

Public police are a greedy institution

May 25 2022, by Kevin Walby and Randy K. Lippert



The Vancouver Police Department's SWAT Mobile Command Centre costs \$500,000 and is funded by the donors of Vancouver Police Foundation. Credit: [Vancouver Police Department YouTube channel](#), [CC BY](#)

The ongoing [calls from communities to defund public police, that grew louder](#) following the police killings of [George Floyd](#) and [Breonna Taylor](#) in 2020, have raised several crucial questions.

As researchers of police work, we looked at some of the critical issues surrounding these calls in our new [book on police, greed and dark money](#)

. We examined the push by public police to accumulate more resources despite these calls and the rise of secretive or "dark money" in public policing.

Although [criminologists have shown that social development leads to less street crime and healthier communities](#), [police departments](#) seem unperturbed when [social programs](#) for housing, [mental health](#) and health care get cut to [fund growing police budgets](#). It is also [unclear whether a well-funded police institution leads to less transgression](#) or safer communities.

The greedy tendencies of police departments help illustrate the major problems with public police funding in Canada and the United States today.

What is a greedy institution?

[American sociologist Lewis Coser](#) first spoke of greedy institutions in 1974. A greedy institution [demands loyalty and conformity to its culture](#), worldview and politics. For example, the military is a greedy institution since it demands full loyalty to branches of the armed forces.

We are not the first scholars [to apply the greedy institution concept](#) to public police and to suggest its officers must be loyal and not cross the ["blue line."](#) Our book extends this concept to show how the police institution seeks loyalty and conformity not just internally, it does so externally as well.

While the public police demands loyalty to its institution and conformity to its worldview, its challengers, within and outside the institution, tend to be shunned or neutralized.

The other meaning of greedy institution is literal.

Police greediness is evident in the quest for private sponsorship of police, especially through private police foundations. These foundations exemplify the attempt of police departments to extend their networks and social connections while accruing more financial resources.

Another example is paid duty policing, which we argue reveals the police managerial desire to control officers' off-duty activities, while ensuring they receive significant extra money beyond their salaries.

In both instances, dark money is something that often involves secret or anonymous donations or income. The murky exchanges of dark money are mostly hidden to the public.

Police foundations: a funnel for private capital

Police foundations have emerged as entities that allow private corporations and individuals to donate to police. In our book, we show how foundations are [being established at record pace](#). In the U.S., there are hundreds of police foundations. In Canada, police foundations in Vancouver, Delta and Calgary, as well as a few others, have been [funneling corporate money to police for decades](#).

Not many people know how prominent the police foundation has become, nor about the sources and levels of dark money it funnels into public police or the related conflicts of interest that arise. For example, Axon (makers of tasers and body-worn cameras) and other weapons companies [are major funders of police across North America](#).

It usually works like this: Private entities give dark money to the foundation. [Most foundation money ends up getting distributed to the police](#) rather than [local charities](#). The police often spend those dollars on tactical units, surveillance devices and police dog teams, things often associated with militarization of the police.

The foundation is the police institution's [shell corporation](#) through which other corporations and individuals [can privately donate](#). These donations continue despite already ample public police budgets and [even after wide public calls to defund public police](#).

The foundation is also a communication vehicle for police, through which allies [such as powerful corporations](#) or folks from [local companies and affluent individuals](#) are accrued. [The foundation can advertise the police worldview](#), garnering more loyalty and conformity. In this way, police foundations [assemble allies and social and political capital](#) even amid loud calls to defund police.

Paid detail policing as literal greed

Paid duty or paid detail is another type of greediness. You may have noticed uniformed and armed police officers standing or strolling about at sporting events: chances are [those officers are working paid duty](#). The sports team or corporation's venue is paying the officer individually.

If you've ever seen police standing around at a [construction site](#), movie shoot or [retail outlet](#) or outside a nightclub, chances are those uniformed officers are [receiving handsome compensation from a private funder](#).

Paid duty also reflects a greedy institution.

Officers are [making big money from these paid duty postings](#). They receive up to \$100 an hour extra from working paid duty and—where not legally required through obscure bylaws—loyal funders are expected to provide "easy gigs" such as standing around at construction sites or sporting events. Yet police administrators often restrict paid duty gigs where cannabis, alcohol, gambling or nudity is involved and that are [assumed to taint officers' loyalty](#).

In Winnipeg, police were [criticized for paid duty guarding of groceries](#) after they [engaged in racial profiling of Indigenous customers](#).

Paid duty is a problem for professional, accountable policing and its connection with [police corruption](#) including in Jersey City, Seattle and [New Orleans](#). In Toronto, officers sometimes miss court dates and exceed limits on paid duty hours worked during lucrative jobs provided by external funders, [as reported by the *Toronto Star*](#).

Paid duty is also a problem because some funders are public, including government departments that operate road maintenance and construction, utilities and hospitals. [The public already pays for police operations](#), with huge proportions of government budgets, but then are [asked by the police institution to pay again for paid duty](#).

Both private sponsorship through foundations and paid duty channel dark [money](#) into police departments. This all suggests that public [police](#) need greater scrutiny so that their greedy influence and reach can be reigned in and this institution can be re-envisioned through a lens of the public good.

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