

Using Literature Review to Inform an Anti-Oppressive Approach to Community Safety

Julie Chamberlain, Stacy Cardigan Smith and Dagen Perrott

Volume 10, Number 1, 2024

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1111461ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15402/esj.v10i1.70833>

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Publisher(s)

University of Saskatchewan

ISSN

2369-1190 (print)

2368-416X (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Article abstract

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Cite this document

Chamberlain, J., Cardigan Smith, S. & Perrott, D. (2024). Using Literature Review to Inform an Anti-Oppressive Approach to Community Safety. *Engaged Scholar Journal*, 10(1), 45–54. <https://doi.org/10.15402/esj.v10i1.70833>



Using Literature Review to Inform an Anti-Oppressive Approach to Community Safety

Julie Chamberlain, Stacy Cardigan Smith, Dagen Perrott

ABSTRACT Literature review is a common piece of any scholarly research, but it is rare for it to be squarely at the centre of a community-based project. In this Report from the Field, the research team critically reflects upon the creation and use of a literature review on grassroots, anti-oppressive approaches to community safety in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. Writing in conversation with one another, we explore the tensions of navigating and challenging safety discourse and securitization practices in our city, from our distinct experiences and positions as an academic researcher, community partner, and student research assistant. In the process, we illuminate a collaboration that offers insights for academic and community researchers alike. We reflect on creating an accessible basis for community conversation and planning while doing justice to the sources of anti-oppressive theory and practice, particularly when initially speaking to mostly white and privileged community members. The literature review has generated discussion about what it means to approach safety as a collective resource rather than an exclusive possession, and will inform practical strategies in the neighbourhood and beyond.

KEYWORDS Residents association; community-based research; community safety; Winnipeg, Manitoba

In the West End of Winnipeg in 2021, a new residents association needed a neighbourhood-focused and anti-oppressive framework for community conversations and action on safety. In this report from the field, co-written by the research team, we reflect on a community-university collaboration to create a literature review as a foundation for action on safety at the neighbourhood level. From our distinct positions we reflect on the tensions of navigating safety discourse in Winnipeg in this time and place, honouring theory and practices that emerge from communities who experience oppression while pushing for anti-oppressive thinking and action in a relatively privileged neighbourhood association. Our insights offer ideas and examples for community and academic researchers.

The literature review at the centre of our reflection explores various ways of defining and talking about safety and describes approaches to community action that align with our understanding of anti-oppression principles (see Perrott & Chamberlain, 2022). We found that feelings and beliefs about safety, crime, and harm influence the conversations we can

have about community safety in ways that may or may not be connected to the full diversity of lived experiences and realities in a neighbourhood. An anti-oppressive approach defines safety as a shared resource, rather than as an exchangeable or individual good (Perrott & Chamberlain, 2022). The literature review suggests questions that community organizations can ask themselves to prompt reflection on how they think and talk about harm, vulnerability, and boundary-making in the neighbourhood. It outlines six categories of anti-oppressive strategies for creating safety: developing the community's social capital; cultivating public and green space; seeing your neighbours; responding to harm without criminalization; engaging in harm reduction; and undertaking street outreach.

The authors are Stacy Cardigan Smith, Julie Chamberlain, and Dagen Perrott. Cardigan Smith is the Chair of the South Valour Residents Association (SVRA), a professional in the philanthropic sector, and the initiator of the research. She connected the organization with the research process, centering community needs, and led the sharing of the literature review with residents. Chamberlain is an academic researcher and faculty member at the University of Winnipeg; she coordinated the project, found funding, and guided student researchers. Perrott was a student research assistant at the time, and has since graduated from the University of Winnipeg. He conducted and drafted the literature review and created infographics to accompany it. All three authors are from white settler backgrounds, with various experiences of class, disability, and other systems that interlock with safety discourse and practice. All three authors continue to be involved in the implementation of ideas from the literature review through a critical participatory action research project with the SVRA Safety Committee.

EXPLORING CARING AND INCLUSIVE APPROACHES TO COMMUNITY SAFETY

What is Safety?

Safety can mean more than just an absence of harm or injury. Safety is the active experience of trust, social connection, familiarity, and support. A caring and inclusive approach to safety improves everyone's sense of safety rather than enhancing the security of a select few. A focus only on security can create exclusion, surveillance, and fear, resulting in the division and isolation of people and communities. True safety requires us to address the root causes of vulnerability and actively create a positive sense of safety.

Safety Feelings vs Safety Facts

Individual feelings of safety, such as anger, worry and fear, are valid, though they don't always mirror the reality of risk. Research shows that violent crime is generally decreasing and exclusionary approaches to security are flawed. This requires reflection on our own views of safety, fear of crime, and who we might stereotype as dangerous or criminal. Sometimes shifting beliefs about what makes us safe can be as important as taking action.

