

ORGANISATION OF EASTERN CARIBBEAN STATES

**FIRST OECS CONFERENCE
ON
YOUTH CRIME AND VIOLENCE**

**UNDER THE DISTINGUISHED PATRONAGE OF
HIS EXCELLENCY, HON. ROOSEVELT SKERRIT
PRIME MINISTER OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF DOMINICA
AND CHAIRPERSON OF THE OECS YOUTH INITIATIVE**

OCTOBER 11 AND 12, 2006

**CARA SUITES HOTEL
CASTRIES, SAINT LUCIA**

THANK YOU

On behalf of the Director General and Staff of the OECS Secretariat, I am honoured to take this opportunity to thank His Excellency, Hon. Roosevelt Skerritt for your patronage of the OECS Youth Initiative, and your participation in the OECS Conference on Youth Crime and Violence.

I am equally honoured to thank the following 'partners' of the Secretariat for their invaluable contribution to the hosting of the First OECS Conference on Youth Crime and Violence:

- ❖ *The Caribbean Development Bank*
- ❖ *The Cara Suites Hotel*
- ❖ *First Caribbean International Bank*
- ❖ *The Canadian International Development Agency*
- ❖ *SOL EC St. Lucia, Ltd*
- ❖ *The Commonwealth Youth Programme/Caribbean Centre*

I wish to extend the Secretariat's heartfelt thanks all the presenters at the conference; the sharing of your information and experiences drew to the attention of the conference, the 'real' picture in the Region, on the issues of youth crime and violence.

To the Conference Delegates, I say 'thank you' for giving of your time, and knowledge to the conference.

To the staff of the OECS Secretariat, I once again, thank you most sincerely for all your hard work. I am really proud of you.



Vasantha Chase
Director
Social and Sustainable Development Division

SUMMARY OF CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE FIRST OECS CONFERENCE ON YOUTH CRIME AND VIOLENCE

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HON. ROSSEVELT SKERRIT
PRIME MINISTER OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF DOMINICA**

11 and 12 October 2006
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1. Background

Crime and Violence, especially their prevalence among youth have become a challenge to the small economies of the OECS. The typical characteristics of youth 'at risk' in the OECS is that they are predominantly male, 15 to 19 years of age; come from families and communities dealing with unprecedented challenges; have some secondary education (incomplete) or little formal education; and ascribe to subcultures marked by substance abuse and criminal activity. This characterization is not unique to the OECS and may even be, to some extent, stereotypical. However, this subculture has been growing steadily. The situation warrants immediate action before that generation of youth is lost.

The OECS Conference on Youth Crime and Violence was designed to: (a) share information about youth crime and violence in the region; (b) collect and make scientific data available to policy makers, institutional directors, and youth leaders; and (c) inform youth crime prevention and intervention policies with local data.

About 60 persons representing OECS youth, youth organisations, medical professionals, law enforcement, social workers, media, OECS academics from the Diaspora, and other national, regional and international agencies attended the Conference. A group of young offenders participated in the Conference on the second

day. The full list of participants and the agenda can be downloaded from the OECS website, www.oecs.org

Incorporated into the agenda was a video presentation made up of a series of vox pops featuring Saint Lucian youth in natural settings, speaking on current and pertinent issues that impact life and on living in Saint Lucia. The young persons featured were randomly selected and were allowed to speak frankly and candidly on matters affecting them and their peers.

2. The Agenda

All presentations are available on the afore mentioned website, www.oecs.org

Pre- Conference “Rap Session”

An hour prior to the formal opening of the Conference, participants were invited to an informal session. They were invited to “Paint on the blank canvas that was the OECS Youth Initiative”. The lively and involved discussion produced an array of suggestions. Presented below are some of the recurrent interventions:

- The OECS Youth Initiative needs to be youth led; the agenda must be set by the youth and the youth must be involved in the implementation of that agenda.
- The OECS Youth Initiative should provide the avenue for more self-exploration by OECS youth. The Initiative should portray young persons as possessing energy and exuberance and as an important resource for societal development.
- The OECS must be empowered by young persons to act on their behalf.
- Young persons want sustainable and meaningful livelihoods.
- Existing national and regional youth initiatives and programmes need to be audited so that they can be appropriately integrated and strengthened.
- The youth must not be treated as a homogenous group. Different categories of youth need different interventions.

