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Strategic planning practices in policing: evidence from the field

Strategic
planning
practices

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to provide information concerning practices for creating strategic plans in municipal policing organizations and their use in practice.

Design/methodology/approach – This study surveyed a sample of Canadian police services, including four of the ten largest services in Canada, to investigate their planning practices and the study's findings to the results of a content analysis of strategic plans reported by Rogers *et al.* (2020). This study did not conduct content analysis and therefore relied on the findings of Rogers *et al.* (2020).

Findings – Some respondents indicated they do not apply some practices generally considered advisable. Other respondents indicated they undertake a practice even though doing so is not evident from a review of the associated strategic plans.

Research limitations/implications – This study is based entirely on self-reported survey data. The study did not interview respondents to find out why they responded as they did.

Practical implications – This study points to specific improvements municipal policing organizations could adopt which offer the prospect of creating better strategic plans and better strategic planning outcomes.

Social implications – Policing organizations are important institutions in society. As a regular part of their activities, they interact with a broad cross-section of the society within which they operate. This paper presents ideas concerning how policing organizations can improve how they adapt themselves to their social environment to improve those interactions.

Originality/value – No other study collects self-reported data on how police services conduct strategic planning and use strategic plans at this level of detail.

Keywords Organizational strategy, Strategic planning, Policing, Planning processes

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Several factors differentiate municipal police services from other organizations. Chief among them is state-sanctioned police use of force. This is rare among organizations. It also has a significant implication: police officers can find themselves in contentious and dangerous situations. The public is naturally interested in how municipal police services use force (Roach, 2022). Police services are, therefore, under intense public scrutiny. There have been many situations in which the public has called into question the behaviour of the police, for example, in cases of officer-involved violence and officer-involved shootings (Maynard, 2020). The fact that the public regards some of these behaviours as inappropriate intensifies the public's scrutiny of the police and raises the public's expectations of police officers.

Policing organizations also attract attention because they are expensive (Di Matteo, 2014; Griffiths *et al.*, 2014). Canada, for instance, spent \$15.7 billion on municipal policing in 2019 (Conor *et al.*, 2020) [1]. The costliness of policing raises stakeholder expectations as the public expects value for the money police services spend.



Few organizations need organizational strategy setting more than policing organizations. At its core, organizational strategy involves understanding the organization's environment and ensuring it has the resources and skills to succeed. Policing organizations will find it challenging to meet stakeholder expectations if they fail to achieve the best fit of their organizations with their environments.

Unfortunately, there is evidence that organizational strategies in policing need improvement. Rogers *et al.* (2020) raise several criticisms. Some examples are (a) articulated strategies appear unlikely to help leadership in their decision-making; (b) components one would expect to see in a well-constructed strategic plan seem absent and (c) there is a lack of focus on performance measurement, so the strategies do not come across as real commitments.

Why would this be the case? An answer may lie in the strategy-setting processes policing organizations deploy. To find out if there is a connection between these processes and the observed weaknesses in strategic plans, we surveyed policing organizations in Canada in partnership with the Canadian Association of Police Governance ("CAPG"). The primary focus of our survey is the determination of the activities policing organizations undertake as they develop their strategic plans. Our study is unique. We know of no other research like it. Our study is informative. We make several suggestions that are likely to improve articulated strategies and performance in policing organizations.

This paper proceeds with a literature review. Next, we discuss our survey methodology, including a description of the themes we address in the survey questions. We go on to present our findings and a discussion of them. Finally, we conclude.

Literature review

Our literature review discusses earlier works, concluding that a well-constructed organizational strategy is essential for success. Next, we consider organizational strategy in policing to provide context for our work. We then discuss the desired construction and content of a strategic plan in policing and board involvement in the planning process to provide a foundation for our survey questions. Finally, we discuss observed strategic plan content.

Strategic planning background

According to Steensen (2014), the idea of organizational strategy emerged in Chandler's seminal work entitled *Strategy and Structure: Chapters in the History of the American Industrial Enterprise* (1969). Chandler characterizes strategy as "... the determination of the basic long-term goals and objectives of an enterprise, and the adoption of courses of action and the allocation of resources necessary for carrying out these goals." (Chandler, 1969, p. 13). Nag *et al.* (2007) placed the beginning of strategic management as an academic discipline in 1979 when Schendel and Hofer published *Strategic Management: A New View of Business Policy and Planning*. They argue that upon its publication, the field of business policy was "... abruptly reconceptualized and relabeled ..." [2] to corporate strategy.

