

HATE, EXTREMISM, AND TERRORISM

In Alberta, Canada,
and Beyond

The Shift from 2019 to 2022

IV. Conspiracies + Hate Crimes

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organization for
the prevention
of violence

CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Due to the significant growth in the popularity of some conspiracy theories, this report includes a section devoted to this trend, which was absent from the OPV's 2019 report.

Although conspiracy theories and the individuals and groups that believe them are traditionally not lumped together with violent extremist organizations, we have chosen to do so for several reasons.

First, however, it is important to note that most individuals who believe conspiracy theories are non-violent and will never mobilize to violence. However, in the years since the OPV's last report, individuals on the fringe of these groups have conducted violence, especially since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and the 2020 U.S. Presidential election.

Additionally, several established extremist organizations have adopted and incorporated parts of different conspiracy theories into their ideologies. For these reasons, this report now includes a section on conspiracy theories, but with exclusive attention to those conspiracy theories which have seen fringe actors mobilize to violence.

CONSPIRACY THEORIES: A BACKGROUND

While conspiracy theories vary widely in their content, they tend to share the notion that some sort of cabal is pursuing an illegal and insidious hidden agenda unbeknownst to the general public.¹

Believers of conspiracy theories often view themselves as having privileged insights that are missed or ignored by the wider population. As a result, conspiracy theories tend to proliferate most during times of high uncertainty and tension, including after the assassination of U.S. President Kennedy, the attacks of 9/11, and global health crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

Individuals often find conspiracy theories more believable during these times because it offers an explanatory narrative and identifies clear culprits to explain otherwise complex, uncontrolled situations. Additionally, the Internet has given conspiracy theories a new mode of spread compared to decades ago, which creates echo chambers of discourse.² Conspiracy theories naturally share a symbiotic relationship with several IMVE ideologies including anti-Semitism, anti-globalisation, anti-authority, and exclusionary nationalism.

Undeniably, most individuals and groups who believe in conspiracy theories are non-violent and will never mobilize to violence. Therefore, belief in a conspiracy is not necessarily an indicator that someone will be more likely to commit violence.

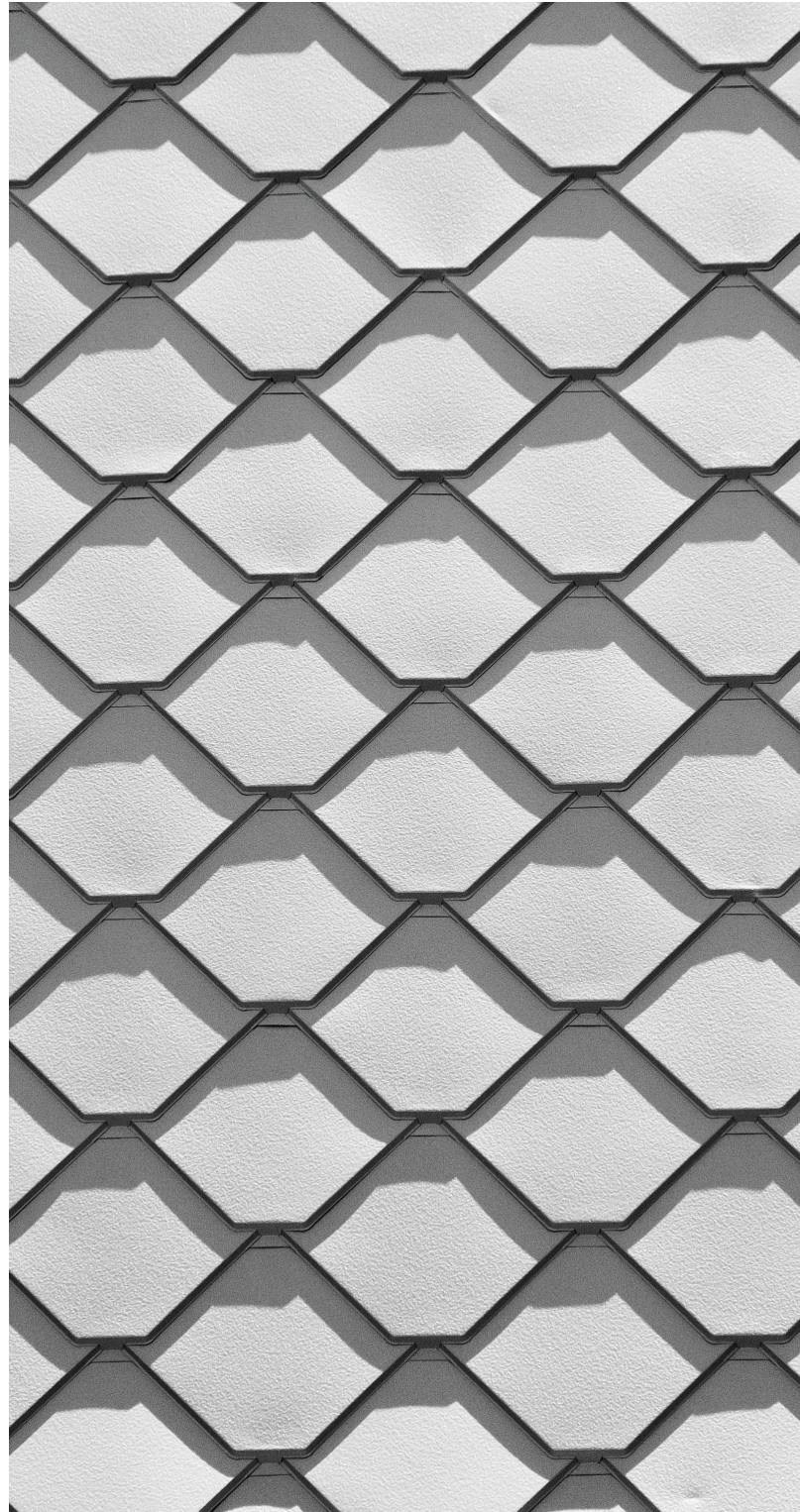
However, for the individuals at the fringes of these communities who do mobilize to violence, they do so to correct a perceived injustice or to expose and undermine the plans of the alleged cabal conspirators.

