



RELATIONSHIPS
BETWEEN
MONTREAL WOMEN
AND **POLICE FORCES,**
PRIVATE SECURITY GUARDS AND THE STM

WRITING

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This project was carried out in partnership with
Institute F
Passages
Women of the world in Côte-des-Neiges
League of Rights and Freedoms
Hoodstock
Support Network for Single and Homeless People of Montreal (RAPSIM)

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THE STM

A REPORT ON RESULTS FROM THE FIRST YEAR OF RESEARCH

A PROJECT BY THE TABLE DES GROUPES DE FEMMES DE MONTRÉAL

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TERRITORIAL ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

It is essential that we fully recognize indigenous territories by supporting their ongoing struggles for justice and equity. Indigenous peoples have been the custodians of these lands for millennia, preserving their cultures, traditions and ancestral wisdom. The challenges they face such as defending their territorial rights, protecting the environment and fighting discrimination, are crucial challenges for our society as a whole. By standing alongside these communities in their quest for justice and acknowledging past wrongs, we strengthen our own social fabric and work together for a more equitable future that respects diversity.

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WHY THIS PROJECT ?

This project was developed by the Table des groupes de femmes de Montréal (TGFM) after concerns were shared by member groups and in order to determine our organization's position concerning certain political issues. The project is called *Feminist Perspectives on Profiling and Police Discrimination*. The project's goal is to shine a light on Montreal women's lived experience and the discrimination they have faced from police services, private security guards and Société de transport de Montréal (STM) constables, and to take concrete action to respond to the needs expressed by these women. As the TGFM uses an intersectional (Hill Collins et Bilge, 2016) and antiracist approach (Maynard, 2017), this study is focused on profiling experienced by women at the intersection of oppressions.

In general, issues around racial, social and political profiling and discrimination are well-documented, they are not always approached from an intersectional feminist viewpoint.. Montreal-specific data on these issues is also less available, other than the research performed by Anne-Marie Livingstone (Livingstone *et al.*, 2020) and reports by Victor Armony, Mariam Hassaoui and Massimiliano Mulone (Armony *et al.*, 2019).

The *Women for the Right to the City* project, which began in 2019, allowed us to develop a platform of feminist demands that contributed to the development of this new project¹. The platform explains what is necessary for a city that is truly accessible and safe for all.

Here are some of the needs shared in the platform:

- Fight racial and social profiling (such as verifying people's legal status without just cause);
- Rely on the presence of community organizations for cohabitation in public spaces;
- Denounce practices that discriminate against sex workers, people experiencing homelessness and those who are represent sexual and/or gender diversity.

The *Feminist Perspectives on Profiling and Police Discrimination* project is also part of a larger context. There is a need to reflect, research and find solutions to the issues around women's safety that were exacerbated due to the health measures in place in 2020 and 2021.

First of all, women have lost their trust in the police/justice system, which is incapable of eliminating the violence they experience. Lockdown measures led to a rise in requests for help in domestic violence situations (SCF, 2020). Anonymous accusations of sexual assault and misconduct on social media platforms have showed how apprehensive women, particularly Indigenous and racialized women, are of the systems in place (Souffrant, 2020).

The lack of services and the growing reliance on police and security forces is also a threat to the safety of the homeless and other marginalized people. Health measures during the pandemic led to increased surveillance of public

spaces and ticketing for those who did not comply with measures in place (Bellot *et al.*, 2022). This phenomenon also led to security forces in community services, a practice that does not fit the needs of women who are experiencing homelessness (Partenariat pour la prévention de l'itinérance des femmes, 2019). This was already a concern prior to the pandemic. According to the 2019 report by Armony, Hassaoui and Mulone, Indigenous women are 11 times more likely to be stopped by police than white women.

The third factor leading us to develop this project was the need for the TGFM to reflect more deeply on current issues such as defunding the police, or, in other words, the redistribution of funds allocated for police to community resources, as well as the discrimination women experienced from police forces and security forces. The City of Montreal's 2020 prebudget consultations (Gelper, 2020) saw community groups call for funds allocated to police to be reduced. These groups suggested alternatives to rethink public safety in order to combat issues of racial and social profiling, among other issues.

We at the TGFM need to continue these discussions. Throughout this report, we will share suggestions from the people we met and/or who responded to our survey.

STEERING COMMITTEE

In the first phase of the project, we created a steering committee with members from six organizations: three member organizations of the TGFM ([Passages](#), [L'Institut E](#) and [Femmes du monde à Côte-des-Neiges](#)) and three allied groups ([the Ligue des droits et libertés](#), [RAPSIM](#) and [Hoodstock](#)). Together, we established data-collecting methods: an online survey and discussion groups.

The committee included two TGFM employees: project manager Laura Carli and researcher Liza Hammar.

Considering the needs of those who have experienced a traumatic event

Please note that this report covers subjects that can be particularly difficult for certain people, specially for those who have experienced traumatic events. We recognize the possibility that discussing interactions with police officers may lead these people to remember painful experiences or experience strong emotions. That's why we encourage that this report be read attentively and carefully, respecting participants' varied experiences and perspectives. We also want to remind readers that the goal of our study is to contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationship between law enforcement and Montreal women, in order to develop actions to fully ensure safety for all women. Our hope is that this work will inspire constructive discussions and actions which will promote more positive and inclusive interactions between women and the police in the future.

1 The platform can be downloaded here: <https://www.tgfm.org/fr/nos-publications/116>

METHODOLOGY

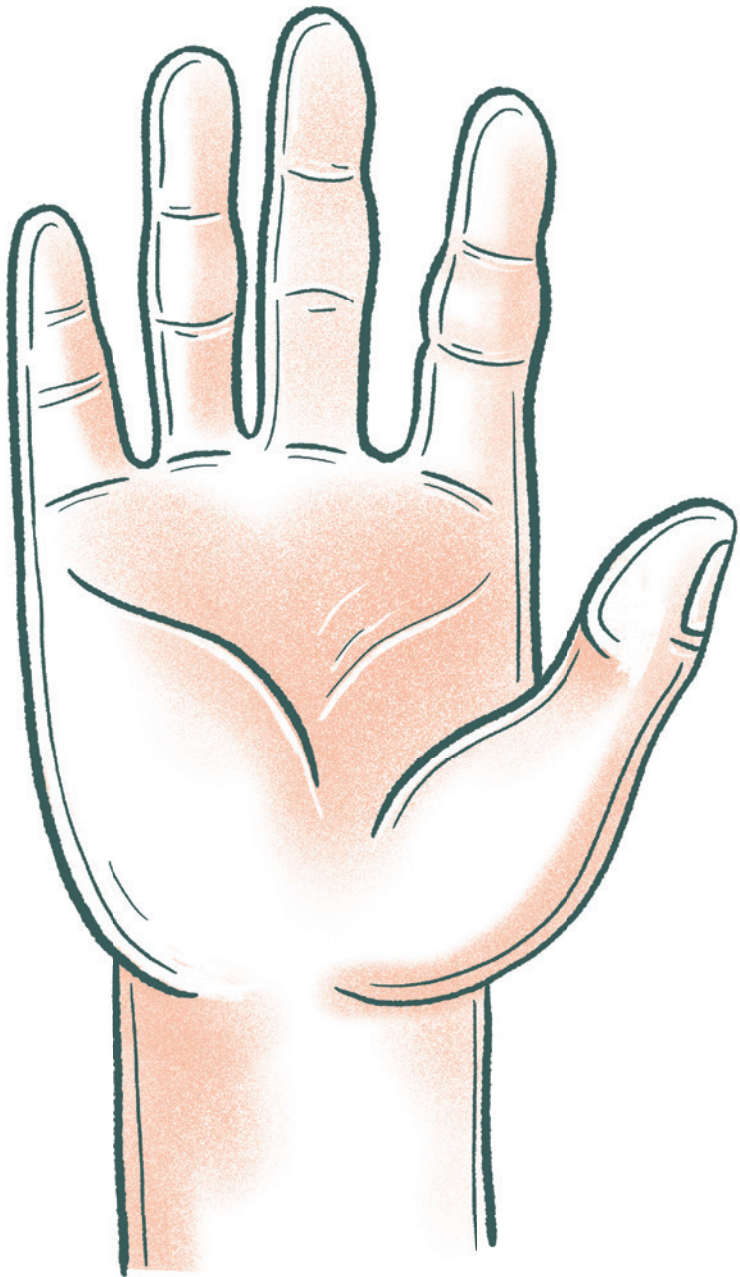
In order to collect data explaining the relationships between women and police forces, private security forces and the Société de transport de Montréal (STM) on the island of Montreal, we did the following:

- 1) Created a bibliographic database including scientific articles, news articles, reports, books, podcasts and videos;
- 2) Created and shared an online survey open between September and December 2022, which was also available in English, Spanish and Arabic. In order to reach more women at the intersection of lived oppressions, paper surveys were also distributed. Member organizations of the TGFM and the Montreal-Nord Supers voisines ("Super Neighbours") (Hoodstock) were an enormous help in finding survey participants in their boroughs.
- 3) Based on what we read in the existing literature, four discussion groups were formed with women at the intersection of different forms of oppression; women who are the most likely to be targeted by police and private security forces.

ANALYSIS

To analyze responses to the online survey, we used a quantitative analysis method. This method works as follows:

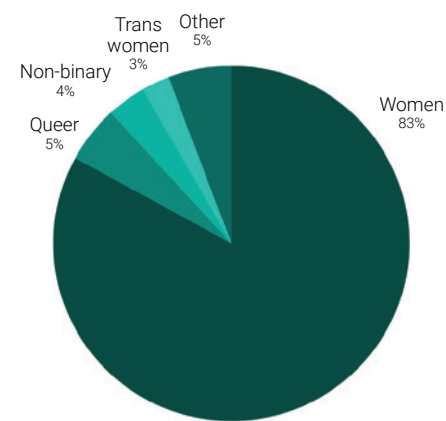
- Responses in all languages are compiled in one table;
- A variable composed of a number and a name was assigned to each question of the survey;
- A numeric variable was assigned to each proposed response;
- Each question and response was replaced by a numeric variable;
- A drop-down menu was inserted for each multiple choice question;
- Variables chosen based on assumptions were cross-compared to arrive at conclusions.



ONLINE SURVEY RESULTS

PARTICIPANT PROFILES

GENDER

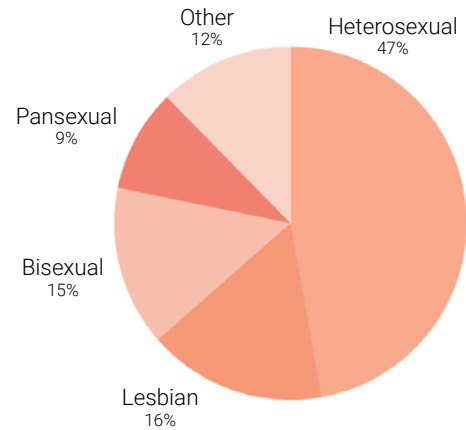
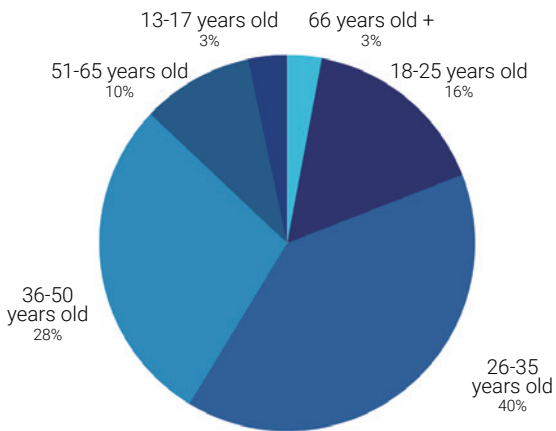


Out of 540 participants, 448 identified as women. To better reach the population we were interested in, we said that the survey was for anyone who identifies as a woman or who is perceived to be a woman, particularly by police, private security or STM constables. As a result, we had 28 queer people, 19 non-binary people, 14 trans women and people with a variety of other gender identities fill out the survey as well. We have only shared data on the gender identities which were identified most often, but there were even more options to choose from: Two-Spirit, agender, trans man, etc.

The graphic below only shows the responses which were chosen most often by participants.

AGE

Participants' ages ranged from 26-35 years old (214 participants) and from 36-50 years old (153 participants).



SEXUAL ORIENTATION

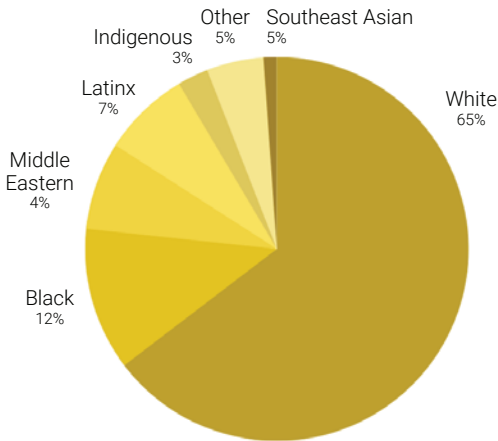
The most common responses were: heterosexual (286 participants), lesbian (99 participants) and bisexual (89 participants). As in the gender identity section, participants were able to choose from a wide range of responses; we are only sharing the most common ones.

IDENTIFICATION

Considering that we were particularly interested in issues related to racial profiling, we had long discussions on how to ask questions related to the identity of participants and how they were perceived by police officers.

Over the past two years, the Canadian government has been consulting on a review of the Employment Equity Act. The main aim of this consultation was to replace the term "visible minority", in order to find a terminology that would not invisibilize people by grouping them under the same category. To do this, the government drew on the work done by the Federal Anti-Racism Secretariat which had drawn up a list to describe "ethnic and cultural origins" in their own terms.

We understand that documents provided by the government are not representative enough of the realities faced by marginalized people or by those with atypical backgrounds, as their goal is to establish closed, easily quantifiable categories. We also know that terms evolve, and that self-identification is a constantly evolving process requiring more than a one-word description. However, in our opinion, the Federal Anti-Racism Secretariat's documentation currently offers the best categorization options².



We weren't completely comfortable with these terms, but found the list of choices to be quite extensive. In addition, we included the option "other" and the possibility of choosing more than one identification – an option that was used by many participants.

² To consult the terms proposed, see: <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/corporate/portfolio/labour/programs/employment-equity/reports/act-review-federal-antiracism-secretariat-demographic-list-annex-1.html>

PERCEPTION OF POLICE FORCES, PRIVATE SECURITY FORCES AND THE STM

PERCEPTION OF POLICE OFFICERS

We started the survey with the following question: "In general, when you think of Montreal police officers, are your feelings (...)" Five possible answers were available. Looking at the table below, a majority of women said their feelings towards Montreal police forces were "negative" (164 responses) or "very negative" (157 responses). Over half of those who answered the question (322 participants) expressed negative or very negative feelings, compared to 219 others whose answers ranged from "neutral" to "very positive".



