Crime & Safety in Western Canada:
The Small Business Perspective

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Executive Summary

Across Canada, but particularly in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba, small businesses are facing a unique set of challenges. Vandalism, theft, waste, loitering, and public intoxication have become major concerns for small business owners. These aren't just problems on a balance sheet; they are heartfelt struggles embedded into the lives of those small business owners who serve their communities day in and day out.

In response to these challenges, small business owners are showing remarkable resilience and adaptability. They are doing what they do best: adjusting and investing, not just in security measures, but in the well-being of their communities. They are providing safety training for their employees and finding ways to keep their doors open, serving the people they care about.

While small business owners demonstrate a high level of social responsibility in response to these challenges, they aren't first responders or social workers. There needs to be a collaborative approach involving various stakeholders, including law enforcement, government agencies, non-profit organizations, and small businesses, to address these pressing concerns effectively.

The report's insights also highlight the importance of improving public spaces, addressing affordable housing, and allocating more resources to tackle mental health and addiction challenges. Additionally, it suggests a shift in the approach to recidivism and resources to support small businesses in dealing with crime and safety challenges.

We would like to extend our heartfelt thanks to the various stakeholders, including law enforcement, non-profit organizations, and government agencies, who shared their insights and knowledge during our discussions. Their invaluable contributions have enriched our understanding of these complex issues and have informed the recommendations in this report.

Through this report, CFIB brings the small business perspective to this important conversation and emphasizes the vital role of collaboration in combating the prevalence of crime and alleviating its impacts in local communities.

Key Takeaways

➢ Small businesses in Western Canada are expressing concerns about crime and community safety, with 41 per cent of them highlighting these issues as a significant challenge, compared to a quarter in the rest of the country.

➢ Crime and community safety challenges disproportionally impact small businesses in Western Canada with almost half (45%) being directly or indirectly impacted by these issues, while an additional third (32%) are worried about them. In contrast, 28 per cent of small businesses in the rest of Canada have faced community safety issues.

➢ The top community safety challenges faced by small businesses in Western Canada include vandalism, theft, waste and litter, loitering, and public intoxication. The prevalence of these issues varies across provinces, highlighting the unique challenges faced by small businesses in different regions.

➢ In response to community safety challenges, Western Canadian small business owners are spending more money on security (62%), changing the way they operate (42%), and providing safety training for their employees (25%).

➢ CFIB calls on all levels of government to prioritize community safety by addressing underlying societal issues, collaborating with stakeholders, improving reporting and transparency, enhancing supports for small business, and overhauling the current approach to handling repeat offenders.

Methodology

This paper presents findings from CFIB's May *Your Voice* survey; an online survey completed by 2,809 small business owners across Canada between May 4 to May 25, 2023 (348 responses in BC, 320 responses in Alberta, 90 responses in Saskatchewan, 114 responses in Manitoba). For comparison purposes, a probability sample with the same number of respondents would have a margin of error of plus or minus 1.8 per cent, 19 times out of 20.

Introduction

Over the past number of years, Canadian small businesses have consistently highlighted crime and community safety as significant issues affecting their operations. Small businesses have demonstrated understanding, compassion, and patience regarding these complex issues and recognize that there are no simple solutions. However, the challenges small businesses face are mounting, not to mention the associated risks for employees and customers. These challenges impede small businesses' ability to operate safely, and therefore require attention from all levels of government to find and implement effective solutions.

This report discusses the impact crime and community safety issues have on small businesses in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba (referred to as Western Canada throughout the report). The report addresses the state of crime in Canada, small businesses perspectives on crime, how these issues impact them, and how they are working to manage these challenges. Through this, the report seeks to work in collaboration with government and other stakeholders to build safer communities.

The Western Canadian Lens

Crime and community safety issues are affecting many small businesses across the country. However, the share of small businesses indicating that this is a concern is much higher in Western Canada, where an alarming 41 per cent of small businesses have concerns, compared to a quarter of small businesses in the rest of Canada considering it a serious issue (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1

SMALL BUSINESSES IN WESTERN CANADA ARE MORE CONCERNED ABOUT CRIME AND COMMUNITY SAFETY THAN SMALL BUSINESSES IN THE REST OF THE COUNTRY

BC: 44%
AB: 41%
SK: 27%
MB: 45%
NL: 26%
QC: 17%
ON: 24%
NB: 23%
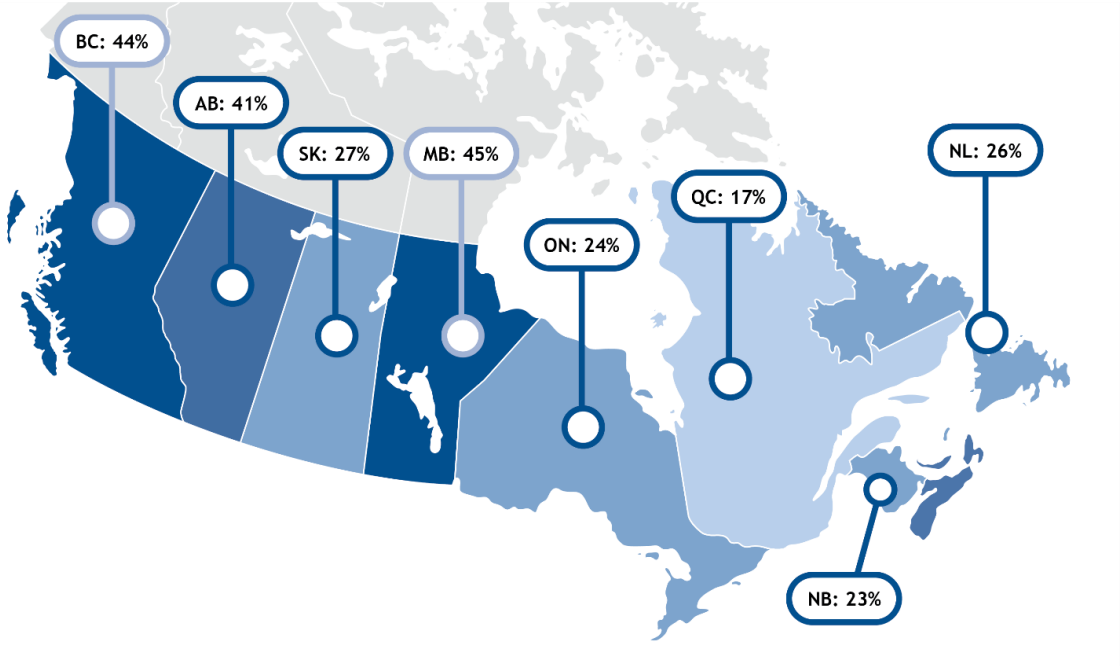
Source: CFIB. Your Voice Survey – May 2023. May 4-25, 2023. N=2,809.
Question: Which of the following are a serious concern to your business? - Crime and safety

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There is good reason for this concern to be heightened in Western Canada. Crime and community safety issues are more likely to impact small businesses in Western Canada: nearly half (45%) of small businesses in Western Canada have been directly or indirectly impacted and another third (32%) are worried about the problem (see Figure 2). In contrast, less than one-third (28%) of small businesses in the rest of Canada have been impacted. Despite experiencing less crime, small businesses in the rest of Canada are still concerned about these problems, suggesting these issues are making an impression that is felt across the country.

