

# Abolish the Police: The Financial Cost of Law Enforcement in Prairie Cities

By Emily Riddle

**FOR MANY YEARS**, Black people in the United States and Canada have been mobilizing with the goal of defunding and ultimately abolishing the police. While the conversation has been amplified in recent weeks following the killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers, it is a continuation of a multigenerational legacy of imagining another way of living on this continent.

Even with the emergence of a mass movement to defund police, numerous Black and Indigenous people have been killed by police in the United States and Canada. This, of course, is a trend.

It is time to ask ourselves what police are actually for—because right now it seems as though cities are effectively paying police officers to kill (or cause the death of) Black and Indigenous peoples.

## What percentage of municipal budgets are being devoted to this violence, and why aren't those resources being used to save lives instead?

Though the largest number of First Nations people live in Ontario, the cities with the highest percentages of First Nations peoples are on the prairies. Many people have failed to mention historic Black communities on the prairies, and it is important to recognize that Black communities have been here for a long time and continue to form new communities on the prairies. Black people are also members of Indigenous communities on the prairies, both now and in the past.

## The prairies are home to the fastest growing populations of both Black and Indigenous people.

In Edmonton, the city I live in, **Black Lives Matter Edmonton** has laid out a concrete plan of actions to work towards the full abolition of the police system in the city, including specific investments in community-based initiatives. There are other groups in prairie cities organizing with the same goals. It is important to note the specific histories on the prairies that have birthed particular relationships to law enforcement in prairie cities, including the Red River Rebellion, Northwest Rebellion, genocide of the buffalo, high apprehension of Indigenous children into child welfare, construction of the railway, etc.

Calls for abolition must be taken seriously, and we have witnessed cities in the United States work towards the full dismantlement of their police systems.

## THE (FIRST NATION) CASE FOR ABOLITION

First Nations communities have not seriously engaged with abolition as a means of liberation. In fact, policing was established on this continent in part to aid in the theft of our territories, later upholding laws that criminalized our ceremonies and stole our children. We also know that Indigenous people are overpoliced and disproportionately represented in prisons in this country, and on the Prairies in particular. Police will not help us address the crisis of murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls; they contribute to this violence. They invade our sovereign territories to ensure pipelines are built. To me, the case for abolition is clear.

**To make it more so, this Brief – and the accompanying data – demonstrate the tremendous resources consumed by urban police systems in Canada and offer a justification for alternative resource allocations.**

As an urban Indigenous person, I recognize that 82 percent of people in Canada live in urban centres and 52 percent of Status Indians live in urban centres. It is time for our communities and leadership to seriously consider what the abolition of policing and prison would look like and to speak out about rural and urban policing systems, since both operate on our territories. Further work must be done to analyze the budget of other policing systems in Canada, such as the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and the Ontario Provincial Police.

Given the need for this conversation in our communities, against the backdrop of police violence more generally, I want to turn to an analysis of public funds and how they are used to subsidize violence. But before more extensively discussing what people normally identify as taxpayer money, I want to presuppose a few things:

1. It is important to recognize that the majority of revenue that cities collect is from property tax. Cities exist due to the displacement of Indigenous peoples and this property tax is collected from those who claim to own our stolen territories. Cities also receive funds from the provinces and federal government. Much of the wealth derived in this country is from the extraction of resources from our territories.
2. Individuals who do not pay taxes to the federal government due to low-income or who are not property owners deserve to be equal participants in conversations about abolishing the police and prisons.
3. Police have always been a tool to maintaining white supremacy and the occupation of our territories.
4. While this Brief reviews city budgets and ultimately suggests the reallocation of both operating and capital budgets that are normally reserved for police services, I do believe that cities need to radically reimagine how they relate to the Indigenous nations whose territories they occupy. Indigenous nations are just that—nations. Cities are municipalities.

In order to make the case that we should defund and ultimately abolish the police in so-called Canada, I think it is important for us to know the sheer amount of funds we are contending with in urban policing systems in Canada. It is clear from our research that while police budgets vary, they make up one of the largest single expenses of many city budgets.

## THE RISING COSTS OF POLICE VIOLENCE

These budgets increase annually with few cities in Canada making any cuts, at least not over the last decade (though there have been some budget “freezes”). London, Ontario, as an example, has actually increased their police budget by 35% over the last decade.

**In 2013, Statistics Canada reported that the cost of policing in Canada had more than doubled since 1997, outpacing the increase in spending by all levels of government. In most cities, they make up the largest single budget line.**

It is well documented that cities in Canada are suffering financially due to increased COVID-19 costs and decreased revenue. At the end of April, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities asked the federal government for \$7.6 billion to cover operating losses suffered by towns and cities, and a further \$2.4 billion for losses related to transit operations. The Federal Government has offered an advance of \$2.2 billion dollars in infrastructure funds (though it is important to note these are not operating funds).

Cities are currently faced with the decision to either raise property taxes or significantly cut services, or some combination of both. The time is ripe to demand that cities radically change their budgets to redirect police budgets to free public transit, public libraries, mental health and addiction services, housing-first initiatives, low-income housing, recreation, arts and culture, food security, etc. The immediate and significant defunding of policing can ensure cities are able to continue to provide more integral services in the short-term. Of course, critically, we should not simply view abolition of police as a cost-saving measure because doing so requires significant investments in alternative safety initiatives.

### **POLICE ABOLITION AS RESTITUTION**

As Indigenous people, we are often caught within different policy jurisdictions. (This has resulted in much harm to our communities when it comes to programs and services or Aboriginal and treaty rights). In some ways this jurisdictional dispute has been a strategy to prevent change. The same is true regarding policing.

**But it is clear that urban spaces are ours and we have the right and obligation to call for these reforms, especially in urban Prairie spaces where our populations are proportionality higher than virtually everywhere else in the country and disproportionately affected by police violence.**

In fact, we have the obligation to call for transformation more generally. This moment in time has powerfully illustrated the possibilities for alternatives. In urban spaces, poverty marks certain neighborhoods as high crime. This could be alleviated by the federal government by providing a universal basic income, something that we've seen is entirely possible with the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB). Black and Indigenous people have been legislated into poverty, and we must understand that abolition means radically restructuring society. We must also understand as a movement towards our own liberation and land restitution.