

A PROFILE OF YOUTH OFFENDERS IN CALGARY: AN INTERIM REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

The Canadian Research Institute for Law and the Family (CRILF) is conducting a three-year study of youth offending in Calgary with funding from the City of Calgary Community and Neighbourhood Services (Year 1) and the Alberta Law Foundation. The objectives of this study are to:

1. identify how the implementation of the *Youth Criminal Justice Act* has affected the flow of cases through the youth justice system in Alberta and the workload for various components of the provincial youth justice system;
2. develop a model for predicting why some Calgary youth become serious habitual offenders (SHOs), while others do not; and
3. build a knowledge base for the City of Calgary Community and Neighbourhood Services, Calgary Police Service and other relevant provincial-based agencies for increasing their effectiveness and efficiency by conducting an environmental scan of current best practices in Canada related to:
 - predictors (risk and protective factors) of offending by youth;
 - use of decision making instruments and protocols across Canada; and
 - programs targeted at chronic/persistent youth offenders across Canada.

The investigation of these objectives was planned over a three-year period and will result in a number of research reports. The activities for Year 1 of the study, which focussed primarily on Objective #2, are the focus of this report.

Methodology

The objective of the first year of this three-year study of youth offending in Calgary was to establish the foundation of a model to predict why some youth become more seriously involved in crime than others. Three major questions directed the research:

1. What are the contemporary trends of youth crime in Calgary?
2. How do the criminal histories of Serious Habitual Offenders (SHOs) in Calgary differ from those of non-SHOs?

3. What characteristics (i.e., demographic, familial, educational, community, interpersonal) and experiences (i.e., delinquency, gang involvement) differentiate youth in Calgary with various levels of involvement with the law?

To answer these questions, two major strategies were adopted:

1. An aggregate examination of the characteristics of youth crime in Calgary and the criminal histories of SHOs compared to non-SHOs using data from the Calgary Police Service Police Information Management System (PIMS); and
2. An in-depth examination of a cohort of youth who ranged from having minimal criminal involvement to serious criminal involvement. Interviews, probation file reviews, and reviews of Justice Online Information Network (JOIN) records were conducted with youth belonging to four different study groups:
 - Serious Habitual Offenders (SHOs): Youth who have been identified by a Multi-Disciplinary Resource Team and the Calgary Police Service according to specific criteria.
 - Chronic Offenders: Youth who have five or more substantive criminal incidents of which they have been found guilty (not including SHOs).
 - One-time Offenders: Youth who have one substantive criminal incident of which they have been found guilty (with no subsequent charges pending).
 - Gateway Participants: Youth who have come into contact with police but have been diverted pre-charge to Gateway, an extrajudicial measures program administered by City of Calgary Community and Neighbourhood Services and the Calgary Police Service.

These strategies yielded an incredibly rich source of data, both reinforcing and adding to past findings regarding the criminal involvement of youth.

Summary of Findings

Crime and Delinquency Among Calgary's Youth Offenders

In general, the characteristics of youth crime in Calgary matched common demographic patterns among youth offenders in the reported literature. Most youth offences in Calgary in 2006 were committed by males of approximately 16 years of age. Property offences were the most common. Male youth were more likely to be involved in crimes against the person than females, who were most commonly involved in property crimes. The aggregate analysis demonstrated that males were more often charged for their offences, which is reflected in part by the fact that a substantial proportion of the female youth interviewed belonged to the Gateway group – having been diverted away from being charged to an extrajudicial measures program.

Other studies (e.g., Smith et al., 1995; Graham & Bowling, 1995) have demonstrated that although SHOs compose only a small proportion of all youth offenders, they are responsible for a disproportionately high proportion of youth crime. Not only did the aggregate analysis from the current study reveal a similar pattern, the JOIN information for the study cohort revealed that, on average, SHOs are involved in substantially more criminal incidents than non-SHOs, also having a higher average number of incidents where charges were laid. Our findings also suggest that the criminal involvement for serious youth offenders escalates at an early age. Although self-report data indicated that youths' first contact with police was at roughly the same age across all groups, PIMS data demonstrated that SHOs had an earlier onset of recorded criminal contact than non-SHOs, and were more likely to be charged at younger ages. Further, this behaviour escalated at a substantially higher rate, peaking at age 14 (compared to age 16 for non-SHOs) before gradually decreasing in subsequent years. Thus, although most youth might have their first contacts with police at roughly the same age, more official measures were taken with the youth who would eventually become SHOs. Possible explanations for this could be the greater level of seriousness or frequency of their behaviour, or the possibility that these youth were in higher risk situations (i.e., run-aways, drug users, etc.). The significance of age 14 as the peak for SHOs criminal activity is similar to the findings from an earlier Calgary school-based study, which demonstrated that youths' self-reported delinquency peaks in Grade 9 (Paetsch & Bertrand, 1999). Criminal behaviour for non-SHOs, on the other hand, peaked at age 16, then decreased slightly.