FIGURE 2

NEARLY HALF OF SMALL BUSINESSES IN THE WEST HAVE RECENTLY BEEN IMPACTED BY COMMUNITY SAFETY ISSUES
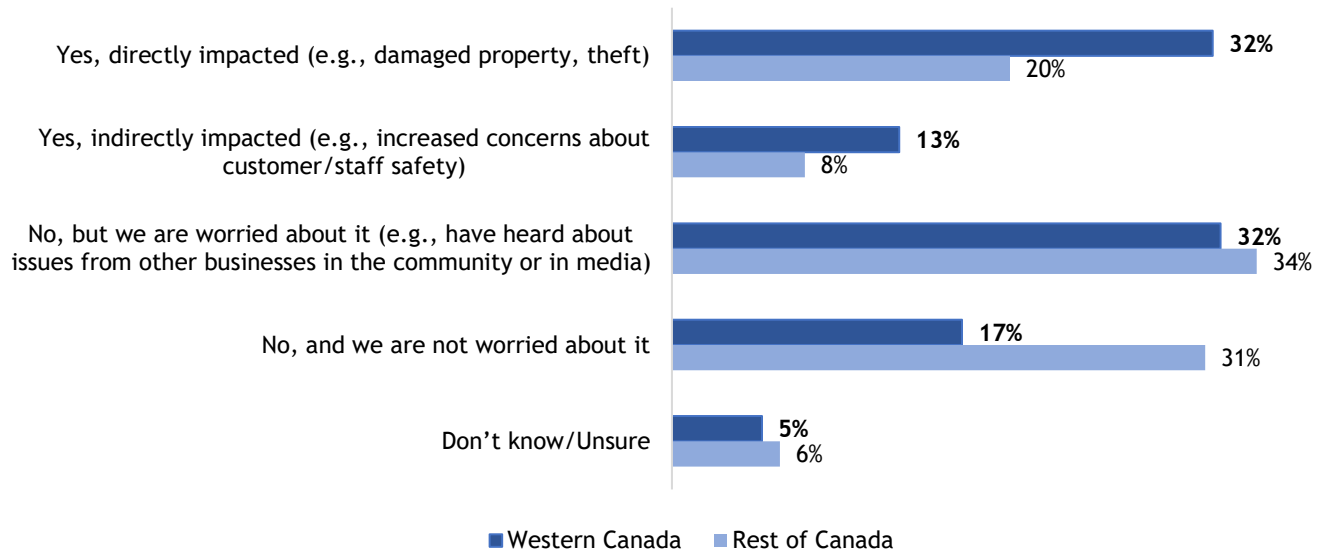
Source: CFIB. Your Voice Survey – May 2023. May 4-25, 2023. N=2,809.
Question: Has your business recently been impacted by community safety issues?

Provincial specific data shows that over half (54%) of Manitoba businesses have been impacted, painting a bleak picture of the province's community safety challenges. In contrast, Saskatchewan reports the lowest share of businesses in Western Canada impacted by crime and safety concerns (38%), which is still ten percentage points above the Canadian average (28%). British Columbia and Alberta report similarly high impact levels that also far exceed the national average (see Figure 3).

FIGURE 3

COMMUNITY SAFETY CHALLENGES HAVE IMPACTED A SIGNIFICANT SHARE OF SMALL BUSINESSES IN WESTERN CANADA
Has your business recently been impacted by community safety issues? – Net impact (Direct and indirect)

Source: CFIB. Your Voice Survey – May 2023. May 4-25, 2023. N=2,809.
Question: Has your business recently been impacted by community safety issues? – Net impact (Direct and indirect)

CFIB's data shows that small businesses across Canada are facing crime and community safety challenges. However, these challenges are heightened in the western provinces, which is why the following report analyzes these issues from a western Canadian perspective.

In addition to crime and safety challenges, small businesses in Western Canada, like the rest of the country, are facing persistent inflation, ongoing labour shortages, rising taxes, and rising interest rates. The rising cost of doing business paired with lower demand for goods and services is taking its toll. Nearly half (46%) of Western Canadian small businesses are making below normal revenues and almost 60 per cent of them are still carrying pandemic related debt.[1] Working to reduce crime and community safety challenges will help business owners return their focus to running their business.

The State of Crime & Safety in Western Canada

Statistics Canada's Crime Rate provides information on the volume of police-reported crimes, traditionally expressed as a rate per 100,000 population. In 2022, Canada saw a near four per cent decrease in the number of police-reported crimes compared to 2019 (pre-pandemic) levels. Manitoba's crime rate saw the highest surge in the west in 2022 compared to 2019 (up 4.2% from 2019, and 13.9% compared to the year prior – the highest year-over-year increase in Canada), followed by Saskatchewan (up by 3% compared to 2019 and by 4.7% compared to 2021). However, like Canada, British Columbia and Alberta observed a decrease in the number of police-reported crimes (14.7% and 11.9% compared to 2019, respectively) (see Figure 4).

FIGURE 4

CRIME RATES ARE INCREASING IN THE WESTERN PROVINCES, WITH THE EXCEPTION OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
*Incident-based crime statistics, Statistics Canada, 2018 vs. 2022*
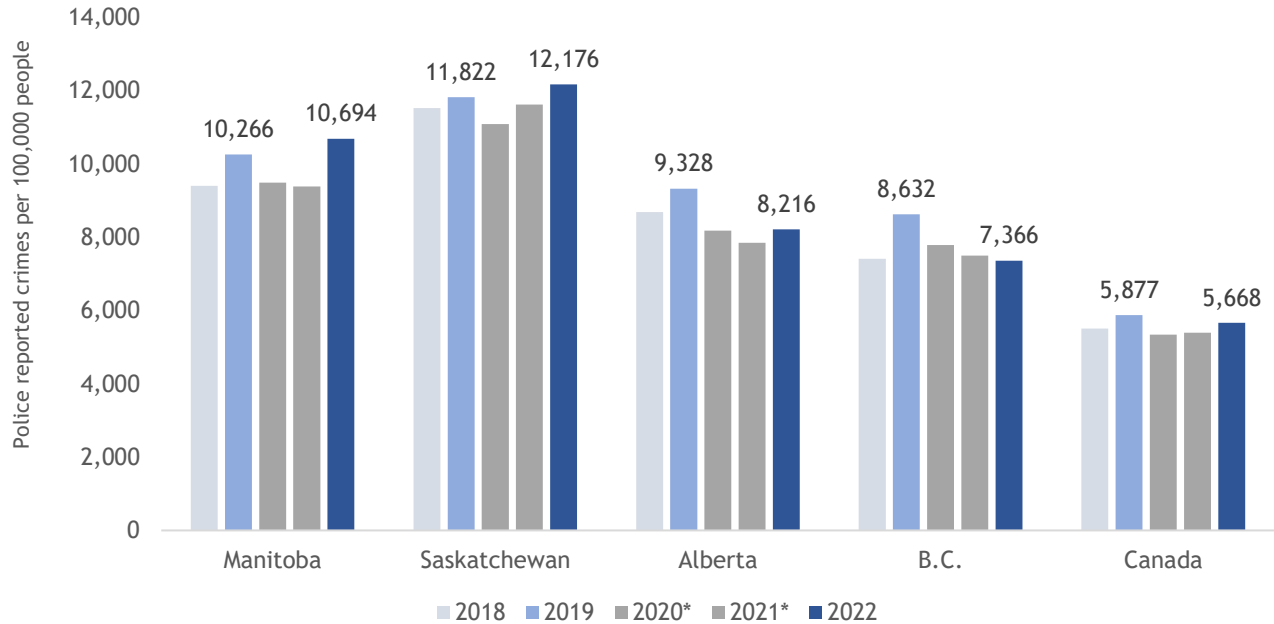
Source: Statistics Canada. Table 35-10-0177-01 Incident-based crime statistics, by detailed violations, Canada, provinces, territories, Census Metropolitan Areas and Canadian Forces Military Police. *Figure excludes traffic violations.

Saskatchewan recorded the highest actual crime rate in 2022 followed by Manitoba, Alberta, and British Columbia (see Figure 4). Despite BC and Alberta reporting a decrease in crime (compared to pre-pandemic levels), all Western provinces recorded higher crime rates than rest of Canada, which had an average rate of 5,668 police-reported crimes (excluding the territories).

