

## Un-equal access to opportunity between suburban and inner-city youth

Three weeks ago, a 19-year-old from Winnipeg's inner city shot two teenagers. Our city government's response was to send in more police officers. But incarceration and tougher sentences do not tackle the root causes of crime: poverty and inequality. On the other hand, if inner city youth had the kind of access to educational and recreational activities that suburban youth did, they would not be committing these crimes.

The major difference between growing up as a middle class child from the suburbs, and growing up as a poor child from the inner city, is opportunity. I was raised in St.Vital: think affluence and SUVs, but also, and more importantly, well-resourced community centres, swimming pools, and sports fields. Starting at 5 years old, I played mini soccer, and took acting lessons. In high school, I had access to all kinds of fantastic educational and recreational activities,

including Model United Nations simulations, and even trips to Senegal and Washington. I played basketball competitively, and my weekends were spent at basketball tournaments or practicing for league games with my friends at the open gym. Some of my most cherished childhood memories are getting pumped up for games with my friends, listening to Space Jam and envisioning future NBA careers. But to be honest, I really hated basketball. It made me angry that my height put me at a disadvantage that I couldn't control; being so short, I would never be able to dunk! I would never be like Shaq!

Just the way my height put me at a disadvantage for dunking basketballs, poverty puts kids from the inner city at a disadvantage. I didn't choose my height, and these young people didn't choose to live

in poverty. Many inner city youth don't have the chance to play sports, make art, or access the quality of education suburban youth do. With few options, many kids turn to criminal activities and gangs. Authors Robin Fitzgerald, Michael Wisener, and Josée Savoie (2004) concluded that "the level of socio-economic

**Crime and violence correlate strongly with poverty.....**

disadvantage in a neighbourhood was most strongly associated with the highest neighbourhood

rates of both violent and property crimes." Crime and violence correlate strongly with poverty and related conditions, and both are higher in Winnipeg's inner-city neighborhoods than in suburban ones. Poor inner city youth are therefore disadvantaged in two ways, their communities are less safe, and they are more likely to turn to criminal activities.



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For some youth living in poverty, lucrative and illegal activities like drug dealing and prostitution can seem like logical options. Having access to recreational and educational activities, can provide more positive options. What is unfair is that major barriers exist for inner city kids from accessing these services. Parents in the inner city can barely afford the basics, never mind recreation fees.

Your family income and the neighbourhood you grow up in should not dictate the opportunities you have. Unfortunately in Winnipeg, it does. According to the 2006 census, the median income for families in the inner city is nearly half of the median income in Winnipeg as a whole; whereas the average in Winnipeg is \$50 000, it is about \$30,000 in the inner city, and even lower in specific inner-city neighbourhoods. Missing out on recreational activities also means missing out on developing important life skills that help youth to succeed in their education and employment. Without educational opportunities, it is nearly impossible to break out of the cycle of poverty.

*In The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger*, Wilkinson and Pickett reveal a large body of evidence that shows that neighbourhoods, cities and countries with higher rates of

inequality have more social problems, including poor mental and physical health, and less social mobility. Their research also shows that homicides are more common in the more unequal areas of cities. Violent behaviour most often comes from young men struggling to maintain what little status they have. Increased inequality only intensifies the stakes for competition for social status, making at-risk youth more likely to commit violent crimes when it is threatened. Therefore, in order to reduce crime, as well as many other inter-related problems, more emphasis needs to be put on decreasing inequality.

Mayor Katz's 'tough on crime' policy is consistent with that at the federal level. Since 2005, the Harper government strategy has been to get tougher on crime, putting more police on the streets, and implementing tougher sentences, instead of addressing structural issues. But throwing kids in jail as a crime prevention strategy risks doing more harm than good. Research shows that placing deviant youth into programs and settings that are populated with other troubled youth may exacerbate deviant behaviour. This practice is counter-productive as it further strengthens negative peer networks.

Spending on things like \$3.5 million helicopters could be much more effectively directed

toward programs that respond to poverty and inequality. For example, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives 2009 Alternative Municipal Budget outlined concrete policies including: additional resources for housing and recreation, the development of an anti-poverty mandate, changes that would allow the police service to take a proactive, community policing approach and responding to the long-standing need for an independent review agency to ensure citizens the right to have their concerns addressed by an independent third party.

Nothing will make me grow taller, neither elaborate limb stretching exercises, or homemade bungee cord apparatuses. Our height is something we cannot change. Fortunately we can change government policy. A municipal election is fast approaching. This provides us with a good opportunity to elect representatives that understand that getting tough on crime requires that they get tough on poverty. Breaking down the barriers to accessing quality education and recreation is pivotal if youth are going to break from the cycle of poverty.

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