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Crime in the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo

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Introduction

In the past seven years the issue of crime in Fort McMurray, Alberta has received a significant amount of media attention. Since 1995 Fort McMurray has been a part of the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, the second geographically largest municipality in Canada, covering almost 65,000 square kilometres, and home to not only Fort McMurray but nine other rural communities, some with histories dating back to the 1780s. The population of Fort McMurray has exploded since the late 1960s, when there were only about 2,500 residents. Today there are more than 100,000 people living in the region. Fort Mac, as it often is referred to, is the urban anchor for the Athabasca oil sands, the largest known reserve of heavy crude oil in the world.

Prominent magazine coverage in such outlets as Maclean's, Chatelaine, British GQ, and The Walrus has often portrayed the municipality as a dangerous place to live. These critiques found their most extreme expression in a 2012 contribution from British GQ, with the writer arguing, "Unfortunately, just like the gold-rush towns of the 1800s, Fort McMurray – or Fort McMurray as it's now known – has become synonymous with crime, an explosion in prostitution and the tough, young, bored single men with too much money and little to do, who are fuelling the chaos".

But it is not only anecdotal accounts that have described the Regional Municipality as a city with a high crime rate, relative to Canadian norms. The 2011 National Crime Rankings of Maclean's ranked Wood Buffalo as the eighth most dangerous city in Canada. Further, according to the crime rate analysis for specific categories of offences, Wood Buffalo was ranked within the top 10 municipalities in the country for homicide, aggravated assault, motor vehicle theft, and impaired driving.

These rankings are based on data compiled by Statistics Canada from police reports, and the rates are, in turn, calculated by reliance on population data from the federal census. There are, of course, limitations to police generated data. Not all crimes are reported to police, and a significant amount of some types of crime is simply not detected. But this "dark" figure of unreported and undetected crime does not typically vary significantly from one community to the next, assuming comparable proportions in police services and competencies. What does vary, however, are population counts within specific municipalities; census data cannot always be relied upon to accurately reflect a given municipality's actual population. ¹

Chris Houle, Information Officer for the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, explained the process that the Centre employs to assess crime rates, "The population is calculated by using census populations of permanent residents and adjusting for policing boundaries. This means that transient workers, tourists, and university students who do not call a location their primary residence are not calculated in the population". ²

The Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo is estimated to have almost 40,000 workers living in work camps.³ But because they are considered to be transient workers by Statistics Canada, they are not counted in the federal census, even though they make up about 40 per cent of the population of the Regional Municipality. These workers are also referred to as a shadow population, as defined by the Alberta government. Alberta considers a person to be a member of a shadow population if he or she "...resides in a municipality on a seasonal basis for a given period of time (at least 30 days), but has a residence elsewhere".⁴ It is important to emphasize, however, that in Wood Buffalo these are not individuals who are marginally or seasonally employed, simply drifting through the municipality. They are, instead, skilled workers with a strong attachment to the work force, a constant daily presence in the camps that service the oil sands projects, helping to build and operate the infrastructure of oil extraction.

Given this backdrop, it is not surprising to learn that in January of 2012 the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo wrote to Maclean's, questioning the crime rankings for 2011, "When Maclean's tabulated the crime rankings for 2011, the magazine used a figure from Statistics Canada's Centre for Justice Statistics, which puts Wood Buffalo's population at 65,565, or roughly half the number our census counted".⁵

The Regional Municipality went on to say that Maclean's could not be faulted for using the federal census numbers, as this is the only way of ensuring that the same data source is being used for each municipality. But in this instance they argue that the municipal census provides much more reliable data regarding Wood Buffalo than does the federal census. Put differently, the Regional Municipality appears to represent an outlier in Statistics Canada's calculations. Unlike the overwhelming majority of Canada's municipalities, the population of RMWB contains about 40 per cent of residents who are, as a consequence of the methods employed by Statistics Canada, not counted as individuals who are actually living within their boundaries.

Further, the cost of rental housing in Fort McMurray is, on average, the highest in Canada, leading to many more occupants per unit of accommodation than is actually captured in either the federal or municipal census. Given this social and economic backdrop, both the Wood Buffalo RCMP and the Regional Municipality suggest that even the municipal census figure of 116,000 (a figure that does include those workers living in the camps) significantly underestimates the actual population of the region. The figure of 116,000 is derived from either asking home owners how many people are living in their residences, or by extrapolating a population base from the number of dwellings within the municipality, with both methods producing similar results. Representatives from both the RCMP and Wood Buffalo note that, regardless of the method of calculation for the municipal census, rates of water use in Fort McMurray are consistent with a much higher rate of occupancy, per unit of accommodation, than 116,000. They conclude that many homeowners are reluctant to admit to renting rooms in their homes or to having created secondary suites, in order to assist with their mortgages.⁶

CRIME RATES IN THE REGIONAL MUNICIPALITY OF WOOD BUFFALO: METHODS OF CALCULATION

In the pages that follow we have conducted our own study of Wood Buffalo's crime rates, comparing the municipality's reported crime with national and provincial averages, and with rates for comparably sized municipalities across Alberta and Canada. We first explain the methods that we have employed for assembling our database.

Population Data

We have retrieved population data from the Alberta Municipal Affairs website:
http://municipalaffairs.gov.ab.ca/mc_official_populations.cfm

We first retrieved annual (2003-2012) population values for the province of Alberta (as a whole), by combining values in the "Population History 1960-2009" PDF for years 2003-2009, and MS Excel spreadsheets for years 2010-2012, published on the Alberta Municipal Affairs website (as above). The PDF and spreadsheets included population values based on municipal censuses (where available), rather than federal censuses.

We retrieved annual (2003-2012) population values for individual municipalities in Alberta from MS Excel spreadsheets published on the Alberta Municipal Affairs website (see above). These spreadsheets again included population values based on municipal censuses (where available), rather than federal censuses. As a result, the population figures that we have selected for analysis include a combination of federal and municipal census populations.

