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CITY HALL

Can city council abolish the Toronto police force? Eight key questions as council debates defunding the police this week

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What would it take to defund the Toronto police?

That question will be central at city council on Monday and Tuesday when it debates two motions over reforming and defunding the Toronto Police Service. Calls to defund the police come amid high-profile incidents of violence and racism involving police forces in the GTA and south of the border.

Here's what you need to know:

1) What does defunding the police mean and who is asking for it?

In recent weeks, defunding the police has taken on many different meanings as protests have spread across North America and beyond. Defunding doesn't necessarily mean reducing the police budget to \$0 or abolishing the force altogether. Typically, it calls for the redirection of some or most funds currently being used for policing to city services for marginalized communities that have been subject to violence and over-policing. Locally, Black Lives Matter Toronto — a group actively fighting anti-Black racism and police violence — has published several demands. The first of these is to "immediately redirect a minimum of 50 per cent" of the current Toronto police budget towards housing, food security, transit, libraries, anti-violence programs and more.

On its website, BLM TO says it is ultimately "working toward the abolition of the police and toward a society where we can all be safe." The group has protested police actions including the shooting death of Toronto man Andrew Loku.

Its demand for a 50-per-cent cut is backed by a number of groups and is the subject of form emails and petitions that have flooded the inboxes of city councillors, according to their staff. Some of those campaigns specifically target members seen to be opposed or on the fence about Monday's motions — an organized effort some told the Star is unparalleled in their time working at city hall.

2) How much does the Toronto police cost and can council just cut its budget?

The council-approved budget for 2020 was \$1.22 billion gross — total spending — and \$1.08 billion in municipal tax dollars. The smaller figure is the funding needed after counting expected revenues the police force makes from things like fines and fees as well as funding from other levels of government. Nearly 90 per cent of that — \$1.08 billion — will go towards the salaries and benefits of nearly 8,000 uniform and civilian members of the service. Those salaries and benefits are set out in a multi-year contract between the Toronto Police Association, which represents members, and the Toronto Police Services Board, which is made up of appointees from the province and council.

That collective agreement is governed by the provincial Police Services Act, city spokesperson Brad Ross said, and is binding until it is replaced with a new agreement. The current contract expires in 2023. That means [the total 11.1 per cent pay hike](#) awarded the police over five years can't be amended.

Also, under provincial rules, council cannot direct specific spending by the Toronto police unless the law is changed at Queen's Park. So it can ask the service to spend less money overall, but it can't tell it how to do that. Additionally, council currently does not see a line-by-line budget breakdown for the service.

3) Can the service lay off officers and use those funds elsewhere?

If it decided to reduce service, the police board is allowed to terminate members without cause under the collective agreement and Police Services Act. The board could also make rank reductions — demoting officers from, for example, a higher-paid sergeant position to a constable.

Officers with seniority who were subject to layoff would be allowed to bump into lower ranks following a traditional union process that would see the last officers hired laid off first.

The province also requires that the police board get the consent of the quasi-judicial Ontario Civilian Police Commission to lay off officers to reduce service.

As for costs, any permanent layoffs must see a severance agreement determined by the board and the association. If they can't agree, it would have to be arrived at through arbitration spelled out under the Act.

Those would be one-time agreements, so the financial cost of laying off police officers would depend on the number of officers and the specific agreement reached. Those one-time costs, even if they were more than the annual savings, would be temporary. Though it could mean significant reductions would not be seen for several months or years, the savings from the cuts to wages and benefits would be long-term.

4) What else can be changed in the police budget?

[As was recommended in 2016](#), the police services board can also freeze hiring and promotions to manage costs without impacting the contract. The mayor's "transformational" task force, with its goal of trimming \$100 million over several years, considered merging police stations to reduce operating costs, as well as the expense of maintaining and replacing outdated stations.

Some of those changes were adopted, some temporarily. Others have not been. For example, as recommended, 54 and 55 Division downtown were consolidated. But other recommended mergers have not occurred. A hiring freeze was implemented, but additional uniform hires [were later allowed the following year](#) because of concerns too many officers had retired or left the service. Though the budget remained flatlined for several years, it has risen beyond the level it was when Mayor John Tory took office in 2014, taking inflation into account. While the goal of reducing the number of uniform officers to 4,750 was met in 2019, the 2020 budget saw an increase to more than 5,000 officers.

5) What changes are being put forward at council?

