

Duty-Related Bodily Harm Associated with Canadian Police

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Why is a contextualized assessment of duty-related bodily harm needed?

Criticisms of Canadian police interactions with the public have escalated since early 2010s, with increasing negative media attention, including exclusion from articles praising other frontline workers, and calls for pervasive reforms. Police use of force is not inherently wrong, is sometimes necessary to protect citizens, and is prescribed by provincial legislation to prevent further risk of harm to the public.

Negative media coverage often focuses on critiquing police causing duty-related bodily harm (DRBH) without sufficient context. Police decisions to use force are often scrutinized through lengthy internal and governmental processes, independent provincial civilian oversight agencies (IPCOAs), and the media, exacerbating mental health risks. Misinformed public perceptions appear pervasive, such as evidence that Canadian university students estimate police use firearms for ~2% of public encounters, despite actual use being ~0.01%.

DRBH reported without context and coupled with anti-police rhetoric likely causes harms to individual police, and undermines efforts at recruitment, retention, community engagement, and Indigenous reconciliation. Concerted efforts are needed to reframe the Canadian police discourse.

The current study

The current study quantitatively analysed publicly available Canadian data on DRBH involving use of force exceeding legally-approved standard operating procedures or involving code of conduct violations (FELSOP), relative to total police occurrences.

All data was extracted from publicly available Canadian datasets spanning 2000 to 2023. IPCOA reports provided DRBH counts involving FELSOP associated with IPCOA referrals to the Crown. IPCOA Crown referrals are used as a proxy for the maximum number of instances of FELSOP with the recognition that a criminal conviction by the Crown is what ultimately draws a conclusion of criminal wrongdoing, and that all parties remain innocent until proven guilty in a court of law. The number of police criminally charged for actions resulting in a deceased member of the public were extracted from official criminal court proceedings.

Counts of active-duty police and police occurrences were extracted from the annual Statistics Canada Police Administration Survey. Official causes of death were extracted from the Statistics Canada Canadian Vital Statistics Database, and Canadian census data were extracted from the Quarterly Demographics Estimates data tables. Counts of police officer fatalities resulting from intentionally harmful acts by members of the public (i.e., excluding accidents) were extracted from a report of on-duty Canadian police officer fatalities (Ral, Touwaide and Piché, 2023).

Results

- Since 2012, IPCOA Crown referrals have been stable at less than 0.08% (i.e., <1/10th of 1%) of all police occurrences.
- From 2000 to 2023, there were 338 fatalities resulting from police or legal interventions, including 47 police officer fatalities resulting from intentionally harmful acts by members of the public.
- The rate of fatalities of members of the public per police occurrence has remained at less than 0.001% (i.e., less than 1/1000th of 1%) since 2000.
- Since 2000, there have been only three Canadian police convicted of DRBH involving FELSOP resulting in a deceased member of the public while on duty.
- Police appear ~23.5 times more likely to die by intentionally harmful acts by members of the public than to be convicted of fatal DRBH involving FELSOP against the public.

Conclusions

The current results suggest an extremely small proportion of Canadian police occurrences have been associated with DRBH involving FELSOP, or fatalities associated with legal interventions. The current proportions of less than 1/10th of 1% raise questions about substantial criticisms and calls for pervasive reforms, and suggest careful considerations are needed regarding reasonable expectations.

Discourse involving police should explicate their extraordinary service despite exceptional demands. Future media coverage and public discourse on police use of force should be contextualized by the current results to further bolster trust in police, recruitment, retention, and police mental health.

Police are members of the communities they serve, which means informed, contextualized, and constructive narratives offer opportunities that can benefit everyone.

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**The original wording of the study was changed and condensed for the current research infographic.*



Read the full study here:

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