

# Cops hope to give wayward kids a last chance

By HOWARD MOZEL  
Special to The Champion

While youth crime remains a concern right across Canada, here in Halton steps are being taken to tackle the problem in an innovative way.

Recently, Halton Regional Police unveiled a progress report on its "Youth Diversion Program" designed to redirect young people who commit crimes from the traditional court system prior to charging them with offenses.

The goal, says Constable Leslie Fredo, is to reduce the number of youths who re-offend. This is done by increasing positive motivation, attitude and behavior by influencing everything from family life and education to employment, housing and recreation.

"I'm very excited about the possibilities of having some great success," said Inspector Dan Okuloski, who explained this program is the first of its kind in Canada, perhaps North America.

Insp. Okuloski said that to his knowledge no one has taken advantage of provisions in the Young Offenders Act to implement a diversion program, while leaving open the option to proceed to the courts if warranted.

Services board member Wendy Roberts said the initiative is a sharp contrast to the boot camps being opened by the province.

"I think this is a tremendous alternative to what we have at present," she said.

In the past year, 1,600 young offender arrests were made in

Halton and while the 27 per cent local re-offending rate is lower than the 40 per cent national average, a problem still exists. Particularly troubling, says Insp. Okuloski, is the 150 per cent rise in violent youth crime (largely assaults) over the past 10 years.

If a young offender can be encouraged to change and not re-offend, said Const. Fredo, everyone saves. She explained that a dollar spent on prevention programs in early childhood can save up to seven dollars in later education, welfare, police, court and correction costs.

## Programs for two-year-olds

While most youth crime is committed by those 17 years of age, Const. Fredo suggested programs should be in place for children as young as two. After all, she explained, problems that lead to crime begin very early.

Diversion is not new, says Const. Fredo. In the past, for example, police have used their discretionary powers to have youths repair a fence they vandalized or make presentations to classmates after committing minor crimes.

Other diversions included arson-related trips to see fire prevention officers and painting over graffiti. Common themes to these tactics were victim restitution, damage repair, essay writing to explain actions and apologies to victims.

Of course not all offenses — serious violence, sexual assault, domestic assaults and residential break-and-enters for example —

will be eligible for the program. Also in place will be guidelines for referral and selection requirements.

There will be three levels of diversion. Level one, for relatively minor offenses and for those under age 12, could be as little as a verbal caution.

Level two could include everything from an apology to restitution for first-time offenders or repeat offenders (if the offense is not the same as the previous one) at an officer's discretion.

Level three, the "formal diversion" stage, could include the full participation of police, family, victims and community services. Together they would hold first-time or repeat offenders accountable for their actions and target the causes of their behavior.

Also in the works is the possibility of creating victim/offender reconciliation panels to allow the parties involved to discuss the crime and decide the appropriate diversion or penalty.

"This is long overdue," said services board member Donald Robison. "I think it's cutting edge."

