

**Navigating Public Incivility: Impact on Municipal Staff and Strategies for a Safer Work Environment
Post-Pandemic**

Includes:

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Abstract

This community-based research project explores the growing issue of public incivility faced by municipal workers in the City of Kawartha Lakes, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Through mixed-method research involving surveys (n=80) and in-depth interviews (n=5), the study identifies the primary drivers of incivility as pandemic-related isolation, the proliferation of social media hostility, and increasing public entitlement. Participants reported emotional, psychological, and safety impacts stemming from frequent exposure to verbal abuse, threats, and unrealistic expectations. The findings reveal that municipal staff often rely on informal coping strategies in the absence of consistent institutional support. Key recommendations include enhanced public education campaigns, improved mental health resources, de-escalation training, and policy reforms to better protect frontline workers. This research highlights the urgent need for systemic interventions to address incivility and support employee well-being in public-facing roles.

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Key Words

Public incivility: Disrespectful, rude, or aggressive behaviour exhibited by members of the public toward others, often in civic or service-related interactions.

Municipal staff: Employees who work for a city or local government, providing public services and supporting community operations.

COVID-19 pandemic: A global health crisis caused by the coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2), which began in late 2019 and led to widespread social, economic, and workplace disruptions.

Workplace aggression: Hostile or harmful behaviour that occurs within a work environment, including verbal abuse, threats, or other forms of interpersonal conflict.

Employee well-being: The overall physical, emotional, and psychological health of an employee, influenced by workplace conditions and organizational culture.

Social media hostility: Negative or aggressive behaviour expressed through online platforms, including harassment, misinformation, or disrespectful comments.

Public entitlement: The belief held by some individuals that they are owed special treatment or services, often resulting in unrealistic demands on public employees.

De-escalation: Techniques used to reduce the intensity of a conflict or confrontation, aiming to calm emotions and prevent further aggression.

Community-based research: A collaborative research approach that involves community members and stakeholders in the design, execution, and application of the study.

Kawartha Lakes: A municipality in Ontario, Canada, known for its rural and small urban communities, where this study on public incivility was conducted.

Introduction

Incivility, simply put, refers to behaviour or speech that is rude and deviates from societal norms; it is often perceived as impolite or offensive.

The issue involving incivility was presented and proposed by Kawartha Lakes through the Community-Based Research Project and Trent University. The project that was selected and presented involved working with the City of Kawartha Lakes and their online platform, Jump In. The City of Kawartha Lakes is a municipality established in 2001 and is located 90 minutes away, northeast of Toronto, Ontario, Canada. They provide services and work for over 80,000 residents who live within the surrounding area, including activities, living and lifestyle options, and business and employment opportunities. The municipality currently employs over 1000 employees that range from public works to human services, law enforcement and fire rescue; simply those who work for the city and strive to make it better every day.

The project was presented and came to be near the end of the COVID-19 Pandemic. It was noticed that the public interacted differently with the municipal employees than previously noted before the pandemic. Employees started noticing that there was a change in attitude towards them, and there was an increase in complaints and reports that needed to be written and followed up on. The situations that were creating these issues ranged from angry comments and accusations, whether over the phone, sent through email or in a face-to-face conversation, to more serious situations, including physical threats and actions.

Staff members were thus impacted by this range of encountered situations, carrying on long after the situation. These actions affect staff both professionally and

personally. It diminishes self-worth, limits work capacity, strains operational budgets, increases staff complaints, impacted municipal well-being, and was found to influence insurance ratings.

When presented with this project, several key questions were outlined to guide the discussion and the research. They followed the overall trend of further understanding why incivility is happening and what can be done about it. Questions such as “How do we respond to the public?”, “Do we always need to be responsive?” and “Do we have sufficient policy and process?” work to understand incivility from an organizational standpoint. Questions like “Are these citizens really having their human rights commission violated if staff engage and the citizen does not like the answer provided?” and “When and how should the municipality consider citizen incivility and complaints to be frivolous, vexatious, and a drain on staff time?” are posed to better understand incivility from a customer/civilian standpoint.

These questions reflect ongoing concerns within the Kawartha Lakes Municipality, highlighting the need for a clearer framework to address public interactions, staff well-being, and the boundaries of municipal responsibility. This project aims to explore these issues and provide deeper insight into managing incivility in municipal operations.

This project highlights many notable societal trends, including the shift in social behaviour over time. While past generations have shared stories of different social experiences, society in the 21st century seems to exhibit a decline in civility. It appears people are less accepting and willing to compromise and understand another perspective (Lilly, 2017). Being able to understand these societal changes is important,

as this project aims to provide a deeper insight into the various factors that contribute to this change and the broader implications that incivility can have on a community.

This community-based research (CBR) project, serves as a platform and support group that has allowed for an in-depth analysis of incivility, specifically what causes it and why it is so prevalent in society. As a year-long, thesis-style course, it emphasizes the idea of independent research and critical analysis and allows for an in-depth examination of a particular topic from start to finish, with a little more guidance along the way. This project has allowed for the development of many academic skills, such as conducting research, collecting and interpreting data, and presenting the findings. This project represents a significant academic endeavour during the academic year with the hopes of sharing a year-long insight into incivility and educating those interested in the topic.

