

## How did the province where medicare was born end up with a city this frightening?

BY JONATHON GATEHOUSE  
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**T**he Jackson Pollock-style burgundy stains that dot the living room ceiling are known locally as “victory marks.” Syringe-cleaning celebrations of a successful hit, where addicts shoot what’s left of the mixture of blood and drugs skyward. There are faint signs of habitation in the rest of the apartment—a dirty T-shirt on the floor of the bedroom closet, a single wiener and a half-finished McDonald’s soft drink in the fridge. But the blackened spoon on the kitchen counter and used needle behind the couch dispel any lingering doubts about the basement flat’s primary use. City officials are here looking for an excuse to close the shooting gallery down. The health inspector checks the bathroom—filthy but functional. Apart from a broken window, the city’s man finds the place in good structural order. It’s the firefighter who finds the potentially fatal flaw—exposed live wires behind the broken stove. The door is locked and the placard goes up: “Unfit for Human Occupation.”

By the standards of Regina’s inner city, the apartment isn’t even that bad. The first home the municipal Housing Standards Enforcement Team—a joint effort by local authorities and citizens’ groups to crack down on slumlords—ever visited was infested with rats. The tenant cried when he lifted his shirt to show the bites the rodents inflicted as they crawled over his mattress at night. Brenda Mercer, the president of the North Central Community Association, is often the first through the door. She rattles off other low-lights: people using the oven to heat their homes in the dead of winter. The man with the mousetraps on his stove top to combat the vermin that kept snatching his dinner from the frying pan. Multiple dwellings with no plumbing because the occupants have ripped out the copper pipes and sold them for drug money. “We’re living in a Third World country here,” she says.

The enforcement team has begged, bluffed and cajoled its way into 500 downtown rental



‘WE’RE LIVING IN

# CANADA’S WORST NEIGHBOUR





properties since it got started in 2004. Close to a quarter of them have been padlocked for deficiencies, safety problems or just general insalubrity, and the landlords ordered to make repairs. Social workers are dispatched to find the tenants new accommodations, offer help with detox, and, when necessary, take kids into protective custody. Not everyone welcomes the aid or the scrutiny. On this day, one slumlord is shadowing the team in his white pickup as it makes its way through the neighbourhood. As the officials pull up at their next stop, the man across the road hustles his kids inside and shuts the door.

The project is one of the most visible efforts

**A FIRE INSPECTOR (left) checks out an abandoned home in the North Central area; police deal with one of the highest crime rates in Canada; and drug use is epidemic (bottom)**



**'IN A THIRD WORLD COUNTRY HERE,' SAYS A COMMUNITY ASSOCIATION PRESIDENT**



# RHOOD

to help this small prairie centre, population just under 200,000, deal with some awfully big-city problems. Inner-city Regina—effectively two neighbourhoods, North Central and the area east of the downtown known as the Core—is among the poorest spots in urban Canada. Thirty per cent of residents depend on government assistance. Local food banks

deal with more than 3,600 requests a month. The health authority, which last year distributed 1.8 million needles, estimates there are more IV drug users per capita than on Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. Girls as young as 11 or 12 regularly work the stroll. Regina's high incidence of break and enters, car thefts, street robberies and violent assaults has placed the city at the top of Canada's urban crime rankings for nine of the past 10 years. (An overall 15 per cent drop in criminal code offences proved just enough to land the city second place in 2005, right behind Saskatoon—13,194 incidents per 100,000 population versus 13,236.)

And while Regina's crime problem may be city-wide, there's no question where its epicentre lies. North Central—153 blocks, 153 back alleys, sandwiched between the CN and the CP rail tracks—accounts for a quarter of all police calls. There are no massive housing projects here, just tiny 1920s-vintage workers' cottages on tree-lined streets. Some are well maintained, others barely qualify as shacks. They all sell for less than most new cars. Six per cent of North Central's 10,500 residents move every month. The median household in-

come is just over \$25,000—half the city average. A typical child will attend all four of the neighbourhood's elementary schools in the course of a single academic year.

It didn't get that way overnight. Morris Eagle, the executive director of the Welfare Rights Centre, a local advocacy group, says the neighbourhood was working-class when he bought his home in 1973. Now it's dirt-poor and dangerous. Wheeling through the streets in his battered SUV, he points out the crack houses, the gang members congregating on street corners, the subsidized housing units that stand empty because the kind of responsible tenants who qualify to rent them want nothing to do with North Central. "Where I live, I wouldn't walk on the street after 10 o'clock at night if you gave me a whole week's wages," says Eagle. "People are afraid."

