



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security

SECU • NUMBER 131 • 1st SESSION • 42nd PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Thursday, October 18, 2018

—
Chair

The Honourable John McKay

Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security

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• (1530)

[*English*]

The Chair (Hon. John McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood, Lib.)): I see quorum. It's 3:30 p.m. We can get started and we'll anticipate that other members will join us.

I don't want to have a debate about this, but prior to starting, I just want to test the appetite of the committee.

The committee submitted a report on aboriginal incarceration and things of that nature. It was a unanimous report and the committee was very much seized with the discussion. When we submitted it, there was an appetite at that time to call the commissioner of Correctional Services back to discuss the report, the recommendations and the government's response. I just wanted to see whether we should start arranging that sooner rather than later, or whether you want to bump that off to the subcommittee.

An hon. member: Is the NDP in favour?

The Chair: The NDP is in favour of that, yes. I have checked.

You're fine. I talked to Michel. Are you fine with that?

An hon. member: Yes.

The Chair: Okay. I'm going to work on the assumption that the committee wants to hear the response.

An hon. member: Always.

The Chair: I know. Always. We may have to circumscribe the questions, mind you.

The second issue is that Mr. Picard has drafted a proposed resolution with respect to cybersecurity. Again, both the NDP and the Liberals are fine with it—he has talked to Glen. It will be eight to 12 meetings, essentially on the economic impacts of cybersecurity. I don't want to get into a big debate; I just want to know—

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, CPC): No, no debate. I just want to know why it's just the banks.

[*Translation*]

Do you want to conduct a study only on bank cybersecurity?

Mr. Michel Picard (Montarville, Lib.): It wouldn't only be on bank cybersecurity. The study should focus on the financial sector in general in terms of the different aspects of economic activity, including individual, trade, business, banking and market activity.

The study shouldn't be limited, since too many things would be excluded.

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: Okay.

[*English*]

The Chair: This is sort of... We're going to get started. Then my guess is that it'll expand over time. Okay?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Michel Picard: We can also specify this, if necessary.

[*English*]

The Chair: Okay. I will take this—

Mr. Jim Eglinski (Yellowhead, CPC): Mr. Chair, it's probably going to overlap with some other committees. I thought there were a couple of other committees doing exactly the same—

The Chair: No. That's why we drafted it as an economic and financial issue, because we didn't want to get into foreign affairs, defence or elections.

Mr. Jim Eglinski: All right. Thank you.

The Chair: With that, the clerk will take those as directions. We'll start to have people feed in witness lists and we'll get some organization going here.

Thank you, witnesses, for your patience.

We have, for our first round of witnesses, Christina Johnson from the Southeastern Alberta Sexual Assault Response Committee and Trevor Tychkowsky from Alberta Provincial Rural Crime Watch Association.

The Chair: I'll go in the order in which it's printed on the Notice of Meeting and recognize Christina Johnson for 10 minutes, followed by Mr. Tychkowsky for 10 minutes. Then we'll open it up for questions. Is that fine with both of you?

Ms. Christina Johnson (Executive Director, Southeastern Alberta Sexual Assault Response Committee): Yes.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Johnson.

Ms. Christina Johnson: Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you for inviting me to present to you today.

I live close to Medicine Hat, Alberta, but I'm actually coming to you from Calgary, Alberta. I'm currently on and would like to honour the traditional territory of the Blackfoot Nation, the people of the Treaty No. 7 region. I'd also like to honour the Métis people, who have had significant impact on this land.

I've been working with SARC for over 10 years. Until a month ago, we were the only sexual assault response committee in southern Alberta.

As an organization, SARC covers approximately 40,000 square kilometres. That means I'm highly bonded with my car; her name is Lola. This region is inclusive of two small urban cities and several rural and remote areas.

In terms of a bit about myself, I was born and raised in a small, remote area in southern Saskatchewan, and I currently live in a small town. When I was growing up, I was about an hour from the nearest bottle of milk. I am a registered social worker whose education focused mainly on rural and remote and indigenous social work. I've spent the last 10 years of my career working specifically at SARC, focusing on anti-violence initiatives, specializing in sexual violence, community development and cross-disciplinary collaboration, and creating coordinated community response protocols and policy development—again, in the very specific areas of sexual violence responses, trauma-informed care and sexual violence-specific care.

Unfortunately, a lot of the research on sexual violence is focused largely on large urban areas, and the reporting of sexual violence to police in rural areas is almost non-existent. There were times over the last 10 years when I would go out and policing organizations would tell me that there might have been one, if not zero, disclosure of sexual violence. This could lead the general population and policing to believe that sexual and domestic violence are not occurring in rural and remote areas. However, I would assert that this is not the case, and that sexual violence is in fact occurring. As a matter of fact, the risk factors for sexual violence are significantly higher in rural and remote areas due to increased poverty, lack of employment opportunities and lack of professionalized support systems in rural areas.

There are great people living in rural and remote areas. I myself come from one. We are robust, strong people. There's a different approach between someone who is well intentioned and someone who is coming at it from a professional world view.

The stark reality is also that the community norms at times tolerate sexual violence. Our society, our laws and our practice also support gender inequality, specifically in how they're interpreted on the ground or the understanding by policing as to how those laws should be applied.

We have a very low conviction rate in Canada even when the reporting of sexual violence does occur. This really leads victims to not want to report, because they often wonder why they've gone through all of this for no conviction.

Several barriers occur for victims of sexual violence in reporting. Some of these are telecommunications and transportation barriers, the significant stigma associated with sexual violence, and a huge concern surrounding confidentiality and the lack of anonymity. This is because of increased familiarity within the population. Everybody knows everybody—I know your dog, and I know your stuff. That really limits people from wanting to report.

There is a culture of victim blaming in some criminal justice communities, as well. This results in a fear of police not responding appropriately. Interrogation by police, specifically if it starts to look

like the individual may not be telling the whole truth.... What happens is it can move away from interviewing and into interrogation. They're really worried about cross-examination in court and not being believed in general throughout the system.

● (1535)

There is a culture of acceptance and normalization of sexual violence and also a lack of protection from the person who assaulted them. In some of our areas, it takes two hours for police to get to some of our farms and remote areas. The victims do not feel protected.

The other side of it is that if they do report, however, while victim assistance or victim services could support them, that is not often seen as an option. A lot of that has to do with the dual relationships that occur in rural and remote areas. The people who are volunteering or who perhaps are employed by VA or victim services can be the abuser's family or friends. They're staff. They're volunteers. There's also social isolation in terms of the ability to actually get there or the ability for the advocate to come to them. Again, there's a fear of shame and a fear of reprisal from the community.

How do we improve our systems?

Some people, even based on the dual relationships, would still love to have a victim advocate. We need to really enforce the referral from RCMP to victim assistance programs. This needs to be open to all victims, regardless of whether the officer deems the victim to be deserving or not deserving of services or whether charges are moving forward.

Next, ensure that victims services coordinators have a strong background and an education in human services. This would bring professionalism and a level of accountability to the program. Oftentimes in rural and remote areas it's the good volunteers who are moved into coordination positions.

Also, honour the significant difference in Alberta between a victim assistance volunteer and an actual advocate. Volunteers do not advocate. They're more of a guide by your side. They'll accompany you. They'll give you a glass of water and a box of Kleenex. An advocate will actually slow down the whole process through the criminal justice system, work as an interpreter and really protect that individual's human rights. There are some models out there.

Currently in Medicine Hat we have two registered social workers embedded in the Medicine Hat Police Service. They're doing all the work from pre-reporting all the way through the system and are there to advocate for the individual. We are seeing a reduced level of secondary trauma or victimization, as well as an increased engagement in the criminal justice system. Early outcomes are very good.

As well, ensure that all rural and remote areas have sexual assault forensic kits. This is currently not the case.

Also, ensure that all officers are trained in trauma-informed caring responses. Trauma presents very much like mental health concerns. This approach, this trauma-informed approach, really changes the system and changes the approach, so that it's not "What's wrong with you?" when people come in, but "What's happened to you?"

Next, train all officers in the neurobiology of trauma. Officers often misinterpret lack of memory and evolving disclosures as lying. Victims cannot tell their story in a linear manner; it's just how trauma is stored. It's important to understand how the brain encodes trauma. This understanding will assist investigators not only in victim engagement but in fully accessing the victim's stored memory.

There are models out there that are specific to sexual violence, such as FETI. These models move away from the who, what and why and start to access those stored memories through the senses, the five senses. Brief but compassionate responses are critical at the initial contact, and knowing to back off and come back 48 hours later is actually a best practice. Again, a richer disclosure will occur.

Also, it's critical to have the RCMP at community response tables. It's resource-heavy, and we all understand that, but that's where the true integration occurs.

As well, it's important to put third party review strategies in place, such as the Philadelphia model. It's also important to train officers in the signs of vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue for themselves and to make the policing culture safe for people to treat their own experiences. Looking at the works of Françoise Mathieu and individuals like her will support that.

Last, if you want to increase reporting, increase accountability in rural and remote areas, it has to begin by believing survivors when they come forward and making it safe physically, emotionally and mentally to do so.

Thank you.

• (1540)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Johnson.

Mr. Tychkowsky.

Mr. Trevor Tychkowsky (President, Alberta Provincial Rural Crime Watch Association): First of all, I want to thank you for allowing me to speak on this really important issue. The Alberta Provincial Rural Crime Watch Association would like to encourage you to complete this study on rural crime and its effects on rural life in Canada.

My name is Trevor Tychkowsky. I'm the past president of the Alberta Provincial Rural Crime Watch Association and currently live in a rural community in Alberta.

We know that crime rates have been on the rise for some time. The public is getting more and more concerned. This has become very clear, as we've had more interest in our organization than ever before. Media interviewers want to know what we can do to reduce crime in the rural areas, and the public has told us that they're not feeling safe in their small communities.

