



"Canadian trends, information and resources connected to cannabis"

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AN APPRENTICE DRUG RUNNER -- IN GRADE 9

'People Are So Desperate For Money That They'll Put Drugs In A Child's Hand'

Bound by Hwy. 400 and Jane St. to the west, Dufferin St. to the east, Steeles Ave. to the north and Grandravine Dr. and Sheppard Ave. to the south, Ward 8 has for years held claim to a higher rate of immigrants, single parents, low-income families, rental households and unemployment than the rest of Toronto.

The 2001 census found 67.6% of the ward's occupied private dwellings were rented, compared to 49.3% in all of Toronto.

Of residents older than 20, 17.5% had less than a Grade 9 education, compared to the city's 10.8%, and more than 20% didn't graduate from high school, compared to Toronto's 14.3%.

Low-income families made up 35.4% of Ward 8's population, compared to Toronto's 19.4%. Nearly twice as many residents in Ward 8 made less than \$10,000 in total annual household income, while less than half made \$100,000 or more.

No one pushed Yomi into selling drugs. Then again, it wasn't a hard business to get into, even for a Grade 9 kid like Yomi.

"People are so desperate for money that they'll put drugs in a child's hand," he says. "They don't care how they get rich."

It may have been about the money for those who hired Yomi to run drugs from

person to person. But not for him.

The way he sees it, "When your hand is idle, you find yourself doing all sorts of foolish things."

Not that his hand should have been idle. He came from a two-parent home, loved to play basketball and, had he not started selling that weed, thinks he could have played professionally.

But he had a temper, too.

Though living at Jane and Sheppard, he went to Central Technical school in downtown Toronto for Grade 9 to play on the junior football team as a starting wide receiver.

"That was like a dream come true," the 22-year-old says. "But I ran into trouble."

He got in a fight with a teammate for reasons he doesn't remember and refused to apologize. So they kicked him off the team.

Shortly after, he was arrested at school for robbing a classmate. So they kicked him out of the school.

Swept into the back of a police cruiser for a night in jail, it was his first arrest. There would be many more to come.

"It was terrible," he says, quick to add, "I didn't take it serious. I just wanted to get out."

Yomi's next school was Nelson A. Boylen CI at Jane St. and Falstaff Ave.

Then came York Memorial CI in Grade 10 -- the Boylen basketball coach moved to this school, so Yomi moved, too. But he got kicked out after breaking one of the school's glass doors while storming away from a dispute.

Several times, he was picked up for failing to comply with his house arrest bail condition.

"You're free one moment and in the blink of an eye you're in a cruiser being taken away. It's not nice," he says. "I've been in jail so many times I can't even remember."

As a youth worker, 33-year-old Mark knows kids scoff at the idea of jail.

"They'll tell you point blank, 'Yeah, I got caught with a gun.' They'll be in the court system for a year and then they'll beat it. They end up beating it. You hear kids talk about it all the time," Mark says.

According to Statistics Canada, the number of youths heard in Ontario courts for charges dealing with the administration of justice -- such as breach of probation, fail to appear for a court appearance and fail to comply with bail conditions -- stayed fairly steady between 1993 and 2003, averaging at about 1,730 youths per year.

The number of youths appearing for crimes against property charges -- such as theft and fraud -- was cut in half from 16,527 in 1993 to 8,389 in 2003.

But the number of youths appearing for drug charges doubled. In 1993, 483 youths appeared for drug possession, compared to 893 in 2003. The peak year was in 2001 -- Yomi's Grade 10 year -- with 1,905 youths. Likewise, drug trafficking charges accounted for 245 youths in 1993, compared to 452 in 2003.

This is what Mark remembers about the first time he was picked up by the cops -- he was 16.

"'What are you doing standing there?' Just standing for the sake of standing. 'You have any I.D. with you?' No. 'What's your name?' "

Mark knew he didn't have to give his name, so he didn't.

"So the partner came out, threw me up against the hood of the car, put my hands in my pocket and threw me in the back of the police cruiser," he says, pointing out the Yorkgate Mall window to the field he says he was driven to.

"They don't hit you in your face. They ain't stupid. They kick you around a few times, stomp you around a little bit. Because they can."

"They use their authority in the wrong ways. I see it a lot of times," he says. "It's a joke if you file a complaint."

Peter Duncan, who has worked as a Toronto Police officer in Jane-Finch's 31 Division since 2001, recognizes the need to build relationships between citizens and police.

That's why he and Sgt. Steve Hicks started up For KICKS (Kids Involving Cops for Knowledge and Sport), an outreach program designed to create some links between cops and kids.

"High risk living isn't something that just happens. It's not a result of divine intervention. It's a result, in many cases, of deficit," says Duncan, who is working on a book about the issue.