Moore and Trojanowicz (1989) address strategy in policing organizations. They characterize it as articulating what "... the organization proposes to do and how it proposes to do it" (Moore and Trojanowicz, 1989, p. 2). This definition is prescriptive for policing organizations. It implies that their strategic plans need to be clear on these points.

There has been plenty of time for the literature on strategy to develop. It includes articles that address the nature of strategic management (Porter, 1996; Nag *et al.*, 2007), how to conceptualize strategic management (Andrews, 1997), case studies (e.g. Li and Alexander, 2021; Holubcik *et al.*, 2020) and empirical studies (Ogunmokun *et al.*, 2005). Over time, the idea

of strategy setting has become widely applicable. In his article entitled *What is Strategy?* Porter (1996) refers to no less than 15 different industries.

There is a reasonably well-shared view of what constitutes an organizational strategy. Articulating an organizational strategy is a mainstream activity, and organizations ought to approach doing so deliberately and earnestly. Each of these matters underlies our decision to include questions in our survey to determine if our respondents appear to be appropriately conscientious in their strategy formulation processes.

Organizational strategy in policing. Many have examined strategic planning in policing. For example, Hann and Mortimer (1994) developed a comprehensive planning approach based on their observation of the Queensland Police Service. Their approach parallels the themes stressed in Hawkins (2005), such as setting goals, developing strategies for achieving them, identifying short-term objectives and making implementation plans.

Zhao *et al.* (2008) characterize strategic planning as involving two dimensions. The first is the breadth of coverage of organizational units by the plan, which they refer to as plan *width*. The second is the extent of organizational levels involved in the plan, which they refer to as *depth*. Their study underscores the need for organizations to make conscious decisions concerning how they approach these dimensions.

Williams (2015) analyses the factors that affect business plan implementation. He bases his study on data from Zhao *et al.* (2008), Law Enforcement Management and Administrative Statistics and the United States Census. He finds that including internal stakeholders in the planning process is the most important factor for successfully implementing strategic plans.

Alosani *et al.* (2020) use data from a survey of members of the Dubai Police to examine the effect of innovation and strategic planning on organizational performance. They find empirical support for contributions from innovation and strategic planning.

Elliott *et al.* (2020) use data from police services in England and Wales to examine the contribution of strategic planning to organizational performance. They find that strategic planning contributes to organizational performance by folding in the contributions of higher-level middle managers. They also find that the strategic planning process can assist in building more effective relationships with stakeholders, thus contributing to overall organizational effectiveness.

Cheung and Yu (2020) conducted a case study on the strategy-setting process at the Hong Kong Police Force from 2017 to 2019. Their main finding is that successful strategic management requires genuine commitment from top management throughout the strategy-setting process. A second key finding is that the process must build buy-in among service members. Cheung and Yu (2020) make clear that strategic planning is a deliberate and intentional activity that links a deep understanding of the organization's environment and a thoughtful evaluation of the future to inform decisions concerning what the organization intends to do and how it intends to do it.

We drew on the above to determine our survey questions.

Guidance from the literature on typical strategic plan contents. Our survey examines whether respondents address the typical components of a sound strategic plan. The usual goals of strategic planning in policing are to develop an understanding of the environment within which the policing is to take place, to establish priorities concerning what the police service intends to do and how it intends to do it, to create plans for obtaining the resources to undertake those things and to specify measurable outcomes [3].

Police services in larger communities are large, complex organizations that face many challenges. The policing environment is fluid, stochastic and multi-dimensional. Resource use is extensive, and performance measurement is challenging (Hodgkinson *et al.*, 2019). Considering these factors and the intended role of strategic planning, a sensible approach involves a deliberate and intentional process grounded in each organization's statements of values, vision and mission ("VVM"), ultimately leading to a declaration of strategic intent [4].

[Hawkins \(2005\)](#) presents strategic planning as the link between an organization's VVM and organizational actions leading to results. Organizations begin strategic planning by assessing the context within which they function. The term for this assessment is an *environmental scan*. While there are many dimensions organizations could use, the usual ones are political, economic, sociological, technological, demographic and global ("PESTDG") [\[5\]](#). In policing, the environmental scan is important because police services must understand their communities and issues. Doing so enables them to construct themselves to meet their communities' needs and expectations.

Once an organization makes this specification, it can come to an understanding of the skills and resources it needs to be successful. The organization can then identify gaps by comparing this to the skills and resources available. Identifying gaps and specifying how the organization will fill them are the intended results of strategic planning. The organization then links the specification of what it wishes to do, how it will do them and its approach to filling gaps to quantitative and qualitative performance indicators. The organization's performance against pre-specified indicators enables its leadership and stakeholders to assess whether the current strategic plan continues to be the right one, whether the organization is achieving its stated outcomes and whether it is addressing gaps in skills and resources. [Poister \(2010\)](#) emphasizes the importance of focusing on strategy formulation, performance management and performance measurement. In this paradigm, the strategic plan is the framework within which the organization drives itself forward to benefit its stakeholders.

