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GUNS, SHOOTINGS AND THE DRUG CULTURE

THE PROBLEMATIC

As noted above, violence and conventional crime have declined significantly since the Roundtable Report in 2008. Throughout HRM, assaults, robberies, break and enters, and thefts have been sharply reduced. Clearly though HRM still has a serious problem with violence, especially shootings related to the drug milieu. 2011 saw the highest rate ever in the municipality for homicides and 2013 the highest rate for attempted murders. Violence, where there was use of firearms, marks off HRM as one of the more dangerous metropolitan areas in Canada. In 2011 metropolitan Halifax had the second highest rate of homicide among CMAs in Canada and in 2012 the fourth highest. HRM has the highest rate of firearm-caused homicides in Canada. As a well-known and knowledgeable public housing resident / leader observed, in describing the circumstances of violence as so different from previous decades, “the boys got guns now”.

Clearly one strategy to deal with this shooting outrage is to disrupt and shut down the supply of weapons. The police services have tried to do this in a variety of ways, most obviously in programs such as “pixels for pistols” where a person can turn in weapons for cameras or other items (cash is problematic), with “no questions asked”, and also by collaborating as part of the National Weapons Enforcement Support Team (NWEST). There is a federally-funded designated officer linked to the NWEST in the HRP who oversees an RCMP and a HRP member as the team assists with all aspects of firearm investigations and prosecution for the province including warrant preparation, suggestions on charges, and verification and history of seized weapons. Unfortunately, while necessary, such supply-oriented strategies have not been as effective as hoped for (because the black market in weapons and perhaps the cross-border trade for illegal

weapons – there are diverse but equally authoritative views about the quantitative importance of guns coming across the border - are not affected in a significant or “game-changing” way by such initiatives), a situation evidenced by the high rates cited above. It appears very unlikely that resorting to more punishing sentencing (such as increased mandatory sentences) would make a difference even if that were an option (unlikely). It would appear then that other strategies directed at impacting demand factors for taking up and using guns would be crucial to complement existing strategies and the six-officer Integrated Guns and Gangs unit fully formed since 2011.

The perspective adopted here is that the emphasis on guns is central in the HRM drug milieu. In this context, being engaged in the drug milieu provides a rationale for guns and vests (e.g., self-defence, intimidation) as well as contacts for obtaining guns and perhaps the funds to buy them. The possession of guns by the young male adults, in addition to conferring status in that milieu, provides them with ways of settling problems / disputes or venting that reinforce their learned dispositions for aggressive and impulsive responses in relationships, especially given sub-cultural influences that glamorize the criminal role (e.g., life styles, gangsta rap music themes); but, also, since they are usually considered replaceable by the high-ups in the drug trade and there is apparently little in the organization of the local drug business that is reining in their explosiveness and compensating for their low skills or interest in alternative ways to solve problems.

The main themes suggested by the above argument that will be explored below are five, namely (a) that the majority of shootings in HRM occur in the drug trade milieu, (b) that some other societies and urban areas such as Britain and even CBRM may not show that pattern in their drug milieus, (c) that the style reflects an inner city American sub-cultural linkage though now prevalent in HRM among both Whites and Blacks in the illicit drug business, (d) that the shootings, while sometimes serving utilitarian ends (e.g., home invasions to obtain drugs or money), are much more reflective of young men expressing violence over a variety of non-business turf issues and using guns to settle personal grievances; (e) changing these behaviours involves at least in part changing individual dispositions, social relationships and the norms and other cultural supports for the behaviour. Such solutions on the demand side are as difficult to achieve as those in

use on the supply side. The following tables and analyses provide evidence for such a perspective.

