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Combating Youth Crime in Canada: Prevention in the Schools

OTTAWA (October 3, 2008) – The Canadian Psychological Association (CPA) is urging the next federal government to help address the chronic shortage of school psychologists needed to curb youth crime.

“We need to focus on prevention, and one of the best places to do that is in the schools,” said Dr. Catherine Lee, President of CPA.

In the leaders’ debates this week, Prime Minister Harper said his government would devote \$50 million to help at-risk youth. “We’d like to see that funding directed to ensuring that our young people have access to the mental health services they need. Think of the young lives we could rescue – and the money we could save – if we could identify youth at risk, offer them needed service early and *before* they engage in harmful or criminal behaviour,” Dr. Lee said.

Children’s Mental Health Ontario estimates that the cost to serve one child through community mental health service is just \$2,250 per year. In contrast, it costs taxpayers \$120,000 per year for each adolescent detained in youth detention.

It is estimated that 1.2 million young people under the age of 20 have mental disorders.¹ Yet only 5 per cent of children with a diagnosable psychological problem receive any form of psychological care.²

A 2007 review of School Psychology in Canada cited a benchmark of one psychologist per 1,000 students³. We’re nowhere near that in Canada. Among nine Canadian jurisdictions reported on, the average ratio of psychologists to students was 1 to 5,161.

¹ Kirby MJL and Keon WJ. (2006). *Out of the Shadows at Last: Highlights and Recommendations of the Final Report on Mental Health, Mental Illness and Addiction*. Ottawa: Senate of Canada, Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology.

² Canadian Psychological Association (2002). *Enhancing the Experience of Children and youth in today’s Schools: The Role of Psychology in Canadian Schools*

³ Saklofske, D.H., Schwean, V.L., Bartell, R. et al. (2007). *School Psychology in Canada: Past, present, and future perspectives*. In T. Fagan & P. Wise (eds.). *School Psychology: Past, present, and future perspectives*. Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.

The fallout from the shortage of trained school psychologists manifests itself in many ways. For example, Canada lags far behind many other industrial countries in addressing bullying and victimization in schools. “Canada ranked a dismal 26th and 27th out of 35 countries on 13 year-old students’ reports of bullying and victimization, respectively”.⁴

“We have an undersupply of school psychologists either because school boards are cutting back or because positions, which are not competitive with private practice, remain unfilled,” said Dr. Jennifer Frain, Chairperson of the Council of Professional Associations of Psychologists (CPAP).

Dr. Karen Cohen, Executive Director of the CPA, explained that “this means some kids will never get access to the care they need because their families cannot afford it. With cuts in public institutions, like schools, psychologists are increasingly working in private practice where their services are not covered by public health insurance plans.”

CPA and CPAP want to see the federal government get serious about this issue by: 1) dedicating federal transfer funding for mental health and specifically for children’s mental health; and 2) working with the provinces to define and develop better models of prevention and service delivery in mental health;

About the CPA

The Canadian Psychological Association was organized in 1939 to improve the health and welfare of all Canadians; promote excellence and innovation in psychological research, education, and practice; and promote the advancement, development, dissemination, and application of psychological knowledge.

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⁴ <http://prevnet.ca/Bullying/BullyingStatistics/tabid/122/Default.aspx>
(Craig & Harel, 2004).