

Report documents racist bias of Toronto police

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A *Toronto Star* inquiry into allegations that racism underlies some actions of the Toronto police has provoked a public outcry. An extensive *Star* investigation into certain types of police records found that the police deal more harshly with blacks than whites.

The *Toronto Star* reviewed records in the Toronto police force's Criminal Information Processing System (or CIPS), going back to 1996. The *Star* had to resort to Freedom of Information proceedings in order to obtain the police database. The CIPS database records 480,000-plus incidents of arrest (or of a ticket being issued), and 800,000 plus cases of criminal or other charges.

The *Toronto Star* inquiry focused on two statistics. It scrutinized 10,729 arrests for simple drug possession, and found that black people arrested on this charge were released at the scene of their arrest 61.8 percent of the time, while white people arrested on the same charge were released 76.5 percent of the time. The *Star* also found that blacks are twice as likely to be held overnight for a bail hearing (15.5 percent vs. 7.3 percent.). Simple possession is a so-called "high-discretion" charge—one where the individual attending police officer has a large amount of leeway as regards to how the case proceeds.

The *Star* also found that blacks were disproportionately charged for offences that could only be discovered *after* a traffic stop—so-called "out-of-sight offences," including failing to update the address on one's drivers license. Thirty-four percent of drivers charged with out-of-sight violations were black, although the black community represents just 8.1 percent of the total population. The discrepancy was even more severe for black men between the ages of 25 and 34, who received 39.3 percent of the out-of-sight

tickets for their age group, despite representing only 7.9 percent of the population in that age group.

Spokesman for a wide array of civil rights, ethnic and immigrant organizations said the *Star's* inquiry substantiated years of anecdotal evidence of police bias against blacks.

But when the *Star* revealed its findings to the police force in a special interview, Police Chief Julian Fantino walked out. Shortly thereafter he vigorously denied that the police force had any racial bias, proclaiming, "We don't do racial profiling, we do not deal with people on the basis of their ethnicity."

His denial was echoed by Tom Kaye, president of the Ontario Association of Chiefs of Police, who said, "We don't see this as being a widespread issue across the province. It's certainly not something that we're that concerned about because we don't believe it exists."

Later, Fantino announced an inquiry to be headed by former Ontario chief justice Charles Dubin. The Dubin inquiry was supposed to determine how the police force could improve its relations with minority communities—in other words, it assumed that the whole affair is merely a question of the police force having an unfair "image." In any case, Dubin quit the inquiry a few days after the initial announcement, citing overlap with other police efforts to defuse public outrage.

Toronto Mayor Mel Lastman attempted to deflect the criticism of the police force onto the black community itself, saying "I want the chief to do what's more important. I want the chief left alone for awhile and I want him to get down to the bottom of what the heck is bothering everybody; kids killing kids." Lastman was referring to a spate of recent fatal incidents of violence in the black community. Along the same lines, Fantino said black parents should do more to encourage their children to grow up wanting to be police officers.

The Toronto Police Association, which is the union representing Toronto police officers, has called for a boycott of the *Toronto Star*, proclaiming, “We ask that all citizens cancel their subscriptions to the *Toronto Star* to send the clear message that principles are more important than profits.” The police union has launched a multimillion-dollar lawsuit against the *Star* and is demanding an apology. The *Star*, however, is standing behind its findings.

This is not the first time that the police association has attempted to silence criticism of the police force. In early 2000, the police association executed “Operation True Blue,” in which they attempted to unseat local politicians who were in any way critical of the police. The police association rewarded those who donated to their campaign against “anti-police politicians” with special windshield stickers—the clear implication being that a recipient of such a sticker would likely get off free in routine traffic pullovers. “Operation True Blue” was suspended in response to public outcry and legal action.

In its contempt for democratic norms, the police association has been very much emboldened by Ontario’s right-wing Tory government. The Tories have portrayed the police force as an embattled and virtuous elite defending average citizens against a vast ocean of crime and danger. In so doing, they seek to deflect increasing anxiety about declining social conditions into support for a reactionary law-and-order campaign.

In 1997, the Tories shut down the police force’s civilian oversight system, replacing it with the present system, in which complaints are dealt with by the individual police forces themselves.

In response to the *Star* inquiry, Toronto’s city council unanimously passed a motion, albeit with 14 abstentions, asking the province to restore the civilian complaints system that had been shut down in 1997. The motion also asks the police services board to reinstate its race relations policy advisory committee.

Ontario’s minister for public safety, Bob Runciman, was quick to reaffirm the Tory government’s support for the current police-run complaints system.

Echoing the demands of various middle class ethnic associations, several of the Toronto City Councillors have called for a campaign to hire more minority police officers.

“There are projected to be 1,200 officers retiring in the next couple of years,” said Councillor David Miller. “It’s a tremendous opportunity to hire a diverse group of officers who understand the modern reality of Toronto and will use their discretion in even-handed ways.”

For his part, Police Chief Fantino is arguing that the number of cops should be increased in size so as to deal with concerns about greater ethnic diversity on the police force.

None of these measures—a better complaints system, more minority cops, or “sensitivity training” for police officers—will put an end to police racism, let alone “democratize” the police. Given the growth in economic insecurity—32 percent of Toronto’s population is living in poverty—and deepening social polarization, the police are being called upon by their ruling class masters to play an ever-more open and active role in defending social inequality and suppressing discontent. Under such conditions, all manner of reactionary views, including racism, find a fertile environment amongst the police.

Although the official debate over the *Star*’s findings has not unsurprisingly focused almost exclusively on race, the *Star* also reported statistics that show the police are harder on people in low-income, heavily policed areas than in other divisions. A *Star* article cited the example of two neighbouring police districts where, race notwithstanding, persons from the more impoverished 51 division charged with one count of cocaine possession were almost three times more likely to be held in jail pending a bail hearing in than those from neighbouring 52 division.



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