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# PUBLIC POLICY SOURCES

Number 72

## Policing Alberta: An Analysis of the Alternatives to the Federal Provision of Police Services

*Barry Cooper and Royce Koop*

### Contents

<i>Introduction</i> .....	3
<i>Existing Arrangements</i> .....	6
<i>Current Controversies</i> .....	9
<i>Analysis of Policing Costs</i> .....	12
<i>Conclusions</i> .....	17
<i>References</i> .....	18
<i>Acknowledgements</i> .....	20
<i>About the Authors</i> .....	20

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## Introduction

On November 29, 1916, A.B. Perry, Commissioner of the Royal North West Mounted Police (RNWMP), announced that contracts with the prairie provinces would be cancelled at the end of the year, and provision of police services by the Dominion Government would be ended. The reason given was that the force had been reduced because so many officers had enlisted in the military. Those remaining were stretched to maintain surveillance on “enemy aliens.” Many of these people, including Clifford Sifton’s famous “men in sheepskin coats,” had immigrated to Canada from the lands controlled by the Austro-Hungarian Empire, then at war with the British Empire. In a short period, their status had changed in the eyes of the Dominion Government from welcomed settlers, to suspected subversives.

There was another reason besides a manpower shortage for the departure of the federal police: they were reluctant to enforce an Alberta statute (Palmer and Palmer, 1990, p. 176). Albertans had voted for prohibition in 1915; the appropriate legislation was passed and it came into effect on Dominion Day, 1916. Commissioner Perry did not wish to involve the police in enforcing legislation that was controversial and, in some quarters, highly unpopular (Spence, 1919, p. 428). Apart from the danger involved, enforcing prohibition would, he argued, tarnish the Mounties’ image (Moir, 1995). For many years thereafter a common complaint by both the Liberal and the United Farmers governments of the province concerned the “lack of cooperation in assisting law enforcement in Alberta” on the part of the federal police (Stretch, 1979, p. 23). This was a major problem because the federal police had abandoned what appeared to be a significant responsibility: they had all but ceased to patrol the Montana border, which thus enabled bootleg-

gers to bring their product into Canada unmolested by customs formalities or Canadian law.

Generally speaking, as Lin and Brannigan (2004) pointed out, the federal police have never been particularly concerned with enforcing laws against public order offences. Indeed, many criminologists do not regard public order offences—disorderly conduct, vagrancy, public drunkenness, and the like—as being “real” crimes at all, but merely reflections of the norms or prejudices of social and moral elites, such as clergymen and temperance advocates. Alternatively, one might consider public order offences and police action to oppose them as the very essence of local identity or community spirit: offences against public order are offences against the way “we” do things “here.” However considered, the notion of public order is more elastic than is major crime, and enforcement of public order offences is more likely to vary in response to local public policy and political culture (Macleod, 1976, p. 88).

Following the creation of the Alberta Provincial Police (APP) in 1917 in response to the withdrawal of services by the RNWMP, the data on arrest rates for serious offences compared to public order offences changed—not because of changing criminal behaviour, but because of changing police behaviour (see Monkkonen, 1981, p. 22; Lin, 1995, ch. 4). The data indicate “that in exercising their discretion the provincial police gave more attention to public order offences stipulated under the provincial statutes” than under the federal Criminal Code (Lin and Brannigan, 2004).

The conventional focus of the federal police on major violations of the Criminal Code—murder,

armed robbery, and the like—raises another issue: the enforcement of public order is essentially proactive, whereas the investigation of serious crime is necessarily reactive. Thus, during the 1920s, the Alberta Provincial Police served as pool hall inspectors, game wardens, truant officers, and, on occasion, they delivered veterans' pensions to widows. In this respect, the APP effectively carried out the public policy of the province and reflected closely the dominant political culture of the day.

There is, however, another side to the sensitivity of a provincial police to provincial political culture: when public policies such as prohibition were not supported by the local community, the provincial police were either unpopular, which undermined their authority, or they were targets of bribery and corruption, which had the same effect. This potential was clearly one that the RNWMP Commissioner wished to avoid, even if it meant the federal police side-stepped some difficult police jobs and were stigmatized by the provincial political leadership as being uncooperative.

In fact, bribery and corruption of police officers proved to be a genuine problem. The 1921 *Annual Report of the Alberta Provincial Police* celebrated the story of one Constable Smith who refused a bribe of \$5,000 to absent himself from the Coutts detachment for two days to enable whiskey smugglers to cross into Canada from Sweetgrass, Montana. He refused; but a bribe of over 40 times his monthly salary was a temptation other APP officers did not resist (Lin, 1995, p. 210; Stretch, 1979, p. 9). The same APP report indicated that 6 of 27 constables engaged in policing liquor traffic were convicted or dismissed for corruption. Because of the greater wealth of the province or because of greater political involvement in the operation of the provincial police, corruption was

a much greater problem in Saskatchewan (Robertson, 1978).

By the same token, by looking first to major crimes, the federal police took on jobs that, from a police public relations perspective, could only gain them respect and approbation. For example, enforcing truancy regulations during seeding or harvesting was bound to ensure the provincial authorities would encounter resistance. So would uncovering illegal stills, which, even though doing so was a federal responsibility, was undertaken chiefly by the APP (Stretch, 1979, 11). In contrast, investigating a murder nearly always ensures the cooperation and respect of the community. In short, "the federal government in effect avoided performing all of the unpopular tasks initiated by the local governments, including the prohibition of liquor laws, the control of immigrants from central and Eastern Europe, and the surveillance of labour unrest during the 1920s. This enabled the RCMP to maintain their popularity in the western provinces" (Lin and Brannigan, 2004). Indeed, from the days of Commissioner Perry to the present, the federal police have always been highly conscious of their image and of the kind of police activity that would maintain it (Aubry, 2003).

