



# Youth and Violence

Information from...

## The National Clearinghouse on Family Violence

### Introduction

This fact sheet provides an overview of violence perpetrated by and among youth in Canada. Recently, the media have focused on sensational reports of youth gangs, school violence and murder involving youth. Many Canadians are left with the impression that youth violence has dramatically increased in the past two decades. According to police statistics however, this is not the case. Only a small minority of youth commit violent crimes. Contrary to popular opinion, most violent young people most often victimize young friends or acquaintances, not adults or strangers. This fact sheet focuses on both young perpetrators and young victims and examines the causes and effects of violence.

### Defining Youth and Violence

*Youth violence* may be defined as any intentional physical, sexual or psychological assault on another person (or persons) by one or more young people aged 12 to 19 years.

The most common *perpetrators* of youth violence are young, heterosexual males. Although a growing number of female youth are violent, the abusive behaviour of males is more frequent and severe. Youth violence can be perpetrated *collectively* by groups or gangs, or committed by *individuals*.

Similarly, the *victims* of youth violence can be groups or gangs of youth, or individual youth. The most common victims of youth violence are: peers, including girlfriends, boyfriends and other young people; family members, including siblings and parents; and

members of ethnocultural groups or sexual minorities (homosexuals, lesbians, bisexuals).

Victimization has been linked to the increased use of drugs and alcohol, eating disorders, tobacco use and mental health problems. Experiencing abuse can cause low self-esteem and other emotional problems, which in turn can result in difficulties in academic performance, in the work force, and in personal relationships.<sup>1</sup>

Experiencing violence early in life can set a pattern which extends throughout an individual's life. Young women who have experienced abuse during childhood or adolescence may direct the resulting pain *inward*, developing various forms of self-destructive behaviour, such as self-mutilation and eating disorders. Young men who have experienced abuse during childhood or adolescence may express this pain *outward*, being violent toward others. Many of the youth who are violent also engage in self-destructive actions, such as suicide attempts.<sup>2</sup>

## Forms of Youth Violence

**Emotional abuse** includes insulting or ridiculing someone or subjecting that person to other forms of verbal humiliation; threatening to use physical violence or murder; throwing, smashing, kicking or destroying the property of others; stalking and monitoring another's activities; displaying jealousy or possessiveness;

and sexist, racist and homophobic verbal abuse. Such abuse is used to control other people's behaviour and place limits on their freedom. Of all the forms of youth violence, emotional abuse is the most common.<sup>3</sup>

**Physical abuse** includes pushing, grabbing, shoving, slapping, kicking, punching, hitting with an object, choking, using or threatening to use a weapon against someone, and murder. These assaults may cause both physical and emotional harm.

**Sexual abuse** includes any unwanted coercive sexual contact, usually as a result of verbal pressure, threats of physical force, or actual physical force. These forms of violent behaviour can cause physical and emotional harm. It is primarily young men who perpetrate sexual violence on female peers, siblings and, in a minority of cases, other young men or boys. Victims typically are forced to perform sexual acts against their will and suffer pain or injury in the process.

## How Widespread Is The Problem?

For many reasons, it is difficult to attain an accurate picture of the extent of youth violence in Canada. First, there is no consensus on the definition of "youth violence." There has been a tendency to rely primarily on official crime statistics when defining the issue. But these statistics usually account only for crime that is reported to the police

and only when a charge is laid under the *Criminal Code*.

Many variables influence both the reporting of crimes and the laying of criminal charges. Many crimes are unsolved or unreported. Moreover, some of the behaviours included in the definition of youth violence used for this fact sheet are not criminal offences (for example, verbal humiliation).

Despite these limitations, youth violence continues to receive significant attention from the media, the police and the general public. Some highlights reflecting the reality of the situation as best we know it, are as follows.

- Every year, approximately 1 in 10 youth comes into contact with the police for violations of the *Criminal Code* or other federal statutes.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, it is only a small minority of young people who become involved with the young offender system. Data collected in 1995 indicate that, of these youth, 19% were charged with a violent offence. Of the small number charged with a violent crime, only a minority related to homicide, attempted murder and aggravated assault. Since 1986, most youth charged under the *Criminal Code* or other federal statutes have been charged with property offences.<sup>5</sup>
- From 1985 to 1994, the youth homicide rate remained relatively stable, fluctuating between 1.5 and 2.5 per 100 000 youths.<sup>6</sup>
- Over the past 25 years, there have been significant shifts in the way police deal with youth crime. Police now lay charges more often than they did in the past.<sup>7</sup>
- There are no reliable statistics on the incidence and prevalence of youth violence involving members of visible minorities, sexual minorities, lesbians, parents or siblings. However, recent research suggests that these categories of individuals are at relatively high risk of experiencing youth violence.<sup>8</sup>
- Recent research on Canadian university and college campuses found between 16% and 35% of women surveyed had experienced at least one physical or sexual assault by a boyfriend in the previous 12 months. Approximately 45% of the women surveyed reported they had been sexually abused since leaving high school.<sup>9</sup> Although this research used a sample over the age of 19, the findings are applicable to the youth population. Recent qualitative research with a sample of 13 to 17 year-old girlfriend abusers suggests that youth violence against female dating partners is an issue in primary and high schools.<sup>10</sup>

