

“I Don’t Want to Live In Fear”: Voices from the Toronto Police Services Board Town Hall Meetings – Interim Summary

Background

Following the killing of George Floyd, a Black man, at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer in May 2020, and the tragic death of Regis Korchinski-Paquet during a wellness check in Toronto, protests erupted in Toronto and around the world calling for radical reform in the way communities are policed in order to address the systemic racism that has resulted in the disproportionate use of force by police against Black, Indigenous, and other racialized groups. Thousands of messages were received by the Toronto Police Services Board (Board) demanding change. In response, the Board announced it would hold a virtual Town Hall meeting to hear the voices of members from communities across Toronto. The response was overwhelming, with over 350 individuals signing up. As a result, the originally planned single day Town Hall meeting was extended to four full-day meetings, which took place on July 9, 10, 15 and 16, 2020.

The meetings followed an open format, creating space to allow the public to make submissions to the Board, providing the Board an opportunity to hear the voices of our communities and to ask questions. The submissions covered a wide range of issues, including police accountability, police reform, and community safety priorities. Members of the public who could not make a live presentation at the Town Hall meetings were invited to provide a written or recorded statement on the Board’s website. In total, over 200 individuals and representatives of community organizations spoke at the Town Hall meetings, or made a written statement or recording.

This interim summary focuses on the main themes raised by the participants at the Town Hall meetings. In total, more than a hundred different recommendations were made by the wide variety of participants, and numerous stories and experiences were relayed. Not all can be summarized in this report, but all are valuable, and all will continue to inform the Board as it develops its approach to eliminate systemic racism, explore alternative community safety approaches, and build trust with communities across Toronto.

This interim report attempts to condense the many experiences and ideas brought before the Board, and, therefore, we have reduced them into broad themes. The intent of this interim report is *not* to analyze what was said, but to summarize what was actually said or submitted to the Board. This interim report will be followed by a comprehensive report that will give due place to the actual words and individual experiences the Board heard. These submissions also remain available to the public on

the Board’s website at: <https://tpsb.ca/consultations-and-publications/july-2020-town-halls>.

Finally, some of the participants offered particular and unique expertise and knowledge that can inform the Board’s actions in specific areas. While many of these matters were not able to be integrated into this interim report, the Board has committed to follow up with those individuals who offered to assist the Board, and benefit from their generosity.

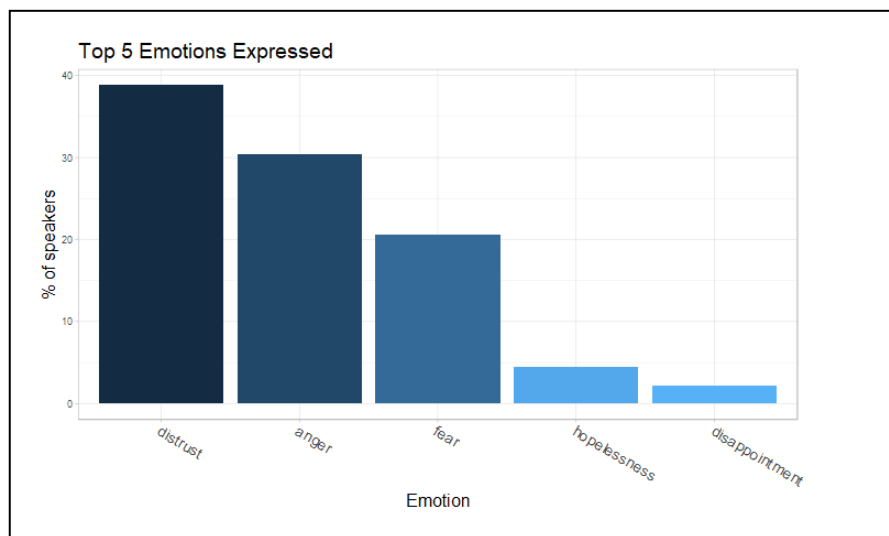
Discussion

The Town Hall meeting participants relayed stories from their lived experience, expressed their feelings about the Service and the Board, explained their perspectives regarding the problems faced by Toronto’s communities with regards to policing, and suggested or demanded concrete actions that could be taken to address them.

Understanding the Problems

Overall, most of the participants in the Town Hall meetings told the Board that policing in Toronto suffers from systemic racism. Many said that for too many residents, especially those on the intersection of racialization and mental health and addictions, the Toronto Police Service is a threat to their safety, rather than a reassuring presence, and many of the speakers were uncertain as to whether there is any way to fix the current system.

