

Sociologist explores perceptions of street safety in urban and rural communities

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Crime is often perceived as an urban phenomenon whereas rural life is viewed as more bucolic, but Timothy Bryan is testing these ideas.

An assistant professor in the University of Toronto Mississauga Department of Sociology, Bryan analyzes how urban and [rural residents](#) perceive and imagine street [safety](#).

"Often, criminological research has assumed certain things about crime. Crime is often perceived as something that happens in [urban areas](#)," says Bryan, whose research revolves around the policing of hate crime and criminal justice reform in Canada.

"What this project wants to do is to disrupt some of those binaries that assume that [urban spaces](#) are always spaces of danger and that rural spaces are somehow these peaceful, quiet spaces."

He is currently focused on the Halifax area, where two recent events have largely shaped the view of public safety. The first is [the April 2020 mass shooting that left 22 people dead in rural Nova Scotia](#), sparking an inquiry into the RCMP's efforts to keep residents safe.

The other event was increased scrutiny of street checks that disproportionately targeted African Nova Scotian residents. A March 2019 study by Scot Wortley, a professor at U of T's Centre for Criminology & Sociolegal Studies, showed that Black residents [were six times more likely to be street checked in the Halifax area](#) compared to white residents.

Bryan traveled to Halifax last year to interview residents about their feelings on street safety and policing. He was supported by an IGNITE grant from the Black Research Network, a U of T institutional strategic initiative.

"On the back of these two events, what I found was that many residents were rethinking their relationship with [police](#)," Bryan says, adding many had previously reported a [positive relationship](#) with police or had no

negative relationships with police.

"But recent events actually started to have residents think differently about whether police were capable of keeping them safe, whether police wanted to keep them safe, or whether the presence of police was even a sign of safety."

The Wortley report ultimately made 53 recommendations focused on street checks, [data collection](#), and police-community relations. In October 2019, [street checks were permanently banned in Nova Scotia](#).

Another element of Bryan's project will use a combination of participant-produced drawings of street scenes and interviews to address questions about [street](#) safety and how police contribute to these perceptions.

He says the exercise not only helps him gain a deeper understanding of the perceptions of urban and rural spaces, but it also asks participants to explain what they would change to make their neighborhoods safer.

"I'm hoping that the images not only provide a method of getting at the data and people's responses," he says, "but become a kind of artifact in themselves as a kind of snapshot of how it is that people are coming to understand where they live, how they live and perhaps what they want changed about the areas within it."

He is currently completing about 40 interviews with participants in Halifax and developing those responses into an academic publication. He hopes to present preliminary findings at research conferences.

Provided by University of Toronto

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