We used the preceding to guide us as we determined our survey questions.

Guidance from the literature on board involvement in strategic planning

A question in strategy formulation is the degree to which an organization's board should be involved in the planning process. [Zahra \(1990\)](#) proposes a way to involve board members in developing an organization's strategic direction. It specifies eight conditions for an effective strategic contribution from the board ([Zahra, 1990](#), commencing on p. 112). They see assistance from board members as leading to more effective corporate performance.

[Judge and Zeithaml \(1992\)](#) discuss the idea of board involvement, citing some authorities who advocate it and others who resist it. They conclude that board involvement in strategy setting positively affects financial performance.

[Siciliano \(2005\)](#) studied board involvement in strategy setting in the credit union business. They find that both Chief Executive Officers ("CEO") and board members agree with board involvement, with stronger agreement among board members than CEOs. [Siciliano \(2005\)](#) further reports that boards are more involved with new strategic decisions than with strategic planning in general. Finally, [Siciliano \(2005\)](#) finds relatively little board involvement in evaluating prior strategic choices. Interestingly, [Siciliano \(2005\)](#) recommends creating a strategic management system that specifies how the board interacts with management in the strategy-setting process.

In an action research study of the New Zealand sports organization responsible for football (soccer in some jurisdictions), [Ferkins et al. \(2009\)](#) found support for the benefits of board involvement in strategy setting. Somewhat like [Siciliano \(2005\)](#), they underscore the complexities of the board and management collaborating on strategy and emphasize the need to "integrate strategy into board processes." ([Ferkins et al., 2009](#), p. 245).

Overall, there appears to be general support for the idea that board involvement in strategy setting is beneficial. Also beneficial, however, are established processes for what this involvement might include. Finally, there appears to be a limit for board involvement that, if exceeded, harms organizational performance.

Observed strategic plan content

As we indicated at the outset, our study seeks to determine if there is an apparent connection between the weaknesses in strategic plans that [Rogers et al. \(2020\)](#) observe and the nature of planning processes in policing organizations. We, therefore, present a discussion of this article.

[Rogers et al. \(2020\)](#) present the results of their review of the strategic plans of 23 of Canada's larger municipal police services. Seventeen of the twenty-three police services covered in [Rogers et al. \(2020\)](#) are CAPG members. Our survey did not require respondents to declare their police service affiliations, so it is impossible to do a complete one-to-one matching of the police services that responded to our survey and the police services covered in [Rogers et al. \(2020\)](#). Nevertheless, some of our respondents voluntarily declared their affiliations, thus enabling us to identify that nine of the seventeen CAPG members in the [Rogers et al. \(2020\)](#) study are also respondents in the current study. There may be additional overlap that we cannot determine due to the lack of a requirement in the survey to report affiliations.

In their review, [Rogers et al. \(2020\)](#) considered the completeness and quality of the way the strategic plans addressed (a) an environmental scan; (b) guiding statements for the organizations (i.e. statements of value, vision, mission and strategic purpose) and (c) areas of operational focus (i.e. law enforcement, crime prevention, community relations, organizational performance and employee focussed goals).

They found that most strategic plans did not report on the political dimension of an environmental scan [6]. Only 15 of 23 strategic plans overtly considered demographic considerations. Generally, commentary related to the environmental scan was of low to medium quality. The quality of the comments was so poor it looked as if there was no underlying intention to use the strategic plans to guide the organization.

The plans generally presented statements of values, vision and mission, but the commentary elaborating on these statements did poorly in [Rogers et al.'s \(2020\)](#) scoring paradigm. They provide this summary comment:

Some plans, however, provided statements that were very spare and potentially banal . . . ([Rogers et al., 2020](#), p. 217)

10 of 23 strategic plans failed to provide a statement of strategic purpose. They addressed operational focus areas but lacked specifics on the organizations' intentions to allocate resources to achieve the plans' goals. Additionally, the strategic plans lacked specific performance indicators to determine whether organizations achieved their goals.

These outcomes are inconsistent with the importance of strategic plans discussed above and do not match up well with the process for doing strategic planning set out above. They cause one to wonder if the observed weaknesses in the strategic plans arise because of the methods used to create them.

Methodology

This study surveyed policing organizations in Canada to find out, among other things, the tasks they undertake as they go about their strategic planning processes and impressions of the relevance and usefulness of the strategic plans they produce.

