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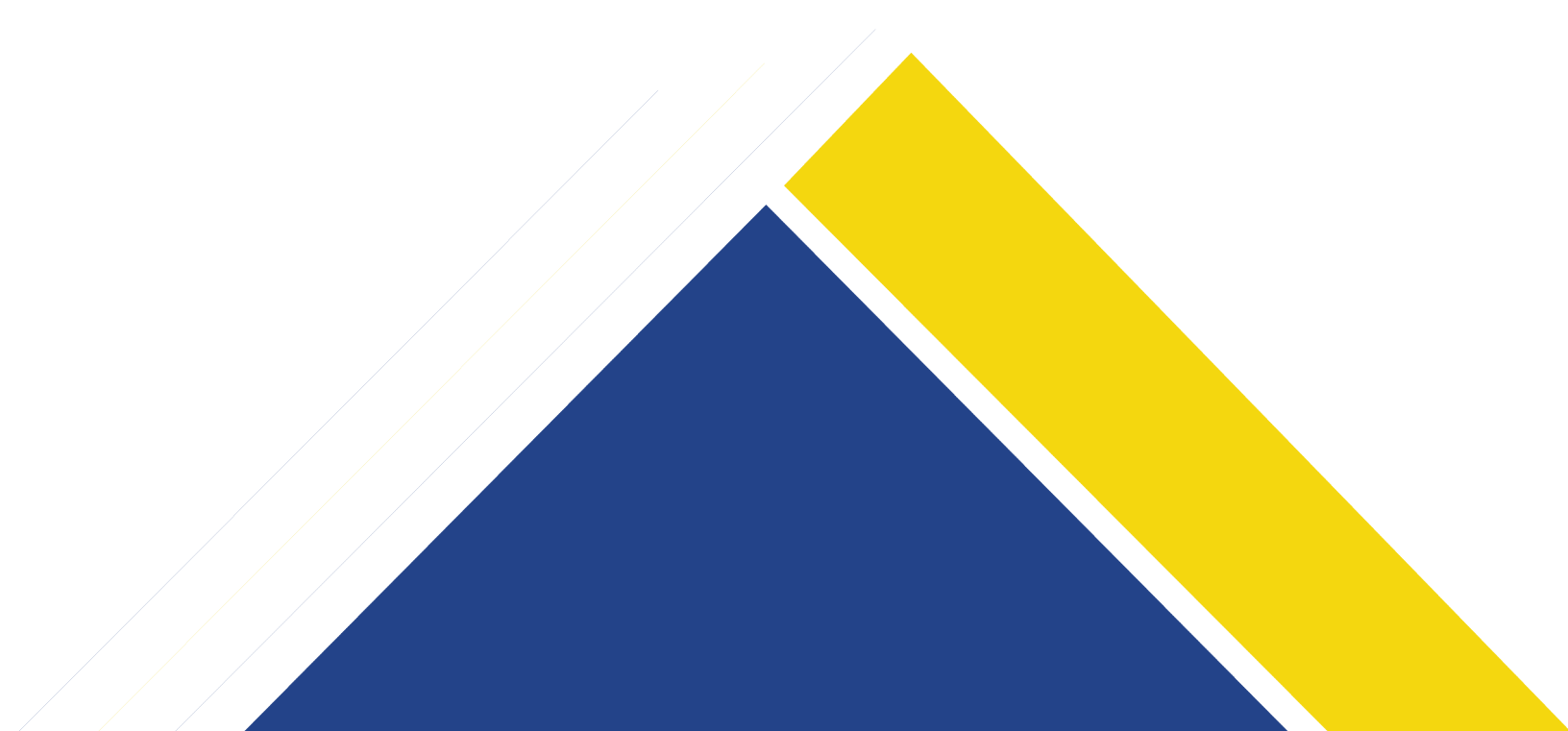
Rural Perceptions of Policing in Alberta

Authors:

Lars K. Hallstrom, PhD – University of Lethbridge

Tanya Trussler, PhD – Mount Royal University

Nicholas Yarmey, MSc – University of Connecticut



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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 with a focus on rural Albertans.

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>.

