

Poll shows Torontonians split on Police Chief Saunders' performance

Chief once called public trust “fundamental” but “fragile”; his first year doesn't appear to have boosted that trust.



Chief Mark Saunders participates in a Toronto Police Services Board meeting. (RENE JOHNSTON / TORONTO STAR) | [ORDER THIS PHOTO](#)

By **WENDY GILLIS** News reporter

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A Toronto police officer had been found guilty of attempted murder. Another had been caught on video unloading more than a dozen bullets into the hood of a car at midday next to a downtown playground. Now, four officers had just been charged with perjury after a judge accused them of “fabrication” in court.

It had been a tough week — an “anomaly,” Chief Mark Saunders told an early morning news conference last January, hours after the four officers were charged.

“We will do our best to [get the public trust back that we have lost in certain ways.](#)”

Public trust, Saunders acknowledged in his cover letter to the Toronto Police Services Board when applying to be chief, is “fragile” but

“fundamental to our success.” It is also difficult to gauge.

Saunders was sworn in at a packed ceremony inside Toronto police headquarters May 20, 2015.

A new, exclusive Forum poll for the Toronto Star shows residents give mixed reviews to Saunders' first year as chief on the issue of public trust.

A random sampling of 804 Toronto voters conducted this week shows 48 per cent of those polled approve of his performance, four in 10 rating him as “excellent” or “good,” while the same number said he was “fair” or “poor.”

As the city experiences a recent rise in violent crime — the number of homicides in 2016 is double that of this time last year, 30 compared with 15 — just over one-quarter of those polled said they feel less safe in Toronto now than a year ago, when Saunders took over from outgoing chief Bill Blair.

Just over half, however, say the city feels neither more nor less safe now than a year ago.

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Saunders acknowledged concerns about public safety this week, after the city was rocked [by the shooting of Rochelle Bobb](#). The pregnant 35-year-old died, but her premature baby was delivered via emergency c-section.

Noting a rise in crime across the country and beyond, Saunders said this week that Toronto was still the safest big city in North America. But he called for an increase in cooperation from the public — namely, for people to come forward to police with information.

But trust is a necessary factor in encouraging people to go to police. In some communities, mistrust reigns, in no small part because of “carding,” critics say. Mayor John Tory himself has acknowledged the “toxic” effect of the police practice of stopping and documenting people not suspected of a crime.

Shortly after he was named chief, Saunders defended the controversial practice, calling it a valuable policing tool. According to the poll, however, almost half of respondents doubt that carding prevents crime.

“Coming out and supporting carding publicly the way he did showed his lack of experience in dealing with important policing issues in the public domain,” said Darryl Davies, a criminology instructor at Carleton University.

Anthony Morgan, a lawyer formerly with the African Canadian Legal Clinic who now works with the firm Falconers LLP, publicly criticized Saunders on his comments about carding [after the soon-to-be-chief referred to people affected by it “collateral damage.”](#)

A year later, Morgan says Saunders missed the opportunity to demonstrate much-needed leadership on the issue of racial profiling and carding.

What the chief should have done, he said, was acknowledge the feelings of those who felt targeted by racial profiling and that the practice fits into a larger context of anti-black racism in policing.

“He could have acknowledged that, then followed up with the commitment about how he was going to fix it,” he said.

Because that was not the response, Morgan feels community trust in circles who felt targeted by the practice has “absolutely” taken a hit.

With files from Betsy Powell

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THE POLL

One year into Mark Saunders' tenure as Toronto's police chief a Forum poll reveals public opinion is split on his performance. The poll, conducted May 16, is considered accurate plus or minus 4 per cent, 19 times out of 20.

804 Votes were tallied for the poll

40% Less than half of respondents said the chief is doing a good or excellent job.

40% The same number of respondents said Saunders was doing a fair or poor job as chief.

27% More than one-quarter of respondents said they felt less safe in Toronto now than they did a year ago.

12% Proportion of respondents who said they felt safer in the city today than they did a year ago.

23% Less than one-quarter of respondents said they believe community relations between the police and public have suffered over the past year.

47% Almost half of those polled said they doubted carding prevents crime.

25% One-quarter of respondents said they believe carding does prevent crime.

Read more about: [Mark Saunders](#)