

RESEARCH ARTICLE



# The governance gap: examining the capacity of police service boards to hold police services accountable in Canada

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## ABSTRACT

In the wake of the Defund the Police and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movements, police accountability and legitimacy are commanding a significant amount of attention. Importantly, questions are being raised about how to effectively govern and manage policing especially with respect to police violence and misconduct. While much of this discussion has focused on the actions of the police, there has been little research examining the civilian bodies responsible for holding police accountable: Police Service Boards (PSBs). In recent years, a few high-profile public reports have identified that certain PSBs in Canada, are struggling to carry out their roles and responsibilities and offered numerous recommendations to address existing shortcomings. These detailed reports have important implications for oversight and governance. However, the scale and generalizability of the response to the concerns raised in these reports remains unknown. In this study, we explore issues of capacity and training for PSB members to better understand the gap between the expectations of PSBs to provide meaningful governance of the police and their perceived capacity to do so. Our research suggests that a significant gap in governance exists, related to the lack of adequate training and capacity building in PSBs across the country. Recommendations and future directions are discussed.

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## Introduction

In the wake of the Defund the Police and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movements, police accountability and legitimacy are commanding a significant amount of attention in Canada and internationally. Importantly, some of the questions being raised are about how to effectively govern and manage policing and reduce police misconduct (Kwon & Wortley, 2022; Prenzler, 2011). Much of this discussion has focused on police organizations, and, in particular, on the role of the police in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Caputo et al., 2018; McIntyre et al., 2021). These discussions include exploring opportunities for other community safety partners to take on responsibility in their areas of expertise (e.g., calls involving mental health, addictions, housing etc.). However, less attention is being paid to those responsible for providing governance and oversight of the police. In Canada, part of this role falls to Police Service Boards (PSBs) or Commissions.

According to Stenning (2021), PSBs in Canada have the duty and authority to provide oversight and to ensure police accountability. They are also expected to hire the chief constable, approve the police budget, set strategic priorities, establish guidelines and review administration and complaints. Their roles and responsibilities require competence in a wide range of areas including strategic planning, management, human resources, performance assessment, finance and budget,

negotiations, and complaint resolution. These responsibilities are similar to those required of civilian police oversight bodies in other jurisdictions, such as the Police and Crime Commissioners in the UK (Dempsey, 2016) and civilian review boards in the US (Ferdik et al., 2013) but differ from the largely investigative, adjudicative, audit-based, and appeals responsibilities of other police oversight bodies (Archbold, 2021).

However, PSBs are often ineffective in carrying out these roles, as evidenced by several investigations into their operations (Zastrow & Rudes, 2022). For example, investigations into police misconduct during the G20 meetings in Toronto, systemic racism in the Thunder Bay Police Service, and the failed response to the Freedom convoy in Ottawa, highlight real concerns about police governance and oversight. As a result, the ability of PSBs to appropriately and effectively govern police services has been called into question (Morden, 2012; Office of the Auditor General, 2023; Sinclair, 2018). While these reports help to document the more obvious failures of existing police governance systems in action, they fail to capture the less obvious, but equally serious problems that arise from the relationships that exist between police oversight bodies and their respective police services (Caul, 2009). As an example, consider the implications of the actions of the Board of Police Commissioners<sup>1</sup> for the Moose Jaw Police Service. This oversight body recently celebrated creating its first ever governance policy, ironically only to mention that the policy was written by the chief of police (Antonio, 2023). This incident raises serious concerns about the nature and role of PSBs; their independence from those they govern; and what constitutes a proper working relationship with their police counterparts. This example begs the question of whether a PSB is engaging in any real oversight if its policies are written by the chief of the organization they are meant to oversee.

Research on police governance in Canada has shown that many PSBs are struggling with their roles and responsibilities. This research provides a number of explanations for why this situation exists. These include the political composition of PSBs, restrictions to who can serve on a PSB, the continuous turnover in PSB membership based on how and when appointments are made, a lack of clarity regarding roles and responsibilities of the board in provincial Police Service Acts, and the capacity of the boards themselves (Roach, 2022; Stenning, 2021). While many authors have identified these concerns as they relate to police accountability, few have undertaken in-depth explorations of the practical realities of PSBs that underlie and contribute to these issues.

In this study, we focus on PSB capacity by engaging directly with the members of PSBs. To provide effective governance and oversight, a PSB requires knowledgeable and capable members. While some Canadian provincial governments claim to provide the necessary training for PSB members (Laming & Valentine, 2022), the issue of PSB training and capacity is repeatedly identified in reports and recommendations to improve PSB effectiveness. To better understand these ongoing issues, we interviewed and surveyed PSB leaders from across Canada. We looked specifically at the kind of training they indicated they were provided, as well as how that training was delivered. We also asked questions about how they believed their training contributed to their capacity and ability to carry out their role in an effective manner. Our findings suggest that a 'governance gap' exists in Canadian police oversight that has important implications for police governance, oversight, and accountability in Canada and elsewhere.

## Background

Canada is an important place to investigate the capacity of PSBs, as the country has long led the development of municipal (and regional) oversight bodies internationally. PSBs have existed in Canada since the 19<sup>th</sup> century and much of the legislation related to PSBs was developed in Ontario in the late 1940s (Stenning, 2009). Since that time, various elements of this legislation have been incorporated into the Police Service Acts of many Canadian provinces. While many of these have not been updated since the early 1990s (Laming & Valentine, 2022) they operate within larger oversight and legal frameworks in the country.

PSBs are just one component of police oversight in Canada. Since this paper focuses solely on PSBs, only a brief overview of the other oversight bodies is required. The Police Complaints Commissioner is independent of both the government and police, but deals with complaints against the police (Ferdik et al., 2013; Helme, 2015). This oversight body ensures that the police act within their defined power limitations and investigates situations when officers have infringed on civil liberties and human rights. In addition, the Independent Investigations Office investigates cases where a person has died or suffered serious bodily harm during or after contact with police. Rather than submitting a complaint, this process is automatic, as police departments are obligated to report such incidents (Helme, 2015; Stelkia, 2020).

