

Tough not enough to tackle youth violence

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By JIM KELLY

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Prevention – not tougher laws and longer sentences – is the way to deal with the problems of youth violence, says former attorney general and Ontario Chief Justice Roy McMurtry.

“The youth criminal justice system has had only a marginal influence on crime in society,” he said Monday at city hall. On June 11, Premier Dalton McGuinty announced the appointment of McMurtry and former speaker of the legislature Alvin Curling to conduct a review of the roots of youth violence.

They will report to the premier by next May.

The review will focus on three key areas. Those are research, consultation and neighbourhood insights.

McMurtry and Curling will examine the underlying causes of youth violence and make recommendations to help prevent it.

The review is also expected to provide suggestions on opportunities to engage youth and communities and make proposals to better co-ordinate strategies among all three levels of government.

McMurtry, who has 50 years experience in the criminal justice system, said Thunder Bay Police Chief Bob Herman and other police chiefs across Ontario concur that law enforcement is not the panacea for youth violence and crime.

“He (Herman) and the other chiefs of police appreciate how important prevention and social programs are to assist young people,” he said.

“Decades of studies have demonstrated that tough sentences, while clearly appropriate in some cases, do not have a wide deterrent effect,” McMurtry said.

“The federal government is very much on the wrong track in stating their emphasis will be on tougher laws and longer sentences.

“They’re trying to get people to believe this is meaningful,” he said.

“It’s not. It’s much more complicated than that.”

McMurtry said half of the time he and Curling will spend on the project between now and next May will be to consult with young people.

“Unless we can create a sense of engagement with young people, we’re not going to accomplish very much,” he said. McMurtry said there is a lack of public space for disadvantaged young people who are vulnerable – space that could be used for recreation, arts, music and drama.

Curling said much more needs to be done.

He said schools are being closed that could be used for resources for the young.

“Many programs are not being co-ordinated properly,” he said.

“Some resources could be put together to have a greater impact with better results.”

Curling said the problem of youth violence and youth crime is an issue that has to be addressed by all three levels of government.

“We’d like to make sure the situation in the future is much more happier,” he said.

McMurtry admitted he and Curling have an enormous challenge before them.

“Some of the issues have been studied to death,” he said.

“The premier has made it clear to us he doesn’t want us to re-invent the wheel. Our task is to bring a fresh insight into the problem.”

McMurtry and Curling will also visit Toronto, Windsor, Hamilton, Kitchener-Waterloo and Ottawa.