



FASTFACTS



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The Tragedy Runs Deep

Recently Winnipeg witnessed the brutal murder of a 34-year-old inner-city Aboriginal woman. Audrey Cooper died from injuries received when she was attacked near her home in the early morning hours. Four young people—including three girls aged 12, 14 and 14—have been charged in her death. The alleged involvement of teenaged girls in Cooper's death has, yet again, raised the issue of whether girls are becoming more violent.

Concerns about an increase in violence by girls is an issue that has periodically figured prominently in the media, especially some ten years ago, with the death of 14-year-old Reena Virk in Victoria, B.C. Reena had been beaten by a group of 7 girls and 1 boy. One of the girls and the boy were held criminally responsible for her death. At that time, media pundits were proclaiming the age of the "nasty girl," and Reena's death was interpreted as a sign that girls are becoming more violent.

Trapped in poverty, ignored by governments intent upon cutting public expenditures rather than creating opportunities, inner city youth can be forgiven when, in some cases, they lose hope for a better future. For many, a culture of despair has emerged—a culture beyond the experience of more well to do Canadians.

Then—as now—such tragic acts are not the "tip of the iceberg," an indication of a female crime wave. According to Winnipeg Police Service statistics, girls made up 31% (302) of youths charged with a violent crime in 2005. Like charges for violent crime generally, most of these are for common or level one assaults. And this figure is not much different

from previous years. In 2001, for example, girls made up 30% (283) of youths charged with crimes against the person. An increase of 19 girls charged with a violent offence over a five-year period does not make for a crime wave. In fact, there were actually 88 fewer girls charged with a violent

offence in 2005 compared to the previous year.

Talk of a female crime wave invariably raises the issue of women's liberation as responsible for the supposed increases in girls' violence. Girls, we are told, are no longer made of "sugar and spice." Now equal to boys, they are demonstrating this equality



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in their use of violence and aggression. But does this suffice as an explanation? Can we really say that feminism is to blame when young girls—especially those living in Winnipeg's inner city—lash out? Or do we need to find our answers elsewhere?

We know that a strong correlation exists between inner-city poverty and crime and violence. A 2004 study done by the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics found conclusively that the closer one gets to the socio-economically disadvantaged, geographic centre of Winnipeg the higher is the incidence of crime.

Manitoba has the second highest child poverty rate in the country. One in five Manitoba children are living in poverty. Half of all off-reserve Aboriginal children in Manitoba were living in poverty in 2001. The province also has the highest percentage (47%) of child food bank clients in Canada. Winnipeg Harvest now provides emergency food to 18,126 children each month. Ten years ago that figure was 5,512.

Poverty is especially concentrated in Winnipeg's inner-city communities, where well-paid jobs are scarce, housing is frequently inadequate, and opportunities for youth are few. Trapped in poverty, ignored by governments intent upon cutting public expenditures rather than creating opportunities, inner city youth can be forgiven when, in some cases, they lose hope for a better future. For many, a culture of despair has emerged—a culture beyond the experience of more well to do Canadians. In this context, should we be surprised when some kids lash out in the form of crime and violence?

Children—and we need to remember that these are children who have been charged in the death of Audrey Cooper—should be taught to be accountable for their actions. But perhaps we need to be accountable for ours. Should we not be held accountable for electing governments more intent on cutting taxes than investing in opportunities for children growing up in poverty? Should we not be held accountable for tolerating the deeply rooted systemic racism that is a part of the everyday experiences of so many inner-city youth? Are we not repeat offenders for continuing to do so, all the while

refusing to accept responsibility for the consequences of our actions?

This issue is about the poverty and racism that have been allowed to fester and grow in Winnipeg's inner city for so many decades. Why do we continue to be surprised when terrible offences are committed? Why do we continue to commit the equally terrible offences of neglect and ignorance?

We need to mourn the death of Audrey Cooper. At the same time, we need to think long and hard about what it will take to make sure such a tragedy does not happen again. To do so will involve confronting the harsh reality that too many kids—both girls and boys—in Winnipeg's inner city have for far too long been denied hope for a better future.

As a society, we all need to be held accountable. That means demanding that governments invest in the many solutions that work in Winnipeg's inner city—solutions built by inner-city people themselves, but sorely under funded by a society and by governments that have lost their vision of a better future for *all* of us.

- Elizabeth Comack

Elizabeth Comack is a Professor of Sociology at the University of Manitoba and a Research Associate with the CCPA-MB. She is the co-author of a report on safety and security issues in Winnipeg's inner-city communities to be released by the CCPA-MB at the end of November.

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