In all forms of oversight in Canada, civilians are involved in the police accountability process, addressing concerns about police misconduct and public dissatisfaction with internal police investigations (Campeau, 2015; Ferdik et al., 2013; Sen, 2010; Stelkia, 2020). This is especially important given the increased public awareness and media attention that has questioned the fairness and impartiality of the internal police complaint process (Bayley & Shearing, 1996; Stelkia, 2020).

While literature on policing and civilian oversight is extensive, surprisingly, there is minimal research available on the skills, experience and training required to perform the roles carried out by civilian oversight bodies such as PSBs. This issue is not unique to Canada, as no research exists in other jurisdictions on the skills required to carry out these roles. For example, in the UK, the role of Police and Crime Commissioners is rapidly expanding to encompass working closely with community safety services, with little research or evidence on how these commissioners will effectively carry out their new roles and expectations (Bainbridge, 2021). In the US, the number of civilian review boards has increased significantly since 2014 (Fairley, 2020), despite a dearth of research evidence on their efficacy (Archbold, 2021). This lack of information is concerning considering the important role of civilian oversight bodies including PSBs in providing oversight and governance, and the potential implications of these roles for police accountability and legitimacy.

In recent years, numerous public incidents regarding the mismanagement and poor oversight of Canadian police services have been made public. As noted above, various shortcomings in police oversight have been identified in a series of critical reports (Morden, 2012; Office of the Auditor General, 2023; Sinclair, 2018). This includes concerns over the use of force, systemic racism, and incidents of police misconduct. However, these reports also highlight serious deficiencies in carrying out governance responsibilities during crises and in relation to police and government authority. Reports on these incidents identified that PSBs failed to set policies and priorities around the events, exert effective leadership and meaningful engagement in governance and oversight policies, and operate in a transparent and forthcoming manner. Importantly, these reports indicate larger issues regarding a lack of clarity of board roles and responsibilities, the willingness and capability to question police leadership, and the ability to govern effectively.

In the wake of the failure of some PSBs to adequately respond to these issues, these reports have all suggested the need for proper orientation and training, including specific training that has yet to be implemented (see for example: Community Safety and Policing Act, 2019 c. 1 Sched. 1). However, many PSBs and provincial police services acts claim that members already receive the required training to carry out their roles. For example, in Ontario, the Police Services Act states that 'the board shall ensure that its members undergo any training that the Solicitor General may provide or require' (Police Services Act, 1990, s. 31(5)). In order to properly understand the context around PSB training and capacity, and why these concerns around training continue to emerge, we must first discuss the structure of PSBs in Canada.

### ***Police service boards in Canada***

PSBs (also known as Police Commissions) are municipal bodies of civilians (usually 7–9 people) responsible for oversight and governance of municipal police services (Helme, 2015; Stenning,

2018). PSBs are generally responsible for employing the Chief Constable (the Chief of Police) and overseeing how civilian staff are employed, establishing policies for the police organization, overseeing the police, setting strategic priorities, and maintaining disciplinary authority for the Chief Constable and their Deputy Chiefs (Laming & Valentine, 2022). The authority of the PSB does not translate to operations, as provincial police acts indicate operations are the domain of the Chief Constable (Helme, 2015).<sup>2</sup>

Various Canadian jurisdictions have implemented police governance through PSBs, including Ontario, British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick. The structure of PSBs varies across Canada, but generally consist of the mayor (acting as the chair), one person appointed by the municipal council, and up to seven people appointed by the province (Government of Ontario, 2021; see also Laming & Valentine, 2022). Members are then expected to complete training provided by the ministry, participate in the annual election of the chair, adhere to the Members of Police Services Boards Code of Conduct, and attend meetings (Government of Ontario, 2021).

Nonetheless, the roles of PSBs tend to vary. The level of autonomy afforded to Chief Constables depends on the nature of the board composition and legislative priorities (Caul, 2009). In their review of PSBs, Laming and Valentine (2022) found that there is much variability in governance within and across provinces and territories in Canada. For example, the Ontario Police Services Act (OPSA) outlines the detailed responsibilities of PSBs, but also identifies situations where they were not permitted to give directions to their Chief Constable (Stenning, 2018).

PSBs also act to protect the police from political interference, guaranteeing a measure of political independence for police services (Caul, 2009; Stenning, 2009). Overall, civilian PSBs are expected to act as an intermediary between the police and the government to promote the autonomy of law enforcement (Caul, 2009; Ferdik et al., 2013). The appointment processes of some PSBs, are intended to contribute to maintaining this autonomy. For example, some PSBs have elected members as chairs, include a high ratio of appointed civilians as board members, and reduced term limits for those appointed. These measures are intended to encourage board members to advocate for public interests and diminish corruption since boards are accountable to the public and individual appointees cannot become entrenched in their positions avoiding potential abuses of power over a long period of time (Caul, 2009; Laming & Valentine, 2022).

A capable PSB is more likely to be able to engage in meaningful governance and oversight. However, PSBs have been criticized for having unclear objectives, minimal funding, insufficient diversity, an overly friendly or overly critical relationship with the Chief Constable, and key to this paper, a lack of training (Bronskill, 2020; Roach, 2022). With minimal training, performing their roles can be challenging for PSB members. Laming and Valentine (2022) have discussed the importance of PSB training that focuses on cultural competency, sensitivity, bias-free policing, roles and responsibilities, and police-community relations. However, in Canada, the only provinces that require some form of training to serve on a PSB are Ontario, Manitoba, and Nova Scotia. In Ontario, board members are expected to complete training courses on human rights, systemic racism, and cultural sensitivity. In Manitoba and Nova Scotia, this training is not explicitly mandatory, but is strongly recommended. However, when reviewing recent recommendations made by the Sinclair (2018) and the Office of the Auditor General (2023), much of these so-called 'mandated' trainings do not appear to be required in practice.

