

LEARNING DISABILITIES ASSOCIATION OF ONTARIO
Submission to Consultation on Roots of Youth Violence
March 2008

The Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario (LDAO) is the provincial association representing the interests of persons with learning disabilities throughout Ontario. Originally founded in 1963 to assist parents of children with learning disabilities to obtain access to special education services, the LDAO has expanded its mandate to include adolescents and adults who have learning disabilities, in postsecondary and employment sectors.

The Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario is pleased to have the opportunity to respond to the consultation on Roots of Youth Violence, from the perspective of youth with learning disabilities (LDs).

According to a review of research evidence by Marshall H. Raskind, PhD, "a number of studies since the mid-1970s have found a "relatively large" number of individuals with LD in delinquent populations. However, the prevalence rates reported in these studies vary widely, ranging from 12% or less to as high as 70% or greater². Most recently, the National Council on Disability (2003) estimated that approximately 30% of children in the juvenile justice system have LD³." Raskind goes on to describe the complexity of trying to link LDs with delinquency, and points out that "we need to be careful not to confuse the prevalence of LD in delinquent populations with the percentage of all children with LD who potentially might end up in the juvenile justice system".

Raskind's article outlines some of the theories about links between delinquency and LDs, e.g. "that school failure resulting from a student having LD leads to criticism, rejection, poor self-image, school dropout, and ultimately delinquency"; that "children with LD have a number of personality characteristics (e.g., poor interpretation of social cues, impulsivity) that make them susceptible to delinquent behaviour"; that "adolescents with LD engage in the same kind of delinquent behavior, and at the same rate as non-disabled peers, but that police, social workers and other professionals treat them differently and may be more likely to arrest them and find them legally responsible for having broken the law"; and that "children and adolescents with LD have cognitive problem-solving deficits in social situations that lead to delinquent behaviors". Anecdotal evidence also suggests that individuals with LDs have a harder time explaining their actions in a logical, credible way, and thus are more likely to be charged with an offence.

Raskind suggests that longitudinal studies are needed to track prevalence of LDs in delinquent populations, but this method might not account for youth who are not identified as having LDs while in school. Studies of adults in trouble with the law suggest that individuals with unidentified learning problems are over-represented in prison populations. Studies of youth who have dropped out of school and/or enrolled in adult literacy programs have also shown an over-representation of identified and unidentified LDs.

The Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario promotes early screening and intervention for students at risk for school failure, and is currently administering a Ministry of Education program, the Web-based Teaching Tool, an online program which primary teachers use for early screening and intervention. We believe that appropriate

early intervention can prevent secondary emotional difficulties, such as frustration and poor self-esteem, which students who struggle with their academic work may experience.

As LDAO pointed out in our February 2006 submission to the Ontario Safe Schools Action Team, many students with learning difficulties who are not getting appropriate remedial programming become so frustrated that they may act out inappropriately. Others respond to triggers in their environment that with careful planning can be avoided. According to a Ministry of Education Fact sheet, students with exceptionalities are over-represented among students who are suspended and/or expelled from Ontario schools, and our chapter representatives tell us that students with learning disabilities are included in these numbers.

Most youth with identified or unidentified learning disabilities will not end up in conflicts, violent or otherwise, that bring them into contact with the law. However, young offenders whose academic histories suggest learning problems should receive psychoeducational assessments in order to understand all the factors behind their actions, and to plan appropriate interventions (including remediation of academic skill deficits). The pre-sentence report provides one opportunity for assessment by a psychologist who is knowledgeable in the field of learning disabilities.

In conclusion, planning for reduction of youth violence should include early screening and intervention for learning difficulties, assessment and remediation of learning disabilities in the school system, and assessment for possible learning disabilities in young offenders. In addition, implementation of recommendations from the Safe Schools Action Team should go a long way toward preventing youth violence in the school setting.

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