Methods

For the methods sections of this project, incivility was a newer term that raised questions as to what it is and how it's defined. To begin, the online resource Google was used to gain a better understanding surrounding this topic. Google searches included the following phrase: "What is workplace incivility?", "What is civility?", "Why is there incivility?", "Examples of workplace incivility", "Workplace incivility vs bullying vs harassment", "Causes of workplace incivility", "Effects of workplace incivility", "Strategies to reduce workplace incivility", "COVID-19 and incivility" and finally, "Social media and incivility."

Such searches allowed for a better understanding overall and provided a good foundation that then allowed for more refined academic searches into the field of study. From here, online resources such as Trent University's search engine OMNI and Google Scholar allowed for more in-depth research and literature review.

A literature review was completed on the topic to gain a better understanding of the existing literature. The literature review ranged from understanding the history and the science behind incivility to understanding the factors that contribute to it to learning about specific instances of incivility and finally learning about what can be done to deal with those who are uncivil. The literature review was constantly growing throughout the entire project as new ideas would come up in conversation, and further ideas needed to be explored.

Before the interviews could be started, an ethics approval had to be completed and signed. The ethics approval covered many areas within the project, including a general overview of my research and rationale for the study, the data I was planning on collecting and analyzing, who I will be participating in the study, and how they will be identified within my report. The ethics approval also went into if there was any risk associated with participating, which also needed a consent form to be completed and signed before any interview could begin.

The research design involved surveys and interviews. The data that is to be collected is based on personal experiences and participants' views and perspectives on incivility. The goal of the survey questions was to gain a brief overview and perspective of the participant, including questions about demographics, experiences with incivility, and coping strategies. These questions helped to gain an understanding of their views

on incivility while keeping the survey short, preventing a loss of interest/motivation to complete. The interview is designed to go deeper into the subject matter, asking more personal questions and gaining specific examples that participants have faced. They also explained some techniques they use to overcome these difficult situations while offering the chance to express themselves for any ideas they might have on what can be done about the issue.

The participants of this study were strictly internal employees who work for the City of Kawartha Lakes, which come from a total population size of over 1000 employees. Participant selection was open to all areas within the organization, ranging from public services, like libraries and public transit, to human services, like housing and children services, and municipal services, like road maintenance and snow removal.

The participants were first exposed to the survey through the City of Kawartha Lakes' official website, *Jump In*, where participants could complete the 5–10-minute survey, which would then be recorded within the database. At the end of the survey, participants also had the option to contact me if they wanted to participate in the interview. Email was a big part of this project, whether working with the CBR coordinators, the host organization or my participants, it was important to maintain communication. Zoom was also used in conjunction with email to allow for communication and updates while also creating a platform for the interviews to take place if they were not conducted in person.

The survey consisted of 80 participants, and the interview consisted of five participants. It was important to get a good response and variability for both the survey and the interview that would allow for an in-depth analysis of the data while remaining

within the project timeline. The data was collected and summarized in an Excel spreadsheet, and the Kawartha Lakes Jump In survey platform, Social Pinpoint, allowing for easy comparison of the data while also being able to turn the data into different types of graphs and charts that provide a visual for the collected data.

The host coordinator, who was the link between the project and the organization, helped to compile a short list of individuals who worked within the organization and agreed to participate in the interview. All participants came from different departments within the organization, which allowed for a wide variety of responses and experiences with incivility. These individuals were contacted via email, confirming their willingness to participate in the interview. After confirmation, participants were sent the consent form, which needed to be signed and sent back, along with some of the questions that would be asked during the interview that they were free to look over. Scheduling was also a part of this email to determine when the interview was to take place, as well as whether it would be conducted in person or online via Zoom. The interviews were conducted from February 12th, 2025, to February 21st, 2025. Notes were taken during the interviews and voice-recorded to refer back to them, allowing for accuracy and thoroughness. To comply with research ethics requirements, voice recordings were kept on a separate USB drive that was password-protected. Upon completion of the project, the voice recordings will be deleted and wiped clean from the USB drive.

After all the interviews were completed, a thematic analysis was used to analyze and better understand the data that was collected. A thematic analysis was used to identify and report on the common patterns found within the interviews, allowing for meaningful interpretations of the data. While the interviews were the biggest contributor

to identifying major themes that were reported on, certain questions within the survey responses were also used in identifying such themes. The biggest question, “What measures do you believe would improve safety and reduce public incivility in your workplace?” within the survey, helped to validate and support many of the major themes that were identified. Braun & Clark’s six-phase framework was followed for the thematic analysis. While coding was not used in this analysis based on the amount of data, familiarization of the data was used and sufficient to gain an initial understanding of the data. This data was then used to generate common themes, which were then refined, reviewed, and validated. After this, names and topics were assigned to these themes, helping to narrow down the research.

The major themes that were identified are the following: 1) The COVID-19 Pandemic contributed to the rise of incivility as people were isolated at home with more free time and didn’t have anything better to do. 2) Social media and other online websites were used as a platform for individuals within the community to go and voice their concerns, many of which were uncivil comments. 3) Entitlement from the public often led to citizens criticizing municipal staff workers and having unrealistic expectations. These were the themes that were identified as to why incivility had increased.

