

POLICE USE OF FORCE IN CANADA:
***A REVIEW OF DATA, EXPERT OPINION, AND THE INTERNATIONAL
RESEARCH LITERATURE***

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Research Objectives

- Despite its emergence as an important social issue, police use of force has been subject to surprisingly little empirical research—especially in the Canadian context.
- This research report attempts to address this research gap by addressing the following research questions: How often do the police in Canada use physical force against civilians? Is police use of force more common in some police jurisdictions than others? Has use of force increased or decreased over the past ten years? What are best practices with respect to police use of force? Can use of force be reduced while simultaneously ensuring public safety and the safety of police officers? What is the current state of Canadian research on police use of force? How can data collection and research on police use of force be improved?

Methodology

- The research team contacted thirty-five different police services and ten civilian oversight agencies from different regions of Canada.
- From each agency the research team requested information about the collection and dissemination of data on police use of force incidents.
- As part of this request, the research team also asked whether we could gain access to each service's use of force data collection form, use of force dataset, and any internal use of force reports.
- We also asked each service to identify their own use of force experts to be interviewed about best practices.
- Overall, only 19 of 35 police services (54.3%), and six of ten oversight agencies (60.0%), agreed to participate in the study.
- Fourteen police services (40.0% of the sample) provided us with the names of their own use of force experts that we could contact for interviews.
- Although we were able to gain access to several internal use of force reports, no police service (0.0%) granted the research team access to a use of force dataset that would have enabled an independent analysis.
- A number of factors could have contributed to the low response rate including a tight research timeframe and the reluctance of some police leaders to participate in a study about this sensitive topic.

An Analysis of Canadian Use of Force Data

- The research team was able to obtain limited use of force data, most of it publicly available, from 16 police services and 6 civilian oversight agencies.
- A re-analysis of available data produced several significant findings.
- The data suggest that deadly police use of force incidents have not declined significantly over the past two decades—even after taking population growth into account. Nationwide, the deadly force rate, per 100,000, actually increased by 28% over the past two decades, despite a growth in de-escalation training and alternative use of force options.
- Comparisons across Canadian jurisdictions are highly problematic due to different data collection and dissemination standards. However, the data that does exist suggests that, similar to data on crime patterns, police use of force rates gradually increase as we move from East to West. Use of force rates are lowest in the maritime provinces, followed by Ontario and Quebec. They are highest in the western provinces and in the northern territories.
- The data indicate that both fatal and non-fatal shootings have increased in Canada over the past decade. For example, between 2010 and 2019, RCMP fatal shooting increased by 39% and non-fatal shootings increased by 50%. There was also a 12% increase in RCMP officers pointing firearms at civilians.
- The use of Conducted Energy Weapons (CEWs) has also increased dramatically across Canada. For example, between 2010 and 2019, RCMP CEW deployments increased by 134%. There was also a 31% increase in RCMP officers pointing CEWs at civilians.
- On the other hand, the police use of both hard and soft control techniques (strikes, punches, kicks, pressure holds, etc.) have dropped significantly. For example, between 2010 and 2019, the RCMP experienced a 46% decline in baton strikes, a 51% decline in the use of OC spray, a 56% decline in the use of hard control techniques, and a 47% decline in the use of soft control techniques.
- An analysis of use of force forms/reports reveals that data collection standards vary dramatically by jurisdiction. Inconsistent data collection strategies make regional comparisons unreliable. It is also impossible to properly evaluate policies, training and technologies that have had an impact on police use of force over the past decade.
- Nonetheless, Canadian police services appear more than capable of collecting detailed information about use of force incidents. This finding provides evidence that a standardized system for collecting and disseminating use of force data is feasible.