Specifically, we have used municipal census figures for Red Deer, Lethbridge and Wood Buffalo. Strathcona County had no municipal census figure, and so we relied upon the federal census of 2011 for this municipality's population. For Alberta as a whole, a combination of municipal and federal census figures was used. Alternative population values were not used for Canada, nor for any municipalities outside of Alberta. The 2012 Uniform Crime Report Survey (UCR) crime rates appear to employ estimates for 2012 population figures that are derived from the 2011 federal census values. These UCR 2012 rates were retrieved directly from the data source without manipulation.

In 2011 the federal census reported that the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo had a population of 65,565. In contrast the municipality's 2012 census reported a population of 116,407, while their census of 2011, based largely on 2007 data, reported a slightly smaller population of 101,238. The magnitude of the difference between the federal and municipal calculations is dramatic, not attributable to a one year change, and the calculation of crime rates based upon these two very different populations will understandably yield remarkably divergent results. Given the enduring stability of 40,000 workers in camps in the Wood Buffalo municipality, we conclude, as does the province of Alberta, that it is appropriate to include them as a part of the population base.

The following population table sets out the basis for our comparisons. We take the essentially conservative position of relying upon the most complete and/or most available of either federal or municipal census data, rather than taking the further step of trying to extrapolate from observations made by the Wood Buffalo police and the Municipality regarding the extent of water use and the number of individuals likely living in unofficial rental accommodations within the RMWB region. For purposes of comparison we have chosen municipal populations in Alberta and Canada that are similar in size to that of Wood Buffalo. As the chart below, Population by Jurisdiction, demonstrates, in those circumstances when both municipal and federal census figures have been obtained, only the numbers in Wood Buffalo reveal a significant discrepancy, pointing to the inevitability of error in the federal calculation for Wood Buffalo.

Population by Jurisdiction

Jurisdiction	2011 Federal Census	Municipal Census	Selected for Analysis
Canada	33,476,688	n/a	33,476,688
Alberta	3,645,257	3,768,284	3,768,284
Guelph	121,688	n/a	121,688
Kelowna	117,312	n/a	117,312
Wood Buffalo	65,565	116,407	116,407
Saanich	109,752	n/a	109,752
Thunder Bay	108,359	n/a	108,359
Strathcona County	92,490	n/a	92,490
Red Deer	90,564	91,877	91,877
Lethbridge	83,517	89,074	89,074

Crime Data

We retrieved all of our crime data from the Canadian Socio-Economic Information Management database (CANSIM, produced by Statistics Canada and available via Data Services of the Simon Fraser University (SFU) Library:

<http://cufts2.lib.sfu.ca/CRDB/BVAS/resource/5602>

The UCR data used in these analyses are from “Incident-based crime statistics, by detailed violations and police services” for various provinces. Specifically, the analyses report on “actual incidents”, and “rate per 100,000 population”. For jurisdictions where alternative population (municipal census) figures were available, crime rates were calculated by employing those alternative population values. The “10 year % change” that we have cited is calculated by assessing the percentage difference between 2003 and 2012 crime rates. These analyses are conducted both for various categories of offences and for specific types of offences.

Selection of Time Periods

All of our analyses used the most current UCR and population data available. We retrieved 2012 crime data to calculate crime rates for all areas under study. In addition, crime data for 2003-2012 were retrieved, in order to provide 10 year trends in rates of change.

With respect to calculation of 10 year trends in rates of change, we employed 2003 and 2012 uniform crime reporting data for all jurisdictions, except those within the province of Alberta. For the province of Alberta (as a whole) and individual municipalities within Alberta, we used the uniform crime reporting counts of actual incidents in 2003 and 2012, but along with the 2003 and 2012 populations, as reported on the Alberta Municipal Affairs website.

RESULTS

The following table sets out varying rates for the total number of Criminal Code violations, excluding motor vehicle traffic, per 100,000 population, in 2012. The table demonstrates that Wood Buffalo has a rate of reported crime that is below the Alberta average, and just slightly above the Canadian average of about 5,600 crimes per 100,000 population. Perhaps most interesting, when compared to the other jurisdictions, Wood Buffalo has seen the most significant drop in reported incidents of crime from 2003 to 2012.

Criminal Code of Canada Violations (excluding traffic), 2012⁹

Jurisdiction	Crime Rate	10 Year % Change
Canada	5588	-28
Alberta*	7466	-28
Guelph	4084	-29
Kelowna	10437	-25
Wood Buffalo*	6633	-47
Saanich	4159	-26
Thunder Bay	7174	-15
Strathcona County	3606	-19
Red Deer*	2773	0
Lethbridge*	8802	-23

The next two tables set out the reported rates of violent offences and property crimes in 2012, again expressed as a rate per 100,000 population. Wood Buffalo's reported rate of violent crime is, again, below the Alberta average of approximately 1,420 incidents per 100,000 population and slightly above the Canadian average of approximately 1,190 incidents per 100,000 population. And as with total Criminal Code violations, Wood Buffalo has seen the most substantial drop in violent crime (44 per cent) of all jurisdictions between 2003 and 2012. With property crime, Wood Buffalo has not only seen the largest decline of all jurisdictions, but also has a current rate of property crime that is below both the Canada and Alberta averages. This should probably not be a surprising finding, given the high incomes and relative affluence of those who live in the Wood Buffalo region.

