

Assessing the Safety of Smart Meter Installations in British Columbia

Analysis of Residential Structure Fires in BC between July 2010 and June 2016



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Introduction

In June 2011, BC Hydro commenced implementation of its Smart Metering Program, which involved converting every residential property in British Columbia from legacy metering to wireless technology smart meters. This Smart Metering Program involves replacing existing electrical meters that are now becoming obsolete, with a comprehensive wireless smart metering system. In total, BC Hydro has installed 1.9 million smart meters to improve service and reliability for 4 million customers in the province. This development in British Columbia mirrors similar activity in other areas, with a general shift by utilities companies from around the world towards upgrading their electricity systems and adopting smart meter technology. It is predicted that by 2015, a total of 250 million smart meters will be installed worldwide (Pike Research, November 2009).

It is anticipated that British Columbia's Hydro's Smart Metering Program will modernize the electricity grid and pay for itself through reduced theft of electricity, energy savings, and operating efficiencies (BC Hydro, 2012). Electricity theft is an ongoing problem in British Columbia and can result in structure fires due to tampering with household wiring and with electricity grid infrastructure. Smart meter installation provides an opportunity to identify and address safety issues such as an overloaded service and electrical bypasses. It is expected that electricity-related fires, including those due to marijuana grow operations, may decline with the installation of the smart metering system in British Columbia.

A range of issues have been publicly discussed with respect to smart meters, the most recent of which has drawn links between these new devices and residential structure fires. As a result, two specific questions have emerged and underscore this report:

1. Has there been an increase in the frequency of residential structure fires in British Columbia, specifically caused by electricity and that may be associated with the deployment of smart meters?
2. Has there been an increase in the frequency of residential fires in the province in the presence of a marijuana grow operation?

In order to respond to these two questions, the scope of this research involves:

- Undertaking an analysis of relevant documentation including BC Hydro's smart metering and Infrastructure Program Business Case (BC Hydro, 2012), and the University of the Fraser Valley (UFV) Research Note entitled, "The Increasing Problem of Electrical Consumption in Indoor Marijuana Grow Operations in British Columbia" (Diplock & Plecas, 2011).
- Analyzing the Office of the Fire Commissioner's fire incident reporting data that covers a six year period from July 2010 to June 2016, and providing pre- and post-deployment analyses of the impact of smart meters on residential structure fires.

Data Analysis

Assessing the safety of smart meter installations in British Columbia and residential structure fires is part of ongoing research and analysis conducted by the authors along with researchers at the University of the Fraser University (UFV). An initial dataset examined by the authors in August 2012 listed 12,425 fires that had been reported to the BC Office of the Fire Commissioner (OFC) and had occurred in British Columbia between July 2010 and June 2012, inclusive. Of these, 31.8% were residential structure fires (n = 3,946). In September 2016, the dataset from July 2010 to June 2012 was revisited, capturing an additional 1,102 fires previously not reported at the time of the initial review. In addition, an additional dataset spanning July 2012 to June 2016 was obtained from the OFC database, to provide a cumulative updated review from pre-meter 2011 data to the most recent post-meter 2014 data available at that time. In September 2016, this data set was updated and expanded to June 2016.

This most recent review expands the total number of fires to 39,928 of which 12,208 (30.6%) were residential structure fires. Table 1 demonstrates the reporting areas within British Columbia that provided details about these residential structure fires, separated into two groups: (1) *pre-meters* (which included fires that occurred between July 2010 and June 2011); and (2) *post-meters* (2012: July 2011-June 2012, 2013: July 2012-June 2013 fires, 2014: July 2013-June 2014 fires, 2015: July 2014-June 2015, and 2016: July 2015-June 2016). For the purposes of this analysis, these two time periods have been compared to examine the broad impact of smart meters for fires. However, the authors are aware that smart meters were not present in all residences from the start of the post-meter time period.

TABLE 1: FREQUENCY OF FIRES BY REPORTING AREA FOR THE PRE-METER AND POST-METER TIME PERIODS – BC DATA, JULY 2012 TO JUNE 2016

Frequency of Fires By Reporting Area - BC Data for Period July 1st to June 30th	Pre-meters	Post-meters	Post-meters	Post-meters	Post-meters	Post-meters	Post-meters	Post vs Pre-Meter
	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2012 to 2016 Change	Pre-meter to 2016 Change
Municipal areas	1,742	1,895	1,940	2,004	1,865	1,814	-4.3%	4.1%
Non-municipal - fire protection	122	125	107	123	126	83	-33.6%	-32.0%
Non-municipal - no fire protection	29	24	30	21	20	15	-37.5%	-48.3%
First Nations Band area	25	25	25	17	18	13	-48.0%	-48.0%
Total	1,918	2,069	2,102	2,165	2,029	1,925	-7.0%	0.4%

The following analysis examines the frequency of fires in the pre- and post-meter groups, with a view to answering two main research questions:

1. What is the frequency of fires with respect to electricity?
2. What is the frequency of fires with respect to illegal activity associated with marijuana grow operations?

