

Rural crime: There's an app for that

BY GERALD PILGER

As I was writing this article, I learned through a Twitter post that a neighbouring farm five km away had experienced a break and enter of their farm shop. The Twitter post encouraged people in the community to check their shops to see if anyone else had been victimized. Unfortunately, I did not see the post until about seven hours after the break-in had occurred.

Actually, it was only by chance that I learned of this break-in even that “quickly” as I do not check Twitter on a regular basis, nor is the poster someone who I receive notifications from. Thankfully, someone I am associated with on Twitter had retweeted the post.

This incident highlights two major frustrations of rural residents. First is the prevalence of crime in rural areas. The second is the perceived lack of response to rural crime.

The good news is that this summer, rural Albertans will be able to access the free Crowd Security app which will address both these concerns.

But those issues need to be addressed all across rural Canada. Are they valid?

There is no question rural crime is a major problem. On May 7, 2019, Statistics Canada released a report entitled: “Police-reported crime in rural and urban areas in the Canadian provinces, 2017” written by Samuel Perreault. Highlights of the report include:

- In 2017, the police-reported crime rate in rural areas (6,210 incidents per 100,000 population) was 23 per cent higher than the urban crime rate (5,051 incidents per 100,000 population).
- Higher crime rates in rural areas were marked in the Prairie provinces, where in 2017, rates in rural areas were 36 per cent to 42 per cent higher than in urban areas.
- Police services in mostly rural areas served 16 per cent of the population in the provinces in 2017, but reported 23 per cent of violent crimes, 17 per cent of property crimes, 27 per cent of Criminal Code traffic offences, and 23 per cent of other Criminal Code violations.
- The police-reported crime rate in Canada declined from 2009 to 2017. However, the decrease was larger in urban areas (down 19 per cent) than in rural areas (down 13 per cent). As with the crime rate, since 2009, the Crime Severity Index has decreased more in urban areas (down 19 per cent) than in rural areas (down seven per cent).

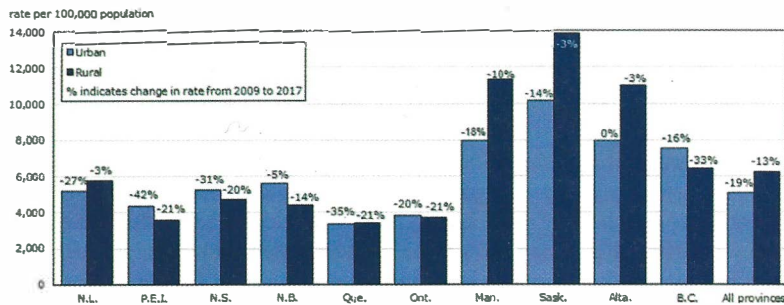
Ask any farmer about rural crime and they will likely be able to tell you about incidents that happened within their community. If you include misdemeanor activities such as mischief, trespass, dumping of garbage and hunting without permission, I doubt there is a farmer who has not been personally impacted by such activities at one time or another.

In fact, such minor activities have become so prevalent that many are simply not reported and therefore not accounted for in statistics and charts like those above. So, it seems likely that actual crime rates are even higher in rural areas.

Which brings up concern number two: the lack of response to rural crime. Is this concern real?

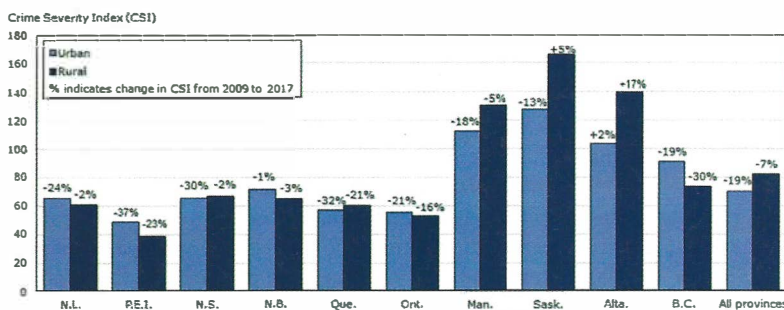
Well, in the two provinces showing the highest

