



In pursuit of next-era community safety and well-being

Police and social services must collaborate more closely to create safe and resilient communities

As individuals and as communities, we all want to feel free from harm and supported in facing any challenges to our well-being. In other words, we want live where we feel safe, enjoy a sense of belonging, and have access to the services we require.

On a practical level, that means trusting that any social issues in the community that may lead to conflict will be addressed as quickly, fairly, and effectively as possible. On a strategic level, it means those responsible for ensuring the safety, health, and welfare of a community jointly own the problems, solutions, and innovations—effective collaboration is also part of community well-being.

Police services are the keystone of community safety and well-being. Their challenge is to uphold and enhance it as

part of a reimagined and system-wide ecosystem that responds effectively to the needs of community members.

In a way, that imperative parallels what's happening in the human and social services field. For example, governing and service-delivery bodies have come to recognize that a range of complex and interconnected economic and social conditions—from income to education to housing—influence health status. These conditions are known as the social determinants of health. This understanding has driven unprecedented investment and coordination across human and social services.

Just as many social determinants can influence health outcomes, numerous social issues can be the underlying reason for calls for police assistance.

For many police services, in Canada and around the world, a growing number of calls are related to mental health or substance use issues. Of course, experiencing these issues doesn't mean you'll become a criminal. Nor do other aspects of life, like poverty. These circumstances can, however, create the conditions for being either the perpetrator or victim of a crime.

There is growing pressure on the justice system to more appropriately respond to, process, and rehabilitate those who interact with it, especially when these interactions have so many common threads.

The system is well aware of these demands.

Isolated community policing and partnership programs have had a positive impact and are making headway. In some jurisdictions, the police are also part of broader and more formal efforts. Ontario, for instance, introduced first-of-its-kind municipal community safety and well-being legislation, to which police contributions are integral. Still, the degree of coordination within the security and justice sector has tended to be slow, localized, and less systematic. Police-service initiatives are typically organic and work from the bottom up. These efforts often butt up against siloed funding models, legacy staffing models, outdated training approaches, and short-term investment horizons. It may be easier and cheaper to focus on the consequences of crime than its root causes, but it's also less effective.

Local problems need local solutions. That means creating space for more community-focused and preventative approaches, and scaling up existing models. Enabling that requires changes at the system level.

Being able to achieve systemic change is complicated: policing, as a profession and as an institution, has become more complex. From all corners, demands and expectations are increasing. That's requiring police to expand beyond their traditional core capabilities of public contact, emergency response, investigation, safeguarding, and detention. New capabilities are arising in response to advances in our understanding of the multifaceted roots of crime.

The policing sector is also under intense scrutiny. Public and political opinion has oscillated between defunding the police and upping the emphasis on security. The system is evolving, but not necessarily with a clear, unified vision of a future model.

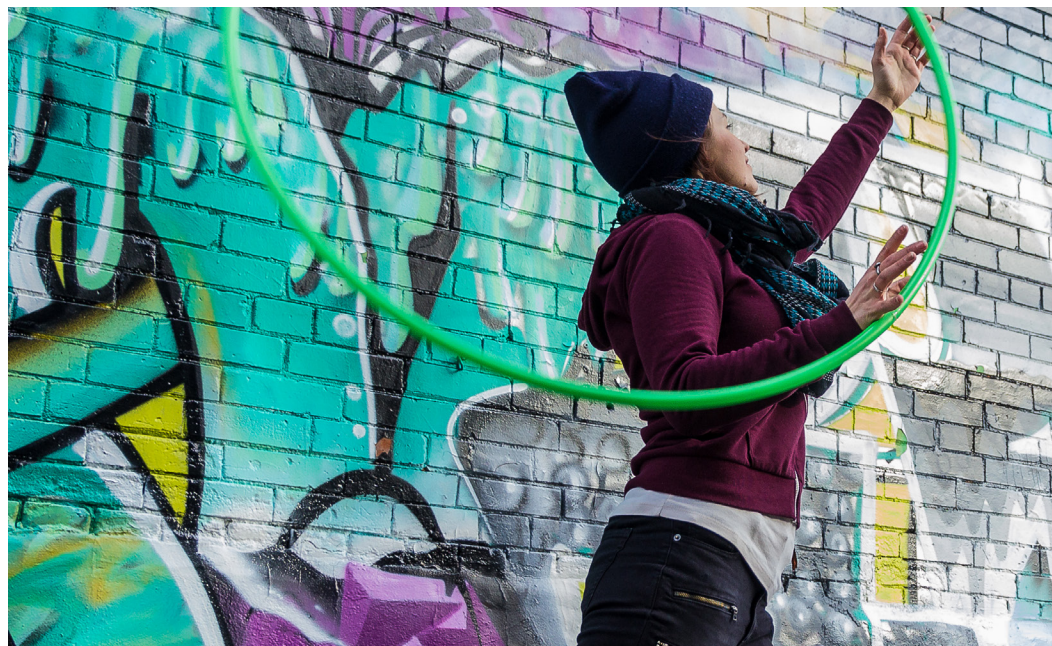
But there must be.