For example, in June 2018, a man was arrested after driving an armored vehicle onto the Hoover Dam, blocking traffic, and holding up a sign that read “release the OIG report.” This was a reference to a Justice Department report which believes of the QAnon conspiracy allege will expose the illegal actions of the “deep state.”³ As a result of this and other incidents, in 2019, an FBI Intelligence Bulletin identified conspiracy theories as a growing domestic terrorist threat and specifically mentioned QAnon as one such conspiracy theory of notable concern.⁴

In response to the rapid spread of the Covid-19 virus in the spring of 2020, policymakers across the globe and in Canada instructed people to stay home to reduce transmission of the disease. Researchers have raised the possibility of a correlation between time spent at home, often scrolling through social media, and exposure and adoption of a myriad of conspiracy theories.⁵

As a result, engagement with online conspiracies has increased overall (including in Canada), several new conspiracies have proliferated, and believers of existing conspiracies like QAnon have been integral in promoting different pandemic-related narratives. Covid conspiracies also tend to align closely with existing anti-authority and white nationalist narratives, making it possible that more people will be left amenable to the ideas espoused by IMVE groups.

However, most individuals who engage with, believe in and disseminate these theories have no previous engagement with extremist content or affiliation with established groups. It also remains to be seen if there is a direct effect between public health measures, adoption of conspiracies, and in more extreme cases, actual involvement in violence or other criminal behavior.⁶



5G CONSPIRACY IN CANADA

A common Covid-related conspiracy links the virus to 5G telecommunications towers. The 5G conspiracy has been around for several years, and believers allege that the technology built into 5G telecommunication towers and our hand-held wireless devices produce radiation that causes a myriad of health issues, including cancer and permanent damage to our DNA.

Now, the 5G conspiracy has been linked to Covid conspiracies, with believers alleging that the lockdowns allow the government to build more 5G towers secretly, or that 5G towers and wireless devices spread the virus or increase our susceptibility to it.⁷

Several attacks against 5G sites have already occurred in Canada and elsewhere, particularly in the U.K.⁸ For example, in 2020, a month after Canada introduced sweeping public health measures due to the Covid-19 pandemic, a cell phone tower in Laval, Quebec, was targeted, resulting in \$1 million in damage.⁹ Around six other towers were lit on fire north of Montreal a month later in May 2020.¹⁰ A confidential CSIS report obtained by Global News detailed the Canadian government's concern over extremist attacks targeting 5G sites as a result of the rapid spread of these conspiracies across the country.¹¹

QANON

QAnon is an elaborate conspiracy that alleges a "deep state" group of Satan-worshipping, cannibalistic, child sex-trafficking pedophiles rule the world. Believers, especially those in the U.S., identify former President Donald Trump as the enemy of these shadowy figures and believe he was working against them during his presidency.

QAnon is considered a meta-conspiracy theory, which means that it easily incorporates other, older conspiracies like the Lizard people conspiracy, the Great Replacement, or White Genocide, which have existed far longer than QAnon itself.

QAnon builds upon earlier "Pizza Gate" conspiracy during the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, which alleged that Hillary Clinton's leaked emails contained coded messages connecting her and several other high-ranking Democratic officials to various U.S. restaurants in a human and child sex-trafficking ring. One of these alleged restaurants was Comet Ping Pong in Washington D.C., a pizzeria that was thereafter the subject of a barrage of threats.¹² This culminated in a believer from North Carolina traveling to D.C. to investigate the theory himself and shooting a rifle in the restaurant, though no one was injured.¹³

QAnon derives its name from a user on the online forum 4chan and its sister site, 8kun (formerly 8chan). In October 2017, a user under the name "Q" began posting anonymously in a thread called "Calm Before the Storm." This became known colloquially as "The Storm" conspiracy, which signaled an imminent event where the "deep state" child-eating pedophiles would be arrested, charged, and imprisoned.¹⁴



"Q" claimed to be a high-level government insider with Q level security clearance – the level of security clearance required in the U.S. to access information on nuclear weapons. "Q" had tasked him/herself with covertly informing the public through so-called "Q drops" (or nuggets of information).

The drops allegedly confirmed the cabal's existence and proved that then President Trump had plans to stage a coup against these implicated individuals. Amongst other things, "Q" alleged Trump never had any involvement with Russia and implied that it was these same high-level Democrats who Russian President Vladimir Putin had corrupted. Websites devoted to aggregating, discussing, and decoding "Q"'s vague content soon proliferated, and the conspiracy has since garnered believers across the U.S., Canada, Europe, and Australia.

The true identity of "Q" has never been confirmed because users on both 4chan and 8kun post anonymously. Adding to the mystery, "Q" stopped posting at the end of 2020 after the U.S. presidential election.¹⁵ However, in February 2022, two forensic and computational linguist teams claim their analysis has given the first empirical glimpse into the true identity of "Q."¹⁶

Although their findings are yet to be verified by other researchers, according to their work, "Q" was actually two different people at different points in time. They argue that evidence points to a South African software developer as the first 'inventor' of "Q," but that the "Q" identity was later handed over to a man named Ron Watkins, the former site administrator of 8kun and current Arizona Congressional candidate.¹⁷ Both have denied being "Q."

The researchers say they hope that unmasking the true identity of "Q" will help reduce the conspiracy's hold on many individuals.

Although many speculated that the QAnon conspiracy would fade away after Donald Trump's loss in the 2020 election and the failure of many of its prophesized events, the QAnon conspiracy has proven highly resilient. It has been linked to several acts of violence in the U.S. and around the world.¹⁸

Indeed, many of the individuals who stormed the U.S. Capitol building on January 6th were Q-supporters and believed the 2020 election had been 'stolen' from Donald Trump.¹⁹

Experts argued that the power vacuum caused by Trump's failed reelection and the absence of "Q" online has quickly been filled by so-called QAnon influencers, or individuals who have amassed large online followings. Many of these share anti-Semitic and neo-Nazi sentiments with other IMVE groups. Additionally, the relevance of the QAnon conspiracy is likely to increase due to the reappearance of a user claiming to be "Q" on 8kun in June 2022.²⁰

QAnon in Canada

Today, the QAnon meta-conspiracy theory connects a complex and wide-ranging number of narratives and beliefs, including anti-5G and anti-Covid-19 vaccination conspiracies. The QAnon conspiracy theory has spread across the world, most notably in several Western countries, including a heavy presence in Canada, where it has been rescripted to implicate a variety of Canadian politicians and elites.

Although many components of the QAnon conspiracy implicate U.S. politicians, the QAnon conspiracy is adaptable to a variety of political realities across the world. QAnon, like other conspiracies, can be molded to fit almost any political circumstance, which has been the key ingredient in its growing popularity outside the U.S. and particularly within Canada.

