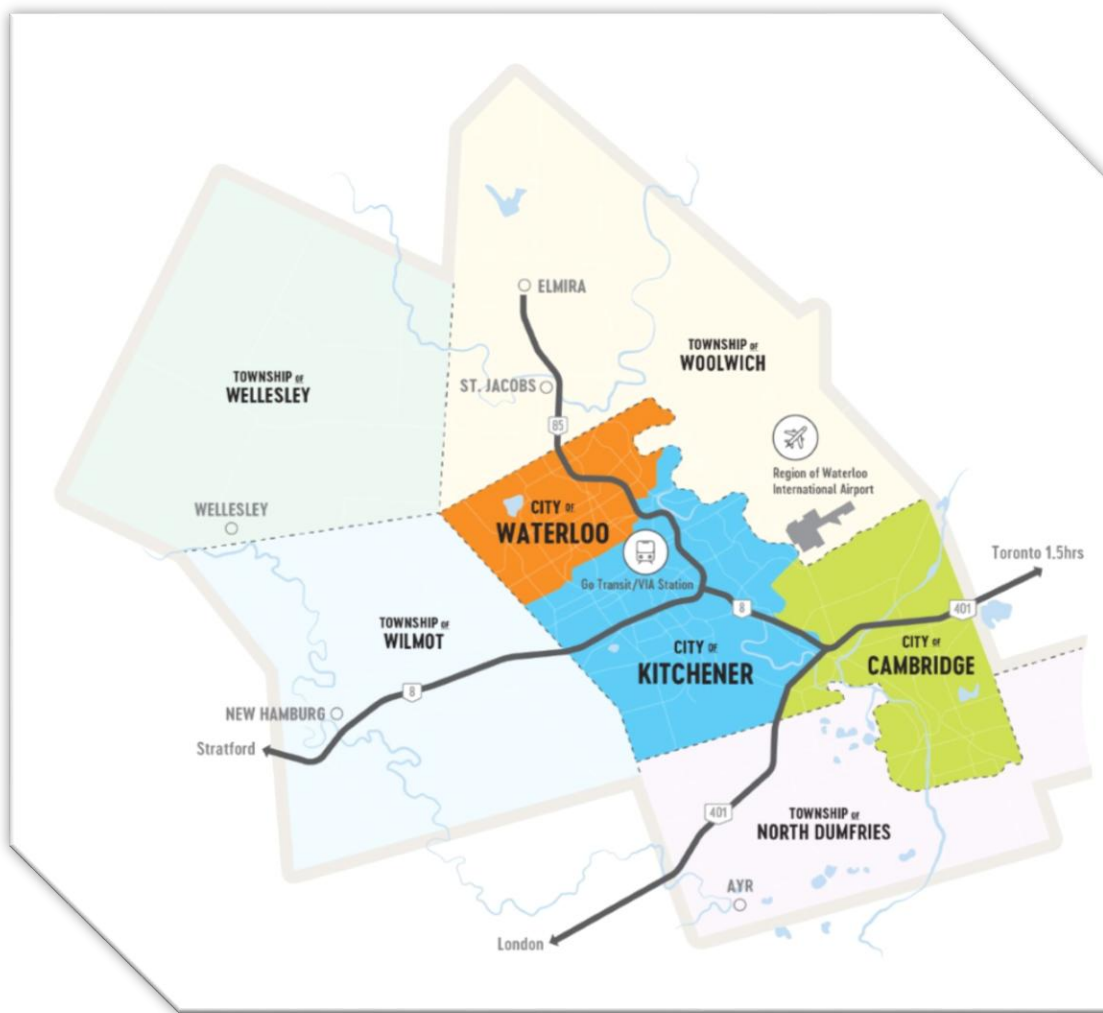


Identity-Based Harm in the Waterloo Region:

Experiences and Avenues for Prevention

Kamil Ahmed & Jamie Armstrong



Executive Summary

Community Justice Initiatives has undertaken a project to explore the prevention of identity-based harm in the Waterloo Region. Our working definition of identity-based harm includes any action, behavior, or structural condition that targets, devalues, or excludes an individual or group based on any personal characteristic. These personal characteristics may include race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, ability, faith, culture, language, or socioeconomic status, among others, as well as the ways these aspects of identity intersect with one another.

There is an abundance of literature from community agencies that paints a detailed picture of identity-based harm in the Waterloo Region. This report summarizes local publications covering experiences of hate crimes, hate-motivated crimes, xenophobia, Islamophobia, anti-Indigenous racism, anti-Black racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, sexism, gender-based violence, and harm against people experiencing homelessness. From our review of this literature, we conclude that identity-based harm exists in vast and complex ways in our community, in subtle forms and overt forms, in a wide variety of settings, affecting a wide variety of identities.

Measures to prevent identity-based harm come in many forms. One avenue for prevention is prejudice reduction measures, which aim to alter the beliefs and behaviors of potential perpetrators of identity-based harm. Prejudice reduction measures may be rolled out in schools, workplaces, or broadly to the public.

A second avenue for prevention is political and structural reforms, which focus on the state's role in producing or eliminating conflict over power and resources. The Waterloo Region Community Safety and Wellbeing Framework is a local example of political and structural reform, though its effectiveness has not yet been evaluated. The Canadian government's Action Plan on Combatting Hate and the new Bill C-9 (the Combatting Hate Act) are two federal level examples.

A third avenue for prevention is socioeconomic investments, which aim to improve the social and economic conditions of community members to reduce interpersonal harm more generally. This might include increased supports for affordable housing, healthcare, education, mental health, and substance use.

Principles of restorative justice and restorative practice can also inform how to effectively prevent identity-based harm. Proactive restorative practices have been carried out in schools and in communities to foster group cohesion, trust, respect, and belonging. Indigenous justice traditions in particular illustrate how restorative practices can serve a preventative function, through an emphasis on kinship, community, and relationships.

A rich array of information exists on approaches to prevent identity-based harm. Still, it is evident that identity-based harm is commonplace in the Waterloo Region. It is necessary to pursue evidence-informed and culturally competent ways of preventing identity-based harm within our region, to continue towards a community where everyone feels welcome, included, safe, and valued.

