

Ottawa cop turned researcher finds decline in proactive policing

"...Fear of being scrutinized by the public."



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Officers are weighing the costs of engaging with the public and for many, the cons outweigh the pros. Photo by Ashley Fraser ASHLEY FRASER / POSTMEDIA

Ottawa police officers are “de-policing” — or avoiding proactive policing — out of fear of being scrutinized by the public, according to the groundbreaking study of an Ottawa police officer turned doctoral researcher.

It is the first study of its kind in Canada that measures what has largely been anecdotal among officers who describe the F.I.D.O mentality of “F**k it, drive on,” when confronted with what many police see as un-winnable situations that will only get them in trouble or publicly embarrassed.

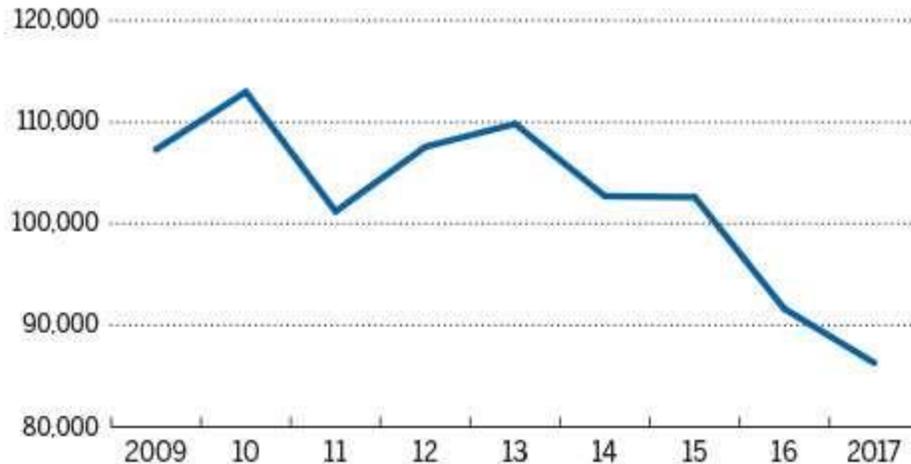
“It’s definitely happening, there’s no doubt about it,” said Greg Brown, a Carleton University doctoral researcher and former Ottawa police homicide and drug investigator.

Brown surveyed 3,660 front-line officers from 18 police services in Canada — from Halifax to Vancouver — and five departments in New York state. In this city, 382 Ottawa police officers participated from all 18 patrol platoons — nearly the entire front-line.

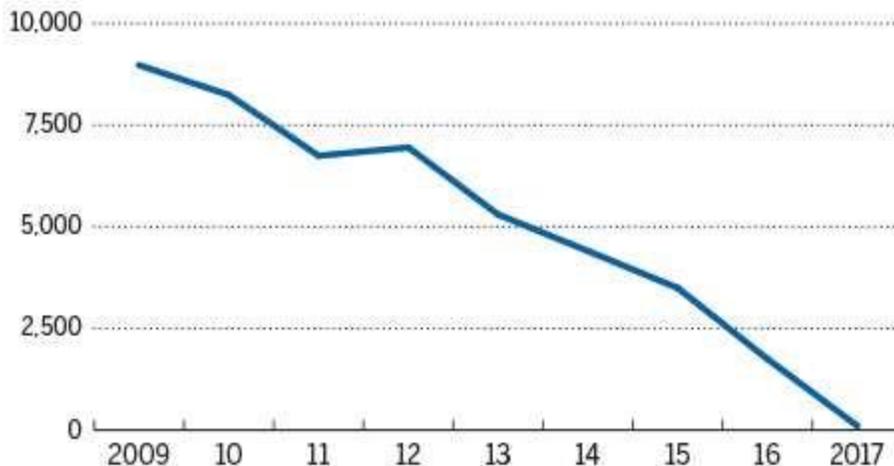
DECLINE IN OTTAWA PROACTIVE POLICING

A Carleton researcher's analysis of Ottawa police statistics shows that both 'officer-initiated' calls and the number of 'street checks' have steadily declined.

OPS OFFICERS' SELF-INITIATED CALLS 2009-2017



OPS OFFICERS' 'STREET CHECKS' 2009-2017



SOURCE: OTTAWA POLICE SERVICE; GREGORY BROWN

SHAAMINI YOGARETNAM AND DENNIS LEUNG

In 70 per cent of all responses, officers displayed what Brown calls “limited to moderate to intensive de-policing.” Brown expects to title his dissertation *To Swerve and Neglect*.”

Brown defines de-policing as “an officer choosing not to engage in discretionary or proactive aspects of police duties.”

Simply, officers are weighing the costs of engaging with the public and for many, the cons outweigh the pros. Any interaction carries with it the possibility of a racial profiling allegation, winding up in front of a disciplinary tribunal or human rights body, media scrutiny, a viral

YouTube video or a judge finding they breached Charter rights. These are the kinds of things that officers perceive can, not only, ruin their careers, but their lives. And the further along police officers get in their careers, the more likely they are to de-police.

“There’s a massive downside to (proactive policing), and I think they can clearly realize that,” Brown said.

The crux of front-line policing has always been officers responding to 911 calls for service.

“That is the core function of their job,” Brown said. “When the computer (inside the cruiser) beeps, you respond to the call, go and address the call. You do what has to be done.”

That core job continues to be done by officers across the city and country, but “everything else is discretionary,” Brown says.

Choosing to pull over a driver for a Highway Traffic Act infraction, approaching a suspicious person in an area of high residential break-and-enters or even seeking out wanted offenders on warrants are all proactive measures. Officers can’t be forced to do them.

“If an officer responds to the calls they’re responsible to respond to, they’re doing their job. The rest is gravy.”

But that’s where a large percentage of officers, according to the research, perceive the danger zone to be.

Driven by self-preservation, officers will park their cruisers, with a cup of coffee in hand and simply wait to be deployed. Decades ago this would have been a subgroup of officers whose behaviors would have been chalked up to laziness. Now it’s more widespread and is a calculated decision based on individual and colleague experience.

Others said they drove the speed limit, to “doomsday scenario calls” — where a racialized person might be exhibiting mental health issues and behaving violently. Officers know there will be video taken and they might have to use force and fear the repercussions.

Officers are most likely to de-police situations out of fear of interacting with a racialized person or those with mental health issues. The gender and sexuality of members of the public they could interact with also weigh on officers’ minds, but to a much lesser extent.

Ottawa police data on officers’ self-initiated calls and street checks have been steadily declining year over year for the past decade, showing that proactive policing is down.

The city force recently released data on the number of “regulated interactions” — formerly “street checks” — officers conducted in 2017. New provincial legislation has regulated a practice that disproportionately saw racialized young men being stopped by police and asked for their personal information.

Ottawa police officers asked for identifying information from people only five times, with only two of those requests qualifying as a “regulated interaction.”

Brown called it a “confluence of two different factors” — new legislation that brings with it a marked change in protocol that officers are reluctant to adopt and the same cost-benefit analysis that officers have been increasingly weighing with any type of proactive policing.

But there is a tension between police forces that continue to say proactive work is necessary and officers who perceive that doing this work is going to get them in trouble, Brown said. The phenomenon is real, as the research shows, but what can be done about it, remains to be seen.

“There’s really no way to police de-policing,” Brown said.