Experiencing Safety

Safety is experienced as an active process of caring and being cared for. It comes from quality of life, knowing your neighbours, a sense of belonging, strong public services and supports, investment in the neighbourhood, accessible transportation, and accountability when harm occurs. Safety is a collective process that requires much more than just a personal sense of security from danger.

5 Questions to Ask Ourselves

1

Are we talking about safety as something that should benefit everyone?

2

Are we critically reflecting on the role prejudice plays in our fear and discomfort?

3

Are we focusing on what makes us feel safe? Or on our fear and discomfort?

4

If we're talking about crime, are we talking about actual rates of crime or our fear of crime?

5

Are we recognizing that harm and vulnerability are natural and that everyone experiences and perpetrates them?

Six Approaches to Creating Safety



See the full 2022 report by Dagen Perrott & Julie Chamberlain, University of Winnipeg, Urban and Inner-City Studies: mra-mb.ca/publication/grassroots-anti-oppressive-approaches-to-safety. For more info contact: info@svrawinnipeg.org

Figure 1. One page summary of literature review highlights

Safety discourse and realities in Winnipeg

Julie Chamberlain

I don't think I had heard the word "safety" spoken as many times in my whole life as I did during my first months in Winnipeg. When I moved here for work in 2021 it seemed to be top of mind for many of the locals I first met. From the outset I was unsure, and questioned, what they meant by "safety," and why it was such a hot topic. "Safety" can be code for difference, for fear of people perceived as "others," and for apparent danger presented by people who are marginalized or excluded from city spaces, and who are in fact more vulnerable as a result (Pain, 2001; Shirlow & Pain, 2003).

Winnipeg certainly has a reputation as a city divided by income, racialization, and the legacies of colonization (Dorries, 2019). I wondered when I arrived here how to navigate the unsolicited advice I received about "safe" and "unsafe" areas to live. Were the Winnipeggers I met concerned about my well-being as a woman living alone, or that I should choose a neighbourhood where residents tended to be white, like me? When I eventually met my new neighbours and they assured me, unbidden, that the neighbourhood was a safe one, I didn't feel reassured, I felt alarmed: safe from what, I wondered? And for whom? Winnipeggers seemed accustomed to defending against a sense of *unsafety* that I couldn't yet grasp.

This was on my mind when Stacy Cardigan Smith reached out for research support for the South Valour Residents Association (SVRA), a relatively new organization in the West End of Winnipeg. The SVRA wanted to analyze and visualize the results of a community survey they had conducted to guide their organizing, and it was already clear that safety was top of mind for some South Valour residents. At the same time, the guiding values of "inclusivity, positivity, collaboration, care, and being evidence-informed" were just being solidified in the organization (South Valour Residents Association, n.d.). They wondered how to approach safety in a manner that would draw residents into collective action, reject coded language, and avoid strategies that reproduce underlying sources of fear and unsafety, including racism, classism, misogyny, transphobia, homophobia, and the stigmatization of people who use drugs or who are experiencing mental health issues. Once we dug into the results of the community survey, the challenge was underscored, since the majority of respondents reported that they felt safe in South Valour, but they were also less likely to be racialized people than the neighbourhood average, and more likely to have higher incomes, to be homeowners, and to identify as women (Moffett Steinke, 2022).

In the two years that my students and I have been working with the SVRA, the word safety has been spoken more and more often in Winnipeg. There are reports that property theft causes "sleepless nights" in the city (CBC Radio MB, 2022) which aligns with our findings that fear of crime and feelings of safety are often mixed together (Perrott & Chamberlain, 2022). After years of public health crisis and isolation, many community members are struggling with basic survival and well-being, with fundamental needs going unmet (McCracken, 2023). The drug poisoning and overdose epidemic threatens and takes lives daily in the city (SaferSites.ca, 2022),

and systematic societal failure to value and protect Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit people puts them at particular risk of violence and death (Shebahkeget, 2022). The current Search the Landfill movement (<https://searchthelandfill.com/>) puts this in powerful relief, as families and communities push for a search of two local landfills for the bodies of Indigenous women murdered by a serial killer. In all these realms of “safety,” communities themselves come together to take action and figure out how to keep themselves safe, while the state fails to put sufficient resources into community well-being and in fact often increases vulnerability.

Our literature review showed that neighbourhoods, as diverse, place-based communities, have options to approach safety in a critical and inclusive way. These include building connections within and between communities; creating public spaces of encounter and recognition; educating themselves and each other; building capacity to respond to harm without criminalization; and taking a responsive, harm reduction approach to meeting the needs of neighbours.

