

The real numbers: Police funding in Ontario's municipalities

July 22, 2020 – Toronto, ON – The Police Association of Ontario (PAO) is listening to the various discussions occurring in communities across Ontario about 'defunding' the police, and we are concerned that the numbers being cited by some organizations are misleading the public into believing a simple shift of dollars will improve public safety and community relations.

The most significant challenge is that the term 'defunding the police', as a concept or statement, has taken on various and, at times, confusing meanings. For some, it means the total abolition of modern policing; for some, it means the massive paring down of police resources and tasks; and for some, it means the redirection of a portion of police funding to other community priorities such as anti-racist initiatives, poverty reduction, and mental health supports.

"Based on what we've heard, along with our member associations in local communities throughout the province, we believe that the majority of advocates are looking for systemic reform that would include positive changes in policing," said Bruce Chapman, PAO President. "We want to engage in discussions about how that can happen, but we all need to be on the same page when it comes to the numbers."

In order to engage in transparent, fair discussions about such an impactful subject, all groups need to be referencing the same data specific to police funding. If a shared set of data cannot be agreed upon, there is a risk that numbers could be manipulated to support changes that may not ultimately benefit the community. Every municipality is mandated to submit a Financial Information Return (FIR) to the Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing every fiscal year. The FIR is a standard document comprised of a number of Schedules that are updated each year to comply with current legislation and reporting requirements. Within the FIR for any given municipality, annual spending on police services, social services, health services, transportation services, and much more can be reviewed.

It is not always an easy task to discover what percentage of a municipality's budget is dedicated to the provision of police services, and this can sometimes result in the dissemination of inaccurate data. Some have claimed police services are funded at double the percentage than they actually are – instead of highlighting spending on police services alone, these figures in fact reflect a municipality's *total spending on protection services*. Though the overarching budget category of protection services varies by region, it often includes a combination of fire, police, court security, prisoner transportation, conservation authority, protective inspection and control, building permit and inspection services, emergency measures and the Provincial Offences Act (POA) (<https://efis.fma.csc.gov.on.ca/fir/Instructions/FIR2019%20Instructions.pdf>). If there are going to be discussions regarding police budgets and the concept of 'defunding' the police, they should focus on the actual police service expense line.



For example, the percentage of total budget spent on police services in 2018 based on these municipalities' FIR (line 0420) was as follows

(<https://efis.fma.csc.gov.on.ca/fir/ViewFIR2018.htm#1999>):

- Peel Region – 18%
- York Region – 18%
- Durham Region – 16%
- Halton Region – 18%
- Hamilton – 10%
- Ottawa – 9%

Though there have been many recent claims in the media and from community stakeholders that local spending on police services is exorbitant (anywhere from 20-40%), the FIR data states otherwise. In almost all cases, the percentage of police services funding does not outstrip the combination of public health, social services, and social housing (<https://efis.fma.csc.gov.on.ca/fir/ViewFIR2018.htm#1999>). Additionally, a municipality's commitment to adequately funding their local social services should not be dependent on cutting the police budget.

“The PAO is certainly open to having meaningful discussions about where and how positive changes could be made to policing that allow our members to be better positioned to support the unique needs of their community,” concluded President Chapman, “but when serious debate is occurring about whether to defund the police, everyone needs to acknowledge and respect the real numbers.”