In 1924, when prohibition ended and was replaced by liquor control boards in Alberta, the federal police offered to return to the province. By then, however, the Alberta Provincial Police had become an effective and respected police service and the province saw no need to rely on Ottawa for police protection. During the 1920s, the Alberta Provincial Police grew in size, experience, and competence. They were a regular part of the law-enforcement landscape, especially in rural Alberta: the blue tunics of the APP had effectively replaced the scarlet of the RNWMP.

In July 1919, the federal government changed the RNWMP into a national police, a major and significant change from the British tradition of supporting a locally autonomous police (except, of course, in Ireland, where a paramilitary constabulary enforced British law). In November 1919, the RNWMP, whose members had been declared by federal law to be constables everywhere in Canada and not merely in the old “North West Territories,” was renamed the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Like the Irish Constabulary, the RCMP has remained a paramilitary organization, in the sense that the federal police are under the administrative control of a central government authority rather than a local or municipal government.

As with so many expectations nourished during the expansive postwar era, the APP was first curtailed, and then extinguished by the depression of the 1930s. Because of the province’s extensive capital investment in the previous two decades, and the large public debt that accompanied it, Alberta was particularly hard hit by the great contraction in economic activities. In 1932, the Alberta government reluctantly reopened negotiations, which as late as 1928 they had spurned, with the federal police. The province was particularly concerned that the federal police would not perform the highly valued social services that the APP delivered, such as enforcing game laws. In 1929, Premier J.E. Brownlee stated: “I am not satisfied that the savings would be sufficient to offset the greater advantage of having at all times, control of our own police force” (*Calgary Herald*, February 7, 1929).

The decision to allow the federal police back into the province following an abrupt departure a decade and a half earlier—an exit that had caused both great disruption and considerable irritation among both provincial officials and ordinary citizens of the province—was not easily taken. It

was, in the end, essentially a cost-cutting measure necessitated by a disastrous decline in prices for agricultural products, a 14 percent decline in provincial revenue between 1930 and 1931, and a \$20 million debt that absorbed nearly half the provincial revenue in service charges (Mackintosh 1935, p. 346). On April 1, 1932, the APP was formally dissolved. By the end of the year, the RCMP was providing police services across the prairie west and in the Maritime provinces as well. Apart from the two provinces of the old colony of Canada, Ontario and Quebec, and the island Dominion of Newfoundland, only British Columbia retained a police force under provincial administration. The RCMP absorbed the BC Provincial Police on August 15, 1950, after 92 years of law enforcement—at the time, 15 years longer than the federal police had existed. As in Alberta a generation earlier, the federal government promised to deliver more for less. Whether the federal police redeemed that promise remains to be seen. What they unquestionably gained was something approaching a provincial policing monopoly—except, of course, in Ontario and Quebec, which retain their own police services to the present day.

It is in this historical context, which may be remembered by a few Albertans, but is more likely unknown to most of the province’s citizens, that the recent discussion over restoring the APP might best be understood (Bly, 2003; van Rassel, 2003b; *Calgary Herald*, January 27, 2001). On-going public conversation regarding the appropriateness of the federal government’s provision of police services in the province is nothing new. Then as now, both economic and political issues are involved. During the Great War it was a political decision by Ottawa that led to the withdrawal of federal officers, and the economic and financial consequences of the Depression largely determined their return. Then as now, there is an economic dimension to the current arrangement:



critics of the federal provision of police services have argued that the province could provide the same service more cheaply. A second, more political argument, is that the province could supply better police service because the provincial government is more responsive to local needs, local culture, and local context than is the federal government. Together, this combination of economic interest with local pride and political culture has focused public attention anew on how well the federal government polices the province and whether its doing so it is a good financial deal for Albertans. This *Public Policy Source* analyzes the arguments on both sides of both issues.

## Existing Arrangements

Today, from direct observation, the average Albertan is probably aware only that police services in the province are provided either by the RCMP or by municipal police officers. In fact, there are four distinctive types of police services currently provided in Alberta: RCMP policing, municipal policing, First Nations policing, and regional policing, which has been a legal option under the Alberta Police Act since 1988. (Alberta, 1991, p. 13). Historically, the arrangements that have led to the several types of policing are quite distinct, as are the needs served by the several police services. As the historical sketch given above regarding the introduction and dissolution of the federal police in Alberta indicates, explicit agreements between the two orders of government (or their abrogation) have proven decisive. In addition, however, the form of policing in any given community is also conditioned by regulations re-

The document begins by describing and assessing existing policing arrangements in the province. It then considers the current controversies over cost effectiveness and the issue of local input and local responsiveness. Third, it assesses the current costs of existing policing arrangements in Alberta and compares these with policing costs in other provinces. Finally, the paper concludes by examining several options for the future of policing in the province.

flecting the population of that community and by the option of a discretionary act by the local municipal government. This section will briefly introduce the different types of policing arrangements present in Alberta and summarize the perceived advantages and disadvantages of each.

