

# Montreal police come up short in crime-busting

**The city has most cops per population but the force ranks 7th in results**

By HENRY AUBIN, The Gazette  
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How sharp is Montreal Island's police department at solving crimes? And how responsible is it in spending taxpayers' money?

Fresh evidence sheds troubling light on these questions.

A study published by Statistics Canada on Thursday compares Canadian cities' police forces' "weighted clearance rates" for crimes. A clearance is cop jargon for formally charging a suspect (or being unable to lay a charge because the suspect cannot be found or has died). StatsCan assigns a weight to each crime according to its severity, so that a murder gets a higher weight than a theft.

The study shows that Montreal's rate in 2009 ranks No. 8 among Canada's 10 largest cities. Only Vancouver and, in last place, Quebec City, fare worse.

What makes this ranking all the more dismal is the study also shows that Montreal police at the end of 2009 had more officers per 100,000 population than did any other major city. We have the dubious distinction of being manpower champs.

Another recent report, this one focused exclusively on homicides, appears to be consistent with StatsCan's finding that the department is subpar at sleuthing. This other report, the subject of a column two weeks ago, shows that police across Quebec have a lower clearance rate for homicides than their counterparts in any of Canada's five regions during the period under study, 1991-2006.

This report, by Tanya Trussler, a professor of justice studies at Mount Royal University in Calgary, does not examine the rates for individual cities. However, about 40 per cent of Quebec's homicides occur on Montreal Island in a typical year, so draw your own conclusions.

So much for the Montreal's police department's performance in protecting the public. Let's look now at its performance in spending your money.

The department's spending in 2011, according to the agglomeration budget approved yesterday, will be 5.1 per cent higher than last year's spending. That's well above the 3.2 per cent rise in inflation that the Conference Board of Canada predicts for the Montreal area in the new year.

And this large increase is part of a trend. Since 2006, the department's spending has increased by 28 per cent -triple the inflation rate. Spending increase have thus averaged 6.9 per cent a year during this stretch.

At first glance, it might appear as though the department is reining in its finances somewhat. After all, a 5.1-percent hike is lower than 6.9 per cent. But that improvement is illusory, says William Steinberg, Hampstead's mayor. He points out that the department has failed to bring in the revenue that it had anticipated in the 2010 budget (partly because the commercialization of its services has been disappointing). The net increase in burden to the island's taxpayers in the new year, he calculates, will therefore really be eight per cent.

The past year has providing some jolting insights into how the police department is policing its own spending. As The Gazette revealed last month, the department planned a modernization of its computer system in 2001 for \$1.65 million, and the latest cost estimate for the unfinished task is \$20 million. As well, several years ago the department handed a financially troubled security company, BCIA, a generous contract for guarding police headquarters without calling for tenders or obtaining city council's approval.

The public-security committee, the political body that oversees the police and that is headed by Verdun Mayor Claude Trudel, said in a report yesterday the island's politicians should ask the province for more money for police, thereby easing the fiscal load on the island's taxpayers. Never mind that Quebec is already over its head in debt.

In a minority report, committee member Steinberg made better sense. He called on the committee to monitor police spending more closely. Now there's a thought.

Salaries and benefits are the main cause of department's fat spending increases. Police, who earn \$72,250 after five years, can retire after 30 years' service with a pension worth 75 per cent of salary -and that pension is, contrary to the norm in the private sector, indexed.

It's still too early to tell if Marc Parent, who became chief last summer, will impose overdue rigour to his department. But one early sign is discouraging. Responding to pressure from the police union, his department will -with the Tremblay administration's blessing -add 150 permanent officers in 2011.

Never mind that crime here is in decline.

And never mind that the department already has more officers per population than any other police force in the country.

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