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CONTRIBUTORS

Opinion | Canadian cities are facing an extortion crisis. They cannot face it alone

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An RCMP officer enters a cafe that was shot at, in Surrey, B.C., on Thursday, August 7, 2025. Police say the shootings are linked to other extortion shootings that have occurred in Canada.

DARRYL DYCK THE CANADIAN PRESS

By Patrick Brown, Contributor

Patrick Brown is the mayor of Brampton.

Every mayor in Canada learns this lesson quickly: the problems that land on your desk are rarely abstract. They arrive as phone calls from small business owners or families whose sense of safety has been shaken.

In Peel Region, extortion has become one of those problems. It's no longer isolated or sporadic. And it's no longer something municipalities can solve on their own.

Over a two-year period, from Jan. 1, 2024, to Nov. 30, 2025, Peel Regional Police recorded approximately 41 extortion or shooting-related occurrences in which the Bishnoi gang was explicitly referenced. These are not rumours or online threats dismissed as noise. These are real incidents tied to a known transnational criminal network.

About half of those calls targeted South Asian businesses. They are family-run operations that anchor neighbourhoods and employ thousands of people. When intimidation reaches that scale, it corrodes trust across an entire community.

In many cases, the pattern is the same. Business owners receive WhatsApp messages demanding payment. Photos of their storefronts follow. Sometimes videos of gunfire. The message is simple: pay, or violence will come to your door. This is how fear spreads: Quietly, digitally and with devastating effect.

The broader trend is just as alarming. Peel recorded 319 extortion reports in 2023. That jumped to 490 in 2024. In 2025, even before December, we were already at 436. This is now a crisis that is unsustainable.

Peel Regional Police responded. They always do. Between 20 and 30 investigators have been assigned to the Extortion Task Force at various points. Since 2024, more than \$8 million has been spent on enforcement, investigations and response. Arrests have been made. Charges laid. Firearms seized. Lives disrupted.

But every mayor understands that local police can chase symptoms forever if the disease itself is not confronted. These networks do not respect municipal borders. They move money across continents. They exploit digital platforms. They rely on fear, silence and underreporting to survive.

This is not a failure of local police leadership. It is a mismatch between the scale of the threat and the tools available to cities.

Ottawa and Queen's Park often say public safety is a shared responsibility. That is true. But shared responsibility does not mean downloading risk to municipalities and hoping for the best. It means using federal and provincial capacity where it

matters most.

I have had very encouraging conversations with Premier Doug Ford and with federal Public Safety Minister Gary Anandasangaree. There is growing recognition across governments that extortion requires alignment between municipal enforcement, provincial policing capacity and federal tools. That collaboration is essential and achievable.

But right now, too much is being overlooked.

Victims are still hesitant to report crimes because they fear retaliation or lack culturally appropriate support. Financial intelligence tools that could disrupt these networks are not consistently embedded at the local level. Border and immigration enforcement agencies are not fully integrated into day-to-day extortion investigations, even when the actors operate internationally.

The solutions are straightforward once stated plainly.

First, Peel needs dedicated federal task-force funding and sustained victim-support investment. Not eventually. Now. Police enforcement without victim protection only drives crimes further underground. This has already been put in place in British Columbia's lower mainland which is also struggling with skyrocketing extortions

Second, a joint task force embedded directly with Peel Regional Police is essential. We need the OPP for provincial reach, Fintrac to follow the money and the CBSA to secure our borders, all working together in real time.

Why? If you disrupt the money, you weaken the threat. If you protect victims, you break the silence that these networks depend on.

Brampton City Council unanimously supported this approach. This is not partisan. It's rooted in responsibility for public safety and economic stability.

Mayors do not have the luxury of waiting for perfect alignment. We deal in what works. And what works here is federal leadership that recognizes extortion for what it is: a national public safety issue playing out on local streets.

Public safety responses cannot exist in silos in Canada. All law enforcement agencies need to truly work together. And they must do it before another family business becomes collateral damage in a crime that never should have crossed our borders in the first place.

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