### RCMP provincial policing

Any community<sup>1</sup> in Alberta with a population not greater than 2,500 has, at least in theory, several options for providing police services. In practice, however, small communities have nearly all applied to the provincial government for police services, primarily because doing so entails no direct costs to the municipality (Alberta, RSA, 2000, c. P-17.4 (1)). But what the provincial provision of police services in fact means, because Alberta

<sup>1</sup> Section 4 of the Alberta Police Act defines such communities as municipal districts, Metis settlements, towns, villages, and summer villages.

musters no provincial police, is that the provincial government negotiates with the federal authorities to obtain services from the RCMP to police rural areas and small towns. The last agreement reached between the two governments was the 1992 Provincial Police Service Agreement, which will expire in 2012. Under the terms of the agreement, the provincial government pays 70 percent of the costs of this service, while the federal government pays 30 percent. We refer to this as the “basic model.”

The obvious advantage of the basic model to taxpayers living in small towns and rural municipalities and districts is that they are not required to pay for their local police force. Of course, this benefit to them is not specifically tied to the existence of the federal police. Similar communities in Ontario, for example, are usually policed by the provincially-administered Ontario Provincial Police (OPP), but as late as 1997, for example, 36 Ontario municipalities had contracts with the RCMP to provide municipal police services (Statistics Canada, 1999a, p. 13). Various other models and “mixed regimes” of police service delivery are obviously practicable, which is to say there is nothing particularly sacrosanct about either federal or provincial administration of police services in Canada.

At the same time, however, the 30 percent share paid by the federal taxpayers would appear to remove some of the financial burden for policing from Alberta taxpayers. Whether or not this is a good deal for Alberta taxpayers in fact depends on whether the RCMP delivers competent and economic services. If the RCMP is an unnecessarily high-cost operation, their effective policing charges could very well offset the 30 percent “subsidy” that these communities receive.

Costing aside, the primary disadvantage of a federal police, many critics of the RCMP have main-

tained over the years, is the absence of any local input or local influence on actual policing practices in the several and varied rural and small-town communities across the province. Alberta, for example, has endorsed a “Community Policing” model or doctrine, which does not, in practice, appear to be shared by the federal police. The president of the Alberta Federation of Police Associations has, on this issue, voiced his concern that, “with RCMP policing, decisions regarding the delivery of policing will largely be made in Ottawa, not by the citizens” (AFPA, 2003b). It is a concern that has appeared from time to time in the press as well, and may be seen as recognizably equivalent to the earlier concerns with what we called public order issues rather than serious crimes.

## **Municipal policing**

Communities with populations greater than 2,500 must pay for their own policing services from local taxes (Alberta, RSA 2000 c.P-17.4-5). If the population is not more than 5,000, however, the community can still apply for police services from the RCMP under the same terms and conditions as the smaller communities. In addition, however, these communities have an option that smaller ones lack: they can raise their own police force or they can negotiate a contract directly with the federal government.

Sixty-three cities and towns in Alberta use RCMP forces following the negotiation of a contract between the municipality and the federal government. Unlike a municipal force, which municipal taxpayers pay for entirely, the federal government assumes a proportion of the costs of this arrangement. Where the population of the municipality is less than 15,000, the federal government pays 30 percent of the costs and the municipality pays 70 percent, much as in the basic model, with the municipality taking the place of



the province as the major payer. Where the population is greater than 15,000, the federal government pays 10 percent of the total costs (Alberta Justice, 2003). The cultural and political advantages and disadvantages of such an arrangement largely resemble those of RCMP contracts for smaller centers. The financial benefit of the federal contribution to policing, however, declines when the population of a community exceeds 15,000.

Calgary, Camrose, Coaldale, Edmonton, Lacombe, Lethbridge, Medicine Hat, and Taber have all established municipal police forces. All the costs for policing these larger communities, however, are paid by municipal taxpayers (Alberta, 2003). The primary advantage of such an arrangement is political or cultural: these communities retain a strong influence in local policing practices. The primary disadvantage is financial because all policing costs are borne by municipal taxpayers, and none by the senior governments.

### **First Nations policing**

The RCMP, in accord with the basic model, typically serves First Nations. In addition, seven tripartite agreements between the provincial, federal, and First Nation governments have been signed. In these cases, the federal government pays 52 percent of the costs of the service and the provincial government pays 48 percent (Alberta Justice, 2003). The primary financial advantage of this arrangement for Alberta taxpayers is that the federal government shoulders over half of the total policing costs. In addition, local input into po-

licing is maintained, which is an important consideration for First Nations, even though they do not pay for their own police services.

### **Regional policing**

Section 24 of the Police Act stipulates that “the councils of 2 or more municipalities may enter into an agreement... to be policed by one regional police service” (Alberta, RSA 2000 c. P-17.24 (1)). Even though municipalities with populations greater than 2,500 have had this option since 1988, only recently has it been actively studied or implemented. In early 2003, the town of Coaldale began a review of its local policing, which consisted of an eight-member municipal police force. Following the review, town council voted on May 26 to open negotiations with the nearby city of Lethbridge, which is policed by a larger municipal force, to form a regional police force (van Rassel, 2003a).

Some of the reasons for pursuing a regional police force appear to reflect issues specific to the municipalities of Coaldale and Lethbridge, but others do not. The financial advantages of such a force include the reduced costs of a single administration, access to specialized equipment and crime units, increased coordination between neighbouring police units, and so on. In this particular case, by forming a regional force, Coaldale gained access to the full-time sex crimes and drug investigation teams and well as to the K-9 and crime scene units of the Lethbridge force (van Rassel, 2003a). In addition, local input into policing in Coaldale remains stronger than for areas that are policed by contracted federal officers.

