

COURTS: Police seek adult sentences for teenagers charged in savage beating that left 15-year-old in a coma

Age of reasoning

When young people commit violent crimes, parents take part of the blame

BY JENNIFER BROWN
Staff Writer

The three teens charged with attempted murder in the savage beating of Jonathan Wamback may be tried as adults.

York Region Police officers were to meet with the Newmarket Crown attorney yesterday to discuss the possibility of transferring the two 17-year-olds and one 16-year-old to adult court — a provision outlined in the Young Offenders Act.

It is probably their intention to have them tried as adults, but I can't speak for the Crown at this time, said Det. Sgt. Chris Barratt during a news conference Tuesday.

And proposed changes to the Young Offenders Act could mean the names of Wamback's attackers may be made public upon conviction.

Parliament is to give second reading this fall to changes to the Act, including allowing the publishing of names of 14- to 17-year-olds who have been convicted of serious crimes and forcing parents to bear young offenders' legal costs if they are able to pay.

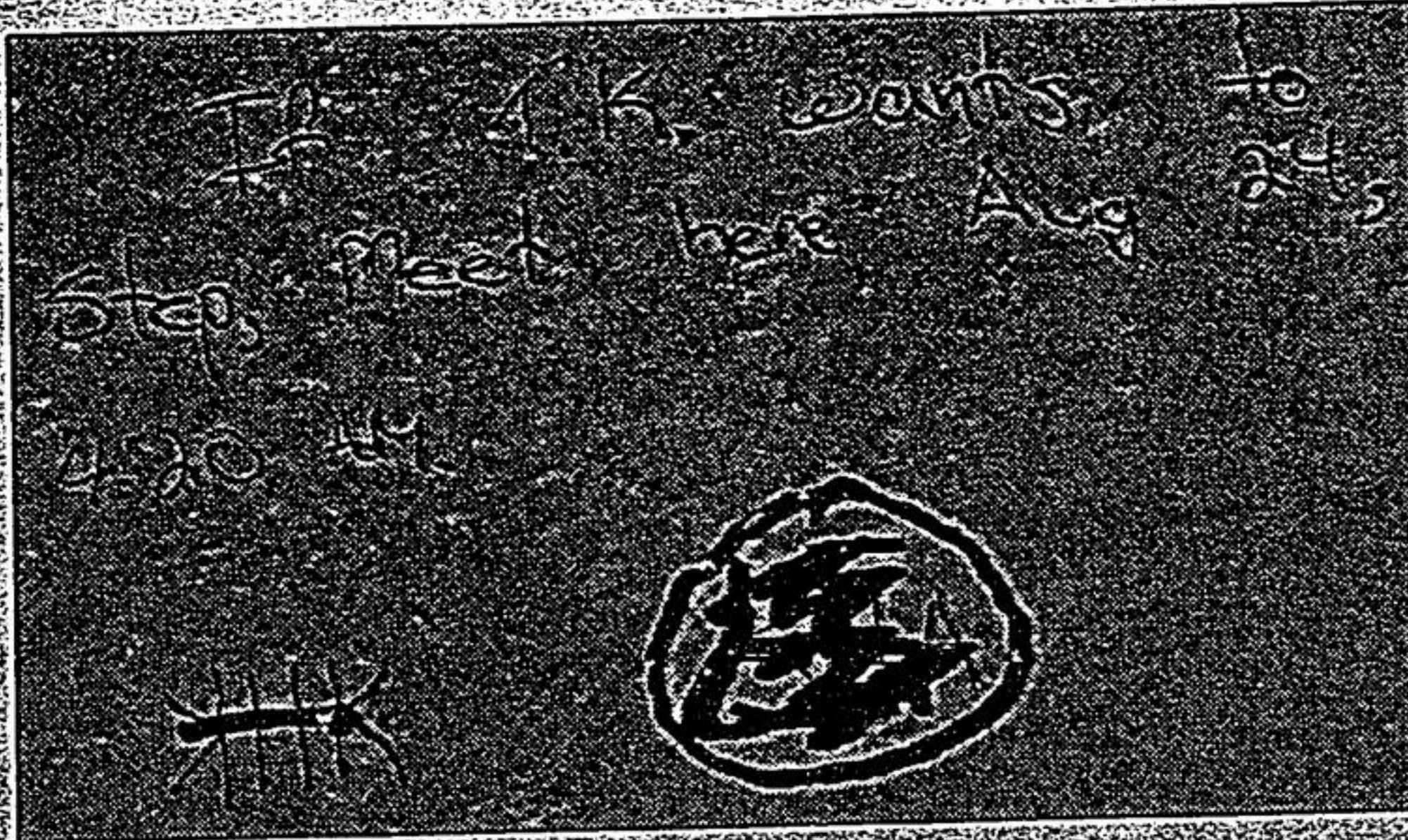
We have to send a message to these characters. We have to send a strong message that this won't be tolerated in civilized society.

The legislative changes have received first reading and it is expected second reading will come when Parliament resumes in the fall.

Oak Ridges MP Bryon Wilfert said in violent cases such as this, young offenders should be prosecuted to the full extent of the law.

"Personally, I'm the kind of guy who would throw the book at these characters," Wilfert said.