A thread of distrust and suspicion could be found throughout many of statements heard by the Board. This distrust, fuelled by disappointment and frustration with past experiences, and a sense of hopelessness for the future, was aimed at both the Service and the Board. With regard to the Service, participants told the Board they do not



believe Service Members can or want to change, that too many police officers refuse to admit there is a problem of systemic racism within the Service, and that the Service has engendered an “us vs. them” mentality that makes it impervious to criticism.

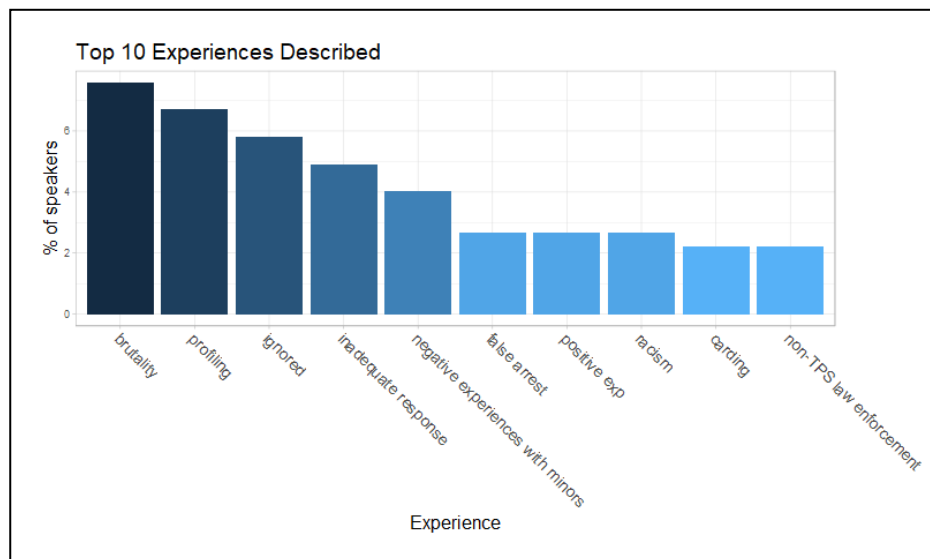
The Board, itself, was also the target of much distrust. While many participants expressed gratitude for the creation of the Town Hall forum, and viewed it as a positive step, they also expressed their views that past reports and recommendations have had

no effect on policing in this city, and expressed their lack of belief that the Board has the will or the courage to enact sweeping changes that will bring it into conflict with the Service or the Toronto Police Association. Participants have said that the onus is on the Board to prove that it is serious in its commitment to eliminate systemic racism and earn the trust of the public.

Many of the participants viewed the Board as one and the same as the Service, and suggested that the Board was failing in its role as an independent civilian oversight body. As a result, they felt there is a need for new and alternative independent oversight bodies. Distrust also extended to the Province’s Special Investigations Unit (SIU). Many of the participants who spoke of the SIU described it as composed mainly of police officers, whose main concern is to protect their colleagues.

Approximately one in three the participants expressed anger with the Service and the Board. Anger at the Service focused on concerns about its mistreatment of vulnerable and racialized communities, including accusations of harassment, over-policing, discriminatory practices, and excessive use of force. Many cited findings by the Ontario Human Rights Commission of the gross over-representation of Black men among the victims of police lethal use of force. Another issue identified was the size of the Service budget, at over \$1 billion dollars and the single largest item in the City of Toronto’s overall budget. Participants indicated that the size of the Service’s budget prevented the City from investing in much needed social services, including housing, mental health and addictions services, and transit, among others. Many suggested that, especially at a time when the City faces a shortfall as a result of the pandemic, part of the Service’s budget must be allocated to other priorities. Moreover, many participants pointed out that the budgetary focus on policing undermines the very goal of increasing safety in Toronto, as it results in the neglect of important crime prevention measures that would prevent crime before it happens, rather than just responding to it.

Fear was also expressed by many participants, fuelled to a large degree by the experiences that participants or their families, friends and neighbours have had when interacting with the police. Participants described experiencing or witnessing brutality, profiling, and false arrests, as well as other incidents of



apparent misconduct. Some have told the Board that they were ignored by Service Members when they or others needed help. A substantial number described incidents

where Service Members were simply unable to provide an adequate response, in particular when interacting with people in crisis, possibly due to lack of appropriate training. A number of participants related incidents where police officers reacted unprofessionally when faced with criticism from passers-by during an interaction with a vulnerable individual, or even when they just stopped to observe such an interaction.