## Current Controversies

Any approach to policing in Alberta has sought to maximize sometimes conflicting goals: a cost effective provision of services and strong public input into policing at both the provincial and local levels that reflects Alberta's political culture.<sup>2</sup> The conflict between the two goals has typically appeared in terms of arguments that cost effectiveness is contingent upon federal funding so that even if provision of services by the federal police detracts from the ability of Alberta and its communities to have meaningful input into policing in Alberta, the trade-off is worth it. In response, critics have argued that local input is worth paying for and, in addition, that it is no longer clear that the involvement of the federal government in provincial policing even provides a financial advantage to Albertans. In this section we briefly consider first the actions the Alberta government has taken in recent years to reconsider the federal provision of police services, the arguments of public interest groups, and the response of the Alberta government to these arguments, statements, and positions.

In 1979, Solicitor General Graham Harle wrote his counterpart in Ottawa complaining that the RCMP had failed to maintain a "satisfactory level of policing service," especially with regard to allocations of manpower (Harle, 1979). Prior to the first election of Premier Klein in 1991, renegotiation of the RCMP contract was an acrimonious affair because Ottawa suggested that the provincial government pay a greater share for rural policing, roughly an extra \$5.3 million annually. Alberta's Solicitor General refused the request, claiming that Alberta could police its rural areas at lower expense (Johnson, 1993). For their part,

members of the RCMP have sometimes been critical of the prominence of contract policing in the provinces, claiming that it has diverted the federal police from its primary purpose, namely, federal policing. As a result, for example, "not one minute of time [in the RCMP Academy] these days is spent on federal law enforcement, such as white-collar crime investigation" (Palango, 1998, pp. 183-4). Contrary to many official accounts of seamless cooperation, RCMP policing in Alberta has almost constantly been associated with controversy.

Following Ralph Klein's first election victory in 1992, the Alberta government has been open to considering the option of greater provincial and local control over policing, but has refused to do so because of the perceived cost of a change from federal to provincial police administration. As part of its broader program to reduce the cost of government, in 1992 the government studied replacing the RCMP contract with a provincial force to police rural areas (Johnson, 1993; Cooper and Kanji, 2000, ch. 3). According to one observer, the government "walked away when it saw the potential costs" (Vivone, 2002).

The most important recent Alberta government contribution to the discussions of policing arrangements in the province is the 2000 *Report on Policing in Alberta*, chaired by MLA Judy Gordon and written by three Conservative MLAs. The *Gordon Report* was meant to comprehensively review policing in Alberta and touch on the role of the RCMP in rural policing and on its effectiveness (Alberta, 2000b). In fact, the discussion paper released by the government to guide the work of

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2 On the elusive question of "political culture," see Cooper, 1984, 1994, 2000, and 2001.

the review committee dealt more explicitly with the RCMP issue than did the report itself. The discussion paper also demonstrated a growing interest in provincial and municipal input into policing. The paper explicitly raised two important questions: “is the relationship between the province and the RCMP working in the best public interest?” and “should the province exert more control or influence over the RCMP?” (Alberta, 2000a, p. 11). The report itself, however, was remarkably uncertain in its conclusions. Of its 35 recommendations, the *Gordon Report* addressed the RCMP contract only once, and it did so in a studiously neutral manner.

The committee recommends that, in preparation for the negotiations for the provincial policing agreement in 2012, an external study of provincial policing be conducted to determine the efficiencies and levels of service of alternative methods of policing Alberta. These could include retaining the RCMP, forming a provincial police service, or regionalization of policing throughout the province, or combinations of these forms. This study should be led by an MLA committee and include public input. (Alberta, 2000b, p. 43)

The report’s neutrality is even more remarkable considering the nature of the submissions to the committee during its consultations. Of the 151 open-ended public submissions on just about every issue pertaining to policing in Alberta, no fewer than 25 explicitly called for some alternative to the RCMP contract; another 25 submissions implied a different policing model than exists at present, and 17 were in favour of keeping the *status quo* (Alberta, 2000b, Appendix I).

Despite the report’s moderation and neutrality, public debate regarding police administration in Alberta markedly increased following its release. This discussion focused both on a growing con-

cern for increased local input into policing practices and increased doubts about the financial benefits of the existing RCMP contract. Two contributions were especially noteworthy: the “Alberta Agenda” letter, written to Premier Klein by six prominent Albertans and published in the *National Post* (Harper *et al.*, 2001), which called for Alberta to exercise its full constitutional responsibility, and the growing opposition of the Alberta Federation of Police Associations to federal involvement in policing in Alberta.

The “Alberta Agenda” is one of many efforts more generally known as “balancing” or “rebalancing” the Canadian federation. In their letter to Premier Klein, the authors drew attention to the conduct of the Liberal Party of Canada during the campaign leading up to Canada’s thirty-seventh general election, which, they argued, targeted the political culture of the province as being “different” and thus in need of what one federal cabinet minister symbolized as “tough love.” The authors accordingly urged the province to reply actively and called explicitly upon Alberta, and implicitly upon other provinces, to resume “control of the powers that we possess under the Constitution of Canada but that we have allowed the federal government to exercise.” Among other recommendations, the letter advised the premier that the province should discontinue its dealings with the RCMP.

Start preparing to let the contract with the RCMP run out in 2012 and create an Alberta provincial police force. Alberta is a major province. Like the other major provinces of Ontario and Quebec, we should have our own provincial police force. We have no doubt Alberta can run a more efficient and effective police force than Ottawa can—one that will not be misused as a laboratory for experiments in social engineering. (Harper *et al.*, 2001)

Although the authors of the “Alberta Agenda” were understandably concerned with broader political issues, their concern with the presence of the federal police in the province was focused on the problem of maximizing the impact of Albertans on police practices within the province. In short, the publication of the “Alberta Agenda” drew public attention to the possibility of a provincial police force administered by the provincial rather than the federal government for the first time in nearly 70 years (*Calgary Herald*, January 27, 2001). Even though initially cool to the “Alberta Agenda,” more recently Premier Klein has indicated he has grown receptive to the policy ideas it contains, including that of a provincial police force (*Calgary Herald*, April 17, 2003; *Ottawa Citizen*, April 28, 2003).

