

Calgary

Police under scrutiny on Edmonton's Whyte Ave.

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Whyte Avenue is the destination street in Edmonton, home to numerous bars and restaurants, the Fringe Fest, any celebrations of note.

But some are wondering whether rowdy crowds and stressed police along the strip are proving a volatile combination — whether police are going too far in their efforts to keep the peace along the city's most popular street.

Almost 35,000 people migrate to a few blocks along Whyte Avenue on weekends.

Const. Mike Richards and Const. Warren Driechel work the area, and say the crowd changes drastically from the early evening to those who are around after midnight.

"I always kind of joke about it being a kind of Jekyll-and-Hyde kind of scenario," said Driechel. "Early on in the evening, you'll see families down here and you'll see couples out on dates, out for dinner, people with their children, families.

But as the night progresses, you'll see them start to leave the avenue. And you'll see groups of young adults going to the bar and you'll see larger groups of, say, guys going out together."

That mix of youth and alcohol is combustible, the police say.

"Three o'clock, when everyone is out on the street, 90 per cent of our problems is alcohol mixed with testosterone and larger groups of people," Richards said. "That's when we earn our pay."

Officers — who hand out almost 900 tickets a month in the area — have to deal with jaywalking, littering, urinating on the sidewalk, vandalism, fights and belligerence, and at a level they say they don't experience any where else in the city.

Too much enforcement for some

But a number of people say they also haven't seen elsewhere the level of police enforcement that exists on Whyte Avenue — and they don't think it's a good thing.

A number of people have filed complaints with the police service over what they feel were over-reactions by officers, who they say sometimes use excessive force for minor offences.

Regina lawyer Deron Kuski says he filed a complaint after he was arrested for jaywalking. He says officers asked for identification, and when he couldn't produce any, wanted to search him and immediately handcuffed him.

"He cuffed my left hand and yanked it to the back and said, 'Are you resisting me?' and brought his knee around and kned me right on top of the knee and buckled my knee," Kuski said.

"Whenever I would hear about a complaint like this against a police officer or someone in authority, you hold some kind of skepticism toward it.

"You think the guy must have done something, he must have lipped them off or got physical with them or something. And the fact this incident was not like that, yet they maintain they were within their rights of doing what they did, is so disturbing to me."

The incident happened two years ago, but his complaint was dismissed after 14 months. He is appealing and has filed a \$50,000 lawsuit. Police deny his claims.

Man alleges police damaged his eyesight

There are similar complaints, many from people caught jaywalking across the busy street.

Rick Land says he was so badly beaten by police officers two years ago that his eyesight was damaged.

He says he and his girlfriend were walking down Whyte Avenue, after having a few drinks, and he mouthed off to officers he believed were hassling a man sitting on a bench.

Police pushed him into a doorway, punched and kicked him, and used a Taser on him, he says. "It's hard for me to remember what happened, because I was beaten unconscious," he said.

Land also filed a lawsuit against the police, after his complaint to the Edmonton Police Service was dismissed, saying he's no longer able to work as an electrician. Police deny his claims.

On July 1 this year, about 2 a.m., Luc Lanteigne was jaywalking across Whyte Avenue when a police officer used his hand to hit him on the back of the head, knocking him to the ground, witnesses said.

The officers said they yelled at Lanteigne not to cross there and he gave them the finger. Lanteigne, who says he doesn't know who yelled at him or what gesture he made, suffered a bloody face and sprained finger. He wasn't charged or given a ticket for jaywalking.

'War zone type of environment'

Psychologist Les Block, who counsels both police and those who feel they've been victimized by the police, says it's often a case where people feel they've been wronged by those they're supposed to turn to for protection.

"It invariably leads to post-traumatic stress, or symptoms of PTS, when they've been in situations where they feel helpless and powerless," he said. "In situations where they've been really hurt, and in situations where there is seemingly no recourse, no one will believe them, no one will listen to them, no one really understands.

"And they feel isolated and estranged."

But Block also sees the police side of things, saying Whyte Avenue in an unpredictable environment.

"When you've got too many people coming out at one time, relatively fewer police officers that are supposed to be managing this situation, then you've got sort of a war-zone type of environment where people are on heightened alert," he said. "It can also lead to a heightened reactivity, so sometimes people respond with more aggression than is actually needed."

Police increased enforcement on Whyte Avenue after the Canada Day riot in 2001. After the bars closed that night, a number of fights broke out with hundreds of bystanders egging the brawlers on.

Pepper spray was used, several officers were injured and more than 20 people were arrested. Thirty businesses were damaged in the melee.

In the aftermath, businesses criticized the city for not providing enough of a police presence and city council developed a zero-tolerance policy. The number of officers increased to 16 during the busy summer nights and surveillance cameras were installed.

Businesses like extra police presence

Many businesses are pleased with the extra officers and their tough stance.

Bar owner Jim Saxon says officers take a lot of abuse, from being insulted to spit on. "It happens every weekend. It's just what happens," he said.

Grace Block, who owns a hair salon in the area, says she's seen people urinate and throw up outside her shop.

"They are doing a good job," she says of the police. "I hear people say they are too rough. I don't think they're too rough. Just doing their job."

Supt. Mark Logar, the officer in charge of Whyte Avenue, won't comment on specific allegations, but says his officers do not use excessive force.

"Our training and our practices and our expectations are such that the person being arrested dictates the degree of force applied to him or her, whatever the cause," he said. "So if the person is very aggressive, he is fighting, he is resisting, we need to tailor our response to the degree of force he applies to us."

Logar says he can only judge by the complaints lodged against officers working the area — and there were seven in 2003.

"I want to be satisfied that everything is above board, and every time I look at the issue myself, I am, in fact, surprised — and pleasantly surprised — at how restrained the constables are on Whyte Avenue," Logar said. "I'm satisfied that the issue of abuse of authority on Whyte Avenue really is not an issue."

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