The Alberta Provincial Rural Crime Watch Association has been diligent in educating our local membership in crime prevention techniques in the hope that these methods may be adopted by the residents of the rural areas. CPTED, crime prevention through environmental design, principles have been widely used and have proven to reduce the instances of rural crime activities. We are constantly looking for other means to get the message out to rural areas.

At the Alberta Provincial Rural Crime Watch Association, we are doing our best in terms of what we can do to resolve the crime problem, but we know that the criminals know the exact response times of rural policing, and they also know what punishment they will receive once they're caught. We believe that this topic can't wait, as taxpayers want answers for what can be done.

We at the Alberta Provincial Rural Crime Watch Association are encouraging the public to make sure their belongings are locked up and to start taking a more proactive approach, as in knowing their neighbours, and also, when they see something suspicious, to call as soon as it's safe to do so, hopefully within the hour, even if it seems unlikely to be suspicious. We also encourage our local rural crime watch groups to have an informal evening stressing CPTED principles.

In closing, we want to thank member of Parliament Shannon Stubbs for presenting the rural crime study bill, and we support her efforts going forward.

• (1545)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Tychkowsky. I apologize for my mispronunciation of your name. It happens to Mr. Picard all the time.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Picard, you have the floor for five minutes.

[*English*]

Mr. Michel Picard: Thank you very much.

I'd like to talk to Ms. Johnson. We've had one meeting before this. So far what I've understood from the witnesses is that among the differences between urban crime and rural crime, we have geography, because it takes time to respond, but the nature of the crimes seems quite similar. We had a hard time finding a big difference.

That's still the case. I still have doubts on this. I still don't understand what's happening in the rural environment. I was under the impression that there must be some characteristic that identifies a more rural type of crime. Maybe you can give us some hints on that.

Ms. Christina Johnson: One of the significant things is the barriers. I'm not sure that the crime itself.... Sexual assault is sexual assault, right? It's those barriers to being able to report it and to be believed that are reducing the reporting of sexual violence.

People could correct me and challenge me on this, but the fact is that sexual violence is sexual violence. This is about the barriers that people have to overcome in order to report or to receive service surrounding that, plus there's that cultural piece that keeps people from moving forward, such as the increased victim blaming and the close connection within tight-knit communities. In growing up rurally, sometimes I was in trouble before I got home because people saw and reported things. I see some nodding of heads there.

Those are the things that make it different. It's the local context.

Mr. Michel Picard: You said something that concerns me, though. I don't have the numbers for the rural environment, and the old numbers are not up to date, but to my knowledge, a female beating victim will report, will do something, after an average of 37 times. I'm not surprised to hear that in the rural environment they don't report on the first hit. There's shame or blame or whatever that goes against the victim herself.

You mentioned community norms that would accept or tolerate sexual violence. Are there norms in some places that don't see it as that bad?

Ms. Christina Johnson: Do you mean that don't see sexual violence as bad?

Mr. Michel Picard: Yes.

Ms. Christina Johnson: Yes. It's all about the pressure for family preservation. That's really what happens. There's also a misunderstanding of the definitions of sexual violence—you know, what is and what is not; boys will be boys; or he's a good kid and I don't want to wreck his future. It's those sorts of cultural norms that are highly reinforced and that really stop people from reporting.

Specifically, the highest-risk age for sexual violence is 14 to 24. You still have to go to school with these kids, right? The person who offended against you is in the same classroom as you.

•(1550)

Mr. Michel Picard: Have you any idea, or have you studied or looked at, why kids who are going to school, for example, may act violently, considering the environment, the culture, or the specific environment of what seems to be a rural-type crime?

Ms. Christina Johnson: I would say that the pertaining risk factors are similar in rural versus urban; however, it would be the intensity and the level of social acceptance. Some of the risk factors can include the level of alcohol use. We know that is absolutely more prevalent in rural areas. Some of the research does show that. It's linked to violence, both domestic and sexual. Multiple risk factors come into play.

Mr. Michel Picard: You mentioned that a community might fear that police would not be willing to engage or react or respond. This is beside the fact that it takes some time, more than one hour, to get there. Why do communities believe...or don't they trust police forces? What is the relationship between police forces and the communities? Communities are tight. They know everyone. In many cases, police are partnering with local forces.

Ms. Christina Johnson: Sometimes your biggest strength is also your biggest weakness. Yes, everybody knows everybody, but here's the deal: When it comes to dealing with people who have been victimized, it takes one bad experience, one wrong comment, and then it goes through the whole community that now it is not safe to report.

The reality is that a lot of times in rural areas, we're not getting highly trained investigators coming into communities, we're getting new recruits. We might have one person who's highly trained and then a bunch of new recruits who are coming in. Really what we're doing is learning off of the back of victims.

Mr. Michel Picard: You mentioned the training of officers. I'm wondering if it's gone through your mind that associations like yours may be the best trainers for police officers to know about those traumas and how to handle those things. You know how it's done on the street, and you can see that they might not have the proper training. Would you be a good organization to do that? Can you offer that to the RCMP and other police forces?

Ms. Christina Johnson: We do specific training in sexual violence response. For example, through the Association of Alberta Sexual Assault Services, we have a first responders to sexual assault and sexual abuse program. That is a good first response, and it's a program that's specific to sexual trauma. It gets to the underbelly. It deconstructs all the myths that keep sexual violence going. However

The Chair: Sorry, Ms. Johnson, we'll have to leave it there. Mr. Picard has run through his time, as he is prone to do.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Mr. Eglinski, you have seven minutes.

Mr. Jim Eglinski: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Johnson, I listened intently to your presentation. Thank you for that, and thank you for the passion that you showed.

It's quite easy to point a finger at a police officer and say that this is done wrong or that's not done right. However, a lot of the actions by a police officer, whether it's RCMP or city police officer or whatever, are actions that she or he follows in an investigation that are required for them to prove a case in court.

Now, I know she said that maybe they could take a 48-hour break or something like that if a person is upset. Try to explain that to a judge or a lawyer, or a defence lawyer. I would really argue a case against that. The police officer needs to get that evidence put together.

Your ideas are excellent, but the problem I see is whether the courts accept that in the terms of evidence. This is where the problem goes. The defence lawyer will try to chew up a statement. The police officer is trying to take a statement which is the best recollection at the time of that incident.

You may not know my background. I was a police officer for 35 years—all rural, aboriginal policing. Now, many times in 48 hours, a story will change. We are trying to find out about the actual circumstances so that we can do the investigation. Sometimes it is impassioned—I totally agree with you—and it's difficult.

I totally agree with you that many rural communities across Canada have recruits, non-experienced police officers. When a person gets experience, he is probably going to want to go to a larger centre. That's where the expertise is. I think what you're saying is that initial contact is not sometimes an expert investigator in sexual crime; he or she may be a fairly new police officer.

Do you think we also need to share some of the responsibilities with the court services, along with the police officers, so that we can get a kind of united front on how we can best handle these very intricate, very emotional investigations?

• (1555)

Ms. Christina Johnson: Respectfully, there is some research that is coming out on the neurobiology of trauma and how the brain encodes trauma. What they are finding is that—you're right—the story does evolve. That is because within that first 48 hours, it has not been compressed into true memory. That's why the current recommendation is to wait 48 hours after the initial contact or after the assault itself, because you're getting a truer story after the 48 hours.

Absolutely, we have to share with the judicial system. As a matter of fact, all the police I know are wonderful people, and I am so happy to work with them. They work their tails off, and they document, and the moment it hits the justice system where it becomes this black-and-white piece where it's evidence—not people but evidence—that's where things really go sideways.

Mr. Jim Eglinski: Thank you.

Ms. Christina Johnson: Thank you.

Mr. Jim Eglinski: Trevor, welcome, and thank you for your presentation.

Can you talk a little more about the Alberta rural crime watch association and different programs like Citizens on Patrol, community and rural crime watch? Do you work quite closely with different groups like that across Alberta through your program?

Mr. Trevor Tychowsky: Yes, you bet. There are several different groups.

As the Alberta Provincial Rural Crime Watch Association, or any rural crime association, we are the passive group. We tell people we don't want boots on the ground. We don't want people doing active patrol. We want that person knowing about their neighbours. We want that person travelling out for coffee to the community to just watch out for their neighbours.

With Citizens on Patrol, its mandate is being the boots on the ground. They actually do backup patrols in their communities and are patrolled on that aspect.

Do we work with them? Yes, absolutely. We have two different kinds of mandates. We are both crime prevention, but we're two different mandates. One is the boots on the ground, and they teach them for boots on the ground, and with the other one, we teach our rural people about just getting back to those roots, getting back to the way it was long ago when all neighbours knew one another. When somebody is away, it's knowing who that person is.

It seems like these last probably 20 years, that's been going away. We don't know our neighbours. In a lot of the small communities, I've talked to a lot of people, and they don't even know who their neighbour is half a mile away. That's really disheartening.

Mr. Jim Eglinski: You live in a rural area of Alberta. There has been a lot of concern about response times and the time police officers take to respond to maybe a serious break-in or something like that. Do you have any opinions on how they can improve the service over and above what they have now dealing with the police ratio per population?

Mr. Trevor Tychowsky: I think the biggest one for us is that, yes, some days they are thin. There is no question that they get a lot more calls than they can ever respond to. Our participation with the RCMP is phenomenal. We have an amazing relationship with them. Do I think that they can improve that in any way? No. Besides the potential of having more police officers, I don't believe that...

We promote to our people that we can't keep asking the RCMP to do it. We the public, we the communities, need to take the crime into our own hands by protecting our own belongings. We need to educate people to make sure they're locking up their stuff. The days of the farmers leaving their keys in their trucks and leaving their homes unlocked are done.

