

Investigating Youth Crime in Sault Ste. Marie Using GIS

By Kristen Hoffman

In 2008, Sault Ste. Marie's City Council became increasingly concerned with the issue of youth crime in the community. The 2007 Sault Ste. Marie Municipal Performance Report results stated that Sault Ste. Marie experienced a 28.9% increase in youth offenders from 946 youths in 2006 to 1,219 youths in 2007. Youth offenders include anyone between the ages of 12 and 18 who commit crime. To determine the roots of the problem, City Council formed the Youth Crime Committee of Council to work in conjunction with the Sault Ste. Marie Police Service (SSMPS) and the Sault Ste. Marie Innovation Centre. SSMIC was involved in this project to provide a geographic perspective to the data. The Youth Crime Committee wanted to know if there was a youth crime problem in the city and where the problem was occurring so appropriate actions could be taken to set up programs and services to lessen the impact of youth crime in those neighbourhoods.

SSMIC tied SSMPS youth crime data from 2006 to 2008 to dissemination areas to maintain confidentiality. Dissemination areas are a census geography that roughly represents the size of a neighbourhood (400 – 700 people). Data was tied to

both the location of the occurrence, to determine which neighbourhoods experienced crime, and to the location of the offender, to pinpoint the areas of Sault Ste. Marie where young offenders resided. The data was then mapped by year (2006, 2007 and 2008) and by all three years combined. Individual crime maps were also created to look at the types of crime being committed and where these crimes were committed in the city. The types of crime that were analysed include assault, break and enter, drug offences, mischief, robbery, theft and theft of a motor vehicle. Once the maps were generated, a report was created outlining the overall analysis on crime in Sault Ste. Marie.

The data extract used in this project was the first of its kind in Ontario, meaning that no other community using OPTIC has requested this information for crime analysis. When the data was delivered, it had to be converted into a compatible file format. Some of the records were incomplete and a unique ID field was missing. A unique ID field was generated based on an amalgamation of other fields in the database. Another challenge faced during this project was a question of comparisons. Communities have different policing and reporting strategies, so crime data gathered is not comparable from community to community. For this purpose, it was

decided that it is best to compare from year to year within Sault Ste. Marie to determine whether youth crime is a problem or not. By analysing the data on a yearly basis, it would be evident where crime is increasing and decreasing and whether or not the situation is improving.

The final report and maps for the project indicated that youth crime was, in fact, not increasing in the city of Sault Ste. Marie. The Municipal Performance Report had recorded individual counts or crimes, as well as suspects. The report done by SSMIC reported only charged persons, which gives a more truthful look at how many youth offenders were in the city. This difference in reporting accounted for the vast difference in the results of the two reports. Graphs indicated that crime had actually been declining at a slow rate, as were the number of youth offenders. Also, the number of crimes committed was consistently higher than the total number of offenders, indicating that there were multiple crimes being committed by the youth offenders.

There were not enough years analysed in this project to draw any trends; however, this mapping process can be continued each year to identify potential areas of concern. It was observed in this report that youth

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crime fluctuates. A slight difference in crime from year to year does not indicate any major problems. The amount of youth crime in Sault Ste. Marie was not extreme and was committed by few individuals. Crime was spread relatively evenly throughout the city, with a slight concentration around schools and low income neighbourhoods. Low income neighbourhoods generally had slightly higher numbers of youth offenders, as well.

Meetings were held with a number of community organizations who

provided suggestions to the Youth Crime Committee of Council. These recommendations will be taken into consideration in the next stages of the project.

In this project, the geographic perspective of GIS was essential in locating the neighbourhoods affected by youth crime. Now that these neighbourhoods have been identified, appropriate steps can be taken by the Youth Crime Committee of Council and other local agencies to implement programs and services to deal with and, in turn, lessen the impact of crime

on youth and the community.

About the Author

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