Police-reported crime (excluding traffic violations), urban and rural police services, by province, 2017



Note: Includes Criminal Code offences, excluding traffic violations. Urban police services serve an area where the majority of the population lives within a census metropolitan area (CMA) or census agglomeration (CA). Rural police services serve an area where the majority of the population lives outside a CMA or CA. A CMA or CA is comprised of one or more adjacent municipalities centred on a population centre (known as the core). A CMA must have a total population of at least 100,000, of which 50,000 or more must live in the core. A CA must have a core population of at least 10,000. To be included in the CMA or CA, adjacent municipalities must have a high degree of integration with the core, as measured by commuting flows derived from census data. A CMA or CA may have more than one police service. Rates are calculated per 100,000 population, and population counts are based on the July 1 estimates from Statistics Canada's Demography Division. Excludes data from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police's Canadian Police Centre for Missing and Exploited Children. Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, Uniform Crime Reporting Survey.

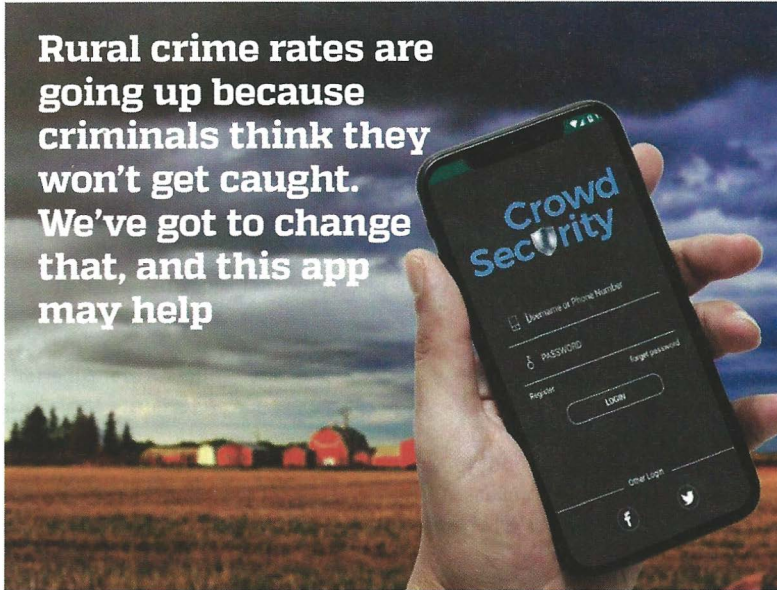
Police-reported crime severity index, urban and rural police services, by province, 2017



Note: The Crime Severity Indexes are based on Criminal Code incidents, including traffic offences, as well as other federal statute violations. The base index was set at 100 for 2006 for Canada. Urban police services serve an area where the majority of the population lives within a census metropolitan area (CMA) or census agglomeration (CA). Rural police services serve an area where the majority of the population lives outside a CMA or CA. A CMA or CA is comprised of one or more adjacent municipalities centred on a population centre (known as the core). A CMA must have a total population of at least 100,000, of which 50,000 or more must live in the core. A CA must have a core population of at least 10,000. To be included in the CMA or CA, adjacent municipalities must have a high degree of integration with the core, as measured by commuting flows derived from census data. A CMA or CA may have more than one police service. Population counts are based on the July 1 estimates from Statistics Canada's Demography Division. Excludes data from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police's Canadian Police Centre for Missing and Exploited Children. Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, Uniform Crime Reporting Survey.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 40

Rural crime rates are going up because criminals think they won't get caught. We've got to change that, and this app may help



crime rates, both Alberta and Saskatchewan governments are attempting to address the issue. Just over a year ago, Alberta Premier Jason Kenney announced a \$30 million, 15-point plan to address crime, which he said was hitting rural Alberta hardest. It increased fines, increased the number of prosecutors, and increased prison terms for repeat offenders.