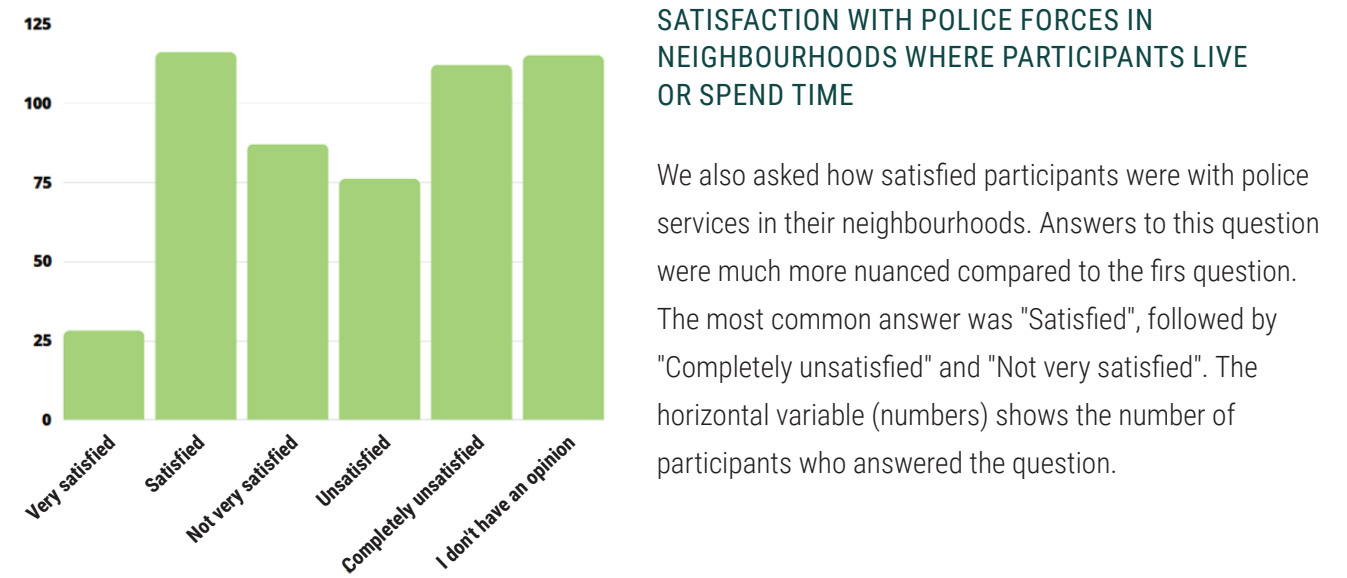
Here are some of the other significant findings from cross-comparing data from the online survey:

- Only 59 white women said that they felt positive or very positive about the Montreal police, compared to 247 white women who had negative or very negative feelings.
- Only 140 white women had received acceptable or respectful and courteous treatment from police officers.

The sociodemographic profile of participants shows that the majority of women who filled out the survey identified as white. If we consider that racial profiling* is one of the issues that has been most often denounced by scholars and activists in the last decade, the above finding shows that difficult relationships with police are widespread, as shown by the answers from women who do not experience racism. Indeed, some participants said that their whiteness allowed them to navigate certain situations more easily and avoid being stopped by law enforcement without cause.

In contrast, the second finding shows that only 140 white women had received acceptable or respectful and courteous treatment from police officers. This data shows that we cannot prove that white women are not always guaranteed better treatment from police compared to racialized women.

On racial profiling, see for example Anne-Marie Livingstone, Marie Meudec and Rhita Harim, 2020, "Le profilage racial à Montréal, effets des politiques et des pratiques organisationnelles", *Nouvelles pratiques sociales*, 31(2): 126-44, <https://doi.org/10.7202/1076648ar> where the researchers write: "Canadian studies show that police stop rates are systematically higher for racialized people, without any correlation with offence or crime rates. In fact, racialized people are more often stopped for unfounded and weak reasons. In Montreal, members of the Black, Indigenous and Arab communities are disproportionately stopped and punished. According to Armony et al. (2019), the chances of a Black, Indigenous or Arab person being stopped in Montreal in 2017, compared to a white person, are 3.9, 5.8, and 2.3 times higher, respectively. Black youth aged 15 to 34 are the group most disproportionately stopped, ranging from 4.4 to 5.3 times more likely to be stopped than white youth of the same age. Indigenous women are the only ones to be stopped more than men, being stopped 11 times more often than white women (Armony et al., 2019)."



SATISFACTION WITH POLICE FORCES IN NEIGHBOURHOODS WHERE PARTICIPANTS LIVE OR SPEND TIME

We also asked how satisfied participants were with police services in their neighbourhoods. Answers to this question were much more nuanced compared to the first question. The most common answer was "Satisfied", followed by "Completely unsatisfied" and "Not very satisfied". The horizontal variable (numbers) shows the number of participants who answered the question.

Comparison of the following variables: "Postal code", "General feelings about the police" and "Satisfaction with police forces in the neighbourhood where I live or spend time"

The survey asked participants to identify the postal code where they lived or spent the most time. When analyzing answers, we used this variable (postal code) to determine the following:

- Where participants came from;
- The closest police stations to the neighbourhood identified;
- General feelings about the police;
- Satisfaction with police services in the neighbourhood identified.

Comparing these variables resulted in the following:

POSTAL CODE AND LOCAL POLICE STATION* (PDQ)	NUMBER OF ANSWERS**	GENERAL FEELINGS ABOUT THE POLICE	SATISFACTION WITH NEIGHBOURHOOD POLICE SERVICES
H1G, Montréal-Nord, PDQ39	61 participants	Positive to neutral	Not very satisfied
H1H, Montréal-Nord, PDQ30	25 participants	Positive to neutral	Not very satisfied
H1W, Mercier–Hochelaga-Maisonneuve, PDQ23	25 participants	Negative to very negative	Extremely unsatisfied (Average 4.6)
H2G, Rosemont–La Petite-Patrie, PDQ35	20 participants	Negative	Unsatisfied to very unsatisfied
H2S, Rosemont–La Petite-Patrie (Petite-Italie, Mile-Ex), PDQ35	18 participants	Negative	More unsatisfied

* Neighbourhood police stations for each postal code were found on the following site: <https://spvm.qc.ca/fr/PDQ>

** We only used neighbourhoods that had a significant number of responses.

Some participants offered details on how ineffective officers in the Rosemont–La Petite-Patrie borough were:

“In 2016, I was harassed and sexually assaulted by my housemate in Rosemont, and the local police station, #35, asked what clothes I was wearing when I was assaulted.” [The police officers] strongly discouraged me from filing a report, so I didn’t.”

“In 2018, in Rosemont, police officers.” This only happened once. My ex hit me and the neighbours were worried, so they called the police. I was able to escape with some things I had thrown into my backpack. I had made it to the next corner when they arrived. My ex was running after me and yelling at me to come back. The police picked me up in their car. They told me that if I didn’t say anything, I would be automatically considered guilty of intimate partner violence in this situation. My ex was standing outside and told his side of the story. They gave him a card with a number he could call if he needed their help again. Since I still wasn’t saying anything, they took my contact information and told me they would get in touch with me soon to start the investigation. They took me back home and I never heard from them again. This is just one example among many.”

While these stories show that the inefficiency and insensitivity of officers working in the Rosemont–La Petite-Patrie borough are well-known, we can also see other issues such as the lack of protection in a case of physical aggression and the feelings of being powerless and ignored when sharing facts with the police.

Comparison between two variables: identifying as “black” and sharing an interaction with police forces and private security guards

While the majority of survey participants identified as white, we wanted to know more about what Black women face in Montreal, which has not been widely documented. This was one of the factors that led us to develop this project. Some participants described situations similar to what has already been documented elsewhere in Canada and in the United States:

“When I go to concerts or festivals, or when I’m at the entrance to a nightclub, there are people who have to inspect my bags or who need to pat me down. I’ve had more than 10 of these interactions, but I can’t say if it’s happened once a month.”

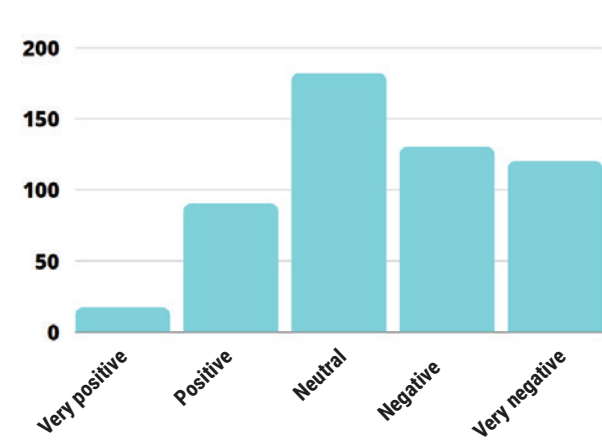
“I was waiting for the bus with my (Black) friends and they told us to leave and stop loitering”.

“In 2021, I was driving, I was stopped and asked for identification, for no reason, on Henri-Bourassa Boulevard.”

These stories show that police officers and private security guards are suspicious, are engaged in strict surveillance and are restricting access to public space.

PERCEPTION OF PRIVATE SECURITY GUARDS

Concerning feelings towards private security guards, in answers to the question “Overall, when you think of private security guards, do you generally feel...” we noticed a trend of responses that said “neutral”, with “negative” and “very negative” in second and third place, respectively. This differs a bit from the general perception of police forces that we noticed earlier in the survey.



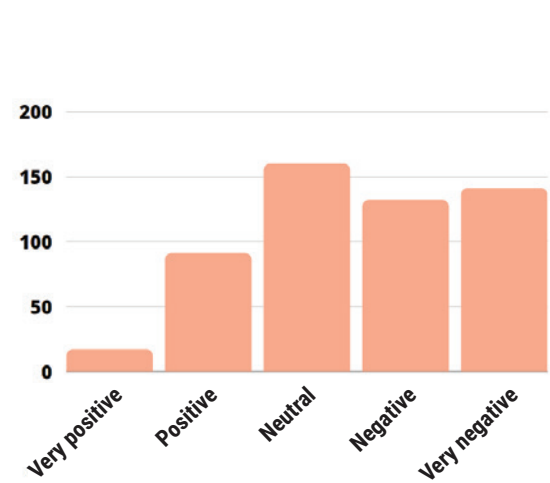
Here are some of the stories participants shared with us:

" 2022, cégep, Gardaworld (private security agency). Guards regularly interfered with the student association by entering the association's offices (even though they didn't have the right) to harass students. "

"Two interactions with security services come to mind: 1) information requests (particularly from Garda at the university): this happened several

times, respectfully and without issue, between 2014 and 2020; 2) During the student protests from 2012 to 2015, there were violent confrontations. During a peaceful protest in 2015, everyone was calmly seated on the floor. The SPVM (Montreal police) started moving towards us, so we had to back up. I lost my shoe while we were moving. It was between the crowd and the police officers. I tried to move towards it and I signalled to the police officer in front of me that I only wanted my shoe back. The police officer moved towards the shoe, took it and threw it behind the police lines. Then they violently attacked us."

PERCEPTION OF SOCIÉTÉ DE TRANSPORT DE MONTRÉAL (STM) CONSTABLES



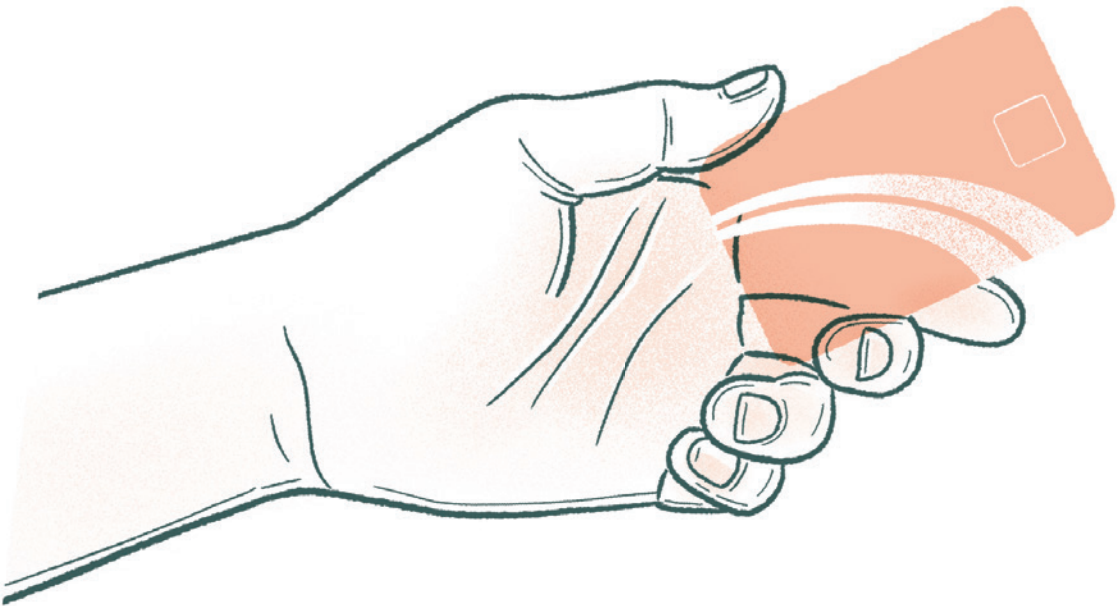
A similar trend can be seen regarding Société de transport de Montréal (STM) constables. For the question “In general, when you think of STM constables, are your feelings (...)”, participants most commonly answered “neutral”, for instance:

"Several years ago, there were STM agents checking tickets on the bus. They were also in the metro." - a participant's story shared in the online survey.

