

# Global Policing Symposium: Challenges and Lessons Learned

## Summary Report

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Institut de développement professionnel  
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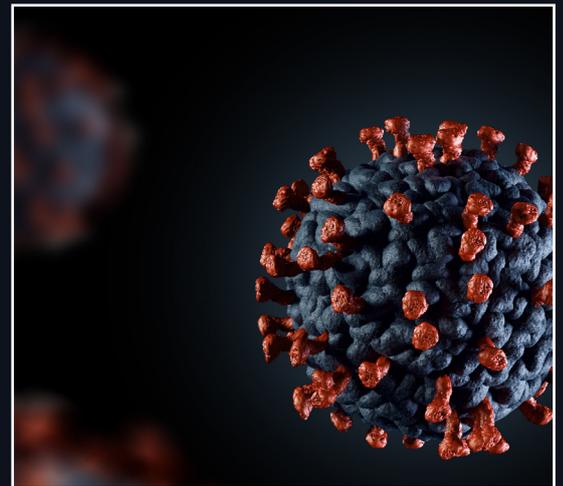
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# Policing in the era of pandemic: experiences from North America, Europe and Asia

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On May 28 the Security, Economics and Technology (SET) program within the University of Ottawa's Professional Development Institute (PDI), together with the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP), the Canadian Association of Police (CACP) and the Miller Center for Community Protection and Resilience at Rutgers University, sponsored a webinar entitled 'Global Policing Symposium: COVID-19 challenges and lessons learned' in which representatives from the IACP and CACP as well as chiefs from police services in North America, Europe and Australasia provided what they have learned about policing during a pandemic such as the one in which we currently find ourselves.



The chiefs were very candid with their remarks, discussing challenges as well as the positive outcomes.

The myriad challenges facing the world's policing and security services during the pandemic have stretched resources, shifted priorities, and forced leaders to rethink how they engage civil society.

Police worldwide are adept at rapid emergency response and triaging critical incidents, however the persistent nature of the pandemic is causing greater strain on police who have fallen ill, require quarantine and are enforcing rules for people's health. This global public health emergency has senior police executives rethinking how to maintain the security of their jurisdictions and the safety of their staff over prolonged periods of time. In some nations protests and domestic violent extremist activities has grown as a consequence of the growing discontent in many constituencies over perceived governmental overreach and personal sequestration. These factors, and others, have forced a reallocation of resources from investigations, intelligence, and routine administration in order to fulfill patrol response missions.

In parallel to the current COVID-19 pandemic, we're facing what the World Health Organization referred to in February as an infodemic, an overabundance of information – some accurate and some inaccurate – that makes it more difficult for the public to seek or receive reliable and trusted sources of information.

Misinformation, disinformation, and misleading information is a catalytic vulnerability that makes fulfilling the mission of public safety organizations harder. Now that many places are emerging from imposed isolation policies, what are the outcomes from sudden unemployment, continued social distancing and stress-related mental disorders?

How will current economic shutdowns affect future police budgeting and staffing? These are compelling issues that will drive the profession of policing in unprecedented directions and require insightful approaches and strategies.

**This is a summary of this virtual seminar, the main lessons learned, and the best practices. The remarks will not be tied to a named speaker to maintain anonymity. In addition, several points were made by several speakers. For ease of readership this summary will present the findings in point form:**

