



Take action against aborted fetus images in public!

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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.

The CCBR in particular also has 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, resulting in complaints to local governments and police. Families with young kids are often the most infuriated, with many stories of children traumatized by 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, people who have had an abortion or miscarriage may be triggered, 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 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 have been victimized by being forced to view graphic imagery of aborted fetuses, or any other anti-choice propaganda you find offensive, complain to your City Council and Mayor and/or to the Bylaw department if you think the incident may be violating a bylaw.

See the next heading for specific cities that already have applicable bylaws that you can use.

- 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 [Helpful legal info](#) below.)
- 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 – restrict them!

1. **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.
2. **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.
3. **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)
4. **Counter protest anti-choice demonstrations** that display the images. 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.

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.

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. 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](#)
- **St. Catharines** (passed [Sept 2023](#), see section 7.3) – contact [Bylaw Enforcement](#)

Further, [Norwich](#), [Oakville](#), and [Toronto](#) are moving towards passing a flyer bylaw soon, while it's now 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.)

Don'ts

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. 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.

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, 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. In fact, many city bylaws already prohibit speech in specific ways (such as noise ordinances). You may want to check your city’s bylaws to see if anything might apply to the graphic signs or flyers.³

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. 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 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.)

³ City Bylaws and Use of Canadian Code of Advertising Standards: <https://www.arcc-cdac.ca/media/2022/03/City-Search-Advertising-Code-Worksheet-all.pdf>