PATTERNS OF HOMICIDE AND ATTEMPTED HOMICIDES IN HRM

The table below describes the patterns of homicides and attempted homicides primarily since the original Roundtable was initiated in 2006. In the period 2004 to 2012 inclusive there were 92 homicide incidents with 94 victims and 100 accused persons, indicating that the homicides were essentially one-on-one incidents. Males accounted for 90% of the accused and 80% of the victims so clearly homicide is largely a male phenomenon. Homicides averaged 7.6 per year over the five years 2004 to 2008 but 12 per year in the five years 2009 to 2013 (including here the number of homicides from 2013 that was available separately). Other data not shown in the table indicate that the male accuseds and victims are in large majority young adults less than thirty years of age. The homicides took place essentially within the urban core area of HRM and were well-distributed amongst the three zones – Central, East and West – that constitute the jurisdiction of the HRP. Apart from the urban core, North Preston (RCMP jurisdiction) stood out as a modest sized community (population estimates range from 1500 to 3700 persons presumably in large part because of frequent movement between North Preston and Dartmouth) with a serious homicide problem, accounting for nearly 10% of all HRM homicides. There was a variety of weapons / M.Os. used in the HRM murders but the two dominant ones were firearm shootings (35%) and stabbings (28%). Fights (33%) and drug context (30%) were identified by HRP as the top two contexts for the homicides. In identifying the context as drug-related, interview data indicate that the police were highlighting the fact that the persons involved as accused and victim were known in the HRM drug milieu, not necessarily that the incident's motivation was specifically linked to a drug deal. Finally, fully 66% of all firearm shooting homicides between 2004 and 2012 were considered in police reports to be linked to the drug milieu by the above definition.

Turning to attempted homicides, the data are available only for the period 2006 to 2012 inclusive but they exhibit a similar though not identical set of patterns. There were 158 incidents involving 231 accuseds and 186 victims, indicating some variance from the

one to one pattern observed for homicides, a variance largely attributable, according to police sources, to “drive-by shootings among rival “gangs”. Males were almost exclusively (97%) the accused and also the usual victims (80%) and, again, the interviews with informed police sources indicated that the majority of offenders were unquestionably adults less than thirty years of age. Dividing the years into two four year periods, one finds, as in the case of homicides, a significant increase in the period 2010 to 2013 (as in the case of homicides, data for 2013 were available to supplement the table on this point) compared to the earlier 2006 to 2009, namely an average per annum of 28 attempted homicides in the later period vis-à-vis 19 in the 2006 to 2009 years. The location factor also mirrored the homicide data in that the attempted homicides occurred basically (80%) in urban core of HRM (i.e., especially here in the Dartmouth area of the HRPS jurisdiction) and the most significant site for this offence outside the urban core was North Preston. The weapon in attempted murders was much more likely to be a gun than in the case of homicides (i.e., 60% to 35%), the context overall to be drug-related (61%) and, in the case of shootings, the link to the drug milieu was highlighted by police records in a whopping 84% of all such incidents.

The data illustrate well the significance of firearms in homicides and attempted homicides in the drug trade milieu. This can be underlined by examining shootings outside that drug context. In the case of robberies since the Roundtable Report in 2008, robberies with firearms have consistently accounted for roughly 16% of annual total robberies. Robberies (especially of businesses and institutions) have declined steadily over that time period, and between 2008 and 2013 by approximately 50% for both HRP and RCMP jurisdictions. So, while the percentage involving a firearm generally remained at 16%, the number of such incidents has been halved. Also, some of these incidents (e.g., the 25 robberies with firearms in 2013) have involved home invasions and person-robberies where the offender and victim have been known to each other and been involved in the drug milieu so the number of firearm robberies outside the drug context would be significantly less than 25 in 2013. In the instance of homicides, over the past ten years there have been three robbery homicides and only one where a firearm was used. In the case of sexual assault and family homicides, over the past decade there has been no instance of a shooting murder, while, in domestic homicides, shooting has been

identified as the M.O. in two of the eight cases. In sum, then, firearms and the drug culture are strongly linked and focused around specific kinds of violence and social circumstances.

