Toward a Community of Safety and Care: Exploring Public Safety in Downtown Saskatoon

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Presentation to Pathways to Equity Workshop
Housing Security and Neighbourhood Safety
Station 20 West, March 26, 2025

The Project

- Funded by Research Junction (connecting City of Saskatoon and USask research)
- Fundamental to the health, prosperity, and sustainability of any city is community safety and wellbeing.
- The COVID-19 pandemic heightened anxieties about while underlining collective responsibilities for public safety, health, and wellbeing of all.
- In Saskatoon as in cities around Canada, efforts are underway to revitalize downtown and make it a safe, welcoming, vibrant place where people can "live, work, learn and play" (City of Saskatoon, 2018).

The Project

- Following World War II, city centres around the world were hollowed out through **neoliberal processes** of disinvestment, deregulation, and market capitalism's "presumed trickledown benefits" and by **colonial legacies** that have constructed settler sense of place (Seawright, 2014).

- A crisis of "**housing divides**" (Spence, 2004) entailed substandard housing in the core and investments in affluent suburbs (Diamantopoulos & Findlay, 2007; Olauson et al., 2022).

- Those "housing divides" are associated with "the politics of exclusion," entailing a bad image for affordable housing, fears about impacts on "property values and the invasion of the poor" (Spence, 2004)—despite **the right to housing** recognized by international United Nations instruments of which Canada is a signatory and Canada's own National Housing Strategy Act, 2019, underlining that "housing is essential to the **inherent dignity and well-being of the person and to building inclusive and sustainable communities**" (bolding added).

The Project Purpose

- Building on the City of Saskatoon (2011, 2013, 2015, 2018b) street activity baseline perception studies, the study aimed to develop an evidence-informed, collaborative response to downtown safety.
  - To assess how community stakeholders understand and experience their safety in the downtown
  - To identify systemic and structural impediments to safety in the downtown
  - To understand barriers to equitable access to services and supports for those most marginalized
  - To identify evidence-informed best practices to enhance public safety in Saskatoon
  - To make recommendations for policy and programming for the City and for partner organizations.
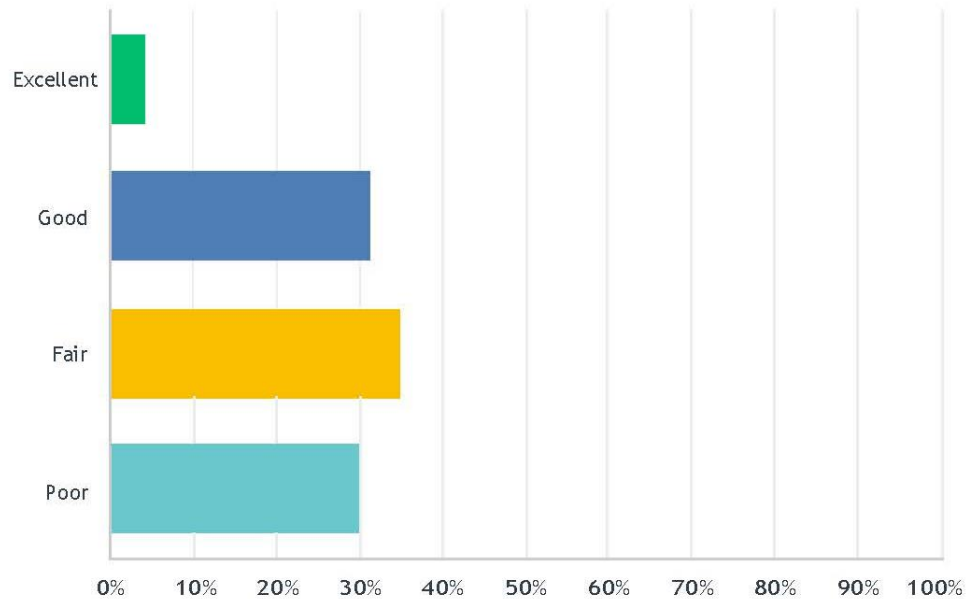
Project Methods

- Three virtual meetings with 15-member **Community Advisory Committee** guided study design, participant recruitment, and dissemination strategy in the face of **COVID restrictions**

- **Mixed methods**: Literature review and environmental scan, survey, focus groups, and key informant interviews

- **Survey** (**262** between January and May 2022)

- **18 key informant interviews** (June 2022-January 2023) representing service providers and users, those who live or work downtown, business, general public, police, community support officers, alternative response officers, urban planners, Saskatoon Tribal Council

- **Focus groups** (August-December 2022) engaging **23** hard to reach/under-represented: service users, youth (18-24), Indigenous people, those who live and work downtown, those who provide support and protection, working poor, and renters.

