



# The agony of proposing system-wide change

Cherri Greeno,\* Kim Nicholson,† Roshan Pinto,‡ and Michael Williams§

## ABSTRACT

Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police (CACP) Executive Global Studies 2020–2022 cohort members share the challenges, fears, and pride experienced while exploring the future of policing...for police.

**Key Words** Systemic change; collaboration; public trust in policing; innovation; professionalization of policing; police reform.

## INTRODUCTION

Feel comfortable with the uncomfortable.

This was the theme that quickly emerged during our 2020–2022 Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police (CACP) Executive Global Studies Program, which saw 24 senior-level police executives travel to 14 countries in search of one answer—what is the future of policing...for police?

This question would be a difficult one to answer at the best of times, but try tackling it when the policing profession is in crisis, when there are calls to defund or, worse, abolish the police altogether. Nevertheless, we were committed to the task at hand.

During our journey, we conducted hundreds of interviews with police, military, and other experts from around the world. We brought our research back, discussed, debated, and ultimately revealed what we believed was the answer to improving the policing profession throughout Canada.

However, we knew that revelation was not what was expected of us.

We were expected by most of our stakeholders to deliver a *thing*. A material object or program. Something concrete. A tangible item that police leaders across the country could use to make change.

As we mapped out our research, we quickly realized it wasn't a *thing* we could deliver, but rather an *idea*.

It wasn't an action. It wasn't structured. It wasn't a gift-wrapped solution.

Instead, it was a thought. A concept. A call for a change in mindset.

Before that change of mindset could occur, we had to deliver a harsh message and it had to resonate—police leaders across Canada must overcome the prevailing reflex to act alone.

As a beginning, we asked police leaders in Canada to think about the development of a special purpose body that

would bring together a diverse group of thinkers to take steps towards acting in unison as a profession and to forever change the landscape of Canadian policing.

## THE PROPOSITION

Under the banner of the Canadian Policing Initiative (CPI), the identified body would be charged with the challenging task of establishing the architecture to change our thinking and to unite police leaders in a common objective, wherever it might be most suitable to do so. Through our Global Studies 2020–2022 research, five key areas were identified as immediately suitable for sector-wide unification, and we believe these can help to form the focus and agenda of the initial CPI body, who would be tasked to further develop parameters, priorities, and opportunities in a *design sprint* model.

The five streams we proposed as an ideal place to start the pan-Canadian discussions are as follows:

1. Wellness
2. Professionalization
3. Leadership Development
4. Innovation and Technology
5. Community Engagement Methods

As we began to work on our proposal, we admittedly grew more and more uncomfortable. We were struggling to find any comfort in the unfamiliar and unpredictable journey this was turning into. How do we propose a system-wide change with an *idea*? Especially an idea that we knew top police leaders in the country were likely not ready to hear? After all, our own research assumption was premised on police culture being resistant to change.

We were headed into the great unknown. And, needless to say, it was frightening.

Correspondence to: Cherri Greeno. E-mail: Cherri.greeno@wrps.on.ca

To cite: Greeno, C., Nicholson, K., Pinto, R., & Williams, M. (2022). The agony of proposing system-wide change. *Journal of Community Safety and Well-Being*, 7(3), 131–133. <https://doi.org/10.35502/jcswb.277>

© Author(s) 2022. Open Access. This work is distributed under the Creative Commons BY-NC-ND license. For commercial re-use, please contact sales@sgpublishing.ca.

SG PUBLISHING Published by SG Publishing Inc. CSKA Official publication of the Community Safety Knowledge Alliance.

We found ourselves recalling scenes from the children's fairy tale *The Emperor's New Clothes*. Do you recall the crowd of followers who were so caught up in believing that they could never be led astray that they ignored what was right in front of their faces? How about the small, rather insignificant voice in the crowd challenging the leader whose ego was more important than the truth, not only to himself, but also to the ever-reassuring crowd? It takes courage to state the obvious, to say you cannot agree with long-established patterns, and in our case, to tell the "system" it is naked, while so many others continue to see it fully clothed. When you do, there's no going back. That's how it felt to be part of the Global Studies 2020–2022 program.

## THE EVIDENCE

Despite the challenges we were facing, we knew our idea was possible. Why? Because there was evidence—both internationally and nationally—to suggest the unified approach we were proposing had been done—and done well—in the past and is actually flourishing in other countries.

Internationally, our collective research identified impressive and varied models of a unified approach in the countries we visited, each of them backed by ample evidence, data, and trend lines that supported the transformative impact of a collective approach on the pace and scope of change.

In the United Kingdom, what started as an online national police well-being resource, Oscar Kilo has grown into a recognizable brand and trusted service across the country. By actively promoting that it's OK to focus on mental health and take care of one another, organizational culture is shifting, members are talking, and police leaders are listening. So powerful has the OK movement become that it has made its way into popular culture, frequently referenced in British policing shows, and is evident on bus shelters throughout the United Kingdom.

In Scotland, Norway, Finland, and Iceland, the concept of true leadership and professionalized policing is held in high regard. In Norway and Finland, a 3-year Bachelor of Police Services is required to be completed prior to applying for a police position. No different than any other post-secondary profession, such as nursing, teaching, or the trades, policing is promoted as a viable career choice to high school students. Because of the prestige associated with acquiring a degree, police officers are viewed as "educated professionals," which has translated into respect and confidence in the public's eye and created a greater pool of diverse candidates. Professionalization of policing and the concept of a degree program were also seen in Croatia, New Zealand, Australia, the United Kingdom, and Spain.

