



Mayor Kennedy Stewart, Chair of Vancouver Police Board
 Vancouver City Council
 Vancouver Police Board

Via Email

December 14, 2020

Dear Mayor Stewart, Vancouver City Council, and Vancouver Police Board,

RE: VANCOUVER POLICE DEPARTMENT - 2021 OPERATING BUDGET

We, the undersigned, unequivocally condemn the City of Vancouver’s 2021 budget, which allocates over \$340 million in expenditures to the Vancouver Police Department (“VPD”). We demand that City Council immediately undertake the work to build a vision of Vancouver without police and cut the VPD budget by 50% in 2022. We further call on the Vancouver Police Board to heed its obligation under the *Police Act*,¹ to consider the priorities, goals, and objectives of the Council of the municipality, and develop an Operational Plan and Budget that commits to defunding, and a shift from enforcement and criminalization.

¹ *Police Act*, section 4.1 (b)

The signatories to this letter recognize that our work takes place on the sovereign, unceded lands of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səllwətaʔ (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations.

2021 Budget Proceedings

Earlier this week, Vancouver City Council approved over \$340 million in police funding and rejected a motion calling for a budget cut of \$5 million. The failure to decisively defund the police – by both Council and the Police Board – enables the VPD to continue a longstanding pattern of interference, degradation, and harm in over-policed communities. We struggle to understand the lack of impetus to respond to the calls to defund the police. We also know that these gaps and failings reflect the systemic classist and racist oppressions baked into our society, particularly anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism.² Despite well-documented issues within the VPD, including specific recommendations put forth by the Office of the Police Complaint Commissioner³, the VPD is not being held accountable as an institution.

This 2021 Operating Budget for the VPD does not accord with the lived experiences and demands made by communities who are under daily threat of police violence and intimidation. By approving this budget, we are being told that the voices, lived experiences, and expertise of people speaking out against policing and criminalization will not be considered by the municipal government. Instead, following months of engagement with the municipal government, advocates are met with a budget that maintains the dominion of police. City Council prides itself on unanimously approving the Motion Decriminalizing Poverty and Supporting Community-led Safety Initiatives,⁴ yet this motion has not been met with commitment and ongoing material support for said initiatives. We know that individuals, grassroots networks, healthcare, and social service providers continue to fill the gaps of failing municipal, provincial, and federal policies. Supporting community safety-led initiatives must start by funding the work that is already in place. A 50% cut to the VPD budget that is re-allocated to these hard-working community groups is imperative; folks currently being criminalized for poverty will be supported by service providers who know best.

Although City Council ultimately rejected the increased budget submitted by the Police Board, they have approved a 2021 Operating Budget of over \$340 million. While this budget is a holdover of 2020 spending, the failure to cut the police budget and instead invest in communities reminds us that there is an ongoing disregard for the lives of people impacted by police violence – specifically Black and Indigenous community members; unsheltered residents of Vancouver; people who use drugs; people working in informal economies – in particular, sex workers; people experiencing mental distress; and people living in poverty. These communities continue to face police violence on a daily basis.

Challenging the Narrative: Police ≠ Public Safety

During budget hearings, Vancouver Mayor and Council heard from hundreds of speakers, many of whom related their own experiences of being victimized and brutalized by the Vancouver Police. Mayor and Council further heard many pleas to defund the police and invest in communities. Numerous speakers detailed the myriad ways in which the police fail

² Krista Stelkia, "Police Brutality In Canada: A Symptom Of Structural Racism And Colonial Violence" (2020, July 15), online: *Yellowhead Institute* <https://yellowheadinstitute.org/2020/07/15/police-brutality-in-canada-a-symptom-of-structural-racism-and-colonial-violence/>

³ Office of the Police Complaint Commissioner, *Annual Report 2019/2020* (2020, December), online: OPCC <https://opcc.bc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/2019-2020-Annual-Report.pdf>

⁴ Vancouver City Council, "COUNCIL MEMBER'S MOTION: 4. Decriminalizing Poverty and Support Community-led Safety Initiatives" (2020, July 7), online: *City of Vancouver*: <https://Council.vancouver.ca/20200707/documents/b4.pdf>

to serve the needs of so many across this City. It is clear that frontline police are undertaking work they are ill-suited for - such as providing supplies to unsheltered people or cleanup of harm reduction supplies. Despite repeated public engagement throughout this year, including letter-writing, social media, and on-the-ground mobilization, Council failed to act, instead choosing to prioritize enforcement and criminalization as the dominant response to community concerns and systemic inequality.

