CRIME

NORTH BATTLEFORD’S LONGEST WAR

Canada’s most dangerous city is fighting for its future

BY JASON MARKUSOFF - As he itemizes North Battleford’s myriad efforts to curb its notorious crime problem, Herb Sutton keeps mentioning hot dogs. They appeared this summer alongside water, juice and cookies at the barbecues that Sutton, the Saskatchewan city’s community safety coordinator, hosted around town. Crime reduction comes up only casually with him or the mayor, mostly in chats about safety-minded design. The pressing message Sutton wanted to drive home over mustard and tube meat was the benefit of locally initiated block parties and making neighbourhood social connections. “The safest communities in the world are those where people know about, care about and look out for each other,” he says.

Sutton is aware that serving frankfurters and preaching togetherness won’t put a dent any time soon in what Statistics Canada says is the most crime-plagued city in Canada, with a severity score nearly two and a half times that of Saskatchewan, the most crime-plagued province. He and other civic leaders concede that none of the things they’re doing might have substantial impact. The city, located two hour’s drive west of Saskatoon, has placed highest in the Crime Severity Index every year since the agency began releasing the ranking in 2009. (Maclean’s uses Stats Canada numbers to produce a crime report ranking the country’s 100 largest cities; this report is based on a list of all 305 communities with 10,000 people or more, which Stats Canada itself compiles.)

Local boosters lament that would-be visitors and newcomers to North Battleford are confronted with its crime reputation so early in their web searches, and that media stories focus on the “crime capital of Canada” rap instead of nice attractions like the upcoming Saskatchewan Winter Games, the pretty nearby lakes or (arguably) the prairie province’s best downhill skiing. Some insist their community is safe, while others can tolerate only so many break-ins or “car shopping” expeditions by young gang members. And though North Battleford hasn’t had a homicide since 2013—the crime index is weighed down by a mass of mischief offences, petty theft and public intoxication—a violent confrontation and car chase last month resulted in the RCMP fatally shooting a man. The gunfire was captured on a neighbour’s cellphone and reverberated loudly in the civic psyche. Mayor Ryan Bater cast it as an alarming rarity; one young eyewitness thought otherwise. “I’m not really surprised, because this is like, a bad city,” Darren Stanley told the CBC.

While anxiety breeds impatience, police and city officials talk less about gangbusting crackdowns than lighter touches and social-support programs aimed at the root causes of its stubbornly high crime score: poverty, addiction, mental illness, plus lingering racial division in a city that is one-quarter Indigenous and surrounded by seven First Nation reserves. The small cluster of the city’s 14,000 people who cause the most problems include seven hard-to-house individuals estimated to commit more than a fifth of all offences in the downtown. “When you’re dealing with those root causes, it’s generational,” Bater says. “It can be frustrating for the citizens I represent. I know that. But we have to stay focused and remember that the people who are having encounters with the RCMP are doing so because of a lifestyle. That lifestyle took a lifetime for them to get into, and it will take a while to get out.”

So, with the help of Sutton, North Battleford has dived headlong into the trend of crime prevention through environmental design. Bright murals have gone up in formerly drab alleyways where fights and minor violations are common. Downtown property owners who leave buildings vacant face new tax hikes, or incentives for improvements. Parks and sidewalks are awash in better lighting, as are residential doorsteps—the city has distributed hundreds of motion-sensing lights residents can affix to their houses as a theft deterrent. They’re part of Eyes That Care, a sort of neighbourhood watch campaign. In exchange for free solar-powered lights, residents agree to report suspicious behaviour, receive regular emails on safety and keep vehicles locked and free of valuables—all to curb what police refer to as “preventable” crime. “You won’t believe how many calls we get in the morning: ‘I went to my car and my wallet is gone.’ Well, imagine that,” says
Insp. John Sutherland, head of the North Battleford RCMP detachment, which has 36 city officers and 22 who mainly police the surrounding area.

His forces are backed up by six community safety officers—souped-up versions of city bylaw officers, who patrol on foot and in police-like vehicles, freeing the RCMP to focus on more serious crimes. (Prince Albert, another high-crime northern Saskatchewan town, has nearly triple the population but only one more CSO.) In June, the province empowered North Battleford’s CSOs to investigate reports of mischief, petty theft and vandalism, which the city says makes this the first truly two-tiered policing system in Canada. Then there’s a small corps of volunteer Citizens on Patrol, who have begun compiling a voluntary registry of all street-facing private security cameras so police know where they are if they’re needed for investigations.

Sutton himself is a rarity, working part-time in his city job and part-time as a civilian program coordinator for the RCMP. The 58-year-old was plucked from the local Catholic school board headquarters three years ago to bring together the city’s disparate initiatives into a community safety strategy. He borrowed an approach that Public Safety Canada recommends to First Nations, emphasizing public engagement, historical context and collective change. His weeks are thick with meetings with everyone from landlord groups to businesses to school leaders and social agencies.

These gatherings have identified gaps in services, such as a lack of free programming for at-risk teens too old for the local Boys and Girls Club yet young enough to be targets for gang recruiters. An agency called Concern for Youth now runs movie and sports nights (with floor hockey gear donated by a men’s group) and Beading and Eating every Tuesday (with supplies donated by an Indigenous lawyer). A homeless shelter opened around the time Sutton started, while a supported-living rooming house is in the works that could shelter downtowners who are too frequently in contact with police.