Results

Literature Review

The literature review established a theoretical framework that informed the broader research direction while also helping to guide the interview and survey

questions. By researching the topic and understanding what it is and why it happens while identifying existing gaps and recurring patterns in previous studies, the literature helped shape a focused, relevant approach to data collection and analysis.

This literature review examines the idea of incivility and the impact it has. Incivility is broken down as behaviour or speech that is rude and deviates from societal norms, often seen as impolite and offensive. Incivility can be expressed both through actions and words when delivered to another individual and can have serious impacts on those who are victims of incivility. It has been found that those who interact with the public experience a great deal of incivility daily, which impacts their mental health. Kawartha Lakes is an organization located 90 minutes northeast of Toronto, Ontario. They are trying to understand why there has been a spike in incivility faced by municipal workers and employees since the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper's objective is to understand why incivility is on the rise and if the pandemic played a role in the increase of incivility. It is also to figure out future steps and what can be done about it. Policies and procedures were also analyzed to determine if there are enough resources set in place to protect those who work for the city of Kawartha Lakes.

To truly understand what incivility is, it is important to understand the science behind it and the history of incivility. Incivility was first addressed in the court and legal system in 2001; a task force was created to eliminate gender bias while further understanding, identifying and isolating all issues present in the federal courts. While the initial goal of this task force was to better understand sexual harassment within an organization, a social science team introduced the idea of incivility. The team found that incivility was a persistent problem, even more prevalent than their previous focus.

Although this behaviour was recognized within the legal field as rude and disrespectful words or actions, it had never been formally studied scientifically, and there was a lack of research on the topic (Cortina et al., 2017). Over the 5 years that the federal court collected data, it was found that 74% of judges, 70% of employees, and 60% of attorneys all reported facing some sort of uncivil comments or actions at work during the given time for the study (Cortina et al., 2001). It was noted that the more frequently someone is exposed to incivility during their time at work, the less likely they are to enjoy their job. This creates a chain reaction that carries not only into other areas of their job but can also be seen in their personal life by damaging their mental health. This paper comments on the incivility faced by members of the legal system, such as judges. This is similar to that of some of the members within Kawartha Lakes, such as bylaw officers and those who have to enforce the law. It deals with members of society who might not be happy with an outcome of a certain situation, such as a fine one might receive.

Incivility comes in many different forms and can be judged and perceived in different ways; where something uncivil to one person might not be noticed by another person. In a paper by Kate Kenski and others tries to further explore how people perceive incivility in online discussions. The study examines various types of uncivil discourse, such as insults, personal attacks, and hostile language, and identifies factors that influence individuals' perceptions of these behaviours. Some of the findings highlighted that demographics, personal experiences, context, and the potential impact on personal well-being all played a role in determining how people perceive incivility (Kenski et al., 2017). This connects to Kawartha Lakes as they have previously

identified incidents where staff members were angrily contacted through online platforms.

The City of Kawartha Lakes employs many bylaw officers and staff members who have reported facing incivility daily. In the paper "Baselining Incivility in One-on-One Police Encounters from BWC Archival Footage: Exploratory Study of Race, Gender and Contact Type Effects," by Holladay and Makin, they investigate instances of incivility through police interactions which are captured through body-worn cameras (BWCs). The study aims to establish a baseline understanding of how factors such as race, gender, and the nature of the encounter affect the levels of incivility exhibited by both police officers and civilians. Through the videos collected, it was found that through the police-civilian interaction, both groups faced uncivil actions from the other group on many occasions. It was also revealed that race and gender impacted the amount of incivility along with the different types of interactions (such as the difference between a traffic stop and arrests) that were faced. Finally, the paper looked into future research ideas as well as ways to improve policing practices (Holladay et al. 2021). This connects to the theme of the study as some bylaw officers will be interviewed. However, this paper by Holladay and Makin also highlights that civilians could also face uncivil actions from officers, which is different from the other papers that have been looked at.

A paper by Barbara Applebaum (2020) challenges civility and how incivility can actually be used as a way to confront persistent social issues. She argues that people often value politeness too highly, which can prevent necessary conversations about injustices. Applebaum points out that calls for civility can silence those who need to speak out, especially marginalized voices. Instead of just focusing on being polite, she

believes we should be open to uncomfortable discussions that can lead to real change (Applebaum, 2020). This paper is different from the other sources as it says why incivility might be beneficial. However, they were specific to events in the past, and Applebaum does highlight an event where incivility is not acceptable. Such instances would include when there is harassment, bullying, hate speech and abusive language, which should not be tolerated anywhere or in any circumstance.

The paper "Gender differences in workplace incivility experiences and their impacts on the well-being and retention of women in law enforcement organizations" by Jill A. Davis (2024) explores how workplace incivility affects women in law enforcement. The article defines incivility as disrespectful behaviours that undermine morale. It then goes further to highlight that women often face gender-specific forms, such as sexism and exclusion. These negative experiences increase stress and lower job satisfaction, contributing to higher turnover rates among female officers (Davis et al. 2024). The article illustrates that workplace incivility is not just a minor issue; it significantly impacts the psychological well-being of women in law enforcement and can lead to issues of retention. By focusing on the gendered aspects of incivility, the study reveals the need to create a more enjoyable working environment for all officers. The article concludes with suggestions for addressing incivility, such as training programs, policy changes, and fostering a culture of respect and support and promoting such programs for both the organization and the public to adhere to.