Territorial Acknowledgement

Community Justice Initiatives is located within what is currently called Waterloo Region, and parts of this literature review focus on community-based research from within the region. The Waterloo Region, as it is currently known, includes the cities of Cambridge, Kitchener, and Waterloo, as well as the townships of North Dumfries, Wellesley, Wilmot and Woolwich. The region sits within 950,000 acres of land that were historically set aside in the Haldimand Treaty of 1874 for the Six Nations of the Grand River. These lands are the traditional territories of the Haudenosaunee, Anishinaabe, and Chonnonton People. The region also lies within the lands protected by the Dish with One Spoon Wampum, an agreement set out between the Anishinaabe Three Fires Confederacy and the Haudenosaunee Confederacy in 1701. The Dish with One Spoon Wampum is intended to be an agreement among all Indigenous peoples and settlers who take residence in the Wampum area:

“The Peacemaker said that nation leaders should eat from this common dish, sharing one spoon and only taking what each one needs. No knife should be used as there should be no conflict and violence; everyone has an equal right to eat from the dish or harvest from the land’s bounty. There should always be something for others and future generations and the plate should be kept clean. Our harvest from and development of the land should be based on ethical, conscious practice as caring stewards.” (Chung-Tiam-Fook, 2022)

Historically, white settler researchers have caused great harm to Indigenous peoples in Canada by conducting research *on* them, instead of with, by, or for them. As such, Indigenous perspectives may not be wholly reflected in a review of research literature. Endeavors in learning from Indigenous community members through research should be reciprocal and beneficial for all. Resources such as the Indigenous Research Level of Engagement Tool from the First Nations University of Canada can provide knowledge seekers with guidance on creating partnerships, using strengths-based approaches, and understanding Indigenous ways of knowing.

Statement of Positionality

I, Jamie (she/her), am a white, Canadian-born settler, descended from German and Scottish settlers. I acknowledge the extent of unearned privilege I have been granted as a white, cisgender, able-bodied, university educated woman from a middle-class family background, and how my positionality while writing this report is shaped by my identity, background, and access to resources. I received my Master’s degree in Criminology and Criminal Justice Policy from the University of Guelph in 2023, and I carry a background in the criminal legal system and academia – fields that have historically caused harm as tools of colonization in Canada and beyond. I am committed to research guided by lived experience of identity-based harm and critical analysis of my own biases, and I am welcoming of critical reflections on anything that is written herein.

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Introduction

"One of the very hardest things about preventing and ending violence is that most of our work isn't really about getting someone to stop being violent. Most of the time, that's not the heart of the thing. The even-more-rigorous struggle is to cultivate all of the awareness and skills that would have been necessary for the violence not to have happened in the first place... Solving violence is rarely as much about the moment at hand as it is about everything else that preceded it." (Shara, 2020, p. 221).

As this quote from author Nathan Shara suggests, the prevention of harm is a complex, yet worthwhile, line of inquiry. This literature review delves specifically into the prevention of identity-based harm. We begin by defining what identity-based harm means, then explore existing literature on the experience of identity-based harm in the Waterloo Region. We then summarize information on the prevention of identity-based harm, first in a general sense, and then through a restorative practice lens.

Defining Identity-Based Harm

The definition of identity-based harm that has guided this literature review is any action, behavior, or structural condition that targets, devalues, or excludes an individual or group based on any personal characteristic. These personal characteristics may include race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, ability, faith, culture, language, or socioeconomic status, among others, as well as the ways these aspects of identity intersect with one another. The type of identity-based harm ranges from explicit harm, like harassment or violence, to subtle harm, like exclusion, macroaggressions, or institutional barriers. The intent behind identity-based harm also falls within a broad range, from "well-meaning" actions driven by subconscious bias to willful, purposeful violence.

In terms of definitions written in law, the Criminal Code of Canada defines hate crime as any of three specific acts:

- Advocating genocide: promoting or committing acts with intent to destroy in whole or in part any identifiable group (Criminal Code, 1985, s. 318).
- Public incitement of hatred: communicating statements in any public place to incite hatred against any identifiable group where such incitement is likely to lead to a breach of the peace (Criminal Code, 1985, s. 319).
- Willful promotion of hatred: communicating statements, other than in private conversation, to willfully promote hatred against any identifiable group (Criminal Code, 1985, s. 319).

These definitions are known to be narrow and require a very high threshold of evidence for conviction (Shafiq, 2022). The Criminal Code also lists hate-motivation in

crime as an aggravating factor, meaning sentencing may be increased for any violation of law if it is proven to be motivated by hate, prejudice, or bias (Criminal Code, 1985, s.718.2(a)(i)). In addition to hate crimes and hate-motivated crimes, police in Canada may investigate “hate-motivated incidents”, which refers to “incidents rooted in hate, bias, prejudice, or discrimination but are not breaches of any code, charter or law.” (Waterloo Regional Police, 2025). The term “hate” has been defined by the Supreme Court of Canada in the case *R. v. Keegstra* as “an extreme emotion that, if exercised against members of an identifiable group, implies that those individuals are to be despised, scorned, denied respect, and made subject to ill treatment on the basis of group affiliation” (Department of Canadian Heritage, 2024, p.4).

Identity-based harm is not a term officially defined in Canadian legislation, but rather an umbrella that encapsulates a range of harm types, some of which have been officially defined in legislation and some not. Identity-based harm does not refer solely to hate crime, hate-motivated crime, hate-motivated incidents, violent extremism, discrimination, prejudice, or bias – rather, it is an overarching concept that includes all these types of harm, and more. It includes a range of both legal and illegal harms, and therefore, justice, accountability, and healing from these harms may occur through the criminal legal system and outside of it.

The Experience of Identity-Based Harm in Waterloo Region

There is an abundance of literature from community agencies that paints a detailed picture of identity-based harm in the Waterloo Region. This literature review is possible because of the efforts of community members who shared their personal stories of identity-based harm and the research teams who have mobilized those stories. We are sincerely grateful for the work and dedication of all who contributed to the research reviewed here.

Starting with a more generalized view, the Centre for Mutual Wellbeing (CMW) collects information through their Anti-Hate Services reporting system. This reporting system allows community members to disclose incidents involving hate related to any aspect of identity through phone call, text, email, or an online form. The CMW’s most recent report shares insights from 2025, in which 289 cases were reported through their reporting system and their online survey (Gordon et al., 2026). Of the cases that came through their reporting system, 41% were classified by CMW staff as “hate incidents”, 33% as “hate crimes”, 18% as “hate-motivated crimes”, 7% as “online hate”, and 2% as “discrimination” (Gordon et al., 2026).

The majority of reports to the CMW are not classified as crimes. As such, police-reported data on crime does not convey the entire prevalence of identity-based harm in the region. Still, we examine it to narrow in on a subsection of that harm. The Waterloo Regional Police reported 224 hate-motivated crimes in 2025 (Gordon et al., 2026).