The Crime Severity Index (CSI) is another measure that is determined by assigning weights to police reported crimes based on the crime's type and severity, resulting in higher index values for jurisdictions with a greater proportion of more severe crimes.[2]

Figure 5 illustrates the CSI across Western Canada. We analyzed the five-year data (2018 - 2022) to account for any fluctuations related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The data reveals the severity of crime saw a spike across Canada in 2019 compared to the year prior. The trend then saw a big dip in 2020 when the pandemic began, and Saskatchewan and Manitoba observed a slow creep up in 2021, leading to higher crime severity in 2022. Alberta and British Columbia kept climbing down during the pandemic and rates went slightly back up in 2022.

FIGURE 5

CRIME SEVERITY IN WESTERN PROVINCES IS HIGHER THAN THE CANADIAN AVERAGE
Crime Severity Index, Statistics Canada, 2018 vs. 2022
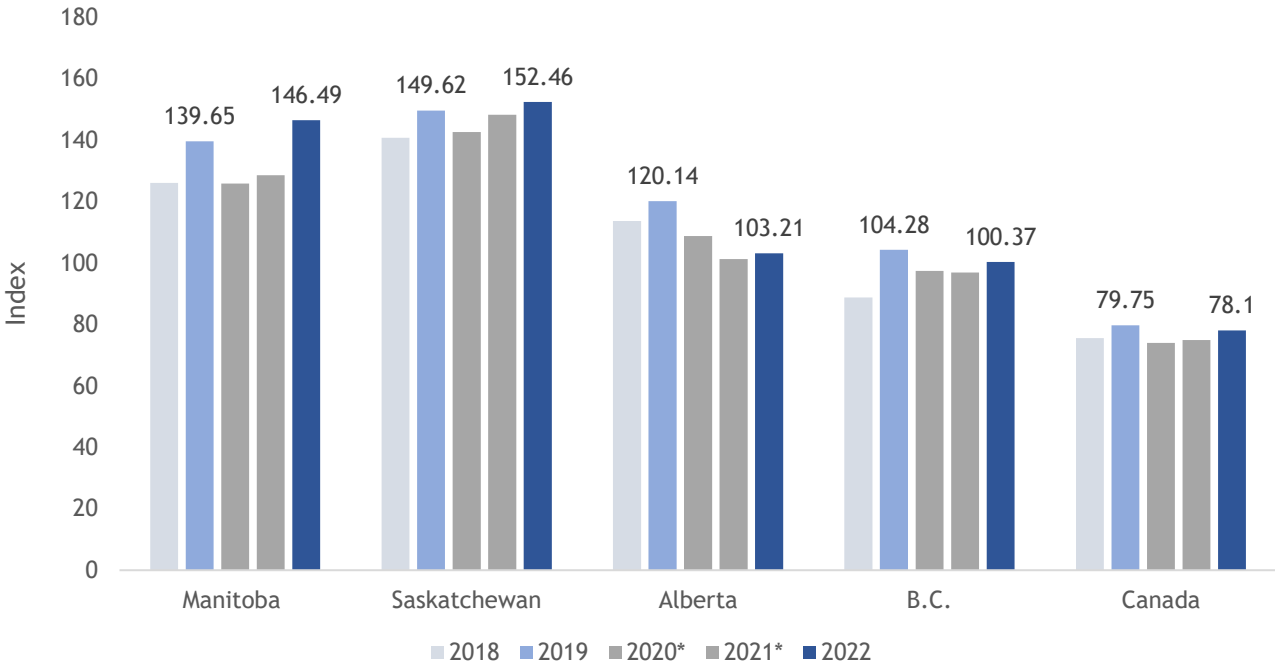
Source: Statistics Canada. Table 35-10-0026-01. Crime severity index and weighted clearance rates, Canada, provinces, territories, and Census Metropolitan Areas.

While Saskatchewan small businesses perceived lower rates of crime and safety concerns in response to CFIB's recent survey, the province has the highest Crime Severity Index (152) compared to its Western counterparts. From 2019 to 2022, Saskatchewan's CSI increased by two per cent and remained the highest at an index of 152.5.[3] Manitoba has the second highest CSI in Western Canada, followed by Alberta, and BC, which experienced decreases in the index between 2019 and 2022. BC reported the lowest CSI of the Western Canadian provinces.

It is worth noting that both the Crime Rate and the CSI rely on *police-reported data*, meaning only reported crimes are considered. Therefore, these two indicators are likely to underestimate the full extent of crime and safety issues, especially considering that some minor offenses small business owners experience are often not reported to police.

These findings suggest a complex regional landscape with differing patterns of crime and severity throughout Western Canada. However, Western Canada, as a whole, tends to have higher crime rates and severity compared to the rest of the country.

Small businesses' growing concern about crime and community safety is reflected in the considerable attention it receives from media, politicians, and consumers. As of late, headlines are dominated by stories of criminal activity and downtowns in disarray. Across Canada, the frequency of searches for the term "crime" in Google's search engine have skyrocketed since January 2022 (see Figure 6), indicating a significant increase in the public's interest in crime-related topics. This upward trend has persisted and shows no signs of a return to more modest, pre-2022 levels.

FIGURE 6

GOOGLE SEARCHES FOR "CRIME" HAVE SKYROCKETED IN CANADA SINCE THE BEGINNING OF 2022
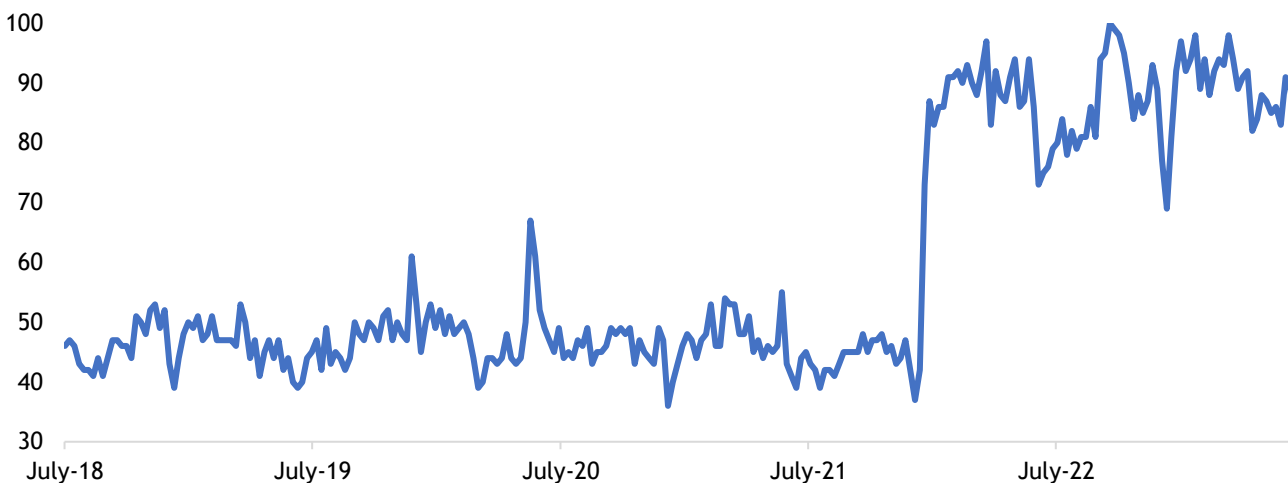
Source: Google Trends statistics. Search for "crime".
Note: Numbers represent search interest relative to the highest point on the chart for the given region and time. A value of 100 is the peak popularity for the term. A value of 50 means that the term is half as popular. A score of 0 means there was not enough data for this term.
https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?q=%2Fm%2F01rbb&date=today%205-y&geo=CA.

The increased focus on crime in the public discourse can influence consumer decisions and shape their overall perception of downtown or other commercial areas as either welcoming destinations or risky environments. These perceptions can deter shoppers from visiting business areas for leisure, shopping, or dining, thereby having a negative impact on small business sales.

