

Stouffville Tribune

A Metroland community newspaper
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EDITORIAL

System has tools to deal with young offenders

Jonathan Wamback was walking his dog in a park when three people attacked him, kicked him repeatedly in the head — possibly with steel-toe boots — leaving him comatose and in critical condition.

Because those charged with this crime are 16 and 17 years old, the most they could face, if they are convicted under the Young Offenders Act, is three years in jail plus two years probation.

That is not justice. They should answer the charges in adult court.

Of course, the Young Offenders Act is a widely unpopular piece of legislation. York Regional Police Chief Julian Fantino and Premier Mike Harris are among those calling for it to be overhauled. The question is, does the legislation need to be beefed up?

There is a widespread public perception that youth crime has increased since the act was introduced in 1984, which isn't true.

Crimes by people under 18 have decreased, both across Canada and in York Region, and the proportion of crimes committed by young people remains low.

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

But there's a more disturbing set of statistics about violent crime.

Between 1996 and 1998, violent crimes, such as assaults, increased by 9 per cent, with weapons charges rising by 103 per cent.

In 1996, there were 533 crimes against persons by youths, compared to 583 last year. Weapons charges jumped from 75 in 1996 to 152 in '98.

The brutal attack on Wamback in Newmarket last week and the shooting of a teenager in Markham June 28 shows why this frightening trend has to be reversed.

And the best way to send a message to violent youths is to try the accused in the Newmarket case in adult court.

The much-maligned Young Offenders Act contains provisions that allow this and, in fact, it has been done in York Region.

The man accused of five vicious sex assaults in the Steeles Avenue and Dufferin Street area, as well as a sixth attack at a Vaughan community centre, was originally charged as a young offender because the attacks happened when he was 17.

After a six-week transfer hearing, he was committed to adult court, although the hearing is being delayed while his lawyer appeals that ruling.

In Taber, Alberta, the Crown attorney has applied for an adult court trial for the 14-year-old accused of the murder of one student and the attempted murder of another at W.R. Myers High School.

Horrific cases such as these, paired with the idea of young criminals getting light sentences and having their identities protected, is what inflames people against the Young Offenders Act.

Certainly, there is room to improve the act, as many of its high-profile opponents believe.

Fantino, who is president of the Ontario police chiefs' association, advocates adult court trials for repeat offenders and youths charged with violent crimes.

Harris said he wants the Young Offenders Act replaced with a tough new law that imposes "meaningful consequences" on young criminals. We agree.

While the law provides a more lenient system for young people, the courts have the discretion to try those accused of particularly violent crimes, such as the attack on Jonathan Wamback, in adult court.

Federal legislators have given the courts the tools to deal with youth violence. But Crown attorneys and judges must be willing to use them.

OPINION

BEST OF NEASE



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Wagon Wheel Ranch not in violation of any laws

In response to all the news coverage of the horseback riding accident that claimed a young girl's life, I find the attempts to place all the blame on the Wagon Wheel Ranch owner and trail guide very disturbing.

As my wife and I are seasoned riders — mostly cross-country trails, fields and jumps — we are well aware that horse back riding can be dangerous at any level.

Helmets and proper footwear with heels are not an option — they are essential.

Unfortunately, many people are not aware of this. If Elizabeth Hader's parents had possessed this information, I'm sure they would have made certain she was dressed appropriately.

At this time, there are no laws which make helmets and heeled footwear mandatory in public stables.

Wagon Wheel Ranch has been operating in excess of 40 years.

The ranch was not in violation of any laws governing riding stables and had a clearly posted Ride At Your Own Risk sign.

What is the point of trying to destroy a long-standing business in the community and the lives of two innocent people and their families?

There is no doubt this has been a terrible tragedy.

Let us hope that Elizabeth's gift to her community will be to increase everyone's awareness of the need for safe riding attire and the establishment of standards to help prevent a similar accident in the future.

GARTH KRIEGER
AURORA

Young offenders who beat good man are cowards

The individuals who beat John Wamback as a possible retaliation on his reporting vandalism to the police are cowards.

It takes a powerful person to stand up to people who are doing wrong in society.

If you believe your child was involved in the beating, you should run him/her to the nearest police station and hope that he/she is punished to the full extent of the law.

You will do your child nor yourself any service to sit back and make excuses for him/her.

As a matter of fact, you will be able to face yourself in the mirror knowing that you have righted a great wrong committed by your child.

If your child can't think independently, doesn't know the difference between right and wrong, or has the capability of such violence, then we do not want that person in our community.

J. PRESTON

LETTERS POLICY

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Brenda Larson

So many people disrespectful, downright mean

When you stop to think about it, we live in a confrontational society. Not that that's a bad thing.

We have encouraged our kids to grow up knowing their rights, knowing they can voice opinions without being penalized. We've armed them with knowledge so they cannot be harmed by unscrupulous individuals or groups.

We have encouraged society's special-interest groups to stage their protests, to lobby government, to get their messages out.

And we've all been encouraged, at one time or another, to express our anger or our issues so that they may be resolved effectively and equitably.

So why, with all this good stuff happening in our society, with our commitment to upholding rights, are so many people so disrespectful, so irresponsible, so downright mean?

A quick scan of a few newspapers seemed to justify my theory that we're all getting meaner and nastier.

The reasons were all there for me, in black and white — road rage incidents, muggings, bullying, stalking, shootings, stabbings, murders.

I was feeling mighty blue when I called local associate pastor David Flint.

And he nicely dismissed my theory. Simple as that.

He doesn't think we're living in a meaner or harder society, just a different one.

My father, if he were alive, would be 90 years old and he used to tell me stories about carrying his '22 around Toronto, and shooting everything that moved. That's what young kids used to do. They certainly don't do that now, he said.

(I didn't mention that part of the problem in society is, in fact, that some people do carry guns and knives around, but I digress.)

Flint aptly points out the need to understand rights and responsibilities. He says young people learn an awful lot about their rights, but they don't seem to be learning much about the responsibilities that go with them.

It was Flint who first raised the idea that we seem to nurture the confrontation in our world — we bring out television cameras to cover the protests, especially if there's a chance that some nastiness will break out.

Flint says it's important that we don't overlook all the people who are doing good in the world and simply focus on the bad guys.

He's right, of course. I just hope his theory holds more water than mine.

