



***LET`S PUT SAFETY IN ITS PLACE!***

**OPINION PAPER ON YOUNG MONTREALERS  
AND THE SENSE OF SECURITY  
IN THE PUBLIC SPACE**

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**SUMMARY**

**Montréal** 

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Being safe, and feeling safe, is of great importance to each and every one of us. It is an essential element of the quality of any living environment. Montreal is considered a safe city. It ranks 22<sup>nd</sup> in the world in terms of personal safety, and among the five safest cities in North America (*Quality of Living Global City Rankings – Mercer Survey, 2008*). Nonetheless, security, or the lack thereof, whether real or perceived, remains a recurring theme in the minds of Montrealers.

This opinion paper looks at the singular position of youths, within the issue of public safety<sup>1</sup>, being as they are both source and victim of insecurity. This paper further attempts to bring some understanding and provides answers on the issue, striving to distinguish between perception and reality.

CjM called upon many experts to complete this study. This opinion paper also relies on the results of a survey of 1,022 young people between 12 and 30, and on the analysis of comments from about 180 people, collected in the course of three public consultation sessions conducted in collaboration with the *Commission de la sécurité publique du conseil d'agglomération*.

This document is a summary of CjM's opinion paper entitled *Mettons la sécurité à sa place!* (Let's Put Safety in its Place!). It includes the five major axes of recommendations submitted to the City by CjM on this issue.

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<sup>1</sup> Public space refers to sidewalks, streets, back alleys, parks, places, public transport facilities and parking areas.

## **YOUTH: SOURCE OF INSECURITY IN MONTREAL PUBLIC SPACE**

In spite of recent criminal trends that refute the belief that youth delinquency is on the rise, young people, especially gatherings of young people, appear to be, in various degrees, a source of insecurity in Montreal public space. With a crime rate 30% lower in 2007 than in 1991 (5,958 per 100,000 pop.), Montreal ranked well under the Canadian average (6,984 per 100,000 pop.), and 5<sup>th</sup> among Canadian Census Metropolitan Areas (CMA) of over 500,000 inhabitants (Statistics Canada, 2008). As for criminality among youth between the ages of 12 and 17, Montreal shows a lower rate (approximately 3,750 per 100,000 youth) than the Canadian average (6,885 per 100,000) or the average in Québec (3,765 per 100,000). In fact, Montreal's CMA shows a lower rate of teenage delinquency than any other CMA in the country, with the exception of Québec City (Perreault, Savoie and Bédard, 2008). The trend in youth crime rate follows the general downward trend.

The real risk of being victim of a crime – committed or not by a young person – is in fact much lower than it was twenty years ago. However, in its annual assessments, the *Service de police de la Ville de Montréal* (SPVM) indicates that the perception of Montrealers regarding the occurrence of crimes has not changed. In other words, crime decreases, but this fact has not influenced the sense of security of citizens. This is particularly true with youth-associated crime.

According to those consulted, the main reason – maybe the only reason – for the insecurity felt by some citizens is that of young people gathering in groups in public places. Their sole presence, their apparent idleness, even their casual behaviour, are perceived as a vague threat, and this sentiment is prevalent among the general population as well as among young people themselves. Our purpose is not to deny the existence of delinquent behaviour on the part of some youth or youth groups, but the perception, though not recent, seems to be exacerbated nowadays by new urban realities, such as modern individualism, the multicultural context, the media coverage and the image of youth that it conveys, the street gang phenomenon, etc.

However, we observe certain differences between boroughs. In some boroughs, there seems to be no feeling of insecurity in regard to youth, while in others, strong insecurity is perceived or experienced. Within boroughs where young people are seen as something of a threat, the sentiment is stronger in some sectors than in others.

In such a context, where reality and perception mingle in the eyes of various subgroups within the general population, the response from the City must be to reassure citizens without

stigmatizing a whole group within which only a minority causes problems. Now, some municipal actions targeting all young people seem to affect young Montrealers to such a point that, in addition to resentment, they feel apprehensive about authority.

## **YOUTH: VICTIM OF INSECURITY IN THE PUBLIC SPACE**

With its partners, the City of Montreal (central city, SPVM and boroughs) have taken action to promote urban safety, using various approaches: situational prevention, prevention through social development, and repression. However, the most effective type of intervention is certainly the one based on social development. This approach – seldom used – aims at improving social cohesion through the re-appropriation and animation of public spaces, and through the rapprochement and interaction among citizens themselves, as well as between the City and its citizens.

