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The problem with the province's crime stats and closing supervised consumption sites

The Ontario government said the crime rate near the Somerset West safe consumption site is 250 per cent higher than the rest of the city. Neither Ottawa Police nor the province could provide any data to back that figure.

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The Somerset West Community Health Centre in Ottawa. Photo by Tony Caldwell /POSTMEDIA

Article content

Crime rates in the downtown Ottawa neighbourhood that is home to the supervised consumption site at Somerset West Community Health Centre have long been the highest in the city for a variety of reasons. That has not changed, but those rates have dropped in recent years—including the years since the site opened in 2017.

Violent crime was down by an average of 6.2 per cent in Somerset ward between the years 2017-2018 and 2022-2023, according to crime trend statistics from the Ottawa Police Service. The ward also saw a 4.7 per cent drop in the rate of assaults, a 10.3 per cent drop in the rate of sexual assaults and a 14.5 per cent drop in rates of robbery during the same five years.

Break and enters and possession of stolen goods also dropped significantly during that period. However, other crimes, including drug offences, weapons offences, theft under \$5,000, fraud, and disturbing the peace were higher.

The stats tell a complex picture of a neighbourhood that is the most densely populated, has the highest rates of poverty and the highest number of rooming houses in the city, said Somerset ward Councilor Ariel Troster. Many of its residents, she said, have been rocked by the drug crisis and hard hit by inflation and the cost of groceries, she said.

Troster questions the use of crime stats to justify closing the Somerset West supervised consumption site.

Minister of Health Sylvia Jones pointed to crime rates when she recently announced her government would shut down 10 of 17 supervised consumption sites – including the one at Somerset West CHC – by next March as part of a shift to more treatment and housing to address the toxic drug crisis. Somerset and nine other supervised consumption sites were targeted to be closed because of their proximity to schools or daycares.

Jones said the crime rate near the Somerset West Community Health Centre is 250 per cent higher than the rest of the city.

Ottawa Police were unable to provide the Citizen with any data backing this figure in Somerset Ward, stating it would have to be obtained via an Access to Information Request.

When the Citizen asked the province for more information about that figure, including where the data came from, a spokesperson said the number speaks for itself.

But Somerset ward Councilor Ariel Troster disagrees. It is unclear where that figure comes from, she says, and it is difficult to get “granular” information about crime rates in a small portion of the ward. She also says it is misleading for officials to imply that the supervised consumption site plays a key role in those numbers.

“I don’t know where that number comes from,” she said. “I see no indication of a clean line between supervised consumption sites and crime. The evidence doesn’t back that up.”

Troster and others fear there will be more overdoses in public spaces throughout the ward and more needles left around after the site is closed than there are now.

“I am very worried about what is going to happen come spring when one indoor (drug consumption) site closes or is banned. These supervised consumption sites are gateways into access into health care, wound care, blood work. It is a very, very supportive community,” she said.

“When you push people into the margins they are going to be in backyards and alleys, in front of schools. It is going to get worse. I don’t want to be stepping over bodies in our neighbourhood.”

The province is banning the opening of any new sites in the province to replace the 10 it is closing down because of proximity to schools and daycares. But those sites will be given priority to house a new HART hub that will offer drug treatment, housing and other services, excluding harm reduction.

Most advocates welcome the new provincial investment in addiction treatment and supportive housing but say doing so at the cost of closing down supervised consumption sites and harm reduction is short-sighted and will result in more deaths from toxic street drugs.

The province is also increasing security around the existing supervised consumption sites. Two existing Ottawa sites, in the ByWard Market and at the Sandy Hill Community Health Centre, will remain open.

In addition to prohibiting the safe consumption site, the provincial changes will prohibit Somerset West from operating a needle exchange program. Officials there say the site was opened in 2017, in

part, because the area had the second-highest area for overdose deaths and rates of blood-borne diseases in the city.

Troster, meanwhile, said there has been a rise in non-violent crime in the neighbourhood, including growing numbers of people using drugs in public, including around schools.

During the Pride parade, Troster said she had to ask a woman not to draw her syringe on Bank Street where crowds, including children, were gathering. She said the drug crisis is a very visible public emergency in her ward and elsewhere.

“We need the entire spectrum of care to tackle this crisis. I fail to understand how removing one indoor site is going to decrease public drug use. We need more services all over the city.”

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