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Public Perceptions of Policing in Alberta

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Introduction

Alberta does have a history with a provincial police force (which was ended due to fiscal pressures during the Great Depression), but the past few decades have seen a renewed interest from conservative and populist politicians in the possibility (particularly since the election of the United Conservative Party). Framed as part of the Fair Deal Panel initiated by the UCP shortly after election (in November 2019), the panel echoed the proposal made in the now-famous “Firewall” letter to Ralph Klein that Alberta should “Start preparing now 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 that 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.”

Although the political landscape of Alberta remains broadly consistent with the tenor of the Firewall letter (see for example Lightbody and Kline 2016¹), the perception, roles, provision and scope of policing across North America has come under increased scrutiny for a number of reasons. These range from (1) highly public, violent and often racialized events in both Canada and the USA, (2) related calls to “defund” the police, (3) concerns in rural areas about increases in crime rates and the impacts of such crimes, but also (4) concerns about lack of federal engagement in the RCMP, (5) concerns about the transactional and longer-term costs of a provincial police force, to (6) the question of whether the Albertan public, whether rural or urban, actually wants to proceed down the pathway to a provincial policing force.

The success of a public service organization such as the police is in part associated with its ability to deliver quality services while maintaining a positive public image. While civil society might not entirely comprehend the inner workings of police services, their perspectives of police remain vital for upholding police and state legitimacy. If citizens do not trust the police or if they believe the police are not doing their job well (or fairly) it can be destabilizing. In Canada, citizens tend to generally have a positive view of police and feel that they can be trusted to do their job; however, this is not consistent across all aspects of policing, and those areas where the public feel the police are not meeting expectations should be a focus of policy makers and police administration with the aim of repairing trust and increasing the capacity of the police to succeed. The following summarizes the results from the public perceptions of policing survey of Albertans completed in February 2023.

¹ Lightbody, James, and Lisa Kline. 2016. “Dispositional Immobility: An Analysis of Non-Decisions as Public Policy in Alberta’s City-Regions.” *Social Sciences* 5 (4): 54. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci5040054>.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of survey respondents ($n = 1,470$).

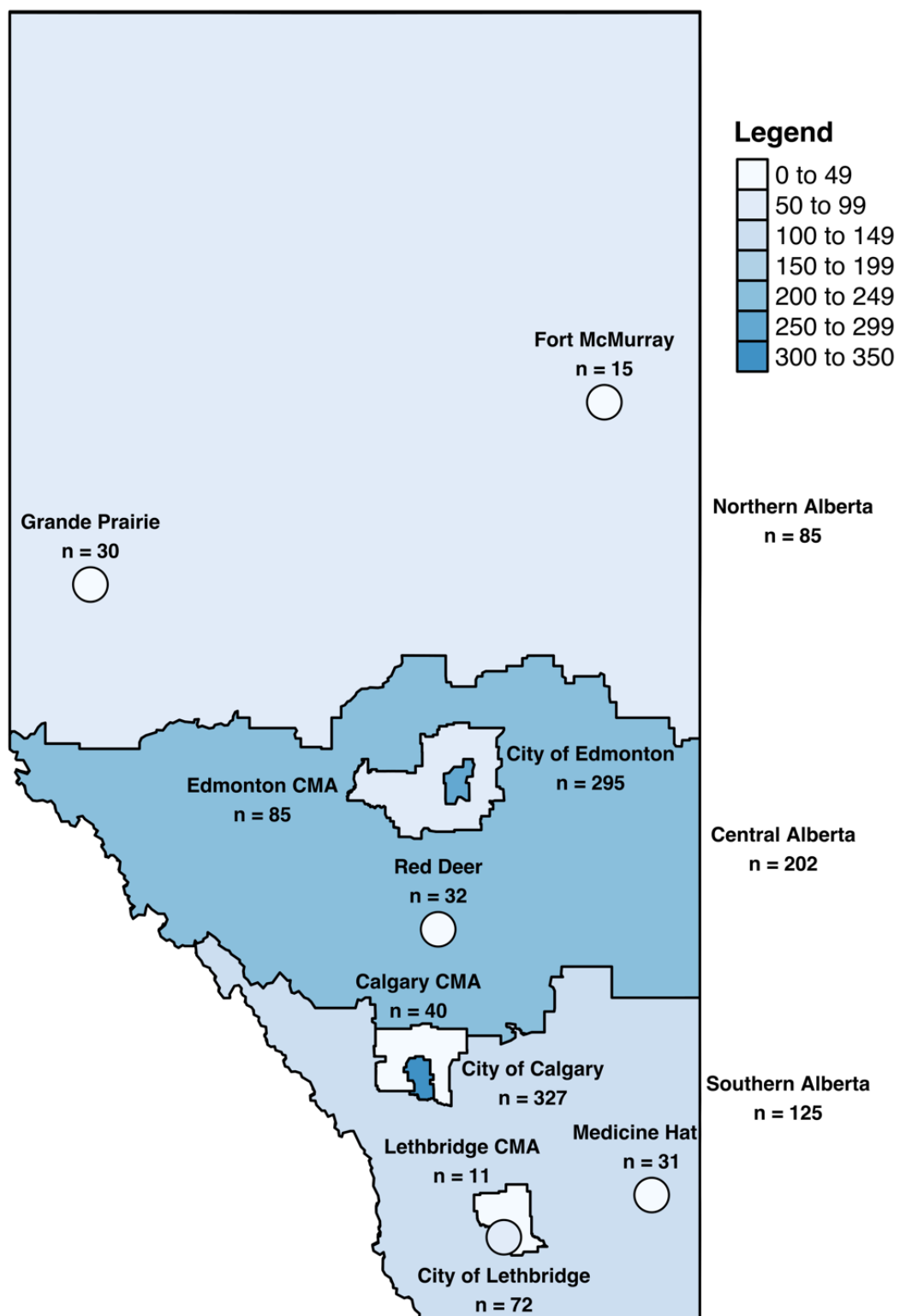
Variable	Category	% of Sample
Sex	Male	42.69%
Average age		53.54 years
Marital status	Married or common law	63.27%
Parenthood	With children at home	34.70%
Average education		14.39 years
Race	White	80.61%
Income category	Under \$30,000	14.33%
	\$30,000 to \$44,999	13.58%
	\$45,000 to \$74,999	23.63%
	\$75,000 to \$99,999	18.15%
	\$100,000 to \$149,999	18.30%
	\$150,000 or more	12.00%