Police-reported hate crimes in the Waterloo Region have been steadily increasing from 2019-2023, before decreasing slightly from 2023-2025 (Statistics Canada, 2024). Despite this decrease, in 2024 the Waterloo Region had the second highest rate of hate crimes per 100,000 people in Canada, second only to the Ottawa-Gatineau region (Statistics Canada, 2024). Waterloo Region has held one of the top two highest spots for rate of hate crimes in Canada since 2022 (Statistics Canada, 2024).

There remains consistent discrepancies between the number of identity-based harm incidents reported to or charged by the Waterloo Regional Police and incidents reported to self-reporting systems or research teams in Waterloo Region (Shafiq, 2022). Some community-based research has shed light on the hesitancy of those who have experienced identity-based harm to report to the police. For instance, research from Spectrum (2021) in Waterloo Region found that LGBTQ2S+ individuals report violence and harassment to police at lower rates than non-LGBTQ2S+ individuals. This may be a result of LGBTQ2S+ harm reports being less likely to be considered “fully resolved” by their conclusion, and that 24% of trans and non-binary survey respondents reported having been harassed by the police on at least one occasion (Spectrum, 2021). Additionally, the Waterloo Region Crime Prevention Council found in research on Islamophobia that many Muslim individuals are uncomfortable to report to and trust in the police (Shafiq, 2019). Local research into women and gender-diverse individuals experiencing homelessness saw that 69% of survey respondents “have avoided using the police or decided not to report a situation of violence because it felt unsafe.” (Gordon et al., 2022, p.15). Indigenous community members have described feeling that “reporting these incidents will fall on deaf ears due to the long-standing history of Canada ignoring the voices of Indigenous peoples.” (Gordon et al., 2024, p. 55). Considering the lack of trust and perceived safety in reporting to the police, it is important to review research from community agencies and research teams. Below we summarize key points from community research in the Waterloo Region on identity-based harm.

The Waterloo Region Immigration Partnership (2024) provides data on surveys from 1700 immigrants in the region. About one in four respondents reported having experienced discrimination in the past year. Of those who had experienced discrimination, 48% cited race/skin colour as the reason, 36% cited ethnicity/culture, 31% cited having an accent, and 27% cited language ability. The research team found a correlation between having experienced discrimination and lower rating of community services, settlement experience, life satisfaction, sense of belonging, feeling of safety, and wanting to stay in the Waterloo Region. Similarly, the Children and Youth Planning Table of Waterloo Region (2024) surveyed over 1800 youth in the region, and found that one in three youth of colour reported experiencing discrimination due to ethnicity or

culture, and one in two youth of colour reported experiencing discrimination due to race or skin colour.

Additionally, the Waterloo Region Crime Prevention Council consulted a panel of Muslim speakers to engage in dialogue about experiences of Islamophobia in the region. The speakers shared personal experiences of identity-based harm, from verbal harassment to vandalism to physical assault (Shafiq, 2019). Some specific examples highlighted in the dialogue included systemic Islamophobic factors impeding access to businesses and services, being physically attacked in an elevator, and being chased and verbally harassed for wearing a hijab (Shafiq, 2019). The speakers reflected on some of the root causes that, in their opinion, create Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hate, such as being uninformed about Islam, openly Islamophobic politicians, selective media coverage, fear of “the other”, and anonymity of social media (Shafiq, 2019).

In a similar vein, a speaker from Crow Shield Lodge, a local Indigenous organization, reflected on root causes of anti-Indigenous hate, and noted elevated levels of hate speech when the Indigenous community gathers in one place for a significant event or practice (Gordon et al., 2024). As written by Clarence Cachagee, representative of Crow Shield Lodge, “it feels that when we use our voices, it brings out more hate.” (Gordon et al., 2024, p. 55). Cachagee estimates that one in three Indigenous community members have experienced hate speech while residing in Waterloo Region (Gordon et al., 2024).

Olufunke Oba (2018) explored the experience of anti-Black racism with Black African youth living in Waterloo Region using elder-facilitated dialogue, individual life stories, and reflective journalling. The resulting narratives from the participants pointed to four mechanisms of identity-based harm in schools:

- Schools promote colourblindness – “You can’t just go, calling people racist. Can you prove it? The White girls will start crying and you better start packing your things, you are the one to get in trouble for calling somebody a bad name.” (p. 90).
- Absence of Black teachers and administrators – “The reality at school suggested Blacks belong in the lower echelons and cannot be knowledge producers.” (p. 91).
- Prominence of stereotypes and generalizations - “There can be five or six white students doing their thing, it’s normal, but if two Black students are together, then it’s abnormal, Black dudes together; that’s a gang.” (p. 100).
- Exclusion of Black history from curriculum - “They did not find themselves or their history represented or only in ways that reinforced their inferiority and furthered their oppression from peers, staff, teachers, and administrators alike.” (p. 106).

This exploration of Black African youths' experiences also provided narratives around resilience in the face of identity-based harm. Themes of self-esteem, resistance, and personal agency were discussed by the youth, who described drawing on their parents' strength, connecting to their African heritage, taking on leadership roles at school, and relying on their faith as ways that they foster resilience.

Shifting to the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals, the Outlook Study provides a detailed account of identity-based harm that targets sexuality and gender in the Waterloo region. The OutLook Study involved a widespread survey of members of the local LGBTQ community, through a collaboration between Wilfrid Laurier University, The Rainbow Community Council, The AIDS Committee of Cambridge, Kitchener, Waterloo, and Area, The Region of Waterloo Public Health and Emergency Services, and The Centre for Community Research Learning and Action. Of the 526 respondents who identified as LGBTQ, nearly three quarters reported being made fun of or called names because of their identity (Luu et al., 2017). It was also reported that 25% of trans respondents had experienced physical assault and 10% of cis respondents had experienced physical assault (Luu et al., 2017). A number of respondents indicated that they avoided certain public spaces due to fear of harm, including healthcare settings, public washrooms, places of worship, and gyms (Luu et al., 2017).

Examining only the responses of OutLook participants who identify as trans, it was found that 73% had been made fun of or called names because of their gender identity (Davis et al., 2019). This number increases to 83% for trans respondents who are in high school (Goldfarb et al., 2019). Due to fear of harassment, 74% of trans respondents in high school reported avoiding washrooms at school (Goldfarb et al., 2019). For trans respondents of all ages, about three quarters reported feeling unsafe in healthcare settings, and half reported having to educate medical staff in healthcare settings about gender identity and trans-related care (Davis et al., 2019).

