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Racialized Communities and Police Services Project 2005-2012

The Racialized Communities and Police Services Project
A partnership of the Manitoba Human Rights Commission and
University of Winnipeg

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Background

From time to time in Winnipeg and across the country, allegations that police have failed to provide services in a bias-free manner have been made. In Manitoba, the relationship between police services and Aboriginal people was a major theme of the Aboriginal Justice inquiry.

The Racialized Communities and Police Services (RCAPS) Project was initiated in 2005, after the Centennial Neighbourhood Safety Committee in Winnipeg informed the Commission about their concerns that police services were biased, based on race (Aboriginal ancestry). The Safety Committee was concerned about the treatment by police of Aboriginal residents in their neighbourhood and they were also concerned about the lack of crime prevention services and about the police response to calls for service from area residents. They wanted to explore constructive ways of dealing with their concerns and were asked to consider various options. One option would have been able to file complaints under *The Code* – instead, the committee asked the Commission to address their concerns through research – obtaining data about racial profiling in Winnipeg.

The RCAPS Committee met with (former) Police Chief Jack Ewatski of the Winnipeg Police Services (WPS) in October 2005 who attended the first round table discussion with racialized community leaders and the Manitoba Human Rights Commission RCAPS working group. In open discussion, various community groups stressed the importance of anti-racism education and the need for more police cross-cultural training and community outreach. They told stories about their experiences with police. Police Chief Ewatski acknowledged that there was mistrust between some community members and some members of the police services. A request was made by the Commission in March 2007 that the WPS become involved in gathering data. The request was declined.

Three community consultations during the winter, summer and fall of 2007 followed. During these consultations, anecdotal information was gathered.

On November 20, 2007 Mr. Keith McCaskill was appointed Chief of Police with the Winnipeg Police Service. He was sworn in on December 10, 2007. The Interim RCAPS Report was released on December 6th, 2007.

Executive Summary of the Interim RCAPS Report

The Winnipeg Police Service has the responsibility of providing its services in an impartial manner, and in particular, without regard to a person's race or ancestry. The interim report provided information on the Racialized Communities and Police Services Project (RCAPS Project), a research partnership between the Manitoba Human Rights Commission and the University of Winnipeg, and presented the results of its first phase, the Community Consultations.

A total of four community consultations were held. The first consultation was with representatives of community-based organizations involved with members of racialized groups in Winnipeg. It sought to gather information about perceptions of bias in police services to members of the organizations consulted. Three additional consultations were held in neighbourhoods in the center and north areas of Winnipeg, where individual participants shared their stories and observations with respect to the provision of police services to themselves and other neighbourhood residents.

Major themes, which emerged from the consultations with community-based organizations, included the fear that many members of racialized communities have of the police, the importance of anti-racism education, the need for more Winnipeg Police Service resources for cross-cultural training and community outreach and the need for a more effective public complaints mechanism than the Law Enforcement Review Agency.

These themes were also predominant in the stories and views shared by individual participants at the three consultations held in neighbourhoods. Other themes of individual presentations were the lack of police services to the Aboriginal community, the abusive treatment by police based on Aboriginal ancestry, the need for community-based policing, the systemic nature of racial bias in the Winnipeg police service, the perception by police and media that members of racialized groups are gang members, and sexually abusive treatment of Aboriginal women by police. The full report is available on the Manitoba Human Rights Commission website www.manitobahumanrights.ca.

Phase 2 – Mid Way Consultation

Phase 2 of the RCAPS Project began with a series of meetings with Chief Keith McCaskill, the first in June of 2008.

During the second meeting with Police Chief McCaskill, an invitation was extended to have two members of the Winnipeg Police Service (WPS) sit on the RCAPS Advisory Committee. By the end of the year it was confirmed that Director of Human Resources Sharron Gould and Deputy Police Chief Bob Webster would join President and Vice-Chancellor of The University of Winnipeg Dr. Lloyd Axworthy, Elder Art Shofley, Dufferin School Principal Suni Mathews and Executive Director of Winnipeg Harvest David Northcott as members of the RCAPS Advisory Committee.