### **Why training matters**

Several authors note that training is key to equitable and democratic policing. Specifically discussing democratic policing and civilian oversight, Hope (2021) notes that having qualified staff with the appropriate skills and training lends credibility to the conduct of the board's work and findings, reports, and other outputs. As such, failing to have mandatory training raises concerns about the

quality of PSB members and how effective they are in exercising judgement and making decisions (Hope, 2021; Laming & Valentine, 2022; Zastrow & Rudes, 2022). However, clear guidelines for this training are not readily available in the Canadian context, or in the policing literature more broadly. Here we turn to research on board member training in other sectors to fill this gap.

Unlike PSBs, members of other public sector boards, like public school boards, are provided with training on core competencies that are universal across board practice domains, including transparency, achievement, initiative, organizational awareness, conflict management, and teamwork and collaboration (Hopkins et al., 2007). In examining school boards in the United States, Hopkins et al. (2007) argue that these core competencies are fundamental elements for all boards to become effective governing bodies. Further, research on boards in the non-profit sector discusses the importance of board diversity practices and policies, such as diversity training for all board members, and how such training can improve board performance (Buse et al., 2016). However, the need for diversity on boards themselves is also highlighted including how this diversity must be supported by board practices to improve effectiveness (Buse et al., 2016). Other research also notes that training is associated with increased satisfaction and commitment, fewer perceived problems, and in the overall retention of volunteers (Wellens & Jegers, 2014).

Board capacity and training, including diversity training, not only improves board effectiveness and feelings of capability, but impacts the board's ability to address emerging concerns. Focusing on risk management in healthcare services in Ontario, Martin (2020) highlights the importance of training and continuous learning, especially in terms of expectations and responsibilities (see also Mannion et al., 2016). When training is underdeveloped, board members will have difficulties meeting the demands of their role, particularly those who are drawn from outside the sector and are less likely to have the technical skills that would enable them to meaningfully address issues (Mannion et al., 2016). Furthermore, education and training contribute to the capacity of oversight boards to mitigate risk and guide organizations more effectively (Martin, 2020).

### ***PSB training recommendations and obstacles to implementation***

As discussed, the capacity of PSBs to hold police services in Canada accountable has been called into question in recent years. For example, after an investigation of systemic racism within the Thunder Bay Police Board, Sinclair (2018) called for compulsory and comprehensive training for board members. Although the Sinclair Report (Sinclair, 2018) suggested that concerns about racism in policing were structural and a result of the lack of policy and planning on behalf of the board, training on expectations was identified as a necessary step in the right direction. Further, without sufficient training and expertise, PSB members will continue to fail to understand their roles and responsibilities and will lack the capacity to perform their responsibilities (Office of the Auditor General, 2023). Similarly, when discussing the failed response of the Ottawa Police Service and the Ottawa Police Service Board to the 2022 convoy protests, the Office of the Auditor General (2023) discussed how past and current board members indicated the insufficient orientation and training provided to them, which failed to prepare them to fulfill their obligations as PSB members. If PSB members do not have the capacity to do their job effectively and are unable to access protocol manuals and formal training (King, 2015), such issues are likely to continue.

Sinclair (2018) recommended that Thunder Bay PSB, in cooperation with the Ontario Association of Police Services Boards and funded by the province, develop a compulsory and standard orientation package for new board members, addressing the critical skills and knowledge areas in governance, police practice, community priorities, business strategy, and the law, required to carry out their police governance mandate. Sinclair (2018) also recommended that newly appointed board members must complete the onboarding and orientation portion of the proposed strategy and should not be allowed to vote until they have completed such training, including the proposed cultural awareness sessions. However, ongoing issues related to PSB governance and oversight (see for example Ottawa and Moose

Jaw, among others), suggest that these recommendations have yet to be consistently implemented in Ontario or nationally. Here we explore the training currently available to PSB members across Canada, and how this training is implemented according to PSB members, to better understand the obstacles to building PSB capacity for meaningful governance and oversight.

## The current study

In 2022, the research team engaged in a nation-wide study of police governance and oversight in Canada. As part of this study, the research team attempted to better understand how PSBs engaged in strategic planning and policy setting. However, the ongoing and reciprocal research framework of the study allowed us to identify new themes and ask questions on emerging issues as the research progressed. One of the issues that surfaced almost immediately was the perceived capacity of the PSBs participating in this study. We soon realized that to properly understand police oversight, we needed to investigate PSB member's perspectives on training and capacity. This included raising questions of what training was provided, how it was provided, and how it translated into their perceived capacity to carry out their PSB roles and responsibilities.

While several important reports speak to notable failures and subsequent investigations of specific PSBs in Ontario, we wanted to investigate whether these statements reflect a more general issue in PSB member training and capacity. In this study, we explore PSB training across Canada by asking PSB members about their training experiences. While many provinces claim to offer PSB training materials, the existence of these materials tells us little about their effectiveness and uptake for end-users. A well-trained board will arguably provide more effective police governance and oversight. However, if there is a gap between the expectations of the role of PSBs, and the resources they are provided to carry out that role, this will have impacts for the police governance and oversight in Canada.

## Data and methods

The current study involved a mixed-methods approach including interviews, surveys, and a large group discussion about training at the Canadian Association of Police Governance's (CAPG) annual conference. We began by interviewing the leaders (chairs and executive directors) of PSBs across Canada using a semi-structured interview process. Working in partnership with CAPG, our recruitment materials were shared with their membership list (64 PSBs) and a convenience sample was produced. These interviews took place between May and August of 2022 and were conducted using Zoom. 25 interviews were completed across 23 PSBs for a response rate from CAPG membership of 35.9%). These interviews included 3 PSBs from British Columbia (BC), 4 PSBs from Alberta (AB), 3 PSBs from Saskatchewan (SK), 2 PSBs from Manitoba (MB), 8 PSBs from Ontario (ON), 2 PSBs from Nova Scotia (NS), and 1 PSB from New Brunswick (NB). Two of these 23 PSBs governed First Nations police services. We asked participants to identify what kind of training they had been offered when they joined the PSB, what kind of ongoing training was available, what the training looked like in practice, whether or not they believed the training was effective, and why or why not.

