My name is Jemilla Mills-Smith — I’m a black woman who has lived in both the populated area of North York and the rural area of St. Albert, Alberta. I have seen the benefits of what public funding for community programs and organizations can do, and, alternatively, what happens when that funding is reallocated to increase police budgets. The former trumps the latter in terms of benefits, but police services are still funded with increasing vigour. I’m speaking in the names of Regis Korckinski-Paquet, De’Andre Campbell, and Chantel Moore — whose lives ended too soon because of police violence and improper training.

The Toronto Police Services has a 2020 operating budget of $1.22 billion, which is the single biggest line on the city’s operating budget — this large operating budget should account for proper training for officers; however, police-involved fatalities in Canada are rising, and police force used in marginalized communities and on citizens with mental health issues are highly disproportionate to other communities. The increasing operating budget is not helping to minimize the negative impact of police-use-of-force: if anything, it’s stimulating it.

It was found in a 2018 OHRC report that black people are overrepresented in police-use-of-force cases, representing 9 out of 15 police shootings resulting in serious injury or death, and 8 out of 13 use-of-force cases resulting in civilian death. From 2000-2017 there were 461 fatal police encounters — and while black people only make up 8.3% of the Toronto population, they made up nearly 37% of these victims. Similarly, Indigenous people make up 5% of the Canadian population, but comprise 37% of the last 100 deaths by police. And it was found in another OHRC study that the TPS has been found guilty of unnecessary charges and arrests, inappropriate or unjustified searches during encounters, and lack of legal basis for police stopping or detaining black civilians. Police training focuses on use-of-force and enforcement; however, this occurs disproportionately in Indigenous and black communities, and does not fully encompass the training needed to de-escalate situations regarding mental health and substance abuse crises, and issues involving people of colour.

The police budget is larger than public funding allotted to libraries, housing, and shelters combined. The TPS is meant to serve and protect, but the data shows that the egregiously large operating budget has done far more damage to BIPOC and at-risk individuals than good. And the benefits of these aforementioned institutions shouldn’t be overlooked. In a book by Leslie Fitch and Jody Warner, it was displayed that libraries combat lower literacy rates nationwide and higher library traffic is linked to more economic activity for local businesses. Additionally, permanent supportive housing helps to provide safe and stable environments for people with mental and substance abuse problems and those experiencing homelessness. And NYU Researchers found that in a city of 100,000, for every community-led programand organizatin, there was a drop in the homicide rate (1.2%), violent crime rate (1%), and property crime rate (0.7%). I ask you to just imagine what that would look like in a city of 6.2 million people. Providing further funding to institutions like these would do more to help these communities, something in which we’re seeing the TPS fail regularly. With the outcomes of wellness checks alone, the TPS is failing in protecting and serving the very people they’re called in to help. And quite frankly, I wouldn’t want to call in a force with weapons to de-escalate a situation to which they are not equipped to handle.

So I ask of you to call to decrease the TPS budget by a minimum of 50% — because the current budget does not seem to be working in keeping BIPOC and those suffering from mental health issues, substance abuse and homelessness safe and protected. I instead ask for a reallocation of funds to community-led programs and organizations like libraries, shelters and affordable housing, community-run health centres, and mental health & restorative services. I ask for the remaining TPS budget to be used, to the best of its ability, to create community-led, trauma-informed emergency services for mental health and psychiatric distress, to call on medical professionals for mental health crises and wellness checks, and to call in well-versed community-led organizations and professionals to assist and oversee de-escalation and cultural sensitivity training every quarter for the next ten years.