In reaction to requests from citizens for more intervention regarding youth gatherings, the municipal answer in every borough is primarily to expand police surveillance in problematic areas.

This preventive measure has certainly some positive effects on the citizens' sense of security, as well as on reducing the number of crimes committed, but in some instances, it also has perverse effects, mainly on the young. In fact, for some young Montrealers, the public arena is where they spend most of their time, one of the few places where they can socialize and meet their peers.

This is the case for street youth. It may also be the case for young people living in densely populated sectors of Montreal where private space is limited. These young people may come to see certain public areas as their own. Their regular presence in these areas and, at times, their behaviour – which might not be so upsetting were it to take place in private – result in frequent reprimands from the authorities. All the more, if this increased police surveillance comes with a reinforcement of laws regarding anti-social behaviour. No sooner evicted from one area do these “troublemakers” regroup in another.

In this context, this type of preventive measure does not appear effective in terms of improving the sense of security of citizens, because it reinforces their perception toward youth – all youth – and it only succeeds in moving the problem elsewhere. Furthermore, those initiatives tend to not only label young people as a source of trouble and insecurity, but also convey the message: “We

don't want you here, we don't want to see you around", fostering a negative self image, and this, whether reprehensible acts have been committed or not.

These actions on the part of the City may also give rise to resentment toward public authority among some young Montrealers, more notably toward the police, acting as first responders in most cases. Such resentment may grow when young people feel targeted by an increased police presence or are subjected to abusive ticket citations.

On this particular subject, the survey reveals the following:

- More than half of the respondents (57.7%) have witnessed a person in authority intervene in a situation where a young person appeared to be disturbing the peace of the neighbourhood. Of those, 32.9% witnessed several incidents.
- Of the incidents they witnessed or in which they were involved, almost half of our respondents (48.1%) estimated that the intervention by the authorities was justified, while 25.4% estimated the intervention unjustified.
- There was no noteworthy difference between young men and young women surveyed, neither between age groups. On the other hand, young respondents from visible minorities were less inclined to consider such interventions justified (36%). As for ethnic minorities, 41.5% of respondents believed the interventions justified, while 57.3% of respondents not belonging to a minority considered them justified.

It so appears that a fair proportion of respondents do not feel or perceive prejudices toward youth on the part of authorities. Nevertheless, some young people, particularly those belonging to a visible minority, do feel or perceive prejudices toward them.

Other than the message the City conveys by way of its set of laws, the manner in which the authorities, such as the police, act toward groups of youths – notably to enforce those laws – is of great importance to insecure citizens, since this manner can reinforce the sentiment that citizens have toward youth gatherings. If the attitude is one of suspicion, it will reinforce citizens' negative perception of youth. Such a response to requests from citizens tends to sever contacts with the younger population.

Fortunately, in most boroughs, particularly in those where socio-urban issues are lively, efforts have been simultaneously deployed to avoid letting this resentment settle in and persist among young people. However, preventive actions targeting youth do not seem to effectively mitigate

the effects of repressive interventions made to relieve the insecurity of citizens worried about youth gatherings. As a result, some youth are affected, notably in their own sense of security in public spaces.

Beyond the impact induced by the insecurity of some citizens toward some youth, the survey and the public consultation highlighted other factors at play in the sense of insecurity of young Montrealers in the public space: the lack of recourse, cleanliness, lighting, urban design, organized activities, and frequentation by people of all ages, as well as mutual respect among users were elements often mentioned.

Although close to 75% of young Montrealers believe their city or neighbourhood is safe, their sentiment toward some public areas is quite different. Back alleys seem to be the public space where young Montrealers feel the most exposed to danger (42% of respondents), followed by parks (15.1%) and public transportation (12.1%). The main reasons for this sentiment of insecurity are:

- insufficient lighting in the evening (57.7%);
- possible encounters with individuals under the effect of alcohol or drugs. (57.6%);
- too few people circulating in public areas in the evening (55.1%);
- and possible encounters with street gang members (52.9%).

