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# TAKING BREAKS IN GENERAL DUTY POLICE WORK: The Case of Surrey RCMP Officers



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## Taking Breaks in General Duty Police Work: The Case of Surrey RCMP Officers

As any general duty police officer knows, taking a break while on duty, especially for a healthy meal, is not always an easy thing to do. In fact, it is not uncommon for general duty police officers to recall shifts in which they were so busy that they did not even have time to take a bathroom break. Every police officer will also recall the many times they started a break, only to have it ended abruptly because of a need to respond to a call for service. In effect, for many general duty officers, breaks must be fit in whenever they can be during an unpredictable workload and ever-changing workflow. This is just the typical experience of general duty police work.

Complicating matters, general duty police officers work under physical demands, psychological stressors, and shift schedules that are not always conducive to healthy living (Anderson, Litzenger, & Plecas, 2002; Anderson, Plecas, & Segger, 2001; Anderson, Courtney, Plecas, & Chamberlin, 2005). The nature of general duty police work demands that officers have adequate time during a shift to decompress, recover from fatigue, and to eat properly to ensure that their bodies are properly fueled (Gilmartin, 2002). Accordingly, there is a need for general duty officers and police managers to be more attentive to the nature, quality, and quantity of breaks that general duty police officers take during a typical shift.

With this in mind, researchers from the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of the Fraser Valley examined the issue of general duty officers' breaks as part of a larger study with the Surrey Detachment of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police – the largest RCMP detachment in Canada.<sup>1</sup> This comprehensive study of general duty members involved 441 full shift ride-alongs in which researchers recorded the minute-by-minute activities of 171 general duty officers.<sup>2</sup> As a result, this study allowed for a comprehensive analysis of the nature and characteristics associated with member breaks during a shift.

The most important finding associated to breaks was that members were not taking anywhere near the amount of break time they were entitled to. As per RCMP policy, members are entitled to take 90 minutes of break time per 12-hour shift; however, in this study, on average, members only took 46 minutes of break time per shift. More specifically, on average, members only took 36 minutes on food breaks per shift and only 10 minutes on coffee breaks.<sup>3</sup> In addition, only 15% of shifts involved a member taking their fully allotted amount of time for food breaks, 17% of shifts involved no food break at all, and in 7% of shifts, the member continued to work on reports or incomplete files during their food break. Given this, on average, members spent approximately only 43 minutes of their 12-hour shift taking a full break from their work.

The likelihood that a member would not take a food break was somewhat differentiated by the Watch. As demonstrated in Figure 1, members in B watch were between two to three times less likely to take a food break compared to members of the other three watches.<sup>4</sup>

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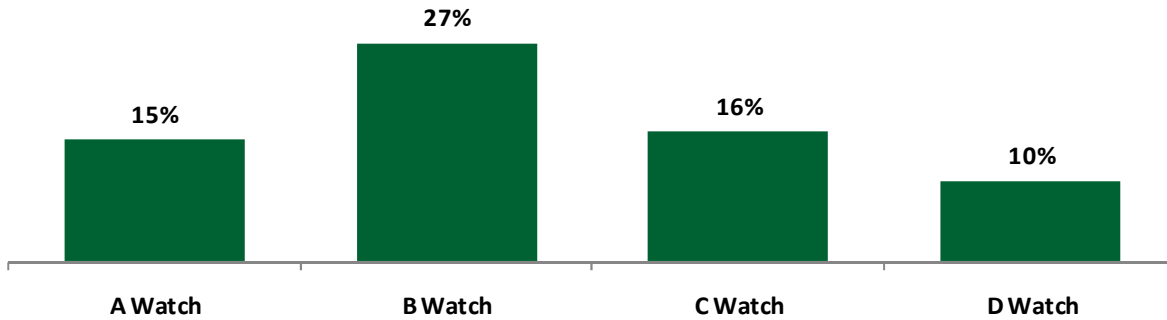
<sup>1</sup> According to their website ([www.bc.rcmp.ca](http://www.bc.rcmp.ca)), the Surrey Detachment of the RCMP has nearly 600 police (regular and civilian) members and a support staff of over 200 municipal employees. Surrey RCMP is also the second largest municipal police force in the province based on authorized police strength alone.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed description of the study's methodology and general results, please see Plecas, McCormick, & Cohen (2010). *RCMP Surrey Ride-Along Study: General Findings*. Report Prepared for Surrey RCMP. The results indicated that the representation of general duty officers, in terms of their gender, age, marital status, years of service, and ethnicity, as well as the shift characteristics, such as the distribution of ride-alongs by Watch, zone, day of the week, night-shift vs. day-shift, and shift cycle was both evenly distributed and provided for excellent generalizability to the full detachment.