The authors of this paper developed the survey questions in consultation with the CAPG. The CAPG distributed the survey to the board chairs of its 78 members, each of which is a municipal policing organization, on April 1, 2019. The survey was closed on April 22, 2019, constituting a three-week open period. The survey recipients received one reminder to reply within the three-week open period and a second reminder with five days left. The CAPG received the survey responses and recorded the data in a spreadsheet. We received the

spreadsheet on May 30, 2019, and developed the tables below. Thirty-seven services responded, representing a 47% response rate. The survey took approximately 15–20 min to complete. [Table 1](#) provides details concerning the nature of the respondents.

Respondent profile - Table 1

[Table 1](#) shows respondents were geographically dispersed and dispersed across services of different types. There was variation in the respondent’s role at the service, which we expected because the chair is not necessarily the person most familiar with the planning details. In total, 43% of respondents were police service board members or staff.

The fact that we did not directly investigate participant behaviour or observe how participants use strategic plans are limitations of our study. We leave the further investigation of these matters to future studies.

The fact that we had no control over which individual completed the survey further limits our study. We asked for our survey to be completed by individuals with the knowledge to provide informed responses, but we couldn’t be specific because we could not determine who this might be.

Our review of the relevant literature enabled us to identify eight themes for our survey questions [\[7\]](#).

Plan creation - Table 2

The literature supports involving governing boards in strategic planning. In [Table 2](#), we consider the roles of the board and the police service in initiating planning, producing the plan, providing the funding and doing the work involved.

Board direction - Table 3

[Siciliano \(2005\)](#) recommends creating a strategic management system to manage board involvement in strategy setting. In [Table 3](#), we consider aspects of board involvement.

<i>Service location</i>			
Ontario	38%		
Saskatchewan	14%		
British Columbia	19%		
Alberta	5%		
Manitoba	8%		
New Brunswick	5%		
Nova Scotia	11%		
<i>Service size</i>			
First nations	Small	Medium	Large
8%	35%	22%	35%
<i>Respondent’s role</i>			
Chair	Vice Chair	Member	Did not declare
27%	5%	49%	19%
<i>Respondent’s experience in years</i>			
< 3	3–6	6–10	> 10
37%	24%	5%	29%
<i>Respondent’s familiarity with planning</i>			
Somewhat	Very		
38%	62%		

Note(s): In [Table 1](#), the percentages shown are the percentage of respondents who selected from one of the available choices

Source(s): Table by authors

Table 1.
Respondent profile

Plan creation	Larger services			Smaller services			Strategic planning practices
	Board (%)	Service (%)	Other (%)	Board (%)	Service (%)	Other (%)	
Initiates the planning process	46	38	15	58	29	13	
Produces the plan	54	31	15	42	29	29	
Provides the funding	39	62	0	50	42	8	
Who actually does the work to prepare the plan	31	62	8	25	50	25	
Note(s): In Table 2 , the percentages shown are the percentage of respondents who selected from among the available choices							
Source(s): Table by authors							
Table 2. Plan creation							

Table 2.
Plan creation

Board direction	Larger services (%)	Smaller services (%)	Overall (%)
There is an existing policy on plan preparation	77	46	57
The board is involved or very involved in deciding on content	93	96	95
The board participates in analyzing data for the plan	38	67	57
The board makes a significant contribution to the plan	77	100	92
Note(s): In Table 3, the first three items report the percentage of respondents who responded “yes” to the related question. In the fourth item, the percentage presented is the percentage of respondents who selected Agree or Strongly Agree from among Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Agree and Strongly Agree			
Source(s): Table by authors			

Table 3.
Board direction

Data foundation - Table 4

Table 4 considers three sources of information policing organizations can use to ground their assessments of their environments.

Stakeholder engagement - Table 5

Table 5 considers some activities undertaken in planning processes to help strategic planners understand their stakeholders.

Data foundation	Larger services (%)	Smaller services (%)	Overall (%)
Police workload statistics	85	92	89
Police budget statistics	77	71	73
Community population statistics	77	79	78
Note(s): Table 4 shows the percentages of respondents who answered “yes” to using the specified data source in developing strategic plans			
Source(s): Table by authors			

Table 4.
Data foundation

Process - Table 6
Hawkins (2005) documents the steps involved in creating a strategic plan. Siciliano (2005) approximates these with a five-step strategic planning process. Table 6 considers specific plan elements.

Environmental assessment - Table 7
Many authors stress the importance of scanning the environment, usually along some well-accepted dimensions (e.g. Cheung and Yu, 2020). Table 7 considers which of the typical dimensions our respondents claim to have addressed.