- The UN definition of youth, i.e. persons between the ages of 14 and 24, needs to be adapted for the OECS. The OECS definition of a youth is any person from the ages of 10 to 35.
- The OECS Youth initiative should be anchored in alliances.

Opening Ceremony

The feature presentation was by Hon. Roosevelt Skerit, Prime Minister of the Commonwealth of Dominica. Other presentations were made by the Director General of the OECS, the Head of CIDA, Canadian High Commission for Barbados and the OECS, and the Director of the Commonwealth Youth Programme/Caribbean Programme.

The Director General drew attention to the fact that the region was losing a significant portion of youth to forces that the region does not understand, and that this has resulted in OECS youth feeling a sense of alienation.

Prime Minister Skerit, in his address referred to the failure of the traditional agencies of socialization to inculcate commonly held social values; his recognition of the anxiety of youth to crime and violence; and the right of young persons to express themselves. He asked the Conference to be conscious of what the youth are saying about why they are feeling marginalized and their response to this sense of marginalisation. The Prime Minister concluded by asking that the youth who feel marginalized be allowed to cultivate an identity for themselves.

Panel 1: The Conceptual Framework

Since violence is a complex social, and political problem, its resolution requires strategies integrated throughout affected communities and nations, and based on a conceptual framework that brings a holistic understanding of the causes and impacts of violence and possible interventions for reduction.

This panel was made up of four persons, three of whom are working in Universities in the United States. The fourth panelist was the Director of the Commonwealth Youth Programme/ Caribbean Programme.

The panel presenters and the discussions that followed concluded that:

- A review of the literature over the last 36 years points to a trinity that reflects and continues to reflect issues of youth unemployment; the dysjuncture between education and employment opportunities; and crime committed by youth, and against youth.
- Youth interventions must be cognizant of the impact and influence of forces and factors external to societies.
- The Caribbean is distinguished by a unique family structure, which in turn influences the family environment and adds a rich quality to it. Dysfunctions that negatively affect and destabilize the family environment lend to antisocial and conduct disorder in adolescents. Consequently, interventions designed to rekindle and enrich the natural family environment can be formidable bulwarks against crime among adolescents.
- It is very important to understand how youth define, and perceive the extent, causes, consequences and solutions to crime. It is equally important to understand how this perception converges with the realities of society as indicated by empirical evidence.
- Too much of the State's response to youth issues has been of a welfare tradition. As a result, a new transformative approach is necessary. This approach should be evidenced based, action oriented and aligned with the socio-economic development agenda of the State.

Panel 2: Hearing the Voices of the Youth

Young people are empowered when they feel that they have and can create choices, make informed decisions freely, take actions based on those decisions and accept responsibility for the consequences of that action. This panel was designed to provide a forum for young persons to express themselves regarding their experiences in the

social, cultural, recreational, legal and health sectors. The first segment of the panel was a video programme through which 7 young persons in Saint Lucia expressed their views on a range of issues. The second segment was made up of a live panel of 6 young persons from the OECS region. These panelists continued the conversation that was initiated in the video.

The panel presenters and other youth who attended the Conference concluded that:

- Youth interventions and programmes must also be informed by “ghetto youth” who together with all other categories of youth should play a critical role in implementing the interventions and programmes.
- Society should refrain from equating a successful youth as a person who has achieved tertiary level education because there are many youth who have skills that do not require higher levels of formal education.
- Legislation is necessary to ensure that families are held responsible for knowing the whereabouts of children under the age of 16.
- Adults should claim ownership of their communities.
- A Community Service Order for youth between the ages of 12 and 17 should be introduced for the OECS region.
- Young persons cannot benefit from CSME because they are not sufficiently trained for the skills that are in demand following the creation of a Common Single Market. Alternatively, many young persons who have a certificate of tertiary education are not accessing benefits of the CSM because they do not know how to do so.
- Young persons must take responsibility for the opportunities that are available to them rather than being dependent on the State, which has invested rather significantly in the necessary institutional and policy infrastructure. In addition, the OECS must celebrate the success stories of those youth who have taken responsibility.
- While it is recognized that the State continues to invest heavily in youth, the impact of such investment is not reaching those youth who are prone to risky behaviour.

