

BACKGROUNDER: Youth and Violence

Prepared on behalf of the PEI Youth Council

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Recently, *Time* magazine published an article posing an argument for the abolishment of adolescence. The article claimed that while the biological aspects of adolescence are unavoidable, society's youth are trapped in a cultural mess filled with corruption, commercialism, and sleaze, and the whole phase which should be eliminated for the betterment of society as a whole. While this article poses the impossible, it does grasp the common perception held in society that its youth are the lowest of the classes. All too often, today's youth are labelled as irresponsible, apathetic, and the cause of many social evils, including crime. Society's unfair perception of young people makes it difficult for youth to establish themselves in society, as they are faced with stereotypes that have been affixed to young people in general. With growing publicity for violent crimes being committed by youth, there appears to be a growing need for services directed towards youth, and youth need more information about the wide variety of services available to them. Adolescence does not need to be abolished, but young people themselves require some maintenance and support to find their own path to follow into the next millennium.

Consider the following figures:

- In Canada, there are approximately 6,219,373 youth between the ages of 15-29, constituting 20.5% of the population.
- Prince Edward Island's population is approximately 137,000, of which roughly 19,500 (or around 7.03%) are between the ages of 15-24.
- Nationally, 11.7% of all offenses are violent crimes, and in 1997, young people accounted for 23% of all Criminal Code offenses in Canada.
- Males aged 20-29 constituted 30.0% of all murder suspects between 1993-97; males aged 11-19 made up another 16.9% of all suspects during the same time period.
- Male youths fall victim to more than one-third (36%) of all youth violence.
- In 1997, 74% of youth victims knew the accused, oftentimes on a friendly basis.
- Only 1% of youth court cases end in acquittal.
- The majority of all youth court cases end in probation.
- Since 1992, cases of violent crimes by youths have increased by 4%.
- In 1997, there were 9,960 criminal offenses on Prince Edward Island, 10.0% of which were violent crimes.
- Between 1993-1997 of the 3027 Canadian murders, only 5 were on Prince Edward Island.
- Common assault accounts for more than 40% of all recorded violent crimes.

The problem of youth crime, particularly violent crime, has been a major concern in the media for the past number of years. The 1990s have seen a dramatic increase in school shootings, as youth turn to violence as a way of communication, and, although this phenomenon is centralized

in the United States, a school shooting in Taber, Alberta in May of 1999 marked the first such shooting in Canada since the mid-1970s. In the wake of the Littleton and Taber school shootings, threats of bombings and violent crime have been recorded across the country, with a number of recordings on Prince Edward Island. Just this past week, students from East Wiltshire Junior Hugh School were sent home for the day due to bomb threats and Stone Park Intermediate School's ordinary operations were crippled when 400 students stayed home due to rumours the school would blow up on June 1.

Tragic incidents such as school shootings have drawn society's attention to its youth, begging the question, "What can be done for today's youth?" The past few years have seen changes and adaptations made to many young offender policies, with more emphasis put on rehabilitation through counselling. Canada's Young Offenders Act was instituted in 1984 in order to replace the existing outdated system with an Act that would cater to the needs of young offenders. The Young Offenders Act was a ground-breaking piece of legislation that embodied three underlying principles:

- Young offenders should take responsibility for their actions, though not necessarily in the same way as adults.
- Society should be protected from youth crime and take preventive measures against it, but should also recognize that young offenders have different needs than adults and that they require guidance and supervision.
- Young persons have the same rights as adults, but require special attention to protect their rights.

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The Young Offenders Act was designed to recognize that crime prevention is necessary to promote the long-term protection of society. Further, it is distinct from the Criminal Code in that it recognizes the special situation of young offenders and addresses the need to identify the underlying causes of youth crime. Studying the fundamental elements of youth crime may enable all varieties of counsellors and teachers to identify and respond to youth who may potentially develop behavioural problems.

But the Young Offenders Act has also faced criticism by those who claim that lenient penalties for youth crime do not allow for genuine rehabilitation. Punishments for young offenders, while they tend to be shorter than those for adults, are implemented in order for those offending youth to be reintegrated into society – but some argue is that many offenders are not punished long enough to be ready for release. Under pressure to reexamine their justice system, governments are now focussing on how to help violent young offenders, especially through education.

There is no simple reason explaining why youths exhibit violent behaviour, and there are many theories as to what causes young people to turn to violence. Violence in the home is one factor of major importance. More than half of all adult violent crimes take place within a home. Whether this violence is directed at the youth, a family member, or anyone within the home it has a great impact on the youth who witness such domestic violence. Recent studies on youth violence place blame as well on the entertainment industry, as modern movies and video games depict scenes of

violence which desensitize society's youth to violence and portray violence divorced from real-life consequences. These may create a "monkey see, monkey do" effect. Finally, some commentators and youth workers consider violence the last line of defence for youths who are struggling and cannot overcome their difficulties within today's society. Their violent activity is a cry for attention and for help.

Unemployment is one issue which can also influence young people to turn toward crime in order to survive. On the East Coast, unemployment rates are high, especially amongst youth who are entering the job market and finding that there is little employment and that there are especially few opportunities for those who have not pursued a post-secondary education. On Prince Edward Island, the youth unemployment rate in 1997 was upwards of 18%. Hard economic times, such as those indicated by high unemployment rates, often lead to an increase in crime.

Whatever the causes of youth crime, it is important to examine also how our institutions address the issue. PEI's young people spend a large amount of their time in schools, and most of these institutions have their own rules and regulations, created for the protection of their students and staff alike. Academic institutions ordinarily have Codes of Conduct which ensure that any criminal activities which go on within the institution can be dealt with by school officials, with or without the involvement of police. In attempting to create violence- and harassment-free institutions, school boards and universities set standards by which they expect everyone to abide. Rules against violence are very straightforward: depending on the severity of the offence assailants are faced with a number of repercussions for their violent actions. The regulations of academic institutions do not attempt to protect the aggressor in violent situations; however, they do offer counselling to the victim, and therefore seem to accept some responsibility for offenses which took place within the institution. Codes of Conduct for the University of Prince Edward Island, Holland College, and the Eastern and Western school boards all outline similar Codes of Conduct; the French school board is well on its way to completing a draft of a new set of Codes. All these institutions uphold that any threat of violence – whether it be by word or action – is against the policy of the institution and is punishable by suspension or expulsion. These policies cannot, of course, address the causes of youth violence within schools.

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While the media define youth violence as a major crisis facing today's society, in fact, youth violence has always been an issue. Violence caused by youth and violence which affects and possible influences youth are the two primary issues, and their relationship is complex. It is not yet known exactly what causes young people to resort to violence, and the many factors require research and study. This research is being undertaken, but it requires direct involvement by young people themselves.

Today's Forum provides the youth of Prince Edward Island with an opportunity to address the issue of youth violence, as it is an issue which many youth have either experienced or witnessed themselves. Through discovering ways to help those of us who may be struggling, we, the young people of Prince Edward Island, may better prepare ourselves for the future.

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