<sup>3</sup> On average, members also took approximately 9 minutes per shift for bathroom breaks.

<sup>4</sup>  $\chi^2(3) = 12.5, p < .01$ .

**FIGURE 1: PROPORTION OF SHIFTS NOT TAKING A FOOD BREAK BY WATCH**



Of note, the pattern presented in Figure 1 was similar to the results associated to how much time members spent on breaks by Watch. As demonstrated in Table 1, B Watch was not only the Watch least likely to take a food break, but members on this Watch also took the shortest amount of time, on average, when on a food break. One possible explanation for these findings is that the culture of the Watch or the individual members is such that breaks are not common taken during a shift.

While there were some minor differences across the four different watches, as would be expected due to differences in relative call loads by watch staffing differences, the most amount of break time taken on a single watch was, on average, 51 minutes – only five minutes more than the average for all the watches and only 11 minutes longer than the watch with the shortest average amount of break time (see Table 1).

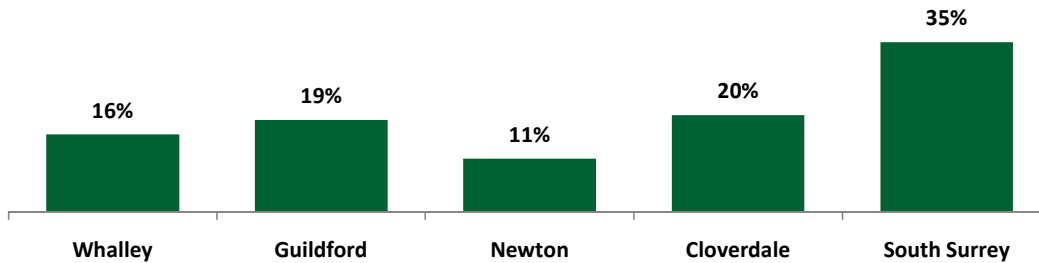
**TABLE 1: AVERAGE NUMBER OF MINUTES OF BREAK TIME TAKEN BY SURREY RCMP OFFICERS DURING A 12-HOUR SHIFT (N = 440)**

Duty Watch	Food Break	Coffee Break	Combined Break Time	Overall Non-Working Break Time*
A Watch	41	5	46	43
B Watch	28	12	40	37
C Watch	34	13	47	44
D Watch	40	11	51	48
OVERALL	36	10	46	43

\*Figures take into account that approximately 7% of break time is spent working while on break.

Members were also more likely to take a food break when working in certain zones. As indicated by Figure 2, members working in the South Surrey district were three times less likely to take a food break than members in Newton, and nearly two times less likely than members in Cloverdale or Guildford. This was interesting because South Surrey is one of the two zones in Surrey that typically experiences fewer calls for service. However, it may be that because this zone receives fewer calls for service, fewer members are stationed there resulting in fewer opportunities to take a food break. Again, the culture of members serving in South Surrey may also influence individual decisions to take a food break during a shift.