### **RISK FACTORS for youth violence perpetration and victimization**

Youth violence is not confined to any one subgroup of the youth population; it cuts across all racial, religious, gender and socio-economic backgrounds.

However, there are factors which place certain groups of the youth population at risk of both offending and being victimized. Identification of these factors can facilitate successful early intervention, violence prevention and health promotion.

### **1. Socio-Demographic Factors**

**Gender:** Most violent youth are male.<sup>11</sup> This is true for both individual and collective abusive behaviour. Of course, this does not mean that *all* male youth are violent. Clearly, only some young men are abusive. Male youth (including homosexuals, members of visible minorities and street youth) are also frequently victimized by youth violence.

**Income Level:** Individuals with few economic resources are at higher risk of both perpetrating and being victimized by physical violence.<sup>12</sup> People living in poverty do not have equitable access to legitimate opportunities for occupational or financial success. They are at greater risk of experiencing mental health problems, unemployment and school drop-out than people not living in poverty.

**Ethnic Origin:** Male youth from ethnocultural minority groups are at higher risk of joining youth gangs and participating in collective acts of violence than youth who are not members of ethnic or visible minorities. This is not related to personality factors but to the racist discrimination,

language barriers, lack of educational and employment opportunities, and poverty that many of these youth experience.<sup>13</sup>

### **2. Familial Factors**

**Violence:** In many cases, perpetrators and victims of youth violence have also been abused in their childhood by adults. Many boys who have witnessed their mother being beaten, and/or have experienced child abuse, in turn abuse other family members and/or peers in adolescence and adulthood. Girls who witness or experience abuse in childhood often go on to suffer abuse at the hands of boyfriends and male partners. Evidence indicates that such experience increases the likelihood of later perpetration or experiencing abuse.<sup>14</sup>

**Harsh Parental Discipline Practices:** Severe and habitual physical punishment by parents or guardians has been connected with the later development of violent behaviour patterns in children and youth.<sup>15</sup>

**Criminal Behaviour:** Criminality of other family members is a key factor in the delinquency of some youth. A recent study concluded that if an older member of a boy's family has been convicted of a criminal offence, the probability of that boy committing a criminal offence increases more than two and one-half times.<sup>16</sup>

### **3. School Factors**

Low school grades, school failure and drop-out have been associated with the experiences of child abuse and/or victimization in teenage years. They are linked to the serious effects that abuse has on both self-esteem and general health.<sup>17</sup>

### **4. Risk Factors Particular to Males**

**Patriarchal Values:** In some male youth, a belief in rigid, traditional gender roles increases the risk of perpetrating abuse against females. Some males believe that they are more important and have the right to control females. When they believe their dominance is being threatened, these youth can use violence in an attempt to regain control.<sup>18</sup>

**Peer Group/Gang Involvement:** Male youth groups or gangs are involved in a significant portion of all youth violence. Not all youth groups can be categorized as gangs; indeed, belonging to a peer group is a healthy part of adolescent development for most youth.<sup>19</sup> The most important factor that distinguishes a gang from a healthy group of friends is the violent, criminal behaviour of the members, for example some illicit drug activities. If a young male is involved with a gang, he will likely be violent along with other gang members.<sup>20</sup>

## **Resiliency**

Several factors can reduce the risk that youth will experience violence. These “protective” factors include a non-abusive home; strong, early childhood attachment to caregiver(s) and good parental supervision; positive adult role models; and completion of high school and post-secondary school.<sup>21</sup>

### **What You Can Do and Where You Can Go for Help**

**Perpetrators:** If you are behaving abusively toward others, counselling or parenting skills training services listed in your local telephone directory can help you to develop non-violent ways of dealing with people. However, *only you can make the decision to stop your violent behaviour.*

**Victims:** There are trained counsellors and services in your community (including support groups, outreach programs and drop-in centres) that can help you to deal with being victimized by violence. If you go to school, speak with a trusted teacher or guidance counsellor who can help you get the help you need. Speak with another adult whom you trust. If you are not able to contact a counselling agency, you can call the Kids Help Phone free of charge at 1-800-668-6868.

**Parents:** If you are a parent and you think that your teenager is violent or is being abused, don't be afraid to seek help for yourself or your teenager. This

could be an important step in stopping a cycle of abuse in your family.

