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COMMUNITY INSIGHTS & DATA-DRIVEN STRATEGIES: Next Steps in Preventing Sexual Violence in Banff

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OPENING MESSAGE

From Ebony Rempel, CEO of YWCA 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.¹ 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 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.

At YWCA Banff, we believe that strong, connected communities form the foundation for lasting violence prevention. When strategies are created with and for the people who live in a community, they are more relevant, sustainable, and impactful. Our goal is to ensure prevention efforts are not externally imposed but co-created and embraced by local residents and leaders, fostering shared responsibility and long-term commitment to change.

To guide the first phase of this work, our collaborative partnered with the University of Alberta CARE Lab, University of Calgary Shift research hub and HelpSeeker Technologies to gather data-driven insights that help communities make informed decisions. 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 our collaboration, highlighting next steps in building a safer, more resilient community—one where sexual violence is not seen as inevitable, but as a preventable issue we can address together.

We look forward to the next phase of this work and the continued collaboration that will drive meaningful change.

With passion,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Ebony Rempel'.

Ebony Rempel, CEO, YWCA Banff

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Introduction*

*This report is adapted from “*What we found: Leveraging data and community insights to prevent sexual violence in Banff*”. For the full report, click here.

Banff’s reported sexual assault rate is higher than the provincial and national averages, indicating a critical community safety concern.² While this statistic is alarming, it is likely an underestimate of the true extent of sexual violence due to significant underreporting.³ Many survivors may be hesitant to report incidents due to fear of stigma, lack of trust in the justice system, or concerns related to employment and housing security, particularly in a town with a high proportion of transient workers.⁴ The persistent high rates of sexual violence in Banff indicate systemic, community-level factors at play. This issue is further underscored by the fact that while overall crime rates in Banff have been decreasing, sexual assault rates continue to rise.⁵ This signals a troubling divergence that cannot be ignored. **Sexual violence is not simply an isolated problem but rather a deeply embedded issue requiring targeted, multi-faceted prevention efforts from a variety of leaders and stakeholders.**

Understanding Banff is Key to Stopping Sexual Violence From Happening

To effectively address the complex issue of sexual violence in Banff, establishing a comprehensive understanding of the community itself is essential. 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. The combination of Banff’s tourism-driven economy, youthful and transient population, and nightlife culture likely contributes to increased risks,^{6,7} making it imperative for local residents and business owners, law enforcement, and service providers to implement proactive strategies to address the root causes of sexual violence and improve community safety.

Community Conditions Enabling Violence: A Confluence of Interconnected Trends in Banff

The high rates of sexual violence in Banff are not random—they are linked to various community conditions that, together, may unintentionally create an environment where violence is more likely to occur. This section highlights five key community trends that help explain the systemic factors contributing to violence in this unique municipality. They are:

1. The elevated sexual assault rates themselves;
2. The dominance of the tourism and hospitality industry;
3. The pervasive housing crisis;
4. The significant shadow and visitor population; and
5. The increasing demographic diversity.

These trends, each significant, operate synergistically, creating a web of vulnerabilities that require a comprehensive and integrated approach to violence prevention. Let’s learn more about each factor and how they create the conditions for violence.

1. Elevated Sexual Assault Rates: A Symptom of Underlying Social Dynamics

Banff’s significantly higher-than-average rates of sexual assault are not just isolated statistics; they reflect underlying social and community dynamics that may enable or fail to deter such violence. One key factor is the weakening of community cohesion due to the town’s highly transient population. The constant movement of seasonal workers and visitors results in little attachment to place,⁶ weakening the sense of community that typically deters harmful behaviors in more stable communities where there is a collective feeling of responsibility.⁸ As these ties weaken, so does the sense of collective accountability, making it harder to uphold community norms that discourage violence. Additionally, the anonymity afforded by high tourist traffic and extensive mobility of a



transient workforce⁶ may reduce the perceived risk of social repercussions for potential perpetrators, as individuals are less likely to be recognized or held accountable by a consistent social network. This diminished fear of social stigma or long-term consequences can embolden those predisposed to violence. The elevated rates of sexual assault in Banff are not random incidents but symptoms of a broader community dynamic where transience and anonymity weaken social cohesion and accountability, ultimately increasing the risk of sexual violence.

