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Toronto's Image as Safe City Marred by Summer of Gun Violence

Aug. 19 (Bloomberg) -- Toronto's reputation as one of the world's safest cities has been tarnished by a summer shooting spree that left 12 people dead in the last month.

The recent incidents, including one that occurred at a downtown music festival, have raised the number of shooting deaths this year to 31, compared with 27 in 2004. Police blame the increase on a proliferation of imported guns and gang wars.

"The gun issue is one we just can't afford to allow," Mayor David Miller, 46, told a news conference Aug. 11. "Guns don't have a place in Toronto."

Canada's largest city, with 2.5 million residents, had 64 homicides last year, less than many U.S. cities. Philadelphia, for example, had 330 murders and New York 570. Toronto ranks among the 20 safest cities in the world, according to a survey by Mercer Human Resources Consulting, a unit of New York-based Marsh & McLennan Cos.

The violence is threatening the image of the city, nicknamed "Toronto the Good," for its safe, clean streets and polite residents. U.S. filmmaker Michael Moore touted the low crime rate as an example for the U.S. in his Oscar-winning documentary "Bowling for Columbine." Moore's film showed that many Toronto residents don't lock their doors.

That's changing, police say. The city has added 50 officers to patrol the neighborhoods around Jane and Finch streets in northwestern Toronto, where many of the shootings occurred. Police Chief Bill Blair reassigned 100 officers from administrative duty.

"The Other Toronto"

The murder of Dwayne Taylor on July 31 took place as police officers looked on. Taylor, 21, was shot and killed at 4:28 a.m. while attending a Caribbean music festival in the plaza at Yonge and Dundas, the city's version of New York City's Times Square. Ajine Stewart, 24, is charged with murder in the shooting.

The violence has dominated the covers of Canada's biggest newspapers, including the Toronto Star, the Globe and Mail and the Toronto Sun, which have had stories on the shootings almost daily in the past two weeks.

"The Other Toronto," said a headline on the Aug. 14 front page of the Toronto Star, above a full-page photo of 33 guns, one for each shooting to that date.

"People live in fear," Armand La Barge, president of the Ontario Association of Chiefs of Police, said in an interview. "If you live on a street and there has been a break-and-enter, or a vicious home invasion, you can feel every bit as victimized as the individual who suffered that crime."

Shootings have increased because criminals are smuggling more firearms across the U.S. border, police and

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politicians say. Most of the handguns used in the shootings over the past month can be traced to the U.S., Blair said.

Drive-By Shootings

At an Aug. 11 meeting in Banff, Alberta, U.S. Ambassador David Wilkins said the U.S. will work more closely with Canadian police to prevent gun smuggling. He said Canada must take responsibility for the weapons because Canadians are importing them. Toronto police have seized 1,202 illegal guns this year, Blair said, compared with 1,224 for the same period last year.

In Canada, anyone possessing a firearm without license and registration can be jailed for up to five years. Possession of multiple unregistered guns can lead to prison terms of up to 10 years.

At least three shootings, including a drive-by in which 4- year-old Shaquan Cadougan was shot in the hip, have occurred near Jane and Finch, where the average household income is about a third less than the rest of the city.

``You see a lot of police on each corner and sitting in their cars, and basically you feel like we're under siege," said Paul Nguyen, 25, who lives in the neighborhood and runs the community Web site at <http://www.jane-finch.com>.

Nguyen said police officers have increased their presence in the neighborhood -- even on Sunday afternoons. Every few minutes, a cruiser passes the brown city-owned townhouses that line Driftwood Avenue, where Cadougan lives.

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