The release of the “Alberta Agenda” and attention paid to it coincided with an increased public profile on the part of the Alberta Federation of Police Associations (AFPA) in favour of increased local influence on policing practice, and correspondingly a diminished federal involvement. The AFPA is an association of all provincial municipal police unions, except Calgary, which withdrew in 2002, and is a member of the federal Canadian Police Association. The federation promotes the interests of municipal police officers in the province but has also taken public positions on several more general policing issues. The AFPA president has summarized the federation’s broad mandate as follows: “it is incumbent upon the federation to identify the key policing issues facing police officers in Alberta and Canada. Committed to excellence in police service, we are obliged to raise the level of public awareness about such issues” (Kawalilak, 2003). Evidently, two such “key policing issues” are provincial and municipal influence on policing practices and the role of the federal police in the province. Along with policing standards, these issues have increasingly come to dominate the federation’s public literature.

The AFPA’s first foray into this area was its detailed and unequivocal submission to the Gordon committee, which included a strongly worded recommendation for the creation of regional police services, a position later advocated at length by the president of the federation (AFPA, 2002). The AFPA thus cautioned against signing further RCMP contracts between municipalities and the federal government, which it confirmed in its support for the decision of the Municipality of Coaldale to form a regional police force (AFPA, 2003a). The federation explicitly opposed continuing to use the RCMP in rural areas: “In order to enhance policing services to rural areas, we recommend that the government expedite the formation of a regional police service on a trial basis, which will include policing of certain rural communities currently policed by provincial policing services,” which is to say, by RCMP detachments under the provincial-federal contract (AFPA, 2002).

The AFPA opposition to the use of the RCMP in both rural areas and municipalities of over 15,000 citizens is, at least in principle, in harmony with the position taken by the authors of the “Alberta Advantage” letter. But whereas the authors of the latter document simply assert that “Alberta can run a more efficient... police force than Ottawa can,” the AFPA offered more detailed reasons for its opposition to use of the RCMP. “Regional policing” the AFPA argued, “provides an improved police presence/service, diverse job opportunities for police officers, policy consistencies, better flow of criminal intelligence, and an increased tax base” (AFPA, 2002). Following their submission to the Gordon committee, the AFPA argued that regional policing along the lines of the Coaldale-Lethbridge agreement was the way of the future. This is one reason why there has been similar public discussion concerning the desirability of a regional police centred in Red Deer (McLaughlin, 2003).



Both the “Alberta Agenda” and the AFPA have touched on the issue of the financial feasibility of alternatives to the federal police, but they have been primarily concerned with the issue of provincial and local input into policing practices in Alberta and with the constitutional responsibilities of the province. This appeal to the political culture of the province and to the pride of Albertans, although emotionally satisfying, is unlikely to appeal to a cost-conscious provincial government unless it can also be demonstrated that police reforms, including the replacement or

reduction of RCMP in favour of regional or provincial police forces, would be cost effective. In this regard, little analysis has been done, at least in the public domain, although AFPA president Peter Kawalilak in a letter to Coaldale town council, claimed that “one of the biggest myths in Canadian law enforcement is a belief that RCMP policing is less expensive than municipal or regional policing” (AFPA, 2002a, b). The following section addresses this claim.

## Analysis of Policing Costs

This section examines the costs of RCMP detachments in Alberta using data collected by the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics (CCJ) in its *Police Administration Survey in Canada* as well as other sources documenting the expenditures of police departments within Alberta and elsewhere (Statistics Canada, 1999). We first compare the costs of RCMP detachments in Alberta to other policing services in the province. Second, we attempt to evaluate the costs of an Alberta police force by comparing the costs of RCMP detachments with those of the Ontario Provincial Police (OPP), which has a force structure similar to that of the RCMP but is provincially administered.

### Relative expenses of Alberta RCMP detachments

Using data from the Centre for Justice’s *Survey on Police Administration*, we can compare the expenses of different types of police departments in Alberta. Every department in the province was classified by the survey as an RCMP detachment, a First Nations detachment, or a municipal police force. In this analysis we will focus only on the

RCMP and on municipal police. At first glance, the RCMP looks cheaper than a municipal police force. When the figures for each department in Alberta for the years 1986 to 1999 are aggregated, the average per capita cost of municipal departments is significantly higher than the per capita costs of RCMP detachment contracts (see table 1).

Even though the data also indicate that the cost of operating RCMP detachments is increasing at a rate greater than that of municipal departments, table 1 shows that, on the whole, it is cheaper per capita to operate an RCMP detachment than a municipal police force. The implication, therefore, is that moving away from RCMP detachments in favour of more localized control of

**Table 1: Average per Capita Costs of Types of Departments, 1986-1999**

Type of Department	Average cost per capita
RCMP Detachment	\$ 82.2
Munic. Department	\$ 131.0

Source: Statistics Canada, 1999a. *Police Administration Survey*, administered by the Center for Justice Statistics. Statistics Canada Collection STC/CCJ-140-60000.



