

Government Needs To Be Good Parent: Study

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VICTORIA — A study by the B.C. Representative for Children and Youth and the province's health officer calls on the government to act as a more responsible parent to the children and youth in its care.

The study – Kids, Crime and Care: Youth Justice Experience and Outcomes – examined more than 50,000 children born in 1986 and who were in school in 1997/98. It's the largest study of youth justice of its kind in Canada.

The study released Monday found schools offer vulnerable children family-type experiences that can put them on a path that keeps them out of jail. But the report calls on government to pay closer attention to the children at their schools.

The 88-page report makes seven recommendations, including urging every school in British Columbia to assign a staff member by next September to oversee the education planning, monitoring and progress of children in government care at their school.

There are about 9,000 children in government care in British Columbia.

“When a child enters school, it is a significant transition in their life, and an opportunity for new roles and responsibilities,” said the joint report by independent children's representative Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond and provincial health officer Perry Kendall.

“Negative experiences that impact on this transition can have long-term consequences, while a positive school experience can help create a lifetime love of learning and healthy social relationships.”

The study found that less than one-third of children who get in trouble with the law graduate from high school and the likelihood of graduation for children who encounter the youth justice system is a dismal 13 per cent.

“Youth involvement with the criminal justice system can only be reduced in British Columbia if that education system is strengthened to meet the needs of the children. It's quite

clear,”Turpel-Lafond said in a press conference following the release of the report.

B.C. Education Minister Shirley Bond said her ministry is willing to work with Turpel-Lafond and Kendall to ensure school children are steered away from a life of crime.

“All of us want to make sure that children in care are successful,”she said, calling the report helpful and saying education board will study the idea of school staff monitoring every vulnerable child starting next September.

The report did note that British Columbia has the second lowest youth crime rate in Canada but Turpel-Lafond said the conditions that can create future gang members and criminals need to be tackled early in life.

“There is much attention being paid at this time to gang violence in British Columbia,”she said. “Things like attacks in suburban malls and parking lots literally bring this violence home to all of us. There are some connections between what we are seeing these past few weeks in terms of gang violence and this report on youth justice, but perhaps not what some might think.”

Children's Minister Tom Christensen said he welcomed the report and said the recommendations will allow the government to examine more ways to offer support to children in care.

The government has come under heavy fire from Turpel-Lafond for its failure to implement previous recommendations to improve the child welfare system.

Opposition children's critic Nicholas Simons said the government will have trouble helping children in danger of turning to crime, because it recently tabled budget cuts that will cut about 200 ministry jobs over the next three years.