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WHAT WE FOUND:

Leveraging Open Data and Community Insights to Prevent Sexual Violence in Banff

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PROJECT OVERVIEW:

A Collaborative Initiative for Preventing Gender-Based Violence in Banff



Sexual violence is a complex issue that deeply impacts individuals and communities. While it exists everywhere, research shows it is disproportionately high in rural and remote areas (Cotter & Savage, 2019). Recognizing the need for meaningful, community-driven solutions, YWCA Banff partnered with Big Hill Haven in Cochrane, Rowan House Society in High River, and Shift: The Project to End Domestic Violence at the University of Calgary in Spring 2024. Together, we set out to explore, design, and test primary prevention strategies that address the social conditions that allow violence to persist.

This ‘Made in Alberta’ collaboration is grounded in the understanding that gender-based violence (GBV) is not just about individual actions but is shaped by broader community structures, norms, and power dynamics. Effective prevention requires more than reactive responses—it calls for proactive, community-wide efforts that foster safer, more equitable environments.

To guide the first phase of this work, our collaborative partnered with the University of Alberta CARE Lab, HelpSeeker Technologies and Shift/UCalgary in their ZeroGBV project, which aims to gather data-driven insights to help communities make data-driven decisions on preventing GBV. Together, we developed a community profile using open-source data, which was shared with local leaders in Banff in October 2024. That day, 29 community members came together to interpret the data, share lived experiences and shape the path forward. This report summarizes the key insights from both open access data and the community insights generated together.

This project, supported by funding from Alberta Arts, Culture, and Status of Women, and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), represents a collaborative and multifaceted approach to understanding GBV in Banff and to inform the development of evidence-informed strategies to prevent sexual violence in Banff.

1.1 A Multi-Methods Approach to Data Collection and Analysis

The Banff ZeroGBV project used a multi-methods approach to understand violence in the community, combining quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis. This approach was crucial for capturing both the statistical scope of the issue and the complex lived experiences of those affected.

The quantitative component of the research methodology is built upon a foundation of publicly available data selected to provide measurable insights into Banff's social fabric and relevant trends. This quantitative data backbone draws from a variety of sources, including Statistics Canada (crime statistics, census data, victimization surveys), Town of Banff (local reports/statistics), and the Alberta Treasury Board and Finance (economic indicators).

These quantitative data sources provide a broad statistical overview of violence and related social and economic conditions in Banff. However, numbers alone are insufficient, and so a variety of qualitative methods were employed to contextualize these quantitative results. These include a literature review on (violence prevention, rural sociology, tourism, GBV), community systems mapping (300+ entities identified), a community data walk with 30 stakeholders, and an accompanying thematic analysis of community discussions.

While recognizing the strengths of this multi-methods approach, there are also certain data limitations inherent in such a community-based research project. These limitations include the underrepresentation of in-depth qualitative narratives from individuals directly experiencing or perpetrating violence, relying more on stakeholder perspectives. Secondly, capturing data on Banff's transient "shadow population" remains challenging, potentially underrepresenting their unique vulnerabilities. Thirdly, while AI tools enhanced analysis, they may inherently carry potential biases.

These limitations mean the report offers a valuable but necessarily partial view, with opportunities for continued research. To mitigate these limitations, the project emphasized transparency in data reporting, triangulation of findings across multiple data sources, and the critical role of human oversight in validating and interpreting AI-generated insights.

1.2 The Rationale for Community-Level Change

The 'Made in Alberta' project strategically prioritizes community-level change as the most effective approach to violence prevention within this unique municipality. This focus stems from a recognition that violence, particularly GBV, is not solely a matter of individual actions but a complex social issue deeply rooted in the structures, norms, and dynamics of the community itself. Addressing violence effectively, therefore, necessitates interventions that target these systemic factors, fostering a community-wide environment that is less conducive to violence and more supportive of safety and well-being for all residents.

The selection of a community-level approach is particularly salient in the Banff context due to the town's distinctive characteristics as a tourism-dependent community within a national park. Banff's social, economic, and demographic landscape differs significantly from typical urban or rural settings, requiring tailored strategies that are responsive to its unique dynamics.

A community-level focus acknowledges and addresses the unique and interconnected nature of factors that contribute to violence (Casey & Lindhorst, 2009). These factors do not operate in isolation; instead, they interact synergistically, creating a web of vulnerabilities that amplify the risk of violence within the community. For instance, as the research highlights, Banff's tourism-based economy intensifies housing pressures, which in turn exacerbate economic stress and impede the ability of newcomers to secure stable housing and integrate into the community.

This interconnectedness highlights the need for prevention strategies that are multi-faceted, relevant to the local context, and simultaneously address multiple levels and

aspects of the community system. A fragmented, issue-by-issue approach is unlikely to produce sustainable or significant reductions in violence rates. Community-level violence prevention initiatives can strengthen community ties and promote a social environment that is less tolerant of violence and more supportive of individual and collective safety (Mancini et al, 2006). Community-level approaches to violence prevention are inherently more sustainable and impactful because they leverage local expertise and foster community ownership of solutions (Casey & Lindhorst, 2009). By actively engaging the local community, we ensure that violence prevention strategies are not imposed externally but are co-created and owned by the community itself. This not only enhances the relevance and effectiveness of prevention efforts but also builds local capacity for sustained action, empowering Banff residents to become active agents of change in creating a safer and more resilient community.