• (1600)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Eglinski.

Madam Moore will have the floor for seven minutes. She will likely ask her questions *en français*.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Moore (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, NDP): I have questions for Ms. Johnson.

You spoke a great deal about the issues surrounding assaults. I want to discuss the long-term implications and the differences between urban and rural crime. When a person is a victim of sexual assault in a rural area, the person's abuser may continue to live in the community for a number of years, whether or not the assault has been reported. This means that many victims of sexual assault will suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder or will have similar symptoms. In the years following the assault, the victim is quite likely to meet the abuser in completely unexpected circumstances, such as in line at the grocery store or at the bank. These traumas can occur at any time and can cause the victim's symptoms to reappear.

Do victims of assault, regardless of whether the assault was reported, continue to receive support even if the assault occurred 10, 15 or 20 years ago and the trauma resurfaces later for some reason?
[English]

Ms. Christina Johnson: Absolutely. It's quite common, and it may not be that they don't see each other for a long period of time. They may see each other daily, or weekly, or when they go to... whatever their faith is on the weekend. There will be a community expectation that there is forgiveness in moving forward. You're very right that people are absolutely carrying symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Moore: The proximity of the abuser in a rural area may complicate a victim's healing process, whereas this wouldn't necessarily be the case in major centres. Is that correct?

[English]

Ms. Christina Johnson: Yes.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Moore: Do you think that health care professionals receive enough training to handle this issue?

[English]

Ms. Christina Johnson: No. Most health care professionals are not trained in sexual violence-specific responses, including our doctors who are doing our forensic kits, which would also impact.... We have locum doctors who are coming into rural and remote areas with zero knowledge on how to actually perform the kits, so that impacts investigation and conviction all the way through sexual trauma-specific supports.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Moore: Not only police officers, but also health care professionals who work in rural areas should receive better training. Is that correct?

[English]

Ms. Christina Johnson: Everyone in the system who has contacts in sexual violence should be trained in sexual violence-specific responses.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Moore: Okay.

I want to address the issue of rural areas, where often only two or three emergency room nurses may be on the night shift. Proper training is therefore crucial. Unlike large hospitals that have dedicated teams to handle front-line responses, small health care

centres that serve the public in rural areas have limited staff, and anyone can be called upon to handle these types of cases. The training should be extended to all people who may be involved in these types of situations, which can occur at any time.

Thank you, Ms. Johnson.

My next question is for Mr. Tychkowsky.

Are minor crimes, such as theft or mischief, committed more often by people from the community or by people from outside the community who commit crimes in rural areas where farms are located? What's your opinion?

● (1605)

[English]

Mr. Trevor Tychkowsky: We've been finding that in fact it's not locals. That used to be the case, but now we're finding more and more that the people they're catching aren't local. These are hardened criminals who will go across many communities and continue these crimes.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Moore: Okay.

The statistics show that there are fewer crimes of this nature in rural communities in Quebec and Ontario. For example, the Abitibi-Témiscamingue region is a seven-hour drive from the largest city, and Timmins, in northern Ontario, is about a seven-hour drive from Toronto.

Can the proximity or lack of proximity to major cities explain the fact that the crime rate is different from province to province? For example, in Quebec and Ontario, the rural areas are much farther from the major centres than in the west, where more major cities are located near rural areas.

[English]

Mr. Trevor Tychkowsky: That could be, potentially. I really don't know the direct answer to that.

My community itself is about one hour from Edmonton, Alberta. I guess there's a possibility. The ones way up north that are farther from bigger centres are getting hit by crime too. There's a crime issue right across our province. In a bit more northern community, would I say there is any less? No. We've been learning that crime in general has gone way up.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Moore: Okay.

You've taken local initiatives to increase security. Can you tell us which initiatives have worked well? Are there any simple initiatives that we could implement? You encourage people to lock their car doors and to get to know their neighbours, but do you have any other concrete examples of very simple initiatives that work?

[English]

Mr. Trevor Tychkowsky: It's really encouraging the general public to call the RCMP. We're getting too many complaints by RCMP members that people will go up to them weeks or months later and say, "By the way, I saw a suspicious vehicle go by but I never thought anything of it."

It seems as though that's a repetitive wall that's happening. People have a fear of calling in or they think it won't be suspicious, or that it was just a neighbour who got a new vehicle. It's not until later, when they find out that a neighbour's place has been broken into that they say, "By the way, I saw a weird vehicle," but they don't let anybody know until quite a bit later, and unfortunately, it's too late.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, Ms. Moore.

Ms. Dabrusin, go ahead for seven minutes, please.

Ms. Julie Dabrusin (Toronto—Danforth, Lib.): Thank you.

Both of you are from Alberta. At our last meeting we had the RCMP here, and they talked a bit about some initiatives that they were doing in Alberta as well. I was hoping maybe you might give me some insight.

As far as I understand it, the Province of Alberta invested something in the order of—I'm going to get the number wrong—\$10 million.

Mr. Jim Eglinski: It was \$8 million for police and \$2 million for provincial—

Ms. Julie Dabrusin: It was \$8 million for police and \$2 million for the justice system, I believe.

Mr. Jim Eglinski: That's correct.

Ms. Julie Dabrusin: The RCMP in Alberta created some new initiatives based on that, working with different organizations and the like.

My first question is for the neighbourhood watch association.

Were you involved at all in this new crime reduction strategy in Alberta?

Mr. Trevor Tychkowsky: You bet. We signed an MOU with the RCMP, and that's when they announced that they were going to create a special crime prevention initiative. We've started to see some good success with that. There is a special task force team that is starting to come into the rural communities and is starting to hit these people who are hardened criminals, so we want to call them. We are starting to see some good increases on that, and we applaud the RCMP for such a good step, but it's a major problem now. The people within the communities are concerned. The trust is starting to go way down.

•(1610)

Ms. Julie Dabrusin: The other part is that when I was looking at their statistics—and they were, in fact, achieving some strong results, based on what they were giving us—they all seemed to be related to property crime. Is that what you're seeing, as well, regarding what the focus is and your involvement on it is?

Mr. Trevor Tychkowsky: That's correct. That's what we're finding. Our community was hit with 11 break and enters in 24 hours, and that was from one end of the county to the other. That was within a 50-mile radius. That was just within the last two weeks. It's still happening.

Ms. Julie Dabrusin: You said you had a memorandum of understanding. What's your involvement? What do you do with the RCMP as part of this new project?

Mr. Trevor Tychkowsky: We always had a great working relationship with the RCMP, but we just signed an agreement that really lays out what we would do as the Alberta Provincial Rural Crime Watch Association and what the RCMP will do for us. It just solidified it, really, saying, "Yes, we will be the eyes and ears for you, and you guys will come to our meetings and give us as much information as we can have to relay to the public."

Ms. Julie Dabrusin: Was there any special training or anything that they provided to you as to what you should be looking for or what you should be working on?

Mr. Trevor Tychkowsky: There was nothing specific.

If we want speakers, we try to encourage our local clubs to use them, because they are definitely subject matter experts in this. We do use them when possible, but in the memorandum of understanding there was nothing specific that said that they will deliver this. As you heard in my speech, we are encouraging the CPTED concept, and they are experts in that matter. We are training more and more people within our area to really deliver that message, because we think it's working.

Ms. Julie Dabrusin: I'm just trying to get a sense of what has changed. If I'm looking at your community and the type of work you're doing, you're seeing a drop, although you mentioned that there was a huge number of break-ins recently. In what the RCMP is doing in your area, because of this new crime reduction strategy, what has changed to make it more effective? How are you tying into that?

Mr. Trevor Tychkowsky: To say that the crime prevention group or the crime—I can't recall the exact name, but—

Ms. Julie Dabrusin: It's the crime reduction strategy.

Mr. Trevor Tychkowsky: Yes, there we go. That organization is quite new at it, so when the whole province is getting it.... When I speak for the Provincial Rural Crime Watch Association, I'm looking at it as our whole community, our complete province. Is crime still going up throughout the province? Of course. But are we starting to see a reduction? Sure we are. Can I say it is that way in our community? No, I can't specifically say that they're in my community to do it, but I am hoping that we'll see some.

Ms. Julie Dabrusin: Thank you.

Ms. Johnson, this whole crime reduction strategy does seem to me, when I'm looking at it, to be property crime focused. Have you had any contact with the RCMP as part of this crime reduction strategy about how it can deal with assaults against women?

Ms. Christina Johnson: No, we've had no contact.

Ms. Julie Dabrusin: Okay.

Have you seen any change in the past six months? It's really just the first six months of this program, but have you had any contact with the RCMP about what they're doing?

Ms. Christina Johnson: We co-operate already with the RCMP, and one detachment of the four sits at one of our collaborative tables locally, but there has been no difference in collaboration in the last six months.

Ms. Julie Dabrusin: Okay, that's helpful.

I'm running out of time, but there is one thing I am interested in.

I live in a big city. In fact, the people in my area do watch for each other and know each other, and that happens in city areas as well. In fact, in some ways, it's harder to escape each other sometimes, because you can hear what's going on in your neighbour's house, especially during the summer.

I'm wondering about the isolation piece in a rural area when we're talking about women. We can hear directly what's happening in each other's home, quite truly, but I would expect that's not the same in a rural area.

What's the impact of that isolation?

• (1615)

The Chair: Very briefly, please.

Ms. Christina Johnson: It's huge. What we know is that high-risk families will move rurally because they'll be less under the microscope.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Stubbs, welcome back to the committee. You have five minutes, please.

Mrs. Shannon Stubbs (Lakeland, CPC): Thanks, Mr. Chair. I appreciate the opportunity to participate.

Thanks to both of you for being here and lending your time and insight to this committee's work.

