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PRIVATE REINFORCEMENTS FOR PUBLIC POLICE FORCES?

By Mathieu Bédard and Jasmin Guénette

Policing costs have been rising for 25 years in Canada, while the number of criminal incidents per officer has fallen.¹ These growing costs can be explained in part by an increase in the number of police officers, which has certainly contributed to a reduction in the crime rate, but also by the fact that those officers perform a growing number of tasks.² In order to contain these rising costs while ensuring the same quality and scope of public safety services, the work of police officers should be refocused on their essential duties, and other categories of personnel should be employed wherever possible.

Some efforts have already been made in this direction, among other things by entrusting police cadets with certain foot patrol or bicycle duties, and by getting them to help during outdoor events.³ The next step in controlling costs is to call on private security companies, which can under certain circumstances supply qualified personnel who are less expensive than police officers.

ESSENTIAL POLICE FUNCTIONS

Certain essential functions are not amenable to being sub-contracted to security agents and must be dealt with by the police themselves. These are the tasks that require a high level of skill in three areas:

- Intellectual: when the work demands a solid understanding and interpretation of the law;
- Social psychological: when the work requires interacting with the public, often in crisis situations where officers must defuse conflicts;



- Physical: when attackers must be subdued and arrests made.

The tasks carried out by police do not all require exceptional skill in all three of these areas at once, however. Out of a list detailing the 215 activities carried out by officers,⁴ only 22 are highly demanding in terms of all three types of skills: intellectual, social psychological and physical. These mostly concern activities with a high potential for violence, including intervening while a crime is in progress, pursuing vehicles, apprehending suspects, subduing attackers, delivering arrest warrants, acting as a mediator during conjugal disputes, and searching for bombs.

This leaves 193 other duties that security agents could perform. Typically, these are tasks that call for special equipment but not substantial skill levels, or else that require certain intellectual abilities but no particular physical prowess. For

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example, there is no need for a police officer, who is paid in part for his elevated social psychological and physical skills, to be immobilized to review photo radar images in order to confirm speed limit infractions. A properly trained civilian could perform this task at lower cost.

These activities that could be subcontracted take up a significant portion of police officers' time. A study carried out in British Columbia reveals, for example, that around 40% of patrol officers' time is devoted to administrative duties, mainly the writing of reports.⁵ These are reports written following burglaries, complaints or witness interrogations. None of the administrative tasks fulfilled by police officers requires high levels of skill in all three areas. A portion of these duties could be subcontracted to security agents.

Many of the activities performed during patrols also fall under the heading of auxiliary tasks. For example, the monitoring of parking and parking meters in the cities of Calgary, Edmonton and Montreal is carried out by security agents.

In Quebec, small municipalities must rely on the Sûreté du Québec (the provincial police) to provide police services. Since Sûreté du Québec officers must cover territories that are quite large, certain small municipalities sometimes turn to private security companies to monitor their public spaces and enforce regulations that are not a priority for the police, but that are nonetheless important for residents. This is the choice made by the municipalities of Saint-Lazare⁶ and Richelieu⁷ to ensure the presence of patrols in their parks and public spaces.

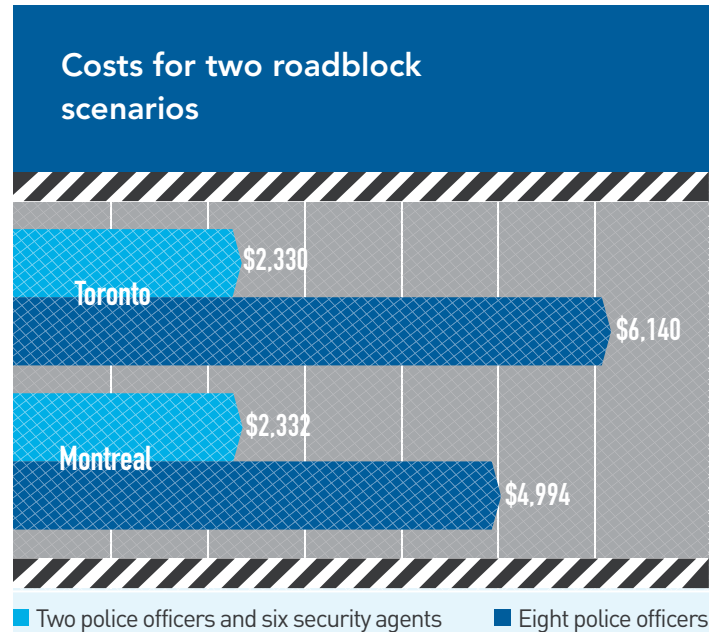
There is no need for a police officer to be immobilized to review photo radar images in order to confirm speed limit infractions.

When these security agents are faced with situations that require police skills, they call upon Sûreté du Québec officers, who give their calls high priority. In a big city, security agents assigned to patrol a park would call on regular municipal police forces in the same way if this service was subcontracted to them.

THE BENEFITS OF SUBCONTRACTING

Including salary, social benefits and payroll taxes, total compensation for a police officer in Montreal's police department (the SPVM) amounts to an average of nearly \$120,000 a year, versus around \$40,000 for a security agent in Quebec.⁸ The subcontracting of auxiliary police duties presents an opportunity to save money by reducing the unit costs of these tasks. In Toronto, the potential savings are even larger, with average compensation of a little over \$140,000 for police officers, versus \$30,000 for security agents.⁹

Figure 1



Sources: See the authors' calculations in the Technical Annex on the MEI's website.

