

Crime and Punishment

adapted from an article by Lori Saunders

- 1 Early last year, Anne McLellan, Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, introduced the new Youth Criminal Justice Act. According to McLellan, the unreformed youth justice system didn't seem to be working very well, with increasing numbers of young people in jail for relatively minor offences.
- 2 "Putting kids in jail, though sometimes necessary, is not an effective response to youth crime," McLellan says. "Putting more young people in jail for longer will not make this a safer society," she adds. She feels, "We need to acknowledge that when serious things happen, there need to be meaningful consequences." The Reform party, McLellan's political opponent, says youth get caught in a cycle of crime because they know there are no serious repercussions.
- 3 *Faze Teen* spoke with 'John Doe' who at the age of 15 was charged with Grand Theft Auto and Possession over \$1000. When asked why he did it, he responded, "I did it for something to do — it was all for fun." John went on to say, "I knew the law. I knew the worst thing that could happen was serving some community hours because I was a young offender and it would be my first offence." So perhaps the Reform party is right. However, he also added: "I thought I would get away with it so it didn't matter what the penalties were."
- 4 According to the Canadian Criminal Justice Association, lawyers who are familiar with young offenders are unanimous in stating that, "These youths, at the time of their offence, gave no consideration to the consequences of their actions and they would in no way be deterred from committing offences if they knew that their name would be published in the paper; no more than they would be if they knew that they would be subjected to more severe sanctions."
- 5 *Faze* spoke with another young offender, 'Jane Doe'. When asked what was going through her head when she went after a young girl, she answered, "She had provoked me for months, so at the time, I was mad — and she was just making me madder!" She recalls, "There were four teachers, two principals and several students watching, so I knew I'd be caught but didn't care at that time." Would severe consequences have



deterred her from the assault? She says, “I probably still would have done it since I wasn’t thinking about the punishment anyway.”

- 6 Needless to say, this new legislation will not please everyone. Justice Minister McLellan says that calls for tougher sentences for young offenders are 19. Throwing children or teenagers who break the law into prisons designed for adults makes no sense, she adds. The legislation is part of a wider strategy dealing with youth crime that doesn’t always involve judges and jails, but community-based efforts to prevent kids from becoming criminals.

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