

M-167: Rural Crime in Canada

Dissenting Opinion from Conservative Members of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security

Introduction

When Alberta Member of Parliament Shannon Stubbs introduced a motion to study the rising crime rates in rural and remote regions of Canada, she noted that her constituents “feel unsafe in their homes and at work because of escalating robberies, thefts, and break-ins in small towns, family farms, and businesses.”¹ Numerous victims of crime in rural areas highlighted in this study expressed the same sentiments in their testimony before the Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security (SECU). Many more wanted to testify but the number of meetings were limited by the Liberal majority members. Canadians feeling unsafe was compounded by frustration over inaction and under-resourced police in rural communities, and a feeling of a lack of will to act by provincial and federal governments. The feeling was confirmed by witness accounts and data reported to the Committee - the rate of rural crime has been climbing faster than in urban areas. Statistics Canada reports crime rates are 30% higher than urban communities². There is a real and growing threat to the once-safe rural communities many in Canada call home.

“As someone who lives in a rural area where crime is almost a daily occurrence, I can offer first hand input to any task force that wants it. Right now, I need the assistance of an authority willing to act before things get out of hand.”

- Correspondence to MP Jim Eglinski, (Yellowhead AB)⁴

The frustration and fear have been largely overlooked in national media reporting, adding to many Canadians in rural and remote communities feeling ignored by their elected governments and let down by a “revolving-door” justice system. In Alberta, action has been driven by the work of Conservative Members of Parliament and their United Conservative Party Members of the Legislative Assembly who undertook province-wide meetings on the challenges faced by their communities. The report by Conservative MPs, [“Towards a Safer Alberta”](#)³ was tabled to the Committee and summarized what MPs heard from thousands of rural Canadians across the province, as well as police and rural municipal leaders. This

document, not intended to be policy but to summarize the challenges and frustrations expressed by Canadians, was largely ignored by the Liberal MPs.

None of the Liberal Members who participated in this study represent rural constituencies. They disputed that the issue of rural crime was different to the challenges faced by urban communities, and questioned the need for individuals to defend themselves. One member of

¹ Speech before the House of Commons (date, time)

² Statistics Canada, *Police Reported Crime Statistics, 2017*, The Daily, 23 July 2018

³ Website for MP Earl Dreeshen: <http://www.earldreeshen.ca/media/Toward%20a%20Safer%20Alberta%20-%20AB%20Rural%20Crime%20Task%20Force%20Report%20-%20FINAL.PDF>

⁴ SECU Evidence, MP Eglinski reading constituent comments, October 30, 2018

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the government suggested victims needed to do more to protect themselves, essentially casting the blame of the crime on the victims, rather than on the criminals. On this issue, they have failed to listen and understand the challenges faced today by rural Canadians and the increasing crime rate they experience.

In rural western Canada, even though we may only be a 20 to 30 minute drive from the nearest detachment, the response time of an officer may be hours or even days to get out to our locations. This leaves us as sitting ducks for criminals to come out, get what they want, and leave. We are then left frightened, alone and fearing we may have to defend ourselves, which will make us into a criminal and no longer the victim, as we have seen with the Maurice family in Okotoks, Alberta.

Nick Correa, Farmers Against Rural Crime

Lack of Police Resources, Emergency Responders to Address Crisis

Each witness who provided their personal or community story of rural crime was unanimous in a single challenge – they lacked the police resources needed to respond to calls. In rural and remote areas, police detachments have limited staff and a large region to cover, which limits their ability to respond at certain times such as nights. Witnesses noted police resources are often hours away and may not be allowed to respond to certain calls until added staff come on shift.

The RCMP, who polices the majority of rural, northern and remote communities outside of Ontario and Quebec, face many challenges policing rural areas. In addition to the large and distant locations, RCMP contract policing is structured so that police in a local detachment can be seconded to national priorities. An officer from a small rural detachment who may be on leave or in court to testify is not always replaced leaving a small unit even smaller.

You're right (about the limited RCMP resources). We have one officer that's on, and it makes it very difficult. The criminals figure that out. They know where the police officers will be. They know when it will be a longer period of time for them to get there.

– Trevor Tychkowsky, Alberta Provincial Rural Crime Watch Association

When police and other emergency resources are unavailable, it leaves Canadians without the protection of law enforcement and responsible to fend for themselves. As highlighted by numerous witnesses, victims of crime, and reports submitted to the Committee, rural Canadians have become vulnerable to criminals. The impacts on rural Canadians from single or multiple offences includes financial strains from theft and insurance rate increases, physical and mental health challenges, strained community relationships, and a feeling of fear and hopelessness.

