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# Theft increases challenge police youth bureau

## the HERALD Features

By ANI PEDERIAN  
Herald Staff Writer  
Caught with a stolen pair of earrings in your bag? If you're under 18, what happens to you next is decided by Tom Johnson, a sergeant and youth officer with Halton regional police in Georgetown.

"There's no cut and dried rule. Each case involving juveniles comes across this desk and I have the final say on it," Sgt. Johnson, 43, said, accentuating his authority with a light thump on the desk.

Each case has to be looked at individually with the child and parents' attitudes playing a big part in Mr. Johnson's decision.

"It's very different from the policing I'm used to," he admitted. Transferred to the youth bureau in January, he has a 16-year record in police work including work in the criminal investigations bureau.

"I find it frustrating at times, but I really like working with kids," Sgt. Johnson said. He has three children himself, 15, 13 and nine years old.

**POSITIVE**  
Despite the fact he rarely sees other than kids in trouble with the law, Sgt. Johnson holds a positive attitude about young people.

"The majority of kids we have today are pretty good, in my opinion," he said. "It's a very small minority who really cause the human cry that you hear about juveniles."

Although he has three file drawers crammed with files on juveniles, most files only contain a single piece of paper, Sgt. Johnson said.

Repeaters are few. Why do young people get involved in crime. The Herald quizzed Sgt. Johnson.

"I think the biggest reason is peer pressure, say a situation where you get five individuals who are really good kids and one of them will say 'I dare you to do this'. Sometimes it's like putting a match to gasoline," he said.



Street scenes like this may not be as noticeable now that Halton Regional police have decided to enforce a 10 p.m. curfew on loitering in town for juveniles. The move is aimed at reducing vandalism.

(Herald photo by Gerry Timbers)

Many families have both parents working and that can be a factor, also.

"The day of the mother at home isn't as common, and children have a lot more freedom now. They come home from school and the parents aren't there. There are a couple of hours where they feel 'They're not here to watch, so maybe I'll slip out and do this'," Sgt. Johnson said.

"It seems to be free time that causes problems. It's, 'What are we going to do, there's nothing to do tonight' for the kids."

**PLENTY**  
As a parent, Sgt. Johnson knows there's plenty to keep young minds and bodies occupied.

"I get so upset when I hear there's nothing to do. There are boy scouts, cubs, church groups, army cadets, baseball, soccer, school sports teams, all kinds of things available," Sgt. Johnson said. Both his daughters take swimming lessons and his son is in rep hockey. Even with lots of activities and parental supervision young people can end up tangling with the law and coming into contact with Sgt. Johnson.

"Shoplifting is the biggest problem in Halton Hills and statistics bear it out," he said. As of June end, there were 49 cases of juveniles charged with it. Last year, there were 26 cases.

However, shoplifting isn't the only crime that brings juveniles into Sgt. Johnson's office.

**CHARGES**  
Last year, there were 29 juveniles charged with theft or willful damage.

age. So far this year, to June end, 22 such charges have been laid.

As for theft other than shoplifting, 35 charges were laid in 1982 and 30 to June end this year. Cases of break and enter involving theft or willful damage were 29 in 1982 and 22 so far.

Liquor licence offences for juveniles, basically drinking under age charges, are down to 13 as of June end and were 23 in 1982.

Last year 23 charges of assault were laid, and so far this year 18 have been laid, Sgt. Johnson said.

Halton's uniformed officers are learning to deal with juveniles themselves instead of passing the buck to the youth bureau officer. They may lay the charges and/or bring their observations and recommendations to Sgt. Johnson.

If it's a serious offence, the sergeant gets involved with it and, if charges are to be laid, he prepares the court documents for juvenile court, which is an arm of Milton's family court.

**ENTITLED**  
"My philosophy is that you're entitled to a mistake and you don't make the same mistake twice," Sgt. Johnson said explaining his preference for dealing with juveniles outside the courtroom. "If there are other ways without going through the court, I'll do it that way."

Parental attitude makes a difference in how Sgt. Johnson deals with a juvenile offender. In most instances parents are very supportive, he said.

However, occasionally there'll be the parent who becomes over-protective of his child and refuses to believe his Johnny could break the law. Then, Sgt. Johnson not only has to convince the child to confess, but also the parents that their child really did it.

During the encounter with the child and the parents, Sgt. Johnson may find it suitable to refer the child to the



Sgt. Tom Johnson

Halton juvenile diversion program. A program initiated this year, it is designed to impress upon juveniles that they are responsible for their actions.

The program puts young people to work for the community or for the person they robbed or vandalized. In this way, they make restitution.

The courts lean heavily on such programs of community service as well.

With parental support, a voluntary supervisory plan may be set up for the youngster, involving curfews during the week and reporting to the police station just like being on probation.

## Call before it's too late

To the editor of The Herald:

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Publicity Chairperson for the North Halton Distress Centre

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