Violent Criminal Code of Canada Violations, 2012

Jurisdiction	Crime Rate	10 Year % Change
Canada	1190	-17
Alberta*	1421	-11
Guelph	875	40
Kelowna	1738	-21
Wood Buffalo*	1412	-44
Saanich	755	-13
Thunder Bay	1489	-21
Strathcona County	532	-8
Red Deer*	2773	0
Lethbridge*	1398	-19

Property Offence Violations, 2012

Jurisdiction	Crime Rate	10 Year % Change
Canada	3414	-36
Alberta*	4414	-37
Guelph	2725	-41
Kelowna	6557	-34
Wood Buffalo*	2986	-50
Saanich	3051	-29
Thunder Bay	4174	-19
Strathcona County	2407	-26
Red Deer*	9511	-33
Lethbridge*	5316	-32

In 2011, Maclean's Magazine noted that Wood Buffalo had the sixth highest homicide rate in Canada, but that statistic is not only skewed by an inaccurate estimate of Wood Buffalo's population – it also fails to look at a more complete portrait of this crime over time, not only in Wood Buffalo, but in Canada more generally. The following two tables document, first the rate of homicide incidents per 100,000 population across jurisdictions in 2012 (and the corresponding rate of increase or decrease from 2003 to 2012), and second, the absolute number of homicides in these jurisdictions from 2003 to 2012.

Homicide Rate per 100,000, 2012

Jurisdiction	Crime Rate	10 Year % Change
Canada	1.56	-10
Alberta*	2.26	7
Guelph	0.00	-100
Kelowna	1.64	n/a
Wood Buffalo*	0.86	-75
Sannich	0.00	-100
Thunder Bay	5.96	610
Strathcona County	0.00	n/a
Red Deer*	2.18	-21
Lethbridge*	3.37	145

Homicide Rates, 2003-2012

Jurisdiction	2003 Rate	2004 Rate	2005 Rate	2006 Rate	2007 Rate	2008 Rate	2009 Rate	2010 Rate	2011 Rate	2012 Rate	10-Year Average
Canada	1.74	1.95	2.06	1.86	1.80	1.83	1.81	1.62	1.73	1.56	1.80
Alberta*	2.11	2.80	3.39	2.93	2.62	3.20	2.70	2.13	2.99	2.26	2.71
Guelph	0.88	2.58	0.84	1.67	0.83	0.00	0.81	0.00	0.79	0.00	0.84
Kelowna	0.00	1.89	2.79	0.91	1.77	0.87	2.55	0.84	1.65	1.64	1.49
Wood Buffalo*	3.50	2.98	2.73	2.54	0.00	3.40	1.11	3.27	2.96	0.86	2.34
Sannich	0.92	1.82	0.00	0.90	0.00	0.88	0.00	0.85	0.85	0.00	0.62
Thunder Bay	0.84	0.00	2.51	1.68	1.70	0.00	5.12	4.27	3.41	5.96	2.55
Strathcona County	0.00	1.32	2.49	1.25	1.21	0.00	2.27	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.85
Red Deer*	2.75	2.63	5.06	0.00	0.00	3.42	2.22	0.00	6.53	2.18	2.48
Lethbridge*	1.38	0.00	1.30	0.00	2.45	2.38	1.17	0.00	2.28	3.37	1.43

Homicide Incidents, 2003-2012

Jurisdiction	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	10-Year Average
Canada	549	624	663	606	594	611	610	554	598	543	595.2
Alberta	64	86	108	95	88	110	95	77	109	85	91.7
Guelph	1	3	1	2	1	0	1	0	1	0	1
Kelowna	0	2	3	1	2	1	3	1	2	2	1.7
Wood Buffalo	2	2	2	2	0	3	1	3	3	1	1.9
Saanich	1	2	0	1	0	1	0	1	1	0	0.7
Thunder Bay	1	0	3	2	2	0	6	5	4	7	3
Strathcona County	0	1	2	1	1	0	2	0	0	0	0.7
Red Deer	2	2	4	0	0	3	2	0	6	2	2.1
Lethbridge	1	0	1	0	2	2	1	0	2	3	1.2

These tables reveal that homicides in Wood Buffalo, as in virtually all comparably sized municipalities in Canada, are relatively rare events, with less than a handful of such crimes occurring in any given year. Further, with such small numbers, rates bounce up and down over time, and significant trends are not easily discernible. In 2012 the homicide rate in Wood Buffalo was much lower than the Canadian average, and in 2011 the rate was much higher. Similarly, while Thunder Bay had the highest rate of homicide of all census metropolitan areas in Canada in 2012, it is worth noting that the 10 year time frame is not supportive of any kind of trend; there were no homicides in the city in either 2004 or 2008. Accordingly, when Maclean's magazine took a single year's data and declared that you were more likely to be murdered in Thunder Bay than in any other city, they were overstating the relevance and utility of that year's data in order to create a dramatic headline. A 10-year overview of rates for any of the smaller municipalities listed above reveals no significant trend of any kind, with respect to the possibility of being a victim of homicide.

When we turn to other kinds of violent crime, notably sexual assault and robbery, the rates of reported incidents in Wood Buffalo in 2012 are below both Canadian and Alberta rates per 100,000 population, and with both kinds of crimes there has been a decline in incidence between 2003 and 2012. With assault, assault causing bodily harm, and assault with a weapon, the rate of reported incidents in 2012 is above the Canadian average, but below the Alberta average; the rate of decline over the past 10 years is, however, more substantial than for any other jurisdiction that we have canvassed.