**Table 2: Average Population of Community by Policing Type, 1986-1999**

Type of Department	Average Population
RCMP Detachment	8,133
Munic. Department	214,021

Source: Statistics Canada, 1999.

police would mean greater police costs. In fact, however, matters are more complex because it turns out that the federal police operate in parts of the province that are comparatively inexpensive to service. Using the data from the Centre for Justice, table 2 summarizes the average populations of the communities that the two types of department serve.

In simple terms, the federal police serve small towns and rural areas while the municipal police serve big cities. Given the incentives in the Alberta Police Act, any other pattern or outcome would be surprising indeed.

The size of the community in which police services are delivered matters because crime rates do not rise proportionately with population increases. On the contrary, crime tends to increase disproportionately with increases in community population. That is, as the population of an urban centre increases, the frequency of encounters between practicing and potential criminals and criminal opportunities as well as criminal associates quickly increases. In addition, the relative anonymity of large urban centers and a resulting loss of social control can result in crime rate increases (Wilson, 1995, p. 29). As a result, both the frequency and the sophistication of crime increase disproportionately quickly as population increases.

Although increased crime does not necessarily cause increased spending on police services be-

cause other factors, such as high wages or generous pensions could have the same consequence, it is intuitively likely that more crime will mean higher police costs. The common sense reason why higher crime rates are strongly associated with higher policing costs is that, in high-crime locales, police services must adapt to greater frequency, diversity, and sophistication of criminal activity. Compared to small towns and rural areas, cities host more crimes, which in turn increases policing costs. In concrete terms, this "adaptation" of police forces to their environment means the creation and maintenance of specialized major crime sections, departments, divisions, or squads including child abuse, domestic abuse, sex crimes, criminal intelligence, commercial crime, drug, vice, K-9, and crime scene units. Naturally, these specialized sections will increase the cost of policing in large population centers. One may expect, therefore, that population is likely a significant explanation of the lower cost of RCMP detachments, which, as we saw, are located chiefly in rural areas and small communities, relative to city departments.

Lower occurrences of crime in Alberta communities patrolled by RCMP rather than municipal police can also be partially accounted for by demographics. It is well understood in the literature that young people, especially young men, are generally the ones committing crimes (Wilson, 1995, p. 26). In addition, between 1988 and 1995, Canada saw a sharp increase in the occurrence of violent crimes committed by youths; between 1993 and 2003 violent crimes committed by girls aged 12 to 17 more than doubled (Statistics Canada, 1999b). One would expect a community with a lower proportion of young people to experience lower crime rates than communities with a higher proportion of youths. The migration of younger citizens from smaller to larger centers is well-known (Statistics Canada, 2002), and has been taking place in Alberta for many years

(Dupuy, 2000; Stirling and Anderson, 1972). Communities with smaller proportions of young people would therefore be less susceptible to high crime rates, thus contributing to lower costs of policing in these communities and, conversely, to the higher costs of policing in larger urban centers. The implications of internal migration and the actual distribution of policing between the federal and municipal police services, therefore, are to enhance the lower policing costs of the RCMP in smaller communities while correspondingly increasing policing costs in larger ones, which typically are policed by municipal departments.

The conclusion from these data is that although municipal departments tend to be more expensive to run than RCMP detachments, the higher cost is a function of the community population served rather than any intrinsic frugality of RCMP detachments compared to municipal departments. Long-standing institutional arrangements have provided numerous incentives for the federal police to serve relatively small population centers and rural areas. This distribution has created the illusion that RCMP detachments themselves are somehow more efficient than are city departments. It follows that, because small town and rural policing costs are lower anyway, there is no reason to think that a provincial police force in the same kinds of communities would not cost less than it costs to police larger centers. Indeed, as we shall see, there are reasons to think that a provincial police would cost less than the federal police.

### Expenses of city and RCMP departments

A direct comparison of municipal and RCMP costs confirms this overview of police expenses in Alberta. We now consider all places in Alberta with populations under 15,000 that are billed by

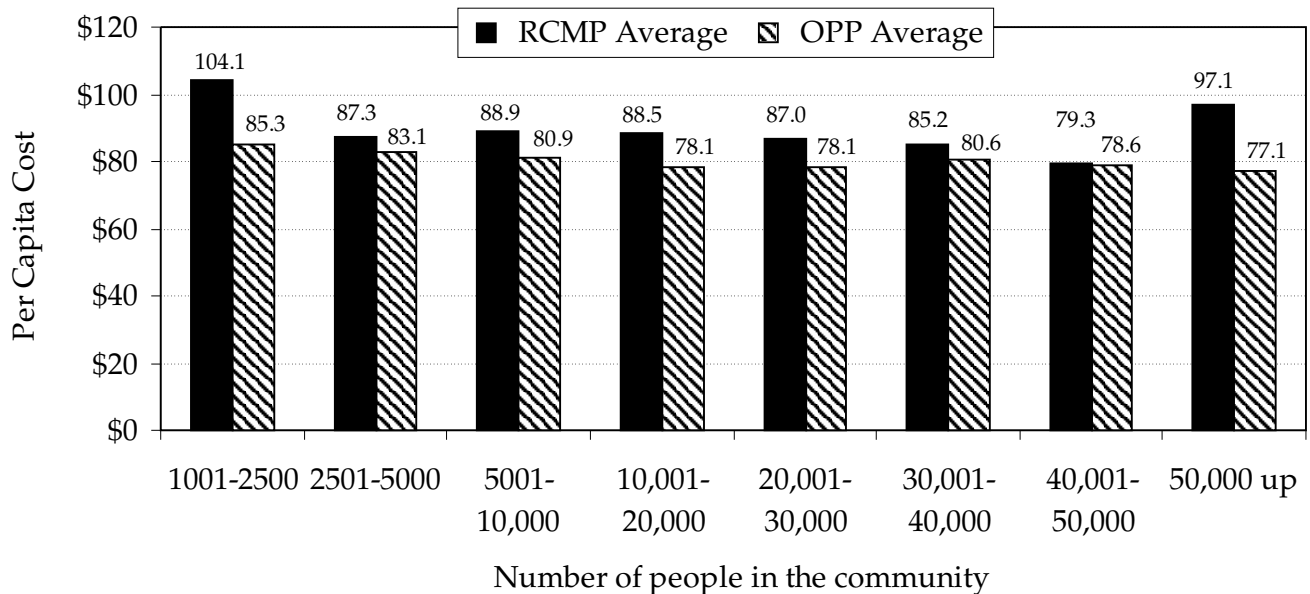
the federal government for provision of police services and compare these costs with those incurred by the municipal departments. The direct costs to be compared include salaries, allowances, stationery, training, telephone, radio, computers, uniforms, investigational aids, vehicles, and vehicle maintenance. Indirect costs include employer contributions to pensions, the federal police training academy, health and dental care, as well as administrative costs associated with the federal External Review Board and Commission for Public Complaints against the RCMP. For 2002/2003, the estimated cost to municipalities, using the CCJ data, was at estimated \$103,000 per officer. How, then, does the federal police compare to its municipal counterparts?

