



Abortion Rights
Coalition of Canada

Coalition pour le droit à
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Your Voice for Choice

Canada's only national political pro-choice advocacy group

POB 2663, Station Main, Vancouver, BC, V6B 3W3 • info@arcc-cdac.ca • www.arcc-cdac.ca

Take action against aborted fetus images in public!

By Joyce Arthur, Abortion Rights Coalition of Canada

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Every spring and summer, extremist anti-choice groups invade cities across Canada and force citizens to view shocking and graphic photos of alleged aborted fetuses.

In this post, we describe some actions you can take to oppose these tactics. But first we provide some background and explain how communities are harmed by such displays and activities. The harms justify the prohibition of these activities by cities and municipalities.

What's happening?

Two groups, the "Canadian Centre for Bio-Ethical Reform" (CCBR) and "Show the Truth" (STT), engage in tactics involving the distribution or display of graphic imagery of alleged aborted fetuses (we say "alleged" because their provenance is unknown and highly questionable). Both groups engage in:

- Hand-delivering graphic postcards or flyers to residential homes (often without envelopes).
- Displaying graphic signs (often very large ones) on busy public sidewalks and even outside high schools.

It's possible that local anti-choice groups might deliver or display CCBR or STT propaganda.

The CCBR also engages in these tactics:

- Hanging huge banners of aborted fetuses over highway overpasses.
- Driving through traffic or across Canada in big-box trucks with billboard-size photos on the side.
- Staging demos at family events like the Calgary Stampede as well as other venues like universities and colleges.
- Advertising on city transit buses such as in Peterborough. (The bus ads do not use gory images, but still contain offensive language and imply that women are killers.)

What are the harms of graphic imagery in public?

These activities change very few minds on abortion, but they do cause many citizens to become upset and irate, resulting in complaints to local governments and police. Families with young kids are often the most infuriated, with many stories of children traumatized over seeing the pictures.

Showing graphic photos of alleged aborted fetuses in public creates significant harms to communities:

- In every city where they appear, the graphics cause a community disturbance or nuisance. Police and city field numerous complaints from the public, children are distraught, and the issue often creates a controversy in the press.
- The privacy rights of parents to instruct and raise their children as they see fit, and in a safe manner, are being co-opted by the tactics of anti-abortion groups without permission or warning.
- The graphics create an unacceptable invasion of privacy into peoples' lives because it is difficult or impossible to avoid the pictures. This is especially the case when flyers/postcards are delivered to homes without permission from residents. Citizens have a common-law right to peaceful enjoyment of their homes.
- When the imagery is shown on city streets, hapless pedestrians and drivers may pass by without warning, or drivers may be caught in traffic and cannot escape for several minutes. Free speech rights do not extend to forcing oneself on a captive audience, which must have the equal freedom to avoid the message without undue inconvenience or restriction of movement.

What can you do about it?

If you or your family has been victimized by being forced to view graphic imagery of aborted fetuses, or any other anti-choice propaganda you find offensive:

1. Complain to your City Council and Mayor, to the police, and/or to the Bylaw department if you think the incident may be violating a bylaw (Calgary and Winnipeg residents: see footnote¹):
 - Explaining your own personal reaction is most effective. Describe what happened, how it made you or your family feel, and the harms that resulted.
 - Ask the city to prohibit these activities because of the community harms they cause. (See [Helpful legal info](#) below.)

¹ Calgary and Winnipeg (and perhaps other cities) have bylaws prohibiting the distribution of unwanted flyers to homes, provided you have a sign at your mailbox or premises that says "No flyers or junk mail", "No handbills", "No flyers", or similar notice. (Winnipeg's bylaw also lists "No trespassing", "No peddlers or agents", or similar notice.) Call 311 to register a complaint about unwanted flyers and do not destroy the flyers.

