

As Ottawa gang symposium approaches, police lay out the big picture

BY MOHAMMED ADAM AND MEGHAN HURLEY, OTTAWA CITIZEN OCTOBER 12, 2012



"Gang members have moved from doing swarmings a few years ago to doing drive-by shootings," says Staff Sgt. Mark Patterson, head of the Ottawa police guns and gangs unit. About half of the city's 34 shootings so far this year have been gang-related.

Photograph by: Julie Oliver, Ottawa Citizen

In advance of the city's public symposium on street gangs on Oct. 17 and 18, the Citizen presents a series of articles examining the problem, the players, and potential solutions.

OTTAWA — He was a normal, everyday kid growing up in a gritty south-end community housing neighbourhood. Smart and easygoing, he did well at school and was popular on the basketball court, where he hung out with friends.

But by 15 or 16, Adnan, as we will call him to protect his identity, was skipping school and running drugs for a neighbourhood street gang. He had fallen into the trap of adult recruiters who prey on teenagers, and no one had any idea. Now 24, he is typical of the young criminals who are fuelling Ottawa's street gang violence and frittering their lives away.

So far in 2012, Ottawa has seen a 36 per cent increase in shootings over last year. What worries Ottawa Police Services Chief Charles Bordeleau, though, is that the violence is becoming more brazen — that shootings are taking place in public, with no regard for public safety. And so on Oct. 17 and 18, the OPS, along with Crime Prevention Ottawa, the Youth Services Bureau and Ottawa Community

Housing, will invite experts, community leaders and the public to a two-day symposium at City Hall and at the Carling Avenue Travelodge to look for a solution.

The city's gun violence is by no means limited to street gangs. Of the 34 shootings so far this year, about half have been gang-related. So how serious is the problem? And is gang violence really a cause for concern in Canada's capital?

Consider some numbers: as of July, there had been 220 shootings in Toronto and 22 deaths. Edmonton, which last year claimed the dubious title of Canada's murder capital with 47 homicides, has recorded 21 so far this year. In Chicago, at least 270 people have died in more than 1,300 shootings in 2012.

Ottawa's 34 shootings are up from 25 last year. Police have recorded five homicides so far — three of which involved guns — down from 11 last year. Compared with other cities, the numbers don't seem to suggest a big problem in the nation's capital.

But Bordeleau says the city's gang problem is real, and if it is not tackled head-on and is allowed to fester, it will become uncontrollable, as other cities have learned to their regret.

"Ottawa's guns and gangs activity is not as pronounced as some other large urban centres, and we want to be proactive in ensuring it never gets to that point," he says.

David Kennedy, the U.S. expert behind Operation Ceasefire, the anti-gang strategy that cleaned up Boston in the mid-1990s, agrees. He says it is not a matter of raw numbers but of scale.

"Ottawa is an extraordinarily safe city," he says. "But if you have 30 shootings, there are going to be neighbourhoods where this is a very serious problem, and if you live in one of those neighbourhoods, you are going to be frightened. And that's not okay."

Police say Ottawa has 12 to 15 street gangs, made up of a new breed of young men whose main preoccupation is drugs and guns. "Gang members have moved from doing swarmings a few years ago to doing drive-by shootings," says Staff Sgt. Mark Patterson, head of the Ottawa police guns and gangs unit.

The two dominant factions are the Ledbury-Banff Crips, who operate mainly in the east and south ends, and the West Side Bloods, who control the west end. All the city's street gangs combined are comprised of some 473 associates and members, more than 130 of whom are considered full-fledged gang members. But Patterson says a major review of street shootings conducted last year found that most of the violence is committed or fuelled by about 25 to 30 hardcore gang members.

The Crips and the Bloods have several offshoots, Patterson says, but they have no central command, and the affiliates operate on their own. Police are also monitoring independent gangs such as the Juggalos, the Lowertown Militia and the Trappers Park Crew.

With the average age of 23, young adults dominate Ottawa gangs. It is a man's world, with just 20 known female gang members, most affiliated with the Juggalos. Only 13 known gang members are under 18.

Most gang activity is concentrated in and around community housing projects, which police prefer not to name publicly for fear of stigmatizing whole neighbourhoods. But Ottawa's gangs aren't very territorial about geography, sparing the city the violent wars between communities found in other cities.