Other than these reasons – stated in the survey and mentioned in the course of our public consultations – experiences of victimisation in public were mentioned:

- In the case of young Montrealers consulted in the survey, close to a third of them (250, or 30.5%) claimed having been victim of, or a witness to, criminal act in the locations mentioned above.
- Of the 250 respondents, 194 claim to have been victim of criminal act in the locations mentioned above (77.6%).
- Young participants to public consultations testified of violence happening daily among young people.

The SPVM has made the following observation: *“For both sexes, the risk of being a victim of a violent act increases as soon as the youngster is 12; it peaks at age 18. Starting at age 19, we*

*observe a gradual decrease of the risk and some stabilisation in the course of the thirties, to diminish again at 40.”* (D’Elia, 2009: 8). The probability of becoming a victim is similar with both sexes, except for victims of sexual aggression, more prevalent among young women. Teenagers between 12 and 18 seem to be the most susceptible to being victim of sexual aggression; the risk decreases drastically after that. (D’Elia, 2009: 9).

Regarding the presence of police officers in public areas viewed as the most dangerous, 64.4% of our respondents indicated that police officers were not present or seldom present in those locations. This tends to make two respondents out of five (42.9%) feel more insecure. However, those who stated that police officers were sufficiently present or often present in those locations indicated that they were reassured by that presence (41.9%).

We also observed a small portion of respondents (12.4%) who mentioned feeling more insecure in the presence of police officers, because it indicated the presence of latent danger, or because they were afraid of becoming a target.

In short, it appears that the sense of insecurity among young people in certain public places, such as back alleys, parks and public transportation facilities is fed by the risk of becoming a victim, a risk particularly high in this age group. Thus, in this sense, young people in Montreal are victims of insecurity in Montreal’s public space. It is especially the case for young people targeted by municipal interventions to reduce the insecurity of some citizens toward youths. Some young people appear more affected than others by these factors of insecurity, notably:

- young women;
- teenagers (12 to 17);
- youths from visible minorities.

Various inspired and pertinent preventive actions were implemented in Montreal, in Quebec, in Canada and around the world. These initiatives target young people as a source of insecurity, but aim mainly to reassure insecure citizens, or to develop better social cohesion. They are described in our opinion paper.

## **CJM'S FIVE MAJOR AXES OF RECOMMENDATIONS**

Because of the singular position of young Montrealers within the issue of safety in the public space— source and victim of insecurity – it is essential for CjM to focus its attention on the issue and to promote interventions that take into account this singularity. From that perspective, and taking into account that public spaces are by nature high risk areas and, as such, the issue of urban safety cannot be entirely resolved, CjM submits the following recommendations:

### ***1. Improving the possibilities of recourse in public space***

Providing public areas with means to obtain help would contribute to reducing the risk of becoming a victim. It would also improve the perception citizens hold of those areas, and thereby increase their sense of security. Young Montrealers mentioned this in the survey and in public consultations. Therefore, CjM recommends the following:

- To increase the number of public phones in public spaces, especially in parks recognized as high-risk, or increase the reassuring presence of personnel (park wardens, street workers, etc.);
- To extend the same assistance systems in place in metro stations to metro entrances and exits.

### ***2. To continue improving urban design and public space animation***

Public spaces must be designed so that we *know where we are and where we are going, can see and be seen, can hear and be heard*. Animation and frequentation of public areas by people of all ages should also be promoted. From the perspective of young Montrealers, this type of urban design would greatly improve safety in public spaces. However, according to our survey and public consultations, it appears that several public areas do not meet these criteria. Therefore CjM recommends:



- The further promotion of the *Guide d'aménagement pour un environnement urbain sécuritaire*, particularly with the advisory committees on urban planning in boroughs and reconstituted municipalities;
- The further improvement of street and public lighting, with systems that favourably modify the perception of the area and its surroundings, or with ecological and intermittent motion triggered lighting, notably in back alleys;
- The installation of safety mirrors in high-risk areas, for example at specific crossroads, back alleys, and pedestrian tunnels;

As for animation, corporate or municipal measures can be implemented. In some cases, these measures could support community initiatives to integrate citizens in such a way as to sustain animation throughout the citizen appropriation of the targeted areas. To this effect, CjM recommends:

- making plans for more animation in public spaces, notably in parks, later in the evening, in the form of organized or free/open activities;