The greatest variable in making up the per officer cost for police services is salaries on the grounds that both the federal police and the municipal police will pay about the same for their vehicles and their paper clips. The annual salaries of first class constables in Alberta for the years 2001 and 2002 range from a low of \$48,305 in 2001 to a high of \$60,396 in 2002. These salaries can be broken down by both municipal departments within Alberta as well as for the federal police force as a whole. Table 3 presents the average salaries of first class constables in the larger Calgary and Edmonton departments, the smaller municipal departments (Camrose, Coaldale, Lacombe, Lethbridge, Medicine Hat, and Taber), and the federal police.

**Table 3: Average Salaries of First Class Constables by Type of Department, 2001-2002**

Departments	Average Salary
Calgary/Edmonton	\$56,119
Other Municipal Departments	\$53,281
RCMP	\$60,040

Sources: Statistics Canada, 1999a (CCJ, Survey; RCMP, Pay Council).

**Figure 1: Average per Capita Costs of RCMP and OPP Detachments, 1986-1999**

Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Centre for Justice, 1999.

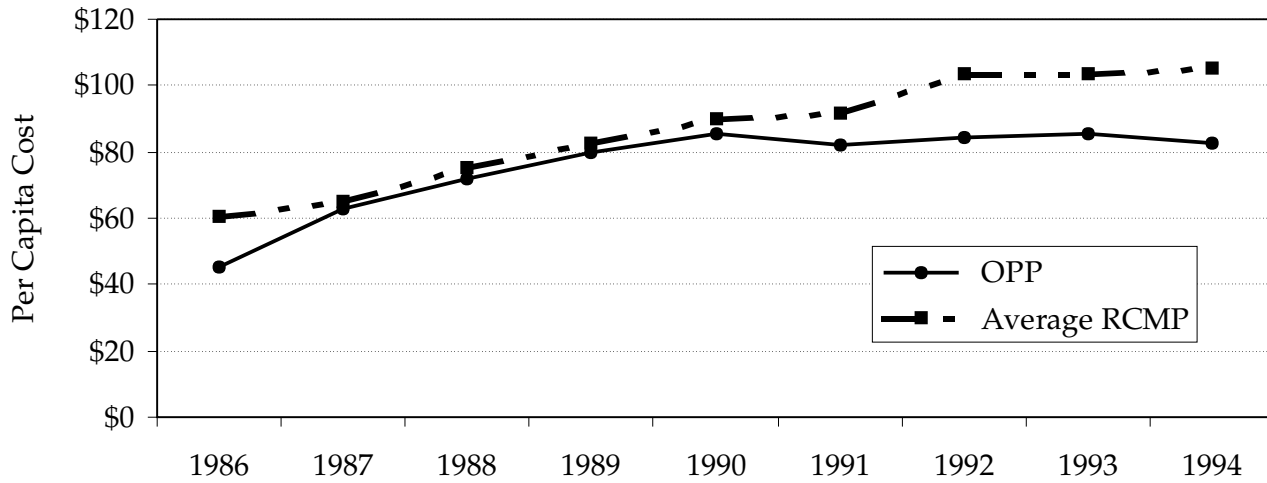
The Calgary and Edmonton departments are distinguished from the other municipal forces because of the previously-discussed effect of population on crime levels. Comparisons of expenses between RCMP detachments and the smaller municipal forces are appropriate because the populations of the communities served by these forces are more comparable. Salaries paid to federal police officers were considerably higher than those awarded by the municipal departments in 2001-2002. In fact, salaries for federal constables were higher than those for constables in the city departments of Calgary and Edmonton, despite the fact that the populations of these cities (and thus their crime levels) are many times higher than those of the communities served by federal detachments. Officer salaries is clearly one area where money could be saved by extending the efficiency of municipal departments to rural areas currently policed by the federal force.

### Comparative police expenses

As noted above, direct comparison of the expenses of federal police detachments and city departments in Alberta is misleading because of the importance of population size and demographic profile in determining the crime rate and thus police costs. A more meaningful comparison would be to compare the costs of the federal police in rural areas and small communities with the costs of provincial police force detachments in similar places. Because the Ontario Provincial Police has a similar force structure to the federal police, a comparison of the per capita costs of those two police forces may provide some useful information.

