

Chapter 4.

Defund to Abolish

A 400-Year Struggle against Policing in Montreal

Defund the Police Coalition (Montreal)

Policing in Montreal has always been a problem, even before the creation of a formal police department. Known as Tiohtià:ke by the Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk) people, the island of Montreal is located at the junction of Kanien'kehá:ka and Algonquin territories. In 1640, the island was bequeathed by the French Crown to a band of settlers known as the *Compagnie des associés pour la conversion des sauvages*, who began to settle the area two years later. Over the next century, the settlers expanded in number (from 50 in 1642 to 3,500 in 1750) and gradually established a rigidly hierarchical society. At the top of the social order stood government representatives, the Catholic bishop and clergy, gentleman-soldiers, merchants, and their families. At the bottom stood soldiers, artisans, workers, sailors, indentured servants, and their families. Beyond this social order entirely were African captives held as slaves by the political, religious, and business elite, as well as various Indigenous peoples. The latter, when they inhabited the city, were either held as slaves or subject to coerced religious conversion in missions.¹

An early form of policing emerged in this context, a form tailored to the hierarchical social order. Certain laws, such as those outlawing public drunkenness and sex work, implicitly criminalized the lives of

the lower classes. Other laws were more explicit in this respect. The sale of liquor to Africans, Indigenous people, and indentured servants was outlawed. Enslaved people and indentured servants, though they could be charged in a criminal or civil case, could not bring charges against another person or appear as a witness in a criminal case. For both categories of captive, moreover, it was a crime to leave their master's home without permission and, of course, to escape captivity. In this context, the role of policing was played by many people. Prosecution for a crime could originate in a complaint filed with a magistrate by any white (non-indentured) person, but military detachments also patrolled the city every night after 9 p.m., scanning the streets and taverns for vagrants, sex workers or women who could be profiled as such, and drunken individuals. When enslaved people escaped, all white citizens were effectively deputized to capture and return the freedom-seeker to their owner. Magistrates interrogated the accused, heard witnesses, and decided on criminal and civil cases.²

When a formal police department was created in 1865, it incorporated these existing logics of criminalization. There is little information about the policing of Black and Indigenous people in this period, as the Black population had dwindled to 72 in 1871 (likely due to out-migration to Ontario) and the last Indigenous community had been pushed off the island in 1721.³ Early targets of the Montreal police department were striking workers, frequently repressed with violence, as well as vagrants, sex workers, and working-class people in general. Between 1836 and 1913, 96 percent of people serving time in the Montreal jail were skilled or unskilled workers, and "disorderly conduct" (usually drunkenness) accounted for 66 percent of convictions.⁴

Political repression was another constant. In the 1960s, the police arrested and brutalized Québécois activists at numerous demonstrations, including "le samedi de la matraque" in 1964 (34 arrests), "la lundi de la matraque" in 1968 (292 arrests, 123 injured), and the October Crisis in 1970 (497 activists, artists, union members, and community workers arrested in their homes).⁵ Targeting the Black community, the police arrested Marcus Garvey on a visit to Montreal

in 1928, violently repressed the Black-led computer lab occupation at Sir George Williams University in 1969 (killing Coralee Hutchison), and frequently raided Black community spaces and the homes of Black activists in the 1970s.⁶ Targeting sexual “deviance,” the police brutally raided cruising spots and gay clubs in the 1970s, ’80s, and ’90s, arresting over 800 people in four raids alone.⁷ In the 1960s and ’70s, an unofficial policy of opening fire on bank robbers, usually working-class Québécois and Irish people, created what one author has called a police “death squad” that resulted in dozens of killings.⁸

Since the founding of the department, the Montreal police have adapted their mandates, funding, priorities, and policies in ways that target people who are seen as less worthy, less deserving, or less than human—people whose lives or behaviours seem to depart from or disrupt the lives, norms, and interests of the dominant class. The actions of the police, while shaped by the society’s structures of domination, also reinforce and help to produce such structures of domination, as they create ideas about who is criminal and who is innocent that mirror and reinforce ideas about human value in general. As Black and Indigenous scholars and activists have made clear, settler colonies on Turtle Island are founded on a distinction between the human and less than human, a racial distinction that casts Black and Indigenous peoples outside the sphere of human belonging. This distinction, however, also provides a terrain for the *relative* dehumanization of many other groups, including other racial groups and non-normative people of all racial backgrounds (e.g., LGBTQ2S+ people, sex workers, people experiencing mental illness and/or homelessness). This structure of domination has made policing a death-dealing institution from its origins to the present.