Trevor, from the Alberta Provincial Rural Crime Watch Association, I want to thank you for your endorsement of Motion No. 167, and for joining the more than 101 other organizations across seven provinces and the thousands of Canadians who have banded together to bring this focus on rural crime. It is a growing epidemic certainly across our province, but in other places around the country as well.

I would invite you to expand a little more on what my colleague was asking about in terms of the successes that have been seen so far with the crime reduction team.

There's a detachment in my area, for example, where there are four officers who have to cover almost 3,000 square kilometres. There are rarely ever two officers on duty at the same time. They certainly have limited and in some cases no support staff.

I think there's a two-pronged issue here. One is that I'm hoping this committee will do a review of sufficient front-line resources in rural, remote and indigenous communities.

Also, would you say, given that there have been successes and a moving of the dial as a result of the work of these dedicated crime reduction task force teams, it reinforces the argument that there

should be a bolstering of RCMP law enforcement visibility and active presence in rural and remote communities to combat rural crime?

Mr. Trevor Tychkowsky: Absolutely, Shannon. You're absolutely right in saying that.

In our community, we have four members. You hit it dead-on, in that when that special task force comes in, they do a great job, but unfortunately, there's only so many of them.

We see it just like a band-aid, because it's only going to cure part of the problem. I believe that at one point, they came into our community, but a short time later, all of a sudden there were another 11 break and enters in 24 hours.

You're right. We have one officer that's on, and it makes it very difficult. The criminals figure that out. They know where the police officers will be. They know when it will be a longer period of time for them to get there.

We know that's happening right across the province. The criminals are figuring all that stuff out. Having that special task force team is great—I applaud the RCMP on that—but it is not the total answer.

Mrs. Shannon Stubbs: I think that the RCMP officers are doing the best that they can in a very challenged situation, but the success of the task forces would, I think, reinforce the argument that focus needs to be brought about in ensuring there are sufficient resources in those communities.

My constituents often tell me that they feel like sitting ducks, that they know more people whose places have been broken into than those who haven't. They're stressed, anxious and fearful for their families, homes and businesses. They are taking measures to try to protect themselves.

What about this issue of constant repeat offenders and the revolving door? Do you think there needs to be attention given to increasing sentences and penalties to deal with that issue, both in terms of the increase in organized crime and also offenders who are perpetuating these crimes?

Mr. Trevor Tychkowsky: Yes, for sure. We definitely are seeing that.

We know of a certain group, and when they were in jail, crime went down. We knew that. When they came out, we were expecting crime levels to increase.

You're completely right, Shannon.

Mrs. Shannon Stubbs: Are there any other additional concrete recommendations or specifics that you would like to see come out of the committee's work?

Mr. Trevor Tychkowsky: No. I think a big one is looking at the justice system, for sure, but also, do we have enough police officers out there? As the government, what are we doing for our people to help protect our people? What more can we do to help protect them? They're really starting to not feel safe, and that's not a good feeling in rural communities.

•(1620)

Mrs. Shannon Stubbs: Yes, and it's a bad thing for everyone, I think, when rural residents are losing confidence, losing hope and feeling that when they call for help it won't necessarily be there. That's frustrating for everybody, I think, both for residents and for law enforcement officers who are just trying to do their job.

Mr. Trevor Tychkowsky: Yes, absolutely.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Stubbs.

I have Mr. Duguid as the next questioner for five minutes.

Mr. Terry Duguid (Winnipeg South, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'll be sharing my time with Ms. Sahota, if time permits.

I want to start by thanking both of our presenters for their excellent presentations. I have a comment and a question for both.

Trevor, I was a member of a citizens on patrol group in my own neighbourhood before political life and also a member of CFCA. I'm very aware of the great work they do, not only to reduce crime in neighbourhoods but also for community cohesion as we get to know our neighbours. I must admit that walking around at two in the morning in my neighbourhood in local parks is sometimes not people's idea of fun, but it was very effective in reducing property crime.

I'm aware that the initiative I was involved with was funded both provincially and municipally, not federally, so I'd like a comment from you on the federal role. Let me first ask Christina my other question and then get both of you to respond, because I want to leave time for Ms. Sahota.

We've launched a gender-based violence strategy of \$200 million over five years, which I'm sure you're aware of. The three pillars are prevention, support for survivors and their families and responsive legal and justice systems. I'm aware, particularly in my home province of Manitoba—we're going to be having a delegation from Thompson, Manitoba—that there are very high rates of gender-based violence in our north, which we know we have to do something about. There's a lack of services.

I wonder if you would comment a bit on prevention. We also have some signature initiatives. I'll use my own community as an example. The Winnipeg Blue Bombers are very involved in prevention and in engaging young men and boys. They're in the schools. They're really having an impact on reducing gender-based violence and the causes of gender-based violence and in dealing with issues such as consent. Do we need those kinds of initiatives in rural Manitoba and rural Canada?

Ms. Christina Johnson: Yes. If we want to get to the root cause of sexual violence, it absolutely is gender inequality, or it's part of it. Getting to that primary prevention of changing the cultural norms, which I talked about in terms of rurality, is a huge piece. Yes, we need far more, and we need men and boys to be leading that and challenging that to create the change.

Mr. Terry Duguid: Trevor, on the federal role in COPP or CFCA, I'm aware that the federal government at times has funded more boots on the ground for police officers, particularly in urban areas. Is there a role for the federal government?

Mr. Trevor Tychkowsky: Yes, I believe so. I think we'd have to explore that option, but you're right. Right now, your funding does go toward the RCMP. We applaud you guys for that. That is a great step, but is there room for you guys to take a more active role in crime prevention? I believe so.

Mr. Terry Duguid: I'll pass this over to Ms. Sahota.

The Chair: You have about a minute and a half.

Ms. Ruby Sahota (Brampton North, Lib.): Ms. Johnson, you mentioned the cultural aspect of gender-based violence and assault. I think you've alluded to this but haven't clearly said so, but would you say there is a specific culture, a Canadian culture, when it comes to this, or do you think there are differences in our rural, urban and other regions throughout Canada? Does the culture vary from place to place, and what solutions can we come to if it is different?

Ms. Christina Johnson: I would say that one rural community is one rural community. When we're working within, it's really using a community development model to figure out what the values and beliefs are of that community specifically when it comes to gender inequality, sexism, and then all the intersections that come within.

I don't think there's one approach to fixing it. It really is getting in and rolling up the sleeves, doing that assessment, meeting the community where it is, and then moving forward through an education approach that is “non-blamey”.

•(1625)

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Our study is a rural crime study. So you don't think there are certain approaches that could be applied throughout rural Canada when it comes to this, or are you saying that every region is unique and we'd have to apply different approaches everywhere?

Ms. Christina Johnson: Oh, sorry, I misunderstood. Yes, an education strategy, specifically when it comes to sexual violence and domestic violence, is absolutely critical in terms of definitions—what it is and what it isn't—and then really taking the time to break it down.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Since you're from Alberta, is that something that's under the jurisdiction of—

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Sahota.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: I've run out of time.

Thank you.

The Chair: We have a few minutes left, and because I'm such a nice guy, I'm going to give four minutes to Mr. Paul-Hus.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: You're too kind, Mr. Chair. Thank you.

Hello, Ms. Johnson and Mr. Tychkowsky.

Ms. Johnson, at the start of your presentation, you said that women weren't reporting sexual assaults. Assaults do occur, but women don't dare to report them. Based on your presentation, I understand that they don't report their abusers because they can't receive services. Is that correct, or are there other reasons?

[English]

Ms. Christina Johnson: I would say that having service is part of it, absolutely. It's also the lack of anonymity. If someone reports, the whole community knows. There are those pieces, and again, that direct access to service. It's also the believability: "Am I going to be believed, and am I going to be supported if I report?"

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: Okay.

This week, people from the RCMP met with us. They told us that, for the past year in Alberta, a great deal of effort has been made. According to them, services for victims of crime have improved.

Ms. Johnson or Mr. Tychkowsky, do you think that there has been a real improvement in the services provided by the RCMP?

[English]

Mr. Trevor Tychkowsky: We've seen an improvement, absolutely, but as was said, unfortunately, sometimes they're going after the big picture. They're going after those hard criminals and trying to chase them all the way throughout the system. Unfortunately, I don't know if that's really more of a band-aid than anything else.

I'm not saying it's a bad approach. It's absolutely a great approach, for a start. These crimes will continue. We have to find ways to give the public, our taxpayers, knowledge so that we can put this back in a positive sense.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: Okay.

You spoke of situations where things calmed down once the criminals had been arrested and incarcerated. However, after the criminals were released, you expected the crime rate to increase. It seems that gangs or specific groups are involved. The people from the RCMP didn't provide any names, obviously, since they can't give us specific information.

The people involved in criminal activity in rural areas are specific groups such as organized gangs that commit crimes everywhere, rather than isolated individuals. Is that correct? If we create a strategy that targets these gangs, can we resolve the issue more effectively?

[English]

Mr. Trevor Tychkowsky: As a rural crime watch, we don't have a whole lot of specifics about who exactly is being arrested. We do know there is gang activity, absolutely, but is it all related to gangs? I really don't know that answer. The RCMP would be the only ones who could answer that.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: Okay.

[English]

The Chair: You have 30 seconds, Jim.

Mr. Jim Eglinski: Real quick, for both of you, earlier you mentioned your involvement and what you're doing. Do you see a role whereby our communities can get even more involved than we are now in assisting the police, in helping the communities be prepared, with better education in case of sexual assaults and a better know-your-neighbours role? Do you think there's a bigger role the communities can play, with an education proponent coming maybe from the police?

• (1630)

The Chair: Very briefly, please.

Mr. Trevor Tychkowsky: Yes. I believe the communities really need to step up to this, absolutely.

Mr. Jim Eglinski: Ms. Johnson.

Ms. Christina Johnson: Yes. We all have a part to play, every one of us.