Q3 What is your perception of public safety in downtown Saskatoon?

Answered: 261   Skipped: 1

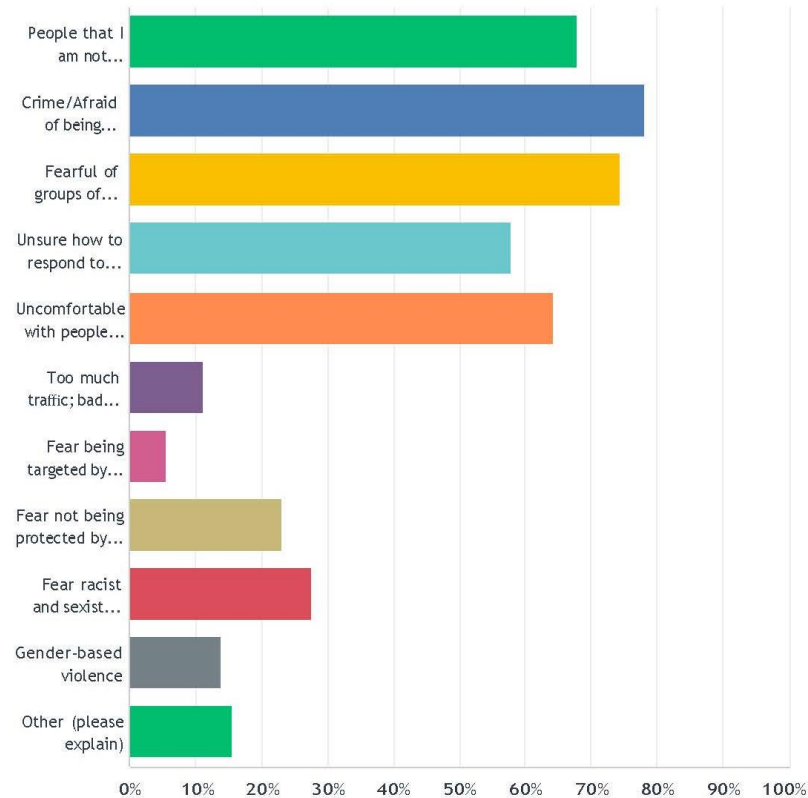# Q6 Please indicate your feeling of safety during the following times of day in downtown.

Answered: 258   Skipped: 4

	STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	UNDECIDED	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE	TOTAL	WEIGHTED AVERAGE
I feel safe during daytime.	21.40% 55	47.47% 122	7.78% 20	18.68% 48	4.67% 12	257	2.38
I feel safe during evening.	6.25% 16	32.03% 82	11.72% 30	29.30% 75	20.70% 53	256	3.26
I feel safe during the night.	2.75% 7	10.59% 27	15.69% 40	33.33% 85	37.65% 96	255	3.93

