

New research shows too much paperwork may hinder effective policing

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Laura Huey. Credit: University of Western Ontario

Fighting and preventing crimes may not be the only activity in a typical day in the life of a police officer in Canada; it's also filing paperwork, tons of paperwork.

Western professor Laura Huey and researchers at the department of sociology examined how [police services'](#) managerial and [data collection](#) practices—intended to provide transparency and accountability—often lead to inefficiencies, including increased [paperwork](#), higher staffing costs and poor-quality [crime](#) statistics.

Huey, along with co-authors Lorna Ferguson and Jacek Koziarski, recently published the paper, "The irrationalities of rationality in [police](#) data processes," in *Policing and Society*, based on interviews from police personnel from two police services in Canada.

"People have an idea that police officers are out proactively engaging in [crime prevention](#) and [community engagement](#), but most police services in Canada today are overwhelmingly driven by calls for services," said Huey. There can often be a long line of unanswered calls for service. Delayed response times may lead to people not reporting crimes against property, such as burglary, so these will not be reflected in crime rates.

The study found that when police do [report](#) to calls, they are required to complete a wide spectrum of reports, for their own purposes, as well as for use by other groups.

"Only a small portion of paperwork is filing cases," said Huey, with other paperwork being used or requested by politicians, journalists, insurance companies and transportation ministries. As an example, Huey described a four-page report for motor vehicle collisions under \$2,000, which included questions about tire pressure for different vehicles involved in the collision, information used by insurance companies.

"Politicians have dumped so many public safety issues on to police without setting boundaries," said Huey. "Policing is ultimately a political job. The budget is set by city council, and if council says you have to measure tires, you will."

If the public and politicians are interested in reducing policing costs, there must be consideration of everything police are being asked to undertake, said Huey.

"It has become part of the role because police are there, and we sort of expect them to be all things to all people," she said. While these reports have been re-defined as a public safety issue, "police serve no purpose in taking the report," said Huey. "They are not going to prevent future accidents by taking these reports."

She added, the cumbersome data processing requirements could have some implications to police morale.

"When you sign up for a job fighting crime and engaging in the community, and you actually spend all day filling out forms, it is demoralizing for [police officers](#)," said Huey. There are also financial consequences for paperwork, as the highest costs in policing are in salaries, and a significant portion of police time is spent on paperwork.

In the end, the paperwork and data collection do not necessarily meet the needs of either the police or the public. In many cases, several reports must be filed for different purposes, which can result in errors in reporting. This may create more work for crime analysts, who attempt to clean the data before it can be useful, or who may not even be able to use the data.

Some data collected and reports prepared by police are also deemed unusable for community implications, such as data on sexual assaults. Huey said that often, the data collected is deemed 'fit for police purpose' to meet the requirements of the police services, but not of the public. This can lead to community concerns when [case files](#) are later examined by community advocates.

Addressing these problems will require a re-rationalization of the data collected by police, re-examining the reports and questions being asked, and considering the wider implications of reporting requirements.

Huey is considering a research-based project focused on communicating about crime and criminal justice to the wider public.

"We have a lack of understanding of what is actually going on in policing; that is driven in part by how information is communicated," said Huey. "Police services have vested interests in what happens, what works and what doesn't. Many public policy decisions are based on the fact that people don't know. Let's take the research we have and develop better communication strategies, so people can make better decisions."

More information: Laura Huey et al, The irrationalities of rationality in police data processes, *Policing and Society* (2021). [DOI: 10.1080/10439463.2021.2007245](https://doi.org/10.1080/10439463.2021.2007245)

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