Mr. Jim Eglinski: Thank you.

The Chair: That's a very good note on which to end our first hour.

I want to thank each of you on behalf of the committee for your efforts to get into the place where you're located and bring your testimony before us.

With that we'll suspend while we bring in the next panel.

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_____ (Pause) _____

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The Chair: Let's call the meeting back to order. I think we have our folks by video conference: Edouard and Jessica Maurice.

I propose to first hear from Alicia Bedford, from Thompson, Manitoba, and Geraldine Dixon.

You can choose between yourselves as to who goes first, but one of you has 10 minutes, and then the other has 10 minutes.

With that, who's going first?

• (1635)

Ms. Alicia Bedford (As an Individual): We're together, so we're both speaking on the same issue.

The Chair: Okay. Will we just group you together and treat it as 10 minutes?

Ms. Alicia Bedford: Yes, I think so.

The Chair: Okay. That's good. That leaves more time for members to ask questions.

The clock is running. Thank you.

Ms. Alicia Bedford: Thank you for having us. I think it is very important that we are speaking out on this issue, about an incident that happened to me a couple of months ago, what has come from that, and the feedback that we've received from speaking out on this incident in our community. I will just start by reading about the incident that happened.

On August 10, 2018, while I was alone at home with my two young daughters, I was awoken at approximately 2:00 a.m. by my oldest daughter's yelling that someone was in our backyard and was trying to break into our house.

We had been doing some renovations on our backyard, so our deck was leading up to the doors in my bedroom. As I looked, I could see the individual trying to come through the screen door into my bedroom.

With force, I was able to push him out and close the door, but I could hear him and what sounded like numerous other people in the vicinity of my house screaming and yelling.

Immediately after closing the door and locking it again, I grabbed my cellphone and dialed the RCMP, which in Thompson here is not simply 911. We have to dial 204-677-6911. Can you imagine what that's like, having someone break into your house and having to dial 10 numbers? It's quite an ordeal.

The first time I dialed the number, I immediately got a recording which said that all operators were currently busy. Being frightened, I hung up and dialed the number again, and again I got the same message that all operators were currently busy.

Hearing these people in my backyard, hearing them trying to get into my house and not being able to reach anybody for help, I called our local fire department. I immediately got through to them and explained what was happening. They put me through to the RCMP once again while they were on the line with me. They stayed on the line with me while we again got this message that all operators were busy.

We continued to hold. That time span felt like a lifetime, but in reality it was probably about five to seven minutes until I was finally able to speak to somebody, explain my situation, and try to get some help for me and my kids.

Once I was able to speak to somebody and give my information, it took literally less than three minutes to have the RCMP dispatched to my house. Unfortunately, by this time everybody was gone. They weren't able to apprehend anybody. However, I imagine that if I had gotten through to somebody immediately and not had to have been on hold for that amount of time, they probably would have been able to get there a lot faster.

I think it's scary. I was raised in this community. I've raised my kids to memorize this 10-digit number, which is harder than three digits, obviously, but is still just as important. I've raised my kids to dial this number when they need help or assistance, and they rely on that. We're raised that way.

Unfortunately, my children are still shaken up about these events that happened. There are questions in their minds now. If they need help, can they actually receive the help? Are they going to be put on hold? Being so young, if they're attacked and they're trying to get help, how long are they going to be on hold before they actually get some help?

I think the question is this: Why does Thompson not have a local dispatch? With the crime rate that Thompson has.... We'll be mentioning that Maclean's magazine has rated us as the second most dangerous Canadian city to live in. We don't have a local dispatch. We don't have a local 911.

● (1640)

I think it's unacceptable that we have to be on hold. Our lives don't seem to matter as much as that of somebody else who has 911, who maybe will get through right away. I just think that's unacceptable.

I'll pass it over to Geri.

Ms. Geraldine Dixon (As an Individual): Hi. I'm Geraldine Dixon. Actually, I am Alicia's mother.

After dealing with the incident that occurred to my daughter and her family, the following day I went down to our local RCMP detachment, where I spoke to an officer, and then after leaving there I spoke to our acting mayor, Colleen Smook. Mrs. Smook recommended that we send a letter of our concerns to the Minister of Justice, as well as to mayor and council. The letters were sent August 13 and August 15, 2018, respectively.

In a follow-up to the letters sent, my daughter and I spoke to the mayor and council at the monthly city council meeting, where Mayor Fenske told us that the decision to get rid of the Thompson local 911 call centre was made by the Manitoba government, not the city, and that northern Manitoba does not have the infrastructure to support a 911 call centre. Mayor Fenske told us that they had been lobbying the government to fix this problem, but "that's just how it is in the north".

We also sent an email regarding our concerns to Cliff Cullen, Minister of Justice, and we copied Brian Pallister, Kelly Bindle and Niki Ashton. We received a reply to our email from Karen Lambert, director of contract policing, recommending to stay on the line when calling 204-677-6911.

I met with Kelly Bindle, Thompson's MLA, on September 19, 2018, after numerous attempts to meet with him, and was told that he would send off another letter to Cliff Cullen as the last reply we received from him was unsatisfactory.

We were told Mr. Bindle would be in contact with us and, to date, one day shy of one month, we had not heard anything. I want to do a follow-up to this because after we sent this letter on to your committee, Mr. Bindle did get back to us and we forwarded his email on to you. But please note that in Mr. Bindle's email he contradicts Mayor Fenske, saying that infrastructure is and always has been in place and at no time has Mr. Bindle seen any lobbying done to change the existing situation.

For awareness purposes, my daughter and I have started a petition, which we will present to the new mayor and council, showing the concerns and the support from the community for a local 911 call centre. Thompson is known as the hub of the north, and Maclean's magazine has ranked us number two on the most dangerous place to live in Canada list. People do not feel safe, and we need change.

If I might add to this, we received another email from Kelly Bindle regarding our RCMP 911 service. There is one paragraph I would love to read, as it highlights why we are here today speaking to you. It says:

The RCMP has provided the following information regarding this specific incident: On August 11, 2018, between 1:30 and 2:30 am, the RCMP received 50 emergency calls—

I'm sorry?

The Chair: Please continue. You have a minute and a half left.

Ms. Geraldine Dixon: Okay. I'm almost done.

—of which 29 were answered. There were also 15 calls that required call backs as they were abandoned.... The average wait time in the queue during this period was 2 minutes 42 seconds with the maximum wait time during this period being 11 minutes and 21 seconds. RCMP have indicated that this was a higher than normal call volume. The RCMP have identified the call that Ms Bedford made to Thompson Fire and noted that this call waited in the queue for 4 minutes and 29 seconds before being answered.

In finishing, please remember that every second counts when you're dealing with an emergency situation.

Thank you.

• (1645)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Bedford and Ms. Dixon.

The committee clerk has received the letter that you forwarded, the correspondence from Kelly Bindle. It's in translation and it will be distributed to members shortly, probably on Monday. Thank you.

With that, I will call on Edouard and Jessica Maurice.

Mr. Edouard Maurice (As an Individual): My name is Eddie Maurice and this is my wife Jessica. Thank you for inviting us here to share our story and speak on an issue that has greatly affected us.

We were invited here to speak because when two criminals came onto my rural property in February, I was the one arrested by the RCMP. My story received national attention after charges were laid against me for protecting myself, my young daughter and my property.

I was home alone with my 12-month-old daughter, who was sleeping in her bedroom downstairs, when I was awoken from my sleep at about 5:00 a.m. by criminals outside my rural home. Instantly, I was terrified, because when you live in the country as we do, your neighbours cannot hear you scream. It was pitch black outside and pitch black in the house, and I didn't know how many criminals there were, where they were or what they wanted.

I took my .22 rifle and went to the front door to confront and scare off the two criminals who were just 10 feet away. I yelled at them to leave and got no response from them, so I fired warning shots into the ground to scare them off. The two criminals ran back up our laneway to a van waiting on the road, and I immediately called 911 to report what had happened in the hope that the RCMP would catch them. I just wanted to protect my daughter, who was sleeping downstairs.

We live on the edge of our town of almost 30,000 people, just a seven-minute drive from our RCMP station. I waited anxiously for the police to arrive, fearful of who might still be out in the dark or that people might come back. Two hours later, three RCMP cruisers drove in and officers came to my door with their assault rifles drawn to arrest me. They were telling me that I, the person who called 911 on the real criminals, was under arrest. It turned out that one of the criminals had been injured by a ricocheting bullet and the police were responding to his, the criminal's, 911 call. I informed the officers that my daughter was still sleeping in her crib and the RCMP officer arresting me expected me to leave her in her care, treating me as the criminal rather than the victim.

At the time of my arrest, I was advised that I was being arrested for the criminal charge of careless use of a firearm. After I was in custody for 24 hours, the RCMP laid three charges against me: careless use of a firearm, pointing a firearm, and, the most serious charge, aggravated assault. Now, this is an important part of the story, because this is where the RCMP made a mistake that was life-changing for our family. They laid the charges at about 7:00 a.m. Sunday and did not even begin a physical investigation of the property or forensics until 9:00 a.m. Sunday. This means that the RCMP made a decision to lay three serious charges against me based solely on my 911 call, a statement that they coerced me into giving without my lawyer present, and a statement from the injured criminal. This criminal had admitted to doing drugs earlier in the night, was found with methamphetamine on him, and had a criminal history. Our two statements were very different. The police had no physical evidence or any admission from me that I intended to injure this person.

The RCMP had a choice at the time. They could have and should have released me because I was a law-abiding, taxpaying citizen with no criminal record. They could have investigated further and laid charges later if the evidence supported it. Instead, they chose to lay the charges without sufficient basis and hoped that the evidence they later found would support them in those charges. I was presumed guilty first, rather than innocent, which is not how our justice system was designed.

