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In 1999, the Canadian Research Institute for Law and the Family (CRILF) in collaboration with researchers from the University of Alberta conducted a survey on the extent and nature of youth victimization, crime and delinquency in Alberta. This Fact Sheet summarizes and highlights findings from the survey. A detailed presentation of the findings is provided in the report, *The Extent of Youth Victimization, Crime and Delinquency in Alberta, 1999*, by J.T. Gomes, L.D. Bertrand, J.J. Paetsch, and J.P. Hornick.

A total of 2,001 students (54% females and 46% males) from 67 public and Catholic junior and senior high schools in towns/rural areas, smaller cities and larger cities in Alberta completed a questionnaire. The surveys were conducted in the spring and fall of 1999. The following highlights are organized by the major content areas addressed in the survey.

PERCEPTIONS OF YOUTH CRIME AND VIOLENCE AND PERSONAL SAFETY

- Students were fairly evenly split on whether they believed youth crime in their community was rising or not. However, those living in smaller cities were more likely to believe that youth crime in their community was rising (42.5%) than were students in large cities (35%) or towns (32%).
- Over half of the respondents (56%) believed that the level of youth crime in their own community was lower than in other areas of their town or city. Less than 7% believed that their own community experienced more youth crime than other areas.
- Four different situations describing scenarios where the respondent would be alone after dark were presented to respondents: walking in the community, using the public transportation bus system, using the public transportation LRT system, and being at home alone. Over three-quarters felt safe walking in their community; however, younger students tended to feel less safe than the older ones.
- Students clearly felt less safe using public transportation. Compared to 35% of the students who rated taking a bus as somewhat or very unsafe, half of the respondents rated the LRT as not being safe to use alone at night.
- Almost all respondents felt safe at home alone after dark (90%). Again, younger respondents generally tended to report lower levels of feeling safe as compared to the older respondents.
- In all situations, females were much less positive in their ratings on feelings of safety than males. In particular, when rating public transportation the majority of females (62%) felt using the LRT alone at night was not safe while 36% of males felt the same way.

VICTIMIZATION AT SCHOOL AND NOT AT SCHOOL

Findings from the survey indicated a decline in victimization rates when compared with results from an earlier survey

of Calgary respondents conducted by CRILF in 1994. The current findings appear to be consistent with recent officially-reported data on youth crime. As well, the lower victimization rates may to some extent reflect the heightened sensitivity of schools and the police toward youth violence which has been especially apparent over the last few years.

Students were asked to report on 11 different types of victimization incidents in measuring prevalence of victimization at school and not at school within the past year.

- Prevalence of victimization was higher at school than not at school. Over half (54%) of the respondents indicated they had been victimized at least once within the past year at school while under half (47%) reported they had been victimized while not at school. Findings provided some evidence that respondent characteristics were more strongly related to reports of victimization while not at school than at school.
- The patterns of victimization were similar across locations. The most prevalent incidents included: being slapped, punched, or kicked; having something stolen; being threatened with bodily harm; and having something damaged. Least prevalent incidents included being attacked by a group or gang, and being threatened with a weapon.
- While considerable gender differences were found in reported victimization both at school and not at school, the differences were even greater for incidents which occurred at school. Overall, males were more likely to report they were victimized than females. Females, however, were more likely to report being sexually victimized (that is, being sexually touched against the respondent's will and being offended by a remark of a sexual nature).
- Younger students were more likely to report they were victimized than older students. Proportionately more Grade 9 students reported being victimized compared to other respondent groups. There was some indication from the findings related to victimization outside of school that older students were more likely to report they had been sexually victimized (that is, someone sexually exposed themselves to the respondent, someone sexually touched the respondent against their will, and someone made an offensive sexual remark).
- Students in larger cities were more likely to report having something taken by force and being offended with a comment of a sexual nature. Otherwise, site size was only weakly related to victimization.
- The composition and strength of family relationships were related to victimization, particularly for incidents that occurred while not at school. Overall findings indicated that students living with both parents, reporting higher levels of family functioning and parental monitoring, and participating more often in leisure activities with parents, tended to be less likely to report being victimized.
- Peer-related factors, in general, were fairly strongly related to reports of victimization, especially for incidents outside of school. Factors including a highly delinquent peer group, frequent participation in activities with friends, and parental disapproval of friends, were associated with a higher prevalence of victimization as reported by respondents.
- School-related factors were strongly associated with victimization. Students who had ever been suspended from school, who had seriously thought about dropping out of school, or who had negative attitudes about their school were much more likely to report they were victimized. Truancy was found to be strongly associated with victimization outside of school, but only weakly associated with victimization at school.
- Findings related to psychological factors (conduct disorder, hyperactivity, and emotional disorder) clearly indicated that students with higher scores on any disorder were more likely to report being victimized. Degree of sexual experience was weakly related to victimization; however, in general students with no sexual experience were less likely to report they were victimized.