Workplace incivility has become a growing concern. A topic that was not that well-known has now become a daily occurrence for many public sector workers.

Vasconcelos (2020) expands on this discussion and considers the effect incivility has on workers long after the workday has ended. The study highlights how behaviours that are deemed uncivil can seriously affect an individual, leaking into their personal life and affecting the social interactions outside of work. It was seen that these types of interactions have a broader societal impact. This paper shifts the focus to understanding the long-term impact that incivility can have rather than the workplace-specific consequences (Vasconcelos, 2020). However, the study never fully performed its own research; rather, it looked at other papers that were published on the topic and included it within its literature review and findings. This leaves room for further research in developing their methodology, allowing for further data collection and investigation into the topic.

The paper by Lin and Lai (2020) examines the relationship between employees and customers, focusing specifically on customer incivility and its impact on service quality. Their study aims to understand the various mechanisms that arise from these interactions and how they influence employee well-being and job performance. The findings indicate that increased customer incivility results in reduced service quality. The research explores the employee-customer dynamic established through each interaction and emphasizes that workplace incivility extends beyond interactions among colleagues; it also persists in the employee's mind and manifests through external interactions with other customers (Lin et al., 2020). Similarly, Hatmaker, Smith and Hassan (2024) raise the point that when employees face workplace incivility, it increases their chances of looking for other jobs. Their study reveals that constant exposure to incivility erodes job commitment and satisfaction within the organization

(Hatmaker et al., 2024). Both studies reinforce the idea that workplace incivility can extend beyond the initial interaction, affecting how the employee speaks, acts and thinks long after the interaction. Both studies report on the issues surrounding incivility. However, they never go into strategies that could be employed to help mitigate these effects, which could allow for further investigation into the topic.

Ngwimba, Chinyamurindi and Dywili (2024) investigate the idea of “decent work” and how much “decent work” an employee contributes within their organization. It is the amount of aspiration one has while they are working and ultimately how much they positively contribute to the company. This term is reliant on five key features: a healthy and secure work environment, competitive wages, comprehensive healthcare benefits, recovery time and supportive workplace values. These factors together promote a positive work environment that satisfies one’s basic work needs. Their research highlights that repeated exposure to incivility undermines an employee’s job satisfaction, damaging the idea of “decent work” (Ngwimba et al., 2024) However, because the study was conducted exclusively in South Africa, its findings are shaped by that country’s unique cultural and socio-economic context. This raises the risk of overgeneralizing the concept of “decent work” without accounting for how workplace values and experiences of incivility may differ globally. Further research would need to be conducted on a much broader scale to be able to fully understand its ideas and application.

The paper by Kelly et al. (2019) is notable for its comprehensive approach to addressing incivility, bullying, and workplace violence. It is one of the few sources that not only outline the challenges of these issues but also proposes actionable solutions. It

is worth noting, however, that this source was created for nurses dealing with such issues. However, some of the proposed solutions could translate and could be used by other organizations dealing with similar issues of incivility. The paper listed steps that should be taken in the event of dealing with someone who is being uncivil: “Primary, Secondary and Tertiary prevention.” The primary prevention section best relates to incivility as it goes over assertive communication skills, which mentions many verbal strategies which could be used, such as seeking to find a workable compromise or learning to say “no” politely and without making excuses for yourself. The other two listed sections refer to how to deal with a situation as it’s happening, as well as what to do after. These sections don’t fully relate to the topic of incivility as they also deal with bullying and workplace violence, but it does mention some important information. It suggests that you can offer the person a chance to step back to collect their thoughts and remove themselves from the situation, avoiding the chance for them to say something that they don’t mean or something that could get them into legal trouble, ultimately preventing the situation from escalating further (Kelly et al., 2019).

The City of Kawartha Lakes Customer Conduct Management Directive was developed to protect municipal workers from incivility they may face during their shifts. The policies set in place outline many guidelines and procedures that must be followed by customers and steps that can be taken to address problems that arise. This document was approved on April 18th, 2024, and can be accessed by all municipal workers. The first section of the report clearly defines incivility as unacceptable behaviours include verbal abuse, physical aggression, threats and harassment. The words “Frivolous” and “Vexatious” are also defined and provide additional actions that

won't be tolerated. These definitions are a crucial step in providing a foundation that can protect staff from persistent harassment and undue stress that is caused by incivility. The report then highlights the steps that should be taken to protect themselves from these types of situations. The first step allows staff members to restrict access for the individual who might have disruptive or threatening behaviour. These restrictions include limiting communication channels, restricting access to city services/property and notifying law enforcement if necessary. If a situation becomes violent, employees are instructed to report the situation to their supervisor, as well as notify law enforcement immediately. This allows for intervention that is quick and supports the city's commitment to workplace safety, which is also highlighted in the report. The policy also considers the well-being of the employee. It sets boundaries on unrealistic demands such as excessive contact, refusal to accept decisions or the harassment of other staff members hoping to obtain a different outcome. This section of the policy helps to prevent individuals from using aggressive tactics to manipulate municipal workers. The final section refers to the legal and ethical considerations that are set in place. It refers to the Human Rights Code, which sets the foundations for decisions that are made regarding complaints that are brought forward. It ensures that these decisions are made fairly and without discrimination. It also helps to distinguish between legitimate complaints and those that are made to harass, defame or disrupt municipal services (City of Kawartha Lakes, 2024).