The evidence didn't support the RCMP's charges, and the preliminary ballistics report confirmed my statement. The Crown withdrew the charges after four months of extreme stress, anxiety and fear for our family. This whole event was traumatic for me. Confronting these criminals outside my home gave me nightmares that were long-lasting. They were dressed all in black, and in the dark you couldn't tell if they had weapons. Then to be arrested and charged like a criminal after calling 911 expecting help, when I didn't do anything wrong and did what any other rural person would do in the same situation, was devastating. I didn't ask for these criminals to come onto my property and force me to make a decision. I don't want anyone else to have to go through this same experience.

• (1650)

Mrs. Jessica Maurice (As an Individual): We became a focal point for people in rural communities across both Alberta and Canada as many people identified with our situation and felt that they would have done the same thing in the same situation. At one local town hall meeting on rural crime, over 300 people gave us an unexpected standing ovation as a show of support for Eddie's actions and our ongoing very public legal battle. People rallied outside the courthouse at all six of Eddie's court appearances, with over 200 people at one, because they felt that there was a huge injustice being done to him. We are here to speak not only about our experience but also on behalf of all of those who supported and spoke to us in the eight months since Eddie's arrest.

What many urban people don't realize is that for us it's not just stuff we lose when crimes like this happen, but we also lose that feeling of safety and security that we all expect in our own homes. There is a feeling of being violated, a fear that the criminals might return to do more harm. There is an ongoing anxiety that remains long after the stuff is gone.

The crime rates in our area have more than tripled in the last five years and the rural community is not only frustrated, they're scared. Criminals aren't afraid to use violence and guns, because they have nothing to lose. They know that the RCMP response times in rural areas are atrocious and they use that to their advantage to commit more crimes. Now they're only becoming bolder with crimes happening in broad daylight and even while people are at home.

People in rural communities, who are a large part of this great nation, are starting to become afraid of the RCMP, too, and our situation is a good example of why. The RCMP have made it clear that if citizens step in to stop a crime in progress and protect themselves or their property, as my husband did, they will be the ones on trial facing jail time. The RCMP are losing the trust of the people that they are supposed to protect.

At the town halls we've been attending, people keep asking the RCMP what they're supposed to do when a criminal comes onto their property. The answer is always to go back in the house, find a safe room, and call 911. But that answer isn't cutting it anymore. The police cannot be there fast enough, as it is not physically possible in the moment when a crime is happening, and this is evidenced by the alarming increase in rural crime.

The RCMP are also telling us to put up gates across our driveways, to get security and camera systems, and to make our properties less attractive to criminals. Why is the onus being put on the property owners to protect themselves and make their properties less attractive to the criminals? This changes the feel of the community in rural areas, where we choose to live because of the privacy, peacefulness, and openness of the communities and neighbours. This whole ideology is thrown away when you have to turn your property into a fortress with gates and security cameras.

We're tired of being told to stand down and being okay with being the victims. Canadians are strong and courageous people and we expect to live freely and safely, and that's not happening. Hiring more police alone is not going to solve the issue of rural crime. We have to take it a step further. If the government is not able to protect us, we need to be able to protect ourselves.

Our recommendation is that this committee and the Government of Canada implement stronger self-defence and property defence laws so that the people can protect themselves without fear of prosecution. We urge you to consider significant changes to the laws to allow people to be their own first line of defence in crimes, just as we are in fire and health emergencies.

While there seems to be a fear of guns in Canadian urban areas, this is not the case in rural Canada. We are raised and taught from a young age about guns, gun safety and to be respectful with firearms. They are a necessary part of the rural lifestyle, to hunt for food and scare off or kill predators to keep our livestock safe. Firearms aren't

the problem in Canada. Our justice system is the problem, and our case is not an isolated incident.

Gerald Stanley and Peter Khill are other victims that have gone through similar situations. Faith in our justice system in rural areas is quickly dying. If you don't do something to strengthen these laws for rural communities soon, more people will stop calling the police. This is already happening. Rural citizens are starting to take justice and protection into their own hands without police involvement. They aren't reporting it and you can be sure that the criminals aren't reporting it either.

Until the criminals start to see that there are consequences to committing these crimes in rural areas, they're going to keep coming and victimizing us. The fastest, cheapest way to change rural crime is not through policing or rehabilitation programs but through allowing us to defend and protect ourselves and our property. Rural Canadians are not willing to sit back and it's up to this committee to represent their wishes. We want to be able to protect ourselves and our property, and it's up to you to make sure that we can.

Thank you.

• (1655)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Maurice.

With that, I'll call on Mr. Picard.

Mr. Michel Picard: I asked Julie to take my place.

Ms. Julie Dabrusin: Thank you. I'm going to start with the Maurices.

Thank you for being here. I was looking at the order of reference for this study, and it was to look at current rural crime rates, existing RCMP and other police resources, current partnerships and possible recommendations. I'm going to focus on that.

Looking at the existing police resources, one of the things I've been looking at is "Police Resources in Canada, 2017", an article put out by Statistics Canada. We've mentioned this a few times. Alberta actually falls below the line for the number of police by population, so that in fact it has a fewer police than the average across the country. I don't know if you were aware of that or if you had any comments about the number of police available in Alberta to respond to crimes, urban or rural.

Mrs. Jessica Maurice: I don't think we have very many comments on the policing numbers. What we are trying to get across to you is what people are communicating to us in the different types of stories, and what the reality is for landowners.

Ms. Julie Dabrusin: I'm just saying, though, that one of the realities is that there are fewer police available in Alberta.

Mrs. Jessica Maurice: Yes. They've recently, I think in March or April, dedicated more funding to police in Alberta.

Ms. Julie Dabrusin: I'm not sure that has actually increased the numbers. I'd have to look into that.

We have talked about the fact that there was \$10 million given by the provincial government in Alberta. I think it was \$8 million towards policing and \$2 million towards the justice system, if I have that right. They've changed a bit of how they do things locally, based on that.

If you look at Ontario and Quebec, there are provincial police, the OPP and Sûreté du Québec.

Is that something you think would be helpful in Alberta, if the province had its own police service in addition to the existing services you have, rather than relying solely on the RCMP?

Mrs. Jessica Maurice: Yes.

We actually have the Alberta sheriffs. We've heard some people recommend that they get more power. Right now, they're not allowed to help the police. They have certain jurisdictional issues, I believe, so they could improve the jurisdiction of the sheriffs to allow them to aid the police. Sometimes what will happen is that the sheriffs will be closer to wherever the incident is, but because of their jurisdiction, they cannot get to the crime that's in progress. They have to wait for the RCMP who are further away.

I think that if there were some improvements made to that, it would be a big help.

Ms. Julie Dabrusin: That's one thing we could look at, the availability of provincial police forces.

Mrs. Jessica Maurice: The reality is that the police still can't get there in the 15 seconds when people are breaking into your home, like in this example. It sounds like they may be closer in a town in Manitoba.

When you're half an hour out of town, the police are still not going to get there, regardless of whether it's a provincial or a federal police service.

Ms. Julie Dabrusin: A lot of what we're hearing about right now is from Alberta. I understand that we have you two as well, and I'm sorry; I'm not ignoring you on the video conference from Manitoba.

We've heard from a lot of people in Alberta, and there is this differential in the amount of police services available, so that is one thing we're looking at as part of this equation.

With regard to solutions, I'm really interested in this. Your suggested solution, then—and I don't want to put words in your mouth, so I want to try to understand this—is better self-defence, meaning that you, and presumably because we create laws for the entire country, I, could use a gun to defend our respective properties.

How do you frame that so I can understand it?

Mrs. Jessica Maurice: This actually affects urban people, so I'm glad you brought this up. A weapon can be anything. It doesn't have to be a gun. It could be a baseball bat. It could be a frying pan that you hit somebody over the head with.

It has happened in urban areas, but probably isn't reported as much. If you use too much force with any kind of weapon, whether it's a gun or not, you could still be charged with assault, even in an urban area, when it's self-defence. I think that it affects everybody in Canada, not just in rural areas, in strengthening these laws.

If you had an intruder in your home, and you—

Ms. Julie Dabrusin: I guess I'm trying to figure out the changes that you're trying to suggest, because we do have self-defence as a defence. There is, within our criminal court system, a self-defence aspect to it. There's a proportionality piece to it, but there is self-defence already built into our system.

I'm trying to figure out what change you're trying to ask us for to do that.

● (1700)

Mrs. Jessica Maurice: When we went to the rural crime meetings, a lot of people were asking, "What can we do?" The police didn't have an answer.

In our experience—with our very expensive legal defence lawyer—the police are not giving people the appropriate answers as to what they can and can't do. People in rural areas are asking for clarity on what that actually means. In our case, you get prosecuted.

Should we always have to defend that we were protecting ourselves and have to spend thousands of dollars on legal bills, when we are protecting ourselves?

Ms. Julie Dabrusin: What I'm trying to figure out....

I was just quickly looking through some articles, and what it said is that there were people rummaging in a car—

Mrs. Jessica Maurice: Yes, 10 feet from our door.

Ms. Julie Dabrusin: I'm just saying.... Then somebody left your property with a shot, like a gunshot.

I'm trying to figure out in this how you would change our self-defence laws. If you looked at a crime's severity, presumably a gunshot wound is more severe than property crime overall.

I'm just trying to see where you're—

Mrs. Jessica Maurice: Here's the thing. You don't know what they're there for in the middle of the night. They were 10 feet from our door. Who knows if there were five other people surrounding our house?

Ms. Julie Dabrusin: Yes, but how would you change the laws? When the police come and they investigate it, what would you have us legally change in the law to change how that defence would work once you're in the situation?