FREQUENCY OF FIRES WITH RESPECT TO ELECTRICITY

As can be seen from examination of Table 2, in both periods of interest (pre- and post-meters) residential structure fires made up approximately one-third of the total fires reported during that time. With respect to the question about the impact of smart meters on the frequency of residential structure fires, the following points can be made about the main findings displayed in the table:

- There has been a modest increase in electricity-related residential structure fires reported where the form of heat was electrical (3.5% increase) and where electrical distribution equipment was the igniting object (8.6% decline). When looking at these same two categories (post-meters) from 2012 to 2016 inclusive, the change reflected a 4.7% increase and 12.7% decline, respectively.
- On a more specific level, electrical distribution equipment generally made up a very small percentage of the overall residential structure fires in both groups (pre-meters: 0.4% and post-meters: 2012 – 0.1%, 2013 – 0.4%, 2014 – 0.3%, 2015 – 0.3%, 2016 – 0.4%). It is likely that these types of fires are most closely related to the meter base, which is directly relevant to the smart meters. While true, the table also shows a 14.3% increase. This is actually only 1 fire more; the percentage of all fires is the same. When looking at 2012 to 2016 in this category, there was an increase of six fires over this period. Put another way, an increase of 0.3%.
- To further examine any potential negative impact of the smart meters for fire safety, the frequency of fires that occurred on an exterior wall where the igniting object was the electrical panel board/switchboard was examined. During the 2014 August review and data extraction, only 1 incident was recorded in this category, and has subsequently been corrected after further review. Therefore, in regards to the pre-meter and post-meter periods examined, the revised data reveals that no fires occurred on an exterior wall where the igniting object was the electrical panel board/switchboard.

TABLE 2: ELECTRICITY-RELATED FIRES – BC DATA, JULY 2012 TO JUNE 2016

Electricity Related Fires - BC Data for Period July 1st to June 30th	Pre-meters	Post-meters	Post-meters	Post-meters	Post-meters	Post-meters	Post-meters	Post vs Pre-Meter
	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2012 to 2016 Change	Pre-meter to 2016 Change
Total Residential fires	1,918	2,069	2,102	2,165	2,029	1,925	-7.0%	0.4%
% residential	28.4%	30.5%	30.9%	32.5%	28.9%	32.5%		
Form of heat is spark electrical (includes arc discharge)	172	170	171	179	180	178	4.7%	3.5%
% residential fires were form of heat was a spark, electrical	9.0%	8.2%	8.1%	8.3%	8.9%	9.2%		
Electrical distribution equipment as igniting object	128	134	131	140	129	117	-12.7%	-8.6%
% residential where electrical igniting object	6.7%	6.5%	6.2%	6.5%	6.4%	6.1%		
Electrical distribution equipment - panel board, switchboard (includes fuse, circuit breakers)	7	2	8	6	7	8	300.0%	14.3%
% residential where electrical igniting object was panel board, switchboard (includes fuse, circuit breakers)	0.4%	0.1%	0.4%	0.3%	0.3%	0.4%		
Fires where Fire Origin Area was an exterior wall and the igniting object was an electrical panel board, switchboard	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.0%	0.0%
% residential where origin area was an exterior wall and igniting object was an electrical panel/switchboard	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%		

***Note:** The figure of 300% reflects an increase of 2 to 8 electricity-related fires from 2012 to 2016 in the electrical distribution equipment category. This percentage should be interpreted with due caution given the challenges associated with representing change in small numbers over time.

FREQUENCY OF FIRES WITH RESPECT TO ILLEGAL ACTIVITY ASSOCIATED WITH MARIJUANA GROW OPERATIONS

With respect to the question about the frequency of residential structure fires related to illegal activity associated with marijuana grow operations; the following main findings capture the results presented in Table 3:

- Fires that were recorded as having been caused by an act or omission associated with illicit drug operations had declined by 82.1% over the period of interest. When examining post-meter change from 2012 to 2016 (inclusive), there was a decline of 73.7%.
- Fires where the igniting object was an electrical bypass (typically associated with theft of hydro associated with production of marijuana) declined from 8 fires in 2011 to no fires reported for the 2016 period.
- Fires where the igniting object was classified as a grow lamp and the activity was illegal declined from five fires in 2011 to no fires reported for the 2016 period.
- Considering the limited number of fires caused by grow lamps where the activity was legal the data has been very stable (pre-meters: 2011 - 1 fire and post-meters: 2012 – 2 fires, 2013 – 0 fires, 2014 – 1 fire, 2015 – 0 fires, 2016 – 1 fire). It is possible that the marijuana licensing regime has had an impact on this. For additional details, consult the study by Len Garis and Dr. Joe Clare (in press) with the Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice.