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the 'feel' of downtown cores and other commercial areas across Western Canada by contributing to reduced foot traffic. Downtown hubs, once vibrant and bustling with activity, were practically abandoned as businesses and their employees shifted to work-from-home models. Additionally, the return to downtowns has been slow, and as a result of many businesses moving fully to work-from-home, or a hybrid model, it is unlikely we will see downtowns as vibrant as they once were for a very long time. This may contribute to the perception that broader societal issues have worsened as they are less masked by crowds.

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In a recent Leger poll, Canadians were asked to compare the current level of crime and violence in their community to before the pandemic began in early 2020.[4] The results revealed that nearly two-thirds of respondents expressed a belief that the incidence of crime has increased. Specifically, 32 per cent of Canadians stated that crime and violence have become "much worse," while an additional 32 per cent reported it to be "a little worse." Only a small minority (2%) expressed a perception of the situation being "a little better."

> *"Employees have reported being harassed during daytime business hours on the main street and in/around local businesses. This is very emotionally upsetting to the point that some will avoid certain areas and travel in groups. This also adversely impacts shoppers frequenting some businesses."*
>
> —Enterprises & Admin. Mgmt. business owner, Smithers, BC

We recognize that publishing this report will draw more attention to these issues, but we firmly believe it is important for small businesses to have a voice in this discussion. Despite shouldering significant and unique responsibilities related to community safety, small businesses are often underrepresented in this conversation and excluded from the formulation of solutions.

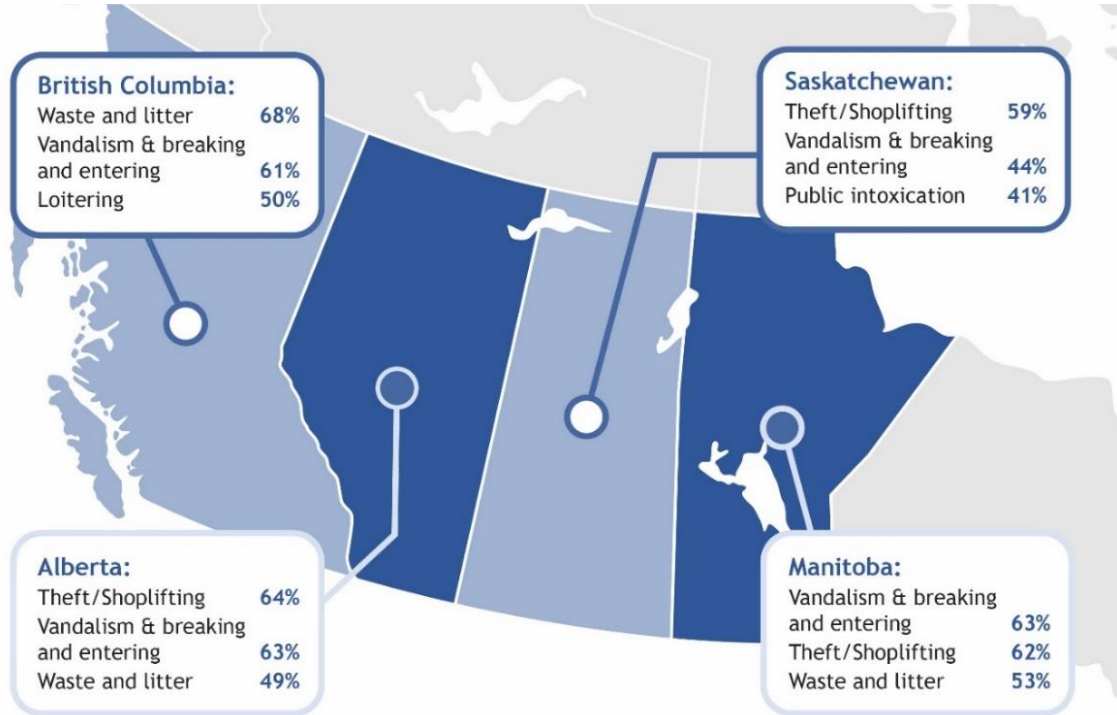# Crime and Safety: The Small Business Experience

Vandalism/breaking and entering, theft/shoplifting, and waste/litter are the top community safety concerns small businesses face in Western Canada (see Figure 7). British Columbia, Alberta, and Manitoba have high concerns about vandalism and breaking and entering (61% to 63%). Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba see theft/shoplifting as a major issue (59% to 64%). BC faces more waste and litter problems (68%) compared to other provinces.

The data also reveals a relatively significant occurrence of public intoxication (e.g., drug or alcohol misuse) across the Western provinces, with almost half of BC small business owners (48%) experiencing these challenges followed by Saskatchewan (41%) and Manitoba (40%). Alberta has the lowest share of small business owners (35%) having experienced public intoxication as a community safety concern.

The prevalence of vagrancy and/or encampments (i.e., individuals residing in public spaces) shows significant variation across the provinces, particularly in comparison to British Columbia and the rest of Western Canada. BC reports the highest percentage, with 44 per cent of small business owners experiencing this challenge. In contrast, Alberta stands at a little less than a third (31%), Manitoba at 17 per cent, and Saskatchewan records the lowest percentage at 6 per cent. Other challenges small businesses have encountered include loitering, vagrancy, and harassment of staff and/or customers.

FIGURE 7

TOP COMMUNITY SAFETY ISSUES VARY BY PROVINCE

British Columbia:
Waste and litter	68%
Vandalism & breaking and entering	61%
Loitering	50%

Saskatchewan:
Theft/Shoplifting	59%
Vandalism & breaking and entering	44%
Public intoxication	41%

Alberta:
Theft/Shoplifting	64%
Vandalism & breaking and entering	63%
Waste and litter	49%

Manitoba:
Vandalism & breaking and entering	63%
Theft/Shoplifting	62%
Waste and litter	53%

Source: CFIB. Your Voice Survey – May 2023. May 4-25, 2023. N=2,809.
Question: What kind of community safety issues has your business recently experienced? (Select all that apply)