Sexual Assault (Level 1, 2 & 3) Incidents, 2012

Jurisdiction	Crime Rate	10 Year % Change
Canada	63	-15
Alberta*	75	-6
Guelph	79	47
Kelowna	68	-36
Wood Buffalo*	44	-22
Saanich	27	-52
Thunder Bay	77	-9
Strathcona County	23	15
Red Deer*	97	-32
Lethbridge*	63	-30

Robbery Incidents, 2012

Jurisdiction	Crime Rate	10 Year % Change
Canada	79	-22
Alberta*	71	-40
Guelph	41	-38
Kelowna	105	0
Wood Buffalo*	55	-10
Saanich	20	-42
Thunder Bay	102	38
Strathcona County	11	-25
Red Deer*	175	46
Lethbridge*	70	-32

Assault (Level 1, 2 & 3) Incidents, 2012

Jurisdiction	Crime Rate	10 Year % Change
Canada	639	-15
Alberta*	821	-9
Guelph	415	11
Kelowna	1058	-12
Wood Buffalo*	797	-43
Saanich	377	-20
Thunder Bay	840	-19
Strathcona County	282	1
Red Deer*	1396	-1
Lethbridge*	958	-16

With property crime, Wood Buffalo appears to have relatively low rates of occurrence, by Albertan or Canadian standards. The one exception is theft of motor vehicles, where the 2012 rate is above both Canadian and Alberta rates, but, notably, below that year's rates for Kelowna and Red Deer. What is particularly striking is the relative rarity of break, entry and theft in the

municipality; the 2012 rate is about one third of Canadian and Alberta rates, and lower than any of the comparable municipalities surveyed. Additionally, Wood Buffalo has experienced the largest 10 year decline in break and entry, of all jurisdictions. On reflection, the relatively low rates of both theft and break and entry should probably not be surprising, given the relative affluence of Wood Buffalo and the population's concomitantly strong involvement in the work force, throughout the 24 hour day.

Breaking and Entering Incidents, 2012

Jurisdiction	Crime Rate	10 Year % Change
Canada	504	-44
Alberta*	513	-49
Guelph	333	-33
Kelowna	766	-39
Wood Buffalo*	172	-68
Saanich	291	-37
Thunder Bay	550	-40
Strathcona County	221	-13
Red Deer*	1127	-47
Lethbridge*	448	-50

Theft (Over \$5000 and Under \$5000) Incidents, 2012

Jurisdiction	Crime Rate	10 Year % Change
Canada	1469	-35
Alberta*	1734	-42
Guelph	1347	-42
Kelowna	3270	-37
Wood Buffalo*	1107	-53
Saanich	1688	-29
Thunder Bay	1978	-11
Strathcona County	1057	-37
Red Deer*	3862	-47
Lethbridge*	2674	-30

Theft of Motor Vehicle Incidents, 2012

Jurisdiction	Crime Rate	10 Year % Change
Canada	223	-59
Alberta*	366	-47
Guelph	82	-72
Kelowna	474	-44
Wood Buffalo*	392	-9
Saanich	76	-57
Thunder Bay	123	-56
Strathcona County	88	-56
Red Deer*	605	-52
Lethbridge*	161	-49

Finally, when we come to the realms of illegal drugs, impaired driving, and prostitution, we see that for cannabis distribution, there is nothing remarkable about rates in Fort McMurray. The rates of incidents of cocaine distribution are, however, higher than Canadian or Alberta rates, an indication that some percentage of the demographic of the Wood Buffalo region – young men with lots of money in their wallets – are both working hard, and playing hard. With impaired driving, rates are above Canadian norms in 2012, but below those of the province of Alberta. With prostitution, (typically soliciting and bawdy house offences), there is, however, contrary to some claims within popular media, no evidence to suggest that there is a greater prevalence of such incidents in Wood Buffalo than elsewhere in Canada.

Impaired Driving Violations, 2012

Jurisdiction	Crime Rate	10 Year % Change
Canada	225	-2
Alberta*	386	5
Guelph	138	-18
Kelowna	485	141
Wood Buffalo*	287	-56
Saanich	154	-57
Thunder Bay	152	-16
Strathcona County	291	64
Red Deer*	483	-1
Lethbridge*	150	2

Cannabis Trafficking, Production or Distribution Incidents, 2012

Jurisdiction	Crime Rate	10 Year % Change
Canada	45	-28
Alberta*	33	-25
Guelph	16	12
Kelowna	76	-50
Wood Buffalo*	12	-80
Saanich	19	-44
Thunder Bay	18	-66
Strathcona County	19	85
Red Deer*	28	-57
Lethbridge*	7	-86

Cocaine Trafficking, Production or Distribution Incidents, 2012

Jurisdiction	Crime Rate	10 Year % Change
Canada	30	23
Alberta*	51	21
Guelph	11	79
Kelowna	57	-38
Wood Buffalo*	107	19
Saanich	9	-27
Thunder Bay	14	-30
Strathcona County	29	1009
Red Deer*	88	146
Lethbridge*	91	113

Prostitution Violations, 2012

Jurisdiction	Crime Rate	10 Year % Change
Canada	6	-67
Alberta*	8	-68
Guelph	1	n/a
Kelowna	14	-76
Wood Buffalo*	7	-78
Saanich	1	n/a
Thunder Bay	0	-100
Strathcona County	0	-100
Red Deer*	12	190
Lethbridge*	13	-18

A Portrait of Crime in Wood Buffalo

It seems clear, by looking carefully at the best available data, that crime is not rampant in the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo. The jurisdiction is not without its difficulties -- cocaine distribution and, to a lesser extent, impaired driving come to mind -- but this is far from a crime "hot spot" in Canada. The following minimally edited commentaries describe a day shift for a constable in the municipality, followed by another constable's night shift; both diaries provide a useful glimpse into the nature of crime within the community.

Day Shift:

I started my shift at 7:00am in the usual fashion, attending the morning briefing. All members on the watch, including supervisors and plain-clothes members, meet at the start of every shift for a briefing by the Watch Commander. In these briefings members are brought up to speed on what has occurred during the previous shift, officer-safety bulletins may be passed out, and descriptions of persons and/or vehicles of interest are disseminated. Members are also assigned work ("pass-overs") if immediate follow up is required on files from the previous shift. Today I received no pass-overs, but was assigned to complete this report.