The Impact of Violent Crime

In terms of the physical trauma, the knife slash to the neck was a clean cut and bled heavily. There is right-eye damage. Sight is severely distorted. I can't read a book without frustration due to horizontal double-vision. I have to read with one eye closed now, which is hard for an 83-year-old who has used both eyes for most of his life. I have serious jaw fractures and no feeling in my lower lip and right side of my face due to significant nerve damage. I can't chew properly; food falls out of my mouth when I eat because of the numbness of my lip and face. During the healing process, my jaws were wired shut for four weeks. I required considerable dental work. Teeth had to be removed and so on. The pain in my neck will never go away. I guess I was close to dying.

My problem right now is the mental trauma. I'm having a terrible time with PTSD. Since that time, I've only been able to have four sessions with the specialist. I'm 83 years old and at a loss to rationalize the vindictiveness of this assault. I'm embarrassed to admit that my problems resulting from this incident are so overwhelming that there are times when I wish the assailants would have killed me. I still feel that way.

– Fred Priestly Wright, former aerospace engineer, municipal councillor.

911 – Please Call Back

I think it's unacceptable that we have to be on hold. Our lives don't seem to matter as much as that of somebody else who has 911, who maybe will get through right away. I just think that's unacceptable.

– Alicia Bedford, Resident of Thompson, MB

Canadians often live together in peace, but when a threat against one's home or family comes up, we call the police. Too often, rural and remote Canadians are left unable to reach police when in a threatening or dangerous scenario. For example, the case presented by Alicia Bedford and Geraldine Dixon in Thompson, Manitoba. When someone was attempting to break into the house, Alicia called her local emergency number: (204) 677-6911. She was on hold for over ten minutes while someone attempted to break into her house, not far from where her children were hiding. She was never able to reach police directly – she called the local fire department who helped get a police response.

Victims Ignored

The impacts of crime go beyond the initial incident and can cause significant, long-term trauma to victims. When victims are repeatedly re-victimized, it can have lasting damage to families, communities and mental/physical health. With the growing number of repeat crimes on individuals, the Committee heard about the impacts.

Financial impacts: Rural Canadians are facing increased costs to add more security measures around their homes, such as erecting fences, gated entrances, security cameras and new locks. The days of leaving your car or home unlocked – even when home – seem to be gone for victims who chose rural life for the peace and security it once provided. Additionally, insurance premiums for victims of rural crime have risen, causing financial hardships for being the victim of a crime. Some no longer can get insurance because they have been robbed so many times.

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Victims suffer significant physical and mental trauma when they are victimized in their homes or experience break and enters, thefts or damage away. Some, as reported at Committee, were victimized as frequently as six times in a few years. Those victims are often left to fend for themselves as criminals have plenty of time to flee before police are able to respond.

As noted by Christina Johnson, there is a lack of access to services and wide service areas for victims of abuse and sexual assault. Across the rural regions in Canada, many victims lack access to police to help them in their times of need, and lack access to help when they need it.

These are stories of families who show their children where to hide in their house so that if thieves do break into their house, their children can be safe. They come home from the school bus and have to run from their lane up into the yard into the house and lock the doors. There are stories of people who put an eight-foot chain-link fence with razor wire around their house. They all have an automatic opener for the gate to get into their house.

– Nick Correa, Farmers Against Rural Crime

Responses from Rural Communities

Rural Crime Watch Associations

“The organizers of one new (rural crime watch in Saskatchewan) group, which formed earlier this year at Christopher Lake, told the Saskatoon StarPhoenix we expected 40 people at the first meeting. More than 150 showed up, all of them eager to help.”

- Saskatoon StarPhoenix, July 10, 2018

Since the sudden and dramatic rise of crime in rural areas, communities have developed their own responses. The growth of rural crime watches has been significant in Alberta and Saskatchewan. These organizations create best practices, educate the community about what to do when you see something suspicious, how to protect yourself and your property, and how to get help.

Witness testimony from Lane Becotte, from Citizens on Patrol – Edam, Saskatchewan noted their tiny community had to establish citizen patrol watches, and cameras to monitor vehicles that drive in or through the town at night. The program has been very successful in reducing the incidents of criminal activity.