Healthcare settings have proven to be a location of increased identity-based harm for trans and non-binary folks. Through interviews with 33 trans or non-binary individuals in Waterloo Region, Drew Burchell and colleagues (2024) found that a significant number of participants have avoided coming out to their healthcare team altogether due to fear of discrimination or differential treatment. Common themes from these interviews highlight harm through "institutional erasure", where trans and non-binary identities are not accommodated through healthcare policies, and "informational erasure", where there is a lack of knowledge about healthcare for trans and non-binary patients. To complement these findings, Spectrum (2021) provide statistics around identity-based harm in healthcare settings: 23% of trans individuals reported hospital staff using harmful or insulting language about identity, 15% reported being belittled or ridiculed for being trans, and 12% reported having hospital staff tell them they are not trans.

Relying on information shared in a forum of 75 LGBTQ+ community members, authors from the Waterloo Region Crime Prevention Council shed some light on factors that underlie anti-LGBTQ+ harm. Forum participants shared a consensus that “there are few safe spaces that honour and celebrate diversity and allow people to fully express their identity.” (Walters et al., 2015, p. 7). Forum participants also pointed out widespread myths, stereotypes and prejudices about the LGBTQ+ community, along with a widespread culture of ignorance and complacency among systems and community members (Walters et al., 2015). Although this community forum occurred nearly ten years ago, it still brings forward factors that may underpin the identity-based harm that more recent reports have examined.

On identity-based harm that targets neurodivergence, one team from the Counselling Collaborative of Waterloo Region has explored identity-based harm for individuals with autism within healthcare settings. This research was done through focus groups with individuals with autism and their caregivers. A significant number of focus group participants shared a sentiment of feeling overlooked and unattended to by medical professionals (Reitzel et al., 2024). In particular, participants of colour or of lower economic status felt that medical professionals carry biases against them, and favor working with non-racialized clients of higher economic status (Reitzel et al., 2024). Participants also felt that medical professionals make assumptions about their abilities, leading to a lack of appropriate accommodations and a feeling of exclusion (Reitzel et al., 2024).

Intersectional research exploring how multiple aspects of identity interact can provide even more nuances of identity-based harm in our community. For instance, returning to the OutLook study, researchers also examined the survey results of 73 individuals who were newcomers to Canada and identified as LGBTQ. This analysis found that 82% of non-racialized newcomers and 97% of racialized newcomers feel they “frequently have to pass as straight” (Boles et al., 2018). Additionally, 66% of non-racialized newcomers and 79% of racialized newcomers felt that “being LGBTQ has hurt their family” (Boles et al., 2018). Overall, newcomers who identify as LGBTQ are less likely to access mental health services, less likely to have a primary care provider, and less likely to come out to their healthcare provider compared to non-LGBTQ and Canadian-born survey respondents (Boles et al., 2018).

Following the OutLook survey analysis, researcher Emily Cox (2020) conducted surveys with eight racialized newcomers who identified as LGBTQ+. Common among these eight interviews was a sentiment that identity-based harm in participants’ country of origin tended to be based on sexual orientation or gender identity, while identity-based harm in the Waterloo Region tended to be based on race or ethnicity. Racism on a systemic level was pointed out by most participants, such as underrepresentation of people of colour in academic settings and workplaces, and procedural barriers to getting

one's driver's license when arriving in Canada. Some participants also noted the pressure of representing the LGBTQ+ and immigrant communities – as one participant noted about their response to racism, “you can't be angry anymore, because... then you are adding fire and then it reflects bad on you [and] on the people who look like you.” (p. 52).

Continuing with an exploration of intersectional research, Brianna Hunt (2019) inquired into the experience of Muslim women in the Waterloo Region through focus groups with 55 participants. A theme among many participants was that subtle, covert discrimination is the most common form of identity-based harm that they experience. As one participant stated, “most of the time, [discrimination] is very subtle, and you wouldn't think that people can notice it, but we can always feel it.” (p.49). At the same time, more overt identity-based harm like verbal abuse and threats of violence shape many Muslim women's experience in the local community as well. Participants shared specific impacts of identity-based harm, including increased stress, feeling unwelcome, unsafe, and isolated, low confidence and self-esteem, and a struggle to find and understand their own identity. Similar to the previously mentioned research, it was also discussed here that Muslim women share a feeling of responsibility to represent their religion and community. As one participant shared, “I keep reminding my girls that you are presenting Islam, please think twice before you do anything.” (p. 54), and another responded, “Yes, and I think this really, like puts a lot of pressure on people.” (p. 54).

The Waterloo Region Family Health Network explored the experience of individuals with an autism diagnosis who identified as transgender and their caregivers through interviews and surveys. Several participants discussed the lack of support and understanding of how their identities interact – some spaces, programs, or policies in the Waterloo Region validate identifying as trans or identifying as autistic, but seldom both (Genik, 2023). Systemic discrimination, microaggressions, and stigma were also a common point of discussion, including common generalizing assumptions about the mental capacity and accessibility needs of trans-autistic folks (Genik, 2023). Many participants agreed that creating more safe and supportive gathering spaces for the trans-autistic community to come together would be a strategy to counteract the identity-based harm they face (Genik, 2023).

Researchers from the Waterloo Region Crime Prevention Council held focus groups to understand the experience of youth who use substances in the region. Participants across all focus groups identified that school was a prominent location for identity-based harm (Darisi & Van den Daele, 2019). Many noted that the school environment doesn't feel supportive or inclusive of youth who use substances, and that both peers and teachers can be bullies who solidify feelings of social isolation (Darisi & Van den Daele, 2019). Identity-based harm in healthcare settings was also commonly noted, with participants sharing that they seldom feel their needs are taken seriously by

physicians or mental health professionals, and that they self-medicate with substances so that they can avoid accessing healthcare altogether (Darisi & Van den Daele, 2019). Many participants also shared the belief that resources and education were needed for schools, parents, and healthcare settings to increase support and limit identity-based harm (Darisi and Van den Daele, 2019).

A team from the Centre for Mutual Wellbeing of Kitchener-Waterloo conducted surveys with racialized Muslim women to gain insight into experiences of gender-based violence (GBV) (Mahmud et al., 2023). Of the participants, 45% reported that they were experiencing GBV, or knew a racialized Muslim woman who was experiencing GBV, at least weekly (Mahmud et al., 2023). In reporting on what type of violence racialized Muslim women were likely to experience in their daily lives, the types that were given included emotional/mental violence (70%), racism (64%), verbal violence (61%), Islamophobia (44%), financial violence (38%), physical violence (31%), spiritual/religious violence (26%), and sexual violence (8%) (Mahmud et al., 2023). Ways that respondents seek safety or recommend those experiencing violence to seek safety include connecting with informal supports (family, friends, and close contacts) and building a formal support network (women's organizations, domestic violence organizations, lawyers, shelters, government organizations, therapists/counsellors, police, and community-based social service organizations). At the same time, another theme was avoiding support systems in order to avoid being shunned or judged by community members, with nearly half of participants reporting that they did not disclose instances of violence to family, friends, community leaders, police, or social service agencies (Mahmud et al., 2023). The report concludes with recommendations for greater restorative services and gender and culturally responsive services so that all survivors of GBV feel comfortable in seeking support (Mahmud et al., 2023).