- If young people do not create their own opportunities and become responsible individuals, then the disconnect between government investment in the youth and the sense of marginalisation and alienation among the youth will continue to exist.
- Youth programmes should aim at building the resilience of the youth so that they can overcome the sense of alienation and marginalisation.
- The on-going efforts at Constitutional Reform in the OECS countries must deliberately include the full participation of the youth.

Panel 3: Causes and Consequences of Youth Crime

“Life is like a box of chocolates.... You never know what you gonna get”. This quote from Tom Hanks in the movie Forest Gump, 1994, set the stage for a discussion by 3 panelists who presented the findings of research that was undertaken in Barbados and in the OECS. The first panelist spoke to the challenge of school based violence in public secondary schools; the second panelist shared the findings of a study that explored the role of violence against youth of various age groups; and, the third panelist described research that had been undertaken on behalf of the OECS Secretariat on young offenders and the legal system.

A survey that was undertaken in 2004, revealed that among other things, 1 in 5 children attending public schools in Barbados have carried a weapon to school; in addition 14% of the respondents claimed that they disliked school for various reasons, including a sense of alienation among students. This alienation reflects itself in a number of risky anti-social behavioral patterns. There must therefore be a more consistent level of supervision of the students and enforcement of a consistent policy in relation to deviant and anti-social behaviour in the school plant.

The report from the survey suggests that there should be an increase in the level of active participation in life at school, through membership in student groups and organisations. Many students feel insecure while in school. Consequently, the report recommends that:

- the physical integrity of the school compound should be developed and/or preserved so that students do not have to keep worrying about their personal safety while in class;
- school children should be provided with skills for conflict resolution and negotiation; and
- Ministries of Education need to develop early intervention strategies in relation to substance abuse.

UNICEF undertook a multi-island study to explore violence against children. The presentation at the Conference provided information generated from the survey in Dominica. The report concludes that

- verbal abuse among the respondents was less severe than physical abuse;
- the respondents claimed a high exposure to physical violence from schoolteachers and parents;
- children become traumatized by violence in school; and
- there is a pervasiveness of violent attitudes and language much of which is inherited from the home and school environments.

The presentation on the legal system and youth crime in the OECS explored ways of implementing non-custodial measures for juvenile offenders, the suggestion being that offenders under the age of 12 be treated under the social services system rather than the criminal system.

During this session, the Conference heard a moving presentation from a 16 year old from the Boys Training Centre in Saint Lucia. He spoke about his incarceration by lamenting that, "I should be in school now". He claimed that most homes lacked the supervision of fathers. "The quicker you educate a youth the better it is", he remarked, adding that "prison ain't no bed of roses". The teenager also offered solutions for addressing the punishment of young people who have committed crime. He recommended that incarcerated youth should be made to do community service in lieu of their incarceration.

The panel presenters and other participants Conference concluded that:

- Teachers have a responsibility for creating well-adjusted citizens.
- Teacher education needs to be re-oriented so that teachers can respond to the needs of the students and so that they can create well-adjusted young persons.
- With so much exposure to violent behaviour, youth are, becoming desensitized; they now feel little emotion when they perform or witness a crime.
- Early childhood educators must be brought into the loop to fight crime and violence among youth.
- There should be call-in programmes for youth. These programme should be run by the youth themselves.
- Incarcerated youth could be used as mediators between rival gangs.
- Consideration should be given to non-custodial sentencing for juvenile offenders who are often victimized and who need protection.