And, like their American counterparts, not every Canadian who engages with the QAnon conspiracy believes all or even the majority of the theory at-large. The theory is so broad and all-encompassing that many adherents believe bits and pieces of the larger narrative but may never be exposed to or believe the entire collection of theories.

Like their American counterparts, Canadian QAnon believers distrust the media and mainstream news outlets. In-group norms encourage believers to do their own online "research," which has contributed to spreading misinformation on social media outlets such as Facebook and Twitter.

In Canada, many of QAnon's central ideas were imported from the U.S., like the implication of political figures and elites in unsavory acts, anti-Semitism, and the belief in a malevolent "deep state" plotting in the shadows.

Like American believers, Canadian QAnon believers heavily implicate the Jewish community in many of their conspiracies. For example, on 8kun, there is a Canadian-specific QAnon "research" page whereby users are encouraged to post evidence confirming the group's conspiratorial beliefs anonymously.

In one particular post from April 22, 2020, an anonymous user posted a YouTube video. The video alleges that several elites whose names are between triple parentheses (an online anti-Semitic symbol used to highlight the names of individuals with a Jewish background or their organizations) helped create and spread the Coronavirus around the world to create a malevolent vaccine.²¹

On another popular Canadian QAnon blog, which describes itself as "Research, Investigative Journalism, Independent Media (Redpilling Future Nationalists)", the editor posts self-researched analyses on a variety of topics related to Canada, including Covid-19, the U.N., and Zionism.

In general, Canadian QAnon believers promote a uniquely Canadian rhetoric that hinges on ultra-nationalism and commonly includes anti-Liberal, anti-Muslim, and anti-Semitic narratives. For example, under a series of posts called “Planned-emic,” (a term which implies the cabal of elites planned the Covid-19 pandemic), the author alleges that Bill Gates and Justin Trudeau are tied to a conspiracy to forcibly mandate the Covid-19 vaccine for all Canadians through a series of convoluted lobby networks.

These and other similar arguments are part of a larger conspiracy that asserts that the “deep state” in Canada, along with the World Health Organization (WHO) and the U.N., orchestrated the Covid-19 pandemic as a way to manipulate politicians and infringe on the freedoms of Canadians through mandatory vaccines.

Outside of pandemic-related issues, QAnon believers have translated many common American QAnon conspiracies to the Canadian political landscape. For example, #ObamaGate, a popular QAnon hashtag in the U.S. that alludes to former-President Obama’s involvement in an alleged child sex-trafficking ring, has been adapted as #TrudeauGate in Canada.

Many Canadian QAnon believers are highly critical of the Conservative Party of Canada (CPC), particularly Erin O’Toole. For example, when the Conservative Party leader Erin O’Toole tested positive for Covid-19, QAnon believers alleged that the announcement was actually code for him having been arrested for his role in a child-trafficking ring.²²

While Canadian QAnon believers are generally most critical of the Liberal government, many also allege that the Conservative Party is a hollow husk designed by the “deep state” to give the illusion of opposition.

One popular Canadian QAnon blog has a page devoted to posting “evidence” of conspiracies linked to O’Toole and the CPC, including the notion that O’Toole is linked to the “anti-free speech” lobby, Canadian Muslim lobbies, and that he helped to orchestrate the pandemic in Canada.

During our interviews with law enforcement in Alberta, many mentioned that due to the nature of the pandemic there has been a growth in QAnon:

“There’s certainly been a growth of QAnon narratives. Quantifying the number of believers is difficult, again, we don’t have a lot of good data. But, one thing that we’ve definitely noticed is the penetration of QAnon narratives... It’s just been really effective. So, even, everybody from pseudo-law believers, anti-[public health order], which kind of blurs the line into anti-authority, people across the spectrum... I have seen neo-Nazis talk about QAnon stuff. There’s an interesting interaction with neo-Nazis, though, especially the younger generation. They kind of view QAnon as a boomer [generation] thing... it’s gone viral within old[er] people. And so, they either joke about it or they try to use it because they see that it’s [an] effective [narrative]. So, I’ve seen a little bit of that... not a lot that I’ve observed directly. But, yeah, absolutely, it’s been growing.”

– Law enforcement official



“Those people who might be prone to suspicion of government and organizations has certainly, that mentality or that messaging [of QAnon] has had the potential to increase. Their paranoia about government and their opposition to the controls that they might be attempting to enforce. Regardless of what it’s related to, be it the pandemic or a new local bylaw about something, I don’t take a lot of time to peruse local Facebook pages... but when I do... yeah, there’s some funny folks out there. I don’t think it’s reached the point of extremism or an area that we’re super concerned about as a threat of violence as of yet. But, you know, there’s certainly some influence there that we’re seeing.”

– Law enforcement official

As a result of the Covid-19 shutdowns, which began across Canada in March 2020, many mass demonstrations took place over the summer and fall, protesting lockdown restrictions, bylaws requiring masks in public spaces, and economic shutdowns. QAnon believers have made their presence known to many, often by holding signs or wearing t-shirts with a large “Q.” For example, in September 2020, a large anti-mask and anti-lockdown protest in Montreal was attended by many individuals carrying the “Q” sign on posters.²³

Although most believers rarely engage in violence, there have been several notable instances in Canada where QAnon and other conspiracy believers engaged in menacing behaviour. In May 2020, in the midst of the Quebec Covid lockdown, a man from Quebec City called and left threatening messages that Premier François Legault’s days “were numbered” and that he had access to a gun and wanted to shoot Quebec’s top public health official, Dr. Horacio Arruda.²⁴

Quebec provincial police traced the man's location during his phone messages to Texas. When the man returned to Canada on May 16th, border guards searched his vehicle and found several papers detailing different conspiracy theories, though they did not find a gun. He was later arrested for making death threats.

Later in July 2020, a man from Manitoba rammed his truck through the gates of the Governor General's residence and set out on foot toward Rideau Cottage, where the Prime Minister and his family were living at the time.²⁵ He was confronted by police and arrested, and police confiscated five firearms from him, which included several restricted or prohibited guns.

He told police he intended to arrest Trudeau during his daily Covid-19 briefing to make a statement about the government's lockdown policies and its ban on assault-style rifles, noting he believed Canada was turning into a "communist dictatorship." Data from his cell phone and social media indicate he engaged with a variety of conspiracies, including QAnon, and promoted the idea that Covid-19 was a hoax.

In Alberta, over the summer of 2020, two "Q" flags were seen flying on homes in a Calgary neighborhood shortly after the incident at Rideau Cottage.²⁶ Residents of the neighborhood have alleged that the flags were passed out as part of a larger 'recruitment' tactic to introduce others to the conspiracy theory.