Outside the shooting-gallery apartment, Cpl. Ray Van Dusen, a community liaison officer with the Regina Police, gestures toward a white house with the street number painted on red wooden hearts. The woman who lived there was recently evicted because she was running her six daughters—all under the age of 18—as prostitutes, he says. A couple



of doors away there's a little parkette. It used to have a jungle gym but the city had to remove it—too many mothers were parking their kids there while they sought fixes or turned tricks in the wee hours of the morning. Standing on the cracked sidewalk, with a breeze stirring the big elms that arch high overhead, it's easy to believe that this is the worst neighbourhood in Canada.

Maybe it's a relic of his past as an amateur boxer—1980 Canadian amateur Bantam Weight champion with a lifetime record of 84-40—but Pat Fiocco, the mayor of Regina, is a glass-half-full kind of guy. Under his tenure, the city has become a capital of positive thinking. He wears an "I love Regina" shirt practically everywhere he goes. When he launched his civic pride campaign in 2002, the pep rally, complete with pipe band and RCMP colour guard, delivered an upbeat imperative. "There's a simple solution to Regina's problems and it's all a matter of attitude," he told the crowd.

There are signs of a turnaround. Strolling through the once ghostly downtown business district, Fiocco showcases the refurbished office towers, new condos and the site of a soon-to-be luxury hotel. Buoyed by the oil and gas boom that has taken Saskatchewan from "have-not" to "have" status, Regina had the strongest big city economic growth in the country in 2004, 5.8

per cent. It ranked fifth in 2005. Overall unemployment sits around five per cent (North Central's rate is estimated to be four to five times higher). Home building permits were up about 20 per cent last year. Only Calgary has a lower office space vacancy rate.

It's hard to find the sunny side of Regina's crime issue, however. Each summer, when Statistics Canada releases its annual ranking, the city's reputation takes a national beating. "I don't think our crime problem is bigger than anyone else's in Canada," says Fiocco. "Most people feel safe in this community. But do they feel safe in North Central? No." Regina is grappling with many of the same challenges other Western centres are, says the mayor. Poverty grew throughout the 1990s as higher levels of government cut transfers and off-loaded services. And the city's poorest demographic—Aboriginal Canadians—continues to swell due to an exodus from the province's even more destitute reserves and higher native birth rates. (Forty-two per cent of North Central residents are of First Nations ancestry according to census figures.) Fiocco says he's not into the blame game, but, like most politicians, seems a rather accomplished player. Ottawa and the province don't pay enough attention to Regina's problems and

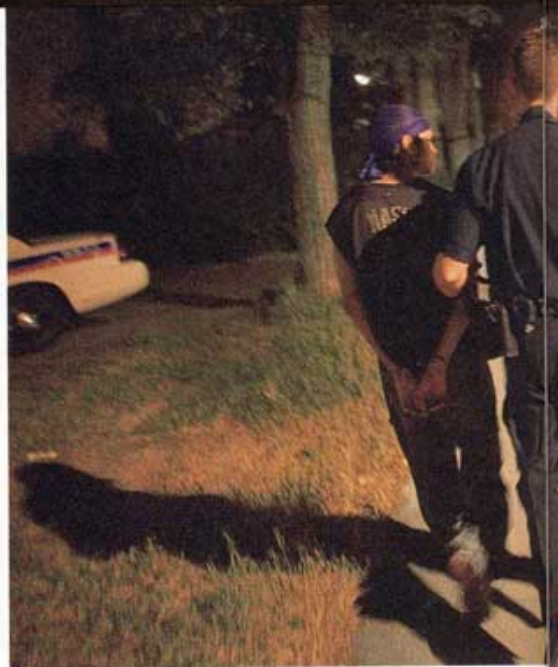


## EXPERTS SAY REGINA'S INNER CITY HAS MORE IV DRUG USERS PER CAPITA THAN VANCOUVER

attach too many strings to their money, he says. "Government needs to be there with us—not overlooking, but learning from us."

And despite Regina's recent good fortune, the longer-term trends are not that encouraging. Like the rest of the province, the city's overall population is greying as young people emigrate in search of economic opportunities. (The Federation of Canadian Municipalities estimates that the number of 25- to 34-year-olds in Regina dropped by almost 30 per cent between 1991 and 2001.) In sharp contrast, a graph of the city's Aboriginal population by age looks like a Christmas tree—widest at the base, especially the group between 5 and 14. And Regina's teen birth rate is among the highest in the nation.