Mrs. Jessica Maurice: I think one of the things that needs to be done is a review of RCMP policies and procedures, and how they handle situations like this. Landowners and people protecting themselves in similar situations should be presumed innocent, not guilty first. In this case, they jumped the gun because it was two weeks after the Gerald Stanley case.

Ms. Julie Dabrusin: I'm sorry, but when you look at the presumption, that's exactly why the charges were dismissed. It is the way the justice system works. I'm just trying to figure out, if we were going to change the self-defence law, which is what you're asking us to suggest, and you want us to change, somehow, the proportionality equation, how would you weight that? How would we weight it so that somebody would be able to shoot in the direction of someone who has come on to their property?

The Chair: Unfortunately, our time has run out.

I'm sure you'll have an opportunity to work that response back into another question.

With that, we'll go to Ms. Stubbs for seven minutes, please.

Mrs. Shannon Stubbs: Given that conversation, here's what I would suggest to my colleague, who is in the government. The Liberals have the ability to do this. It should be incumbent upon the Liberals, in particular, and every one of us who is elected, to ensure the safety and security of the people we represent, and to give them answers about how exactly we are going to ensure that people forced into this position, against their will, because they have no other options, will not be revictimized and criminalized.

Let me suggest to this committee that this is an area that should be folded into the recommendations. Frankly, it's your job and ours to figure out how exactly to answer that question, not two people victimized by criminals who have broken into their property.

I would like to thank the people from Thompson, Manitoba, and the Maurices, for sharing your time here today. I wish that an entire hour was dedicated to each of your testimonies, but time is what it is.

Eddie and Jessica, I wonder now, would you do anything differently?

Mr. Edouard Maurice: I would not call the RCMP. That is why I was prosecuted. The criminals who came onto my property were on drugs. They didn't know where they were. In their statements, they couldn't even locate us at all. I wouldn't have had to go through what I went through if I hadn't called for help. The police didn't come for two hours anyway, so really there was no point in calling.

Mrs. Shannon Stubbs: Given that this issue involves all three levels of government working together, I think on the point that Jessica made, and in response to your answer, it is the job of the Liberals to review the policies and procedures of the RCMP. It's their responsibility to take action on ensuring accountability, and that the RCMP give accurate information and are able to serve and protect communities. I'm sure RCMP officers want that too. You should never hear from a rural resident, or any Canadian anywhere in this country, that they wouldn't call the RCMP to come and protect them because they might not get help.

Can you tell me how this ordeal has impacted your family, and also what the overall feeling is in rural Alberta about the crime problem?

• (1705)

Mrs. Jessica Maurice: In terms of how the whole ordeal has impacted us, obviously it was incredibly stressful, the whole four months of the court process. Eddie had nightmares after this incident and now we have to lock our doors all the time..

We always have a fear of people coming back. Every time there's a car we don't recognize on our street, we're wondering if they're scoping out our place, or if they're going to come back later that night. In this particular instance, we believe that they had scoped out our property. I was out of town and one of the vehicles was gone, so they had been watching our place for how many days—who knows?

I had to take time off work because I couldn't handle the stress of everything, and Eddie ended up quitting his job because the stress just got to be too much.

Mr. Edouard Maurice: Really, the overall feeling in Alberta is that people aren't going to call. They'd rather call their neighbours. They are setting up plans to deal with it themselves. People are saying they're just going to shoot, shovel and shut up from now on. They don't want to be the next Eddie Maurice.

Mrs. Shannon Stubbs: It's guaranteed that no law-abiding rural citizen in this country wants to feel like that or be put in this situation.

Our witnesses here from Thompson, Manitoba mentioned the impact on kids and on their family. Do you have any comment on the impact on your kids or your concerns about the future?

Mr. Edouard Maurice: When we were going through the whole court battle, we had to have conversations that no family should ever have. "What if I do have to go to jail? What will happen? We'll have to sell our property. What will we tell our kids?" These are conversations that we had to have privately while going through the court process.

Mrs. Jessica Maurice: In terms of the impact on our kids, we now have a five-year old, who was four at the time, and our youngest daughter is just over 18 months, so she was about a year when this happened. They could feel the stress we were feeling. They had to spend a lot of time with their grandparents, because we were going to meetings with the lawyer. There were times when I couldn't cope with parenting and had to call my mom to come and get the kids because they throw tantrums when they're stressed out, when they're feeling things. It affected them as well.

Mrs. Shannon Stubbs: Right. So everything quite clearly didn't just work out because the charges were dropped.

Do you have any sense of what happened with the criminals relating to the crimes at your home?

Mrs. Jessica Maurice: Yes. We're not so sure about the one woman who was charged, but the male, his name is Ryan Watson. He was injured pretty seriously from the ricochet. Five weeks later, he was found in a stolen vehicle with break-in tools and charged again.

At this point, I don't believe they've really spent much time in incarceration. They were let out awaiting trial, I guess. They were also just charged with summary offences, trespassing at night and mischief at night, I believe it was.

Mr. Edouard Maurice: And theft under \$5,000.

When he was on our property, that was his third time being arrested. He was arrested four times in a matter of six months for the same—

Mrs. Shannon Stubbs: When people say there's a revolving door of criminals and the rights of criminals come before the rights of law-abiding citizens, the victims of crime, that's what they mean.

Mr. Edouard Maurice: Absolutely.

Mrs. Shannon Stubbs: Are you convinced, and are your neighbours and your friends in the community around you convinced, that crime rates have dropped in Alberta and in rural communities?

Mrs. Jessica Maurice: No. We hear about crimes every day. I just don't know if people are reporting it as much.

Actually, in the last six months in Turner Valley, which is a neighbouring area to ours, crimes have gone up instead of down, so I think people just aren't calling as much.

Mrs. Shannon Stubbs: Thank you.

Thanks to all of you for being here today.

The Chair: Ms. Moore, you have seven minutes, please.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Moore: Ms. Ashton will begin.

[English]

Ms. Niki Ashton (Churchill—Keewatinook Aski, NDP): Thank you very much.

The Chair: Welcome to the committee, Ms. Ashton.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you, Chair.

I'll be sharing my time with my colleague, Ms. Moore.

I want to thank all of the witnesses for coming today, the Maurices, Ms. Bedford and Ms. Dixon, who are joining us from Thompson, my hometown as well.

I really appreciate your taking the time to explain what happened to you, Ms. Bedford. It is a story that I know you've told many times and that has really gripped people in our community and across Manitoba.

I think it's also very important that at the national level we hear from you about what you went through and, frankly, what our community is going through when it comes to trying to get help in what could possibly be a life-or-death situation.

You've alluded to some of the crime statistics, and the pressures on the 911 system. It's been indicated to us that the RCMP are short-staffed in Thompson and in communities across the north, The Pas, Flin Flon and elsewhere, in terms of servicing not just our community but also the surrounding region.

How important do you think it is for the federal government and for all governments to invest and ensure that there is proper RCMP support or increased RCMP presence, including more officers in Thompson?

• (1710)

Ms. Alicia Bedford: I'd like to see the stat where, as was said, Alberta falls below the line, and I'd like to see where Manitoba falls

as well, because I don't think, from our kind of experience and just the stories we've been told from people telling their personal stories....

You always think it's an isolated incident until you're put in something like this. Then people feel obligated to come and tell you their stories. We have heard horrific stories from people. I was on hold for four minutes and 29 seconds. I urge any one of you to put on a timer, sit quietly with nothing to do for four minutes and 29 seconds, and imagine how long that feels. Then have somebody break your windows and doors while hearing your children scream. Now imagine how much longer that seems.

I know the RCMP are stretched thin in our town. I know it's a thankless job. I know they are stressed. I know they have community safety officers, who I imagine are there to alleviate some of the stress, but they work during the day. I don't know a whole lot of criminals who do their jobs during the day. I would imagine that most of it happens at night, when the CSOs unfortunately are not working. I just think whatever they are doing right now is not working. The numbers they have aren't sufficient. Something needs to be done.

In terms of answering these questions, we're just two people from Thompson. We don't know who to go see. We don't know who to talk to. We just know that something needs to be done. That's why we rely on the people in your position to help us.

Ms. Niki Ashton: I thank you for your courage in coming forward. It can't be easy to relive the traumatic events you and your family went through.

You talked about the petition. Can you tell us a bit more about how much community support you've received and what you're hearing from people when it comes to the need for the 911 service and of course ensuring that the RCMP are properly staffed to respond to our communities' needs?

Ms. Alicia Bedford: We started a petition just to see. We were having people come to us and just tell their stories. We figured we would start this petition so that we could bring it to light and see just how many people we could get. Within a day we had hundreds of signatures. I'm not exactly sure where we're at right now. We had local businesses requesting to have the petition put in their businesses.

They're spread out around town. They're everywhere. People are talking about it. If you go on Facebook, people are talking about the incident. We were at our local Tim Hortons having coffee, and one of the staff members was going around with the petition. They had no idea who we were.

People want it, and it's needed. Hopefully, by bringing awareness.... We plan to bring it to the next city council meeting, to the new mayor and council. We hope it will have the backing of the city.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you very much.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Moore: Mr. Maurice and Ms. Maurice, I understand that this incident must have been extremely difficult for you. I also live in a rural area where we don't often see police cars on the road, although we probably see them more frequently than in your area. You were alone with your daughter, and this type of situation can be extremely frightening. There usually isn't much time to think about what to do in these cases.

Do you think that one solution could be to review the response priorities?

These priorities are often based on data for urban communities. For example, a break and enter isn't ranked among the highest priorities.

Should the response priorities be reviewed to ensure that the time frame for reaching the location where a break and enter has been reported is less than two or three hours, since the circumstances at the time of the emergency call are unknown?