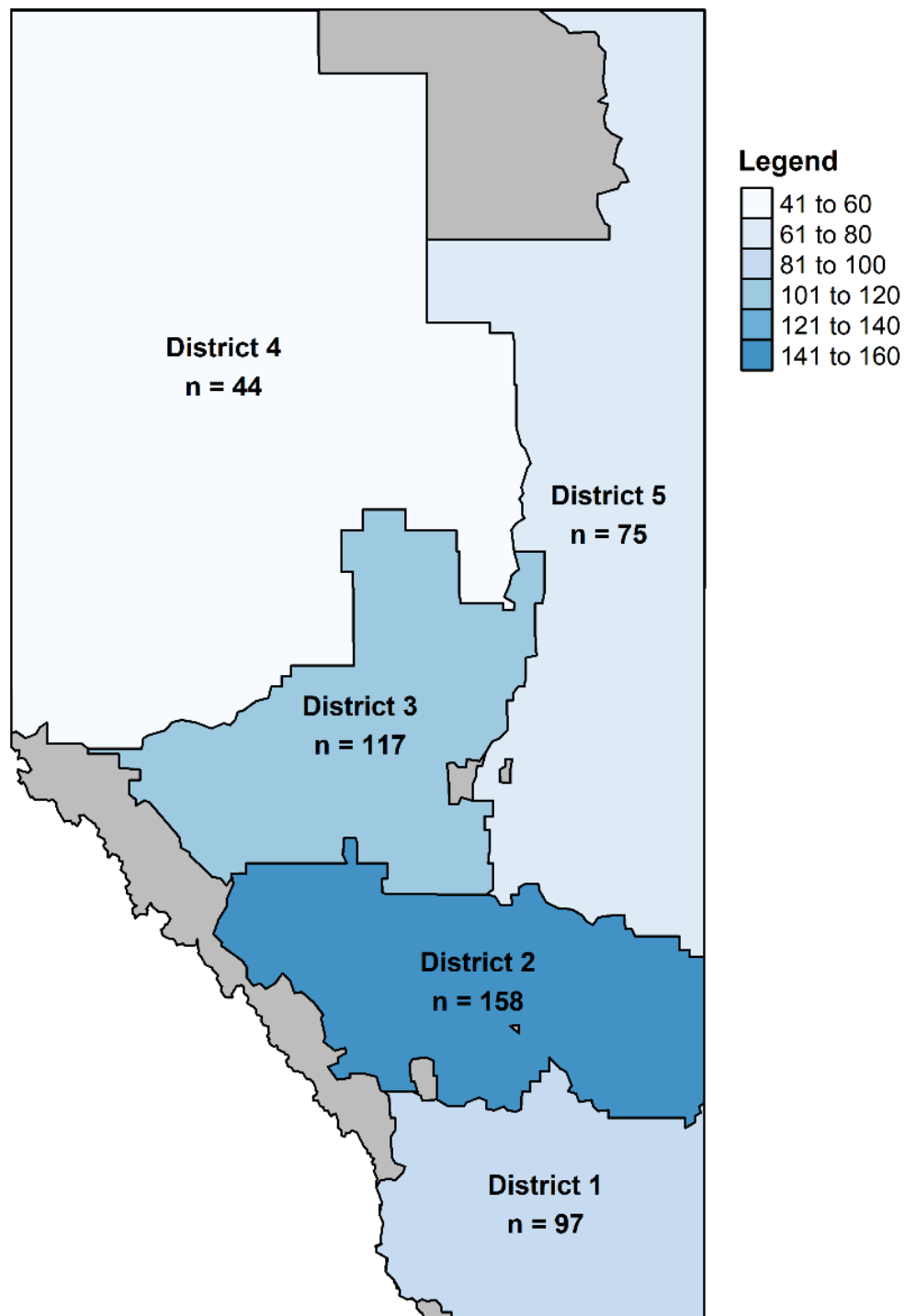
Table 1. Descriptive statistics of sample from rural Alberta ($n = 504$).

Variable	Category	% of Sample
Sex	Male	38.17%
Average age		56.22 years
Marital status	Married or common law	68.45%
Parenthood	With children at home	28.92%
Average education		13.64 years
Race	White	89.48%
Income category	Under \$30,000	16.45%
	\$30,000 to \$44,999	17.32%
	\$45,000 to \$74,999	26.75%
	\$75,000 to \$99,999	16.01%
	\$100,000 to \$149,999	16.67%
	\$150,000 or more	6.80%

Table 1 outlines the basic demographics of the rural Albertan sample. The larger data set included 1470 respondents of which 504 self-identified as rural. These cases were cross checked with locational data to verify. In the rural sample, 38.17% were male, which is lower than the larger sample and lower than the regional demographics typically indicate. The average age of respondents was 56.22 years which is slightly higher than the regional average. Almost 70% of respondents were married and almost 30% had children under 18 years living at home. The average education level was just under 14 years, meaning slightly above high school. Nearly 90% of the sample was white , which is higher than provincial demographics (Alberta = 76.5%), and the largest income category was \$45k to \$75k. There was good distribution across the other income categories, with the only one smaller than 10% of respondents being \$150k or more. Figure 1 shows the number of respondents from each RMA District.

Below we outline the opinions of 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). Maps show results summarized to the level of RMA districts.

Figure 1. Sample size by RMA District.



Safety: The Majority of Rural Respondents Feel Safe

Figure 2. I feel safe in my community (*n* = 504).

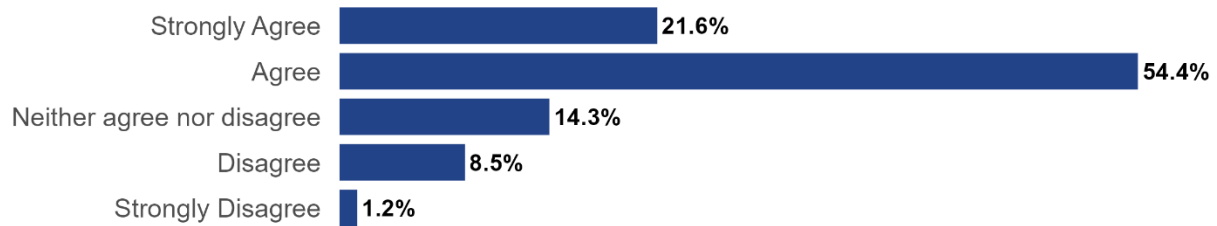


Figure 3. I feel safe in my community (% strongly agree or agree).

