

1515 Rebecca Street, Suite 227, Oakville ON, L6L 5G8
Administration: 905-825-3622 • Toll Free: 1-877-268-8416 • TTY: 905-825-3743
Fax: 905-825-3755 • 24 Hour Crisis Line: 905-875-1555
Website: www.savisofhalton.org Email: savis@savisofhalton.org

March 27, 2008

Dear Editor,

This letter is in response to recent public concern over the issues of violent crime within the community – including bullying and harassment that takes place within our school settings.

As you are likely aware, there has been recent attention in the media about the reality of violence experienced by female youth within schools. For example, on February 21, 2008, the Ontario government's safe schools strategy expanded its scope to specifically target the problem of sexual harassment and sexual assault in schools. On January 27, 2008, *The Burlington Post* ran an article concerning changes to how Halton's school boards will address problematic student behavior, including bullying, harassment and weapons in schools.

Even more relevant, the February 8, 2008 *Burlington Post* headline reported that the number of violent crimes in Burlington was up 15.6 per cent -- from 870 cases in 2006 to 1,006 in 2007. In the February 8 article, Halton Supt. Keith Gregory said "most" of the assaults, which include domestic assaults and bar fights, involved people who knew each other. He went on to stress that "a key component of the [increased] violent crime figure was the fact the assaults were not random."

Readers should know that it is these same crimes – that is, those involving people who knew each other -- that impact our community's youth the most. A Canadian statistic tells us that 54% of girls under the age of 16 have experienced some form of unwanted sexual attention¹ -- in addition to this, in cases reported to police, 80% of sexual assault survivors knew their abusers. About 10% were assaulted by a friend and 41% were assaulted by an acquaintance. 28% were assaulted by a family member².

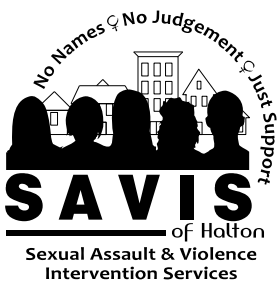
In the lives of girls and young women, it is no comfort to know that "most" assaults "are not random".

SAVIS provides free, confidential and non-judgmental 24-hour support to all survivors of sexual violence. We advocate against violence in the community at large and promote prevention through community education. Our support services include confidential support to teens that have experienced violence, including sexual harassment, sexual assault and family violence. We assist teens at various youth-friendly locations -- the

YMCA of Burlington, Pulse Youth Health Centre and Velocity (Burlington), the Oakville Youth Development Centre, Off the Wall (Acton) and Open Door (Georgetown) – throughout Halton.

¹ J. Holmes and E. Silverman, 1992, *We're Here, Listen to Us: A Survey of Young Women in Canada* (from http://metrac.org/new/stat_sex.htm)

² Statistics Canada, 2003, *The Daily*, 25 July (from http://metrac.org/new/stat_sex.htm)



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In addition to this, SAVIS recognizes the importance of the prevention of violence through public education. As such, SAVIS has a database of over 30 presentations and workshops that are offered to students, community groups and professionals free of charge. In the last year, SAVIS' Education Program alone conducted over 200 assault information and prevention skills workshops to 5,555 community members in Halton Region. More specifically, through its ongoing partnerships with the Halton District School Board and the Halton Catholic District School Board, SAVIS worked with 3,807 students at the elementary, junior high and high school level (grades 1-12) using a wide range of mediums from puppetry to small group work and multi-media.

Violence against women is one of the strongest indicators of prevailing societal attitudes towards women. What is the Safe Schools Strategy doing to address this problem on behalf of girls? The sexual violation of girls is a serious -- though unfortunately, habitually unaddressed -- problem in Ontario.

SAVIS believes that the best way to prevent sexual assault is to work with sexual assault centres and women's services that support women affected by violence -- in order to effectively change a society that presently condones sexual assault and other forms of violence against women.

Together, we will make a difference.

Sincerely,

Jacqueline Benn-John, MEd.
Executive Director

c.c. Jeannie Meyer, Chair, SAVIS Board