In 2021, a man from Gatineau, Q.C. named Kevin Goyette pleaded guilty to charges of making threats to kill the Canadian Prime Minister and other government officials.²⁷ The threats reportedly occurred on a closed Facebook group, where he replied to a poll asking members of the group how far they would be willing to go to stop Covid-19 mask mandates with the following: "a bullet for Legault, Arruda and Trudeau, that would serve as a lesson for the next ones."

More recently, during the 2022 "Freedom" Convoy protests in Ottawa, many people showed up holding "Q" placards or chanting popular QAnon slogans.²⁸ Indeed, one of the protest organizers, James Bauder, has reportedly endorsed QAnon and called for Trudeau to be put on trial for treason.²⁹ Bauder is the leader of a conspiracy group called Canada Unity, which alleges, amongst other things, that Covid-19 related policies are illegal under Canadian law and the Nuremberg Code.³⁰

The Freedom Convoy is against all Covid-19 related public health measures, including vaccine mandates and vaccine passports. Although not all Convoy supporters are connected to extremist groups, it did attract some, including conspiracy theorists such as QAnon believers. For example, at the Freedom Convoy in Ottawa, QAnon logos have been found on trucks, and QAnon stickers were posted across the protest area.

Before the Freedom Convoy, several groups organized similar smaller protests and pickets across Canada relating the Covid-19 pandemic to QAnon. For example, Hold Fast Canada organized pickets outside the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's headquarters, stating that concentration camps were active in Canada.³¹

Another group known as Action4Canada filed a 400-page court document stating that the Covid-19 pandemic was started partly by Bill Gates and the “New World (Economic) Order” to inject 5G microchips into Canadians via the Covid-19 vaccine.³² QAnon falsely claims that the Covid-19 vaccines contain a 5G microchip, which will connect individuals to 5G towers and be tracked by the government.³³ Both groups participated in the 2022 Freedom Convoy.

Canadian QAnon ‘Influencers’

One of the most prolific QAnon figures in Canada is a B.C. resident named Romana Didulo, the leader of an unregistered online political party called the Canada1st Party of Canada.

Amidst the public health measures during the pandemic’s second wave in 2020, Didulo began posting about her party. After this content gained little traction, she switched her rhetoric in May 2021 to include popular QAnon narratives and began to amass followers. Her rise was fueled, in part, by endorsement from other QAnon influencers like Charlie Ward, a popular British QAnon figure.³⁴

By June of 2021, she had garnered over 20,000 followers on her Telegram channel. By December 2021, her following had swelled to over 70,000.³⁵ Didulo’s rhetoric blends common QAnon conspiracies, particularly about the pandemic, and anti-authority beliefs.

In short, Didulo claims that she is “the head of state and commander in chief of Canada,” and was appointed to this position by “the white hats and the U.S. military, together with the global allied troops and their governments – the same group of people who have helped President Trump.”³⁶ She also claims to be the “Queen of Canada” and has replaced Queen Elizabeth II of England, “who has now been executed for crimes against humanity.”³⁷

Because Didulo operates almost entirely online, she has amassed followers from all over Canada who remain relatively unconnected to each other and operate independently. For example, during an interview with a rural detachment in Alberta, a member of law enforcement told us they had come across a novel group:

“Recently, I heard something called The Nuance. I tried to research it but I haven’t come up with anything. So, it might even be brand-spanking new. I never heard it before... The [individual said they had] discredited the old Queen and they’ve hired a new Queen of North America. And I was like, “Oh, that’s interesting.” They don’t recognize the current Queen or the current Canadian or American government. I was called to [the individual’s] property [for noise complaints, trespassing and mischief]. He was throwing a music festival for him and all his friends. He didn’t spew [his beliefs] at first. He was very polite, very respectful to law enforcement. And, he presented it as a business case, if I was interested in changing my views. So, kind of like a ‘new hire’ type of deal.”

– Law enforcement official

Although the group name *The Nuance* does not appear to be used within Didulo’s circle, this individual’s rhetoric seems to indicate he is indeed a follower or supporter of Didulo. Across Alberta and the rest of Canada, many of her followers have taken action by hand delivering and filing fake cease-and-desist notices to businesses and police forces, demanding that they end all activities related to the pandemic.³⁸ During our interviews, law enforcement officials across Alberta spoke about these activities:

“We’ve got [a few of her supporters] here in the local area... I have heard of them attending businesses and schools and serving them notices on behalf of the Queen of Canada.”

– Law enforcement official

“Have you seen that [Canada1st Party] or something like that? We got served a notice in the mail from someone in this area saying that the lockdowns are unconstitutional and this person who names herself the Queen of Canada orders us to stand down and all that stuff... we were served that and a lot of the detachments in the area were served that. But we were served in the mail by one of her political followers. We don’t know who it was but we do know it came from this area... The letter we got is basically a cease-and-desist order from a politician that basically says ‘all Covid-19 vaccines and experimentation, genetic bio-warfare across Canada...’”

– Law enforcement official

Although most of these interactions have been peaceful, Didulo’s rhetoric has become increasingly violent over the last several months. In November 2021, the RCMP executed a search warrant, seized her electronic devices, and conducted a psych evaluation after she posted the following instructions to her 70,000 followers:

“shoot to kill anyone who tries to inject Children under the age of 19 years old with Coronavirus19 vaccines/ bioweapons or any other Vaccines. This order is effective immediately.”³⁹

A month later, in December 2021, a man in Laval, Quebec, was arrested after threatening his daughter’s school in a private chat room of Didulo’s followers.⁴⁰ In the post, he provided details of his daughter’s school, which was offering vaccination to students at that time, and wrote, “[its] time to go hunting bang bang.”⁴¹

Didulo and her followers were also present during the 2022 Trucker Convoy protests in Ottawa.⁴² In a widely shared video, Didulo is seen burning a Canadian flag in front of parliament as her followers watch; her followers have been seen waving the flag of her so-called “kingdom” around the city.⁴³