In this regard, it would be advisable to:

- facilitate the issue of permits to efficiently use public infrastructures dedicated to culture, leisure and sports;
- extend the opening/closing hours of parks;
- arranging for public transportation to be more user-friendly, by developing a more serene environment, by broadcasting classical music in metro stations for example;
- encouraging citizen involvement in the improvement of public spaces in boroughs and reconstituted towns, by offering incentives:
  - For example, launching a “Nicest Back Alley Contest” that would include a lighting component. However, boroughs and reconstituted towns must first address the issue of back alleys currently presenting security problems.
  - For parks, spring clean-up initiatives could be organized, where residents of the neighbourhood, youth that use the park, and police officers and city personnel are invited to participate. The money collected through the sale of recuperated discarded items could be used for a project determined in advance by all participants. The project could be one related to the security of the area. In the same spirit, tree-, shrub- or flower-planting sessions could be offered.

- Promoting existing citizen initiatives.

### **3. Promoting Greater Social Cohesion**

Promoting greater social cohesion contributes to alleviating the tensions that are inherent to life in society. It plays a part in gaining a better understanding of others, which favours the development of non formal social control and solidarity in the neighbourhood. All of which adds up to a greater sense of security in public spaces, particularly in neighbourhoods where this sentiment is based on false perceptions about others. In the opinion of young Montrealers consulted, and in our view, it would be profitable to reinforce existing initiatives and to develop new ones towards that end. Thus, CjM is submitting the following recommendations to promote greater social cohesion:

#### **3.1 Creating intergenerational and intercultural rapprochement**

Such a rapprochement can be promoted by supporting:

- Projects or programs focusing on intergenerational and intercultural dialogue and contacts between youths and parents (more free activities for families, for example) and between youths and apprehensive citizens (volunteer work, for example);
- Social and artistic projects focusing on participation and interaction between citizens, or between the City and its citizens, as done in Salaberry-de-Valleyfield with the *Social Intervention Project in Museology*, or in Brussels with the *Zinneke Parade*<sup>2</sup>;
- Citizens' initiatives such as *Moroccan Fathers* in Amsterdam<sup>3</sup> where the goal is to reach out to young people of the neighbourhood, make contact, open dialogue and, in doing so, transmit values.

#### **3.2 Creating rapprochement between citizens and authorities**

Such a rapprochement can be promoted by:

- Making sure the *Commission d'agglomération sur la sécurité publique* continues consulting young Montrealers;

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Avis (Opinion Paper), chapter 5, point 5.2.3.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

- Establishing in boroughs and reconstituted towns an activity consisting in “taking a walk” in each neighbourhood with the Mayor, allowing citizens to talk with elected officials about the problems they face (as is done in borough Rosemont – La Petite-Patrie);
- Organising regular meetings in boroughs and reconstituted towns between citizens (including youths) and the authorities (including the police service), as done in Herent, Belgium, with *Cafés citoyens*<sup>4</sup>;

Such meetings could be initiated by the *Tables de concertation en sécurité urbaine*. Meetings would take place at fixed dates, for example on the first Saturday of each month, at a friendly location, already used by citizens, like the municipal library or cultural centres. Elected officials, municipal public servants, police officers, community workers and citizens assemble to discuss various topics. Each topic can be introduced with a short play prepared in collaboration with *Mise au jeu*, an organisation that promotes the active participation of the public. In order to reach the most concerned young people, teams of street workers such as the *BUMP* mediation team of Petite-Bourgogne could be called upon to collaborate.

- Enhancing, in accordance to each context, the work of community workers with young people and their participation at issue tables and committees;
- Making sure that police officers show more flexibility in their attitude and their interventions when they answer citizens complaints regarding young people, particularly when it concerns youths from visible minorities;
- Pursuing the training of police officers on diversity management, including issues regarding young Montrealers and their particular reality, in order to improve interaction and communication between them and the police;
- Looking into options other than fines, notably in cases of loitering.

### **3.3 Offering social mediation**

It would be useful to:

- Favour social mediation in the cases of complaints from citizens about youths.

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Avis (Opinion Paper) chapter 5, point 5.2.4.

To do so, each borough and reconstituted town – or at least the ones where insecurity associated with youths is an issue – should have a team and a location dedicated to social mediation (i.e. a centre for social mediation).

