

Good morning members of the Victoria Family Court and Youth Justice Committee and thank you so much for inviting us here today for this important and timely discussion.

My name is Damian Kowalewich and I serve as the Inspector In Charge of the Community Engagement Division of the Saanich Police.

Thank you to the CRD for hosting us here today. Also, I'd like to acknowledge and recognize the other panel members, Deputy Chief McRae and Cst. Magee and Mia Golden.

I know many of the folks here today and am so grateful that there are individuals like you who serve our communities and aim to advocate, protect, and learn about the challenges faced by youth in the Capital Regional District.

At the Saanich Police we are an organization who care deeply about the youth in our community. Our Strategic Plans speaks to how our services to youth in school settings are evolving and how we will continue to identify meaningful opportunities to proactively connect with youth.

We know that maintaining positive relationships with youth is an integral part of crime prevention and building trust and confidence in the police both now and into the future.

So, what are some of the major issues facing youth today? I will touch on two concerns today-----that being gangs and sextortion.

We will start with gang recruitment, something that has been active here as of late in Saanich.

For clarity, and as stated in the Criminal Code, a "gang" is a "Criminal Organization" that is a *group of organized people that is composed of three or more persons; and*

*has as one of its main purposes or main activities and facilitates or commits serious offences, that, would likely result in the direct or indirect receipt of a material benefit, including a financial benefit, by the group or by any of the persons who constitute the group. This does not include a group of persons that forms randomly.*

As part of our efforts to combat gang activity and recruitment, we have taken a multi-pronged approach. Through education, by way of the many Gang Education and Trends safety seminars, we were able to reach residents across the CRD. While partnering with other local police agencies, recreation and culture groups, and parent advisory committees, we informed attendees of ways to identify early risk factors, have awareness for social media and substance abuse trends and to understand how current and local gang activity operates. We also stressed the importance of community-based support and provided parent resources and guides.

We also conducted research. Our researcher found that the Saanich Police Major Crime Unit had been involved in 35 investigations, from mid-2022 to date, that were associated with gang activity in Saanich schools. More than 10 youths were identified as being involved in gang activity associated with schools over that same period.

Some of the files investigated by the Major Crime Unit included assault with a weapon (stabbing), victim/witness intimidation, assault, break and enter, threats and drug trafficking. Some of these investigations are before the courts which precludes me from releasing any additional information today.

Other investigations use sources of information that are sensitive and cannot be disclosed to non-law enforcement individuals.

Of note, the significant increase in gang files documented in 2023 was related to the activities of one criminal organization that originated in the Greater Vancouver area. This quantitative data is critical to show the reality of what youth in Saanich have been involved in and the pressures they face.

Lastly, through intelligence gathering and dissemination, our patrol and community engagement officers are regularly updated and apprised of youth that are in or associated with gang activity and their known locations and hot spots are shared to encourage awareness and proactive patrols in these areas.

Sextortion is another troubling trend that has hit our region. We have been receiving a growing number of reports of “sextortion,” as are other agencies.

This is where someone threatens to reveal an individual’s online sexual behaviour if they don’t pay a certain amount of money — often using pictures or videos that victims have been convinced to send. The way this typically works is that teens, usually males are convinced by an individual online that they would like to start a romantic relationship, and then intimate photos are exchanged. Of course, the person, the person on the other end is not in fact who they say they are.

Our numbers of sextortion reports have been rising since last year, and they receive several every month. In Saanich the results are varied, yet shocking.

Victims have harmed themselves out of shame, taken up jobs to pay the criminals once the photos are sent and in Prince George, 12-year-

old Carson Cleland, killed himself in October after becoming a victim of sextortion.

Most sextortion scams are run by criminal organizations in eastern Europe and Africa. Our department has an Internet child-exploitation investigator who handled these cases, and we also partnered with media to spread this concerning trend.

Along with these troubling trends, we have also made efforts to grow and stay current with the changing social landscape. Law enforcement and public safety in Canada continues to evolve and adapt to our changing world. We listen to the needs and wants of our community and exercise a high degree of emotional intelligence when dealing with folks.

Our officers receive training in a range of topics including diversity, addressing unconscious biases and how to deal with vulnerable people, including youth.

Our internal policies reflect the same. We pay special attention to vulnerable populations and define them as:

- children and youth ages 0-18,
- Indigenous,
- low income or living in poverty,
- members of LGBTQ2+ communities,
- newcomers (immigrants, temporary residents and refugees),
- Official Language Minority Communities,
- people experiencing homelessness,
- people experiencing domestic or gender-based violence,
- people living in group homes or supportive living,
- people living with mental illness,
- people struggling with addiction,

- persons with disabilities,
- prison populations,
- all racialized groups, and
- seniors and elders (in and out of care).
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You would have noticed that almost all of those listed may have a direct connection or correlation to youth in our communities. As such we have policies that include:

OP15.5 – Young Persons

IN7.5 – Gender Diverse/Transgender People

IN1.3 – Trauma Informed Practices

IN1.4 – Victim Assistance ...and

IN 3.1 – Child Welfare

We take these topics very seriously and have put much thought and effort into properly serving our most vulnerable groups.

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As part of the ongoing discussions surrounding youth challenges in the community, a spotlight has been shone on the absence of SLO's and the real and perceived issues facing youth in the Greater Victoria Area.

With our partial footprint in local schools, we have continued to serve, educate and connect with schools in District 63 and private schools.

As mentioned, our departure from SD 61 required us to pivot and find new ways to educate youth on concerning trends by other means, such as social media, presentations, and mainstream media.

As part of our ongoing commitment to work with stakeholders during this period of SLO absence within SD 61, we have continued to

engage with the trustees to collaborate and restore and build relationships.

Moving forward, our hope is that discussions will continue, and collaboration will occur. Concerns have been raised about our content delivery within schools. To that, we are willing to work with educators and trustees to share our information and ensure that all academic stakeholders feel comfortable with our content delivery. That reason alone should never be the reason to cease a successful relationship between SLO's and schools that has lasted for over 45 years.

Our removal from SD 61 have caused our communication lines with schools, students and staff to suffer. We have shifted to being reactive as opposed to proactive. We know that Early education and intervention is something that allows us to engage and provide support at the earliest possible opportunity, which in many cases can keep youth out of the criminal justice system.

In order to remain effective, our presence in schools gives us a direct link to share information, bring awareness, and promote education from a public safety standpoint. All of this is needed to keep students and staff aware and engaged to help them stay safe in schools.

We will continue to take a collaborative approach and are pleased with the recent provincial order from Minister Singh to collaborate and develop a coordinated safety plan that meaningfully addresses increased gang activity, safety concerns and crime prevention and crisis response in SD 61 schools.

I'd like to end with a quote from an academic paper authored by Drs. Irwin, Osterberg and Lee. The report (and I can send the link if interested), sponsored by The Crime Reduction Research Program (CRRP), which is a joint-research model in British Columbia

between academics, the provincial government, and police agencies operated by the Office of Crime Reduction – Gang Outreach, concluded that:

“The presence of a consistent SLO in the school can strengthen relationships, partnerships, and enhanced collaboration between the students and their families, the school, and the police. If this consistency is not present, the value and impact of the program can be substantially reduced.”

Thank you, that concludes my time.