Canadian DIMENSION

The brutality is in the budget

With every budget decision, city councillors make choices that shape what Winnipeg looks like and how people will experience it

Bronwyn Dobchuk-Land / March 14, 2023 / 6 min read

ECONOMIC CRISIS HUMAN RIGHTS



Uniformed police officers at Winnipeg's Millennium Library. Photo by Ruth Bonneville/ *Winnipeg Free Press*.

Last Sunday, when my five year old asked me if we could go to the library, I had to tell her it was closed. It was cold, we needed to get out of the house, and the library is a perfect place: a kids area, natural light, new books, an engaged librarian, and a place for me to just sit and not spend any money while my kids played. My kid commented that it didn't make sense that the library was closed Sundays. I agreed—the day of the week we finally have time to take a leisurely trip to the library as a family, our local branch is closed and only six of the 20 Winnipeg Public Library branches are open. And between May and September, not a single branch is open on Saturdays or Sundays. She asked why? I told her the city would rather spend money on police than librarians, which in my personal and professional experience as a criminal justice researcher, was the most accurate answer I could come up with.

This is only one of many ways that the city's spending priorities come up in daily conversation. Why isn't the swimming pool or splash pad open before July and after September or early in the morning before it gets too hot and sunny? Why are all the swimming classes full when we try to sign up just minutes after the registration goes live

(and when, where, and how is she going to learn how to swim)? Why are we still waiting for the bus? Why is the bathroom next to the playground always locked? Why is the sidewalk impassable with our stroller in the winter? Why are the garbage bins outside the apartment buildings on our walk to daycare overflowing onto the sidewalk? Why aren't they emptied more often? Why don't they hold more trash? Why are people sleeping in tents in the park nearby? Why are the police visiting them? What did they do wrong, are they bad?

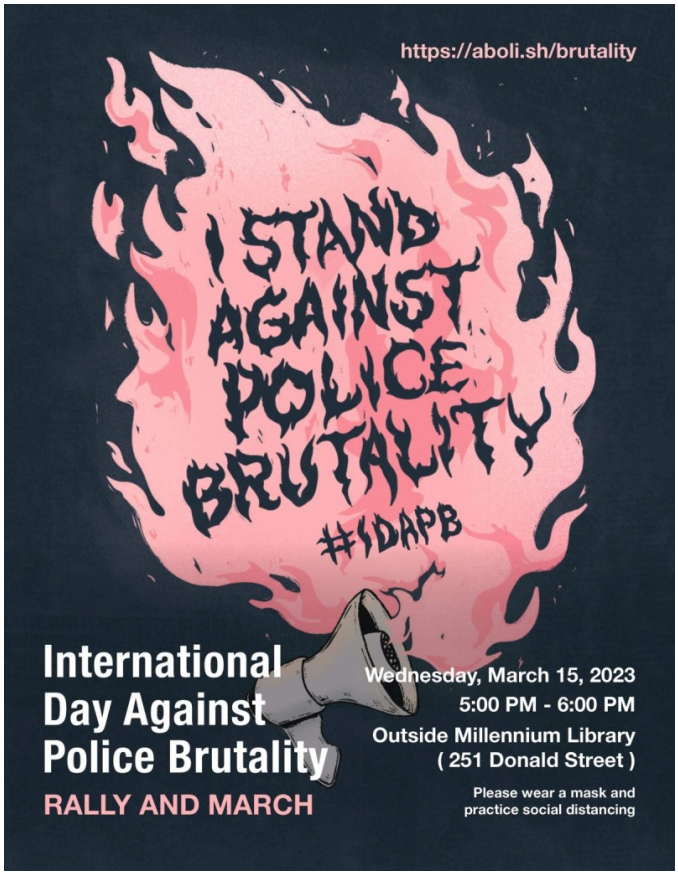
Cultural scripts told me that when I became a mom my feelings about safety, security, and policing would change: I would want more of it. Instead, I notice other things about the city that I didn't before: the sidewalk conditions, the absence of spaces to warm up or cool off or use the bathroom. I feel the erosion of these things—it feels like the city is actively working against my caregiving efforts. I know that these impacts are amplified in the lives of my neighbours in more precarious social positions.