A study performed in 2016 by Schilpzand, De Pater, and Erex reviewed literature on workplace incivility in all aspects. The study was broad and analyzed the different sources of workplace incivility (i.e. supervisor, co-worker, or customer), the profession

of the victim and the country in which this occurred. From the study, it was determined that the current state of incivility is broad and diverse, but more research needs to be done (Schilpzand et al., 2016). Many years have passed since this paper was published, and there are still gaps in the study of incivility. However, a general trend was noticed between the different papers: that incivility is subjective and is in the “eye of the beholder.” Incivility does appear more often when there is someone who has power over another or through social media where it lacks face-to-face interaction. Additionally, gender, race, ethnicity, and age also contribute to the severity of incivility that is faced. Since the passing of COVID-19, the employees who work for the City of Kawartha Lakes have noticed that people are uncivil, and further research needs to be conducted on the topic of incivility while considering the impacts that the pandemic had. To be able to understand the factors that contributed to this increase could help deal with the problems and patterns that are seen in today’s society regarding incivility.

Interview Findings

Five interviews were conducted, with participants varying in the departments they work in. Interviewee identification, interview dates and department are identified in the table below. All departments are generalized so that participants can remain anonymous.

Table 1

Interviewee Identification	Interview Date	Department
A	February 11, 2025	Community services
B	February 12, 2025	Public Works
C	February 12, 2025	Community services
D	February 19, 2025	Human Services
E	February 20, 2025	Human Services

This study sought to understand how municipal employees experience and respond to public incivility, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Interviews with five anonymous staff members revealed a consistent set of themes relating to the perceived causes, manifestations, and impacts of incivility, as well as the coping strategies and solutions used or proposed by staff. Thematic analysis identified three primary causes of increased incivility: (1) the COVID-19 pandemic, (2) social media and digital communication, and (3) a growing sense of public entitlement and having unrealistic expectations for public workers. The following sections summarize insights from each participant in relation to these themes, along with emerging findings around mental health, workplace support, and safety.

Participant A

This participant, who has been a long-serving member of the organization, shared some of the most severe examples of incivility reported in this study. A key

incident involved an individual who persistently harassed the participant and their family through voicemails, emails, and in-person disruptions, ultimately resulting in criminal charges and a formal trespass order. They reported feeling unsafe at times, noting that organizational buildings had to be modified with panic buttons and increased security due to the aggressive nature of some members of the public.

Participant A strongly linked the rise of incivility to the COVID-19 pandemic, which they believed gave people fewer social restraints. They linked this shift to prolonged isolation, increased free time, and broader societal stressors, which they believed contributed to a surge in aggressive public behaviour. Social media was a key driver in the spread of hostility and misinformation due to online anonymity. Comment sections were described as breeding grounds for hostility, leading them to disable comments on municipal communications to prevent negativity from spiralling. The participant noted that a single negative comment could overshadow numerous positive interactions, undermining public engagement efforts. Entitlement was also frequently expressed and how municipal employees are required to tolerate any form of communication because they are “publicly funded.” The participant also highlighted gendered dimensions of incivility, suggesting that females within this department are more often targeted and subjected to harsher criticism.

Coping mechanisms included daily long walks to decompress, delaying responses to hostile emails to allow for calmer replies, and drawing strength from informal peer support among councillors. They advocated for public education on municipal roles, stronger communication guidelines, and more robust protections for public officials to prevent harm and improve morale.

Participant B

The second participant, a public works employee within field operations such as road maintenance and waste management, provided insight into the frontline experience of incivility. They described a culture shift during the pandemic, particularly as residents during the holiday seasons had to remain home due to the pandemic policies, which increased scrutiny on municipal services. This heightened visibility, coupled with limited staffing and strict provincial regulations, contributed to unrealistic expectations and increased hostility.

Participant B recounted multiple incidents, including one where an employee was verbally assaulted and physically threatened by a resident who climbed onto a municipal vehicle, preventing the employee from doing their job. Other cases included threatening emails with references to employees' personal information, which prompted police involvement. The participant noted that incivility had a clear gendered and emotional impact on staff.

They noted that organizational coping strategies included redirecting staff to safer routes, implementing safe work policies, and encouraging employees to disengage from abusive interactions. Personally, the participant practiced emotional regulation techniques and delayed response tactics while emphasizing professionalism in the face of hostility. They highlighted the importance of public transparency and consistent messaging about service standards, as well as increased training and support for employees.

Participant C

Participant C works in the communications department, where they spoke about the emotional and psychological toll of digital incivility. They recounted a recent incident where a Facebook post that was meant to praise snowplow drivers for their efforts during a period of bad weather. However, this post was met with harsh criticism instead, including public calls for the dismissal of the entire communications team. It was noted that the online environment was portrayed as significantly more hostile than in-person interactions. Although the type of comment only represented a small minority, it had a disproportionate impact on the mental health of the individual, leading to anxiety and, eventually, the need for medication and mental health support. There were instances where the public expected immediate and personalized responses or questioned the value of the work altogether. These comments were demoralizing, especially when they questioned the legitimacy of their role or implied wasteful spending of tax dollars.

