

Canada · CBC Investigates

Library workers punched, spat on as security incidents rise, data shows

Suspected overdoses in Toronto's public libraries up 529% between 2022 and 2023

[Anya Zoledziowski](#), [Kimberly Ivany](#), [Lori Ward](#) · CBC News ·
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Violence on the rise in Canada's libraries

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Data obtained by CBC News reveals a rise in violent incidents and overdoses inside Canada's libraries, with some blaming cuts to social services funding.

Once seen as oases of calm and quiet, libraries across Canada are becoming increasingly chaotic – even dangerous – with staff often ending up on the front lines of crisis.

Data obtained by CBC News shows there's been a dramatic rise in recent years in the number of security incidents — things like physical assaults, suspected overdoses, and thefts — at public libraries in Canada's major cities.

CBC News obtained data from 11 public library systems across Canada, spanning several years.

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"These increases are most significant at branches located in the downtown core of Toronto, and reflect broader societal issues that are playing out across our communities, including in our public spaces," a TPL spokesperson said in a statement.

While Toronto's data is staggering, the same trend is playing out elsewhere.

The Winnipeg Public Library experienced a 21 per cent increase in the number of incidents between 2022 and 2023. Meanwhile, Vancouver Public Library saw a 14 per cent increase, according to its tracking. Only Calgary's incident count remained the same per patron visits from 2022 to 2023. Mississauga's rates declined notably from previous years, in part because the system's main branch was closed for renovations between March 2021 and February of this year. (Note, each system keeps its own data, and the definition of a security incident can vary; most include suspected overdoses or intoxication, harassment or threatening behaviour, violence, theft and/or trespassing.)

Drug and alcohol use, including overdoses, seem to be a leading incident reported in most cities.

"There is a crisis on the streets of Toronto and the streets in all the communities across Canada," said Siobhan Stevenson, a University of Toronto professor in library and information sciences.

"Libraries, because they're open and free, they're like canaries in the mine."

'On high alert all the time,' says Toronto librarian

CBC spoke to several librarians across the country to better understand how these statistics play out in real life. One librarian working at a branch in the Toronto Public Library system, who CBC News is not identifying because of the risk of repercussions on the job, said that there's a sense that staff in the most affected branches have to be "on high alert all the time."

"Sometimes you're like, 'Oh my gosh, I didn't expect to be calling 911 every week,'" she said.

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WATCH | Librarian talks about why she thinks security incidents are happening:



Why is violence happening in Canadian libraries?

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A Toronto librarian speaks to a CBC reporter via Zoom, saying sky-high costs of living are partially to blame for the spike in library security incidents. CBC News isn't naming her because she worries about reprisal at work for speaking out.

The librarian said people have thrown books and spat at staff, there have been verbal assaults as well as attempts by some patrons to follow staff home. "Just profound anger, and we're there and it's directed at us," she said, adding that colleagues have been punched.

"I feel it in my body, like my joints, my muscles," she said. "It really takes a toll on you."

These incidents mirror what's happening in many places across the country.

Earlier this year, three security guards at a downtown library in Edmonton received minor cuts while removing someone with a knife from a library bathroom. Following a fatal stabbing in Winnipeg in 2022, the Millennium library introduced metal detectors and additional security guards to cope with rising security incidents. Ottawa Public Library recently asked for \$3-million to pay for more security guards.

- [Books, internet and naloxone: In-house nurse supports people in crisis at Edmonton library](#)
- [Winnipeg librarians were worried about growing violence before fatal stabbing, union says](#)
- [Some Saskatoon public libraries change hours in response to assault on workers](#)

"People are like, 'What? At a library?' Yes, at a library. And if it's happening at a library, it's everywhere," said Stevenson.

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Smaller communities affected, too

While large urban centres are particularly affected, smaller communities are also feeling the brewing crisis.

"We've probably called the police more in the last two years than we have in the previous five," said Chantelle Taylor, deputy director of Cumberland Public Libraries in Amherst, Nova Scotia.

"It's a handful of times in comparison to a bigger region, but we are seeing more people with mental health crises coming in," Taylor said. "We have a food pantry out in the foyer, we're filling that up. So things are changing and I don't see it getting better anytime soon."



Chantelle Taylor, deputy director of Cumberland Public Libraries in Nova Scotia, says even the county's small locations are seeing an uptick in security incidents, including vandalism and theft. (Daniel Jardine/CBC)

She said vandalism is happening more frequently, and a donation box was stolen last year.

Experts and library staff point to the widespread lack of funding for social programs as part of the problem; libraries are often the only free places where everyone, including a city's more vulnerable population, are welcome to escape hot or freezing weather, access the internet and use public washrooms.

In fact, social media platforms like TikTok are teeming with comments about how public libraries act as a "lifeline" for many.

"Thank you for treating humans with decent respect. I have once experienced homelessness and libraries were a safe place for me as well, it means a lot," TikTok user Marty wrote of libraries.

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"This is not a library problem. This is a political problem. This is a social problem. And to get past it, we need the political will to change our thinking around how we fund or how we want to fund social services," Stevenson said.

"The problem is that there's just a lot of these vulnerable people, and the library really probably isn't the best solution."

- [City report on Millennium Library safety calls for more security measures, staff](#)
- [Why putting social workers in public libraries could help Montrealers in crisis](#)

Already, some libraries in Ontario have brought in social workers to support library staff, and universities in the United States have started offering a combined degree in library studies and social work. But the way to meaningfully fix the situation, Stevenson said, is for cities and provinces to reinvest in social programs that keep Canada's most vulnerable people housed and cared for.