#### **4. Deconstructing prejudices and promoting responsible citizenship**

With regard to insecurity associated to youths, it is essential to work on promoting social cohesion but also on demythicizing and clarifying facts about youths and youth gatherings.

Thus, CjM recommends:

- The implementation of an awareness campaign to deconstruct prejudices about youth; The *Youth Event* formula of January 2009 could be renewed, showcasing initiatives from young Montrealers. Other approaches could also be developed, such as a video for the media. Locally, initiatives such as the ones implemented in Charleroi, Belgium<sup>5</sup>, and more recently, in the Saint-Michel area of Montreal<sup>6</sup>, could be developed and applied elsewhere.

It is also essential to promote responsible citizenship regarding obligations relative to societal life and to reinforce the control citizens have on their own security – or at least on the manner in which they perceive it – by making them aware of the various risks inherent to urban life.

To achieve this, CjM recommends the following:

- To develop an awareness campaign targeting all citizens, including youths, on the obligations of citizens, the meaning of citizenship and mutual respect;
- To pursue and multiply preventive actions within the young population in view of the risks of becoming a victim, targeting mainly young girls and the young between 12 to 17 years of age (sexual aggression, taxiing, bullying, etc.).

#### **5. Doing more for young Montrealers**

Finally, it seems essential, according to young Montrealers consulted, and in view of the present analysis, that more should be done for the young, in particular for those that are marginalized or at risk of being marginalized, in order for them to feel they can take their place in the community.

Thus, CjM recommends:

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Avis (Opinion Paper) chapter 5 point 5.1.1.

<sup>6</sup> Young people from Saint-Michel, with the support of *Par la Grand'Porte* Youth Centre, have produced and launched a documentary entitled *Saint-Michel : images et réalités*, that focuses on their reality.

- To maintain in good condition, modernize and adapt existing sport, cultural and leisure equipment; publicize their availability and the services related targeting youths;
- To develop new sports, cultural and leisure infrastructures, mainly for the 18 to 30 year-old clientele. It seems inadequate and not very accessible.
- To go beyond the occupational goal in the offer of activities by promoting the participation of youth in the planning process and the organization of their recreational activities;
- To ensure that more places for socializing are available for young people. For instance, an area dedicated to youths should be integrated into sport, cultural or leisure sites when they are built or renovated, for example, youths cafés, accessible, anonymous, with adequate opening hours, open to all, young and adults, no matter their cultural origin, sexual orientation, etc, and where users don't have to buy to stay;
- To augment the number of community workers in some areas, improve their working conditions and ensure the service is there to stay;
- To support projects and programs already implemented by community organisations, while providing recurrent financing or increasing by-project financing;
- To solicit the involvement of the government of Quebec, especially in terms of financial support, in particular for Montreal initiatives relative to socio-urban issues: fight against poverty, against homelessness, against street gangs, etc.

CjM also believes that it would be particularly pertinent to:

- Create a youth portal on the Web site of the City of Montreal, allowing young Montrealers to find out about what's going on in their neighbourhood or elsewhere in Montreal and to express themselves;
- Make sure that the site is well promoted among young people as well as among the general population.

## **WHAT WE SHOULD ALL REMEMBER...**

Improving urban design and animation in public areas, and developing the possibilities for recourse are essential. But initiatives favouring positive interaction between generations and between cultures would also greatly contribute to appeasing the tensions that undermine social life and are the source of insecurity. It would bring better understanding between all and promote more proximity and better dialogue between citizens and authorities.

Another initiative to develop or to reinforce would be for citizens to acquire new skills allowing them to have a better hold on their own safety, or at least in the way that they perceive their safety. It should include activities to help distinguish between fact and fiction about youths and to make all citizens, including young citizens, aware of the various risks inherent to urban life. It is also crucial to give young people the opportunity to get involved in activities that bring them self-satisfaction, to meet with their peers in places they can call their own, to express themselves and to be informed about the resources dedicated to them. These measures would allow young people to have their place in the community and would mobilize citizens for a peaceful and safe environment, while improving their own sense of security.

With this opinion paper, CjM wishes to provide elected officials and municipal administration representatives with inspiring ideas for solutions that reflect the point of view of young Montrealers so as to improve the sense of security of Montrealers in the public space.