

THE CIVILIANIZATION OF PUBLIC SAFETY FUNCTIONS

November 21, 2019
AMO WatchFile Guest Column

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Today, the Macdonald Laurier Institute released its latest contribution to policing policy. The paper's author, Dr. Christian Leuprecht, has written extensively on the rising cost of policing in Canada. He has spoken at various AMO events and met with AMO's Policing Modernization Task Force in 2015. One key task force recommendation is to permit the greater transfer of specific non-core policing functions to civilians or other security providers where appropriate. The paper, called "Where to draw the blue line? How civilians and contractors can let police do the policing" speaks to that in greater detail. Dr. Leuprecht writes a summary below.

Stressed municipal budgets, expanding public expectations, growing complexity of police services, and mounting salary pressures are all driving calls to reform the way policing services are delivered.

The costs of policing services and the cost drivers are multivariate; there is no simple solution for reform. On the one hand, reformists tout "civilianization," privatization, and contracting as possible game-changers to contain rising costs, improve service delivery, and deliver community safety outcomes. On the other hand, law-and-order traditionalists – police associations and chiefs first and foremost among them – deem alternative service delivery (ASD) a disruptor. But many industries and sectors are being disrupted by technology and new business models, including crime. Why not policing?

This study examines the current and potential contribution of alternative service delivery to what is commonly known as non-core policing functions. Initially the study frames the problem that is driving this discussion. It reviews alternative service delivery, distinguishes among three of its key concepts (civilianization, privatization, and contracting out), and examines how alternative service delivery applies to policing. Two propositions distinguish alternative service delivery from non-core policing: that police have been providing services that are not, at their core, policing services, or that police are not optimized to deliver; and that, normatively, in a democracy, such services are problematic insofar as they constitute unwarranted intervention by the state in people's lives. Indeed, the public has an intuitive sense of how core a service really is: popular support is higher for uniformed police to deliver services involving Criminal Code offenses than to deliver other services such as security at public events.

To this end, the study details the sort of services that are already being delivered under non-core policing and the associated gains in efficiency and effectiveness that come from switching to alternative service delivery for non-core policing. To illustrate the point, this study examines a series of case studies drawn from across Canadian cities. Together, they show the range of services that civilians are already delivering around the country on behalf of police services. Unsurprisingly, the approaches and extent of service delivery vary across the country. Nonetheless, it turns out that the “civilianization of service delivery” (i.e., giving civilians the task of carrying out some policing functions) that is highly contentious and hotly debated in one place has long been delivered successfully elsewhere. To be sure, the greatest obstacles to change come from police associations and chiefs who are stiffly resisting the efforts of legislators and other civilian authorities to implement new approaches. Still, albeit limited and unsystematic, there is actually more evidence than one might expect from across Canada on alternative service delivery in policing and the delivery of non-core policing by civilians.

The study contains several key findings. First, there is much confusion about concepts such as privatization, civilianization, and contracting; the study explains those concepts in depth, which will help ensure that the public discourse on alternative service delivery and non-core policing is clear and sensible.

Second, what may be acceptable and appropriate in one context may not be doable in another, but the study emphasizes that better and more systematic evidence will go a long way toward alleviating such concerns from the public, associations, and the law enforcement members.

Third, evidence shows that many of the concerns raised about alternative service delivery can be addressed with proper, enforceable contracts and careful selection of a qualified, appropriate, experienced alternative service delivery provider, especially if that provider’s personnel are drawn from retired police or military members who are already experienced and understand the policing culture.

Fourth, while it may be tempting to think of alternative service delivery primarily in terms of efficiencies, observations from across the country indicate that non-core policing really provides a more effective service delivery with better outcomes, which enables police services to reinvest the money and personnel they save in the uniformed service. As such, rather than positing non-core policing as zero-sum in which non-core policing’s gains are losses for traditional policing services, research shows that non-core policing is actually positive-sum for police and communities alike.

Finally, the study points out that the legislative environment to enable non-core policing varies across the country, sets different standards and expectations, and in many cases exposes municipalities to potential liability, which deters them from even experimenting with non-core policing. The implementation of non-core policing will remain tepid unless legislation reduces that liability while providing for a more coherent and systematic set of standards.

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