

STREET VIOLENCE MESSAGING

PURPOSE

This document provides proposed messaging to replace the language commonly being used in Ottawa to discuss street violence. It aims to shift the language (among spokespersons and the media) from “gang activity” to “street violence” and to shift the understanding of disputes away from the language of “turf” or “war” to language about the business of drug trafficking.

The aim is to broaden and clarify understanding about street violence in Ottawa, to avoid stigmatizing neighborhoods and to ensure an anti-racist approach. Doing so means a concerted effort on the part of all stakeholders to create new language around the issue.

NEW LANGUAGE

Suggested terms to describe street violence in Ottawa:

- Street violence and street level violence
- Gun violence
- Drug trade, drug dealers, drug traffickers, drug trafficking
- Root causes: Poverty, marginalization, racism, substance use, trauma

MEDIA MESSAGING FOR USE BY SPOKESPERSONS

ROOT CAUSES

There are a number of systemic root causes of street level violence in Ottawa. Those causes include poverty, trauma, marginalization, racism, the global drug trade, as well as the demand for illicit substances that fuels the drug trade. The Ottawa Street Violence and Gang Strategy works collectively towards addressing systemic change including holding ourselves accountable as institutions to the community we serve. Our initiatives address some of the root causes by connecting youth to employment, housing, substance use counselling, and mental health services. We also seek to develop services where there is a gap.

SHIFT TO STREET VIOLENCE

The reality is that life on the streets of Ottawa has shifted. In most cases, it’s not a matter of organized, neighbourhood based gangs committing violence and selling drugs. Instead, here in Ottawa, we primarily have loosely affiliated individuals dealing drugs and committing violence. They are almost all young men, many who have grown up in poverty and experienced marginalization and racism. They don’t have a stable gang affiliation for the most part. However, most young men carry weapons for protection against the threat of retaliation. They are generally more likely to use violence to settle disputes and conflicts. The lifestyle, which some of these young men are involved in, normalizes violence and encourages social norms such as carrying weapons.

THE SITUATION IN OTTAWA

We have a street violence problem associated with drug trafficking. It's one that's fueled by the drug trade, the disputes that go with that trade, and the associated lifestyle. The connections in the drug trade go beyond Ottawa to other cities in Canada. We have a number of initiatives in place to address this problem at every level—starting with the individual, their family and affected communities. The Ottawa Street Violence and Gang Strategy is focused on neighbourhood cohesion, prevention, intervention, and enforcement and suppression.

INCREASES AND DECREASES IN ACTIVITY

While we've seen increases in street violence involving weapons right across Canada during the pandemic, Ottawa has been doing better. In 2020 shooting incidents have significantly decreased over 2019. The Ottawa Street Violence and Gang Strategy Steering Committee is addressing the challenge head-on. The people on the frontlines – from police officers to social workers – are actively working to address the issue. For example, we have implemented the Post-Incident Neighbourhood Support Networks, which brings together the resources needed to respond to traumatic incidents.

MORE INFORMATION

The Ottawa Gang and Street Violence Strategy is available on the Crime Prevention Ottawa website at crimepreventionottawa.ca (see Publications, Neighbourhoods). For questions, contact:

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