

Hamilton's Gender-Based Safety Audit

PRESENTED TO

City of Hamilton

PRESENTED BY

YWCA Hamilton

Table of Contents

3	Land Acknowledgement
4	Indigenous Communities of Hamilton
5	With Gratitude
6	Introduction
9	What is a safety audit?
10	What is a gender-based safety audit?
11	What is community safety?
12	Place + People: Background, Methodology + Methods
17	What is data sovereignty?
19	What we learned: Background + Analysis Process
22	Themes
24	Recommendations
35	Limitations
37	Conclusion
38	Glossary of Terms
41	Standpoint Statements
45	References

Land Acknowledgement

We engaged in Hamilton's GBSA upon the traditional territories of the Erie, Neutral, Huron-Wendat, Haudenosaunee and Anishnaabeg peoples. This territory is covered by the Upper Canada Treaties, within the lands protected by the Dish With One Spoon wampum agreement, and is directly adjacent to Haldimand Treaty territory.

Living on these territories makes all people in Hamilton treaty peoples, including those who come as settlers, or immigrants of this generation or earlier generations. As such, we have many responsibilities to uphold in our shared collective duties to the land, and the people, animals, plants and kin that also live here. This includes facing difficult and painful truths. In truth, the nation referred to as Canada, was founded with an intent to colonize and exclude – perpetuating Western knowledge and systematically attempting to eliminate Indigenous culture and connection to the land. In truth, this legacy continues today embedded in anti-Indigenous racist practices legitimized by policies, laws, systems and structures.

Indigenous women, girls and Two-Spirit and LGBTQIA+ people continue to be denied safety, security and human dignity because of these human rights and Indigenous rights abuses and violations. This includes ongoing disappearances, murders and violence. They are mothers, aunties, children, cousins, friends, and neighbours. We stand with and alongside Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit and LGBTQIA+ people. We honour and respect Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing in ways that center their wisdom, expertise, and sovereignty. We stand in solidarity with the MMIWG Calls to Justice and are committed to doing our own internal work, as a settler-colonial organization, to meaningfully integrate these calls into our systems, structure, and practices. For example, the right to safety for Indigenous women, girls, and Two Spirit and LGBTQIA+ people, their families and communities, along with our commitment to Indigenous self-determination and data sovereignty, wove itself throughout Hamilton's GBSA. To learn more, see the "Indigenous Communities of Hamilton" section of this report.

We acknowledge we have much work to do.

Indigenous Communities of Hamilton

Hamilton's GBSA Audit Team acknowledges the autonomy and rights of Indigenous peoples residing in Hamilton. Engaging Indigenous urban leadership in the GBSA Audit affirmed the need for a "For Indigenous, By Indigenous" community safety audit that is meaningful, relevant, and action-oriented to the experiences and needs of the Indigenous community of Hamilton.

The legacies of colonialism have led to modern outcomes in which Indigenous Peoples disproportionately face poorer safety and well-being in urban centres, including increased rates of violence and discrimination. According to the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, discrimination is one of the factors behind high rates of violence against Indigenous women (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019).

YWCA Hamilton endorse the call from the leadership of the Indigenous community of Hamilton for a "For Indigenous, By Indigenous" community safety audit of Hamilton that is resourced and facilitated by organizations that have committed to advancing reconciliation.

With Gratitude

Being part of Hamilton's GBSA is personal to us, because the experiences of safety and unsafety are personal. They are wrapped up in who we are and who we are perceived to be. We also feel them daily - on our way to work, school, home. These experiences influence our decisions, from where we go, when we go, and how we get there.

Thank you to everyone who shared their truths with us throughout the audit. Your truths are treasures we are holding together. We believe you. We also know there is a cost that comes with telling your story and sharing your ideas, especially when what you are saying isn't new and the truths are painful.

We are deeply humbled by everyone who chose to be part of this work. None of this and what will come from the audit can be done without you. We commit to holding the stories and ideas you shared with care, and working with you and others to make change.

Introduction

Violence, harassment and discrimination are persistent issues that disproportionately affect women, girls and gender-diverse people, often limiting their freedom and participation in public life. In Hamilton, like many other urban areas, “safety” is not a universal feeling or experience. While some people feel an overall sense of security throughout their day-to-day lives, others face threats of physical, emotional, and sexual violence, harassment, and systemic inequities that undermine their sense of belonging and well-being.

Research helps us understand that women, girls and gender-diverse communities experience safety in public spaces in a variety of ways that intersect with their identities, cultural backgrounds, socio-economic status, and overall experiences (Government of Canada, 2024, December 4). In Hamilton, gender-based violence (GBV) remains a significant issue, with both systemic and individual challenges. Many incidents of sexual and domestic violence remain underreported, with studies suggesting that 90 percent of sexual assaults and 70 percent of domestic violence cases go unreported (Ogrodnik et al., 2018). In 2022, Hamilton crisis support lines logged 7,660 calls (Woman Abuse Working Group, 2023, July 7). The city’s declaration of intimate partner violence as an epidemic (Nickerson, 2023, August 21) reflects the growing recognition of these issues.

Racialized women face unique barriers in seeking support for domestic violence (Majid et al., 2021). For example, interviews with social service providers highlighted the need for culturally appropriate services tailored to racialized Muslim women, particularly those addressing domestic violence. Without such services, many women delay seeking help, fearing stigmatization or a lack of understanding from service providers.

The experiences of immigrants, newcomers, and racialized communities in Hamilton reveal a complex relationship between safety, discrimination, and gender. According to the 2021 “Discrimination Experienced by Immigrants, Visible Minorities, and Indigenous Peoples” report by the Hamilton Immigration Partnership Council (HIPC), around 60 percent of immigrants and visible minorities reported facing discrimination in Hamilton in the past three years (Sutter & Esses, 2021).

Discrimination often occurs in public spaces like streets, parks, public transit, and workplaces, but it is especially pronounced when these communities attempt to access housing or navigate the criminal justice system. The report indicates that female immigrants and visible minorities are more likely than their male counterparts to experience discrimination in Hamilton. The forms of discrimination these women face are not only based on their ethnocultural identity, but also intersect with their gender, making them more vulnerable in both public and private spaces.

Hate incidents in Hamilton have become an increasing concern, as recent data reveals troubling trends in the frequency and severity of incidents targeting marginalized groups. In 2019, Hamilton Police Services had reported the highest incident rate of hate crimes among all Canadian cities (Moreau, 2021, March 29), a distinction that highlighted the city's urgent need to address hate and discrimination. According to the city's Community Safety and Wellbeing Plan, 20 percent of respondents in a virtual town hall expressed concern about hate crimes, emphasizing the significance of this issue for public safety (The City of Hamilton, 2021). In November 2024, masked demonstrators stood in front of Jackson Square holding a banner that read "Mass deportations now." This prompted swift responses from many community groups, including a press conference in front of city hall by the Hamilton Immigration Partnership Council (Chandler, 2024, November 16). Hate incidents in Hamilton disproportionately affect Black, Indigenous, queer, and immigrant communities. The Hamilton Anti-Racism Resource Centre (HARRC) indicated a 26 percent increase in reported hate or bias incidents in 2023 according to police data (George, 2024, April 22), particularly impacting Black and Jewish communities. In 2024, posters espousing white supremacy were distributed in downtown Hamilton (McCullough, 2024, October 12), and violent clashes occurred between hate groups and counter-demonstrators at events like Pride in 2019.