HOMICIDES AND ATTEMPTED HOMICIDES IN HRM		
	HOMICIDES 2004-2012	ATTEMPTED HOMICIDES 2006-2012
# OF INCIDENTS	92	158
# OF ACCUSED INVOLVED IN INCIDENTS	100	231
# OF VICTIMS FROM INCIDENTS	94	186
GENDER		
MALES ACCUSED	90 (90%)	225 (97%)
FEMALES ACCUSED	10 (10%)	6 (3%)
MALE VICTIMS	75 (80%)	150 (80%)
FEMALE VICTIMS	19 (20%)	36 (20%)
LOCATION OF INCIDENT (TOP 4)		
HRM CENTRAL	25 (27%)	41 (26%)
HRM EAST	22 (24%)	48 (30%)
HRM WEST	20 (22%)	34 (21%)
NORTH PRESTON	8 (9%)	13 (9%)
WEAPON (TOP 2)		
SHOOTING	32 (35%)	94 (60%)
STABBING	26 (28%)	42 (26%)
CONTEXT (TOP 2)		
DRUGS	28 (30%)	96 (61%)
FIGHTS	30 (33%)	23 (15%)
SHOOTING CONTEXT		
DRUGS CULTURE	21 (66%)	79 (84%)

Source: Halifax Regional Police, Fall 2013

CONTEXT

Homicide rates have been decreasing in Canada and the USA for several decades, receding to levels last seen in the 1960s but, as noted above, this has not been the case in HRM. 2011 was a particularly bad year for shootings and murder (75 shooting incidents and 19 homicides were reported by HRP, both HRM records) and while homicides have declined appreciably since then, HRM currently has the highest rate of firearm homicides in Canada and the number of attempted homicides in 2013 (i.e., 40) has surpassed the previous high-level mark of 32 in 2011. Minutes of the HRM Police Board indicate clearly that beginning in 2009 guns and shootings increasingly became a problem and regular topic of discussion at Police Board meetings and in one 2009 session the HRP police chief is reported as saying “guns and vests are now tools of the crime trade”. The strong linkage of guns and shootings to the small number of African Nova Scotians involved in the drug milieu was also discussed at these meetings. Strategies and programs to deal with the shootings were frequently discussed, basically targeting the supply side (e.g., pixels for pistols, national firearm registry, the NWEST) and in 2010, just prior to the egregious violence of 2011, it was reported that “HRP police seize illicit firearms once every couple of days and roughly 800 guns were taken off the streets last year, 250-300 of which “can be directly tied to crime”; clearly, even impressive implementation of such supply-side strategies had a limited impact.

It is useful to place the HRM rates in context. While high in Canada, the rates for homicide are quite low compared with American cities, being a maximum of 5 per 100,000 while larger urban areas such as Chicago, New Orleans, Detroit and St. Louis have rates per 100,000 of 16, 58, 48 and 35 respectively and many smaller urban areas there also have much higher rates than HRM. Many observers link the high rates with the availability of firearms and American culture with its “enshrined right to bear arms”. In the larger American cities the high rates have been consistently linked with “inner city” subculture. The “inner city” has been heavily populated by Black Americans (more recently also Latin Americans) where, as Whites and middle class Blacks fled along with factories and large companies to suburbs and other outlying areas, a subculture emerged over generations of unemployment, poverty, single parent families, violence and, in varying degree, a deviance service centre where drug use was rampant and outsiders

would come for drugs, alcohol and sex. In that context there also developed a strong association among gangs, guns and the illicit drug trade, an association that was further strengthened and celebrated by “gangsta rap”, hip-hop music and imagery that reflected the experience of some creative people living there, “documenting the culture of the inner city” as some would say (Jenkins, 2013).

