TIMES COLONIST

Two decades after a downtown ridealong, policing challenges have only grown

Jack Knox
Nov 14, 2021 4:00 PM

1 / 8 Victoria police officers Mark Jenkins and Jess Moretto patrol the area around Our Place. Jack Knox says nearly 20 years after a night when he accompanied a police officer on patrol downtown, the challenges, and the lack of resources to deal with them, are even more pronounced. ADRIAN LAM, TIMES COLONIST

Downtown groups say Victoria is in “a state of public safety crisis.”

The assertion is in a letter to city council in which the five signatories — business and tourism groups, Our Place, the Victoria Conservatory of Music — push for more money for an overwhelmed police department.

“It’s a basic need for all citizens to feel they are not in danger,” says the letter, which also refers to the “current unsafe environment” and says “the status quo is not a safe option.”

Whether you agree with that *Mad Max*-ish assessment is a matter of perspective, but few would dispute that downtown is more troubled than it was.

And that brought to mind the wet, chilly night shift that I spent with a Victoria cop named Brent Burger way back in 2002.

Right off the hop, there was a wanted criminal outside the Douglas Hotel — remember the Dougie? — who decided drunk o’clock was the right time to turn himself in.

But that incident quickly gave way to a call about a pre-teen boy who was locked out of his house and worried about his missing mom. By the time police arrived, she was home. Turns out she had gone downtown and bought $40 worth of cocaine after being straight for several months. She was now repentant and afraid her son would be taken from her.

“We’re not here to take your kid away,” Burger assured her. “We’re here to help.”

Except all the police could really do was give her the crisis-line number, arrange for a friend to come over, make sure there was food in the cupboards and give her a pep talk. No other resources were available at night.

Then it was off to a group home, where a mentally ill man had just fired his caregiver into a wall. If it had happened during the day, an (overworked) emergency mental-health team could have taken him for a psych assessment at Royal Jubilee Hospital, but because the call was after hours, the job fell to the police.

And because the rules say police can’t leave the hospital until a doctor decides what to do with the patient, Burger was stuck in the waiting room cooling his heels with the man. “I’ve done six-hour stays in here,” Burger grumbled.

It was almost three hours before he was back on the street, immediately picking up a belligerent man who staggered out of a nightclub and into a set of handcuffs.

Also that night: a grizzled old man who was sucking back Listerine and Alberto VO5 hairspray; a traffic stop that led to a handgun stashed under a dumpster behind Denny's; a trip to a warm cell for a passed-out man wearing two coats, three shirts and three pairs of pants, and who Burger feared would be mugged if left on his own; a near-fatal overdose in a downtown pizza joint; an out-of-control Bay Street party in which the 18-year-old tenant said she was, like, totally sorry for, like, all the trouble; an incoherent, shoeless man who staggered out of a Traveller's Inn retching and bleeding freely from his mouth after trying to tear his own uvula out of his throat. Was that last one the result of drugs, mental illness, both?

At one point, Douglas Street bystanders laughed at a one-woman rodeo in which an impaired driver was taken into custody cussing and kicking. It wasn't as funny later when, in cells, she tore a strip of fabric from her mattress and pulled it tight around her neck. Then she fought the police and jailers trying to get her under control so that an ambulance could take her to hospital.

At the end of the shift, Burger carried an aluminium ladder out of an apartment building and asked the cheerful, co-operative, mentally ill man who had stolen it to put it back where it belonged. Burger was worried the man needed help (the walls of his apartment were plastered with newspaper accounts of disaster — plane crashes, 9/11, that sort of thing) so made a note to call the mental-health team.

The vulnerability of such people concerned Burger. Earlier, he had chased away a couple of addicts who had simply moved into the apartment of a mentally handicapped man, injected him with drugs and trashed the place. "It was uninhabitable," Burger said.

Mostly, that night in 2002 was about substance abuse, violence, mental illness and social illness, often overlapping, without the resources to deal with it.

Why bring this up now? Because almost 20 years after that night, the challenges, and the lack of resources to deal with them, are even more pronounced.

Burger, who retired from VicPD this year, saw the shift as he left: a surge in the number of marginalized people, who were offered housing but not other supports. "We have these people who have come to our city and we aren't able to

help them properly," he said when I caught up with him.

Within that surge were people who would commit crime, get caught, then — untreated — be spat out of the revolving door to do it again.

Police were overwhelmed, with one high-stress call after another. "This was every day, non-stop."

Downtown businesses, stuck on hold after calling 911, just gave up. Burned-out cops balked at working overtime shifts, which only made things worse. "The acute calls weren't going down."

The rhetoric from city hall was discouraging, as was the sophomoric self-righteousness of the All Cops Are Bastards crowd, the ones who see Derek Chauvin kneeling on George Floyd's neck every time they see a uniform.

