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Poll shows rural Albertans opposed to provincial police force

An online survey in February delivered by Leger and sponsored by the University of Lethbridge's Prentice Institute for Global Population and Economy and the Rural Municipalities of Alberta (RMA) shows a distinct lack of support for the creation of a provincial police force among rural Albertans.

The survey gauged the public perception of policing and was particularly focused on rural Albertans. Created as part of a collaboration between the RMA, Dr. Lars Hallstrom, a political science professor from ULeithbridge, and Dr. Tanya Trussler, a professor in the Department of Economics, Justice and Policy Studies at Mount Royal University, the survey asked respondents about their views of policing, crime and criminal justice. Some 1,470 participants completed the survey, which was designed to over sample rural residents.

The majority, approximately 54 per cent of respondents, disagreed with the idea of Alberta having its own police service. Only 23 per cent of respondents agreed that Alberta should have its own police service.

The majority of respondents reported having a high level of trust in the RCMP and felt police funding should be maintained. Most respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the police are doing a good or excellent job.

"At the end of the day, our priority is safe rural communities," says RMA President Paul McLaughlin. "The RMA and its members support the work of the RCMP to address rural crime and don't see any need for a fundamental change to how policing is delivered. The results of this survey show that individual rural Albertans share a similar view."

"The conclusions of this survey for rural Albertans are quite clear," says Hallstrom. "Similar to the results of other recent polling, there is limited support for the removal of the existing police structure and replacing it with a provincial police force. Although there is some variation, depending on where people live in the province, the emphasis is really upon maintain and improve, not replace."

Three quarters of rural Albertans who responded to the survey indicated they feel safe in their community. However, more than half also felt crime had increased in their community.

“These results are similar to national statistics, as most Canadians say they feel safe,” Hallstrom says. “While they do feel safe, close to 56 per cent indicated they felt crime in their communities was increasing. This also varies by region.”

While there was clear support for the current policing model, overall perceptions of the justice system were not favourable, with close to 79 per cent either agreeing or strongly agreeing that the court system is not hard enough on criminals. Close to three quarters of respondents agreed with the statement that the criminal courts are too lenient.

“Our focus is on improving policing, improving social services and improving the justice system to ensure that rural communities are safe and supported. This is a key target and manageable without the development of an Alberta Provincial Police Service,” says McLauchlin. “At this point we’d like to see the province re-direct the time, energy and money spent on pushing a provincial police service towards further enhancing social supports and the justice system.”

“Both rural and urban Albertans tend to have a positive view of police and feel they can be trusted, but this is not always universal nor consistent. Police are often the ‘first point of contact’ for citizens, and the larger judicial system and process can be quite complex,” says Hallstrom. “There are clearly areas for improvement, both from a practical and a policy standpoint, but there is really very little support for discarding what is already in place. When we factor in the well-documented costs associated with that approach, it’s pretty clear where public opinion lands.”

RMA values the partnership with Ulethbridge in undertaking this type of polling in rural communities. Rural municipalities and residents want police services that are as responsive as possible and allow Albertans to feel safe in their homes. While the current model is not perfect, there has been a recent commitment on the part of the RCMP to prioritize rural safety, which has resulted in significant decreases in rural crime rates.

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