



C S K A R E S E A R C H B R I E F

The Structural Deficit in Canadian Police Governance

Why Training Alone Cannot Fix a Broken System

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Research to Practice to Alignment

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The Issue

Police boards across Canada are held fully responsible for the adequacy, effectiveness, and culture of local policing, yet they are structurally denied the levers, authority, and infrastructure required to govern meaningfully.

For roughly the past 15 years, the dominant response to governance failures has been to call for more training for board members. This paper argues that Canada faces a structural governance deficit, not a knowledge deficit. As long as the underlying framework is flawed, additional training will simply produce better-informed participants in a system designed to underperform.

Key Findings

The paper identifies three interrelated fractures in Canada's civilian police governance model.

1

Operational Independence Misused as a Shield

Police operational independence, grounded in jurisprudence such as *R. v. Campbell*, was designed to protect specific law-enforcement decisions from political interference. In practice, it is often poorly understood and can be used by police executives to block legitimate democratic, financial, and strategic oversight. Routine board requests for information can be dismissed as “operational,” leaving boards cautious and uncertain about what they can ask. The result is a pattern of under-performing boards - entities that bear formal accountability but have limited access to information, few levers, and little real authority.

2

Big Budgets, Bare-Bones Governance

Boards routinely oversee police budgets exceeding \$100 million while operating on secretariat budgets that, in some jurisdictions, are as low as \$14,000. Many boards lack dedicated staff, legal counsel, research/analytic capacity, and expert communications support. This forces them to rely on municipalities for legal advice and on police services for strategic and financial planning support, eroding independence and creating a structural hierarchy in which those being governed are better resourced than those tasked with governing them.

3

A Governance Architecture That Inhibits Expertise

Board design often reflects an “awkward mix” of councillors and citizens appointed by different orders of government, with little transparency and minimal structural support. Short, politically tied terms—often one to two years—mean that just as members become competent, they rotate off and institutional memory is lost. Skills-based competency frameworks for appointments are rare or inconsistently applied, producing a recurring cycle of inexperience that can be convenient for those who prefer compliant, low-challenge boards.

These fractures destabilize the broader governance and accountability ecosystem that includes boards, chiefs, municipal and provincial officials, and communities. When boards are systematically weaker than those they oversee, the ecosystem cannot sustain the rule of law, public confidence, or ethical decision-making over time.

Conclusions

Canadian police governance is experiencing a structural crisis, not a training gap. Misapplied operational independence, chronic resource starvation, and an appointment architecture that inhibits expertise have together rendered civilian oversight largely performative in many settings. Training, under these conditions, becomes just performance art: it can improve individual knowledge but cannot overcome a system that withholds authority, information, and basic infrastructure from the very bodies charged with governing.

As a way forward, the paper proposes reframing the doctrine from **operational independence** to **operational responsibility**. Boards should not give before-the-fact permission for specific operations - that would be interference - but chiefs and executives must be accountable after the fact for explaining operational decisions, outcomes, and cultural impacts to their boards. This is paired with a blueprint for reform focused on board composition, tenure, infrastructure, and board-police relationships.

Recommendations

The paper advances a coherent reform agenda at two levels.

System Design and Legislation

- ▶ Codify operational responsibility in provincial police legislation, clarifying boards' rights to data/information and responsibilities for after-the-fact accountability, while preserving the prohibition on directing specific operational decisions.
- ▶ Move board composition toward a professional, skills-based model that combines transparent appointment processes and explicit competency matrices - with careful attention to members' character, judgment, and overall governance "fit".
- ▶ Reform board tenure by adopting extended, staggered terms that reduce vulnerability to political cycles and allow institutional knowledge to grow.
- ▶ Establish statutory minimum funding standards for boards, including secretariats, independent legal counsel, research/analytic capacity, and professional communications support proportionate to the size and complexity of the police service.
- ▶ Shift board-police relationships from "hands-off deference" to active, informed, accountable engagement, supported by written role clarity and robust information-sharing protocols.

Pragmatic Agenda for Provincial Associations

#1

Build a Governance Reform Working Group

Convene willing boards within 12 months to develop a common reform agenda and speak with a unified voice to provincial ministries.

#2

Develop Model Governance Modernization Legislation

Within 18 months, draft model legislation that provinces can adapt, codifying operational responsibility, resourcing standards, and skills-based appointments.

#3

Commission Strategic Case Studies

Produce 2–3 strategic case studies annually that document how governance failures have constrained oversight, effective policing, and community safety.

#4

Negotiate Data and Information Rights Protocols

Ensure boards' need for operational data to govern is codified, not dependent on the goodwill of individual police executives.

#5

Create a Competency-Based Appointment Framework

Develop a standardized framework and press appointing authorities to align their processes with it.

What This Means For...

Police Service Boards

- ▶ Reclaim your mandate under operational responsibility: distinguish clearly between what you must not direct and where you must insist on information and accountability.
- ▶ Document structural gaps, not just individual failures, to create an evidence base for reform.
- ▶ Champion skills-based appointment matrices, longer staggered terms, and minimum resource standards as preconditions for the level of accountability you already carry.

Police Executives

- ▶ Treat strong governance as a safeguard, not a threat: preserve operational independence on tactics while providing fulsome, timely explanations to your board about major decisions and their impacts.
- ▶ Refrain from using “operational” as a catch-all shield; co-design information protocols that respect legal boundaries and give boards the data they need to govern.

Policymakers

- ▶ Modernize police legislation to clarify the limits of operational independence and embed operational responsibility.
- ▶ Fund governance as critical infrastructure, with enforceable minimum standards tied to police budget size and complexity.
- ▶ Professionalize appointments and terms through transparent, skills-based selection and staggered terms that build continuity and expertise.

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