

A CLOSER LOOK AT YOUTH AND CRIME IN CANADA

2008



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary	3
Preface	4
Definitions	4
The Overall Crime Statistics	5
Youth Crime Statistics	5
Youth Violent Crime Statistics	6
The Demographics of Youth Offenders	7
Youth Violent Crime with a Firearm	8
Profiling Young Offenders – A Calgary Study	8
Conclusions	11
References	13

Executive Summary

The Canadian public's *perception* that the youth crime rate is a growing phenomena in society and that communities are increasingly vulnerable to violent criminal behaviour by young people is one that is unfortunately reinforced by external sources. Sensationalized media coverage, frustrated law enforcement officers and vote seeking politicians have tended to portray only parts of the overall reality of crime in general, and youth crime in particular, over the past two decades or more. This paper examines the most current statistical evidence for youth crime in Canada (decreasing) and focuses particularly on reviewing the evidence of *violent* youth crime. It reviews the *types* of violent crime in which young people engage and at what ages, and finds that Level 1 assault is the most common variety. The paper concludes with a review of some ground breaking initial results reported from a Calgary study which profiles young offenders over a 7 year period.

Preface

As the recent public debate during the Canadian Federal election once again demonstrated, politicians of all stripes focused on the issue of crime, and particularly youth crime, as something which is increasing and putting all Canadians at greater risk. Everyone seemed to “know” that youth crime is out of control, and that youth crime has become more violent. The media certainly appeared, by and large, more than ready to accommodate those perceptions (albeit with some notable exceptions! – e.g. Gardner, Sept. 24/08, <http://www.canada.com/ottawacitizen/columnists/story.html?id=b9b23930-03ea-4864-ab92-e3744aff4f4a>) and highlight notorious examples of horrific crimes (<http://www.cbc.ca/canada/calgary/story/2007/07/09/med-hat.html>).

So it is perhaps timely, if not crucial, to once again offer a sober review of the available evidence for youth crime in Canada and to determine whether we as concerned citizens can make a realistic assessment of the seriousness of the issue and decide upon the best course of action to be taken by society in addressing it.

For purposes of this paper, we will look at a population of youth to be taken as between the ages of 12 and 17 years old. This is the age group that is dealt with by *Youth Criminal Justice Act* of 2003. Significant changes in how the justice system dealt with youth were introduced in the YCJA over its predecessor, the *Young Offenders Act*, and the statistical information presented below demonstrate how those changes have impacted how young people have been processed through the system.

It is also important to point out that the statistical data available to us is drawn exclusively from “police reported” data. There exists a strenuous debate as to the volume of “unreported” crime or incidents that may occur annually, although a survey of Toronto students may be revealing in terms of how much delinquent behaviour has gone unreported. As the study reports, “less than half (42%) of youth who had reported committing at least one type of delinquent act in their lifetime stated that their most recent act had been discovered by parents, teachers, police or other individuals” (<http://www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/85-002-XIE/85-002-XIE2007006.pdf>). It may be argued, however, that violent action against another person, particularly murder, may be somewhat more difficult to keep concealed or unreported.

Definitions

Although this paper is particularly focused on crime against other persons, it is appropriate to distinguish between the various categories of crime identified by Stats Canada.

Crimes against the person include *violent* crime (murder, attempted murder, robbery, sexual assault, other sexual offences, major assault and common assault) as well as uttering threats, criminal harassment and others). Other categorized crimes include *crimes against property*, *breaches of the administration of justice* and *other criminal code offences* such as carrying a weapon or engaging in prostitution. *Criminal Code traffic* offences include impaired driving amongst others.

It is also relevant to this paper to distinguish between the various levels of “assault”. The Criminal Code defines assault as when a person applies force intentionally against another person, or attempts or threatens, by an act or gesture to apply such force to another person (“common assault”). Assault with a weapon or causing bodily harm is when a person causes bodily harm (of a temporary nature) to another through an action of force. *Aggravated assault* describes assault that maims, disfigures or endangers the life of another (“major assault”). These are referred to as Levels 1, 2 and 3 respectively.

