

July 16, 2020

An open letter to the Toronto Police Board Town Hall and our community:

I have had the opportunity to study Criminology and Psychology at the University of Toronto and have accumulated over three years of experience working in Toronto's criminal justice system. In this time, it has become abundantly clear that our justice system, starting with the police, is in desperate need of reform.

The police do not prevent crimes. They respond after a crime has already taken place. To live in a fair and equitable society that values all lives, we need resources that actively work to prevent crime. The police cannot and do not do this. Therefore, funding for those resources should come out of the enormous police budget.

It is not good enough to respond after irreversible harm has been done to both the community and the offender. Services that address mental health, access to housing, better education in low-income communities, and anti-racism initiatives are all resources that will directly and drastically decrease our crime rates. A large police force will become obsolete if we address the question of why people commit crimes instead of what to do with the criminals our society creates.

The current system of crime and punishment sets people up for failure. Billions of dollars are poured into punishing human beings for things like mental illness, substance abuse, poverty, and illiteracy. These are things that people are born with and deserve help for. I find it abhorrent and unacceptable that our society values punishment more than support.

From firsthand experience, I know that the majority of people who come across the criminal justice system in Toronto's criminal courts are overwhelmingly people in need of help. Instead of providing that assistance, we house them in horrid, inhuman conditions like those of the Toronto South Detention Centre that aggravates existing mental health conditions. When the police engage in racial profiling practices or continue to criminalize the mentally ill, they open a revolving door into the criminal justice system that sets people up to fail. Our government needs to spend money helping people not aggravating treatable mental conditions and further marginalizing the most vulnerable members of our society.

It is also of importance to note how my personal interactions with members of the Toronto police service at my place of work have shaped my views. Sexist, racist, homophobic, transphobic, xenophobic and misogynistic values are incredibly prevalent within the police subculture. And no, not all my interactions with police officers have been negative. The issue is not the individuals; it is the subculture. These values are tolerated and perpetuated by the police in their interactions with each other and with members of the public. This needs to stop.

As an informed, passionate citizen who is crying out for social reform, I would like to see the following:

- A shift away from the crime and punishment model of criminal justice towards a rehabilitative one
- An end to criminalizing health issues
- Mandated psychological and implicit bias testing for every active police officer
- Civilian input and representation in all matters the Special Investigations Unit looks into
- More transparency in SIU investigations
- Medical responders instead of police in reply to mental health calls in need of de-escalation
- Anti-racist initiatives to effectively address police bias
- More funding to schools and activities (like sports programs) in low-income areas instead of an increase in police activity

I sincerely hope my concerns are adequately addressed for the health, safety, and well-being of everyone in our community.

David Epstein