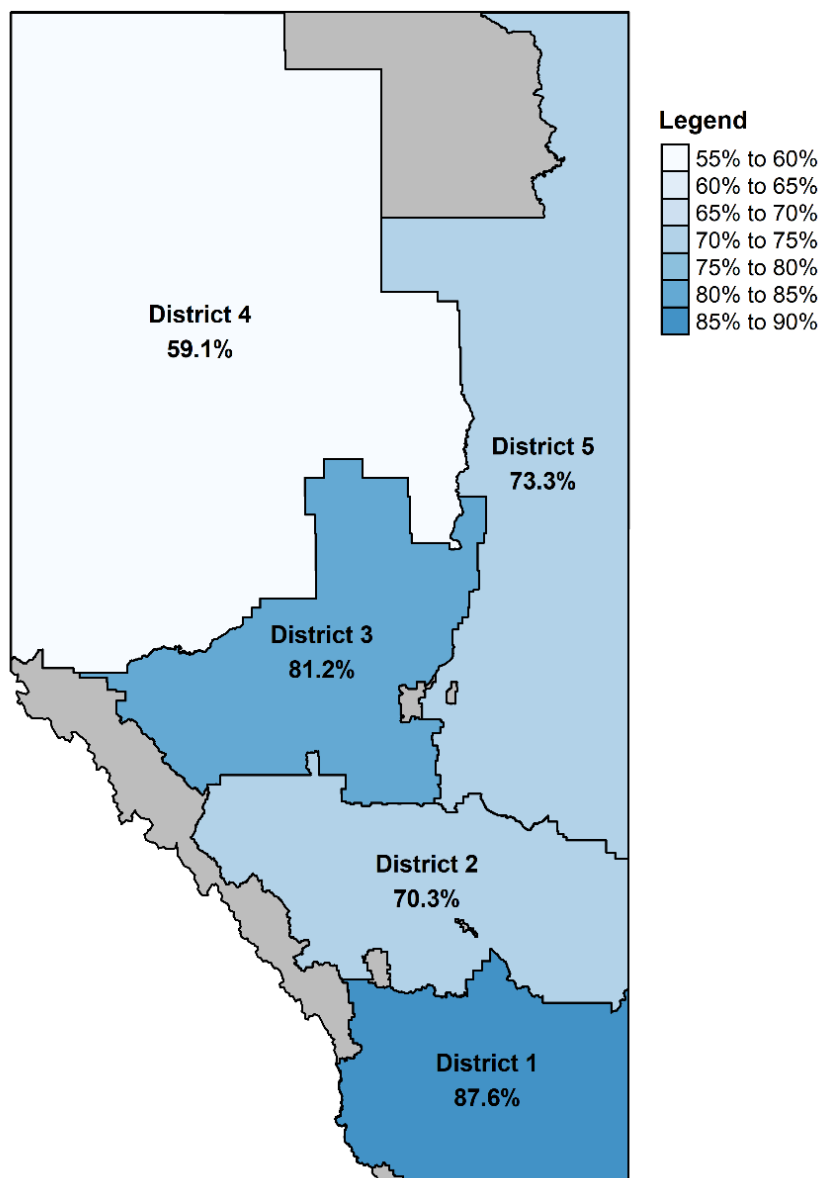


Figure 4. Crime has been increasing in my community ($n = 504$).