The Overall Crime Statistics

First, the statistical evidence. It is somewhat ironic, given the current public debate about crime, that the most recent statistical data shows that the crime rate actually dropped yet again in 2007 over the year previous. This *continued* a trend that has been documented in Canada for decades and in fact, the 2007 represented the *lowest* percentage rate in 30 years! (<http://www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/85-002-XIE/85-002-XIE2008007.pdf>). The violent crime rate also fell by 3%, making it the lowest since 1989, and reversing a slight upward trend noted for the two years prior. Criminal offences that did witness an increase in 2007 were either drug related (4%) or impaired driving offences (3%).

At the same time, the data for the overall youth crime rate for **2007** also demonstrated a 2 % decrease over the previous year. This also represented a reversal of the upward trend (3%) that was recorded for 2006 and which had formed much of the basis for the evidence cited in the 2008 election campaign. Yet what is not commonly noted is that the overall youth crime rate actually had dropped by 6% in 2005 and that even violent youth crime had declined by 2% (<http://www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/85-002-XIE/85-002-XIE2006004.pdf>) in 2005 over 2004.

What is clear from the somewhat “up and down” youth crime rate numbers is that youth crime is dramatically down since its peak in 1991 and furthermore, that for the past decade, it has remained fairly consistent.

It is instructive, however, to delve a little deeper into the youth criminal stats and to try to tease out some additional insights into the exact nature of what young people are being *charged*. It is crucial to recognize at this point in the discussion that the police reported data show *all the incidents involving youth* and not only charges. Furthermore, these data by no means reflect convictions. It may be perceived facile to point out that an individual is innocent until proven guilty in a court of law, but is quite clear that the current debate is based on the numbers of people *charged* with an offence and not their guilt. This will be further explored later in this paper.

Youth Crime Statistics

In spite of the overall reduction in youth crime in Canada, the public’s attention has been directed to the violent crime statistics, perhaps to confirm or heighten the unease felt by many that youth are becoming increasingly dangerous to public safety. And unfortunately, the data does demonstrate that violent crime among youth has increased steadily since the 1980’s (<http://www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/85-002-XIE/85-002-XIE2008007.pdf>). In fact, it has doubled from what it was in 1987.

The most recent detailed analysis of youth crime stats come from two sets of data produced by Juristat. These are the *Crime Statistics in Canada 2007* (with a section on Youth Crime - <http://www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/85-002-XIE/85-002-XIE2008007.pdf>) and the *Youth Court Statistics 2006/2007* (<http://www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/85-002-XIE/85-002-XIE2008004.pdf>). While it is not quickly apparent as to how to reconcile the information contained in these reports (as they are reporting on slightly different aspects), they do affirm the major trends. **Note however, that the Youth Court Stats report on actual cases (charges and results) while the Crime Stats report all incidents reported to the police (which may or may not have resulted in charges being laid).**

The *Youth Court Statistics* report notes that 179,873 charges were heard in the youth courts in 2006/2007. Of these, 78.5% were Criminal Code offences (including 1.7% related to traffic offences) while the

remaining 21.5% were offences against other federal statutes. Drug possession and trafficking only comprised some 4.5% of the total charges.

Of the 141,213 Criminal Code offences, some 21.5% (30,358) were administrative violations which, if removed for purposes of this discussion (along with the 3,043 traffic related charges), would leave 107,812 offences. Of these, 55.5% were crimes against property, 32.7% were crimes against a person and 14.5% were *other* (of which 42.9% were weapons related).

The two major categories of criminal code offences also warrant a closer examination. Of the 56,906 crimes against property offences, a full 33.7% related to theft, 23.1% involved mischief, 19.1% were possession of stolen property and 17.9% were B&E.

Among the 35,290 charges of crimes against the person, a full 34.4% were classified as common assault and 22.3% were of major assault. 17.2% of the charges involved uttering threats, 12.9% were robbery, 8% were of a sexual nature and the remaining 4.5% were other.

Youth Violent Crime Statistics

The *Crime Statistics in Canada 2007* report actually offers a comparison of 2006 and 2007 figures for youth accused of selected Criminal Code offences (Table 6 - <http://www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/85-002-XIE/85-002-XIE2008007.pdf>). The report distinguishes between violent crime, property crime and other criminal code offences for a total of 176,175 youth charged in 2007 (cf. to 178,852 in 2006).

