Youth and Violence What's the Story?

The rate of youth offences has been declining since the early 1990s. While the decline in overall numbers is comforting, the proportion of youth charged with violent offences has increased. In 1986, 408 youth per 100,000 were charged with a violent crime. In 1995, that rate was up to 938, representing a 13 per cent growth rate per year.

While youth violence can be prevented, there is no single effective strategy for all youth or all settings. Nor is there a single risk factor that accurately predicts aggressive or violent behaviour. However, there are common risk factors that can predispose a young person to aggressive or violent tendencies. There are also protective factors that build resiliency in children and youth and can help to decrease the probability of a young person becoming aggressive or violent.

What's the Picture?

- The overall youth crime rate is dropping but the proportion of youth crimes that are violent is increasing.
- Many youth and adults who commit crimes displayed antisocial and aggressive behaviour as children.
- Violence is usually a learned behaviour. Children who witness or experience violent acts are more aggressive, and as adults, they are more likely to be victims of aggression or to victimize others.
- There are two distinct groups of offenders: Life Course Persistent (LCP) offenders and Adolescence-Limited (AL) offenders. LCP offenders usually start displaying aggression well before age 10 and continue being aggressive throughout adulthood. They may also demonstrate antisocial behaviour, behavioural difficulties at school, academic problems and possibly attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder.
- AL offenders may have some of the above characteristics, but generally fewer. Their antisocial behaviour starts and usually finishes in adolescence.
- LCP offenders account for only five to eight per cent of adolescent offenders, but over half of the offences. The vast

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majority of these offenders will continue displaying aggression into adulthood.

- Bullying is a form of aggression. Being bullied can have substantial and lasting effects on children's social and emotional adjustment. School-wide campaigns condemning bullying and encouraging more appropriate behaviour can dramatically decrease bullying.
- Violence in the media tends to influence children who are already at multiple risk of aggressive behaviour.

What Puts Kids at Risk?

Not all known risk factors for violence and delinquency can be eliminated. Yet understanding risk factors, such as the following, can help define populations that should receive preventive interventions:

- low birth weight
- pre- and postnatal exposure to toxins such as alcohol, tobacco, cocaine, heavy metals
- pregnancy and birth complications
- poor temperament in infancy and childhood
- early aggression
- low family socioeconomic status
- below-average IQ scores
- poor academic performance
- poor school attachment (e.g., low interest in school, low achievement, truancy, dropping out)
- parents who are neglectful or abusive (emotionally, physically or sexually)
- impaired cognitive processes (e.g., misunderstanding others' intentions)
- poor parent-child relations (e.g., poor discipline practices, minimal involvement, poor supervision, low emotional warmth, negative attitudes toward child)
- family breakdown
- high family stress
- exposure to family violence
- large family
- male gender (a 5:1 ratio male to female).

What Protects Kids?

Despite exposure to multiple risk factors, many children don't go on to display serious antisocial behaviour. Protective factors, such as the following, can minimize the effects of risk factors:

- positive parenting skills
- a stable family environment
- positive role models
- increased family socioeconomic status
- a close, trusting bond with a nurturing adult outside the family
- supportive relationships, including those with teachers and friends
- good peer relations
- great empathy and support from mother or mother figure
- sense of hope and optimism
- belief in oneself
- a sense of being in control of one's life and able to cope with whatever happens
- strong social skills
- the ability to find refuge and self-esteem in hobbies, creative pursuits, useful work and assigned chores
- receiving recognition for involvement in positive extracurricular activities.

Prevention Strategies: What Works

Prevention programs have the best chance of success when they start early in childhood and continue through adolescence.

- Successful prevention efforts enhance protective factors and reduce, or minimize, the impact of risk factors.
- Fostering healthy social development in children, youth and all community members is an effective way to reduce bullying, racism, harassment and other forms of violence.

Effective programming requires a community-wide effort that addresses the various social contexts (e.g., family, school, community) in which children and youth live and function.

There is a growing body of scientific evidence that can be used to implement sound and cost-effective prevention programs. However, there are also many important initiatives and programs underway, both across Canada and internationally, that show promise in preventing youth violence and instilling pro-social behaviour, but which have either not been sufficiently researched or have not been shown to have sustained effects.

Helping practitioners, programmers and others choose best practices requires having research-based evidence to work from. Schools, agencies and community initiatives need more resources to demonstrate effectiveness both in the short- and long-term. And even the best-validated programs will not succeed, or will fall short, if they are not adequately funded or are not implemented by competent staff. Resources for ongoing training and support are key to success.

The following are recommended programming strategies, categorized according to the contexts in which children and youth live and develop.

