



YOUTH ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY



Community Safety and Well-Being Bureau

Our Strategy

In keeping with Peel Regional Police's (PRP) mission, this strategy is committed to community safety and well-being through progressive, innovative and inclusive service excellence. The vision is to create a safe community together in partnership with youth and those who serve them.

The following principles will guide all aspects of how PRP serves, engages and supports youth.

1. NOTHING FOR YOUTH WITHOUT YOUTH

Youth will play a key role in the development of engagement initiatives and inform major decisions that affect youth.

2. CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE

Youth-focused initiatives at PRP should be equitable and inclusive to youth from diverse backgrounds, experiences and perspectives.

3. TRAUMA INFORMED

PRP must engage in a way that recognizes youth are shaped by their lived experiences, which for some includes trauma and a wide range of experiences with police and other institutions.

4. ASSET BASED

Every youth has assets upon which to build. PRP youth activities and initiatives should adopt an approach that leverages those assets.

5. COLLABORATION AND PARTNERSHIPS

Police cannot work in isolation and must collaborate with community partners who have relationships and expertise in serving youth.

6. EVIDENCE DRIVEN

Current and emerging programs should be evaluated using empirically sound methods that include feedback from young people.

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Message from the Chief

Nothing for youth without youth.

That is the first principle of the guiding framework of the new Youth Engagement Strategy for Peel Regional Police. I am very pleased to share this progressive and forward-thinking strategy which will shape the future of our engagement with youth up to the age of 24 in Peel Region.

It is critical to have a roadmap to support youth, particularly when the last census showed that youth aged 24 and under comprise 25 per cent of the population in Mississauga and 27.6 per cent of the population of Brampton¹. The Community Safety and Well-Being Bureau commissioned an independent organization to conduct extensive research with youth, parents and police officers which was used to develop this plan. One of the clear messages was that nothing should be developed for youth without youth involvement, and we are committed to listening.

The development of this plan is one of the commitments made in *“Our Way Forward: A Strategy to Operational Community Safety and Well-Being at Peel Regional Police.”* It is part of our commitment to continue moving from a service model that is mainly reactive and enforcement driven, to one that is more proactive, collaborative and focused on preventing and mitigating risks to the safety and well-being of the youth in our community. It provides several high-level actions that will be carried out in consultation with community partners and youth over the coming years. This will include developing specific actions and measurable outcomes that will enable us to ensure our programs are effective and having the desired impact.

Thank you to those who participated in the research, the community partners who provided feedback in the development of this strategy and to those within PRP who contributed. I am confident this will lead to stronger relationships with the youth in Peel Region and play a key role in our vision to achieve a *Safer Community Together*.



Nishan Duraiappah, Chief, Peel Regional Police

Community of Practice

Peel Regional Police is committed to making well-informed decisions that have been viewed from a variety of perspectives. To that end, this strategy has been reviewed by our Youth Engagement Community of Practice, a group that is comprised of youth-focused community partners within Peel Region. This group will assist in guiding the implementation of this strategy, help determine next steps and create channels and pathways to bring youth perspectives to the table.



Understanding the Issue

“We don’t need increased engagement, we need meaningful [existing] engagement.”

YOUTH IN FOCUS GROUP

In 2024, PRP commissioned Pages for Good, a consulting firm that does research, to conduct a survey and focus groups to provide an independent, unbiased lens on youth safety, policing and police interaction with youth within Mississauga and Brampton.

The research was conducted between April-June 2024, and gathered input from four groups of participants:

- Youth aged 15-24
- Parents of school-aged children 6 years and up
- Community leaders working with youth
- Peel Regional Police members

In addition to the survey that garnered 550 responses, there were 45 focus groups participants.

The report, *Real Talks Peel*, defines youth engagement as empowering all young people as valuable partners in addressing and making decisions about issues that affect them personally and/or that they believe are important.