Q9 If no, why do you not feel safe walking or cycling in downtown? Tick all that apply.
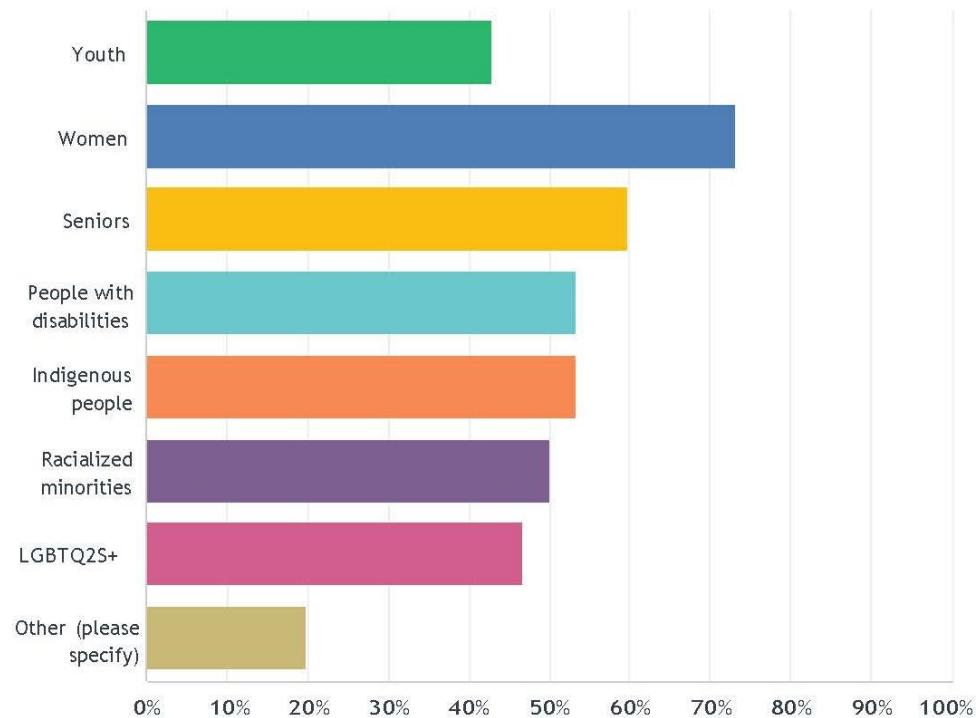
Answered: 109   Skipped: 153

Public safety meant protection from "others" and law enforcement to "permit safe passage of *common* pedestrian traffic" and protect "legitimate" users of public space.   Safety in numbers but only for some types.
For some, their personal identity (First Nations, transgender, Indigenous woman) made them feel unsafe.

Q14 Who do you think are most negatively impacted by the current levels of public safety? Tick all that apply.

Q17 These events/activities positively influence my perception of public safety in downtown.

Answered: 237   Skipped: 25

	STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	UNDECIDED	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE	TOTAL	WEIGHTED AVERAGE
Festivals	48.51% 114	40.85% 96	6.38% 15	2.55% 6	1.70% 4	235	1.68
Food events	49.36% 116	39.57% 93	7.23% 17	2.13% 5	1.70% 4	235	1.67
Public arts & Culture	49.57% 116	41.45% 97	5.13% 12	2.56% 6	1.28% 3	234	1.65
Fireworks	32.33% 75	38.79% 90	17.24% 40	6.90% 16	4.74% 11	232	2.13
Street fairs/vendors	45.53% 107	43.83% 103	6.81% 16	2.55% 6	1.28% 3	235	1.70
Busking	20.61% 47	37.72% 86	22.81% 52	12.28% 28	6.58% 15	228	2.46
Panhandling	1.74% 4	7.83% 18	29.13% 67	31.30% 72	30.00% 69	230	3.80

Q28 What are the reasons or root causes of activities and behaviours that contribute to making you feel unsafe? Indicate how important each of the following factors are.

	VERY IMPORTANT	IMPORTANT	MODERATELY IMPORTANT	SLIGHTLY IMPORTANT	NOT AT ALL IMPORTANT	TOTAL
Lack of affordable rental housing	30.84% 66	36.92% 79	13.08% 28	9.81% 21	9.35% 20	214
Barriers to appropriate health/mental health services	52.34% 112	28.50% 61	10.28% 22	6.07% 13	2.80% 6	214
Access to appropriate substance use services	51.85% 112	27.31% 59	9.72% 21	6.94% 15	4.17% 9	216
Barriers to appropriate, secure employment	32.39% 69	39.44% 84	16.90% 36	7.51% 16	3.76% 8	213
Inadequate social assistance	43.46% 93	28.97% 62	11.68% 25	9.81% 21	6.07% 13	214
Family breakdown	31.90% 67	34.29% 72	18.10% 38	10.48% 22	5.24% 11	210
Domestic violence	40.95% 86	34.29% 72	15.24% 32	5.24% 11	4.29% 9	210
High levels of poverty	53.02% 114	30.23% 65	9.30% 20	6.05% 13	1.40% 3	215
Intergenerational trauma	42.45% 90	32.55% 69	12.26% 26	8.49% 18	4.25% 9	212
Child and Family Services involvement	25.00% 53	30.66% 65	25.94% 55	10.38% 22	8.02% 17	212
Inadequate policing	22.01% 46	29.19% 61	22.49% 47	18.66% 39	7.66% 16	209
Inappropriate policing instead of prevention and intervention services	36.36% 76	27.75% 58	16.75% 35	10.53% 22	8.61% 18	209
Inappropriate private security interventions	19.43% 41	27.49% 58	21.80% 46	14.69% 31	16.59% 35	211
racism/sexism/discrimination	41.71% 88	25.12% 53	15.17% 32	10.43% 22	7.58% 16	211