Family-Oriented Strategies

Parent Education

Children need to get a good start in life. Mothers should receive good prenatal care and education, eat right and avoid tobacco, alcohol and other drugs. The first few years after birth are a critical foundation for life.

- Programs that nurture and support parents play a key role in preventing aggressive behaviour in their children. These include education programs aimed at helping parents learn effective behaviour management techniques.
- Parent training sessions typically include teaching parents how to: set clear expectations for behaviour, monitor children's behaviour, reinforce positive behaviour, provide consequences for inappropriate behaviour, develop and use effective communication skills and nurture children.
- Effective parent education programs involve parents in ongoing relationships and training sessions that last from six months to several years.

The Incredible Years Parenting Program, a 12-week parent training program used at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH), has consistently helped parents manage children's behavioural difficulties in a warm, supportive, playful family environment. The program focuses first on building a solid emotional foundation with children, then works on teaching parents techniques such as praise, rewards, time out, consequences and problem-solving. Videotapes of successful parenting techniques provide a forum for learning.

Pre-school Programs

There is extensive evidence that some pre-school programs, especially when combined with weekly home visits over the pre-school years, can have a long-term impact on families and children.

- Pre-school targeted programs that provide a stimulating and varied play environment for children can have a positive effect on children's language development, learning capacity, coping skills and competence. These effects reduce the behavioural problems that are often seen when children enter school.

The Perry Preschool Project in Michigan is often cited as an excellent example of such a program. It addresses high-risk preschoolers and emphasizes facilitating parent involvement in children's academic and social development.

Family Programs

Family therapy refers to a host of approaches to working with family members together, rather than individually.

- Research investigating family and child-focused programs demonstrates that offering services in the home and community is much more effective than institutionally-driven approaches.
- A combination of early education for the child and family support and education (e.g., reading to child, positive reinforcement, effective and non-abusive punishment) can reduce antisocial behaviour over the long term.
- Family approaches that emphasize behavioural techniques (e.g., positive reinforcement, effective and non-coercive punishment, parental monitoring, involvement and advocacy) tend to be more effective and have longer-lasting results than non-behavioural approaches (e.g., supportive counselling).
- A comprehensive community approach should include both community-based prevention and early childhood programs. Intervening solely with the family, without broader efforts to address factors such as poverty, joblessness, crime or substance use, will not achieve the same successes.

Family And Schools Together (FAST TRACK) is a comprehensive approach in Tennessee that includes parent training and home visits along with school-based efforts to improve elementary school children's social skills and academic performance.

Multi-systemic therapy, as the name suggests, involves working with various systems, including the family, schools, family-related agencies and the court system. It is one of the most cost-effective and validated interventions for young people who are at high-risk for disruptive behaviour or are already displaying problem behaviour, and for their families.

A multi-system approach involves a relatively short (i.e., 4–5 months) but intensive therapy aimed at strengthening family functioning. Sessions focus on improving family relationships, strengthening parental authority and effectiveness, and modifying children's behaviours, using a variety of techniques including family therapy, parent education and cognitive-behavioural approaches.

School-Oriented Strategies

Research and the experiences of countless community workers, parents, youth and professionals have identified several promising practices that schools, working in partnership with their communities, can use to promote positive learning environments.

- Multiple co-ordinated programs and services using the school as the hub — and implemented by a variety of agencies, organizations and schools — can help to significantly reduce antisocial behaviours.
- Programs and approaches that involve the whole school in co-ordinated strategies, programs, services and activities can reduce bullying and harassment, improve attendance, reduce the number of negative incidents and conflicts, increase student attachment to school (preventing dropout) and prevent gangs.
- Specific partnerships, such as those between police and schools, and community agencies and schools, can lead to targeted improvements.

The following are the fundamentals of a safe and healthy school, excerpted from "Positive Learning Environments in Schools: A Pan-Canadian Consensus Statement."

Youth Engagement — Meaningfully involving youth in violence prevention efforts within the school and community can reduce antisocial behaviours. Participatory programs involving youth can take a variety of forms, including: after-school programs; peer mediation; peer helper and peer leader programs; community service learning; extracurricular sports; recreation; adventure and arts programs; school watch; teen court programs; and

reaching out to at-risk or marginalized youth.

Instruction and Informal Learning — Classroom and informal instruction can help young people learn positive social skills, attitudes and beliefs. Evaluations have shown that this kind of learning can also enhance general decision-making skills, improve basic academic skills and school success, help to reduce stress and manage anger, develop conflict resolution skills, prevent violence, increase knowledge of and respect for law and consequences, increase youth involvement in the community and reduce discrimination, prevent alcohol and other drug use problems, develop responsibility and character and enhance media literacy skills to reduce the impact of media violence.

