



Opportunities for volunteering within Canadian policing: Insights from England and Wales

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As policing in Canada evolves to tackle complex challenges such as changes in crime, connecting with communities, improving public trust and legitimacy in the service, and recruiting and retaining quality police personnel, resources and budgets continue to be restricted. At the same time, the evidence base of “what works” within policing continues to grow and be utilized to inform decisions. Our ongoing research on volunteer police, training, and education, and working collaboratively with colleagues across different countries, has motivated us to write this commentary as it has helped highlight for us the variety of ways policing differs in similar economic, political, and social environments. It has also highlighted that we have much to learn by comparing across locales and when we take a more global approach to understanding policing and the evidence base on which it is built.

Given this, by comparing and contrasting the role of uniformed volunteers in Canada (known mostly as auxiliary members or reserve constables) with uniformed volunteers in England and Wales (known as special constables, not to be confused with Canada’s Special Constables who are sworn Peace Officers, paid employees, and who work in particular locales such as university campuses, court security, and public transit, and not the focus of this commentary), we want to highlight the important role served by volunteers, the opportunities and possible benefits associated with engaging them, and the need for more research on volunteers in Canadian policing to assist in growing the evidence base to inform both decisions and practice. Research to inform decisions and practice in relation to unpaid volunteers within policing is still in its infancy. Volunteers have played a large part in policing since its inception and their role is likely to expand in coming years as the police are asked to do more with less, but there is a need to ensure that the decisions made about volunteers are the best-informed ones.

England and Wales has a more established volunteer framework than Canada under a national agenda of Citizens in Policing (CiP), championed by a Chief Police Officer with a national strategy. In 1831, the Special Constables Act formally established the voluntary role of special constables to support policing in times of civil unrest. Today, slightly over

147,000 full-time equivalent regular police officers serving in forces across England and Wales have the frontline boosted by slightly over 6,300 volunteer uniformed special constables (Home Office, 2024), who as unpaid volunteers agree to donate a number of hours each month. In addition, over 7,300 police support volunteers (Home Office, 2024) also formally donate their time to use their existing skills and expertise in support of policing in non-operational roles such as staffing police station front counters, administration, or monitoring CCTV.

Canada has no such framework or national strategy, and historical information on volunteers in policing is limited. Although in comparison to England and Wales, some of Canada’s largest police services (e.g., Royal Canadian Mounted Police and Ontario Provincial Police) only initiated their auxiliary programs in the 1960s (Parent, 2017). Canada has approximately 70,114 full-time officers (Statistics Canada, 2023), but it is unclear how many unpaid uniformed volunteers support these officers and in what roles; this is despite most major police services having formal volunteer policing programs.

While the specific requirements for becoming a uniformed volunteer vary by country and police service, there are several common requirements for appointment such as citizenship or permanent residence in the country, being 18 years of age or older, and being able to pass a criminal background check and medical assessment (Parent, 2017).

In England and Wales, special constables wear the same uniform as their regular police officer colleagues, have similar equipment, and when on duty have the same warranted powers and authority, whereas police support volunteers often wear corporate clothing rather than a uniform and do not have warranted powers. Canada differs in that auxiliary members often wear uniforms that attempt to overtly distinguish them from regular officers (e.g., different colours and insignia) and have limited police powers when volunteering (O’Connor et al., 2022a).

Regardless of the country, upon recruitment, volunteers usually complete an initial programme of learning, which requires a return on this initial investment to make such an approach economically viable. It is important to note that many volunteers often donate significant time each month in support of policing (O’Connor et al., 2022b; Pepper and

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Wolf, 2015), and importantly, the use of such volunteers should not be seen only in economic terms, but also having broader social, cultural, and community impacts (Pepper and Rogers, 2022).

The opportunities presented to policing and society for using volunteers are many and varied. Their role is to supplement mainstream policing; this is often on the front-line performing patrols, responding to calls for service, supporting victims, taking part in crime reduction initiatives, community events, neighbourhood policing, or policing large-scale events.

Across England and Wales, the number of volunteers has declined in recent years; this in part may be due to the competitiveness of volunteering opportunities with other agencies, perceptions by the public of the police and people re-evaluating their work-life balance after the COVID-19 emergency. Despite reducing numbers, in 2021, volunteer special constables in total donated an average of 186,000 hours a month (Police Federation, 2023), a significant number of additional resources. There is, however, an opportunity for growth across both nations in the wider attraction, use, and retention of volunteers. For example, some special constables in England and Wales are approved to use their existing specialist knowledge, skills, and qualifications to support policing in other ways, such as investigating cybercrimes, being crew members in marine units, or piloting drones. Having access to these specialized transferable skills from volunteers benefits policing, but at the same time, the volunteers gain valuable transferrable experiences and new knowledge and skills to take away with them.

Over the last few years in England and Wales, many special constables have also moved to become regular police officers. One of the great opportunities presented by a standardized special constables learning programme designed by the professional body for policing across England and Wales, the College of Policing, is that if special constables have completed their formal learning and then apply to be a regular police constable, there is an opportunity for their learning to be recognized and transferred to their new regular officer learning programme, shortening the duration to become a fully-fledged regular police officer (College of Policing, 2020). We are not aware of such a national streamlined process existing within Canada; however, there are calls for the establishment of provincial professional bodies in Canada to aid a move to the recognition of policing as a profession, including greater standardization of learning (Sundberg et al., 2021).

Volunteers are also seen as a bridge between local communities and policing, enhancing the services' local legitimacy by enabling special constables and auxiliary members to volunteer where they care most about their community. In England and Wales, the representativeness of ethnic minority groups across the ranks of the special constabulary is traditionally higher than their regular police colleagues, although it must be acknowledged that the proportion of female volunteer special constables is often less than their regular police colleagues. Unfortunately, there are no such longer-term trend data available in Canada.

With increasing demands on policing, reduced budgets, and the hope to reconnect and gain the trust of the

public, there is growth in the use of volunteers across England and Wales under the banner of CiP. These include additionality achieved through the recruitment, training, and deployment of relatively new volunteer roles such as uniformed Volunteer Police Community Support Officers, who donate their time to provide community reassurance, and Volunteer Police Cadet (VPC) leaders, who engage young people in a uniformed youth scheme learning about policing, citizenship, and participating in community initiatives, the indications from which suggest that the economic and wider societal benefits of VPC leaders could be significant (Pepper and Rogers, 2022). However, researchers have only begun to scratch the surface of the impacts of calls for reduced budgets and their impact on the use of volunteers and the service.

The need for a better understanding of volunteers within policing in Canada is critical. In comparison to England and Wales, there is so much we still do not know, but we can still learn from each other. There is a lack of research on volunteers in Canadian policing to build the evidence base to inform national, regional, and local policy decisions and practices. There is great potential for volunteers to help influence the changes in policing that so many have called for, but as it stands, understanding and evolving this potential in the Canadian context is in its infancy.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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