SELF-REPORTED DELINQUENCY

Students were asked to report on 14 different items measuring the extent to which they had engaged in delinquent behaviour both within their lifetime and within the past year. The items included both property- and violence-related behaviours.

Compared to the earlier study,¹ results from this survey indicated that delinquency rates in Calgary have fallen considerably. As discussed in the Victimization section, findings from the current survey appear to be consistent with

the officially reported trend of declining youth crime.

- Two-thirds of the respondents reported they had engaged in at least one of the delinquent behaviours in their lifetime.
- Over half (56%) of respondents reported they had engaged in at least one of the delinquent behaviours in the past year.
- The patterns of delinquent behaviours were comparable for lifetime and past year. The most prevalent forms of delinquent behaviour were: slapping, punching or kicking someone in anger; stealing something worth less than \$50; throwing something to hurt someone; damaging someone's property; and threatening to hurt someone. The least prevalent forms of delinquent behaviour were: sexually touching someone against their will, breaking into a house, threatening with a weapon, and stealing something worth \$50 or more.
- Minor property-related acts represented the most prevalent forms of delinquent behaviours for both males and females. However, as found with reported victimization, males were more likely to report they had engaged in delinquent behaviour on at least one occasion than were females. The findings also indicated that males were more likely than females to report on delinquent sexual behaviour.
- In general, younger students were less likely to report delinquent behaviours as compared to older students. Grade 9 students were more likely than any other respondent group to indicate they had carried out one or more violence-related delinquent acts.
- Respondents in smaller cities were more likely to report something had been taken by force, and students in larger cities were more likely to report taking a car or motorcycle without the owner's permission.
- With regard to family life and reported delinquency, family functioning (e.g., a weak or negative relationship with family members) and parental monitoring were strongly related to reported delinquent behaviour. Low levels of family functioning and low levels of parental monitoring were associated with a higher likelihood of reporting delinquency. While weakly related, respondents living with both parents tended to have lower reported delinquency rates than respondents from other kinds of households.
- As with victimization, peer-related factors were strongly linked to delinquency. A highly delinquent peer group, frequent participation in peer activities and parental disapproval of friends were all found to be related to reporting delinquent behaviour.
- Respondents experiencing more school-related problems were more likely to report engaging in delinquent behaviours. Students who had ever been suspended from school, who had seriously thought about dropping out of school, or who had negative attitudes about their school were much more likely to indicate they had engaged in delinquent behaviour.
- While participation in leisure and extracurricular activities was generally weakly associated with delinquency, involvement in commercial/entertainment activities (e.g., going to the mall or video arcade) and cultural/educational activities was notable. Respondents who took part in more commercial/entertainment activities were more likely to report they had been delinquent; however, students who took part in more cultural/educational activities were less likely to report delinquent behaviour.
- Findings related to conduct disorder and hyperactivity, more so than for emotional disorder, revealed that respondents scoring higher levels of disorder were more likely to report they had engaged in delinquent behaviours. Students who reported no sexual experience were less likely to report engaging in delinquent behaviours.

HAVING WEAPONS AT SCHOOL

The possession of weapons at school is a form of delinquent behaviour of particularly serious concern to school administrators, law enforcement personnel and the public. In the survey, students were asked whether they had carried various types of weapons at school or had the weapons in their lockers within the past year.