They began working for the municipality post-pandemic but were still able to observe the continuing effects of COVID-19 on public engagement. From Participant C's perspective, residents became more entitled and hostile, emboldened by the anonymity and immediacy of digital platforms. They described their experiences with "keyboard warriors" and how they regularly distorted facts or launched personal attacks online with little fear of consequences. They also noted that due to the worldly events happening at the time, more people were isolated at home with limited freedom, so it was thought that social media users had nothing better to do with their time.

To manage stress, they practiced breathing exercises, took strategic breaks, and leaned heavily on other co-workers for support as they all shared similar experiences and could relate. Responsibilities were shared across the group to reduce exposure to online hostility. It was recommended that there be more robust mental health supports, expanded staffing, and internal debriefing protocols, along with clearly articulated communication policies to protect employees.

Participant D

Participant D has worked in many positions within the municipality and has experienced many forms of incivility, depending on the position. Based on the current department and the roles of this participant, they often serve as the first point of contact for some of the angriest members of the public. They described several incidents involving individuals storming public buildings and yelling at staff members and fellow employees. While they did not often feel physically threatened, the unpredictable and emotionally draining nature of these interactions left Participant D and their colleagues mentally exhausted.

It was reported that from their perspective, people appeared angrier, and expressions of frustration became more socially acceptable. They attributed this trend to a broader societal shift, noting that “there are a lot of angry people out there” and that this anger often gets projected onto municipal staff. They described the lasting effects of such encounters, including needing to take breaks to compose themselves before resuming duties. The participant emphasized the distinction between constructive criticism, ultimately working towards a common goal and better understanding, versus

unproductive emotional dumping, which is their personal belief that characterizes incivility. Often, public frustration had little effect on their emotional well-being, but they did realize that they had to bore the brunt of that anger simply by being accessible to the public.

They recalled incidents where a resident stormed a public building, yelled at staff members, and had to be escorted from the premises. It was noted that such individuals have been formally trespassed since then and have still interacted with staff through digital platforms. An emerging theme was the emotional weight that frontline workers face, which includes being the final stop for complaints and often absorbing public hostility that have already passed through multiple departments.

Though formal HR support is likely to exist, participant D primarily relied on informal peer support and conversations with family members to cope. It was recommended that there should be increased use of mindfulness practices, conflict de-escalation training, and more widespread acknowledgment of the emotional demands placed on staff who deal with the public on a daily basis. They also supported physical safety measures, like restricting access to the public in certain areas of the building.

Participant E

This participant's experiences have spanned multiple departments, giving them broad exposure to public incivility. They recalled high-tension events involving threats against city officials and Indigenous leaders in response to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives. In one case, they had to physically intervene during a flag-

raising ceremony to protect a First Nations chief from an aggressive resident known for spreading misinformation and hate speech.

Participant E described how incivility escalated post-pandemic, particularly in relation to emotionally charged topics like inclusion. During one strategic planning session, they received backlash over the inclusion of DEI priorities, including threatening behaviour both online and in person. These incidents left the person worried about being personally targeted. It was also noted on a separate time how operational disruptions, such as delayed street sweeping due to staffing rules and procurement issues, triggered disproportionate public outrage, including threats of violence. However, these reactions were perceived as attempts by residents to regain control during a time of uncertainty.

Despite the challenges faced, the participant felt strongly supported by the leadership team, who encouraged them to disengage from hostility. They described a culture of empowerment, where staff are not obligated to endure abuse and have support from their superiors. Still, they highlighted systemic issues that contribute to incivility, such as economic hardship, misinformation, and inadequate mental health resources in the community.

The suggestions included de-escalation training, proactive public education, clearer boundaries for accessing staff, and visible security presence at key municipal facilities. The participant also emphasized the importance of addressing the root causes of public anger, particularly mental health and socioeconomic challenges, as part of a broader community strategy.

Survey Findings

Survey results collected from 80 municipal staff members offered a rich quantitative and qualitative understanding of public incivility. The demographic distribution revealed a workforce predominantly identifying as female (74.68%), with the most common tenure bracket being 1 to 3 years (28.75%). Notably, nearly four in five respondents (78.5%) reported experiencing incivility from the public at least occasionally, with 38% indicating such incidents occurred “often” or “always.” These trends echo the patterns described in interviews, suggesting that incivility is not an isolated phenomenon but a widespread occupational hazard across departments.

Types of incivility most frequently encountered included rude or offensive comments (87.34%), unrealistic expectations (82.28%), verbal abuse (68.35%), and online/social media hostility (34.18%). A significant portion of staff also reported direct threats (30.38%) and harassment (26.58%), with a small number indicating incidents of vandalism or property damage. These results confirm the escalation of incivility beyond mere rudeness into more aggressive and sometimes dangerous territory.

Emotional responses mirrored the intensity of these interactions: 77.22% felt frustrated, 55.70% reported anxiety, and nearly half (45.57%) felt demoralized. In alignment with qualitative interview findings, many respondents reported turning to informal coping strategies—primarily colleague support (64.56%), breaks from work (48.10%), and incident reporting (51.90%). However, only 12.66% sought therapeutic help, and a concerning 10.13% said they used no strategies at all. These patterns point to the normalization of incivility in the workplace and potential gaps in accessible mental health support.