**Teachers and Counsellors:** You can play an important role in preventing violence and helping abused youth recover from their experiences with violence. If you encounter youth who are the perpetrators or victims of violent behaviour, you may have a legal obligation to contact the police or the local child welfare office, depending upon the age of the young person.

**Peers:** If you think that one of your friends is being abusive, let them know that the behaviour is wrong, against the law and hurtful. Let them know that they are responsible for their actions, and that there is help available. If you think that a friend, family member, or even a person you do not know well, is being abused, offer them your support. Encourage them to seek help, and let them know that they are not to blame for the abuse.

### **Suggested Reading**

The National Clearinghouse on Family Violence (NCFV) has many publications related to youth and violence, such as: *Dating Violence* (fact sheet); *Making the Decision to Care: Guys and Sexual Assault*; *When Teenage Girls Have Been Sexually Abused: A Guide for Teenagers*; and *When Teenage Boys Have Been Sexually Abused: A Guide for Teenagers*. Contact information for the NCFV is provided at the end of this fact sheet.

There are also resources on the issue of youth and violence available from other Canadian organizations.

Suggested publications include the following:

*Alternatives to Violence: A Therapeutic Group Program for Male Youth Who Are Abusive Towards Females*, by Mark Totten, Louise Manton and Don Baker (1995). Available from the Youth Services Bureau of Ottawa-Carleton, 1338½ Wellington Street, Ottawa, Ontario K1Y 3B7. Tel: (613) 729-1000; Fax: (613) 729-1918

*Healthy Relationships: A Violence Prevention Curriculum* (1994). Available from Men for Change, P.O. Box 33005, Quinpool Postal Outlet, Halifax, Nova Scotia B3L 4T6. Tel: (902) 422-8476; Fax: (902) 425-1862

*Preventing Crime by Investing in Families and Communities: Promoting Positive Outcomes in Youth Twelve to Eighteen Years Old* (1996). Available from the National Crime Prevention Council, 130 Albert Street, 8th Floor, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0H8. Tel: (613) 941-0505; Fax: (613) 952-3515

*Promoting Healthy, Non-Violent Relationships: A Group Approach with Adolescents for the Prevention of Woman Abuse and Interpersonal Violence*, by David Wolfe and Bob Gough (1994). Available from the Youth Relationships Project, Department of Psychology, University of Western Ontario, London,

Ontario N6A 5C2. Tel: (519) 679-2111 ext. 4726; Fax: (519) 661-3961

*Sexual Assault: A Help Book for Teens in the Northwest Territories*, by Diana Barr (1992). Available from the Victims Assistance Committee, Department of Justice, Government of the Northwest Territories, P.O. Box 1320, Yellowknife, Northwest Territories X1A 2L9. Tel: (403) 920-6911; Fax: (403) 873-0299

“Taking Action on Homophobia and Violence,” in *Taking Action on Violence in the Lives of Young Women: A Youth Leader’s Kit* (1995). Available from Community Action on Violence Against Women, YWCA of Canada, 80 Gerrard Street East, Toronto, Ontario M5B 1G6. Tel: (416) 593-9886; Fax: (416) 971-8084

*Parent Abuse: The Abuse of Parents by Their Teenage Children* (1996). Available from The Parent Abuse Project, Captain William Spry Community Centre, 10 Kidston Road, Halifax, Nova Scotia, B3R 2J7. Tel: (902) 479-1111; Fax: (902) 479-1177

### **Audio-Visual Resources**

There are a number of audio-visual resources on youth and violence available through the joint Health Canada/National Film Board of Canada (NFB) audio-visual collection. These videos can be borrowed from partner public libraries across Canada. Suggested videos include:

“*Right From The Start*,” (1992) about violence in dating relationships, and “*Taking Charge*,” (1996) about sexual harassment, homophobia, racism and violence. Please note that “*Taking Charge*” is currently available only from NFB. To order videos from the NFB, call 1-800-267-7710, fax (514) 283-7564, or write to NFB of Canada, Sales and Customer Services, P.O. Box 6100, Station Centre-ville, Montreal, Quebec H3C 3H5.

