

A Three Tier Approach to Public Safety in British Columbia



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Concept BC Public Safety Model¹

British Columbia is policed by 11 independent municipal police departments providing services to 11 communities with a combined population of 1,379,473 and the RCMP who police 65 municipal contracts with a combined population of 2,927,140. The RCMP also provide provincial policing services to rural areas and communities with populations under 5000. The population covered in rural BC is 685,074.

In 2018, Policing cost the province \$407,780,677 the municipalities \$1,305,965,153 and the federal government \$245,824,016 for a total cost of policing of \$1,959,569,847.

Each independent police department is governed by a police board who along with the mayor and council, determine resource levels. Administration and funding are the entire responsibility of the municipality, including individual contracts for salaries and benefits. Each RCMP municipal contract is administered under the Provincial Police Service Agreement (PPSA) however the municipalities themselves determine resource levels. Funding through the agreement is set at 70% for municipalities from 5000 to 15000 people and 90% for communities with populations over 15000. The 30% and 10% respectively are covered by the Federal government. For communities under 5000 there is no cost to the community however the province covers 70% of costs and the Federal government covers 30%. As demonstrated above, 77 local governments, 12 police boards, the province and the federal government are all involved with the administration and deployment of police resources in BC. This model presents a significant challenge for the Province to ensure adequate and effective policing, particularly with respect to criminal investigations.

In 2015, police in British Columbia created 367,354 new criminal files. Of that number, 56,601 files were cleared by charge and 41,506 files were cleared “otherwise”. Cleared otherwise indicates the suspects were dealt with other than by charging, through diversion, restorative justice or other methods. This indicates that in 2015, only 26% of criminal files were cleared. The remaining 74% would be considered still under investigation. This adds to the year over year number of criminal files that remain unsolved and under investigation. Of concern is the ten year average clearance rates for offences associated to street level drug abuse such as break and enters (less than 9%), theft of motor vehicles (less than 7%), theft over \$5000(9%) and theft under \$5000 (14%). There were approximately 145,000 of these offences reported in 2015.

The 2015 Crime Statistics in British Columbia indicates that the Crime Severity Index in BC for that year was 94.7 which was nearly 36% higher than the national average. Increases in

¹ Updated where indicated with 2018 data from “Police Resources in British Columbia, 2018

robberies, attempted murders and violent firearms crimes were the primary drivers of an increased violent crime severity index for BC, the types of crimes that can be often linked to drug trafficking and drug addiction.²

Investigating criminal offences however is only a fraction of the work performed by police. The RCMP report that in 2016 they responded to over 1.3 million calls for service of which only 35% represent criminal activity. The remaining 65% was of a social nature or assistance to the general public. As an example, data indicates that the Surrey RCMP Operational Communications Centre received 378,000 calls and generated 181,000 files for the detachment in 2015. Stats Canada indicate that Surrey’s reported crime was 49,228 files, or 27% of their file load. Prince George detachment opened 41,000 files in 2015 of which 10643 were criminal representing 26% of their file load. This ratio was also reflected by the independent forces.

The average case load per police office (based on 2018 authorized strength) is the best indicator of workload across the province. For reference purposes, the independent police departments average criminal case load is 39 (high of 48, low of 19), RCMP 5K to 15K municipal detachments average is 66 (high of 116, low of 27) RCMP over 15K, the average is 59 (high of 113 low of 41) and RCMP provincial detachments is 53 (high 188 low 5). The following chart is a sample of the significant variances in workload across the province in 2018.

Community	Population	Authorized Strength	Case Load
Central Sanich Independent	16046	23	23
Courtenay Mun. RCMP	25244	30	96
Fort St. James Prov	4580	13	62
Northern Rockies Prov	596	15	46
Oak Bay Independent	17474	23	23
Penticton Mun. RCMP	33964	46	113
Sidney Mun. RCMP	11065	15	30
Surrey Mun. RCMP	526,307	844	49
Terrace Mun. RCMP	11164	25	111
Terrace Prov.	1023	7	77
Texada Island Prov.	8385	2	25
Tsay Keh Dene Prov	384	3	324
Vancouver independent	650,575	1327	42
Vanderhoof Prov.	8819	10	93
Wells Prov.	301	3	95
Williams Lake Mun. RCMP	11215	25	99