A clear distinction emerges between the Western provinces and the rest of Canada regarding several community safety issues (see Figure 8). Compared to the rest of Canada, we see significant disparities of 10 percentage points or greater in issues related to waste and litter, public intoxication, and vandalism/breaking and entering.
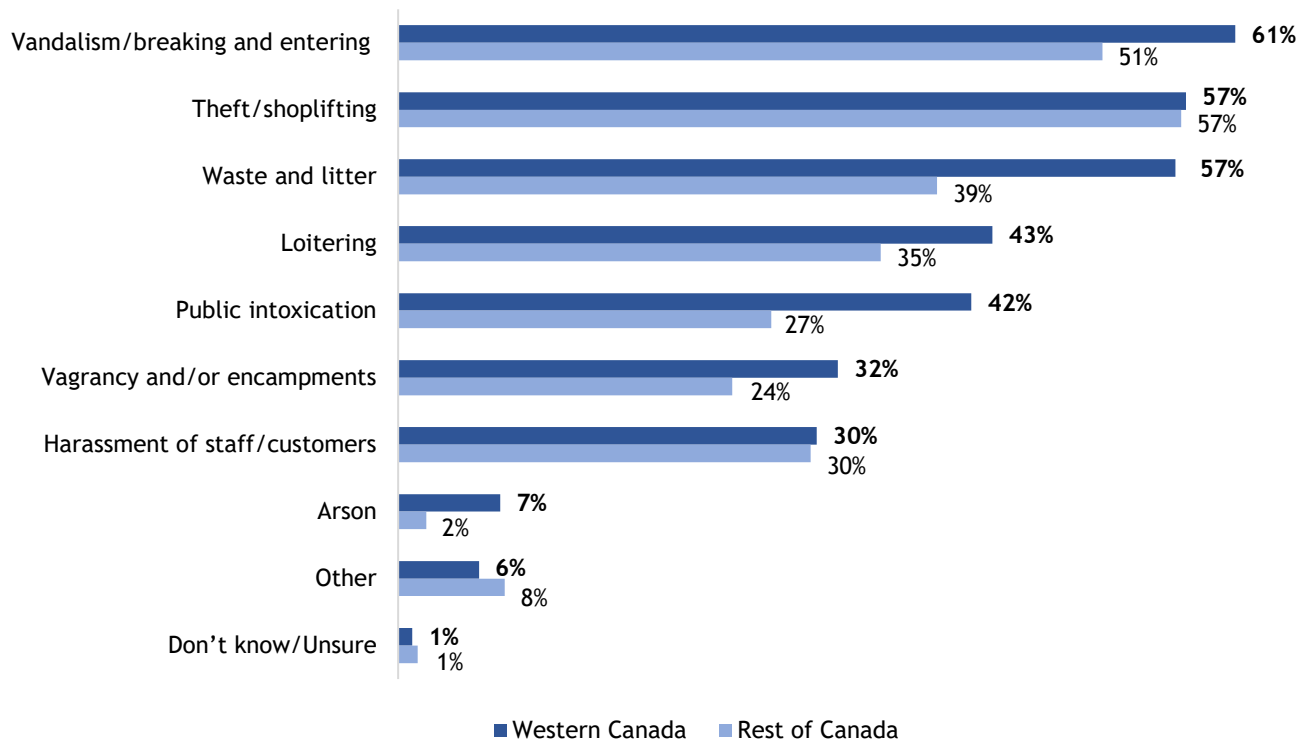
> *"Our business deals with elderly customers and right out front of our building there are daily panhandlers who get very intoxicated by the end of the day. Swearing yelling, throwing around garbage. Some of the elderly feel uncomfortable going out to their car."*
>
> —Personal Services Business Owner, Winnipeg, MB

Additionally, Western small businesses have encountered more vagrancy and encampment issues, reflecting an eight percentage-point difference compared to the rest of the country. These disparities highlight the unique challenges faced by Western small businesses.

FIGURE 8

CANADIAN SMALL BUSINESSES FACE VARIOUS COMMUNITY SAFETY CHALLENGES WITH HIGHER INCIDENCE IN THE WESTERN PROVINCES

	Western Canada	Rest of Canada
Vandalism/breaking and entering	61%	51%
Theft/shoplifting	57%	57%
Waste and litter	57%	39%
Loitering	43%	35%
Public intoxication	42%	27%
Vagrancy and/or encampments	32%	24%
Harassment of staff/customers	30%	30%
Arson	7%	2%
Other	6%	8%
Don't know/Unsure	1%	1%

■ Western Canada ■ Rest of Canada

Source: CFIB. Your Voice Survey – May 2023. May 4-25, 2023. N=2,809.
Question: What kind of community safety issues has your business recently experienced? (Select all that apply)

Impact on Small Business

Crime and safety challenges don't just affect small businesses financially; they also disrupt the safe and nurturing environment that small business owners are committed to foster for their employees and customers. The findings in Figure 9 illustrate that small business owners are profoundly worried about their staff and customers, extending beyond their own personal safety. While the percentage of small business owners concerned about personal safety, and the safety of their staff and customers varies across Western Canada, there is no doubt that these businesses genuinely care for and are committed to prioritizing their staff and clientele's safety.

FIGURE 9

CONCERNS ABOUT PERSONAL SAFETY AND SAFETY OF STAFF/CUSTOMERS IS HIGH IN WESTERN CANADIAN PROVINCES

BC	86%
MB	78%
AB	73%
SK	59%

Source: CFIB. Your Voice Survey – May 2023. May 4-25, 2023. N=2,809.
Question: How concerned are you about your personal safety and/or that of your staff and/or customers due to community safety issues? Net concern (Very or somewhat concerned).

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Small businesses are sensitive to underlying issues such as the lack of affordable housing and the challenges related to mental health and addictions. However, hyper-visibility of these challenges without resolution for long periods of time negatively alters the perception of safety in commercial areas, leaving businesses struggling to deal with the consequences.
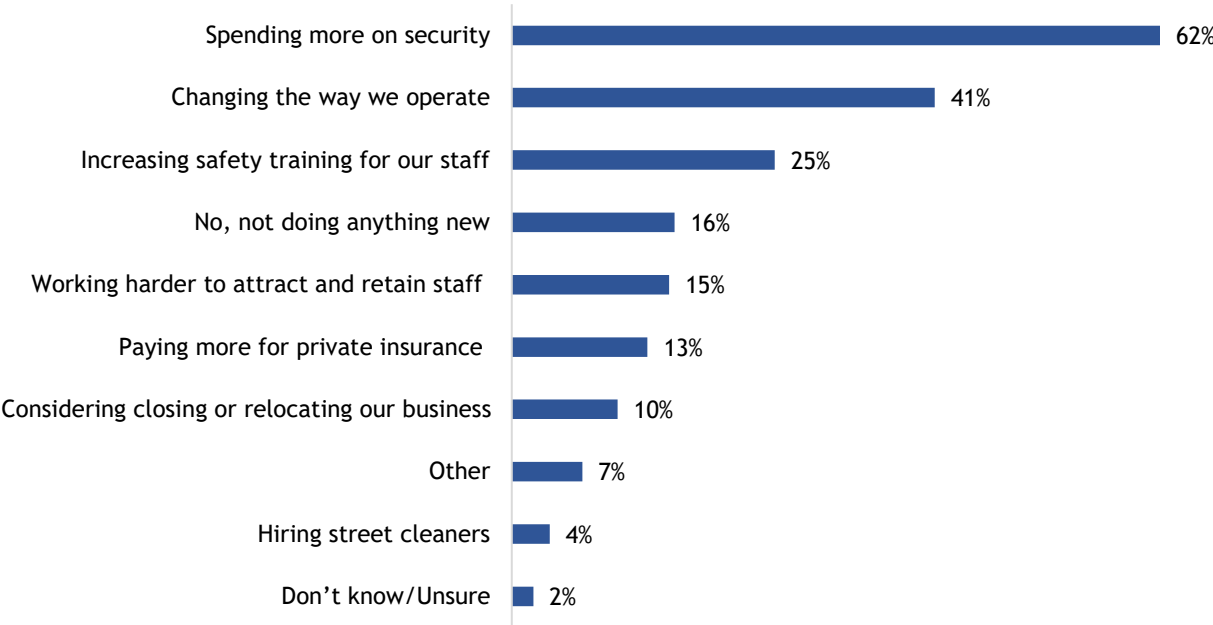
> *"I don't like my staff to be by themselves when it gets dark. Sometimes, we lock our doors at 5 o'clock, even though we're open until seven. One of our staff's vehicles was vandalized right in front of us and there was nothing we could do. That was $500 of damage that she had to pay for."*
>
> —Personal Services Business Owner, Victoria, B.C.

How are small businesses responding to the challenges they face?

A significant number of Western Canadian small businesses are responding to community safety issues by spending more money on enhancing their security infrastructure (see Figure 10). These expenditures include measures such as installing cameras, hiring security guards, and adding bars to windows. Nearly two-thirds (62%) of Western Canadian small businesses are taking these measures, with businesses in BC (68%) and Alberta (63%) implementing them more frequently than those in Manitoba (54%) and Saskatchewan (47%). It should be noted, however, that some business owner who rent cannot implement security measures such as adding bars to windows due to the limits of their lease agreements.