There is a motion on the agenda from Coun. Josh Matlow, seconded by Coun. Kristyn Wong-Tam, to request the police board provide a 2021 budget request to the city that is, at a minimum, 10 per cent lower than the 2020 budget — in other words, a cut of \$122 million. The motion asks that those funds be redirected to community supports. It also asks the province to allow council control over specific spending and for the board to provide a line-by-line budget breakdown.

"It is incumbent upon decision-makers to ensure that necessary resources and supports are provided to Black, Indigenous and People of Colour. The police budget is the single largest item in our city's operating budget," said the motion that acknowledged ongoing anti-Black racism.

There are currently no other public proposals for defunding the police coming to council, but councillors can try to make amendments on the fly.

Tory has his own series of recommendations, starting with asking city staff to work with the police service to develop "alternative models of community safety response" that includes creating a non-police response to calls that don't involve weapons, such as mental health crises.

The recommendations do not include any immediate moves to defund the police. Tory has previously indicated he will not support Matlow's motion and his own recommendations could be seen as a competing proposal. While Tory's recommendations have been automatically added to the agenda, Matlow's proposals will need a two-thirds majority vote to even be debated at council on Monday. Otherwise, they will be referred to Tory's executive committee.

Tory's motion also asks the auditor general to review the budget for efficiencies. Tory said in the written item he is "confident" the changes proposed will lead to increased community safety as well as budget reductions "based on actual change and careful calculation." He recommended any savings be reinvested in anti-violence, anti-poverty and other community programs.

Tory also wants to see police equip all officers with body-worn cameras by Jan. 1, 2021 — which would increase next year's budget.

"To the tens of thousands of Torontonians who have called and emailed my office and the offices of my council colleagues over the past few weeks, and to those who have peacefully taken to the streets to march and protest: I want you to know that I see you, I hear you, and I am listening," the item from Tory reads.

Police association president Mike McCormack, whose fiery rhetoric has often questioned any reduction in the force, calls Matlow's motion "grandstanding" and doubts there is 10 per cent to cut from "core" policing.

6) How does this compare to other cities?

In Minnesota, where the killing of George Floyd in police custody set off a firestorm of riots and protests across the U.S., nine councillors who have the power to pass reforms vowed to dismantle its local police force. But that is a process that looks like it will take a long time to roll out. [As the New York Times reported earlier this month](#), council will ask voters to remove provisions in their city charter that require a minimum number of officers and committed to a "yearlong effort to research other models of public safety and to listen to what residents say they would like to see."

Meanwhile, in New York, which has the largest and most expensive police force in America at \$6 billion (U.S.), according to the Times, [several proposals have been tabled to cut funding from 3 per cent to almost 20 per cent](#). The Times reported Mayor Bill de Blasio has vowed to cut funding, but has indicated he'll reject a proposal to cut \$1 billion from the budget (or 16 per cent).

In Montreal, Mayor Valérie Plante has said she's open to reforms but has not committed to defunding the SPVM, [the CBC reported](#), saying she's speaking with other mayors in the province.

7) Can council just abolish the police?

That decision is not up to council, which does not have direct oversight of the police service. As it is in the U.S., aspects of policing are enshrined in legislation at upper levels of government. For example, municipalities are required under the provincial Police Services Act to provide "adequate and effective police services" that must include things like emergency response 24 hours a day. There are also requirements police forces have canine tracking, physical surveillance and other capabilities.

Abolishing the service would also come with questions about how violent crime like shootings and sexual assault as well as mental health crises should best be responded to and how to better maintain public safety — much of which has never been discussed at length by the board or council.

Brent Ross, spokesperson for the Ministry of the Solicitor General, told the Star in an email that the Police Services Act "requires a municipality to fund a police service to have an 'adequate' number of personnel and to provide them with necessary facilities and equipment."

"If a police services board believes that the budget provided to it by a municipality is not sufficient to maintain an adequate number of personnel or to provide them with adequate equipment or facilities, then the board can ask the Ontario Civilian Police Commission to determine whether the budget is sufficient," he said.

8) How can I get involved?

Council meets Monday and Tuesday. There are no speakers allowed at council meetings and while the public can normally watch from the public gallery, council is still [meeting virtually](#) due to the COVID-19 pandemic. If you want your councillor to know how you feel about this issue, you can contact them directly. Anyone can visit <https://www.toronto.ca/city-government/council/members-of-council/> to search which ward they live in and find contact information for their representative, as well as Tory's office.



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