

# Paying more for policing doesn't stop or reduce crime, say researchers

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In 2023, the cost of policing to Canadian taxpayers closed in on [\\$20 billion](#) for the first time. While annual police budgets continue to grow, there is little debate in the media about its cost to taxpayers and the value

for money in relation to crime reduction.

This [50% increase over inflation in the cost of policing from 20 years ago](#) is now coinciding with disturbing increases in violent crime. Homicides are up, stoking public fear. [Violent crime](#) has returned to levels seen 20 years ago. Canada's [homicide rate](#) is second only to the United States among G7 countries, and is rising as the American rate drops.

[The rate of homicide involving Indigenous victims](#) is six times that of non-Indigenous people, and it's three times higher for Black men.

With [one in three](#) women experiencing some form of violence in their lifetimes, intimate partner and sexual violence is now recognized as [being at epidemic](#) levels.

## **More money not leading to less crime**

The majority of policing costs are paid from [municipal taxes](#) and have risen faster than expenditures on transit or [social services](#). The cost of policing at the municipal level per capita varies considerably from a high of \$496 annually for Vancouver to a low of \$217 in Québec City.

Though much of the rhetoric for justifying increasing police budgets is about crime, [an analysis of trends](#) over the last 20 years in Canada could not find any correlation between increases in municipal police budgets and a reduction in crime rates.

[Our review](#) of studies in the United Kingdom and the United States shows that investments in programs tackling [risk factors](#) give better returns than innovations like [problem-oriented policing](#).

Police budget increases do not impact crime rates significantly and do

not make us safer. When the [U.K. cut police budgets](#) along with other government services by 20 percent, it had no dramatic impact on crime rates. A simple [comparison between Chicago and Toronto](#), which have almost the same populations, shows that Chicago's 13,000 [police officers](#)—7,000 more than Toronto—have not been enough to close the gap from Chicago's 600 homicides annually to Toronto's 70.

Increases in violent crime in Canada are happening in concert with increases in spending on policing, as well as [clogged courts](#) and [overcrowded jails](#). This means more harm to victims and fewer public dollars available for initiatives that improve community safety.

## Cost assessment

In 2008, researchers at Canada's Justice Department examined the social and economic costs of crime, including estimates of the tangible and intangible [harm to victims](#).

In our review, we followed the same methodology to update their analysis to 2022 dollars and the current population. Our annual total, including court and corrections costs, is \$22 billion, 68 percent of which is for policing. In addition, our estimates of the costs of harm to victims are \$23 billion for tangible costs like property and productivity losses and at least \$100 billion for intangible costs like pain and suffering.

We've previously examined programs that showed addressing [risk factors](#) can reduce crime, but there are few studies delving into the return of investment on these programs. For some time, Canadian experts have cited a 2010 study that found [for every dollar spent on enriched child care and parenting programs, the community gained roughly seven dollars worth of benefits](#) in reduced criminal involvement and costs to the justice system.

Today, there are existing programs and initiatives where the return on investment is much higher.

Stop Now and Plan (SNAP) is a Canadian program that counsels young people on how to deal with emotions in social situations and helps families through interventions with children ages six to 12, [which studies have found gives a \\$32](#) return on investment per dollar spent.

Life skills training for youth aged 12 to 14 years old reduces alcohol and [drug abuse](#) and violence with a [cost benefit of \\$25 per dollar spent](#). This is a U.S. initiative that's been replicated in Canada.

## **Taxpayer savings**

Public Safety Canada has illustrated the impact of Stop Now and Plan, along with a program helping youth at risk avoid a life of crime and a support program for families.

[Its estimates](#) are more conservative than the aforementioned studies, but are nevertheless impressive because they illustrate large savings to taxpayers in Canada through early intervention.

They show a 30 percent decrease in spending on policing, courts and corrections—potentially \$7 billion in taxpayer savings a year for each program. We believe taxpayers could save another \$7 billion in costs like lost productivity and property loss and \$30 billion pertaining to the harm inflicted on victims of crime.

The evidence is clear: making people safer is about being smart with investments that reduce crime, not increasing taxes to pay for what doesn't.

[In a comprehensive 2023 Gallup survey in the U.S.](#), two-thirds of

respondents said it would be more effective to put money and effort towards addressing social and economic problems such as drug addiction, homelessness and mental health than strengthening law enforcement. [Similar surveys](#) in Canada show overwhelming public support for prevention measures.

Canada could be inspired by the British violence reduction initiative which has shown crime reductions of [25 percent](#) in injuries and police response.

In the U.S., President Joe Biden's administration has launched an [Office for Gun Violence Prevention](#) and is promoting state and city offices to apply what works. [Cities that have an office, like Boston](#), have reduced [violent crime](#) by more than 50 percent.

Investing in violence prevention works to reduce crime, harm to victims and costly spending on policing and criminal justice.

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