

The **eReview** provides analysis on public policy relating to Canadian families and marriage. Below please find an article on the role strong families have in youth crime prevention.

Family tragedy: Responding to youth crime

By Peter Jon Mitchell, Research Analyst, Institute of Marriage and Family Canada

The tragic slaying of Toronto teen Jordan Manners at the hands of two 17-year-olds has renewed public outcry against violent crime in our schools and communities. Politicians from various levels of government engaged in a rancorous round of finger pointing, demanding everything from gun control to prison-like security measures in schools. This case also reignited vocal disdain for the Canadian youth justice system. Few have stood up to talk about why families matter in this debate. It's not gun control legislation or politicians who curb crime. The families in which kids are raised matter as well.

The Youth Criminal Justice Act, which was adopted federally in 2003 to legislate justice for kids aged 12 to 17, has been the target of criticism ever since it was enacted. Writing in the *Winnipeg Sun*, Lorrie Goldstein recently called the YCJA a 'farce,' protecting the identities of the guilty and handing out slaps on the wrist [1] – yet this should come as no surprise. It was the intent of the legislation not to use sentencing as a deterrent. It's hard to ignore Goldstein's criticism when considering the one-day jail sentence followed by 15 months of supervision handed to a 15-year-old Winnipeg teen in 2003 for beating a man to death. [2] Last summer two 16-year-olds led London Ontario police on a wild car chase, undeterred by their combined 430 previous encounters with the law. [3]

A family affair

While the YCJA has obvious shortcomings, it's Canadian family culture that falls short in preventing youth crime. The YCJA preamble reads, "[C]ommunities, families, parents and others concerned with the development of young persons should...take reasonable steps to prevent youth crime by addressing its underlying causes..." [4] The burden of youth crime prevention rests not only on legislation but on families and parents supported by the community.

Studies indicate that unhealthy family situations do contribute to the root causes of youth crime. Likewise, strong families are one of the best deterrents of crime. Family dysfunction, poor parenting practices,



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neglect, and father absenteeism can lead to antisocial behaviour and increase a child's risk of offending. [5] Studies have suggested that the presence of a father plays a vital role in the life of a child. A longitudinal nationally representative study found that children of absent fathers were at a significant increased risk for incarceration before the age of 30. [6] That's why Temple University child psychologist Laurence Steinberg argues, "Any attempt to reduce youth violence...must include a systematic effort to improve the home environments of...children and adolescents and, in particular, to engage...parents in the business of parenting." [7] This does not excuse youth of the responsibility of their actions, but families have an important role in shaping the values of their children.

Steinberg suggests family-friendly policies and programs to promote parental effectiveness, parental education and prenatal care. He also argues additional benefits to families are derived from programs addressing mental health, substance abuse recovery and the reduction of poverty. [8] A study by Dr. David Olds, professor of pediatrics, psychiatry and preventative medicine at the University of Colorado, found that when single low-income mothers were visited by public health nurses throughout pregnancy and the first two years after birth, their children were less likely to be arrested, convicted or violate probation and were less likely to participate in risk behaviours such as drugs and alcohol consumption. [9]

Canadian youth justice in retrospect

Parliamentarians at the dawn of the twentieth century realized that imprisoning youth with adult convicts was likely to entrench young people in a life of crime rather than deter them. The Juvenile Delinquent Act of 1908 referred young people to detention homes and centres but sidestepped due process of law, eliminating initiatives such as the appeals process. [10] The 1983 Young Offenders Act corrected the 'punishment without process' nature of the JDA, by attempting to balance legal process with welfare provisions. [11] Lacking clear principles, the YOA produced sentencing disparities, even between similar cases. When the government proposed the YCJA, it was billed as 'get tough' legislation that would restore a purposed and principled framework for youth justice. [12] Diverting cases away from custody and focusing on rehabilitation, the YCJA has weathered similar criticism levelled against the YOA, especially with the prevalence of gangs and violent crime in urban centres.

The YCJA was not intended to be a stand alone preventative measure. That responsibility also falls on the parents, family and community in which Jordan's killers failed to develop into responsible and honourable young men. If action is demanded from the government on youth crime, it should be for policies and programs that support the development of strong and vibrant families.

Cultural change

Perhaps still stung by his time in prison, one time Watergate hatchet-man turned prison reformer, Charles Colson remarked a few short

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TEMPLE UNIVERSITY
CHILD PSYCHOLOGIST**

years after his release that deterrence is best achieved through cultural change [13]. American black activist and founder of the National Ten Point Leadership Foundation, Reverend Eugene Rivers would agree. He argues that active fathers are needed to combat the 'globalization of the thug life.' [14] Reflecting on Toronto's youth violence Rivers called on black churches to engage the cultural and practical dimensions of gang-related violence. [15] Community institutions like churches can support cultural change by strengthening families who challenge the culture of violence. The Manners' murder signals a need for cultural change that youth justice legislation, gun control and security measures alone cannot provide. The mechanism of cultural change is established on the foundational building block of society – strong, healthy and vibrant families supported by community initiatives and bolstered by family-friendly public policy.

[1] Goldstein, L. (2007, May 30) Youth crime law is a farce. *The Winnipeg Sun*. 8.

[2] Matthews, G. (2006, June 23) Take off the kid gloves, Vic. *The Ottawa Sun*. 13.

[3] Kirwin, S. (2006, August 17) 430 times later, youths in trouble. *The London Free Press*. A.1.

[4] Youth Criminal Justice Act (2002) retrieved May 31, 2007 from

<http://www.justice.gc.ca/en/ps/yj/repository/downloads/60100000.pdf>

[5] Sprott, J.B. and Doob, A.N. (1998) *Who are the most violent ten and eleven year olds? An introduction to future delinquency*. Ottawa: Applied Research Branch Strategic Policy Human Resources Development Canada. 7. Retrieved June 1, 2007 from

<http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/en/cs/sp/sdc/pkrf/publications/research/1998-002361/w-98-29.pdf>

Ralph, A. and Sanders, M.R. (2004, August) The 'teen triple P' positive parenting program: A preliminary evaluation. *Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice*. Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology. 1.

[6] Harper, C. and McLanahan, S. (2004) *Father absence and youth incarceration*. San Francisco: Center for Research on Child Wellbeing.

[7] Laurence Steinberg as quoted by Doob, A.N. and Cesaroni, C. (2004) *Responding to youth crime in Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 264.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Olds *et al* as reported by Doob and Cesaroni, 262-63.

[10] Doob and Cesaroni, 190-92.

[11] Ibid, 192-98.

[12] Ibid, 22-23, 224-227.

[13] Colson, C.W. (1979) *Life Sentence*. Lincoln: Chosen Books Publishing. 217. Considering the failure of the prison system to reform criminals, Colson offers a brief historical reflection on cultural change initiated by churchmen and revivalists.

[14] Rivers, E. (2005, December 2) The sins of the fathers are visited on black youth. *The Globe and Mail*. A23.

[15] Ibid.