For these reasons, policing has also been a target of resistance throughout its history. Some of this resistance has involved tacit, everyday acts of refusal and rebellion; some has involved more visible resistance, such as organized protest, direct action, and advocacy. Resistance to policing became more visible and well organized in Montreal in the late 1970s. The first major Montreal protest against

police racism occurred in 1979, after the police attacked a group of Haitian soccer players in the east-side neighbourhood of Rosemont. Further large-scale protests against police racism and violence occurred after the 1987 killing of Anthony Griffin, a Black teenager, and the 1991 killing of Marcellus François, another Black teenager. Significant protests also followed the police raids of gay clubs in 1977 and 1990, and annual protests against police abuse and violence have occurred since 1995.⁹

These protests, along with broader community organizing efforts, have resulted in a series of police reforms that mirror those implemented in other North American cities. Cultural sensitivity training has been integrated into police education since 1987, minority hiring targets were established in 1991, new venues of police-community dialogue have continually appeared, and modest reforms to police discipline were introduced in 1990 and 2013. These reforms responded to some activist demands, but sidestepped many others. More transformational demands, never implemented, included the replacement of police with community self-defence in certain neighbourhoods, the disarming of front-line officers, full civilian control of police discipline, and the decriminalization of many offences.¹⁰

The implemented reforms have done little, if anything, to alter the operation of policing. The introduction of sensitivity training, for example, coincided with a sharp increase in the killing of Black Montrealers, leading some (civilian) trainers to quit in protest in 1991. Reforms to police discipline were similarly ineffective. In the first five years of the new discipline system (1990–95), only 1.5 percent of complaints against an officer resulted in disciplinary action. The 2013 reform, the creation of an “independent” body to investigate police killings and significant acts of violence, has yet to result in a single charge against an officer.¹¹ Racial profiling continues to be a problem. A study in 2009 found that 38 to 40 percent of Black residents of two Montreal neighbourhoods had been stopped in the previous year, compared to only 4 to 6 percent of white residents. A 2019 study found that Black men and Indigenous men were four times more likely to be

stopped than white men, while Indigenous women were twelve times more likely to be stopped than white women.¹²

In spite of four decades of protest and reform, then, policing in Montreal continues to operate as it always has. And for good reason: the implemented reforms have failed to dismantle the structure or imperatives of policing. They have sought cosmetic changes to policing, but not less policing—or none. As a result, policing continues to reflect, reinforce, and help to produce structures of domination. It continues to criminalize lives and behaviours perceived to fall outside dominant norms, and therefore upholds through surveillance and various forms of violence the dominant structures of the society: capitalism, white supremacy, ableism, and cisheteropatriarchy. Oppressed populations are criminalized both through the codification of laws (which turns ordinary, non-harmful behaviours into infractions) and overpolicing (which results in arrests for infractions that go unpoliced among more privileged groups).

The police are the primary public institution responsible for public safety, but their work has little to do with this mission. It targets non-normative behaviours or entire communities, not harm. From a safety perspective, most of what the police do is unnecessary. It is either unrelated to safety, directly injurious to safety, or both. Police work that is not unnecessary, meanwhile, could be performed better by other agencies, existing and yet-to-be-created services oriented toward care, preventing and stopping harm as defined by those who experience it, and holding people accountable when harms are committed. There is a whole realm of harms that exist in society, finally, that the police do not even purport to address and often cause or contribute to.

The Montreal Defund the Police Coalition emerged from the recognition that mere reforms will not address the problem of policing. Reforms will not make communities targeted by policing safer, because the role of policing is to make them unsafe. What is required instead is an entirely different approach to public safety and well-being and, to make this possible, a transfer of public money from the

police to community-based initiatives centred on care, harm prevention, and transformative justice. The coalition was formed in June 2020 in the midst of the worldwide uprising against police racism and violence that followed the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor (killed in her home by Louisville, Kentucky, police), as well as Regis Korchinski-Paquet (Toronto) and Chantal Moore (Edmunston). It began with a small number of groups already engaged in efforts to defund and disempower the police. Together, these groups developed a list of demands (appended to this chapter) and asked groups across Montreal to support the demands and join the coalition. By September, over sixty groups had joined and six committees had been created to address particular tasks: popular education, communications, direct action, analysis of the police budget, reinvestment, and ending police involvement with youth.

A strong and central representation of women involved in fighting against gender-based violence has been essential to the coalition's work. In Montreal, as elsewhere, many of the dominant voices in the discussion of sexual violence or intimate partner violence advocate for punitive approaches, but most marginalized women have a more nuanced view of violence and the best ways of addressing it. Dominant voices—playing the role of pundit, troll, or devil's advocate—love to point out what defunding the police would supposedly mean for survivors of sexual and domestic violence. But members of the coalition live with these realities every day and have elaborated demands that are coherent with their needs and the intersecting forms of oppression that exist in their communities. The primary concern of many women who are experiencing intimate partner violence might be to ensure they don't lose custody of their children in family court or at the hands of social workers; to not be murdered once their partner is out of police custody; to get psychological, social, and financial support; or to heal and prevent intergenerational trauma within their community. Police do not provide any of those services; indeed, they often work in direct opposition to those needs. For one thing, the women who are most at risk of being victims of violence are often the

same women who are the most at risk of being arrested or brutalized by police. Defunding the police provides a path to untangling those connections and mobilizing for a better approach to violence.