FIGURE 10

WESTERN CANADIAN SMALL BUSINESS OWNERS ARE SPENDING MORE ON SECURITY AND CHANGING THE WAY THEY OPERATE IN RESPONSE TO COMMUNITY CRIME AND SAFETY CHALLENGES

Response	Percentage
Spending more on security	62%
Changing the way we operate	41%
Increasing safety training for our staff	25%
No, not doing anything new	16%
Working harder to attract and retain staff	15%
Paying more for private insurance	13%
Considering closing or relocating our business	10%
Other	7%
Hiring street cleaners	4%
Don't know/Unsure	2%

Source: CFIB. Your Voice Survey – May 2023. May 4-25, 2023. N=2,809.
Question: Is your business doing anything new in response to community safety issues? (Select all that apply).

> *"We had four break-ins before the landlord relented and allowed us to install security bars. He was more concerned about the 'image' of the building than our business. In the meantime, we got denied insurance, spent $20,000-$30,000 on security cameras, locks, sirens, and so on."*
>
> —Unclassified & IVMs business owner, Vancouver, B.C.

Those with limited finances have had to find alternative solutions to deal with these community safety issues. Some small business owners have adapted their operations by keeping their doors locked during open hours, by closing certain entrances, adjusting operating hours, and/or by providing more appointment-based services. In fact, 41 per cent of businesses in Western Canada have made these changes.

Community safety challenges are also exacerbating labour shortages for small business owners. Due to concerns about high-risk areas or locations perceived to be 'unsafe', approximately 15 per cent of small businesses in Western Canada are having to work harder to attract and retain staff. This situation is more pronounced in Manitoba (20%) and BC (18%), where labour shortages are particularly severe and business owners find themselves working an average of 54 hours per week.[5]

Moreover, many businesses across Western Canada are prioritizing safety training for their employees to effectively handle these issues. BC (31%), Alberta (26%), and Manitoba (17%) have a higher share of small businesses focusing on employee safety training, whereas only nine per cent of Saskatchewan small business owners are doing the same.

Small businesses' commitment to creating a safe environment for both their employees and customers demonstrates a deep sense of responsibility towards their local community, yet it comes at a price. Many small business owners have had to adjust their budgets to accommodate for the cost of dealing with crime and safety issues, such as property damage and security costs. For example, nearly one-fifth of Manitoba small business owners (19%) are opting to pay more for private insurance to avoid the high cost of property damage repairs.

Despite the challenges they face, business owners remain hopeful that governments will step up and take decisive action to address the underlying issues contributing to community safety challenges.

> *"In 2022 we spent $40,000 repairing damage caused by the street population. There was a high frequency of low-value damage averaging $3,000 per occurrence. Too low for insurance to be involved. Not to mention had we reported them all we would no longer be able to purchase insurance."*
>
> —Finance, Insurance, Real Estate & Leasing business owner, Duncan, B.C.

Rural Experience

Rural communities are not immune to crime and safety issues. In fact, according to Statistics Canada data, rural communities are seeing much higher crime rates and CSI levels compared to urban areas. While this gap has been persistent over the years, the pandemic widened it even further.

When the pandemic lockdowns were enforced, urban areas experienced a significant reduction in foot traffic leading to an 11 per cent decline in crime rates in 2020 compared to the previous year. In contrast, rural areas noticed a much less dramatic drop, with only a two per cent decrease in crime rates.[6] In 2021, rural areas reported 7,929 incidents per 100,000 population while urban areas reported 48 per cent less incidents (5,363 per 100,000).

While urban crime rates remained relatively stable in 2021, rural crime rates slowly returned to pre-pandemic levels. However, it's important to interpret this trend with caution as urban areas tend to be more business-centred and foot traffic has not yet returned to normal levels.

CSI levels also showed a similar trend of the widening gap between urban and rural areas. From 2011 to 2021, rural areas reported a seven per cent increase in CSI levels (from 85.5 to 91.9) while urban areas observed a decrease of eight per cent (from 75.2 to 69.3).

The prairie provinces (Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta) recorded the highest rural crime levels as of 2021 (see Figure 11). Rural Saskatchewan observed the highest CSI (187.0) followed by rural Manitoba (152.8), and rural Alberta (144.5). On the other hand, rural BC had a lower CSI (90.6) compared to the other provinces, but higher than in the rest of Canada.[7]

FIGURE 11

CRIME LEVELS IN RURAL PROVINCES HAVE EXCEEDED THOSE IN URBAN CANADA
Crime Severity Index, Statistics Canada, % indicates percentage change from 2011 to 2021
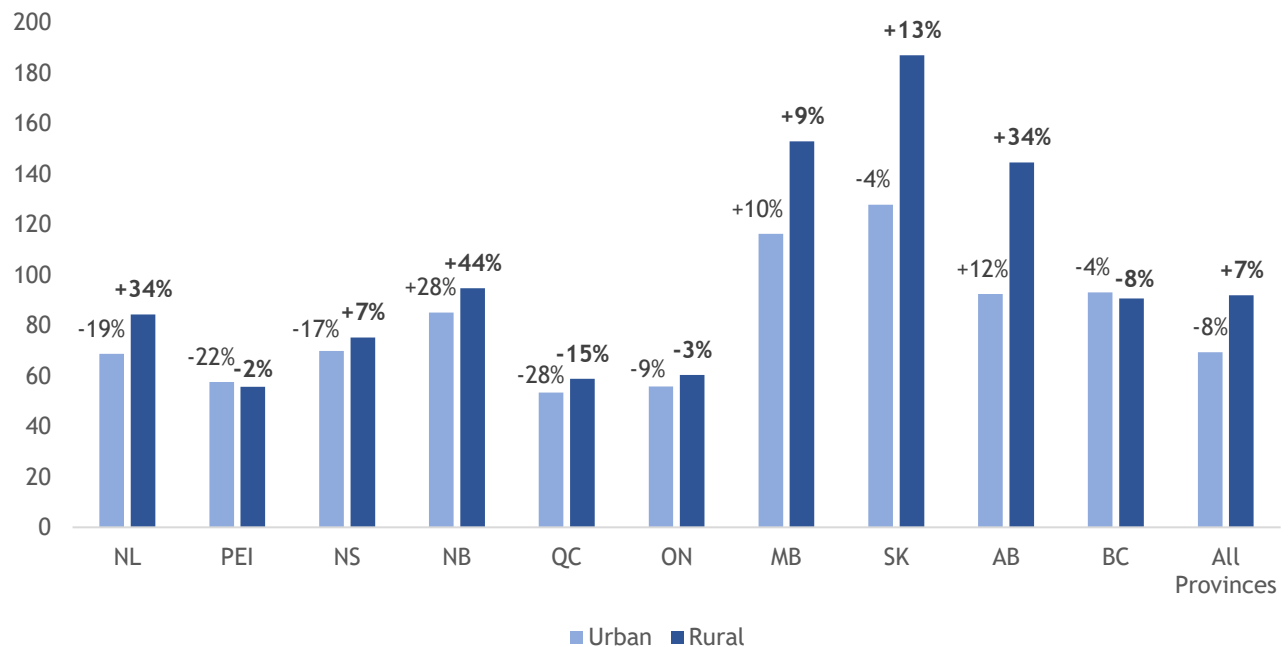
Source: Statistics Canada. February 20, 2023, Police-reported crime in rural and urban areas in the Canadian provinces, 2021.

Reducing rural crime presents numerous challenges due to a lack of services and infrastructure relative to urban areas (e.g., limited police services, lighting, housing, mental health support). Geographical barriers also hinder timely police response for businesses such as agri-businesses situated in remote locations. Additionally, access to resources such as mental health services, housing, and homeless shelters remain a common concern for rural businesses.

> *"Our own small town shut down its only shelter with no options, leaving desperate people more desperate and limiting their options to survival, impacting the businesses and communities around them. We need more shelters, access to mental health and government programs to help people by empowering them and getting them active in society again."*
>
> —Manufacturing business owner, Salmon Arm, BC

Insights from Stakeholder Engagement

CFIB met with a range of stakeholders including law enforcement and non-profit organizations to engage in an open conversation about crime and community safety issues. The purpose of this engagement process was to ensure diverse perspectives were considered. In our conversations, we discussed underlying issues, potential solutions, and shared feedback from our members about how crime and community safety issues impact small businesses.

