



# Winnipeg's community safety team: Two years of meaningful impact

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## ABSTRACT

Winnipeg's community safety team was established in 2023 with a mission to improve safety within the city's bus system and public spaces. It added a tier to the network of emergency services and community-based organizations that became overwhelmed with the growing crisis of homelessness, addictions and mental health since the global pandemic. In 2 short years, this relatively small and uniquely compassionate and trauma-informed team has made a significant impact on community safety.

**Key Words** Safety; transit; compassion; outreach; layered policing; statistics; public; perception.

## BUILDING A NEW TEAM

We have experienced a crisis of poverty and homelessness in Canada. In recent years, unsheltered people have increasingly moved into encampments through a calamity that seems to have started during the global pandemic. While most disenfranchised people exist as peacefully as they can, simply struggling to survive the crushing weight of poverty, many also struggle with addictions and mental health problems. The disruptiveness of these social struggles has impacted public transportation systems across Canada due to being one of the few spatial areas the disenfranchised can exist within. This creates a major impact on the perception of our community and society as a whole, as there is an inherent confrontation of an uncomfortable reality when moving through public spaces between where we live, work and play.

Impoverished people have sought refuge in public transportation systems, especially in the extreme climates experienced on the prairies that occasionally reach temperatures of  $-35^{\circ}\text{C}$  ( $-31^{\circ}\text{F}$ ). In most major urban centres, public resources have been overwhelmed; shelters are full, and our healthcare systems are having to look closely at restructuring to meet the demand of our new social realities. Within buses and bus shelters, many have found a relatively safe, although inadequate, refuge from the elements (Christmas, 2024).

In Winnipeg, as in many places across Canada, methamphetamine-induced violence and social disruption are now commonplace on buses and within transit shelters. In recent years, transit ridership, revenue and the ability to hire and retain bus operators have been drastically affected, leading to

concerns about safety and dissatisfaction from the public. In 2023, newly elected Mayor Scott Gillingham carried through with campaign promises to do something about the public safety crisis in Winnipeg, especially within the city's transit system. Funding was allocated for a new team to support the array of existing and struggling government and non-government organizations already working on varying aspects of the growing safety issues in the city.

In the fall of 2023, Winnipeg's new community safety team (CST) was established in record-breaking time. The first cohort of 23 officers, 2 support staff and a team lead were equipped, housed, trained and deployed within a period of months. It was no small feat as, on top of all the logistics of building an office and acquiring uniforms and vehicles, we had to negotiate a unique operating agreement with Manitoba's provincial government. Our safety officers are empowered as peace officers under the provincial *Police Service Act* and as special constables under the City of Winnipeg Charter Act. The authors of this paper are an inaugural safety officer, who has since been promoted to supervisor (Wardrope), and the inaugural team lead (Christmas).

The team lead reports directly to the city's chief administrative officer. By design, the individual safety officers of the CST are exceptionally diverse in background, age, gender, education, culture and experience. They were selected from diverse fields of work, including social services, law enforcement, transit, government and non-government organizations. Regardless of their backgrounds, to align with the vision of the CST, all the safety officers were selected for their compassionate attitude toward service delivery. They were

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also selected for the ability and willingness to be trained in de-escalation and the use of responsible force for self-defence and to protect others when required.

Similar tiered solutions have been implemented across Canada, largely to support overwhelmed police, fire and paramedic services. In Winnipeg, we have taken a uniquely trauma-informed and compassionate approach to working with some of our most vulnerable citizens.

We built a permanent “sharing circle” into our new CST office, large enough for a large circle of chairs that we utilize daily for team briefings, debriefings and community collaboration and sharing. This practice is rooted in traditional Indigenous beliefs and is an important aspect of our team culture and the incredible bond our team has developed, thus allowing us to re-centre ourselves on the compassionate service we provide to others (Christmas, 2026; Welsh & Christmas, 2024).

We have directed our compassionate and trauma-informed approach to community service inward as well. Our debriefing practice aims to allow the team to learn from each other and to unpack the microtraumas of the work we are doing with unsheltered people. The briefing circle serves both a therapeutic function and a logistical one. The CST leadership recognizes the high risk of moral injury that this type of work brings, as those with previous police experience are painfully aware that proper debriefing has been generally lacking in recent decades. Recently, to continue bolstering the effectiveness of this debriefing model, our team is implementing emotional resilience skills training, which is considered a leading edge in Canada (CIPSRT, 2025). In the following sections, we showcase some of the quantitative impacts our team has had and what we considered to be a success in the metrics we have strived to measure.