Application - Table 8
Poister (2010) stresses that for a plan to contribute to organizational performance, the organization must use it as a guiding document. Table 8 summarizes how our respondents view plan usage.

Impact - Table 9
Stakeholder buy-in to the importance of the plan is a contributing factor to the contribution of planning to performance (e.g. Cheung and Yu, 2020). We explore matters related to this in Table 9.

We used 61 survey questions. Six questions asked for information about the respondents, 33 addressed elements of how organizations created the strategic plans, 15 inquired about how organizations used the strategic plans or the usefulness of the strategic plans and 7 were

Table 5.
Stakeholder
engagement

Engagement	Larger services (%)	Smaller services (%)	Overall (%)
Community member survey	92	83	86
Police service members/staff survey	85	79	81
Town hall meetings or similar	85	58	68
Are there excluded groups or people?	46	42	43

Note(s): In Table 5, the first three items report the percentage of respondents who answered “yes” to using the specified item in developing strategic plans. The fourth item reports the percentage of respondents who answered yes to the existence of excluded groups or people

Source(s): Table by authors

Table 6.
Process

Process	Larger services (%)	Smaller services (%)	Overall (%)
Key issues are identified	100	100	100
Key issues are prioritized using data	92	92	92
Key issues are used to identify goals	92	100	97
Specific indicators are identified to determine progress on goals	85	83	84
Board identifies performance outcomes	69	79	76

Note(s): In Table 6, the percentages shown are the percentage of respondents who responded in the affirmative to engaging in the indicated activity

Source(s): Table by authors

Environmental assessment	Survey: % addressing		Plan review		Strategic planning practices
	Larger services	Smaller services	% addressing	Quality of comments	
	(%)	(%)		(%)	
Political (“P”)	69	67	9	25	
Economic (“E”)	92	96	39	69	
Sociological (“S”)	100	79	39	64	
Technological (“T”)	85	79	48	59	
Demographic (“D”)	92	88	65	75	
Global (“G”)	62	42	13	42	
Note(s): In Column 1 of Table 7 , the percentages shown are the percentage of respondents who responded affirmatively to considering the indicated item in their strategic planning processes. In Column 2, percentages shown are the percentage of strategic plans reviewed in Rogers et al. (2020) where consideration of the indicated item was observed. Column 3 is a score out of 100% assigned by Rogers et al. (2020) based on assessing the quality of comments observed in strategic plans about the indicated items					
Source(s): Table by authors					
Table 7. Environmental assessment					

Application	Larger services (%)	Smaller services (%)	Overall (%)	
Progress toward goals reviewed periodically	85	88	86	
Used to guide board decision making	85	100	95	
Used to develop budgets and operating plans	92	92	92	
Used to assess the Chief's performance	92	92	92	
Used to assess the performance of the service	92	88	89	
The plan is very or extremely useful	70	63	65	

Note(s): [Table 8](#)'s first five items report the percentage of respondents who say that the indicated activity was undertaken. For the sixth item, the percentage reported is the percentage of respondents who selected Very Useful or Extremely Useful from among Somewhat Useful, Very Useful and Extremely Useful

Source(s): Table by authors

Table 8.
Application

Impact	Larger services (%)	Smaller services (%)	Overall (%)	
The board rubber stamps the plan	46	17	27	
I am not really sure of the purpose of the plan	8	8	8	
Essentially a marketing tool	46	33	37	
Essentially a communication tool	54	59	57	
Of limited use in guiding decision making	31	29	29	
Commission rarely uses the plan	31	33	33	
There must be a better way	31	25	28	

Note(s): In [Table 9](#), the percentages shown are the percentage of respondents who selected Agree or Strongly Agree from among Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Agree and Strongly Agree

Source(s): Table by authors

Table 9.
Impact

repeated questions intended to uncover inconsistencies in responses. Insofar as these were concerned, we found no material inconsistencies.

Findings

In the following, we report results separately for (a) the 35% of respondents who identified as larger services ("LaS") in [Table 1](#) and (b) the rest of the respondents, which we refer to as smaller services ("SmS").

[Table 2](#) summarizes the responses to questions concerning plan creation. A response under "Board" means that a member of the police service board undertook the activity shown in the table. A response under Service means that an employee of the police service undertook the activity.

Respondents indicated that, most frequently, the police service board initiated the strategic planning process (46% for LaS; 58% for SmS) and produced the plan (54% for LaS; 42% for SmS). In LaS, the service provided the funding in 62% of instances compared to 50% for SmS. Service members tend to do the work to prepare the plan (62% for LaS; 50% for SmS). Under this item, 25% of SmS respondents chose Other. Both the board and the service did the work for these respondents, but in response to a commission policy, or in cases where the Ontario Provincial Police provided policing service to the community, by the OPP itself.