Key Takeaways

- **Collaborative Effort:** ZeroGBV Banff is a partnership of the YWCA Banff, Rowan House Society, Big Hill Haven, University of Calgary – Shift, University of Alberta – CARE lab, and HelpSeeker Technologies, combining diverse expertise to prevent violence.
- **Data and Community Voices:** The project uses both hard data (e.g., numbers or facts that can be proven) and local experiences to understand patterns of violence in Banff, ensuring a complete picture.
- **Multi-methods Approach:** The research combines numbers (crime statistics, census data) and lived experiences (community session) for a robust analysis.
- **Systemic Issue:** Violence in Banff is seen as a community-wide problem, not just a few isolated incidents requiring community solutions.
- **Interconnected Social Factors:** Addressing violence requires tackling the social conditions and the complex interplay of tourism, housing, transience, and diversity.
- **Local Expertise is Key:** Effective prevention strategies must be tailored to Banff’s unique context and driven by community knowledge and ownership.



UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT: A Profile of Banff

To effectively address the complex issue of GBV in Banff, it is essential first to establish a comprehensive understanding of the community itself. Banff is not a typical urban center or a conventional rural town; it is a unique entity whose character is profoundly shaped by its location within a national park and its reliance on a tourism-driven economy. This section provides a detailed profile of Banff, examining the key contextual factors that influence community dynamics and, consequently, the landscape of violence prevention.

2.1 The National Park Setting



Banff's economy is overwhelmingly reliant on tourism, a sector that shapes not only the town's economic structure but also its social dynamics and community culture. The Town of Banff's tourism industry provides ample employment opportunities and is heavily dependent on a young mobile workforce (Smith, 2021). This creates a unique economic landscape with several characteristics that are relevant to understanding violence prevention.

The tourism sector in Banff is characterized by a high concentration of employment in accommodation and food services, arts, entertainment, and recreation. While these sectors provide vital economic opportunities, they are often associated with specific workplace dynamics that can increase vulnerability to violence and harassment (Ram, 2018).

Tourism jobs are frequently characterized by long hours, demanding customer service expectations, and public-facing role—factors that can contribute to occupational stress and burnout among workers. Furthermore, many tourism jobs are seasonal, leading to income instability and job insecurity for a significant portion of the workforce. Almost one in five workers (17%) earn below \$20,000 annually, and 49% of workers earn less than \$40,000 annually (Rieger, 2023), highlighting the prevalence of lower-wage employment within the tourism sector. This economic vulnerability, coupled with the high cost of living in Banff, can create significant financial stress for residents, potentially exacerbating interpersonal tensions and increasing the risk of violence (Schwabe-Reese et al., 2016).

Banff's tourism economy significantly shapes its social culture, fostering a vibrant nightlife and party atmosphere. As a renowned destination for recreation and entertainment, Banff attracts visitors seeking leisure and nightlife, which, while economically beneficial, contributes to environments where alcohol consumption is normalized and can become excessive. This prevalence of active nightlife scenes in Banff's tourist-heavy environment increases the use of alcohol and other substances, factors known to impair judgment, lower inhibitions, and heighten the risk of aggressive and violent behaviour, including sexual assault (Liu & Xu, 2023). This intersection of a tourism-driven economy, a youthful population, and a culture of nightlife creates a complex social environment with specific vulnerabilities that demand attention in violence prevention efforts.

2.2 Population Dynamics: Growth, Youthfulness, and Transience



Banff's population is characterized by dynamic growth, a distinct youthfulness, and a high degree of transience, all of which have significant implications for community safety and violence prevention. The town has experienced notable population growth in recent years, increasing by 29% from 7,500 residents in 2011 to 10,287 in 2023 (Brinkhoff, 2023), a rate exceeding Alberta's overall growth (24%) during the same period (Alberta Treasury Board and Finance, 2024). This rapid population increase, while indicative of Banff's economic dynamism, also places strain on local infrastructure, services, and resources, potentially exacerbating existing social pressures.

Banff's demographic profile is distinctly youthful, with 22% of residents aged 20-29 years, which is nearly double Alberta's provincial rate of 12.3% (Statistics Canada, 2022). Banff's median age of 36.8 years is also significantly lower than the provincial median (Statistics Canada, 2022). This concentration of young adults, particularly those in the 20-29 age range, has implications for community dynamics, social interactions, and risk factors related to violence. Younger populations may be more likely to engage in nightlife activities, substance use, and transient relationships, factors that can, in certain contexts, increase vulnerability to violence.

Furthermore, a significant proportion of Banff's population consists of transient workers, individuals who reside in the town for short periods, typically to work in seasonal tourism jobs. About 40% of the population consists of short-term workers (Town of Banff, 2024), contributing to a high degree of population turnover and social instability (Smith, 2021). This transience weakens attachment to place and poses challenges to the creation of social networks (McCole, 2015), reducing collective accountability and potentially increasing the risk of violence due to diminished social cohesion and informal social controls.

Beyond its official population, Banff hosts a substantial "shadow population," a term used to describe individuals present in the community but not captured in official census counts. Banff's significant shadow population, driven by the influx of between 800 and 1,000 seasonal workers and 4.3 million annual visitors (in 2023) (Lee, 2023) creates a dynamic where the actual population of Banff fluctuates dramatically, placing immense pressure on local resources, infrastructure, and services (Ellis, 2024a). This transient population, often unfamiliar with local norms and lacking strong social ties to the community, can contribute to a sense of anonymity and reduced accountability, potentially creating an environment where harmful behaviours are less likely to be noticed or addressed.