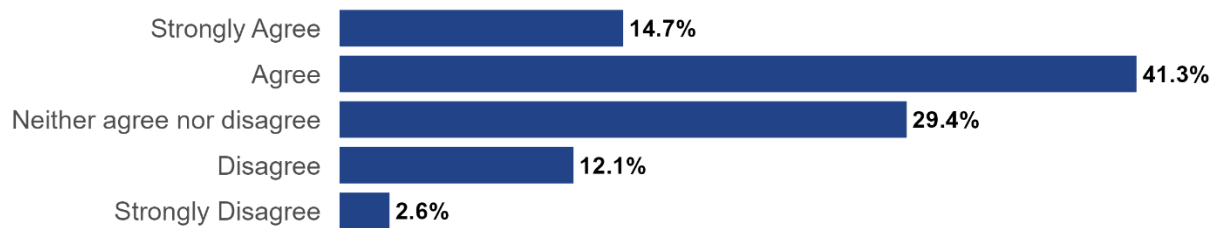
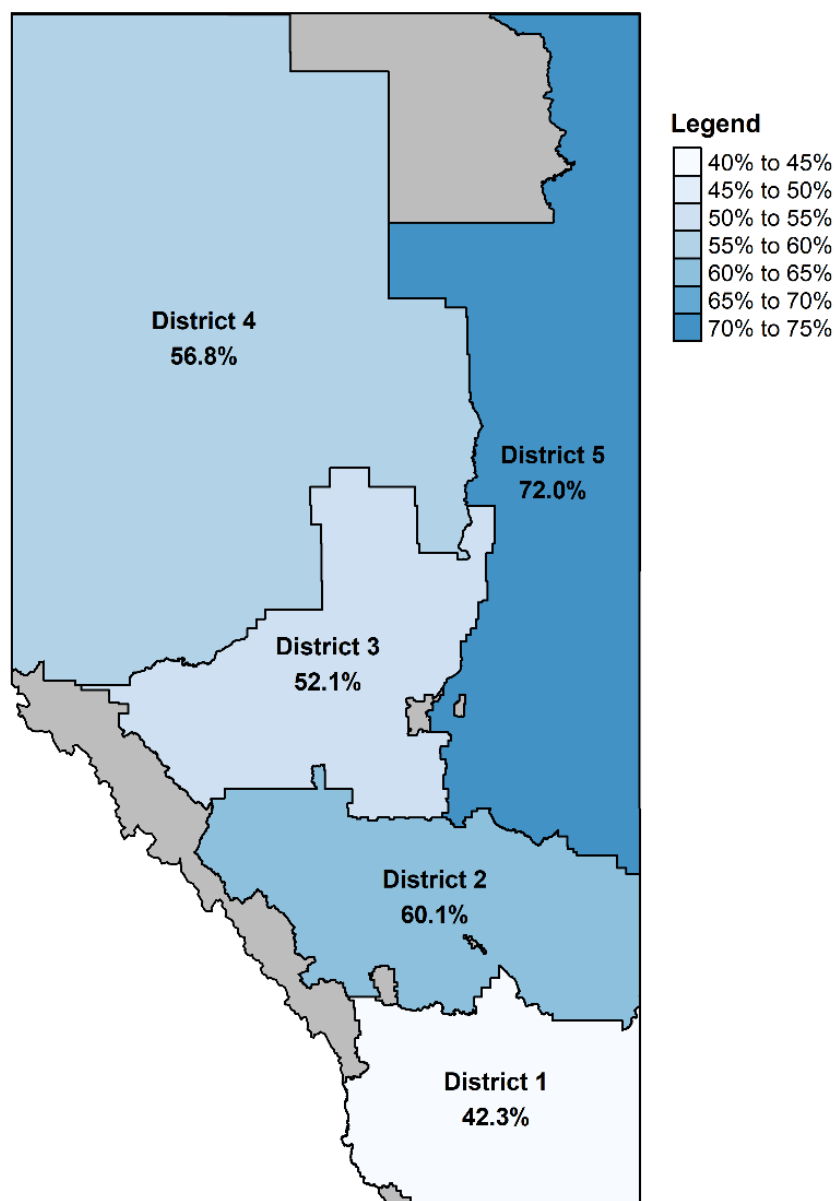


Figure 5. Crime has been increasing in my community (% strongly agree or agree).



1.3 Rural Perceptions of Policing in Alberta

Overall, rural Albertans do feel safe in their communities; however, they also feel crime is increasing. The large majority, approximately 75% of respondents, indicated that they feel safe in their community (Figures 2 and 3). Respondents reported feeling less safe in District 4 (59%) and District 2 (70%). These results are reflective of the national statistics, as most Canadians indicate they feel safe. While they feel safe, 56.0% felt that crime had been increasing in their community (Figures 4 and 5). Respondents were more likely to say crime has been increasing in District 5 (72%) and District 2 (60%). This is likely a reflection of the higher rural crime rates in recent years making respondents more likely to be in closer proximity to crime.

Trust in the Justice System: A Systems Issues

Figure 6. The criminal justice system is not hard enough on criminals (*n* = 484).

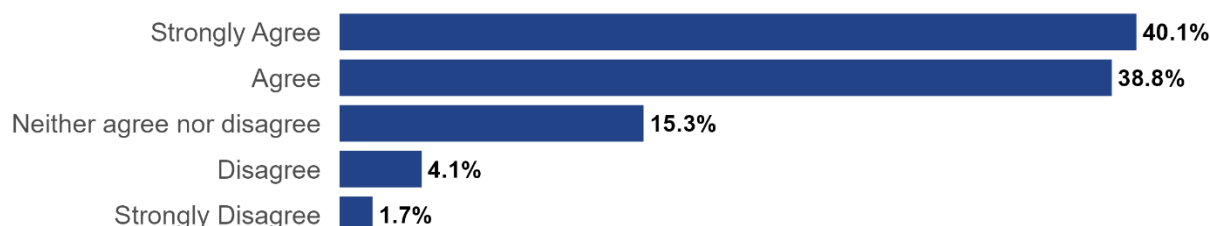
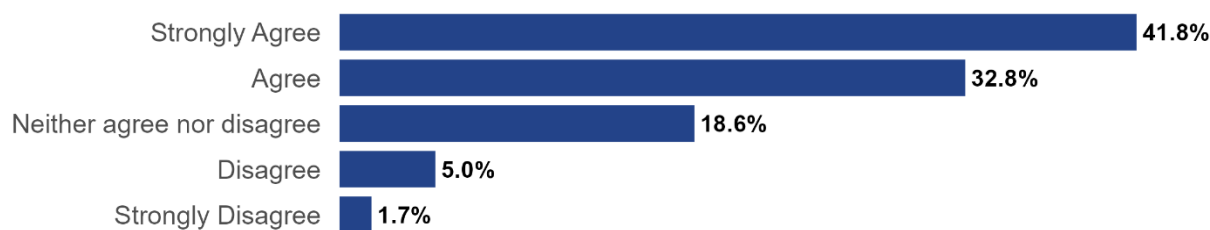


Figure 7. The criminal courts are too lenient (*n* = 478).