Table 1 outlines the basic demographics of the sample. Of survey respondents, 42.7% were male, which is lower than provincial demographics typically indicate (Alberta = 49.9%). The average age of respondents was 53.5 years, which is higher than the provincial average of 39.0 years (Note: people under 18 years old were not included in the sample). About 63% of respondents were married or common law, and 35% had children under 18 years old living at home. The average education level was 14.4 years, which corresponds to 2.4 years in addition to high school. Just over 80% of the sample was white, which is higher than provincial demographics (Alberta = 76.5%), and the largest income category was \$45k to \$75k per year (23.6% of respondents). There was a good distribution of respondents across the other income categories.

Geographically, respondents were grouped into one of 13 regions based on their reported municipality/city of residence. The regions included seven cities (Edmonton, Calgary, Red Deer, Lethbridge, Medicine Hat, Grande Prairie, and Fort McMurray), three census metropolitan areas (CMAs; Edmonton CMA, Calgary CMA, and Lethbridge CMA), and three rural regions (Northern Alberta, Central Alberta, and Southern Alberta). CMAs are defined as communities that are socially and economically integrated with a nearby population center. Figure 1 shows the number of respondents from each region of Alberta.

In this report we outline the opinions of the 1,470 respondents. Most of the opinion questions were measured by asking individuals to respond to statements on a scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree (*i.e.*, a 5-point Likert scale).

Figure 1. Sample size by region.



Safety: The Majority of Respondents Feel Safe

Figure 2. I feel safe in my community ($n = 1,470$).

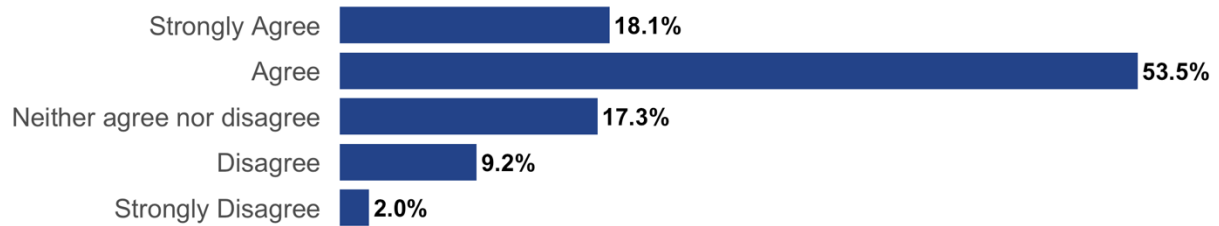
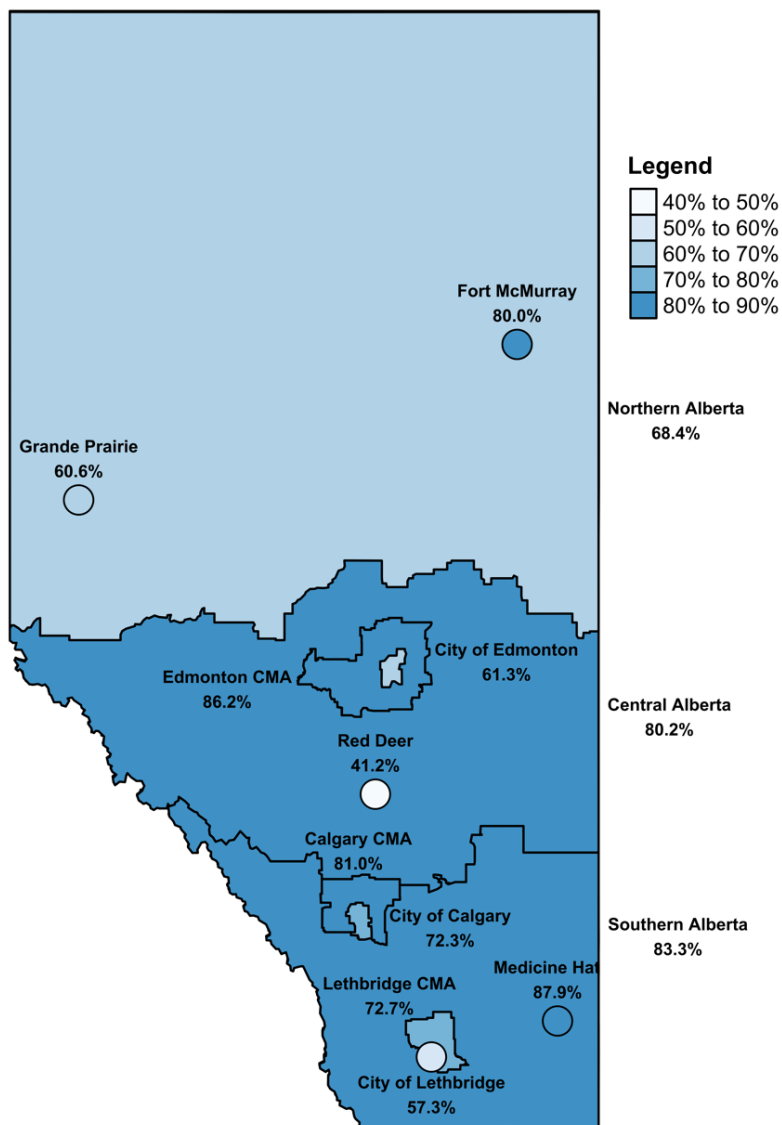