I spent the first four and a half to five hours of my shift dealing with matters pertaining to my recruit. I am a field coach, and for the past six months I have been assigned to oversee the training of a recruit sent from Depot (the RCMP training academy in Regina). My recruit was scheduled to be signed off on the RCMP Field Coaching Program, which is a transitional six month period starting upon graduation from Depot -- recruits are monitored and guided by a training officer with ever decreasing levels of supervision.

There are certain skills or competencies which recruits are required to demonstrate as a part of their six month assessment, one of which is their ability to prepare and present testimony in court. My recruit did not have occasion to present testimony during the six months I was training her, so today I arranged a "mock trial", where she would give evidence on an old impaired driving file of mine in order to evaluate her testimony. Two Constables on the watch played the roles of Crown and Defence.

After the "mock trial", I completed my recruit's final written assessment, and conducted a final interview with her and her supervisor, as required for her successful completion of the Field Coaching Program.

After signing out a car, radio, and a Conductive Energy Weapon (taser) and checking to make sure all were functioning properly, I attended a complaint of a stolen bicycle, and other bizarre happenings at a townhouse in a residential neighbourhood in my patrol zone. The complainant reported that his bike was stolen four days ago out of his back yard, and that the day after a barbeque had appeared in his back yard, which

did not belong to him. Two days later the barbeque was removed. I obtained a written statement, and examined and photographed the back yard. I assessed the scene and determined there was no need to call out Forensic Investigators. With no suspects, witnesses, video surveillance, or forensic evidence, all viable avenues of investigation have been exhausted, and this file will likely be concluded unsolved.

I left the residence and was dispatched to a call of an intoxicated male in a park beside a business in the downtown core. This is a common type of call in my patrol zone, and I often respond to several of these in a shift. The complainant provided the male's name, and I recognized him to be one of our city's local homeless, and a frequent client of the RCMP.

While en route I observed a vehicle with an expired license plate. I conducted a traffic stop, confirmed the vehicle insurance was valid, and let the driver off with a warning and instructions to proceed to a registries office to renew the registration.

I continued on to the park downtown but found it empty; the male had moved on.

I did foot patrols through the parking lots of surrounding businesses, and in the grassy areas that separate the park, the surrounding businesses, and several apartment complexes in the area. These are areas where the local homeless frequently drink and do drugs, but today they were essentially empty. I found nothing of note, and no self-generated work.

I picked up a coffee at a coffee shop downtown, but before I had a chance to drink it I was dispatched to a residential alarm at a townhouse-style condo in a newly emerging residential area downtown.

I located the condo building, which contained approximately 14 units, but the alarm company did not have a unit number, so I had no way of knowing from which unit the alarm had come. I checked every unit in the complex, and found no signs of damage or forced entry, but found an insecure door at the back of one unit. I called and waited for backup, and then cleared the residence with my service pistol drawn. The residence was empty. This file was cleared as a false alarm.

While I was clearing the residence for the alarm call, a theft call was dispatched, where the complainant was calling from another province. The complainant reported that he had asked a family member to pick up a cheque made out to him (as he was out of town) and deposit it into his bank account. The family member allegedly deposited the cheque into his own account. After roughly an hour long investigation I determined that the family member had picked up the cheque at the complainant's request and deposited it into a joint bank account -- no criminal offence had been committed. I attempted to mediate and counsel the various family members in relation to the complainant's issues with drug addiction, which were the root cause of this call.

Next I attended a two vehicle collision on the highway which runs through Fort McMurray. Dispatchers advised there were possible injuries and an ambulance had been dispatched. Several members attended and I was not first on scene. I took photographs of the involved vehicles and collected names and contact information from witnesses and cleared the scene.

I continued to patrol the downtown core for a while, and then found a quiet spot to pull over and do some follow up work on some ongoing investigations.

After that I fuelled up my car, and made some patrols through a recreational area down by the river, which is a hot spot for drugs, drinking, and prostitution. I found nothing of note.

Next I responded to a call at a business in the industrial sector. The complainant reported finding a firearm and a backpack full of ammunition. I tried to contact my complainant en route for more information but was unsuccessful. I attended the business and seized a rifle and a small wheeled suitcase filled with rifle and shotgun ammunition. The rifle was stored in a case with a trigger lock under a desk in a private office, and the ammunition was hidden away in a closet. It appeared as though an employee had gone on vacation and stored his rifle and ammunition at work. This investigation is ongoing.

My next call was of a suspicious vehicle off in the ditch in an empty construction yard behind a condo complex. This area is a common dumping ground for stolen vehicles. I attended the scene and ran the vehicle's license plate, but the vehicle had not been reported stolen. Another member contacted me to advise they had been dealing with the owner and driver of that vehicle in relation to an earlier impaired driving complaint. This member confirmed the vehicle was not stolen. After clearing from the vehicle call I did more follow up work on some ongoing files.

When members from the next watch on duty had arrived in my zone I returned to the office, and secured the seized rifle and ammunition in temporary exhibit lockers. I did not process the exhibits as I was already 30 minutes past the end of my shift.

Night Shift:

I was patrolling Anzac, approximately 30 minutes southeast of Fort McMurray. It's a rural area, approximately 150 residents, surrounded by oilsands sites (Nexen, Conoco Phillips, etc.) and it also includes the Gregoire Lake First Nation.

We start with a briefing -- files of interest from the day shift; there was nothing of note, and I tested my Laser for speed enforcement. I check my email and look at my task queue (list of files). I typically do not touch my task queue on night shifts unless

something is urgent, as it is not my practice to call or visit people late at night or early in the morning. Today we had planned to do a checkstop. I learned at the start of shift that several of the members planning to attend were now unable to, but two of us planned to go anyway.

On my night shifts I typically go hunting for impaired drivers. As this is a rural area, with a car required to get anywhere, I have found that there are many impaired drivers. Since moving to the Anzac area in February, we have towed at least one vehicle almost every week (26 tows to date). We've actually had one impaired case, now, five nights in a row.

