

City, RCMP to issue impact statements in gun convictions

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Judges dealing with gun-crime cases in Surrey will from now on be reminded of the city's rising death toll and the number of gang-style shootings as the city tries to clamp down on guns and gangs.

Whenever someone is convicted of firearms offences, the City of Surrey and RCMP will issue a joint community impact statement to the Crown, outlining what gunplay has done to the community.

The statement, signed last week by Surrey Mayor Dianne Watts and RCMP Chief Supt. Fraser MacRae, states that in 2008, 33 people were shot – 10 of them dead -- in Surrey. Police also seized 222 shotguns and rifles and 102 firearms and investigated 98 confirmed incidents of 'shots fired' last year.

The statement likens the gunplay situation to a "plague that is afflicting the whole province and is particularly acute in the Metro Vancouver area." It also calls for the courts to deal with gun crime in a manner "that will deter others from committing similar offences."

"It's clearly saying that the safety of the public should be first and foremost," Watts said Tuesday. "I don't want to blur the lines of politics and justice -- that's not appropriate. "But I think it's appropriate to be the voice of people in my city, and they're saying enough is enough; there's been enough carnage in our city."

The community impact statement is similar to one initiated by Surrey RCMP in 2004 relating to auto theft, which has shown some success, MacRae said.

He said the idea is to help give the courts a better picture of how a particular crime is affecting the community and to demonstrate to the accused and the public that these are serious matters.

The statement, he said, would complement the "effective and compelling" arguments made by Crown counsel. "Clearly, not only in Surrey but in Metro Vancouver, the public is really concerned about this type of activity," MacRae said. "It's not a significant element in our strategy but every little bit helps."

David MacAlister, a Simon Fraser University professor of criminology, said the impact statement won't hurt. But he said it could be more helpful to the courts if it outlined the actual costs of guns and gangs to the city, such as the police hours lost, tied up or reallocated from other departments as a result of gang activity.

The impact statement was released by Watts last week during her annual speech to the city.

Speaking to Surrey businesspeople, Watts said that in recent weeks, Surrey has seen a "tipping point in terms of public attitudes towards crime, gang violence and public safety." As mayor, she added, she is also frustrated with the intensity of gun violence.

Watts told business leaders the focus should be on keeping criminals behind bars, doing a better job of coordinating gang prevention and education programs for children and their families, and putting more police on the street. On a per-capita basis, she said, Surrey has fewer police officers than Toronto or Montreal, and spends close to 50 per cent of its entire operating budget on public safety.

She added Tuesday that criminals with multiple gun charges are often let out on bail and break conditions such as curfews and prohibitions on firearms. "Anyone involved in the drug trade or anything else going on out there is clearly not going to adhere to [conditions]," she said. "It's just a revolving door."

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