•(1715)

[English]

Mrs. Jessica Maurice: I don't think a review of priorities will make much difference when there isn't enough coverage in the first place. Part of the reason they were unable to come for two hours is that they had so few staff on duty. As these ladies were saying, until 6 a.m. or 7 a.m. there is only one police officer on duty. He had to go to the hospital with the injured person and then wasn't able to come out to this property. As well, the RCMP need to have two members to attend to a call with firearms, which makes complete sense, but there just weren't enough staff on duty to respond.

Until you have enough coverage, there is no point in addressing priorities, I think.

The Chair: Ms. Sahota, please, for seven minutes.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Mr. Chair, I will start by saying that I'm a little disappointed by the rant that Ms. Stubbs just gave.

Trying to politicize this issue I don't think is the right way to get to any solutions. It's not a Liberal problem, a Conservative problem or an NDP problem. It's something that we need to work on together on all sides of the aisle so that we can help the people here. The Conservatives were in power for 10 years. When it comes to these matters, the same Criminal Code laws existed then that exist now. It's quite rich to say that breaking and entering didn't happen under the Conservative rule but all of a sudden is happening under the Liberal government. That is not what we're here to do.

I'm glad that this private member's motion has come forward to this committee so we can figure out how we can work together to solve these issues.

It's quite atrocious, I think, Ms. Dixon and Ms. Bedford, what you've had to go through.

I sympathize with you as well, Mr. and Mrs. Maurice.

I know that safety is really important for every individual, regardless of where they live. Once somebody has been through your stuff, you can't regain that sense of safety again.

I'll start with you, Ms. Bedford and Ms. Dixon. What is it that you think, because I know that funding.... The response rate in a lot of rural communities, as we're hearing right now, is quite slow. The Manitoba government, from what I've seen, has increased community safety funding by only 1.9%, by about the rate of inflation. Do you think there has been enough of a priority put in place by the province to have policing and to put money into these areas?

Do you think more can be done? If so—I know that you don't know where to go to get those supports—what have you been calling for so far and what work have you tried to do?

Ms. Geraldine Dixon: We want to try to get our own dispatch centre. We are the hub of the north. Right now when you make a call, you're sent down to Winnipeg. Everybody knows that when you're in an emergency situation every second counts, so when you finally get through.... It's not just us who have been put on hold. The hold seems to be an ongoing issue here in terms of how long you're put on hold, and when you finally get through, then it's the questions.

Winnipeg is not aware and does not know what Thompson is or even where it's located. If we tell them that there's an incident, that there's a fight or someone is trying to break into a building, they don't know. You have to try to give them the street number and where it's located and all of that. You're wasting time, the time during which you're trying to answer these questions about what the address is and whatever.

We're saying that if we had our own centre here, the RCMP would be able to respond immediately, in the sense that they would know directly where to go. If you say there's an incident at the post office.... I've lived in Thompson for 45 years. I don't know the address of the post office, but our RCMP know where it's at. There's the difference. That's what everybody's frustrated with. It's the dealing with the system.

•(1720)

Ms. Ruby Sahota: I think that's a great solution and a workable one. I know that the different levels of government have to figure out a way to work to achieve that for you.

Ms. Bedford, were you going to say something?

Ms. Alicia Bedford: You're asking if enough has been done. I don't think that at this point enough has been done. Clearly, if we still have people on hold for 11 minutes, or for four and a half minutes like I was, I don't think enough is being done.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Okay.

I'll turn my questioning to you, Mr. and Mrs. Maurice. You mentioned that you felt that the burden to.... The police are teaching people other methods of keeping their property safe. A fence—you're right—would seem kind of cumbersome. Security cameras, other things.... They're trying to teach people safety mechanisms to keep their properties safe. You said that this was too burdensome. Is that correct?

Mrs. Jessica Maurice: No. I don't think there's anything wrong with gates and security systems, but I don't think the burden should be solely on the property owners. I think it's the burden of the justice system to make sure that repeat offenders aren't coming back and doing more crimes.

Mr. Edouard Maurice: Why are we having to put out tens of thousands of dollars just to deter the criminals? When we drive down our roads now, we can't stop in and talk to our neighbours because there are gates on every single yard that we used to drive into.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: You've also been raised to take proactive measures and learn safety skills when it comes to using a gun. Is that correct?

Mrs. Jessica Maurice: Yes, I think everybody.... Even as women

Ms. Ruby Sahota: You're happy to do.... Does that not seem burdensome as well? Maybe that would be challenging for Ms. Dixon or Ms. Bedford, so maybe we need to come up with a solution that might fit all people.

Mrs. Jessica Maurice: I'm sorry. I don't understand your question. Can you repeat it, please?

Ms. Ruby Sahota: You said that using a gun is a safety measure, a technique, that was taught to you and other people in your area at a very young age. Is that not also cumbersome and a burden that's put on the individuals, having them protect themselves with their own guns rather than figuring out a system that may protect and work for everyone?

Mrs. Jessica Maurice: I see what you're getting at, but I feel like it's a tricky question, to be honest.

Our primary aim in having firearms in rural areas is not to protect ourselves from other people. It's like a vehicle. It has a lot of potential to be dangerous if used in the wrong way. That is why we take the ownership and use of them very seriously, and people are very careful with them. You don't just go around shooting off a firearm like a crazy person. You have to have respect for them, just like you have to have respect for vehicles.

If you're going to own a gun, you have a responsibility to be safe with it, and I think most firearm owners would agree.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Do you know of any other jurisdictions where crime rates have gone down when gun owners are given the free authority to go ahead and shoot?

Mrs. Jessica Maurice: We are not experts on that, no. But—

Ms. Ruby Sahota: I just figured that maybe these issues have been brought up through your legal case and you talked about this with your....

Mrs. Jessica Maurice: We were focused on our own case.

The Chair: Thank you Ms. Sahota.

Mr. Barlow, you have the remaining time, which looks like about four minutes, but go with five.

Mr. John Barlow (Foothills, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Sahota, we're not trying to politicize this, but crime rates in Canada dropped for 12 straight years until 2015. We held town halls

across Canada and listened to thousands of residents. One of the main things they brought up is that they want to have stronger sentencing. They've heard from us that that's one of the biggest issues. However, when the Liberals are bringing forward bills like Bill C-75 that reduce the sentences for some of the most vicious and violent crimes, that is sending a very different message to Canadians, which is certainly not what we have heard. If anybody is taking the wrong direction on this, I would say that it's you and your government.

I want to give the witnesses a chance to answer. We have maybe three minutes left.

Eddie and Jessica, what are you hoping to accomplish from your appearance here today in front of the committee? What are you hoping comes from your testimony?

Mrs. Jessica Maurice: This committee is mostly made up of MPs from Ontario and Quebec and, I think, mostly urban areas, so we hope that you gain an understanding of what rural reality is actually like in our areas. It is quite different from downtown Toronto or some of the urban ridings that you represent.

We're also looking to have a review and improvement in the RCMP policies and protocols for handling situations where landowners and rural residents have to take measures to care for themselves and their properties. We want you to look at and consider who you're really protecting here. Is it the criminals who are committing these crimes, or is it the taxpaying, law-abiding, contributing citizens who founded this country?

We also feel that there is a lack of accountability in the RCMP system. We're also having problems with 911 dispatch in our area in Alberta because it is centralized. Obviously, that's a problem in other areas as well. We want to make sure that the RCMP are accountable for their actions and that they're not just throwing charges around without having done their due diligence.

Also, with regard to Bill C-75, the bill before the House about sentencing, the characteristics of an effective justice system are not just about rehabilitation, which I think is an important part of a justice system because we should be helping to rehabilitate offenders. It's also about punishing them for their offences, deterring others, which the system is not currently doing, and giving retribution to society. I think that there needs to be some review of those aspects, as well, in the criminal justice system and when you're looking at Bill C-75 because reducing sentences is not going to provide those pillars to the justice system, and it's not going to do anything to deter future crimes.

That's all that I have, but basically, we need to stop the revolving door of criminals.

• (1725)

Mr. John Barlow: I know my other colleague mentioned that the system worked, that your charges were dropped, but it didn't work.

Obviously, from your story, this has not ended for you, has it? You did fire a warning shot with your firearm, but this hasn't ended for you, has it?

Mr. Edouard Maurice: No, it hasn't. For the rest of my life, those charges are on my name. Anytime we decide to travel, to take our kids to Disneyland, I may not be able to go with them. I may be turned away at the border, sent back home, and they'll have to go on without me. Further, I just got my firearms licence back last week. The chief firearms officer was not listening to my calls or my lawyer's calls. I finally had to get a minister's office involved.

Mr. John Barlow: So eight months later you are still feeling like a criminal.

Mr. Edouard Maurice: Essentially, and I still am missing a firearm. Our local RCMP does not have it. We don't know if it's still at forensics. We have no idea where it is and who has it. I have still not received it 115 days after my charges were dropped.

Mr. John Barlow: As you've gone through this process—and I want to counter some of the messages from my colleagues across the way—the onus should not have been put on you. The onus should

have been put on the criminal. Absolutely you took action that you felt was appropriate, but I think the message you're trying to relay here is that you had a 12-month-old daughter asleep in the house. You were on your own. We should be doing everything we possibly can to ensure the victim's rights are at the forefront, not necessarily the criminal's.

Mr. Edouard Maurice: That's correct.

Mr. John Barlow: Is there any last message you want to convey to us before you leave?

Mrs. Jessica Maurice: I have one example that I'd like to bring forward. With regard to gates and cameras and all of that, I think this is an example you will understand. When a woman is raped, we don't say that it's her fault for dressing promiscuously; it's the rapist's fault. I feel that the same applies to rural properties and rural crime.

The Chair: Thank you, all of you, for making the effort to appear before the committee.

Mr. and Mrs. Maurice, Ms. Bedford and Ms. Dixon, we appreciate your efforts to share your stories with us. They certainly will inform the conversation that we as committee members have.

With that, the meeting is adjourned.

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