In addition, the intersection of housing and gender highlights disparities in how homelessness affects different populations, particularly women and gender-diverse people. In Hamilton, these challenges are exacerbated by a growing housing crisis (Baird, 2023, June 30). According to a report conducted by the McMaster Research Shop for the Hamilton Community Foundation in 2018, GBV is deeply connected to housing instability,

with 45 percent of renter households spending over 30 percent of their income on housing (Ogrodnik, 2018).

Housing affordability compounds the difficulties of escaping abusive situations, with women citing this as a barrier to leaving partners. This issue is especially pressing for people experiencing marginalization, including Indigenous women, women of colour, Two Spirit and LGBTQIA+ individuals, and women with disabilities, who experience higher rates of violence. Women who live in rural areas, with a first language other than English, and who cannot access services easily during regular workday hours also face barriers to accessing supports (Pike et al., 2016). The 2023 “Just Recovery” report (Just Recovery Hamilton Coalition, 2023) highlights that women with disabilities are disproportionately affected by various forms of abuse, and sex workers face additional challenges in reporting violence due to fears of criminalization. Many women avoid shelters due to safety concerns or insufficient space (Just Recovery Hamilton Coalition, 2021), opting for hidden or precarious forms of homelessness.

In 2023, Hamilton declared a state of emergency to address homelessness, mental health, and opioid addiction, seeking provincial support for these interconnected issues (Peesker, 2023, April 13).

In response to these realities, Hamilton’s City Council approved the Gender-Based Safety Audit (GBSA) initiative as part of Hamilton’s Community Safety and Well-Being Plan in September 2023. This initiative was one of many ways the City is working to enhance community-driven solutions to safety and well-being, with the aim of ensuring all residents feel safe, have a sense of belonging, and can meet their needs through use of public spaces and amenities within the community.

Hamilton’s GBSA was led by YWCA Hamilton. The initiative ran from January 2024 - December 2024. As a local leader in women and gender diverse individuals’ programs and services, and an active community organization supporting women and gender-diverse individuals’ health, safety and equity, YWCA Hamilton was uniquely positioned to lead this work in relationship with communities and the City of Hamilton.

What is a safety audit?

While safety audits are not new, nor is applying a gender-based and/or identity-based analysis to programs, structures and systems (METRAC, n.d.), combining them together is innovative for the City of Hamilton.

Safety audits are a tool that individuals, organizations, businesses, and/or municipalities can use to evaluate different features of their environments, with the goal of improving everyone's safety. A safety audit is typically a checklist or "inventory" of features that may affect the safety of those using the space. It allows for the assessment of risk and the proposal of solutions and strategies to increase safety. The United Nations and the World Health Organization both use safety audits to support their planning around the world. In Ontario, the Metropolitan Action Committee on Violence Against Women and Children (METRAC) is a well-regarded organization that has provided training, consultation, legal information and other resources to support safety audits in urban centres, like Toronto, for over 40 years.

Hamilton's GBSA adopted an evidence-informed approach guided by frameworks for safety audits conducted by METRAC, the United Nations and the World Health Organization.

What is a gender-based safety audit?

Women and gender-diverse individuals face different and often increased safety risks in various community spaces than others. This disproportionate risk is further increased for women and gender-diverse individuals who are also Indigenous, racialized, disabled, elderly, identify as Two Spirit and LGBTQIA+, and/or are precariously housed or unhoused (Government of Canada, 2024, December 4).

Gender-based safety audits have been defined as a process that brings individuals together to walk through a physical environment, evaluate how safe it feels to them, identify ways to make the space safer, and organize to bring about these changes (METRAC - Neighbourhood, n.d.). Hamilton's GBSA invited participants to identify safe and unsafe public spaces in the city, and recommend how the unsafe spaces can be improved. These spaces were categorized as either the **1) social environment**, which included the attitudes, behaviours, cultural norms and structural aspects that influence the way a person experiences safety in their environment; and/or **2) physical environment**, which included the physical features of a public space (e.g., sidewalks, crosswalks, lighting, signage, parks, trails).

Hamilton's GBSA prioritized the experiences and knowledge of women and gender-diverse individuals living in a neighbourhood and/or using a community space as experts in their own safety, comfort, dignity and accessibility needs.

What is community safety?

For the purposes of Hamilton's GBSA, the audit team used the Ontario Government's definition of community safety: "The ideal state of a sustainable community where everyone is safe, has a sense of belonging, opportunities to participate, and where individuals and families are able to meet their needs for education, health care, food, housing, income, and social and cultural expression." (Government of Ontario, 2024, January 14, n.p.).

This "ideal state" is informed by the social determinants of health, quality of life, structural and systemic barriers, and our individual identities, all of which come together in ever-evolving ways to shape real and perceived experiences of safety and unsafety. Research shows that safe communities "...are the communities where people have what they need – for economic stability, to connect with their neighbors, to have a voice in policy, to be supported in achieving what they're called to do" (Amherst H. Wilder Foundation, 2021, November 30, n.p.). The audit team also recognizes that "to be supported in achieving what they're called to do" without fear is not accessible to everyone, all of the time. Systemic and structural barriers, and our individual, intersecting identities play central roles in the ways people experience safety and unsafety in public spaces - an important set of factors for women, girls and gender-diverse people involved in Hamilton's GBSA.

Place + People: Background

Hamilton's GBSA included both personal stories and lived experience testimonies about the daily realities of residents' safety concerns and awareness, as well as a larger, more systematic review of secondary data sources to help contextualize how safety is shaped by gender and other intersecting aspects of identity and history in Hamilton. Secondary data sources explored the experiences of public and communal safety challenges faced by women, girls and gender-diverse individuals in Hamilton, as well as quantitative data sets nationally, provincially and locally. Statistics shared in this report mainly apply to cis-gender women; however it is fair to hypothesize that the statistics are reflective of the experiences of trans and non-binary people as well given the intersection of their marginalized-by-society identities. The review of secondary data also included solutions and interventions that have been pursued to address safety challenges.

Comprehensive quantitative datasets on gender-based safety within Hamilton is very limited. As a result, the data used for visualizations and analysis are few. Datasets used include domestic violence charges between 2015 and 2023 and hate crimes between 2019 and 2023 (Hamilton Police Service, 2023), victims of violent crime (Statistics Canada, 2019, July 22), shelter occupancy and bed availability (The City of Hamilton, 2023), and emergency shelter data (The City of Hamilton, 2023, August 14).

Qualitative secondary data sources were selected based on their relevance, credibility, and timeliness. The audit team conducted online searches using specific search terms related to gender, safety, and key community organizations, focusing on materials from the past decade (2014-2024). To capture diverse perspectives, we included information from community organizations and social media platforms, which provide insights into contemporary issues and real-time public discourse.

Secondary data sources also included: community-based reports; Hamilton Police Services (HPS) statistics; academic-led community-based research; social media groups; news reports; and organizational studies that have captured broader trends and patterns related to violence, inequity, discrimination, and safety-seeking interventions in Hamilton.

The audit team decided to draw from non-academic sources that are closer to on-the-ground communities, as we believe these situate the experiences of women, girls and gender-diverse people within broader trends and structural forces in Hamilton. We reviewed local news articles to ensure the inclusion of region-specific narratives and updates. This approach allowed us to gather a comprehensive range of data reflecting current trends and local dynamics.

The results of our secondary research review and analysis are integrated alongside the primary data shared by communities involved in Hamilton's GBSA throughout this report.