Enabling evidence-based conversations in South Valour

Stacy Cardigan Smith

The tension between safety and security is present in our South Valour community, as it is throughout our city. Safety is a shared resource that benefits everyone, while security is focused on protection of some people through the exclusion of others (Perrott & Chamberlain, 2022). The SVRA board knew there must be a better way to approach community safety, but knowing what that could mean in practice was another story. We trusted that our community is generally made up of people who care, but who may not know that some of the safety approaches historically used in our city can cause harm. We wanted a way to share information that allowed community members to learn, explore, and discuss caring safety concepts, to see how they might suit our neighbourhood, and to generate ideas for implementation. Our collaboration with Julie and Dagen has allowed for this to happen. We were intentionally building a foundation for future action.

South Valour is a central neighbourhood that is walkable and close to transit routes. The community is primarily made up of heritage homes, many of which are more than 100 years old and are being renovated. A beautiful tree canopy covers the streets in the summer, but many of the trees have died in recent years due to old age, a lack of biodiversity, and disease. During the past decade, the community has seen a transformation, welcoming new restaurants, bakeries, and breweries. We have a community centre that provides recreational programming and daycare, however the centre has struggled lately to attract enough volunteers. Our local school is the only one in the division to offer Cree and Ojibwe language programs. According to the 2016 census, about three quarters of South Valour residents own their homes. Residents tend to be younger compared to the rest of Winnipeg, and have a lower income (\$38,469) than the city average (\$44,915). 17% of residents identify as having Indigenous ancestry and 27.5% identify as another “visible minority” (City of Winnipeg & Statistics Canada, 2019).

In December 2020 we were brought together as a group of strangers to serve as the inaugural SVRA board, and from the beginning it was clear there would be tension about how we should approach community safety. The board was primarily made up of white settlers, the majority of whom do not self-identify with any equity-seeking groups. We chose to serve because we care about our community, but our interests and priorities, our awareness of our power and privilege, and our willingness to adapt, all varied. One board member was set on creating a “safer” community by developing a safety patrol. Others said that a patrol would make them feel less safe, and they worried that this would be exacerbated for community members who experience marginalization.

We knew we wanted to be intentional in our approach to community safety for all. To create space for conversation, diffuse conflict, and ensure decisions were made based on data and evidence (rather than hunches or personal desires), we conducted a survey to determine community priorities, and established a mission, vision, and values to guide our approach (South Valour Residents Association, n.d.). When the safety patrol board member learned the board wasn’t immediately in support of his preferred approach, he largely withdrew from the organization; this is a choice some people will make.

As Dagen and Julie worked on a literature review to inform our work, being able to take these academic findings and make them relevant, accessible, and useable for the community was a top priority for the SVRA. Academic approaches can be intimidating; there is a tension between the “best practices” of academics and experts, what community volunteers have capacity to undertake, and what community members have the patience and interest to engage with. Along with a short report, Dagen developed infographics that were easily digestible (see Figure 1 for an example).

We organized a community conversation to discuss the findings of the literature review, and worked with a professional conflict resolution facilitator to create a space where everyone could feel heard and connect the findings with lived experiences. Community members were invited to share their experiences and generate ideas for what we as a grassroots residents association could do to promote safety using an anti-oppressive lens. One resident arrived with footage captured from their back lane security cameras and wanted to talk mainly about the crime they had experienced. Most came to learn and discuss, and no one was made to feel like they didn’t have a place in the discussion and our community.

We came away from that meeting with 25 action items. We built trust with and within our community through taking the time to demonstrate why residents should engage with us. The community has responded by trusting us enough to share their ideas. As we now work on next steps, we know we must strive to engage neighbours who have not yet been included. A thriving South Valour community is one in which everyone feels they belong.

Honouring theorists of community safety in hostile conditions

Dagen Perrott

As I write I am painfully aware of the security guard watching from the balcony above, one of five I passed as I entered Winnipeg's downtown library. This is in addition to the two police officers and a metal detector stationed at the entrance. These were implemented in response to the murder of a young man by a group of four boys earlier in the year.

In my experience, Winnipeg is a city obsessed with safety but lacking in imagination. It relies obsessively on security, borders, and policing to address issues that are often rooted in poverty. The downtown library has a metal detector; a nearby food court a security checkpoint. Over a quarter of the municipal budget is spent on the police force, a budget line that is increased year-by-year while public transit, parks, community spaces, and other services get starved for resources (Dobchuk-Land, 2023). Community supports, preventative measures, and holistic approaches to safety are underfunded despite evidence showing they work (Selman et al., 2019).