**FIGURE 2: PROPORTION OF SHIFTS NOT TAKING A FOOD BREAK BY ZONE**



Analyses were also conducted to determine whether other shift or member characteristics might result in differences in the amount of time members spent on breaks. The only factors that revealed relevant differences were member’s age and years of service. As indicated by Table 2, the amount of break time that a member took appeared to decrease with age. Of note, officers over the age of 40 years old took half as much non-working break time, on average, when compared to officers under the age of 30 years old. This finding is extremely important because older members may require more time to recuperate from the stressors of police work and they are taking, on average, the shortest breaks per 12-hour shift.

**TABLE 2: AVERAGE NUMBER OF MINUTES OF BREAK TIME TAKEN BY MEMBER’S AGE (N = 440)**

Age	Food Break	Coffee Break	Combined Break Time	Overall Non-Working Break Time*
20 – 29	42	9	51	48
30 – 39	30	12	42	39
40 and Older	17	10	27	24

\*Figures take into account that approximately 7% of break time is spent working while on break.

At the same time, we found that officers with less than one year of service took significantly less break time than officers with three years or more of service (see Table 3). Perhaps for those with less years of service, psychological reasons, such as the perceived need to prove themselves on the job by taking as many calls for service as possible, may have contributed to this result.

**TABLE 3: AVERAGE NUMBER OF MINUTES OF BREAK TIME TAKEN BY YEARS OF SERVICE (N = 440)**

Years of Service	Food Break	Coffee Break	Combined Break Time	Overall Non-Working Break Time*
< 1 Year	31	9	40	37
1 – 3 Years	41	8	49	46
> 3 Years	32	22	54	51

\*Figures take into account that approximately 7% of break time is spent working while on break.

In interpreting these findings, there is little doubt that the nature of police work drives what is realistically possible in terms of officers getting breaks. At the same time, there may be a variety of explanations for why officers do not take their fully allotted break time. One possible explanation may be an officer’s workload does not provide enough time in a shift or in a block of shifts to do all that needs to be done without working overtime or working on a scheduled day off. However, these findings may also be a reflection of the dedication of Surrey RCMP members to serving their communities, a culture of not taking breaks when there are calls for service, or simply the inclination of officers to forego their breaks because they enjoy their work. In effect, it is unclear why so many members do not take breaks or their

fully allotted amount of break time; however, there are two important implications associated to members not taking an adequate amount of break time during a shift: physical health and workload.

Considering the amount of break time members took in Surrey, it was not surprising that eating healthy foods and drinking an adequate amount of water during a shift was not the norm.<sup>5</sup> The long-term consequences of working four-on, four-off shifts without taking a sufficient amount of time to decompress, relax, rest, and refuel while on duty can have serious physical and mental health consequences (Vila et al., 2002; Lee and Ashford, 1996; Martinussen et al., 2007; Martinussen, Richardsen, & Burke, 2007; Jamal, 2004; Vila, 2006). In the case of Surrey, each general duty officer, on average, works an additional 114 hours or the equivalent of 11 shifts annually as a result of not taking their fully allotted amount of break time. It would be interesting to compare these findings to those of other busy policing jurisdictions throughout North America.

While the current study focused on the regular four-on four-off shifts of general duty members, it should also be noted that it is well known that many police officers work overtime hours to cover the shortage of available officers due to sickness, vacation time, and understaffing. Hiring more police officers might be one response to this situation; however, given the financial constrictions that many jurisdictions face, it may not be possible to simply add more police officers. Other possible ways to address this issue might be to remove certain tasks or responsibilities from general duty officers thus providing them with more time to take breaks and focus on specific duties. Other options may involve introducing systems or technology to ensure that general duty officers can work as efficiently as possible.

It is important for the police to continue to examine the basis for members not taking breaks or their fully allotted amount of break time. At the same time, supervisors and managers should consider creative ways to ensure the additional time worked by members is acknowledged, if not compensated in some other way. At the very least, given that the general public is likely unaware of how much extra work officers provide, acknowledging this publically may serve to further enhance the public's perception and support for their local officers.

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<sup>5</sup> Please see McCormick, Cohen, & Plecas (2011). Nutrition and General Duty Police Work: The Case of Surrey RCMP Members. Centre for Public Safety and Criminal Justice Research.

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