"We have to send a message to these characters. We have to send a strong message that this won't



Top, the washroom in the Newmarket park where Jonathon Wamback was confronted by a gang of youths. Above, graffiti referring to the Templar Knights that appears in a park restroom.

be tolerated in civilized society.

The maximum a youth can receive on an attempted murder charge is three years plus two years probation. The maximum adult sentence is 25 years.

Wilfert said the changes are necessary to strengthen the law for all concerned.

"I want to make sure that when law enforcement officers lay a charge, they have knowledge they are not just going through the motions," he said.

Wamback, 15, was in Ken Sturgeon Park in Newmarket's Stonehaven subdivision between 6:30 and 8:30 p.m. June 29 when three youths confronted him near the public washrooms.

The three teens believed Wamback was "tagging" the park restroom walls — painting gang graffiti there.

Barratt said after a loud argument between the teens there was a fight and Wamback fled on foot, taking an indirect path toward his home nearby.

His attackers got into a grey Toyota Camry operated by a fourth youth and went looking for Wamback.

They found him between two houses near the park area and severely beat him about his head, police said.

Wamback was able to get home, where he collapsed into

unconsciousness.

He was taken to York County Hospital and later transferred to the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto where he remains comatose on life support.

Wamback suffered brain damage and has had at least two surgeries since being admitted to hospital.

Barratt said the family is struggling with the possibility he will never fully recover.

This is totally new to us. It was a very violent, shocking attack.

"I spoke with his father today and he is extremely upset. The prognosis for Jonathan is not good. The family knows they will not get back the same son they had."

The teens, who have been charged with attempted murder, reportedly belong to a group called "SHA" — meaning Stonehaven Avenue.

They apparently believed Wamback was a member of a rival group which is referred to as "TK" or Templar Knights, a name that appears on the walls of public washrooms in Stonehaven parkettes.

They believe he was with

Templar Knights, but we haven't established that yet," Barratt said.

Police believe teens in Newmarket are emulating gang-like behaviour, but indicated this was the first reported incident that has escalated to violence.

"They haven't had much contact with police," Barratt said. "This is totally new to us. It was a very violent, shocking attack."

The teens were to appear in Newmarket court for a bail hearing today. The driver of the car has not been arrested and reportedly did not witness the beating.

RIDDLED WITH GRAFFITI

While the washrooms at Ken Sturgeon Park and Rene Bray, another park within Stonehaven, have been riddled with graffiti and repeatedly vandalized, Barratt said police were not aware a gang problem existed.

"Sometimes we rely on the public to bring it to our attention," he said.

"But by the virtue of this investigation, I think you will see these two youth groups disappear. Parents are now aware and they know we are aware."

He pointed out that the parents of teens involved now have "the full picture," saying that in retrospect, they must have heard about the attack through contact with their own children.

"I think the families are going to pull in the reins a little now," he said.

As adult members of this community, Barratt said parents have a moral and civic responsibility to bring whatever information they may have to the attention of authorities.

Wilfert also emphasized the role of parents.

"Where are the parents? What's happening in the home and in this school system? We can't be afraid to have rules — and we don't have them."

Anyone with information is asked to call investigators at (905) 881-1221 ext. 7140 or relay information confidentially by contacting CrimeStoppers at 222-TIPS.

Start using your eyes and ears

BY JENNIFER BROWN
Staff Writer

Affluent or underprivileged, neighbourhoods rocked by vandalism and violence need to take ownership of their communities or risk losing them to crime.

It's simple but sage advice that comes from the voice of experience — a Vaughan councillor who has confronted the same problems facing the residents of Newmarket, shocked by the vicious gang-like beating of a teen from Stonehaven.

"Vandalism and violence knows no borders and is not dependent on family income. The root cause is boredom and it can exist if the neighbourhood is rich or poor," said Bernie DiVona.

Added security measures at a Woodbridge park have curbed vandalism, said DiVona, who spearheaded a campaign last year to take back parks that were being over-run by unruly teens.

Last spring, after facing park repair bills of \$2,800 monthly for close to 18 months, the City of Vaughan approved a volunteer Yellow Jacket park patrol program, a curfew and the installation of video cameras in Robert Watson Park.

The park had been marked as the turf for a group known as the Russet Way Gang — named for one of the streets backing on to the park.

The Yellow Jackets were residents who, armed with cell phones supplied by Bell Mobility, were trained to become the eyes and ears of the park during the day.

While at first the volunteers had concerns about being targeted by those they were reporting, DiVona said they were trained to be non-confrontational. A security firm was also hired to patrol at night.

And now the young people, who were damaging Robert Watson Park have moved on, DiVona said. And residents have a new sense of ownership over the park.

Failing to inform police of a problem will only make things worse — in the Stonehaven case, police said they had no idea trouble was brewing.

"By not reporting an incident, an increased undercurrent of violence and vandalism develops. The victim and the family knows when something happens but if they don't report it, you can't improve the situation."

But DiVona said a key factor is parents knowing what their children are up to.

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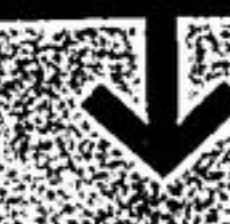
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