

Community Safety Engagement – What We Heard Report

April 2024



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Project Summary & Background

The City of Lethbridge (“the City” or “Lethbridge”) engaged StrategyCorp – a strategic advisory firm – in November 2023 to help advance their community safety, well-being, and inclusion work in light of their receipt of funding through the Government of Canada’s Building Safer Communities Fund (BSCF).

Through this project, the City sought to explore how new community-based initiatives could be implemented to prevent youth from participating in gun and gang activity. The City also aimed to examine how existing community safety and wellbeing-related plans could be updated to broaden their geographic reach and ensure they address recent community challenges. A key element of this work was a needs assessment focused on both general community safety and the experience of youth within the community specifically.

Engagement & Research

To inform the needs assessment, StrategyCorp conducted several research activities, including:

- Community Safety Survey (1,704 total responses);
- A Youth Needs Assessment Survey (52 responses);
- 11 interviews with cross-sectoral representatives;
- 1 focus group with community agencies;
- 1 focus group with school division representatives; and
- 2 Community Pop-Ups (i.e., informal in-person engagement opportunities).

Deliverables/Outcomes

The City of Lethbridge requested that StrategyCorp create a high-level summary of key themes from the stakeholder and community engagement completed as a part of this project.

Summary of Key Themes

The stakeholder and community engagement process was designed to facilitate the collection of information related to two distinct yet interrelated focus areas: a youth needs assessment and a community needs assessment.

Youth Needs Assessment Summary

The youth needs assessment stream concentrated on identifying how youth could be best prevented from gang and gun involvement in Lethbridge. Insights from the youth needs assessment can be categorized into 12 distinct themes:

1. **Transportation Access:** Many youths in Lethbridge find the public transportation system challenging to use due to inefficient routes and high costs. This difficulty can restrict their ability to reach essential social services, healthcare, and prosocial activities, contributing to a sense of isolation. This challenge highlights the need for improvements in the City's public transportation system to better support youths' needs.
2. **Prosocial Opportunities:** Numerous prosocial opportunities exist in Lethbridge, such as sports, arts, and other recreational activities. However, access to these opportunities is often uneven across the City, and affordability is a significant concern for many families. Despite the existence of fee assistance programs, administrative barriers can make them difficult to access, limiting youth participation and suggesting a need for more evenly geographically distributed and affordable options.
3. **Mental Health:** Many youths in Lethbridge are faced with complex mental health challenges (e.g., social anxiety, depression). These challenges have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the pervasive use of social media. However, access to professional mental health support is limited in Lethbridge, leading to growing concern and frustration within the community. Despite these challenges, increased awareness and advocacy present an opportunity for the community to prioritize mental health services and create a supportive environment for youth struggling with mental health issues.
4. **Substance Use and Addiction:** Lethbridge is witnessing an increase in the use of highly addictive and lethal drugs like opioids and methamphetamines among its youth. Substance use can lead to criminal activity and the experience of significant trauma, affecting both users and non-users. The public consumption of drugs and the witnessing of overdoses contribute to a sense of insecurity and distress among many youth. However, amidst this concerning trend, there is an opportunity for enhanced education and prevention efforts targeting youth to mitigate substance use and addiction, promoting healthier choices and lifestyles.

5. **Safe & Welcoming Spaces:** Some youths in Lethbridge feel unwelcome in public spaces, which has further contributed to feelings of social isolation. Although some local businesses have made efforts to create welcoming spaces for youth, there is a need for more widespread initiatives to foster an environment where all youth feel included and can engage in positive activities within the community.
6. **Safe & Affordable Housing:** Housing is a significant issue for different types of youth in Lethbridge, including unhoused youth and those under the guardianship of Children and Family Services. A lack of affordable and safe housing options affects their well-being and safety, pointing to the need for more affordable and suitable housing options for youth in Lethbridge.
7. **Parental/Caregiver Supports:** Many parents and caregivers in Lethbridge are not equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to assist youth in navigating specific challenges, such as mental health crises and anti-social behaviour. In some cases, other obstacles, including financial hardship, cultural barriers, and personal viewpoints, can further complicate this assistance. These challenges underscore the need for more resources and support for parents and caregivers, in addition to reinforcing the importance of highlighting existing programs for parents and caregivers.
8. **Service Access Barriers:** Despite the existence of various programs and services designed to support youth in Lethbridge, a range of barriers can hinder youth from accessing these supports. These barriers include limited availability, geographical dispersion, and a lack of awareness about these resources. More accessible and well-publicized services are needed.
9. **Youth Criminal Activity:** Youth in Lethbridge engage in criminal activity for various reasons, including drug addiction, peer pressure, a lack of prosocial activities, and exploitation by family members or community acquaintances. This situation highlights the need for more effective interventions and supports to deter youth from engaging in criminal activity.
10. **Youth Gun and Gang Activity:** There has been an increase in the use of a variety of weapons, including replica guns, by youth involved in criminal activities in Lethbridge. While youth gang activity is generally less structured, it is still prevalent. These trends point to the need for more preventative strategies to deter youth from engaging in gun and gang activity.
11. **Rehabilitation of Young Offenders:** The youth criminal justice system in Lethbridge plays a crucial role in rehabilitating young offenders. However, more resources and volunteers are needed to expand these efforts effectively. As schools continue to navigate complex challenges pertaining to their students, there is an opportunity for them to provide more dedicated support services for students.