Then, in his 2018 throne speech, Saskatchewan Premier Scott Moe promised to “continue work on improving police response times and visibility through the Protection and Response Team (PRT).”

Both Saskatchewan and Alberta have expanded the duties of conservation officers and highway patrol officers to address rural crimes and both have strengthened trespass laws. These are signs that rural crime has caught the attention of governments and law enforcement agencies. The problem is that most of these measures focus more on punishment than on prevention and response to crimes.

ALBERTA'S NEW CROWD SECURITY APP

This is where the Crowd Security app comes in. The app is the brainchild of three individuals: Trent Kenyon, a former rural Alberta RCMP member and now a community peace officer in central Alberta; Blake Moser, president of the East 13 Rural Crime Watch Association; and Gary Zhang, a geographical information systems (GIS) expert.

At a meeting this past February, Kenyon shared Statistics Canada data showing that, in 2017, rural Alberta had a police-reported crime rate of 10,964 per 100,000 people. This was 38 per cent higher than in urban Alberta. He attributed this disparity primarily to opportunity. According to Kenyon, “people commit crimes because they think they can get away with it.”

Kenyon explained that criminals see rural Alberta

as easy pickings. He pointed out that the increasing distances between farms and rural infrastructure means fewer potential witnesses. Expensive tools and equipment tend to be less secured. There tends to be long response times by police because of the large territory they have to patrol. And the large grid system of rural roads gives criminals lots of opportunity to escape capture even if police do arrive in time.

But the biggest problem may be that rural Canadians continue to have a trusting nature. These are the issues, Kenyon said, that must be addressed if rural crime is to be reduced.

The founders of Crowd Security looked at what crime prevention practices worked in the past. After all, many farmers grew up when doors were never locked and keys were left in vehicles. The difference they noted was that in the past there were many more farms and farmers knew all their neighbours. Rural residents knew all the vehicles driving the local roads and were quick to check out a strange vehicle in the neighbourhood, or at least notify their neighbours of its presence.

Today a farmer may not even know the names of people living on acreages next door or those who are renting old farm sites, and while the old party line telephone system could quickly alert the entire neighbourhood to a problem, today, in spite of instant global communications, you may not even be able to find out the phone number of the person down the road if all they have is a cell phone.

Now, however, most community residents have a smartphone or home computer which can easily link people geographically. And this is the basic premise behind Crowd Security. Individuals download the Crowd Security app and set their location as well as the area for which they want to be notified of any suspicious activity. Then, should they see anything suspicious, they simply upload a text message about that activity on their phone. They have the option of attaching pictures or video as well.

Every other user of the Crowd Security app who has requested notification of activity within the area in which the event is happening will be instantly notified. This gives your neighbours the opportunity to be aware that something is happening in the neighbourhood. If they note the same person or vehicle, they can then add to the original post, creating a time and event line of the suspicious activity.

As well, that second post is then forwarded to not only the first people notified but to all those residing in the vicinity of where the second post was made, effectively tracking that person or vehicle as it moves across the community or even the province. This process continues until there are no longer concerns about the person or vehicle. If at any point in time it becomes apparent that the police should be notified, any poster can forward the crowd-sourced information to police thereby providing not only all the crowd-sourced details and locations of the suspicious vehicle or person but

also the contact information of the witnesses who have posted.

Let me give you another personal experience where the Crowd Security app may have helped. Two years ago, a vehicle was stolen about 20 km away from our home. We had no idea a vehicle was stolen in the community that morning. The vehicle owner called the police and gave a description of the stolen vehicle, the driver and the direction it went. But by that time police arrived, it was long gone.

Remember, there was no general notice to the community about the theft. However, a few hours after the theft, while a neighbour was filling his seed drill beside the road, a police officer stopped and asked if he had seen the vehicle. He had not. After the police left, the neighbour phoned me (I was seeding across the road) to tell me what happened and to be on the lookout for that vehicle.