To start imagining the next era of community safety and well-being, we need to be asking the core questions: How do police and justice capabilities need to evolve? What's exerting pressure on them? What is the exclusive domain of police services? What interventions should happen—how and with whom should they be undertaken to tackle the root causes and nip crime in the bud?

Transformation demands a retooling of how interrelated parties respond to common issues. Police services alone cannot solve the societal issues that can lead to interactions with them. Nor should they have to. But they do need to be an active part of a broader ecosystem of social care, prevention, and intervention.

For police and public services of all types, the next era of community safety and well-being will be about adhering to a systems-based approach. This will mark a new and more sustainable way of thinking, planning, investing, and operating.

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From reactive to preventative

In the traditional policing model, the main objective was to maintain public order by suppressing and controlling crime. The police were intended to be the primary guardians of public safety, with three main functions: to answer calls for service, deter crime through a highly visible presence, and investigate suspicious circumstances of a criminal nature.



For decades we've been seeing moves toward community policing, the start of a transition from reactive and punitive to proactive and preventative.

The police shouldn't only be a presence when a crime is committed—ideally, they're also addressing the issues that can contribute to criminal behaviour. Crime control is still important, but so is partnering with the community organizations, social services, public health, and other agencies involved in addressing the social determinants of well-being and reducing the vulnerability to criminality.

Traditional models are no longer effective, and thus have little role to play in the future of policing and the community well-being more broadly. What may be helpful?

After conducting global research, Deloitte recently posited that the [future of the social safety net](#) should be:

- **Hyper-personalized.** Understanding individual circumstances and complexities allows for more tailored interventions. It also enables organizations to focus resources on those who need them most, in the way they need them.

- **Evidence-driven and measurement-obsessed.** Service design is based on data and outcomes to gain a solid understanding of current demand trends and better anticipate future ones.

- **Inclusive and human-centred.** The user experience is at the core of all social-care services. Providers and responders have to consider the individual needs and circumstances of each person accessing the system from the start.

- **Connected.** Social-care services are designed to integrate delivery value chains and user journeys across a series of interventions, all focused on user needs and goals.

Following these four principles is essential to getting programs and services on a solid and sustainable footing. Granted, it's a challenge for all public services, from health care to income support to policing. But it sets the stage for progress.

There are many roadblocks to clear along the way. The boundaries between police, social care, and health care work (particularly in mental health) are increasingly blurry. Resourcing models have yet to catch up to these intersections. Funding isn't coordinated or consistently based on outcomes. There's also a lack of appropriate funding for organizations in a position to address some root-cause issues. Data can be disparate and disconnected.

Moreover, there are gaps in the care continuum and wraparound services. The efficacy of interventions is not consistently mapped or understood, which makes it difficult to achieve optimal outcomes. And there can be lack of trust between agencies, partners, and the community.

An integrated social-care ecosystem is one that includes effective police services. Throughout this space, policymakers and decision-makers are being challenged to develop cultures of innovation, create more value, and deliver a more human experience for their citizens. The future requires a shift to focus much more on prevention rather than reaction.

Learning to scale what works

Across Canada, there are examples of progressive police initiatives that are contributing to safety and well-being, reshaping policing models at the community level in the process. Such localized action is necessary and powerful, but it only gets us so far. We need to learn what works so we can scale it.

Some services are now embedded in their communities, like the Longueuil police in Quebec. The province recently [invested \\$3.6 million](#) in a police project called RÉSO, which began as a pilot in 2019. Through the project, selected officers work closely with specific communities to create the understanding and trust that underpins effective interventions. They also refer members of vulnerable populations to supportive resources before a matter becomes criminal.

The additional funding allowed 24 more officers to train in different neighbourhoods, without weapons or uniforms. Another pool of provincial funding was used to hire social workers. The police chief in Longueuil, which sits across the Saint Lawrence River from Montreal, says that with RÉSO, “We want to focus on prevention, rather than repression.”

Five provinces over, in British Columbia, the [Chinese Community Policing Centre](#) delivers crime prevention programs in partnership with the Vancouver Police Department, local groups, seniors’ centres, and schools. The volunteer-run organization also helps crime victims who require translation services to access police services and the justice system. Vancouver now has 11 such centres, building a bridge between the community, the police, and other service providers, such as victim support programs.

Partnerships with the right service providers, at the right time, are essential. In Thunder Bay, Ontario, the police service

partnered with the local Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) on a pilot called [IMPACT](#), or Integrated Mobile Police and Crisis Team. An IMPACT unit includes a police officer and a crisis worker who have trained together and work from a patrol car to respond to all mental-health-related calls 24/7.