Figure 3. I feel safe in my community (% strongly agree or agree).



1.1 Public Perceptions of Policing in Alberta

Figure 4. Crime has been increasing in my community ($n = 1,470$).

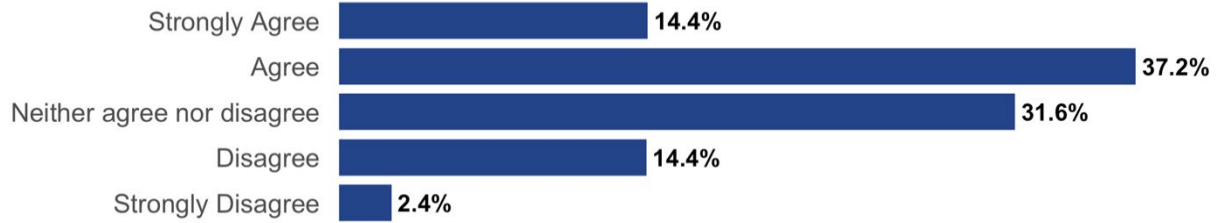
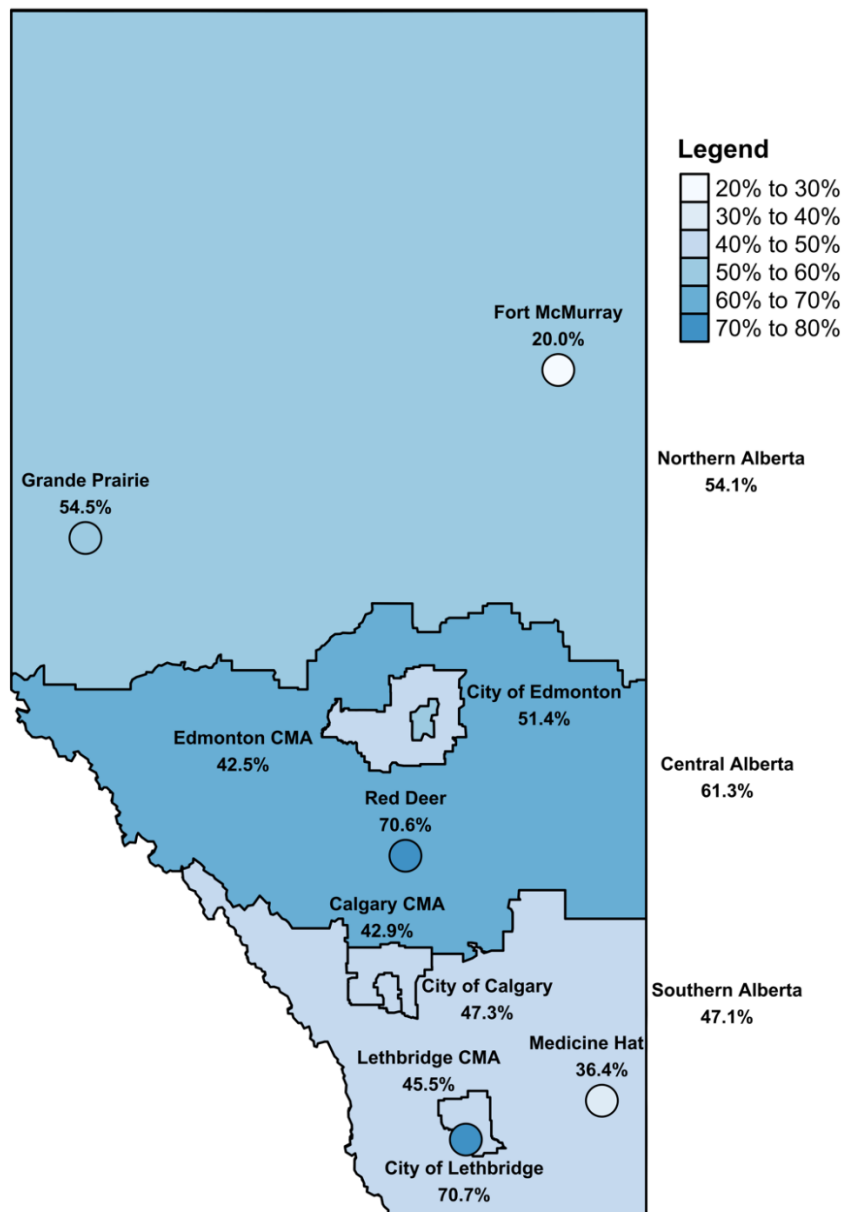