## HOW WE HAVE MOVED THE NEEDLE IN THE FIRST 2 YEARS

In quantifying the trauma-informed service that the CST has provided over the last 2 years, we have examined internal data collected within the CST as well as Winnipeg's transit system. However, statistics only offer a macro-view. The general sentiment held by the public, informed by their perceptions of safety, can have a lasting impact on mental health and shape how individuals navigate public spaces; hence, the qualitative impressions that add context to the numbers are important. Despite the CST's relatively small size, our efforts have been targeted and deliberate for maximum impact, already having a meaningful impact on public safety both in and around the transit system.

With 3 weeks remaining before we begin our third year of operation, our team has logged over 8,500 officer hours riding the most problematic routes identified by Winnipeg transit (CST, 2025). The teams also invest considerable time patrolling public spaces and transit properties, which include hundreds of bus shelters. One to two officers operate our communications/dispatch system during our shift. We also have several mobile patrol vehicles to provide support and timely responses for the transit staff and our safety officers who are out on foot.

The CST has strategically deployed its resources by spending approximately 75% of its riding time on the high-

est-risk routes. Other routes are visited in an attempt to be as visible as possible throughout the city. We strive to focus on the trouble areas, while also being seen by everyone to improve perceptions of safety among “non-problematic” routes, alleviating fear as random acts of violence are not predictable.

Our CST reported on over 8,800 engagements, including 4,500 well-being checks, 1,550 community engagements (assisting people and attending community events), 125 incidents of assault and 660 disturbances with unruly individuals (CST, 2025).

Rapport and relationship building through our community engagements make up 17% of our reports, whereas confronting situations that are violent or threatening to public safety (disputes and assaults) make up 8.9% of our reports. Community engagement and well-being checks for our team can go beyond assessing a situation for concerns. They can include providing food and water, driving a vulnerable person to a shelter or their home and connecting individuals with resources based on their needs.

Within our team, we have learned that community building establishes trust, as we often interact with the same people on a daily or weekly basis. Those we help get home one day might be in a meth-induced psychosis on a bus the next. By investing the time, meeting people where they are at and seeing to their immediate needs, we enhance our ability to connect and de-escalate situations and improve feelings of safety. Approaching encounters with dignity allows the establishment of long-lasting trust that is sorely needed in alleviating the root cause of these issues. In contrast, emergency services have been overwhelmed. The police have hundreds of high-priority service calls, which results in the low-priority calls not receiving the attention they should.

The CST has markedly reduced the demand for emergency services within the transit system. This is notable as it highlights that not all situations require the highest level of emergency response, such as individuals abusing substances or experiencing a mental health crisis, as they can often be managed with a trauma-informed, lower level of response. Between 2020 and 2023, Winnipeg transit's requests for police attendance during incidents have increased between 12% and 20% year over year (MNP, 2025, p. 19). While this was a consistent and troubling increase, the first meaningful improvement was in the year of the CST's inception in 2024, with an impressive decrease in police requests of -23% (MNP, 2025, p. 20). This can be attributed to the CST's hours spent on transit as a more immediate point of contact when issues arise.

Rather than removing a disruptive person from a bus with no social intervention, we seek to find solutions that will prevent a recurrence the next day or, for some, within the next few hours. We believe that meaningful impact is found through our consistent follow-through. This approach not only meaningfully strengthens the qualitative impact of our work but also improves public perception of safety for transit users.

The gaps that the CST fills within our city can also be seen in what types of incidents the police are requested for within transit. Between 2020 and 2024, an average of 4,589 police requests have been made on behalf of transit (MNP, 2025, p. 20). While 35% of police requests involved assaults on buses and in shelters, the remaining 65% involved unruly

passengers, people sleeping on buses, substance abuse and fare disputes, respectively (MNP, 2025, p. 20).

What this tells us is that a couple of thousand police service calls per year from transit are not necessarily police-appropriate issues, leading to an unnecessary workload increase for the police. The majority of these incidents within transit can be handled by other agencies and resources, including the CST. If our focused team continues to proactively alleviate the burden on police for these call types on transit, the benefit goes beyond impacting the lives of those we deal with. It also showcases massive monetary savings that result from our small team dealing with non-police matters.