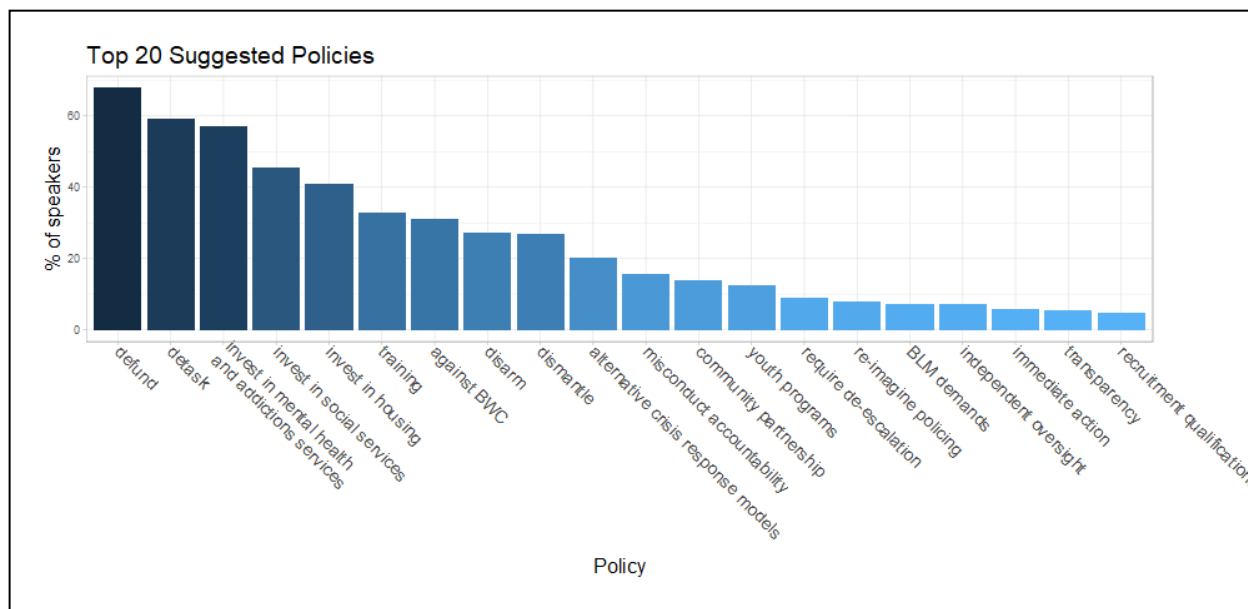
Combined, it is clear that these experiences lead many to fear the police: fear that they will be the subject of biased policing because they are members of racialized or vulnerable groups, and fear that friends, neighbours or clients in crisis will be hurt if the police are called to respond. Several participants told the Board that they refrain from calling the police in an emergency, and expressed the need for alternative response options with non-police professionals that are better trained to respond to crisis situations.

This fear is compounded by a sense that police lack accountability for their actions. Participants related accounts of police misconduct that have been brushed aside with minor disciplinary action. Many pointed to the practice of suspension with pay for officers under investigation, the small number of charges brought forward by SIU following investigations of alleged misconduct, and the fact that few, if any, Service Members have faced significant discipline, or even lost their job as a police officer following complaints of misconduct.

Suggested Solutions

As noted by many participants, it is the Board's role to engage with experts and identify the best solutions to the problems facing policing in Toronto. It is not the public's duty to conduct the research necessary to develop appropriate solutions. Nevertheless, the Board is grateful to the many participants who brought forward their ideas, suggestions and demands for concrete changes in the way policing services are provided to the City of Toronto, and the way the Board carries out its oversight role.

Over one hundred specific recommendations across a broad variety of areas were heard at the Town Hall meetings. Many of these derived from the specific lived experience of participants, and illuminated to the Board issues that would, otherwise, have been difficult to identify. This further demonstrates the power and importance of continued consultations with the public. This interim report will focus on the main themes that were raised repeatedly throughout the Town Hall meetings.



