

Toronto police and the illusion of safety

Opinion BY *EBERECHUKWU PEACE AKADINMA AND CECILIA AMOAKOHENEM* March 20, 2023

TORONTO—On Jan. 9, 2023, the Toronto Police Service (TPS) approved an additional \$48-million to the police budget after a 14 per cent increase in the total budget within the past five years. Despite protests from the city’s critics, Toronto Police Chief Myron Demkiw maintained that the increase was necessary to improve response times and increase the presence of officers. Conversely, decades of research demonstrate that the police create the illusion of safety. So how exactly, then, do former mayor John Tory and his colleagues justify the recent increase in the police budget, or the \$337,000 for the “copaganda” podcast? We argue that at a time when Toronto is becoming aware of the full extent of harm caused by this organization, this move is simply a way of attempting to restore the tarnished image of TPS.



Eberechukwu Peace Akadinma. Handout photograph

Interestingly, the illusion of safety only benefits a certain population: the white, cis- and able-bodied demographic. Every other community is acutely aware of how quickly the wrong encounter with the police can escalate, leading to detention or, worse, death. The homeless woman sleeping on the TTC. The psychiatric patient going home for a short visit with a hospital pass. The young Black adult with a hoodie or durag. These experiences and that of the Indigenous and LGBTQ+ communities provide concrete examples of the harms of surveillance, as their lives are intimately acquainted with negative policing. Even TPS’ data on June 15, 2022, show that their surveillance has brutalized Black bodies.

While safety concerns in the subways have recently garnered much media attention, it is unclear how increased police presence can mitigate these safety issues. In fact, the opposite has always been true;

where the police gather, harm occurs. From Toronto's Anti-Violence Intervention Strategy dedicated to serving "priority neighbourhoods," to their response to mental-health crises, what is evident is that an institution with a history of causing harm cannot be expected to commit to repair. Furthermore, it is inconceivable that the department implicated in the deaths of many Black and Brown people with mental health issues is the same one tasked with keeping Torontonians safe.

Herein lies a fact: any attempt to fix or address crime that fails to look at structural factors is only an illusion of intent. The Toronto Police budget continues to expand, yet the policies consistently fail to produce tangible results. To continue to fund and expand the police budget is to mismanage taxpayers' dollars. Furthermore, as there are worries over the sustainability of the \$1.7-million in expenditures past March 20, 2023, we are concerned that the increased budget will not be the last budgetary ask from TPS. If the boundaries are not clearly drawn on the TPS purview, we will see continued requests for funding that only draws support away from other much-needed programs in the city.



Cecilia Amoakohene. *Handout photograph*

As graduate students, we contend with absolute certainty, as other policy experts have pointed out, that the crime rate decreases significantly when people's needs are adequately met. In light of global economic inflation, people are resorting to stealing food and groceries for their daily sustenance. The city's nurses continue to leave the profession in droves due to the endless stretch of their labour and poor compensation. The TTC remains poorly maintained. The rate of homelessness continues to increase.

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Now, more than ever, there is a need to champion the social determinants of health approach in policy and budgetary decisions. The monies pumped into the police piggy bank can be invested in creating jobs, social housing, public transportation, childcare, disability welfare, food security, education, and healthcare. These sorts of investments will increase the amount of affordable housing in the city, allowing those with housing needs to have a safe place to rest their heads and, subsequently, mitigate the rate of homelessness. Correspondingly, ensuring that education, from elementary to post-secondary, is accessible allows us to provide a future with no bounds for Toronto's next generation. Likewise, creating job opportunities and welfare access for those living on the margins of our society supports them in building a safer and more sustainable life.

Here, we want to reiterate that continuing to finance the police is an expensive venture that yields no tangible results. Instead, if our ultimate goal is to address crime and create a safer Toronto, we must engage an upstream approach by looking at the structural determinants of crime. A truly safe Toronto is one where all its residents are housed and properly cared for without constant surveillance.

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