

RCMP vs. Municipal Police

Today · Public

By Coquitlam Mayor Richard Stewart

I get lots of email, and I try to respond (or arrange for a response) to all of it. Sometimes I feel that an email and its response might be of interest to others, so I publish it here. And sometimes we hear the same kind of comment or question from many sources -- and through many avenues.

This is a question we've heard a lot of comments on, and many different questions. So it's worth an in-depth answer. I'll offer an amalgam of the various questions I've received on that subject.

The question from several residents:

Why isn't Coquitlam doing what Surrey is doing with their police? Surrey's Mayor has promised to create a municipal police force to replace the RCMP, which I think we should be doing too. Why would we want a police department run out of Ottawa when we could have our own police force that we could direct and control. McCallum says it might cost up to 10% more, though I don't believe it would be that much. But even if it is a bit more expensive, we should do it.

Thank you for writing to me about policing.

We've looked closely at the issues associated with the model of policing, as I suspect every community does, and I must say that the numbers that are currently being discussed don't make sense. I don't know the context of the "10%" comment, but that isn't an accurate representation of the costs involved.

There are four main reasons why municipal police forces are typically significantly more expensive than RCMP – 1) Federal subsidy, 2) wage level, 3) force size, and 4) shared services.

Federal Subsidy: The Federal Government pays 10% of the cost of running an RCMP detachment, which I suspect is the basis for "10%" being used in the context of the incremental cost. That subsidy means that we pay 90 cents of every dollar of policing cost in our community, and the Feds kick in the remainder. And to increase from 90 to 100 is actually an 11% increase (11.11% percent actually, but let's keep it simple). So, if RCMP and municipal police costs are EXACTLY the same, then the switch from RCMP to municipal would require an 11% budget increase. But of course, RCMP and municipal police DON'T cost have the same costs, which we'll see below.

Wages: The second reason for the disparity is that municipal police wages are substantially higher than RCMP wages. As I understand it, the current salary gap between the two is in the order of 12% (RCMP have traditionally been non-unionized, though that is changing). It's unclear whether that gap will narrow, but I don't think it will evaporate in the next decade. And while municipal policing wages would have to reflect to some degree the cost of living in that jurisdiction, RCMP is a national force, so it will likely continue to use an average (to some degree) of the costs of living from across the country in determining salaries. In other words, it's unlikely that the national RCMP salary will be set based on the cost of living in the most

expensive region in the country (Metro Vancouver), so the RCMP remuneration will likely stay lower than municipal police in this region, even as they unionize.

Cop-to-Pop ratio: The ratio of police officers to population (generally called the “Cop-to-Pop ratio”, typically described as “one officer for every 600 residents”, etc.) varies from city to city (see the attached table from the BC Solicitor General’s office). And the cop-to-pop ratio for municipal forces is significantly higher than for the RCMP. There are several reasons for that.

1. Economies of Scale: Here in BC, the RCMP (E-Div) is a much larger organization than even the largest municipal police force, and as such offers economies of scale to draw upon for specialty services or peak demands. If we have a school lockdown here in Coquitlam, for example, we will typically immediately (and mostly seamlessly) see RCMP cars and officers from the major RCMP detachments of Ridge-Meadows, Surrey, Langley, and Burnaby, all a few minutes away.
2. Integrated Teams. Here in BC, we have a system of “Integrated Teams” for a variety of regional functions, improving efficiency and effectiveness.
 - ERT – Emergency Response Team (often called a “SWAT team”)
 - ICARS – Integrated Collision Analysis and Reconstruction Service, for investigating complex car crashes
 - IFIS – Integrated Forensic Identification Service
 - IHIT – Integrated Homicide Investigation Team
 - IPDS – Integrated Police Dog Service (to share police dogs around-the-clock)
 - IRSU – Integrated Road Safety Unit, aimed at assisting local detachments with traffic safety issues
 - CFSEU – BC – The Combined Forces Special Enforcement Unit is BC’s “integrated anti-gang police agency”. The [CFSEU-BC](#) is the largest integrated police program in Canada, made up of members from every RCMP detachment and municipal police force in the province, dedicating over 400 officers to the fight against criminal gangs.
 - Air-One, the RCMP helicopter that serves the region.
3. More flexible sharing of resources in emergent situations. For example, during the last couple of school lock-downs in Coquitlam, we would typically end up with more police vehicles to manage these complex situations than Coquitlam detachment would have on-the-road at the time. And if you looked from the air during one of those incidents, you’d see the large unit markings from Burnaby, Surrey, Maple Ridge, Langley, etc., responding somewhat automatically -- and reciprocally -- to emergencies in other RCMP communities. At one such lock-down, the RCMP Inspector who debriefed me was someone I didn’t recognize; she was actually in a Burnaby RCMP SUV, and I was impressed with how seamlessly the command structure worked.
4. Senior Management – with the RCMP, divisional administrators and District Commander positions are funded by the Federal government, whereas with municipal forces their top brass are paid by the city.