Bad guys, emboldened, became more aggressive and abusive of cops.

"We've got good people, but good people can only take so much," Burger said. In October, 39 of VicPD's 249 officers were unavailable to respond to calls for reasons that included physical and psychological injuries. (Note that the department had 241 officers in 2008, and 211 after the merger of the Victoria and Esquimalt departments in 2003.)

To keep enough cops on the street, the department pulled back the officers assigned to regional traffic and organized-crime units, having earlier cut its own crime-reduction team and other functions.

At the same time, other pressures keep pushing police budgets up, up, up. Across Canada, the cost and complexity of investigations has risen dramatically in the past couple of decades.

A series of court decisions raised the bar for the way evidence is collected and disclosed — justifiable measures, but costly ones.

In the old days, an officer interviewing witnesses would write down a few notes; now every word might be captured in an audio or video file, then painstakingly transcribed into written form.

Note that after the 2010 murder of a Fernwood man, VicPD had to provide the defence with transcripts of interviews with 600 to 800 neighbours; imagine the time and expense of doing so.

The department has said the cost of a straightforward, open-and-shut murder case, not a whodunit, starts at half a million bucks.

Back on that night in 2002, Burger could bring in that three-pairs-of-pants drunk without getting bogged down in too much paperwork. Now that report must contain more details: Why was the cop in the area? What were the specific indications of impairment? What made the officer think the arrestee needed to be taken into care?

There are more high-tech investigation tools, too, and documenting their use takes time. (Toronto's police force estimated it would cost $18 million a year just to store the video images if all of its street cops were outfitted with body-worn cameras.)

Newish standards for missing-persons and domestic-violence files are labour-intensive — working through a domestic dispute can take eight hours. It's the right thing to do, but doing the right thing is time-consuming and expensive.

VicPD has four civilian staff in its legal-services section whose time is largely taken up handling freedom-of-information requests. Police handle telebail hearings now. Prosecutors want more evidence before approving charges. It all adds up.

Expect the costs to rise, too. Victoria and Esquimalt are pondering a proposed police budget that would rise by seven per cent — just over $4 million — and include money for six additional officers.

If it makes taxpayers in those municipalities (the ones who shoulder the cost of policing the entire region's downtown) feel any better, neighbouring communities covered by the Mounties are bracing for bigger bills, too. A new collective agreement between the RCMP and its members, who haven't had a raise since 2016, will push a senior constable's pay from $86,110 then to $106,576 as of April.

Even with higher wages, though, police forces, including the RCMP, are having trouble filling their ranks. Note that VicPD is dangling a $20,000 signing bonus to lure experienced officers from other departments.

The thing is, even if VicPD's proposed budget gets approved, will adding six cops to a 249-member force solve what troubles the city core?

Of course not, but neither will the defund-the-police demands of those who portray police as oppressors of the afflicted and addicted.

The five downtown groups that wrote that letter to Victoria council made a point of countering that image: "We also believe that VicPD, far from criminalizing mental health, homelessness and addictions, actively seeks to protect our most vulnerable, street-involved citizens — especially from the very real criminals who prey on them."

That doesn't mean that it wouldn't be a good idea to find alternative ways to deal with a lot of the calls, particularly those involving mental health, that default to police. It's just that it isn't always as neat and tidy as some believe.

When funding was denied for two of the three officers that VicPD had posted to the local ACT teams — psychiatric nurses, addiction-recovery workers, registered nurses, social workers, and so on — that work with people whose severe mental illness is often compounded by substance abuse, it was workers on those teams who came forward to declare the move reckless. Without the presence of the dedicated officers, they said, there would be circumstances under which they couldn't help their clients.

The idea that police spending can simply be transferred to mental health and addictions budgets doesn't work in the real world — but it's also true that policing is just a Band-Aid.

A couple of weeks ago, the mayors of Victoria, Saanich, Nanaimo, Vancouver, Prince George, Kamloops, Richmond, Coquitlam and New Westminster used that term in a commentary published by the Times Colonist. They spoke of people whose needs are too high for supportive housing, and whose behaviour gets them spun back into the community without supports.

“The fact that people with concurrent mental-health and substance-abuse issues, trauma and acquired brain injuries are left out on our streets isn’t a Prince George, or a Nanaimo, or a Kamloops problem; it’s an urban problem, it’s a health problem and it’s an urgent problem,” the commentary said.

The truly vulnerable and the repeat criminal offenders who prey on them get lumped together, treated alike, the mayors said, calling on the justice system to ensure “the appropriate level of accountability” for the latter and for the former to get the services they need.

The mayors went on to talk about waiting for the province to come through with complex-care housing that might not be the whole answer, but that beats the status quo. “We can’t wait much longer.”

No, we can’t. Unfortunately, some people have been waiting 20 years for things to get better, only to see them get worse.

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