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Research & Transformative Learning Theme for Global Studies 2023

Policing In a New Generation of Youth, Their Families and Their Communities

Much has changed since Global Studies last directed its focus on youth in 2009. Social media was not even a common term, and most among the prevailing 'youth' cohort of the times were born before the internet. Smart phones were about one year old. While there were some conversations at the time about "generational differences" inside policing, today many of our current recruits were born after the turn of the century. And, many of those we might like to recruit have completely different expectations and options for how they hope to earn their living. As such, this is a theme that lends itself to a dual lens approach: how do we remain a sustainable profession; and, how do we continue to respond to and best serve the needs the people who have always, statistically, defined our primary market, most often defined by the ages of 15-24.

On the functional, operational side of policing, our officers are dealing with an increase in calls for service that point to significant challenges for today's parents in managing a new generation of youth in a modern technological world. Parents are not necessarily equipped to navigate the complexities facing today's youth, issues that parents did not face in their childhood, and there is no easy blueprint for how to parent our way through these challenges. Policing has become involved in this issue by way of parents phoning for police assistance when they don't know how to parent certain behaviours of their children. Social media has taken over the minds of our youth, and many don't know how to handle it, without the boundaries put in place by their parents because their parents no longer know how. This too often translates into more and different police work, with increases in online predators, bullying and harassment, with cases such as that of Amanda Todd highlighting the potential gravity of this issue.

Youth today are also being diagnosed with unprecedented rates of anxiety, depression and substance use disorders. This translates into behaviours to which police must respond, including increases in admissions to hospitals for youth for mental health support. It is no longer okay to just send the child for counselling. Such situations may also require the inclusion of the family system, working together with community resources to support the child at risk. This is a concept well outside of traditional policing roles, and one that merits further research and promotion.

What is the effect of this as it translates to community? Police have been removed from many schools across Canada, yet we have documented and demonstrated success both in schools and in various cadet or other youth engagement programs that have had positive effects on the trajectory of youth in society. What do we do now in the face of broken trust? We are seemingly not wanted in schools, yet we know we can play a crucial role in supporting youth in their most vulnerable steps toward maturity. What does a youth engagement model need to look like within a new generation of youth, families and communities, many of whom may be new to Canada, and many others reflective of racially and colonially marginalized groups?

At the same time, internal to our own sector, we are witnessing crisis levels in our inability to attract, prepare and retain our own workforce.

Global Studies 2023 will be asked to interpret this broad and dual theme, and to identify global environments where Canada might learn from similar experiences, challenges and youth engagement solutions underway. Ultimately, their study results will guide us all in updating our understanding of how policing and the youth of the coming decade might continue to coexist, cooperate, and ensure continuing strengths in community safety and well-being.