In 2009, the Commission solicited interim responses in the form of recorded individual interviews from community leaders who had been in attendance at the original round table discussion in 2005 and present when the RCAPS Interim Report was released in 2007. As with previous consultations, the confidentiality and anonymity of individual participants who shared their observations and stories were respected. They were asked the questions below. A summary of the responses follows.

1. What interaction has there been between your organization/members of your community and the Winnipeg Police Service over the past three years?
2. Over the past three years has the overall relationship between members of your community and the Winnipeg Police Service changed? If so, how?
3. In the past three years, has the Winnipeg Police Service's response to requests for service from members of your community changed? If so, how?
4. In the past three years, has there been any change in the crime prevention services provided to neighbourhoods where members of your community reside? If so, what has changed?
5. How would you describe the current understanding of members of your community about the role, duties and procedures of the Winnipeg police?
6. Have police contacts with members of your community changed in the past three years? If so, how have they changed? Can you give examples of the changes, both good and bad? (Examples of police contacts include traffic stops by police, inquiries by police, informal conversations with on-duty police, detentions and arrests by police, police attending requests for service)

7. How would you describe the current level of trust of members of your community regarding contact with police? Has the level of trust changed from three years ago?
8. How would you describe the current level of fear members of your community have regarding contact with police? Has the level of fear changed from that of three years ago?
9. What do you think would build a greater level of respect and trust between members of your community and the Winnipeg Police Service?

In 2009 there appeared to be a growing optimism in the communities. Although stories of racism and abusive behavior continued, most community leaders reported that there was improvement, recognizing that change does not happen quickly. There was a general sense that the WPS and individual officers were willing to work with them, in an “active partnership atmosphere.”

Some cited particular projects such as crime prevention programs, safe houses and cleaning up Central Park as positive steps. Specific programs include Project Breakaway and Neighbourhoods Alive.

As one leader pointed out, it was important to note that leaders of communities represent one particular view of the relationship with the police and are speaking from that perspective. “When you move towards the police interaction with individual members of the community there may be a different kind of experience. I think it is really important to make that distinction because as leaders, we don’t always reflect what really goes on in the neighbourhood.”

The interviews revealed that there was considerable praise for Police Chief McCaskill and his role in building bridges to the community. “There seems to be a difference in the force. We’re still getting complaints and there’s still suspicion about racism in the police and so there is still a certain fear of the police, but the Chief’s statements and actions have been very positive.” The general consensus regarding Chief McCaskill was one of respect and hope. “Chief McCaskill has been outstanding in his reaching out to the community.”

There was however, continued criticism by some regarding response time. Community leaders believed that individuals did not call the police because they believed they would not get a response in time. This resulted in trying to deal with the situation themselves. “This to me is a systemic problem that the police have got to deal with.”

When it comes to the community understanding the WPS, the general sense is there seemed to be an effort to make this happen but a better understanding was still required by the community. Some believe that a mutual understanding could come from more community involvement. “We want more contact with the police. We want them when we have a celebration during Black History month. If we are having a banquet, we hope somebody will come.”

In the first community consultation in 2005, many leaders believed that awareness building and anti-racist education would help build a better relationship with the police. Although the WPS has shown such programs exist, leaders continued to call for more education. “I think they really need some anti-racist education within the police force to really start deconstructing old attitudes and behaviours around racialized people...” Others, however, believe that these programs have had a positive effect. “I think there has been more sensitivity training – and I only use that word because it almost seems that more of the police people that we have seen coming to our agency tend to be younger, and tend to be more supportive to the clients that we’re working with.”

It was noted that in some of the immigrant communities, there was still fear of the police. This has much to do with the countries from which they came and were persecuted by the police or military, rather than specific action of the WPS. As one leader said, “They don’t have the understanding that the police are there to help and support them, not persecute them.”

There was mixed reaction when leaders were asked about community members and direct contact with the police. For example according to one interviewee, “You have more engagement between police at the street level and local organizations in different parts of the city. That’s new and will have impact over time – positive impact.”