Detachment Size

In addition to those items, the municipal police department seems to produce more pressure for police resources. For example, take a look at the 2016 numbers published by the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General, where you can see the comparison of RCMP and Municipal

police forces. Here, you can compare the average Municipal police department with the average RCMP detachment in terms of cop-to-pop, caseload, and total budget. As you can see, on all three measures the RCMP detachments come off as more efficient and significantly more cost-effective than municipal police departments.

Here are the comparators for RCMP police departments:

Police Resources in British Columbia, 2016



Municipal Police Statistics, 2016

RCMP MUNICIPAL UNITS: 15,000 POPULATION AND OVER

Municipality	Population	Auth. Strength	Adjusted Strength ¹	Pop Per Officer	CCC Offences	Crime Rate	Case Load	Total Costs ¹	Cost Per Capita
Burnaby Mun ¹	238,728	277	299	798	13,554	57	45	\$54,822,755	\$230
Campbell River Mun	33,696	43	43	784	3,406	101	79	\$8,731,227	\$259
Chilliwack Mun ^{1,3}	93,355	110	121	772	11,069	119	91	\$22,078,831	\$237
Colwood Mun	17,583	17	17	1,034	631	36	37	\$3,478,927	\$198
Coquitlam Mun ^{1,3}	147,670	162	172	859	8,532	58	50	\$31,494,951	\$213
Courtenay Mun	26,056	30	30	869	2,563	98	85	\$5,185,237	\$199
Cranbrook Mun	20,452	26	26	787	1,488	73	57	\$5,082,459	\$249
Fort St. John Mun	22,618	36	36	628	2,437	108	68	\$6,936,700	\$307
Kamloops Mun	91,402	136	136	672	10,644	116	78	\$22,804,435	\$249
Kelowna Mun	126,737	191	191	658	13,115	104	69	\$32,584,618	\$259
Langford Mun	39,936	38	38	1,051	1,770	44	47	\$6,531,304	\$164
Langley City Mun ¹	27,283	50	55	496	4,980	183	91	\$10,419,186	\$382
Langley Township Mun ^{1,3}	123,164	140	151	816	9,080	74	60	\$29,836,504	\$242
Maple Ridge Mun ^{1,3}	85,954	97	106	811	7,274	85	69	\$19,313,565	\$225
Mission Mun ¹	39,873	51	56	712	3,880	97	69	\$10,928,540	\$274
Nanaimo Mun ³	93,734	145	145	646	9,325	99	64	\$26,631,283	\$305
North Cowichan Mun	30,229	31	31	975	2,613	86	84	\$6,257,034	\$207
North Vancouver City Mun ^{1,3}	52,794	64	64	825	4,225	80	66	\$12,248,213	\$232
North Vancouver District Mun ^{1,3}	86,602	91	91	952	4,041	47	44	\$16,026,502	\$185
Penticton Mun	33,016	45	45	734	4,419	134	98	\$8,887,418	\$269
Pitt Meadows Mun ¹	19,090	22	24	795	1,306	68	54	\$4,687,137	\$246
Port Alberni Mun	16,236	34	34	478	2,313	142	68	\$6,975,344	\$430
Port Coquitlam Mun ^{1,3}	61,193	71	76	805	3,945	64	52	\$14,199,452	\$232
Prince George Mun	70,912	138	138	514	10,912	154	79	\$23,407,154	\$330
Richmond Mun ^{1,3}	213,392	224	232	920	11,867	56	51	\$45,727,561	\$214
Salmon Arm Mun	18,128	19	19	954	825	46	43	\$3,582,938	\$198
Squamish Mun ^{1,3}	19,406	25	27	719	1,518	78	56	\$4,795,475	\$247
Surrey Mun ^{1,4,7,8}	544,258	819	822	662	46,352	85	56	\$147,835,883	\$272
Vernon Mun	41,671	56	56	744	5,028	121	90	\$10,615,414	\$255
West Kelowna Mun	34,930	24	24	1,455	1,410	40	59	\$4,340,751	\$124
White Rock Mun ¹	19,288	23	24	804	1,491	77	62	\$4,954,626	\$257
Total	2,488,386	3,235	3,329	747	206,013	83	62	\$613,401,424	\$247

That's the RCMP communities (over 15k in population). And here's the corresponding numbers for Municipal police departments in the province:

MUNICIPAL POLICE DEPARTMENTS⁸

Municipality	Population	Auth. Strength	Adjusted Strength ¹	Pop. Per Officer	CCC Offences	Crime Rate	Case Load	Total Costs ²	Cost Per Capita
Abbotsford Mun ^{1,2,13}	141,565	204	210	674	9,176	65	44	\$44,916,890	\$317
Central Saanich Mun	15,895	23	23	691	545	34	24	\$4,640,833	\$292
Delta Mun ^{1,2,9}	102,937	180	182	566	4,740	46	26	\$36,390,284	\$354
Nelson City Mun	11,249	19	19	592	918	82	48	\$3,407,839	\$303
New Westminster Mun ¹	73,771	110	113	653	4,842	66	43	\$25,357,400	\$344
Oak Bay Mun	17,368	23	23	755	488	28	21	\$4,682,583	\$270
Port Moody Mun ¹	34,193	51	52	658	1,093	32	21	\$10,204,857	\$298
Saanich Mun	110,889	161	161	689	4,174	38	26	\$32,976,224	\$297
Vancouver Mun ^{3,10}	655,109	1,327	1,327	494	54,075	83	41	\$276,415,365	\$422
Victoria Mun ¹¹	102,022	245	245	416	10,833	106	44	\$50,273,629	\$493
West Vancouver Mun ^{1,2}	44,510	79	81	550	2,384	54	29	\$15,076,359	\$339
Total	1,309,508	2,422	2,436	538	93,268	71	38	\$504,342,263	\$385

Footnotes for this table are on page 11.

See *Police Resource Definitions and Data Qualifiers* on page 24 for additional explanatory notes.

Using just those numbers, the 2016 average cost per capita of RCMP forces was \$247, while for municipal forces the number was \$385 -- 56% more. Of course, there are other factors to consider for those differences. But just the cop-to-pop in RCMP-policed communities comes in at 1 in 747, while for municipal forces it is 1 in 538 -- a difference of almost 40%. Is it because RCMP serves communities that have lower crime? No, crime rates of course are a factor, but the numbers show that cities with municipal forces actually have a lower average crime rate at 71, while the number is 17% higher on average for RCMP communities. In terms of Coquitlam, our 2016 cop to pop was 1 in 859 and our crime rate was a low 58.

Indemnification

One of the other issues that can be significant is that the Federal Government indemnifies municipalities that use the RCMP from claims and compensation settlements, as well as legal services. Policing is a high-risk service -- from crashes to police dog bites -- and the risk for RCMP communities is covered by the Federal Government.

IM and IT and the mundane

Information Management and Information Technology are both large parts of policing, and setting up such systems from scratch contains enormous cost risks. So a conversion from RCMP to municipal policing is a very complex process from this perspective. Everything from software licenses, network, infrastructure, will end up costing a municipal force more than it costs RCMP-policed communities.

With RCMP communities, such services as purchasing, payroll and HR are performed in the detachment, while in communities with a municipal police department, some or all of those duties could be excluded from the police budget, performed by the City Hall Purchasing, Payroll, and HR departments.

“But the Mayor would have more control over a Municipal Police force.”

Yep, that’s the oft-repeated suggestion. And it’s wrong. Completely wrong. Under the Police Act, elected officials have control over the policing budget, same as any other civic service. But Mayor and Council don’t direct police services, whether you have a contract with the RCMP or you have a municipal police force.

I've had several conversations with mayors in other communities, and the typical response from my colleagues from non-RCMP cities is that "the grass isn't greener" on the municipal side of the policing fence.

"But you have your own Police Board with a Municipal Force."

Yes, and the Province appoints almost all of the Police Board members, leaving Mayor and Council with no direct control of policing, other than budget.

Transition

And then there are the transitional costs -- not just the new uniforms and equipment, etc. There is typically an expectation that a community moving between police forces would incur about a one-year's budget in transition costs (for Coquitlam, something like \$30 million) as we'd have to run two police forces for a year. And we can expect a large number of complications, training expenses, etc. that are hard to predict.

Conclusion

I won't get into the debate over whether Surrey should convert to a municipal police force, as that decision is entirely up to their residents. But here in Coquitlam, I'd recommend against it, as I believe our annual policing costs would increase by 30 - 34%, not counting the amortization of the one-time costs (if you amortized those costs over a full decade, it would add about 10% more, raising the cost increase to at least 40%.

We get good service from the men and women at Coquitlam Detachment RCMP, and our community is safe because of the continued investments we've made over the past two decades to ensure our force is right-sized for our need, something that's both easier and less costly for those communities served by the RCMP.