As it turned out, later that evening, I found the vehicle abandoned on a nearby dead-end road. The thief had abandoned the vehicle and walked a mile to where he stole another vehicle to get away.

I wonder, if the first vehicle owner been on Crowd Security and sent out a notification about the first theft, could either I or my neighbour have seen the vehicle go by where we were seeding. If so, we could have updated the owner through Crowd Security on where the vehicle was spotted. This would have provided additional information to the police of where it was travelling.

Could we have prevented the second vehicle theft? Or could the police have been able to notify Crowd Security app users about the stolen vehicle, thereby not having to stop and tell individual farmers to be on the lookout?

Crowd sourcing can provide significantly more details of criminal activity to police. It can also reduce unnecessary calls to police. Instead of four or five different people calling police to report a suspicious van in the area, Crowd Security allows residents to share sightings of the van first and chat about what it is doing before calling police. It may turn out that one person on Crowd Security knows the van is associated with, for example, utility work going on in the area, thereby making any notification to police unnecessary.

While new to Canada, similar systems are in place elsewhere and have been proven to reduce crime. In Sacramento,

California, a similar-type system has been in use for two years and the police department recently credited the app for reducing crime in the city by 24 per cent.

Some readers may equate Crowd Security to the system implemented in some areas of Saskatchewan by the RCMP and Rural Crime Watch Associations whereby police send out notifications of suspicious activities so the community can watch for a vehicle or person.

Instead, Crowd Security is the opposite of the Saskatchewan program. While Crowd Security does offer the ability for police to notify citizens, its real value is allowing citizens to notify each other and then the police, if and when police response is needed. It is the community policing the community.

What makes this crime fighting tool even more attractive is that it is free. There is no cost for the app. All that is required is your participation in looking out for yourself and your neighbours. If you see something suspicious, report it and that report

is instantly shared with every other Crowd Security participant within a personalized geographic area.

Crowd Security is upgradeable for a fee for people looking for even more protection against crime. For a yearly fee you can use the app without ads. As well, there are purchasable add-ons like geo fencing to ensure trackable assets do not leave your property and the ability to tie the app to your home alarm system for remote monitoring of your premises.

Will this stop all rural crime? No, but it is one more tool farmers can utilize to protect their homes and property. It is not a substitute for marking property, locking doors, removing keys, alarm systems, surveillance cameras, driveway gates, participation in local rural crime watch associations, and even guard dogs. But it complements each of these options, and the more actions you take to lessen the opportunity for criminals to get away with a crime, the less crime there will be. **CG**

Crowd Security opportunities

While the Crowd Security team is focused on the rollout in Alberta this year, the app could be implemented anywhere there is interest from the public and police departments. The founders hope it will expand across Canada in the coming years as interest and investment in the technology grows. So, if you are looking for a ground level investment in the rural security business in another province, this may be of interest to you too.

Crowd Security currently will be rolled out for beta testing in Alberta in June with full service beginning in July. If you are interested in participating in fighting crime in your communities, additional information is available on the web at www.crowdsecurity.ca.

To summarize how Crowd Security operates, this is the process as described on the website:

- Download the app, and talk to your neighbours, co-workers, friends and get them to download the app. The more

people sharing the information the easier it is to stop the trouble.

- Report an event using your smartphone or home computer. This could be a crime event happening to you or someone else (i.e. theft of your vehicle), or a suspicious activity event (i.e. vehicle wandering aimlessly around your neighbourhood).
- Report the event with pictures, video and/or text and our GPS technology will automatically pinpoint where it is happening and all users in your specified range will automatically be alerted in real time.
- Now, while police are enroute, concerned citizens in your area can safely help keep an eye on the event in progress and continue reporting new information which creates a trail of evidence for the police.

The team behind Crowd Security are currently looking for local partners across Alberta who are willing to introduce this app to their communities. Ideal candidates would be people already involved in electrical and/or security equipment installation.