

REIMAGINING CRIME: Positive Change Starts with the Kids

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Youth criminality is changing in Newfoundland and Labrador, as are policing techniques aimed at youth. Recent innovations undertaken with the RCMP take a new look at youth criminality, changing the emphasis from recidivism (the return to crime) to desistance (the continued avoidance of criminal activity).

Recent socio-economic challenges in Newfoundland and Labrador—such as the cod moratorium, demographic shifts, and an influx of oil money—suggest that life in the province is changing. Youth are often most impacted by these variations in future prospects, the structure of the province (physically and economically), and the realities within which they live. Researchers have long noted the link between lifestyle factors, economic opportunities, and youth engagement in criminal activity. In NL, with its rural nature, particular socio-economic history, and increased (selective) prosperity from its oil-driven economy, there is now a requirement to better understand the explicit factors affecting youth experience.

Clearly, youth “needs” are changing alongside technological advancements that are also reshaping the type of “crime” in which youth participate. For example, decades ago, police often responded to “vandalized or knocked over mailboxes,” which is no longer the case. Youth crime, like all crime, is evolving (e.g., break and entries are being replaced by online fraud and theft) despite the national crime statistics showing a reduction in rates of occurrence. But are these rates actual or superficial? Do they represent a need to rearticulate and define understandings of what constitutes a crime today? Indeed, these purported decreases in crime may not be reflective of reality.

In this province, for example, the number of youth accused of police-reported crime decreased in all categories between 2011 and 2012, with a decrease of

three per cent in total violent crime. Youth homicide rates remain zero and major assaults decreased, break and enter was reduced by 25 per cent, motor vehicle theft by 23 per cent, and total property crime by 18 per cent. Overall, the youth crime rate in the province decreased 11 per cent. This trend is found across almost every province in Canada, with the exception of Prince Edward Island, which saw an increase of two per cent in rates of youth crime, and the Yukon, which experienced a one per cent increase. Of the provinces and territories with decreased rates, both NL and Saskatchewan experienced the greatest drop (11 per cent), while Nova Scotia had the lowest reduction in youth crime (one per cent), followed by Manitoba (two per cent), Northwest Territories (three per cent), and Quebec (four per cent). However, is crime really declining? Or are the crimes we are counting no longer representative of the crimes youth engage in?

The importance of trust

Given the swiftness of technological changes and reach of social media, new information about youth needs in the province is necessary for producing and promoting successful community development for youth engagement. To this end, provincial public debate about crime prevention and management for youth highlights a need for effective youth intervention and community development programs, and, specifically, for programs that, both reduce youth experiences of victimization and their unintentional or intentional perpetration of crime or criminal behaviours.

The interactions of diverse policing personnel and agencies with youth have been highlighted as a source of potential concern, with some suggesting youth have been treated too leniently by the law, while others arguing officers have been too aggressive. The Ontario-commissioned report *Roots of Youth Violence* concluded that youths' wellbeing is negatively impacted by aggressive policing, resulting in alienation, decreased self-esteem, feelings of hopelessness, and a loss of faith in the justice system generally and law enforcement especially. This last finding is particularly damaging given that, without trust in the system and the police who are its agents, who can youth turn to when they are threatened, victimized, targeted, or scared? Beyond the supportive role of family, friends, guardians, or, for some, state representations, youths *should* be able to turn to agents of the law—those with the sworn duty to protect them and their wellbeing—for assistance, support, or guidance. However, without that trust, youth, like any other persons, would not feel comfortable or able to go to police for assistance. This challenging situation requires remediation.