Since its creation, much of the Defund the Police Coalition's work has involved engaging with communities, especially those most targeted by police, to develop a concrete and prioritized plan for defunding and reinvestment. What aspects of policing should be the first to go? What community-based initiatives should be the first to be funded with the money freed up? Other tasks include direct action (usually protests) and public outreach (press conferences, interviews with media, video capsules). This work, along with the work of activists around the world, has begun to shift public opinion and force open political opportunities. An Environics poll in July 2020 found that 54 percent of Quebecers supported reduced funding for the police, a positive result given the newness of the idea of defunding to many people. In a pre-budget public consultation in August 2020, moreover, 73 percent of Montrealers called for a reduction in the police budget. Despite the coalition's organizing and strong popular support, the ruling Projet Montreal government chose to increase the police budget by \$14.7 million for 2021.¹³ The struggle will continue, then, into the next budget-making season—and beyond.

Beyond the objective of actually defunding the police and reinvesting in our communities, the coalition's work and its ripple effects have also created opportunities for popular education and bringing together many groups who often feel left out of conversations about policing or who don't always work closely together. The Defund the Police Coalition positions itself clearly in solidarity with everyone who experiences unwanted contacts with police, regardless of whether their behaviours are considered crimes or not, and has made solidarity with other impacted communities mandatory. Not everyone in the coalition needs to fully understand the needs of, for example, trans women, sex workers, people living with HIV, or undocumented migrants, but they must agree to the inclusion of their needs in the coalition's demands. Similarly, groups and individuals who have been

fighting against some police practices and unjust laws without including a robust racial analysis are expected to use their membership in the coalition as an opportunity to address racism in meaningful ways. Bringing people together around the shared goal of defunding the police unites various struggles, from ending the overdose crisis to making our streets safe for Black youth, from ending the disappearances and murders of Indigenous and trans women to making sure everyone has food to eat and a comfortable place to sleep.

Policing in Montreal has been a problem since the beginning of the city's existence as a settler colonial outpost. This problem was merely professionalized with the creation of a formal police department in 1865, and it has endured through over four decades of effort to reform this institution. The struggle to defund the police emerges from a long history of resistance to policing and the increasing recognition that the problem is not too little reform, but too much policing. The struggle to defund the police creates new solidarities among the communities who are harmed at once by the police and the hierarchical, oppressive social order that the police abet and help to create.

Defunding the police creates a point of convergence and solidarity between communities that have, until recently, been left to combat the police on their own or in smaller coalitions. It provides a language and a vision for a different kind of world and a different meaning of safety. The struggle to defund the police has made it clear that everyone but the elite will benefit from defunding the police and reinvesting care, harm prevention, and transformative justice. This truth will carry forward the movement and allow it to grow, flourish, and win.

Ten Demands of the Defund the Police Coalition (Montreal)

Defund

1. Immediately cut at least 50 percent from the \$665 million Service de police de la Ville de Montréal (SPVM) budget and redirect these funds to the programs and services, managed by and for affected communities, outlined in the demands below.

Disarm and Demilitarize

2. Withdraw all weapons from police officers, including tasers, batons, firearms, rubber bullets, tear gas, pepper spray, and sound cannons; disband militarized police units, including SWAT teams and other units using military grade weapons and surveillance equipment.

Decolonize

3. Invest in Indigenous models of justice and empower Indigenous communities to address through these models all harms committed by Indigenous people; empower other oppressed communities, especially Black communities, to develop and run similar approaches to justice.

Reinvest

4. Invest in programs created and run by communities to prevent harm (including harms related to violence, mental illness, and drug use) and support transformative justice; empower communities to develop and manage programs that work for them, with the understanding that communities are not monolithic, experience multiple intersecting axes of oppression, and require leadership and programs that integrate and utilize an intersectional approach (e.g., LBGTQ2S+, disability, sex work, drug use).

5. Create and fund unarmed service teams outside the police to address mental health and drug related crises, traffic violations, gender-based violence, juvenile “summary” offences, and missing persons cases.
6. Invest in programs and services, including youth programs, recreation programs, and social housing, in presently criminalized communities; empower communities to develop and manage programs that work for them.

Decriminalize

7. Decriminalize all drugs, sex work, and HIV status, eliminate the SPVM drug squad, morality squad, Eclipse squad, and all other units targeting marginalized communities, as well as all proactive surveillance programs, and release and expunge criminal records for drug and sex work charges.
8. Eliminate social control bylaws related to “incivilities,” and release and expunge all records related to these bylaws (including unpaid bylaw fines), including surveillance and enforcement in public transit.
9. Permanently withdraw police from schools and sports programs, and cease police patrols of public parks, community events, and other spaces in which youth congregate.
10. End the criminalization and surveillance of migration by eliminating all collaboration between the police and Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) agents and any other form of involvement of the SPVM in immigration matters.