A recent study of Saskatoon's low-income neighbourhoods, published in the *Canadian Journal of Public Health*, found that city's poorest residents were 16 times more likely to have attempted suicide, had 13 times the rate of diabetes, four times the mental health problems and almost twice the rate of heart disease. A similar project has since been commissioned in Regina (the idea of tracking health outcomes in North Central and the Core seemingly never occurred to anyone until the media started asking). But it's a safe bet that



the results will be just as bad, if not worse.

Janice Cibart, a community health nurse who has spent the past decade working with IV drug users in North Central, says things have gone even further downhill over the past four years as neighbourhood addicts turned from prescription drugs to crack and





Cibart around for a picture essay. Every one of her clients whom he photographed is now dead. "Their health is usually way down on their list of priorities," she says.

Drug habits are often supported through prostitution. Cibart visits her clients in their makeshift brothels—"Puttin' Out Houses"—

**A STATISTICS Canada study found that conditions for Aboriginals in most urban centres are improving—except in Regina**

Peter Gilmer, executive director of Regina's Anti-Poverty Ministry, an advocacy group, says there is a growing income gap between poor and rich, a divide that is even starker in the case of Aboriginals. Efforts by the province to move people from the welfare rolls to "transitional" work-training programs where benefits are lower and allowances for rent and utilities are fixed, have deepened the hole many people find themselves in. According to a recent University of Regina report, the

average low-income family in the city now falls \$6,500 a year below the poverty line. Gilmer finds it all short-sighted. "The Aboriginal population here is growing so fast that if these kind of levels of inequality continue, it's going to end up affecting everyone." To his mind, solving the problem will require people to tackle some unpleasant realities. "For me there's an inherent contradiction in Saskatchewan. On the one hand there's the tradition of social justice—this is the home of medicare, the co-op movement, the country's first bill of rights," says Gilmer. "On the other hand there's also a history of racism and poor bashing, inequality and exclusion."

Kathy Donovan, who studies poverty and drug use at the University of Regina's Social Policy Research Unit, calls the city "the most segregated community in Canada." Hemmed in by the rail lines and busy road-



ways, North Central has become a ghetto, she says—the unemployment rate for Aboriginals more than triple that of non-natives, the political approach toward problems of crime more reflexively "law and order" than progressive. "This town is a pigsty of repression," says Donovan, invoking a national newspaper's even more inflammatory description of the province as "the Mississippi of the North." But poverty—extreme poverty—is becoming the city's defining fault, she says. "Regina is the only place I've ever heard of where they steal the food out of people's freezers during break and enters."

Cibart says she often wonders how the rest of the city can just ignore what goes on downtown. "It shocks me in a city the size of Regina." She says her goodbyes and heads out to deliver an emergency bag of groceries—Kraft Dinner and soup from her own kitchen cupboard—to a 19-year-old client. Two years ago he lost all of his toes to frostbite after getting high and going for a barefoot stroll in the middle of winter.

The white Dodge takes off the moment the police officer flicks on the lights. Stomping on the pedal, its young driver weaves in and out of traffic along a busy

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## VANCOUVER'S DOWNTOWN EASTSIDE



injectable cocaine. Coke's fleeting buzz has junkies shooting up 15 or 20 times a day. The track marks abscess, leading to blood or bone infections. Hepatitis C is rampant. So is depression. And the end for hard-core users is predictable—an overdose or organ failure. In 2002, a newspaper photographer trailed



thoroughfare and then makes a hard right into a Burger King parking lot. For a moment, it seems like he's boxed in, as the squad car trails behind, tires squealing almost as loud as the siren in the frigid night air. But the Dodge finds an exit, grinding over the curb and back onto the roadway. The car picks up speed and blasts through a red light, narrowly missing the cross-traffic. The chase is over.