Research in Vancouver and throughout BC has found that law enforcement practices, driven in part by ongoing gentrification efforts and reinforced by multiple forms of criminalization, limits access to services such as overdose prevention sites.^{5,6,7} Despite police narratives about “perceptions of crime,”⁸ law enforcement is not an adequate response to social crises. Police do not prevent or reduce crime. Police do not house people. Police do not help drug users to access safe supply or seek recovery. Police do not protect sex workers from violence. Police do not help individuals facing mental health challenges. Only communities do. Police cost our city more and more with each person criminalized or inducted into the carceral system.

We therefore call upon City Council to recognize, support, and uplift the work of community members already doing the vital work of protecting and building their own communities. These include initiatives and organizations like Battered Women’s Support Services, Downtown Eastside Women’s Centre, PACE, Sweet Grass Patrol, Vancouver Aboriginal Transformative Justice Services Society, Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users, Western Aboriginal Harm Reduction Society, WISH Drop-in Centre Society, and the numerous other organizations and informal networks whose work actually promotes community safety and wellness.

The dearth of funding for peer- and community-led services has clear consequences, including fatalities, stigmatizing solutions,⁹ or calls for service to law enforcement. Lack of appropriate housing, shelter, and drop-in spaces means that people who rely on public space must use public and private facilities to meet their needs - including substance use needs. The COVID pandemic has exacerbated existing deficits and forced many community spaces to close or severely limit people accessing services, meaning communities that rely on these services are left out on the streets and subject to further violence at the hands of the VPD. Workers in customer service positions, many of whom are precariously employed¹⁰ (i.e. precarious, low wage earners, and/or migrant workers), regularly contend with social issues far beyond their job description. Without 24/7 access to peer- and community-led crisis response, these workers may be forced to respond to drug overdoses without adequate training or preparation. Calling for defunding of the police is not a call for diminishing safety, instead it’s a call to urgently redirect public funds to better-suited programming.

⁵ Alexandra B. Collins et al. "Policing Space in the Overdose Crisis: A Rapid Ethnographic Study of the Impact of Law Enforcement Practices on the Effectiveness of Overdose Prevention Sites" (2019). *The International Journal of Drug Policy* 73: 199-207.

⁶ Shira Goldenberg et al. "Police-Related Barriers to Harm Reduction Linked to Non-Fatal Overdose Amongst Sex Workers Who use Drugs: Results of a Community-Based Cohort in Metro Vancouver, Canada" (2020). *The International Journal of Drug Policy* 76: 102618-102618.

⁷ Darcie Bennett and D.J. Larkin, *Project Inclusion : Confronting Anti-Homeless & Anti-Substance User Stigma in British Columbia* (2018), online: *Pivot Legal Society* https://www.pivotlegal.org/project_inclusion_full

⁸ Vancouver Police Department, "SURVEY SHOWS HEIGHTENED CRIME CONCERN IN VANCOUVER" (2020, November 9), online: *VPD* <https://mediareleases.vpd.ca/2020/11/09/survey-shows-heightened-crime-concern-in-vancouver/>

⁹ Fraser Health Authority, "FACT SHEET: Blue Lights in Publicly-Accessible Washrooms" (2020, February), online: *FHA* https://www.fraserhealth.ca/-/media/Project/FraserHealth/FraserHealth/Health-Topics/Mental-Health-Substance-Use/Harm-reduction/201902_Fact_Sheet_Blue_Lights_in_Publicly_Accessible_Washrooms.pdf

¹⁰ Retail Action Network, "Press Release: BC's Retail Action Network Welcomes Mandatory Mask Announcement" (2020, November 20), online: *RAN* <https://retailaction.ca/2020/11/report-recommends-paid-sick-leave-2/>

Consider that this year alone, there have been multiple, tragic deaths in bathrooms - highlighting the dire needs of people who rely on public space.^{11, 12, 13} Time and time again, advocacy organizations, service providers, and peer groups call for services and support, yet inadequate and unpredictable funding for their work means that 911 is a catchall. The singular focus on funding law enforcement to first responders has resulted in a failure to invest in community initiatives.

Vancouver Police Board

The Police Board is an organization mandated to provide policy and general direction to the VPD¹⁴, and such policies and direction must be attuned to the very real concerns that many stakeholders have expressed, regarding expanding police budgets, scope creep, and the inappropriate criminalization of marginalized and equity-seeking groups.