Methodology

The GBSA's community consultations and engagements were informed by best and promising practices found in community-engaged (University of Chicago, n.d.), trauma-informed (Edelman, 2022), critical disability (Heilig & Hardesty, 2024), anti-racist (Waller et al., 2022) and participatory feminist qualitative research (International Development Research Centre, 2018) and theoretical approaches. This included identifying a set of guiding principles:

- *Dedicated to accountable and responsible action* - We were guided by the following values: equity, reciprocity, justice, and action. We were transparent with communities about the principles and practices that informed the work. We committed to imperfectly exercising an anti-oppressive, anti-racist, trauma-informed, community-first approach to conducting and completing the audit.
- *Rooted in community knowledge, wisdom and expertise* - Women, youth and gender-diverse communities are experts in their own safety, comfort, dignity and accessibility needs. Their knowledge, expertise, and wisdom are powerful contributors to the City's overall health and prosperity.

- *Guided by an intersectional framework* - We prioritized the experiences and knowledge of women and gender-diverse people who face additional systemic and structural threats to safety due to race, class, sexual orientation, etc. By addressing the unique safety risks faced by these community members, we engage the safety, dignity, comfort, and accessibility needs of many Hamiltonians.
- *Committed to honouring community agency* - Communities own and retain the information and ideas they share within Hamilton's GBSA, and are invited to make decisions around how/if it is shared throughout the project. All information shared was grouped together to make the information less identifiable.

Methods

A snowball sampling technique was employed to support recruitment efforts, which followed a concentric circle model, centring the voices of women, girls and gender-diverse people who experience disproportionate impact of violence and unsafety, as well as additional systemic and structural threats to safety due to race, class, age, and sexual orientation. From refugees and newcomers, to queer youth, racialized teenagers, seniors, precariously housed and unhoused people, transit users, women and girls that access recreation programs, people who use drugs, to stay-at-home and working moms, Hamilton's GBSA engaged an expansive set of backgrounds, experiences and identities. Each widening concentric circle engaged a broader range of women, girls and gender-diverse people in Hamilton.

Participants were involved in the GBSA from across Hamilton. They came from Winona, the East and Central Mountain, downtown, Westdale, the North End, East Hamilton and Stoney Creek. Communities were supported to facilitate their own community engagements for the audit and were compensated for engagement costs, which included food, childcare, community facilitators, additional supplies and/or materials (e.g., printing, art-making supplies), and honorariums (e.g., gift cards). Communities tracked and submitted their expenses to YWCA Hamilton for payment.

HAMILTON'S GBSA: FINAL REPORT

Additional expenses included hiring an external consultant, Co:Culture Collective, to work with YWCA Hamilton staff on the project; providing funding to support YWCA staff involved on the project; event planning expenses for the November 4, 2024 community gathering; knowledge translation and mobilization costs, such as a facility rental and food for a community feedback session, and a video.

Departments, divisions and sections within the City of Hamilton also played a central role in Hamilton's GBSA. The following divisions worked with or participated in the audit:

Department	Division	Section
Healthy and Safe Communities	Children's and Community Services Division	Early Years Service System Management
	Recreation	City Wide Services
	Housing Services	Homelessness System Operations
Public Works	Environmental Services	Parks & Cemeteries
	Transit	Transit Customer Experience & Innovation
	Transportation	Transportation Operations Roadway Maintenance
Planning & Economic Development	Tourism & Culture	Placemaking Public Arts & Projects
	Economic Development and Economic Planning	Hamilton Immigration Partnership Council (HIPC)
City Manager's Office	Communications & Community Engagement	Community Initiatives

Note: Hamilton Public library supported the audit through the engagement of library users; and the Hamilton Police Service provided aggregated data and a report for the secondary literature review.

Hamilton's GBSA engaged just under 1,000 people with 788 unique individuals responding with their unique demographic identities and the remainder opting for a more anonymized submission. Engaging communities in this initiative required extensive relationship building and repair work, which took significant time by the audit team. Research reminds us that engaging people about their experiences about safety is, in itself, work that requires both psychological and social safety (Edelman, 2022). Additionally, communities that currently and historically experienced structural and systematic barriers may experience low-trust, skepticism and a reluctance to engage in initiatives connected to systems, such as municipalities. These experiences can lead to stigma and fear, and unequal power dynamics can create feelings of disengagement. In addition, lack of access to transportation, technology, childcare and culturally appropriate services can create significant obstacles to engagement (MacDonald et al., 2024, August). Language and literacy differences, as well as cultural norms and expectations can increase, and, if left unaddressed, increase harm.

The following comment highlights the lack of trust some communities experienced in relation to the work:

"Participants in the conversation on safety and civic engagement expressed skepticism about the City's audit process. They felt that people have been asked for this information countless times and have spoken up, but have not been listened to. This experience did not leave people with enough trust to participate more fully in the audit process or a desire to share the content of our discussion. We feel this sentiment strongly expresses community perspectives on safety with civic engagement in Hamilton itself as for participants, this audit felt like an extension of the City as a bureaucratic/political entity itself."

- Hamilton's GBSA Participant Group Feedback

In response to these realities, the audit team used an evidence-informed approach to nurture psychological and social safety among participants throughout Hamilton's GBSA. This included taking the time to build trust through: practicing open and ongoing communication; being transparent around the limitations of the audit; maintaining a commitment to learning from each other through the exchange of knowledge, skills, resources and ownership; and applying a bias toward action - the results of Hamilton's GBSA were focused on longer-term outcomes.

Customized support was provided to each community involved, and the audit team remained flexible to serve emergent community needs and remove as many barriers to engagement as possible. Communities were invited to participate in all phases of the GBSA - data collection, analysis, and knowledge translation/mobilization. The audit team also facilitated a community gathering and showcase on November 4, 2024 at the Workers' Arts and Heritage Museum, which provided an opportunity to bring communities together to share interim learnings and experiences, alongside City of Hamilton staff and Councillors. In addition, Hamilton's GBSA centered communities' data sovereignty throughout the initiative.

What is "data sovereignty"?

The audit team chose to focus on data sovereignty as both a way to action the initiative's values, while also growing relationships and trust with communities. Centering data sovereignty throughout the initiative is also a response to communities' current and historical experiences of structural and systemic barriers, as well as increasing public skepticism with public institutions, such as municipal governments. The audit team was guided by the First Nations Information Governance Centre's OCAP principles (First Nations Information Governance Centre, 2025), which outlines approaches to data sovereignty and information governance.

For Hamilton's GBSA, data sovereignty means:

- We believe women, youth and gender-diverse communities are experts in their own lives;
- We honour participants' decisions to contribute their ideas and wisdom to the audit;
- Communities who participate in the gender-based safety audit own and retain their data;

HAMILTON'S GBSA: FINAL REPORT

- Participants are invited to exercise their power of choice about when they share data, how they share data, and who has access to that data; and
- All information gathered and shared from participants will be grouped to make the information less identifiable.

On a practical level, data sovereignty within the GBSA was exercised in the following ways:

- Participants received a copy of the data they shared;
- Participants and community members at large were invited to participate in the audit data analysis (i.e., meaning-making) process;
- Participants and community members were invited to review and comment on the draft report's overarching themes and recommendations in three separate feedback sessions mid-January 2025;
- Community members had access to the final report; and
- The audit team does not have control over how people use their data post-involvement in Hamilton's GBSA.