Opening Doors — A CAMH school-based program, Opening Doors is designed to prevent and/or reduce a variety of problems, including: substance use, truancy, violence and other antisocial behaviours among at-risk youth in their transition years (grades 8-10). The program combines student group learning with a parent program designed to foster a home environment where parents support and reinforce their children's school experience and their efforts to make lifestyle changes.

Positive Behavioural Expectations — Schools should have fair and consistently-implemented school conduct and discipline policies to reduce the number and severity of antisocial behaviours.

Parent and Community Support — Parents and other adults can be mobilized to support positive changes among youth and the community. Parents/guardians should be knowledgeable of and involved in the various aspects of their children's lives. Efforts should be made to help parents become more involved with the schools that their children attend.

Such programs as in-school mentoring are also recommended.

Appropriate Security Precautions — Well-designed school building and facilities, appropriate use of specialized equipment, as well as lighting and appropriate precautions can make school sites safer.

Inter-agency Partnership — A range of health, employment, social and counselling support services to families, youth and schools can decrease violence and help victims and offending youth to restore their place in the school and the community.

Health professionals and agencies, social service agencies, child welfare authorities, the police, employment and training institutions, housing authorities, the courts and other mandated public services can develop inter-agency plans that will make a difference. Co-ordinated case management and appropriate sharing of information can improve the young person's chances of success. Prepared responses to critical incidents, with appropriate supports to victims, their families and the school community can reduce the trauma related to serious incidents. Specialized support to youth with mental health disorders and emotional disturbances can be effective, as can co-ordinated support for rehabilitation and reintegration of young offenders.

Community-Wide Strategies

Effective violence prevention efforts require comprehensive approaches to reduce risks and enhance protective factors. These approaches need the collaboration of stakeholders from many community sectors, including the juvenile justice system, mental health agencies, the education sector, health and recreation agencies and child welfare services.

The U.S.-based Communities That Care strategy includes three phases:

1. The recruitment of key community leaders to serve on an overseeing body are trained in risk and protection-focused prevention.
2. A community risk and resource assessment includes data on the risk and protective factors for adolescent behavioural problems in the community. Risk factors for prevention activities are prioritized based on the findings. A plan is then developed to address targeted risk factors and enhance protective factors, drawing from a selection of evidence-based programs and strategies.
3. The final step involves implementing and evaluating the selected programs and strategies in collaboration with community leaders and grassroots community sectors who have a stake in the outcome. Data on baseline risk and protective factors serve as the benchmark against which to judge community progress in risk reduction and protective factor growth in subsequent years.

This strategic process requires leaders and community grassroots representatives to take ownership of the prevention planning process. Interventions must effectively target people they wish to serve. Combining the knowledge of effective risk- and protection-focused programs with local ownership produces the best outcomes.

Other recommended community-based programs include:

Mentoring Programs

Relationships are critical; one caring and competent adult in a child's life can make a tremendous difference. A U.S.-controlled study found that the Big Brothers/Big Sisters program resulted in 46 per cent less drug use, 32 per cent less hitting (people) and 52 per cent less truancy. According to a program-effectiveness study of Big Brothers/Big Sister mentoring programs, "the most notable

change in the young person is decreased anger/frustration and worry. The young person is also less often sad or unhappy following a mentoring relationship, less fearful or anxious, more persevering and less likely to be restless or hyperactive or to cry excessively.

Despite these results, approximately half of mentor pairings fail to develop into ongoing relationships. More research needs to be conducted on the characteristics of successful mentors or mentoring relationships.
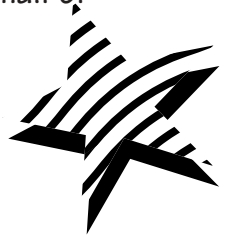
After-School Programming

Juvenile crime and at-risk behaviour are most likely to occur immediately after school, when many children are unsupervised over long periods.

A Canadian study of an intensive after-school program (involving sports, music, dancing and scouting) demonstrated a 75 per cent reduction in juvenile arrests. Unfortunately, the effects were not sustained beyond three years, because the intervention was not co-ordinated with other prevention initiatives. This illustrates the importance of addressing multiple risk and protective factors, and should not detract from the value of having such programs.

Community Policing

In an era of decreasing resources, crime prevention offers a cost-effective way to make communities safer. Community policing engages residents as well as law enforcement officers in efforts to help people resist crime, feel less afraid, better organize their neighbourhoods and restore or sustain civic vitality. Researchers have repeatedly pointed out that there is no one "right" way to implement community policing.