Of the total charged in 2007, 39,747 (22.6%) were violent crimes, 65,098 (40%) were crimes against property and 71,330 (40.5%) were *other* (*Disturbing the Peace* and *Mischief* accounting for almost half of those and *Bail Violations* for an additional 18.5%).

Examination of the 39,747 violent crimes in 2007 reveals that 77.6% of these were assaults, 11.8% were robberies, 5.5% were sexual assaults (3 were aggravated sexual assaults), 4% were other assaults and .8% were other sexual offences. In addition, there were 77 (.19%) homicides and 50 (.13%) attempted murders.

In comparison with 2006, 22.1% of all 178,852 crimes charged were violent crimes, 37% were property crimes and 40.9% were *other*. Of these, 39,576 violent crimes (a very similar number to 2007) charged in 2006 yielded the following breakdown – 30,885 (78%) were assaults, 4,577 (11.6%) were robberies (although robberies *with* firearms exceeded those in 2007 by some 0.2%), 5.5% were sexual assaults (7 were aggravated sexual assaults), 3.7% were other assaults and .76% were other sexual offences.

Notably, however, the fact that the 2006 number of homicides (86) represented 0.21% of all violent crimes and attempted murder (76) at 0.19% - and that both figures are greater than the figures for 2007. In other words, homicides, attempted murder, robbery with firearms and aggravated sexual assault were all lower in the more recent data – representing the most extreme of the violent youth crimes.

It is also very important to point out that the vast majority of all assaults (excluding sexual), both in 2006 and in 2007, were of the Level 1 variety (“common assault”) - 74.5% and 73.3% respectively. That is, assaults without a weapon or not causing bodily harm. Common assaults, furthermore, at 58.1% and 56.8% respectively of *all violent crime* charged in the last two years, **represented well over half of the roughly 22% of all young people charged with crimes that are the most abhorrent to Canadians.**

The Demographics of Youth Offenders

It is also instructive to take a closer look at a profile of **who** these charged youth actually are (as far as legally permissible). The Youth Court Statistics 2006/2007 (Table 4 - <http://www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/85-002-XIE/85-002-XIE2008004.pdf>) reports on the age breakdown and associated offences for 59,463 cases (not number of people charged).

Of these total cases, **78.7%** of the youth involved were aged 15 or older. Only **12.8%** (7,248) were age 14. As well, 26.7% of all the cases were offences against the person, 37.7% were offences against property, 8.8% were administration of justice violations and the final 26.8% were other criminal code offences, traffic violations or offences under other federal statutes.

27% of the crimes against the person were perpetrated by youth 12 - 14 years of age. This same age group was associated with 24.2% of crimes against property, 16.7% of administration of justice violations, 17.2% other criminal code offences, 5.8% of criminal code traffic offences and 12% of other federal offences.

It is interesting to note from the breakdown of the “under 15 years” of age group, that there is a higher percentage of crimes against the person cases than crimes against property in comparison to youth aged 15 and older. This probably reflects the likelihood that older youth engage in crimes against property (more skilled/more brazen/more in need of monies?) more than younger individuals and the fact that younger persons are less likely to engage in other types of criminal activities (traffic, drug and justice violations precisely because of their age.). At the same time, younger individuals tend to react to immediate situations that often involve other youth, so Level 1 assault is more likely. What is important to remember is that the overall number of youth under the age of 15 engaged in crime remains quite small.

The matter of the number of charges or cases does not represent the complete picture of the level of youth crime. These figures are all about accusations and not actual guilt. Table 6 of the Youth Court Statistics 2006/2007 provides data in regards to the percentage of cases by Province that resulted in findings of guilt, acquittal, stayed, withdrawn/dismissed or “other”.

Of the 56,463 cases referred to above, only **60%** actually resulted in a finding of guilt. 21.6% of the cases were withdrawn or dismissed and a further 16.1% were stayed. It is interesting to note that New Brunswick reported the highest percentage of guilty findings (88%) and the Yukon with the lowest (46%). Of the remainder, only Ontario, Saskatchewan and Alberta reported percentages below the Canadian average. Quebec reported the highest percentage of acquittals (5.5%), with British Columbia and Nova Scotia second and third (at 2.5% and 2.2% respectively) while PEI and the NWT showed no acquittals.