Banff has also experienced increasing demographic diversification in recent years, with notable growth in its immigrant, visible minority, and Indigenous populations. The immigrant population has grown by 75% from 2006 to 2021, now constituting 22.5% of Banff's total population (Statistics Canada, 2024a). This growth rate is more than double the national immigrant growth rate (36%) during the same period (Statistics Canada, 2024a).

The visible minority population in Banff has also increased, reaching 21% of total residents, and the Indigenous population has nearly doubled, now representing 2.5% of the total population (Statistics Canada, 2022). While this increasing diversity enriches the community, it also presents unique challenges related to cultural integration, language barriers, and potential experiences of discrimination and social exclusion for newcomers. These challenges can, in turn, increase vulnerability to violence and create barriers to accessing support services, particularly for individuals who may be unfamiliar with Canadian systems or hesitant to seek help due to cultural or linguistic differences (Sisic et al., 2024).

2.3 The Tourism-Driven Economic Landscape

Banff's economy is overwhelmingly reliant on tourism, a sector that shapes not only the town's economic structure but also its social dynamics and community culture. The Town of Banff's tourism industry provides ample employment opportunities and is heavily dependent on a young mobile workforce to hold up this industry (Smith, 2021). This creates a unique economic landscape with several characteristics that are relevant to understanding violence prevention.

The tourism sector in Banff is characterized by a high concentration of employment in accommodation and food services, arts, entertainment, and recreation. While these sectors provide vital economic opportunities, they are often associated with specific workplace dynamics that can increase vulnerability to violence and harassment (Ram, 2018).

Tourism jobs are frequently characterized by long hours, demanding customer service expectations, and public-facing roles, factors that can contribute to occupational stress and burnout among workers. Furthermore, many tourism jobs are seasonal, leading to income instability and job insecurity for a significant portion of the workforce.

Key Takeaways

- **Unique Context:** Banff National Park's Need to Reside policy and tourism-driven economy create distinct social dynamics.
- **Dynamic Population:** Banff has a young, growing, and highly transient population, including a significant "shadow population" of seasonal workers and visitors.
- **A Tourism Economy:** Banff's tourism-dominated economy creates unique social dynamics that can increase vulnerability to violence.



ELEVATED RATES OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE: A Critical Community Safety Concern in Banff

3



Among the spectrum of social challenges facing Banff, the persistently elevated rates of sexual violence stand out as a particularly critical concern, demanding focused attention and community action. While overall crime rates in Banff have decreased by 38% between 2019 and 2023, sexual assault rates have increased by 13% (Statistics Canada, 2024b), peaking at 247 per 100,000 in 2022 (Statistics Canada, 2024b). This indicates a disturbing divergence: while crime decreases, the incidence of reported sexual assaults remains disproportionately high. Data for 2023 indicates that Banff's rate of sexual assaults declined to 126 reported incidents per 100,000 (Statistics Canada, 2024b); however, it remains substantially higher than both provincial and national levels (90 and 89 incidents per 100,000, respectively) (Statistics Canada, 2024c), suggesting that the underlying factors contributing to this elevated risk persist despite any apparent year-over-year fluctuations.

The consistent elevation of sexual assault rates in Banff underscores the chronic nature of this issue and the need for investigation and implementation of effective, targeted prevention strategies. Compounding the gravity of these statistics is the well-documented phenomenon of underreporting in cases of sexual violence. National statistics estimate that as few as 6% of actual sexual assault incidents are ever formally reported to police (Cotter and Savage, 2019). Numerous barriers prevent victims from reporting sexual violence to law enforcement, including fear of disbelief or secondary victimization, feelings of shame or self-blame, concerns about privacy and confidentiality, and a lack of trust in the criminal justice system. This stark reality of underreporting means that the official statistics for Banff, while already alarmingly high, likely represent only a small fraction of the true incidence of sexual violence within the community.

To further contextualize Banff's elevated sexual assault rates, we compared data from Whistler, British Columbia, another prominent Canadian tourist destination with similar demographic and economic characteristics. While acknowledging the inherent challenges in directly comparing crime statistics across jurisdictions, particularly for smaller municipalities, the available data suggests that Banff's sexual assault rate in 2022 (247 per 100,000) surpassed that of Whistler (177 per 100,000 in Whistler) (Statistics Canada, 2024d). This comparison indicates that Banff's elevated rates may not simply be an inevitable byproduct of tourism or transient populations but rather suggest the presence of localized factors within Banff that may be exacerbating the risk of sexual violence beyond what might be expected in a similar tourist-driven community.

The consistently elevated and likely underreported rates of sexual violence in Banff present a challenge to the community's safety and well-being. These statistics represent real harm experienced by individuals within the Banff community, undermining the sense of security and social cohesion essential for a thriving and healthy town. Addressing this challenge necessitates a multi-faceted approach that moves beyond reactive responses to individual incidents and focuses on proactive, community-wide strategies to prevent sexual violence from occurring in the first place. Understanding the underlying community conditions that may be enabling or exacerbating this issue is the essential first step

towards creating a safer and more respectful environment for all who live, work, and visit Banff.

Key Takeaways

- **Alarmingly High Rates:** Banff's reported sexual assault rate is substantially higher than provincial and national averages, indicating a serious community safety concern.
- **Underreporting is Significant:** Official statistics likely represent only a fraction of the actual sexual violence occurring in Banff.
- **Systemic Issue Indicated:** High rates suggest deeper, community-level factors are at play, which is further evidenced by the diverging increase in sexual assault rates and decreasing overall crime rates. This suggests a need for targeted prevention efforts.