Panel 4: Youth Crime and the Legal System

This panel comprised representatives from the police and from crime commissions. The purpose was to provide law enforcement officials with the opportunity to present some of their issues on the subject of youth crime and violence; it also offered the youth the opportunity to dialogue with the law enforcement officers. All the presentations were substantiated with statistical information

Panelists expressed concern over increased criminal activity committed by youth. Such activities include, *inter alia*, murder, robbery, petty theft, use of dangerous drugs, riotous behaviour, etc. The reasons for youth crime were identified as:

- A breakdown in family values
- A breakdown in the family structure
- Lack of sporting and other activities of interest to youth
- The ineffectiveness of the police force

It was also felt that violence is a learnt behaviour and it is often learned in the family, the community, from parents and from other family members, and from friends. Mention

was also made of the influence of music and film. Mention was made by one panelist of the negative influence of the behaviour of talk show hosts. Alarm was also articulated over the increasing rate of criminal activity within the school plant and the apparent graduation away from pens and pencils to cutlasses, knives and guns as part of the school kit.

The figures show that most of the homicides were a result of not being able to settle arguments. The vast majority of the offenders are males and the rate of recidivism is high. This has been attributed to the poor rehabilitation programmes that are available to juvenile offenders. A couple of the panelists also noted that various pieces of legislation were not uniform in the treatment of youth.

The panelists and conference participants recommended the following:

- The provision of non-custodial sentencing and alternate dispute resolution for juvenile youth.
- Teacher training for early recognition of violence.
- Training the police force in methods for handling delinquent youth, including conflict resolution.
- Harmonization of all legislation that deal with youth.
- More resources to be channeled to the family court.
- The community should be involved in the rehabilitation of incarcerated youth so that recidivism can be controlled.
- The enforcement of the law must be appropriate to the age of the offender.
- Young offenders should be housed in a facility separate from those in a halfway house.
- Parents/family should be encouraged to take home a young, first-time offender on bail.
- Young parents should be taught parenting skills.

Panel 5: Socialisation and Youth Crime

The panel of social care workers spoke very passionately about the causes of violent behaviour; the physical signs and effects of abuse on children; and how a child victim of sexual abuse becomes a sexual perpetrator, even at childhood. One of the presentations was punctuated with the voices of abused children and adult survivors.

The presenters and the other conference participants concluded that:

- There needs to be a spotlight on schools: school based accountability and also on school social workers who focus on delinquency prevention and early intervention programmes;
- A National Policy for the Management of Child Abuse and Neglect needs to be adopted as a matter of priority, including:
 - Mandatory reporting of all suspected and actual cases of child abuse and neglect;
 - A team approach between the police and the Division of Human Services and Family Affairs in investigating incidences of child sexual abuse;
 - Establishment of a national Child Abuse Register to better capture data; and
 - Mandatory counseling of all persons suspected and convicted of child sexual abuse.
- The OECS Child Care and Protection Bill should be adopted;
- A Child Protection Unit within the Police Force should be introduced with the emphasis on:
 - Special interviewing room with one way mirror, video and audio facility;
 - Development of an Operations Manual for the police in the investigation of child abuse and the placement of such a manual in each police station throughout the OECS;
 - Specialist training for law enforcement officers who work on causes of sexual offences against children.

- A National Action Child Care and Protection Commission should be established to help better coordinate the delivery of social services to children and their families.