Engaging YWCA Hamilton as a trusted third party to lead Hamilton's GBSA and support the relationship-building and repair work alongside communities meant the audit team was able to engage communities who currently and historically have fractured and/or disconnected relationships with the City of Hamilton. Our evidence-informed approach helped us reach communities who may not otherwise participate in a GBSA. In doing so, the approach may have helped begin strengthening trust between some communities and the City of Hamilton. As one participant said:

"I want to walk alone through these streets without feeling fear. I want to see beauty everywhere like I once did, not shadows everywhere with any number of unseen monsters lurking amongst them. I want to be able to trust those whose job it is to keep us safe, not automatically be wary of them like so many of us are these days. I just want everything to be beautiful again."

- Hamilton GBSA Participant

What we learned: Background

Hamilton's GBSA and the *Quality of Life Framework for Canada*

The audit team chose the *Quality of Life Framework for Canada* (Statistics Canada, 2024, March 13) to organize the themes and recommendations that came from Hamilton's GBSA. While the framework bundles "safety" under the domain of "Good Governance", research and practice knowledge reminds us that concepts of safety and unsafety are directly tied to *all* quality of life measures, and strongly influence all five of the domains included in the framework - prosperity, health, society, environment and good governance. Research shows how increased physical, psychological and social safety is correlated to a sense of belonging, which is interdependent on people's ability to have a sense of meaning and purpose, and overall life satisfaction (Boyd & Richardson, 2009; Hahn, 2017; Slavich & Cole, 2013). Belonging is further informed by our physical and built environments, our ability to take care of ourselves and those we care about, our access to set and meet goals, to have our rights and freedoms respected, and to have access to the public services we need when we need them, in ways that are accessible and culturally relevant. Safety is the lynchpin to our well-being, both individually and as a collective.

The Quality of Life Framework for Canada was developed in 2020/2021 by the Federal Government's Department of Finance as a tool to strengthen national datasets and better incorporate quality of life measurements into decision-making and budgeting (Statistics Canada, 2024, March 13). Statistics Canada launched a first version of Canada's Quality of Life Hub in 2022. It brings together economic, social and environmental datasets to support the measurement of Canadians' quality of life. The framework consists of a set of 84 indicators, organized into five domains: prosperity, health, society, environment and good governance. The framework also includes two cross-cutting lenses which are applied across all domains: the fairness and inclusion lens; and the sustainability and resilience lens. These cross-cutting lenses ensure assessment of the known systemic and structural barriers and inequities that disproportionately impact certain communities over others continue to be centered in decision-making and budgeting; as well as promote long-term thinking about quality of life in Canada so "...policy development and decision making aims to ensure that today's progress is not being achieved at the expense of future generations" (Statistics Canada, 2022, March 30, n.p.).

The *Quality of Life Framework for Canada* is helpful for Hamilton's GBSA because it provides an evidence-informed tool developed to help guide decision-making in public policy and planning processes, including budgeting decisions. In this way, the framework is proactive, providing the "potential for prevention rather than crisis-driven policy." (Wollny et al., 2010, p. 65), and aligns with the goal of Hamilton's Community Safety and Well-Being Plans to "...achieve a proactive, balanced and collaborative approach to support safe and healthy communities address the root causes of complex social issues" (Sanmartin et al., 2021, July 12, n.p.).

The audit team recognizes that gender-based safety in public spaces requires a holistic, interconnected analysis, as well as a set of actions at the individual, community and system levels. The complexity of the factors that inform how women, girls and gender-diverse communities experience safety in Hamilton are interdependent and require a corresponding analysis and set of actions. Whitby et al. (2014) distinguish between parallel and integrated approaches to policy in the context of 'Beyond GDP', arguing that "...it is important to emphasise that 'balanced' [policy making] does not just mean the adoption of social and environmental goals in parallel with economic goals (experience tells us that economic objectives tend to trump other ones) but rather a more integrated approach to economic and other policy making" (p. 12). This includes the key factors that play central roles in well-being - social supports, welcoming communities, trust, generosity and a healthy environment (Helliwell, 2019). As such, the recommendations that follow require each other to work together, in order to achieve a lasting shift and potential increase in experiences of safety for women, girls and gender-diverse communities in Hamilton.

Analysis Process

The audit team recognizes that making meaning from the rich and highly contextual data shared by the communities who participated in Hamilton's GBSA is informed and influenced by our own identities, experiences, beliefs and biases (see "Standpoint Statements" for audit team positions in relationship with this initiative). The audit team took many steps to not only acknowledge, but account for the varied influences that inform how we understood and reported on the data.

Quantitative and qualitative data in the forms of surveys, interviews, focus groups, and arts-based approaches were imputed in Dedoose. The audit team used inductive/deductive hybrid thematic analysis to identify codes and themes from both the qualitative data and quantitative data. Deduction means applying a pre-determined theoretical pattern “tested against observations, whereas induction begins with observations and seeks to find a pattern within them” (Babbie, 2010, p. 52). The audit team applied a range of community-engaged, trauma-informed, critical disability, anti-racist and participatory feminist qualitative theoretical approaches to the data. An inductive/deductive hybrid thematic analysis (Proudfoot, 2022) provides the “best of both worlds” and has been shown to enrich the overall analysis of mixed methods data and “demonstrate the greater rigor that can be achieved in thematic analysis when a hybrid approach is taken” (Fereday et al., 2006). Themes were generated following these steps: familiarization with data; generation of initial codes and adding new codes as we worked through the data; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining themes; and final analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Following best practices, audit team members debriefed and checked emerging themes individually and as a collective. Audit team members also triangulated qualitative and quantitative data to ensure mutual validity. In addition, the audit team chose to:

- Frame the themes and recommendations from a strengths-based, systems perspective, instead of a deficit-focused, personal one. This helps to highlight the systems and structures that inform and influence women, girls and gender-diverse communities’ experiences of safety, instead viewing them as an individual responsibility.
- Invite communities to respond to and inform draft themes and recommendations before they are finalized, as well as triangulate the themes and recommendations among members of the audit team. Three community feedback sessions - one in-person and two online - were hosted in January 2025 to share draft themes and recommendations and invite community input; an online survey was also developed for community members who were unable to attend the sessions, but wanted to provide feedback. Input was integrated into the report’s themes and recommendations.

Themes

Organized following the *Quality of Life Framework for Canada*, the following themes and recommendations emerged from our analysis. Given the complex set of interconnections across themes and corresponding recommendations, they should be reviewed as interdependent components that, taken together, frame the experiences of gender-based safety for the women, girls and gender-diverse communities who participated in Hamilton's GBSA. It should also be noted that participants highlighted how long-term, sustainable investments (e.g., financial, organizational, people) in safety for women, girls and gender-diverse communities is central to building stronger, more resilient communities for everyone.

Themes

"Safety is Collective"

(Quality of Life Indicators: society, good governance)

We call for governments, communities, businesses, organizations, and institutions to come together in bold and compassionate ways to respond to the evolving and diverse safety needs of the women, girls and gender-diverse people who call Hamilton home.

"Safety is Political"

(Quality of Life Indicators: prosperity, health, society, environment and good governance)

We call for timely, accountable action from government and other social service organizations to address the multi-layered, complex and root causes of the current health and social crises facing women, girls and gender-diverse communities in Hamilton.

"Safety is Inclusive"

(Quality of Life Indicators: health, society, environment, good governance)

We call for the design of public spaces, programming and services that ensure that everybody - regardless of their gender, race, socio-economic background, language or abilities - can access and contribute to with no barriers.

