

## CALGARY YOUTH OFFENDERS STUDY

A Calgary study is providing a rare and valuable glimpse into the trends, characteristics and experiences of youth offenders.

The study examines the overall reported chargeable incidents in Calgary in 2006, compares the criminal histories of Serious Habitual Offenders (SHO) with non-SHOs, and profiles 123 youth offenders involved at various stages of the youth justice system.

The research findings promise to provide those working with youth offenders, including The City of Calgary, the Calgary Police Service, the province and local community agencies, with solid information to bolster existing programs and guide future initiatives.

The findings are from the first year of the three-year study called A Profile of Youth Offenders in Calgary.

The research is being conducted by the Canadian Research Institute for Law and the Family and funded by The City of Calgary Community & Neighborhood Services, Calgary Transit and Alberta Law Foundation.

### Summary of first-year results:

Overall, the findings confirm many of things that staff working in the youth justice system have long suspected.

This includes the important roles that family support, school attendance and organized

recreation opportunities play in preventing youth involvement in crime.

The importance of these factors is echoed throughout the study findings.

In all reported chargeable incidents involving youth in 2006:

- > Very few of all Calgary youth between the ages of 12 & 17 were formally charged with a crime (2.7%)
- > Most youth were 15 years or older (70.6%) and male (73%)
- > Most incidents occurred on weekdays (78.1%) and during school hours or right after school (54.4%)
- > Most incidents did not involve co-offenders (59.7%)
- > Most incidents involved property crime (52.8%) and relatively few involved crimes against the person (16%)
- > Very few incidents involved the use of a weapon (5%) and of those, knives were the most common weapon

In the study, comparisons were made between Serious Habitual Offenders (SHOs) and non-Serious Habitual Offenders (non-SHOs).

Youth offenders designated as SHOs by the Alberta Solicitor General are, generally speaking, the youth who have the most significant criminal impact in the community.

In a comparison of the criminal histories between SHOs and non-SHOs from 2000-2006:

- > SHOs' have an earlier onset of recorded criminal contact and their involvement appears to peak at 14 years of age, while non-SHOs peak at 16 years old.
- > SHOs were involved in significantly more reported chargeable incidents (33.4 per youth) than non-SHOs (4.7 per youth)
- > When comparing the characteristics of 123 youth offenders involved at various points of the youth justice system, those youth who are more seriously criminally involved were:
  - Considerably more likely to have experienced family violence, and

were more likely to live somewhere other than with parents at the time of the interview

- Far more likely to have run away from home at least once, and very few engaged in social or leisure activities with their families.
- More likely to have had contact with Children’s Services, including living in foster care or group homes
- More likely to have had some experience with gangs (defined in the study as three or more youth who regularly engage in criminal activity).
- Much less likely to be involved in sports or clubs, whether on their own or with family
- Much less likely to be attending school

When considering all 123 youth offenders:

- Self-reported drug use was very high across all levels of offending. Marijuana, ecstasy, and mushrooms were the most commonly used among all youth who had used drugs, and nearly all reported having used marijuana. More criminally involved youth tended to

report use of harder drugs, particularly crack and cocaine.

- Drug dealing was also common among more serious offenders, with a substantial majority having experience with both buying and selling drugs.
- A majority of all youth reported knowing where to find drugs
- Self-reported carrying of weapons increased with the degree of criminal involvement, from 15% for Gateway participants (an extrajudicial program to steer first-time offenders away from committing more crimes) to 55% for Serious Habitual Offenders (youth offenders having the most significant impact on a community).
- Knives were reported as the primary weapon of choice, as well as pepper spray, batons, metal knuckles, machetes or homemade weapons.
- Six of the 123 study participants reported ever carrying guns in the community.
- A gang was defined to the study participants as a group of three or more individuals committing criminal activities. Seventeen of the 123 study respondents reported currently being a member of a gang.

“This study reinforces our belief that the

entire community must work together to prevent youth crime,” says Inspector Bob Couture of CPS Community and Youth Services. “The Calgary Police Service must continue working with Community & Neighborhood Services and our many community partners to support families when their kids are young. The best way to get youth out of the justice system is to prevent them from getting in.”

The final two years of the study will include 12-month and 24-month follow-ups with the 123 youth offenders, an investigation of the impact of the YCJA on the youth justice system, and an examination of best practices for working with chronic and serious habitual offenders.