



ADVANCING A CANADA-WIDE STRATEGY FOR BELONGING

BRIEF 2: WORKING TOGETHER FOR SAFER COMMUNITIES: BELONGING AS THE FOUNDATION OF COMMUNITY SAFETY

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary	3
Purpose of this Brief	4
Key Findings	5
Key Questions	7
Putting Ideas into Practice	10
Discussion Guide	11
References	12

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As communities across Canada navigate complex social pressures and polarization, safety models benefit from shifting toward proactive, upstream development. At the heart of this work is an understanding that community safety is shaped by the social and economic conditions in which people live. Poverty, exclusion, and inequitable access to resources can increase vulnerability to harm and weaken the foundations of community well-being. Grounded in community models like Waterloo, Cornwall, and Windsor-Essex, this brief outlines how community belonging serves as a foundational pillar of public safety and a protective buffer against poverty and systemic harm.

Defining safety as something co-created through trust, relationships, and shared responsibility, rather than maintained solely through incident containment, enables public systems to distribute operational demands before challenges escalate. To advance this vision, this brief highlights three opportunities for action. First, local governments can reallocate resource flows toward culturally relevant, community-led restorative justice initiatives that address the underlying drivers of harm. Second, local leaders can formalize multi-sector governance networks across public health authorities, emergency services, and grassroots groups to break down silos. Third, regional networks can integrate community belonging and social infrastructure directly into local safety strategies by investing in shared physical environments and relational spaces that foster connection, participation, and community well-being.

PURPOSE OF THIS BRIEF

The purpose of this brief is to offer a collaborative approach to community safety across Canada, demonstrating how belonging can strengthen everyday safety. Evolving municipal governance requires a strategic review of public safety frameworks through the integration of holistic wellness, restorative practices, and cross-sector collaboration. While local conversations often focus on reacting to crises after they occur, this document explores how proactive initiatives address root challenges early by strengthening community connections.

This document aligns with emerging municipal planning frameworks and supporting qualitative data from the Tamarack Institute's call for a Canada-wide Strategy for belonging as a policy priority. As the second installment in a seven-part briefing series, it shares evidence showing that neighbourhoods thrive when local programs and networks are accessible to everyone, especially those facing systemic barriers. Readers will find practical guidance on designing everyday initiatives that nurture trust, equity, and a shared sense of community safety.

KEY FINDINGS

MOVING UPSTREAM: BALANCING CRISIS RESPONSE WITH RESTORATIVE DEVELOPMENT

Sustainable community safety thrives when municipal frameworks balance responsive services with proactive, restorative practices that strengthen the social and economic conditions in which people live. Poverty, exclusion, and inequitable access to resources can increase vulnerability to harm, weaken social cohesion, and erode the foundations of community well-being. [Evidence](#) from [Cornwall](#), [Prince Edward County](#), and [Windsor-Essex](#) demonstrates that community safety is strengthened when local governments invest in social development, poverty reduction, and cross-sector collaboration alongside traditional safety measures. By prioritizing prevention, early intervention, and community-led action, municipalities can address challenges before they escalate while fostering the conditions for belonging, resilience, and collective well-being.

RE-CENTERING LOCAL PERCEPTIONS OF SAFETY THROUGH INCLUSIVE SAFE GROWTH PRINCIPLES

True public safety relies on strong social connections, mutual trust, and collaborative urban planning that addresses the physical layout of neighborhoods. [Practical models](#) from Canadian municipalities, such as the City of Saskatoon's Safe Growth and CPTED [initiative](#), demonstrate that community safety significantly improves when local government planners work alongside individuals to design urban spaces. Rather than relying on technical surveillance, intentionally co-designing welcoming community spaces, accessible streetscapes, and inclusive local hubs empowers people in neighborhoods to naturally look out for one another. Investing in this essential social infrastructure repairs the local social fabric, reduces isolation, and actively [strengthens](#) people's day-to-day perceptions of safety and belonging.

EMBEDDING EQUITY THROUGH SHARED LOCAL GOVERNANCE AND TRUST-BASED COLLABORATION

Community safety plans achieve deep legitimacy and long-term viability when local decision-making power is co-created alongside the populations they serve. Breakthrough models, such as the Region of Waterloo's [participatory grantmaking](#), demonstrate the value of expanding who guides local resource allocation. By sharing funding and priority-setting decisions directly with community networks, municipalities can dismantle historical planning gaps and build mutual trust. This collaborative, decentralized approach ensures that municipal staff, first responders, and civic leaders work as true partners with neighborhoods by co-designing safety policies that reflect real-world experiences and recognizing that communities are active co-creators of their own well-being.