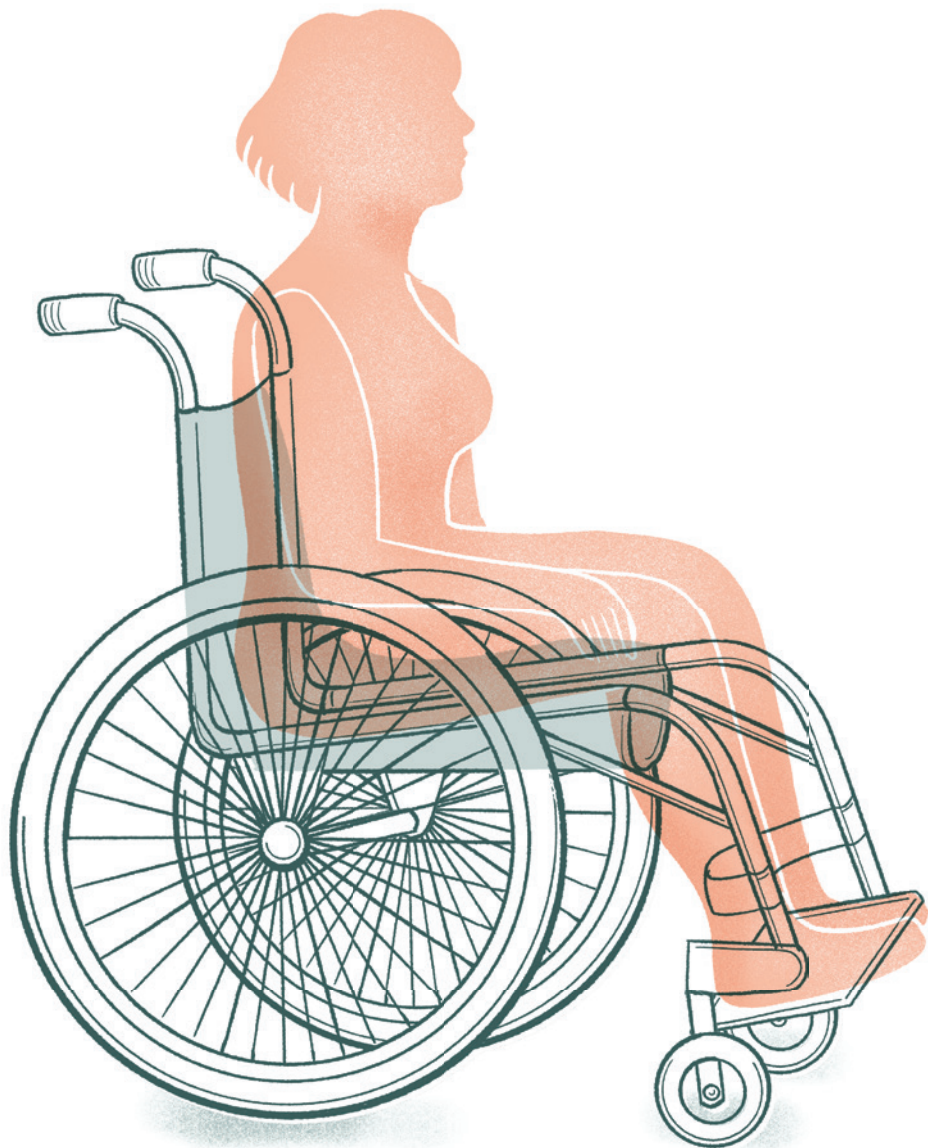
The second and third most common responses were “negative” and “very negative”. “Positive” and “very positive” feelings were in 4th and 5th place among responses, but no participants shared why their feelings were more positive.

"I asked a security guard for directions (which I actually needed) right AFTER he had spoken to a man experiencing homelessness who had a beer can. He didn't give me correct directions and when I saw him again to tell him that it wasn't the right way, he was short with me and said that I shouldn't have bothered him WHILE he was dealing with someone else. STM agent, 2019." - a participant's story shared in the online survey.

"During covid, I was one of the STM agents who performed "random" checks and searches. Each group I was a part of was made up of people who looked "alternative" - punks, BIPOC³, visibly queer, etc. None of the white middle-class people were treated this way. STM agents intimidate passengers, causing discomfort and hostility for them by looking at them in an aggressive way, by putting on gloves as a preventative measure, by not wearing masks when covid was at its strongest or by practicing social distancing. I have seen police officers, STM agents and security guards make facial expressions ofexaggerated disgust after being near people experiencing homelessness, as well as wiping their hands excessively - especially considering that they didn't need to touch anyone ?? The threat of power imbalances and what happens as a result happens everywhere, all the time because cops are everywhere, all the time." - a participant's story shared in the online survey.



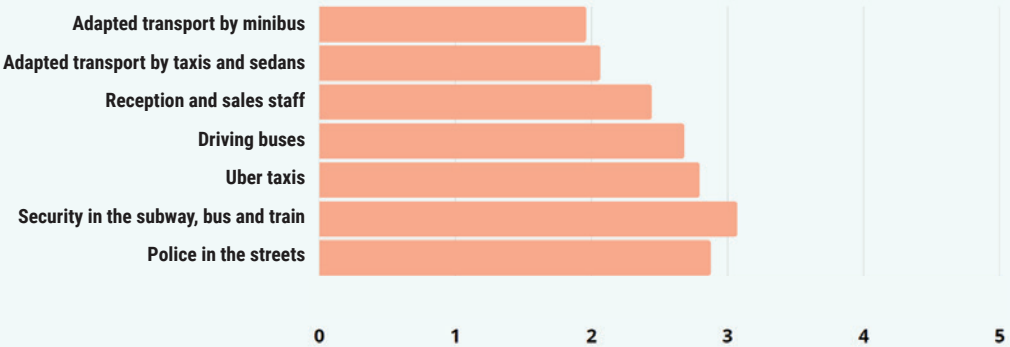
3 BIPOC, Black, Indigenous and People Of Colour (in English) or PANDC (in French) refers to people who are Black, Indigenous and people of colour.



WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES

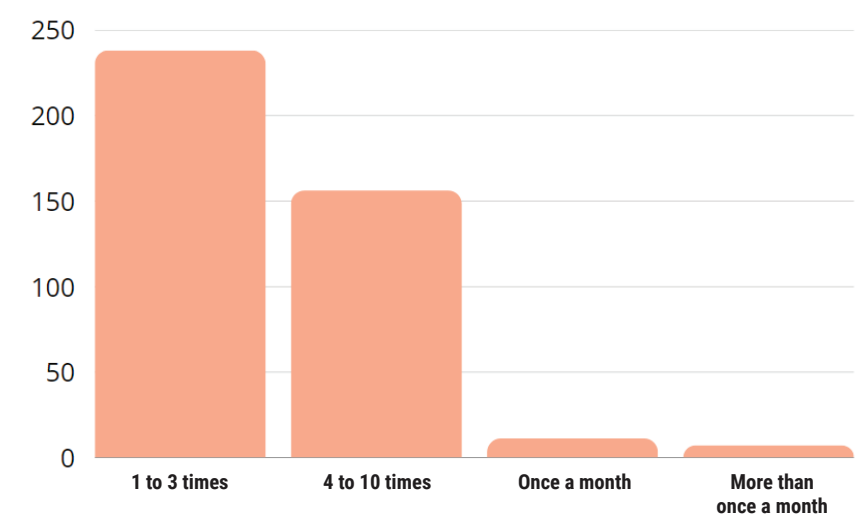
When this report was being written, another TGFM project called For safer, more inclusive and more sustainable mobility, is being developed to better document the experiences of women with disabilities in public spaces. This research is performed through logbooks, discussion groups and a survey of 147 women with disabilities. The data gathered has not yet been published, but there are three recurring subjects:

- The first subject looks at the question of **paying for adapted transit**. Since adapted transit vehicles do not all have ticket readers, riders can only use monthly passes, pay cash or use a one-trip ticket. These payment methods are not sufficient: monthly passes are expensive, and always having exact change or a one-trip ticket is a challenge for disabled riders. Some women take the risk of using 10-ticket passes, but if they are stopped by STM constables, they will have to pay a fine. In 2017, Linda Gauthier, an activist with the Regroupement des activistes pour l’inclusion au Québec (RAPLIQ), attempted to prove in municipal court that this inability to pay for public transit like the rest of the population was a form of discrimination. Unfortunately, she lost her case.
- The second subject is the **unequal treatment provide by the STM as an authority**. In order to use adapted transit, women need to reserve trips in advance. If a trip is cancelled less than two hours before departure, it is considered a late cancellation and is noted in the user’s file. If women cancel multiple trips, they will receive a letter telling them that if they continue these late cancellations, they will lose access to adapted transit. Women feel that the reasons they are cancelling are not taken into consideration. Women might have to cancel trips because a meeting is ending earlier or later than expected, because they’ve changed their plans, or because the people they planned to see have COVID symptoms. Receiving these letters from the STM is a shock and contributes to the fear of losing this essential service, particularly in winter, when ice and snow on sidewalks make it harder to travel.
- The third subject concerns how **STM staff contribute to feelings of safety and to accessibility during travel**. Women responding to this survey were asked to rate the attitudes and behaviour of STM staff on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 representing security and caring and 5 representing danger and inaccessibility. As the graphic below shows, adapted transit drivers are considered to have the most caring and safest attitudes and behaviour. On the other hand, security staff in the metro and on busses and trains, like police in general, are considered to represent danger and a lack of security.



INTERACTIONS WITH MONTREAL POLICE OFFICERS

A total of 412 people out of 540 said that they had interacted with police officers in Montreal. The graphic below shows how many interactions were reported:



QUALITY OF INTERACTIONS BASED ON THE NUMBER OF INTERACTIONS

In addition to the number of interactions, we asked participants to tell us how their interactions with police were. These responses were compared with the number of interactions for the following result:

NUMBER OF INTERACTIONS WITH POLICE OFFICERS	QUALITY OF INTERACTIONS
1 to 3 interactions	More or less neutral
4 to 10 interactions	Neutral but more negative
Once per month	More or less neutral
A few or several times per month	Negative

Comparing data does not show a direct correlation between the number of interactions and the quality of those interactions. According to these results, it is not possible to say that the number of interactions with police necessarily leads to lower-quality interactions. However, there were no cases where participants who had had more than one interaction with police said that those experiences were positive or very positive.

When it comes to people who have had between 1 and 3 interactions with police services, particularly those who had called the police for help, we asked about their opinion of the quality of those interactions. Here are our findings:

- 18 people said that police officers showed respect and courtesy;
- 50 people said that police officers behaved appropriately;
- 55 people said that police officers were disrespectful towards them;
- 64 people said that they did not feel either listened to or understood by the police officers;
- 30 people chose the option “I don’t know/this doesn’t apply to me”.

259 people said they had interacted with private security guards:

- 139 people said they had interacted 1 to 3 times
- 77 people said they had interacted 4 to 10 times
- 21 people said they interacted around once per month
- 22 people said they interacted a few or several times per month

IN PARTICIPANTS’ WORDS

We asked those who had interacted with police officers or with private security guards to share details with us. We received dozens of pages of stories! Due to the number of stories we received and the limited time we had to finish this project, we had to make the difficult decision to only share the issues named most frequently by participants.

To better understand the issues faced by women in Montreal, we organized their stories according to the issues described. Here are a few examples:

Queerphobia

"I was carded while driving in 2018 because the car was registered under my (female) name but the police didn't think I looked like a woman. This has happened to at least two other people I know who are gender-diverse (a cisgender woman who doesn't follow female gender stereotypes and a non-binary person)."

Racial profiling

"In 2019, we saw a homeless Indigenous person who was lying on the floor of the train, unconscious (intoxicated). We called the STM security staff, who got the person out of the train by pushing them on the ground and laughing. I couldn't believe it. Police officers, whether they work for the public or for a private company, often have racist, classist and even sexist biases. We should always have social workers available. That would prevent situations like this from happening."

Political profiling

“There’s a heavy police presence at a lot of different protests: the worst is always during protests to support Indigenous people. I remember during one protest in support of the Wet’suwet’en in NDG (spring 2021), the police wouldn’t let us leave the protest and bullied the protesters using their shields and their batons.” “I never feel safe during protests because of the police presence.”

“I’m an environmentalist activist. During big demonstrations for the climate or the Earth, there are no problems... But during protests against specific projects, they use other measures and questioning. There is police profiling, too, if we show something anticapitalistic or against repression.”

Gender profiling (sexism)

"The first time I reported, it was as though I wasn’t taken seriously. I was made to feel guilty. So, when I experienced harassment again, I never reported it. Why would I, anyway? We know that female victims of aggression are never taken seriously and that there is no justice."

Social profiling

“I think the question “how many times” should take different periods of a person’s life into account. I had repeated contact every day during a more unstable period of my life, starting in 2012. I experienced social profiling over more than three years, to the point where I no longer felt that I had the right to occupy public space. These extremely negative interactions, and the repeated tickets for behaviours as ridiculous as putting my feet on a bench, affected my self-esteem and my ways of acting in groups.

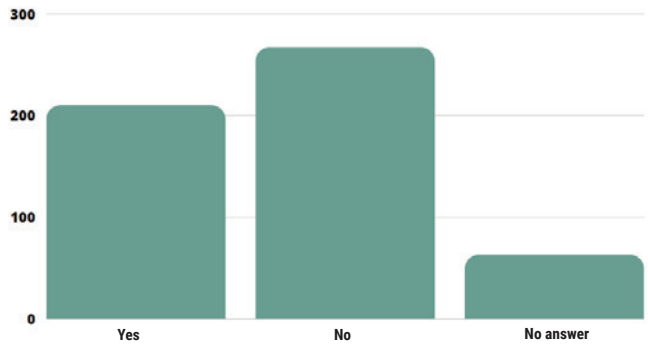
Positive experiences

Sharing positive experiences shines a light on individual perspectives regarding certain police officers, but they are accompanied by a negative dimension concerning the institution as a whole, as this story shows:

“I’ve had good experiences with female police officers who participate in community round tables (socio-community officers). They show a desire to work together - with the people concerned - to find solutions. But they are working at cross-purposes because it isn’t part of the organizational culture. We can see that the institution doesn’t take their “little projects”, which focus on awareness and contact with citizens , seriously...the institution only does that to keep up appearances...”

RIGHTS AND THE DUTY TO PROTECT

In this section of the survey, we asked for participants to talk about situations they experienced when they could have needed police intervention but did not get help from the police. Here are the conclusions drawn from their responses.



To answer the question *“Have you experienced one or more situations when you would have needed to call the Montreal police, but you did not contact them?”*, over 210 people said that they had felt the need for police services without having called for help. However, 267 people did not report feeling such a need in this particular context, while around 63 people did not respond to the question.

We then took the reasons that participants didn’t call the police, based on the concerns mentioned most often:

- To avoid additional violence
- Police seen as useless
- Lack of confidence in police
- Political or ideological reasons
- Fear of not being believed or listened to
- Overly long procedures

Interaction between two variables: "Black" Identification and Reason for Not Calling the Police (even in case of need)

In the case of black women, they said they were afraid to call the police because: it might put them in danger; the situation could escalate; or they might not to be believed when they testify.

Here are a few examples:

“The first time I reported, it was as though I wasn’t taken seriously. I was made to feel guilty. So, when I experienced harassment again, I never reported it. Why would I, anyway? We know that female victims of aggression are never taken seriously and that there is no justice.