- Most respondents (84%) reported they have never had a weapon at school; however, 15.6% indicated they had a weapon at school on at least one occasion in the past year. Most students who reported having a weapon at school indicated this happened only one time.
- The most prevalent weapons included illegal knives (7% had an illegal knife on at least one occasion) and

other types of knives as listed under "other type of weapon" in the survey. The least prevalent were handguns (0.6%) and pellet guns (1%).

- Males were more likely to report having a weapon at school than were females. For example, for the most prevalent type of weapon carried, 11.5% of males as compared to 3.8% of females reported having an illegal knife. Results also indicated that older students were more likely to report having an illegal knife than younger students; notably, Grade 9 students were most likely to report weapon possession.
- A fairly strong relationship was found for family life and having weapons. Students with lower scores on family-related factors (family functioning, parental monitoring, shared leisure activities with parents) were more likely to report weapon possession.
- Peer delinquency and parental opinion of the respondent's friends were strongly associated with weapon possession at school. Respondents who reported no or a moderate level of peer delinquency were less likely to report having weapons as compared to students with a high number of delinquent peers. As well, students whose parents disapproved of their friends were more likely to report having weapons than were those whose parents approved of most friends.
- Respondents experiencing more school-related problems were also more likely to report having a weapon at school. Achieving higher academic grades, spending more time on homework, not skipping classes, and having a positive school attitude were all strongly related to not having weapons. As well, students who had never been suspended from school and students who had never seriously thought about dropping out of school were least likely to report carrying weapons.
- Consistent with findings about engaging in other types of delinquent behaviour, higher levels of participation in commercial/entertainment activities (e.g., going to the mall or video arcade) were positively related to reporting weapon possession while more involvement in cultural/educational activities tended to be associated with not carrying weapons.
- Respondents reporting high levels of psychological disorder were more likely to report having a weapon. Conduct disorder, hyperactivity and, to a lesser extent, emotional disorder, were related to likelihood of reporting. Respondents who indicated a high degree of sexual experience were also more likely to indicate having a weapon at school.

PERCEPTIONS OF THE POLICE AND CONTACT WITH THE POLICE AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

Students were asked about in-school and outside-school contact with the police and their experience with the criminal justice system, their opinions on the quality of police performance on various job components, and whether they were aware of youth service agencies. Students' suggestions for making the school and community safer places were also obtained.

- Over half (53%) of the students reported they had a school resource officer or an officer who regularly visited their school.
- The most common types of contact between students and the police while at school involved educational programs: 56% of respondents indicated police presentations on youth crime and violence prevention and 53% identified personal safety as the reasons for police contact.
- With regard to contact with the police occurring while not at school, contact tended to be related to crime events. The most prevalent reasons given for contact included being a witness to a crime (20%) and reporting a crime that took place outside of school (19%).
- Relatively few respondents reported having any contact with the criminal justice system. Of the total respondents, under 6% had been arrested, less than 5% had been charged, about 4% were found guilty of an offence, and under 2% spent a night in jail or a detention centre.
- In rating police performance, the majority of students had quite positive opinions about the police. Over three-quarters of the respondents felt the police were doing a good or very good job in enforcing the law and making the community safe.
- The majority of respondents did not identify any clubs, agencies or special programs for troubled youth in their school or community. Of the 23% who indicated they were aware of at least one service, the most frequently

cited included school (and other) counsellors, and the Kid's Help Phone.

- With respect to suggestions regarding how the school or community could be made safer, the majority of comments noted that the school the student attended or the community the student lived in was already safe. While quite a high number of respondents actually indicated they did not know what could be done, or that they felt nothing could be done, students who did offer suggestions mostly indicated that increased police presence would provide a safer environment. Also cited was the need for tougher laws and rules and more community surveillance programs (such as Block Watch).

¹ Smith, R.B., Bertrand, L.D., Arnold, B.A., & Hornick, J.P. (1995). *A Study of the Level and Nature of Youth Crime and Violence in Calgary*. Calgary, AB: Calgary Police Service.

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