Panel 6: Youth and Violence: A Health Perspective

The panelists observed that the designation of youth violence as a public health issue complements the more traditional description of the problem as a criminal justice concern. Panelists referred to the PAHO publication, “Youth: Choices and Change: Promoting Healthy Behaviors in Adolescents” (2005) and the World Report on Violence and Health (2002). The former report reveals that peer social networks show an increasing level of support as the adolescent ages; however, almost 10% of adolescents in the 16 – 19 age group feel isolated. The report also indicates that high levels of physical and sexual abuse, depression, suicide ideation and anxiety are common among adolescents. The latter report concluded that:

- Childhood aggression is a good predictor of violence in adolescence and early adulthood; and
- There is progression from one type of aggression to another; and

The following interventions were recommended as a result of the discussion:

- Develop an appropriate juvenile justice system;
- Reduce harsh physical punishment in schools;
- Reinforce the reporting of violent acts by the health services;
- Provide schools with social workers who can also be made responsible for school attendance and truancy;
- Involve private practitioners in interventions designed to mitigate crime against youth;
- Re-orient public clinics with the active involvement of youth;
- Promote music as a strategy for peace building;
- Use “peace-promoting” language; and
- Create “gangs” for productive involvement through music, membership in youth groups, art, craft, sports, games and other activities.

Conclusions and Recommendation

Recommendations were provided by two groups; one set by the youth and the other set by the Conference rapporteurs.

The following is a summary of the two sets of recommendations .

Youth Voices

- Establish a coalition of Youth groups throughout the OECS region.
- Undertake an audit of all youth groups, policies, and programmes in order to ascertain the gaps and then design interventions to fill these gaps. Use the information to identify best practices for rollout throughout the OECS.
- Create multiple forum for youth to express their views, perceptions and concerns.
- Strengthen community and national youth groups so that they can participate in the national and regional development agenda.
- Youth should be integrally involved in the design and implementation of the OECS Youth Initiative.

Crime Prevention

- Create and implement programmes to determine and then reduce the level of felt alienation among students.
- Invite the public sector and civil society to contribute to brainstorming on how to deal with school violence.
- Enforce consistent policy in relation to deviant and anti-social behaviour in schools.
- Determine which students have experienced violence in the home and personal violence, and develop programmes to address these youngsters.
- Provide students with skills to resolve and negotiate conflict.
- Revise disciplinary policies in schools.
- Train teachers on how to motivate youth learners and to stress moral reasoning and building of character for a civil society.

- Invest in trained psychologists for a holistic approach to children and violence in the school and home.
- Create ‘zones of safety’ for youth to keep them out of criminal justice system.
- Train the police to work with juveniles.
- Train young persons to become advocates or mediators and to speak on crime in schools.
- Introduce more youth based activities – sports, arts and culture, music – and programmes for youth to address their concerns and problems.

Youth Socialisation

- Train and promote young persons as agents of change.
- Promote music as a strategy for peace building;
- Use “peace-promoting” language in pre-adolescent schools;
- Youth organizations, should consider organizing information campaigns and educational and training programmes in order to sensitize youth to the personally and socially detrimental effects of violence in the family, community and society, to teach them how to communicate without violence and to promote training so that they can protect themselves and others against violence.

Law Enforcement

- Promote and encourage inter-agency collaboration among all agencies involved with youth matters.
- Review and amend existing legislation to give greater effect to non-custodial sentencing and alternate dispute resolution for juvenile youth.
- Revise – i.e. increase – the age of criminal responsibility so that the child is under the responsibility of Social Services and not criminal services.
- Create and invest in social reintegration programmes to address offending habits that lead to incarceration and to diminish recidivism.
- Diminish/abolish inconsistencies in the legal environment as they relate to youth.

Youth Health

- Reinforce the reporting of violent acts by the health services;
- Provide schools with social workers who can also be made responsible for school attendance and truancy;
- Involve private practitioners in interventions designed to mitigate crime against youth; and
- Re-orient public clinics with the active involvement of youth;

Youth Employment and Employability

- Skills development for youth with particular emphasis on training and employment promotion strategies which support their integration into the labour market;
- Creation of skills, knowledge, competencies and attitudes that will allow youth to find work and to cope with an unpredictable labour market.
- Training and employment promotion strategies which support integration of youth into the labour market.
- Modernising of technical and vocational training
- Create structured work-based learning which is more likely to impact the life chances of at-risk young people.
- Micro-credit facilities to stimulate youth entrepreneurship

Research

- Stimulate investigations of innovative and developmental research that informs sound decision making in youth matters