Figure 5. Crime has been increasing in my community (% strongly agree or agree).



1.1 Public Perceptions of Policing in Alberta

Overall, Albertans do feel safe in their communities; however, they also feel crime is increasing. The large majority, approximately 72% of respondents, indicated that they feel safe in their community (Figures 2 and 3). These results are reflective of the national statistics, as most Canadians indicate they feel safe. However, respondents were less likely to feel safe in Red Deer, Lethbridge, Grande Prairie, and Edmonton. While they feel safe, 52% felt that crime had been increasing in their community (Figures 4 and 5). Regions where respondents were more likely to feel crime had been increasing were Lethbridge (71%), Red Deer (71%), rural Central Alberta (61%), and Grande Prairie (55%).

Trust in the Justice System: A Systems Issues

Figure 6. The criminal justice system is not hard enough on criminals ($n = 1,389$).

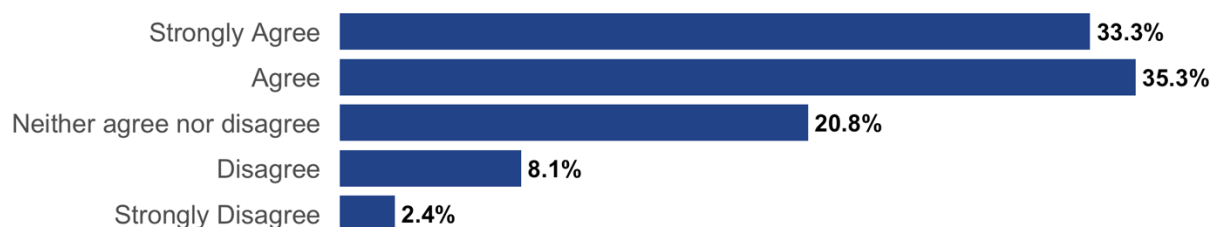
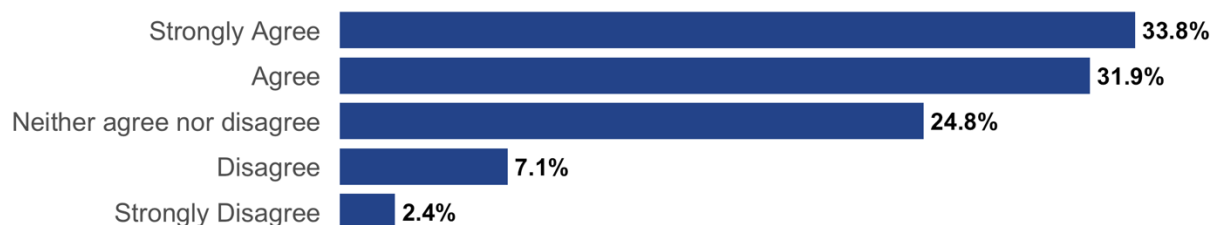


Figure 7. The criminal courts in Canada are too lenient ($n = 1,358$).

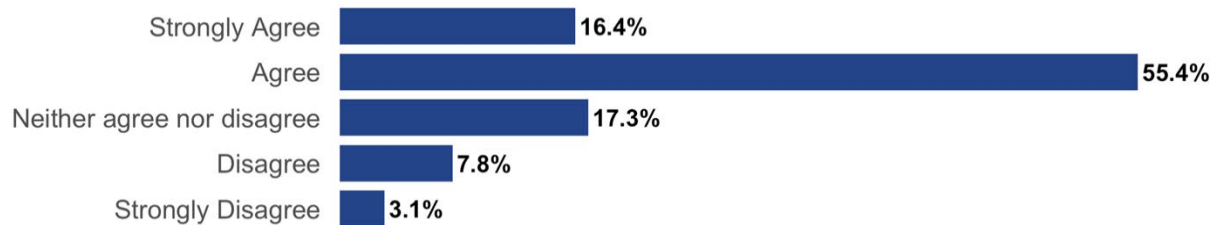


Overall, respondents do not have faith in the courts and the justice system. The courts and corrections systems in Canada do not usually garner a large amount of trust. The justice system is typically not well understood, and there is often a perception of leniency. As outlined above, the majority (68.6%) either agreed or strongly agreed that the criminal justice system is not hard enough on criminals (Figure 6), and 65.7% either agreed or strongly agreed that the criminal courts are too lenient (Figure 7).