A Confluence of Community Conditions Enabling Violence

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The persistently elevated rates of sexual violence and the broader challenge of GBV in Banff are not isolated phenomena. Rather, they are symptomatic of a complex interplay of interconnected community conditions that, in confluence, may inadvertently create an environment more conducive to violence.

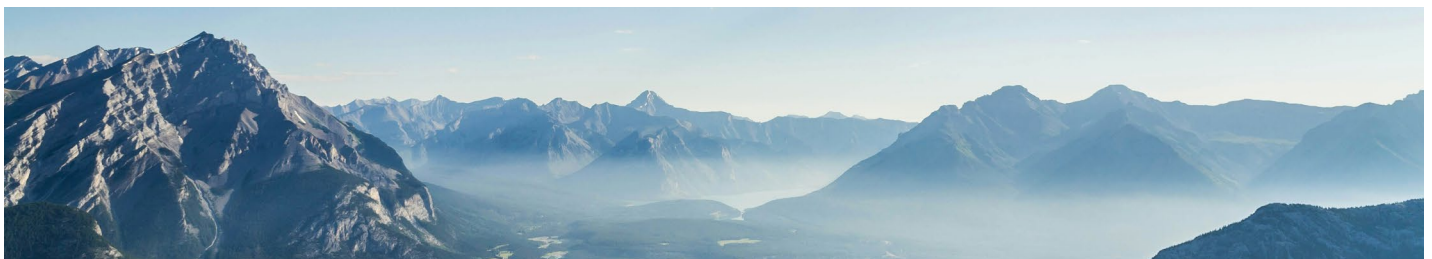
This section examines five key community trends that, when viewed holistically, reveal the systemic factors potentially enabling violence within this unique municipality: the high rates of sexual assault; the preeminent role of the tourism industry; the widespread housing crisis; the substantial shadow and visitor population; and growing demographic diversity. These significant trends work together synergistically, creating a web of vulnerabilities that necessitates a comprehensive and integrated approach to violence prevention.

4.1 Elevated Sexual Assault Rates: A Symptom of Underlying Social Dynamics

The very fact that Banff experiences sexual assault rates significantly exceeding provincial and national averages is not merely an isolated data point; it is an indicator of underlying community conditions that may be enabling or failing to adequately deter such violence. One key factor identified by the research is the weakening of community cohesion due to the transient nature of Banff's population (Smith, 2021). The constant influx and outflow of seasonal workers and visitors can erode the strong social bonds and informal social controls that typically operate in more stable communities (McCole, 2015). As community ties weaken, so too does the sense of attachment to place, potentially diminishing the effectiveness of community norms in deterring harmful behaviours.

Furthermore, the anonymity afforded by Banff's high tourist traffic may reduce the perceived risk of social repercussions for potential perpetrators of sexual violence. In a community where individuals are less likely to be recognized or held accountable by a consistent social network, the fear of social stigma or long-term consequences for their actions may be diminished, potentially emboldening those predisposed to perpetrate violence.

The elevated sexual assault rates, therefore, are not simply a reflection of random incidents; they are a symptom of a community context where social cohesion and accountability may be compromised by transience and anonymity, creating an environment where the risk of sexual violence is amplified.



4.2 Tourism Shaping Workplace Dynamics and Social Norms



The overwhelming dominance of the tourism industry in Banff’s economy exerts a profound influence on community dynamics, creating specific workplace conditions and social norms that may inadvertently contribute to violence risk. With approximately 61% of Banff’s workforce directly employed in tourism-related sectors (Town of Banff, n.d.), the industry’s characteristics shape the daily lives and social interactions of many residents.

While tourism provides economic opportunities and sustains the town, its inherent features also introduce vulnerabilities that must be considered in violence prevention efforts. A key factor is the transient nature of the tourism workforce. The constant turnover of seasonal workers, a defining feature of Banff’s labor market, can disrupt social stability and impacts community bonds (Ooi et al., 2016). Transience can impede the development of strong, lasting relationships between colleagues and within the broader community (McCole, 2015), reducing the sense of collective responsibility and mutual support that can act as informal safeguards against violence.

Furthermore, many tourism jobs, particularly those in public-facing roles within the nightlife and service sectors, increase workers’ exposure to potentially aggressive or inappropriate behaviours (Poulston, 2008; Ram et al., 2016). Employees in these roles often interact with large numbers of visitors, some of whom may exhibit impaired judgment due to alcohol consumption or a “vacation mindset,” increasing the likelihood of encountering disrespectful, harassing, or even violent behaviour (Poulston, 2008).

The demanding nature of tourism employment, characterized by long hours, high-pressure customer service expectations, and physically and emotionally taxing work, can contribute to occupational stress and burnout among workers (Ram, 2018). This chronic stress and exhaustion can, in turn, exacerbate irritability, reduce emotional regulation, and potentially increase the likelihood of interpersonal conflicts and even violent reactions in stressful situations (Ram, 2018).

Moreover, the economic structure of the tourism industry, with its reliance on seasonal employment and often lower-wage jobs, can create financial instability and job insecurity for many residents (Smith, 2021). This economic precarity may create financial stress and psychological strain, potentially increasing the risk of aggression as individuals cope with these pressures or making them more vulnerable to victimization due to reduced stability in their lives.