While one might theorize that the tendency to charge SHOs at younger ages may be due to extrajudicial measures (EJMs) not being used, the findings from this study suggest otherwise: the use of extrajudicial measures is surprisingly more common for more serious offenders. Both the aggregate and JOIN data indicated that SHOs were more likely than non-SHOs to receive EJMs, with SHOs and Chronic offenders being more likely to receive EJMs for more than one incident. The reason for this is not certain, but may be explained by the fact that, given many SHOs and Chronic offenders have extensive contact with the criminal justice system, EJMs may offer solutions that have not yet been tried through traditional sanctions. Although the rate of successful completion of EJMs was high amongst all groups, it is clear that their effect is not lasting for some youth.

The early escalation of criminal behaviour among more serious offenders is accompanied by an escalation of the seriousness of their offences. Although both the aggregate and individual data demonstrated that property offences were clearly the most prominent amongst all groups, more seriously involved youth have a greater likelihood of having been charged with more crimes against the person and at younger ages. Self-reported delinquency indicates that Chronic offenders and SHOs are more likely to threaten/use force or a weapon in their crimes. While charge data for Gateway clients were not available (by definition), self-reported delinquency indicates that they were more likely to be involved in minor theft, and to a slightly lesser extent, harassment.

Although charge data across groups do not indicate that drug-related crimes are among the most common offences, self-report data paints quite a different picture of

drug involvement among the youth offender cohort. A majority of youth in all groups reported having used illegal drugs, ranging from just over half of the Gateway clients to all of the Chronic offenders and SHOs. Marijuana, ecstasy, and mushrooms were the most commonly used among all youth who had used drugs, and nearly all reported having used marijuana in particular in the past year. More criminally involved youth tended to report use of harder drugs, particularly crack and cocaine. Although a substantial proportion of SHOs reported using these drugs, their reported use in the past year dropped off significantly – whether it be due to their being incarcerated, or due to their involvement in the Serious Habitual Offender Program (SHOP) and the possibility that they had been connected with addictions resources. Chronic offenders, however, were slightly more likely to report hard drug use in the past year, indicating the possibility that their drug use had not yet been addressed, or they simply hadn't engaged with the resources provided. Drug dealing was also common among more serious offenders, with a substantial majority having experience with both buying and selling drugs.

Based on the results from both the aggregate and cohort data analysis, weapons were not a significant issue in the reported crimes of Calgary's youth offenders. Although weapons were not being used in reported crimes to any great extent, and despite the fact that youth felt generally safe in their communities, youth are carrying weapons quite regularly. With the exception of Gateway clients, many respondents reported having taken a weapon to school or carrying one in the community, this tendency becoming greater for those more seriously involved in crime. Further, although not prominent in official records (i.e., PIMS, JOIN) self-report findings indicate that a substantial number of youth – particularly Chronic offenders and SHOs – have used weapons in the past.

The Significance of Social Factors

Possible social explanations for why some youth become more seriously involved in crime than others were found in the interviews with youth. Clear disparities were discovered across social elements, beginning with noticeable differences regarding familial situations. Findings suggest that youth more seriously involved with crime tend to come from less stable family situations. More seriously involved offenders were more likely to come from single parent families, were considerably more likely to have experienced family violence, and were more likely to live somewhere other than with parents at the time of the interview – whether it be in a foster or group home, with another relative, or in custody. SHOs were more likely to live with parents than Chronic offenders, perhaps an indicator of program efforts to ensure greater stability for these youth. Nearly all of the more persistent offenders had run away from home at least once, and very few engaged in social or leisure activities with their families. The relative lack of familial and home stability for youth in these groups was contrasted by the cohort of Gateway youth, half of whom came from families where parents are still married, and all of whom lived with at least one parent. These youth demonstrated stronger attachments to their families, being significantly less likely to run away and significantly more likely to engage in leisure activities with their parents.

Involvement with child welfare adds a very telling component to the family situations of youth offenders. Whereas the Gateway and One-time offenders reported relatively low levels of child welfare contact, a significant majority of Chronic offenders and SHOs had been involved with child welfare at one point in their lives, many having been placed in foster and/or group home care. Nearly half of the Chronic offenders reported that they were living in a group or foster home at the time of the interview. This high rate of involvement further demonstrates the high level of instability and lack of continuity in the family experiences of serious youth offenders.

Findings further suggested a disparity in peer associations. Interviews revealed that Gateway clients were most likely to meet their friends at school, have friends roughly the same age, and have their parents approve of their friends. Where Chronic offenders and SHOs were also meeting friends at school, substantial proportions reported having older friends and meeting their friends on the street or in jail. Self-reported delinquency indirectly supports the idea that more serious offenders associate with negative peers, being more likely to engage in delinquent acts with friends. For the most part, the parents of Chronic offenders and SHOs are more likely not to approve of their friends.

