

1. For decades, various police services in Ontario have utilized the practice of street checks, sometimes referred to as “carding” (in reference to the cards on which the information is recorded), as a means to gather personal information from citizens who police officers suspect may be involved in criminal activities.
2. This targeted practice, which was used as a crime prevention measure, was widely viewed by the policing community as a valuable intelligence gathering tool in the fight against crime.
3. Over time, street checks evolved into a general, uncontrolled practice that did not have the checks and balances required to ensure its usefulness. The very definition of the term “street checks” became vague. Different police services within Ontario ascribed different police practices to the term and, in many police services, the number of street checks conducted became a measure of officer performance. As a result, police officers were incentivized to engage in poor practices.
4. The degree to which the practice devolved became, at times, quite ridiculous. In order to meet the required quotas, the bar for suspicious behaviour was lowered, and then dropped entirely. I was informed by police stakeholders that some police officers recorded the names and birthdates obtained from tombstones to submit as street checks. Groups of young people on their way to school were stopped and asked for their identifying information, sometimes with only the racialized members of the group being questioned. Young men simply playing basketball were stopped and collectively asked to provide their identifying information.
5. What was once a useful investigative tool became an unfocused practice that was disproportionately applied to the most marginalized communities and against the most disadvantaged people. It was conducted without any measurement of its effectiveness, including its effectiveness as a crime prevention tool. Instead of capturing people involved in criminality, this tool captured and recorded the identity and personal information of hundreds of thousands of individuals who did not have any criminal history. In essence, it amounted to a general documentation of anyone the police felt was suspicious. That subjective suspicion varied greatly with each police officer. To make matters worse, the system had no fair, objective process for individuals to have their street check records removed or nullified.
6. Because of the nature of various police records management systems, as well as the access and exchange of information between police services, many innocent individuals’ reputations and lives were tarnished as a result of this practice.
7. During my consultations, these points were poignantly captured in a submission to the Review by a retired deputy chief of police of one of the 12 largest police services outside of Toronto. He stated the following:

I absolutely despise the manner in

which this once useful tool has evolved. In my day – you know, the neo-Juras-sic period of policing – we had “suspect cards”. These were filled out and entered police files only if officers checked a person who had a criminal record, or was on probation or parole. They were an effective tool in putting a person (who had a documented criminal history) in a particular place at a particular time. Many new investigative leads were generated as a result. The cards were never used for anything else that I was aware of.

I am very disappointed (but not shocked or even surprised) to see traditional police and civic leaders who are stubbornly defending the carding system. This controversy could easily have been virtually eliminated if the police had sat down with the community and talked openly. Perhaps a joint police/community panel could have navigated the issues into a system that would have worked for everyone.

When I was a young officer, we learned a great deal from the actions of more senior officers who we perceived as “good” or “effective models”. We never received formal instruction on effective patrol at Police College or through the police service itself. But we did receive the informal street policing message loud and clear that to be really effective you had to stop everything that moved after midnight and particularly in lower income areas. I think that particular practice is also alive and well.

8. During my consultations, I met with police officers at all levels as well as from small, medium and large police services throughout Ontario. The message delivered to me in those meetings was consistent. The practice of street checks was originally intended to be an investigative tool to capture the information of people who had a criminal record, were on probation or parole, or were suspected of being involved in some type of criminal activity. The majority of the police leaders concurred that this practice was once an effective one. The information obtained in these encounters was useful in tracking individuals involved in criminality as well as placing a person in a particular location at a particular time. As a result, new investigative leads were generated.

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9. However, the practice eventually evolved from targeted inquiries of people suspected of criminal activity to inquiries of people who simply looked suspicious and, eventually, to completely random inquiries. This latter practice is what most people think of when they think of “carding”.