The city feels it has been forced into social-service areas that are provincial or federal jurisdictions. But the alternative would be worse: in each of the past two years, city hall has given $25,000 in emergency funding to the homeless shelter because the feds don’t want to fund shelter for off-reserve First Nations people, while the province says they’re a federal responsibility, Bater explains. The challenges North Battleford faces are too big for the city, he adds, and communities across northern Saskatchewan face identical issues. Cuts in the last Saskatchewan budget made it harder for the city to fund its own initiatives, and officials had to find other places to trim so they could still afford better lighting for the skateboard park. The province, for its part, points to various social housing projects it funds, as well as efforts to identify and rehabilitate repeat violent offenders in the area. A special two-day meeting in Janu-
ary will bring together the federal, provincial, city and tribal governments to figure out better co-operation on safety in North Battleford.

Sutton, the RCMP and the city have in recent years been engaging more with the Battlefords Agency Tribal Chiefs on issues like safety and economic development. Both sides say they’re improving a relationship whose wounds long predate residential schools and the Sixties Scoop. Chief Lorr Whitecalf of the Sweetgrass First Nation points to 1885, when settlers fled the town of Battleford in fear of near-starving Cree who were approaching to plead for supplies—then made disputed claims that First Nations people looted and ransacked the empty town. Ensuing hostilities and suppression of the Northwest Rebellion led to the hanging of eight Indigenous men at Fort Battleford.

Whitecalf is glad to shake hands more often with Insp. Sutherland but says there’s a continuing history of constables mistreating Indigenous people, on-reserve and off. “Some of our kids grow up being scared of cops, because that’s all they know,” she says. The social separation in town pains her: when she shops in Saskatoon, she’s treated like anybody with a debit card; in North Battleford, storekeepers watch her warily, she says. The tensions approached boiling point last year when Colten Boushie, a 22-year-old resident of Red Pheasant First Nation, was shot dead on a farm 100 km south of the city. Some non-Indigenous residents in the area call it “the Gerald Stanley case” rather than the Boushie case, out of sympathy for the accused landowner, who is white.

Sutherland says his constables all take Indigenous-awareness training and are regular attendees at area powwows, round dances and interagency meetings. Redeveloped downtown streets display banners saying “North Battleford—Treaty Six Territory,” and a Treaty Six flag will soon fly permanently in front of city hall. Still, something’s wrong when a minority population nearly fills the docket in the city’s criminal court, says lawyer Ben Feist. “People do their two or three months and are out for a couple of years and rinse and repeat,” he says.

While some city initiatives are steps in the right direction, others smack of overpolicing, he says. Feist calls for fundamental justice reforms and less prison overcrowding, and Sutton has led workshops on better court and sentencing options—but this too is well beyond civic reach.

In the meantime, thousands of residents ruminate over the problems on a Facebook group for crime victims that hosts routine complaints about inadequate policing and incomplete public reporting of crimes. Its administrators shrug off criticism that the content is too negative—“I haven’t seen a positive crime yet,” quips Guy Turcotte. They praise some of Sutton’s initiatives, but worry that houselights won’t alleviate too-common daytime property crimes. Turcotte wants an end to alternative sentencing. Grant Cookman, who posted a recent car break-in attempt his home security camera captured, pines for 1980s policing—“where they grabbed you, roughed you up a bunch”—or at least the nighttime curfew siren of his youth. North Battleford’s curfew bylaw is still on the books, but officials have said it’s unenforceable under the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Police and the city did bid for an expanded panhandling bylaw this fall—basically making it illegal to beg downtown—but similar constitutional arguments helped persuade council to reject it.

Stats show that non-violent crime severity has dropped slightly in the years since the latest safety efforts began. But that hasn’t nudged it off the top spot on Statistics Canada’s cities list, so the mayor and RCMP avoid setting clear targets or predictions on their crime levels or ranking. They can’t, if they’re tackling the conditions behind youth gangs, racial division and substance abuse. They’re playing a long game. “We’re starting this,” Sutherland says, “and none of us may be here to see the end of it.”

There’s plenty of heartache, and often a couple of steps back for every few forward, the inspector says. At least the people of North Battleford are more committed than ever to helping police and the city with this difficult fight, says Nicole Fidelak, executive director of Battlefords Concern for Youth: “It feels like the community that’s being built now is ready and willing to put forward that effort to build change—like it’s at a real tipping point.” The day after Fidelak spoke to Maclean’s, someone called police to report that he’d been chased and shot at from a vehicle. Police located the suspect car and gave chase. An RCMP cruiser was rammed. The Saturday-evening incident ended with Mounties shooting and killing Brydon Whitestone, a 22-year-old from Onion Lake Cree Nation. Regina city police were assigned to investigate.

Over the next week of reputation-scarring headlines, the city unfurled still more safety initiatives. The community safety officers will now have regularly scheduled downtown foot patrols. And the city will formally create and name neighbourhoods in the city, with hopes that community associations will form. Will either effort change much? Community development takes time, and so might shaking North Battleford’s reputation.