SURVEY HIGHLIGHTS

- About one quarter of all respondents believe that PRP is doing everything it can to keep youth safe. However, more young people (ages 15-24) disagreed (29.4 per cent) than adults 25+ (21.2 per cent) that PRP is doing all it can to keep youth safe.
- Nearly 40 per cent of young people (ages 15-24) do not believe they are given the opportunity to provide input on police-related matters that affect them.
- Fewer than 25 per cent of all respondents believe that PRP makes youth-related decisions based on facts. Moreover, only about one third of young people (ages 15-24) feel comfortable contacting PRP compared to 55 per cent of adults 25+.
- Overall, respondents are more likely to feel PRP does not have a grasp on youth and what youth worry about.

70.8%
of community respondents believe that a younger cohort of youth, under 16 and under 18, should be the focus of the PRP’s youth engagement efforts.



THE FUTURE OF YOUTH ENGAGEMENT: FOCUS GROUP RESULTS

*“There’s a sense that they
are always trying to help.”*

YOUTH IN FOCUS GROUP

- Youth highlighted a desire for more educational initiatives to understand their rights and improve safety, as well as the importance of positive engagement with PRP to build trust and understanding. They believe that engagement with police is not a one-time event, but a continuous and everyday process that happen in neutral environments and not necessarily in schools.
- Community leaders perceive youth-police engagement as a critical tool to uphold youth and community safety. Their discussion underscored the effectiveness of some of the current initiatives and emphasized the need for police to understand youth perspectives, create safe spaces for youth activities and offer programs supporting parents.
- Parents, on the other hand, expressed skepticism, discussing the history of racial bias in policing and the negative impacts of the School Resource Officer program. Many parents were apprehensive about police interactions with youth, emphasizing that police should focus on policing rather than taking on roles better suited for trained mental health and social workers or coaches and mentors.
- Suggested initiatives from focus group:
 - Interactions with plain clothes officers
 - Volunteer opportunities and apprenticeships
 - Mentorship programs
 - Partnerships with community organizations
 - Youth leadership programs
 - Youth advisory boards
 - After-school programs/sports

Top three youth engagement actions to focus on:

- Teach youth about their rights
- Teach youth about safety
- Help youth get together in safe space



Top three safety issues for the community:

- Theft
- Dangerous driving
- Guns and gangs



A Respectful and Culturally Responsive Approach

Peel is one of the most culturally and ethnically diverse communities in North America. Nearly 70 per cent of Peel residents identify as a member of a racialized community, which is more than twice the average for the population of Ontario. Peel is also home to one of Canada's largest newcomer populations with more than 104,000 residents who have come to Canada within the last five years. We must implement this strategy in a way that is culturally responsive and recognizes the lived experiences of all youth, particularly those who come from racialized communities.

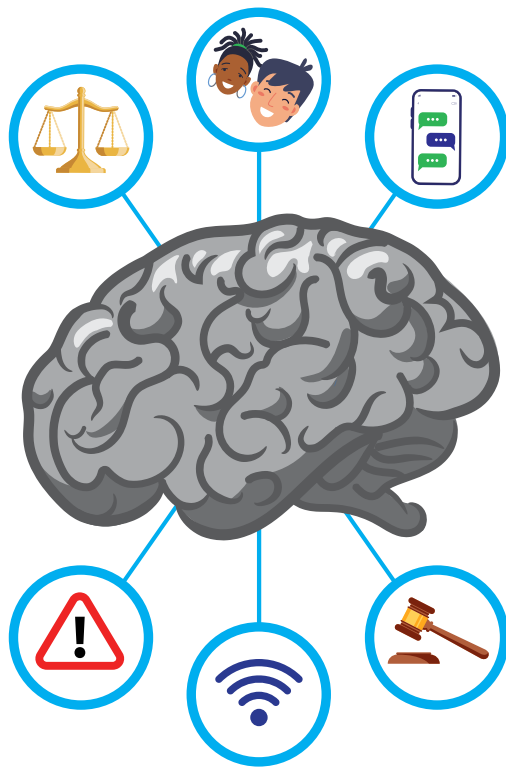
The strategy must also be an extension of our commitments to the Ontario Human Rights Commission, and our binding Memorandum of Understanding to address systemic racism. This includes fully meeting our obligations under the Ontario Human Rights Code, the *Youth Criminal Justice Act* and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. By taking a respectful, rights-based approach to engaging young people, our goal is to build a foundation of trust that will lead to stronger youth-police relations and a safer community for Peel youth.