Findings

- Achieving public safety is widely understood as preventing danger and protecting property and well-being.

- Saskatoon Board of Police Commissioners community conversations (2021) highlighted such a view but also recognition of the responsibilities of "a more caring community" and request for "respect for basic human rights and respect for the Canadian Charter" (p. 9).

- Underpolicing can be as problematic as overpolicing (Friedman, 2021a).

Findings

- Valuing public spaces/public assets
  - UN SDG 11 target 7: "by 2030, provide universal access to safe, inclusive, and accessible, green and public spaces, especially for women and children, older persons, and persons with disabilities."
- Reorienting policing and protective services
- Preventing crime through environmental design
- Promoting inclusive and sustainable communities and economies: Nothing about Us without Us
- Blame games often target those most marginalized, the "wasted lives" of economic modernity (Bauman, 2003), "shield[ing] us from ugly truths, and in part for that reason, perpetuates them" (Hanson & Hanson, 2006, p. 425).

Findings

- Perceptions of public safety and crime do not always match statistical realities (Smith, 2022).

- Hate crimes remain under-reported and disproportionately impact Indigenous, racialized, and LGBTQ2S+ people (Government of Canada, 2022; Smith, 2022).

- Financialized housing and NIMBYism aggravate inequalities, access, and affordability for marginalized, including people living with disabilities.

- Addressing root causes requires a community effort, intersectoral, interdisciplinary, intercultural, and intersectional approaches (Crenshaw 1991; Statham, 2021).

- Then we might rebuild "good relations" (Thistle, 2017), pp. 14-18) and "complete communities" where all have access to diverse amenities, services, and opportunities (City of Saskatoon, 2018a).

Interview Findings

- Participants added nuance to survey findings, questioning social media simplifications and amplifications, coded communications.

- "Public spaces are where folks experience community."

- People recognized public safety **for** the vulnerable understanding their fears rather than safety **from** the unhoused.

- Language mattered as people reframed shelters, addicts, homeless as wellness centres and relatives.

- But there were contradictions between safety in numbers and congregation "without purpose"; seeing and being seen by certain "types" as threatening.

- "Finger pointing" and "passing the back" as undermining efforts by levels of government, NGOs, and individuals to address poverty. Concentrated versus dispersed services brought out NIMBYism and worries about people "who have nothing to do" contradicting the hard work of poverty!

Focus Group Findings

- Tensions between requests for more policing, for balancing enforcement education and community engagement, concerns about inadequate supports, stigma, and who can safely inhabit public spaces, and fears re the drug presence, gangs, violence, self-blame, and heavy-handed enforcement.
- "I ain't no rat. It would probably get me choked."
- "When you grew up in the hood, it is kind of hard to have public safety."
- Young adults were seen as most vulnerable.
- "They're basically scared of growing up, scared of losing their lives, scared of everything they are headed for."
- "Homelessness does not equal unsafe. . . . They are just looking to survive."

Conclusion

- Amplified competing versions of public safety and shifting responses
- Increased recognition of structural and systemic inequities and of importance of access to public spaces and assets so critical to health and wellbeing
- Increased efforts to operationalize a human rights, public health, and social justice approach to public safety
- COVID exposed and exacerbated injustices and made it harder to hold on to equality narratives and opened people to need for change, for investments in what neoliberalism considered unaffordable luxuries.
- It mobilized new intersectoral, intercultural, and innovative collaborations, challenging the exclusionary dynamics in community understandings, redoubling commitments to Reconciliation, and helping clarify what a community of safety and care might look like.