TABLE 3: ILLEGAL ACTIVITY-RELATED (MARIJUANA GROW OPERATION) FIRES – BC DATA, JULY 2012 TO JUNE 2016

Illegal Activity-related (Marijuana Grow Operations) Fires - BC Data for Period July 1st to June 30th	Pre-meters	Post-meters	Post-meters	Post-meters	Post-meters	Post-meters	Post-meters	Post vs Pre-Meter
	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2012 to 2016 Change	Pre-meter to 2016 Change
Total Residential fires	1,918	2,069	2,102	2,165	2,029	1,925	-7.0%	0.4%
% residential	28.4%	30.5%	30.9%	32.5%	28.9%	32.5%		
Act/Omission illegal operations/activities (e.g. grow ops, meth labs)	28	19	14	11	10	5	-73.7%	-82.1%
% residential fires where act/omission was illegal operations/activities (e.g. grow ops, meth labs)	1.5%	0.9%	0.7%	0.5%	0.5%	0.3%		
Igniting object was electrical distribution equipment - electrical bypass (illegal operations)	8	6	3	3	3	0	-100.0%	-100.0%
% residential where igniting object was electrical bypasses (illegal operations)	0.4%	0.3%	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0.0%		
Igniting object was grow lamps/lights (illegal)	5	1	2	0	0	0	-100.0%	-100.0%
% residential where igniting object was grow lamps/lights (illegal)	0.3%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%		
Igniting object was grow lamps/lights (legal)	1	2	0	1	0	1	-50.0%	0.0%
% residential where igniting object was grow lamps/lights (legal)	0.1%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%		

LOCATING ELECTRICAL FIRES WITHIN THE BROADER CONTEXT FOR BRITISH COLUMBIA

To put these incidents within the broader context of residential fire activity in British Columbia over the period of interest, it is important to examine the relative frequency of cooking related fires and fires that resulted from smoker’s material, as displayed in Table 4. As indicated, fires caused by electricity are relatively infrequent compared to those resulting from commonplace activities such as cooking (approximately 29% of fires in 2011 and 2012; and 34.1% of fires in 2013, 33.0% of fire in 2014, 33.4% of fires in 2015, and 37.0% in 2016) and smoking (approximately 17% of fires for pre-meters and post-meters).

TABLE 4: FREQUENCY OF COOKING FIRES AND SMOKER’S MATERIAL FIRES – BC DATA, JULY 2010 TO JUNE 2015

Frequency of Cooking Fires and Smoker's Material Fires - BC Data for Period July 1st to June 30th	Pre-meters	Post-meters	Post-meters	Post-meters	Post-meters	Post-meters	Post-meters	Post vs Pre-Meter
	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2012 to 2016 Change	Pre-meter to 2016 Change
Total Residential fires	1,918	2,069	2,102	2,165	2,029	1,925	-7.0%	0.4%
% residential	28.4%	30.5%	30.9%	32.5%	28.9%	32.5%		
Cooking equipment fires	561	592	716	715	677	713	20.4%	27.1%
% residential where cooking equipment was igniting object	29.2%	28.6%	34.1%	33.0%	33.4%	37.0%		
Smoker's material fires	294	338	354	379	338	354	4.7%	20.4%
% residential where smoker's material was igniting object	15.3%	16.3%	16.8%	17.5%	16.7%	18.4%		

Conclusion

With respect to the two main research questions of interest, the following can be summarized:

- Available data does not indicate that there has been an increased frequency of residential structure fires associated with electricity since July 2010. If anything, it is stable.
- Available data does not indicate that there has been an increased frequency of fires caused by electricity associated with illegal activity since July 2010. If anything, there is a large decline which may be related to the medicinal grow issue.

Both of these findings need to be interpreted with caution, given the very small numbers of events that occur in these categories. However, having drawn attention to this issue, it should also be noted that the analysis presented here includes all fires reported for the whole of British Columbia over the time period of interest. As such, these are the best estimates available.

A final point worth emphasizing relates to the relative frequency of fires caused by electricity when compared to those that result from cooking and smoking. Without wishing to minimise any fire event, it is important to maintain perspective that these every day activities result in many more fires for British Columbia than those caused by electricity.

References

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