Finally, the tourism culture in Banff may inadvertently contribute to blurred social norms and a normalization of risky behaviours (Smith, 2021). The tourism culture may foster a party atmosphere that normalizes casual relationships and risky behaviours, suggesting that phrases like “Flirting is just part of the job” or “The customer is always right” could blur professional boundaries, potentially contributing to inappropriate or harmful interactions. The emphasis on leisure, recreation, and nightlife within the tourism sector can create an environment where excessive alcohol consumption and boundary-pushing behaviours are sometimes implicitly or explicitly condoned (Ooi et al., 2016), potentially increasing the risk of sexual violence and other forms of aggression.

4.3 Housing and Staff Accommodations Exacerbating Vulnerabilities

The housing crisis in Banff, characterized by chronic shortages and exorbitant costs, creates pressures that significantly increase residents’ vulnerability to violence and undermine community safety. Banff faces severe housing shortages, with less than a 1% vacancy rate (in 2023), which is among Alberta’s most acute situation (Government of Alberta, n.d.).

This scarcity of affordable housing, coupled with rental costs that are some of the highest in Alberta, ranging from \$1,720 for a one-bedroom apartment to \$2,358 for a two-bedroom unit (Lee, 2024), creates a pervasive housing insecurity that impacts a large segment of the Banff community. The housing crisis directly contributes to overcrowding, a condition



4.4 A Significant Shadow and Visitor Population

that can heighten stress and tension within households and shared living spaces. Limited personal space and lack of privacy can exacerbate interpersonal conflicts and create environments where tensions can escalate more readily.

The skyrocketing rental costs force many residents into unstable housing situations, characterized by frequent moves, temporary accommodations, or precarious living arrangements (Smith, 2021). This housing instability could reduce community attachment and weaken social cohesion, making it more difficult for residents to build strong social support networks (Ooi et al., 2016) and increasing feelings of isolation and vulnerability. Perhaps most critically, the housing crisis in Banff creates a direct link between housing and employment, a dynamic that can significantly increase vulnerability to exploitation and violence, particularly within staff accommodation settings.

For many residents, particularly those in lower-paying tourism jobs, employer-provided staff accommodation is often the only viable housing option in Banff's prohibitively expensive rental market. This dependence on employer-linked housing creates a power imbalance that can be exploited, making individuals reluctant to report harassment, abuse, or unsafe living conditions for fear of jeopardizing their employment and, consequently, their housing (Smith, 2021). This "forced situation," as described by community members during the Data Walk session, can trap individuals in potentially unsafe environments with limited options for escape or redress.

The housing crisis also has broader impacts on mental health and access to support services, further compounding vulnerabilities. The constant stress and uncertainty associated with housing insecurity can negatively affect mental well-being, contributing to anxiety, depression, and heightened stress levels. Poor mental health may impair emotional regulation and coping skills, potentially increasing the likelihood of violent behaviour or victimization.

Moreover, housing instability can create barriers to accessing essential support services, including counseling, conflict resolution programs, and violence prevention initiatives. Individuals experiencing frequent moves or precarious housing arrangements may struggle to establish consistent connections with service providers, creating a situation where those most in need of support face the greatest obstacles to accessing it.

Banff's unique character as a world-renowned tourist destination results in a population that is far more complex and dynamic than official census figures alone can capture. Beyond its permanent resident population, Banff is characterized by a substantial "shadow population" comprised of seasonal workers and a massive influx of annual visitors.

Banff experiences dramatic seasonal population shifts, from 9,000 residents to upwards of 40,000 people during peak tourism seasons (Ellis, 2024a). This fluctuation creates significant challenges for resource allocation and community management. While vital to Banff's tourism-driven economy, this transient population exerts significant pressures on community resources, social structures, and the overall environment of safety and security within the town.

The transient nature of this shadow and visitor population contributes to a weakening of community bonds and social cohesion. A community's social fabric relies on established relationships, shared norms, and a sense of collective identity, all of which can be eroded by constant population turnover (Ooi et al., 2016). As individuals move in and out of Banff on a seasonal or temporary basis, opportunities for building strong social networks and fostering a sense of belonging can be diminished (McCole, 2015). When individuals feel less connected to the community, social accountability and monitoring diminish. This weakened social fabric can reduce informal social controls and increase the potential

for behaviours that deviate from established community norms, including those related to safety and respect.

Furthermore, in a community characterized by constant turnover, individuals may perceive a reduced risk of being recognized or held accountable by a consistent social network. The large number of tourists and temporary residents can create lack of attachment to the community (Smith, 2021). This anonymity can reduce the fear of social or legal repercussions, making individuals feel they can act without facing long-term consequences. This perceived impunity can embolden individuals to engage in behaviours they might otherwise refrain from in a more stable, close-knit community where social accountability is stronger. The “vacation mindset,” often associated with tourist destinations, may further contribute to this phenomenon. Visitors, and even seasonal workers, may feel less bound by normal social rules and expectations when they are in a temporary environment perceived as separate from their everyday lives, potentially increasing the risk of behaviours that disregard community standards and individual safety.

The significant shadow and visitor populations also place considerable strain on Banff’s limited resources and infrastructure. Dramatic seasonal population shifts affect everything from housing availability to social service delivery capacity. This strain can impact the availability and accessibility of essential services, including law enforcement, emergency medical services, and social support systems, potentially reducing the community’s capacity to effectively prevent and respond to violence. For transient individuals, navigating these stretched resources and accessing support services can be particularly challenging, further increasing their vulnerability in situations of risk or crisis.

