Toronto, July 12, 2020

To the Toronto Police Services Board,

It takes only 24 weeks to train as a police officer in Ontario, while in most European countries a minimum of 3 years of higher education is required. In all of North America including Ontario police training is much more focused on the use of force and firearms than in Europe. In the US more than a month of the 9 month total training that is required is spent on physical use of force.

In Germany trainees are encouraged to de-escalate, resorting to lethal force only when absolutely necessary. This level of restraint isn’t unique to Germany—it’s a Europe-wide standard. In some European countries, the rules are stricter still: Police in Finland and Norway, for example, require that officers seek permission before shooting anyone, where possible. In Spain, police must provide verbal cautions and warning shots before resorting to deadly force. Even in circumstances where weapons aren’t used, police officers in Europe tend to be more restricted in what they can do. Chokeholds of the kind used to immobilize and ultimately kill people by North American police forces are entirely forbidden in much of Europe.

I am a well-to-do, privileged white male and a European immigrant in Toronto, and yet I’m afraid of the police here. It’s the general demeanour of many officers and how they’re armed and their short training that intimidates me.

What happens, then, when the heavily armed police in Toronto are sent to meet the homeless, minorities, racialized and vulnerable populations? To do "wellness checks" amongst those who are struggling? In Canada like the US, the police are dealing with issues of poverty and homelessness, and act as first responders to mental health issues. When the police are asked to address issues they are inequipped to address, the result can be a disaster.

In northern Europe where I’m from the police are seen as a trusted partner who address road safety and other challenges in the community, while in Toronto they seem more like an armed force meant to intimidate, and turn a blind eye to the appalling number of traffic safety issues in the city. In Europe, while there certainly is systemic racism there, the police rarely kill anyone. In Finland which has a total population of 5.5 million, only 9 people have been killed by the police since 2000, while in Toronto, with a population of 2.7 million, about 50 individuals have died during a police intervention between 2000 and 2017. And the risk of getting killed by police in Toronto is much higher for black people. While black people in Toronto make up about 8.3 per cent of the population they represent nearly 37 per cent of the victims killed by police.

This must change. The police in Toronto need training that’s less focused on violent force, and more training in general.

Sincerely,

Karri Ojanen