Though gangs have become more transient, Patterson says police are aware of "hot spots where these guys are congregating and where shootings are taking place," notably the south end, the south east, Lowertown, Vanier and parts of the west end.

Citizen research and historical evidence show that community housing projects around Carling Avenue, Bayshore Drive and Woodridge Crescent, as well as the Ritchie Street and Ramsey Crescent neighbourhoods, are traditional Bloods territory. The Crips are active mainly in the neighbourhoods around Ledbury-Banff, Heatherington, Walkley and Cedarwood, and the Russell Road areas.

Patterson says it's becoming more common for gang members from Montreal, Toronto, Peel and York regions to come to the nation's capital, and for Ottawa members to cross jurisdictions.

The Quebec-based Boy Blue street gang, for example, recruited about 10 Ottawans to help distribute crack cocaine.

"We're in between Montreal and Toronto so there's a major corridor for these guys to try to establish their business," Patterson says. "There's no borders for them, which is why there's no borders for us."

Police acknowledge perceptions that Ottawa's gang problem may be largely an ethnic one, but dismiss it as simplistic and wrong. A 2008 Ottawa police report found that membership of the two dominant gangs — the Bloods and the Crips, was made up of 57 different nationalities. A study last year by Carleton University professor Katharine Kelly, who interviewed 16 Ottawa gang members, found that 13 of the 16 emigrated from countries ranging from Lebanon and Kuwait, to Pakistan, the Congo, Somalia and Ukraine.

"Gang members are from our community — white, black, Asian, you name it. It is not an ethnic issue, it is a criminal issue. It is not because you are black or Asian that you become a gang member. They are a makeup of our diverse community. They are who we are," says Bordeleau.

And Patterson says Ottawa gangs are not as tribal as they once were. Old groups such as the Jamaican Posse, Asian Boyz and the all-white A-Team have disappeared. And while remnants of the Native Bloods are still around, they are less active.

"Gangs today are about drugs and making money, and it doesn't matter what your religion or ethnicity is if you want to be part of a gang," he says.

Patterson says many of the gang-related shootings and killings have to do with settling scores, and these may include local disputes over turf or leadership. Lack of respect and other perceived slights — especially disputes over women — often lead to violence.

Crack cocaine distribution is the top driver of gang activity in Ottawa, Patterson says, followed by the pimping of young women and gun trafficking. Home invasions targeting drug caches and cash are also on the rise.

Indeed, some of the gang members interviewed by Carleton University researcher Kelly boasted about the money they make from dealing drugs. One started dealing at 15, and at the time of the interview was earning \$20,000 a month. Another was making \$1,000 a day, and when police caught up with him, they found a kilogram of cocaine and \$20,000 cash in his home.

Experts say the impressionable teenagers who are drawn by adults into gang life don't see the danger. Studies show the average life expectancy of an active U.S. male gang member is 20 years and five months, that a staggering 95 per cent of gang members don't complete high school and 90 per cent have been arrested by 18, that 60 per cent are dead or in prison by age 20.

What they see instead is the money and glamorous life dangled before them, and crucially, the respect a gang member commands among his peers. As well, many of the young recruits come from backgrounds that make them easy prey: poor and broken homes that lack adult supervision or feature abusive parents. Violent, rebellious and lacking a sense of direction or belonging, many of them drop out of school and find a home in a gang. Indeed, 15 of the 16 gang members interviewed by Kelly had quit or been expelled from school.



View [Shootings in Ottawa \(2012 to date\)](#) in a larger map

Marc Clairoux, who ran with violent skinhead gangs in the 1990s and now counsels troubled kids, blames poor parenting, which he says contributed to his waywardness.

“My mother and stepfather drank constantly and they would pass out. My brother and I will go out and do whatever we want. We would stay out all night and they wouldn’t know or care,” he says.

“If you don’t take care of your kids, they are going to be bad.”

Police say even parents who claim to care, are often in denial about their children’s criminal activity. Young men who don’t work often have thousands of dollars stashed away at home, and the parents ask no questions. They just don’t want to know.

So what’s the solution to such a complex problem?

Bordeleau says arrests alone won’t do the job, and that he is looking to next week’s symposium to produce a strategy the city can adopt.

Going into the summit, the stakes are high. Says Nancy Worsfold, executive director of Crime Prevention Ottawa, “These gang members are our kids — they are us. It is not ‘them’ and ‘us.’ We need to own this problem collectively and find a solution.”

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