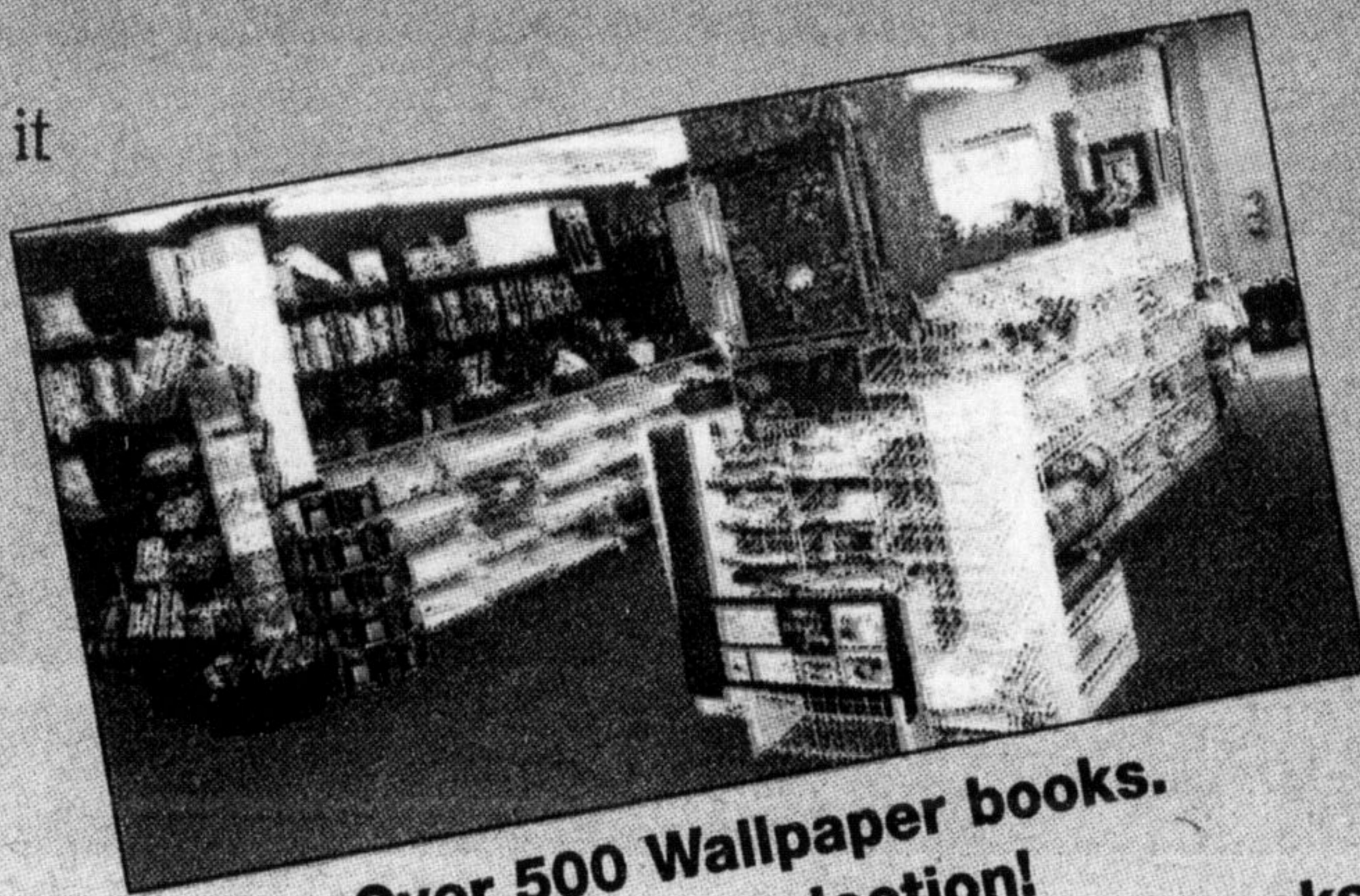
Deputy Police Chief Ean Algar said the issue of a healthy community is an important one. The program, which integrates the resources of 20 social agencies and others, will go a long way to achieve this, he said.

In conjunction with the diversion initiative, the HOPE (Helping Our Parents' Effectiveness) program is designed to assist the parents of young offenders and youths at risk of becoming entangled in the law.