“The success of the program has had a huge impact on reducing crime in our area. When we started this program, the town of 400 people was hit three to four times a night. It was mostly stolen vehicles and some break and enters. We've had many, many different situations. It hasn't been very fun, to be honest, but at the end of the day it's reduced the crime, and that's what we have been doing to reduce the crime. Information given to the RCMP by volunteers has led to numerous arrests of gang affiliates, people with outstanding warrants, and drug traffickers, as well as recovery of stolen property.” – Lane Becotte, Citizens on Patrol – Edam

But the organization, driven by average citizens and entirely volunteer-based, is in direct response to crime and puts a toll on its members. Citizens can be on patrol until four or five in

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the morning, before having to head to work. And even with them watching and calling the RCMP, response can be slow compared to urban zones.

“The volunteers monitor the suspicious activity at a safe distance until the RCMP arrive... If the RCMP are busy with a higher-priority call, the volunteers keep monitoring the situation—sometimes up to two or three hours—until they are able to respond.” – Lane Becotte, Citizens on Patrol
– Edam

With hundreds of Canadians across the country working towards protecting their own communities and families, crime watch groups stress the need to avoid vigilantism and taking matters into their own hands. However, numerous questions came forward during the hearings on those who had to defend themselves and their families. Witnesses spoke of the challenge of having family and loved ones at risk just for being in a rural area.

I have a 15-year-old son. A guy walked into my house while he was home—I was at work—at three o'clock in the afternoon. He locked himself in his room in the basement so they could not get at him. I will agree that the damage to him is done, but a harsher sentence.... This was that guy's ninth conviction. If he had a harsher sentence from the start, he would have been off the street. He would not have been in my house, and quite frankly, we wouldn't have had to deal with him.
– Lane Becott, Citizens on Patrol – Edam

Self-Defence Challenges and Concerns

Last year, Edouard Maurice and his wife came to media attention for having defended himself and his home from criminals. Thieves came in the early morning hours and were scared off when Maurice, fearful of how many people were out there trying to steal his car or other property, fired a warning shot at the criminals. His 911 call went unanswered, but a criminal who was struck by a ricochet had called police, and police responded quickly – arresting Maurice.

I was home alone with my 12-month-old daughter, who was sleeping in her bedroom downstairs, when I was awoken from my sleep at about 5:00 a.m. by criminals outside my rural home. Instantly, I was terrified, because when you live in the country as we do, your neighbours cannot hear you scream. It was pitch black outside and pitch black in the house, and I didn't know how many criminals there were, where they were, or what they wanted.

– Edouard Maurice, Alberta Resident

Edouard Maurice became the rallying cry of Canadians in rural Canada frustrated by a lack of support and resources to help them and their families as they became victims of repeat offenders, while someone protecting his home and family was arrested in minutes.

As noted by testimony, *“the process is often the punishment itself.”*⁴ This is wrong. Canadians who are forced to defend themselves, their families and their property from criminals should not be facing tougher criminal prosecutions than the criminals who sought to harm them. Yet,

⁴ SECU, Evidence, Solomon Friedman (Criminal Defence Lawyer, As an Individual) 23 October 2018

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due to a number of factors highlighted by the study, as well as documents submitted, there continues to be a lack of clarity and Canadians who are victimized at home can sometimes face criminal jeopardy if they try to defend themselves or protect their property. The sentiment voiced at committee by one witness that if you take action into your own hands, you can face serious legal and financial consequences. *“People are saying they’re just going to shoot, shovel and shut up from now on. They don’t want to be the next Eddie Maurice.”*⁵

This is clearly not a desirable situation. Solomon Friedman offered this analysis of the situation:

*“I’ve had police officers tell me in cross-examination when I’m asking them as to why a charge was laid say they weren’t defending a person, they were defending their property...there needs to be reform to the self-defence provision so the (Criminal) Code as it’s written reflects the common law. Those are pretty simple legislative amendments. The Supreme Court has been calling for them since 1995. ...The federal government can show leadership by having a policy to allow first responders, police officers, to know the test for self-defence and apply it in the way the Criminal Code intended.”*⁶

This lack of action raises the question over whether ordinary Canadians know and understand their rights and responsibilities, and whether law enforcement is adequately trained to interpret situations correctly.

*“In fact, as far back as 1995, the Supreme Court stated that legislative action “is required to clarify the Criminal Code’s self-defence regime”.*⁷

Repeat Offenders, Revolving Door of the Justice System

Victims of crime in rural areas have reacted by organizing their own security teams and patrols. They have come together to defend each other, but they are not the only ones organizing. Testimony provided to the Committee noted criminals preying on rural Canadians are coming primarily from urban areas. Criminals understand police response times in rural areas can be slow, neighbours can be miles away, and rural regions are easy prey.