Trust in the Front Line: Views on the Police

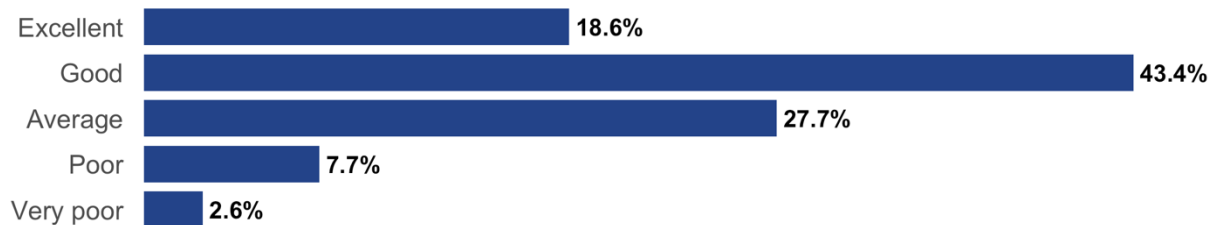
The police in Canada are generally more trusted than the other sectors of the justice system. They are often the visible component of criminal justice and are the primary point of contact with the general public, unlike the courts and corrections.

Figure 8. I generally support how police act (*n* = 1,442).



As depicted above, a large majority of respondents support how the police act, with 71.8 % either agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement (Figure 8). Only 10.9% either disagreed or strongly disagreed. In Canada more generally, there is a relatively high level of support for the police.

Figure 9. How good a job are the police doing? (*n* = 1,406).



Most respondents indicated that they believe the police are doing a good or excellent job (62.0%; Figure 9). Only 2.6% and 7.7% believe the police are doing a very poor or poor job, respectively (10.3% in total).

1.1 Public Perceptions of Policing in Alberta

Figure 10. I have a high level of trust in the RCMP ($n = 1,423$).

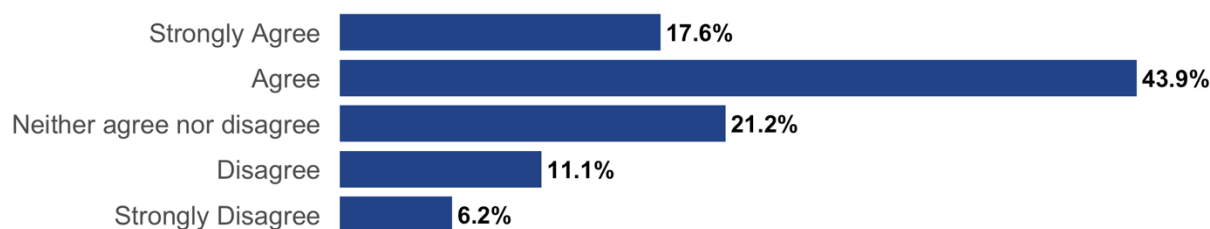
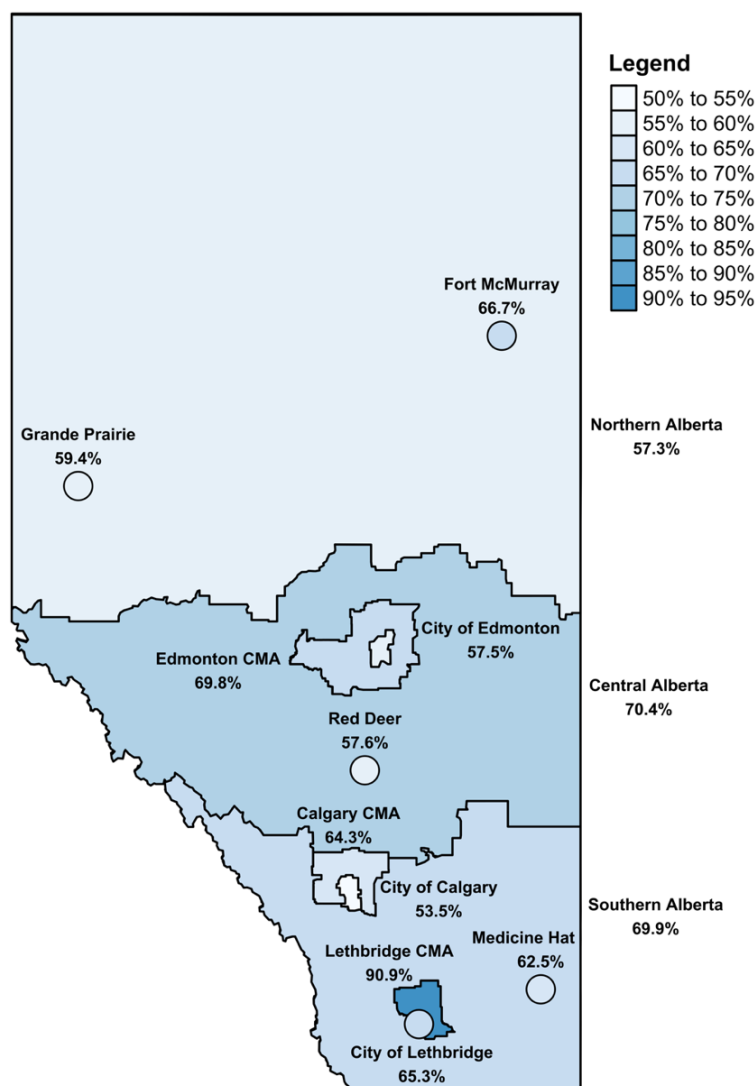
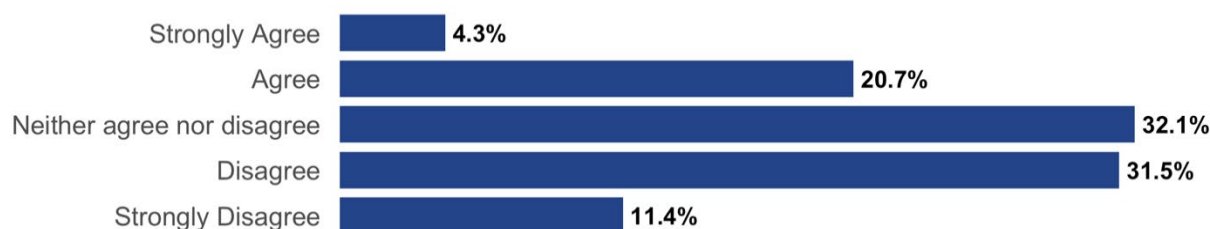


