

Dispelling Myths about Youth Violence

by Mark Totten

/The Ottawa Citizen,/ Feb. 10, 1999

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Once again, the media has focused our attention on the important issue of youth violence. A quick scan of the headlines past couple of days leaves the impression that violence amongst the teen population is spiraling out of control.

For example, "Thugs pound cops in downtown brawl," Ottawa Sun, Jan. 27. "Youth killed in Bayshore stabbing, Knife attack draws 90 days, Teen to serve 17 months for gang attacks," Jan. 30, the Citizen.

This recent violence in Ottawa-Carleton is not part of a larger trend in Canada. By failing to make this fact clear, the media escalates a growing panic in our community about young people and violence.

It is helpful to dispel myths about and gangs by using current statistics. To begin, the youth violence crime rate is decreasing, and the most common types of violence are assaults leaving no injuries and involving no weapons. Although the 1997 overall rate of youth charged for violent crimes was just over twice the 1987 rate, the vast majority of these acts included the least serious of all violent, criminal acts. Further, this rate has not increased since 1994 and in fact, decreased in 1996 and in 1997. A major contributing actor to this decrease in violent crime is that young men, who commit the bulk of violent crime, comprise a smaller and smaller proportion of Canada's aging population.

In 1997, according to a recent report by the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, youth charged with assault accounted for only 13 per cent of all youth charged for any crime in Canada. Further, almost three-quarters of all youth charged with assault were charged with common assault, the least serious form of assault (including pushing, slapping, punching, and face-to-face verbal threats). Instead, most young offenders committed property offences, including theft and break and enter.

The rate of the most serious types of violent youth crime (referred to as major assault, including homicide, as assault causing bodily harm, aggravated assault, assault with a weapon) has remained constant at 18 per 10, 000 since 1995. The statistics report notes that between 1987 and 1997, a yearly average of 51 young people were charged with homicide, ranging from a low of 36 youths in 1987 to a high of 68 youths in 1995. The 54 young people were charged with homicide in 1997 represented less than 0.1 per cent of all youth charged with a criminal offence, and only 12 per cent of all people charged with homicide in Canada. Why, then, do the media insist on fanning the flames of the most

atypical, albeit serious, form of youth violence?

On a related note, the media's definition of a "youth gang" is problematic. A group of two or more youths, especially if they are black, would appear to warrant the label of gang. Cases in point: the Citizen's headline "Teen to serve 17 months for gang attacks" last Saturday. Apparently swarming a stranger with several other teenagers, irrespective of the seriousness of violence, constitutes a gang activity. Likewise the Toronto Star's conclusion that there are more than 180 youth gangs across greater Toronto is grossly inaccurate. Included in the Star's definition are youths who band together, think up a name and try to act tough and commit offences ranging from shoplifting to assault to murder.

The following definition of gangs is helpful in clarifying the difference between groups and gangs of youth. Most youths belong to groups of friends, which are a positive, healthy influence upon their social and emotional development. Groups can provide acceptance, identity, self-affirmation, and support young people in their transition from dependent childhood, through the difficult stage of adolescence, into independent adulthood. Less than one per cent of youth in Canada belong to hard-core criminal youth gangs.

The key difference between a group of youths and a gang is the gang's high degree of organization for violent criminal objectives. A youth gang is a group of three or more youths whose members routinely commit serious crimes and regularly engage in severe acts of violence. The media's inaccurate usage of the term gang does real harm to all youth, in particular to visible minority youth. More often than not, the media present black youth as being representative of all gang members. Although racial origin is an important factor in gang analysis, the media do not offer any thought or analysis as to why this may be the case. For example, visible minority youths face discrimination in many areas of their lives and as a result, experience blocked opportunities in the areas of schooling and employment. In the face of this, gangs have more appeal.

There are two ways in which the media could demonstrate some social responsibility and show leadership of this issue: by situating these shocking tragic events within the larger Canadian context of a decreasing youth violence rate and a generally law-abiding, respectful, vibrant youth population, and by digging for more detail to provoke thoughtful analysis.

Failure to do so results in yet another instance of fuelling the widening gap in Canada between a declining rate of criminal behaviour and a rising a fear of youth crime. It does no one any good to have their lives negatively influenced by media-based misinformation. Is it any wonder that some youth turn out to be antisocial, given the fact

that this is a foregone conclusion for some of us?

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