

CRIME

Every fast food drive-thru worker in this city is a police informant

By **Nathan Munn** Jun 14, 2018

A policing program that rewards fast-food drive-thru workers for calling the cops on suspected intoxicated drivers is raising questions about accountability and privacy in a mid-sized Canadian city.

Police in the city of Burlington, Ontario wanted to reduce the number of impaired drivers on the road and came up with a novel idea: Why not recruit every fast food drive-thru employee in the city to be a potential informant?

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They reached out to restaurant owners of Tim Horton's, Dairy Queen, Wendy's, A&W, Burger King, Arby's, Harvey's, KFC, Swiss Chalet and McDonald's franchises, and in April 2017 Project Drive Thru was born. Since then, employees of 38 fast-food restaurants in the city have been trained by police to identify suspected drunk or high drivers who pull up to their drive-thru windows, and call 911 to turn them in.

"By taking part [in the program], you and your employees agree to be an extra set of eyes and ears for us," read program materials prepared for restaurant managers by police and obtained by VICE News through a freedom of information request. "Even if you aren't sure, call [police]. It's better to be safe than sorry."

Carolyn Swinson, spokesperson for Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) Canada, told VICE News that MADD believes the program is an effective way to get intoxicated drivers off the road.

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“We often see [news] reports of people being arrested after going to a drive-thru [while intoxicated],” Swinson said in a phone call, noting that drive-thru workers often call police to report obvious drunk drivers anyway.

“Police have simply formalized [the process]. They know that fast food workers can see in the car, they can see if there’s alcohol or drugs.”

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But the repurposing of fast-food workers as extensions of the police doesn’t sit well with everyone.



Project Drive Thru lack accountability and can lead to discrimination.

“I believe that eliminating intoxicated driving is incredibly important,” Morgan told VICE News in a phone call.

“[But] I worry about the biases that could [influence] the decision to call police on certain civilians. Stereotypes about the drunken Indian, or the weed-smoking black man, might [cause] workers to act on these biases [when] reporting to police.”



Project Drive Thru

Do you suspect that a customer is driving under the influence of drugs or alcohol?

See it. Call it.

Dial **9-1-1** and help us get them off the road.



Think a driver is impaired? Here's how to know:



See or smell drugs/alcohol?



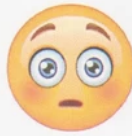
Slurred speech?



Blood-shot or glossy eyes?



Trouble conversing/ordering?



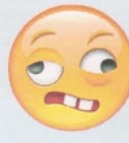
Dilated pupils?



Difficulty handling money?



Bad driving/control of car?



No eye contact?



Sleepy? Unconscious?

For more information, contact:

Halton Regional Police Service
905-825-4777

Twitter: @HaltonPolice/@HRPSBurl

F.O.I.

Details and video at: www.haltonpolice.ca/ProjectDriveThru

intoxication - such as slurred speech, fatigue, or “not making eye contact” - in order to help them decide when to report a driver. Workers receive an iTunes gift card for every tip that leads to an arrest.

Project Drive Thru may not be achieving its goals. In 2016, before the program launched, the Halton Regional Police Service (which operates the program) made 10 arrests of drivers based on tips from drive thru workers. In 2017, that number fell to three, according to documents obtained through a freedom of information request.

Halton police did not respond to questions about the program, including whether or not restaurant workers can report other suspicious activity beyond impaired driving to police.

VICE News reached out to restaurants involved in Project Drive Thru to find out their thoughts on being called up to participate in the program.

“Is that the emoji thing?” one unidentified Dairy Queen worker asked when asked about the program, before passing the call to her manager, who said that any questions would have to be sent in writing to the company.

Several restaurant chains did not respond to questions about Project Drive Thru. A public relations representative for Tim Horton’s asked to know more about this story, but did not respond to follow up inquiries.

"Most young people are pretty responsible."

Morgan explained how individuals' privacy rights could be compromised under the program, especially since drive-thru workers aren't required to file an official report when they call police about a driver.

“Drive-thru workers don't have the same rights [as police] to inspect or to report on what's going on in a private person's car,” he said, noting that in his opinion the practice

He also noted that it's not always easy to identify drunk or high drivers and that drive-thru workers "don't have the training and skills" needed to accurately determine who is impaired.

"That's simply not their role," he said.

Swinson, of MADD, agreed that identifying when someone is intoxicated isn't always straightforward. "We know that many [intoxicated] people get through [roadside sobriety checkpoints]," said Swinson. "Habitual drinkers may not show signs of intoxication."

But she doesn't believe that asking fast food employees to act as informants during their shifts is unreasonable.

"Most young people are pretty responsible," she said. "I think it's all of our responsibility, regardless of age, to keep drunk drivers off the road."

As for the innocent drivers who are detained and released after drive-thru interventions that turn out to be false alarms, Swinson wasn't concerned.

"If the [driver] isn't impaired, nothing happens. [Being questioned by police] is a minor inconvenience for them."

"These are reasons to be exceptionally cautious about potential increases in police contact with civilians."

Morgan disagrees. "The problem with this position is that statistics [show] that black, Indigenous and [other] people of colour are at a much higher risk of being shot and killed by police, especially if they are perceived to be in a compromised mental state," he says.

“I just don’t think this is the way to do it.”

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