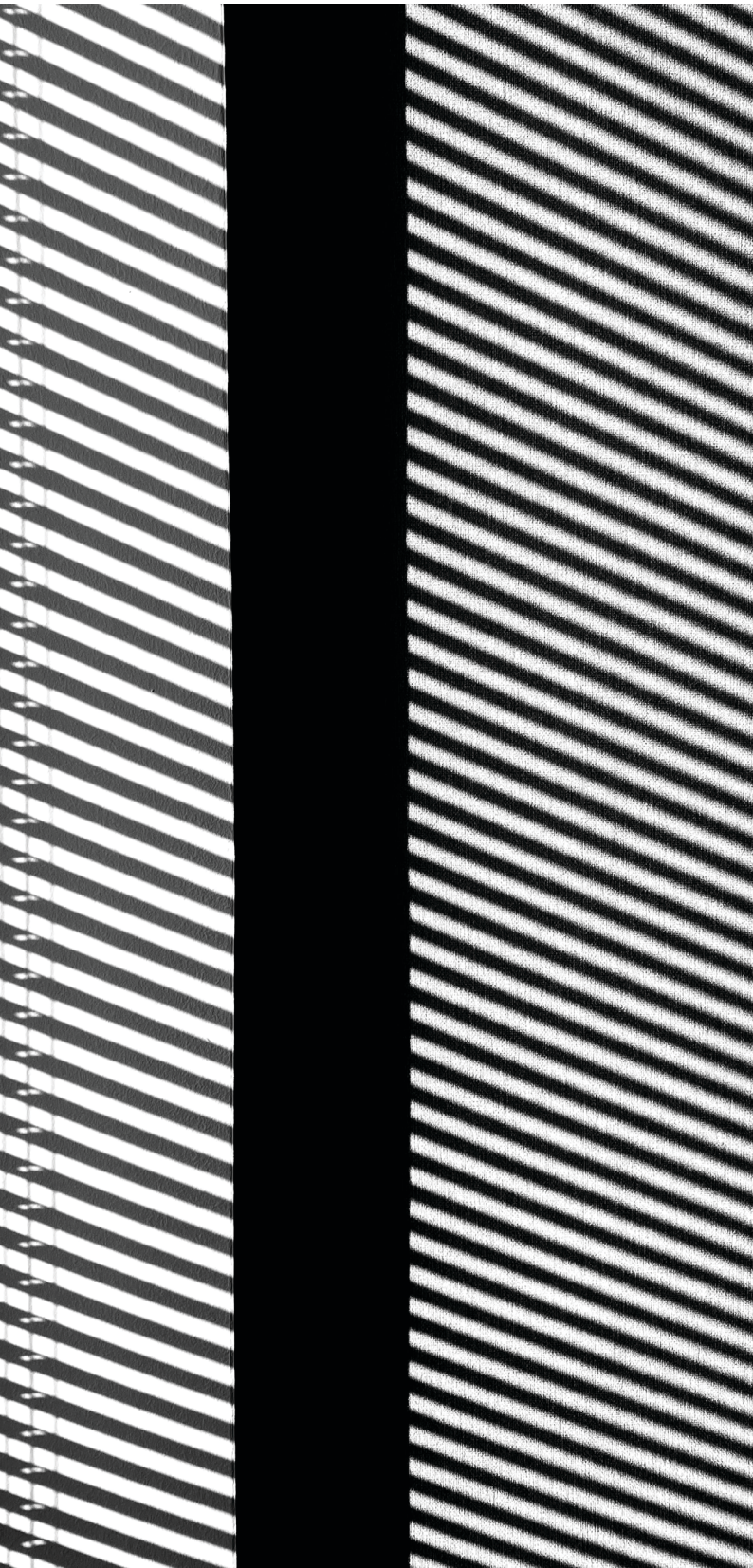
Other important Canadian QAnon “influencers” include a prominent YouTuber from Ontario who goes by the online moniker “Amazing Polly,” and has been linked to the start of the Wayfair human trafficking conspiracy.⁴⁴ The conspiracy alleged that Wayfair – an online furniture retailer – was trafficking children in cabinets and other furniture with girls’ names. Another prominent “influencer” is Alexis Trudel-Cossette, based in Quebec, who is one of the largest influencers in the online French-speaking conspiracy space.

TRENDS: ONLINE ENGAGEMENT WITH CONSPIRACIES, QANON, AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Conspiratorial thinking is a common marker across different extremist groups, particularly anti-authoritarianism. According to recent research by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), conspiracy theories and QAnon content specifically proliferated online during the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic and the run-up to the 2020 U.S. Presidential election.

The report from July 2020 demonstrated that the number of users engaging with QAnon content on many online platforms increased exponentially starting in March 2020 when Covid-19 lockdowns began in the West.⁴⁵ For example, the report found that the number of unique Twitter users engaged in QAnon discussions increased by 140% during March 2020 alone.

To target misinformation, Twitter and other social media platforms announced sweeping account bans starting over the summer of 2020, targeting users sharing and promoting QAnon content.⁴⁶



As a result of backlash around the globe to lockdown measures, QAnon conspiracies have found new breeding grounds for believers. For example, the ISD report found that QAnon content has spread geographically throughout the pandemic, with the U.S. still holding the top spot as the largest QAnon content-producing country, followed by the U.K., Canada, and Australia. The fifth spot, previously held by Russia between 2017 and 2018, was reportedly held by Indonesia in 2019, and is now held by Germany as recently as 2020.

For example, the Amadeu Antonio Foundation out of Berlin found that German-language QAnon groups on Telegram proliferated during the first lockdown in March 2020.⁴⁷ The largest is QGlobal, which grew from 21,000 members before the pandemic to more than 160,000 at the start of 2021.

ASSESSMENT

The rapid growth and popularity of conspiracy theories like QAnon and the 5G conspiracy have forced researchers to reconsider the definitional boundaries of violent extremism. While most believers of these conspiracies may never engage in or even support violence, some have perpetrated violence to further uncover or thwart the conspiracy they believe in.

This is likely to occur again. Additionally, the rise of QAnon 'influencers' like Romana Didulo increases the likelihood that at least some followers will want to answer her calls for violence. This means that the threat to Canada increasingly involves the fringes of not only groups that believe some of these conspiracies, but individuals who are unattached to these groups entirely.

HATE INCIDENTS AND CRIMES

BACKGROUND

Much of this report has focused on belief systems or movements associated with violent extremism and terrorism. However, it is important to recognize that hate crimes and hate incidents represent an equal or more serious threat to social cohesion and Canadians' sense of safety and belonging.

Alberta, like the rest of Canada, has witnessed a worrying rise in police-reported hate crimes over the last several years, a trend that shows few signs of abating. However, despite rising rates and growing attention paid by all orders of government to respond to hate, what exactly constitutes a 'hate crime' or 'hate incident' remains a confusing topic to many Canadians. Therefore, before discussing present trends in Alberta, a brief overview of the legal landscape related to hate offences in Canada is necessary.