I tend to target the local bar in Anzac as I have found many workers from site come to the bar to get away from camp food and to drink (as most work camps are dry). Unfortunately they also choose to drive home after drinking. My presence sometimes mitigates this but it's also an ongoing problem that won't go away.

At 2145 hours we conducted a checkstop at the turnoff from highway 881 onto Long Lake, just south of Anzac. At 2209 I detained a driver as there was a strong odor of liquor in the vehicle and on the driver's breath. The driver also fumbled with his documents while trying to hand them over to me. The driver also had red and watery eyes. I was certain the driver had been drinking and was pretty sure he was going to fail my Approved Screening Device (but not 100% sure, so I used it anyway). At 2224, the driver failed (meaning his blood alcohol level was at least 100mg) and was subsequently arrested for impaired driving. I transported the driver to cells while my partner towed the driver's vehicle. While dealing with that vehicle we noticed several vehicles turn off onto Singer Drive. This is a rural community that is largely inactive at night. I believe these vehicles were trying to avoid our checkstop.

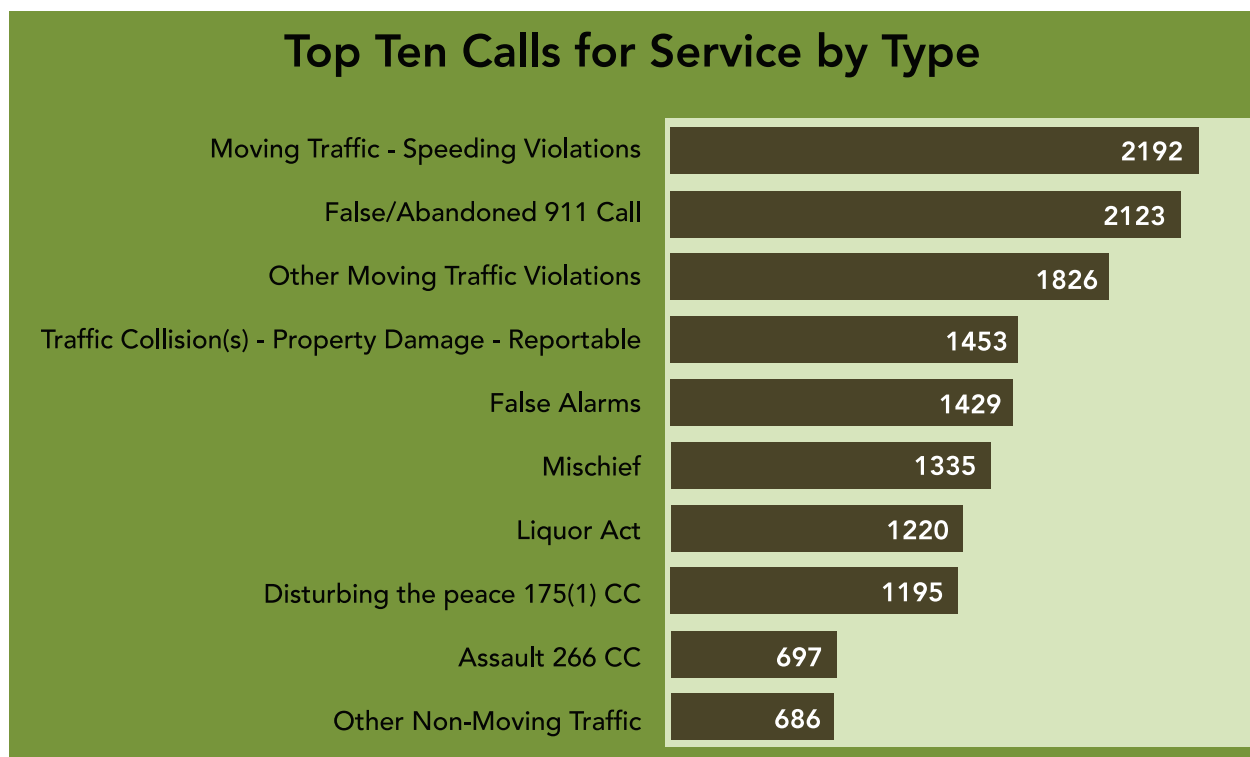
At 2304 I arrived in cells and noticed my car reeked of liquor. I subsequently provided the driver with a lawyer call. While waiting to provide breath samples I asked the driver if he had considered a designated driver. He said he thought he was being responsible. Sadly, this is a common theme amongst the site workers since I've been out here. At 1237am the driver provided his first sample -- which was 100, but the second sample was 80. As a result the driver was issued a 72 hour suspension. He was then released to a taxi which took him back to his work site. I seized his licence -- which he will have to pick up at the detachment.

Unfortunately, due to delays I did not end up with an impaired charge --disappointing, but given that I work rural this will sometimes happen. I took no calls for service this night. Some nights go this way which gives me the freedom to go find things --look for impaired drivers, drugs, and so on.