Given the support in the literature for board involvement in strategic planning processes, the results in [Table 2](#) suggest that some respondents may need to adopt board involvement. These results may be related to the fact that only 57% (OvA, [Table 3](#)) of respondents claim to have an existing policy on plan preparation. Developing a formal policy might trigger a more intentional discussion of whether and how to involve the board.

An additional implication of the lack of a planning policy statement is that a group tasked with creating a new strategic plan wouldn't necessarily have any members in common with the group that created the expiring plan. Even if there is some membership continuity, memories of a planning process implemented several years ago may have faded. Consider the finding reported by [Johnsen \(2022\)](#):

A multivariate regression analysis showed that a prospector adaptation, stakeholder participation, use of management tools and ease of use of the strategic planning process had the greatest positive correlation with the perceived usefulness of strategic planning. ([Johnsen, 2022](#), p. 1)

Ease of use of the planning process is clearly important. It seems likely that policing organizations could enhance ease of use by maintaining an evolving policy that specifies what the planning process should include. Those engaged in planning could, and probably should, improve the policy over time.

[Table 3](#) indicates the board is very involved in deciding on the content of the strategic plan (95% OvA) for both LaS and SmS. It significantly contributes to strategic planning in most instances (92% OvA), but its involvement in analyzing data for strategic planning is somewhat more limited (38% for LaS; 67% for SmS). This outcome is unsurprising since LaS have the resources to employ analysts to undertake this work.

[Table 4](#) shows the frequency of respondents reporting they used the data sources listed in the table. LaS and SmS reported using police workload statistics frequently (85 and 92%, respectively). Services use police budget statistics (73% OvA) and community population statistics (78% OvA) less frequently than police workload statistics, but similarly so across LaS and SmS. Although the results suggest frequent or very frequent use of the indicated data sources, the small group that said they did not do so may need to re-evaluate their approach. Grounding plans in data gives them a verifiable foundation and lends legitimacy to them. Again, an existing policy on strategic plan preparation might encourage using foundational data more frequently.

Table 5 considers sources of stakeholder input to the planning process.

86% (OvA) of respondents reported using a community member survey, and 81% (OvA) reported using a police service member or staff survey, with slight differences across service sizes. 85% of respondents from LaS reported using town hall meetings or similar, versus 58% for the SmS. While the percentages reported are encouraging, it is probable that all services should use the engagement tools considered in Table 5 to improve their understanding of their communities. We acknowledge that SmS may have ways of getting in touch with their smaller communities in less formal ways than through town hall meetings.

Most noteworthy in Table 5 is that 43% of respondents (46% for LaS; 42% for SmS) say that planning processes excluded some groups or individuals. One respondent explained it this way:

Despite best efforts, including working directly with councils, the workforce, and community members through forums and surveys, the majority of people in our community do not engage.

Another respondent indicated the following:

There is no effort to target specific groups in the process, so it is hard to assess any specific demographic, group, or individual missed.

Also mentioned are youth, students and marginalized populations. The following is a representative comment:

It is very hard to say that all groups or individuals' views are captured, but I cannot think of a group that we are missing or leaving out . . . perhaps the youth? Perhaps we should consider asking Schools to contribute.

Exclusion can be problematic because modern social media capabilities can give a powerful voice to groups or individuals who feel excluded or feel strategic plans fail to address their concerns. Exclusion is also antithetical to the idea that strategic planning is rooted in aligning an organization with its environment. Knowing the front-of-mind issues for stakeholders is an essential antecedent to alignment. Here again, the low reported percentage may be tied to the low reported existence of a policy on plan preparation. Such a policy could describe how planners should encourage engagement.

Table 6 addresses elements of the process. It reports solid results for the first three elements (100, 92 and 97%, respectively, OvA) with similar results across the LaS and SmS. Performances on specifying indicators (84% OvA) and identifying performance outcomes (76% OvA) are less solid. This result is consistent with the perennial problems police services face in measuring performance. Hodgkinson *et al.* (2019) summarize the measurement challenges police services have faced for many years.

While measurement is challenging in policing, it is critical for successfully implementing a strategic plan. Once an organization creates a strategic plan, there must be measurement to determine if the organization is carrying out the actions delineated in the plan. Poister (2010) argues that planning empowers an organization to engage in strategic and performance management. Interestingly, the SmS report identifying performance outcomes more frequently (79%) than LaS (69%). It was beyond this project's scope to identify the source of this difference. Doing so offers an opportunity for future research.

