

Drifting police service needs renewed direction from next mayor

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Is there a problem with policing in Toronto?

Most residents would likely say no. Crime rates are dropping. Evidence of major corruption seems to be behind us. New initiatives are reducing violence in at-risk areas. Residents tell pollsters that they feel safer, and are more satisfied with Toronto's police services, than at any time over the past decade.

These results are even more remarkable when compared to other Canadian cities. One only needs to look at the riot sparked by a fatal shooting by police in Montreal, Vancouver's troubled downtown eastside, or higher urban crime rates across the country. Within this context, our policing issues appear as mere irritants.

If only it was true.

In reality there are deep undercurrents that need immediate attention.

Addressing them now, as part of an election debate for a new mayor is not only good policy. It will also make our city safer, sooner.

There are three common assumptions about policing in Toronto that need to be challenged. First, that Toronto's falling crime rate is exceptional. Second, that enhancements to public safety simply require more funding. Third, that policing priorities are the exclusive preserve of the Police Services Board. Together these views are making us less safe.

Let's look at those comforting crime statistics first. Viewed in isolation, declining crime rates are reassuring. But a different picture emerges when one reviews comparative figures and wider definitions.

Fifteen years ago, Toronto was one of the safest cities in North America in terms of overall violent crime per capita. For nonviolent crimes such as burglary our rates were particularly low, although they were higher than Los Angeles and New York. Since that time our overall crime rates have declined, but public safety has improved much faster in both New York and Los Angeles. And thanks to a rapid decline in Chicago's crime rates, it now has a violent crime rate similar to ours. Simply put, other North American cities are making better headway in the fight against crime.

Which brings us to the second assumption: can we do better at public safety without spending more? Currently the Police Services Board submits annual budget increases above the increase in City revenues and, regardless of the administration, Council agrees to them.

In fact, research shows that there is no short-term correlation between police force size and crime. But in our case, without a vision to guide policing expenditures, the easiest path is to agree to budget increases.

Practically, there is little choice. If Council and the Police Services Board were to ever disagree on the adequacy of the Police budget, either party could appeal to the Ontario Civilian Police Commission. Although the Commission has never been called upon to judge the adequacy of Toronto's police budget, Council is wise enough not to try.

As to the third assumption, the vast majority of large Police Service Boards assure effectiveness and refresh their mandates through a strategic plan. It is through this process that the public is engaged to discuss expectations, effectiveness, and priorities within limited public resources.

For Toronto, this vital piece has been missing since 1992. In its place, the Board issues publications. But it is not the same as going to the public to address core issues.

As a result, there has been drift. Without the discipline of a strategic plan review, the Board continues to operate a number of non-core activities such as an on-street parking business, providing off-duty officers for construction projects, and employing school crossing guards.

Admittedly, there is no crisis facing policing in Toronto at present. But there is the need to review fundamentals. The best place to start the conversation is within the current mayoral campaign.

So far the mayoral candidates have had much to say about finances, bike lanes, tolls and transit. Successful policing is at least as important as any of these. As such it is vital that our next mayor articulate a vision on how we can expect to have our public safety enhanced. Hopefully that vision will include a way to refresh the vision of the Board. It's not only good politics, but it should make for good policy.

The timing couldn't be better. Given five years of stability and strong current relations between police and stakeholders, now is the time to discuss priorities and to chart a course for the future. The risk, if the candidates fail to engage this issue, is that the drift will become more pervasive, and our city will become less safe than it could be.