IMPACT enables the immediate assessment and support for individuals in crisis, reducing the need to apprehend and bring them to hospital. The Thunder Bay Police Service says it’s about using the expertise of community partners, and having each grow their understanding about the other’s role in a mutual challenge. Such partnerships are becoming more common as they become recognized as adequate and appropriate services for officers and those they serve.

Another example is the Peel Regional Police (PRP), which serves the area just west of Toronto. In 2020, it announced major changes to its organizational structure, which included removing siloed programming and services for a more efficient alignment of resources. This has allowed the PRP to make progress toward a [more inclusive form of community policing](#). It hopes to have a positive impact on community safety and well-being in four key areas: traffic safety, mental health and addictions, violent crime, and priority populations. At the core of this commitment are [multi-sectoral partnerships](#). As in Thunder Bay, PRP has partnered with the CMHA to launch a mobile crisis rapid response team (MCRRT)—a health response to a health problem.

Taking a systems-based approach requires an integrated response focused on root causes and the use of data to inform solutions. Two years ago, the Edmonton Police Foundation launched a project called the [Community Solutions Accelerator](#). This hub combines data, artificial intelligence, and machine learning to generate insights

on and approaches to some of the big challenges facing the city, including crime and addictions. A top priority is exploring the pathways that lead to drug use, as many of the calls to the police are related to drugs. The project focuses on identifying scalable solutions in partnership with the community.

Also based in Edmonton, the [TELUS Community Safety and Wellness Accelerator](#) is a group of international tech startups with products offering social, community, or wellness benefits that have been chosen to use their apps and platforms to address challenges such as domestic violence, addiction, mental health, child abuse, and early emergency detection. The group’s goal is to improve outcomes by using technology to process data from community service agencies and the police service.

There are great examples abroad as well. In England, [Changing Futures](#) is a three-year, £64-million program that helps adults at risk stabilize and then improve their life situations. Its clients are adults experiencing multiple disadvantages, including combinations of homelessness, substance misuse, mental health issues, domestic abuse, and contact with the criminal justice system. Local public and community sector partners might include public health, housing support, social services, the police, the prison system, and the courts. Here’s the key: to reduce future demand for crisis services and transform the way local services are delivered, the clients’ input is collected and used to inform decision-making, from design to delivery and evaluation.

Such initiatives are a great shift—but they’re only a start. If the current state is about improving police responses, the next era is about pushing the envelope. Together, we need to define citizen needs, support all service providers with funding and other resources, and improve our approaches to prevention as well as intervention.

Five common elements point to a promising future

1

Take a systems-based approach to root causes

The police, like any organization, have to focus on their mandate. But how can they best contribute within the mandate of the entire social-care ecosystem?

The social determinants that can lead to crime are a clear indication, as is the abundance of literature on this topic to date: this isn't a policing – only conversation. We're seeing traction with police service initiatives that are brave and bold. It's happening within their vertical of traditional service delivery and across the systems of other service and community organizations.

Moving to a people-first approach is particularly important for vulnerable populations. Many individuals living with challenges are criminalized because they lack supports or don't know how to access them—or because there are no supports to access.

The police can play a major role in identifying the needs and complex pressures that certain communities face. They're in a position to co-create approaches with the organizations on the ground and the neighbourhoods themselves, all to best serve the public and mitigate the circumstances that create the conditions for criminality to begin with.

2

Focus on the “service” in police service

Whether they're a victim, offender, or witness, people don't usually interact with the police on a good day. Still, there's a reason we call the police a service in Canada. Any organization providing a service—a retailer, bank, government department, or police agency—should understand and prioritize the fundamentals of making interactions respectful, open, and effective.

Next-era community safety and well-being will require a challenge to the traditional thinking and service delivery, to manage expectations about what services police can provide over the long term.

3

Make “being connected” the raison d’être

A lack of data-sharing and systemized reporting can result in the duplication and overlap of services, and get in the way of more coordinated solutions. And a lack of understanding about where gaps and overlaps exist makes it difficult to identify who would be best to address them and how, let alone which interventions would be the most effective.

The next era of community safety and well-being must be one in which the relevant parties are intrinsically connected, and in which policing is integrated into the delivery value chains and client journeys of the greater human and social services ecosystem.

4

Get uncomfortable

All leaders should have a healthy comfort with discomfort. Moving to more integrated systems—ones that tackle the root issues that can create the need for services—might require unconventional approaches that are, historically, difficult to navigate.

That includes novel cross-ministry or interdepartmental planning and funding. This would shift community safety and well-being from being an unguaranteed annual budget item vulnerable to other priorities to being part of a systemized approach to budget planning. New approaches would also include pooling, sharing, and accessing data to inform real-time and strategic decision-making.