“In a lot of our dealings with criminals, they’ve been out for their sixth or seventh time and they’ve had two or three warrants out for their arrest. One in particular that we were dealing with had over 12 warrants for his arrest.”

– Lane Becotte, Citizen on Patrol – Edam

“We’ve been finding that in fact it’s not locals. That used to be the case, but now we’re finding more and more that the people they’re catching aren’t local. These are hardened criminals who will go across many communities and continue these crimes.”

– Trevor Tychkowsky, Alberta Provincial Rural Crime Watch Association

⁵ SECU, Evidence, Edouard Maurice (As an Individual) 18 October 2018

⁶ SECU, Evidence, Solomon Friedman (Criminal Defence Lawyer, As an Individual) 23 October 2018

⁷ IBID

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Nearly all witnesses talking about the criminals in their rural communities noted these criminals are primarily from urban areas, were under the influence of drugs or alcohol, and often times they were subject to outstanding parole or bail conditions, and already had multiple convictions. In rural Canada, as in many other areas, faith in our justice system is waning as Canadians see criminals getting the benefit of the doubt while families under attack are left with minimal support. Repeat offenders should face serious consequences for their actions, have access to addiction counselling, and demonstrate they have reformed. Canadians deserve to live in safe communities and not be re-victimized by these criminals.

“In conclusion, it was reported that there definitely was an erosion in public confidence in the justice system among people who lived in these rural communities because of all of this, and what they perceived as a lack of response.” – Scott Newark, Oct 30, SECU testimony

In Newark’s testimony, members heard that a large number of the violent crimes were coming from the same small groups of offenders. When these offenders were in jail, the crime rates in certain areas went down. When they were released, the crime rate increased.

Government Response

Throughout our study, several Conservative Members made special appearances at committee to hear about the study and speak on behalf of their rural constituents who face criminal threats on a daily basis. NDP Vice-Chair Mathew Dubé was often replaced by his colleagues who represent rural ridings and could speak to and inquire on behalf of rural Canadians. Sadly, not one of the over 30 rural Liberal Members attended a single meeting. It seems less likely that a rural Member would have limited this study to just four meetings. It was apparently difficult for the Liberal MPs from Brampton, Oakville, Toronto and Montreal to find common ground with witnesses.

Actions Instead of Words

There is an imperative to act – and this government should not be ignoring the plight of rural Canadians.

“I know that we're a long distance apart, but when you're making your findings and doing your report, think of my family. Think of my four-year-old-son, my one-year-old daughter, my 13-year-old brother and my 15-year-old sister and the fear that we have in our area with criminals and theft. It's not only the properties that we're worried about losing—it's our family members.”

– Nick Correa, Farmers Against Rural Crime

Canada is a country that often rallies to help each other in our times of need. Canadians rallied when a terrorist attacked Parliament, when an individual shot innocent people in Toronto, and when an attack was carried out at a mosque in Quebec City. Canadians come together and support one another – just as many in rural areas donated to help with legal fees of Edouard Maurice when he faced a trial for defending his family and property. A government that fails to help Canadians in their times of need is undeserving of its position.

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The government could act now to reduce crime rates in rural areas. It could act to prevent repeat offenders from returning to victimize a community again and again. It could improve bail release and custody conditions, and it could increase the use of electronic monitoring. These policies would put the focus back on the criminals, not on victims.

The Liberals could deal with policy challenges like the illegal border crossings that pull resources out of rural communities – or commit to ensuring all detachments would have the appropriate levels of staffing including relief staff for members on leave. RCMP staff left in rural regions with limited resources and personnel cannot be asked to simply do more – they need the resources to make an impact. These improvements could also reduce the need for citizens to take on policing patrols and protections in their own neighbourhoods when there are no police present.

The Liberals could act to clarify self-defence laws, raised since 1995 by the Courts as being inadequate. They could commit to providing support for police and prosecutors on charges against individuals who defend themselves and their families.

Conservative Members of the Committee call on all rural Members of Parliament to make their voices heard. Speak up for their constituents and ensure that all Canadians have access to emergency services and police protection for their communities. It is only when we put Canadians ahead of political allegiances that we can address the need of the many victims of crime in rural communities.