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Presentation to the Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security

Systemic Racism in Policing in Canada

Remarks by:
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Mr. Chair, members of this distinguished committee. As a member of the Board of Directors of the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police (CACCP), I would like to express our appreciation for having the opportunity to appear in front of you today. My name is Bryan Larkin, I am the Chief of the Waterloo Regional Police Service.

Let me begin by saying that we live in a great country yet, as great as it is, racism is an insidious part of Canada's history and it continues to be a reality in our communities today.

We have study after study, including government-commissioned reports, that demonstrate we have an issue with systemic racism throughout our justice system, which includes our legal system, our courts, and our police services.

The voices of Black, Indigenous and other members of our community were clearly heard as they recently conducted peaceful rallies and demonstrations across the country in calls to action to reform police interactions with the public.

They expressed concerns about police practices, systemic racism and racial profiling. Black, Indigenous and other ethno-cultural groups have also condemned their over-representation in the justice system and their treatment within it.

This powerful moment we are experiencing has culminated after more than a century of systemic racism in Canada.

Time is overdue for meaningful change in all aspects of our society. Tackling racism requires a concerted response from the entire community, including the police, to bring vision and take courageous leadership in our organizations and in our relationships with communities.

A shift in the focus of policing over time

Here in Canada, the approach to policing has significantly evolved and changed over time.

Our police services have developed many strong relationships with their communities over the years, shifting the emphasis from a focus on “law enforcement” to community engagement and well-being, as well as proactive crime prevention that reflects true partnerships.

Our association is focused on the development of progressive, community-oriented leaders at all levels. We believe this approach is a key success factor to addressing the issue of systemic racism that affects our members, our communities as well as trust in policing services.

There is much talk about improving the mental health of officers and achieving diversity, equity and inclusion in police services, and the CACP strives to support tangible change in a meaningful way within our organizations.

A national strategic policing priority

For this reason, diversity, equity, and inclusion represent one of nine national strategic policing priorities that guide the work of our association.

A CACP committee devoted to equity, diversity and inclusion was established in 2018 and is committed to support the CACP's efforts and its membership to create and enhance practices that promote fairness, equity, and inclusion through the identification, mitigation and elimination of implicit bias and discrimination in practices and policies, remove systemic barriers, and to promote the advancement of inclusive diversity and human rights within policing institutions.

To achieve the cultural and operational change that is required, we feel it is important to begin with a common vocabulary and understanding of the key concepts that help to identify, mitigate and be proactive to prevent racism and discrimination within our police services and during our interactions with the communities we serve.

Equity is fairness; making sure everyone has what they need to succeed and removing barriers that disadvantage some groups over others. This is different than treating people equally, which is behind the concept of "equality," and recognizes the unique needs, challenges and goals of different communities for community safety and well-being.

Diversity is the range of visible and non-visible qualities, experiences, and identities that shape who we are, how we think, and how we engage with and are perceived by the world. These can be along the dimensions of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, age, physical or mental disabilities, religious/spiritual beliefs, or political ideologies. They can also include differences such as personality, style, capabilities, thoughts, and perspectives.

Inclusion is recognizing, welcoming, and making space for diversity. Being truly inclusive capitalizes on the diversity of ideas, experiences, skills, and talents of all individuals within the workplace or the community so that everyone can fully contribute, participate and succeed.

Recruitment, Training and Oversight

Police training and civilian oversight in Canada are among the best in the world.

Reflecting the powers and authorities invested in them, **officers are carefully selected** and are increasingly facing more rigorous scrutiny and screening to try and ensure that they meet and espouse values such as those of the CACP which consist of courage, integrity, respect, transparency, inclusiveness, excellence, and compassion.

We are working on enhancing our recruitment, hiring and promotion processes to increase the quality of our recruits and to accelerate the diversification of our organization so that we can be more representative of, and be more responsive to, the communities we serve.

Much progress has been made to embed accountability within our teams and expectations to model professional, equitable and inclusive behaviours and leadership, but clearly, we need to do more.

Officers are also provided with extensive training that goes well beyond basic police skillsets. Training includes a wide range of cultural awareness, sensitivity, and de-escalation techniques. Once again, much progress has been made, but we are open to new approaches and strive to continuously improve. This includes investing in and involving communities in our training and processes to understand what works and what doesn't work.

Once officers are hired and trained, they have more **independent civilian oversight and accountability** than almost any other profession. Again, meaningful improvements can be made and, as we have heard from across the nation, is demanded of us. We are up for the task. This is something we whole-heartedly support given the extraordinary powers granted to the police by law.

Race-based data collection

As we embark on a course of change, how can we tell if we are making progress?

Every day, there are innumerable positive and professional exchanges our officers are having with Canadians. However, amongst this, we still see far too many problematic interactions that belie who we are and aspire to be. Many of these have been highlighted in the media and undermine community trust.

The problem is, the data doesn't currently exist to accurately define the scope and breadth of the problem of systemic racism in Canada.

The collection of data on Indigenous and ethno-cultural identity has been a subject of discussion in Canada for many decades.

The need for quality data about the experiences of Indigenous peoples and ethno-cultural communities with Canada's criminal justice system has been identified consistently across numerous reports, commissions, and inquiries.

There have been demands from community groups and the public for police to collect data stemming from citizen-police interactions, and directions on the collection of race and ethnicity data to police agencies from civilian oversight organizations, quasi-investigative commissions, and agencies, as well as provincial governments.

This information is paramount to understanding the extent to which people from these communities are over-represented in Canada's criminal justice system, beginning with their interactions with the police, and how institutional policies, practices and cultures contribute to the inequities faced by Black, Indigenous and racialized communities.

This information is a necessary, but not sufficient component of evidence-informed policy-making.

We also need to bolster this with collaborative partnerships with affected communities and stakeholders to advance community safety and well-being.

Last month, the CACP issued a joint statement with Statistics Canada announcing our commitment to work together to meet this important information need for the justice community and the Canadian public committed to advancing racial equity.

Together, we will work with the policing community and key organizations to enable the police to report statistics on Indigenous and ethno-cultural groups in police-reported crime statistics on victims and accused persons that includes important context and avoids stigmatizing communities.

We believe this initiative will be helpful in providing an evidence-based picture of the current situation and to help inform future policing and community safety policies and practices in partnership with communities.

Conclusion

Racism, whether systemic or individual, is painful, inexcusable, and cannot be tolerated.

When racial bias transpires during police interactions, the confidence and trust of the public in our services is shaken, and these are the cornerstones of our profession.

To stop systemic racism requires a whole of society approach.

While improvements are required in policing, and the CACP is committed to supporting positive change in this regard, police services are part of a broader system focused on community health and safety.

All components of this system must also adapt, evolve, change, and collaborate to effectively advance racial equity. We stand with our partners committed to do this work.