Interviews with Canadian Use of Force Experts

- Interviews with twelve serving police use of force experts, and six representatives from Canadian police oversight agencies, provided valuable data reflecting the current landscape of police use of force in Canada.
- Consistent with the research literature, our respondents reported important changes with respect to the evolution of police use of force policies and practices in Canada.
- Most cited that use of force practices have become more formalized and regulated. There is now a greater emphasis on effective communication and de-escalation.
- Most respondents feel that new policies, combined with improved training and access to non-lethal use of force options (i.e., Conducted Energy Weapons, OC spray, etc.), have led to a reduction of police use of force in Canada over the past two decades. This perception is somewhat inconsistent with actual use of force statistics (see above).
- Many participants agreed that the over-representation of mentally ill people as subjects in police use of force incidents stems from the overreliance on police to deal with these populations—a problem exacerbated by cuts in funding to mental health and social services. These officers acknowledged that the police were not well equipped to deal with these populations, and although training was suggested as a means of improving outcomes, it was not seen as a real solution to the problem.
- There was less consistency with respect to perspectives on use of force involving racialized people. Whereas a small number of respondents questioned the validity of the documented racial disparities in police use of force, suggesting Canadians' views are skewed by American media, other respondents cited increased rates of criminality among certain racialized groups and experiences with social and economic marginalization as drivers of these disparities.
- Measures to reduce racial disparities in use of force proposed by the officers include reducing social inequality, increasing the representation of under-represented groups in policing, advancing community policing efforts and enhanced training. Little was said about the individual and institutional-level mechanisms known to contribute to such racial disparities.
- We were also interested in our respondents' general perspectives on best practices with respect to use of force and on the ways in which police use of force can be controlled and monitored.
- Many respondents stressed the need for effective communication and de-escalation training.

- Respondents' views were mixed with respect to whether in-car and body cameras would reduce the illegitimate use of force. However, some civilian oversight officials highlighted the value of body camera footage in their investigations.
- We also found general support for the presence of police oversight agencies in Canada, although the impact such agencies have had on the nature and scope of police use of force in Canada is yet to be determined.
- All respondents indicated the need for more Canadian research on police use of force. There was a high level of support for the idea of a standardized national police use of force data collection strategy.

Recommendations

In the conclusion of the report, we provide recommendations for the improvement of research on police use of force data in Canada. We also provide recommendations with respect to decreasing use of force incidents—especially the frequency of deadly force encounters. We base these recommendations on our review of available Canadian use of force data, interviews with Canadian police experts on use of force and a review of the international research literature on use of force and best practices.

- 1) *Police services and their governing bodies should, on a continuing basis, review the policing research literature to identify emerging best practices with respect to use of force.*
- 2) *Police services must develop strong use of force policies that express the value of both police and civilian lives and restrict the conditions under which force can be used.*
- 3) *All police officers in Canada should be given high quality training on de-escalation tactics.*
- 4) *Canadian police services should continue to examine the impact of video technologies and their impact on use of force.*
- 5) *Policing services and their governing bodies should adopt less-than-lethal use of force options. Firearms should only be used as a last resort.*
- 6) *Policing services should develop specific use of force strategies for armed civilians not in the possession of a firearm.*
- 7) *Policing services should engage in cultural transformation efforts that de-emphasize hyper-masculine, para-military traditions.*

- 8) *Police services must establish strategies for reducing the over-representation, in use of force cases, of civilians in mental health crises.*
- 9) *Police services should increase the recruitment of female officers.*
- 10) *Police services should increase the recruitment of Black, Indigenous and other racialized officers.*
- 11) *All police recruits should be screened for racial sensitivity and cultural competency.*
- 12) *All police officers should receive periodic cultural competency, anti-bias training.*
- 13) *All police reforms with respect to use of force policies, training, technologies, and tactics should be subject to high quality evaluation research.*
- 14) *To ensure high quality research and evaluation, a federal-provincial-territorial task force should be established with the goal of developing a standardized method for recording data on Canadian use of force incidents.*
- 15) *The federal-provincial-territorial task force should consult with academics and quantitative research experts in the development of the standardized use of force data collection process.*
- 16) *A standardized use of force data collection process should ensure the collection of important variables identified in the research literature. Important information includes situational variables, civilian characteristics, and officer characteristics.*
- 17) *Racialized communities should be consulted with respect to the collection, retention, analysis, and dissemination of race-based use of force data.*
- 18) *On an annual basis, each police service in Canada should submit data on police use of force to an independent research body. This would enable the creation of a Canadian national police use of force dataset.*
- 19) *Police services, their governing bodies, and the independent research body should release use of force data to the public on an annual basis.*
- 20) *Police Services should engage in a continuous review of their use of force data collection and analysis practices so that they reflect emerging best practices.*