- Email a copy of your written complaints to ARCC. Even if the city or police don't respond or refuse to act, more complaints mean more pressure, and it builds a case for future regulation.
 - You can also Tweet the City. Here's a sample (add hashtags as appropriate):
Showing aborted fetus pics in public is harmful to our community – ban them! #cdnpoli
2. Send a complaint to Ad Standards. Complaints do not have to be for paid ads. Please see ARCC's guidelines for submitting complaints about anti-choice messaging in particular. Graphic imagery of aborted fetuses violates the *Canadian Code of Advertising Standards* in numerous ways:
 - It is inaccurate and misleading (Section 1a).
 - It is harmful to children and exploits their credulity (Section 12).
 - It is discriminatory and demeaning to women, and can bring public contempt onto them (Section 14a,c).
 - It undermines human dignity, and offends standards of public decency (Section 14d).
 3. Place a "No flyers or junk mail" notice at your mailbox. This may not stop anti-choice groups from delivering them because they do not respect peoples' privacy or rights. However, if your City passes a bylaw prohibiting the delivery of unwanted flyers, as Calgary and Winnipeg have done, that will give the City the power to take action against the anti-choice group. (If you live in Calgary or Winnipeg, see footnote on pg 2)
 4. Counter protest the anti-choice demo. It's probably best not to confront them (see Don'ts below). Instead, focus on passersby and engage in constructive actions. For example:
 - Stand at opposite ends of the demo with warning or protest signs so that unsuspecting pedestrians and motorists can avoid the scene or at least be prepared.
 - Use the opportunity to educate the public. Provide valid information to counter misinformation. Use the ARCC website to print out materials to give to passersby.
 - Think about doing fun positive actions. Use satire, hold signs that poke fun at the protesters, wear costumes, play music, etc. Give out cookies, condoms, or balloons. Ask a local sexual health centre for freebies.

Don'ts

Don't talk to the anti-choice demonstrators holding the signs or delivering flyers. They are fanatical extremists who can't be reasoned with, and most are religious fundamentalists.

Don't set up a counter protest too close to the anti-choice one, to avoid any chance of physical contact or violence.

Don't risk yourself. If an angry passerby tries to vandalize their signs or physically attack them, this allows them to press charges, get publicity, and play the martyr. Be prepared and know that:

- They often photograph and film people without their consent, probably hoping to get people to say something inadvisable that they can quote later, or collect evidence to use in legal action.

- They may attempt to provoke you into doing something rash. Don't take the bait.
- They will spin any minor incident to make opponents look bad.

If you do decide to confront them (as a feminist activist did in Toronto in July 2018), plan it in advance, control your temper, and never touch the CCBR volunteers or their signs, as they may charge you with assault.

Helpful legal info

When writing letters or talking to people about it, especially your City Council or Mayor, you may want to frame the issue as not about abortion or “pro-choice vs. pro-life” – it’s about how best to protect children and communities from the harms caused by these tactics.

It is also not about anti-choice groups’ “freedom of expression,” because free speech does not extend to forcing oneself on a captive audience. Further, courts are especially concerned about harms to children. Charter rights like freedom of expression can be limited to protect children much more so than for adults.

In addition, cities and municipalities have the authority to pass bylaws to keep the peace, maintain a safe community, prevent nuisance or indecency, protect private property, limit offensive signage in public, ensure traffic safety, and so on. Courts would likely find such objectives to be compelling enough to override the anti-choice groups’ freedom of speech, at least in particular places and circumstances. You may want to check your city’s bylaws to see if anything might apply.

Therefore, cities should not be afraid to pass bylaws to prohibit graphic imagery. Calgary has already passed two bylaws in direct response to anti-choice graphic images – one to prohibit the delivery of non-commercial flyers to homes, and one to prohibit the hanging of banners from highway overpasses. Hamilton has also passed a bylaw against highway overpass banners in response to the CCBR.

Cities should also cite the *Canadian Code of Advertising Standards* in their bylaws and policies, because that will enable them to reject or remove offensive anti-choice messaging, including inaccurate advertising and aborted fetus imagery. Many cities/towns across Canada already cite the Advertising Code in policies or bylaws related to public messaging.

Stay safe, and be proud that you’re standing up for human rights. Thank you!