The Young Brain

There are several phases of brain development as children progress to the age of 24 when the brain is fully mature. Recognizing this, and the factors inherent in the development stages up to the age of 24, helps to understand why some young people make decisions that may put themselves in situations where they are at risk.

When developing initiatives and programs to work with and support youth engagement with police, it is important to recognize factors related to brain development and to ensure these are taken into account.



CHARACTERISTICS OF AN ADOLESCENT MIND²

Risk Taking More Likely

- Inherently more likely than adults to take chances
- Often engage in activities that have a greater risk to achieve higher levels of excitement

Less Focused on the Future

- Often underestimate the level of risk of activities
- Downplay the threat of punishment
- Place more emphasis on the short-term than on long-term consequences

More Influenced by Peers

- More likely to respond to the influences of their peers rather than their parents
- More likely to take risks while in the presence of their peers

Sensitive to Perceived Injustice

- More keenly aware of injustices; any appearance of unfairness will reinforce this perception
- More likely to accept responsibility if they feel that processes are fair and transparent

Why Now?



The relationship between police and youth in Peel Region has changed since the School Resource Officer program came to an end in 2020. There were a variety of factors involved in the decision to leave the schools, including that some youth, particularly racialized youth, said they were negatively affected by the presence of uniformed officers. This strategy is not about how to re-engage in a school setting; rather, it aims to help redefine how PRP engages, serves and communicates with Peel youth in a more thoughtful, consistent and transparent manner in a broader community context.

PRP has many existing programs that bring young people and officers together in the spirit of cooperation, education and mentorship. This strategy builds on that foundation and is designed to encourage a positive relationship with police and ensure youth feel comfortable engaging with police officers which ultimately supports the safety and well-being of youth and the broader community.

One of PRP's core initiatives was the creation of the Divisional Mobilization Unit (DMU), which was launched in 2021, to support a wide range of priority populations – including youth – through proactive engagement and support. The main function of the DMU is upstream interventions, education and awareness, and community engagement and relationship building.

A January 2024 evaluation of the formation of the DMU found it is well positioned to take on additional youth engagement activities aimed at building relationships and trust, and to connect young people who need support with relevant partner agencies in the community. While it is centrally managed, there are members of the unit based at four PRP divisions – 11, 12, 21 and 22. The evaluation, which consisted of surveys and one-on-one interviews, found that DMU members want to collaborate more with community partners to address youth issues and with young people to help improve perceptions and understanding of policing.



Engaging with Youth Through a Community Safety and Well-Being Lens

PRP has adopted the provincial community safety and well-being (CSWB) framework as a core foundation of our service and as an extension of our commitment to Peel's CSWB Plan. This framework is a tool, or 'lens,' that shapes how we strengthen the safety and well-being of our communities by planning in four key areas of intervention: incident response, risk intervention, prevention and social development. It is based on the idea that it is more effective to work further 'upstream' to proactively identify and address community needs.

This framework is also about taking approaches that are collaborative, holistic and based on evidence. We have, and we will continue to, apply the CSWB lens to our approach to engaging with youth, in collaboration with our community partners.





SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Addressing root causes of social issues by ensuring people have access to programs and resources to help maintain their safety and well-being.

COMMITMENT: We will identify opportunities through upstream programs and initiatives to build resiliency among youth and create positive opportunities for engagement.

PREVENTION

Putting proactive strategies in place to mitigate risks to the safety and well-being of individuals and communities.

COMMITMENT: We will work proactively to identify issues affecting youth and seek to develop opportunities – alongside community partners and youth – to co-construct solutions and mobilize knowledge and education.