From another perspective, one leader said that feedback from the community suggested that there is very little change. Brutality was still reported by community members. One said, “I’ve heard of lots of stories from neighbourhoods where the police are extremely verbally abusive in a very racialized way...I hear examples of our people being targeted around profiling. It is still happening.” Another comment was, “On the whole, the feedback that I get from community members about the relationship is that there’s very little change. The focus still is on being too quick to respond in terms of arrests and that type of thing. There is still a fair amount of brutality that is reported to me by community members. And we talk about these things on a fairly regular basis.”

When it comes to trust, the responses were the most mixed from “There is a good level of trust between the staff of this organization and the police, but those in the community feel the police are out to get them. There is not very much trust...” to “I would say that there is improvement. I hope – maybe it’s just wishful thinking, but in my experience, with the work of the missing persons, they seem to be really listening to the community. There seems to be a little more openness to dialogue around being proactive or problem solving.”

And finally, leaders continued to believe that community policing is the answer. Some said that positive steps have been made. “My sense is that things are generally getting better. I think in the current Winnipeg Police Service leadership there’s a fairly good commitment to community policing...”

Others, however, didn’t necessarily see it that way. “I haven’t really seen big efforts around building on community policing – I don’t see a strategy for getting police into the community.”

The overall picture expressed by the leaders of community groups interviewed was that progress was being made, although perhaps slower than they would have liked. Issues such as fear, trust and understanding were being addressed, but most agreed that it had to be ongoing. It must also be acknowledged that there continued to be, even if it is at a lesser extent than in 2005, reports by individuals in the community of poor response time, little improvement on community policing and instances of verbal abuse and racism. Virtually all believe many of these issues could be addressed with stronger community policing.

Phase II of the RCAPS Project concluded with the Manitoba Human Rights Commission receiving and reviewing the Winnipeg Police Service policies and confirmed that they included a commitment to bias-free policing.

As well, a report was commissioned, researched and written by a University of Winnipeg graduate student that examined initiatives by the Winnipeg Police Service regarding bias-free profiling practices and training protocols. The report concluded that numerous successful initiatives have been put in place although even more can and needs to be done in order to maintain the public’s confidence.

Phase 3 – Final Consultation

“This project began with an incident involving a 10 year old boy who had a knife held to his throat but was too frightened to go to the police.”
Member of the Centennial Safety Group

The final meeting of the Racialized Communities and Police Services (RCAPS) Project was held on November 7, 2012. The purpose of the meeting was to bring the project to a conclusion and look to the future.

It is difficult to achieve a balance between human rights and public safety. Over the past seven years the Manitoba Human Rights Commission (MHRC) has been involved in a research project examining the relationship between racialized communities and the Winnipeg Police Service (WPS). There have been allegations on the part of the community leaders and community members of excessive force by Winnipeg Police Officers. There also have been concerns raised on the lack of education, communication and mistrust by both sides.

Jerry Woods, the Chairperson of the MHRC chaired the meeting and explained that the working and advisory committees of this project did not consist solely of staff from the Manitoba Human Rights Commission. Also involved were researchers from the University of Winnipeg, the Winnipeg Police Service, community members and leaders.

Mr. Woods stated, as he has in the past, that the project was not intended to attack the police but rather to start a dialogue between the WPS and Racialized Communities. The RCAPS Project, nonetheless has been both controversial and appreciated.

This final meeting, once again took the form of a round table discussion and the following community groups were represented: IRCOM House, North End Community Center, ACOMI, Ka Ni Kanichihk, North Point Douglas Women’s Centre, Rossbrook House, the Centennial Community Improvement Group, Winnipeg Harvest and one of the original members of the Centennial Safety Group. Guest included Winnipeg’s Chief of Police Devon Clunis and members of the RCAPS Project Advisory and Working committees.

The following is not a transcript but rather a general overview of points made by the participants. The statements quoted, however, are an accurate account of what was said by various leaders and serve to re-enforce the points made.

