

# Navigating Public Incivility

## Impact on Municipal Staff and Strategies for a Safer Work Environment Post-Pandemic



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### Background

- The City of Kawartha Lakes, located 90 minutes northeast of Toronto, serves a population of approximately 80,000 residents. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, municipal employees began experiencing a noticeable shift in public interactions. Compared to pre-pandemic times, there was a sharp increase in hostility—including aggressive comments, unrealistic demands, and even physical threats.
- Incivility refers to speech or behaviour that is rude, disrespectful, or disruptive to societal norms. While it may not always be overly aggressive, it can have significant consequences for workplace morale and efficiency.
- These negative interactions have had lasting effects on staff, impacting their well-being, self-worth, and overall job satisfaction.
- Additionally, the rise in complaints and confrontational incidents has placed a strain on municipal operations, diverting time and resources away from essential services.

### Purpose

This study aims to explore the rise in incivility, its impact on municipal employees, and potential solutions. Increased hostility from the public has affected staff well-being, job satisfaction, and municipal operations. By understanding these challenges, the municipality seeks to foster a safer, more respectful work environment, ensuring employees can continue delivering high-quality services without undue stress.

### Research Questions

- How does public incivility impact the health, safety, and well-being of municipal employees?
- To what extent should municipal staff be required to respond to public interactions?
  - What are the boundaries of their responsibilities?
  - Are existing policies and procedures sufficient to manage incidents of public incivility, or are additional measures needed?
  - How should municipalities balance citizen complaints with staff well-being?
  - When should complaints be classified as frivolous or vexatious?

### Methods

1. Met with the organization to discuss incivility and how the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to it.
2. Surveyed and interviewed members from different departments within the organization to hear their experiences and perspectives on incivility.
3. Analyzed results to better understand the factors that contribute to incivility and explore potential solutions.

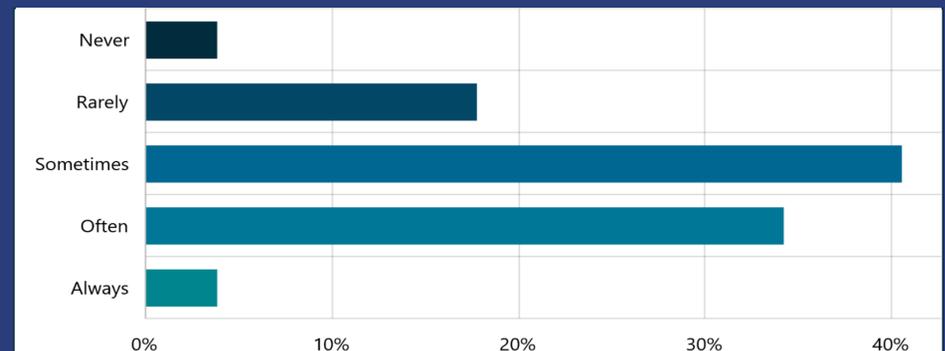


Figure 1: Number of encounters with incivility in the last year.

### Findings

1. Survey results indicate that over 95% of respondents reported experiencing some form of public incivility within the last year, with more than 75% encountering it at least once a week (Figure 1). Incivility exposure can leave a person feeling anxious, demoralized, and frustrated.
2. Employees commonly cope with incivility by taking breaks, seeking peer support, and reporting incidents.
3. The most frequently reported forms of incivility include rude/offensive comments, verbal abuse, and unrealistic expectations from the public.
4. Interview responses highlight that social media/phone calls have become a platform for public incivility, allowing individuals to engage in hostile behaviour with minimal consequences.
5. Potential solutions alluded to increased training for employees and a “Zero Tolerance” policy for rude behaviour; employees can disengage from certain conversations.