Like many of their counterparts, police in Regina have strict rules about high-speed pursuits. The force won't endanger public safety for a stolen 1991 Dodge Spirit, or any other vehicle. The thieves know that all they have to do to get away is drive fast, or erratically enough, to scare the police off. In this case, all that's left to do is follow the trail of leaked oil in hopes of recovering the car. Officers find it ditched a few minutes later near the Roughriders football stadium, in the heart of North Central. No one got a good look at the driver, or his young passengers, but the officers figure they've probably met them all before, and soon will again. Leaning against his squad car, Sgt. Dean Fedor, a 28-year veteran of the Regina Police, reflects on the changes in his hometown. "When I started out it felt like when you reached out you could connect with maybe one in 100 people and make a difference in their lives. Today it's more like one in 1,000." The whole of society has changed, he says. "There's less respect. And if people don't respect themselves, they can't respect other people."

According to Canada's Criminal Intelligence Service, Saskatchewan now has the highest per-capita concentration of youth gangs in the country—20 active groups with approximately 1,500 members. Aboriginal gangs like the Native Syndicate, Redd Alert, or recently formed NSK (Native Syndicate Killers) control or cause much of the street-level crime in Regina, says RCMP Staff Sgt. Bob Bazin, the former director of the CIS's Saskatchewan office. "It all revolves around the drug trade. People have to feed a habit, pay a debt." Prospective members steal cars, commit B&Es or assaults to establish their bona fides. And increasingly, the gangs are threatening and intimidating people in the community who would report their activities to police.

The province's jails are a major recruiting ground. By some estimates, as many as 25 per cent of inmates at any given time are members of Aboriginal gangs. The percentage in youth custody is probably even higher. (The Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations estimates that six out of 10 youths arrested in the province's urban centres are native, as are 75 to 90 per cent of those in youth custody.) The gangs' allure—money, excitement and a ready-made family—is

hard for authorities to combat. "We're up against a pretty big recruiter, offering pretty big incentives," says Bazin.

Cal Johnston, Regina's chief of police, bristles at suggestions his city is sliding toward an American-style problem with gangs, violence and drugs. "I think people who live in Regina know very accurately how safe it actually is." He prides himself on not making excuses for the high crime numbers, but the chief does offer explanations. People in Regina still report the kind of petty crimes—bicycle thefts, vandalism, etc.—that big city police forces long ago stopped investigating. And some of the force's own crime-fighting initiatives, like a program that performs 8,000 curfew and bail condition checks a year on repeat offenders, help to drive the charge count up. What Johnston does acknowledge is that his 350 officers work much harder than their counterparts in other parts of the country, dealing with more crimes per capita than almost any other urban centre. "It's about intensity," says Johnston. "In Regina, things are very intense and have been for a very long time."



## SOME CRIMINALS IN REGINA



From the outside, that seems like an understatement. In 2006, Regina had eight murders. The previous year there were also eight, giving the city the second-highest per capita murder rate—3.97 per 100,000 population—among major Canadian centres. (Edmonton was the worst with a rate of 4.29.) Consider the fact that 15 of those killings occurred in North Central and the Core—combined population 15,000—and the problem looks even starker. Nationally, Aboriginals make up three per cent of Canada's population, but account for 17 per cent of homicide victims, and



a policy—perhaps unique in the Western world—of not discussing the circumstances of murders until a case is before the courts, refusing comment on even the method of death.)

This past spring, a Regina court heard testimony about gang involvement in one November 2004 slaying. Wayne Gerald Friday, 44, was kidnapped from his North Central home by a group of six men following an altercation over drugs. They beat him with tire

from was set ablaze. Janine Wesaquate, 20, died in the arson. Her death—classified as a murder—remains unsolved.

The police have had some successes in recent years. Auto theft (2,171 incidents and attempts in 2005) is down almost 50 per cent since 2001. Chief Johnston credits a strategy that focuses on the young offenders responsible for most vehicle thefts and tries to divert them before they graduate to more serious crimes. Residential break and enters have dropped by half over the past decade, and business B&Es are down by 35 per cent (3,504 total in 2005). But violent crime has increased substantially since the mid-1990s (there were 3,205 recorded assaults in 2005), and the number of robberies has jumped—250 in the first six months of 2006, versus 185 during the same period in 2005.

Increased enforcement, says the chief, can only carry the city so far. A real solution to Regina's crime woes will require a national effort to address the underlying social issues—poverty, unemployment and exclusion.

"Our city has an Aboriginal population of about 10 per cent, perhaps 20,000 people," says Johnston, who notes that almost half of crime victims in Regina are native. "The largest First Nation in Canada right now, the Blood Reserve in southern Alberta, has about 8,000 people." Ottawa has jurisdiction over reserves, but is no longer responsible for Aboriginals who leave them. And people regularly tumble into the gaps between the programs and services

offered by the feds and the province.