The discussion centered around one question: *Has the relationship between the Winnipeg Police Service and Racialized Communities changed over the last five years, and if so how?*

The general consensus in the room was that communication between the WPS and community organizations has improved over the last five years. The most consistent criticism was that the process was too slow. Many however, appreciated the efforts of former Police Chief Keith McCaskill whose efforts to connect with the communities and its youth was acknowledged and appreciated.

Police Chief McCaskill was highly regarded for his individual efforts such as meeting with community leaders for coffee or at community events. The group responsible for initiating this study, the Centennial Safety Committee, reported that it meant a great deal to members of the community and her organization when Police Chief McCaskill invited them to his swearing in ceremony. "It helped the community connect with the WPS on a different level."

One community member stated that although he missed community substations, in the last five years he has seen more foot patrols in his neighbourhood. "It builds trust for the WPS when people see the beat officers constantly, even though they are not fully trusting yet."

Another community leader however, thought that his community did not see much of a change in foot patrols over the years. "We are always asking for them and never seem to get them. We had part time officers, but one left and another was promoted. They were never replaced."

Everyone agreed on the importance of community policing, not only for safety but also as role models for the young people. "Children do not have many role models to aspire to, other than gangs."

Some of the leaders explained that although the relationship between community organizations and the WPS was getting better, this did not always mean it was the same at the street level where problems still exist. "Goodwill cannot only be at the top. The problem is that the Chief may come to an event but the rest of the Winnipeg Police remain faceless. The community needs to needs to know police officers."

It would appear, by the accounts of the community leaders and members present that many believe racial profiling and overly aggressive behaviour by some police officers continue to exist. For them, this translates too often into fear and distrust.

And although one community member said that cultural training seemed to be improving, he went on to explain that newcomers to Winnipeg already have a built-in fear and mistrust of what they see as a paramilitary organization. Many come from war torn countries where they look to their elders for protection and trust, and not the police. “The police in their former country are oppressive therefore they think that all people in uniform here are the same.” Not only does distrust and misunderstanding of the police stop some from contacting them, there is also the constant fear of retaliation.

Mistrust is emphasized when the police are believed to be too aggressive, or as one community member put it, “manhandling people.” Some cited police officers as being too heavy handed when accompanying social workers, for example during child apprehensions. It was said during the discussion that today’s police officers also have to be social workers, trained in conflict resolution. “There is still a lot of fear, a lot of racial comments and a total lack of trust for contacting the police. Some of the training for the police officers needs to be social work focused. For example, how they are trained in conflict resolution? We believe that part of the job is not understood by the Winnipeg Police.”

Very similar statements were heard at the first RCAPS Community leaders’ roundtable in 2005.

There was also concern from some groups over the treatment of women in the community. One leader reported an accusation by a woman who reported being raped and her case was never investigated. Also there was criticism for referring to missing and murdered woman as “sex trade workers” as it infers that they are less worthy. This description is also thought to be hurtful to families.

“These women are also mothers, daughters and sisters and this causes another barrier between the community and the Winnipeg Police because of the hurt it causes to families.”

Another concern voiced was that the police talk down to some women, especially Aboriginal women.

A final worry raised was that other groups, referred to as “parapolice” are practicing racial profiling and can be overly aggressive. Many community members do not distinguish between the WPS and other enforcement organizations. “Although we realize that this is not the Winnipeg Police, the community lumps all these ‘forces’ together. They are harsh with the indigenous people. They are not the actual police but they are putting forward an aggressive image and because they are the ones that are walking the streets, they are reinforcing that the uniform represents a hard policing attitude...”

The group relayed satisfaction with some of the changes listed above and although most realize change takes time, there is a frustration with how long it is taking. “The direction is good, but the pace is too slow.”

Police Chief Devon Clunis' response to the community leaders was reassuring, stating that he was in agreement with much of the feedback he had just heard. He also stated that the police deal with crime and disorder.