Table 7 of the same Report, provides data on the percentage of cases resulting in findings of guilt from 1998/1999 through to 2006/2007, as well as by types of offence. This table shows that 2006/2007 yielded the lowest percentage of guilt findings (60%) for the last 9 years – from a high of 70% in 1998/1999 that has been gradually declining since then. Furthermore, for crimes against the person cases, the findings of guilt for homicide have fluctuated between a low of 29% in 2001/2002 to a high of 59% in 2004/2005. The percentage remained the same at **53%** for the last two years. Attempted murder guilty findings have hovered around an even lower percentage, with 20% for 1999/2000 and 26% for 2006/2007. Only 2000/2001 saw a spike of 65% findings of guilt (with 57% for 2005/2006); the remaining years were all below 48%.

Sexual assault findings of guilt ranged from a high of 66% in 2001/2002 to a low of 56% in 2003/2004. 2006/2007 reported 63%, about average for the nine years. And finally, major assault convictions have been dropping since 1999 (70%) to the most recent at 64%.

Youth Violent Crime with a Firearm

The one area in which there was a noticeable increase in youth crime statistics for 2006 was in the percentage of youth accused of committing a violent crime with the use of a firearm. The 2006 rate (of 1,287 youth) was 32% higher than in 2002 and the highest since this data was first available (1998) (<http://www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/85-002-XIE/85-002-XIE2008002.pdf>). About half of these violent crimes committed with a firearm were related to robberies. Furthermore, Toronto and Saskatoon reported the highest rates of youth accused of a fire-arms related violent crime while Quebec City had the lowest. The rate (0.4) for youth committing a homicide with a firearm has however remained about the same for many years.

Profiling Young Offenders – A Calgary Study

The statistics provided above are important data for a truer understanding of the state of youth crime in Canada. From this, it is clear that the public perceptions of the degree and scope of criminal activity committed by youth is out of proportion to the reality of the situation. These apprehensions have been greatly fuelled by the media and politicians over recent years.

But even these statistics do not enable researchers and developers of public policy to really understand contemporary youth crime and to extract the underlying social contexts for youth crime today, to say nothing about attempting to predict which youth are at greatest risk of becoming a serious offender.

A recent interim document from the Calgary – based Canadian Research Institute for Law and the Family (http://www.ucalgary.ca/~crilf/publications/Final_Report_A_Profile_of_Youth_Crime_in_Calgary_March2008.pdf) is a very informative report of a three year study of youth offending patterns in Calgary. In particular, the study seeks to understand the contributing and motivating factors that result in the appearance of *serious habitual offenders* (SHO) in the hope that this will trigger more appropriate and timely “system” responses (both in the areas of social assistance and justice).

The report examines the total 5,961 chargeable incidents involving youth in Calgary in 2006 in terms of determining the contemporary trends of youth crime in that city. In addition, the study profiles 42 SHO's identified for Calgary in 2006 and compares them to 42 non-SHO's, selected through a stratified random sampling process. The study also takes a historical look at these two sets of data over a period from 2000 – 2006.

Of particular interest is the fact that although only 352 incidents were committed by the SHO's, as compared to 3,552 by the non-SHO's, these 42 SHO's (1.2% of all youth involved) accounted for 5.9% of all incidents (*ibid*: Page 24). This can also be interpreted as saying that each SHO was involved in an average of 8.4 incidents while the average for a non-SHO was 1.6.

Almost ½ of the 5,961 chargeable incidents involved youth aged 16 (27%) or 17 (22.5%) and a further 21.1% were age 15. 73% of the incidents involved males. Over ½ of the incidents involved property offences (52.8%) and another 31.1% were classified as “other” (primarily breaches, drugs and traffic offences). Once again, that meant that only 16% of the incidents were offences against a person. And

more importantly perhaps, a full 95% of the offences were committed without use presence of a weapon. Of the remaining 5% involving a weapon, 1.8% was associated with knives and .2% with a firearm (otherwise the weapons were whatever came to hand – a baton, a club, pepper spray or a vehicle).

38.5% of the incidents resulted in no charges being laid. Of these, 54.4% resulted in Young Persons Measures being exacted and a further 27% resulted in Young Persons Sanctions. In terms of incidents in which charges were laid (61.5%), the percentage of those charged increased steadily with age, from a low of 33.9% for 12 year old offenders through to 76.2% of those aged 17. Males (65.2%) were also more likely to be charged than females (51.4%).