2. Tourism as a Dominant Industry: Shaping Workplace Dynamics and Social Norms

The dominance of the tourism industry in Banff’s economy significantly shapes community dynamics, influencing workplace conditions and social norms in ways that may inadvertently contribute to male-perpetrated violence. With over 61% of Banff’s workforce employed in tourism-related sectors,⁹ the industry’s characteristics impact the daily lives and interactions of most residents. While tourism in a mountain town provides essential economic opportunities, its structure also introduces vulnerabilities that must be addressed in violence prevention efforts. A key concern is the transient nature of the tourism workforce. The turnover of seasonal workers disrupts social stability and weakens community bonds, making it harder to foster a sense of collective responsibility and mutual support⁶—both of which are crucial in preventing violence. Additionally, many tourism jobs, particularly those in public-facing roles within the nightlife and service sectors, expose workers to higher risks of aggressive or inappropriate behaviors.^{10,11} Employees in these roles regularly interact with large numbers of visitors, some of whom may have impaired judgment due to alcohol consumption or a “vacation mindset” that lowers inhibitions and blurs social boundaries.⁵ This environment increases the likelihood of workers encountering harassment, disrespect, or even violence. Addressing these risks requires targeted strategies that acknowledge the unique challenges posed by Banff’s tourism-driven economy and its impact on community safety.

3. Housing and Staff Accommodations Under Strain: Exacerbating Vulnerabilities

The housing crisis in Banff, marked by chronic shortages and high rental costs, places significant pressure on residents, increasing their vulnerability to violence and undermining community safety. With a vacancy rate of less than 1%, one of the lowest in Alberta,¹² affordable housing is scarce, forcing many residents into precarious living situations. Rental costs are among the highest in the province, ranging from \$1,720 for a one-bedroom apartment to \$2,358 for a two-bedroom unit.¹³ This housing insecurity often leads to overcrowding, which can heighten stress, strain relationships, and create conditions where interpersonal conflicts escalate more easily.⁶ For many residents, particularly those in the tourism sector, frequent moves and unstable housing arrangements contribute to a sense of instability that makes them more vulnerable to violence and exploitation. Employer-provided staff housing, often the only viable option for low-wage workers, further exacerbates the risk of harm. The strong link between housing and employment creates a power imbalance that can be exploited, making individuals hesitant to report harassment, abuse, or unsafe conditions for fear of losing both their job and housing.⁶ During the Banff October 2024 Data Walk session, community members described this as a “forced situation” that traps individuals in unsafe environments with few alternatives. The broader mental health impacts of housing insecurity also contribute to increased vulnerability.⁶ Constant stress and uncertainty can lead to anxiety, depression, and difficulty coping, which may increase the likelihood of both perpetration and victimization of violence. Addressing these housing challenges is critical to improving safety and well-being in Banff.



4. A Significant Shadow and Visitor Population: Transient Pressures on Community Safety

Banff's reputation as a world-renowned tourist destination results in a complex and dynamic population that extends well beyond official census figures. Alongside its 9,000 permanent residents, the town sees significant seasonal fluctuations, increasing to over 40,000 individuals during peak tourism times.¹⁴ This influx, driven by seasonal workers and visitors, is critical to Banff's economy, yet it also places strain on community resources and disrupts social cohesion. The continuous turnover of residents and tourists undermines community ties, limiting opportunities for fostering robust social networks and shared group norms.¹⁵ Consequently, informal social controls that usually help maintain safety and accountability may weaken, raising the likelihood of behaviours that stray from community standards. The high level of transience in Banff also breeds a sense of anonymity, where individuals might feel less community responsibility due to the absence of a stable social network.⁸ This can encourage certain behaviors, including those that compromise safety and mutual respect. Furthermore, the shifting population imposes heavy demands on essential services, such as housing, law enforcement, and social support. As resources become increasingly strained, both permanent and temporary residents may find it challenging to access the assistance they require, heightening vulnerability, especially in situations of risk or crisis.¹⁵ Tackling these issues calls for targeted strategies that consider Banff's unique population dynamics and ensure that safety and support systems remain robust throughout the year.