² 2019 BC crime severity in BC is now 104.4 vs Canada at 79.5

Authorized strength is the number of police officers the department or detachment has been authorized to fill, including any officers in management, supervisory or administrative positions. This is an important factor as it decreases the number of officers taking active files. Using Williams Lake detachment as an example, the number of officers taking and investigating files would be reduced to 18 increasing the case load to 165. The number also includes what is determined as “soft vacancies”, police officers who are on medical leave, maternity, paternity or other types of absences or vacancies attributable to transfers. Vacancies termed “hard vacancies” are positions purposefully kept unfilled because of budgetary constraints, or diversions of resources to other priority areas. BC currently has approximately 200 provincial “hard” vacancies. Soft vacancies account for an additional 3.5% vacancy pattern.

Although there are many factors that affect the structure, funding and governance of policing in BC, none has impacted as much as the complexities associated to criminal investigations. These complexities increase each and every time a court decision prescribes what police must or must not do in their investigations, when tribunals render recommendations on how police perform their duties, or when government prescribe policies on how police should respond to various types of incidents. Information management, disclosure, technical interceptions, internet crime and other modern phenomena put added stresses on police resources.

In addition to the above factors, our province has suffered immensely over several decades with missing and murdered women, mostly from remote rural areas of BC, many of whom migrated to the lower mainland becoming involved in the sex trade and drugs. Sexual abuse in rural first nation’s communities has been identified as one of the leading causal factors in driving young women from their communities and a significant factor leading to alcohol and drug abuse. Domestic violence and violent crime predominate crime trends in the north district. Property crimes dominate many of our more populated areas primarily to support drug addicted citizens desperate for their next fix. Persons suffering from mental illness are committing petty crimes out of frustration or in a desperate effort to help themselves. Our corrections have an over representation of indigenous persons, of individuals suffering from mental illness and/or addictions.

There is an old Sioux proverb that states “If you don’t know where you are going, any path will take you there”. We are on that path, in fact, we are on a path that has intersected and crisscrossed our province in an aimless fashion for decades. We need to find a clear path that will lead us in the right direction.

In my prologue above I’ve focused on elements that have led us to where we are today, in essence, it is a broad diagnosis of public safety in British Columbia that has lead us to the results we experience daily. We need to stop and ask “Who is important to us, what is our purpose, and what matters most to us? Where are we going, and how are we going to get there? We must begin with the end in mind.

Strategic Goal

Develop a unified Public Safety Model that separates criminal behavior from behavior precipitated by factors such as mental illness, addictions, social dysfunction and other causal factors. Provide a highly technical and focused response to prolific and dangerous criminals who travel extensively throughout the province targeting vulnerable citizens and provide a focused and fluid uniformed presence to address criminal behavior wherever required across the province.

The Public Safety Model would be structured with three distinctive components: criminal investigation officers, public safety officers and community safety officers.

Criminal Investigation Officers – comprised of armed uniformed and plain clothes officers modeled after the current CFSEU whose sole responsibility would be to conduct investigations into prolific and dangerous criminal individuals or organizations. This unit would also provide uniform general duty functions to assist public and community safety officers and investigate domestic violence, sexual offences and criminal offences that cannot be remedied through restorative justice programs.

Public Safety Officers – unarmed and uniformed in passive but distinctive uniforms (eg: Blue shirts/jackets worn by 2010 Olympic volunteers) who are cross trained in mental health, addictions, children and family and other disciplines necessary to address the social issues that predominate today's policing.

Community Safety Officers – unarmed and uniformed in a passive but distinctly different uniform than the patrol officers or public safety officers (eg: red shirts/jackets by some community ambassador programs). Entry level positions with qualifications much the same as private security companies. Provides high visibility street level security patrols, citizen wellness and property checks.

The goal of this strategy is to eliminate all artificial boundaries that lessen the effectiveness of criminal investigations. A unified structure would provide stable funding, less administrative interference, increased accountability and increased investigational successes. It would provide for the strategic deployment of resources at the operational level when and where required. It would eliminate barriers that prevent sharing of information between different agencies. It would better serve the public interest. It would be supported by a "Smart Province" approach utilizing technology such as CCV, sensors, facial recognition software and other leading-edge technical supports.