KEY QUESTIONS

1 What is the current landscape of community safety and belonging in Canada?

The current landscape reflects a shift toward combining everyday social and economic needs, such as poverty reduction, housing and mental health supports, with local safety strategies. While public attention often centers on emergency responses, national numbers highlight a baseline challenge: less than half of Canada's population (48%) reports a strong sense of belonging to their local community.

Evidence shows that when people feel isolated or disconnected from their neighborhood, local trust drops and neighbourhood ties weaken. This means that community safety depends just as much on creating vibrant spaces and strong social connections as it does on daily emergency services. This reality is influencing how local governments design their strategies. For example, Ontario now requires municipalities to develop formal Community Safety and Well-Being (CSWB) plans. This mandate has prompted local governments, health networks, and service providers to work together, shifting their focus from incident response toward prevention models.

2 Who is involved, and how do different life experiences shape community safety?

Community safety is a multi-sector responsibility that brings together municipal staff, neighborhood associations, first responders, community service providers, and public health practitioners. This collaborative model is necessary because the day-to-day experience of safety is not identical for everyone. Data from Statistics Canada indicates that urban youth, particularly those who identify as 2SLGBTQ+ or are living with a disability, are significantly less likely to experience a strong sense of local community belonging than their peers. Similarly, neighborhoods face unique challenges regarding economic stability, social trust, and safety.

A trauma-informed approach recognizes that community safety can only be achieved when institutions work together to understand these varied lived experiences and design spaces where everyone feels secure. In practice, models like [Wellbeing Waterloo Region](#) demonstrate how cross-sector groups work to identify and address structural barriers to well-being.

3

What should local leaders keep in mind when creating everyday initiatives that foster connection, equity, and community safety?

Supporting a neighborhood effectively involves blending daily emergency responses with proactive, everyday community planning. One pathway opens up through the physical environment. Integrating concepts like Safe Growth and accessible public spaces allows parks and streets to become safer and more welcoming for everyone.

Another avenue focuses on building trust and relationships locally through community-led collaborative approaches like participatory grantmaking. Shifting decision-making power to community groups invites people to co-shape safety and wellbeing goals. By embedding connection directly into everyday programs, local governments and institutional partners can ensure spaces are vibrant and safe before vulnerabilities become emergencies.

4

What are the structural consequences of institutional action versus inaction?

Maintaining a strictly compartmentalized approach to public safety leads to fragmented service delivery and organizational inefficiencies. When public institutions isolate safety from upstream community networks, municipal administrative capacity becomes strained by recurring, reactive expenditures. This approach places a strain on first responders without addressing the root factors of inequities. Over time, an exclusive reliance on incident containment can weaken public trust, increase isolation, and leave communities vulnerable to compounding challenges.

Conversely, adopting a collaborative, multi-sector community safety approach that explicitly centres belonging optimizes municipal operational capacity, elevates service performance, and generates long-term social value. As illustrated by Windsor-Essex's joint planning model, coordinating action across multiple outcome areas allows jurisdictions to address overlapping social determinants of safety simultaneously. For policymakers, shifts toward shared-leadership networks distribute the operational demand on emergency services, support civic participation, and create more stable local environments where municipal safety investments work in tandem with neighbourhood cohesion and civic trust.

SNAPSHOT OF A COMMUNITY IN ACTION: WATERLOO REGION

Context: In the Waterloo Region, Ontario, municipal staff recognized that community safety and belonging are inseparable. They knew that the communities most impacted by systemic barriers needed a real voice in designing solutions. To do this, they applied their legislated Community Safety and Wellbeing Plan (CSWP) as a mechanism to shift how public funds are allocated.

From idea to action: The Region adopted a trust-based, participatory grantmaking model that explicitly centred First Nations, Inuit, and Métis (FNIM), African, Caribbean, and Black (ACB), and racialized communities. By removing traditional bureaucratic barriers, such as rigid charitable status requirements and funding limits, and forming a 12-member diverse Community Change Committee, they shifted real decision-making power directly into the hands of people.

To date, nearly \$15M has been invested upstream to transform ideas into tangible community well-being and safety initiatives, driving holistic prevention and care by providing trauma-informed mental health support to 10,000 individuals, delivering 15,000 meals and food hampers, engaging 3,000 youth, and hosting over 40 cultural connection events for more than 10,000 community members.

LEARN MORE

PUTTING IDEAS INTO PRACTICE

To transition from a reactive, punitive state to a regenerative, holistic safety model, decision-makers across sectors can advance three concrete, evidence-backed actions:

Reallocate municipal resource flows to restorative and community-led justice programs. Allocate municipal and provincial justice funding into culturally relevant, community-led restorative justice initiatives. Restorative justice centres healing, intersectional accountability, and reintegration rather than ostracization. For example, local governments can scale up mediation circles and community-led conflict resolution hubs to address the trauma underlying harmful behaviour.