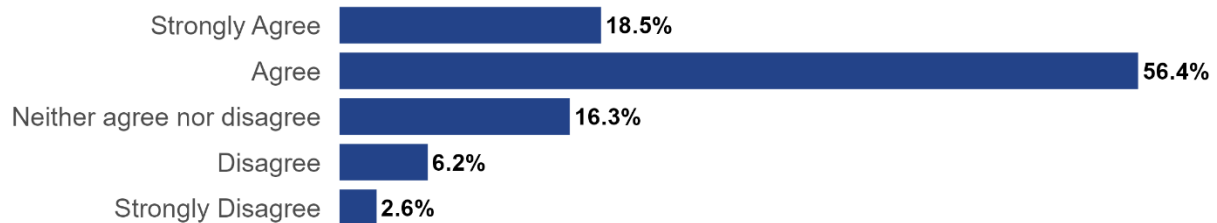


Overall, respondents do not have faith in the courts and the justice system. The courts and corrections systems in Canada do not usually garner a large amount of trust. The justice system is typically not well understood, and there is often a perception of leniency. As outlined above, the large majority (78.9%) either agreed or strongly agreed that the criminal justice system is not hard enough on criminals (Figure 6), and 74.7% either agreed or strongly agreed that the criminal courts are too lenient (Figure 7).

Trust in the Front Line: Rural Views on the Police

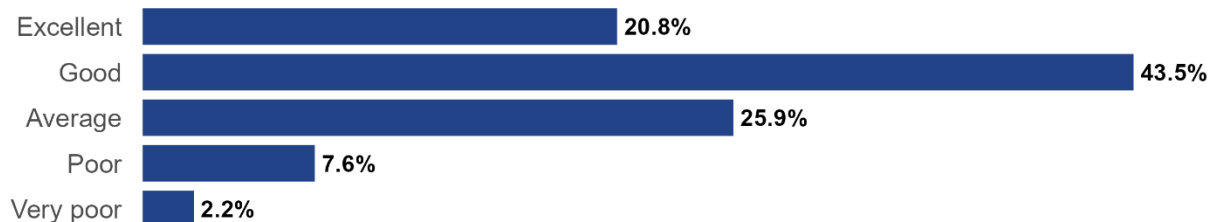
The police in Canada are generally more trusted than the other sectors of the justice system. They are often the visible component of criminal justice and are the primary point of contact with the general public, unlike the courts and corrections.

Figure 8. I generally support how police act (*n* = 498).



As depicted above, a large majority of respondents support how the police act, with 74.9% either agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement (Figure 8). Only 8.8% 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* = 490).



Most respondents indicated that they believe the police are doing a good or excellent job (64.3%; Figure 9). Only 2.2% and 7.6% believe the police are doing a very poor or poor job, respectively (9.8% in total).

1.3 Rural Perceptions of Policing in Alberta

Figure 10. I have a high level of trust in the RCMP ($n = 496$).