Criminal Investigation Officers

An effective criminal investigation not only focuses upon prolific and dangerous criminals who target the vulnerable but focuses on perfect investigations. Perfect investigations result in high charge approval rates and a likelihood of conviction in every case. Perfect investigations will also lead to guilty pleas. Success measurements in this element would include substantial increases in charge approvals, convictions, guilty pleas and clearance rates.

Public Safety Officers

Premised upon the principle of “no involvement, no commitment”, public safety will become everyone’s responsibility. The central component of the BC Public Safety Agency is comprised of officers working collaboratively with communities to safeguard vulnerable citizens who come to the attention of the community through disruptive and obstructive anti-social behavior. Often this behavior is precipitated by mental health, addictions, abusive relationships and a host of other causal factors. Success measurements in this element would include the installation of effective community lead restorative justice programs in every community leading to reduced recidivism, reduced domestic violence, reduced prosecution and incarceration of vulnerable citizens and reduced administrative court proceedings. This would lead to a significant reduction in the over representation of indigenous persons in the criminal justice system and corrections.

Community Safety Officers

The foundation of public safety is community safety where citizens of all ages and gender can move freely about. The community safety element of the BC Public Safety Agency would be comprised of recognizable officers and volunteers assigned to communities or neighborhoods keeping watch 24 hours a day. These officers would often be first responders to the homeless, the addicted and fragile and ensure they are safely attended to by the public safety officers. Those individuals who are on court ordered curfews would be regularly checked upon. Premises would be routinely checked to ensure they are secure; officers would become intimately familiar with the citizens and would confirm the safety of children and others who were out at unusual times or who appeared in distress. Success measurements in this element would include reduced property crimes, homelessness, domestic violence and missing persons. The combination of the public safety officer component and the community officer safety component would contribute towards a significant reduction in drug overdose deaths.

Alignment

Alignment of resources to meet this strategic goal will be extensive but should not require more FTE's or funding than what already exists within the current structure. There will, however, be some "casualties of change" that will require planning and management. Processes, systems and structure will need a complete overhaul.

Processes - We need to ensure that people work together smoothly, we eliminate non-value-added activities and minimize wait times. New processes demand sufficient flexibility adjusting to unexpected demands and contingencies. This can be achieved through using a single entity with one governance board. Funding processes would include incentive-based funding.

Structure – to ensure optimal organizational relationships exist, structure should have the right reporting relationships in place, people have the right responsibilities, and people who need to work together are members of the same group.

People – people will be selected who have the needed skills and attributes that are the most difficult to teach. Training will be delivered on a need-to-perform basis that is directly linked to key responsibilities and, people will be given opportunities to develop and use multiple skills

Information – who gets to know what, and when? The right information should be readily available, accessible and accurate for the hands of the right person at the right time.

Decision Making – decisions are made at the right level by persons with the right expertise at the right time.

Rewards – both extrinsic (pay and benefits) but intrinsic as well. Focus should be on reinforcing behaviors and results that are critical in meeting stakeholder needs, provide clear incentives for everyone to help each other succeed and should be perceived as fair, simple, clear and meaningful.

Create an Empowering Organization

Policing in today's world is rigorously controlled by the courts and developing jurisprudence as they strive to comply with the rule of law in Canada. Government policies and public demands provide another layer of control. Command and control are also necessary in high risk policing situations requiring deadly force. This is one of the reasons why it is crucial that policing and criminal investigations be separated from the social and public assistance dynamics of police work.

Empowerment is considered a "third alternative" to a controlling, or in some cases, an abandoning leadership style, and ideally suited to the public and community safety elements of this strategy. Empowering is about creating conditions that foster and release the creativity, talent, ability, and potential that exists in people so they can do their jobs.

In developing our new public safety model, we need to ensure that we cultivate an environment where people can do their best and are committed, where we clearly identify the nature of work they need to do, and determine how much responsibility and authority people should have. It will identify who does what, how it will be done, with what resources and accountability and for what reasons.