

Police chief talks gangs, strike and the gun registry

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Toronto Police Service Chief Bill Blair took questions from Globe and Mail readers online yesterday.

On the heels of a Globe investigation into the gang activity in Toronto's 12 Division - a police district that has had one-third of the city's murders this year, many of them linked to street gangs - Chief Blair was asked by readers about gangs, police and the justice system, the Toronto strike, and Tamil protests.

Here's an edited and condensed excerpt of the discussion. The full version is available exclusively at globeandmail.com. *We've seen a spike in gang violence this year in York South-Weston, or 12 Division. Police responded with a raid and a focused deployment of extra Toronto Anti-Violence Intervention Strategy (TAVIS) officers. First, tell us more about what you're doing in 12 Division this summer.*

We have placed particular emphasis on building effective relationships with the people who live and work in some of the most vulnerable areas of the city. Places where the police and the public work together are lousy places to sell drugs, carry a gun, victimize innocent people, and lure young people into a life of criminality. There is ample evidence that this [TAVIS] strategy works. We have dismantled many of the worst criminal gangs, and we have made our neighbourhoods safer.

Do you feel that the police should be given greater latitude in reasons to arrest suspected gang members?

Canada is a country governed by the rule of law. The police will continue to do our best to reduce victimization and to prevent crime, [but] the rest of us should not be robbed of our fundamental rights and freedoms because of the actions of a few.

The legal system requires that all of your officers be godlike at all times. Any mistake will let a known criminal walk.

How do we deal with this?

Police officers have to make instant decisions, under very stressful circumstances, based on an increasingly complex legal framework. I think it is a testament to their character and the quality of their training that they get it right in the overwhelming majority of cases.

In cases where the officer may have made a minor mistake, the courts are increasingly weighing the value of the evidence before automatically excluding it. I think this makes sense to most Canadians.

Why are there arrests in only four of 12 Division's homicides?

Unfortunately, some of the murders that have taken place will take longer to solve than others. Many gang shootings have few witnesses.

We often solve these cases by conducting investigations into the activities of the gangs. It takes time but we never give up on any case.

When will police start enforcing the law with respect to the CUPE strikers? It's clear that this has not been the case to date.

On the contrary, the police have been following the rule of law. It is not the role of the police to intervene into a civil matter.

This does not mean that pickets can assault people or damage property, but it does give them certain rights regarding a lawful picket at sites related to their employment.

The police will continue to keep the peace, and work to maintain respect and civility during this strike.

Police did nothing during the illegal Tamil protest. Why?

Some people who claim to be advocating for the rule of law frequently just mean that they want the law to be used to advance their interest. It doesn't work that way. There was no threat to public safety. No one was being hurt and no property was being damaged.

I think that the best measure of the effectiveness of our response is the fact that we managed the largest demonstrations of their kind, without injury or damage.

All Canadians enjoy basic fundamental freedoms and it is a responsibility of the police to protect and defend those freedoms in our society.

What would a handgun ban mean for Toronto?

About 30 per cent of all crime handguns that we seize from criminals have been stolen or otherwise diverted from legal gun owners.

Legal gun owners are not dangerous but their guns certainly become dangerous when they get into the hands of criminals. I support any measure that will make it harder for criminals to get guns.

I believe the gun registry has failed to save one life. Do you agree that spending billions to harass law-abiding citizens does nothing to reduce criminal gun violence?

With respect to the gun registry, you are misinformed. It is an important source of information for public and police officer safety. It helps us keep our people safe. Filling out a form does not limit anyone's ability to be safe, and it hardly constitutes harassment.

You are also misinformed about the cost of the registry. Although there was certainly concern about its initial cost, I am now advised that it costs about \$3-million a year to administer. This is money well spent.

With a report from Josh Wingrove