Formalize multi-sector, shared-leadership governance networks. Establish localized, cross-sector planning tables, such as the [Windsor-Essex](#) joint planning model or the upstream systems approach led by the Waterloo Region, that bring together governments, public health authorities, school boards, emergency services, and grassroots community networks. True community safety cannot be achieved in silos. Formalizing shared governance structures helps build neighbourhood cohesion and civic trust, distributing systemic demands across a network of mutual accountability rather than a single agency.

Integrate community belonging and social infrastructure into local/regional safety strategies. Formally embed community belonging and relational spaces into core municipal safety frameworks by actively investing in shared physical and social environments, such as community bread ovens, neighborhood hubs, youth spaces, and peer-support networks. Communities are more resilient when people know their neighbors and share spaces of mutual care. When less than half of Canada feels a strong sense of belonging, protecting and funding relational spaces and networks acts as a buffer against hate and polarization. Local safety strategies must actively build belonging into how decisions are made, ensuring that individuals, particularly those excluded from our systems, hold tangible power over their local environments.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

The questions below are designed to foster dialogue within your team, network, or community planning table.

- **Part 1: Setting the Stage** offers general prompts to set the stage, break the ice, and get people talking about the intersections between belonging and community safety.
- **Part 2: Deep Dive** provides questions to help you reflect further on the ideas outlined in this brief.

PART 1: SETTING THE STAGE

1. When you hear the phrase community safety, what is the first image that comes to your mind? How does that image change if we replace the word safety with belonging?
2. What helps people feel connected in your community, and what gets in the way?

PART 2: DEEP DIVE

1. Beyond crime rates, what indicators could help us understand whether our communities are becoming safer, more connected, and more resilient?
2. Whose voices and experiences are often missing from conversations about community safety, and how can we create more opportunities for them to shape local decisions?
3. What investments in people, places, or relationships would make the greatest difference to community well-being and safety in your neighbourhood?

REFERENCES

INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH:

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- Forum for Youth Investment (2026): [Design Principles for Community-Based Settings: Environments Filled with Safety and Belonging.](#)
- Psychology Today (2026): [How Can We Save Democracy? Start With Neighbouring.](#)
- Psychology Today (2026): [The Power of Community: Preventing Loneliness and Isolation.](#)
- UN Sustainable Development Goals (2026): [Goal 16 - Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.](#)
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CANADA-WIDE RESEARCH:

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- City of Windsor (2026): [Windsor-Essex Regional Community Safety and Well-Being Plan.](#)
- Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada (2026): [Federal Pathway Annual Progress Report.](#)
- Government of Canada's National Seniors Council (2025): [Dialogue – Preventing Social Isolation and Loneliness and Promoting Social Engagement and Social Connectedness in Canada.](#)
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- Canadian Intergovernmental Conference Secretariat (2018): [Principles and Guidelines for Restorative Justice Practice in Criminal Matters.](#)

TAMARACK INSTITUTE'S RESOURCES:

- Article (2026): [Belonging as Essential Social Infrastructure.](#)
- Blog (2026): [Region of Waterloo: Advancing Equity Through Trust-Based, Participatory Grantmaking.](#)
- Resource Page (2026): [Advancing a Canada-wide Strategy for Belonging.](#)
- Resource Page (2026): [Communities Building Belonging.](#)
- Community of Practice (2025): [Community's Role in Community Safety.](#)
- Blog (2024): [Renewing our Commitment to Shaping a Future that Celebrates Belonging.](#)
- Article (2023): [Community Belonging. A Way to End Poverty in Canada.](#)
- Blog (2023): [Response to the June 2023 Hate Acts at the University of Waterloo Campus.](#)
- Report (2023): [Communities Ending Poverty 2023 Deep Dive.](#)
- Blog (2022): [Wellbeing Waterloo Region.](#)
- Blog (2022): [Windsor-Essex's Community Safety and Well-Being Plan.](#)
- Case Study (2022): [Windsor-Essex's Community Safety and Wellbeing Plan: An Engaged Community.](#)
- Field Notes (2022): [Centering Anti-Racist and Equity Frameworks in Anti-Poverty Work.](#)

METHODOLOGICAL REFERENCE:

- Briefing structure adapted from British Columbia/Yukon Pressbooks (2020): [The Mission, the Message, and the Medium: Science and Risk Communication in a Complex World.](#)

OUR APPROACH TO ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Tamarack uses artificial intelligence thoughtfully to support aspects of our work while maintaining human oversight, community voice, transparency and accountability. We are committed to being transparent about how we use AI, where we choose not to use it, and the tensions we are navigating as these technologies evolve.

[LEARN MORE ABOUT HOW TAMARACK USES AI](#)