

# RCMP



ROYAL CANADIAN MOUNTED POLICE

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## LET'S TALK INNOVATION

Spurring change with  
new ways of  
working

**FINAL  
ISSUE**



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# USING THE FORCE OF STUDENTS

## Research sparks big changes to police tools

BY AMELIA THATCHER



*National Criminal Operations partners with Carleton University in Ottawa to undertake research projects that spur changes to RCMP programs, policies, training and equipment, such as pepper spray.*

SERGE GOUNIN

In 2014, several RCMP members reported having trouble with their oleoresin capsicum (OC) spray during altercations. Instead of temporarily blinding and distracting unruly offenders, the OC (or pepper) spray barely had any effect.

"There were some bad batches where the spray wasn't effective at all," says Simon Baldwin, a researcher and use-of-force analyst in National Criminal Operations (NCROPS). "So we decided to look deeper and see how widespread this issue was."

Baldwin called on his in-house research team of psychology and criminology students to examine how the RCMP could improve the effectiveness of the spray.

With some research and digging, the team discovered the RCMP actually used one of the lowest concentrations of OC spray compared to other agencies. Little evidence existed to favour one spray over the other, so Baldwin's team decided to put it to the test in several experiments.

The team concluded that the RCMP should switch to a higher concentration of the spray to maximize effectiveness, without compromising safety. As a result, in October 2016, the RCMP did just that.

### Partnership

Thanks to a partnership between Carleton University and the RCMP, the research team, made up of a dozen undergraduate and graduate students, brings evidence-based decision-making to NCROPS while providing students with real-world research opportunities.

"There's no substitute for immersing yourself in an organization when you're trying to learn about it," says Craig Bennell, Carleton University psychology professor and director of the school's Police Research Lab. "The RCMP's needs match up with our research interests, so it's been an incredibly collaborative process."

While students are responsible for articulating research questions and designing studies, the RCMP often provides the initial ideas for new projects, as well as support and guidance along the way.

That constant back and forth is vital, says Bennell, who was instrumental in establishing the partnership between the university and the RCMP.

"The RCMP members are the ones who have their finger on the pulse, they're the

ones who know what the current challenges in policing are," he says. "I don't think we could do the research we do and have it be useful without them."

Overall, Bennell says it's a win-win collaboration, allowing the students to gain valuable work experience while improving RCMP practices.

### Projects

Many student research projects have resulted in major changes to RCMP programs, policies, training and equipment.

"We've got new projects all the time, the work never stops," says Brittany Blaskovits, a PhD student at Carleton who works with NCROPS. "It's rewarding to see how our research actually makes change."

Over the past two years, Blaskovits has helped out on a number of projects including firearms research, excited delirium syndrome and most recently, public perception of police officers.

"The RCMP has been really forward-thinking on current issues — they're eager to use empirical research to inform their decisions," says Blaskovits. "But it's two-fold: we also get to work with a respected agency and get input from police experts who work in the field."

The students' research on failure rates during firearms qualifications and analysis of member-involved shootings contributed to changes to firearms training.

Regarding excited delirium, Blaskovits and Baldwin studied how police should handle a violent subject in a heightened state of psychological and physiological excitement. Their work resulted in the implementation of a new online course for all members.

What's more, a recent student project led to the replacement of the general-duty holster in April 2016. The students tested the old holster against a newer model to see which one allowed members to draw their pistol more quickly. After successful field tests, the RCMP decided to introduce the new holster force-wide.

"We want to show members the benefits of research," says Baldwin, who is also working on his PhD. "We want to show that we're doing something with their concerns and use-of-force reports, and that we're making decisions based on operations. At the end of the day, the key focus for us is officer safety and improving front-line policing." 🐾