The Centre for Mutual Wellbeing of Kitchener-Waterloo has also published research on the experience of Muslim youth in the region, relaying information gathered from 113 survey participants and 19 focus group participants (Valerio, 2023). One main theme among focus group participants was discrimination as a barrier to personal health and wellbeing, in that participants were "struggling with discrimination and to balance their religious identity with a hostile surrounding." (Valerio, 2023, p. 8). Common among participants was experiencing verbal harassment, discrimination, and prejudice, with instances of escalated violence like the Quebec Mosque shooting leaving participants "afraid to speak up." (Valerio, 2023, p. 9). It was also pointed out that there is a lack of representation of youth voices and Muslim voices in community organizations and local leadership, which would feel empowering for participants (Valerio, 2023). Participants spoke of resiliency in the face of identity-based harm through their faith, in that faith was "guiding their behaviour and helping them to focus on and prioritize 'what really matters' from an Islamic perspective." (Valerio, 2023, p.10).

To conclude our exploration of intersectional research, we summarize research from Jennifer Gordon and colleagues (2022), who conducted surveys and interviews with women-identifying and gender-diverse individuals experiencing homelessness in the Waterloo Region. Of the 61 participants, 48% reported experiencing violence 1-2 times a week, and 44% reported experiencing violence every day. Delving further into aspects of identity, it was found that 100% of trans respondents experienced transphobia regularly, 60% of racialized respondents experienced racism regularly, and 60% of queer respondents experienced homophobia regularly. On the topic of safety, 83% of respondents indicated they stayed in an abusive housing situation because it felt safer than being homeless, and 65% of respondents indicated that they avoid accessing services and supports they need because of safety concerns. Several respondents discussed in interviews the ways in which they protect themselves from identity-based harm:

- “I will change the way I present myself in the means of my gender or ethics in order to blend in with an environment in which I believe is violent.” (p. 27).
- “Don’t tell people you’re homeless, it’s like giving them permission to take advantage of you.” (p. 27).
- “Keep to yourself, most people haven’t noticed me because of that and so when conflict happens they leave me out of it.” (p. 27).

Once again, we express gratitude to the community agencies who have conducted the research discussed thus far, and to every participant who worked alongside the research teams to provide personal accounts of identity-based harm. Thanks to the historic and ongoing work of dedicated community members, it has been made clear that identity-based harm exists in vast and complex ways in our community, in subtle forms and overt forms, in a wide variety of settings, affecting a wide variety of identities.

Prevention of Identity-Based Harm

In this section, we explore theoretical underpinnings and practical approaches around preventing identity-based harm, in the Waterloo Region and beyond. This section is structured around the three categories of identity-based harm prevention efforts put forth by Stanford law professor Shirin Sinnar – prejudice reduction, structural and political reform, and socioeconomic investment.

Prejudice Reduction Measures

The first category proposed by Sinnar (2023), “prejudice reduction measures”, includes prevention measures that aim to change the beliefs of perpetrators of identity-based harm and alter the norms and expectations of acceptable behavior in a community. These efforts stem from the view that identity-based harms are outward

manifestations of internal biases. Prevention measures in this category do not attempt to alter social and political structures, instead focusing on changing individuals' attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors within those structures. Particularly successful prejudice reduction measures tend to involve face-to-face contact and knowledge sharing between diverse individuals or groups.

Some prejudice reduction measures may be carried out in schools, intending to interrupt prejudices in a learning environment before a community's citizens become adults. For instance, a program titled "HateLess: Together Against Hatred" has been delivered in German schools for grades seven to nine, with the goal of preventing hate speech and hate crime among students (Wachs et al., 2024). The HateLess program aims to increase knowledge of the prevalence and impacts of hate, as well as emotional and social skills for positive engagement with people of diverse backgrounds (Wachs et al., 2024). Among over 800 students who took part in the program, there was a significant decrease in hate speech behavior and a significant increase in countering hate speech behavior and in empathy behaviors compared to before the program and compared to students who had not taken part (Wachs et al., 2024). Thus, the authors conclude that this program may be a valuable approach to preventing hate speech and related behaviors.

Another example of a prejudice reduction measure, called "community conversations", has been recently evaluated by a team at Nottingham Trent University in the United Kingdom. The community conversations in Nottingham aim to bring community members of diverse identities together to identify and discuss local issues (Zempi et al., 2025). Community members share knowledge and collaborate with others towards a common goal, in the hopes of increasing community cohesion and respect for diverse perspectives (Zempi et al., 2025). This research team conducted interviews and focus groups with community conversation facilitators, who had led nearly 500 participants through community conversations (Zempi et al., 2025). They found that facilitators saw generally positive interactions between members of community with diverse backgrounds and often heard participants verbally expressing changes in viewpoints and prejudices following the community conversations (Zempi et al., 2025). The authors note that further research is needed to examine the effects of community conversations on those who have caused or have experienced identity-based harm (Zempi et al., 2025).

There is not an abundance of literature on the implementation and evaluation of prejudice reduction measures in a more local context. Still, there are plenty of recommendations for the development of prejudice reduction measures in Canada, Ontario, and the Waterloo Region. For instance, the Anti-Hate Network, funded by the Government of Canada's Anti-Racism Action Program, has provided a list of preventative steps to "make school communities less vulnerable to hate-promoting

groups and individuals" (The Canadian Anti-Hate Network, 2022, p. 35). Some of these prejudice reduction steps include:

- Train staff to identify hate-promoting ideology among students;
- Establish a culture of safely discussing equity and racial justice;
- Increase visibility of symbols of diversity and tolerance;
- Provide information to parents to understand the threat of hate-promoting ideology;
- Establish norms and policies for classroom work and behavior that reinforce tolerance and obstruct hate-promoting ideas;
- Engage students, teachers, parents, and administration in updating school curriculum to reflect the identities and stories of all of its members (The Canadian Anti-Hate Network, 2022).