In Colombia, when faced with increased public trust issues, the Colombian National Police realized that, to make meaningful change within their organization, they needed to consult with and hear from the public. Adopting a business-type model, their leaders went into the community and conducted interviews with residents, leaders, and university executives. This may not sound revolutionary, but it's *how* they did this community consultation that is unique. They took their consultation process into the homes of the family members of their employees to gain true insight into how the employees viewed the organization. They didn't just talk to them. They listened. And they took action.

In Australia and New Zealand, innovational success was driven largely by the Australia New Zealand Policing Advisory Agency (ANZPAA). Appropriate for our research theme, ANZPAA's purpose is to "position policing for the future." ANZPAA provides balanced and impartial advice on current and emerging priorities, identifies and responds to risks and opportunities, and supports policing to solve complex problems and create preferred futures. The agency proactively partners with policing and key stakeholders to generate and share innovative ideas, enhancing outcomes for policing and communities. They also provide consistent good practice and explore ways to optimize resources in a cost-effective and sustainable way. Notably, ANZPAA has tracked a growing uptake of the advice and services they offer, with many more agencies now using their trend forecasting and other analyses to inform local policy and practice.

In New Zealand, the high level of trust between police and the Māori people was unmistakable. The New Zealand Police place a lot of focus on authentically inclusive engagement, collaborating with and including the Māori people in everything they do. This ranges from providing guidance in the development of procedures and business plans to the recruitment of new members. This collaboration has resulted in strong, positive relationships between the two co-existing societies—thanks to many years of nation-wide, dedicated efforts.

What was more compelling than all the discoveries from our international research was the fact that we saw the mindset to act together happen right here in our own country—with Community Safety and Well-Being (CSWB). As just one example, this loosely defined CPI concept, as proposed, reflects and builds upon the proven success of the Ontario Working Group (OWG) approach. By drawing on Saskatchewan initiatives, the informal OWG led that province through wide and rapid expansion of CSWB Plans and, ultimately, ushered in supporting legislation in just 4 short years. In fact, the widespread adoption of CSWB as a core policing philosophy now spans every province and territory, and no specific entity or structure has ever "owned" the mandate.

We know how to do it, but we have never come together in quite this way for the benefit of our own sector. We're fragmented by jurisdictional boundaries, real and perceived. Frankly, they're used as a shield and too frequently become the excuse for maintaining status quo or going at it alone. And yet, Canadian police find ways to transcend these boundaries in the case of an emergency or when there's an operational requirement, such as a protest or a cross-border investigation. Yet, somehow, the idea of coming together to create a single innovation plan for the use of body-worn cameras or to develop a standard curriculum for senior police leaders is incomprehensible.

In fact, we were acutely aware that the Global Studies 2008 cohort's suggestion for a pan-Canadian approach to professionalized policing was collecting dust, along with the outcomes from subsequent cohorts whose findings implied something similar. We concluded that nothing was done due to the simple fact that there was resistance, an outright refusal to accept that change was necessary. Someone told us, "You can't change the system without changing minds," and it's a brilliant summation of where we currently are as a policing profession. It's also the biggest hurdle to achieving system-level change. This was—is—our struggle.

## THE CHALLENGE

Ultimately, our call to action is as simple as it is complex. On the one hand, we are simply looking to engage in new, open-minded conversation, one to which others will be welcomed, and one we can no longer choose to avoid. The complexity derives from the myriad directions this new conversation might lead, and frankly, we are excited by those possibilities. Imagine if we were able to suspend the jurisdictional reflexes and let the art of the possible become the new ethos to guide this work. How might our public and our stakeholders respond when they see the Canadian policing sector acting together to introduce, develop, and advance a new decade of reform?

The weight of knowing that we were on the path to proposing significant change was daunting. After all, we weren't simply presenting the idea to a group of our peers. We were presenting it to the most recognized and influential leaders in the field. As Inspectors, Superintendents, and civilian professionals, we were outranked. Why would they listen to us? Doubt began to overtake most of us, and we questioned whether proposing such a drastic recommendation would be a career killer.

But we also asked ourselves, "If we don't do it, who will?"

In the end, we decided to be ok with not necessarily feeling ok. Instead of fearing rejection, we would challenge it. If no one on the inside challenged the system, we knew that system would forever be resistant to change.

## THE MESSAGE

There should be no regrets in identifying gaps, researching emerging trends, and trailblazing a successful path for the

future. Regardless of our fears, we were confident that our research led us to the conclusion that this change is necessary, and that necessity became our driving force. As Plato said, necessity is the mother of invention. And we knew that overcoming our own personal fears to capitalize on a critical moment in time was the only way to drive that necessary change.

As the program concluded and our recommendations were revealed, we knew we had contributed not only to significant change in the policing profession but to our own personal growth as well. While we didn't think it possible at first, we did learn to feel comfortable with the uncomfortable. As a result, we emerged stronger leaders, stronger individuals, and stronger police professionals.

We hope our own learning will encourage other CSWB professionals, wherever they may fit within the system, to keep asking the most difficult questions, to recognize the most compelling answers even when others have not, and to drive necessary change in the system forward without reservation. If we don't do it, who will?

We learned something else, too. Once you know the right thing to do, it is almost impossible not to do it.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

### AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

\*Director of Corporate Affairs, Waterloo Regional Police Service, Waterloo, ON, Canada; †Executive Director of Strategic Affairs, Winnipeg Police Service, Winnipeg, MB, Canada; ‡Inspector, Executive Officer to the Commissioner, Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Ottawa, ON, Canada; §Inspector, Toronto Police Service, Toronto, ON, Canada.