"Resources are needed for organizations outside of the library to pick up some of that slack," Stevenson said.

In a statement to CBC News, the City of Toronto said it's committed to addressing the challenges libraries are facing, and shared a list of measures already in place, including a partnership between the library and Toronto Community Crisis Service.

The city did not say whether there are plans to increase funding for social services.

Management reluctant to make changes, some say

Last year, the Canadian Urban Libraries Council formed a working group in response to the rise in security incidents, ultimately releasing a "toolkit" that consolidates existing policies, procedures and templates across libraries. CUPE [released a statement](#) saying it was disappointed that the group "didn't look for new actions libraries could undertake."

In Saskatoon, a local union leader said management hasn't done enough to respond to the growing threat of security incidents — a concern echoed by many other library employees across Canada that CBC spoke with.

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Jeff Bergen, past president of CUPE 2669, says Saskatoon Public Library management seems to be reluctant to implement more safety measures requested by library employees, like personal whistles or walkie-talkies. (Chanss Lagaden/CBC)

"We've been trying to get safety improvements made for at least the last two or three years and management has been very resistant to that," said Jeff Bergen, past president of CUPE 2669 which represents library workers at Saskatoon Public Library.

Bergan said library staff have had to deal with racial slurs, profanity, threats, physical assaults and even an attempted sexual assault, and so far, management hasn't provided them with whistles or walkie-talkies despite repeated demands. Bergan added that because of funding cuts, staff often work alone, too.

"They never used to have to work alone, and now almost everybody has to work alone, which is a big safety risk," he said.

Between 2022 and 2023, security incidents went up 28 per cent across Saskatoon Public Library branches, according to data provided by the library.

WATCH | Why management may not respond to library workers' concerns:



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respond to library workers' concerns about safety.

A Saskatoon Public Library spokesperson said in a statement that the library is currently in negotiations with the union and that its offering to codify several safety-related measures, including emergency alarms and an agreement that will ensure no employees work alone in areas open to the public.

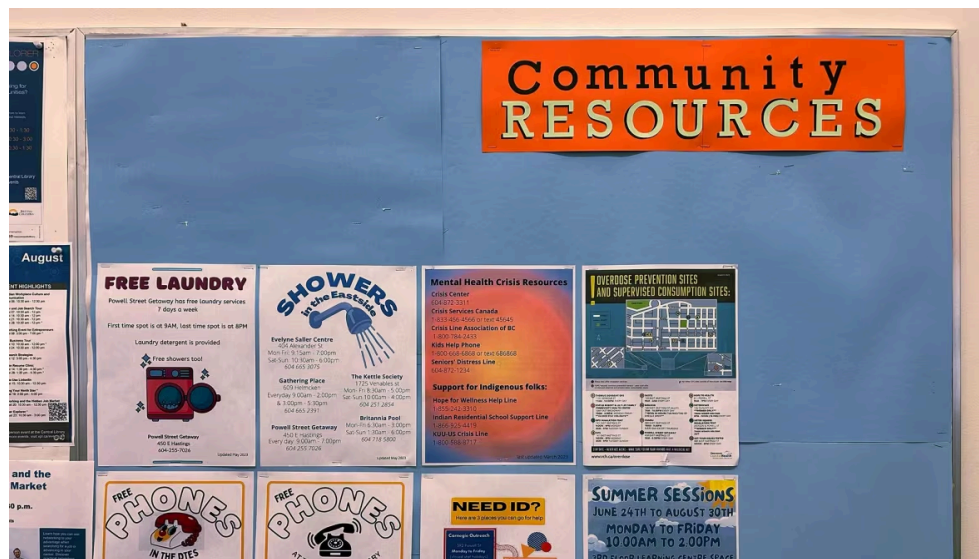
In April, several Saskatoon Public Library branches temporarily changed their hours of operation, so that they close at 6 p.m. instead of 9 p.m. in response to assaults. Staff also got phones. These measures fall short, according to Bergen, who said he believes management wants "to protect the public image of the library."

Libraries are still safe to visit

Stevenson said the rise of security incidents at public libraries needs to be addressed but it shouldn't create fear among visitors.

"That is a really unfortunate message to pick up from all of this because it's not exactly that," she said.

Several libraries have pointed out that incidents are rare compared to how many people use their facilities.



Posters inside a Vancouver Public Library branch advertise services for patrons like free laundry and locations to shower. (Kimberly Ivany/CBC)

In Vancouver in 2023, there were fewer than six security incidents for every 10,000 visits and Edmonton, which logged 3,452 incidents in 2023, noted that there were only about eight incidents per 10,000 visits.

"While these incidents comprise a small fraction of visits to EPL, public libraries are not equipped to address issues of social disorder, mental health, and addictions," an

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The Toronto librarian who spoke to CBC said that public library staff often get into the job so that they can help people, but a lot of the crises they're currently managing fall outside the scope of their training — and it's setting up library workers to fail.

"We're not social workers," the librarian said. "The fact that we just can't be everything to everybody is probably the most frustrating thing."

Corrections

- A previous version of this story misstated injuries to Edmonton library security guards. In fact, they were not stabbed but received minor cuts while removing someone wielding a knife. Also, the previous story gave the incorrect title for Jeff Bergen. In fact, he is the past president of CUPE 2669.
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With files from Julia Fowlie

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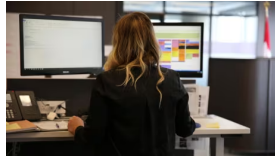
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