Canada lacks a standalone 'hate crime' offence, and hate-motivated offences are dealt with in a few different ways by the Criminal Code.

First, there are three speech-related offences found under the Hate Propaganda section of the Criminal Code: 318 (1) – Advocating Genocide, 319 (1) – Public Incitement of Hatred, and 319 (2) – Willful Promotion of Hatred. Two of these offences require Attorney General consent before police can proceed with laying a criminal charge (318 (1) and 319 (2)), a hurdle that often lessens the probability of a charge being laid.

The Public Incitement of Hatred offence does not require Attorney General consent, and is intended to deal with incidents where speech is likely to lead to a near-term breach of the peace, and therefore requires police to act expeditiously.⁴⁸

The high thresholds and caution police must demonstrate when pursuing these charges is a reflection of Canada's commitment to freedom of expression and a recognition that, ultimately, a free society may be forced to tolerate some forms of 'lawful but awful' speech. Despite these difficulties, there have been several noteworthy convictions under 319 (2) in Canada in the last several years, including the 'Your Ward News' case in Toronto.⁴⁹

There are two additional ways in which criminal offences motivated by hate may be dealt with to explicitly address the underlying motivation for the offence. This can be done either via a mischief charge where the target of the offence is a religious or educational institution (Section 430 (4.3) of the Criminal Code), or by considering a possible hate motivation as an aggravating factor during sentencing, as provided for by Section 718 (2) of the Criminal Code.

Through 718 (2), most hate-motivated crimes – offences like assault, uttering threats, etc.- are dealt with by the courts. However, even the use of hate as an aggravating factor is still relatively rare. Citing a Department of Justice study, the Globe and Mail reported that between 2007 and 2020, "judges discussed or considered laying a harsher sentence because of hate just 48 times".⁵⁰

A related area of concern is 'hate incidents,' where an individual engages in behavior – often the utterance of identity-based slurs or online harassment – that, while non-criminal, can have profound and lasting effects on targeted individuals.

Often, victims in these scenarios feel a sense of disempowerment when, if they decide to report the event to someone, be it a social media company or law enforcement, little action is taken. The growth in non-criminal, yet still damaging, hate-motivated incidents underscore the reality that while policy and legislative responses to hate are necessary, they are ultimately likely to be insufficient, and a broader societal response is required.

Trends

Statistics Canada reported a significant and steady increase in police-reported hate crimes between 2015 and 2020 across the country. In 2016 there were 1,409 police-reported hate crimes of all kinds, including crimes targeting race or ethnicity, against people with disabilities, or sexual orientation.⁵¹

In 2019, there were 1,951 police-reported hate crimes, indicating a 43% increase overall. During the first year of the pandemic, police-reported hate crimes increased by 37%, rising to 2,669 in 2020.⁵²

The vast majority of these hate crimes tend to be committed against particular racial or ethnic groups, religious groups, or an individual's sexual orientation and are increasing.

For example, hate crimes against a race or ethnic group almost doubled from 2019 to 2020 (+80%); crimes against religious groups increased by about 10%; and crimes against sexual orientation increased by about 82%.

Although smaller in number, crimes committed against an individual's sex increased significantly from 12 in 2015 to 53 in 2019, and decreased slightly in 2020 to 46.

Of all metropolitan areas in Canada, the area with the highest police-reported hate crimes per 100,000 population is Peterborough, Ontario.⁵³ The trend south of the border in the U.S. is similar, though the increase is not as stark as in Canada. In 2015, the FBI reported 5,818 hate crime incidents,⁵⁴ and in 2020 there were 8,052, indicating a 38% increase overall.⁵⁵

STATUS OF HATE CRIMES IN ALBERTA

The trends within Alberta's two largest cities – Calgary and Edmonton – are more complex.⁵⁶ In Calgary, the number of police-reported hate crimes has increased from 80 in 2019 to 141 in 2020, indicating a 76% increase. This was the highest number ever of police-reported hate crimes in Calgary. In Edmonton, the overall number has increased from 73 in 2019 to 79 in 2020; however, from 2016 to 2020, police-reported hate crimes in Edmonton have increased by 58%. Some of the interviews with law enforcement in Alberta outline that the LGBTQ+ community is a common target of hate crimes in their area:

“Right now, as far as trends, basically what we’re seeing more of is a lot of vandalism and graffiti. And, a lot of it is focused towards LGBTQ+ in the form of graffiti, vandalism. We’ve had an increase, I would say, and I think a lot of that’s just related to Covid, schools being shut down, kids being more active and going to places where you no longer have people there to prevent incidents from happening. So, a lot of the graffiti you’re looking at, they’re not really gang tags or anything like that, but they are using racial slurs and that has been increasing.”

– Law enforcement official

“[As far as] hate-related crime[s]... we’ve had a couple incidents against the LGBTQ community. With respect to flag burning and things like that. So that was, a couple of incidents... The [LGBTQ] flag burning was local... so, it was a residential flag that was hanging at a house. And somebody went into the yard and took it down and burnt it. We weren’t able to solve the most recent [flag burning], so we don’t even know who that was.”

– Law enforcement official

It is important to note that the actual number of hate crimes is likely even higher due to underreporting. This was echoed during an interview with one Alberta law enforcement official:

“Yeah, I honestly can’t make an assessment with reasonable confidence. There are so many issues with the methodology for recording, the definitions are a disaster in Canada, like it’s just, the whole process and the whole system is so difficult to draw meaningful numbers out of. I really couldn’t say what the overall rate of hate crime is.

I can tell you, from some groups, we’ve seen increased reporting... The reporting percentage is so low that [any] variations in reporting [seems like a big difference.]. [any] changes to rates of reporting are going to show pretty big numerical increases. Which, I think are unfortunately misinterpreted, especially in the media but also by others as being an increase in actual hate crimes. So, I wouldn’t be able to make an assessment on the actual rate of hate crimes in the province.”

– Law enforcement official

“A lot of times we find that [hate crimes/incidents] go unreported. We find out things happened after the fact, so their business has been vandalized or something has occurred. But as far as a targeted community, there’s not a specific one. We’ve seen it with most ethnicities. We don’t have a huge count of hate crimes and incidents here, and again I think a lot of it goes unreported from what we can tell. But it’s mostly verbal or mischief, but no specific targeted community.”