“Safety is Relational”

(Quality of Life Indicators: society)

We are in deep, interdependent relationship with one another. Although our understanding and experiences of safety and unsafety are diverse, they mirror and affect each other. When one body feels safe, others tend to feel safe.

“Safety is Community Care”

(Quality of Life Indicators: health, society, good governance)

We must intentionally build a culture of belonging and community care to increase personal and collective safety within all the communities we work, visit, play, learn and live in.

Recommendations

Address safety's root causes in laws, policies, procedures, funding, and structures

(Quality of Life Indicators: good governance; society; health; prosperity; environment)

"General improvements to social services like mental health and addiction and housing initiatives. I think many of the incidents which make people feel unsafe are due to individuals being loud or aggressive because they are unwell or in an incredibly stressful situation so solving those root issues is an important step."

- Hamilton GBSA Participant

There was a sense of hopelessness amongst the group. The issues that they are facing living in Hamilton are bigger than them. They need more affordable housing in safer communities. All they really want is the ability to walk comfortably to stores and schools without the fear of violence. They have nowhere else to turn and desperately need change.

- Hamilton GBSA Participant

"Diversity and cultural difference are increasing in our community, but there is little awareness and education to create an inclusive environment."

- Hamilton GBSA Participant

In recognition that perceptions and experiences of unsafety are often the symptom of deeply rooted inequitable systems and structures, participants emphasized the need for a collaborative, multi-sectoral set of responses to address the underlying root causes. They recognized that not all areas of focus will be within the City of Hamilton's purview - changes are required at the provincial, national and judicial levels as well. With this in mind, participants called for the focus on culturally relevant, culturally appropriate and low-barrier:

- Affordable, accessible and supportive housing, specifically designed for women experiencing homelessness;
- Local healthcare support;
- Healthy, nutritious and low-cost food;

HAMILTON'S GBSA: FINAL REPORT

- Social and economic supports (e.g. paternity leave; employment insurance; social assistance);
- Justice and legal supports, including legal navigation services for women, girls and gender-diverse people;
- Childcare and additional family supports, such as family reunification (where appropriate); and
- Community-based mental health and grief supports

They highlighted the need for increased, long-term funding to community-based programs, services and supports to work in partnership with governments and institutions to address these systemic causes.

Participants also called for changes to laws and policies to decriminalize sex work, reinstate evidence-based harm reduction supports and services in the community, and increase penalties for perpetrators who commit violence against women, girls and/or gender-diverse people, specifically sex workers.

They also called for increased communication between the City of Hamilton and communities to build awareness, foster trust, and track progress.

Recommendations

Increase access to training, education

(Quality of Life Indicators: society)

“There is a discomfort/lack of felt safety when you go somewhere to access supports or a business, and you do not know who may think/say something oppressive related to who you are. For organizations and supports - we need everyone (staff, etc.) to be on the same page and to all understand policies so everyone is treated with respect and with consistency.”

- Hamilton GBSA Participant

Participants spoke about the need to both provide and increase community-based training and education opportunities for staff working at the City of Hamilton, Hamilton Police Services, local hospitals and clinics, principals and educators, private security personnel, and transit operators.

Participants called for access to training and education that focuses on: ongoing anti-racism, anti-oppression; anti-semitism; gender diversity/identity; trauma-informed, cultural competency; cultural sensitivity; human trafficking; understanding sex work; de-escalation; neurodiversity skills, and non-violent crisis intervention training (e.g. personal safety techniques). This also includes more services and well-being supports for staff and volunteers of businesses and organizations who work with historically vulnerable community members.

Participants requested that women and gender-diverse people be well-resourced, and contracted to help plan and facilitate community-based offerings in ways that are grounded in their experiences and culture. They acknowledged that training and education requires a long-term commitment and ongoing resources (e.g. financial, staff) to make an impact.

Recommendations

Increase and enhance safety and security protocols in public spaces

(Quality of Life Indicators: environment; good governance; society; health)

"I don't like to go on streets with no people because I have no one to help me, if something goes wrong."

- Hamilton GBSA Participant

"I am worried about getting killed. There are no payphones at all in Hamilton. How will I call for help?"

- Hamilton GBSA Participant

Throughout Hamilton's GBSA, participants shared their personal experiences and concerns related to increase in gun violence, crime, physical, verbal and sexual assault, including experiences of racism, sexism and predatory behaviour. What constituted "increased and enhanced safety and security protocols" varied, but what was important for participants was these interventions were visible, readily accessible and culturally relevant, and did not require specialized knowledge or skills to operate. The audit team organized this recommendation into the following groups: **1) Safe Infrastructure Enhancements; 2) Security Measures; and 3) Well-maintained Spaces.**

a) Safe Infrastructure Enhancements

"We should have a button like a stop button if we do not feel safe or are being bothered by another passenger that will directly connect us to 911 or some kind of penalty to deter people from doing stuff."

- Hamilton GBSA Participant

"We need more payphones OR a set up to ring to emergency services like they have on college campuses."

- Hamilton GBSA Participant

"More 24/7 spaces for moms with kids, places to access a phone, access bathroom, safe haven."

- Hamilton GBSA Participant

In an effort to ensure the safety of women, girls and gender-diverse communities in public spaces, participants called for urgent and specific city-wide implementation of:

- Emergency call buttons/booths at transit stops, on public transit, at main intersections, in public parks, on trails, and in publicly accessible washrooms;
- Readily accessible cell phone charging stations and payphones;
- Publicly available single-stall gender-neutral washrooms;
- Additional gender-neutral signage in change rooms and washrooms in recreation and community centres;
- Offering more regularly scheduled, gender-specific programs and/or sports and recreation opportunities in City recreation centres;
- Increased shelter supports that address the safety needs of gender-diverse people and couples; and
- Encourage accommodations and awareness around the increased vulnerability of disabled and immunocompromised neighbours to the spread of infectious diseases (e.g. masking)

Recommendations

b) Security Measures

"Safety is the feeling of having the freedom to do your routines and life without fears."

- Hamilton GBSA Participant

"To me, I feel safe when I am around people who are friends."

- Hamilton GBSA Participant

"Having streets blocked off for children and families to come out and get to know each other and build community."

- Hamilton GBSA Participant

As expected, participants' recommendations and approaches on how to address public security concerns varied and diverged. All ideas recommended that increased security measures include: the physical presence of a trusted person with the necessary training, skills, and cultural competency to intervene in unsafe situations.

Recommendations fell into two groups: 1) **community-led initiatives and enhanced engagement** in public spaces, such as parks, alleyways, trails, and transit stops with adequate funding and supports for staff and/or volunteers; 2) **increased security patrols** from private security, Hamilton Police Service, and transit inspectors, in parks, alleyways, trails, and transit stops.

These different approaches to increasing security measures highlight how a person's experience of safety or unsafety is reflected in their identity, including gender and cultural background, and how these factors inform how they engage and experience systems, whether they are more informally organized, like community-led responses or more formally organized, like police and other security patrols.

These recommendations for the two distinct approaches highlight concerns from women and gender-diverse individuals that supports for safety should go beyond traditional police-only incident response to supporting survivors of gender-based violence. Gender Based Violence organizations acknowledge the role of police in responding to immediate risks, incidents of gender-based violence or life-threatening situations, but believe more funding needs to be directed to services that directly support survivors. For example, SACHA's counselling services have long waitlists, and the demand for educational programs far exceeds their capacity to respond.

