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City, police have strides to make against gangs: alderman

By SHAWN LOGAN, CALGARY SUN

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While fewer bullets are flying in Calgary's gang war, a city alderman says it's no time to let up on organized crime.

Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart attended last week's inaugural Canada-U.S. gang summit in Toronto and said the message coming from youth gang experts was unanimous: head off youngsters who have the potential to turn to a life of crime while they're still in the classroom.

"Just because the shootings have stopped, that doesn't mean we don't have a gang problem," said Colley-Urquhart, who represented the Calgary Police Commission at the summit.

"We still have a chance to intervene a lot earlier — Calgary has a real chance to get ahead of this problem."

Since 2005, the toll from the city's bloody gang war has claimed 50 lives and racked up some 140 incidents of gang violence, hitting every corner of Calgary from inner city slums to sleepy suburbs.

Over the same period cops also had to deal with 79 non-lethal shootings and nine stabbings, all linked to gangs.

Colley-Urquhart said while city cops have done a good job keeping transient gangs from gaining a significant foothold and keeping tabs on local groups, there remains a large pool of recruits to bolster their numbers and that needs to receive more attention from law enforcement.

"As a country we quite often feel the gang problem is a policing problem but what we're learning is we need to get to these people early on — as early as elementary school," she said.

"We know that very early on we can see indications that some kids are predisposed to finding a surrogate family and those are the ones we need to focus on."

Police chief Rick Hanson has long been a proponent of early intervention, proposing cops take an active hand in the classroom to keep kids from turning to gangs.

Colley-Urquhart said the cities of Toronto and Surrey have been active in the classrooms and that has made a difference in those communities.

She said she will be meeting with cop brass and school board officials in the near future with the hope of setting up similar programs in Calgary schools.

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