The report goes on to tabulate more details as to parameters of the incidents – from time of day and days of the week through to the month of the year in which the incidents occurred. All of these are interesting facts for the development of crime prevention strategies.

The study then looks at the historical evidence for this selected cohort of 84 youths over a period from 2000 – 2006. The 42 SHO's were involved in 1,402 incidents over those 7 years, for an average of 33.4 each or an average of 4.7 incidents per year. In contrast, the 42 non-SHO's were involved in 196 incidents over the same period for an average of 4.7 incidents each or an average of 0.7 incidents per year.

61.9% of the 84 youth were born in either 1988 or 1989, so that they were just 10 or 11 years of age when the dataset analysis commences. As a result of this early data, it is possible to show that the development of criminal behaviour started substantially earlier for SHO's than non-SHO's. At age 10, eight incidents are reported for the SHO's and none for the others. At age 11, there are 16 reported incidents for the SHO group and only one for the non-SHO's. From age 11 though to 14, the number of incidents rises dramatically for the SHO's (up to 410); although there is a gradual increase of incidents for the non-SHO group from age 12 to 16, it remains far smaller than those of the SHO's. By age 17, these groups show 97 chargeable incidents for the SHO's as opposed to 44 incidents for the non-SHO's. It is interesting to note, however, that chargeable incidents fall from age 16 to 17 in both groups and that the incident number actually declines from age 14 onwards for the SHO's. This reduction may reflect the fact that individuals are now spending more time under some form of custody (and thereby have fewer opportunities to offend) or that is some maturational reform has occurred.

A further breakdown of the *types* of incidents associated by age and group show that while incidents against persons peaks at age 14 for both groups, it declines steadily for the SHO's and remains consistent for the non-SHO's. It is noteworthy, however, that SHO's commit person related incidents at age 10 through 13, an age span wherein there are virtually no such incidents for the non-SHO's. On the other hand, incidents against property rises steadily for the non-SHO's from 14 through 16 years of age while it is more sporadic for the SHO's.

In terms of incidents involving weapons, the vast majority of incidents did not involve weapons; and where weapons were used (2.6% of non-SHO related incidents and 4.9% of SHO related incidents), the firearm was the least likely involved (0.3%). In fact, the non-SHO group did not use either a firearm nor a knife over the 7 year period as a weapon, whereas the SHO group used a knife in 2.1% of the incidents. Most disturbing, perhaps, is that SHO youth aged 13 or younger were involved in knife associated incidents in 15 reported cases and with a firearm in 3 incidents from age 14 and younger.

Four features become clearer through this detailed examination so far. A disproportionate number of chargeable incidents involving youth are committed by a small number of *serious habitual offenders*, they have an early start in criminal behaviour, with a preponderance of incidents against other persons, and

they are more likely than non-SHO's to use a weapon (knives being the weapon of choice), even though weapons play a very low role in both groups.

That a small cadre of youth was disproportionately responsible for a greater number of criminal incidents would come as no surprise to law enforcement, judicial and probation officers.

What may be less well recognize, however, are some of the social history associated with these young offenders and this is where the study provides some valuable insights for future consideration in crime prevention.

The second half of the Calgary study seeks to build the social profiles of a sample of youth categorized according to four streams of contact with the youth justice system. These streams comprise youth identified as the Gateway (Extrajudicial Measures) Program clients, One – time Offenders, Chronic Offenders (having had 5 or more offences or incidents of which they were found guilty) and Serious Habitual Offenders (youth identified as such through various agencies, place in a program and receiving special police monitoring).

A total of 123 youth were sampled through interviews either in person or over the telephone during the course of a year. The sample was unfortunately not consistent, with unequal representation across the four groups (20 for the Gateway clients, 42 for the One - time Offenders, 41 for the Chronic Offenders and 20 for the SHO's). However, some pertinent characteristics did become obvious, especially for the Chronic Offenders (CO) and SHO youth.

