

## Drawing the line on crime

Top police brass gets together with A-G and community safety minister to explore ways to make communities safer

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Guns, gangs and drugs.

All three are playing a role in fuelling fears that Toronto, and other cities across the province, are increasingly unsafe.

Police Chief Bill Blair and other top cops are meeting with Attorney General Chris Bentley this week for a crime summit to specifically address violent, "out-of-control" crime.

"We're going to do whatever it takes to make sure the public safety is protected," Bentley vowed last month.

Key law enforcement officials plan to look at the way the justice system deals with violent repeat offenders, how to stay tough on the causes of crime and examine federal legislative reform for possible solutions to rising crime concerns.

The crime summit arranged by Bentley follows a number of homicides that stunned Toronto, including the murders of Bailey Zaveda, 23, outside the Duke of York tavern on Oct. 25, and Susan John, 43, and her mother Sarumma Varughese, 65, in their Rotary Rd. home on Oct. 13.

Bentley is bringing together a high-powered group of crime experts. In addition to Blair, there's Community Safety and Correctional Services Minister Rick Bartolucci, OPP Commissioner Julian Fantino and Sudbury Chief and head of the Ontario Association of Chiefs of Police Ian Davidson.

Toronto homicide squad boss Brian Raybould says, "Gangs and guns and drugs are the continuing backgrounder to so many of these (murders)."

Statistically, the odds of being a murder victim, let alone an unintended victim, are low in Toronto, Staff-Insp. Raybould says; however, there's a psychological factor. "People feel they're unsafe and perception becomes reality."

While incidents of violent crime and murders are down, the number of shootings is up.

"What are we going to do about it? I think we have to keep doing what we're doing," he says.

"That's the big problem. The guns are killing people but the guns are being used in defence of the drug trade in so many of these cases," Raybould says.

"I have yet to see a gang kill (another) gang just for the sake of it. What we see is gang members killing gang members ... to protect that particular commodity they're dealing in.

"It's hard to say we're being effective when we have innocent people gunned down on the street," he says.

While Crowns and police take a hard line on violence, the group of five will explore other ways at their crime summit of preventing violent crime, such as the provincially-funded Toronto Anti-Violence Intervention Strategy or TAVIS.

Toronto police targeted two high-risk neighbourhoods over the summer -- Jane-Finch and Regent Park -- assigning more than a dozen additional officers in each community, to rebuild trust and weed out criminals. By the end of the summer, when the program ended, crime dropped in those neighbourhoods, arrests were up and both police and residents declared the program a success.

Police also intend to lock the revolving door of suspects entering court and being released within days, by focusing on tighter restrictions on bail and other release programs and sentencing.

The chiefs and the attorney general also want to speed up the court process by boosting the number of new courtrooms across the province, in part to reduce the time officers have to be in court and allow the justice system to focus more time and resources on major cases.

The meeting will also review the recent McMurtry-Curling Report on the causes of youth violence. There's TAVIS and cops in schools.

With criminal lawmaking a federal responsibility, the group will also identify what they need and lobby Ottawa for reform.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper has promised more money for crime prevention programs and police on the street and tougher laws, including youth justice reform.

Meanwhile, Toronto city Councillor Michael Thompson believes they should be looking for help closer to home -- in the community.

"Part of what I think is lacking is, the very people that they're trying to help are not part of the solution," he says. "And so many of those in the community -- who I believe should be part of the discussion and debate about this issue -- have not been invited to the table because it has been viewed as a police and a political issue."

"I think there has been a failing in that sense," Thompson says.

The ministers have said this meeting is the first step and the table will get bigger in future.

The police and Queen's Park are overlooking the experience and depth of knowledge that community members can bring to the discussion, Thompson says. He'd call in clergy, sociologists and social workers.

Money has been thrown at Toronto's crime troubles without an overall plan or community involvement, he says. "We tend to put in, you know, \$2 million here or \$5 million here, and that's going to be the solution. The thing is, it's not going to take government alone to tackle these issues. Every member of every community has got to be involved."

Ontario corrections officer Jim Aspiotis, president of the Ontario Gang Investigators Association, agrees. He says police are good at enforcement, "somewhat good at intervention, but they really can't do prevention.

"What you need at that summit is representatives from school boards, community agencies. You can't say this is a police matter," Aspiotis says. "Once it's gone to a police matter, it's gone too far, because the other options of prevention and intervention are gone."

Aspiotis says kids appear predisposed to solving conflict with violence and caregivers are generally not trained well enough to identify kids at risk.

"We have to just change people's mindsets," he says. "There has to be a massive education campaign," in part to teach teachers and parents, school boards, to community organizations; Boy Scouts to Girl Guides.

A similar crime meeting in New York state recently involved teachers, social workers, Scout leaders, "anybody that interacts with youth," Aspiotis says. "It's a question of co-ordinating and resources."

Caseworker Derek Woodruff with the Breaking the Cycle -- a gang exiting program -- says the effects of violence on people, particularly youths, are being overlooked.

"A lot of the kids in these communities witness violent crimes, and they get stuck and experience trauma and they take this into the schools," says Woodruff, who works in Scarborough, which has seven of the city's 13 priority neighbourhoods.

Because counselling is often not available immediately, kids don't know how to process their exposure to violence.

"There's problems with how they think and perceive the world. Fear. You know, is the world a safe place? Well, no. How do I make it a safe place? Well, grabbing a gun isn't too bad of an idea," Woodruff says.

"There's many causes of the cycle, but one piece of the cycle we're not talking about is trauma. We've already talked about poverty, poor education, the breakdown of the family ... We've even talked about speeding up the court process, mandatory sentencing. We've done that.

"You need trauma counselling."

You also need skills development as part of prevention and intervention -- activities ranging from graffiti art and ramp building for BMX bikes to helping kids become entrepreneurs, Const. Scott Mills says.

Mills says social workers and police officers have to be "out there after school, after supper, all night long, all weekend long.

"We got it licked Monday to Friday during the school year," Mills says. "But we really need to up the ante after hours.

'TEACH A SKILL TO KIDS'

"We need to teach a skill to kids that's on their level" that will make them some money, Mills says.

"Once you teach them the skills how to do that, they're not going to be tagging in neighbourhoods," he says. "Attract them to an activity they like and teach them some skills, so when they leave your program, they actually go out to somebody in the job market and say, 'I know how to build this, I know how to do this.'"

He says there also has to be some effort on developing a relationship among youths, community members, schools and police.

"Everything has got to be relationship building and you got to focus on the technology," Mills says. "You got to be in a multimedia world to deal with these kids."

Police have to be included in relationship building between adults and at-risk kids, Mills says. "We got to be there every day."

The people who are reaching out to at-risk youth are overwhelmed. "They're not getting the financial support they need to do it full-time. They're really struggling and burning out.

"I'm one of them," Mills says. "I got kids coming to me left, right and centre. I got 1,500 kids on my Facebook."

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