Perceptions of punishment

The RCMP's B Division, which polices large parts of NL, recognizes this. As a federal agency, the RCMP strategically prioritizes the reduction of youth involvement in crime (as victims and offenders) and strives to support sustainable long-term responses to youth engagement in "deviance." To reach such objectives, both police training initiatives (including multi-day workshops drawing in both youth and officers across the province) and active involvement with agencies in support of youth (like the Coalition on Youth Justice) are essential. The RCMP has also partnered with Memorial University, and academics and officers now work alongside each other, with applied practice informing research development and vice versa. Exploring the relative positions of the province's youths and officers towards each other has an overarching goal of redefining crime and reshaping "best practice" for officers as a modern, reflexive relationship, a foundation for long-term interactions that promote prevention and safety.

The ultimate aim is to reduce youth victimization and perpetration of crime. The police force understands that traditional solutions fail to address the greater social and environmental problems that may trigger youth

experience of crime. Little knowledge exists regarding the quality and type of interactions between police and youth in Canada (including in this province), and this indicates an academic and paraprofessional need to fill an important knowledge gap.

We are looking at both those policing and those "being policed" to examine differences in experience and perceptions, recognizing the diversities that exist across the province: NL is not a homogenous entity. The intent is to understand youth's attitudes and perception of police (helpful or punitive), and whether youth desire to use police as a peacekeeping human resource or preventative "external support" when being drawn towards deviance. In turn, how do officers perceive and police youth; do they have the sufficient and effective tools they need? Or are they lost between warnings, process, and confusing legislation?

This change in perspective (and partnership) moves the discussion away from a focus on recidivism to "desistance," the processes that promote the ongoing and active decision to avoid, or repeatedly desist from, crime. The early studies of desistance examined digression from crime through the lens of an age-crime curve, that is, with the view that crime trends change as people age. It has long been noticed that a disproportionately large number of offenses are committed by people in their teens, yet few continue to engage in crime as they age into and throughout their adult years. According to age-graded social control theory, key institutions, such as employment, and social bonds, such as marriage, provide informal social controls that help regulate individual behaviours over time. An alternative view is that informal control arises from decreased exposure to delinquent peers.

Finding new hope

Desistance has largely been studied outside of Canada, and has generally been attributed to changes in external circumstances over life. Unfortunately, neither the word desistance nor its study have been adapted and normalized in this country. However, via this collaborative process with the RCMP, we will study how desistance can be made an option for NL youth. Indeed, simply changing from a focus on people who continue to commit crime to those who make the (at times more difficult) decision to turn away from crime will encourage a reframing of the discussion around criminal activities, behaviour, and decision to be criminally

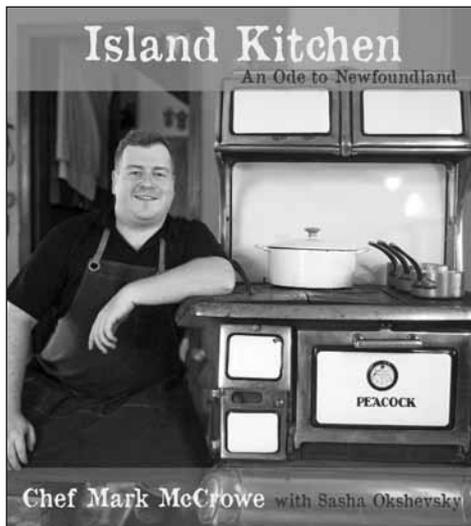
active. Concentrating on what is unique and noteworthy about the people who successfully reject or withdraw from crime informs and further encourages those who are trying to move along the same path. In keeping within these priorities, there is a significant social contribution to be made by addressing and potentially mitigating the movement of youth into the adult criminal justice system by promoting and understanding desistance rather than focusing on and speaking to the criminally active or recidivists.

Agency, the free choice that individuals have to act, is the central factor supporting desistance, but such

agency must be revealed and understood within the social context of the desister. Such change, emphasizing positive outcomes post-criminality, encourages more affirming movements and gives hope to all who have become caught up in such less-than-productive lifestyles. To this end, we all must remember that it is a societal responsibility to ensure that youth are safe, that their human rights are respected, and that they are neither a victim of, nor resorting to, criminality. **NQ**

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