4.5 Increasing Diversity and Newcomers: Integration Challenges and Vulnerabilities

Banff’s demographic landscape is rapidly diversifying, with significant growth in its immigrant, visible minority, and Indigenous populations. Over the past twenty years, the city’s population has become increasingly diverse, with significant changes across multiple demographic groups (Government of Alberta, 2023). While this increasing diversity enriches the community culturally and socially, it also introduces specific integration challenges and potential vulnerabilities that must be considered in violence prevention efforts.

The immigrant population in Banff has experienced remarkable growth, indicating its increasing attractiveness to immigrants seeking economic opportunities and a unique lifestyle within a national park setting. However, newcomers to Banff—including immigrants, refugees, and temporary foreign workers—face unique challenges, such as cultural adjustment, language barriers, economic hardships, and discrimination (Foneyne et al., 2023).

The intersection between newcomer status and economic vulnerabilities compounds these challenges. Many newcomers to Banff are employed in seasonal, lower-wage tourism jobs, often facing precarious employment conditions and financial instability (Smith, 2021). The interdependency between employment, housing, and immigration status, particularly for temporary foreign workers, can create situations where individuals feel compelled to tolerate unsafe working or living conditions for fear of jeopardizing their ability to remain in the country (International Finance Corporation, 2020). This “compound vulnerability,” makes newcomers particularly susceptible to exploitation and violence, and may create significant barriers to reporting abuse or seeking help (Sisic et al., 2024). Addressing the specific needs and vulnerabilities of Banff’s increasingly diverse newcomer population is therefore essential for creating a truly inclusive and safe community for all residents.

Key Takeaways

- **Interconnected Trends:** Five key trends – high sexual assault rates, tourism dominance, housing crisis, shadow population, and increasing diversity – work together to increase violence risk.
- **Tourism Industry Dynamics:** Transient workforce, high-stress jobs, and blurred social norms in tourism create specific vulnerabilities.
- **Housing Insecurity:** The housing crisis exacerbates stress, weakens community ties, and creates dependencies that can be exploited.
- **Shadow Population Impact:** Transience and anonymity weaken social accountability and strain community resources.
- **Diversity Challenges:** Newcomers face unique barriers related to language, culture, and systemic navigation, increasing vulnerability.



Grounding Data in Lived Experience and Local Expertise

5

Recognizing that quantitative data alone provides an incomplete picture of the complex realities of violence within a community, local stakeholders participated in a Community Data Walk in October 2024. This served as a crucial bridge between the research team's initial data analysis and the invaluable lived experiences and localized expertise of individuals working and residing in Banff. By bringing together approximately 30 representatives from diverse sectors across the community, the Data Walk aimed to validate the research findings, enrich the analysis with qualitative insights, and foster a collaborative dialogue on effective violence prevention strategies tailored to the specific context of Banff.

5.1 Manifestations of Violence in Community Settings

One of the recurring themes was the vulnerability created by staff accommodation and housing dynamics. Participants emphasized how Banff's policy of linking housing to employment, while intended to address local needs, can inadvertently create precarious situations for residents, particularly those in lower-wage tourism jobs. As one participant explained, the fear of losing employment also means the fear of losing housing, thus individuals may be reluctant to report unsafe conditions or experiences of violence. The combination of overcrowded shared living spaces, often in hostel-style accommodations, and the lack of separation between work and living environments was identified as a contributing factor to tension and conflict, potentially increasing the risk of interpersonal violence.

Workplace power dynamics emerged as another significant area of concern, particularly within the hospitality sector, which dominates Banff's economy. Participants described how power imbalances inherent in customer-facing service roles, coupled with cultural differences and generational shifts in workplace norms, can create environments where harassment, exploitation, and even violence are more likely to occur. The expectation that service staff must prioritize customer satisfaction, even at the expense of their own well-being, was highlighted as a contributing factor to workplace vulnerability. As one manager shared, in response to holding guests accountable for inappropriate behaviour, the reaction was, "You need to get servers who can take it." This anecdote illustrates a deeply ingrained cultural norm within some segments of the tourism industry, where inappropriate behaviour is normalized and even expected, placing undue pressure on workers to tolerate mistreatment.

The experiences of newcomers and immigrants were also highlighted as a distinct area of vulnerability. Participants emphasized the challenges faced by individuals navigating a new culture, language, and social environment, often while simultaneously dealing with economic precarity and the pressures of maintaining their immigration status. The web of dependencies between employment, housing, and immigration status creates situations where newcomers may feel particularly trapped in unsafe or exploitative conditions, with limited options for seeking help or reporting abuse. As one service provider noted, "Your housing, your finances, your future, your immigration status are all tied to your employment or your education, and that environment is toxic and you're experiencing violence, you might not be in a position where you feel you can leave or report or speak up."

The discussions also drew attention to the heightened risks present in remote and isolated settings within Banff's tourism landscape, particularly in backcountry operations. Participants shared experiences suggesting that backcountry lodges and similarly isolated workplaces can present unique challenges for worker safety due to limited oversight, reduced access to support, and potential power imbalances between staff and management or guests. The lack of readily available assistance and the inherent isolation of these settings can amplify vulnerabilities and create environments where violence is more likely to occur and less likely to be reported or addressed effectively.

Beyond specific workplace settings, participants also described manifestations of violence in broader public spaces and daily interactions within Banff. Experiences of harassment in public spaces, particularly for young female workers, were shared, highlighting that the issue of violence extends beyond formal workplaces into the community at large.