5. Increasing Diversity and Newcomers: Integration Challenges and Vulnerabilities

Banff's demographic landscape is undergoing a period of rapid diversification, with significant growth in its immigrant, visible minority, and Indigenous populations. Banff's population has become increasingly diverse over the past two decades, showing significant changes across multiple demographic groups.¹⁶ While this growing diversity enriches the community culturally and socially, it also introduces specific integration challenges and potential vulnerabilities that must be considered in violence prevention efforts.

Banff National Park spans the present-day territories of Treaty 6, 7, and 8 First Nations and is within the recognized "Homeland" of the Métis people.¹⁷ Banff's Indigenous population has grown from 85 (1.3%) in 2006 to 210 (2.5%) in 2021.¹⁸ The establishment of Banff National Park led to the displacement of Indigenous Peoples and restrictions on their traditional practices, including hunting and movement within the park.¹⁵ The history of Banff is also marked by conflict and dispossession, as Indigenous Peoples were prohibited from hunting in the park starting in 1890, and their movement was restricted by policies that limited their ability to leave reserves and practice traditional ways of life within the park boundaries.¹⁵ These past injustices underscore the importance of addressing historical wrongs and ensuring that any work related to Indigenous communities is done with their full participation and consent.

The immigrant population in Banff is growing, indicating Banff's 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 a unique set of challenges such as cultural adjustment, language barriers, economic hardships, and discrimination.¹⁹ Language barriers can significantly impede newcomers' ability to access information, resources, and support services, increasing their vulnerability to exploitation and violence.²⁰ Cultural adjustment stress, arising from the need to adapt to new social norms, customs, and expectations, can also contribute to feelings of frustration, anxiety, and isolation, potentially increasing vulnerability to both perpetration and victimization of violence. Newcomers may also face discrimination and social exclusion within the community, further marginalizing them and reducing their access to social support networks.²¹ Experiences of discrimination

can lead to feelings of anger, resentment, and helplessness, potentially increasing the risk of violent behaviour or victimization.

Learning from the Community: Grounding Data in Lived Experience and Local Expertise

Recognizing that numbers from open access data alone can't capture the full reality of violence in a community, local stakeholders joined a Community Data Walk in October 2024. This event connected research findings with the lived experiences of 30 diverse community representatives in Banff, validating data, adding local insights, and fostering collaboration on tailored violence prevention strategies. The following seven themes emerged from the day.

1. Staff accommodation and housing dynamics emerged as a recurring theme due to the heightened vulnerability they create for residents. Participants emphasized how Banff's policy of linking housing to employment, while intended to address local needs, can inadvertently lead to 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.

2. 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.

3. 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 intricate dependencies among 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."

4. Remote and isolated settings are a large part of Banff's tourism landscape, particularly in backcountry operations. As one participant noted, "The situations... have been scariest at the backcountry lodges." 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.

5. Violence in public spaces and daily interactions within Banff emerged from a variety of participants. One parent participant shared, "My daughter's just 18 and she works at



a restaurant in Canmore and does a day shift as a bus girl and she gets a lot of unwanted attention... And also, on her walk home in the daylight next to construction sites, a lot of unwanted attention there.” Experiences like this demonstrate instances of harassment in public spaces, particularly for young female workers, highlighting that the issue of violence extends beyond formal workplaces into the community at large.

6. Substance use and party culture, particularly in Banff’s vibrant nightlife scene, was also identified as a contributing factor to violence risk. One participant also highlighted the influence of digital platforms on perceptions of violence and substance use, saying “We do find that sometimes they’re not able to manage how they consume the alcohol... And what is interesting is that it’s almost like a social media application to normalize violence. So you may see something on TikTok, and in your mind, the intellectual person is saying, ‘That is absolutely wrong.’” Participants noted how social media can normalize and even glorify excessive alcohol consumption and boundary-pushing behaviours within mountain towns, further contributing to an environment where the risk of aggression and sexual violence is heightened.