Unruly passengers, substance abuse and sleepers on the bus do not require the highest escalation of response meant to deal with life-or-death emergencies. Often pre-empting the need for a police response, the CST has performed over 680 safe rides since inception (CST, 2025). Safe rides often involve taking a disruptive person to a shelter or a relative's place, so they are not causing a disturbance on a bus or taking a vulnerable person out of a precarious situation. This promotes a sense of safety when the public witnesses our team provide dignified follow-through, including separating an escalated individual from a triggering situation.

By transit's account, there have been year-over-year increases in a variety of disruptive incident types from 2021 to 2023, with a significant dip across the board since the CST's inception in 2024. Between 2021 and 2023, assaults increased by 55%, then 38.4%, followed by a dip of -1.3% in 2024. Incidents of unruly individuals increased by 34.8%, followed by 12.4%, then a significant decrease of -14.3% in 2024.

While the data show that safety incidents have been reduced, this may not reflect individuals' real sense of safety. In June 2024, MNP, an independent consultant firm, was hired to generate a report that measures the CST's impact in the field. Transit riders were asked to specify what contributes to their feelings of a lack of safety while riding transit. As seen from MNP's survey completed amongst passengers of Winnipeg transit, the citizen responses highlight that a large portion of disturbances are not necessarily dangerous but create an atmosphere of a lack of safety, with substance use on transit (67%) and witnessing individuals experiencing homelessness (38%) being major concerns (MNP, 2025, p. 22).

In contrast, the 2025 MNP report illustrates that specific citizen concerns around substance abuse went down by -19%, from 67% to 48%, despite the actual decrease in substance abuse incidents having gone down -13.8% between 2023 and 2024 (CST, 2025).

Concerns about safety due to witnessing unsheltered people have also gone down from 38% to 29% (CST, 2025). The CST's impact on this metric of perceived safety could signify that in observing the CST interact with those abusing substances and experiencing homelessness, it showcases that these situations are not inherently unsafe. Rather, they are uncomfortable and cause unease. With our trauma-informed approach, the CST cuts the tension by treating people with respect and showing that individuals abusing substances or experiencing homelessness are not inherently dangerous; rather, they need help, thus humanizing the concern, leading to transit riders feeling safer.

Transit users' concerns about being victimized or attacked while on transit have reduced from 35% to 25% over the past year. Concerns about gang violence have reduced from 28% to 16%. The fear of witnessing violence has been reduced from 51% to 40% (MNP, 2025, p. 22). Presence, whether it be in witnessing the CST ride a bus or in engaging with individuals on the street, has had a notable effect on these specific concerns across the board.

Dealing with violence or disturbances only makes up 8.9% of CST's reported incidents. For transit users, the CST highlights that a sense of safety comes from knowing that if an issue were to arise, either uncomfortable or unsafe, the concern will be addressed by trained professionals who are equipped to deal with an escalated situation.

When examining perceptions of safety among transit staff, 15 out of the 16 interviewed transit operators reported feeling unsafe some or most of the time. This is an alarming figure, as it showcases a widespread heightened sense of fear stemming from years of experiencing uncomfortable situations and victimization (MNP, 2025, p. 26). Assaults categorized by transit include physical assaults, as well as incidents that would severely affect perception of safety, such as verbal threats, being spat on and objects thrown at operators or their protective shields.

This widespread feeling of lack of safety among bus operators is hardly surprising when examining the data. Between 2021 and 2023, there was a continuous increase in the total number of operators being assaulted. A notable positive reduction of -21% occurred in 2024, the year of the CST's inception, from 223 to 176 reported assaults on transit operators (MNP, 2025, p. 23).

This highlights that the CST has been effective in both reducing demand on emergency services and increasing safety by a significant margin, considering the size of our team. Being established as a transit-focused team affects real safety, but for transit operators who have dealt with years of increasing violence, the sense of safety will be a slow metric to improve.

## LOOKING FORWARD

In its first 2 years, the CST has demonstrated a meaningful impact on both the perception and reality of safety within Winnipeg's transit system and associated public spaces. Responding to violence and uncomfortable situations for transit riders with a trauma-informed, compassionate approach, the CST has effectively addressed many situations that might otherwise have escalated. The CST has prevented countless disturbances simply by being present and spending the time and effort required to have long-lasting impacts on the lives of those we deal with.

As a result, in addition to the obvious benefits, emergency services are freed up to focus on the calls that truly require their attention. This highlights the CST's role as a vital, responsive presence in the realm of public safety. The long-term outcomes are yet to be seen, but the need for multi-sectoral partnerships like this is inevitable and, in our view, here to stay.

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#### ETHICS APPROVAL AND INFORMED CONSENT

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#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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