

“Defund the Police” has been a rallying cry of some activist groups recently and surprisingly several politicians have bought into the rhetoric which should concern all citizens.

Across Canada, the last 30 years has seen dramatic cuts by government to institutionalized care for marginalized people and those requiring mental health care, especially long-term health care. While the population of Ontario has increased from under 10 million to over 14.5 million (46% increase) between 1990-2020, the capacity for the care of those in need of psychological and psychiatric care has decreased significantly especially for those requiring any longer-term care. Health care is a **provincial and federal responsibility**. Remember this fact.

Thirty years ago, it was rare for police to deal with people in mental health crisis, and when the police were called there were facilities available for police to quickly transport the person for treatment and likely admission. Sadly, as the higher levels of government have cut care capacity of health care, especially mental health care capacity the number of available facilities/beds to treat these people has decreased; the number of people reaching crisis has increased; the number of people with mental health issues needing affordable housing has increased; the number of people living on the street with mental health issues has increased, and the availability of community support for these people has decreased. It would be fair to say that as this care capacity has decreased not only has the incidence of crisis increased, so has the level of crisis among these people has increased before triggering the 911 call for assistance.

Over those 30 years of decreasing care capacity police have become the default 24/7/365 social agency to respond to all mental health crises in our communities. Today, as much as 70-80% of front-line police response can be associated with mental health crisis calls. It is no surprise then that in a society where care capacity has decreased, crisis levels have increased and the call for assistance is not to health care institutions, but to police, there will be the rare incident that could have tragic outcomes.

No one wants this outcome. No police officer wants to be involved in a situation where a person in need of care, but is so deep in crisis, that force must be used to try to protect other members of the public or themselves. However, everyday in every community in this province this situation occurs. Thankfully, in over 99% of those situations police are able to deescalate the situation safely and attempt to get the person into the healthcare system.

Having stated all the above you may think I am supporting the defund concept.

I am not, and would argue strongly in favour of increased funding to police. In 2020 the ratio of police officers to 100,000 citizens in Canada is at its lowest level since 2001(Stats Canada) and is almost the lowest ratio globally. Further, violent crime is increasing. Most police agencies are stretched to their limits with officers simply responding to calls for service (which are heavily backlogged) with virtually no ability to do proactive police work (crime prevention).

The Defund movement wants police budgets reduced and that money used to deal with other social issues. Reducing police budgets is dangerous. Over 90% of a police budget is entirely the cost of people. This makes sense because only people can deliver the service of protection, crime prevention and security. Reducing municipal police budgets has immediate local impacts on staffing and service levels. However, rebuilding the social safety nets being asked for by the Defund movement will take years and are the responsibility of the federal and provincial governments.

Instead of demanding that municipalities defund the police, all citizens should be demanding the federal and provincial governments properly fund and structure our health care system. The journey to the present has been long and gradual. There is little argument the capacity of our health care system and social services must be improved, but to suggest the pathway there is through police budget cuts is simply dangerous.

In closing I do not support a reduction to the police budget that is based on unverified ideology and frankly would never achieve the things that the movement is seeking. In fact, I believe there is adequate study and research that would demonstrate reducing police budgets has the exact opposite effect especially in disadvantaged and marginalized areas of the community. Further I could never support any politician at any level that would support these proposed reductions which are not based in evidence of any kind.

Sincerely

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