The findings from these initial interviews suggested that training was a much bigger concern than we had originally anticipated. As such, we expanded the research to include a survey of PSB members from across Canada attending the Canadian Association of Police Governance's annual conference in September of 2022. The survey was done as part of a workshop facilitated by the research team which included the participation 50 members from PSBs and police services across Canada. Participants were asked to complete the survey during the workshop. They were then asked to share their answers at their conference tables (approximately eight people per table) and record point form notes of their discussion on flip chart paper. The participants then shared the highlights

of these discussions with the rest of the conference participants as part of a larger focus group discussion. This enabled participants and the research team to ask for additional details and clarification and these responses. This data provided additional context to the survey responses and helped inform the coding process and overall findings.

After police members and duplicate services were removed from the survey/focus group discussion sample, we were able to survey an additional 39 members from 17 PSBs, representing an additional 26.5% of CAPG members. These included 2 PSBs from BC, 1 from AB, 6 from SK,<sup>3</sup> 1 from MB, 5 from ON, 1 from NS, and 1 from NB. One of the 17 PSBs represented was a First Nations PSB. Where several responses for each board occurred (we had a maximum of four participants from one board), responses were coded and clarified for the most consistent response.

The survey asked participants the following questions: First, how much training were you provided when you started on the board? Response categories included: Over 40 hours, between 30–40 hours, between 20–30 hours, between 10–20 hours, less than 10 hours, and I received no training). Second, how much of this training focused on strategic planning? Response categories included: Over 10 hours, between 5–10 hours, between 1–5 hours, less than 1 hour, and I received no training in strategic planning. Third, and finally, board members were asked to share their experiences in more detail after the survey by discussing the training they had been given, and the training they still required. Additional insights were derived from these discussions.

The combination of 25 interviews, across 23 PSBs, and 39 survey responses across 17 PSBs creates a total of 64 participants representing 40 PSBs (62.5% of CAPG's membership and approximately 30% of all possible PSBs) across Canada. In total this includes 5 PSBs from BC, 5 from AB, 9 from SK, 3 from MB, 13 from ON,<sup>4</sup> 3 from NS, 2 from NB. Three of these PSBs provide oversight for First Nations police services. Considering that only 7 of Canada's 13 provinces and territories have PSBs, all seven provinces are well represented here. The data from the interviews, and surveys (including the notes from the conference group discussion) were coded for key themes (Williams & Moster, 2019). The first author read through all collected data twice to identify key concepts and themes. Two additional research assistants then blind coded the data to identify concepts and themes and ensure inter-rater reliability (Selvi, 2020). Once this stage of coding was completed, the research team compared all identified themes and concepts and completed a final thematic coding process. These themes are presented here along with the survey findings on the amount of training and the focus of the training.

## Results

Several themes emerged in the findings. These themes included: 1. most PSB leaders received little or no training, 2. the training that was provided was haphazard and/or inconsistent, 3. the training pedagogy is problematic, 4. PSBs often had to seek out additional training or create their own, 5. that the areas of training that were lacking included strategic planning, governance, oversight, and 6. that a number of structural conditions (lack of compensation, makeup of the board, board turnover, etc.) made it difficult to build and maintain capacity.

### *Most PSBs are provided little or no training*

The lack of training in general emerged in both the interviews and in the survey. For example, after asking a participant how much training they received, they responded: 'None, that I'm aware of' (I12-SK<sup>5</sup>). Indeed, apart from a few PSBs for large police services, most participants indicated that they received no training or only a few hours. Others suggested that while training was supposed to exist, they had not been provided with anything meaningful: 'To be honest I've heard of training existing, but I didn't really receive any official training from the province. (The executive director) introduced himself and made himself available if I had questions' (I14-ON). Some participants indicated that they had been

**Table 1.** Summary table for survey results.

Question 1: How much training were you provided as a PSB member?		Question 2: How much (if any) training did you receive that focused on strategic planning?	
No training	7 (17.9%)	No training in strategic planning	17 (45.9%)
Less than 10 hours of training	21 (53.8%)	Less than one hour	14 (37.8%)
Between 10–20 hours of training	6 (15.4%)	Between 1–5 hours	5 (13.5%)
Between 20–30 hours of training	1 (2.5%)	Between 5–10 hours	0 (0%)
Between 30–40 hours of training	2 (5.1%)	Over 10 hours	1 (2.7%)
Over 40 hours of training	2 (5.1%)	Missing data	2 (5.1%)
<b>Total:</b>	<b>39 (100%)</b>		<b>39 (100%)</b>

provided some training: ‘I received a few hours of training. We were given a PowerPoint and it mostly went over the Police (Services) Act. I had to do a lot of learning on my own’ (I9-MB), but that the training was not enough. A few participants also raised concerns about the implications of this lack of training. For example, one participant stated: ‘there is no actual training for the board. And then they are expected to command this large organization and a (multi-million) dollar budget. All without any training’ (I10-ON). This response clearly implies that there are potentially significant consequences for failing to adequately train board members.

The survey provided additional support to the findings from the interviews that PSB members were not receiving training (see Table 1). When asked how much training they were provided when they started on the board, 21 participants (53.8%) indicated that they received less than 10 hours of training and 7 (17.9%) indicated that they received no training (total 28 participants or 71.7% of the sample). The remaining 11 (28.3%) participants indicated that they received between 10–20 hours of training (6 participants 15.4% of the sample), 20–30 hours of training (1 participant or 2.5% of the sample), 30–40 hours of training (2 participants or 5.1% of the sample), and 40 or more hours of training (2 participants or 5.1% of the sample).

