



USJE Responds to the Report of the Mass Casualty Commission

MAY 31, 2023

UNION OF SAFETY AND JUSTICE EMPLOYEES

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SYNDICAT DES EMPLOYÉ-E-S DE LA SÉCURITÉ ET DE LA JUSTICE

Three years ago, the worst mass shooting incident in the history of our country claimed the lives of 22 innocent people in Nova Scotia, and deeply affected thousands more.

The Union of Safety and Justice Employees has reviewed the recommendations from the Mass Casualty Commission, which undertook a rigorous examination of the events leading up and in response to the murder of 22 individuals in Nova Scotia in April 2020 by a lone gunman who disguised himself as a police officer.

USJE recognizes all those who were touched by this tragedy, including the families who lost loved ones, those who were injured or terrorized during the violent rampage, including Lisa Banfield (the gunman's common law partner), all members of the RCMP, Correctional Service of Canada, other first responders, as well as the broader community of Portapique who were directly or indirectly impacted.

Many of USJE's members in Nova Scotia — who are public service employees with the RCMP and CSC — were deeply affected by this tragedy given their support role with

RCMP and CSC operations. Some of the psychological impacts on these employees have yet to be fully acknowledged.

We know this day will never be forgotten by them, or the many Nova Scotians whose lives were changed by this horrible event.

The Mass Casualty Report is comprised of 7 volumes — totaling over 3000 pages — containing a robust examination of the many facets of policing and societal factors that were at play preceding, during, and subsequent to these horrible and traumatic events in rural Nova Scotia.

Because USJE doesn't have the expertise to weigh in on all aspects of the report, our analysis below focuses very specifically on areas where USJE members may be affected because of the efforts by the RCMP and federal and provincial governments to respond to the report in the short and long term.

For more information on the report, please visit: <https://masscasualtycommission.ca/final-report/>

1. RCMP Uniformed Personnel

Early in the report called, *Turning the Tide*, it highlights that:

“We need to rethink the role of the police in a wider ecosystem of public safety. Significant changes are needed to address various community safety and well-being needs of the 21st century. The existing culture of policing must change. Issues around interoperability between emergency responders and other community safety partners, for example, require improvement.”

p. XIII-XIV

The report identifies the people who were affected by the mass-shooting at the start, including those who were directly linked to the geographical area in and around Portapique and were either witnesses of the event or were close enough that they could have been endangered.

The report also references relatives of the victims across Canada and the US (New Mexicans were among the victims) and the public at large who were shocked by the senseless violence.

Finally, USJE members are fleetingly mentioned in the context of first responders and service people, including police operations personnel within the RCMP and other policing agencies, emergency health service professionals, firefighters, and others providing front-line services.

This said, however, when it comes to the specific roles that USJE members would have played in their professional capacity that day, the report is not explicit. There are vague notions of “RCMP operational teams” mentioned throughout but USJE members — who were and are part of the RCMP operational backbone — were not the subject of sustained research or interviews by the commission. Understandably, the focus is almost entirely on the 22 victims, the various witnesses, and their families, as well as the police officers and other key policing personnel who played a role that day.

2. Role of and Support for RCMP Public Service Employees

Overall, the report paints the RCMP at H Division as being overwhelmed by the scale of the disaster, regardless of the quality of the training of the officers. In Volume 7, the commission identified 13 problems with the decision-making process in the first hours of the disaster (p.146-147). The law enforcement professionals involved were not able to picture the scale of the senseless violence unfolding around them and failed to warn the public of the danger.

What is clear is that the support staff of the RCMP is not understood to have contributed to these failures. The command structure suffered under massive stress and a lack of adherence to and/or implementation of rigorous protocols.

Notably, the report emphasizes that:

“RCMP policy requires that a scene commander be designated at a critical incident that entails an IARD response, but no one was appointed to fill that role. The absence of a trained scene commander had a significant adverse impact on the RCMP’s critical incident response in Portapique.”

P. 47

Less acknowledged is the impact on RCMP operational staff who were, nonetheless, deeply implicated in many aspects of policing and public safety promotion and enforcement.

This said, the section of the report focused on the RCMP Operational Communications Centre and the non-commissioned officers who worked on the response from further afield is relevant to USJE’s membership. It sets out and examines the RCMP’s approach to the critical incident response in the first few hours of the mass casualty.

While the Commission is clear about forging important partnerships with external community partners, agencies etc., the specific role of the RCMP’s federal public service employees or civilian members were not examined in a fulsome manner.

Additionally, the Commission makes an urgent call for better coordination across policing services and related agencies who are overseen by different levels of government (municipal, provincial federal, etc):

“We must invest in a public safety system that is about more than police services, where multiple partners work together every day with substantial community engagement.”

p. XIV

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However, the psychological impacts on RCMP operational support staff are not contemplated or examined to any degree of thoroughness in the report.