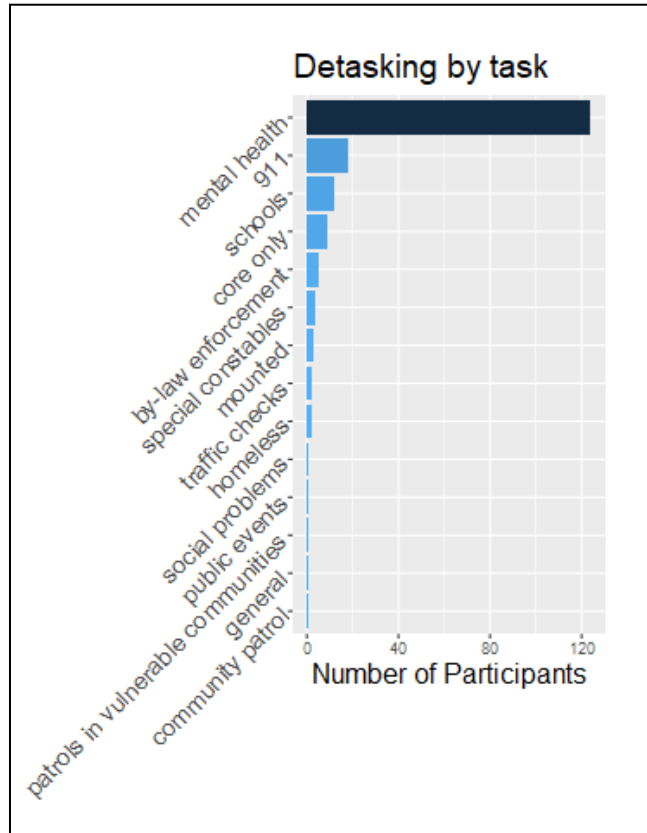
Defund and Reinvest

A majority of participants called for the defunding of the Service. Of those who identified a specific number, approximately 60% suggested the Service budget should be defunded by 50%, and a further 30% suggested that it should be defunded by 10%. Defunding generally was not presented as a punitive measure, but as a means to reallocate desperately needed funds to a variety of social services, particularly mental health and addictions services. Many participants also proposed that this reinvestment would result in less need for policing, as the underlying causes of crime would be better addressed. In particular, participants noted that investment in mental health and addictions services, and in housing supports, would reduce the burden of person in crisis calls, thus reducing the need for police funding.

Detask

Approximately half of the participants acknowledged that the police are asked to do many things they are not trained or qualified to do, including handling people in crisis. These participants asked that the task of attending to these individuals be redirected to mental health professionals. Many asked for the development of alternative crisis response models, with some specifically naming the CAHOOTS (Crisis Assistance Helping Out On The Streets) model used in Oregon as one such potential model to adopt or explore adopting in Toronto.

Some participants also suggested that 911 triaging should be transferred to a different provider, who would decide when police intervention is required and when an incident is better triaged to another first responder. Some participants noted that they fear calling 911 when they need help because they don't want police involvement. One suggested that the "menu" of "police, fire department, ambulance" should be expanded to include mental health professionals, so that callers can feel safe that they will receive the appropriate response – including to mental health crisis calls – when dialling 911.



Other tasks and areas that participants suggested could be transferred away from the police include schools, by-law enforcement, and TTC special constables. A number of participants suggested police should only be

tasked with core policing activities that could legitimately require use of force, such as responding to violent crime. In addition, a small number of participants told the Board that they believe the Mounted Unit should be disbanded.

Training and Recruitment Qualifications

Approximately one in three participants said they thought training of Service Members should be improved. Many pointed out that the training period for new recruits is significantly shorter than what is required of police officers in some European countries, and several suggested that new recruits should be required to have completed some higher education degree. Other suggestions included a greater emphasis on de-escalation and crisis response training, improved anti-racism and anti-implicit bias training, and an enhanced focus on officers' own mental health.

A number of participants told the Board that training should be at least partially civilianized. The Board was told that community-led and peer-run organizations should participate in providing training, and learning from individuals with lived experience should be an important part of any anti-bias program. Participants told the Board that this would reduce the focus on use of force as a primary tool for policing, and shift the balance towards de-escalation methods.

Notably, a substantial number of participants opposed the focus on additional training, citing evidence that anti-bias training is not an effective tool, and certainly not in isolation, for eliminating systemic bias.

Finally, a number of participants noted that the recruitment of new officers should be structured so as to ensure the diversity of the Service, and promotion standards must ensure that this diversity is also reflected throughout the ranks.