Individuals' experiences of racism and systemic discrimination may significantly impact feelings of safety. For years, racialized communities have had more frequent interactions with police, often in ways that cause harm and create mistrust. As a result, equitable, trauma-informed approaches to public safety should be considered as part of providing safety from incident-response to social supports.

The rise in Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, and anti-immigrant sentiment is a national concern. Responses to these challenges have been multifaceted within Hamilton. The "No Hate in the Hammer" initiative, launched in 2019, is one of several community-led efforts to combat hate and promote inclusion (No Hate in the Hammer, 2022, August). This coalition was formed in response to rising hate rallies by groups like the "Yellow Vesters," which espoused homophobic, anti-immigrant, and anti-Semitic messages. The movement's mission is to foster a more inclusive Hamilton through education, advocacy and public demonstrations of solidarity. Hamilton's Anti-Racism Resource Centre (HARRC) is a community-based organization dedicated to confronting racism and promoting equity across Hamilton. HARRC works to address systemic discrimination, provide direct support to individuals impacted by racism, and build community partnerships to create meaningful change. The organization facilitates workshops, advocacy efforts, anti-racism education and public forums. In its 2023-2024 impact report, HARRC noted that it provided over 300 individuals with direct assistance related to racism, racial harassment and hate incidents in Hamilton, including conflicts related to racism in schools and public settings. In partnership with the Hamilton Centre for Civic Inclusion (HCCI), HARRC launched "We Support Hamilton" - an online tool made by community for community to report local hate incidents in Hamilton and surrounding areas.

In addition, the Hamilton Police has a dedicated hate crime unit. HPS keeps a record of all police reported hate crime and hate bias incidents trending back to 2011. In 2024, the Hamilton Police formalized the Hate Crime Case Review team, which reviews practices to identify gaps in reporting, training, policies and procedures.

Recommendations

c) Well-maintained Spaces

"Streets that are clean, green, more trees feel safer than streets with empty storefronts, boarded up windows and empty lots surrounded by fencing."

- Hamilton GBSA Participant

"...the pathway from behind the basketball court that goes to the school is also scary and unsafe at night."

- Hamilton GBSA Participant

"I feel like I am a nature person, I feel like I am safe with nature, like I am at peace, like there are no troubles."

- Hamilton GBSA Participant

Research points out the link between well-maintained spaces and the positive effect they have on perceptions of safety, specifically for women, girls and gender-diverse communities (Dubey et al., 2025). For participants of Hamilton's GBSA, well-maintained public spaces featured prominently in their perceptions and experiences of safety. For participants, these spaces are:

- Bright, clean, and provide access to nature and green spaces
- Increase the urban canopy of trees;
- Increase lighting in alleyways, on trails and in parks;
- Construct spaces with more natural lighting;
- Construct crosswalks that are "brighter", with more reflective paint;
- Increase pedestrian-controlled crosswalks;
- Increase the number of garbage, recycling bins, and sharp containers, and the frequency of times they are emptied across the City;

- Provide welcoming and culturally relevant wayfinding in parks, transit stops, and on trails that include: up-to-date maps and other public communication that is available in different languages, as well as braille;
- Address out-of-date, broken or damaged public infrastructure quickly, such as lighting, broken windows, damaged seating and/or out-of-date communications; and
- Increase public art around boarded-up buildings and inviting artists and communities to collaborate on art projects that “reimagined” unsafe spaces into spaces that are bright, fun, creative and community accessible.

Increase accessibility on public transit and local sidewalks/roadways

(Quality of Life Indicators: environment; good governance; society)

For participants of Hamilton's GBSA, their experiences as pedestrians and while accessing public transit was an important factor in how safe they felt in public spaces. Pedestrian safety in Hamilton is essential for fostering inclusive, accessible public spaces (Just Recovery Hamilton Coalition, 2021) especially for women, seniors, caregivers, and individuals with disabilities. Well-designed sidewalks and walkways that prioritize pedestrians ensure that all residents can move through their neighbourhoods safely. Women, in particular, are more likely to report feeling unsafe walking alone, especially after dark. Studies show that women are twice as likely as men (Just Recovery Hamilton Coalition, 2023) to feel unsafe walking at night, which restricts their mobility and limits their access to public spaces. For older women and those with children, the frequency of not walking outside increases markedly, particularly in areas where walkways are poorly maintained or lack proper infrastructure. In Hamilton, there are a couple of Facebook groups available for women who like to take walks and want to build community and safety in Hamilton for themselves (Women's Walking Group of Hamilton, n.d.). Public transportation plays a vital role in ensuring mobility and safety for many individuals, especially women, gender-diverse people, seniors, and individuals with disabilities, all of whom are more likely to rely on transit. This recommendation is divided into two sub-categories: 1) **Safer HSR**; and 2) **Safer, Inclusive Travel**.

Recommendations

a) Safer HSR

“Reducing the amount of time we have to wait at night can make it so there is just less opportunity for someone to be attacked. Staggering bus routes that go the same direction could help too.”

- Hamilton GBSA Participant

“When one feels discrimination because of skin colour/hijab, like when you enter a bus and sit next to someone of different colour and he/she wakes up and moves away from you, or shows a rude finger when you get near them.”

- Hamilton GBSA Participant

Participants identified the following infrastructure changes to help support their perceptions and experiences of safety on public transit:

- Increase the number of stops along a given route, as a way to shorten walks from work or home during the evening or early morning hours;
- Institute a “Stop Request Program” - Drivers can stop between stops as requested by riders after dark;
- Implement accessible bell pulls and emergency call buttons;
- Increase lighting at bus stops
- Increase accessible public communication, such as posters or announcements that help people understand what to do in case they feel unsafe, as well as “zero tolerance” for racist, sexist or other discriminatory behaviour;
- Dispatch more buses along routes during times where overcrowding may occur;
- Increase accessibility of bus route information, such as: signage at eye level, written in plain language with larger font size, and in multiple languages;
- Increase the variety of seating and more frequent seating options to accommodate a range of mobility users; and
- Increase cultural competency training for drivers

Recommendations

b) Safer, Inclusive Travel

"I don't like walking across a street with no sidewalk."

- Hamilton GBSA Participant

"My parents don't like me going on Aberdeen because there are always too many cars and people on Aberdeen don't always pay attention when they are driving."

- Hamilton GBSA Participant

Accessibility in public spaces increases perceptions and experiences of safety. Participants noted the following infrastructure changes to increase safety as they move through the city as part of their daily routines:

- Increase number of protected pedestrian crossings and/or intersections with flashing lights;
- Include wider sidewalks in infrastructure updates;
- Install more lighting around crosswalks;
- Install "brighter" reflective paint on and around crosswalks and ramps;
- Ensure timely repairs to broken or cracked sidewalks; and
- Design for uninterrupted, accessible connection points between parks, schools and community centres, grocery stores and pharmacies

Limitations of Hamilton's GBSA

As with the majority of community-based initiatives, the design of Hamilton's GBSA is subject to limitations.

The **first limitation** is time constraints. As noted previously, engaging communities in this initiative required extensive relationship building and repair work, which took significant time by the audit team. Research helps us understand that engaging people about their experiences with safety is, in itself, work that requires both psychological and social safety. Additionally, communities that currently and historically face structural and systematic barriers, including discrimination and exploitation, may experience low-trust, skepticism and a reluctance to engage in initiatives connected to systems, such as municipalities.

The audit team used an evidence-informed approach to nurture psychological and social safety among participants throughout Hamilton's GBSA. Prioritizing the time to support community safety and trust throughout the duration of the initiative was paramount in order to engage communities meaningfully in the GBSA, although the initiative's timeline remained the same.