Additionally, the Canadian Centre for Safer Communities has identified through interviews and surveys that school staff share a widespread desire for training on preventing, identifying, and responding to behaviors that indicate identity-based prejudices (Colliver, 2024). Based on an analysis of characteristics of hate crime offenders, Farrell and Lockwood (2023) also recommend curriculum for both teachers and students around preventing and responding to hate crime, and further recommend training for businesses and community organizations. In the Waterloo Region Crime Prevention Council's exploration of Islamophobia in the region, the panelists encouraged education about Islam and Muslims throughout the community as a strategy for preventing Islamophobia (Shafiq, 2019). As was outlined in the previous section on the experience of identity-based harm in Waterloo Region, folks from diverse marginalized communities are regularly confronted with community members' assumptions and lack of knowledge about specific aspects of identity. The prejudice reduction approach seeks to prevent identity-based harm by targeting these assumptions and gaps in knowledge.

Political and Structural Reforms

Sinnar's (2023) second category of identity-based harm prevention efforts are political and structural reforms. Prevention efforts in this category consider the state's role in producing or eliminating conflict between groups over power and resources. A state's racialized, gendered, and colonial hierarchies are seen as the drivers of identity-based harm. Two hypotheses exist within this category: the "emboldenment hypothesis" states that identity-based harm is encouraged by displays of majority supremacy (e.g. racist comments from White politicians), while the "political threat hypothesis" states that identity-based harm is linked to successes of marginalized groups (e.g. the election of a Black president). Both hypotheses propose that structural and political elements

motivate identity-based harm, and therefore, preventing identity-based harm must occur at the structural and political level.

Community safety and wellbeing frameworks provide an example of political and structural measures to prevent identity-based harm. Since 2019, the Government of Ontario requires that all municipalities across the province develop a plan for community safety and wellbeing. The plans must address four areas of focus related to crime and harm: social development, prevention, risk involvement, and incident response (Region of Waterloo, 2022).

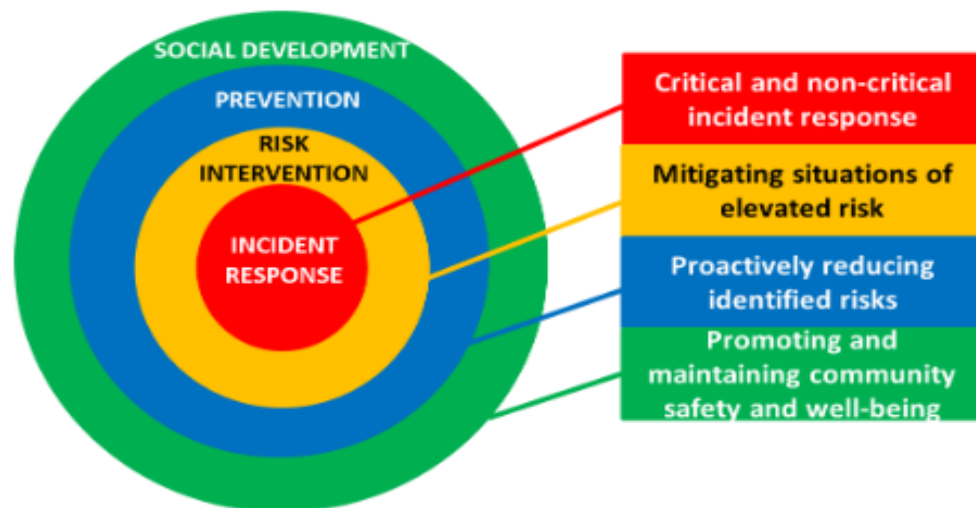


Figure 1: Ontario Community Safety and Well-being Planning Framework (Region of Waterloo, 2022)

The Region of Waterloo (2022) was granted approval for the Waterloo Region Community Safety and Wellbeing Framework in January 2022 after consulting with community members and gaining approval from the Ontario Ministries of the Attorney General and Solicitor General. The community advisors identified a need for this plan to include anti-hate as an overarching principle, suggesting that the municipal government take responsibility for dispelling hate, racism, and discrimination in the local community. As such, the Waterloo Region Community Safety and Wellbeing Framework identifies four priority areas: combatting hate, mental health and addictions, creating safe and inclusive spaces, and addressing intimate partner violence, gender-based violence, and missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. In the area of combatting hate, an Action Table was launched in April 2024, with the goal of "developing an action plan for combatting identity-based harm and hate that reflects the highest priorities, greatest impacts, and holds systems accountable." (Safe and Well Waterloo Region, 2025). With its core focus on combatting hate, the Waterloo Region Community Safety and Wellbeing Framework is an example of a political and structural reform for preventing identity-based harm.

At the federal level, the Department of Canadian Heritage (2024) recently provided an Action Plan for Combatting Hate. The plan includes three pillars: 1) empowering communities to identify and prevent hate; 2) supporting victims and survivors and protecting communities; and 3) building community trust, partnerships, and institutional readiness. The first pillar in particular includes initiatives for preventing identity-based harm by “changing attitudes, behaviours and social norms that contribute to hate by building strong and healthy communities.” (p. 13). Budgeting for this pillar includes \$25 million over five years for the Canadian Heritage Multiculturalism and Anti-Racism Program to “fund projects and community-based events that prevent or address hate, support networks and resources, and foster intercultural and interfaith understanding.” (p. 14). The budget also includes \$19.5 million over three years for Public Safety Canada’s Centre for Community Engagement and Prevention of Violence to “enhance its capacity to address radicalization to violence and violent extremism... and build the capacity of Canadian practitioners and communities to prevent and counter extreme forms of hate-motivated violence.” (p. 14). Some initiatives in the third pillar also relate to prevention of identity-based harm in Canada. The National Strategy on Countering Radicalization will be implemented to enhance support for frontline prevention efforts, and the Combatting Hate Community Information Resource Hub will be created to foster knowledge sharing between government, law enforcement, and community agencies.

In another example of political and structural reforms, in September 2025 the Minister of Justice introduced in the federal House of Commons “Bill C-9 – An Act to amend the Criminal Code (hate propaganda, hate crime and access to religious or cultural places)”. The Bill, with a short title of “the Combatting Hate Act”, proposes several changes to the Criminal Code of Canada around hate crime:

- Create an offence of willfully promoting hatred against any identifiable group by displaying certain symbols in a public place;
- Create a hate crime offence of committing an offence under that Act or any other Act of Parliament that is motivated by hatred based on certain factors ;
- Repeal the requirement that the Attorney General consent to the institution of proceedings for hate propaganda offences;
- Create an offence of intimidating a person in order to impede them from accessing certain places that are primarily used for religious worship or by an identifiable group for certain purposes;
- Create an offence of intentionally obstructing or interfering with a person’s lawful access to such places.