### ***The training provided was haphazard and/or inconsistent***

Participants not only commented on the lack of training, but also that any training that was provided was done so in a haphazard or inconsistent manner. For example, one participant explained:

‘The training is all over the map. There is no formal program. It is more of an orientation. There was training before I started, but it was never replaced when I joined the board. So, I haven’t had any formal training over the last three years. I mean, there was some effort to orient me to a few things, but they focus more on practice and police roles than on our role and governance’. (I4-BC)

Here, we can see that despite public documentation that indicates the existence of formal training, that in practice, the training either does not exist or has not been updated as promised. Some respondents even talked about how training used to exist, but then it was removed:

‘When I started my predecessor had a training manual already set up. At the time, the ministry had a training program for new members. But they nixed it. Ironically enough, there was more support back then for new board members to get trained’. (I22-ON)

The lack of formal training, particularly in the case of Ontario, was highlighted by other participants: ‘There is no formal training in Ontario. The leadership sits with a new board member for an hour to cover responsibilities, gives them some documents and then it is just trial by fire’ (I11-ON).

Finally, there were concerns that the training only occurred at the beginning of the role, and that this training needed to be consistent: ‘The (provincial) government had done some training, but it has to be ongoing. It needs to be ongoing because it doesn’t mean anything when you just start out’



(I15-BC). These findings suggest that not only is the training informal and haphazard, but that PSB members require ongoing training and support.

### ***The training pedagogy is problematic***

For the participants that did receive some training, several identified that *how* the training was provided resulted in very little capacity building. Training was not only informal and haphazard, as described above, but also done in a way that did not promote real learning. For example, one participant described the training as ‘they just threw documents at us’ (I13-SK) and another indicated that their training was little more than a conversation about the provincial Police Act: ‘my training was 1.5 hours sitting with the chair (of the PSB). I was given a copy of the Police Act. That’s it. The training is really lacking’ (I16-AB). Many participants described that they were simply expected to read over their provincial Police Services Act and ask questions if they had any. One participant indicated that some effort was put into improving this pedagogy through online modules on the Police Act:

‘There was an online training of the Police Act. You had to read passages and answer questions. It was really basic, but you had limited time to complete, and they didn’t tell you that. Then, if you answered questions incorrectly, it wouldn’t tell you which ones so you could learn from your mistakes. But you could proceed even if you got it wrong. Only one person on our (PSB) actually completed the training because it was so frustrating. It is terrible and needs to be changed. But two years later, we are still without any real training’ (I5-AB),

Despite efforts to improve pedagogy, the above quote indicates that these efforts were poor and ineffective. Indeed, as described above, despite the attempt to make the Police Act more accessible, the learning modules were not useful for the board members and many simply did not complete the training. This quote also suggests that there was no follow-up or accountability related to these trainings. These findings indicate that not only is training for police board lacking, and haphazard, but the training that does exist uses poor pedagogies such as expecting participants to parse dense policy alone with little follow-up or accountability.

### ***PSBs often had to seek out additional training or create their own***

Due to the lack of adequate and meaningful training, some participants indicated that they had to seek out additional training or even create their own. For example, one board leader said:

‘I developed my own manual for new board members, because they (the province) nixed the training. I went through each of the responsibilities of the act and supported those with examples. I provided them with additional background as well, including our own policies and reports that touch on each of the responsibilities in the act. . . I’m responsible for putting all that together’. (I22- ON)

Here we see that the participant had to go above and beyond their role to ensure that some kind of training was provided to their board. Another participant indicated that they had to rely on their own experience or expertise in the field to back fill the lack of training provided to their members:

‘I had experience working in justice, so I understood the system. I created a guide for our (PSB) members, and I go over their job with them. . . I also take them to the (provincial) commission, give them PowerPoints on political responsibilities, take them to the police service, make them do ride alongs, and bring them to volunteer events’. (I21-MB)

The lack of adequate training for their police board, meant that this participant placed the responsibility for board training on themselves. As such, the training becomes more of a personal initiative rather than a provincial responsibility. Still others highlighted how they had to outsource their training to other police boards and provincial contacts:

‘We have done some training through the provincial police governance body and with some contacts from (other cities in the province) who would come in and give talks ... But if we didn’t push for it (training) nothing would get done. For example, we had zero strategic planning training until this year’ (I8-AB),

confirming that much of the training is not only haphazard, but relies on the willingness of other agencies, who are not responsible for PSB training, to support each other and build PSB capacity.

### ***The areas of training that were lacking included strategic planning, governance, and oversight***

As the conversation about training progressed in the interviews, many participants discussed the kind of training they needed in order to be effective in their roles. To reiterate, the role of PSBs includes setting policy, providing oversight, governing the police organization, and setting strategic priorities. However, our participants suggested they were not provided meaningful training in these areas. For example, one participant suggested:

‘They should be teaching us the role of the board. They need to explain what it means to be a member of a governance board in general. And then explain the role of the board and its authority. Our members don’t realize they have authority. They are not responsible for police operations’. (I3-NB)

Additionally, respondents also highlighted the kinds of training they received that were unrelated or even detrimental to their role on the PSB. In the previous example, we see that the training that does exist appears to focus more on operations than on the role of the PSB. Others highlighted similar issues: ‘We need to train people to make change. We need training in strategic planning, but the focus on (police) operations is much more important to them’ (I6-SK-FN). The focus on police operations may undermine the role of the board to set policy and strategic priorities, as provincial police acts mandate that operations are under the purview of the Chief Constable, not the PSB.