Many American studies, television programs (e.g., the critically acclaimed “The Wire”) and movies have described the above developments in great depth and have advanced strategies for ameliorative social policy. Typical has been a St. Louis study (Jacobs and Wright, 2006) carried out over several years and published in 2006 where the authors described and offered explanations for the very high level of homicides (roughly 250 annually) largely involving Black American young adults with linkages to the drug trade. Focusing on street justice and retaliation, they found that in this street-level, low status criminal milieu, the number one preference of the victimized criminals was for face-to-face, immediate retaliation and that they rejected for a variety reasons any recourse to the justice system. The shooters, like their victims, were depicted as marginalized persons, having low status vis-à-vis the mainstream legitimate world, and believing that, should they not retaliate, they would invite further victimization and forfeit whatever status they have in their own milieu. It is not clear what the retaliation was for but the incidents discussed were ostensibly minor from an outsider’s perspective. Research in the mid-1990s spawned by Kennedy in the Boston area (Kennedy, 2011), where essentially the same features characterized its high rate of homicide (i.e., Black males, gangs, guns and drug trafficking), pin-pointed small circles of males goading one another to violence, violence sometimes about turf and money but usually, according to Kennedy, “it’s beefs, disrespect, boy-girl stuff”.

Though on a smaller scale, it appears that the “guns, gangs and drugs” association in HRM has indeed followed the inner-city pattern discussed above. The connection among the three components however does not follow like a DNA-trait. In CBRM for example there is a high rate of drug trafficking but, according to police and other CJS officials there, there has not been a homicide in the drug milieu for many years and the one recorded in 2000 involved an outsider. The CBRM justice officials, including African Nova Scotians, and community activists, readily agreed that the situation in

HRM was different, more like the classic inner-city American model, and several characterized Halifax streets as much more dangerous because of it. In CBRM on the other hand, the drug trade was depicted as controlled by family-like, non-competitive small groups obtaining drugs from groups like the Hell's Angels not the HRM gangs and having no significant young male adult presence wreaking havoc with weapons. Also, there is limited cultural support in CBRM for the inner-city life style – the local Black population is well-integrated and has never had any significant involvement in crime, and while gangsta rap and hip-hop celebration of guns may be popular among youth of all stripes there seems to be no particular impact on behaviour. In other Canadian areas such as Edmonton, labeled the murder capital in Canada in 2012, the homicides were primarily among street people (i.e., the homeless, often Aboriginal) and the M.O. was the knife. Toronto was seen by both CBRM and HRM respondents as having a drug milieu more similar to that in HRM.

Research for this Review found considerable consensus among various police specialists in HRM that firearm homicides and attempted homicides reflected the “inner city” American cultural style. The underlying motives were seen as basically similar to the described in American studies. As one well-traveled, senior detective officer in HRM commented, “I found here [HRM] there is a high degree of wanton violence and the three Rs – respect, reputation and retaliation – are the immediate causes”. And, as in the American inner cities, virtually all informed CJS officials considered that the low level traffickers earned little money and faced serious risks both of being arrested by police and being robbed and assaulted by their peers, a complex circumstance that would presumably generate much frustration (Bourgois, 2003, Venkatesh, 2008). Bourgois in his three year participant observation in Spanish Harlem found that low level dealers frequently quit the business but then drifted back into it; Venkatesh in his similar longitudinal research in Chicago commented on the frustration and noted “For all their braggadocio, to say nothing of the peer pressure to spend money on sharp clothes and cars, these young members stood little chance of ever making a solid payday ... Now I knew why some of the younger BK members supplemented their income by working legit jobs at McDonald's or a car wash”.

A common opinion among HRM police and informed others also was that the organization of the drug trade at the street level was not conducive to reining in the violent young men. Police officers, White or Black, HRP or RCMP, held views similar to informed community leaders (mostly African Nova Scotians) assembled by the Nova Scotia Department of Justice in 2012 to discuss what to do about the drug milieu-linked violence, namely that the problem was especially critical among young Black men in several areas of HRM “solving” personal issues with firearms. It was acknowledged by virtually all parties that currently Whites as well as Blacks were involved in the drug milieu and resorted to firearms to deal more or less impulsively with a range of issues, and that utilitarian motivations also were important factors in their use of firearms, but the core was deemed to be an inner city subculture largely Black at root and sustained by both lifestyle and organizational factors.