To effectively prioritize and allocate investments, police services need to be part of a collaborative, evidence-based approach that evaluates the greatest causes of vulnerability and the efficacy of interventions. And that much is easier said than done.

5

Democratize, share, and use data to drive better outcomes

Police have a wealth of data from calls for their service. This data can be examined to understand the nature, frequency, and types of interactions in the communities they serve, which could be used to help shape new approaches. Call data indicates crimes, arrests, and even trends, but it can also be used to follow up promptly with the people involved—those who reported or witnessed a crime, for example—to best measure and improve the public’s experiences. That would be a truly powerful tool for transforming the culture of policing.

Data and clear outcomes—such as seeing a reduction in recidivism overall or in a particular type of crime, like domestic violence—are also integral to understanding when the role of police has expanded reasonably to meet citizen needs and when those needs are better met by another service provider within the social safety system.

Building trust

Even if all these changes are made, there can be no next-era partnerships or public engagement and support without trust. [Trust](#) is what underlies a meaningful relationship between any organization and those who interact with it. And it's built moment by moment, decision by decision, action by action.

For police services, the trust felt at an aggregate societal level isn't indicative of the reality on the ground, as trust—or the lack of it—is created in different communities in different ways. Consider whether different groups see themselves represented within the police, or whether they feel their needs are being appropriately addressed. Or how the level of trust in the police's ability to handle conflict calls, apply the use of force, or even carry out their core functions effectively can vastly differ between, and even within, groups.

Canadians routinely encounter the police for everything from reporting a crime to getting a ticket for running a light to being arrested. A 2020 [Angus Reid Institute survey](#) found that two-thirds of Canadians have had at least one direct interaction with a police officer in the last five years; only 8% have had more than five.

For the most part, Canadians do have a positive image of the police. The same survey showed that 74% view the police in their community favourably, and 72% see their local police as a source of pride. That's overall. The numbers aren't quite as high for younger Canadians, Indigenous peoples, and those who identify as a visible minority. In fact, a higher number of those aged 18 to 24 feel *less* secure when they see a police officer than *more* secure.

The researchers concluded that we're a country that is both critical and supportive of the police at the same time. There's a lot of goodwill and a lot of room for improvement. Taken together, that translates to opportunities.

Taking a more connected, personalized, data-driven, and systems-based approach won't automatically strengthen trust between the police and their communities. What it will do is enhance the capability of police services to have more citizen-centred, hyper-personalized, and quality upstream interactions—the ones with citizens—that create the conditions that do.

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Fostering resilient communities

Get it right, and the next era of community safety and well-being can help to build stronger, more resilient communities.

These are communities that can continually adapt and thrive. They are connected with each other, with networks of support. People and institutions have the capacity to identify problems within the community, establish priorities, and act together to implement solutions. They can work in partnership to assess, manage, and monitor the risks to their well-being. When communities experience more collective and individual well-being, demands on policing fall, and there are fewer interactions with the justice system.

In resilient communities, people feel they have a voice and agency in shaping responses. They see themselves in their police service—a service that builds trust across all demographics.

Consider how Sir Robert Peel, the father of modern policing, framed it: “The police are the public, and the public are the police; the police being only members of the public who are paid to give full-time attention to duties which are incumbent on every citizen in the interests of community welfare and existence.”

This principle of policing is as true now as it was almost 200 years ago, when Peel established London’s Metropolitan Police Service.

The police can add considerably to resilient communities, especially when the focus isn’t on transactional policing (such as swooping in to make an arrest) but rather on relational policing: being embedded in the community and, as members of the community, supporting the continuity of citizen care.

Some great work is already being done from within existing pathways. What police services, along with human and social services organizations and other partners, need to think about is how to remap those pathways to drive even more personalized action and better outcomes.



The future needs commitment

The pressure to transition to a service-delivery approach is unrelenting. Change is hard, and it requires an understanding of what needs to change. Everyone in this space is grappling with similar challenges and seeking to overcome their constraints.

The police have shown progress and demonstrated a capacity to adapt. A “next era” of community safety and well-being can be achieved, but only if the parties with the mandate to deliver the services are equipped to efficiently do so. And only if the interventions that can more readily identify

risks (to safety, well-being, and vulnerability to crime) are understood. Only if gaps in continuity of care are filled. Only if various authorities, at all levels, become more connected through governance, funding, programming, and data. And only with system-level enablement.

The future of community safety and well-being is a formal concept. It’s a model of service delivery in policing and beyond to bolster our collective resiliency. More than that, it’s a social imperative. Let’s make it happen.

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—Sir Robert Peel

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This is part two of a three-part blog series on what the future of security and justice looks like for Canada, and how we can get there. Next up: we'll explore the role of justice organizations in tackling climate change, and the impacts of climate change on the security and justice sector.

Read the first blog in the series: [In pursuit of equitable access to justice.](#)

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