The pervasive influence of substance use and party culture, particularly in Banff's vibrant nightlife scene, was also identified as a contributing factor to violence risk. Participants noted how social media can normalize and even glorify excessive alcohol consumption and boundary-pushing behaviours, further contributing to an environment where the risk of aggression and sexual violence is heightened.

Finally, the issue of financial violence and economic control emerged as a significant, yet often overlooked, form of abuse within the Banff community. Participants highlighted how the high cost of living in Banff, coupled with economic vulnerabilities faced by certain populations, can make financial control a particularly potent and damaging form of abuse, limiting victims' autonomy and ability to escape unsafe situations.

5.2 Risks to Private Sector Participation

A key focus of the Community Data Walk was to explore the potential risks and challenges that Banff businesses and the private sector might perceive in actively engaging in violence prevention efforts. Participants representing diverse business sectors articulated a range of concerns, highlighting the delicate balance between promoting community safety and managing operational and reputational risks within a competitive tourism market.

Reputational dynamics emerged as a central consideration. Businesses expressed sensitivity to the potential for negative publicity if their engagement in violence prevention were interpreted as an admission of existing problems within their establishments or the broader community. Concerns were raised about the delicate balance between acknowledging the importance of addressing violence and maintaining Banff's image as a desirable and safe tourist destination. As one participant noted, there is a tension between transparency and the desire to "attract people to come here," suggesting a fear that openly addressing issues of violence might deter tourism. Furthermore, some businesses expressed a desire to ensure that their internal practices and organizational culture genuinely aligned with violence prevention principles before publicly promoting their commitment to safety and inclusivity. This concern reflects a recognition that inauthentic or performative engagement in violence prevention could be counterproductive, potentially damaging a business's reputation if their actions were perceived as insincere or merely for public relations purposes.

Operational and resource implications were also identified as significant barriers to private sector participation. Businesses, notably smaller operations with limited resources, expressed concerns about the financial costs and logistical challenges of implementing violence prevention programs and policies. Liability concerns were also raised, with some businesses fearing that taking proactive steps to address violence might inadvertently increase their legal exposure or create additional responsibilities for incident investigation and response. The high turnover rate within Banff's tourism workforce was cited as a further challenge, making it difficult to sustain long-term prevention initiatives and

ensure consistent training and implementation of safety protocols across a constantly changing staff.

Investigation and response challenges within workplace settings were also highlighted as a significant area of concern. Participants noted the inherent complexities of conducting thorough and impartial investigations of workplace incidents, particularly in smaller businesses where HR resources may be limited, and potential conflicts of interest may arise. The traditional role of HR departments, often focused on protecting the organization from liability, rather than prioritizing the needs of individual employees, was also discussed as a potential barrier to effective and employee-centered responses to reports of violence or harassment. Participants emphasized the need for resources and training to equip businesses, particularly smaller operations, with the capacity to conduct fair, thorough, and trauma-informed investigations and to implement appropriate and supportive responses to incidents of violence within their workplaces.

5.3 Prevention Actions and Consequences of Inaction

One component of the Community Data Walk was to move beyond problem identification, explore concrete actions for violence prevention, and consider the potential consequences of inaction. Participants engaged in a frank and insightful discussion about the imperative for proactive engagement in violence prevention, highlighting both the potential benefits of collective action and the significant risks associated with failing to address the issue.

The consequences of inaction were articulated with a clear sense of urgency. Participants emphasized that failing to engage in violence prevention is not a neutral stance; rather, it carries significant risks for individuals, businesses, and the community. One of the most immediate consequences identified was the potential for escalating problems and costs. As data trends indicate, rates of sexual violence in Banff are not decreasing, and inaction risks perpetuating and even exacerbating this concerning trajectory. Participants highlighted the financial implications of failing to address violence, noting that the costs associated with responding to incidents, managing reputational damage, and dealing with the impacts on employee well-being can significantly outweigh the investments required for proactive prevention. As one participant stated, “There is a financial cost to not addressing your employees dealing [with violence],” underscoring the economic rationale for prioritizing prevention.

The impact of inaction on workforce stability and retention was also emphasized. In Banff’s competitive labor market, particularly within the tourism sector, businesses that fail to demonstrate a commitment to employee safety and well-being risk damaging their reputation and losing valuable staff. Participants noted that younger generations of workers are increasingly prioritizing workplace safety and inclusivity and are more likely to seek employment with organizations that actively address issues of violence and harassment. Failing to meet these evolving expectations can lead to increased employee turnover, difficulty attracting and retaining skilled staff, and a decline in overall workforce morale and productivity. As one participant stressed, “You might as well put your dollars into prevention,” highlighting the long-term strategic advantage of investing in a safer and more supportive work environment.

Beyond direct business impacts, participants also highlighted the broader cultural normalization of violence that can result from community inaction. Failing to actively challenge and address violence, whether through silence or a lack of visible prevention efforts, can inadvertently create an environment where harmful behaviours are perceived as acceptable or tolerated. As one community member pointed out, “If you’re not saying something, you’re creating a safe space for people to behave that way,” underscoring the powerful message conveyed by both action and inaction. Allowing harmful behaviours to go unchecked, even microaggressions or subtle forms of harassment, can contribute to a workplace or community culture where GBV is not only tolerated but may even be



implicitly normalized, making it increasingly difficult to challenge and address more serious incidents of violence in the future.

