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Youths commit small number of York crimes

■ *Lawyer's report shows youths commit only one-fifth of crimes across region*

RICK VANDERLINDE
Staff Reporter

When York Region Det. Bob Wiche was stabbed in the neck by a knife-wielding 15-year-old last year, public reaction was swift.

Youth crime is out of control - the boy must be tried in adult court and given a lengthy sentence.

But while the graphic display of violence inside Newmarket's courthouse was shocking, statistics show young offenders only commit a small percentage of the crimes in York Region.

Of the 3,644 crimes against persons last year, youths between 12 and 17 committed just 559 of them. And only 67 of the 302 weapons charges were attributed to young offenders.

York Regional Police statistics show crimes against property were the largest component of youth crime. But even in that category, only 2,179 young offenders were charged with a property offense, compared to 23,209 adult offenders.

Those statistics contradict the public perception that youth crime is out of control, according to Kenneth Alexander, a lawyer with the Region of York.

"There's a perception that it's an epidemic, but that's not really the case," he said in a report to York's police services board. "There's a lot of U.S. influence - the shootings in the schools that is reported to us, but is not relevant to Canada."

Alexander wrote the report to help board members formulate their position on proposed changes to the Young Offenders Act.

Justice Minister Ann McLellan is expected to introduce a number of changes this fall, including

• subjecting violent 14- and 15-year-

olds to adult sentences; publishing the names of 14- to 17-year-olds who have been convicted of serious crimes;

• forcing parents to bear young offenders' legal costs if they are able to pay.

In his report, Alexander said the public perceives the act as being easy on young offenders.

But he pointed out the Young Offenders Act actually increased penalties against youth when it was introduced in 1984.

"Young offender dispositions increased by 135 per cent for closed custody cases," he said. "It's not born out that the Young Offenders Act is more lenient... but it is sometimes perceived by youth as more lenient... so

"There's a perception that (youth crime) is an epidemic, but that's not really the case."

— York Region lawyer Kenneth Alexander

they go out and perform more crime."

Despite Alexander's report, some police board members believe the Young Offenders Act needs to go further, by including 11- and 12-year-old offenders who now can't be charged with any crimes.

York regional chairperson Bill Fisch

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