To address these limitations in the future, GBSAs could extend the overall timeline, in order to account for the ongoing relationship- and trust-building efforts required for these types of initiatives.

The **second limitation** concerns coding the rich data shared during the initiative. The themes and recommendations contained in this report were generated by an experienced and imperfect audit team, with input and insights from a wide range of local communities. Making sense of data is never neutral (Castillo & Gillborn, 2023).

We are all informed and formed by our experiences, biases and beliefs. This is true for participants, as it is for researchers and analysts. Categories are neither natural nor given; data cannot speak for itself (Gillborn et al. 2018). From YWCA Hamilton staff, to audit team members, community members, and City of Hamilton staff, we "...are not passive consumers of research, but active and critical actors in the research and policy process" (Gillborn et al. 2018).

To account for these limitations, the audit team implemented the following strategies:

- Identify the different positions/“standpoints” of audit team members, and how these positions in relation to social identities may inform their analysis and understanding of the data (see “Standpoint Statements” section).
- Frame the themes and recommendations from a strengths-based, systems perspective, instead of a deficit-focused, personal one. This helps to highlight the systems and structures that inform and influence women, girls and gender-diverse communities’ experiences of safety, instead viewing them as an individual responsibility.
- Invite communities to respond to and inform draft themes and recommendations *before* they are finalized, as well as triangulate the themes and recommendations among members of the audit team. Each member of the audit team reviewed data separately and cross-referenced themes as a way to identify outliers that may need to be re-examined.

Future GBSAs may want to also consider including these strategies in their audit design.

The **third limitation** focuses on resource constraints. Meaningfully engaging women, girls and gender-diverse communities across the City of Hamilton - a city of close to 570,000 people (Statistics Canada, 2021) - requires time and resources (e.g., financial, relational). To ensure purposeful engagement rooted throughout the lifespan of the initiative, the audit team intentionally scoped the GBSA based on findings in relevant literature, secondary data and our own practice knowledge.

These findings reminded us that women, girls and gender-diverse people experience disproportionate safety risks in community spaces based on a range of intersecting identities, such as their race, cultural background, primary language spoken, perceived ability, age, housing precarity, among others. Scoping Hamilton’s GBSA as a relationship-building and trust-growing initiative with populations most impacted is an important place to start. Doing so allowed the audit team to leverage resources in ways that both respectfully engaged communities, while meeting the initiative’s overall timelines.

Widening the scope for future GBSAs will require additional resources and time to not only ensure communities are meaningfully engaged, but relationships continue to strengthen across community members and the City of Hamilton.

Conclusion

"I try to surround myself with woman-centric communities and I find hope there...we know the bad stuff is happening but we also have each others' backs."

- Hamilton GBSA Participant

Communities involved in Hamilton's GBSA remind us that our perceptions and experiences of safety are deeply interconnected with our sense of belonging, inclusion, accessibility, and comfort. To address these complexities, a multi-sectoral, bold and compassionate approach is required - one that responds to both the "symptoms" of safety, as well as the root causes.

The themes and recommendations that came from the voices of local women, girls and gender-diverse communities in Hamilton are not new. They validate the chorus of voices and reports around that world that highlight how women feel less safe in public spaces, adjust their behaviour more often and avoid certain places or activities out of fear or discomfort (Vera-Gray & Kelly, 2020). Designing public spaces with women, girls and gender-diverse people in mind has been shown to increase safety, accessibility and comfort for everyone (Moonen, 2024).

Glossary of Terms

As communities reminded us throughout Hamilton's GBSA, addressing safety in public spaces requires all of us in collective action together.

Glossary of Terms

Audit Team: A general description for the core team who led Hamilton's GBSA for YWCA Hamilton and the City of Hamilton. This included: Bernadette Arthur, Principal, Co:Culture Collective; Clarissa Vasquez, Artistic Director & Knowledge Mobilization Consultant; Sarah Glen, Vice-President, Culture & Knowledge Mobilization for YWCA Hamilton; Stephanie Milliken, PhD student and YWCA Hamilton staff; Surbhi Rao, undergraduate researcher at McMaster University; Keyana Pregent, data analyst; Katherine Walker-Jones, undergraduate researcher at McMaster; Violetta Nikolskaya, Director, Inclusion & Engagement for YWCA Hamilton; and Mary Vaccaro, faculty member in the School of Social Work at McMaster University.

Community Safety: "The ideal state of a sustainable community where everyone is safe, has a sense of belonging, opportunities to participate, and where individuals and families are able to meet their needs for education, health care, food, housing, income, and social and cultural expression" (Government of Ontario, 2024, January 15). This "ideal state" is informed by the social determinants of health, quality of life, structural and systemic barriers, and our individual identities, all of which come together in ever-evolving ways to shape real and perceived experiences of safety and unsafety. Community safety is not accessible to everyone, all of the time. Systemic and structural barriers, and our individual, intersecting identities play central roles in the ways people experience safety and unsafety in public spaces.

Determinant: A determinant is a factor that has a large impact on something, even when the connection might not seem obvious. For example, income level is a determinant of health because it can impact how healthy people are even though it isn't a medical condition.

Gender: Gender means the roles, behaviours, and identities that society links to being masculine, feminine, or beyond (ex. androgynous or non-binary). A person's gender can match or be different from the sex they were born with.

Gender-Based Violence (GBV): Gender-based violence is violence where the victim's gender plays a role in making them vulnerable to/targeted for violence. GBV can happen by or to anyone, regardless of their gender and sexual orientation, but is most commonly reported as done by men to women. Examples of GBV include sexual harassment and assault, femicide, and intimate-partner violence (IPV).

Gender-diverse: Gender diversity is an umbrella term for anyone whose gender is different from the sex they were assigned at birth, including (but not limited to), transgender, non-binary, agender, and gender-fluid people.

Holistic care: A comprehensive approach that takes into consideration physical, social, cultural, mental and emotional well-being.

Intersectionality: Intersectionality is a way of looking at oppression that understands how combinations of categories like race, class, religion, gender, sexuality, and age impact our experiences and the discrimination we face. For example, a Black woman (at the 'intersection' of being Black and a woman) may face barriers to employment that neither Black men nor white women face.

Intimate-partner violence (IPV): Intimate-partner violence, also known as domestic violence, is a kind of gender-based violence caused by a past or current partner. Examples include physical abuse, emotional and psychological abuse, and stalking.

Opioid: Opioids are a group of drugs that block pain signals in the brain. They are used in hospitals for pain relief but are also addictive and can lead to fatal overdose. Examples include codeine, fentanyl, Vicodin (hydrocodone), and OxyContin (oxycodone).

Racialized: Racialized is a term that refers to non-white people. Similar terms include “racial minority,” “people of colour,” “people of the global majority,” or “BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Colour).”

Structural Barriers: Structural barriers are obstructions that individuals and communities experience as a result of the way entire systems interact (see systemic barriers) resulting in disconnection, marginalization, exclusion, extraction, exploitation and other disparate outcomes. These barriers are structural in nature, meaning the culture of oppression and discrimination becomes intentionally or unintentionally embedded and reproduced as a result of individual, societal or institutional practices, policies, traditions and/or values.

