

[REDACTED]

I make the following submission to the Special Committee on Reforming the Police Act. This submission is in my personal capacity as a retired professional writer and editor.

During the 1990s, I was employed as the part-time researcher for the Intermunicipal Committee on Race Relations, established by the municipalities of Victoria, Saanich, Esquimalt and Oak Bay. This committee was established initially to ensure that the 1994 Commonwealth Games proceeded without racist incidents. The point was to learn what different local ethnicities thought about the various police forces in our region and how those relationships could be improved. Two colleagues, [REDACTED] and [REDACTED], had already done the foundational research, producing an interim report called the Police Perceptions Project.

Our Intermunicipal Committee, which evolved into the Capital Region Race Relations Association, had 16 members: municipal councillors, police officers and representatives from most ethnic minority groups in our region. My research was assisted by many community members and involved interviews with about 40 local organizations, including Indigenous societies and bands as well as religious, cultural, ethnic and immigrant support groups. My research also included meetings of the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police, plus interviews with multicultural police representatives in Winnipeg and Montreal.

My research was supported by over 400 survey responses from these local associations. My draft report was titled Making Peace: The Maturing Partnership of Capital Region Minorities and their Police. Unfortunately, as a consequence of the initial committee's dissolution, this report was never finished and published. I still have my notes in draft form, however.

Based on my research then and since, I believe that this special committee needs to reform B.C.'s Police Act in two specific areas.

(1) Use of Force and its Follow-up.

B.C. police, both municipal and RCMP, have killed many innocent people over the years, often because of systemic racism.

Mainly, police unions must to be held in check better. They have had too much control, which they have abused routinely for too many years. Police associations and unions have demonstrated their systemic racism most prominently — through defensiveness, delays, obfuscation and intimidation — in almost every review of excessive use of force, notably in official inquests.

(2) Recruiting and Communications.

The revised Act should set out how police departments can do a better job of recruiting among minorities. Victoria and Saanich may have the whitest and most male police departments in North America — and that's saying something.

Police must stop benefitting from the widespread misperception that policing is dangerous work. WorkSafeBC, like workers compensation boards across Canada, compiles the statistics on short- and long-term injuries plus fatalities for every industry, including policing. They prove that policing is safer

than almost any other job. Yet that misperception is the main reason minority youth resist becoming cops.

Use of Force and its Follow-up

B.C. police, both municipal and RCMP, have killed many innocent people over the years, especially Indigenous and mentally challenged men. It's not just B.C. of course; on average, Canadian police kill one more citizen every 7.5 weeks.

Given who these victims are, it too often comes down to systemic racism. So I agree with the B.C. Civil Liberties Association: the Police Act should ban all police street checks. And it should put in place a moratorium on any further police use of surveillance technology.

An improved Police Act would require police officers and their managers to recognize that society has already decriminalized sex work and simple drug possession. Too often police continue to treat poor people, immigrants and Indigenous people — especially land defenders — as if they were criminals.

The Police Act must be amended to set provincial guidelines for non-enforcement. Our police departments must be directed not to use municipal or provincial resources toward enforcement of their particular positions on social issues. This reform committee or the Ministers responsible should explain how resources can be shifted from policing to community safety and decriminalizing social issues.

After killings by B.C. police, our Coroners Service still routinely delays public hearings far too long. Two organizations investigate police-involved shootings in the province: the B.C. Coroners Service and the Independent Investigations Office. Our improved legislation must require these services to provide reasons for every failure to provide timely answers; too often it has been due to a lack of resources. B.C.'s entire justice system must move more quickly, particularly when it comes to interviewing witnesses immediately after an incident. This Police Act reform committee must do what it can to end the slow pace of our criminal justice system.

Recruiting and Communications

As the BCCLA recommends, this Police Act reform committee must work with Indigenous peoples in B.C. to align our Police Act with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

B.C.'s RCMP and municipal police departments have been both biased recruiters and poor communicators. White supremacy and misogyny may well be at the root of the problems with recruitment and training, and with the culture in police academies, departments, associations and unions.

Another point: my research showed that policing is actually one of the safest jobs in Canada. Most of us don't believe that — but most of us are wrong, including the police themselves.

WorkSafeBC keeps track of every job-related injury or death, every year, and for every vocation. These statistics enumerate all fatality and long- and short-term illness claims. The statistics are in their online Industry health and safety data (RCMP jobs are category 912130, municipal police jobs are category 913130).

These data show that truck drivers, sales clerks, janitors, carpenters, chefs and construction labourers proportionally sustain 10 to 25 times more injuries and deaths than do our police. Even grocery clerks, nurses and typists suffer more than cops do.

These data show that all of us, especially police officers, need to dump the misperception that policing is dangerous. Movies and TV dramas — and police unions, of course, to the chagrin of most police chiefs — push this bogus notion. The bald truth is that police have safer jobs than almost all of us.

One serious consequence of this misperception is that young potential recruits — Indigenous, Asian, Black and LGBTQ — say potential danger is the main reason they don't want to become cops.

Summary

We in the public have incredible expectations of our police. On one hand we need them to be our protective warriors; on the other we need them to be compassionate counsellors. We can neither expect nor get perfection from our police; they aren't superhuman.

But if B.C.'s police recruit better (including thorough background checks) and train constantly on the appropriate use of force (especially engaging with young ethnic minority men), then B.C. can eventually have police officers with kind hearts, good ethics and real competence where it's needed.

