

Police Leadership Must Protect the People Delivering Public Safety

By Bruce Townley | Beyond Resilience Canada

Are police leaders creating the conditions their officers need to serve the public effectively and remain healthy?

I believe that question belongs at the centre of how we judge police leadership.

Protect life. Prevent and investigate crime. Maintain public peace. Support victims. Enforce the law fairly. Build the relationships that make those responsibilities possible.

These are demanding responsibilities. Yet police are also expected to respond when other public services are unavailable. Leaders must ask what officers can reasonably deliver, what support they need and what those expectations are costing them.

Public safety depends on the people delivering it. Their working conditions must be part of the assessment of police performance.

Match Responsibilities With Capacity

Public Safety Canada's 2013 policing summit report identified growing demands, new forms of crime and a criminal justice system requiring more resources to complete the same tasks. More than a decade later, leaders should demonstrate what has changed in daily police work. Another strategy document is not an operational result. [1]

Greater Sudbury's 2024 crime report, as reported by Sudbury.com, identified approximately 85 per cent of calls as non-criminal. That is a local figure, not a national estimate or a measure of time spent. [2]

Non-criminal does not mean unnecessary. A missing child, a suicidal person in immediate danger or a volatile domestic situation may require police without an established offence. But an immediate response does not automatically make police responsible for solving the underlying problem.

Officers cannot provide continuing psychiatric treatment, create supportive housing or replace sustained addiction care. A uniform should not become the default answer to every gap in public services.

The leadership responsibility is to establish clear priorities, document demands and raise capacity problems with those who control funding and services. That responsibility extends to governing bodies and governments. Frontline supervisors cannot resolve decisions made above them.

Officer Health Is a Test of Leadership

A Canadian study published online in 2017 found that 36.7 per cent of participating municipal/provincial officers and 50.2 per cent of participating RCMP officers screened positive for at least one mental disorder. These voluntary survey results are neither clinical diagnoses nor representative estimates for every officer. They document a substantial burden among participants; they do not establish a national increase since 2017. [3]

We do not need to prove an increase before taking prevention seriously.

Conditions inside police organizations deserve scrutiny alongside traumatic events outside them. A 2015 study identified competing demands, court-system pressures, work outside one's mandate, understaffing and a nonsupportive organizational culture as sources of role overload. It does not prove that mandate expansion alone causes mental illness. It gives leaders reason to examine how they organize the work. [4]

A 2026 Ontario study identified continuing barriers involving stigma, uncertainty about supporting public safety personnel with post-traumatic stress injuries and difficulty finding meaningful accommodations. [5]

Occupational mental health belongs in decisions about staffing, supervision, workplace conduct, recovery and mandate. Treatment matters. So does preventing avoidable harm before an officer needs it.

We cannot keep expanding expectations and then treat officers' resilience as the solution to the gap.

A Leadership Decision I Have Never Forgotten

While serving as the chief's executive officer, an officer asked to speak with me in person. He arrived visibly upset. He had been involved in a shooting of an armed person and had been cleared of criminal wrongdoing. A civil action against the service remained.

He told me our in-house lawyer had demanded that he obtain his psychological records from his treating psychologist. He broke down in my office.

I comforted him and directed him not to provide the records until I had addressed the matter. I informed the lawyer, then approached those managing the litigation. I explained my concern about the potential harm to the officer and asked them to find a resolution.

A few days later, I was advised that the matter had been resolved. I told the officer in person. His relief was unmistakable. I also arranged a face-to-face meeting so the lawyer could apologize to the officer.

The service had a legal matter to manage, but it also had an officer to protect. Preventing avoidable harm sometimes requires a senior leader to intervene, challenge a process and insist that the person affected receives proper consideration.

We need to prepare leaders to exercise that judgment and capture evidence of what they do.

Recruit and Promote for the Priorities We Expect

Recruitment and promotion must reflect these priorities. We should select officers who can exercise sound judgment and build public trust, and leaders who can create the conditions for them to succeed. Resilience must never become a hiring requirement used to excuse preventable organizational harm.

Train Leaders to Prevent Harm

Prevention should influence how leaders are selected, trained, promoted and evaluated.

There is progress. The RCMP reported developing a module on the National Standard for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace as part of its Executive/Officer Development Program in 2022–23. Its 2024–25 results report describes work on a workplace culture strategy and a performance measurement framework informed by employee experiences. Those steps do not establish that every supervisor is adequately prepared or evaluated on prevention, nor do they establish practice across Canada. [6][7]

Offering training, demonstrating competence and improving working conditions are different achievements. Governing bodies should ask for evidence of all three.

Leaders need preparation to identify psychological hazards, manage workload and recovery, address harmful conduct and respond without retaliation. They also need authority and resources, with clear routes for escalating problems they cannot resolve.