"When you have high-risk youth, with nothing being addressed, they will become high-risk adults. Then we get high-risk youth and 'round and 'round we go."

The only positive aspect to young Mark's encounters with police was that, in the six or seven times he was picked up, nary a charge was laid.

Mark was one of the "smart" ones, he says. All thanks to his on-the-block mentor, Travella.

"It's like a style, like a clothing line," he says of his reason for getting into drug hustling. "Everybody's wearing it. I wanna wear it too, right?"

Jane-Finch wasn't a good market for drugs like cocaine. So he stuck to marijuana.

First with the dime bags, 10 bucks a pop. As his clientele grew, so did those bags.

But he was trained only to carry what he could claim as personal use to the cops.

"Travella taught me, 'Don't be stupid. You're gonna slip, yes. But if you're gonna slip, make sure it's a slip you can get back up from.' "

So even when Mark started making thousands of dollars a week selling weed, he always maintained a job. It kept him below the radar and kept his mom from asking questions.

Another trick was to cover his face during the countless swarmings. They went a little something like this:

A new guy shows up on the block, but Mark and his friends knew no one had moved in.

"You would surround them. 'Can I help you? What are you here for?' They don't got an answer, they get beat up," he says.

That victim would then get his buddies and jump one of Mark's friends.

"It goes back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, until boom, someone finally gets killed."

A senseless end to a life not yet old enough to prove nobility. Years later, on and on it goes.

Following the lunch hour stabbing death of 16-year-old Dineshkumar Murugiah outside his Scarborough high school last September, a young man explained how he understood the likely demise of his close friend:

"If you say the wrong thing to the wrong person, you can bet there will be a fight. Some are clean one on one, and then sometimes kids feel like they gotta

prove something and that's when these weapons come out," the friend said on condition of anonymity.

"You say something, they say something, or you look at them weird, they look at you weird. Arguments happen, maybe a punch is thrown, (you're) left alone, (it) comes back to haunt you," he said.

"It's about feeling more powerful and putting someone in their place and in sad cases, things like this happen where someone is left dead."

Those closest to him said Dinesh had turned his life around in the months leading to his death, that he was going to church every week and focusing on his studies.

Before 15-year-old Chevon Josephs crashed a stolen car into two taxis last June, killing himself and two teenaged girls, he was said to have been gravitating more toward positive mentors, trying to get himself back in school.

The old cliché, his friends and family claimed: A good kid in the wrong crowd.

In 1975, the province was blasted for a five-year crime prevention experiment in the Jane-Finch area that took 18 months to get necessary government approvals.

The province was "extremely cautious" about social programs, particularly preventative ones, Doug Barr, a Social Planning Council worker and local school trustee said at the time.

Fast-forward 33 years. "Absolutely nothing has changed except for the hairstyles," says 28-year-old [jane-finch.com](http://www.jane-finch.com) founder Paul Nguyen. "Jane and Finch has been pretty much frozen in time.... Life is the same. There are still cop problems, employment problems, crime problems, all this type of stuff. Nothing has changed."

The Jane Finch Street Involved Youth Issues Coalition was initiated in 1999 in response to growing awareness "that the needs and issues of the highest risk youth in the Jane-Finch community had been chronically under resourced," said the Griffin Centre's 2005 Jane Finch Neighbourhood Action Plan. Millions of dollars have been poured into the neighbourhood over the years, but, says Nguyen, "There's no real barometer for success."

So "established" programs keep getting funded, while grassroots programs started by those who grew up in the area are often snubbed, says Nguyen. "When you give someone a voice and they feel like they achieve something, they'll aspire to do more and they'll spread it around," he says.

Instead, money is often thrown at short-term solutions that make good photo-

ops, but fail to address the roots of problems: Young, ill-prepared parents -- "kids raising kids," as Nguyen puts it.

Julian Falconer's recent report, commissioned in response to the school shooting death of 15-year-old Jordan Manners last year, noted that the federal and provincial governments "have been reluctant to commit the necessary financial resources" to the Community Safety Plan established by Mayor David Miller's Advisory Panel on Community Safety.

Though Miller's panel included representatives from all levels of government, police, and community, youth, private and not-for-profit organizations, Falconer found "a significant degree of cynicism about the true commitment of our governments and institutions to address the needs of marginalized communities."

"The communities are ... fed up with being studied, consulted and reported on by commissions, task forces and panels," Falconer said. "What is required is real political will, backed up by real resources."

Researchers have capitalized on the blood-spattered headlines of Jane and Finch, obtaining grants during spikes in crime. The neighbourhood has been studied to death, but social problems continue to thrive.

"It's paralysis by analysis," Nguyen says.

MAP posted-by: Steve Heath

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