The survey provided additional support to the findings from the interviews that PSB members required specific types of training (See [Table 1](#)). Participants were asked to indicate how much (if any) of the training they received focused on strategic planning. Of the 37 participants who responded to this question (2 missing), 17 (45.9%) indicated they received none and 14 (37.8%) indicated that they received less than an hour. Of the remaining participants, 5 (13.5%) indicated that they received 1–5 hours, and 1 (2.7%) indicated that they received over 10 hours. No participants indicated that they received between 5–10 hours of training.

Some interviewees stated that they not only needed training in strategic planning, but they also needed to be shown how to properly parse the type of information they were receiving from police leaders. Many participants felt that they lacked the capacity to meaningfully engage with and criticize the type of information they received from police chief reports. For example, one respondent noted that: ‘they tend to just report the stats, like crime rates and stuff, and not relate that to the strategic priorities’ (I1-NS). Others highlighted not only their lack of knowledge regarding how to parse these statistics, or being able to question how these data related to the strategic plan, but also the absence of financial acumen, that made it difficult for them to weigh in on budgeting decisions. Indeed, the majority of the workshop discussion emphasized the need for legal and financial capacity on PSBs: ‘we have very limited financial expertise’ (D15-AB), and: ‘we have some HR and legal, but we need more, and we need more financial understanding’ (D33-BC).

Still others made a broader appeal claiming that: ‘we just need ongoing training’ (D20-ON-FN). This quote highlights some of the feelings of exasperation expressed during this workshop and the interviews, in which participants seemed at a loss about their lack of training and did not even know where to start with the kind training necessary.

### ***Structural conditions (lack of compensation, makeup of the board, board turnover, etc.) made it difficult to build and maintain capacity***

Finally, participants identified that there were several additional considerations that contributed to issues of training and capacity building. One example was compensation for board members' time. Because being a PSB member is largely a voluntary role (save for the executive director of some boards), this means that board training is unpaid time. For example:

'We have a hard time getting the board members to give up time to do the training. We have started to include training at the beginning of every meeting from community partners and done some "police board 101". We've also registered them for CAPG webinars, but they are usually during the day when people are working so they get missed'. (I1-NS)

This quote speaks to larger issues of board compensation and member availability. If board members are not compensated for their time, which many are not in Canada, they may be less likely to engage in training, even if it exists. In the case above, the board had to incorporate training sessions into their regularly scheduled meetings in order for it to be taken by members. While an innovative solution, this detracts from the time the board could be spending setting policy and governing the police organization. Others also identified time as an impediment to their effectiveness: 'We need time. Our board brings important skills and experience, but it is short on time. Both individually and collectively' (D44-SK).

Other participants raised concerns about the lack of compensation impacting board composition: 'We don't attract high talent on the board. There is no remuneration. We are trying to get people paid.' (I3-NB). Others suggested that their location made it difficult to recruit a diverse pool of candidates. Participants suggested this was less of a problem in PSBs for large cities where the candidate pool was more diverse and tended to have members with more capacity: 'Most members have board experience; we just need to train them on the police setting' (I2-AB). However, this was not a common experience in medium or smaller municipalities.

Still others spoke about the issue of board turnover. They suggested that it was difficult to build and maintain capacity when the board was constantly in flux. For example, one participant shared: 'We are really trying to get some experience built up for the commission. When I started everyone was new besides the vice chair. . . that first year was just spent learning' (I12-SK). As a result of the constant turnover in board membership, many PSBs across Canada are operating with very little institutional memory or experience. This may be confounding the issue of training, as PSBs need to be able to both build and maintain capacity.

Finally, some participants raised concerns about how PSBs are generally organized: 'The makeup of the board is a challenge. The politicians on the board can be parochial. It can be very political' (I7-ON). Because most PSBs across Canada require a particular number of provincial and municipal appointees, and these are usually (city) councillors, this means that PSBs are largely made up of politicians. Some participants suggested that the board was then easily influenced by limited viewpoints and unable to recruit members with diverse experiences and skills that may contribute to a more representative and effective PSB.

## **Discussion**

In the last decade in Canada, several high-profile policing incidents and the subsequent investigations, highlighted the failure of some PSBs to provide adequate and effective governance and police oversight (Morden, 2012; Office of the Auditor General, 2023; Sinclair, 2018). These incidents are not unique to Canada, as multiple cases of police misconduct internationally have raised serious concerns about how to manage and prevent these incidents moving forward (B.B.C., 2023; Stenning, 2021). However, based on our findings, recommendations regarding the need to focus on more and better training and capacity building nationwide have yet to be realized. Indeed, while some provincial Police Services Acts outline the responsibility of the province to provide training to

PSBs, little was known about what this training actually looked like and how it was implemented with PSB members. In the current study, we attempted to explore these questions in order to better understand the nature and extent of training PSBs members currently receive in order to provide meaningful police governance and oversight, especially in this post BLM, and ‘defund the police’ era.

Our study findings indicate that a ‘governance gap’ exists in police oversight in Canada, between the expectations of the role of PSBs and the capacity and training PSB members are provided to fulfill that role. Our study included a diverse sample of PSB leaders from a wide range of Canadian jurisdictions in our effort to better understand their training experiences and their perceived capacity. Most study participants indicated that they had little or no training, or that the training they did receive was haphazard and insufficient. While training does exist in most provinces through the provincial government, and at the national level through organizations like the Canadian Association of Police Governance (CAPG) who offer monthly webinars (Canadian Association of Police Governance, 2023), these results show that, in general, participants cannot, or do not, access this training, and/or that the training that is provided is not considered adequate.

These findings are consistent with reports by Morden (2012), Sinclair (2018) and Office of the Auditor General (2023), that also found that not only is training largely absent for PSB members in Canada, but that the training provided fails to adequately prepare them to fulfill their roles and responsibilities. Our results suggest that the recommendations contained in these reports for more and better training may be more generalizable than initially anticipated.