That judgment applies to practical decisions too. Equipment must protect officers while allowing them to move, work comfortably and engage with the public. The same load represents a greater proportion of body weight for a smaller officer; body type, individual fit and acclimation also matter. Research supports assessing equipment arrangements. One Swedish study found less discomfort and lower-back pressure with a combined load-bearing vest and thigh-holster arrangement than with a standard duty belt,

although upper-back pressure increased. Leaders should examine benefits and burdens before adding another item. [8][9]

Capture What Matters Without Exposing the Officer

An intervention like mine may never appear in a performance record. Defining good leadership is only the first step; capturing reliable evidence is harder.

I would start with a brief, confidential monthly review supported by ongoing records. What concern was identified? What action was taken? What indicates it helped? What remains unresolved? Serious safety concerns require immediate attention.

The system should also examine overtime and recovery, confidential employee feedback, timely responses to concerns, access to care, accommodation and sustained return to work. These proposals should be piloted with employees, occupational health specialists and privacy advisers; they are not a validated national reporting model.

The fine line is protecting confidentiality while providing enough information to address occupational risks. Reports should focus on working conditions and management actions. Therapy notes should not become routine performance data. Information needed for individual safety or accommodation decisions belongs in the appropriate separate process.

My intervention could be recorded as a concern identified, escalated, resolved and followed up, without reproducing the officer's psychological records. Named cases need restricted access; governing bodies should generally receive aggregated information, with care where small teams make people identifiable.

Supervisors' self-reports need checks through confidential feedback and independent review. Assess leaders on what they control and whether they escalate problems beyond their authority. Fewer complaints or claims may reflect better prevention—or less willingness to report. Employees must never be penalized for seeking help.

Another form to complete is not prevention. The purpose is to make risks visible, ensure someone acts and establish whether the action helped.

Protect Service and Relationships

Managing workload responsibly also means deciding when another service should lead. Toronto reported that its Community Crisis Service handled 78 per cent of calls transferred to it by 911 in 2024 without police involvement. The service operates around the clock. That result applies to transferred calls, not all mental health emergencies. [10]

A dependable alternative, clear response criteria and measured results allow responsibility to move safely. Simply telling police to step back would leave people exposed.

Leaders must also protect positive police contact. Officers need opportunities to listen, assist and build relationships before enforcement becomes necessary. If diversion leaves police dealing predominantly with confrontation, we risk narrowing the public's experience of policing. That is a risk to assess, not a proven outcome of these programs.

Neighbourhood engagement, youth relationships and prevention need protected time. Diverting calls will not strengthen community policing if every hour released is absorbed by another reactive demand. Making the police role smaller is not, by itself, success.

Governments must provide dependable services and workable handovers. Police leaders must examine their own competing initiatives and duplicated processes, while protecting rights, disclosure and independent oversight. Rural and remote communities need approaches suited to their circumstances.

What I Expect from Leaders

Police performance should include investigative quality, victim service, response capacity, positive community relationships and occupational health.

A service that measures output without examining the conditions under which its people deliver it has an incomplete picture of performance.

Governments must fund the services around policing. Police leaders must protect capacity and working conditions within it. The availability of a police officer is not proof that the rest of the system is working.

Police leaders must be judged on the service their people deliver, the conditions they create and the action they take to prevent avoidable harm.

Evidence notes

- These studies do not establish a single national trend in police workload or mental illness since 2017. Changes in reports or claims may reflect health, recognition, eligibility or several factors together.
- The 2026 Ontario stigma study is qualitative and concerns public safety organizations, not national police prevalence.
- The 2023 equipment study involved 32 officers—31 men and one woman. The 2019 Swedish driving study tested a combined load-bearing vest and thigh-holster arrangement. Neither establishes effects on all Canadian officers.
- The personal account is the author's recollection, not a determination of legal entitlement to clinical records.

Sources

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- [6] RCMP, 2022–23 Departmental Results Report, Employee Well-Being Strategy: <https://rcmp.ca/en/corporate-information/publications-and-manuals/2022-2023-departmental-results-report/full-report>
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- [8] The effects of equipment carriage on functional movement quality among law enforcement officers (2023), Ergonomics: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/37026409/>
- [9] Larsen et al. (2019), Duty belt or load-bearing vest? Discomfort and pressure distribution for police driving standard fleet vehicles: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31280798/>
- [10] City of Toronto, Toronto Community Crisis Service anniversary release, July 8, 2025: <https://www.toronto.ca/news/city-of-toronto-recognizes-service-award-recipients-in-celebration-of-the-toronto-community-crisis-services-one-year-anniversary-expanding-city-wide/>