The first two columns of Table 7 show the frequency with which respondents report addressing the usual strategy-setting dimensions – PESTDG. Results are encouraging for the ESTD components (E: 92% LaS/96% SmS; S: 100% LaS/79% SmS; T: 85% LaS/79% SmS and D: 92% LaS/88% SmS). Performance is weaker for the Political (69% LaS/67% SmS) and Global (62% LaS/42% SmS) components.

The third column of Table 7 presents the percentage of strategic plans reviewed by Rogers *et al.* (2020) where they observed commentary on the individual components of PESTDG.

The availability of data from two sources enables a comparison of what respondents said in our survey to what [Rogers et al. \(2020\)](#) actually observed. For example, for the P dimension, 69% LaS/67% SmS of respondents reported considering the Political dimension, but [Rogers et al. \(2020\)](#) found evidence of this in only 9% of the plans they reviewed. They find similar mismatches for every item listed in [Table 7](#). Part of the issue could be that organizations consider components of PESTDG in their planning but do not record their deliberations in the plans. While this approach may arise for practical reasons, we believe the plans should reflect what the planners considered.

The fourth column of [Table 7](#) presents the scores assigned by [Rogers et al. \(2020\)](#) for the quality of the comments in the plans corresponding to each element of PESTDG. Results are mediocre for Economic (69%), Sociological (64%), Technological (59%) and Demographic (75%). Similar to our survey responses, the results are poorer for the Political (25%) and Global (42%) dimensions than for the other four dimensions. Although respondents say they address the ESTD dimensions, these do not show as being addressed in many of the strategic plans themselves, and when planners do address them, they do not do so in a high-quality manner. As [Rogers et al. \(2020\)](#) note:

... are the relatively poor ratings for the quality of the environmental scan factors mentioned in the plans. These range from a low of 25% for political factors to a high of 75% for demographics. This may be indicative of a failure to recognize the importance of providing detailed descriptions of these factors – it is, of course, especially important if this information is actually intended to be used to inform decision making or for other planning purposes. That these scores are so low implicitly suggests that this may not be the intent of these strategic planning documents. ([Rogers et al., 2020](#), p. 216)

The difference in outcomes for the survey results versus the review of the strategic plans suggests that further research is needed to determine why this is occurring. Of course, the fact that few respondents report working from a template for how to create a strategic plan may be at the root of this. Planners may not know that they should address all of the PESTDG elements and may not know what a fulsome effort to address each element is supposed to look like. An evergreen document that details how to conduct strategic planning could improve outcomes.

It is also the case that survey respondents can sometimes report aspirations rather than facts. [Andrews et al. \(2006\)](#) discuss this issue in the following way:

Empirical research suggests that chief executives tend to provide information on strategic aspirations rather than actual strategies and overlook the range of different perceptions of strategy within organizations ([Bowman and Ambrosini, 1997](#); [Walker and Enticott, 2004](#); [Andrews et al., 2006](#), p. 55)

Our survey results may be suffering from a similar phenomenon, which is a matter that researchers could address in future work.

The results in [Table 8](#) suggest that respondents used strategic plans appropriately and that this is the case for both LaS and SmS. 86% (OvA) of respondents reported reviewing progress toward goals periodically. 95% (OvA) indicated that the respondents' organizations used plans to guide board decision-making. 92% (OvA) said organizations used the plans to develop budgets and operating plans. 92% (OvA) said they used plans to assess the Chief's performance. 89% (OvA) said they used the plans to assess the performance of the service. An exception to the solid results for the first five items is that only 65% (OvA) of respondents said the strategic plan is very or extremely useful. This outcome is consistent with the sentiment expressed by [Rogers et al. \(2020\)](#) that strategic plans come across more as public relations documents than plans used to guide decision-making and action.

Such an outcome is problematic for any organization. A strategic plan is an overall statement of an organization's direction. One of the main reasons organizations create strategic plans is to establish a benchmark against which the organization can evaluate many organizational decisions. The leading question organizations need to answer every time they make a decision is this: Is my decision supportive of realizing the strategic plan? Suppose organizations never ask this question and never deliberately evaluate the answer against the strategic plan. In that case, they run the risk that the sum-total of their decisions operate to subvert the strategic plan. Failure to cross-check decisions against the strategic plan can cause mission drift, leading to an oft-asked question: Knowing where we started from and what we were trying to achieve, how did we end up in this position instead?