In short, Bill C-9 would expand the definition of hate crime to include a broader range of behaviors that can be charged and prosecuted. Responses to the proposals of Bill C-9 have been mixed. On one hand, the Federal Ombudsperson for Victims of

Crime has lent their full support to the Bill. They suggest that the changes to the Criminal Code will strengthen the ability to prevent and prosecute hate crimes and will affirm the legal system's validation of the harms of hate crime (Roebuck, 2025). On the other hand, the Canadian Civil Liberties Association (2025) published a critique of the Bill signed by 43 community and civil society organizations from across Canada. They suggest that there is a lack of clear safeguards in the Bill that will "increase the risk of arbitrary, inconsistent or selective enforcement... [that] are likely to disproportionately harm equity-deserving groups, who have historically been subject to excessive surveillance and policing of their expression." (p. 2). They instead encourage the government to pursue community-based approaches to combatting hate that do not rely on the criminal legal system.

The Centre for Mutual Wellbeing of Kitchener-Waterloo (2023) have put forward a range of recommendations for action at the federal, provincial, and municipal levels of government to address Islamophobia specifically. These recommendations were gathered during a community consultation with over 30 members from the local Muslim community and Muslim-led community organizations. At the federal level, the Centre's recommendations relate to reworking of the definition of Islamophobia that guides federal legal decision-making, amendments to the Criminal Code for defining, documenting, and responding to hate-motivated crimes, and greater investment into understanding and healing from gendered Islamophobia. At the provincial level, the recommendations relate to creating provincial Hate Crime Accountability Units, social and economic investment towards uplifting Muslim women, improving provincial human rights commissions, mandating anti-Islamophobic teaching for students and staff in schools, greater training and oversight for police to address Islamophobia and hate, and investment into affordable housing. At the municipal level, the recommendations relate to creating by-laws against street and neighbor harassment, investment into community-based reporting and services for healing, developing training and opportunities for Muslim women's leadership, and promoting community awareness on anti-Islamophobia and local Muslim history. Evidently, there are a wide array of avenues for political and structural reforms to prevent and respond to hate in the Waterloo Region and beyond.

Socioeconomic Investment

The third category of identity-based harm prevention efforts proposed by Sinnar (2023) is socioeconomic investment in communities. In this category, identity-based harm is correlated with the social and economic strains of a community, such as lack of affordable housing and healthcare and elevated mental illness and substance abuse. Prevention efforts in the category of socioeconomic investments tend to lump identity-based harm together with interpersonal harm more generally, and aim to improve the

living conditions of community members so that the motivation to harm others will be lessened.

As was previously mentioned, the Waterloo Region has had one of the highest rates of hate crimes in Canada since 2022 (Statistics Canada, 2024). Also, the Waterloo Region has had lower-than-average wellbeing scores since 2021, according to Statistics Canada's Canadian Social Survey (Ayer, 2025). These wellbeing scores indicate that Waterloo Region residents report lower mental health, life satisfaction, neighborhood satisfaction, meaning and purpose, and sense of belonging than the Canadian average (Ayer, 2025). While these two data sets may suggest a correlation that lends itself to socioeconomic investment pathways of prevention, there must still be caution. Empirical evidence is mixed on whether economic strain or poor mental health are directly connected with hate crime and other identity-based harms (Sinnar, 2023).

Still, there is some evidence that suggests that preventative socioeconomic investment has had an effect on levels of harm in the Waterloo Region. For instance, researchers Newberry and Brown (2015) have worked alongside the Waterloo Connectivity program to evaluate its efficacy in preventing harm. The Connectivity program, launched in 2014, is a weekly meeting of professionals from health and social service agencies to collaborate on individual cases of elevated risk factors, such as mental illness, addictions, homelessness, or family dysfunction. Connectivity members share resources and knowledge with a goal of proactively intervening in a case before imminent harm or crisis occurs. Through analyzing data from follow-ups with clients after they had received support from the Connectivity program, it was found that clients experienced increased trust in local service providers and increased stability and wellness, along with decreased interactions with police. This provides just one example of mobilizing community resources to prevent harm by addressing socioeconomic strains.

Overlap of Prevention Approaches

The categories proposed by Sinnar (2023) – prejudice reduction measures, social and political reforms, and socioeconomic investment – are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, many of the examples provided for each category involve elements of multiple prevention approaches. For example, prejudice reduction measures that are rolled out in schools would involve a degree of political and structural intervention if they were to be mandated by the provincial government. Federally regulated structural reforms may involve a component of boosting socioeconomic supports. Local efforts to improve socioeconomic conditions may involve events to foster community members' sense of belonging and inclusion that also serve as prejudice reduction measures. The overlap among prevention efforts speaks to the complexity of factors that may lead someone to cause identity-based harm, and best practice for preventing identity-based harm will

likely include elements of prejudice reduction, systemic reform, and socioeconomic supports.

Cautions for Prevention Approaches

Scholars have provided cautions for the prevention of identity-based harm, with the warning that prevention efforts may end up causing more harm if not carried out thoughtfully. Sinnar (2023) points out that preventative policies in the past have fueled unjust discrimination against those they deem to be a “risk”, providing the example of terrorism prevention fueling Islamophobia and anti-Muslim sentiment. In the name of prevention, Black and Indigenous individuals are more often surveilled and punished in public, at work, and at school than non-racialized individuals (Colliver, 2024). Prevention efforts that do take place in schools are operating in an environment built on white supremacy, colonial ideologies, and a hierarchical power structure that grants power to teachers over students (Parker-Shandal, 2020). To counter these harms, prevention efforts should focus on solving broad societal problems rather than identifying risk within individuals, and should locate as much power as possible with community service agencies rather than law enforcement agencies (Sinnar, 2023).

Another way that prevention efforts can avoid causing harm is to include the voices of those who experience identity-based harm in conversations about prevention. This idea was brought up a significant amount throughout the previously mentioned surveys, focus groups, and panel discussions with marginalized individuals. For example, in research into trans-autistic supports in the Waterloo Region, survey participants critiqued existing community programming by noting “organizations often assume what the community needs without getting them involved in the conversation.” (Genik, 2023, p.8). In focus groups with youth who use substances, participants advocated for inclusion of their own voices in conversations about supports and services, citing the disability rights slogan “Nothing about us without us.” (Darisi & Van den Daele, 2019, p.12). Conversations around prevention of identity-based harm must include the voices of lived experience in order to avoid perpetrating further harm.

Prevention and Restorative Practice

In this final section, we explore the ways that restorative justice and restorative practices can tie into identity-based harm prevention efforts. Restorative justice has a lengthy history, and its definition varies among different individuals, agencies, and cultures. At Community Justice Initiatives, restorative justice is defined as:

“An approach to addressing conflict, crime and harm that brings together those who have caused harm, those affected by it, and the broader community to collaboratively seek healing, understanding, and meaningful accountability. RJ prioritizes the recognition of needs, accountability, the repair of harm, and — whenever possible —

restorative relationships. Rather than being a one size fits all model, RJ is a flexible framework grounded in principles and practices that guide individuals and communities toward transformation in themselves, others, and the systems and contexts in which we live.” (Community Justice Initiatives, n.d.)