Body-Worn Cameras

Of the participants who discussed Body-Worn Cameras (BWC), almost 95% expressed opposition to their implementation. Reasons to oppose BWC implementation included concerns about costs and concerns about the increased surveillance of already over-policed communities. However, the majority of those opposed to BWC argued that this tool is simply not effective for the purpose of eliminating systemic racism and reducing excessive use of force. Evidence was cited showing that law enforcement agencies who implemented BWCs did not demonstrate consistent reductions in use of force, and, indeed, in some cases, saw a rise in its use. Others have cited evidence showing that the recordings made from the perspective of the officer tend to create in the viewer empathy for the officers, and exaggerates the sense of danger from the people facing them. Others noted that BWCs can be used as an accountability tool, but not a preventative one. Several participants noted that BWC use must be strictly regulated for it to have any positive effect. In particular, the Board was told that officers should not have any discretion to decide when to turn the BWC on or off, and the Service should not have discretion with regards to releasing recordings of alleged misconduct incidents. A number of participants demanded that strict discipline be enforced against officers who fail to properly activate their BWCs.

Disarming and Demilitarizing

More than one in four participants demanded that Service Members be disarmed, and that any militarized gear be removed from the Service. A small number of participants suggested that officers might continue to have access to firearms when responding to violent calls, but that those could be stored in a secure compartment in the vehicle when officers are responding to non-violent calls, including during wellness checks.

Some participants specified that disarming the police should include not only firearms, but also less-lethal weapons, including Conducted Energy Weapons (CEWs), batons, and pepper spray.

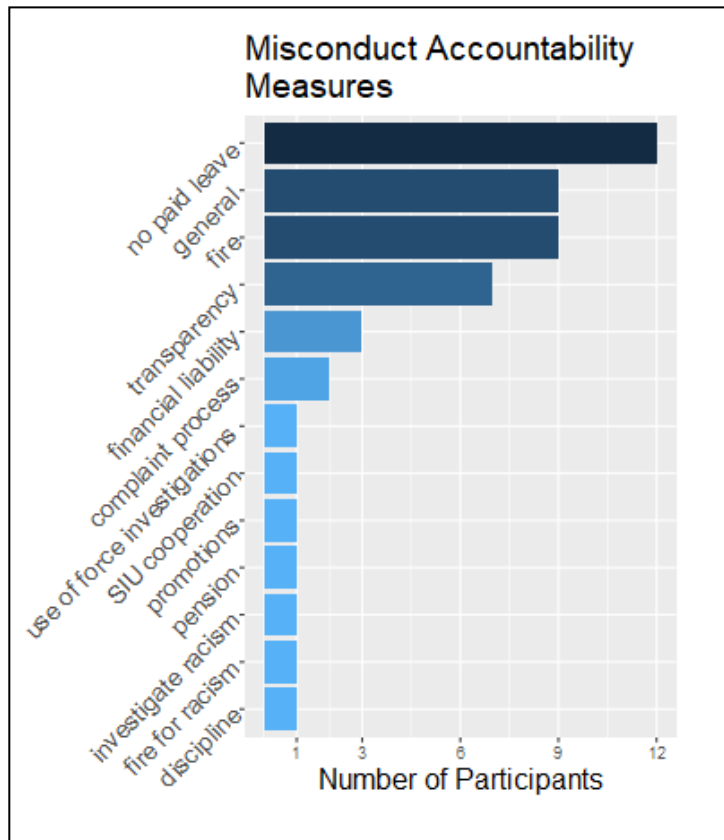
Dismantle and Re-Imagine

Approximately one in four participants demanded the dismantling of the Toronto Police Service altogether, and a “re-imagining” of community safety in Toronto. While some suggested some form of police agency should be rebuilt following the dismantling of the Service, others suggested that Toronto can be a “city without police.” Among those

advocating for a re-imagined police service, several called for following a principle of “policing by consent.”

Misconduct Accountability

A number of participants highlighted flaws in the manner in which Service Members are held accountable for incidents of misconduct. Most frequently, participants demanded that officers suspended due to misconduct investigations should not continue to get paid from public tax dollars. Several participants also demanded that officers found guilty of misconduct, in particular with regards to racism, should be fired. Participants also frequently demanded greater transparency with regard to misconduct accountability and discipline.