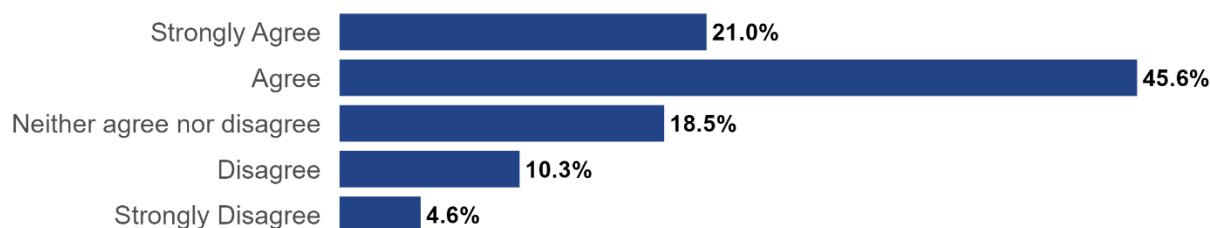
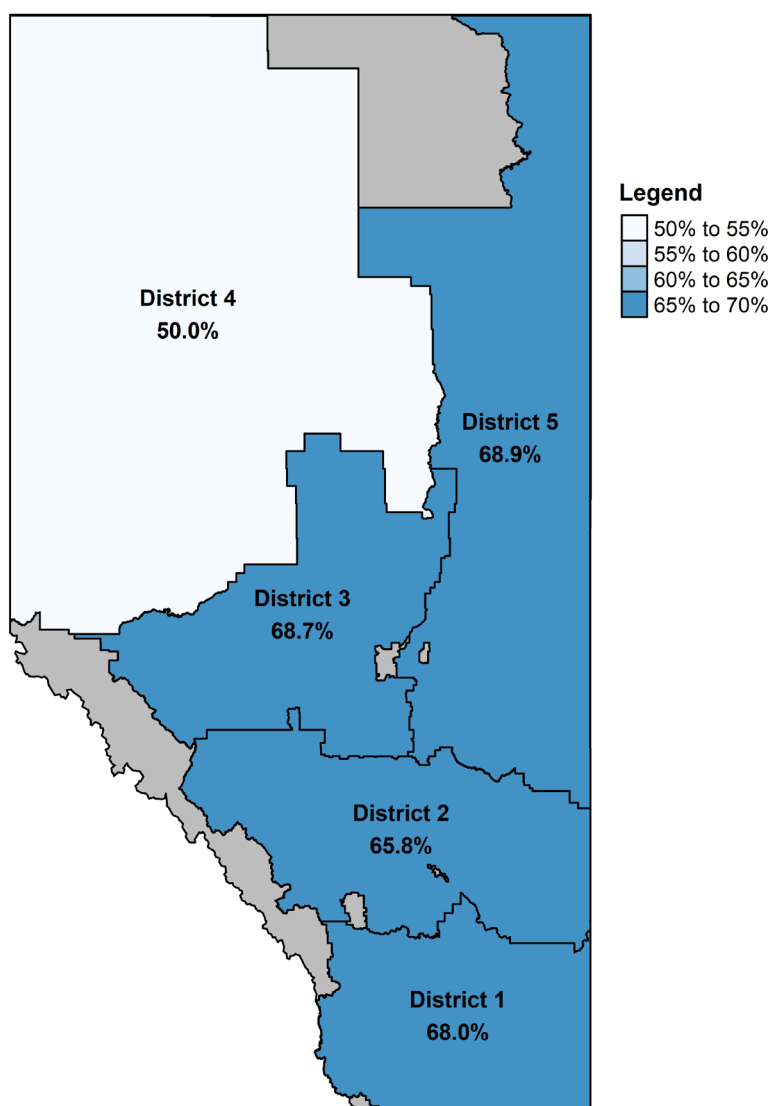


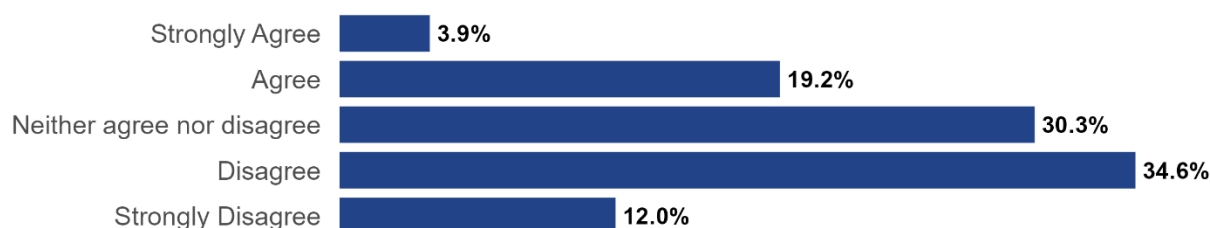
Figure 11. I trust the RCMP (% strongly agree or agree).



There is overall a high level of trust in the RCMP as indicated by agreement with the statement “I trust the RCMP” (Figures 10 and 11). 21.0% strongly agreed with the statement, and 45.6% agreed with the statement (66.6% in total). Respondents were less likely to trust the RCMP in District 4 (50%). Among all rural respondents, 14.9% either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement.

1.3 Rural Perceptions of Policing in Alberta

Figure 12. Youth have a high level of trust in police in Alberta (n = 433).

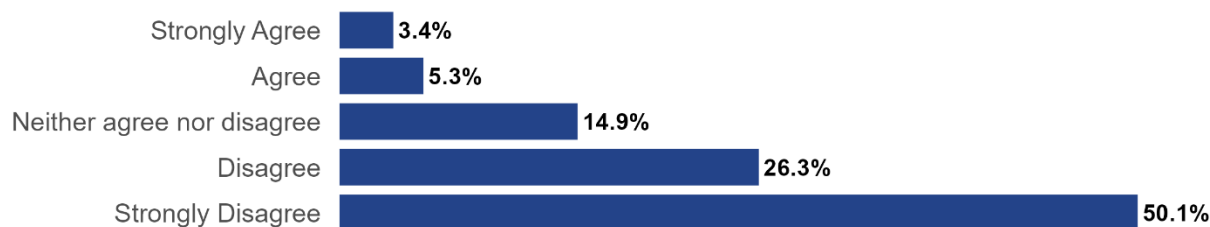


However, when asked whether respondents felt that the youth had a high level of trust in the police in Alberta, there was much less agreement. Keeping in mind that this is a perception of youth perspectives, as opposed to actual youth perspectives themselves, 46.6% of respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement “youth have a high level of trust in the police” (Figure 12). It should be noted that about 30% of respondents were unsure about youth’s perspectives of policing.

Rural 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 rural areas they service.

Figure 13. The RCMP should be dissolved (n = 475).