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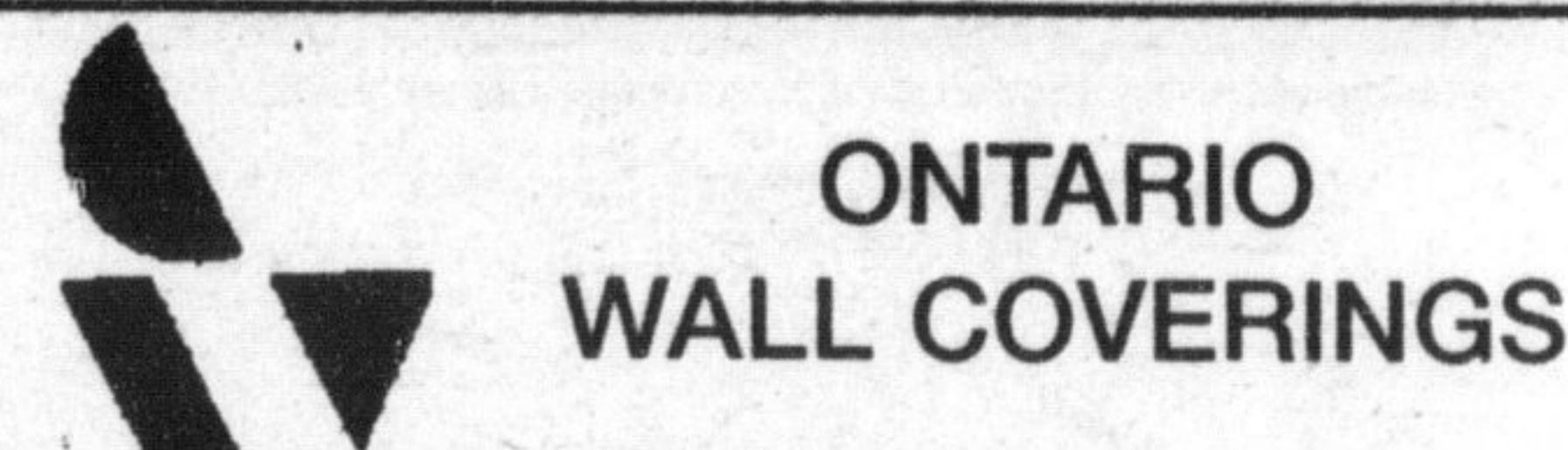
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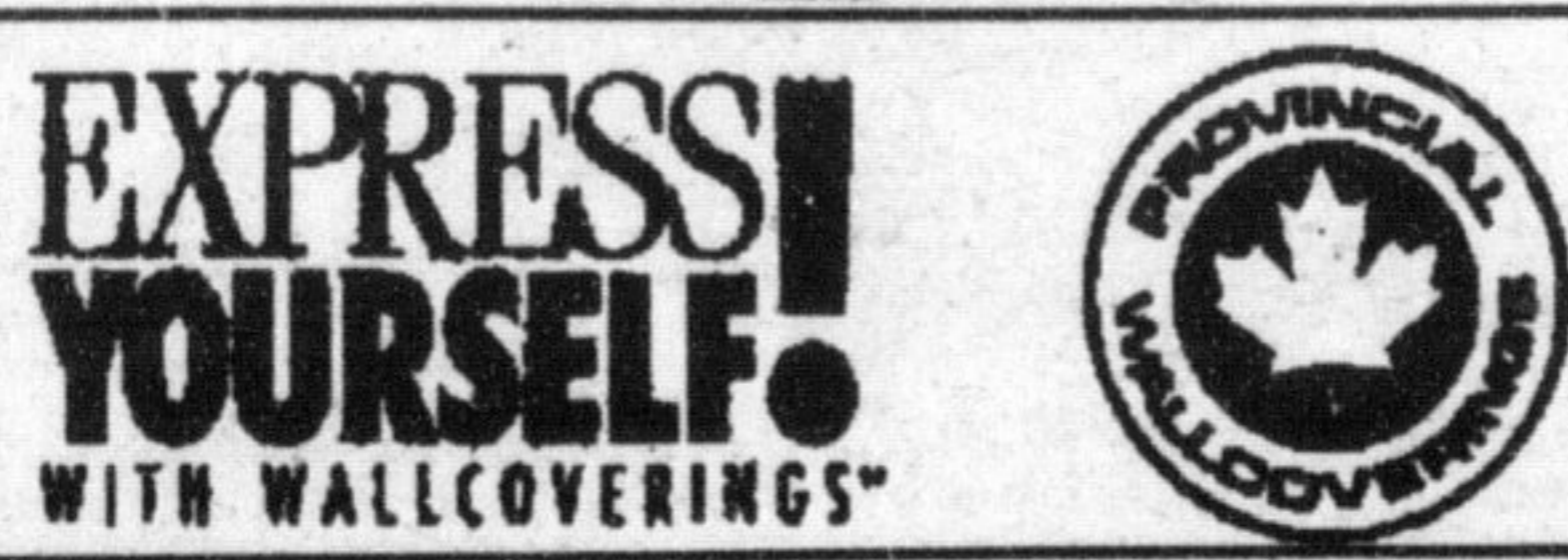
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