7. Financial violence and economic control emerged as a significant, yet often overlooked, form of abuse within the Banff community. For example, one participant noted, “I would say one thing that I find interesting in terms of a trend in violence that I’ve witnessed quite a bit more frequently is around financial violence, financial control, especially with the high costs of living here.” 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.

Private Sector Participation in Preventing Sexual Violence

A key focus of the Community Data Walk was to explore the potential risks and challenges that businesses and the private sector in Banff 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. The following three themes were identified:

1. Reputational dynamics emerged as a central consideration. Businesses expressed a sensitivity to the potential for negative publicity if their involvement in violence prevention were to be interpreted as an admission of existing problems within their establishments or the broader community. One participant commented, “One of the risks about businesses getting involved, but without maybe having the resources or the tools, or even just if they’re getting involved more so from the reputation side of wanting to look good, the risk of this becoming just a checklist item and then kind of marketing your workspace as a safe place that takes it seriously, and then people show up, and that’s not the reality.” Comments like this focused on concerns raised about the delicate balance between acknowledging the importance of addressing violence and maintaining Banff’s image as a desirable and safe tourist destination.

2. Operational and resource implications were also identified as significant barriers to private sector participation. For example, one individual said, “Even just to implement some [prevention initiatives], like there might be good ideas for investment, but yet if you don’t have people who are in the structure who can move it along, and it’s new people all the time, that can be really hard to implement.” Businesses, particularly smaller operations with limited resources, expressed concerns about the financial costs and logistical challenges associated with implementing violence prevention programs and policies.

3. 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 sexual harassment

Key Reflections on Preventing Sexual Violence in Banff: A Vision for a Safer, More Cohesive Banff

incidents, particularly in smaller businesses where HR resources may be limited, and potential conflicts of interest may arise. One participant noted, for example, “Investigation is a really complicated task, like process and task, and most employers, I would say, don’t have somebody who’s trained in it... And so, how would they even be? We’re required by Occupational Health and Safety to handle it, right? But to what extent and how is it actually happening?”

Participants offered five key reflections that underscored the complex challenges and significant opportunities facing Banff in its efforts to prevent sexual violence and enhance community safety. These remarks captured a sense of both urgency and optimism, highlighting the need for sustained, collaborative action while acknowledging the unique strengths and potential of the Banff community. Key Reflections include:

1. Banff is a Town and a Destination: Participants emphasized Banff’s dual identity—as both a tourist hotspot and a residential community. Many noted the need to shift visitor perceptions and highlight that Banff is home to real people, not just a vacation destination. As one person said, “The awareness of some tourists that this is a real community that people live in is so crazy... They don’t see the residential area. It’s very easy not to even notice it. It’s for me to come and play. It’s my playground.”

2. Interconnected Risks Require Holistic Solutions: Violence risk in Banff is shaped by a web of factors—employment, housing, immigration status, and social networks. One individual summarized this, noting that “Your housing, your finances, your future, your immigration status are all tied to your employment...” Addressing sexual violence effectively requires integrated strategies that tackle these interconnected challenges.

3. Community Strengths as a Foundation for Change: Despite the challenges, Banff’s high community engagement, collaboration among local organizations, and strong social ties were seen as assets that can drive meaningful violence prevention efforts. One person pointed out, “We have a really good base of engagement compared to another community... but we have our folks who seem to attend [events] over and over and over again... how do we get those early adopters [of violence prevention] to bring a friend?”

4. Navigating Scale and Integration Challenges: Participants acknowledged the tension between Banff’s small-town dynamics and large-scale tourism demands. One individual raised the question, “How do we build a system that supports equal access and that people feel heard, can heal and relationships can be restored?” These types of comments suggest that prevention efforts must be scalable and adaptable across sectors, from small businesses to major resorts, ensuring equitable access to resources.