Failure to benchmark an organization's behaviour to its strategic plan on an ongoing basis can lead to misalignment. We specify three types:

- (1) Resource misalignment: Is the organization putting together its resources to realize its strategic plan?
- (2) Implementation misalignment: Are the things the organization implements as time unfolds consistent with the strategic plan?
- (3) Measurement misalignment: Does the organization measure what it needs to determine whether it is implementing its stated strategic plan, if it continues to be the right one, and if it is delivering the intended results?

A strategic plan provides organizational focus. If the organization faces growing misalignment, it is, in effect, discarding the direction it sought when it made the strategic plan. Misalignment makes it difficult for the organization to succeed. Here, let us point to a quote that appears in the book *The five dysfunctions of a team* (Lencioni, 2006):

If you could get all the people in an organization rowing in the same direction, you could dominate any industry, in any market, against any competition, at any time.

A strategic plan provides an organization's focus and alignment to get "all the people in an organization rowing in the same direction . . .".

As Table 9 shows, 46% of respondents from LaS say that the board rubber stamps the plan. It is important to evaluate this in the context of 93% of respondents from LaS stating that the board is involved or very involved in deciding on the strategic plan's contents (Table 3). This raises doubt concerning the meaning of this result. The idea of rubber stamping the plan could just as well be related to the board already being familiar with what the service is asking them to approve as opposed to indifference to their role as approvers. More research is required on this issue.

8% of both LaS and SmS say they are not sure of the purpose of the plan. This is a small percentage, but it is disconcerting that it is not even closer to zero. As for the role of the strategic plan as a marketing tool, results strongly support the idea that respondents believe this (46% LaS/33% SmS). The same goes for the question couched in terms of a communication tool (54% LaS/59% SmS). Indeed, strategic plans can be a marketing or communication tool because they explain the nature and intent of a municipality's police service. But for respondents to declare this is *essentially what it is* suggests a problem. A strategic plan is essentially a tool for articulating how a police service fits within its environment, how it intends to be successful and for guiding decision making on these dimensions.

Outcomes are also weak for the last three items addressed in Table 9. Percentages that declare plans of limited use (29% OvA), as rarely used (33% OvA), and that there must be a

better way (28% OvA) are disconcerting. Also, there is not much difference between outcomes for LaS versus SmS. Unfortunately, these results are consistent with the results of [Rogers et al. \(2020\)](#), where much of what they observed comes across as perfunctory. Future research needs to examine the causative sources of such poor results.

Conclusions

Several central messages emerge from our survey. First, the frequency of adopting a policy on plan preparation seems too low. It is difficult to achieve continuity in the planning process and improve it without a deliberately constructed policy.

The results suggest that more planners should make use of foundational data. The weak results on plan usage and plan buy-in may be related to the inadequate use of data to underpin the plan. If a plan is not grounded in data, it can come across as a thought experiment or as a communications exercise rather than as a compelling document to be used to guide the organization.

The results indicate that some planning processes exclude some stakeholders. The protocol for including stakeholders is a matter that a policy on plan preparation would typically address. Policing organizations must develop robust protocols for the broad inclusion of stakeholders and record them in organizational memory. The protocol can ensure there is appropriate inclusion even if the members of the planning team change.

There appears to be a need to increase focus on setting specific goals and measuring outcomes. [Poister \(2010\)](#) argues that goal setting and measurement followed by performance management is the point of the strategy-setting exercise. It is difficult to use a plan for organizational guidance if it lacks specifics on the goals the organization is pursuing and fails to measure progress toward those goals.

The weak results under plan usage cause one to wonder how the planning process was motivated and pitched to interested parties. [Cheung and Yu \(2020\)](#) describe a comprehensive approach for planners to include key participants to achieve buy-in and information sharing. As organizations form policies on plan preparation, the policy can specify behaviours and activities that promote buy-in.

Insofar as opportunities for future research are concerned, it appears that approaches to strategy setting in the larger police services are inconsistent with the fact they are “multi-operating-unit” organizations. Instead of a single over-arching strategic plan, some organizations like this create an organization-wide one combined with operating-unit strategic plans. Future work could examine the role of the latter approach in larger police services.

Notes

1. Unfortunately, the Statistics Canada series entitled *Police resources in Canada* was discontinued after the 2019 publication cited here.
2. [Nag et al. \(2007\)](#), p. 935.
3. This paraphrases most of article 146 of the Police Services Act, RSO 1990.
4. The statement of strategic intent often takes the form of articulation of strategic priorities and the reasons for them.
5. These are similar to the dimensions referenced in [Cheung and Yu \(2020\)](#), p. 247.
6. The absence of commentary on the political dimension may arise because there are sensitivities to how a policing organization explains its political climate.
7. The survey questions are available upon request of the first listed author.

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