

**The Teens Hurting Teens Study is a collaborative effort of the London Police Service and the Child Witness Project of the Centre for Children and Families in the Justice System, funded by Ontario's Ministry of the Attorney General.**

The focus is on violent crime committed by youth against other youth. We read a random sample of 247 police reports from a three-year period before and after the proclamation of the Youth Criminal Justice Act (YCJA), analyzed all police occurrences for 2004, reviewed 105 case files from the Child Witness Project, and interviewed 17 young people (and their parents) who experienced or witnessed peer violence. In addition to a summary report, we have fact sheets of recommendations for four professional groups: schools, police, prosecutors, and those who help young witnesses prepare for court.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOLS

*The majority of peer-on-peer violence known to the police occurs at school or on the way to or from school. Because the victim and accused are usually acquainted, the reality of on-going contact can cause distress and raise safety concerns after the incident is discovered by authorities. Fear of retaliation or intimidation by the accused and his or her associates may result in the victim skipping classes, missing extracurricular opportunities, changing schools, or even dropping out.*

### Observations About Offenders

- police are using the YCJA to divert a significant proportion of youth without laying a charge, using means such as warnings and cautions
- youth who are charged typically have had multiple previous contacts with police as offenders, as witnesses or as victims of crime
- where police arrest a youth, it suggests they believe the offence is serious; the youth is likely to re-offend; and/or the victim is at risk
- in 70% of the cases studied here, the victim and accused were friends, acquaintances or school mates
- there was a wide variety of motives in the study cases including arguments over money or property and the targeting of students who were perceived as different

### Observations About Victims

- victim concern about reprisals is common and many youth feel intimidated by the accused and his or her friends
- we can assume that the majority of incidents remain undetected and undisclosed

- when the police are notified, it is typically the school or a parent who calls
- victims of peer violence feel further victimized if they have to drop courses or are unable to participate in sports or other extracurricular activities because of fear
- many teens are desensitized to violence and will minimize the impact on themselves or on others
- some teens develop trauma symptoms including cycles of depression, anger and anxiety; problems concentrating; loss of interest in activities; feelings of detachment from others; and, images of the incident suddenly coming to mind
- classes may be missed to attend counselling, medical or court-related appointments
- victims expecting to testify may experience anticipatory anxiety and some describe feeling that their lives are "on hold" during this waiting period which can span most of a school year
- court dates are not always convenient for victims and witnesses and may occur during examination times or on the first week of school

...helping  
the victims  
of 'youth  
on youth'  
criminal  
violence

## The Needs of Youth Victims at School

Paradoxically, victims of violent crime may feel more vulnerable after a report to authorities. In the school context, a student may worry about being called a “rat” and will typically fear reprisals. The school's response to peer violence can play a large role in maximizing a victim's ability to learn and fully participate in school. It is important that victims not be penalized for coming forward.

### **A Safe School Environment**

When peer-to-peer violence occurs in the school context, victims can be preoccupied with fears of seeing the accused and of re-victimization. Following an assault, the classroom, cafeteria, locker room or the school bus may be perceived or experienced as unsafe places. Schools can listen to the victim's concerns and develop a safety plan that may include changes to class schedules and transport arrangements.

### **Ensuring Support**

A police decision against laying a charge is not indication that the incident was minor or there was no victim trauma. It does mean, however, that a victim cannot access court-based and most police-based victim services. The police consider many factors before laying a charge, most importantly the accused's prior record. When charges are not laid, it may fall to the school alone to address issues of on-going safety and to help victims find any counselling they might need.

### **Understanding the Seriousness of the Incident**

Some victims deal with physical consequences of a crime, but the emotional consequences are typically just as great. On the face of it, an incident may appear fairly trivial, but characteristics of the offence alone are not usually the best indicator of degree of trauma. You may not be aware of prior abuse, family

stressors or on-going bullying that the student is reluctant to disclose or discuss. This incident may be the most recent in a series of violent acts experienced by a young victim at home and at school. On-going fear of an accused is also a factor that can precipitate or increase trauma symptoms. However, as is typical for teenagers, they may downplay their fears to others and minimize the seriousness of the offence.

### **Privacy Concerns**

Teenagers are acutely concerned with privacy. Some staff must know about the incident and any resulting prosecution, to monitor on-going safety issues. However, students will appreciate knowing that staff are apprised on a need-to-know basis and that no confidential information will ever be revealed by the school to other students.

## Recommendations

These suggestions are offered to Ontario schools.

- designate one teacher or guidance counselor as the “go to” person the victim can contact when he or she has concerns or needs to talk
- familiarize yourself with the implications for victims of the different ways police resolve cases in your community (e.g., charging vs. diversion) and how they compel an accused's attendance in

court (e.g., promise to appear vs. arrest)

- either the investigating officer or the victim can share with the school the details of legal restrictions on victim/offender contact, so incorporate this information into safety planning for the victim
- recognize points of potential difficulty for victims such as the day an accused returns from suspension or the day of any trial or sentencing

- be aware of how your actions toward the accused may be interpreted by the victim as condoning or minimizing the severity of his or her victimization
- do your best to accommodate the many appointments and court dates victims must attend while their cases are processed through the court system
- if a course requires a field trip to the courthouse, avoid entering a courtroom where a teenager or child is testifying

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