Overall, the above graph indicates the strong disagreement with removing the RCMP by the rural Alberta respondents. The majority of respondents (50.1%) strongly disagreed with the statement that the RCMP should be dissolved (Figure 13). The second largest group (26.3%) disagreed with the statement (in total 76.4% disagreed or strongly disagreed). This indicates very little support for the removal or replacement of the RCMP (less than 9%).

1.3 Rural Perceptions of Policing in Alberta

Figure 14. Alberta should have its own police service ($n = 461$).

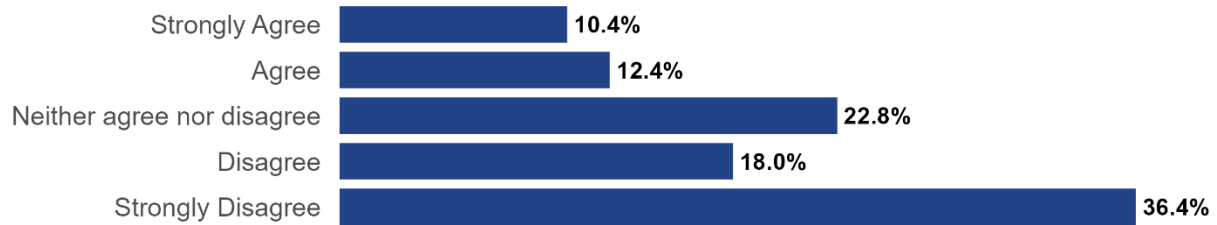
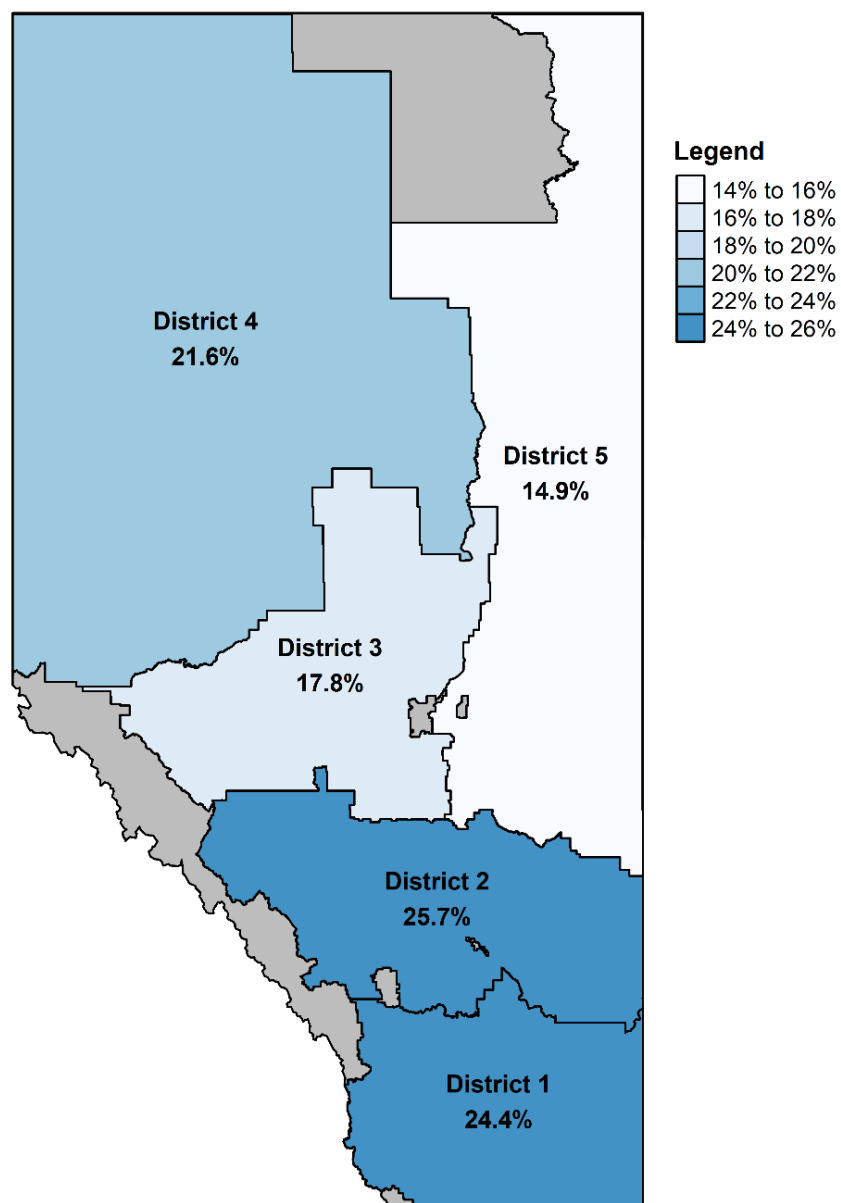


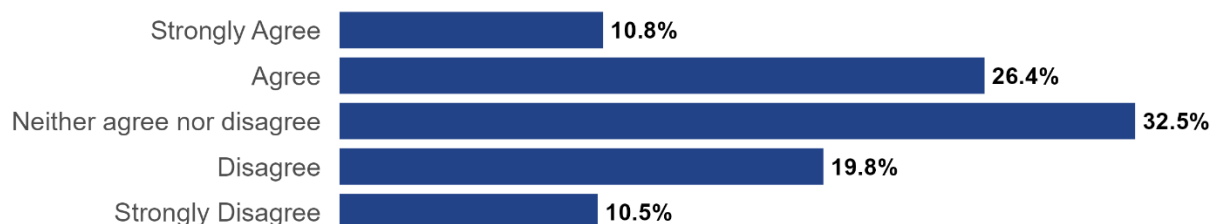
Figure 15. Alberta should have its own police service (% strongly agree or agree).



