

Police grossly understaffed for Game 7: union

Mayor says that after peaceful previous events, he didn't anticipate trouble would arise

By Jeff Lee and Tracy Sherlock, Vancouver Sun June 18, 2011 2:08 AM

A force of 5,000 officers, rather than 'the five or six or 700' that were deployed, was needed Wednesday evening, says Vancouver Police Union head Tom Stamatakis.

Police struggling to control an Olympic-sized crowd with a fraction of the officers available during the 2010 Games faced an impossible task, the head of the Vancouver Police Union said.

"If you want to manage a crowd like that effectively without having it turn into a riot, then we need probably 5,000 police officers, not the five or six or 700 police officers we had out there [Wednesday] night," Tom Stamatakis said in an interview. "You need to really step up in terms of physical resources throughout the crowd and keep a lid on things."

During the Olympics, there was a security team of 15,300, which included 6,000 police officers from across Canada and 4,500 members of the Canadian military.

The Vancouver police department would not say exactly how many officers were downtown Wednesday night when the violence broke out.

The mayhem and riots left more than 150 people injured, more than 50 businesses damaged, 15 cars destroyed and at least 14 officers nursing cuts, bites and in one case, a concussion.

Vancouver police Chief Jim Chu said he would have had more officers out if he had anticipated the riot. When trouble broke out, a group of police leaders quickly decided to dispatch RCMP officers from the suburbs to reinforce city police in the downtown core.

Bob Whitelaw, who made more than 100 recommendations for British Columbia's attorney-general and the British Columbia Police Commission after the 1994 Stanley Cup riot, said police in Vancouver were lulled into a sense of security because things went well during the earlier playoff games and during the Olympics.

"The first six games set the police up in a complacency mode: 'Everything is going well, everybody's having a good time, let's back off.' Apathy then came into the play: 'Let's just let them have fun.' And then denial that anything was going to happen, and boy, it sure unravelled [Wednesday] night," Whitelaw said.

He said police were too slow to intervene, and there may not have been enough of a police presence downtown.

"I saw more police standing around waiting for instruction," Whitelaw said. "What they could've done was to be more proactive."

Reporters questioned Chu repeatedly on why it appeared that police waited or held back while rioters took to the streets. Several reporters who were in the melee said they watched as police stood by while thugs set vehicles on fire and looted stores.

Chu said his officers were following a plan of changing into crowd-control equipment and weren't supposed to put either themselves or innocent bystanders into unpredictable situations.

"The goal of our crowd control unit officers and the overall plan was to suppress the riot. The longer that riot went on the higher the chance somebody could get hurt or stores looted," he said.

Whitelaw said some of his findings from 1994 were not followed, including the recommendation that cars not be parked in the surrounding area during the Stanley Cup celebrations, largely because in 1994, cars were vandalized as angry rioters left downtown. This time, rioters set numerous cars on fire.

During the Olympics, many downtown streets were closed and people were encouraged to use public transit to get cars off the roads.

Whitelaw also said police needed to crack down early and strongly against any drinking.

Although officers tried early in the day to get an upper hand on the booze in the fan zones, media reported seeing people bringing in large amounts of alcohol when police weren't around.

In Boston, news reports said the police banned street parking in that city's downtown, didn't allow any public gatherings outdoors, added hundreds of extra police patrols and did not allow people to enter downtown bars after the second period started. The Boston police would not disclose how many police were out Wednesday night, and they declined to estimate the size of their crowds, saying only that they "were prepared and had sufficient officers on the streets for crowd control."

The Boston police have had plenty of experience to learn from. In the past seven years, three people died and there was widespread vandalism in the city during celebrations of big wins by the New England Patriots, Boston Red Sox and Boston Celtics.

Christopher Schneider, assistant professor of sociology at the University of B.C., said the police response was likely tempered by the presence of cellphone cameras and the relative peace during the 2010 Olympics.

"The police didn't really step up the force to quash the riot as quickly as they might have and I suspect this has to do with the fact that everybody's got camera phones ... and police have got a lot of heat lately about how they have been responding rather violently," Schneider said.

"The whole world is watching; this is Game 7. The police don't want to get caught up in, 'Here we are beating up the citizens of Vancouver.'" Stamatakis said the VPD was given information that trouble was brewing.

"There was information available, and that's the kind of information that leads to early closure of premises selling liquor, and that leads to deploying police officers at SkyTrain or along arterial routes to head off people intent on creating problems."