As a parent, I am intimately acquainted with where funding is cut. As a criminal justice professor, I keep track of where the funding is going instead. The latest proposed city budget will increase the city's funding of police by another $8.3 million, bringing the Winnipeg Police's total budget to $327 million in 2023. Meanwhile, libraries will only receive a tiny $165,000 in additional funding to its $32 million budget. The police funding increase will be 50 times that of libraries. In fact, mill rate support of Winnipeg Police is equivalent to all of public transit, recreation, parks and urban forestry, snow clearing and ice control, libraries, and arts, entertainment, and culture *combined*.

With every budget decision, city councillors make choices that shape what our city looks like and how different people will experience it. The workers at community centers, libraries, on buses—still so friendly and eager to help—are stressed out because there aren't enough of them to meet the growing needs of community members only getting poorer. They are mistreated from all angles: by stressed out neighbours and the city that underpays them and understaffs their workplaces. And the most recent city budget promises that it will only get tighter, more stressful, more austere especially for the poorest among us.

Too often we hear the refrain from city councillors that their hands are tied by provincial decision making—and we need to talk about the province too—but the city absolutely has the power to make our lives better, and we know this because the decisions it has been making have been making our lives worse. Maybe the city can't solve poverty by itself, but it could do a lot more to make the lives of poor people easier.

City budgets are expressions of values—they tell us whose lives matter to the people crafting the budget, often in rank order. Because the stakes of a city budget are life and death, we can measure their impacts by observing whose lives are being shortened and put at risk by the enactment of this value system? We can observe, empirically, that the defunding of community supports and services produces increased violence and vulnerability to violence. In the face of impending personal crises (an abusive partner, unsafe housing, a bad drug trip or a bad batch of drugs, freezing to death, getting heat stroke, having a mental breakdown), people trying to plan for their own safety have fewer and fewer options thanks to city budget decisions: the city has cut the hours of the places people can go, their routes to getting there, the range of people and services they might access. They are left to have a crisis, and to call on crisis response: fire, paramedics, and police—none of whom are equipped or seem to think it's their job to respond to these kinds of crises, even as they are the only ones left to do so.



Poster advertising the International Day Against Police Brutality rally and march outside Winnipeg's Millennium Library, scheduled for March 15, 2023. For more information, click here.

The city is responding to very real safety concerns by shuffling more money into policing and away from the people, places, and services we rely on to get through our everyday lives. For the people who suffer most from this shrinking of the public sphere—those with the least wealth, the most kids, the least family support, the most isolating disabilities—they are not only left unsupported, their preventable crises are increasingly likely to be met with police, whose toolbox is limited at best and often actively damaging. The police officers who respond to these crises don't have to lift a weapon—or even a finger—for their presence to be violent. The violence is in the complete context—the total lack of support, the burdening of individuals with what should be a collective responsibility for care—and the meeting of their problems with punishment and hostility instead.

The struggle over city budgets has been a central site of community organizing efforts to defund the police across Canada and the US—efforts that have escalated since the

uprisings of 2020. In 2022, a social planning council survey of Winnipeggers found that 62 percent of respondents saw poverty reduction as the most effective route to crime reduction (compared to 19 percent who chose "police"). Yet now, any gains we feel like we may have made are being reversed. Scott Gillingham—supposedly a new mayor with new priorities—has revealed, in slightly different language, that he supports community (with his words) but supports police and security with his investments. A shift in language or consciousness about the harms of policing is worth very little if we continue to defund the community and fund the police.

This year's International Day Against Police Brutality is being marked by groups who will gather to reflect on the harms of policing and visions for a better world. We are meeting in front of the Millennium Library—a site where budgetary brutality has crystalized over the past few years. The city has failed to take library safety seriously, ignoring calls from library workers, patrons, and community groups for investment in staffing, community safety hosts, and outreach. Instead, they've responded with more police and security, repelling the people who need library services most urgently.

This year's rally coincides with city budget deliberations, and so we ask: what could we have if we defund the police? We could have properly staffed libraries, transit routes, community centers, and pools. The city could directly provide things that people need to be healthy and safe: housing, safe consumption sites, food, and more. Community support is evidence-based violence prevention, policing is not. Police are bleeding the community dry, and it is costing us all. Nobody should have to tell their kids that they can't access books or pools or any of the services that make our city livable.

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