Throughout 2020, we have seen the Police Board fail to curb police power and spending. Examples of this include:

1. Rejecting a 1% cut to the police budget;¹⁵
2. Interfering in the independent review of street stops, by (i) providing a draft to a Deputy Police Chief, and (ii) removing allegations of racism and misconduct from the final, public report;¹⁶
3. Deferring a further review of street stops to "early 2021 despite clear data indicating the practice is racist;"^{17,18}
4. Failing to reverse the creation of widely-decried "Neighbourhood Response Team;"¹⁹ and
5. Unanimously voting on a provisional police budget of \$322 million, a 2% increase from 2020²⁰.

The conduct of the Police Board reveals an organization that is deeply enmeshed with the VPD and unable to act independently or provide governance that reflects dissenting views on policing.

Conclusion

¹¹ First Nations Leadership Council, "STATEMENT: FNLC OFFERS CONDOLENCES IN THE DEATH OF INFANT IN THE DOWNTOWN EASTSIDE" (2020, April 24), online: BCAFN https://www.bcafn.ca/sites/default/files/docs/news/2020APR24_FNLC%20Statement%20regarding%20Death%20of%20Infant%20in%20the%20DTE_S.pdf

¹² Jon Woodward, "Calls for more checks on city toilets after 2 deaths" (2020, April 23), online: CTV News <https://bc.ctvnews.ca/calls-for-more-checks-on-city-toilets-after-2-deaths-1.4909594>

¹³ Independent Investigations Office of BC, "IIO is Seeking Witnesses to an Incident at a Tim Hortons on Terminal Avenue in Vancouver (2020-292)," (2020, December 1), online: IIO <https://iio.bc.ca/media/iio-is-seeking-witnesses-to-an-incident-at-a-tim-hortons-on-terminal-avenue-in-vancouver-2020-292/>

¹⁴ Vancouver Police Board, *WHAT THE POLICE BOARD DOES* (n.d.), online: Vancouver Police Board <https://vancouver.ca/police/policeboard/Mandate.htm>

¹⁵ Scott Hurst, "Vancouver Police Board rejects city's call for 1% budget cut, asks Council to rescind motion" (2020, June 5), online: CTV News <https://bc.ctvnews.ca/vancouver-police-board-rejects-city-s-call-for-1-budget-cut-asks-Council-to-rescind-motion-1.4972251>

¹⁶ Dan Fumano, "Exclusive: Internal police board emails raise questions about review of VPD street checks" (2020, November 20), online: Vancouver Sun <https://vancouversun.com/news/local-news/exclusive-internal-police-board-emails-raise-questions-about-review-of-vpd-street-checks>

¹⁷ Jon Woodward, "Racial disparity in Vancouver police street checks continued in 2019: FOI data" (2020, November 11), online: CTV News <https://bc.ctvnews.ca/racial-disparity-in-vancouver-police-street-checks-continued-in-2019-foi-data-1.5185423>

¹⁸ Jen St. Denis, "Vancouver Police Board Pushes Review of Street Checks to Next Year" (2020, September 18), online: The Tyee <https://thetyee.ca/News/2020/09/18/Vancouver-Police-Board-Pushes-Review-Next-Year/>

¹⁹ WAHRS, Pivot Legal Society & VANDU, "Joint Complaint opposing New VPD Neighbourhood Response Team" (2020, November 9), online: Pivot Legal Society https://www.pivotlegal.org/joint_complaint_on_neighbourhood_response_team

²⁰ Vancouver Police Board, "Statement from Vancouver Police Board regarding the 2021 budget ask" (2020, December 7), online: City of Vancouver <https://vancouver.ca/police/policeboard/documents/2020-12-Board-Statement-2021-Budget.pdf>

We must build upon the important and thankless work that is already ongoing throughout Vancouver. This work exists despite and in spite of the efforts of police to criminalize the very existence of members of our communities. Our communities cannot thrive in the face of the ongoing harm from over-policing. If City Council continues without defunding police and reallocating resources to community measures, it means continuing to leave these communities without adequate protection. We implore you to think first of our neighbors that have been made vulnerable and choose support over harm.

The route to justice is by funding communities instead of police. It is by funding community-led safety initiatives and peer-led crisis response. We only ask that you truly listen to the concerns and ideas brought forward by those who are most exposed to policing, and act accordingly.

Sincerely,

BC Association of People on Methadone (BCAPOM)

Black Lives Matter- Vancouver

Carnegie Community Action Project

Coalition of Peers Dismantling the Drug War

Crackdown Podcast

Democratic Socialists of Vancouver

Divest VPD

Law Students for Decriminalization & Harm Reduction

Law Union of BC

Pivot Legal Society

PACE Society

Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users (VANDU)

Vancouver Prison Justice Day Committee

UBC Social Justice Centre

CC: Brenda Butterworth-Carr, Director of Police Services
Honourable Mike Farnworth, Minister of Public Safety and Solicitor General