12. **Cross-Sector Collaboration:** Lethbridge boasts strong collaboration among various organizations that support youth. However, there are opportunities to enhance this collaboration by focusing more on proactive decision-making and early identification of at-risk youth. Despite having youth tables, many initiatives do not include preventative measures.

Community Needs Assessment Summary

The community needs assessment stream focused on gathering broad input from the community regarding safety and perceptions of safety in Lethbridge. Responses to the Community Safety Survey revealed a generally neutral sentiment towards safety within the community, with a smaller number of individuals feeling either completely safe or unsafe.

Overnight and evening periods are perceived as the least safe times in Lethbridge, and particular neighbourhoods, notably downtown and the northside of the City, were identified as areas of concern. The most pressing safety and wellbeing issues identified were substance use/addiction problems, homelessness, crimes against property and persons, and inadequate access to health services. Additionally, 65% of participants expressed a lack of effective community safety and wellbeing initiatives, indicating a need to enhance awareness of, or improve these initiatives.

Input from the Community Safety Survey and other engagement conducted as a part of the community needs assessment was utilized to develop qualitative themes in line with the six elements of the [Downtown Clean and Safe Strategy](#) Action Plan:

1. **Enforcement:** Many community members have expressed disappointment in policing and the justice system, advocating for both an increased police presence and a focus on crime prevention and rehabilitation. The Lethbridge Police Service (LPS) Watch Program has met mixed reactions, with some advocating for increased diversity and transparency in training among volunteers.
2. **Security:** As discussed above, many community members perceive downtown and North Lethbridge as unsafe, especially near facilities serving unhoused individuals. This perception negatively impacts local businesses and deters foot traffic. Assault rates and theft have been increasing significantly in the community, contributing to the perceived lack of safety. Limited foot traffic in City parks also makes some community members feel unsafe.
3. **Outreach:** Community patrols supporting unhoused individuals and those facing mental health or addiction challenges are seen as vital for enhancing community safety. Direct outreach support, providing transportation, hygiene care, and nutritional assistance to vulnerable individuals, is also seen as crucial and effective in supporting LPS and reducing police response times. The provision of preventative support by community patrols creates more time for LPS to focus on incident response.

4. **Cleaning:** Nearly 1 in 4 residents surveyed expressed concern about unclean public spaces, and close to 1 in 5 residents surveyed highlighted enhanced cleanliness as a key improvement opportunity for community safety and wellbeing. Some residents suggested expanding programs that make the City clean, safe, and vibrant, like garbage cleanup, sidewalk sweeping, and graffiti removal.
5. **Built Environment Improvements:** Some community members believe enhancements to public infrastructure, like installing water fountains and planting more trees, can improve safety. Concerns about snow and ice on community paths and roads, and enforcing traffic rules, were also raised. Improved lighting and increased surveillance across the City, especially in areas with limited foot traffic, are desired.
6. **Promotion:** There is a need to drive greater foot traffic to areas perceived as unsafe in Lethbridge to enhance individuals and businesses' sense of safety. There is an opportunity for the City to make it easier for people to organize events (e.g., through enhancing the promotion of available grants, incentives, and financial supports for local street activation) to increase the attraction of individuals to different neighbourhoods.
7. **Other:** The open use of drugs in public, as well as the visibility of unhoused individuals and those experiencing a mental health and/or addiction crisis, negatively affect the community's perception of safety. Some community members view harm reduction services negatively, associating them with petty crime. Others believe education about unhoused people and individuals experiencing mental health and addiction challenges could be improved to inspire more understanding and compassion.