POLICIES, PROGRAMS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The persons engaged in trafficking in the drug milieu in HRM reputedly are few in number and those involved in the homicides and attempted homicides are usually well-known by the police, as is evident in the common phrases that follows the publication of these events, namely “not a random shooting”, “persons involved known to police”. So why should the public worry about safety; as long as they shoot straight, “it’s bad guys hurting bad guys”. And the significant over-representation of a small minority of a small minority African Nova Scotian population may reinforce such a perspective. Essentially though, the designated drug-milieu minority, usually living in low status rentals, often products of vulnerable and poor families and much exposed to real and symbolic violence, are largely the creation of a sub-culture abetted by societal inequality and a legacy of racism. Their action and its consequences (e.g., high risks of incarceration, murder etc) have grave implications for their families and communities. Shrugging off the violence is not an option. Nor is public safety not threatened in a more general sense. Considerable, costly policing effort is required to keep the violence reined in and for police officers the risk to themselves is quite significant. In December 2013 the head of

the HRP Association commented publicly: "There just seems to be an awful lot more incidents where we're running into firearms or getting involved with people who have the edged weapons... We are still rated as number one with respect to the likelihood of being shot and killed in Halifax, which is not really a ranking you'd like to brag about ... city officials and police officers [need to] sit down and try to come up with a solution".

Given the huge scale of the drug problems and the high level of homicides associated with drug milieus in the USA it is not surprising that there is considerable American attention to policies and programs directed at radical change. The American emphasis, War on Drugs, until recent years, has been on tough penalties for low level trafficking (prisons there are overwhelmed with young Black men), gun control (verging on the impossible) and greater police presence through special enforcement units and community based policing. Jacobs and Wright, for example, suggest that the key to reducing the criminal victims' retaliation is police action in seizing the criminal's guns and becoming more proactive in preventing the spread of retaliation and counter-retaliation. Ultimately, though, as the authors acknowledge, the key is getting at the marginality, the zero-level social status that translates into a violent quest for "respect" in the face of slights and modest victimization.

Signs of significant changes in policies and programs are many nowadays in the United States. The War on Drugs has been increasingly criticized for the high levels of incarceration and exorbitant costs it has wrought and the current Obama administration has called for waiving mandatory sentences for low level drug offences. In the Western states (USA) there is a strong trend to regulate, not criminalize, the sale and purchase of marijuana (Colorado in January 2014 will be the first state to launch this approach). In exploring new approaches to the drug and violence problem, the work of Kennedy (Don't Shoot, One Man, A Street Fellowship and the End of Violence in Inner City America, 2011) has become path-breaking in advancing feasible solutions at the local level. His approach in Boston emphasized the police and community agencies working with the small number of persons and gangs ("crews" in the drug business) in the drug milieu who accounted for most of the violence. Through what might be called a "weed and feed" strategy (i.e., clearly conveying an enhanced likelihood of punishment for those

individuals and crews continuing the violence while concerned members of their community expressed to them a strong desire for the violence to stop and social workers offered services to help them detach from the cycle of violence). The Boston initiative led to a sharp reduction in violence for several years and the program, labeled Ceasefire and informally known as the Boston Miracle spread to a host of other American cities, generally operating in poor, predominantly Black neighbourhoods as in Boston. In 2004 Kennedy's approach was implemented in High Point North Carolina but here the focus was not only with violence but also on ending the open-air drug markets that existed there. There was apparently a much greater involvement of community leaders as well as police and key players in the local drug markets but the same basic carrot and stick strategy was employed whereby key drug gang members were assembled and convinced to cease violence and the open-air drug trafficking or spend "decades in jail beginning tomorrow" – presumably the police had grounds for charges but the charges would be waived if the imposed arrangements held up. This initiative also proved to be successful, virtually ending homicides and open-air trafficking in the area for at least seven years.