“In 2021, in Ville Saint-Laurent, I had an argument with my boyfriend at the time (now my ex). He made death threats and I screamed so loudly that my neighbours called the police...the police officers arrived 2 days later. I might have been dead if I hadn’t been able to escape.”

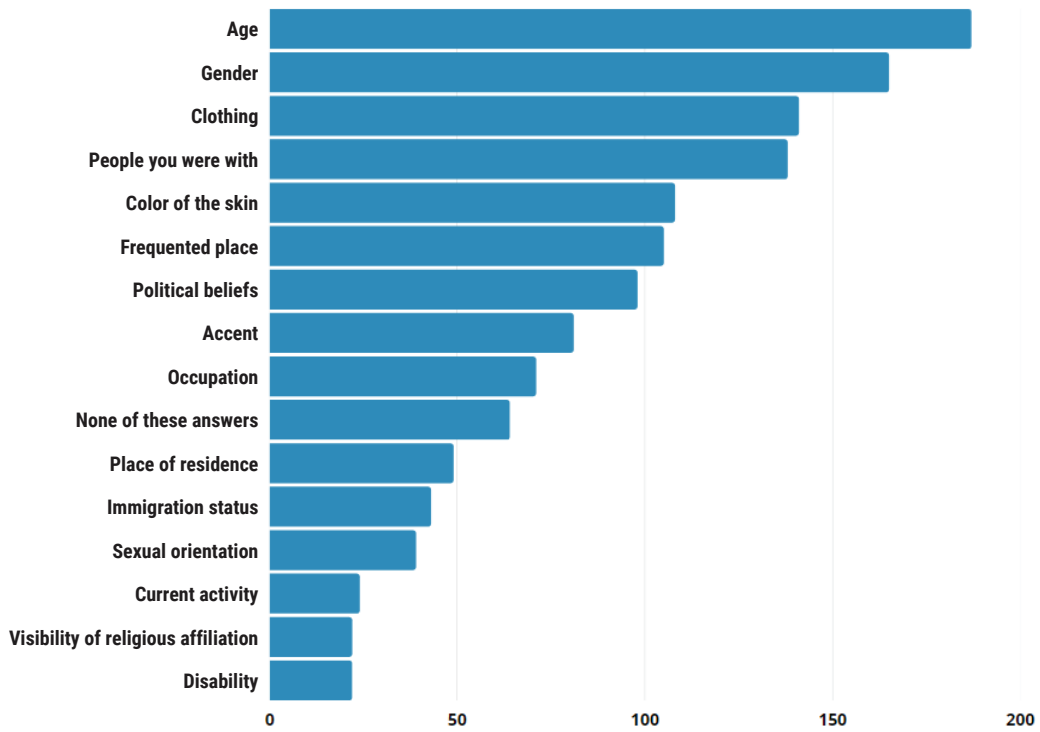
“A police officer was extremely dehumanizing towards me and was verbally violent. He humiliated me this summer while I was experiencing psychological distress. This resulted in more trauma. Now, I dread interacting with the police because I had contacted them in the first place.”

FACTORS THAT AFFECTED INTERACTIONS WITH POLICE OFFICERS

In the survey, we asked about factors that might influence interactions between women and police officers by asking the question in a neutral way to avoid any value judgments, whether positive or negative, on our part.

We examined variables such as skin colour, socio-economic context (activities, employment, etc., gender, and age, among other factors, to understand their impact on these interactions. We saw that the influence of skin colour on police interactions can vary. For instance, some people said that being middle-aged or elderly allowed them to go unnoticed. The same situation occurred with regards to skin colour: some participants said that being perceived as a white woman allowed them to better navigate a situation where there was police presence. This question tried to show how the same factor could lead to different results.

The following table shows which factors participants mentioned most often as having an impact on their interactions with a police officer.



Participants were able to choose the option “other” and provide additional examples of influencing factors. They also shared more details on the answers they chose. Here are a few examples:

“My mental health status and my social class”

“My last name”

“Often, the fact that I am white, older now and being experienced in navigating certain interactions had an effect (I’m called “madame” while a friend with me is arrested) Other times, being visibly queer,

anticapitalist or antiracist leads to violence on their part.”

“I have to say that all of these factors have protected me during these interactions, because I look like a middle-class white woman and these interactions often occur in privileged institutions. That’s why I allow myself to fight back against the police brutality I witness.”

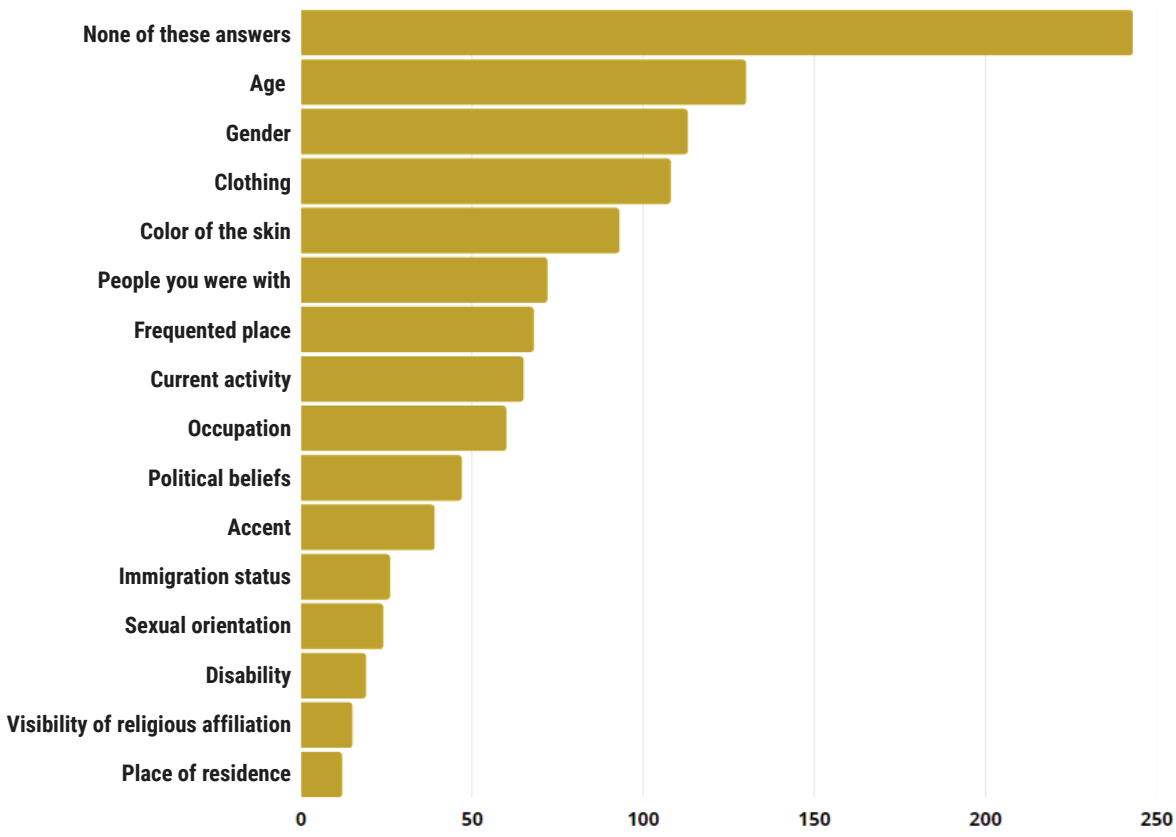
“These factors make my interactions easier. You seem to be implying that these influences might be bad or lead to discrimination. On the contrary, I feel that I have been privileged by the factors I checked off.”

“My disabilities: C-PTSD, dyslexia and ADHD have all had an impact on how I am treated by the SPVM.”

“I am Anglophone, so they often react with frustration and become more impolite and more aggressive.”

FACTORS THAT AFFECTED INTERACTIONS WITH PRIVATE SECURITY GUARDS

Concerning factors which have influenced interactions with private security guards, we noticed some correlation with the factors mentioned in the previous section. The graphic below shows the results.



POLITICAL PROFILING

DEFINITION

According to the Ligue des droits et libertés (2023), political profiling is defined as “any action made by one or more people in a position of authority against a person or group of people for reasons of safety, security or public protection, which was made because of factors such as political opinion, political convictions, belonging to a political group or doing political activities, without any true motive or reasonable suspicion, and which results in a person being seen or treated differently.”

FIGURES

Out of 413 people surveyed who had interacted with the police, 98 (approximately 1/4) indicated that their “political convictions” had influenced their interactions.

Thirty qualitative experiences mention situations of profiling or political repression, mainly during protests (as part of the student movement, defending Indigenous rights, or as part of antiracist, anticapitalist or environmentalist protests).

STORIES

Analyzing the data gathered throughout our study, we noticed a number of instances of police profiling based on political beliefs, particularly in the stories participants shared.

As one participant pointed out: *“There’s a heavy police presence at a lot of different protests: the worst is always during protests to support Indigenous people. I remember during one protest in support of the Wet’suwet’en in NDG (spring 2021), the police wouldn’t let us leave the protest and bullied the protesters using their shields and their batons. I never feel safe during protests because of the police presence.”*

As an environmentalist activist says, *“During big demonstrations for the climate or the Earth, there are no problems... But during protests against a specific project, they use other measures and questioning. There is police profiling, too, if we show something anticapitalist or against repression.”*

These stories are interesting in that they reveal specific repression which is not related to the gender of those profiled, but rather their political beliefs.

This is confirmed by existing literature; in a study of female protesters in Quebec and their relationship with the police, researchers Maude Pérusse-Roy and Massimiliano Mulone note: “several participants feel their gender does not make a difference in their physical interactions with the police. According to their experiences and impressions, it seems that, when female protesters found themselves in a group where there was a police intervention, gender tends to disappear and police behaviour will not differ between male and female protesters. More accurately, female protesters all seem to think that police forces’ decisions to intervene are influenced mainly by political beliefs.” (Pérusse-Roy et Mulone, 2020, p.251).

Women and people perceived to be women are not only profiled because they are women, but also because of their ideas and the social projects they believe in.

That said, not all women are profiled and politically reprimanded in the same way. One story from our study describes a situation specific to disabled people: *“In 2012, I was pinned to the ground even though I wasn’t even participating in the protest. I am deaf in one ear, so I never heard them coming”*. This story shows how profiling and political repression can, even if they are based on the repression of controversial ideas, take different forms and have different impacts depending on the identities and living conditions of the person experiencing them.

This is also backed up in existing literature. Researchers Maude Pérusse-Roy and Massimiliano Mulone cite a study by Francis Dupuis-Déri (2009) and affirm that “repression of a sexual nature (jokes, suggestive remarks, insults, humiliating comments and touching of a sexual nature)” exists (Pérusse-Roy and Mulone, 2020, p.242) and that how this repression is experienced depends on gender, race, whether or not the person is homeless, etc.



WHAT THE LITERATURE ALLOWS US TO UNDERSTAND

In the study cited above, the researchers point to repression which is specific to women, which also takes other factors of oppression such as racism and ableism into consideration. They develop these elements by analyzing the different profiles of female protesters. They say that “the most dedicated female protesters, who are more confrontational, were verbally assaulted about their gender identity as well as being physically mistreated, while women who behaved more peacefully were treated in a paternalistic way” (Pérusse-Roy and Mulone, 2020, p.254).

Starting from different police attitudes concerning female protesters, which move between paternalism and violence, the researchers suggest that “the police regulate social gender norms in two ways : on one hand, by being violent towards women who do not follow expectations placed upon them; on the other hand, by reinforcing the established social order concerning relationships between men and women by adopting a paternalistic approach towards female protesters who do not deviate (too much) from the norms associated with their gender.” In this way, the police adopt different attitudes towards women who do not fit gender norms and take part in regulating gender norms themselves. The police contribute to preserving the patriarchal order.

The elements mentioned above, related to political profiling experienced by women, allow us to reflect on the role of the police. If the police are deployed to repress protesters, as in the stories cited above, it is essential to question the (true) role held by police within society. On this subject, Serge Quadruppani and Jérôme Floch wrote the following in Défaire la police (2021):

That which the police defend with all of the means at their disposition is not order and society, but a certain order and its own society. Police blackmail about fear and safety are not attempting to regulate human liberty, but rather lonely, deprived and therefore weak individuals produced by the world of economics. Police violence is made to control and repress the bodies and spirits which are living and therefore dissatisfied. The police is not only the armed branch of the State; it is the guarantee that each person will stay where they are meant to. (Baschet *et al.*, 2021, p.7).

A feminist reflection on the police needs to consider not only the relationships between the police and women, and minority groups more broadly; it must also consider the role of the police institution in the patriarchal organization of society.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE STUDY CONCERNING THE PERCEPTION OF POLICE SERVICES, PRIVATE SECURITY AND THE STM

540 people responding in 3 different languages;

Several pages of testimonies relating interactions with the police, private security and the Société de transport de Montréal (STM);

A quantitative analysis which made it possible to identify several findings.

PERCEPTION OF POLICE OFFICERS

- The majority of women surveyed expressed negative and very negative feelings towards Montreal police forces.
- White women also expressed mostly negative feelings towards the police, which indicates that other forms of profiling affect women, whether the profiling is social, gender or political in nature.
- Satisfaction with police forces in residential neighbourhoods varies, with some neighbourhoods showing less satisfaction than others, particularly the neighbourhood station 22 (PDQ22), which received very negative reviews.
- The stories collected show the experiences of victimization and discrimination on the part of police, particularly in cases of domestic violence.

PERCEPTION OF PRIVATE SECURITY GUARDS

- Participants’ perception of private security guards is also mostly neutral or negative, with stories discussing inappropriate behaviour and invasion of student spaces.
- The private security company GardaWorld was specifically mentioned for its interactions with students, which have led to concerns.

PERCEPTION OF STM CONSTABLES

- STM constables are also seen in a neutral or negative light, with participants sharing stories of problematic interactions, including unwarranted ticket checks and a hostile attitude towards certain groups of passengers.
- STM constables have been criticized for discriminatory behaviour towards groups like punks, BIPOC⁴ individuals and queer people.

4 BIPOC, Black, Indigenous and People Of Colour (in English) or PANDC (in French) refers to people who are Black, Indigenous and people of colour.

FACTORS AFFECTING INTERACTIONS WITH POLICE OFFICERS

- Several factors have been identified as affecting interactions with police officers, including skin colour, socio-economic background, gender and age.
- Some white women mentioned that their status as white women helped them better navigate interactions with police, while others said that their queer, anticapitalist or antiracist identities led to violence from police officers.
- Participants’ stories also showed preoccupations regarding discrimination on the basis of social class, disability and language.

