

July 14, 2020

Dear Toronto Police Services Board,

First I want to thank you for listening to the community's desire to speak about our experiences with police services and the changes we want to see in our city. Thank you for taking this important step of listening. I urge you to continue listening and to let this listening and learning be an instigator of mass institutional change.

Before I share my personal views I want to take a moment to identify myself. My name is Candice Irwin. I am a cis gender, queer (though often assumed heterosexual), white woman. I was born and raised in Canada and have lived in Toronto for eleven years. I work as dance artist and educator. My work primarily takes place within public schools and community gathering places throughout the Greater Toronto Area. I share this information to make two things clear. First, I come in frequent contact with Toronto's marginalized communities. Second, I hold a significant amount of privilege within our current social and city structures. And yet, even with this privilege, I do not feel protected by the Toronto Police.

My reasons for not feeling protected by your institution are not because you do your job poorly, it's actually because you do your job quite well. You uphold the laws set out by our government without question. You use the skills your training taught you with consistency. The problem lies with the fact that the skills you were given are centred around force and control. This is not your fault, it is ingrained into the police force's history, but it is your responsibility to change it.

From a young age I remember fearing police, without ever even being told to, because I knew that you had the capacity to block me from many futures through being the first step in the criminal justice system. You also had the capacity to fully end my future with minimal proof I was a threat - you do all carry guns and a license to kill. As a young woman, these realities bred a deep, anxiety inducing fear of doing any small thing that could appear to be "wrong" or against the law. It ran so deep that things like not using a cross walk to cross the street made me panic. As a child I truly felt that if I did anything wrong I could be stopped by a cop or potentially arrested. This fear actually heightened when I moved to Toronto as your presence is much more visible here. I share this not because I am advocating for breaking laws, but because I think it's important to understand just how deep the community's fear of you runs.

In saying this, I am aware that my chances of being arrested for not using a cross walk are slim. But I've definitely been fined for small, unintentional misdemeanours. I've had police officers refuse to answer my questions when I politely ask them to clarify why I am receiving a ticket. And in these instances all I can think to myself is, how are you truly serving me and my community in this moment? All you've done is made me afraid, confused and less financially able to care for my family. I've often left these interactions so flustered that I have made further unintentional mistakes while moving through the city (forgetting to turn my car signal on or incorrectly reading traffic signals). You have in no way helped me understand how I can better care for my community next time and you've left me in a state that I am probably even more of a "danger" to those around me because of my mental and emotional state. What is the use of fining or arresting people if you are not giving them any tools to do better in the future?

I share these stories with the knowledge that my experiences with Toronto police pale in comparison to the experiences of marginalized community members - especially our BIPOC neighbours. In these communities the fear of arrest and death are much more vivid and real possibilities. My white body is at least supposed to be protected, as long as I follow the law. The police were designed to take care of me. They were not originally designed to protect anyone outside of that norm. Let me be clear, this history is not your fault, but it is your job to change it.

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I know Toronto police and politicians have spoken many times about “reform” as a solution. I’ve listened to the arguments for and against this step. What I feel reform forgets to acknowledge though is that no level of reform can erase hundreds of years of community fear. It cannot eliminate the past traumas our communities have felt. The history of fear and abuse is just too long. Rebuilding trust takes time. As a dance teacher, I often talk with my students about how if you want to change a habit, you need to repeat the new idea at least twice as many times as you did the old one. Toronto Police was founded almost 200 years ago (1834). Our community does not have 400 years to build a new relationship with you. That is too long to wait.

Furthermore, while the Toronto police’s budget continues to grow and crime does not steadily decline, the services that have better relationships with our community - health care, social housing, education, the arts, etc.- continue to have their budgets cut. There is no other government organization within our city that is given MORE money without delivering better results. If anything, they are consistently asked to do more with less regardless of their results.

I realize the idea of cutting your budgets and doing less is scary. No one knows that better than the communities you serve. We have continued to try to survive and support one another while we watch our budgets shrink. And so I ask you, from your place of privilege, to take this letter as a call to let go. Let go of what you “think” Toronto needs and allow the voices of the city to fill your thoughts and hearts instead. Because from where we sit, surrounded by the police’s presence and power, we are requesting something different than what you offer. If you truly stand by your vow to “serve and protect” your community above all else, I believe you will hear this call and make the choice to cut your budget. You will give this money back to the struggling communities who you believe you protect. For to truly protect someone is to listen to them and take care of them how THEY want to be taken care of. You have not been doing that. This is your chance to change that history. Please listen to us and defund the police.

Thank you,

Candice Irwin