The tendency for more serious youth offenders to gravitate toward negative peers also finds support in levels of gang involvement. Where very few Gateway and One-time offenders reported recruitment by a gang, with only two reporting actual involvement, well over half of the Chronic offenders and SHOs had been recruited and/or been members of gangs. Whether involved or not, a large majority reported having friends that belonged to gangs. Although few youth reported current membership in a gang, only about half who were in gangs wanted to get out of them. As such, belonging to a gang plays an important social role to these youth, possibly related to the absence of a strong family presence.

The absence of positive adults and peers in the lives of persistent offenders (both Chronic offenders and SHOs) is further demonstrated in information regarding leisure activities. Where Gateway clients were significantly more likely to be involved in structured extra-curricular activities with adult leadership, this tendency drops off significantly even at the level of One-time offenders. A very small number of One-time offenders, Chronic offenders and SHOs reported involvement in sports, clubs, or other organizations in their free time, further demonstrating a lack of pro-social associations. This lack of participation could be explained in part by a lack of familial resources, given that Chronic offenders and SHOs were less likely to have two employed parents.

More persistent offenders also tended to struggle with school. As expected, school participation was strongest for Gateway clients, all of whom were attending school. Where this could be explained by their being slightly younger than the rest of the groups, Gateway youth were significantly less likely than the other groups to consider dropping out of school. Investment in school amongst the groups decreased with greater criminal involvement, with a substantial proportion of SHOs, Chronic offenders, and even One-time offenders reporting that they skip and have considered dropping out. Although two-thirds of the Chronic offenders reported that they were

attending school, this may be slightly overrepresentative given many were interviewed in CYOC and were required to attend school.

Information on school problems adds a telling component to the differences among groups with regard to school experiences. Bullying and fighting were definitely issues for the youth in the study, with many of the Gateway clients and One-time offenders reporting being bullied and getting into fights at school. Chronic offenders and SHOs were less likely to have been bullied, but all had gotten into fights at school. Nearly all of the One-time offenders, Chronic offenders and SHOs had been suspended in the past. Aggressive behaviour in school was further evidenced by self-reported delinquency, with a majority of youth in all groups having reported harassing, threatening or bullying people, and for more seriously involved youth, doing this with a weapon.

Interview information relating to investment in pro-social activities and participation in school finds connections to the aggregate analysis and some significant findings with regard to time. Examination of the frequency of chargeable incidents by month revealed that more crimes are committed by youth during the first half of the year, not the summer as one might expect. This could be explained by the possibility that, as the school year progresses, youth are less invested in it and more invested in other potentially more negative influences. As such, they skip more toward the end of the year (March-June), with some potentially dropping out entirely after their first semester. The possibility that crimes are committed while youth should be in school is reinforced by both the day and time of day when crimes are being committed. The data demonstrate that more youth offending occurs during the week, and during school or after school – not on the weekends or in the evenings as might be expected. As revealed by the interviews, youth offenders – particularly Chronic offenders and SHOs – are committing crimes during times when supervision is minimal. A lack of investment in school (i.e., skipping, dropping out) and participation in after-school activities may explain this pattern.

Responses to Youth Offenders

Sentencing data reveal a certain amount of contrast between offending groups, particularly with regard to type and effectiveness. One-time offenders most commonly received community-based sentences (i.e., probation, community service). The presence of fewer administration of justice charges (i.e., breaches of community sentences) suggests the relative success of community-based sentences for these groups, which could be explained by a greater amount of home and community stability. On the other hand, while Chronic offenders and SHOs also received a significant number of community-based sentences, the large number of administration of justice charges (i.e., breaches, failure to comply) for these groups indicates tremendous difficulty in fulfilling the conditions of these types of sentences, possibly due to a lack of stability in the community and/or a greater investment in a criminal lifestyle. This, combined with their participation in more serious crimes, likely results in the tendency for more serious offenders (particularly SHOs) to receive custodial terms and more intensive community sentences.

It is quite clear that youth offenders, particularly those involved in more serious or persistent offending, require a great deal of support. Results do indicate that youth offenders are being connected with psychological services, with a substantial majority reporting that they have received counselling, particularly among SHO and Chronic offenders. However, it is clear that intensive adult support and positive associations continue to be lacking for youth more seriously involved in crime.

Conclusions

The first year of CRILF's three-year study on youth offending has yielded a valuable starting point toward developing a model for predicting why some youth become more seriously involved in offending than others. Clearly, differences in social, individual, and offending characteristics exist among youth with varying levels of involvement with the law, and these factors all combine to affect a youth's ability to change their offending behaviour. It is difficult based on the current data to predict whether interventions with delinquent youth will successfully stop their criminal behaviour. Further, it is difficult to determine whether involvement in SHOP will be enough to help more criminally persistent youth stay away from a life of crime. However, the planned criminal record follow-ups with these youth at 12 and 24 months post-interview will aid in discovering which youth are able to avoid future involvement in crime, and the defining factors that assist them in doing so.

Given the richness of the data collected in Year 1 of the study, this project could only touch on the social background of the cohort of 123 youth who participated in the study. Provided this information, future initiatives may delve more deeply into some of the individual social factors that define the lives of these youth, and work towards developing more effective responses for youth.