RISK INTERVENTION

Working with partners to proactively address situations where there is risk to the safety and well-being of individuals and communities.

COMMITMENT: Though collaboration and connections to community-based services, we will continue to work with our community partners to provide timely interventions for youth who are at risk of negative outcomes.

INCIDENT RESPONSE

Responding to issues that require a response by police or other crisis-based service providers.

COMMITMENT: We will actively seek to understand the root causes that bring youth into contact with police. Our approach will balance accountability and support while seeking to create off-ramps to reduce involvement with police and the justice system.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Promoting and maintaining community safety and well-being.

This is about promoting and maintaining the safety and well-being of individuals and communities. It includes working with multi-sector partners to address community priorities from a wide range of perspectives. It is important to ensure youth know what resources are available and that there are ongoing opportunities for positive engagement.

WHAT WE ARE DOING

PROACTION COPS & KIDS

A mentoring program that builds and fosters positive relationships between police officers and youth through skill-building. The program creates an encouraging environment and often leads to educational and career opportunities for the youth. Some programs include aviation, athletics, culinary skills and access to the trades.

BOYS TO MEN PROGRAM

A police-led mentorship initiative designed to provide at-risk boys with guidance, support and positive role models. The six-week program aims to help them develop life skills, build confidence and make informed decisions as they transition through critical maturation stages of their lives.

YOUNG WOMEN'S MENTORSHIP PROGRAM

An initiative aimed at empowering at-risk girls by fostering leadership skills, building confidence and providing mentorship opportunities. This program creates a supportive environment where they can learn from female police officers and community leaders.

YOUTH IN POLICING INITIATIVE (YIPI)

An eight-week summer employment opportunity offered to youth between the ages of 15 and 18 who reflect the cultural diversity of Peel Region.

INTENDED DELIVERABLES

- 1) Support skill development and resiliency in youth through programs such as YIPI, Peel Community Safety certificate and ProAction initiatives.
- 2) Establish and implement a PRP youth mentorship program to strengthen relationships between officers and youth looking for positive role models.
- 3) Leverage sports and creative mediums as an opportunity to positively engage with youth while also offering developmental, character building and life skills.
- 4) Develop a youth citizens academy to educate young people on their rights as citizens, the role of police and help officers understand the concerns of youth.
- 5) Expand and evaluate existing programs including Boys to Men and the Young Women's Mentorship programs.
- 6) Seek ongoing opportunities to leverage the perspectives of young people in the development of a broad range of initiatives at PRP.

PREVENTION

Proactively addressing community needs and risk factors.

This is about proactively identifying and addressing community needs to reduce risks to safety and well-being before they result in crime, victimization or other harms.

WHAT WE ARE DOING

SAFETY AND AWARENESS PRESENTATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

A program that helps educate newcomers on Canadian laws and personal safety. This presentation is offered annually at post-secondary institutions and programs throughout the region.

PEEL CHILDREN'S SAFETY VILLAGE

Teaching elementary school aged children about road, bike, internet and personal safety.

DIGITAL LEADERSHIP/SOCIAL MEDIA

The sessions emphasize individual responsibility while using the internet and social media and discuss age-appropriate topics that affect youth health and safety, including cyberbullying.

IVY (INTERVENTION FOR VULNERABLE YOUTH)

This program is designed to raise awareness amongst youth of the risks of human trafficking and provide prevention tools, including signs to look for that may indicate a young person is being targeted.

INTENDED DELIVERABLES

- 1) Continue to work with partners to develop youth-specific initiatives and programs to address issues of concern to youth.
- 2) Develop creative ways to share knowledge with youth on emerging issues of concern that could impact their safety and well-being.
- 3) Build the capacity of PRP members through training opportunities to enhance their ability to more effectively engage with and support youth in our community.
- 4) Continue to deliver educational content to a wide range of youth to address current and emerging issues that affect their safety and well-being such as gangs, dangerous driving and human trafficking.
- 5) Continue to work with Peel Region and community partners on strategies to reduce and prevent youth violence.