A 2005 Statistics Canada study found that conditions for Aboriginals living in most of Canada's urban centres had actually improved over the past two decades. One glaring exception, however, was Regina, where the gap in school attendance between native and non-native students widened, and the Aboriginal employment rate dropped. Guy Lonechild, vice-chief of the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations, doesn't mince words about the plight of natives—in the city and on the reserves—in the province. "Our conditions are probably the most deplorable in the country," he says. "And nobody in government is listening to us or taking us seriously." Saskatchewan First Nations average five children

## 'STEAL THE FOOD OUT OF PEOPLE'S FREEZERS DURING BREAK AND ENTERS'



A TWO-YEAR-OLD (top) plays in the yard of her family's North Central home; a celebratory gulp honouring the birth of a friend's first child; worshippers pray for change at Four Winds Gospel Fellowship (left)

23 per cent of those accused of that crime. At least 11 of Regina's 16 murder victims since the beginning of 2005 were native. The identity of the killers isn't as clear, since eight of the 16 murders remain unsolved (as of late last year, the Crown was reviewing evidence with an eye to laying charges in one of those cases).

Historically, Regina Police have had one of the best murder "clearance" rates in the country, solving 93.5 per cent of all homicides between 1976 and 2005. No one can explain why the rate has suddenly dipped below 50 per cent. None of the crimes has been officially classified as "gang-related," although it's not hard to find people who will tell you differently. (Regina Police follow

irons, jacks and other weapons before stuffing him into the trunk of a car. After driving a short distance, they stopped in a back alley to finish him off. According to witnesses, it was Quinton Lloyd Bitternose, 29, who pulled out a rifle and pronounced, "This is what happens when you f--k with the Native Syndicate," before shooting Friday in the neck and stomach. (Bitternose has since been convicted of first-degree murder.) Since the victim was still alive when his body was dumped on Muscowpetung First Nation, near Fort Qu'Appelle, the crime didn't count among the 10 violent deaths that won Regina the 2004 "murder capital" designation. Just over two weeks after Friday's killing, the same North Central house he was abducted



per household, and 60 per cent of those households are single-parent, says Lonechild. Infant mortality is four times higher than the rest of Canada. Unemployment runs as high as 30 per cent, and average household income—around \$18,000—is lower than the norm.

Last fall, the FSIN took out newspaper ads decrying the condition of the province's natives as "Third World." The living standards of Saskatchewan First Nations would rank 87th on the United Nations' Human Development Index, they say, behind the Philippines and Jordan, just ahead of Suriname. Canada ranked sixth in the 2006 global survey. Tired of government inaction, Aboriginal leaders are threatening to file national and international human rights complaints about the conditions. "Turning a blind eye isn't acceptable anymore," says Lonechild.

In North Central, Brenda Mercer says there is a willingness to make things better. "The community wants to be involved in the solutions. They want to do it themselves." People have had enough of the poverty and pain. Mercer, who was adopted by a white couple and grew up off-reserve, speaks frankly

of the family she left behind. Many, including one brother, now an IV drug addict, end up on the streets of her neighbourhood. "But under all the problems there is a glimmer of hope," she says. "People want change. The problem is that change doesn't come fast enough." And however well-intentioned the programs to shut down slum houses and cut down car thefts are, it's obvious that digging Regina's inner city out of its hole is going to take a much bigger shovel.

On this wintry Friday night, things have been relatively quiet in North Central—minus 25, plus wind chill has a way of keeping people off the streets. It's just after 3:30 a.m. when police dispatch reports an armed robbery in progress at the 7-Eleven, one of the few stores in the neighbourhood, and the only one bold enough to stay open all night. Squad cars flood the zone, fanning out through the back alleys, looking for the suspects. Officers collar one—easily identified by a tattoo on his face—about a block away from the shop. They pin him down, handcuff and search him on a freezing concrete stoop, before hauling him away. A canine unit sweeps

surrounding backyards for his accomplice. The clerks at 7-Eleven are almost giddy as they describe the robbery to police. The pair never showed a weapon, just kept their hands thrust deep into the pockets of their ski jackets. Drunk or high, they tried to open the till, but couldn't figure it out. In the end, they fled with only a couple of \$2.99 ham and cheese sandwiches. "Is that all they took?" asks the one clerk. "Those aren't even the expensive ones." M

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