

MEDIA RELEASE

Provincial police association calls for changes after reported 18-year low in police presence per capita

TORONTO, October 9, 2019 / CNW / -- Last week, Statistics Canada released data that found that the 2018 police presence per capita across Canada is at its lowest number since 2001¹. Though their report outlines various year over year changes in police service-related figures, the Police Association of Ontario (PAO) is notably concerned that these declining rates will affect the ability of our police personnel to keep up with the incredible demands of a growing population.

The recently-released data reveals that the total number of sworn police officers across the country has fallen to its lowest level since 2009. However, when adjusted to reflect population changes, the 2018 reported police presence per capita is actually at an 18-year low. 2018 saw the seventh consecutive annual decline in this rate, with Ontario's police strength experiencing the third largest decrease in the country at a 4% drop. Concurrently, Ontario has experienced an increase in its overall crime severity index for the past four consecutive years – 2018 saw the single largest jump at 6.43%.

Front-line police personnel are dealing with a growing-range of public safety and social issues in their communities, such as the opioid epidemic, human trafficking, gun violence, cybercrime and more.

In addition, many police services around the province are struggling to fill their schedules, which results in increased requests for overtime. More overtime can lead to higher rates of burnout, burnout can lead to potential mental health issues that may culminate in leaves of absence, and leaves of absence then result in further scheduling gaps. It's a difficult cycle to break without making a significant commitment to change. However, it is a cycle that must be broken to ensure the safety of the public and our members.

The Police Association of Ontario has long-warned of resource-related issues – human, equipment or otherwise – impeding the professional effectiveness and personal well-being of our police personnel members. When provincial crime rates are increasing and police staffing levels are decreasing, how are our sworn police officers and civilian police service employees expected to continue upholding public safety at the same levels?

¹<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/191003/dq191003a-eng.htm?CMP=mstatcan>

²<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/adhocs/009437numberofpoliceofficersthatdiedbysuicideinenglandandwalesages20to642015to2017>

“At some point we need to ask the question, when will political leaders begin to acknowledge that there is a breaking point? The continuous underfunding of policing is not sustainable,” says PAO President Bruce Chapman. “Every day across the province, we hear from our members that front-line police service personnel are trying to keep up with an increasing public demand for police service and it is resulting in burnout and other mental health issues.”

Earlier this year, the Office of the Chief Coroner for Ontario assembled an expert panel to examine police officer deaths by suicide after nine serving and retired Ontario police officers took their own lives in 2018. The panel’s recently released report contains numerous important recommendations, with one specific to resourcing, accommodation and burnout. As the report notes, most police services in Ontario follow an ‘authorized strength’ staffing model that assumes “all police positions are filled and members are at work.” It does not account for members being away from work on medical leave, which translates to “intensified workload demands in regular deployment, and often through increased overtime levels, essentially it falls to the members to subsidize the shortfall in the authorized strength.”

“This is greatly unfair to all members – those who are trying to get better and those still on-duty – as it puts them in very challenging positions,” says Chapman. “Although likely unintentional, this model ends up exacerbating mental health and occupational stress issues. Members who are off on leave to get help will often feel the pressure to return to work too early because they don’t want their teammates to burn out from filling the associated service gaps.”

We don’t need to look far for examples of how decreased police funding and strength has driven up mental health issues amongst police personnel. In 2018, the United Kingdom’s Home Office conducted a ‘frontline review’ to gather input from police officers and staff throughout the UK. As reported by The Independent in July 2019, the review “...highlighted rising long-term sickness and mental health issues among officers, who reported widespread low morale and feelings of being ‘less able to meet their duty’...”, while also describing “...mounting pressure from case ‘overload’, overtime and cancelled rest days, as forces shuffle officers around different roles to plug gaps.” Though 2018 data is not yet available, the United Kingdom unfortunately lost 21 police officers to suicide in 2017².

Concrete changes are needed now. Immediate plans need to be made and implemented to address these very real issues, otherwise the safety of the public and our members will continue to be a great concern. The development of tools and resources to assist police personnel experiencing mental health issues is certainly a step in the right direction, but it does not address the root causes. The PAO is calling on all levels of government – municipal, provincial and federal – to commit to investing in the required police resources and social services to restore appropriate rates of police presence per capita so our police personnel are effectively able to protect the public and protect themselves.

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About the Police Association of Ontario

The Police Association of Ontario (PAO) is the official provincial representative body for 18,000 sworn and civilian police personnel from 47 local police associations across Ontario. A unifying voice for advocacy in policing, the PAO provides its member associations with representation, resource and support.

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