To illustrate the amounts of savings that could be made, take the example of a roadblock operation in Montreal lasting eight and a half hours and aiming to nab impaired drivers, which would normally require eight police officers. In a scenario in which this operation is carried out by eight SPVM police officers, it costs the City of Montreal \$4,994 in remuneration and employer contributions. However, the majority of the tasks involved in such roadblocks are auxiliary duties, like installing signage, administering physical coordination tests, administering breathalyzer tests, coordinating blood and urine tests, as well as filling out reports. The only duties that fall under the essential functions of police officers are the impounding of vehicles for major infractions and the arrest of drivers.

In a scenario in which auxiliary duties were subcontracted to the private sector, and where six of the eight participants were security agents, the cost could be reduced to \$2,332, a saving of over 50%. In Toronto, the amount saved would be even greater (see Figure 1). This calculation is valid for other types of auxiliary tasks, like security cordons to protect crime scenes, the responsibility for which has just been entrusted to a private company in Dorset County, England.¹⁰

Some more regular activities also consist primarily of auxiliary tasks. Simply responding to a call regarding a break-in when the crime is no longer in progress requires between 5 and 10 hours of work, but involves no tasks that are essential police functions.¹¹ In London, England, a police officer is sent to the site of a burglary only if the burglars are still present; otherwise, it is a security agent who shows up.¹²

Canadian cities could draw inspiration from these procedures for burglaries by only sending a police officer to secure the

Table 1

Reduction in crime following a division of duties between police officers and security agents		
REGION	TASKS PERFORMED BY SECURITY AGENTS	CRIME REDUCTION PERCENTAGE
Lincolnshire, England	Practically all duties in police stations and certain tasks outside of stations, like the transportation of people who have been arrested	14% from 2012 to 2013
Grand Central Business Improvement District in New York, United States	Patrolling, surveillance, alerting the police to crimes and helping citizens as needed (fires, medical emergencies, providing information, etc.)	53% from 1988 to 1993
Los Angeles, United States	Patrolling, surveillance with a particular emphasis on vagrancy and alcohol consumption in the streets, and serving as intermediaries between citizens and police	11% from 1994 to 2005

Sources: The Police and Crime Commissioner for Lincolnshire, *The G4S Lincolnshire Police Strategic Partnership—One Year On. Annual Report*, June 2013; Bruce L. Benson, *To Serve and Protect: Privatization and Community in Criminal Justice*, New York University Press, 1998, p. 156; Philip J. Cook and John MacDonald, "Public Safety through Private Action: An Economic Assessment of BIDs," *The Economic Journal*, Vol. 121, No. 552, 2011, pp. 445-462.

premises and collect evidence, or when the situation otherwise justifies it, and entrusting the balance of the tasks to security agents. We estimate that for the 10,499 break-ins committed in Montreal in 2013, the gross annual saving would have been \$3.9 million, or more than 60% of actual costs.¹³

The SPVM employs 79 police officers, in addition to 188 civilians, for the activities of the human resources and organizational development department, the financial resources department, corporate communications, material resources and information resources.¹⁴ The remuneration of these police officers represents around \$9.4 million. By subcontracting these auxiliary tasks to the private sector, this cost could be reduced to \$3.2 million.¹⁵ In Toronto, 244 police officers and 410 civilians are employed in equivalent services,¹⁶ which implies a potential saving of \$27 million.¹⁷

In Lincolnshire, England, a private security company took over practically all auxiliary activities. It has been managing

the county's police stations since 2012 and has surpassed all savings targets, while the crime rate has fallen by 14%.¹⁸

In each of the cases mentioned above, the gross savings correspond to the freeing up of police officers' time, during which they can be assigned to other duties that are more in line with their essential functions. This will not actually correspond to net savings in financial terms in the short run since collective agreements and job tenure would not allow for reductions in the remuneration costs of police departments.

However, in a budgetary context like the one facing the City of Montreal, where the municipal administration has asked its police department to reduce the number of police officers by 45 positions per year for the next five years, these gross savings could be allocated so as to conserve the same level of services to the population despite the reduction in the police force.¹⁹ In the longer term, and combined with a more profound reorganization of police services, these gross savings could be transformed into net savings for taxpayers by limiting the need for new hires.

The subcontracting of auxiliary police duties presents an opportunity to save money by reducing the unit costs of these tasks.

TOWARD A BETTER DIVISION OF DUTIES

The subcontracting of certain tasks to the private sector not only reduces the cost of these tasks for taxpayers. This division of labour between police officers and security agents would increase police productivity and potentially lead to reductions in the crime rate (see Table 1). For example, when such a strategy was adopted in the neighbourhood around

Grand Central Station in New York, crime fell by 20% in two years and by more than half after five years.²⁰

Subcontracting certain tasks to the private sector therefore amounts to complementing the work of police officers, not replacing those officers. The importance of the work police officers do is actually reaffirmed. They become the guarantors of respect for procedures and specialists in the use of force. They are charged with making sure that the private company embodies the same values and applies the same rigour that they do. In different contexts, this relationship between police officers and security agents will take different forms:

- Coordination: for example, security agents reporting to the police dispatcher for their assignments;
- Cooperation: security agents relying on police officers for tasks that correspond to essential police functions;
- Supervision: during a roadblock or security cordon, for example, in which security agents do traffic and control work while allowing officers to take care of arrests.

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CONCLUSION

Subcontracting out to private companies some of the tasks currently performed by police officers is a viable solution for curbing constantly rising police spending. Various international and Canadian experiments confirm the success of this model of collaboration with private companies, which even seems to contribute to a reduction in crime. It is therefore possible to manage public safety differently and to do more, all while conserving public funds.

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