Figure 11. I have a high level of trust in the RCMP (% strongly agree or agree).



Overall, the majority of respondents trust the RCMP (Figures 10 and 11). For the statement "I trust the RCMP," 17.6% strongly agreed and 43.9% agreed (61.5% in total). Approximately 17% of respondents either disagreed, or strongly disagreed, with the statement. Trust in the RCMP was lowest in the cities of Calgary (54%), Edmonton (58%), Red Deer (58%), and Grande Prairie (59%).

Figure 12. Youth have a high level of trust in police in Alberta ($n = 1,268$).

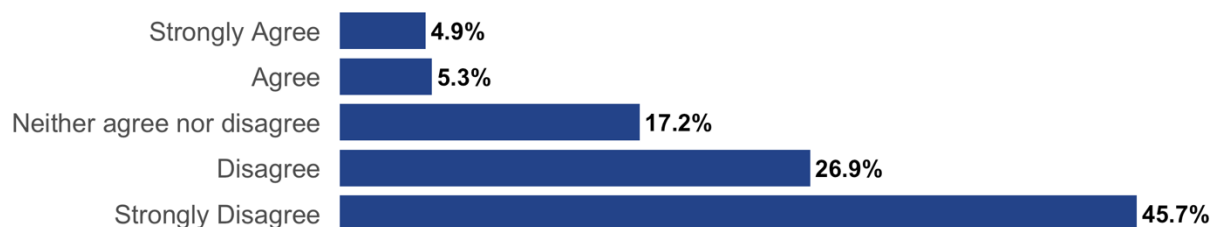


However, when asked whether respondents felt that the youth had a high level of trust in the police in Alberta, there was much less agreement. Keeping in mind that this is a **perception** of youth perspectives, as opposed to actual youth perspectives themselves, 42.9% of respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement “youth have a high level of trust in the police” (Figure 12). It should be noted that almost one third (32.1%) of respondents were unsure about youth’s perspectives of policing.

Perspectives on Police Reform

Overall, most Albertans are **not** supportive of either the dissolution of the RCMP or the creation of an Alberta Police Service. While there is some support for police reforms, for the most part, attitudinal questions on policing in Alberta indicate that funding should be maintained and the RCMP should stay in the areas they service.

Figure 13. The RCMP should be dissolved ($n = 1,362$).



Overall, the above graph indicates the strong disagreement with removing the RCMP by Albertans. The largest group of respondents (45.7%) strongly disagreed with the statement “the RCMP should be dissolved” (Figure 13). The second largest group (26.9%) disagreed with the statement (in total 72.6% disagreed or strongly disagreed). This indicates very little support for the removal or replacement of the RCMP (10.2% support).

1.1 Public Perceptions of Policing in Alberta

Figure 14. Alberta should have its own police service ($n = 1,350$).

