

VIOLENT YOUTH CRIME RISING; STATS REVEAL GANGS AND GIRLS NOW FIGURE MORE OFTEN IN INCIDENTS

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REALITY CHECK: Is youth violence getting worse or does it just seem that way after two weeks of highly publicized teen crime in Toronto?

The answer -- from cops to victims to social agencies to the statistics -- is yes, the streets are meaner for our kids.

Teen violence is more intense, escalates far faster and involves groups, girls and weapons more than ever before, experts say.

"The severity of what is happening is definitely on the rise," says Sally Spencer, executive director of Youth Assisting Youth, a peer-mentoring program for at-risk youth in Toronto and York Region.

FROM FISTS TO KNIVES

"Before, you'd have a school fight with your fists. Now, forget that. Now, you start with the knives and go to the guns."

While the number of all crime cases heard in Canadian youth court has dropped 20% over the last decade, violent crimes cases -- for homicide, sexual assault, assault and robbery -- have jumped 25% over the same period, reports Statistics Canada.

Separate stats from the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics (CCJS) show an increase of 13% in the youth violent crime rate between 1993-2003, with a significant jump in 2000 after a decade of relative stability. In Toronto, arrests of young people aged 12-17 for violent crimes has remained stable since 1999, even dropping by about 200 arrests since they peaked in 2000.

But Stu Auty, president of the **Canadian Safe School Network**, says that when you take a longer view over several decades, the upward trend in youth violence is unmistakable.

"This is brand spanking new," he says. "When you look at stats compared to 25 years ago, you didn't even find on the charts any of this kind of crime, where kids are stabbed openly on a street corner. It's outrageous."

A straight comparison of the youth violent crime rate in Canada over 25 years shows an increase of several hundred per cent, but it's a statistically inaccurate picture due to major changes in the law and the way police and courts have handled youth over that time, says Marnie Wallace of the CCJS.

'TIP OF THE ICEBERG'

"A decade is about as far back as you want to look," she says.

Either way, the numbers offer only a glimpse at the "tip of the iceberg" because stats are only collected after police become involved, cautions Staff Sgt. Dave Saunders, head of Youth Programs for the Toronto Police.

"Youth are very uncomfortable reporting crime," he says. "There are many victims who are suffering in silence."

Saunders says there are three distinct trends in Toronto:

- The growth of gang-type or group violence, as was the case with Drew Stewart, 16, who was swarmed by a group of teens and fatally stabbed Dec. 3.
- The rapid escalation to weapons in conflicts, as happened Nov. 28 when Tamara Carter, 11, and an unnamed 23-year-old man were shot on a TTC bus after an argument.
- An increase in female violence.

More difficult to answer is why youth violence is intensifying.

The theories could fill a newspaper: Family breakdown and poor parenting, poverty, violence in the home, the Internet, the decline of religion and morality, video games, the proliferation of guns, lenient laws and weak sentences, a lack of discipline in schools, and on and on.

Joe Wamback, whose son Jonathan was beaten to within inches of his life by a group of Newmarket teens in 1999, says he's fed up with all the excuses for the behaviour of "psychopathic individuals."

"These scumbags make a conscious decision and we need to hold them accountable," Wamback says.

Still, most experts agree our youth are "soaked" in violence from their earliest years in a society that embraces the use of aggression to solve problems.

"Kids are fed a steady diet of aggression in all forms of popular culture," says Dr. Fred Mathews, psychologist and director of research at Central Toronto Youth Services.

'SCRIPTS' FOR VIOLENCE

"If you need scripts to teach you how to act out violently, they're everywhere."

Mathews notes that many perpetrators of violence have been victims first, often of abuse, violence or neglect in their home.

There's much work being done. In Toronto, Mayor David Miller's community safety plan -- passed by council in March -- has led to the creation of a secretariat to co-ordinate anti-crime work and an advisory panel headed by Ontario Chief Justice Roy McMurtry.

Their work has focused on engaging youth in four neighbourhoods: Malvern, Jamestown, Jane and Finch, and the Kingston-Galloway area.

Toronto Police run a number of outreach and school programs, including the Empowered Student Partnerships program, which challenges high school students to address local problems by coming up with their own campaigns.

And there are programs like Youth Assisting Youth, which for 28 years has been pairing at-risk youth with young mentors to effect change "one kid at a time."

But ultimately, Mathews says, we must begin by looking in the mirror.

"Our children and youth can never be any healthier than the adults around them," he says.