– Law enforcement official

Many victims of hate crimes and incidents are reluctant to report them to the police because they come from marginalized communities, such as the Black and Indigenous communities. These communities have had historically negative relations with law enforcement or believe that the police will not take the crimes seriously. In addition, hate that originates online has been a particularly difficult problem to address for many Alberta law enforcement officials we interviewed:

“We are also concerned with hate-based [activity] through online forums, which seems to be a difficult issue for us to investigate, to track, and I think we find that more often than not if someone is going to make some sort of hate speech or remark it’s likely not to be to the person’s face, it’s [more] likely to be on an online forum where there’s that anonymity and they can say what they want without fear of reprisal. We had people of color at [the local] high school who were targeted in messaging from an online forum. Again, production orders yielded us nothing. We couldn’t get any subscriber information to lock that down.”

– Law enforcement official



“It’s not so much stuff that’s occurring face-to-face, it’s more like online someone’s commenting on [on something] and then they start going at each other... But then again, charges are difficult because you don’t actually know the screen-name if it’s actually the person and sometimes they have fake names and it [makes] trying to figure out who they are [difficult]...”

– Law enforcement official

Moreover, some individuals will reportedly tailor their activities in order to avoid law enforcement action:

“One [person], actually, when we got dispatched [to the place of residence]... we walked in [the] house and it was basically a shrine of Hitler. And [the individual] was writing a book, and was going for publishing... [This individual has] popped up in a few different places trying to just put out hate literature. Not so much hate incidences and directly involving people, and not violent... But more like spreading the word of hate.

And same with the other [person] too, it was more of spreading the verbiage of hatred rather than violently acting against anybody else. It was more, just the propaganda and the dialogue. But not specifically at a person. It was always just in a comment or not directed at anybody because they’re very good about not specifically pointing out a specific person... because they know that they’ll [get] charged. They’re smart about it that way.”

– Law enforcement official

COMMUNITY INITIATIVES AGAINST HATE CRIMES AND INCIDENTS

As a result of both the rise in the number of hate crimes over the years and the recognition that many hate crimes and incidents go unreported, several community initiatives have been created to fill this gap and provide support for victims.

One example is StopHateAB.ca, a website which encourages victims – regardless of religious, ethnic or racial background – to self-report through the site if they have been a victim of a hate incident in Alberta. This often goes unreported to law enforcement due to its non-criminal nature.

StopHateAB provides community education and training workshops and compiles the reported incidents to make the information accessible to the community, increasing awareness.

Similarly, the National Council of Canadian Muslims (NCCM) tracks anti-Muslim hate crimes and incidents reported to them by victims, the police, or incidents reported to media across the country. These and other community initiatives are critical for empowering victims to report crimes and incidents, giving a more complete picture of the status of hate in Canada. This is especially important for individuals and communities reluctant to report them to law enforcement.

HATE CRIMES AGAINST THE ASIAN COMMUNITY

Hate crimes in Alberta and across Canada are varied in their targeting and in their tactics. Media reports suggest hate crimes targeting the Asian community are increasingly related to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Chinese Canadian National Council Toronto Chapter produced a report discussing self-reported anti-Asian incidents motivated by the pandemic, the bulk of which were reported in British Columbia, Ontario, and Québec, with Alberta coming in fourth.⁵⁷

For example, in Calgary in 2020, the downtown Chinese Consulate building was vandalized with hateful messages in reference to the Covid-19 pandemic twice in May.⁵⁸ In June, a Chinese restaurant was broken into and vandalized with hateful messages like “Go back to China.”⁵⁹ The restaurant also appears to have been deliberately set on fire.

Later in September 2020, a Calgary man was charged with mischief to property and causing a disturbance after he harassed and followed a Canadian-born Chinese man and then spat on his car.⁶⁰ In Vancouver, the Vancouver Police Department reported that hate crimes against Asians have increased by 717% in 2020 alone.⁶¹

A similar marked increase has been noted in the United States. This has been particularly acute in a recent string of attacks in the California Bay Area, prompting the formation of a new special response unit.⁶² There, an elderly man from Thailand was attacked and killed during his morning walk at the end of January 2021.⁶³

Between March and December 2020 alone, the Stop Anti-Asian Pacific-Islander Hate coalition documented over 3,800 anti-Asian hate crimes across the U.S.⁶⁴

Similarly, a Pew Research Center study from June 2020 indicated that roughly 31% of Asian Americans reported they'd been the subject of racist slurs or jokes since the pandemic began, and 26% said they feared they might be physically attacked.⁶⁵ This trend is likely to continue in the near term, but as the pandemic comes to an end, it remains unclear whether this spike will persist.

ANTI-MUSLIM HATE CRIMES

Anti-Muslim hate crimes have been common around the country and within Alberta and, in some cases, have escalated to violence. However, according to an interviewee from Alberta law enforcement, members of the Muslim community have become more forthcoming with reporting hate crimes:

“Based on the reporting... it seems that Muslim community groups within Alberta have become more willing to report to police. Unfortunately, based on what I hear from some of our policing partners, some of that reporting doesn't go to the police necessarily, sometimes it goes straight to the media. So, again, that's one of the kind of confusing things, you've got basically three separate tracks of people tracking hate crimes in the province – you have police-reported crimes, non-police quasi-governmental groups [like] NGOs, and then you also have reports that go straight to the media or social media.”

– Law enforcement official

Interviews with Alberta law enforcement mention a current trend in hate crimes in lower Alberta targeting the Muslim community:

“Again, we're getting the graffiti, mostly targeting the Muslim community. [Locally] for example, if something happens in the States, a shooting at a synagogue or anything like that, we actually get ahead of that and go talk to the community leaders of the Churches. Let them know that, you know, this isn't acceptable here and that we're supportive. And, we just open the lines of communication that way.”

– Law enforcement official

In July 2020, an Edmonton mosque was vandalized with racist graffiti.⁶⁶ The graffiti included several symbols like the “Aryan star” and the number “114,” a possible reference to David Lane's infamous “14-Words” slogan: “we must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children.” David Lane was a famous American white supremacist and neo-Nazi who was a member of The Order, a terrorist organization responsible for several high-profile crimes, including the assassination of a Jewish radio host in 1984.



There has also been a recent trend in hate crimes against Black Muslim women in Edmonton. Between 2020 and the publication of this report, seven Black Muslim women were targeted, threatened, or attacked in Edmonton.⁶⁷

The first occurred in December 2020, when three Edmonton women were assaulted in two separate incidents days apart at the Southgate Centre mall. First, on December 8th, two women wearing hijabs were assaulted in the parking lot. A week later, the second attack occurred against another woman wearing a hijab in the Southgate LRT station.⁶⁸ Two unrelated individuals were arrested and charged for these attacks.

