

Special Report: Peel's Unfair Share

The fight against youth crime:

What is it going to take?

This is the fourth in a series of stories that will highlight the problems that underfunding of Peel's social services are causing for Peel residents.

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"Everyone fails once the trigger has been pulled. At that point, it is too late: it's too late for the victim, it's too late for the shooter."

So says high school teacher James Flaherty about the fight to keep Peel's young people away from crime. He says it's time for the government to stop pouring resources into punishing, and start doing a better job of preventing.

"It costs \$1 million to investigate just one murder in Peel," said Flaherty. "Imagine the kind of prevention work we could do with \$1 million."

Flaherty, who teaches at Malton's Ascension of Our Lord Secondary School, wrote and directed the award-winning short film, *Mouse*, about gang violence in schools. He worked closely with police on the script and said he was amazed at the statistics. According to the most recent annual report from Peel Regional Police, there are 122 known gangs and 1,834 gang members or associates in Peel.

"The role models in many of these neighbourhoods are the gang members," said Flaherty. "The kids see the money, and the fearful respect these gangs get, and they want that. We need to give them alternatives."

The tripping point isn't a lack of ideas, said Regional councillor Gael Miles, who chairs the Peel Youth Violence Prevention Network Steering Committee (CPYUPN). Her group has 27 recommendations, from parenting programs to using schools as community hubs, ready to go — once it finds the money.

"The only way to start to fix these problems is to get recognition from the provincial government, which

primarily funds the human services, that we are seriously underfunded," Miles said. "We just can't do it with the funding we have now."

Part of the PYVPPN's mandate is to identify gaps in regional services, and Miles said one of the biggest is violence prevention programs in middle schools.

"We have Success by Six for the younger years, and the YES (Youth Education and Safety) program for the high schools, but in between there is nothing to help them talk about support networks or mental health," she said, adding a pilot program at three Brampton middle schools was a huge success. "We've had requests from all the other schools to bring it in, but again, no money."

Flaherty said the middle school years are crucial for keeping young people on the right track. The lead character in his film, *Mouse*, is only 10 when he falls in with a local gang.

"It may seem young, but it's not unheard of," he said. "If they get caught, there's a belief that nothing will happen to them, they aren't going to go to jail."

Flaherty said the problem doesn't start with the young people, but in the world around them.

"It's sad when you talk to these kids and ask them where do you see yourself in five years and they tell you they will be happy just to be alive," he said. "It's a pretty dismal outlook they are fighting against."

One former young offender, whose identity is protected by youth laws, said the warning signs were there — a



In 2008, the most recent statistics available, Peel Regional Police reported 1,040 young people in Peel were charged with violent offences such as assault, sex crimes or robberies. In the same time period, another 817 were charged with crimes against property, such as breaking and entering or theft, and yet another 1,034 were charged with offences related to driving, drugs or weapons.

Photo by Torstar Network

suspension for smoking, a dislike of school and borderline grades — but it took getting arrested to put him on the right path.

"I was convicted of assaulting a guy with a beer bottle at a park behind my school," he said. "I had been drinking pretty heavily with friends and this guy walked by with his crew and things kinda got out of hand."

He spent 30 days in a youth facility and said part of his rehabilitation was a job training course. He now works in customer service and said he would've liked to have had access to similar programs in his teens.

"I think after-school programs would have benefited me. My school basically told me if you don't 'get it,' then tough luck," he said. "A tutoring program or something where you could stay extra time with some educators would have been helpful for sure. Also, I wish there was some more job training in high schools for kids who weren't really made for post-secondary education."

Deterrence programs do work, says Peel police Det. Steve Jones, the force's youth crime coordinator and liaison for the Pre-charge Diversion program.

He said they've seen a reduction in youth charges over the past few years, not due to a decrease in crime, but in the way situations are dealt with.

"The diversion program keeps them out of the court system," Jones said. "They don't get a criminal record, they do community services and write letters of apology, and just learn to be responsible people."

Jones said that in 2007, 445 young offenders went through the program and a follow-up one year later showed that 91 per cent had stayed out of trouble.

"It gives them a second chance," he said.

Second chances can make all the difference, said Scott Moreash, Peel District School Board trustee for the school inside Roy McMurtry Youth Centre, a correctional facility in Brampton for young offenders.

He said his students follow the same curriculum as before jail, but often improve with the smaller classes and social service programs they didn't have on the outside.

"These aren't monsters; they are normal kids who made a poor decision," Moreash said. "Yesterday, they were at Lorne Park, or Central Peel (secondary schools), and overnight they found themselves in Roy McMurtry."

Miles said fixing the problem involves treating not just the youth in trouble, but the people they look to for guidance.

"We need to help parents understand what their kids have to cope with every day at school, in the community," she said. "It used to be if there was a disagreement, one might slug the other. Now, it's knives and guns. That's the culture these kids are growing up in every day."

But accessing the social services needed — from newcomer settlement, to child care, to affordable housing — can be difficult as an ever-growing population has to make due with a stagnant level of resources.

The wait time for mental health and family counseling in Peel can be up to a year — an eternity for a family dealing with a child with a behaviour disorder, said Miles.

"When parents and teachers see these signs of aggression, they don't have anywhere to turn," she said.

"Even if they are lucky enough to get a referral to some sort of help, it could be months before they are seen."

The 2008 Roots of Violence study, a Queen's Park initiative that looked at how young people get involved in crime, found that 20 per cent of Ontario's young people have a mental health disorder, but 80 per cent of them do not receive help. As a result, their conditions deteriorate. Disruptions can lead to expulsions from school, or troubles with police, another reason why early intervention is the key, said Flaherty, who added that issues like poverty, culture clash and feeling like nobody cares can also send youths down the wrong path. He's on the committee putting together a new youth centre in Malton with an eye towards giving children and teens a positive hang-out.

"We are looking at what will literally keep these kids from falling into the traps of crime and gangs," he said. "For many of them, they have nothing else to do after school."

Miles said the Roots of Violence study echoed the sentiment.

"We need to stop closing doors on young people and start opening them instead," she said. "If they want to hang out at a recreation centre, we should not just be allowing, but encouraging them to come and giving them positive ways to get active in the community."

In the end, said Flaherty, governments need to make a stronger commitment to raising productive, contributing members of society by allocating more resources to young people — or face the consequences.

"If you don't give kids an alternative, they will find one," he said. "And it may not be the one you want."

