



How Much Does The City Value Our Kids?

I was reading some stats on youth crime in Winnipeg recently and was gob smacked by the numbers. Our city, it turns out, is the youth crime capital of Canada, with the highest incarceration rate of kids between the ages of 12 and 17 of any province in Canada. The only other places that come close are the Saskatchewan and the Northwest Territories.

Not surprisingly, we also have the highest child poverty rate in the country.

So what, exactly, is going on and how is the city responding? Well, as far as I can see based on the most recent city budget not much of anything is being done, and if some members of the city's Executive Policy Committee had their way, we would be doing even less.

In fact the city's budget committee recently floated the idea of reducing grants for youth community services from \$3.4 to \$1.3 million, noting that none of it could go to operating costs like salaries. Thanks to the protests of citizens and service providers they backed off and restored the budget to an already meagre, \$3.4 million.

They did add an additional \$1 million for community-based crime prevention via youth recreation, which, let's face it, is just another drop in the proverbial bucket.

Meanwhile, council axed the \$650,000 budget for Community Connections, a thriving service provided at the Millenium Library to assist vulnerable people of all ages - many of them indigenous - with information on everything from resume writing to addiction counselling. This, despite the pleas of librarians and community advocates to keep the program.

So where are our tax dollars going instead? Well, instead of investing more in programs that help kids and keep them off the street and out of trouble, the city announced a \$20 million increase in the police services budget, which rings in at a whopping \$352 million.



The police can't solve the city's child poverty or youth crime problem.

I'd lay bets that even our new top cop, Gene Bowers, knows that policing isn't the way to reduce youth crime. After all, the only things the cops can do is respond to calls, intervene when they see a crime in action or arrest the perpetrators once they're found.

And here's the thing - the perpetrators are getting younger and younger.

One recent incident was an attempted mugging of a woman by three kids, the youngest of whom was just 12 years old. Another March incident saw a 15 year old stabbing a thirty-five year old man.

So why, in God's name, isn't the city investing more in those kids?

Well, the answer seems to lie in claims made by certain councillors that providing social services like Community Connections isn't within the city's jurisdiction. Worse still, according to another source, the mayor's office has indicated that youth programming isn't where the city should be investing money.

Say What!?

If the city isn't prepared to tackle our child poverty problem and youth crime rate who will? Why, for example, is a city owned recreational facility being built in the suburbs, while an after-school summer program in a low income neighbourhood is refused support?

Why are we contemplating billion dollar road projects, when so many kids are living in poverty?

And why is the police budget almost 100 times the budget for youth services?

The poster features a collage of photos showing diverse children and families. A central image shows a young girl in a black 'FOOTBALL' t-shirt. To the right, the Rossbrook House Foundation logo is displayed above the text 'NO CHILD ALONE DINNER' in large blue letters. Below this, the date 'APRIL 27, 2023' and the location 'RBC Convention Centre' are listed. At the bottom right, it says 'TICKETS ON SALE NOW: rossbrookhouse.ca'. In the bottom left corner, there is a logo with a heart and the text 'OPEN DOORS • OPEN ARMS' and 'SUPPORT ROSSBROOK HOUSE PROGRAMS'.

Organizations like Rossbrook house and the Boys and Girls Club, with a proven track record in preventing youth crime aren't being adequately funded by our city and provincial governments.

To my mind, something is very wrong with this picture and the problem seems to start in the mayor's office and Executive Policy Committee then filters down to councillors, whose only recourse is to make trade-offs. The kind where they vote for new roads, in exchange for keeping just one community pool open.

An outdoor pool which, as insignificant as it may seem, has the potential to keep bored teenagers off the streets and out of trouble in the summer.

In fact numerous studies demonstrate that after school activities and summer programs are the best ways to reduce youth crime. Juvenile incarceration, on the other hand, only serves to damage the mental and physical health of our kids, impede education and expose them to possible abuse.

I say “our kids” because, frankly, their lives and futures are everyone’s responsibility. As the old saying goes, it takes a village to raise a child and that includes “raising them” out of poverty and providing them with a chance to succeed.

Now, perhaps that isn’t the sole responsibility of city government. But given current circumstances there is little doubt that the mayor and councillors should be doing more. Because if they expect the police to solve the youth crime problem, if they fail to provide low income kids with the services they need to stay safe, it speaks volumes about how much we value our children.

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