

Re: Item 8.3.1

Board of Police Commissioners

June 4, 2025



Canadian Mental  
Health Association  
*Mental health for all*

# Restructuring Crisis Response Programs Into Civilian-Led Teams

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# Policing Mental Health

- “Policing mental health” describes the role of law enforcement in responding to crisis situations.
- **Emotional distress is often misinterpreted as dangerous**, especially for Black and Indigenous people reflecting longstanding systemic biases that shape how crises are perceived and responded to:
  - Sanism drives assumptions that people in distress are “irrational, unpredictable, or violent”.
  - Racism drives the over-surveillance and criminalization of racialized communities.
- In reality, people experiencing acute distress or crisis are far more likely to be harmed than to cause harm.

(Black & Calhoun, 2022; Cotton & Coleman, 2010; Hon-Sing Wong, 2022; Koziarski, 2018; Meerai et al., 2016; Shore, 2015; Yee, 2022)

# Understanding Risk:

## CBC's *Deadly Force* Database

- From **2000 to 2017**, at least **461 people** died during police encounters in Canada
  - Of those, **68% (n = 377)** individuals were experiencing **mental health or substance use-related crises**.
- **Black and Indigenous people were significantly overrepresented** in these deaths:
  - *Black individuals: 8.63% of deaths*, but only **2.92%** of the population
  - *Indigenous individuals: 16% of deaths*, but only **4.21%** of the population

(Marcoux & Nicholson, 2018; Singh, 2020)

# What We Did: *Scoping Review*

1

Reviewed **46 sources** including peer-reviewed articles and grey literature:

- Focused on **civilian-led crisis teams**: first-response programs without police involvement
- Included models from **Canada, the United States, Australia, and Norway**

2

Analyzed how models were restructured into civilian-led teams:

- We identified common processes involved in the **development, implementation, and sustainability** of these terms

# What We Found—*Three Core Themes*

Across the 46 sources, we identified three core themes, each with associated sub-themes, that describe key processes and considerations central to restructuring crisis response models into civilian-led teams:



# ► **THEME 1:** *Decentering Police in Crisis Response*

**39 sources** emphasized intentional efforts to remove police from crisis team staffing.

**Police services deliberately ceded authority, either on their own impetus or due to legislative and policy changes.** This was facilitated by:

## *Sub-Theme 1.1:*

### **Collective Awareness (n = 27):**

- Widespread shift in public consciousness about the harms of policing mental health
- Heightened awareness helped surface the need for non-police options
- Brought civilian-led crisis teams into mainstream public and policy discourse

## *Sub-Theme 1.2:*

### **Establishing a Distinct Team Composition (n = 46):**

- **Nurses paired with mental health workers including clinicians and/or peers** (e.g., Kearnes, 2022; Mental Health Weekly, 2022a, b; Yousif 2022, 2023)
- **Mental health workers** (e.g., Reach Out Response Network, 2020; Townsend et al., 2023)
- **Behavioural health crisis workers and licensed clinicians** (e.g., Ryder & Nash, 2024; Towles, 2021)
- **Trained crisis responder volunteers** (e.g., Nonko, 2020; Welborn, 1999)
- **Mental health professionals and peers** (e.g., Campbell, 2022; CityNews Staff, 2023; Fleming, 2021)

## ► **THEME 2:** *Determining Operational Framework*

**32 sources** discussed the development of an operational framework as a key part of restructuring crisis response into civilian-led teams, highlighting dispatch logistics and scope of response as critical components:

### *Sub-Theme 2.1:*

#### **Dispatch Logistics (n = 25):**

- Refers to how teams are accessed (911, 211, or direct lines) and their hours of operation.
- There is no universal standard for how teams are contacted. Services that were more straightforward to access and that advertised widely saw greater uptake.
- Teams' availability ranges from limited hours to 24/7, depending on funding and staffing.

### *Sub-Theme 2.2:*

#### **Defining Response Criteria (n = 37):**

- Refers to the types of situations civilian-led teams are equipped to respond to. Teams are dispatched based on keywords used by callers:
  - ***“mental health/substance use crises”***  
(e.g., Fagan, 2023; Ziafati, 2022)
  - ***“non-violent crises”***  
(e.g., Eagan-Elliott, 2021; PSSP & Shkaabe; Makwa, 2023; van Lier, 2022)
  - ***“non-emergency crises”***  
(e.g., CSG Justice Center, 2024; Kearnes, 2022)

## ► **THEME 3:** *Team Uptake and Sustainability*

**30 sources** indicate social and political will for alternative crises models, along with adequate resourcing, as critical factors in enabling the development, implementation, and sustainability of civilian-led teams.

### *Sub-Theme 3.1:*

#### **Social and Political Will (n = 28):**

- The relationship between social and political will was described as reciprocal across the literature: Community advocacy influences political action and political decisions shape public engagement.
- Restructuring crises services to civilian-led teams is facilitated by police services' openness to cede authority and work in partnership with civilian-led teams to transition crisis response and coordinate service.

### *Sub-Theme 3.2:*

#### **Team Resourcing (n = 35):**

- Partnerships and network-building key to long-term funding (e.g., Ryan, 2024)
- Sustainable teams require dedicated, ongoing funding — not short-term grants (e.g., Irwin & Pearl, 2020)
- Debate exists on funding sources:
  - *Some support reallocating funding from police budgets to crisis teams* (e.g., Towles, 2021)
  - *Others support additive funding models* (e.g., Eagan-Elliott, 2021)



# Key Considerations/Next Steps

- Knowledge translation with an emphasis on engaging community and centering community voices in all decision making
- Understanding Canadian policing perspectives on restructuring to civilian-led teams
- Determining how identified processes are being employed and to what degree in crisis services across the country

# References

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## Open Access Data:

Rowe, Megan; Eaton, Andrew, 2025, "Data for Restructuring Crisis Response Programs as Civilian-Led: A Scoping Review", Borealis. <http://doi.org/10.5683/SP3/oXKHUZ>

## Manuscript Preprint:

Rowe, M. W., Nguyen, A., Lowe, L., Fletcher, K., & Eaton, A. D. (under review). Restructuring crisis response programs as civilian-led: A scoping review. *International Journal of Mental Health Systems*. <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-6674129/v1>



THANK YOU!  
*Questions?*

