

ONTARIO POLICE SERVICES

Critics plan to nix degree requirement

Province says it will scrap demand for post-secondary education to remedy recruitment crunch

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Premier Doug Ford caused a stir when he said Ontario will back down from plans requiring new police officers to have a university or college education, raising concerns future cops could be 18-year-olds fresh out of high school.

The goal, as he put it, was to boost recruitment at a challenging time for police services — which for years have mostly hired post-secondary grads but are experiencing a shortage of officers — and put “more boots on the ground” to fight rising crime.

“Some of the police services can’t fill their spots at the Ontario Police College,” says Mark Baxter, a Brantford police sergeant on leave serving as president of the Police Association of Ontario, representing unions.

“The pool of potential candidates is not what it was.”

Hamilton’s police service, for example, recently revealed it had 1,000 applicants last year, down sharply from 1,900 two years earlier.

Even if Ford’s announcement seems somewhat moot given hiring trends, it also seems odd, coming weeks after the inquiry into the 2020 mass shooting that claimed 22 lives in Nova Scotia recommended the Royal Canadian Mounted Police beef up their training of recruits with a three-year,

degree-style training model.

While the Ford government and the police community say the change is about opening doors to candidates with valuable life experiences — and not necessarily degrees — others argue it will hurt recruitment in the long run.

“It’s actually working in the opposite direction of the way we want to be going,” says Greg Brown, a former Ottawa police officer who worked undercover and as a homicide detective before joining the State University of New York and Carleton University.

“Police are expected to do a lot more, a lot better, than they ever have before,” adds Brown, an adjunct research professor in Carleton’s departments of sociology, anthropology, law and legal studies.

“There’s a big emphasis on recognizing mental-health challenges in the community, de-escalating whenever possible, being able to deal with people in crisis ... criminal investigations are much more complex ... Reversing the educational trajectory is the exact wrong way to handle that.”

Brown points to the city of Ottawa’s policing controversy during the so-called “Freedom Convoy” when protesters shut down the city’s downtown during the winter in 2022 and violence and killings involving police that have led to “defund” movements, combining to make a career in policing less attractive.



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FORMER
OTTAWA POLICE
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“Many jurisdictions in Ontario are way low on their officer to population ratio, at historic lows,” he says, leaving officers under high stress and burned out. “Those are valid concerns that I hear all the time.”

In their bid to recruit a more diverse crop of officers reflecting Ontario’s population, police services say sticking with a high school diploma or equivalent as the educational standard is the way to go and it’s unlikely to change long-standing trends in hiring.

“If you just took a look at the surface of the announcement, you might not appreciate fully how many of our graduates do have post-secondary education,” says Supt. Francesco Barredo, unit commander of the Toronto Police College in south Etobicoke, who acknowledges concerns about police education requirements are “understandable.”

Acting Supt. Stephanie Burritt of Toronto Police talent acquisition notes the last graduating class of 113 officers included 101 with degrees and ages ranging from 21 to 51. She said graduating classes typically have 60 to 80 per cent of cadets with post-secondary education. The average age has held at 29 for three years.

“It’s really all about life experience and what the candidate brings to the table,” she adds, with volunteer work, community involvement and previous employment playing ma-

nor roles in hiring, in addition to education.

The path to policing can differ from one city to another, but in Toronto, successful applicants take introductory courses and training at the Toronto Police College before moving on to three months at the Ontario Police College in Aylmer before returning for finishing courses in Toronto.

University of Toronto police reform expert Julius Haag, an assistant professor, agrees police recruiting is unlikely to see a major shift to younger, less educated officers because of the tremendous pressures and scrutiny police are under.

Following moves by the previous Liberal government to formalize post-secondary education for police officers before its defeat in 2018, Ford’s government wrote the requirement in the Community Safety and Policing Act passed in 2019. It was intended as a modernization of previous 1990 legislation governing police.

The new act was never proclaimed into law and faced heavy lobbying from the police community.

Most police forces in Canada require a minimum education of a high school diploma or equivalent, although there are exceptions. In Ontario, Kingston police demand a university or college degree, or a high school diploma followed by “advanced military training.”