FACTORS AFFECTING INTERACTIONS WITH PRIVATE SECURITY GUARDS

- Factors that affect interactions with private security guards are similar to those identified for police officers, particularly: belonging to a racialized community, socio-economic class and individuals’ behaviour.

REASONS TO NOT CALL THE POLICE

- Many women said that they did not call the police despite being in situations where they could have needed to for the following reasons: they were afraid of additional violence, they had political preoccupations, they were afraid of not being believed or listened to, and they felt that the process would be too long.

With regard to the fear of further violence, we invite you to read the report Justice pour les femmes marginalisées victimes de violences sexospécifiques. Ce que la littérature et les intervenantes nous apprennent, notably Chapter 3 " Résultats : expériences et obstacles propres aux réalités des femmes davantage marginalisées" (Thibault et al., 2022) available on this link : <http://sac.uqam.ca/liste-de-publications.html>

The study shows that the women surveyed hold a largely negative perception of police, private security and STM constable services. The women surveyed also had significant preoccupations concerning discrimination, violence and a lack of confidence in the institutions mentioned. The results also show that a number of factors, such as belonging to a racialized community, gender, socio-economic class, and individual behaviour, may influence these interactions and perceptions.



DISCUSSION GROUPS

Between September and December 2022, we organized four separate discussion groups for Indigenous and non-Indigenous women experiencing homelessness, women working in the sex industry, and women who participated in our online survey. Survey participants had expressed a desire to meet with us to share their experiences with police forces in more detail.

We held interviews with a total of 32 people who shared a variety of issues with us. The following four articles are based on our analysis of group participants’ responses as well as on existing academic literature.

WOMEN EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

We think we are familiar with the face of homelessness: an older man with a long beard sleeping on a park bench or a sidewalk. However, this very visible figure hides others in his shadow.
(Benjamin, 2022)

In 2020, the Réseau d’aide aux personnes seules et itinérantes de Montréal (abbreviated RAPSIM, a network of organizations that help homeless people and people living alone in the city) published a portrait of homelessness in Montreal’s public spaces. To prepare this portrait, RAPSIM surveyed its member organizations. Intervention workers from around thirty organizations for homeless populations responded to the survey. The findings in RAPSIM’s report summarize the facts agreed upon by many intervention workers who help people experiencing homelessness or who were consulted for the survey (Bacro and Lemieux, 2020, p.5). Here are some of the portrait’s findings:

- 64.5 % [of the organizations consulted] “said that cases of verbal abuse on the part [of police officers] were “often” or “always” reported to them” (RAPSIM, p. 16);
- 63.3 % of participating organizations reported cases of harassment and bullying from police forces “all the time” or “often” (Bacro and Lemieux, 2020, p.16);
- Speaking of bullying, some organizations reported that service users “were sometimes threatened (with being [hit], [taken to court], having their dog taken to an animal shelter, etc.)” (Ibid, p.17);
- Concerning police questioning, “in two thirds of participating organizations, questioning without just cause were “always” or “often” reported by the organization’s users.” (Ibid, p. 17)

In a report published in 2022, the Partenariat pour la prévention et la lutte à l’itinérance des femmes (Partnership to Prevent and End Women’s Homelessness, abbreviated PPLIF) reminded us that homeless women already live at the intersection of multiple oppressions and that the pandemic only exacerbated the precarity and violence they already experience. The PPLIF added that several issues such as “overstretched, overcrowded and exhausted” human and material resources in shelters, “the lack of funding for community work” and the resulting “increased number of unfulfilled requests for shelter space leaves women without options” (PPLIF, 2022, p.8) - in other words, more women end up living on the streets.

These findings were of particular interest to us. We decided to meet with women experiencing homelessness to find out if their circumstances were different and if they were experiencing other issues that were unique to women but were not yet reported in research.

We worked with Passages, a member organization of the TGFM, to organize a meeting with young women experiencing homelessness. In general, women stay at Passages for a fixed period. Once that fixed period is over, former residents can participate in group activities organized by Passages’ staff. The PPLIF report puts into context the issues experienced by women experiencing homelessness who use services at Passages and in other shelters:

Women using our services are dealing with multiple issues: poverty, homelessness, physical and mental health issues, drug and alcohol use, suicidal ideation, eating disorders, etc. They have to cope with various experiences of (domestic, familial, institutional, social, honour-based) violence and complex realities related to migration, immigration status, gender identity and sexual orientation. (PPLIF, 2022, p.4)

The day we met with the women at Passages, we started by introducing ourselves and explaining the goal of our activity and the project we were working on. Before we had even finished introducing the project, the women started to share their own experiences with police officers or with private security guards! We didn’t need to ask many questions to break the ice. The women already had lots to say and, indeed, it might have been the first time they had the space to talk about their experiences with police.

One of the experiences these women shared concerned the lack of efficiency on police officers’ parts when contacted. Many of the situations described were when women needed help from the police, but the police arrived either too late to help, or they behaved in a way that wasn’t appropriate for the context. For instance, one woman talked about when she experienced a violent situation due to her neighbour knocking on her door; she called the police, who arrived too late to help and told the woman they couldn’t help her because it was her word against that of her neighbour. Other examples described how the police arrived at the home of one woman who was having a problem with her housemate. The housemate made up a story about cockroaches to defend herself. The police officers said: *“In your country, you’re used to living with cockroaches, but not in Canada,”* and left the building. The officers judged the woman due to her background and blamed her for the situation, even though she had been the first person to call the police.

Concerning the inadequate approaches participants often described, one of the most common observations was related to calling the police during an episode of psychological distress:

“I was in an unstable situation for 7-8 months, during which I had suicidal crises. My friends had to call the police and several times, they arrived and wanted to take me to the hospital. Twice, I happened to have good police officers, in the sense that they listened to me and asked me what I wanted to do. They wanted to help. All the other times, they always used force and violently shoved me into the car.” (E., Passages participant)

E. said that each time, the police said the same thing: “We have to take you to the hospital”, but she didn’t want to go, because she wouldn’t be able to get help and knew she would be held a long time. So E. described being “on the defensive”, which led to the police officers saying they were obliged to use force on her. Once they arrived at the hospital, the agents left, saying “that’s it, I did my job”, from what this woman described. She added, “This happened several times, because in those moments, it was my only option, so I didn’t have a choice. Since it went badly, I always associate asking for help with something negative” (E., Passages participant)

The de-institutionalization of those living with mental illness began in the 1960s. While this can have the benefit of allowing people with mental illness to live in society, the existing social and health services did not follow the de-institutionalization of mental health care (Rutland, 2022). A direct consequence of this is that “in Montreal, police respond to around 50,000 mental health calls per year. Almost all of these calls could be rerouted from 911 to a more appropriate non-police intervention team.” (Rutland, 2022)

A 2015 report from the Conseil des Montréalaises stated: “Women experiencing homelessness have increasingly serious mental health issues” and that “the system (is) not able to offer psychological or psychiatric care to women in vulnerable situations” (Conseil des Montréalaises, 2017, p.16). In addition to creating “increased pressure for (community) resources”, the health care system’s inability to provide mental health care is the main reason the police are involved in so many situations of psychological distress.

In Ontario, a report by the Independent Police Review Director offers interesting reflections and recommendations on the link between police services and mental health crises. Unfortunately, as in Quebec, the Ontario police intervene first in situations where people are in crisis (McNeilly, 2017, p.21). According to specialists we consulted for this report, avoiding police intervention in cases of crisis would require “building a mental health care system that works correctly” (Ibid., p.21).

How, then, to go about rebuilding a health system with the necessary resources to respond to people with mental health issues or people in crisis? Is investing more money in police services in order to have combined squads the best solution? Or would it be better to invest enough money in existing services that have developed expertise over the years in working with people who have significant mental health issues?

According to the Montreal police force’s (SPVM) website, they receive over 33,000 calls per year related to psychological distress (SPVM, 2023)⁵. The SPVM also says they have special teams to intervene in these types of situations. They also offer training sessions, which are sometimes voluntary, to officers who want to be better prepared for mental health interventions (SPVM, 2023). Despite these improvements, several questions remain for us: 1) do students at the police academy really want to perform these types of interventions when they choose to take this training session? 2) As a society, are we really making the choice to call on police officers for mental health problems, or would we prefer to have more resources available in the health and social services sector, where waiting lists for psychologists are extremely long?

We also can’t forget that since the start of the pandemic in 2020, mental health issues have only increased for several age groups. For instance, there are more young people taking antidepressants (Bordeleau, 2023).

WHAT PARTICIPANTS SUGGEST

One of the women we met at Passages suggested that police squads should have different missions according to their interests or values. For example, officers who are more interested in social work, who are particularly sensitive or empathetic towards the most vulnerable people in society could choose to offer mental health services. Officers who prefer fighting organized crime could choose to concentrate their efforts there without having to intervene in mental health crisis situations.

Another participant in our discussion group shared her opinion on police intervention in cases of violence, where, she said, ***“not calling the police is also a way to protect yourself. I have a friend who was sexually assaulted. She didn’t want to call the police because she didn’t want a negative experience on top of another negative experience.”***(M., Passages participant). Not only can police intervention make a situation worse, but it can also be difficult for some women to talk about very private matters to strangers: ***“You don’t want to have to explain your whole life to two people who don’t care and who will move on to something else right after. They have no tact. These are private things and you don’t know how to talk about them”*** (L., Passages participant). These opinions were shared by all of the women present: ***“The thing is, other places you can get help can’t do everything, and sometimes they tell us to call the police”*** (M., Passages participant) To this, another participant added: ***“And sometimes the police also tell us “I’ve already seen worse in my line of work, I’ve seen this before, much worse than you, etc.”*** (C., Passages participant). One woman said that ***“The police should be trained to have empathy. If they were trained correctly, maybe things would go better”*** (M., Passages participant). In other words, more regular training sessions for police forces, as are offered for assault, could improve the situation. However, one thing the women all agreed on was that investing more money in alternatives to the police was preferable to increasing the SPVM budget because, even when the police invests in training, “education takes years and years”, according to one participant whom the other participants all agreed with.

Another woman concluded this part of the discussion by saying, ***“I think it’s society as a whole that isn’t kind or empathetic”*** (Er., Passages participant). These words have a lot in common with what Indigenous women experiencing homelessness said when we met with them. The changes these women want cannot only happen on the surface: they will require more reflection and will need to be accompanied by concrete changes on several levels: health, education, etc.

5 The site doesn't say whether this figure is current, but it differs from what we've found in other articles and reports.

RESPONSES IN CASES OF GRAVE DANGER

According to the Conseil des Montréalaises’ report cited earlier, the narratives of women experiencing homelessness:

are also characterized by abuses on the part of police forces, particularly by harassment which takes the form of being taken to court; women say they received tickets for “spitting on the ground”, “throwing a cigarette butt on the ground”, or “crossing an alley diagonally”, among other “offences”. Some say that their handbags are often searched so that their money can be taken, or their crack pipes stolen. They remain victims of cruel statements from police officers and from the population in general. “Do you do 2 for the price of 1?”, one police officer asked a woman being questioned, because she practiced sex work.” (Conseil des Montréalaises, 2017, p.19.)

We asked women if, beyond what they had shared with us, they were comfortable calling the police if needed, and almost all of the women said they would only call the police if there was a murder. We then asked, “*What purpose do police serve if they don’t protect people?*”. They responded, “**None**” (which made all the participants laugh). They added that “***the police create structure and ensure order, but that doesn’t mean they have a purpose or that they are useful, but that’s not their job***” (M., Passages participant).

So, we asked again, “*What situations are the police useful in?*” One participant said: “***I think it’s psychological, because it allows people to control themselves because they know the police are there, otherwise people would do whatever they want...keep order***”, M. said. Another woman added “***Really, whether or not there are police, there are crimes and violence***” (Er., Passages participant).

Other factors that all participants agreed on included these observations: there is lots of violence towards Indigenous people and people experiencing homelessness; the police should not be armed at all times and should be better trained.

We ended with a final question for our participants. They came back to the necessity of having trained groups to respond to mental health-related questions or conflicts. According to one participant, having police forces “trained according to their desires and interests”, where officers who “want to take care of people can do so” and others “who want the action movie experience” can do that instead.

SEX WORK⁶ AND RELATIONSHIPS WITH SECURITY FORCES

Our discussion with the organization Stella, l’amie de Maimie, started when we were told the organization’s workers are ambivalent towards the police. While their repressive practices lead to anger and fear, when danger is imminent, the police is the only option.

Stella is an organization run by and for sex workers. As existing literature notes, these women have difficult relationships with police officers due to the current legal framework⁷, moral principles and past events in North American societies. Reports vary and can become much more complex when discussing sex workers who belong to populations which are already marginalized due to their migration status, gender identity or who belong to a racialized minority. These people are especially targeted by police forces; Andrea Ritchie writes about the situation in the United States in her work *Invisible No More*, but the Canadian context is not much different:

In addition to racial profiling and discriminatory arrests, women of color who are or are perceived to be engaged in prostitution continue to be subjected to verbal harassment and abuse and police violence. Nearly nine out of ten respondents to the 2015 US Transgender Survey who reported involvement in the sex trades also reported police harassment, assault or mistreatment. Ritchie, 2017, p. 154)⁸

Currently, according to the law, only those who ask for sexual services (clients) are criminalized. However, the reality is that sex workers are also targeted in different ways: bullying, harassment, transphobia, etc. For instance, police officers note women’s tattoos or piercings, saying “***this is how I’ll recognize you when you’re dead***”. This kind of intimidation is often justified by officers who say they are trying to convince sex workers to change careers. They claim they are trying to help, but their behaviour is harassment. Sex workers are therefore seen as both criminals and victims by police. If they are victims of street violence and report this to the authorities, they are not believed and are mistreated: as one sex worker remembers, police officers once told her “***Call me when you’re raped.***”

Over the years, the press has also contributed to the creation of this dichotomy: journalists describe sex workers either as criminals or as victims who need saving - not only from the dangers of sex work, but also from a life of abuse and drug use (Comack, p.132). This dichotomy presented by the press does not allow for a deeper debate on sex work, and it certainly does not allow these women’s needs to be heard.

To come back to the lack of sensitivity on police officers’ parts, we asked sex workers if having more socio-community agents or having police officers partnered with psychosocial intervention workers would be more appropriate solutions. The organization said that the direct contact between socio-community agents and police forces could make the complaint process easier in cases where a woman wants to make a complaint. These police teams have a

6 We are aware that for some of our member groups, the expression "sex work" is replaced by "prostitution" or "work in the sex industry". In this section, we favour the expression "sex work", because that is what is used and encouraged by those we consulted to develop this section of the report.