The implications of this research are important. First, a lack of adequate and effective PSB capacity, even perceived, has impacts on police governance and oversight. Many of the participants identified that they did not feel adequately trained or capable of carrying out in their roles and responsibilities effectively. This is concerning considering the important role these leaders are meant to play in governing police services and holding them accountable (Ferdik et al., 2013; Stenning, 2021). A lack of training and capacity, and an overall feeling of uncertainty about their roles and responsibilities may ultimately result in ineffective police governance and oversight. Considering the ongoing incidents of police misconduct in Canada, (see for example the cases of Dafonte Miller, Sammy Yatim, Ejaz Choudry, Jason Collins, Mona Wang, etc.), coupled with investigative reports such as those mentioned above that have signalled this is due, in part, to PSB failures to set policy and procedures for these police services, it is likely that without meaningful investments in PSB training, these incidents may continue to emerge.

The capacity to provide meaningful governance and oversight is important considering that the international research on the effectiveness of civilian oversight identifies similar challenges for ensuring police accountability. However, much of this literature focuses on investigative, review, and audit styles of oversight rather than advisory (Archbold, 2021). At the same time, the roles and responsibilities of PSBs in Canada often extends beyond an advisory role and, as such, better research on these entities and their capacity is critical. Other jurisdictions should equally pay attention to concerns regarding board competence since these concerns are likely not unique to the Canadian context. Indeed, other authors have proposed revisions to civilian review boards in the United States that raise similar concerns about meaningful accountability and policy setting (Ofer, 2015).

Second, a lack of training, or ineffective training, also has implications for the kinds of decisions that are made by PSB leaders. While much has been written in the extant literature about the need for police oversight bodies to ensure proper police training (see for example Engel et al., 2020; Hope, 2021) there is very little discussion on the content and quality of training for members of these oversight bodies. Our findings indicated that the training that was provided focused largely on police operations. However, according to several provincial police acts, police operations are beyond the purview of PSBs (Roach, 2022). If PSB members are not receiving training in strategic planning or governance and oversight, as evidenced by the findings here, they may be unable to properly parse the information reported by their police services. As discussed, police leaders are

often required to report on progress towards strategic priorities. However, the information provided by police services to PSBs is frequently unrelated to these priorities (ex. changes in crime rates or arrests rates) and has little to say about how the service is performing in relation to achieving stated goals and objectives (Hodgkinson et al., 2019). If PSB members do not have the capacity to engage with this information, they may be unable to adequately critique and question biased priorities or misinformation.

Third, and relatedly, capacity issues at the PSB level have implications for the dispersal of public funds. Policing organizations are often responsible for 20–25% of municipal budgets in Canada since many police services are effectively departments of the municipality they serve (Ho, 2020; Statistics Canada, 2022). In an era of ‘defund the police’, public scrutiny over police spending is at an all-time high. Certainly, much of the concern raised in other jurisdictions, like the US have called into question the capacity of police oversight bodies to effectively carry out their roles in the wake of growing incidents of police misconduct (Ferdik et al., 2013; Ofer, 2015). If PSB members indicate that they have little, or no, strategic planning or financial training, it follows that they will likely not have the capacity to command the planning around these sizeable municipal budgets. Decisions related to police budgets can have considerable consequences including that some are inconsistent with the needs and demands of the communities being served (Maynard, 2020).

### **Recommendations**

Important recommendations emerge from this research. Our results indicate that training and capacity issues are fairly widespread, and that real investment in capacity-building for PSBs is needed nationwide. At the same time, we recognize the potential of these recommendations to apply to civilian oversight of police more broadly. While little is written on the competence of members of citizen review boards in the US or Police and Crime Commissions in the UK, we suspect that based on their similar structures (Ferdik et al., 2013, Newburn 20,212) the need to adequately address training for these bodies is widespread. This is especially true as new review boards are created for police services across the US, many of which still do not have these boards in place and lack adequate forms of accountability (Ofer, 2015).

This training should be adequate, offered in a regular and consistent manner, and provided with sufficient resources to be sustainable. Furthermore, the training should highlight key areas of including: understanding the legislatively mandated responsibilities and authority of the PSB, strategic planning, governance, oversight, evaluation and performance assessment, budgeting and financial awareness, and policy making. While each province would be responsible for ensuring the training is contextualized to that province’s policing needs and their Police Act, investment in this training should be federally mandated. Associations like CAPG have taken on some of this work through monthly webinars and training (Canadian Association of Police Governance, 2023), but these webinars can be costly making it challenging for smaller PSBs with limited resources to allow their members to participate. In addition, these training sessions are not mandated, so not all PSBs can afford to access this training. Clearly, investment in PSB training is needed nationwide.

This recommendation for improving and expanding training extends those recommendations outlined in the Office of the Auditor General (2023, p. 24) report that states: ‘The Executive Director, with the support of Board members, should review and enhance the new Board member orientation program, including additional focus on roles and responsibilities. As part of this, clarity should be provided on the role and responsibility of Councillors who sit on this independent Board.’ However, our findings indicate that training cannot rely solely on the capacity of the board leadership, as many of our participants noted that as the leaders of those boards, they had not received adequate training themselves. As a result, these leaders, many of whom were executive directors, may not be able to meaningfully ascertain what constitutes appropriate training. Indeed, the responsibility for laying out the content and guidelines for PSB training should not be placed on

the users, but rather, should rest with provincial authorities, and incorporate input from governance and legal experts.

In making these recommendations, we recognize the need to reiterate the important structural issues that were identified by participants during this study. First, the pedagogy used in the training of PSB members needs to be carefully considered. While training involving online modules may exist, participants reported that they found this kind of training ineffective. Furthermore, some participants stated that due to issues with the current training, they had to develop their own training materials and delivery methodologies. While an innovative solution, such a response raises questions about the quality, consistency, and sustainability of this kind of training, especially after those responsible for developing the training leave the organization. We suggest that a high-quality pedagogical approach, that is consistently evaluated for effectiveness, should be put in place for PSB training across Canada.

