

Teen students rounded up in Toronto school sex-abuse case

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THOMSON: Sixteen students at this Toronto high school are facing charges for the repeated abuse and harassment of a 16-year-old girl. The victim told police this abuse lasted more than 18 months. Joining us now with more on this case is Toronto Police Detective Sergeant Peter Duncan.

Good morning to you. And thanks for joining us.

DUNCAN: Good morning.

THOMSON: To begin with, this is just a horrifying story for parents right across this country, to think that something like this could go on for so long. How come it took 18 months?

DUNCAN: Quite often, people that are victimized are those that are less likely to come forward. They're people that are more easily intimidated. And I think most abusers will seek those people out. It's not the people that are likely to step up quickly and say no. It's the ones that aren't going to say anything for a while.

Fortunately, in this case and in many others eventually some victims will come forward when they find people who they can trust, and who they feel comfortable with to disclose those things. And then those people come forward and do the right thing, which is what happened here.

THOMSON: Two of the teenagers who were already under arrest and then 14 were arrested on Monday, immediately after those arrests -- and you heard -- there was a public outcry on behalf of, well, certainly many of the parents involved in the case saying that this was just the wrong thing to do, you know, going into the school to arrest these people. Tell me about the decision to go to the school for the arrests.

DUNCAN: Largely, it was logistic. We had over a dozen students to seek out and arrest. To do that separately at different homes would have been very difficult. If any of the students were missed they might have been on the loose. And it would have been a threat to the victim. The victim's address is known to many of the students and many of the people involved. So it was important to keep the victim safe.

THOMSON: And the victim has been further victimized as a result of this. In some cases I understand that she was harassed by the students when they found out.

DUNCAN: Yes.

THOMSON: Is she needing protection now?

DUNCAN: There are steps being taken. I can't disclose what those are. But there are some steps being taken. And the victim's family is in contact with us, and vice versa. And, so far, she's doing well.

THOMSON: Were you surprised at the outcry? Because one would expect the parents of those arrested to defend their children. That's not surprising.

DUNCAN: Absolutely.

THOMSON: But there was also claims of harassment, that all of those put under arrest were black, that the victim was white. And one parent actually said this is racial profiling.

DUNCAN: I did read that in the paper this morning. It is not a new thing for a police officer to hear that. We simply deal with the conduct. We deal with what's put before us, and we don't deal with the cosmetics or the skin colour. We deal with the conduct. And that's what we did in this case as well.

THOMSON: Detective Duncan, thank you.

Joining me now: the president of the Canadian Safe Schools Network, **Stu Auty**.

Thanks for coming in.

AUTY: A pleasure, Beverly.

THOMSON: Let me get your reaction to this, when you started learning about the details of this horrific case.

AUTY: Well, it's extraordinary. The bar has been lowered yet again, what's going on in some of these schools. But the reality is, there is a massive code of silence here that for this to continue on for a year and a half, with nobody apparently knowing. Or if those that did know didn't come forward, that in itself is a statement.

THOMSON: And happening in the school for the most part. I mean, I know that there were some attacks that took place outside of the school, but many of them inside the school.

AUTY: And so, where's the communication? I think that's the question that I have. Who is communicating to whom? What friends of this girl knew about this and didn't talk to people? Why didn't the girl talk to her own parents? Why didn't the girl talk to some of the teachers?

So, there is a lack of trust, apparently, that's going on here that the victim simply could not feel confident enough, could not feel --

THOMSON: Or was terrified.

AUTY: Or was terrified, or was intimidated, for whatever reason. But simply could not come forward. Quite extraordinary.

THOMSON: Detective Duncan was saying yesterday that it's a classic case of picking on an individual, like a bullying thing. And, sadly, it's all too common in these schools.

AUTY: Well, this intimidation is right over the top, though. I mean, these kinds of things happen all the time, essentially. But to this level, to get to this point where it's criminal activity -- ongoing criminal activity -- in a very public place, that's the question, as to how that could continue.

THOMSON: What about the programs that exist today? We are certainly more aware of bullying and programs that have been put in place in schools. Are they working?

AUTY: Well, in many cases they are. This particular school has the Empowered Student Partnership Program, which is an outstanding program where kids can in fact take a look at issues in their school. They survey their own students, the student body, and they can come up with programs. So, those programs are in fact in place - much more today than they have ever been, Beverly.

The reality today is, however, every once in a while something like this can occur because of the level and the intensity of intimidation. The lack of trust, people not willing to communicate to the police. Not trusting the police, not trusting their teachers, not trusting the parents in the community who in fact can come forward to help. If there's any kind of direction that we can give, it's go and talk to a responsible adult. Have that kind of a relationship, at the very least, where you can feel as though you are going to be looked after.

THOMSON: Detective, are you getting cooperation from other students in the school now that they've learned about it? Are people coming forward? Or is there still a problem with intimidation?

DUNCAN: Most of the people that we needed to speak to we spoke to prior to making the arrests yesterday. There were some comments made by some students that were positive and that were in the media and that were made to us, saying that they're glad that this has happened. And with the staff as well. I met with them for quite some time a few hours after the arrests, and they're happy that something is being done. It was a hard day for them yesterday. There's going to be some short-term pain, for certain. But it's for long-term gain and for better safety for their school.

THOMSON: And in this case the victim has indicated that she would like to return to school at some point.

DUNCAN: Yeah, she said that to me as well as some other police officers. She would like to, because she doesn't feel that she's done anything wrong. I can't speak specifically about the case other than to say that.

THOMSON: Of course. I understand.

Detective and **Stu Auty**, thanks so much for coming in to discuss it with us. Appreciate your time.

DUNCAN: Thank you.

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