7 To read more about the debates on current legislation, see the following document : <https://chezstella.org/stellibrary-publications/stella-feuillet-decrim-101/>

8 In *Invisible No More*, Andrea Ritchie also analyzes the stereotypes which relate racialized women and sex work because of belonging to historically oppressed minorities (colonization, migration policies, etc.) To find out more, you can read chapter 7, Policing Sex. (Ritchie, 2017, p.144)

more specialized approach which is also often kinder. However, they do not trust the other potential effects of such a strategy, which might give the impression of “police who are half outreach workers, half police” whose goal is “only criminalization, moving forward with investigations, and collecting data.” They insist that such a police force is a priori less violent in nature (*“so yes, they are less physically violent, but that only serves to strengthen the SPVM’s power.”*) but also they also critique police structure as a whole and the criminalization policies towards marginalized populations.

The socio-community officers also often participate in round table meetings with community organizations. We asked Stella their opinion on this. They answered: “The police come to community round tables with their weapons. That alone ensures a power balance in discussions.” Stella feels that there’s no point in coming to a round table meeting with weapons. Workers at Stella also dislike that the police force is also *“armed when they receive complaints or hear stories. That’s another reason criminalized people carry weapons: to protect themselves from the police, which only increases the number of weapons in the community. We feel that disarming the police would lessen the need to carry weapons in civil society”*.

Concerning partnerships with psychosocial intervention workers, the women at Stella feel that they don’t have a purpose and sometimes make an environment less safe, because people don’t want to open up to an intervention worker who arrives with police. It is counter-productive to combine help with the repressive power that police forces represent. Stella feels that the relationship with the community is fundamental. *“Working with the police would destroy that. If intervention workers are working alongside SPVM officers, this is another way for the police to access a great deal of data that they would never have without the intervention workers’ trust”*.

Intervention workers’ presence can also lead to harmful situations. If sex workers who have children want to report violence that they experienced in their work, they are at risk of being reported themselves to youth protection services (the Direction de la Protection de la Jeunesse, or DPJ). This prevents these women from having access to the police, even in cases of grave danger.

Stella says that it would be more appropriate to take money from the SPVM to give to community organizations, which are independent: “At Stella, we manage crisis situations ourselves. We never call the police without the consent of the person in danger or at risk of danger.” If women want to call the police or make a report, we go with them. We have a non-directive approach. We are antiscarceral and anti-repression ourselves, but if a woman wants to go to the police, we go with her. We don’t support the system, but we use it because there’s nothing else.”

For Stella, defunding would also include legal changes⁹ as well as having rights like other workers, as sex work is currently criminalized, with all the danger that implies concerning money earned and other factors. Defunding a good portion of the police¹⁰, alongside the decriminalization of sex work, homelessness and drug use, would change the current situation for the better.

9 To find out more about the legal changes sex workers would like to see, you can look at the following document: <https://chezstella.org/stellibrary-publications/stella-feuillet-decrim-101/>

10 To find out more about Montrealers’ fight to defund the SPVM, see the following document: <https://bit.ly/307SYZT>

This is backed up by research. Indeed, according to Robyn Maynard, the criminalization of sex work only makes sex workers more vulnerable:

The ongoing criminalization of sex work, and particularly some street-based sex work, facilitates the heightened surveillance of Black women - as real or imagined sex workers - and allows for not only ongoing possible criminalization through prostitution laws, but also facilitates other intrusive policing measures like ticketing and arrests for municipal, drug and other minor infractions. As well, ongoing criminalization continues to reinforce vulnerability to violence and exploitation.
(Maynard, 2017, p. 144)

Speaking of certain police approaches developed in the past few years, we were able to ask the sex workers what they thought of police wearing portable cameras. Stella is opposed to this project because “it justifies increased police spending and will be used to spy on marginalized people, rather than the police: police officers can shut their cameras off. We already know that police officers have one another’s backs and will cover for one another, so this will only give them more money and power.” Over the years, Stella has developed critical thoughts on political matters. As we noticed that several tools and documents had been developed a few years prior, we asked if Stella’s demands had changed since other parties were in power. Their response: *Governments may claim to be progressive, but turn out to increase gentrification, while some conservatives have ideological positions but act differently on the ground because they do what seems to work.” In Montreal, “with Valérie Plante, there’s no dialogue”*, workers say.

Stella says that in the political arena, “some officials are clearly against sex work. Others, such as the federal Liberals, seem to want to engage in dialogue, but end up just wasting our time. They always ask community services to produce more documentation, but they never do anything with it.”

The group feels that some progressives are pseudofeminists who hate sex workers for religious or moral reasons. They also regret *“that unions are also opposed to sex workers: very few unions support sex workers as workers.”*

Stella also points a finger at the overall lack of solidarity for sex workers from other feminist groups. This is due to an ideological disagreement on how sex work is perceived: for Stella, sex work is work, and they fight for sex workers to have better working conditions. Stella wishes that feminist groups were more supportive of this fight.

Stella says that, when it comes to sex work, criminalization policies dominate at both the federal and provincial levels: “they work together for more criminalization by instrumentalizing the rights, freedom and safety of women and children”,

PRIVATE SECURITY GUARDS AND SOCIÉTÉ DE TRANSPORT DE MONTRÉAL (STM) CONSTABLES

In order to have a more complete view of the situation, we also asked workers at Stella to tell us their opinion on private security guards and STM constables. For security guards, *“it really depends on the context”*. For instance, Stella says that security guards in homeless shelters do not have adequate training to work with the population that uses shelters and they lack the skills to be in such an environment. However, they feel that security guards don’t always react with violence and can sometimes be useful, with the exception of the STM.

They all agree that the STM uses *“incredibly violent repression for \$3.50”*, particularly between Berri-UQÀM and Atwater stations. They say that *“it’s because their job is to be repressive”*, especially towards racialized women: *“taking the metro is stressful because they see the presence of STM constables.”* Constables’ uniforms are similar to those of the police, so they often *“allow people to believe that they are police officers and that they have the same powers that police officers do.”*

However, in the case of sex work, everything is more complex because there are several different coercive institutions in place, from immigration to commercial inspections. For instance, if a massage parlour is inspected, these different institutions are often involved.

STELLA’S RECOMMENDED SOLUTIONS

We ended our discussion by asking the sex workers what would improve their situation. They named several things. We have made a list of what they shared with us. Even if they are in list form, their words are extremely important and we could have long discussions using them as a starting point:

- Fighting poverty and dealing with mental health issues and drug issues;
- No longer criminalizing sex work: “removing the police’s mandate to repress sex work and changing society’s mentalities about sex work;”
- Accepting that sex work is work like any other and allowing safe drug use.
- Reflecting on acute situations of imminent danger: having the means to hide, leave, etc.
- Being able to identify people at risk of committing a direct crime such as murder, because the act of reporting people to the police adds to the risk of increased violence: believing women who say, “my husband is so dangerous that he might kill me soon” and isolating both parties.
- Prison only postpones crises. It’s necessary to heal and help both the aggressor and the person being attacked.
- Can we think about how to imprison people without opening criminal files ? This would help people want to change.
- There are people who will always resist change, but restorative justice can help if we change the system as a whole.
- Family rights are sometimes problematic: “how can children be left accessible to a violent parent ?”
- We need more collective work, more community work. We need community relationships for different justice systems to be able to function. For instance, a community that has its own physical space helps creates a feeling of solidarity, which leads to a feeling of belonging and people taking collective responsibility.
- Access to mental health care, particularly for people who are violent.
- Others in the group pointed out that extremely violent men and misogynists will never agree to change. Currently, out of the solutions suggested, having another man intervene to scare a violent man works better than the police.
- Intergenerational and ideological aspects: “We need to change education, change whorephobia and all the misogyny that accompanies it”;
- Feminist solidarity: other women need to show solidarity with sex workers. “There’s currently a division between sex workers and others, and women who accept that encourage whorephobic violence.”

NEOCOLONIALISM AND MISTRUST IN INSTITUTIONS

According to the 2019 report by Armony, Mulone and Hassaoui, “Indigenous women are particularly targeted by police checks: they are 11 times more likely to be checked than white women are.” (p.11). This is the result of treatment called racial profiling. According to a definition from the Commission des droits de la personne et des droits de la jeunesse (Commission on the Rights of the Person and of Youth Rights, or CDPDJ), shared in the same report,

[R]acial profiling is any action done by one or more people in positions of authority to a person or group of people for reasons of safety, security, or public protection, based on real or presumed belonging to a race, colour, ethnic or national origin or religion, without valid motive or reasonable suspicion, and which treats the person differently. Racial profiling also includes any action from people in situations of authority who disproportionately apply rules to certain segments of the population based on their racial, ethnic, national or religious identity, whether real or imagined Armony *et al.*, 2019).

The term “race” refers to a social construct which remains present in our society but has no basis in biology. To be more precise: “race” does not exist, but many, many atrocities have been and continue in its name, particularly racial microaggressions and systemic racism. Indeed, “race” led to the creation of the Indian Act, which sought to eliminate Indigenous identity in order to assimilate Indigenous people into the dominant culture by creating residential schools, where young Indigenous people were taken from their families of origin, or adopted by white families in what is called the Sixties Scoop)¹¹.

This reality led us to organize a discussion group with Indigenous women who are experiencing or have experienced homelessness. Before entering into the details of what the women consulted told us, we need to look at history. Examining the colonial pasts of Canada and Quebec allows us to understand why Indigenous women are treated differently from white women.

The article *Police et colonisation des peuples autochtones au Canada*¹² reveals that the first police forces in North America were created during colonization. At this time, special forces were put in place to ensure the success of colonization, not to prevent criminal acts or protect the population. During the 18th and 19th centuries, the introduction of police was done to apply the laws of the new Canadian nation-state and ensure those laws were respected.

In the first steps of colonization, the role of police forces was not to protect and ensure the safety of the population: “its classic role in regulating criminality” was secondary (Jaccoud *et al.*, 2019, p.3). The first police force in France was established in 1829; in Canada, John A. Macdonald created the North-West Mounted Police in 1873. Later, it would become the Royal North-West Mounted Police and finally the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP, or “the Mounties”).

11 To find out more, we invite you to look at this site: <https://www.google.com/url?q=https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/sixties-scoop&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1684868483879459&usq=AOvVaw1eCm1NylKSByauZgVIMUUP>. You can also look at the website of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. 2015. " Chapitre 1 : Le colonialisme au temps de l'Empire " Pensionnats du Canada : L'histoire, partie 1 des origines à 1939, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, QC https://nctr.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/5-Lhistoire_partie_1_des_origines_a_1939.pdf

12 The article was published in the Commission d'enquête sur les relations entre les Autochtones et certains services publics : écoute, réconciliation et progrès, commonly called the Viens Commission as it was chaired by the honourable Jacques Viens. Online: <https://www.cerp.gouv.qc.ca/index.php?id=2>

Imposing the legal system of colonizers on colonized peoples is a well-documented strategy in all states around the world that have been created through the appropriation of Indigenous lands (Smandych and Lee, 1995; Fitzpatrick, 1983; Goyette, 1987). Indeed, distinct legal systems are seen as obstacles to nation-state building projects (Jaccoud, 1995). Marginalizing, neutralizing and even criminalizing traditional Indigenous law became essential to the development of a new state in the eyes of settlers. The police serve as one of the first links in the chain of the justice system and are assigned a central role in building state sovereignty. (Jaccoud *et al.*, 2019, p.2)

According to the same article, “the RCMP also played an active role in the forced relocation and sedentarization of the Inuit. Between 1950 and 1960, RCMP officers slaughtered hundreds of sled dogs. The harmful impacts of this loss are still felt today (Scott *et al.*, 2018, p. 96 et 97)”.

This occurred at the same time that many Inuit children were forced to attend residential schools. Even today, some Indigenous people refer to these events to explain why they have so little confidence in law enforcement agencies.” (Jaccoud *et al.*, 2019, p.2).

Like the institutions that came before it, the RCMP plays a role in territorial appropriation rather than ensuring the protection of the population. “The provincial police is clearly a political lever used to for “territorial reappropriation” rather than a service designed to ensure public safety in Inuit communities.” (Ibid., p.2) ¹³

The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls reveals that Sûreté du Québec officers, particularly in the city of Val d’Or¹⁴, sexually abused Indigenous women, who were often calling the police for help. Women have also reported being bullied and subjected to other abusive behaviours (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019).

If we consider the other harmful events Indigenous women¹⁵ have experienced, such as forced sterilizations (Senate Standing Committee on Human Rights, 2021)¹⁶ and other forms of institutional violence, including the abuse suffered by Joyce Echaquan¹⁷, it is nearly impossible to imagine mutual trust between Indigenous women and institutions of health and public safety. Even though some current political figures in Quebec do not care for the term “systemic racism”, it is impossible to explain the mistrust of the state and its institutions other than by the systemic racism and violence it has subjected Indigenous populations to.

13 There are many sources on the history of residential schools, as well as films which show what Indigenous children and their families experienced. To start, we recommend you look at the Decolonial Toolbox developed by the Montreal Indigenous Network and Mikana here: https://www.mikana.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/EN_Educational_Pathway_Final_june2022_V2.pdf

14 A report by Radio-Canada :<https://ici.radio-canada.ca/tele/enquete/2015-2016/episodes/360817/femmes-autochtones-surete-du-quebec-sq>

15 The term "Indigenous" refers to members of the following communities: the First Nations, Métis and Inuit. <https://www.mikana.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Terminology.pdf>

16 Other sources include https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2022/sen/yc32-0/YC32-0-441-4-fra.pdf and this Quebec-specific article by researcher Suzie Basile : <https://files.cssspnql.com/s/oPVHFaKlp8uw5oF>

17 A report from Radio-Canada : <https://ici.radio-canada.ca/info/dossier/1007399/joyce-echaquan-atikamekw-sante-racisme>

Despite the reorganization of the constitutional system and the work of the Viens Commission, colonial practices continue, which we recognize as neocolonialism. “The adoption of a First Nations Police Policy (PPN) in 1991 was part of this trend and followed the principles of developing police services managed by Indigenous communities and offering culturally appropriate services.¹⁸” (Jaccoud *et al.*, 2019, p.3) However, many issues still exist, including linguistic barriers, profiling, stereotypes, discrimination, racism, abuses of power, and inequality in budgets allotted to public safety for Indigenous police forces (Ibid., p.3). Indigenous people are also overrepresented in the penal system.(Sauro, 2022). How, then, can Indigenous people trust police forces and private security guards? Even though Indigenous police forces exist, they are still subject to the laws of the Canadian criminal system, a concrete example of neocolonial practices. According to the Viens Commission, these police forces do not have the same status or the same budgets as non-Indigenous police forces, which translates to worn equipment, night shifts filled by just one officer, and a large shortage of employees (Commission d’enquête sur les relations entre les Autochtones et certains services publics au Québec: écoute, réconciliation et progrès, 2019, p.39)

Even if “around 90 % of the population living in an Indigenous community or village in Quebec is currently served by an Indigenous police force, on the ground, this translates to 22 police forces working in 44 First Nations communities and Inuit villages” (Ibid., p. 37). These police forces do not operate in downtown Montreal, for instance, where a significant number of Indigenous people live or experience homelessness. Even if Indigenous police forces existed in Tiohtiá :ke/ Montreal, they would not have the same agreements with the provincial and federal governments.



