

Rural violence on rise
More people resorting to guns when conflicts arise, says RCMP officer

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by Richard Liebrecht

Aggression and violence are on the rise in rural Alberta, warns a RCMP officer who has seen a spike in the number of gun-related calls Mounties are responding to.

RCMP spokesman Cpl. Wayne Oakes said "people are not generally able to work things out as peacefully" as they once did.

So far this year, the RCMP's Emergency Response Team (ERT), which deals with high-risk situations, has been deployed at least 40 times, said Oakes.

Of those calls, 19 dealt with individuals who were armed and barricaded, or suspected of having a weapon, he said.

The ERT responded to 158 calls in 2008, and Oakes said about three quarters of those were for armed and barricaded persons.

But prior to 2008, the unit averaged only 110 to 130 calls per year, said Oakes.

"The level of aggression and violence has definitely increased," he said.

Based on the incident counts, along with more media reports of violence, Oakes said he sees a trend toward more conflicts involving weapons.

"It does seem to be increasing. The curve is edging upward," he said.

Police are being more cautious and calling out the ERT in more situations, accounting for part of the rise, said Oakes.

"If officers go to a domestic dispute, they might be well advised to have ERT on standby or in attendance," he said.

The three ERT units in Alberta are stationed in major centres and must be called out by local officers, often taking hours to arrive.

But they are equipped to deal with dangerous situations, said Oakes.

"Especially when you know there's an increased likelihood that firearms are involved, you must take steps to increase safety."

As for the reasons behind the trend, Oakes said he has no clue what is causing more people to pick up weapons.

But a criminologist from the United States drew parallels between Alberta and American states like Texas, where oil jobs are attracting people from across the country.

The exaggerated wealth of Alberta's oilfields could have garnered the same unfortunate effect as in the U.S., said Jack Levin, a professor at Northeastern University in Boston.

"When an area is populated with strangers, these kinds of crimes increase," Levin said.

"I think it's one of the side-effects of an area that even looks like it has opportunities."

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