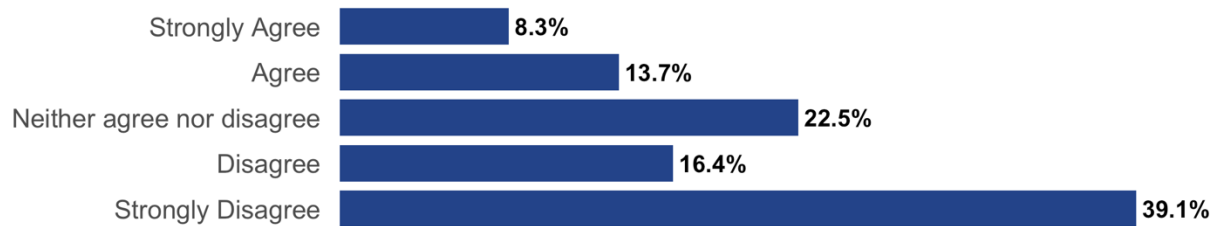
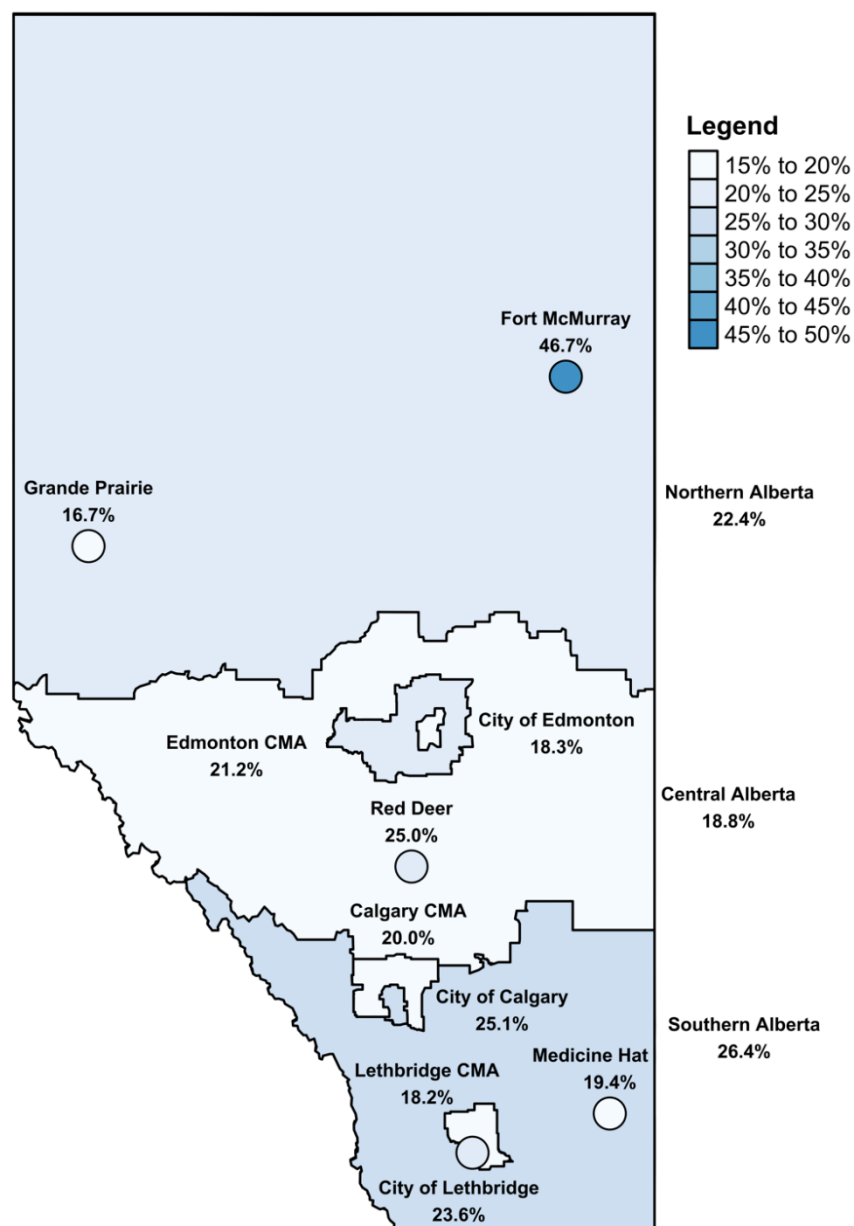


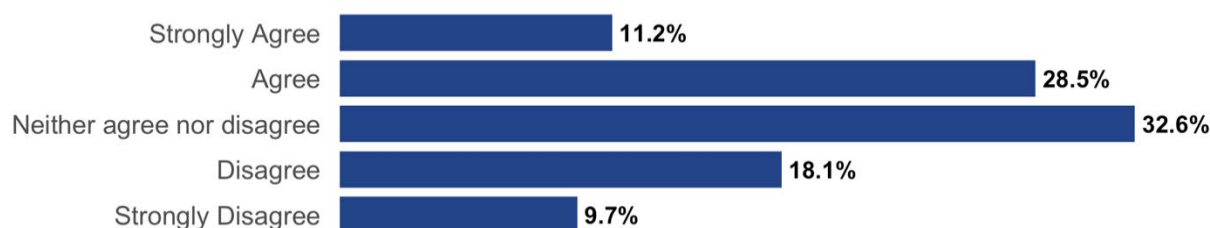
Figure 15. Alberta should have its own police service (% strongly agree or agree).



1.1 Public Perceptions of Policing in Alberta

There is also disagreement (although not as strong as the opposition to the dissolution of the RCMP) with Alberta having its own police force (Figures 14 and 15). The majority (55.5%) either disagreed or strongly disagreed with Alberta having its own police force. Furthermore, the largest group (39.1%) strongly disagreed with having an Alberta police service. Less than one quarter (22%) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with an Alberta police service, but that number was much higher in Fort McMurray (46.7%; Note: Fort McMurray only included 15 respondents), and slightly higher in rural Southern Alberta (26%), Calgary (25%), Red Deer (25%), and Lethbridge (24%).