Audio-visual resources on the issue of youth and violence are available from a number of Canadian organizations. Suggested resources include the following:

“*The Guy Next Door*” (1995), about male youth violence against females, and “*Bonehead*” (1994), about youth involvement in neo-nazi Skinhead gangs, were both produced by the Youth Services Bureau/Winter Films Productions. Copies may be obtained from the Youth Services Bureau of Ottawa-Carleton, 1338 ½ Wellington Street, Ottawa, Ontario K1Y 3B7. Tel: (613) 729-1000; Fax: (613) 729-1918

“*Madison: Not Just Anybody*,” (1992) about dating violence, is part of the Madison Series, and is available from Forefront Productions, 609-402 West Pender Street, Vancouver, British Columbia V6B 1T6. Tel: (604) 682-7910; Fax: (604) 682-8583

“*Youth Violence: What’s Out There*” (1995), a video produced by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, deals with different forms of youth violence and non-violent methods of conflict resolution. It is available from Friday Communications, P.O. Box 91511, West Vancouver, British Columbia V7V 3P2. Tel: (604) 986-0252; Fax: (604) 986-0277

## Endnotes

1. Canadian Council on Social Development, “It’s a Matter of Good Health: Stop Youth Violence,” *Vis-à-vis: A National Newsletter on Family Violence*, 13 (2) (Spring, 1996), pp. 1,4.
2. Lundy, Colleen, and Totten, Mark, “Youth on the Fault Line,” *Social Worker* (Fall, 1997).
3. Totten, Mark, *Power for the Powerless: Girlfriend Abuse by Marginal Male Youth* (unpublished doctoral thesis (Ottawa: Carleton University, 1996), pp. 34-36.
4. Hung, Kwing, and Lipinski, Stan, “Questions and Answers on Youth and Justice,” *Forum on Corrections Research*, 7(1) (1995).
5. Statistics Canada, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, “Canadian Crime Statistics” in *Juristat*, 16(10) (1995), pp. 14-15.
6. Statistics Canada, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, “Homicide in Canada – 1995” in *Juristat*, 16(11) (1995), p. 10.
7. Carrington, Peter J., and Moyer, S., “Trends in Youth Crime and Police Response, Pre- and Post-YOA” in *Canadian Journal of Criminology*, 36(1) (1994), p. 22.
8. For examples, see:  
(1) Wiehe, Vernon. *Perilous Rivalry, When Siblings Become Abusive* (Toronto: Lexington Books, 1990);  
(2) Weissman, Eric. “Kids Who Attack Gays,” in Herek, Gregory and Berrill, Kevin (Eds.), *Hate Crimes: Confronting Violence Against Lesbians and Gay Men* (Newbury Park: Sage, 1992).
9. Kelly, Katherine, and DeKeseredy, Walter. “The Incidence and Prevalence of Woman Abuse in Canadian University and College Dating Relationships,” *Canadian Journal of Sociology* (18)2 (1993), pp. 137-159.
10. Totten, loc.cit.
11. Statistics Canada, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, “Youth Court Statistics 1994-95 Highlights” in *Juristat*, 16(4) (1996), p. 4.



12. Smith, Michael. "Patriarchal Ideology and Wife Beating: A Test of a Feminist Hypothesis," *Violence and Victim, Volume 5* (1990), pp. 257-273; Tremblay, Loeber, et al., "Predicting Early Onset of Male Anti-Social Behaviour from Pre-School Behaviour, in *Archives of General Psychiatry, Volume 5*, pp. 732-739.
13. Pearcy, Patricia, *Youth/Criminal Gangs in British Columbia* (B.C.: Ministry of the Solicitor General, 1991), pp. 1-2, 6-7.
14. Mathews, Fred, *The Invisible Boy: Revisioning the Victimization of Male Children and Teens* (Ottawa: Health Canada, 1996), pp. 45-46; Modlin, Barbara, *Review of the Family Factors Influencing Juvenile Delinquency*, for the National Crime Prevention Council Secretariat, March 1995.
15. American Psychological Association, "Volume 1: Summary Report of the American Psychological Association Commission on Violence and Youth" in *Violence and Youth Psychology's Response* (1993), p. 19.
16. Fisher, Donald G., *Family Relationship Variables and Programs Influencing Juvenile Delinquency* (Ottawa: Solicitor General Canada, 1985).
17. Melter, L.J. et al., "An Analysis of the Learning Style of Adolescent Delinquents," in *Journal of Learning Disabilities, Volume 17* (1994), pp. 600-608.
18. Smith, loc.cit.
19. Weiler, Richard, *Youth Violence and Youth Gangs: Responding to Community Concerns* (Ottawa: Solicitor General Canada and Department of Justice Canada, 1994), p. 4.
20. Mathews, Fred, *Youth Gangs on Youth Gangs* (Ottawa: Solicitor General Canada, 1993), p. 15.
21. Zimrin, Hanita, "A Profile of Survival." *Child Abuse and Neglect, 10(3)*, (1986), pp. 339-349.

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For further information on family violence, contact:

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toll-free **1-800-267-1291**  
Fax: (613) 941-8930  
Faxlink: (613) 941-7285  
Toll-Free: 1-888-267-1233

Internet Homepage: <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/nc-cn>



TTY/TDD users: (613) 952-6396  
or toll-free: 1-800-561-5643

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