Guiding Principles and Recommendations

Further research is needed to better define best practices in violence prevention. But based on what is known so far, here are some important guiding principles, or recommendations, to consider:

- Youth violence can be prevented. But there are no "magic bullets" or quick fixes that will work for a sustained period.
- The earlier the better. Several early intervention programs that focus on both the family and child have demonstrated positive long-term effects on serious, violent and chronic delinquency.
- Fostering pro-social behaviour and preventing youth violence requires broad, community-based ownership, planning, evidenced-based interventions and a thorough understanding of risk- and protection-focused prevention programs.
- The challenges of cross-system, community-wide programs are numerous, yet they can achieve dramatic results that no one organization or sector could possibly hope to match.
- There are two important groups of offenders to be aware of: the Life Course Persistent offenders, who begin at an early age and continue through adulthood; and the Adolescent-Limited offenders, who typically offend only during adolescence. Different interventions are required for these groups at different developmental stages.
- School-based prevention programs have been found to play a key role in preventing adolescent problem behaviours, including violence. Co-ordinated, comprehensive programs that involve teachers, parents, children and community agencies have shown positive results.
- Using a risk- and protection-focused approach that engages and empowers community members and multiple sectors to use evidence-based programs and strategies can have many positive effects on children and youth that include, but go far beyond, the prevention and reduction of youth violence.

Resources and Services for and About Youth

The Incredible Years Parenting Program – Contact Mary-Lynn Reddon D'Arcy at (416) 535-8501 ext. 4371.

Additional Web-based Resources

The following Web sites each have extensive listings of other relevant sites.*

The Institute for the study of Antisocial behaviour in Youth (affiliated with CAMH and the Hospital for Sick Children): www.iay.org

Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence: www.colorado.edu/cspv

Safe and Healthy Schools Gateway: www.safehealthyschools.org (This site includes an extensive resource/Web site listing.)

The London Family Court Clinic has produced material and resources focused on violence prevention, including A.S.A.P.: A School-Based Anti-Violence Program: www.lfcc.on.ca

The Bully Beware Program in British Columbia: www.bullybeware.com

Growing Healthy Canadians: A Guide for Positive Child Development: www.growinghealthykids.com

Canadian Centre for Studies of Children at Risk: www-fhs.mcmaster.ca/cscr/

Incredible Years Parents, Teachers, and Children Training Series and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention: www.ncjrs.org/html/ojjdp/2000_6_3/contents.html

* Please note that inclusion of these sites does not imply endorsement of their content by CAMH.

Resources and Services for and about Youth

Information Line

If you have a touch-tone phone, you can use the service 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Every day from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. (except holidays), trained staff are on hand to serve people without touch-tone service, and to provide information and referrals to anyone who needs help.

This service is free and completely confidential. Call as often as you like. Taped messages include: Alcohol, Children and the Family; Talking with your Kids About Drugs; and An Early Start: Drug Education Begins at Home. The 24-hour Information Line has more than 36 taped messages in English and French, touching on a wide variety of mental health, alcohol- and other drug-related topics. Selected messages are also available in several other languages, such as Cantonese, Greek, Italian, Polish, Portuguese, Punjabi and Spanish.

- Ontario Toll-Free: 1-800-463-6273
- Toronto: (416) 595-6111
- Substance Abuse Network of Ontario (SANO): sano.camh.net

Other Information

A large variety of information is available via fax, free of charge. To access the FaxBack Library, dial (416) 595-6099 and follow the prompts.

If you need more details about alcohol and other drug treatment, call the Drug and Alcohol Registry of Treatment (DART). Ontario Toll-Free: 1-800-565-8603

For courses related to specialized mental health and addiction knowledge and skills, contact Education and Training Services at (416) 595-6020.

Web-based Resources

- Virtual Party: www.virtual-party.org

- Educating Students about Drug Use and Abuse: Ready-To-Use Lesson Plans for Drug Education in Your Classroom: sano.camh.net/curriculum

- Preventing Substance Use Problems among Young People: A Compendium of Best Practices: www.cds-sca.com

Public Information Materials

- An Early Start
- My Kid On Drugs?
- About Cocaine
- About Smoking
- About Marijuana
- About Alcohol
- Help! There's a Teenager in My Home!
- Take Action: Alcohol, Other Drug Problems and Your Family

Other Resources

- Let 'Em Go: How to Support Youth in Creating Their Own Solutions

- Drug Use Among Ontario Students: Findings from the Ontario Student Drug Use Survey (1977–2001)

- Youth and Drugs: An Education Package for Professionals

- Youth Action Program

- The Smart Report: Substance Abuse and Canadian Youth

- Opening Doors (school-based program for Grade 9 students at risk)

- Freedom to Act: The Harm Reduction for Rural Youth Project Experience; Supporting Youth Creating Solutions for Youth

For additional information about these or other CAMH products, or to place an order, please contact:

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33 Russell Street
Toronto, Ontario M5S 2S1

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