18 The organization Hoodstock refers to “culturally adapted and safe”. Their practices are adapted according to the cultural norms of the communities they work with in order to ensure that health care is safe, non-discriminatory and avoids reproducing disparities which come from systemic racism.

DISCUSSION GROUP WITH INDIGENOUS WOMEN EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

“I work in a shelter for people experiencing homelessness. I often interact with SPVM officers, particularly from station 38, who are often disrespectful and do not seem to understand the realities of Indigenous people experiencing homelessness. I feel that there are often too many police for the work that needs to be done. Their intervention doesn’t take cultural safety into account and too often, they are very rude to community members. I think they are often very careless.” - a person who responded to the online survey.

At the beginning of this section, we mentioned that Indigenous women “are 11 times more likely to be checked than white women are.” We also explored the historical reasons for a lack of confidence in police and discussed the concepts of racial profiling, the colonial past and neocolonial practices.

In Tiohtiá:ke/Montreal, a large number of Indigenous women are homeless. Homelessness keeps these women in economic precarity. As a result, they are also victims of social profiling: the discriminatory treatment reserved for people who are perceived as belonging to lower social classes.

Thanks to work with the Montreal Native Friendship Centre, we met around ten Indigenous women who are currently experiencing or have experienced homelessness to talk about their relationships with the police, whether the SPVM, private security guards, or STM constables. More concretely, we talked to the women about what factors have led to their lack of confidence in the police. They discussed misleading tactics used by officers, such as asking for an ID card and refusing to return it; discriminatory, impolite and rude treatment; aggressive tones and body language; intimidation and being subjected to the same amount of physical force as men. The women also talked about being beaten up, being mocked by officers or even moved to vacant, faraway spaces against their will, a practice known in Western Canada as *starlight tours*.

As Robyn Maynard writes in her book *Policing Black Lives*, /

The violence of settler colonialism...has resulted in a similar dehumanization of Indigenous girls and women across Canada. Indigenous femininity, too, has received none of the protections granted to white and middle-class Canadian women. High rates of law enforcement violence directed at Indigenous women has made national and international headlines. (Maynard, 2017, p. 118)

(In emergency situations, they do not want to call 911, especially if there is a warrant for their arrest. They can only access it in life or death situations. For instance, they will not have access in the case of a violent conflict in their community. They prefer to intervene themselves to reduce tension and avoid a neighbour calling the police. Only one participant said she had been helped when she experienced domestic violence.

While the Indigenous women we met said that most of their experiences with the police have been negative, they did mention having better experiences with socio-community agents they called “street patrollers”. However, as soon as they are alone with these “street patrollers”, they said that these officers change their tones and lose their empathy. The participants do not know why this “hypocritical” behaviour occurs, but they say that Indigenous people and police being better acquainted would improve mutual understanding and respect.

Concerning the tickets they receive, Indigenous women say that officers sometimes add false information. They only realize later on, once their ticket has been translated. They feel that reporting these issues is “pointless” because the officers’ serial numbers are not on the tickets. These women fear retaliation from the police.

When they are called, police officers only communicate in French, even if they are able to communicate in English. The women we talked to said that younger officers and female officers are not sympathetic; indeed, they are even harsher. Police officers also become more aggressive when Indigenous women don’t understand what the officers want.

One of the areas where the women we met spend a lot of time is the Milton-Parc neighbourhood. According to a May 2022 report by the Montreal Ombudsman, Nadine Mailloux, the neighbourhood is one of the most frequently visited by police services due to the number of homeless people and the complaints made by residents to the ombudsman (Mailloux, 2022). The report indicates that an effort to improve police intervention in the neighbourhood needs to be made by offering training sessions and having help from the Indigenous liaison officer. However, in situations where intoxicated women interact with SPVM officers, they are more at risk of being summoned to court. Research shows that this happens far too often: the Indigenous population is overrepresented in Canadian prisons (ICI Radio-Canada, 2022)¹⁹.

We also talked about the penal system during our discussion. Women said that when one person they knew was imprisoned, she was left with nothing for two days: no toilet paper, food, or blankets. She was even menstruating. They also told the story of another woman who had been detained and handcuffed both on her ankles and wrists while being treated in a hospital because staff thought she was “dangerous”. All the hospital staff saw that she was handcuffed, which one participant said was “extremely humiliating when everyone should have the right to health care.” Social profiling is done through discriminatory behaviour regarding behaviour considered normal by the general public, such as drinking alcohol with food in a park, crossing the street at an intersection, etc. These little offences rarely lead to tickets for non-Indigenous people but often result in tickets for Indigenous people.

The women consulted said that private security guards also treat them differently from the general public in stores or banks. Women are followed in grocery stores and other businesses, which makes them feel uncomfortable. They feel like easy targets because guards assume that they will shoplift. Treatment from private security guards is similar throughout institutions, businesses, banks, hospitals, etc. Many women said they are not able to open bank accounts even if they have ID with them. To be taken seriously, they need to be accompanied by employees of the organizations they visit.

When we held the discussion group with these women, we wanted to find out if they felt they were treated differently from Indigenous men by police and security guards due to their gender. The women said they felt police forces like the SPVM see all Indigenous people as a homogenous, problematic group. They do not feel they are treated differently due to their gender. However, they say that they have had a few specific experiences related to their gender, such as sexual assault, being assumed to be sex workers, being afraid of being alone in the streets and needing to be accompanied by an intervention worker.

We also asked the participants to tell us about their experiences with STM constables. They said they are targeted and labelled as dangerous or undesirable people by constables who try to get them out of metro stations. They see more and more frequent abuses of power, particularly since constables were granted more powers the inspection teams “no longer need to wait for reinforcement from the SPVM. They can stop someone who has committed a criminal act or intervene when someone is suspected of harassment in the whole of the STM network”(Ferah, 2021). Participants said that constables are more aggressive when they detain people.

What Indigenous women described in our study is not different from what has already been written in the literature we consulted. They also said that several reports have already been published, but no action has led to any concrete policy or social changes.

In order to resist their treatment, some women speak out when they see injustice occurring, such as when people in their community are targeted or treated violently by police. They say: “ *Treat them/me, like how you would like to be treated* ”.

Another way to resist is to use humour or to make fun of the situation: when Indigenous women are followed by security guards in stores, they go to the condom shelves or try to reveal the undercover agents so they won't be followed anymore.

In public spaces, women said they need to be accompanied by men to stay safe, or respond in their native languages when they are spoken to in French. These resistance strategies are used by Indigenous women in order to combat the abusive treatment they experience from the authorities.

IN CONCLUSION: NO SURPRISES...

As the title says, after having read a number of publications on the subject, surveying members, intervention workers and participants online, after several discussion groups, we have arrived at the following conclusion: existing literature on the subject seems to be confirmed on the ground. The phenomena observed and described in the literature is backed up by the Indigenous women experiencing homelessness who live through these situations. There may be a few positive changes happening, but they are extremely small compared to existing problems.

Like the women we surveyed, we really hope that this report can lead to concrete policy and social changes. But we have to admit that we aren't very optimistic...

19 Also see : Chan, W. et Chunn, D. (2014) Racialization, crime and criminal justice in Canada. Toronto, ON : University of Toronto Press.

WE NEED TO TALK

On November 21, 2022 we held a discussion group with people who had already responded to our online survey. The eight participants had very different backgrounds, but they had all had unpleasant experiences with the police and had responded to our invitation to talk more. Right away, we noticed that most of them had lots to say, and, in particular, they wanted to tell us about situations that had gone badly. Each of them shared one or several of their own experiences: a mother fighting legal institutions after her teenage daughter was raped, a woman whose job exposes her to violence but who did not benefit from protection on the part of the police, another with mental health issues, etc.

Gabrielle's²⁰ case is an example of the depth of our discussions. On the suggestion of a psychologist at her university, she went to her local police station to report the violence and death threats she was receiving at home. Once she was at the station, Gabrielle, who comes from a South Asian background, spoke to two officers, a man and a woman: *“I was nervous, but I was hoping that at least I wouldn’t be stabbed or shot at home. The female police officer didn’t seem to want to hear me. I was asking how I could protect myself and the officer had no response for me: she kept saying that someone showing me their weapons wasn’t a direct threat, she was yelling at me”*,

The figure of a female police officer who is more violent than her male colleagues came up over and over in our discussions. This violence is linked to the sexism inherent in the police but is also a form of misogyny and racism expressed specifically by women. *“She was stereotyping me and said that I had nothing to cry about. She wanted me to write a report and give my name. She treated me like a criminal. I was crying, and she mocked me. She treated me like a stupid bimbo.”* (Gabrielle, 21 November 2022).

According to Massimiliano Mulone, working for the police is heavily associated with a virile image, which might explain why female police officers are even more violent, as reported by many women we met:

It must have been very difficult for the first female police officers to enter into this environment, because you started with a handicap, a presumption that you were less competent due to their gender - maybe you weren’t strong enough, not cold and rational enough, all of these stereotypes targeting women. So you had to prove yourself much more than a man did. (Radio-Canada.ca, 2020)

Gabrielle ended up writing a formal report: “I wrote the report because I was forced to. I heard her tell her colleagues that I was just troubled: in fact, I was suicidal, and at that point I had no hope left. I wanted to hang myself. Filing a report led to the police taking her abuser’s weapons away. Gabrielle moved away and was not assaulted again because her abuser was afraid of the police arresting him.

This police action prevented the worst from happening. However, for Gabrielle, the treatment she received from officers left her with terrible memories: *“If that happened again, I would go to a shelter and record my interactions with the police.” If I had been a strong white man, they wouldn’t have treated me that way. The police officer just saw me as a poor immigrant woman.”*

20 These are pseudonyms, as we do not want to share participants' real names.

Flavie spoke on behalf of her daughter, a 16-year-old who had been raped. From the start, she didn’t want to report her daughter’s sexual abuse: *“Do you really want to file a report for sexual assault ?”* Flavie asked. The female police officer discouraged us from making the complaint. She told my daughter that it could *“take 2-3 years, during which the rapist would be free and and would harass us. They told us the he would never go to prison anyway - even though he had child pornography on his telephone”*, Flavie told us. She had also experienced injustice in her youth: *“I was a victim of violence in my own home. My father was violent towards me and once I told him that I wished someone would shoot him. I was put in a youth detention centre for a year.”* Never having a fair response to her situation, Flavie continues to fight for her daughter and hesitates to keep asking institutions for justice: *“I have so little faith in the system that I feel that it’s better to seek justice oneself; for my daughter’s situation, for her rape, I sometimes want to take care of it myself. The police do nothing, protect nothing. The system is disgusting”*, Flavie added.

Another participant, Béatrice, told us about two occasions where police officers tried to discourage her from filing a report, then finally refused to file a report for her at all. The first time was a case of harassment and sexual assault; she and her girlfriend were followed by a man, hid in a café and called the police. When the police arrived, *“we wanted to file a report, but the police told us to leave. They threatened me so I would leave !!”*. The second time, she was the *victim of domestic violence (committed by a woman) and they refused to accept my report because I wasn’t covered in blood,*” Béatrice told us.

Béatrice ended by telling us that she has had *“15 years of bad experiences in Montreal”*, which has led to her having a lack of confidence in the Montreal police. *“Once I was sexually assaulted and when they suggested I file a report, I refused, because now I don’t think it does anything. I’ve lost confidence.”*

Hélène came to share her feelings on the police. “As a woman, when I see the police, I have an anxiety attack, especially when I’m with Black people”. Hélène’s boyfriend is Black and of Haitian origin, and he experiences racial profiling often. She feels that the solution is in training agents properly: “I think that the police should be trained in racial profiling and in how to treat victims of domestic violence.”

Hélène also works in a crisis centre. In her professional role, she hesitates to call the police unless it’s absolutely necessary: *“As a crisis centre employee, I only call if there are no other options, when there’s a security issue that can’t wait. I always try to avoid it because it revictimizes the victim”*, Hélène told us.

We spoke a great deal with our participants about their specific experiences to try to find what they had in common and reflect on potential responses to the violence they described. Some of them shared strategies to put together evidence (body cameras) and defend themselves (pepper spray), while others said that better training for police officers and specialized tribunals was necessary. The participants did not all share the same opinion on the best strategies to use.

There has not yet been enough research in Montreal to study the impacts of body cameras. So far, opinions are mixed. The City of Montreal currently believes that body cameras will reduce profiling and police brutality (CBC News, 2020). Others believe that the cameras do not actually allow officers to take responsibility for their actions. The use of these cameras will cost even more money, requiring a budget increase for the SPVM, as researchers (The Gazette, 2021) and activists (Ricochet, 2021) point out.

It was a difficult conversation to have, with many violent stories shared. We felt that the participants wanted to share their stories so that change could occur, *“so that this doesn’t happen to anyone else”*, as one woman said.

To end the meeting, we asked participants to share their needs. They named: **access to social worker outreach services, listening, empathy, validation, safety, to be believed, resources, psychological help, agency and financial compensation, among other things.**



HIGHLIGHTS OF THE 4 DISCUSSION GROUPS WE HELD BETWEEN SEPTEMBER AND DECEMBER 2022

YOUNG WOMEN EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

- **The varied realities of homelessness:** the accepted image of homelessness, an older man with a long beard sleeping in a park, hides the varied realities of homelessness. Other realities, such as those experienced by homeless women, reveal the many problems they have to deal with.
- **Police violence towards people experiencing homelessness:** According to the Réseau d’aide aux personnes seules et itinérantes de Montréal (RAPSIM), there are alarming data concerning police violence towards people experiencing homelessness. Significant rates of verbal abuse, harassment, intimidation and checks without just cause are reported by those affected.
- **The impact of the pandemic on women experiencing homelessness:** The Partenariat pour la prévention et la lutte à l’itinérance des femmes (PPLIF) revealed the worsening precarity of and violence towards women experiencing homelessness, due to the pandemic. Issues like overstretched resources, the underfunding of community work and being turned away from shelters were mentioned.
- **Mental health issues and inadequate police interventions:** The experiences women experiencing homelessness shared show how inadequate police interventions are in situations of psychological distress. Participants described cases where the police arrived too late or used an inappropriate approach, which shows the consequences of the de-institutionalization of mental health services.
- **Questioning the role of police in mental health crises:** Participants wonder what role the police should have in mental health crises, asking themselves how to (re)build a mental health system with appropriate resources. Participants suggested alternatives such as specialized mental health teams rather than standard police interventions.
- **Women’s opinions on the police and their suggested solutions:** Women experiencing homelessness expressed mistrust towards police, described negative experiences and asked themselves whether police protection is actually useful for them. They suggested solutions such as police forces with special missions, improved training for officers and increased investment in police alternatives rather than an increase in police budgets.