As an immigrant teenager who grew up in the North End of Winnipeg, he said he realizes that there are not enough positive role models for youth. He referred to wanting "to see officers out there with windows down, out of cars, engaging youth."

In response to one community leader who talked about police having to also play a "social work role" he said police officers are not social workers, but admitted that they are often forced to deal with the consequences of social issues.

Police Chief Clunis said he believed this is a critical time in the city's history, adding that change is needed in the next five to ten years or it will be too late. His philosophy is based on prevention and community building, focusing on engaging with youth. He concluded with a commitment to continue working with everyone in the room.

Recommendations

Although 2012 marks an end to the Racialized Communities and Police Services Research Project, the participants agreed that a close relationship amongst the parties involved should continue. The following are eight recommendations for the future.

1. Pro-active communication and education efforts should continue to ensure that the intention of the leadership of the communities and the WPS reaches those involved at the street level.
2. WPS recognizes that data collection is a tool to address concerns and perceptions in racialized communities and collect statistical information on the interactions of the police officers and community members.*
3. The MHRC and the WPS identify human rights issues and develop appropriate initiatives to prevent and eliminate racism and other forms of discrimination and enter into an anti-discrimination agreement.**
4. The WPS continues to have a collaborative dialogue with the MHRC to identify human rights issues and develop appropriate initiatives to prevent and eliminate racism and other forms of discrimination.

5. The WPS continues to meet with communities to discuss concerns and work with these communities to facilitate solutions.
6. WPS provide sufficient support to ensure that new and existing officers learn appropriate practices so as not to resort to racial profiling.
7. WPS provide sufficient support for new and existing police officers to receive ongoing training initiatives on conflict resolution.
8. The MHRC consider further investigation into concerns expressed by community leaders of “parapolice” organizations that are often considered part of the WPS by community members.

* In the first year of the RCAPS Project, a request was made to the WPS to collect statistical information on the interactions of the police officers in various communities. Collecting such Statistics can be a valuable tool in preventing discrimination.

The discussion of collecting statistical data first emerged in 2005. At that time the Commission invited former Chief Ewatski of the Winnipeg Police Service to meet with representatives of the Commission and the U of W to discuss issues with respect to bias-free policing and to explore the possibility of collaborating in a research project to evaluate whether there was any bias based on race in the provision of police services. The idea of collecting data, as has been done in other jurisdictions was tabled. It was declined. The Commission continues to believe that collecting this information would be beneficial.

The Kingston Police Service was the first to collect such data. (October 2003 to September 2004).

In March 20, 2009, in a joint submission, the Canadian Human Rights Commission (CHRC) and the Canadian Race Relations Foundation (CRRF) urged policing and security agencies systematically collect human rights-based data as a tool to help prevent discrimination.

In May 2012 the Ottawa Police Service (OPS) agreed to collect race-based data on traffic stops by OPS officers.

** An agreement or charter was signed in Ontario between the Ontario Human Rights Commission and The Toronto Police Service. Accordingly the Toronto Police Services Board is to finalize an internal policy on human rights to guide the police in the future. The success of this type of charter has wide implications as the partners, committed to human rights, can set the path for other organizations to bring about real change.

Conclusion

Although this project has taken seven years to complete, it is important to note that over the past seven years, there have been positive changes in the relationship between the WPS and Racialized Communities. It is fair to say a project lasting only three years could not have detected the change that we can identify today. Change at such a level is slow and a frustration of some and the reality of others.

In 2005 we heard that communication between the WPS and Racialized communities needed much improvement. Today that improvement is obvious at the leadership level of both the WPS and the Communities. Furthermore there is cautious optimism that it can also improve on the street level.

There are still accusations of misunderstanding, lack of education and in some cases, excessive force on the part of the WPS. These areas remain a concern.

A commitment to examine all the barriers that remain in existence and a willingness to work towards action to bring about real change is certainly required.

As the RCAPS Project draws to a close, the MHRC hopes to continue to meet with, and assist or support either racialized communities or the Winnipeg Police Service to ensure progress continues.

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