5. A Shared Vision for a Safer Banff: The group expressed optimism about Banff’s potential to lead in violence prevention. This is summed up by one person’s comment, “There’s a real opportunity here. And I think the opportunity is there for this community to come together.” As a whole, the group envisioned a safer, more cohesive community where violence is not tolerated, and all residents and visitors feel valued and protected.

This shared commitment provides the momentum for continued collaboration and investment in long-term change.



Moving Forward: Key Recommended Changes to Achieve in 2025 for Violence Prevention in Banff



Based on research findings, insights from the Community Data Walk, and an assessment of current conditions in Banff, YWCA Banff recommends the following steps to enhance violence prevention efforts.

1. Strengthen Violence Prevention in the Tourism and Hospitality Sector by increasing engagement with hospitality organizations to make violence prevention a core part of workplace culture and guest interactions. This can be achieved through:

- **Expanding Partnerships:** YWCA Banff will collaborate with tourism and hospitality organizations to integrate violence prevention into staff training, workplace policies, and industry standards.
- **Enhancing Training and Capacity Building:** Develop evidence-based, culturally responsive training for hospitality workers and leadership to recognize, prevent, and respond to violence.
- **Implementing Clear Policies and Reporting Mechanisms:** Establish workplace policies that prioritize violence prevention and ensure accessible, confidential reporting systems for employees and guests.
- **Fostering a Culture of Safety and Accountability:** Encourage leadership to actively support prevention initiatives, recognize proactive efforts, and engage staff in ongoing dialogue to create a safer, more inclusive work environment.

2. Develop a Collaborative Primary Prevention Plan with Banff Lake Louise Tourism and the Town of Banff that addresses the root causes of violence. This plan should integrate best practices, policies, and strategies that foster a culture of safety, respect, and inclusion across the community and tourism sector.

3. Enhance Data Collection and Research to Better Understand Perpetrator Patterns by strengthening research and data collection efforts to inform targeted prevention strategies. Key initiatives include:

- **Collaborating with RCMP:** Analyze five years of sexual violence reports to identify trends in victim and perpetrator demographics, common settings, and circumstances.
- **Partnering with the Tourism and Hospitality Sector:** Gather and analyze workplace-reported data on sexual violence, leveraging insights from the data walk to design industry-specific prevention measures.
- **Engaging Employers and Staff Accommodation Owners:** Assess risks in workplace and housing settings, using findings to inform prevention efforts, including the YWCA's Canmore project (336-room staff accommodation initiative).

4. Build YWCA's Capacity to Strengthen Community Prevention Efforts in the following areas:

- **Address resistance and backlash to prevention initiatives** by fostering open dialogue, addressing misconceptions, and engaging leadership in meaningful conversations about the benefits of prevention.
- **Better utilize the power of social networks, workplace relationships, and shared community values** to foster a culture of safety and respect. By incorporating culturally informed and norm-based approaches, workplaces can create peer-driven change that normalizes violence prevention as a core part of workplace culture.

- Create safe and inclusive work environments where employees feel a sense of belonging and protection, and there are established policies and practices that prioritize employee well-being, ensuring all staff members—regardless of background or role—feel safe, valued, and protected.
- Implement a comprehensive approach to preventing sexual and gender-based harassment by integrating evidence-based training, clear workplace policies, and proactive intervention strategies. Ensure that all employees, from frontline staff to management, receive regular education on recognizing, preventing, and responding to harassment. Strengthen accountability by establishing accessible reporting mechanisms, enforcing consequences for violations, and fostering a workplace culture where respect, safety, and zero tolerance for harassment are actively upheld.

These targeted strategies will enhance community-wide violence prevention, create safer workplaces, and ensure data-driven, evidence-based solutions guide future community actions. By embedding violence prevention into Banff's hospitality sector and broader community, we can build a culture of accountability, inclusivity, and safety—where all residents and visitors feel valued and where there is zero tolerance for sexual violence.



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