Crime and community safety issues are deeply complex and cannot be attributed to a single factor, nor solved with a single solution or by one group. This underscores the importance of a collaborative approach between all stakeholders. Small businesses, non-profit organizations, charities, police services, and governments must work together to share resources and knowledge.

The following are the main insights from our engagements:

1. **There is a lack of support/resources available for small businesses to deal with challenges related to crime and safety.**

CFIB asked stakeholders if they knew of any resources that might be helpful to small businesses experiencing crime and community safety challenges. While all stakeholders acknowledged crime's negative impacts on small businesses, many indicated they are not aware if there are any resources or supports available.

We discussed several possible initiatives with stakeholders that could help fill this gap:

- Offering financial compensation to businesses affected by vandalism and other forms of property damage by establishing a **property** damage relief fund would help alleviate the cost burdens caused by such incidents.
- Offering small business owners and their employees accessible **online toolkits, safety workshops, and training sessions** to help provide practical guidance on how to address common safety concerns, implement effective crime prevention strategies, and protect both business operations and employee well-being.
- Creating a centralized **crime reporting system** tailored specifically for small businesses. Ideally, this system would help simplify incident reporting and the tracking of criminal activity.

2. **Collaboration is key.**

To effectively tackle community safety challenges, it's crucial for all stakeholders within the community – including law enforcement, government agencies, small businesses, non-profit organizations, and charities – to collaborate closely. By fostering open communication, sharing insights, and pooling resources, these organizations can collectively adopt a data-driven approach to address these pressing issues.

> *"We already have the RCMP engagement with local business on group email if we suspect drivers scoping out locations [for theft]. Its similar to neighbor hood watch."*
>
> —Manufacturing business owner, Slave Lake, AB

One suggestion to accomplish this is to establish formal **community safety roundtables** to bring together a diverse array of stakeholders on a regular basis to facilitate the exchange of information, ideas, and collaborative strategies. By creating an avenue for open dialogue and shared expertise,

municipal governments can harness the collective wisdom of non-profits, businesses, local law enforcement, and others, thereby ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the issues and means of tackling them.

Communities can benefit from joint partnerships with law enforcement and localized experts that are trained to engage with vulnerable members of the public who may be causing a disturbance in small business communities, (i.e., social workers) and/or social policing, in which specifically trained individuals liaise and dispatch out to vulnerable unhoused persons (e.g., Calgary's HELP team or Regina's Community Support Program).[8]

3. All levels of government must take responsibility.

Stakeholders told us that different levels of government often defer responsibility to one another instead of being accountable to the issues surrounding crime and community safety. Better cooperation is needed between all levels of government, and all must begin to take accountability for issues contributing to these challenges.

4. Improvements to public spaces can mitigate crime and safety concerns in commercial areas/downtown cores.

Several workable measures were suggested that could be implemented to improve crime and community safety in public, commercial and downtown areas:

- **Enhancing outdoor lighting** in commercial areas can deter criminal activity during the night hours, providing a safer atmosphere for both businesses and residents.
- **Cleaning and maintenance of public spaces** is essential. This includes initiatives such as graffiti removal and sidewalk cleaning, contributing to an environment that is uninviting to potential criminal activities.
- **Investing in public washroom infrastructure** can help address some of the challenges related to waste and litter. Improving the convenience and safety of public restrooms not only caters to the needs of citizens, but also enhances the overall quality of public spaces.
- Increasing the presence of **police on transit** will help ensure secure access to public transportation for citizens, employees, and customers alike. By creating a safe environment within transit systems, the government enhances mobility while promoting a sense of security during travel.

> *"Lighting is terrible. The local businesses illuminate [the area] a great deal more than the streetlights. If we turned off our lights, you would need a flashlight to see the sidewalk. Dark areas attract [mischief]."*
>
> —Arts & recreation business owner, Winnipeg, MB

5. Improving the supply of affordable housing is critical.

Issues arising from a lack of affordable housing can affect everyone within the community. It is important that all levels of government work together to quickly address Canada's housing issues.

A critical starting point lies in increasing the availability of affordable housing by reducing the financial barriers that hinder housing development. By implementing tax reductions, streamlining permitting processes, and engaging in strategic rezoning efforts, all levels of government can incentivize developers to build more affordable housing units.

6. More resources are required to address the ongoing mental health and addiction crisis.

In addition to public investment to help support mental health and addiction issues, more resources, including improved access to mental health professionals, healthcare infrastructure like stabilization centres are needed to support vulnerable populations.[9]

Building stabilization centres for complex addictions and mental health recovery can help reduce the strain on emergency services and enable struggling individuals to access the specialized care they need. Addressing mental health and addiction challenges at their core can positively impact the overall well-being of the population, subsequently reducing the indirect economic impacts of the mental health and addiction crisis.

7. The current approach to recidivism is flawed.

Through our conversations with law enforcement, we learned that the current approach to handling recidivism is resulting in the release of repeat offenders without adequate penalization or redirection.[10] This sentiment is echoed by 95 per cent of small business owners who support the development of an improved approach to handling repeat offenders, including changing bail rules (see Figure 12).

Multiple studies in recent years have reported varying rates of recidivism among different offender groups in Canada. A 2019 Correctional Services Canada study found that 23 per cent of federal offenders from a 2011-2012 cohort reoffended.[11] A 2019 Statistics Canada study focused on Nova Scotia's youth criminal incidents in 2012/2013, found that 50 per cent of youths aged 12 to 17 had subsequent police contact within two years.[12] Additionally, a 2015 study by Sécurité Publique du Québec showed that 55 per cent of provincially sentenced offenders released in 2007/2008 had further engagement with law enforcement following their release.

What do Small Business Owners Want to See?

When asked what policy measures should be implemented to address crime and community safety issues, the vast majority (95%) of small business owners in Western Canada say they support an improved approach for handling repeat offenders through measures such as bail reforms and connecting offenders to mental health services.

Other policy options that received significant support include: faster cleaning and upkeep of public spaces (83%); governments prioritizing action on poverty reduction; affordable housing, and mental health (82%); and investments in community safety infrastructure like streetlights, parks, and public restrooms (80% support) (see Figure 12).

Finally, 53% support establishing a taxpayer funded property damage relief program to compensate businesses for vandalism or other damage. This initiative has been implemented in several jurisdictions, but small business owners have emphasized proactive measures over reactive ones. The Government of BC recently announced the Securing Small Business Rebate Program which business owners can apply to for property damage cost relief (up to $2,000), but they can also access funding to proactively retrofit their business and mitigate future damage (up to $1,000).[13]