Two months later, in February 2021, another man made racial slurs and behaved aggressively toward a Black Muslim woman at the University of Alberta transit centre.⁶⁹ Elsewhere in Edmonton that same day, a man came up behind another Black Muslim woman and pushed her to the ground, threatening to tear off her burqa and kill her.⁷⁰

These three attacks underscore the continued vulnerability of visibly Black Muslim women to hate crimes and also highlight the intersectionality of hate crimes, which target individuals for more than one element of their identities.

In June 2021, a Black Muslim woman was attacked from behind and thrown down on the pavement, and the perpetrator fled without saying anything.⁷¹ On New Year's Day in 2022, a Black Muslim woman was attacked near a Mosque in Edmonton in front of her children; the man was arrested and charged.⁷²

HATE CRIMES AGAINST OTHER RACIAL/ETHNIC, OR RELIGIOUS GROUPS

In the midst of 2020, marked not only by the Covid-19 pandemic but also by civil rights and police reform protests, several high-profile hate crimes and incidents against the Black community in Canada occurred.

For example, over the summer of 2020 in Toronto, two nooses were placed at a construction site where two black workers were stationed at Michael Garron Hospital.⁷³ In December 2020, an Edmonton man was charged after he made death threats and assaulted a Black man walking on a residential street near his home.⁷⁴ A few months later, in February 2021, an anonymous user(s) on Zoom disrupted a Montreal-based virtual presentation organized for Black History Month by drawing racial slurs and pornographic images.⁷⁵

In 2019, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) reported that anti-Semitic hate crimes hit an all-time high in the U.S. that year, with over 2,100 crimes, including assault and vandalism.⁷⁶

For example, in December 2019, five people in a rabbi's home in New York were stabbed while celebrating Hanukkah by a man wielding a machete.⁷⁷

Across the border, however, Statistics Canada reported in 2019 that despite an overall drop in the number of anti-Semitic incidents from 372 to 296, the Jewish community was still the most targeted group in Canada.⁷⁸

Although hate crimes against the Jewish community have historically not been as violent in Canada as in the U.S., they continue to be a growing concern in many communities.

For example, in January 2021 in Vancouver, a man was assaulted by another man who allegedly hurled anti-Semitic remarks at him.⁷⁹ Across the country in Quebec during the same time, a synagogue was defaced with spray-painted swastikas on all the building doors.⁸⁰ In May 2021, an individual drove their vehicle around an Edmonton neighborhood 'seeking Jews' and making threats to the residents of two homes.⁸¹

Online anti-Semitic harassment has been common around the world and particularly since the start of the pandemic. Many IMVE groups and individuals who hold extremist views have blamed the Jewish community and Israel for the start and spread of the virus due to a variety of conspiracies and prejudices.⁸²

Additionally, many conspiracy theories like QAnon heavily feature the Jewish community as sinister actors in the "deep state." For example, in the U.K. in 2020, the Community Security Trust – an advisory board on security matters – recorded 41 incidents connected to anti-Semitic pandemic-related conspiracies alone.⁸³

Anti-Indigenous hate crimes have also been on the rise in Canada, and hate crimes against Indigenous Canadians likely remain the most underreported to police.⁸⁴

In its most recent report on hate crimes in Canada, Statistics Canada notes that in 2020, there were merely 79 police-reported hate crimes against Indigenous people – a number that is almost certainly a small fraction of the true rate.⁸⁵

A particular high-profile event occurred in February 2020. The Mohawks of Tyendinaga, Ontario engaged in a weeks-long blockade of a railway in support of the north-western B.C. Wet'suwet'en. This was after RCMP enforced an injunction on unceded Wet'suwet'en territory to clear the way for the construction of a controversial Coastal GasLink pipeline.⁸⁶

As a result, a bomb threat against the implicated Indigenous communities was made in an email sent to addresses associated with both Indigenous townships. According to Anti-Racist Canada, the address used to send the threatening email was linked to a suspended Twitter account which was used to make threats to Indigenous communities, including threatening to burn reserves and attack a pregnant Indigenous woman.⁸⁷

"You and your punk friends, the Mohawk warriors, need to call off the blockades... If you don't, you will find a bomb in your mailbox, and your parents will be in dangers. This is a threat, you are on notice..."

the email reads, sent on February 26th.⁸⁸

PROTEST-RELATED INCIDENTS

Similar to other established groups discussed throughout this report, hate-related incidents have also occurred during anti-racism and civil rights protests, and anti-lockdown protests.

For example, in September 2020, two anti-racism events turned violent. In the first event in Ponoka, a demonstrator was struck by a vehicle during a heated exchange between demonstrators and counter-protesters.⁸⁹ Although the RCMP are still investigating, event demonstrators allege that the incident was targeted. A few weeks later in Red Deer, a second anti-racism demonstration ended in violent scuffles between protesters and counter-protesters.⁹⁰

In Calgary in November 2020, a Black Lives Matter mural was vandalized and covered with white paint and is currently being investigated as a hate crime.⁹¹ More recently, in 2021, the Edmonton Public School Board condemned the formation of a "white alliance" student group that appeared on Instagram with posts using the phrase "white lives matter."⁹²

Members of established groups like the Soldiers of Odin (SOO) and the Urban Infidels have been implicated in several more violent responses to BLM protests. For example, in October 2020, an anti-racism rally in Lacombe, Alberta, was interrupted by around a half dozen self-proclaimed Urban Infidels who began yelling "Where are all the Black people?"⁹³

In February 2021, an anti-lockdown protest at the Alberta legislature turned violent when four officers were allegedly punched while attempting to make an arrest.⁹⁴ As discussed elsewhere, showing up at protests and rallies has been a popular way for established extremist groups to increase their visibility and try to rekindle interest in their group - as membership and activity declined precipitously in the years leading up to the start of the pandemic. Whether or not these groups can attract new recruits from the broader anti-public health measures or anti-civil rights milieus remains to be seen.

ASSESSMENT

The threat of hate crimes in Canada has increased by almost 50% in the last 5 years, as evidenced by data from Statistics Canada. The threat to the Asian community is particularly high due to prejudices and hate fueled by the ongoing pandemic, as well as the myriad of conspiracies which attribute the blame of the pandemic toward the Jewish community.

This is true not only for Canada but across the border in the U.S. and around the world. Although hate crimes do not always escalate to violence, the psychological and social implications for the victims and their communities indicate a need for vigilance and continued community resilience.

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