- While police forces are used to crises and the need to adapt on the fly, the novel coronavirus has presented unprecedented challenges (“we have never seen anything like this”), accelerating the need to innovate. However, some departments have found a benefit in re-purposing and leveraging crisis management programs originally intended for non-pandemic crises such as earthquake management. These constituted an accelerator to develop pandemic-specific guidance and the ability to leverage existing resources. It is important that these types of programs are constructed with that type of flexibility in mind;
- While dealing with COVID-19 police forces still have to deal with their day-to-day duties that must be addressed whether or not COVID-19 were present. This has implications for the prioritisation of tasks;
- Like the rest of society police forces are faced with illness and infection and have to meet the needs of their officers. They have child care and other needs as does everyone else;
- Changes in practice have been required such as placing only one officer per car even on a night shift and canceling training classes. Leave, promotions and re-postings were also canceled in many jurisdictions. The halt in training will have downstream consequences: e.g. an inability to fill vacancies at a time when forces are already overtaxed and have high sick leave-related vacancies;
- Some forces developed Excel spreadsheets to monitor PPE ‘burn rates’ and were willing to share those with other jurisdictions;
- Police forces have been pushed into functions which they have traditionally never been asked to carry out (a good example was where one force was asked to help mortuaries find facilities to keep the bodies of those who died from COVID-19);
- Forces differ in their mandates: some are national, others state/provincial, still others are municipal and there have been conflicting messages from political leaders at each level on measures to take and enforce, complicating the police response. Forces with a first nation/native element also were called upon to not bring the virus to self-contained and possibly more vulnerable communities;
- Executive orders have different weight in different jurisdictions. Some are binding and some aren’t. The repeated issuance of Executive orders which substantially changed parameters sometimes caused confusion over what rule to follow and challenged police service ability to develop and roll out revised procedures with adequate training.
- Few forces had a ‘pandemic model’ in their toolbox and those that did had never been called upon to deploy it. That every force will not have such a policy after COVID-19 is unacceptable;
- COVID-19 or no COVID-19 crime continues. While some participants noted a decrease in certain types of crime others reported increases in murder and domestic abuse (this situation is compounded by the fact that many women’s shelters are closed down, cutting off places of refuge for women and children). There was also a spike in highway ‘racing’, undoubtedly fed by much lower levels of traffic on roads due to COVID-19 lockdowns. Responding to these incidents put further pressure on officers already stretched to the max;
- The pandemic has also raised concerns over conditions in prisons where social distancing is a greater challenge. Remand situations are also problematic, leading to decisions to make greater use of bail and recognizance tools. ‘Video remand’ has been used where appropriate. The early release of convicted criminals has also been

considered (prisoner transportation was also cited as a problem);

- The closing of green spaces has had a disproportionate effect on the homeless who regularly use this option, leading to over capacity of shelters, themselves dangerous in light of difficulties maintaining safe personal distancing;
- Several chiefs expressed concerns over disinformation (deliberate falsehoods spread by those with an agenda) and misinformation (false information not intended to achieve an agenda) spread online, exacerbated by the fact that lockdowns and isolation are leading people to spend much more time on the Internet. Coupled with this is a slight increase in possible hate crimes as communities deemed 'responsible' for COVID-19 (i.e. Asian) are targeted for retribution;
- The online space is also being exploited by far right (white supremacist, neo-Nazi, etc.) groups to spread disinformation on the novel coronavirus, challenge government orders to shut down and call for protests. The very nature of these groups implies that violence is a very real possibility, which would necessitate a police response (one more thing to worry about);
- Privacy and personal data protection policies are putting some officers in harm's way (e.g. if they go to a call and cannot be told whether the person is infected with COVID-19). There are legislative gaps either in substance or interpretation in privacy laws inhibiting information sharing on hot spots and infected individuals;
- Some jurisdictions are also faced with protesters demanding a re-opening of the economy and an end to social distancing. A variety of groups are turning out and police have to ensure that the gatherings are lawful;
- Many chiefs noted that under normal circumstances (e.g. mass shootings in Nova Scotia in early March) when a big event occurs they can borrow resources from other jurisdictions. As COVID-19 is affecting everybody everywhere this is no longer possible;
- COVID-19 is also unique in that it is an open-ended crisis (unlike a hurricane/earthquake) and police forces cannot plan for an end any time soon, making resource allocation a challenge;
- Several forces had personnel posted abroad or on international missions and had to arrange for their return or to support them while outside the country. Aside from the logistical challenges this imposed, the subsequent need for quarantine would entail that these resources would not be immediately available for other duties;
- A positive takeaway from this crisis, and one which this seminar was hopeful would ensue, is the recognition that all law enforcement agencies are in this together, can learn from each other, and that staying in touch (virtually) is a must. Police services ARE learning from each other - close attention was paid to efforts by those in the hot zones such as New Jersey and New York City, both of which have been particularly hard hit by the coronavirus, and allowed real time best practices to shape the programs of other jurisdictions which clearly reduced the spread and effect of the virus and saved lives and helped protect the resources of police services. Many set up 'command centres' drawing in all relevant services within a given jurisdiction, facilitating the real-time sharing of the best information and practices;
- Several forces have found ingenious and novel problem-solving ideas during the pandemic. These include a focus on keeping officers and families informed; combining resources and capabilities of fire, EHS and police to ensure a 24-hour turnaround of testing through the design of the testing facility; and a community approach to problem solving for youth.

**All participants were grateful for the opportunity to listen to others' experiences and see that we all share many of the same challenges. Virtual seminars such as these are worth organising and the University of Ottawa's PDI SET will engage with its partners to work on similar future events.**

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