July 16, 2020

Dear Toronto Police Services Board,

Let me begin by mentioning that the fact that we, the public, found out one from one callers on July 9th  2020 that the Virtual Town Hall call-in line was not secure (and other peoples phone calls could be overheard, including Mayor Tory’s) proves that Toronto Police Services (TPS) are not ready to deal with bodycams, and especially not responsible enough to hold the data produced by this level of technology.

We also heard from this testimony that you commissioned a white paper report on community-led initiatives for police service, and you never read it, so I do wonder if you’ve done any research about the efficiency of bodycams before putting a rushed motion forward in collaboration with John Tory at city hall a few weeks ago.

There are several reasons why bodycams would be a complete waste of public funds, and would only increase the Toronto Police Budget 2021 budget of $1,221.2 million. Studies, new stories, and testimonies have shown that BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Colour) have been repeatedly, and disproportionally targeted and killed by Toronto Police Services.

We really don’t need expensive bodycam footage to prove this.

There are a number of other reasons that corroborate this wasteful expense. To begin, bodycams only show from the perspective of cops (not the victim), which skews the view of the situation. This effect of skewed “point of view footage” can be seen in interrogation videos. Footage shot from the perspective of the suspect is much more effective in proving that [confessions were coerced by police services, compared to videos shot from the perspective of the interrogators.](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/08/opinion/bodycams-privacy.html)

In addition, police services have historically failed to release footage when officers are portrayed negatively or being negligent, and [tend to only release footage that lies in their favour](https://www.bwcscorecard.org/). This is not what I call transparency, but rather a way to mislead public perspectives and protect violent behavior by police services.

Furthermore, departmental policies often give officers the discretion to turn the camera on and off, while privacy policies are often focused on protecting officers rather than the general public. This negates any argument that these devices are an accountability measure.

Mayor Tory, last week you said you were surprised by citizens not being pleased by your motion to add bodycams, but who are these bodycams protecting and which narrative are they enforcing? [Police officers patrolling streets and recording citizen who have the assumption of privacy is the creation of a surveillance state](https://www.aclu.org/report/bigger-monster-weaker-chains-growth-american-surveillance-society). Partnered with AI software – [which we know TPS has used](https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2020/02/13/toronto-police-used-clearview-ai-an-incredibly-controversial-facial-recognition-tool.html) is extremely dangerous.

Studies have shown over and over that boycams do not keep police members line but rather are used as a tool for citizen surveillance. Does the TPS budget include cameras, training, policy requirements, data storage and retrieval resources? Will you need additional funding next year because you’ve grossly underestimated the costs of this dangerous imitative? Have you considered the ethical consideration of how bodycam footage will be stored and released to the public?

This expensive and dangerous surveillance tool does not protect BIPOC communities. Redirect TPS budget funds to services requested by BIPOC communities. I urge you not to invest in a tool for citizen surveillance.

Sincerely,

Olivia Wong