Systemic Barriers: “Systemic barriers are the real obstructions that individuals and communities face from one arena to another within a system of various institutions. These obstructions can take the form of attitudes, policies, or practices that result in unequal access and exclusion from, the built systems services and programs (e.g. education, legal, health care, etc) they are forced to access and participate in. The discrimination, racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and other forms of oppression that individuals and communities face). They can have serious and long-lasting harmful impacts on individuals [and communities], such as on their physical and mental health, emotional well-being, life expectancy, physical safety, job and financial security, and career progression” (Othering & Belonging Institute, 2023, n.p.). For example, the over-policing of some communities can result in residents being disproportionately arrested, subsequently charged, convicted, sentenced and incarcerated at rates disproportionate to other community members within the overall population. Thus, the barriers present within one part of the system spread throughout the entire system (Othering & Belonging Institute, 2023, January 16; Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, 202, October 10).

Wayfinding: Wayfinding is the way people process, make decisions about and experience locating, following or discovering a route through and to a specific space. How people move through public spaces is not only supported by maps and signage, it is also informed by gender, cultural background, past experiences and other forms of identity (Symonds et al., 2017).

Standpoint Statements

The audit team recognizes that making meaning from the rich and highly contextual data shared by the communities who participated in Hamilton's GBSA is informed and influenced by our own identities, experiences, beliefs and biases. The audit team took many steps to not only acknowledge, but account for the varied influences that inform how we understood and reported on the data. One of these ways was to identify the different positions or "standpoints" of audit team members, and how these positions in relation to social identities may inform analysis and understanding of the data.

Bernadette Arthur:

A neuro-expansive, mid-forties, Afro-Caribbean Black woman, I am. Born to immigrant parents and grandparents who immigrated from the islands of Trinidad and Tobago in the seventies with immigrant dreams packed alongside madras curry powder. Shaped by my maternal grandmother's stories of learning how to survive and eventually thrive in a country that provided equal measures of opportunity and hostility to her Black female body and those of her children. I am a treaty person, born and raised in the region renamed Scarborough, ON, on "the traditional territory of many nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples." I have been deeply shaped by the resilience and ingenuity of the matriarchs in my family, the varied cultural communities I encountered growing up in Scarborough, ON in the eighties and nineties, and by the Black Caribbean church who offered culturally protective factors and a safe-ish place for me to practice sharing my voice, and being in deep community with others.

I am a life-long student and the informal education I've experienced has been just as potent and transformative as the formal education. I have been in reciprocal relationship and participated in learning communities with anti-racist, anti-oppression, liberatory and healing-focused, womanist, community-based practitioners and educators. My educational background is in Child and Youth Work and Psychology. These people and spaces, along with natural and spiritual elements have informed and shaped my views, perspectives and ethics around the rights, dignity, sovereignty, and value of all human beings and the sacredness of the natural world.

Sarah Glen:

I am a white woman in my early forties, who came to Hamilton from British Columbia. I grew up on- and off-again at the edge of the Pacific Ocean, with my Ukrainian grandmother – a woman who escaped persecution to settle in Canada, and whose connection to the land and wisdom that came from the life of plants were my first teachers. She taught me to listen with my entire body to human and non-human kin. She taught me that safety is internal and relational – something I try to share as a mom to my little one now.

My education and professional experiences – from journalism and communications, to community-based research, to education – has shown me that change is something we learn through our relationships together. There is a power that comes from our collective work. I have been honoured to be invited to walk alongside communities as they share their stories, dreams and questions in ways that inspire action. I have also experienced what can happen when these treasures are used as commodities, and constrained when truths are uncomfortable. The data and information we use to make decisions isn't neutral, but formed and informed by the humans (all of us!) who interact with it. These experiences have helped me see the central role safety plays in systems change – it is the lynch pin to our well-being, both individually and as a collective.

Stephanie Milliken:

I am a biracial, queer, disabled woman in my early thirties, and I have lived in the Hamilton area for most of my life. I have also worked and volunteered frontline in social services for the last decade. I think all of these “parts” of me inform both my commitment to creating spaces where all voices are valued, as well as my understanding of both the opportunities and challenges faced by diverse communities across the city when it comes to their experiences of safety and belonging.

My academic journey spans social work, gender studies, and political science — fields that have deeply influenced my understanding of social systems and power dynamics around us. I bring critical theoretical frameworks to my work as a community-based researcher-in-training, aiming to centre the voices of those most affected by critical issues in our communities, and foster compassion in both research and practice.

Creating safety and community well-being is a collective responsibility; the perspective I have taken towards this project is informed by my belief that without being accountable to and showing grace for each other, we will not achieve the transformative changes we yearn for.

Keyana Pregent:

As a 24-year-old Afro-Caribbean woman whose father immigrated to Canada, I have a deep commitment to social justice and the well-being of marginalized communities. With a background in criminology, I have focused my academic and volunteer efforts on understanding and addressing the needs of vulnerable populations, particularly those affected by gender-based violence. My research interests are focused on the role of shelters as critical support systems for survivors, and I am passionate about advocating for improved resources and services to help protect and empower victims. Having volunteered with various marginalized groups, I have witnessed firsthand the vital importance of safe spaces, and I am dedicated to creating meaningful change in this area.

Surbhi Rao:

I am an undergraduate student in my early 20s and have been living in Hamilton for the past 4 years. I'm also a racialized, second-generation immigrant, cisgender woman raised in the suburbs of Toronto.

While my upbringing in a bilingual immigrant household may give me a better understanding of certain experiences, I also have the privilege of being a Canadian citizen by birth and a native English speaker. Understanding struggles that certain groups face while having fewer barriers to having my voice heard motivates me to spotlight perspectives that do not get enough attention.

My interdisciplinary education helps me understand multiple perspectives. My experience with community engagement brings me to this project with the belief that communities have invaluable expertise. Communities know their needs and often have creative and practical solutions to the challenges they face, yet many have decisions made without them. Investing in communities and their ideas is the most effective way to improve our city.

Violetta Nikolskaya:

I am a white, lesbian, cisgender woman, in my early 30s, of immigrant experience, having arrived on these lands as an infant refugee alongside my single mother and grandmother. Their endless courage, humility and kindness shaped me. My lived experiences of housing precarity, poverty and immigration have deeply informed my professional and academic trajectory. These experiences and my initial career in housing is where I witnessed the transformative power of community care.

My education in sociology, social work, and peace studies, all conducted at McMaster University, have informed my practice of social justice and equity. While my academic philosophies are grounded in critical theories and perspectives, it was my time as a collegiate debater that formed my commitment to perspective-taking, negotiation, and storytelling as tools for empathy and activating compassion.

For five years, I conducted community-based research by day and worked at a family shelter by night. These experiences taught me the profound responsibility of being an active listener and advocate. Peoples' stories hold raw power, and, when shared with permission, an active listener can help make those stories accessible to more communities. As a researcher, my goal is to ethically and thoughtfully amplify the voices of those entrusting me to share their stories.

Katherine Walker-Jones:

I am a Bachelor of Social Work student at McMaster University who participated in this work as part of my third-year placement in community-based research. My perspectives are evolving through this experience, but I show up wary of the potential to recreate the harms of broader oppressive systems through the ways that data are gathered and then used. At the same time, I am very curious about how knowledge creation can be performed toward a liberatory end. My contributions to this project are biased by my own experiences of safety and danger in Hamilton, where I have now lived for a little over four years. I believe these experiences are mediated most significantly by being white, middle class, able bodied, and someone who is generally read as a cis woman. My experience of these combined positionalities is one of privilege and relative safety, which I have considered while participating in work on this safety audit.

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