



Take action against aborted fetus images in public!

Updated **March 12, 2024** (first written 2017)

Extremist anti-choice groups frequently invade cities across Canada and force citizens to view shocking and graphic photos of alleged aborted fetuses.

In this guide, 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 regulation of these activities by cities and municipalities.

What's happening?

Two groups, primarily the “[Canadian Centre for Bio-Ethical Reform](#)” (CCBR) and their numerous city chapters,¹ but also “[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 (usually without envelopes) as well as handing them out on the streets.
- Displaying graphic signs (often very large ones) on busy public sidewalks and outside high schools and at universities.

The CCBR in particular has also engaged in the following tactics:

- Driving through traffic or across Canada in big-box trucks with giant photos on the side.
- Staging demos at family events like the Calgary Stampede as well as other venues like universities and colleges.
- Hanging huge banners of aborted fetuses over highway overpasses.²

¹ CCBR uses local front groups to obscure its responsibility, often in the form of a city name against abortion – “London Against Abortion” “Toronto Against Abortion” etc. The CCBR also owns several websites: www.whyhumanrights.ca, www.helpforpregnancy.ca, and www.helpandhealing.ca.

² CCBR seems to have given up on this tactic after accidents occurred in Hamilton and Calgary caused by driver distraction. [Hamilton](#), Nov 4, 2013. [Calgary](#), Jun 17, 2013. [News story about Calgary banners](#), Jun 3, 2013.

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. Everywhere they appear, the graphics cause a community disturbance or nuisance. Police, cities, and universities field numerous complaints from the public and students.

- The images can be devastating for children. Families with young kids are often infuriated, with many stories of children traumatized as a result of having seen the pictures, including having nightmares. 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 images are also extremely distressing to cis women and gender-diverse people capable of pregnancy. For example, if someone has had a miscarriage or any negative pregnancy experience, the images can trigger traumatic memories and cause mental distress. The images can potentially induce guilt or shame in people who have had an abortion, while anyone who strongly values reproductive rights may experience the images like a gut punch, because they represent an infuriating challenge to their fundamental human rights.
- Seeing graphic images of aborted fetuses can be analogized to the exposure to graphic images and events experienced by some professions, which can result in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Examples include soldiers, police officers, first responders, funeral industry workers and medical examiners, journalists, and social media content moderators.
- The graphics also create an unacceptable invasion of privacy into peoples' lives because it is often difficult or impossible to avoid the pictures. 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 have 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** and/or to the Bylaw department.

- 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 regulate or prohibit these activities because of the community harms they cause. (See later in this guide for specific cities that already have applicable bylaws you could cite. Also see Helpful legal info.)
- 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 message or tag the city on social media. Here's a sample (add hashtags as appropriate):
Showing aborted fetus pics in public is harmful to our community – restrict them!
2. **Place a “No flyers” or “No 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 has a bylaw prohibiting the delivery of unwanted flyers (see next heading), that will give the city the power to take action against the anti-choice group.
 3. **Use the Trespass Remedy:** For residents in BC, AB, MB, SK, ON, PE, and NS only:
 - Place a "No Flyers" or “No Trespassing” notice by your mailbox.
 - Sign and send a Trespass Notice to the Canadian Centre for Bio-Ethical Reform (CCBR) – here's instructions: www.arcc-cdac.ca/trespass-remedy/.
 - If the CCBR comes onto your private property, call police and ask them to lay charges under your provincial Trespass Act.
 4. **Complain to Ad Standards:** This option is *only* for anti-choice messages that do not depict aborted fetuses.* Please see [ARCC's guidelines](#) for submitting complaints.

*Ad Standards may not accept complaints of graphic imagery of aborted fetuses because it has already been found **four times** to contravene the [Canadian Code of Advertising Standards](#) under Section 14(c) and (d). Previous decisions found that the imagery:

 - “...when combined with the words “unmasking choice”, denigrated women who have chosen to have an abortion.” (Section 14c)
 - “...displayed obvious indifference to conduct or attitudes that offend the standards of public decency prevailing among a significant segment of the population.” (Section 14d)
 5. **Counter protest anti-choice demonstrations** that display the images. It's probably best not to confront them (see [How to protest safely against graphic imagery](#) 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.

Local governments with flyer bylaws

Some municipalities already have bylaws regulating flyers, generally falling into two categories: specific bylaws for the graphic anti-abortion flyers, and broader bylaws that prohibit unwanted flyers in general.

“Viewer Discretion” graphic flyer bylaws

These bylaws require graphic flyers showing fetuses to be enclosed in an envelope or wrapper, with the sender’s info and a trigger warning on the outside.³ If you receive a flyer without a covering, keep the flyer as evidence and submit a complaint.

- **London** (passed [May 2022](#)) – contact [Bylaw Enforcement](#)
- **Woodstock** (passed [Feb 2023](#), see pg 7) – contact [Bylaw Enforcement](#)
- **Calgary** (passed [May 2023](#)) – contact [Bylaw Enforcement](#)
- **Ingersoll** (passed [June 2023](#)) – contact [Bylaw Enforcement](#)
- **Strathmore AB** (passed [July 2023](#)) – submit [Citizen Communication Form](#)
- **Okotoks AB** (passed [Aug 2023](#)) – [Report an issue](#) or call [Municipal Enforcement](#)
- **Airdrie AB** (passed [Sept 2023](#), see pg 18) – Contact [Municipal Enforcement](#)
- **St. Catharines** (passed [Sept 2023](#), see section 7.3) – contact [Bylaw Enforcement](#)

Further, [Norwich](#), [Oakville](#), [Toronto](#), and [Hamilton](#) are moving towards passing a flyer bylaw in 2024, and it’s on the agenda of other cities including Burlington, Mississauga, Vancouver, and others. *(This document is kept updated; check back later).*

Unwanted flyer bylaws (general)

These bylaws prohibit the distribution of unwanted flyers to homes that have a sign on the premises. In most municipalities, you can call 311 to register a complaint about unwanted flyers – even if your municipality does not have a bylaw. Keep the flyer as evidence.

