



Getting Tough on Youth Crime

By Dr. Lorne Foster

When the Youth Criminal Justice Act came into force replacing the Young Offenders Act on April 1, 2003, it also replaced a long-standing focus on punitive justice with a focus on restorative justice – placing a greater emphasis on rehabilitation, while still holding youth accountable for their actions.

This new direction in youth justice is the result of the fact that in Canada, as well as other Western societies, there is a growing realization that the old "lock-em-up-and-through-away-the-key" legalistic model has a limited impact on upward trends in juvenile crime. Indeed, the data is beginning to show that the increasingly complex legal environment in Canada demands creative and collaborative solutions in regard to youth justice. Or, to coin a phrase - it now takes a village to save a child.

We are at the dawning of a new realization. To actually "get tough on youth crime" (to use the hard-line vernacular), society has to mobilize all of its potential resources – traditional and non-traditional - in a cooperative and integrated search that looks beyond the justice system for solutions. In this view, the justice system is just one piece of this puzzle.

Long-lasting solutions must address the causes of youth crime in a broader, more comprehensive strategy that brings local communities together with the system-professionals in a joint venture that involves a variety of individuals, organizations and governments in such areas as crime prevention, child welfare, mental health, education, social services and employment.

Developing Action Plan

In this regard, and in conjunction with the new Act, a series of special Youth Justice Forums have been scheduled in November to provide opportunities for increased public involvement in the new youth justice system, and input into the development of an action plan for the future.

The pending community forums, which are scheduled for the Greater Toronto Area, Durham and Peel regions, will focus on generating a network for the exchange of information, and development of best practices in youth crime prevention. These first-of-a-kind community forums promise to bring together youth services professionals, local communities, young people, the business community and the police in order to provide information on the Youth Criminal Justice Act, and to facilitate partnership strategy sessions.

There are an array of sponsors providing leadership for these events, most notably: the Ontario Ministry of Public Safety and Security, the City of Toronto, Toronto Police Services, Rotary Club of Toronto, the Downtown Yonge Business Improvement Area, the Jamaican Canadian Centre, and the Toronto Youth Cabinet, the City of Toronto's Community & Neighbourhood Services, and Operation Springboard (specialists in "alternative to custody" youth programming, and the primary organizers and "lead hand" of the upcoming sessions).

According to Jean Milligan, Supervisor, Project Development Operation Springboard, "The main objective of these forums is to provide a networking and partnership building opportunity for local community members, social and justice professionals for the purposes of accessing both traditional and non-traditional resources that will support the implementation of the Youth Criminal Justice Act."

Like An Epidemic

For Blacks and other racialized minority groups, whose populations are disproportionately affected by the justice system, the problem of juvenile crime strikes at the heart of the community like a rampant and paralyzing epidemic. So, for many communities of colour, the new Youth Criminal Justice Act is a welcome injunction, and may present promising opportunities ahead for direct community action in regard to the devolving reality of their at-risk and high-risk youth. However, in order to fully seize the initiative, communities of colour might also use the upcoming special community forums as points of departure to mobilize in a push to become decisive players in the unfolding community-base support infrastructure – not only learning about, but providing positive alternatives for minority youth in culturally sensitive environments, such as, culturally specific police diversion programs, informal alternatives to the court process, options to custody programs, counseling and intervention programs, and community service.

In the end, the agonizing risks for minority youth are rooted in their sense of alienation and hopelessness radiating from their unequal conditions. Therefore, the ultimate battle in the war against juvenile crime in racialized minority communities will take place in the struggle to enhance the life chances and motivational structure of Canada's children of colour.

The upcoming Youth Justice Forums are an uplifting precedent, and necessary first step that should be used to their best advantage.

Note: Youth Justice Forums will be held at Metro Hall (55 John Street, 3rd floor, November 18, 2003, 8:30 a.m. - 12:30 p.m); the Scarborough Civic Centre (150 Borough Drive, November 24, 2003, 8:30 a.m. - 12:30 p.m); and the Jamaican Canadian Association (995 Arrow Road, November 25, 2003, 8:30 a.m. - 12:30 p.m). For more information or to receive a registration form please contact Jean Milligan at Operation Springboard 416-977-0089.