Restorative justice is just one part of the broader concept known as restorative practice. Restorative practice encompasses a range of preventative and responsive approaches to addressing harm in a community or society. Restorative practice differs from the mainstream criminal legal system in Canada because restorative practice is:

- Participant-centred
- Voluntary
- Non-punitive
- Directly accountable
- Equity-minded
- Community-driven
- Relationship-focused
- Non-adversarial
- Respectful
- Critically self-reflective
- Power sharing
- Multipartial

The European Forum for Restorative Justice, in partnership with justice practitioners around the European Union, has published a report theorizing how restorative practices and harm prevention relate to one another. They point out several relating factors between restorative practice and harm prevention: 1) both are future-oriented, aiming to affect future behaviors; 2) both emphasize a personal and collective responsibility for the actions of an individual; and 3) both take into account underreporting of harm to law enforcement, indicating that power over preventing and responding to harm cannot be centralized in the formal criminal legal system (Crawford et al., 2010). The authors also provide four factors that can influence the impact that restorative practices have on preventing harm: 1) community members' awareness of restorative practice as an option; 2) restorative practice being the default response within the criminal legal system; 3) the emphasis on increasing social bonds (e.g. healing family relationships, providing education or employment opportunities); and 4) the collaboration of community resources within the restorative practice (Crawford et al., 2010).

Exploring the more practical side, author Chastity Raybuck-Bonilla (2020) interviewed 18 students from California high schools that had implemented proactive restorative practices in their classrooms. These high schools were in a district where staff underwent training on proactive restorative practices to use in the classroom, with goals of building student-student and student-teacher relationships and collectively devising and agreeing on classroom rules and norms. Most students who were interviewed reported a noticeable difference in classroom environments between teachers who implemented the restorative practices and those who did not. In particular, students found that restorative practices in their classrooms built a sense of community,

established connection and trust with teachers, increased academic achievement and engagement, developed mutual respect between teachers and students, and formed a feeling of being valued, heard, and cared for. In addition to all these positives, the author cites several other studies which found that proactive restorative practices in schools have decreased disciplinary measures and suspensions.

Connecting restorative practice to prevention is not new. Restorative practices have been relied on by different cultures and communities for centuries in both preventative and responsive ways. While they might not have called it restorative practice as such, the underlying ethos and premise were shared. Authors with connections to Black, Indigenous, and other racialized communities have written about how restorative practice has historically connected to harm prevention. Author Fania E. Davis (2019) writes in *The Little Book of Race and Restorative Justice*, “While often mistakenly considered only a reactive response to harm, restorative justice is also a proactive relational strategy to create a culture of connectivity where all members of a community thrive and feel valued.” (p. 19). Author Crystena Parker-Shandal (2020) writes in *Colorizing Restorative Justice*, “Limiting [restorative] processes solely to addressing conflicts after they occur misses entirely the opportunity to use them for developing communal relationships and proactive dialogue.” (p. 65). She further describes the preventative aspects of restorative practices, naming the development of communal relationships, dialogue skills, relational connections, peace-orientation, and equitable views on power within a community.

Also in *Colorizing Restorative Justice*, author Desirée Anderson (2020) describes the co-opting of restorative practices by institutions built on white supremacy – these institutions use the responsive aspects of restorative practice for their own purposes while ignoring the preventative aspects. As she states, within white supremacist institutions, “Restorative justice sees offenses as damage to relationships and seeks to repair those relationships. Nevertheless, what do we do when there are no relationships to build on? What happens when there is no community established to which one might return?” (p. 147). Anderson advocates for the abilities of restorative practices to build community and facilitate healthy dialogue in order to prevent white supremacy and hate.

Indigenous justice traditions can inform how restorative practices serve a preventative function. Indigenous writers Larry N. Chartrand and Kanatase Horn (2016) describe that, although Indigenous legal traditions vary across Canada and different Indigenous peoples have uniquely complex ways of addressing harm, many Indigenous legal traditions share a view of “kinship as law”. Kinship places responsibility upon individuals and the community to foster and maintain positive relationships - with other people, with the earth, with spirituality, and with themselves. Kinship responsibilities are taught through childrearing practices, storytelling, and ceremonies from a young age until one becomes an Elder. In communities where kinship between individuals and

between humans and the natural world is fostered from youth to elderhood, interpersonal harm is thought to be prevented.

Delving further into Indigenous justice and prevention of harm, Indigenous researchers John G. Hansen and Darlene Lancely (2016) interviewed three members of the Opaskwayak Cree Nation in Manitoba. The interviews explored how the Opaskwayak Cree Nation's use of restorative processes helps in preventing harm in the community. The interviewees shared that from a young age, community members are taught not only that there are consequences of harming one another, there are also benefits when community members respect and uplift one another. As the authors put it, "The teaching of appropriate behavior rather than just punishing is crucial to the justice process. Without teaching one the impact of their behavior and suggesting ways to repair harm, it seems less likely that we would prevent further incidences from happening." (p. 6). The community encourages participation among youth, adults, and elders in teaching one another and engaging in the community's justice processes. It is held that the sense of belonging and inclusion that comes with participation in community activities is a factor that prevents harm among community members.

Taking into account the long history of restorative practices in Manitoba, the Manitoba Indigenous Chamber of Commerce (2025) has recently advocated for policies in government and Indigenous communities to shift away from punishment and towards prevention strategies. They put forward a call to action across the country: "Ultimately, the goal should not be to punish, but to build communities where crime is less likely to occur in the first place. This requires a fundamental shift in how Canada approaches justice: one that prioritizes Indigenous voices, acknowledges historical harms, and invests in long-term solutions." They also propose that building preventative communities may include investment in education, mental health, housing, and youth programming – all of which create the social infrastructure for kinship and restoration.

In contrast to the dominant colonizer-centered criminal legal system in Canada, Indigenous communities have understood the preventative nature of community- and relationship-based practices for some time. While restorative practice does not make up the entirety of identity-based harm prevention strategies, it provides a selection of community-building tools that evidently prove useful in preventing harm.

Conclusion

A rich array of information exists on approaches to prevent identity-based harm. Still, it is evident that identity-based harm is commonplace in the Waterloo Region, across many aspects of identity and many different settings. It is necessary to pursue evidence-informed and culturally competent ways of preventing identity-based harm within our region, to continue towards a community where everyone feels welcome, included, safe, and valued.

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