In contrast to the risks of inaction, participants also articulated a compelling vision for the potential benefits of proactive violence prevention. They emphasized the leadership opportunities available to businesses and community organizations that choose to champion violence prevention efforts, highlighting the potential for Banff to become a recognized leader in community safety and inclusivity. Participants envisioned a scenario where Banff could leverage its commitment to violence prevention to enhance its reputation as a desirable place to live, work, and visit, attracting both talent and tourism by promoting a message of safety and respect. As one participant suggested, for a major ski resort to declare itself “the safest place for you to work” could be a “remarkable” differentiator, attracting employees and signaling a strong commitment to worker well-being. This vision extends beyond individual business benefits, encompassing the potential for Banff to reshape its community narrative and reinforce its core values. By proactively addressing violence and promoting a culture of safety and respect, Banff can strengthen its community identity, enhance its appeal to residents and visitors alike, and create a more welcoming and inclusive environment for all.

In terms of current and proposed actions to prevent violence, participants shared a range of existing initiatives and innovative ideas for future implementation. Existing organizational initiatives include the implementation of workplace policies, staff training programs, and collaborations with community organizations like the YWCA Banff to deliver healthy relationship and bystander intervention training. Community safety networks, both formal and informal, were recognized as valuable assets, with examples including information-sharing networks among hospitality establishments and formalized partnerships like the Bow Valley Inclusion Partnership’s Workplace Inclusion Charter. Immediate safety measures, such as visible support roles like “Care Bears” and discreet signaling systems like “angel shots,” were also highlighted as effective interventions already in place within some Banff businesses.

Participants proposed several new initiatives to enhance violence prevention efforts. The development of a third-party reporting system was strongly supported as a way to address concerns about impartiality and potential conflicts of interest in workplace investigations. The implementation of pre-arrival tourist education campaigns, akin to existing initiatives that promote responsible wildlife interactions, was suggested as a way to proactively establish expectations for visitor behaviour and communicate community values. The necessity for unified community messaging around safety and respect was underscored, with participants envisioning a cohesive narrative that could be shared among businesses, organizations, and public spaces. Lastly, improved data sharing between organizations was recognized as a vital step towards developing data-driven prevention strategies and ensuring a more coordinated and effective community response to violence. These proposed initiatives, combined with current efforts and a renewed commitment to collaboration, present a promising roadmap for enhancing violence prevention and improving community safety in Banff.

5.4 Reflections From Participants: A Vision for a Safer, More Cohesive Banff

Participants provided insights that highlighted the complex challenges and significant opportunities Banff faces in its efforts to prevent GBV and improve community safety. These comments conveyed a sense of both urgency and optimism, emphasizing the need for ongoing, collaborative action while recognizing the unique strengths and potential of the Banff community.

A recurring theme in the final reflections was the recognition of Banff’s dual identity as both a world-class tourist destination and a residential community. Participants emphasized the need for a more nuanced understanding of Banff that acknowledges and values the experiences of residents, not just visitors. As one participant observed, “The [lack of]



awareness of some tourists that this is a real community that people live in is so crazy,” underscoring the need to bridge the gap between the tourist perception of Banff as a playground and the lived reality of Banff as home for a diverse and vibrant community. Bridging this divide, it was suggested, requires a concerted effort to communicate Banff’s identity as a residential community, with its own set of values, expectations, and needs, to visitors and the wider world.

Participants also reiterated the importance of understanding the interconnected systems and dependencies that shape violence risk in Banff. They repeatedly emphasized the complex web of relationships between employment, housing, immigration status, and social networks, underscoring the need for holistic and integrated prevention strategies that address these interconnected factors simultaneously.

Despite the challenges, participants expressed a strong sense of community capacity and existing strengths within Banff. The high levels of community engagement, the collaborative spirit among local organizations, and the demonstrated capacity for collective action were all highlighted as valuable assets that could be leveraged in violence prevention efforts. Participants expressed optimism about Banff’s potential to harness its existing social capital and build upon its established networks to create a more coordinated and impactful approach to community safety.

The scale and integration challenges inherent in a community like Banff were also acknowledged. Participants recognized the unique tensions between Banff’s small-town dynamics and the demands of its large-scale tourism operations, highlighting the need for prevention strategies that are both scalable and adaptable to the specific context of Banff. The challenge of effectively integrating violence prevention efforts across diverse sectors, from small businesses to large resorts, and ensuring equitable access to support and resources for all community members was also discussed as a key consideration for future action.

The final reflections from participants coalesced around a shared vision for change in Banff. This vision is characterized by a commitment to creating a safer, more cohesive community where violence is not tolerated, and where all residents and visitors feel respected, valued, and safe. Participants expressed optimism about Banff’s potential to become a leader in violence prevention, to redefine its narrative as a community that prioritizes safety and inclusivity, and to serve as a model for other tourism-dependent communities facing similar challenges. This vision, rooted in a deep commitment to community well-being and a recognition of Banff’s unique strengths and challenges, provides a powerful impetus for continued collaborative action and sustained investment in violence prevention efforts.

Key Takeaways

- **Lived Experience Validation:** Community input validates the research data and adds essential real-world context.
- **Staff Accommodation Concerns:** Housing tied to employment and overcrowded conditions are key vulnerability factors for perpetration of sexual violence.
- **Workplace Power Dynamics:** Power imbalances in the hospitality sector and generational differences impact responses to harassment.
- **Newcomer Vulnerabilities:** Immigration status, cultural adjustment, and limited support networks create unique risks for newcomers.
- **Substance Use and Nightlife:** Tourism-driven party culture and substance use contribute to heightened risk environments.
- **Financial Violence:** Economic control is a significant and often overlooked form of abuse in Banff's high-cost environment.



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