



Policing: Let us count the differences between streets of Canada and America
by Jean-Michel Blais

When I present to various community and police groups I often talk about police equipment, tactics, oversight and challenges that we face here in Halifax within the larger context of policing in North America. That certainly has become more front and centre as people have tended to paint Canadian police with the same brush as American police. Although some Canadian police services have had comparable challenges, our American counterparts have seen a marked increase in criticism regarding their actions and approaches in the past year, especially regarding police-involved shootings and armed deployment. I wanted to raise a few points that may allow our citizens to better understand some of the important features and differences between Canadian and American policing. Although we often are outfitted with similar equipment and look comparable, there are some significant structural and institutional differences worth noting.

Number of police services: Canada has less than 235 distinct police services. In the United States, a country 10 times our population, there are almost 18,000. Many are small services with limited capacity, training opportunities and expertise.

Training: In Canada, about \$13 billion is spent on policing every year. \$1 billion of that is spent on ongoing training. From my interactions with many US chiefs, training has been cut back severely in many jurisdictions these past seven years. In some cases, it has been virtually eliminated

Budgets: Police services are financed through municipal, provincial and federal taxes. All ticket revenues go back to the respective governments and not police services. Items seized and monies confiscated are also directed to various government coffers. In many American jurisdictions, fines, ticket revenue and confiscated items go directly to finance police services, corrections and even courts.

Equipment: Most Canadian surplus military equipment is either sold abroad or donated to museums. As the result of a US federal government initiative, American police services can and have received surplus military hardware.

Civilian oversight: In Halifax, we have a Board of Police Commissioners which, by provincial statute, is responsible for the oversight of policing services. In the event there is a police-involved shooting or injury of a civilian, the Serious Incident Response Team (SiRT), and not another police service, is responsible for the ensuing criminal investigation. In the event of a public complaint,

citizens can go directly to the Office of the Police Complaints Commissioner. In the majority of American jurisdictions, there are no police boards, commissions or civilian-led investigative units and complaints overseers.

Selection of police leaders: United States sheriff services have elected senior executives as do some courts through elected judges and prosecutors. This phenomenon is inexistent in Canada.

Gun culture: It is estimated that we have around 7 million firearms in Canada, the majority of which are long guns used for hunting. Estimates in the US are around 300 million weapons, many of them handguns (as many states allow for concealed carry) and automatic rifles. It is further expected that in 2015, more than 40,000 people will die as a result of firearms (homicides, accidents and suicides). That will be more than all those who die in vehicular accidents which has traditionally been between 35-40,000 people since 1975.

Our proximity to the United States as well as the availability of media and culture has resulted in there being a misunderstanding of the authorities, equipment and accountabilities we have here in Canada. The above differences result in a significantly different approach to policing here in this country. Are we in Canadian law enforcement perfect? Of course not, but thanks to these differences and many others, we are better able to build and maintain confidence, trust and safety in partnerships with our communities thanks to the choices that we, as a society, have made.

Jean-Michel ('JM') Blais is the Chief of the Halifax Regional Police (HRP), and previously was a senior commissioned officer of the RCMP. This work is the sole opinion of the author and does not necessarily represent the views of the Halifax Regional Police, Halifax Regional Municipality, RCMP, Department of National Defence, Canadian Armed Forces or Royal United Services Institute of Nova Scotia. The author may be contacted by email at:
RUSINovaScotia@gmail.com.