- about 35% of both groups had parents who never married
- 19.5% of CO's lived in foster/group homes (none of the SHO's did) at time of the interviews
- 85% of the CO's were Caucasians as were 50% of the SHO's (30% of the latter were Native)
- 55% of the SHO's were living with a single parent
- 51% and 55% respectively of the CO's and SHO's were unemployed at the time of the interviews
- 85% of the CO's and 80% of the SHO's had run away from home at least once
- 74% of the CO's and 69% of the SHO's had experienced family violence
- 83% of the CO's and 75% of the SHO's have had involvement with the Child Welfare System
- 32% of the CO's and 55% of the SHO's were not attending school at the time of the interviews
- almost 79% of both groups skip classes
- 82% of the CO's and 89% of the SHO's had been suspended from school
- 90% of the CO's and 100% of the SHO's had been in fights at school
- 49% of the CO's and 75% of the SHO's have taken weapons to school
- 60% of the friends of the CO's were the same age in contrast to 45% of the friends of SHO's being older
- other than at school, SHO's made the most number of friends while in custody
- CO's and SHO's had virtually NO involvement in adult led sports, clubs or activities
- 70.7% of CO's and 73.7% of the SHO's were diagnosed with a mental health disorder (cf. to 31% of One time Offenders) (Mental health disorders included ADHD, FASD. Learning Disorder and Conduct Disorders)
- CO's and SHO's are very likely to have multiple mental health disorders
- 100% of both groups had used illegal drugs, with everyone having used marijuana
- almost 90% of both groups had used ecstasy
- 15% of the CO's and 30% of the SHO's used crystal methamphetamine
- 76% of the CO's and 65% of the CSHO's used cocaine
- 41.5% and 50% respectively used crack
- 68% and 70% respectively sold illegal drugs

- 70% of SHO's had both harassed and assaulted someone on public transit (versus 38% and 46% for the CO's)
- 75% of both groups had damaged or destroyed others' property
- 61% of CO's and 80% of SHO's have broken into a house
- 71% of CO's and 78% of SHO's have stolen a car or motorcycle
- 61% of CO's and 82% of SHO's threatened someone with a weapon
- 90% of CO's and 100% of SHO's have assaulted or hurt someone
- 60% and 90% respectively have hurt someone with a weapon
- although a little over half of both groups had once been members of a gang, only 22% and 30% respectively belonged to a gang at the time of the interviews
- of those who had gang experience, 41% of the CO's and 38% of the SHO's said their gangs had more than 100 members

These data, albeit based upon a relative small sample size, do confirm and reiterate what has been reported from earlier studies. This study concludes (*ibid*; pages 95 – 100) with a series with summarizing statements in regards to the characteristics of youth crime in Calgary as well as some discussion of the significance of the social factors associated with the four categories of interviewees.

While it may appear to be a truism to repeat it here, it is clear once again just how important a role the family fulfils in the healthy social development of a young person. A stable, caring and engaged family environment in the critical early developmental years (birth to 10 years of age) would go a long way in preventing early possible proclivities to criminal behaviour in a young person. An absence of family violence, participation in family activities, sufficient resources to engage in community youth activities, encouragement and support in the education process and parental monitoring of anti-social behaviours (bullying, illegal drugs and alcohol use, owning a weapon and gang participation) would all contribute to a youth's healthy and safe integration with the greater community.

It is also very clear from this analysis that there is correlation between “staying in school” and criminal behaviour. Young people who do not like school or their teachers, and who do poorly at school, are often beset with a mental health disorder that makes learning in the traditional setting difficult. These young people therefore reduce their investment in their education and are more prone to antisocial behaviours (http://www.ucalgary.ca/~crilf/publications/Final_Report-Youth_Offender_School_Investment_and_Extrac.pdf).

Conclusions

In some respects, attitudes in Canadian society towards children and youth rights and privileges are caught up in a curious series of contradictions. On the one hand, society has demanded of legislators better protection and care of children through both provincial and federal legislations and services. On the other hand, politicians, law enforcement officers and the media have repeatedly emphasized the apparent increase of youth criminal activity and the urgent need to respond forcefully to that growing threat to our security. The call is for a tougher approach to youth crime, to tighten, amend or replace some of the seemingly “weak” rules in the Youth Criminal Justice Act and to increase the number of policeman on the streets. Recently, during the 2008 election, the Conservative Party of Canada included in its platform the promise to have youth as young as 14 years of age who commit a *violent* crime to be tried in adult courts and receive adult sentences (e.g. <http://cnews.canoe.ca/CNEWS/Canada/CanadaVotes/2008/09/22/6839791-sun.html>)

Yet, as has been demonstrated through the statistical analysis above, overall crime in Canada has been on a downward trend for decades. We are safer today than we were thirty years ago. And although youth violent crime has increased over the past years, overall youth crime is reduced.