WORKERS AT STELLA

- **Ambivalence towards police forces:** Workers described ambivalent feelings towards the police, varying between anger and fear. Sex workers have difficult relationships with police due to the law, moral principles and past events, particularly for marginalized populations.
- **Police violence towards workers in the sex industry:** These workers, especially if they are from minority groups, are often targeted by police violence including verbal harassment, assault and poor treatment. The current system only criminalizes those who solicit sexual services, but sex workers deal with being targeted in various ways, including through intimidation.
- **Need for police reforms:** Suggestion of a more specialized approach with socio-community agents to make the complaint process simpler. Some shared preoccupations concerning “police who are half outreach workers, half police” and criticism of criminalization policies targeting marginalized populations.
- **Mistrust of socio-community officers:** Workers expressed mistrust of partnerships between psychosocial intervention workers and police, revealing that meeting socio-community officers is often unsafe. They worry that collaborating with the police might compromise the intervention workers’ confidentiality and ability to be trusted.
- **Defunding the police:** Proposition to take funding from the SPVM and give it to independent community groups.
- **Decriminalization of sex work, homelessness and drug use:** Less police involvement in these areas would allow for better distribution of resources towards other sectors or services.
- **Criticism of policies and a lack of solidarity:** Workers criticized political approaches, including from progressive governments, and the tendency to criminalize sex workers. Workers criticized the lack of solidarity towards sex workers from some feminist groups and unions. They called for a more inclusive and complete view of sex work as work.

INDIGENOUS WOMEN EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

- **Racial profiling and distrust of law enforcement:** Indigenous women are 11 times more likely to be stopped by police than white women due to racial profiling (Armony *et al.*, 2019). Racial profiling is based on factors of belonging such as “race”, skin colour or ethnic background. It is a widely documented reality.
- **Colonial heritage and its impact on Indigenous women’s safety:** The origins of discriminatory treatment come from Canada’s colonial history. Police forces were first created to support the colonial project, not to ensure public safety. The imposition of colonizers’ legal systems on colonized people was meant to marginalize, neutralize and criminalize traditional Indigenous law, which contributed to Indigenous distrust in institutions.
- **Neocolonialism and continued colonial practices:** Neocolonialism continues despite attempts at constitutional reform and policy changes for First Nations police forces. Indigenous police forces do not have the same status and budget as non-Indigenous police forces, which creates linguistic barriers, profiling, stereotypes, and racism.
- **Institutional violence and a lack of confidence in institutions:** Law enforcement perpetuates abuses, bullying and sexual violence, which contribute to Indigenous women’s lack of confidence towards these institutions. Forced sterilizations and other forms of institutional violence reinforce this lack of trust.
- **Injustice in the penal system and disproportionate repression:** Indigenous women are overrepresented in the Canadian penal system, with cases of excessive judicialization and inhuman treatment while in detention. Social profiling leads to unjust tickets, abusive tailing from private security guards and difficulty interacting with institutions including banks.
- **Resistance and hope for change:** Indigenous women use a variety of forms of resistance such as speaking out against violence, humour, and travelling in groups in order to prevent abusive treatment. Despite small improvements, our analysis found limited reasons to be optimistic concerning concrete changes to policy and social practices.

DISCUSSION GROUP WITH ONLINE SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

- **Shared experiences:** Eight women who had negative experiences with police shared their stories with us and with each other.
- **Mistreatment by female police officers:** One participant was mistreated by a female police officer when she asked for help concerning death threats, which showed the officer’s discriminatory behaviour.
- **Sexist pressure from police:** The discussion revealed that women were often mistreated or discouraged from filing complaints by female police officers, perhaps because of sexist pressure and the need to prove themselves in a masculine police environment.
- **Trauma despite receiving help from police:** Some participants were helped by police, but the treatment they experienced from officers has left lasting trauma.
- **Loss of confidence in the legal system:** Others lost confidence in the legal system and want to seek justice in the ways that they see fit.
- **What participants need:** Participants expressed needs such as access to social services, listening, empathy, safety, resources and psychological help.

CONCLUSION

In writing this report, the TGFM wished to give a voice to those who agreed to share their experiences with the police, private security and STM constables, particularly women who live at the intersection of oppressions. Many worrying issues were mentioned by participants and in the existing literature. Some possible solutions came out of our research in order to end discrimination from law enforcement. These solutions will allow us to continue to reflect on how we can ensure real safety for all women. Many of the issues mentioned are systemic, so political will is necessary to find solutions.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

In existing literature and discussions among activists, there are several possible solutions to the question of the police, needs for protection and women’s security. The *Me Too* movement added to these discussions. The existing literature, but especially the results of the study, led to the development of the following possibilities.

A VARIETY OF VIEWPOINTS

For example, think about the demands to reform police officer training so that they learn how to treat victims of sexist and/or sexual violence. "I think that the police should be trained in racial profiling and in how to treat victims of domestic violence". This statement was often mentioned with the idea of specialized tribunals²¹.

To protect victims of domestic violence, the idea of anti-approach bracelets was discussed, among other ideas, but there was not a consensus on the subject.

Concerning police brutality, particularly towards racialized, Indigenous and marginalized communities, some suggest that police should have to wear body cameras²² or that police should be put in teams with social workers, but these initiatives are opposed by grassroots groups, as we mentioned in the section on our discussion groups.

21 " À propos du tribunal spécialisé ". s. d. Gouvernement du Québec. Consulted June 13, 2023. <https://www.quebec.ca/justice-et-etat-civil/systeme-judiciaire/processus-judiciaire/tribunal-specialise-violence-sexuelle-violence-conjugale/a-propos>.

22 On this subject, a story from the *focus group* held with the sex workers at Stella explains that wearing body cameras "would justify increased police spending and will be used to surveil marginalized people, rather than the police: police officers can shut their cameras off. We already know that police officers have one another's backs and will cover for one another, so this will only give them more money and power."

Concerning police brutality, the Conseil des Montréalaises developed the following demands in a report on homeless women in Montreal (2017)²³:

- “That the City of Montreal, with the support of the protector of people experiencing homelessness, put an end to the judicialization of women experiencing homelessness; that the City ensure them better access to justice, particularly through existing programs, encourage them to use the programs and provide the necessary community support.
- That the STM commit to reducing the judicialization of people experiencing homelessness inside their stations.
- That the City of Montreal and the SPVM improve their relationships with First Nations and Inuit people.
- That the SPVM create a position for an Indigenous community development counsellor.
- That the SPVM encourage Indigenous police officers to intervene when Indigenous women experiencing homelessness need support.”(Conseil des Montréalaises, 2017)

The need to train police officers is also essential, and the police is hoping to recruit officers in racialized, Indigenous and marginalized communities²⁴. However, there are no studies that show that a diverse police force leads to institutional change. Indeed, a study on systemic racism in Canadian police services discusses the experiences of racialized police officers: “the racialized officers do not feel included in police culture and are not part of the police brotherhood. I use the word “brotherhood” intentionally. They are not given certain tasks or area assignments, and they are often overlooked when it is time for a promotion.” (McKay, 2021, p.73)

As philosopher Elsa Dorlin explains in her chapter “Tout le monde aime la police” in the book *Défaire la police* (2020), the police are presented as a solution to a variety of social problems: “You don’t need a doctor, a nurse, a shrink, a social worker, a judge, free public transit, shared gardens, land to live on, decent housing, teachers or educational counsellors, cashiers, forest rangers, to need, to warm up, to wash yourself, to house yourself, to hide, to rest, to wander, to forage, you don’t need medicine, documents, gifts, help..., you need more “safety”, so call 17²⁵ ”(Baschet et al., 2021, p.52-53). We felt it important to ask participants’ opinions about some of these solutions, particularly during discussion groups. More broadly, we asked women about their needs and expectations.

23 Conseil des Montréalaises. 2017. " L'itinérance des femmes à Montréal. Voir l'invisible ".

24 " Le SPVM lance l'opération recrutement : diversité ou profil social - Communiqués - Service de Police de la Ville de Montréal - SPVM ". s. d. Consulted June 13, 2023. <https://spvm.qc.ca/fr/Communiqués/Détails/15534>.

25 The French equivalent of 911 in North America.

We also considered Montreal-based demands to defund the police²⁶, and the criticism of proposed police reforms. The Matsuda Collective wrote the following in *Défaire la police* (2020) :

No, calling 911 will not help someone in the midst of a psychotic break, but it is undeniable that the funding for health services has been cut while funding for police services increases. No, hiring police officers who are Black, Latino or from other minority groups will not change the functioning or the direction of a racist institution. No, new training sessions for police officers (to discourage police control or teach de-escalation techniques, etc.) will not diminish violence on the ground. On the contrary, this training will allow officers to aggress, mutilate or kill “while respecting current deontological rules and procedures”. Derek Chauvin himself had given this type of training to his colleagues who helped him kill George Floyd on May 25, 2020. (Baschet et al., 2021, p.32).

FUNDING SOCIAL WORK AND HEALTH CARE

Concerning the idea of teaming up social workers and SPVM officers, Stella offers a critique which wonders what the result of such an initiative would be. They say, “the goal [of these policies] is criminalization, continuing investigations, finding data; so yes, they might be less physically violent, but this will only increase the SPVM’s power”. Stella also wants to defund the police in order to better fund community services while allowing them full autonomy.

In the survey, many of the stories shared discussed the need for access to health care, rather than the need for police services:

Whether it's for me or for someone else, I will no longer contact the police in Montreal's Gay Village. We need outreach workers who have been trained in mental health and addiction, rather than repression, which only perpetuates the cycle of oppression."

"I often find that medical services, emergency services or street outreach workers are better able to de-escalate conflict than the police are. The police could put me in jail. They have weapons. This is an issue when it comes to conflict resolution between individuals where there is no immediate danger (such as a weapon, etc.)."

However, it is important to note that social work can also be influenced by ideological and political beliefs. Historically, social work has been used by the state to oppress Indigenous populations and marginalized people. As a result, if we want to increase access to social services while reducing police services, it is essential to decide what social work approach (whether feminist, anticolonialist, emancipatory, etc.) would be preferred.

26 " Defund La Police ". s. d. Defund the Police Coalition / Coalition Pour Le Définancement de La Police. Consulted June 13, 2023. <https://defundlapolice.com/en/home>.

On this topic, Edward Hong-Sing, MJ Rwigema, Nicole Penak and Craig Fortier, in their chapter called Abolish Carceral Social Work from the book Disarm, Defund, Dismantle: Police Abolition in Canada (Pasternak, Shiri, Kevin Walby et Abby Stadnyk, 2022), call for a radical reflection on social work. The authors feel that “we must oppose all collaboration between social workers and the police. We must resist the carceral functions that social workers can sometimes fulfill in our agencies, schools, hospitals and community organizations (...) It is imperative to reject the idea that social worker are an easy way to get to a world without police.”

More precisely, the authors encourage social workers to build solidarity with the communities they are meant to serve, all while detaching themselves from the state. They feel that “if the way that social work is currently structured contributes to maintaining oppression, the key to collective liberation can be found in approaches which do not centre our relationship with the state, but rather our relationships with one another, the deprofessionalization of care, the promotion of our community, etc. It is essential to redirect financial resources towards these approaches while respecting communities’ autonomy, leadership and vision.”

Concerning the racist and colonialist dimensions of social work, the authors call for social workers to be proactive in contesting the power of social work and of the police. This means recognizing how these systems benefit white supremacy, denouncing them, promoting antiracist and anticolonialist policies, and engaging in efforts to improve the material conditions of BIPOC communities.

DESIRE FOR OTHER FORMS OF JUSTICE

In the survey, a “desire for alternative (non-punitive) justice” was expressed. These alternate forms of justice are used throughout all discussions related to the penal system and to the care of victims of violence, especially women. During the fourth discussion group, which was open to survey participants, the necessity of moving towards other forms of justice was discussed.

It is possible that other approaches, such as reparative justice programs, which seek to reduce dependence on the legal system through mediation, could be extended. We invite you to look at the Équijustice²⁷ website to learn more about their programs. There is also *Outils de paix*, a coalition of organizations which promote non-violence through various approaches.

DECRIMINALIZATION

The workers from Stella were some of the participants who mentioned the need to change laws in order to decriminalize sex work and drug use. More broadly, ending the criminalization of marginalized populations experiencing homelessness or who have major mental health issues would make a big difference.

27 <https://equijustice.ca/fr>

OUR NEEDS

- It is crucial to not criminalize marginalized populations, such as people without permanent addresses, those who use illegal substances, or those who suffer from serious mental health issues.
- We need to reflect on how to manage situations where there is clear and immediate danger of violence by giving people the means to protect themselves or to leave when necessary.
- The capacity to isolate those who might commit serious crimes, such as murder, is essential. It is crucial to take warnings of imminent violence seriously. When women say “My partner is an immediate threat to my life”, the people involved need to be isolated.
- Even though electronic bracelets may seem like an unrealistic measure, we should not exclude them on principle, but consider them on a case-by-case basis. Some women express that they are on the threshold of extreme violence. It is imperative to listen to them.
- Avoiding the creation of criminal records when people are incarcerated can help people find the motivation to change.
- The success of these non-punitive justice approaches depends on constructing community relationships. Communities need to have spaces available which encourage feelings of solidarity, belonging and collective responsibility.
- Encouraging solidarity among women is essential.
- There are needs that have to be met: the need to be listened to and the needs for empathy, validation, recognition, security, and access to information.
- We need more efficient health and social resources, such as intervention and psychological support services, with non-punitive approaches.
- Women must find the ability to act both individually and together.
- The need for justice, reparation, and the restitution of power are essential.
- Access to health care should be guaranteed for all, without exception.

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THE TGFM

The Table des groupes de femmes de Montréal is a regional round table founded in March of 1996. Its mission is to promote and defend the interests of women from a feminist perspective of gender equality. It intervenes in all spheres of social, political, economic and cultural life that may influence women's living conditions in Montreal.