But Vancouver Mayor Gregor Robertson was insistent there was no advance warning that troublemakers were planning to disrupt the celebrations.

"I had no prior knowledge of the potential chaos and organizing by troublemakers. The Police Board and council had no advance information that this was possible."

If they had, the police would have acted differently, Robertson insisted.

Determining the appropriate police presence before an event is a delicate balance, said Steve Summerville, a former police officer who specializes in crowd control and is president of a training/consulting firm called Stay Safe.

"If you had every copper in B.C. deployed and nothing happened, there would be a lot of egg in somebody's face then, too," Summerville said.

He said police can't legally tell the public how many officers they have deployed, and there are no set standards for how many police should be deployed for any particular size crowd.

"It's very situation-specific. But it would be far easier to say, 'We've got far too many cops and we're sending some home,' Summerville said. "I would imagine budget is a major issue."

Chu said he decided the appropriate staffing levels and that there was no political interference in that call.

Summerville also said determining the level of aggression police should use is difficult when there is "massive civil disorder."

He says if police had been more forceful, they risked being blamed for instigating the riot. "I've worn the helmet and shield, and it's terrifying for the officers and I don't think any of them would want to see it go down that way. Some days you did not know if you were going to go home," Summerville said. "You can't fire into a crowd just because people are jumping on a car."

"If you're going to physically engage members of the public for property damage, then people are going to get seriously hurt. The bottom line is nobody got killed. That's an important thing because that potential definitely was there."

He said police are criticized for all levels of reaction.

"If you come across too hardcore, it's like you're damned if you do, damned if you don't," he said. "If you come across with a soft approach, people say you didn't do anything."

Summerville said that having a proactive backup plan is very important in crowd control. He said in his experience at the G20 in Toronto, there were 1,000 backup police officers who were five minutes away and ready to go.

"If you have to start calling for assistance on the phone ... it would appear you were a little short-sighted," Summerville said. The Vancouver police and Mayor Robertson blamed the havoc on anarchists who premeditated their violence, but both Schneider and Whitelaw said at least some of the revellers were hockey fans.

Whitelaw doesn't believe all of the rioters were hooligans.

"Hooligans generally cover their faces with balaclavas or the like, but some of these people were wide open about letting their faces be seen on camera," Whitelaw said. "Many of them seemed to be just young people who were out to have some fun and got caught up in it and that's unfortunate."

Schneider also does not believe that anarchists were waiting in the wings to start the havoc.

"It's not a criminal mindset when people break a window or go into a store. People were celebrating the criminal activity with strangers. The look on their faces was euphoric," Schneider said. "When you see that level of civil disobedience, everyone is at risk."

Social media may have fuelled the riot because people hung around to take photos of themselves in the midst of the action.

"They were taking pictures of themselves in front of the burning police cars, the fires, the police riot groups," Whitelaw said.

"That's new. People wanted to be part of the action and record it for posterity and send it out to their friends."

Those who were just watching events unfold on Wednesday night may have added to the mob mentality, Schneider said.

"When the riot started unfolding -and I suspect this is why it might've got more out of control than it otherwise might have -you have a lot of law-abiding citizens hanging around downtown who otherwise would've got out of Dodge, because they wanted to take their photo in front of a

burning cop car," Schneider said. "When you have a mob or riot-like activity, individual accountability tends to go out the window. People see other people setting fires and they think, 'I'm going to set a fire too, and I won't get caught.' These types of people typically wouldn't set a fire on their own."

Schneider said he saw many photos of people causing damage who were wearing Canucks gear.

"When you're wearing a \$150 or \$200 Luongo jersey, you've got to be pretty invested in the team to spend that kind of cash on a jersey," Schneider said.

All three experts said it is prudent to ban parking in areas where large public celebrations are being held.

"People can hide under cars, or run on top of cars. There should be public transit, with free busing in and out, and parking areas outside the downtown area," Schneider said.

Wednesday's riot was worse than the 1994 riot in terms of the violence, the fires, the hooliganism, the vandalism and the outright defiance of the law, Whitelaw said.

He estimates that although there might be \$1 million or more in property damage, the damage to Vancouver's reputation will be worth more than \$1 billion.

"That's not just going to take months to heal, that's going to take another five years plus to recover," Whitelaw said.

With a file from Kim Bolan tsherlock@vancouver.sun.com jefflee@vancouver.sun.com

© Copyright (c) The Vancouver Sun