Less than half (46.84%) of the respondents reported receiving training on managing incivility. Departmental effectiveness in addressing the issue was viewed ambivalently: 36.71% rated it as “neutral,” and 20.25% expressed dissatisfaction, suggesting a need for clearer protocols, leadership visibility, and frontline resources. Although a reassuring 85.90% reported feeling safe interacting with the public, 14.10% indicated otherwise—an important minority that underscores the risks for certain roles or departments.

Qualitative responses provided further depth. Definitions of incivility shared by respondents frequently referenced disrespect, raised voices, intimidation, and unwarranted emotional outbursts. One respondent noted that incivility occurs “when a disagreement becomes emotionally charged and is directed personally at staff,” aligning with the interviewee who described a shift from procedural disagreement to personal attack. Several comments emphasized how incivility disproportionately impacts women and frontline workers, reinforcing a theme seen across interviews.

When asked what could improve safety and reduce incivility, respondents proposed a variety of structural and cultural solutions. These included council and public education campaigns to clarify staff responsibilities and municipal processes, de-escalation training, improved safety infrastructure (such as locked access doors and increased camera use), and clear enforcement mechanisms like no-trespass orders. One respondent emphasized the need to better manage public expectations, while another pointed to the “culture of entitlement” among residents, exacerbated by misinformation on social media.

Additional comments highlighted the toll that incivility takes on morale and mental health. Some respondents reported feeling fearful at times, particularly during emotionally charged public meetings or when being approached alone. Others expressed hope that better community engagement and consistent enforcement of respectful conduct policies would offer relief.

Overall, these survey findings reinforce and extend the themes identified through the interviews. They suggest that public incivility is not only a matter of interpersonal conflict but a structural issue affecting staff well-being, service delivery, and the overall municipal workplace environment. Having increased staff support, public awareness and education, safety enhancements, and having mental health support groups emerge as the most consistent recommendation across the data sources.

Major Themes, Implications and Suggestions

Across all interviews, participants consistently cited the COVID-19 pandemic as a catalyst for heightened incivility. Isolation, economic stress, and an overall decline in public patience were seen as major contributors. Social media enabled users to post aggressively without accountability, and misinformation circulated rapidly, often targeting individual staff members.

Public entitlement was a major theme. Participants reported residents frequently invoking their taxpayer status to justify hostile behaviour. This sense of entitlement often translated into unrealistic expectations, confrontational encounters, and resistance to municipal protocols.

Common coping strategies among staff included physical and emotional distancing, peer support, mental health care, and selective disengagement from aggressive residents. Formal policies such as trespass orders and panic buttons were seen as essential, but many employees also relied heavily on informal team solidarity.

The general recommendations among participants was the need for comprehensive public education campaigns regarding incivility, as there is a lack of public knowledge regarding the issue. There should also be clear communication boundaries and staff empowerment for municipal employees and an understanding that these workers are just doing their jobs and are sometimes out of their control. The need for institutional support for mental health and safety for both staff and public members is encouraged as, most times, words and actions are just a reflection of one's internal emotions and a lack of knowledge/tools on how to deal with these battles. Being able to increase staffing would be beneficial in distributing emotional labour, especially when individuals need mental health days. Finally, policy changes need to be implemented to restrict access to vulnerable personnel, as well as an overhaul of current and existing policies to adhere to the changing world.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal a concerning and persistent pattern of public incivility directed toward municipal employees in the City of Kawartha Lakes. This incivility has intensified in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, with participants identifying increased isolation, societal frustration, and digital platforms as amplifiers of hostile behaviour. The results support a growing body of literature indicating that

incivility is not just an interpersonal issue but a structural and occupational concern with significant implications for staff safety, morale, and organizational functioning.

One of the most striking findings is the normalization of incivility in municipal workplaces. Nearly 80% of survey respondents reported experiencing incivility sometimes, with many facing it often or always. (These values were defined with numerical values: sometimes = once a month, often = weekly/bi-weekly, always = daily or multiple times a week) This normalization is troubling, particularly given the emotional and psychological toll it exacts. Staff members reported feelings of anxiety, frustration, and demoralization. These effects were also reflected in much of the literature (e.g., Vasconcelos, 2020; Davis et al., 2024).

Interviews offered deeper insight into the day-to-day realities of incivility. Participants described being yelled at, threatened, and harassed both in person and online. These accounts demonstrate how incivility has evolved beyond casual rudeness to include serious emotional and safety concerns. For some, especially those in public-facing roles or working on sensitive issues such as equity and inclusion, incivility became a frequent and draining occupational hazard that isn't given the attention it deserves. These stories follow similar experiences as explained in the literature (e.g., Lin & Lai, 2020; Holladay & Makin, 2021) and highlight the impact that workplace hostility has on both well-being and operations within the job.

The COVID-19 pandemic appears to have exacerbated these challenges by destabilizing social norms and increasing public reliance on digital platforms. Many participants linked the rise in incivility to the isolation and stress of the pandemic, which seemingly removed traditional filters and social expectations. Social media, in particular, was identified as a key mechanism by which incivility was amplified. By providing an online platform which allows users to say whatever they want, often enabling unfiltered, aggressive commentary due to anonymity and lack of accountability. This creates a place where users gain confidence and feel like they have the right to express themselves and feel free from any consequences.