1.3 Rural 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 (54.4%) either disagreed or strongly disagreed with Alberta having its own police force. Furthermore, the largest group (36.4%) strongly disagreed with having an Alberta police service. Respondents in District 5 were least supportive (15% agreed or strongly agreed).

Figure 16. Police reform is needed in this province ($n = 455$).



While the majority of rural 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 (32.5) appears unsure about police reform (which may relate to the ambiguity of the general question; Figure 16). Slightly more respondents support (37.2%) than oppose (30.3%) 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 ($n = 485$).

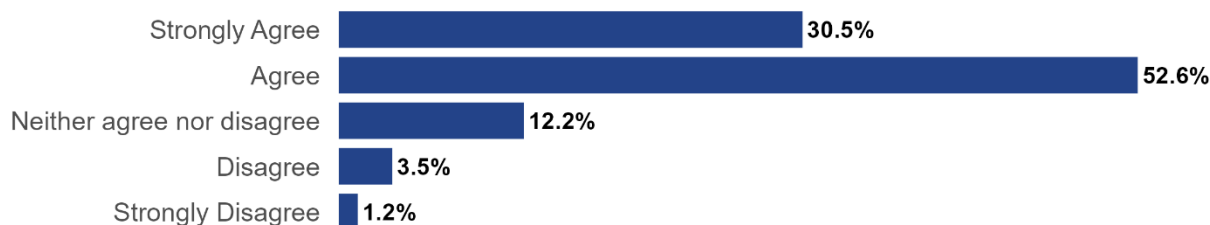
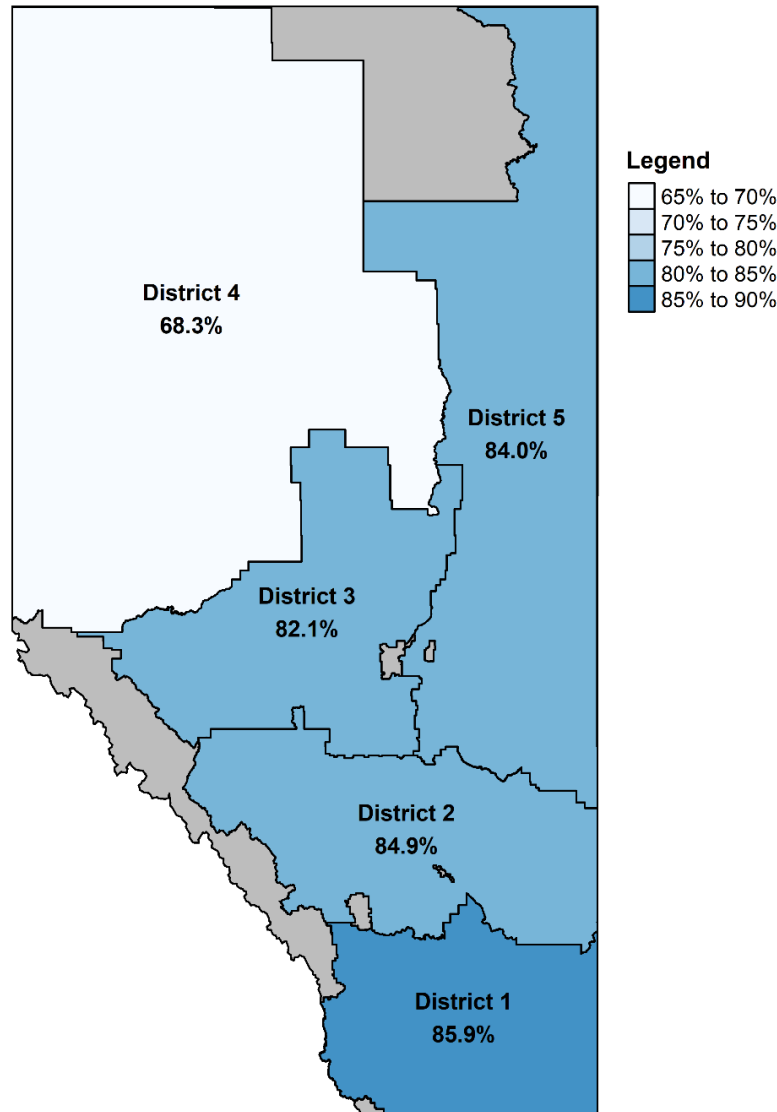


Figure 18. Police funding should be maintained (% strongly agree or agree).



When asked about defunding the police, the large majority of respondents (83.1%) felt that police funding should be maintained, not decreased (Figures 17 and 18). The lowest support for maintaining police funding was in District 4 (68% support).

Conclusion

Overall, the conclusions of this survey (for rural respondents) 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 between RMA Zones, 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.