

Letters to the Editor
Winnipeg Free Press
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Dear Editor:

As noted by the Free Press (Saturday, August 16th) the shooting death of Craig McDougall by WPS officers and the recent Taman inquiry continue to raise the question of who polices the police. The John Howard Society supports the move by the Provincial Government to review the Police Act and look for two specific changes to be legislated. The first is the creation of an independent Police Commission to supervise the day to day operations of the Police Service – Winnipeg is the only city of our size in Canada without one and it is now badly needed as a way to re-establish trust of the public in the Winnipeg Police Service. The second is the creation of an independent investigative body that automatically looks into police shootings and any allegations of wrong-doing by Police officers (unlike LERA which must wait until a complaint has been filed).

The first task for a police commission should be to call for a review of how police constables are trained to respond when facing off with individuals armed with a knife or a screw-driver. Knives are dangerous but technology has changed since the last police officer in Winnipeg died from stabbing in the line of duty almost 40 years ago. Now most officers wear tactical vests which provide a large degree of protection from edged weapons. They also have greatly improved batons and ‘nightsticks’ that can be used to disarm someone. Therefore, do knives still constitute a level of threat that justifies the use of deadly force? These are questions that need to be considered by an independent police commission, in consultation with the police force, to ensure WPS practices are up to date and appropriate.

Cool logic dictates that a person should drop a knife or other weapon when confronted by a police officer but not everyone is thinking logically in these situations. Someone is even less likely to give up their weapon if he is afraid of being assaulted once they are arrested. Are young men being killed because they are afraid to face the police unarmed? If so, the fact that two young men have been killed by the police in the last month does nothing to decrease this fear. An independent review agency is needed to look into police behaviour and address anything that supports the impression that a police officer is to be feared rather than respected (and thus listened to).

I commend the Free Press for its coverage of this issue in last Saturday’s paper and urge you to continue focusing on this important matter.

Sincerely,

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