RISK INTERVENTION

Working with community partners to proactively address situations where there is risk to the safety and well-being of individuals and communities.

This is about addressing situations of elevated risk before they become a crisis or result in harm. It includes addressing the underlying issues and creating pathways to community services to lead to better outcomes for both youth and the community at large.

WHAT WE ARE DOING

CSWB REFERRALS

When frontline officers identify underlying community safety and well-being issues that put individuals, including youth, at risk of harm or ongoing/unnecessary police involvement, they can refer the young person to the CSWB Services Section, which will then follow up to identify risk factors and make appropriate referrals.

SITUATION TABLES

The Peel Situation Table is a partnership of nearly 50 service organizations that provide wrap-around supports to individuals at an elevated risk of harm. The goal is to stabilize the situation and reduce police involvement and that of other incident-based responders. Approximately 32 per cent of individuals brought forward through the Situation Table are young people under the age of 18.

PRE-CHARGE DIVERSION PROGRAM

Diverting youth from formal criminal proceedings to Associated Youth Services of Peel before a charge is laid to prevent further involvement in the justice system. In 2023, a total of 241 young people were diverted through this program. Approximately 80 per cent of these youth did not reoffend.

INTENDED DELIVERABLES

- 1) Work proactively with community partners to identify youth at risk and explore opportunities to co-develop programs and initiatives to provide support and guidance.
- 2) Identify opportunities to expand the use of our pre-charge diversion program to divert youth away from the justice system by providing alternate pathways.
- 3) Implement protocol with Peel Children's Aid Society to support a more collaborative approach to youth who are at-risk, including those who are frequently out of care.
- 4) Further leverage the DMU to follow up and engage with youth and families to create connections to community health and social service supports.
- 5) Strengthen support to youth affected by hate and bias through our reassurance protocol and wrap-around supports.

INCIDENT RESPONSE

Issues that require an urgent response by police or other crisis-based service providers.

Youth from various backgrounds and lived experiences come into contact with police for a variety of reasons. Often times, these interactions are non-criminal in nature such as a mental health-related intervention, an addiction issue or a missing person report. As a police service, it is our responsibility to respond to these calls in a supportive and compassionate manner that takes into account their life experiences and other contributing factors. This includes ensuring a prompt and effective response to youth who are in crisis and require access to supports.

Since the COVID pandemic, the number of youth (defined as younger than 18 by the *Youth Criminal Justice Act*) arrested has increased. The top reasons for arrests in 2024 were:

- Assaults: 438
- Firearms/weapons: 193
- Robbery: 179
- Break and enter: 25

By far, the most prevalent reason for an urgent police response to an issue involving youth was related to missing persons' reports. In 2024, 552 youth went missing a total of 906 times. Mental health issues also factor significantly into the number of interactions with youth in the region. Between 2022 and 2024, a total of 1,581 youth under the age of 18 were apprehended under the *Mental Health Act* – an average of 527 per year. This equates to nearly 1.5 persons under 18 apprehended per day.

PRP wants to ensure its members effectively respond to calls that involve youth who may be affected by mental health issues or various other social determinants of health, and it is our core responsibility to make sure they are connected with the right resources and supports to mitigate challenges and help improve their lives.

INTENDED DELIVERABLES

- 1) Continue to work with school board partners to strengthen existing protocol to ensure a respectful and appropriate response to situations that require a police presence within our school communities.
- 2) Evaluate our crisis response to look for opportunities to best serve the needs of youth who are experiencing a mental health crisis.
- 3) Building on the PRP autism strategy, continue to work with community partners to explore opportunities to strengthen service to neurodiverse youth.
- 4) Continue to build PRP's capacity to effectively respond in a developmentally and age-appropriate manner to youth who are involved in an incident that requires a police response.

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY



PeelPolice.ca/YES



¹ Statistics Canada. Census 2021

² Young People Strategy 2021-2024, Edmonton Police Service, <https://www.edmontonpolice.ca/CommunityPolicing/CommunityInitiatives/YoungPeopleStrategy>