So what can be made of all this? Clearly, the Calgary Young Offender profiles summarized above are extremely instructive and relevant. And sadly, there is little there that is new. Social workers, law enforcement officials and researchers, among others, have long recognized the crucial importance of family stability, the challenges of mental illness and family violence, the despair of poverty and unemployment and the loneliness of being an outsider, in a minority or just “different” (whether by race, language, religion, culture, intellect or gender orientation). Issues in any or all of these circumstances can result in anti-social behaviours as ways of compensation or denial. And, if left unaddressed, many of these anti-social behaviours can lead to criminal activity.

Youth today have many more, and much improved, opportunities for education, recreation and employment than at any time in history. Certainly, they have a fair greater choice of options than the previous immediate generations. And over the past thirty years, the proportion of youth that become involved with the law has declined steadily as society had devoted more attention and financial resources to recreational facilities, supported youth associations and clubs, responded better to learning challenged youth and enhanced the services and programmes offered by government social service departments.

In many respects, our North American society has embedded within it the seeds of most of the ills that we are currently experiencing. And the argument can be made that this has been the case for decades.

The social emphasis on ownership of material goods - the newest, fastest, biggest and most expensive that money can buy, on looking “good” – young, hip and sexy, and of having/doing anything you want readily and immediately accessible – a lifestyle characterized by remote controls, cell phones, “iPods”, the internet and easy loans. That is the message that sells throughout society. And when coupled with the idea that we are “entitled” to all these good things, that everyone has them and really, that there is little need to be denied since money can be made through so many ways. And if employment appears to too onerous and time consuming, then there are certainly other “market activities” to be explored.

Obviously, these social realities do not result in criminal behaviour by the majority of the population. Family relations, school, church, recreational activities and employment opportunities all mitigate against anti-social choices.

Yet, we know that there remain many youth in our society who are not provided with the conditions or tools necessary to make the right choices at key stages in their lives. Youth who live in abusive relationships, live in poverty, have mental health issues, suffer from low self esteem, become addicted to drugs and alcohol or find solace and acceptance through gangs. These are the youth may more readily succumb to society’s mixed messages and who are most vulnerable to criminal behaviour and activities.

So how should society respond to those youth that do run afoul of the law?

The *Youth Criminal Justice Act* of 2003 is an excellent example of society accommodating the importance of making youth accountable for their actions and behaviours, appropriate to their age and abilities, while at the same time ensuring that youth receive the maximum opportunity for turning their life around and become contributing members of the community. Since the inception of this Act, there has been a demonstrated decline in court cases dealing with youth offences, as more youth are diverted to alternative measures at the discretion of the police officer or the crown. The merits of this strategy far exceed the perceived miscarriage of justice as some youth do in fact re-offend and need to be dealt with

through the formal justice system. The fact is that many youth that are diverted **do not** re-offend and re-integrate into society without further complications (as is also true for most adult offenders). And, through diversion, they are not stigmatized with a permanent record nor given the opportunity to make “friends” whilst incarcerated.

But clearly, the best “solutions” apply to those stages in the life of a youth before they run into trouble. And while there are no simple and obvious answers as to what needs to be, and can be, done, it is clear that whatever human and financial resources that public funds direct to this challenge, they need to be expended on programs, services and support systems that assist youth as they mature. Threatening to put youth through adult courts and impose adult sentences will do NOTHING to change the behavioural trajectories of those youth on the wrong track. It will only help to guarantee life - long offenders in our midst.

It is undeniable that youth commit crimes, and some youth commit horrific crimes. Yet it must not be forgotten that the number of those that do are, in fact, a very small number indeed and that these are NOT representative of the norm in our society. Their actions should not be used to instill an ungrounded fear in the community that many youth are potentially violent. But they should highlight that there remain serious challenges to be addressed in our “rich” society and that much more needs to be done to improving/stabilizing the social reality for many young people.

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