Figure 16. Police reform is needed in this province ($n = 1,327$).



While the majority of respondents do not appear to want changes to the RCMP, nor a replacement with an Alberta police service, there is more support for police reform. Above, we can see that the largest group (32.6%) appears unsure about police reform (which may relate to the ambiguity of the general question; Figure 16). More respondents support (39.7%) than oppose (27.8%) police reform. The lack of consensus here requires further analysis into more specific types of reform.

Figure 17. Police funding should be maintained, not decreased ($n = 1,411$).

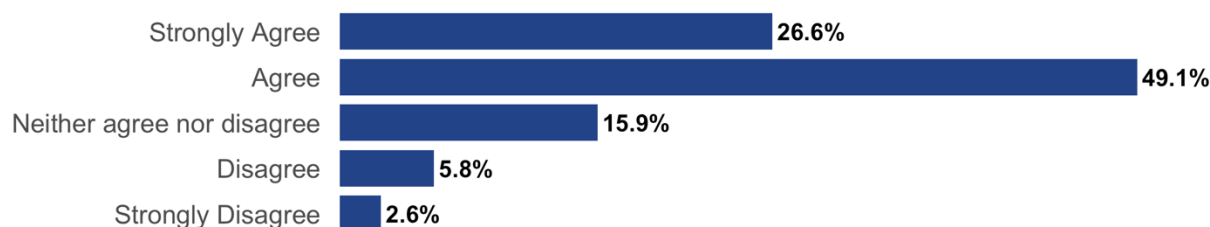
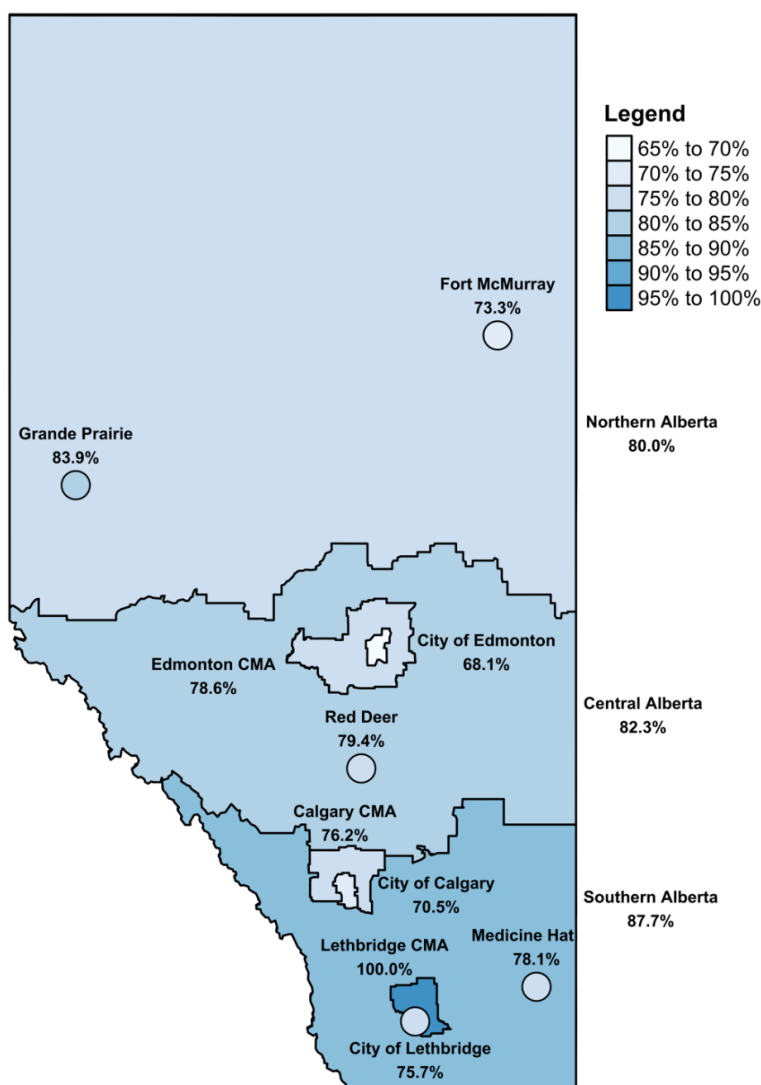


Figure 18. Police funding should be maintained (% strongly agree or agree).



When asked about defunding the police, the large majority of respondents (75.7%) felt that police funding should be maintained, not decreased (Figures 17 and 18). Support for maintaining police funding was even higher in Lethbridge CMA (100%; Note: Lethbridge CMA included only 11 respondents), rural Alberta (Southern: 88%, Central: 82%, Northern: 80%), and Grande Prairie (84%).

Conclusion

Overall, the conclusions of this survey are quite clear. As has been found in similar initiatives, there is limited support for the removal and/or replacement of the existing policing structures. There is some regional variation within the province, but on the whole there is typically a clear distinction between the majority position, and the minority position. On select topics there is some uncertainty, but the survey shows a clear lack of support for the 2019 proposal.