I was excited and nervous when I was asked to work on a literature review on anti-oppressive and grassroots approaches to safety. I was nervous for how to navigate charged conversations around safety and security. I was excited that a neighbourhood I perceived as benefiting from the existing approaches to security could see the value or necessity of alternatives. Growing up just a dozen blocks to the east of South Valour, we lived across what felt like an invisible line. On one side I saw as a safe place, while on our side many of my neighbours were just trying to survive violence and over-policing, which didn't prevent yearly murders, break-ins, or bruises on the face of the corner store owner. I grew up relatively privileged and protected in this context, but I learned that the topic of safety requires careful reflection on vulnerability, marginalization, and the harm that comes from an overreliance on security (Okechukwu, 2021).

A second security guard strolls along a balcony to watch from above the first. Each surveys the four floors of terraced decks along the edge of the library. Their presence is alarming and uncomfortable for me. They trigger old traumas and remind me of how often our response to a crisis is to criminalize instead of caring for people.

The SVRA didn't just need critique, they needed a literature review to enable nuanced and well-informed conversations on safety, and to provide actionable alternatives. I wanted to honour that 'anti-oppressive' and 'grassroots' approaches to safety come from communities who are targeted by state violence or who are seen by the state as undeserving of protection (Turner, 2020). I knew that my work would draw on theory, expertise, and strategies that came from Indigenous communities and sex worker communities (Blagg & Anthony, 2019; Law, 2011). I would draw from how "Black and Brown feminist movements have organized against sexual violence; LGBTQ

groups have rallied resistance to police and transphobic violence; and immigrant women have created alternative interventions to domestic violence” (Turner, 2020, p. 293).

When highlighting practical strategies, it is important not to co-opt, decontextualize, or depoliticize ideas that stem from real needs for safety initiatives that do not reinforce social inequity and state violence. Alternative visions of community safety are deeply tied to commitments to address how “structures of capitalism, settler-colonialism, racism, patriarchy, cis-heteronormativity, and ability” create the inequity on which policing and bordering thrive (Perrott & Chamberlain, 2022, p. 4). For example, the seminal INCITE! (2001) statement called out how state-focused approaches to addressing gendered violence contributed to an expansion of state violence against marginalized women. Understanding how security for some has been built on the oppression of others requires time, trusting relationships, and spaces of dialogue. While our literature review could provide evidence, explanations, and examples of how anti-oppressive approaches are effective, SVRA knows best how to continue these difficult conversations on the ground and how to do the hard work of addressing the facts, feelings, fears, and beliefs that people have about safety.

I take a short break from writing this and head to the library washroom. On my way I pass two additional security guards. Hidden in the back is a single office where a busy crisis support worker speaks quietly to an older man, while a few other patrons appear to wait their turn. Unable to focus under such overt surveillance I eventually decide to leave for the University library. I pass by more than a dozen private security guards from various companies and three more police officers as I walk the short distance inside the Winnipeg Skywalk. Every guard represents a societal choice to fund security over safety. Their eyes, as cold as the mid-winter air I step out into to escape, seem to follow me.

Conclusion

The power of a literature review as a meaningful community-based research method and planning tool has surprised us. Since we published the review, other communities in Winnipeg have asked us to talk about our findings, and to help them, too, to think about what they can do. As we work on implementing strategies that emerged from the review, we are continuing to reflect on the tensions and challenges of talking about and acting on neighbourhood safety in anti-oppressive ways, and this report from the field offers some insights for community and academic researchers. The proof, ultimately, is in action; we share frustration and anger about how people in our city are drastically under-supported despite so much evidence about what builds truly safe and inclusive neighbourhoods.

About the Authors

Julie Chamberlain (*corresponding author*) is an Assistant Professor in Urban and Inner-City Studies and co-lead of the Community-Based Research Training Centre at the University of Winnipeg. Her work focuses on knowledge and action for anti-racist and anti-oppressive change in urban and community development and planning. Find out more about her work at <http://juliechamberlain.org>. Email: j.chamberlain@uwinnipeg.ca

Dagen Perrott is a Senior Research Assistant at the University of Winnipeg and program assistant for the Community-Based Research Training Centre. He holds a BA in Conflict Resolution Studies and Urban and Inner-City Studies. His research interests currently include community safety, urban design, and spatial justice.

Stacy Cardigan Smith has lived in South Valour since 2010 and is honoured to serve as inaugural chair of the South Valour Residents Association. She has a master's in Philanthropy and Nonprofit Leadership. She works for The Winnipeg Foundation as Manager of Generosity Planning, supporting donors' generosity journeys in alignment with community needs.

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