Community Partnership

Approximately 15% of participants advocated for increased community partnership in developing police procedures and training, as well as in the day-to-day work of the Service. Many noted that the perspectives of people with lived experience could be indispensable in helping to rebuild the trust between the Service and various communities. Several representatives of organizations extended invitations to the Service and the Board to partner with them in addressing the issues raised in the Town Hall meetings.

Black Lives Matter Demands

Many Town Hall meeting participants quoted or explicitly referenced the demands published by Black Lives Matter Canada during the protests, in full or in part. These demands are reproduced in [Box 1](#) below.

Independent Oversight

A number of participants called for new models or approaches to independent oversight over the Service, in particular with regards to investigations of alleged misconduct. Some also called for increased involvement of the City and the Auditor General in auditing the Service’s budget.

Conclusion

The Board's July 2020 Town Hall meetings were unprecedented in both the format imposed by the pandemic, and the number of people energized to be heard as part of the current public discussion on systemic racism and police reforms. The Board is grateful to all of the participants for their willingness to engage with the Board, and believes that the value of this public forum has been proven beyond doubt in the many valuable ideas raised and issues identified.

The Board recognizes that it is now tasked with justifying the trust given to it by the participants by demonstrating real and substantial change. Furthermore, the Board is committed to continuing the conversation that has started with these Town Hall meetings in a variety of different ways, to ensure that the Board and the Service remain transparent and accountable to the public.

Box 1: Black Lives Matter Canada Demands

DEFUND THE POLICE

1. Immediately redirect a minimum of 50 percent of the \$1.1 billion TPS budget toward the communities they have devastated by investing in secure, long-term housing for street-involved and unhoused communities, food security programs, public transit, public health, public libraries, and community-led anti-violence programs.

DEMILITARIZE THE POLICE

2. End Emergency Task Force (ETF) and Emergency Response Teams (ERT) (similar to the US-based SWAT teams), tactical squads, military grade weapons, and surveillance equipment.
3. Remove all weaponry from police and other law enforcement, including tasers, batons, firearms, rubber bullets, tear gas, pepper spray, and sound canons.
4. End the mass surveillance of our communities through the use of technologies such as stingray, facial recognition, and predictive policing technologies, drones, robots, and G20 surveillance technology that remained in Toronto.

REMOVE COPS IN SCHOOLS

5. Remove police and school resource officers (SROs) in all schools (Public, Catholic, Private, and Post-Secondary) in Toronto.
6. Remove police and school resource officers (SROs) in all schools, at all levels, across Canada.

REDUCE SCOPE OF POLICE

7. End all special constable programs and all policing on campuses.
8. End the policing of public transportation.
9. End the policing of minor bylaw infractions and noise complaints.
10. End paid-duty policing program (officers for hire by developers, street festivals, etc.).
11. End police collaboration with the CBSA.
12. Eliminate all stealth police cars and plainclothes operations.
13. Eliminate community policing patrols in highly racialized communities.
14. End Carding

DOCUMENT POLICE VIOLENCE

15. Mandate the public collection of data regarding police killing, and incidents of police brutality for all local, regional, provincial, and Federal police or law enforcement agency disaggregated by race, gender, age and citizenship.

DECRIMINALIZE POVERTY, DRUGS, HIV & SEX WORK

16. Release and expunge record for all poverty-related charges (including bylaw infractions, solicitation, sleeping outside, public urination, loitering, solicitation).
17. Decriminalize drugs, sex work, and HIV status.
18. Release and expunge records of all drug-related and sex work charges.

CREATE ALTERNATIVES

19. Create Crisis Intervention and Mad co-lead support teams; work with communities to develop models that work for them.
20. Create police-free, community-led, trauma-informed emergency service for mental health/psychiatric distress and other forms of crisis.
21. Invest in community support for shelters, drop-ins, after-school programming in low-income, Black, and Indigenous neighborhoods.
22. Create restorative services, mental health services, and community-run health centres
23. Invest in harm reduction, including safe supply, safe injection/inhalation sites, and harm-reduction outreach workers.
24. Establish a community-based and trauma-informed emergency service for people who have experienced gender-based violence.
25. Implement of civilian transportation safety service and better/safer road infrastructure for pedestrians, cyclists and public transit
26. Create a civilian conflict resolution resolution service to replace policing of minor bylaw infractions/noise complaints
27. Provide permanent, secure housing options for all people who need housing.

(Source: <https://blacklivesmatter.ca/defund-the-police/>)