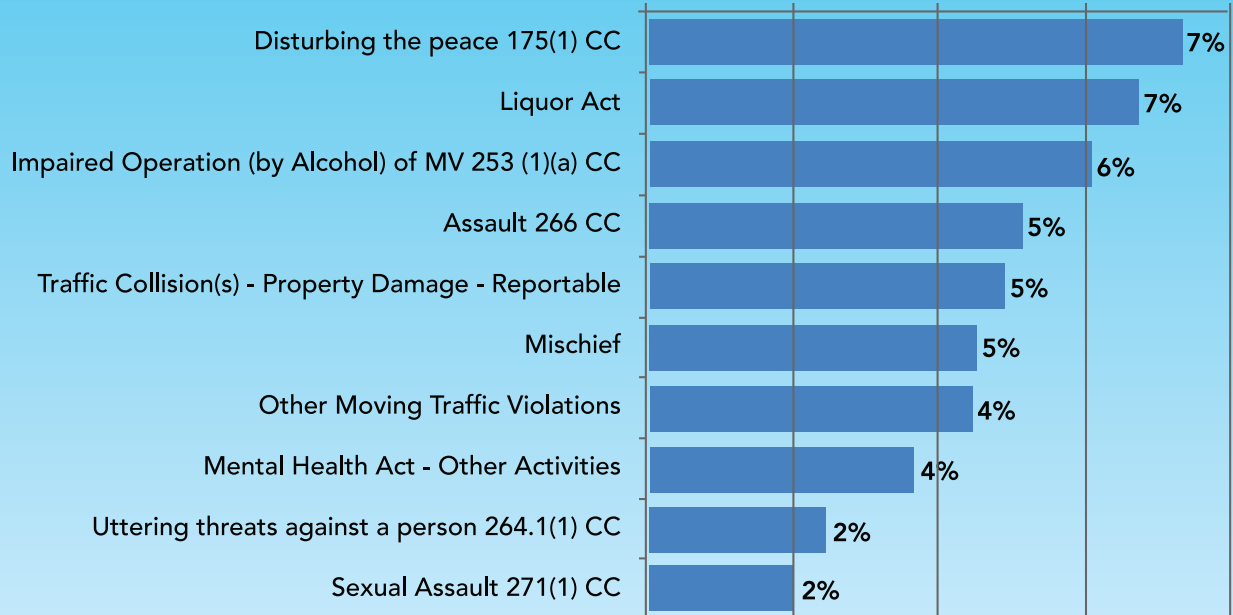
Policing in the RMWB: Calls for Service and Workload

Data prepared by the RCMP in Wood Buffalo highlight both the most common calls for service by police within the region, and the kinds of calls that create the greatest workload for the membership. The following two charts point to dominant patterns of policing within the region.

The first observation that emerges from looking at the top 10 calls for service is that they mostly involve traffic control. Local residents need a car to get just about anywhere in the Wood Buffalo region, and driving from home to work and back often involves traffic congestion, a considerable amount of time on the road and, at least in some circumstances, careless driving or driving under the influence of alcohol. When we shift our attention to the top 10 calls for service by workload, we begin to see the importance of alcohol to the day to day life of the police officer. The profile in Wood Buffalo is not markedly different from any other community in Canada that is more rural than urban: a motor vehicle is required to get to and from work and recreational activities. The charts that follow reveal that this reality shapes the nature of crime in the community; we find a predominance of violations of the Liquor Act, the offences of disturbing the peace and impaired driving, traffic accidents, and other driving offences.



Top Ten Calls for Service by Workload



Discussion: A Profile of Crime in Wood Buffalo

This study reveals that while there is a relatively consistent database for the compilation of actual incidents of crime reported by police in Canada and many other western states, the denominator used in the equation, which is necessary for calculation of a crime rate, can be badly flawed; this is particularly true when a census is unable to take account of a large shadow population of transient workers living within a region. Our study set out to remedy this problem by using the Alberta municipal census, with its counting of this shadow population in the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, and elsewhere. As a consequence of using more complete data, we have been able to demonstrate that the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo does not have particularly high rates of violent crime or property crime. Homicides are relatively rare, as they are in most communities of about 100,000 people, and as they are in Canada, more generally.

We want also to point to the limited value of the Maclean's practice of determining a crime rate from year to year fluctuations, irrespective of the category of criminal offence. Virtually all academic analyses of crime rates use a frame of reference of at least 10 years duration, in order to draw meaningful, accurate and useful conclusions about either increases or decreases in rates of reported crime; many analysts use 20 to 40 year ranges in order to capture both increases and decreases in crime, and the reasons that might lie behind such changes. Baer and Chambliss have noted that selective reporting of crime data (as employed by Maclean's) can generate fear and misperceptions. They cite the example of a 1994 FBI report, noting an increase in stranger homicides in the U.S. between 1991 and 1994. What was not said in this

report was that the rate had actually fluctuated quite dramatically between 1980 and 1994, and that the 1994 rate of stranger homicides was actually lower than that of 1980. A more recent example -- Olivier Gueniat, a criminologist, and the police chief of Jura, Switzerland, expressed concern in April of this year over the 2012 annual report of the Swiss Federal Statistics Office; the report highlighted what appeared to be a year to year dramatic increase in burglaries in the country. Jura noted, "By comparing one year to the next you can have a 20 per cent increase in burglaries, but when you look over 10 or 20 years the number of break-ins in 2012 was slightly less than in 2004". Jura went on to say, "Right now we're giving a false perception to the population, and the politicians talk about things they don't have the full grasp of".

Similarly, in 2011, criminologist Don Weatherburn, writing *In Uses and Abuses of Crime Statistics*, described the selective use of data as the most common way in which crime statistics are abused by the media. He notes that there are two principal forms of this abuse. The first is that of comparing the crime rate for a period of time in which it is unusually low to a period of time in which it is unusually high. The second is that of reporting on a small portion of a trend (for example, a year to year change), thereby giving the reader an incomplete portrait of the general trajectory of changing rates.

In Wood Buffalo reported rates of robbery and sexual assault in 2012 are well below both Canadian and Albertan averages, and, more significantly, are lower today than they were a decade ago. With property crime, we have a similar kind of portrait. Rates of break, enter and theft, and theft under or over \$5,000 are considerably below Canadian and Albertan averages, and rates of decline are more precipitous in Wood Buffalo than in all of the jurisdictions that we have canvassed. On reflection, this should not be particularly surprising. This is an affluent community, where most people are working long hours, in relatively skilled occupations, for industries that operate 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Arguably more noteworthy is that while Wood Buffalo has a disproportionate percentage of young men in its population (22 per cent of the region's population is composed of young men between the ages of 15 and 34, in contrast to the Canadian average of less than 14 per cent) the crime rate is actually lower, for many categories of crime, than in comparable Canadian municipalities.

