



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) but also "[Show the Truth](#)" (STT),¹ 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.

¹ Beware that CCBR often uses local front groups to obscure its responsibility, in the form of a city name against abortion – "London Against Abortion" "Toronto Against Abortion" etc.

- Hanging huge banners of aborted fetuses over highway overpasses.²
- Advertising on city transit buses such as in Peterborough.³ (The bus ads did not use gory images, but still contained offensive language and implied 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, 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.

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.

³ CCBR seems to have given up on this tactic after an Alberta court ruled that the City of Grande Prairie was justified in refusing a CCBR ad. The decision was upheld on appeal.

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 if you think the incident may be violating a bylaw (London, Calgary, Winnipeg, Ottawa, Halifax residents: see footnote⁴):
 - 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 – ban 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, such as [London](#), [Calgary](#), [Winnipeg](#), [Ottawa](#), and [Halifax](#), that will give the City the power to take action against the anti-choice group. (Ensure you have the required type of sign; see footnote 4.)
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 **London** has a [bylaw requiring](#) that graphic flyers showing fetuses be enclosed in an envelope or wrapper. If you receive a graphic flyer without a covering, complain to enforcement@london.ca. **Calgary, Winnipeg, Ottawa, and Halifax** have bylaws prohibiting the distribution of unwanted flyers to homes, provided you have a sign at your mailbox or premises. For Calgary and Winnipeg, the sign should say: “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. Ottawa's bylaw says a “No junk mail” sticker is required and is available for purchase at the [Client Service Centre](#). Halifax's bylaw requires a “NO FLYERS” notice with specific dimensions and font requirements; [see here](#). For these four cities, call 311 to register a complaint about unwanted flyers and keep the flyers as evidence.

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 no longer accepts complaints of graphic imagery of aborted fetuses because it has already been found to contravene two clauses of 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 [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.

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 who can't be reasoned with, and skilled propagandists. They may also respond aggressively and hurtfully, compounding any emotional upset you are feeling.

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, probably 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.

In addition, 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, some 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.

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 three bylaws in *direct response* to anti-choice graphic images – one to prohibit large signage outside schools, one to prohibit the delivery of unwanted 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. Most recently, London passed a bylaw requiring flyers showing fetuses to be enclosed in an envelope or wrapper with identifying information on the outside.⁵ It is the first bylaw in Canada that specifically limits these graphic flyers.

Finally, bylaws prohibiting delivery of unwanted flyers in general have been passed by Calgary, Winnipeg, Ottawa, and Halifax.

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.

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

⁵ A similar law was introduced in Ontario provincially in 2021, but did not move forward (it may be re-introduced). Attempts are also being made in Nova Scotia and British Columbia to introduce such laws.