USJE does note that the emergency psychological services made available to other groups involved in the tragedy were not extended to those who were involved in a technical or operational (behind the scenes) manner in the events.

There was a focus on ensuring information and support was provided to the families of victims, affected citizens, and the community, which USJE fully supports as those services were clearly needed and important. Nonetheless, even within the RCMP, Public Service Employees and Civilian Members were not given access to supports available to RCMP Officers.

3. Larger societal response

The report shines a spotlight on the societal context of the gender-based violence that was perpetrated on that day. Volume 3 of the report is therefore a call to action on the endemic nature of gender-based violence in Canada as the root cause of most other acts of violence including mass casualty events.

Lisa Banfield, the common law spouse of the perpetrator, was a victim of abusive behaviour from him for years. The rampage started with an attempt on her life, which she thankfully survived.

USJE recognizes the extent and severity of gender-based violence as it affects intimate partners, children, families, and organizations. USJE concurs with the recommendation that there must be an effort to mobilize a whole-of-society response; a concerted and long-term focus on situating women's experience at the centre; putting safety first; and imposing meaningful accountable measures.

The report asserts that putting safety first “necessitates lifting women and girls out of poverty, decentering the criminal justice system, emphasizing primary prevention, and supporting healthy masculinity.”

USJE is beginning to explore some of these themes through a variety of forums, such as our increasingly active National Equity Committee,

to ensure that we can contribute meaningfully to societal and cultural change within the organizations in which our members work.

Volume 4 of the report also focuses on “Community”. It contains two very important discussions on the efficiency of the Alert Ready and the public warning system in general. The other focus is on developing a much better effort to fully articulate and understand the nature of rurality, a fundamental concept in a country like Canada that stretches over half a continent.

Rurality and gender-based violence are often linked, as is highlighted in the variety of reports on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. As USJE represents 18,000 federal public safety employees from coast to coast to coast who live in and serve a broad range of urban, rural, and remote communities, we support any and all efforts focused on better resourcing agencies and organizations in rural and remote Canada. This includes areas of policing, violence prevention and a major investment in families and the next generation.

The term “women” in this text is understood in its largest possible meaning to include gender-based violence against any people who identify as women.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Mass Casualty Commission represents a historic analysis of one of Canada's largest modern day tragedies. The complexity and sophistication of this report is impressive, but the fact that many of USJE's members continue to be overlooked is quite disappointing.

Federal public service employees working for the RCMP are a crucial part of the operational backbone from coast to coast to coast and were deeply impacted by what transpired in Portapique and surrounding areas.

Their role in supporting all aspects of RCMP operations is quite significant and their lived experiences as RCMP employees and residents living in Nova Scotia and the Atlantic region need to be better understood as the RCMP moves forward with many of the recommendations in this report.

13 Key Recommendations

As outlined in the *Toronto Star*: www.thestar.com/news/canada/2023/03/30/here-are-13-key-recommendations-of-the-nova-scotia-mass-casualty-commission-report.html

1. An external, independent review of the RCMP, including a review of the contract system under which the RCMP provide policing services to much of rural Canada.
2. After the review, identification by the federal public safety minister of tasks that are suitable to a federal policing agency and ones that are better reassigned to other agencies.
3. Closing of the RCMP's training depot in Regina and establishment of a Canadian Police College. The RCMP should phase out the depot model by 2032 and create a three-year degree-based model of police education for all police services in Canada.
4. A review of the RCMP's critical incident response training, to be completed within six months.
5. Revision of the RCMP's national communications policies to state clearly that the objective is to provide accurate information about its operations, and in particular to respond to media questions in a timely and complete manner.
6. A clearer definition of the relationship between the federal minister of public safety and the commissioner of the RCMP.
7. A national framework for public alerting systems led by Public Safety Canada, with provinces continuing to operate the systems, but "pursuant to national standards."
8. The creation by the federal government by September of a National Resource Hub for Mass Casualty Responses to provide victim services, build capacity to respond to mass casualties and develop a standard for victim responses.
9. A declaration that gender-based violence is a national "epidemic" and a public health approach needs be taken to violence against women. "Stable core funding" for groups that help women survivors, along with the creation of a national commissioner for gender-based violence.
10. Amendments to the Firearms Act to require a license to have ammunition and to limit people to owning ammunition for the weapon they are licensed to have.
11. Federal limits on stockpiling ammunition.
12. Rapid action by the federal government to reduce the number of prohibited semi-automatic firearms in circulation in Canada.
13. Creation by the governments of Canada and Nova Scotia by May 31 of a body to ensure its recommendations are implemented.

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