FIGURE 12

POLICY MEASURES SUPPORTED BY SMALL BUSINESS IN WESTERN CANADA TO ADDRESS COMMUNITY SAFETY ISSUES
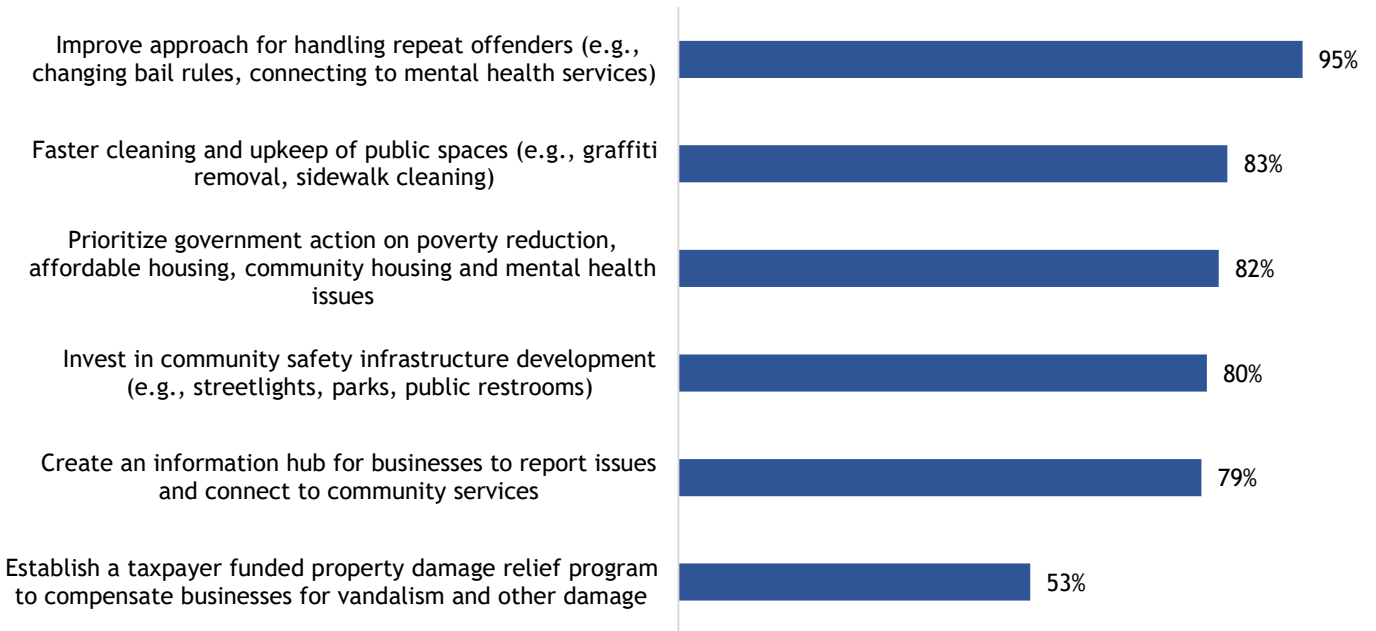
Source: CFIB. Your Voice Survey – May 2023. May 4-25, 2023. N=2,809.

Question: *Please indicate your level of support for the following potential policy measures to address community safety issues – NET support (Strongly and somewhat support).*

Conclusion & Recommendations

To address the pressing crime and safety challenges communities are facing across Western Canada, CFIB has developed a set of policy recommendations aimed at fostering collaboration, enhancing reporting and transparency, and addressing underlying issues all while implementing easily achievable measures in the short-term to improve community safety. These recommendations were developed for consideration by all levels of government and are based on data from small business owners across Western Canada and insights from engagements with various stakeholder organizations that operate on the frontlines of these issues. These recommendations can also be adapted to rural communities.

1. Address underlying issues contributing to crime and safety issues, including affordable housing, mental health and addictions.

2. Improve resources for small businesses including proactive funding for increased security, funding for crime related repairs, and guidance, prevention and response strategies for small business owners and their staff.

3. Strengthen collaboration between all levels of government, non-profits, community organizations, and small businesses to develop data-driven and evidence-based policies and programs aimed at addressing crime and safety.

4. Improve safety in commercial areas and public spaces, including improved outdoor lighting, regular cleaning and maintenance, and increased presence of police and security.
5. Develop an improved approach to recidivism, including reevaluating bail rules and connecting repeat offenders to mental health and addictions services.

It is crucial for stakeholders, including government authorities and law enforcement agencies, to address community safety concerns and collaborate with small business owners in implementing effective crime prevention strategies. By fostering a sense of security, small businesses can thrive, communities can flourish, and the overall well-being of society will be enhanced.

About CFIB

The Canadian Federation of Independent Business (CFIB) is Canada's largest association of small and medium-sized businesses with 97,000 members across every industry and region. CFIB's research capacity is second-to-none because the Federation is able to gather timely and concrete information from members about business issues that affect their day-to-day operation and bottom line. In this capacity, CFIB is an excellent source of up-to-date information for governments to consider when developing policies impacting Canada's small business community. CFIB is dedicated to increasing business owners' chances of success by driving policy change at all levels of government, providing expert advice and tools, and negotiating exclusive savings.

To learn more, visit cfib.ca.

Endnotes

[1] CFIB. Your Voice Survey – May 2023. May 4-25, 2023, n=2,809.

[2] StatsCan. 2009, Measuring Crime in Canada: Introducing the Crime Severity Index and Improvements to the Uniform Crime Reporting Survey. https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-004-x/2009001/part-partie1-eng.htm. Statistics Canada publishes annual data on the number and type of incidents that are brought to the authorities' notice (I.e., local police, RCMP). Traditionally, "crime rate" was the only data figure reported- which gives information on the number of police-reported incidents that have occurred for a given population (police-reported crime is typically presented as a rate per 100,000 people). This does not consider the severity of each crime; a robbery, for instance, would be weighed the same as a homicide. To address this gap, StatsCan began publishing the Crime Severity Index (CSI), which helps us monitor annual changes in the severity of crime as reported by the police. CSI considers the relative importance of a certain crime in relation to other crimes, in addition to the volume change of that crime.

[3] Statistics Canada. Table 35-10-0026-01 Crime severity index and weighted clearance rates, Canada, provinces, territories and Census Metropolitan Areas.

[4] Leger and the Association for Canadian Studies (2023). North American Tracker. https://legermarketing.wpenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Legers-North-American-Tracker-April-11th-2023.pdf.

[5] CFIB. The 8-Day Work Week – The Impact of Labour Shortages on the Number of Hours Worked by Canada's Small Business Owners, April 24, 2023.

[6] Statistics Canada, Canadian Centre for Justice and Community Safety Statistics, Uniform Crime Reporting Survey; StatsCan. February 20, 2023, Police-reported crime in rural and urban areas in the Canadian provinces, 2021. https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2023001/article/00002-eng.htm.

[7] Statistics Canada. February 20, 2023, Police-reported crime in rural and urban areas in the Canadian provinces, 2021. https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2023001/article/00002-eng.htm.

[8] These community organizations and programs are often comprised of professionals who have received trauma-informed-care training, working together with government and/or police services to deliver support to their communities and individuals who are in need of assistance. Their work ranges from patrolling streets to needle pick-ups, as well as delivering social assistance to those who are having difficulties with their mental health, homelessness, addictions, etc.

[9] Stabilization centres (or equivalent models) are low-security units for those individuals who present serious and immediate dangers to themselves and their communities, and for those who require treatments with long-term supports for acute and chronic mental health/addiction needs. Often times equipped with staff who have received trauma-informed-care training (such as social workers), these centres help alleviate congestions in facilities such as emergency rooms, hospitals, remand centres, etc. (BC First Nations Justice Council, September 2022. https://news.gov.bc.ca/files/Prolific_Offender_Report_BCFNJC_submission.pdf.

[10] The definition of recidivism differs from one place to another, and there are notable differences in how it's characterized and quantified. For instance, recidivism might be measured through various means such as re-contact with law enforcement, re-arrest, reincarceration, or reconviction. In Canada, the Department of Justice has specifically defined recidivism as "the act of committing another crime or coming into conflict with the criminal justice system again" (Recidivism in the Criminal Justice System, 2020, https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/jr/jf-pf/2020/docs/aug01.pdf).

[11] Correctional Services Canada (2019). A Comprehensive Study of Recidivism Rates among Canadian Federal Offenders. https://www.csc-scc.gc.ca/005/008/092/005008-r426-en.pdf.

[12] Statistics Canada, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics (2019). Youth re-contact with the Nova Scotia justice system, 2012/2013 to 2014/2015. https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/85-002-x/2019001/article/00003-eng.pdf?st=po0cfiq6.

[13] Government of BC. News release. New funding will help businesses with vandalism costs. Accessed 10/23/2023. https://news.gov.bc.ca/releases/2023JEDI0047-001224.