

Five key themes in city report on gang violence

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Ottawa Police cruiser

It's a problem Ottawa police say they cannot arrest their way out of.

To tackle the issue of gangs in the city, strategies include creating support networks for parents before problems arise, identifying high-risk youth and building on skills development to help young people get out of gangs.

These are among priorities highlighted to address gang violence and deglamourize gangs for kids in a report released on Monday.

"What we have here is an affirmation of working together with common values and a common vision," said Nancy Worsfold, executive director of Crime Prevention Ottawa. "I think we brought some players together (that hadn't been together before)."

The report is a culmination of a public forum and leadership symposium, Taking Action Together: Addressing Gangs in Our City, that drew hundreds of people to discuss ways to crack down on gangs.

There have been 32 shootings in Ottawa this year; eight more than the city saw in all of 2011.

Working with families for prevention, identification of those at risk of gang involvement, building a trusting relationship between the community and police, intervention and service co-ordination for high-risk children and youth and exit strategies - an area that critics say is sorely lacking - were the five key themes experts addressed and shared ideas on.

"It has brought community awareness to the issue of gangs," said Ottawa police Staff Sgt. Mark Patterson, with the guns and gangs unit. "It's brought it to the forefront."

While crime prevention experts say some of the strategies are not new, they build upon existing efforts - such as building trust between police and the community - already channelled towards cracking down on gangs before the Ottawa situation gets worse.

"Some of the kids are at the crossroads, and this is a real opportunity to say 'how do we support these young people and change the direction?'" said Gord Boyd, youth justice services director with the Youth Services Bureau. "We don't have a large proportion of youth entrenched in gang activities. We have a larger group of kids who are at risk (of joining gangs)."

The YSB will co-host training for agencies and other community organizations to identify youngsters at risk of gang involvement.

A community leadership network for families, to help better connect immigrants to mainstream services and the justice system, is in the works.

Next steps also include building on an existing program to meet with people who are in conflict with the law, or about to reintegrate in the community.

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