Second, PSB members should be compensated for their time. While many board members hold municipal appointments (example: councillors) and are compensated as part of their publicly funded positions, this is not the case for everyone. In Canada, policing is a multi-billion-dollar enterprise (Statistics Canada, 2022), and one of Canada's largest public expenditures (Leuprecht, 2014). However, aside from the executive director, most of the individuals providing oversight to the police, are not compensated (or adequately compensated) for their time. As described by the participants in this study, the lack of compensation impacts both the ability to attract highly qualified candidates and PSB capacity-building and, in turn, the effectiveness of PSBs. Adequate and appropriate compensation could also contribute to reducing PSB turnover, which would improve the sustainability of capacity building efforts like additional training.

Third, and perhaps a recommendation for the long-term, is the need to reconsider the composition of PSBs. Others have highlighted the issue of PSB composition related to the political nature of current PSBs (see Caul, 2009; Laming & Valentine, 2022). In our study, participants also raised concerns about political interference, due to the make-up of their PSB. However, our findings also identified the inability of PSBs to recruit for particular skill sets, such as individuals with financial acumen, knowledge of organizational management, or strategic planning skills. We recommend reconsidering the composition of PSBs, such that they better reflect the diversity of the communities they serve (Ferdik et al., 2013) and allow the recruitment of individuals with the skillsets needed to support the overall functioning and capacity of a PSB.

In sum, there is a governance gap in Canadian policing. To address this gap, attention should be directed toward PSB training. This training should be of high quality, coordinated, and delivered in a consistent manner across provinces and at the national level. It should be properly funded and should engage in meaningful pedagogy. PSB members should be compensated for their time and the composition of PSBs should be reconsidered. In the absence of serious consideration and action on these issues, claims about police oversight may be no more than public relations statements, doing little to ensure the effective governance and oversight of the police in Canada.

## Limitations and future directions

As with any study, our research is limited in a few ways. One, we engaged in a mixed-methods approach. The manner in which questions are asked in an interview, versus a survey, can make it difficult to bring together findings in a meaningful way, as questions are often phrased differently to enable long-form versus Likert-type scale responses. In addition, the survey was only distributed to conference attendees and not all PSB members across Canada, which may indicate that the participants are more engaged in governance than other PSB members. Nonetheless, the survey was done in conjunction with a facilitated discussion which enabled the research team to contextualize these findings. Furthermore, we were able to access a larger number of leaders from PSBs across Canada, which contributes to the generalizability of our findings. Future research may seek to expand the participant base and questions regarding PSB training and effectiveness.

Two, we spoke exclusively to PSB leaders, such as chairs, vice chairs and executive directors. Doing so, meant that our findings are slightly skewed towards PSB members who have spent more time on their respective boards and have more experience. However, considering how many participants identified the lack of, and/or the problematic nature of their training, we are confident that our findings would translate to newer, and less experienced, PSB members.

Three, we were limited by the fact we were unable to test the connection between training and PSB effectiveness directly. Rather, we can only make claims about the described or likely connection between capacity and meaningful police accountability. Nonetheless, our findings provide important evidence of a general lack of capacity across PSBs in Canada and identify important recommendations to make improvements. Future research may benefit from testing the impact of improved training on PSB effectiveness, as well as examining how this training is implemented and adopted in practice. Future research should also explore the impact of PSB composition including related competencies on overall capacity.

Fourth, and finally, we recognize that our study makes some normative assumptions about the impact of training as it relates to police oversight and governance. Several authors have noted that PSBs have very little control of the police organizations they are responsible for governing (Roach, 2022; Stenning, 2021). Indeed, the overall structure and organization of police governance would need to change substantially to truly impact police oversight long term (Keys and Keys 2023). As a result, improvements in PSB training may do little to address concerns about police oversight and accountability in Canada. However, we argue that increasing the capacity of PSBs is an important part of rethinking what the role of PSBs should be both in Canada and internationally.

## Conclusion

The extant literature suggests that training and capacity are an important contribution to PSB effectiveness. However, until now, the training experiences of PSB members had not been properly investigated. Our study examined PSB training with PSB members across Canada. Overwhelmingly, we found that PSBs members indicated that they had very little or no training. The training that was provided was haphazard or incomplete, used ineffective pedagogies, and did not focus on the skills PSB members needed to carry out their roles and responsibilities.

While some PSB leaders resorted to creating their own training, there was no measure to indicate if these alternatives were successful. Importantly, many structural issues, including compensation, board composition, and board turnover, served to exacerbate these challenges. As a result, many PSB leaders do not feel they are capable in their roles, and this is contributing to a 'governance gap' in Canadian policing. Our study offers several recommendations to meaningfully address these challenges including the coordination and provision of PSB training nationwide. Suggestions are also made regarding ways to address some of the larger, structural factors that impact uptake of PSB training. Without substantial investment in capacity building, we will likely continue to witness failures in police accountability, similar to those seen in Toronto, Thunder Bay, Ottawa and elsewhere across the country. Considering that police governance and oversight issues are not unique to Canada, these findings may be applicable to police oversight bodies in the United States, England and Wales, and other similar jurisdictions.

## Notes

1. 'Commission' is used instead of 'board' in some provinces and refers to the same governing body.
2. Despite this distinction, many PSBs often struggle to determine the line between operations and policy (Caul, 2009; Roach, 2022). We would argue this relates directly to the issue of training on PSB roles.

3. The conference took place in Saskatoon Saskatchewan, so this likely increased participation from the Saskatchewan PSBs and led to a higher representation for this province.
4. Ontario is the most densely populated province in Ontario, with the largest number of police service, hence why it accounts for approximately 1/3 of participants here.
5. The codes here represent the interviewee (I) or discussant (D) number, and their province (ex. SK is Saskatchewan). An addition of – FN refers to a First Nations Service within a particular province.

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