- **Winnipeg** ([view bylaw](#)) – The sign should say: “No flyers or junk mail”, “No handbills”, “No flyers”, or similar notice. The bylaw also lists “No trespassing”, “No peddlers or agents”, or similar notice.
- **Ottawa** ([view bylaw](#)) – A “No junk mail” sticker is required, available for purchase at [Client Service Centre](#).
- **Halifax** ([view bylaw](#)) – A “NO FLYERS” notice is required with specific dimensions and font requirements; [see here](#). However, this is a voluntary bylaw with no penalties.
- **Mirabel QC** ([view bylaw in French](#)) – This bylaw bans all commercial flyer deliveries and residents must opt in to receive them. You can [submit a request](#) about a nuisance.

(Note: [Calgary](#) and [Woodstock](#) also have unwanted flyer bylaws but it’s better to use their newer graphic flyer bylaws.)

³ The Viewer Discretion Legislation Coalition in London came up with this idea. <https://vdlclondon.ca/>

What about graphic signage in public?

Cities that regulate graphic signage (or are considering it)

So far, only Calgary has passed a bylaw to regulate graphic signage in public but only outside schools. In October 2020, the city passed an amendment to its *Temporary Signs on Highways* bylaw (Summary / Download bylaw). It was enacted in response to graphic images of aborted fetuses being displayed outside high schools. The amendment limits signs with advocacy messaging to just 5" x 3.5" within 150 metres of any Calgary school during school hours.

Calgary's legal department believes the restriction is justifiable under the *Charter*, as it still allows display of the images but with reasonable restrictions to protect students' rights and safety.

Several other cities are currently looking at how to ban or regulate the graphic signage:

- **Oakville:** On June 19, 2023, Town Council directed staff to look again at placing restrictions on graphic public displays (as well as graphic flyers). The report is expected in early 2024.
- **Toronto:** On July 10, 2023, City Council passed a motion and directed municipal licensing staff to report in April 2024 on the feasibility of prohibiting advocacy signs in public that display graphic images (as well as regulating graphic flyers).
- **Hamilton:** In November 2023, City Council passed a motion (page 11) that directed staff to prepare a report for the Planning Committee by mid-2024 on the feasibility of regulating or prohibiting graphic imagery in public spaces (as well as regulating graphic flyers).
- **London:** In February 2024, the Community and Protective Services Committee directed staff to draft a bylaw to regulate graphic images in public. The report is expected by end of June.

How to protest safely against graphic imagery

We recommend you don't talk to the anti-choice demonstrators holding the signs or the volunteers delivering the flyers. Also, do not phone the anti-choice group to complain, or contact them through their website or social media. They are fanatical extremists and skilled propagandists who can't be reasoned with and will try to trick you. They may also respond aggressively, compounding your emotional upset.

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 someone gets angry and tries to vandalize their signs or physically attack them, this allows them to press charges, get publicity, and play the martyr. Be prepared and aware:

- They often photograph and film people without their consent, hoping to get people to say something inadvisable that they can quote later, or collect evidence to use in a legal action.
- They may attempt to provoke you into doing something rash. Don't take the bait.
- They will call police for any minor incident, even just for recording or following them, and will press charges whenever possible.

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 anti-choice volunteers or their signs, as they may charge you with assault.

Further resources on how to protest safely:

- Know Your Rights, Canadian Civil Liberties Association
- An Activist's Guide To Safer Protest, Ontario Federation of Labour
- Counterprotesting in Niagara 101 & Emotional Health and Safety Guide, Niagara Reproductive Justice

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. Gender equality rights must also be safeguarded, because the graphic images ads represent an attack on the rights of cis women and trans people who can get pregnant, and imply they are murderers if they have abortions.

Cities and municipalities have the authority to pass bylaws to keep the peace, maintain a safe and welcoming community or transit system, prevent nuisance or indecency, protect private property, limit certain signage in public, reduce noise, ensure traffic safety, and so on. Courts should 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 to the graphic signs or flyers.

Cities should not be afraid to pass bylaws to regulate or prohibit graphic imagery, because such bylaws can meet constitutional scrutiny to ensure Charter rights are balanced. Calgary has already passed four bylaws in *direct response* to anti-choice graphic images – one to prohibit large signage outside schools, two to prohibit the delivery of unwanted flyers and graphic flyers to homes, and one to prohibit the hanging of banners from highway overpasses. Eight municipalities in total have now passed “Viewer Discretion” bylaws for the graphic flyers. Hamilton has also passed a bylaw against highway overpass banners in response to the CCB.

Cities should also cite the Canadian Code of Advertising Standards in their bylaws and policies, because that should enable them to reject or remove offensive anti-choice messaging, including inaccurate advertising and aborted fetus imagery in public. Many cities/towns across Canada already cite the Advertising Code in policies or bylaws related to public messaging. (While the Code is not a legal authority, it is widely used and respected by advertisers and municipalities.)