Official criminal statistics almost universally support the existence of a gender specific age-crime curve; crime usually begins in adolescence and reaches a peak in early adulthood, typically dropping off relatively quickly after that time. Put differently, most crime is committed by young men between the ages of 15 and 34. What is noteworthy about Wood Buffalo is that despite the over-representation of young men within the region, there is no evidence of the inflated rate of crime that one would expect. The best explanation for this finding appears to flow from the nature of the community; this is a place where young men flock to make good money; they may be in camp for 20 days and back home for 10, or they may be permanent residents in the Wood Buffalo region, but regardless of how they live within the region, they are

there to provide skilled labour for a variety of oil sands projects, or to service these industries; they are already committed, at least while in Wood Buffalo, to an adult trajectory of responsible employment.

But, of course, Wood Buffalo is also not without its difficulties. As data from Statistics Canada have revealed, there are relatively high rates of cocaine distribution within the region, and some more limited difficulties with impaired driving. Again, this is probably not particularly surprising, given the youth and the wealth of the community, and the inevitability of transportation by motor vehicle. The young men who live within this region work hard and they play hard. Regrettably, they do not always do so responsibly.

But the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo is far from awash in crime, or to quote the florid language of Britain's GQ, "synonymous with crime" and full of "tough, young, bored single men with too much money and little to do, who are fuelling the chaos". Consider, alternatively, what any visitor will find -- a burgeoning community, working hard to establish impressive amenities for its citizens, concerned about the crime that does exist and, despite the controversy that continues to swirl around its industries, asking that its people and its culture be assessed with both fairness and civility.

Footnotes

¹ See <http://www2.macleans.ca/canadas-most-dangerous-cities-the-rankings/>. See also Alex Hannaford, "No country for young men", *British GQ*, London, United Kingdom, March, 2012. See also Philip Preville, "Down and dirty in Fort McMurray, 79 *Chatelaine*, 2006, and most recently, Taras Grescoe, "Big Mac", *The Walrus*, November, 2013, 42. Taras Grescoe's article is actually sympathetic to the sense of community that many are seeking to build in the region, but he changes tack in his final five or six paragraphs to highlight the negative environmental impacts of the oil sands. Perhaps this is simply the lot of those who live in the region – that, regardless of the nature of their community, they cannot escape from scrutiny of their industry.

² Personal communication from Chris Houle, Information Officer, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, Statistics Canada, to Neil Boyd, August 16, 2013, via email.

³ See http://www.municipalaffairs.alberta.ca/documents/msb/2011_pop.pdf, and most notable, at p.10.

⁴ See M.J. Aylward, *Shadow Populations in Northern Alberta*, 2006, www.nadc.gov.ab.ca/Docs/Shadow-Populations.pdf.

⁵ See <http://www2.macleans.ca/2012/01/17/wood-buffalo-s-response-to-the-national-crime-rankings/>, Brendan Proce, Communications, Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo.

⁶ See "McMurray renting prices highest in nation", <http://www.fortmcmurraytoday.com/2013/07/04/mcmurray-renting-prices-highest-in-nation>. Personal communication, Brendan Proce, Communications, Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, Superintendent Bob Couture, RCMP, Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo.

⁷ As indicated, crime rates are reported per 100,000 population. The asterisks denote jurisdictions where population figures other than the federal census have been used.

⁸ Data provided by the RCMP Wood Buffalo Detachment, August 2013.

⁹ See, for example, the relatively recent article by Michael Tonry and David Farrington, "Punishment and Crime Across Space and Time", *Crime and Justice, Volume 33*, 2005, pp.1-39. The authors employ an 18 year time frame in order to make sense of international changes in crime rates over time. Additionally, a search of the Criminal Justice Abstracts database for "crime rates" demonstrates that virtually every study is considering at least five years of data and more commonly 10 and 20 years of data, in order to understand increases and/or decreases in reported crime.

¹⁰ See Justin Baer and William J. Chambliss, "Generating Fear: The politics of crime reporting", Crime, Law and Social Change, 1997, Volume 27, Issue 2, pp.87-108,

¹¹ "Police chief calls for better crime communication"
www.swissinfo.c/eng/swiss_news, April 26, 2013.

¹² See Don Weatherburn, "Uses and abuses of crime statistics", Crime and Justice Bulletin, Number 153, November, 2011, New South Wales Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research.

¹³ See Statistics Canada, Annual Demographic Estimates: Canada, Provinces and Territories, <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/91-215-x/2012000/t512-eng.htm>, and <http://www.woodbuffalo.ab.ca/Assets/Corporate/Census+Reports/Census+reports+Part+1.pdf>, at page 45.

¹⁴ The most often cited reference for this observation is David P. Farrington, "Age and Crime", Crime and Justice, Volume 7, 1986, at p. 189.

¹⁵ The average family income is about \$190,000 in Fort McMurray, and the annual budget for the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo is about one billion dollars -- about the same amount as the city of Vancouver, a municipality that has more than five times its population.

These tax dollars, generated mostly by the oil sands projects, and to a much lesser extent by booming residential construction, have paid for a host of community amenities. MacDonald Island Park is Canada's largest community, recreational, leisure and social centre. The Suncor Community Leisure Centre is a 450,000 square foot building, opened in 2009 and housing two Olympic sized swimming pools, four ice surfaces, one of which is an NHL sized arena, an eight sheet curling rink, a 15,000 square foot fitness centre, squash and racquet ball courts, an indoor running track, a remarkable public library, and a host of basketball and badminton courts. The indoor facilities are complemented by the island's Miskanaw Golf Club, an 18 hole course ranked within the top one per cent of public and municipal golf clubs in the country.