Public entitlement emerged as another powerful theme. The idea that residents, as taxpayers, feel justified in expressing hostility or making unreasonable demands reflects a broader societal trend of eroding trust and increasing dissatisfaction with institutions. This perception contributes to emotional burnout among staff who are often unable to meet such unrealistic expectations due to a wide range of factors while dealing with customers who are often aggressive.

The strategies that are used by staff to manage incivility include taking breaks, delaying responses, and leaning on coworkers. This points to a significant reliance on informal coping mechanisms. While these may offer short-term relief, they do not address the structural roots of the issue. There is a clear need for systemic interventions: stronger internal policies, improved access to mental health care and de-escalation training for staff. However, the biggest intervention should come from

enhancing public education about incivility and learning about the roles and limits of municipal workers, moving towards a more understanding and patient community. Encouragingly, some organizational supports like no-trespass orders and access restrictions were seen as effective. However, these reactive measures must be accompanied by proactive strategies to shift workplace culture and public expectations. Education campaigns that clearly outline the responsibilities of municipal staff and emphasize a respectful environment and engagement could help foster a more civil relationship between the public and the organization.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that public incivility is a complex, multifaceted issue that requires an equally comprehensive response. Municipalities must prioritize staff well-being through policies, training, and resources that acknowledge the emotional labour of public service. Simultaneously, broader community-level efforts are needed to address the social conditions that fuel incivility: misinformation, entitlement, and economic strain. Future research should continue exploring these dynamics while testing the effectiveness of different mitigation strategies in real-world settings.

Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. Personal Experience with Incivility

- Can you describe a recent experience where you encountered public incivility at work?
- How did this experience affect your emotional and mental well-being in the moment?
Did the effects last after the encounter?
- How do you define “incivility” in your own words, particularly in the context of your job?
- Have you noticed an increase or decrease in incivility since the pandemic began? How so?
- Can you recall a time when you felt particularly unsafe or threatened due to incivility from the public? How did you manage the situation?

2. Workplace Impact and Responses

- In what ways does public incivility affect your ability to perform your duties or deliver services?
- How does witnessing or experiencing incivility impact your relationship with colleagues or supervisors?
- Do you feel your workplace culture supports you in dealing with incidents of incivility?
Why or why not?
- Are there formal channels (e.g., HR, supervisor support, peer networks) in place to report and address incivility? How effective do you think these are?

3. Coping Strategies and Emotional Responses

- What personal strategies or techniques have you found helpful in managing the stress caused by public incivility?
- When dealing with an uncivil encounter, do you have any specific coping mechanisms or strategies to protect your well-being?
- Have you received any formal or informal training to deal with public incivility or conflict resolution? If yes, how helpful has it been?
- Do you feel your team or department has developed any "best practices" for managing challenging interactions with the public?

4. Safety and Support Systems

- Do you feel physically safe at work, especially during face-to-face interactions with the public? Why or why not?
- Are there any particular measures that could be implemented to improve staff safety during interactions with the public?
- Have you ever thought of an idea on how to address incivility or, how, as an organization, should handle incivility?

5. Post-Pandemic Context

- How did your experiences with public incivility change during the pandemic, and how have they shifted back to pre-pandemic patterns (if at all)?
- In your opinion, what role has the pandemic played in increasing or decreasing public incivility?

- Do you think the virtual environment (e.g., virtual public meetings) has affected the way people interact with municipal staff? Is it more or less civil than in-person interactions?
- What challenges do you believe the pandemic has created for municipal staff in handling incivility, and how do you think these can be addressed?

6. Policy and Procedural Recommendations

- What policies or practices do you believe municipal organizations could implement to reduce public incivility and protect staff?
- What resources do you think would help municipal staff who deal with frequent public incivility?
- How can municipal leadership support staff who are experiencing or witnessing incivility in their roles?
- What role do you think the community itself plays in reducing incivility toward municipal staff, and how could the municipality encourage more civil public behaviour?

7. Reflection and Closing Thoughts

- If you could change one thing about your work environment to help mitigate public incivility, what would it be?
- What advice would you give to new municipal staff members about handling incivility in their roles?
- Is there anything else you think is important for understanding the impact of public incivility on municipal workers and how it can be managed?

Appendix B

Survey Questions

Demographic Questions

- What is your department? (optional)
- How long have you worked in your current position?
- How do you identify? (Optional)

Experience with Incivility

- How would you describe what incivility is in your own words (Open-ended)
- In the past year, how often have you experienced incivility from the public? (Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Often, Always)
- What types of incivility have you encountered? (Select all that apply: rude comments, verbal abuse, threats, harassment, others - please specify)
- How did the incivility make you feel? (e.g., anxious, frustrated, demoralized, indifferent)

Coping Strategies

- What strategies do you use to cope with incivility in the workplace? (e.g., seeking support from colleagues, taking breaks, reporting incidents, other - please specify)
- Have you received any training or resources on how to handle incivility? (Yes/No)
- How effective do you think your department is in addressing incidents of incivility? (Very effective, Somewhat effective, Neutral, Somewhat ineffective, Very ineffective)

Safety and Support

- Do you feel safe while interacting with the public in your role? (Yes/No)
- What measures do you believe would improve safety and reduce incivility in your workplace? (Open-ended)

Additional Comments

- Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences with incivility?
(Open-ended)

Appendix C



Figure 1: Kawartha Lakes logo

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