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Vancouver Mayor credits seven-month police ‘surge’ in Downtown Eastside for declining crime rates

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VANCOUVER

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Vancouver Mayor Ken Sim says Task Force Barrage is 'only the beginning.' His council will dedicate an additional \$5-million to extend the policing initiative.

DARRYL DYCK/THE CANADIAN PRESS

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Surrounded by police and fire officials in dress uniforms, Vancouver Mayor Ken Sim declared Monday that a special, seven-month police “surge” in the Downtown Eastside has significantly reduced crime there and in surrounding areas.

He and Vancouver Police Chief Steve Rai announced that the lessons from what was called Task Force Barrage will be used for a new model of policing the Downtown Eastside, with a reorganized management system at the top and more collaboration with community groups.

A new policing district will also be created for the area.

“Task Force Barrage is only the beginning. We’re moving from a temporary surge to a permanent structure,” Mr. Sim said. His council came up with an additional \$5-million, on top of the \$456-million already allocated to police for 2025, to support the initiative.

Mr. Sim, Chief Rai and Fire Chief Karen Fry cited numerous statistics about the declines in various kinds of crime in the Downtown Eastside since the task force started in mid-February.

They included a 34-per-cent reduction in structure fires in the Firehall 2 area that serves that neighbourhood; a 44-per-cent decline in robberies; and a 36-per-cent decline in drug overdoses dealt with by three fire halls nearby.

Chief Fry attributed the reduction in fires – often started next to buildings by people congregating on sidewalks – to the increased presence of police officers patrolling and visible on the street.

But the police department’s own statistics dashboard, which produces summaries of crimes by neighbourhood on a weekly basis, shows that many types of crimes are down in areas far from the Downtown Eastside.

Residential break-ins in Vancouver’s wealthiest neighbourhood, Shaughnessy, were down by 67 per cent from the same period last year, for example. They were down by 63 per cent in Sunset, in the city’s southeast corner.

And the overall crime statistics for the city are down across the board, with Mr. Sim saying they are at the lowest level they’ve been at since 2002.

Mr. Sim said crime rates over all were down not just because of the recent initiative but also because, “for the first time in 15 years, we have a fully funded police department.”

Still, the declines match similar trends across Canadian and American cities over the past several years.

Statistics Canada reported that crime was down 4 per cent nationally in 2024 compared with the previous year and that, generally, crime rates have declined since a peak in 1992.

The U.S. Council on Criminal Justice recently noted that homicides and several other serious offences declined in the first half of 2025 across 42 U.S. cities, a trend that has been observed for the past three years.

Drug-overdose deaths are also declining in both countries.

Recent data from the Public Health Agency of Canada show that British Columbia, Alberta and Ontario - the provinces where most of Canada's drug deaths occur – recorded decreases in opioid-related fatalities between 12 per cent and 37 per cent in 2024, compared with 2023.

In the first half of this year, B.C. saw a 29-per-cent decrease in drug deaths compared with the same period last year.

Observers have proposed several theories as to the reason for this. Provincial and territorial health agencies have attributed the decrease at least in part to the changing toxic drug supply, according to the PHAC.

Mr. Sim said the city will start tracking performance of all municipal departments, not just police, in targeted areas – the downtown business core, the West End, Strathcona, Mount Pleasant.

“There is a motion coming to council for a new performance framework so everyone knows what is working and where we need to do better.”