The Boston Ceasefire project and its North Carolina adaptation are not without some limitations as is evidenced in the failure of the former to be successfully implemented in some jurisdictions and the significant re-emergence of violence in the Boston area in the latter part of first decade of the 21st century, and, in the case of the latter project, the ambiguous evidence for a displacement effect. Still, success has been evident too and both projects have much significance for HRM since both types of initiatives were adopted here in 2013. A multi-year, federally funded Chicago version of Ceasefire (known as Cure Violence) is being readied for implementation in several HRM communities (mostly but not exclusively African Nova Scotian) and the HRPS has just completed a modest self-financed version of the North Carolina project through its Uptown Drug Intervention program and is weighing the option of continuing the Uptown initiative and expanding it to North Dartmouth. The Uptown and North Dartmouth are the two most violent and heavy drug traffic areas in HRM as is discussed in depth elsewhere in this review where evidence will also be presented documenting the success of the Uptown pilot project in 2013. Aside from these two significant developments, the HRM-funded Youth Advocacy Program (YAP) has received five year federal funding for its

Souls Strong project where the aim is “With the participation of community residents, community leaders, service providers, and program partners, the Souls Strong Project aims to prevent young men between the ages of 15 to 20 years from engaging in anti-social and criminal behaviours”; the project will operate exclusively in North Preston, an area shown above to have a serious and longstanding violence and drug trafficking problem. YAP brings to the project considerable experience accumulated over the past seven years dealing with younger, mostly African Nova Scotian males and more recently with young teenage girls (i.e., the Girls United project).

While the problems of serious violence largely embedded in the drug milieu are very significant, the above developments generate much hope for their amelioration as clearly they are targeted appropriately and have considerable community support as well as buy-in from the criminal justice system (especially the two police services where their espousal of a social development approach seems well reflected in their support for the initiatives). If such initiatives were not in place and ready for implementation they or similar policy thrusts would have been recommended here but they are, so the key concern is to ensure those projects are integrated into HRM policy strategy and to focus on other recommendations that complement them. The implications for recommendations for this Review are four-fold:

1. The main challenge for HRM government will be its capacity to learn about and develop empirically-based effective policies and programs from these larger extant projects – projects that are essentially one-time, federally funded. Accessing information about the processes and outcomes, meaningfully incorporating it in HRM strategic planning, comparing it with the experience of other municipalities and prioritizing its resources and advocacy accordingly, requires a capacity that does not exist at the moment. That need is a prime consideration in the Review’s recommendations concerning the Public Safety Office, the Office of the Manager of African Nova Scotian Affairs and a more strategically active municipal involvement in areas that pertain to the roots of violence and public concern for safety.

2. It is also recommended that HRM government support the continuation, and expansion to North Dartmouth, of the Uptown Drug Intervention initiative. Some resources will have to be committed to this endeavour to provide for agency participation, modest outreach activity and appropriate evaluation.
3. As noted above, the Ceasefire approach has advanced a stick and carrot model of effecting the desired change. It is important to determine what sticks or punishments can be effective and how enforcement strategies and alternative processes and outcomes in initiatives such as Ceasefire can be mutually reinforcing. For example, are the existing legislated penalties for using guns appropriate? Are they in fact operative (successfully prosecuted, accepted by the judiciary)? How is enforcement impacted by these alternative programs? It is recommended that there be a summit along the lines noted above by the spokesperson for the HRP Association – CJS role players, provincial and HRM representatives - to consider these enforcement issues.
4. The demand for heavy drugs especially fuels the illicit drug trade and the existing projects and above recommendations do not directly deal with that demand. The low level drug dealers they target – the runners if you will – typically are not addicted though reportedly many are frequent users of “soft drugs” such as marijuana and hash. One common policy to deal with this demand has been establishing a Drug Treatment Court (DTC) restricted to addicted offenders and emphasizing treatment rather than incarceration. There are such DTCs in large number in the United States (some 2000) and ten in Canadian municipalities across Canada (all five of the largest municipalities in Ontario have a DTC), some federally funded and some operating largely on a municipal shoestring. In HRM the Mental Health Court now has a drug treatment program for its addicted mentally ill clients so there is a precedent here for a therapeutic jurisprudence approach. It is recommended that HRM call on the provincial government to establish such a court here and collaborate with the provincial and federal government in that regard.

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