On the basis of data provided by the Canadian Center for Justice, it becomes apparent that RCMP detachments in Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia are more expensive to run than are OPP departments. Figure 1 summarizes the results; the comparative costs are grouped by community size.

**Figure 2: Per Capita Costs of Alberta RCMP and OPP Detachment by Year, 1986-1994**



Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Centre for Justice, 1999.

Figure 1 shows that from 1986 to 1999, federal police detachments in Canada were more expensive to run than were provincial detachments in Ontario; moreover, the provincially-administered police incurred a lower per capita cost than did federal detachments in every type of community, but particularly in relatively small and relatively large ones, where the difference was in the range of \$20 per citizen.

While these differences are important, one should also note the difference in the upward trend in spending in the two kinds of departments. Figure 2 summarizes average spending of the sample federal and provincial departments for the years 1986 to 1994, which include two years when the federal police experienced a salary freeze.

Figure 2 confirms the information presented in figure 1: in each year provincial police detachments operated more cheaply than federal police

detachments. More significantly for the longer term, although the costs of both types of departments increased over the period analyzed, federal costs increased at a faster rate than did provincial costs. Specifically, the per capita cost of federal police detachments increased an average of \$5.60 per citizen every year and the cost of provincial police detachments increased an average of \$4.60 per citizen. After eight years, the costs of federal policing on average had increased by \$44.50 for each citizen, whereas the cost of provincial policing had risen by \$37.10 per person.

These comparative data lead us to make two conclusions. First, the provincial police force in Ontario has been consistently less expensive to operate than the federal police in Canada; and second, the federal police have been less capable of containing cost increases than have the provincial police.

## Conclusions

Alberta has several options available to it for organizing its future needs for police services, particularly outside Calgary and Edmonton. It can

1. Maintain the status quo.
2. Maintain roughly current arrangements, but
  - a) Replace the federal police in all capacities with a provincially-administered force.
  - b) Replace the federal police in communities with a population greater than 15,000 with a provincially-administered force.
3. Replace some or all federal police detachments in rural areas with several regional forces based in larger population centers.

### Maintaining the status quo

As discussed earlier, the existing arrangements regarding federal involvement in policing in Alberta appear to be financially advantageous because federal taxpayers pay a share of the costs of such policing (30 percent for communities with populations less than 15,000 and 10 percent for communities greater than 15,000). On the other hand, federal policing deprives Albertans of input into and control over policing in the province.

However, the cost of federal provision of police services in the province is more a function of the population of the communities policed and associated criminal activities than it is of the frugality of the RCMP. Moreover, a comparison with the OPP indicates clearly that a provincially administered police delivers services at a lower cost than the federal police. In addition, the federal police appears less capable than municipal departments in Alberta of maintaining current levels of spending, such as in the area of officer salaries.

### Replace the federal police with a provincial police force

The provincial government has two major options. First, it could recruit and train its own police force and simply replace the federal police with this new force while maintaining the current police act. This alternative would have two initial effects: a revived Alberta Provincial Police force would patrol rural areas with populations under 2,500; and municipal governments that wish to do so could contract with the provincial (rather than the federal) government for policing services. This alternative would maximize the influence of Albertans on policing practices in the province. At the same time, it would extinguish the federal provision of policing in the province.

The second alternative is more modest and would maintain a federal police presence in Alberta. Were the provincial government not prepared to remove the RCMP completely, a preliminary step would be to allow communities with populations above 15,000 to contract with a new provincial force rather than with the federal police. The rationale behind this option is a reflection of the small existing federal financial contribution to providing police services in medium-sized communities. Such communities would lose only the 10 percent “subsidy” paid by federal taxpayers and so would have the least to lose by getting rid of the federal police. As in the more extensive option, this option would significantly increase the input of the provincial and local communities into the conduct of police operations.

One thing at least seems clear from the foregoing analysis: there is no indication that replacing the federal police with a provincially administered force would result in increased costs. Indeed, On-



tario's example indicates that a provincially administered police force delivering services to smaller communities is significantly more efficient than the federal police doing so.

## Regional forces

The option favoured by the Alberta Federation of Police Associations, namely regional police forces, would amalgamate urban departments and surrounding rural areas and small towns. The result would be a net decline in the federal provision of police services and a net increase in provincial provision of these services. As the Coaldale amalgamation with Lethbridge indicates, this option would provide direct access to smaller communities of the more sophisticated crime units available in urban centers. It would also reduce costs by lowering administrative overhead and duplication. As comparisons with the OPP demonstrate, such departments would be very likely to be more cost effective than federal police detachments currently are.

No doubt a more extensive and detailed analysis of specific federal police operations around the

province would produce some variance in the efficiency of the several detachments. The figures involved, however, are currently inaccessible through the CCJ. This analysis does provide, however, sufficient grounds for the province of Alberta to undertake such a detailed analysis. Such a study might consider, as well, issues ignored in this *Public Policy Source*, including the role and deployment of special, auxiliary, or deputy constables, and the use of private security firms, particularly where protection of property is concerned.

A reduced federal police presence in the provinces more generally would enable that force to focus more on genuine federal issues: organized crime, internal security, interdiction of illegal immigrants, and so on, as well as major crimes that occur interprovincially. Just as with the original presence of the RNWMP, the departure of the federal police in 1916, and their subsequent return, any move to replace the existing federal police with a new provincial force in Alberta or anywhere else in the country will involve a complex mixture of political will and economic analysis of costs and benefits.

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