



Community Safety and Well-being What We Heard

Community voices and stories



Territorial acknowledgement

Strathcona County is located on Treaty Six Territory and the homeland of the Métis Nation of Alberta, Regions Two and Four. Strathcona County honours the First Peoples of this land.

We recognize that we stand upon land that carries the footsteps of Cree, Métis and Blackfoot amongst many other Nations, who have been here for thousands of years. Therefore, Strathcona County has an inherent responsibility to foster healthier relationships with First Peoples and further the Calls to Action as outlined by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

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Introduction

Background and summary

Hope is essential. We know that might sound like a bad bumper sticker — a platitude for all the painful change and exhausting uncertainty we've walked through over the past couple years. But bear with us.

We're living in a reality not one of us could have predicted. For many, the pandemic led to fear, loneliness, lost jobs, tense relationships and financial stress. Our community is at increased risk of mental health challenges, substance use and violence, and there are more long-term effects to come. That's just the pandemic. Our world is also having discussions about race, equity and safety as we see overburdened systems that simply aren't meeting the needs of our families and neighbours.

On their own, each of these challenges is daunting. Together, they're overwhelming. These social concerns are interacting and building on one another, making our lives more complex than ever. Many of us are tired, sad, lonely and anxious, experiencing the impacts of a global pandemic and polarizing political moments. Plus, the people, places and organizations we usually lean on have been overwhelmed too.

And still, hope is essential. If we don't hope for a better future, how can we build one? In Strathcona County, we want to employ hope, turning it from a word into an action. We want to use this moment, with all its challenges and complexity, to imagine a kinder future — a community where every one of us feels safe, respected and heard. We want to build a County where our differences are seen and celebrated, and where we all know we belong.

This work is called the Community Safety and Well-being project — CSWB for short. CSWB is a way for communities to address root or systemic causes of crime, while also promoting the well-being of all residents. The Strathcona County CSWB project launched in early 2021 after Council motioned in late 2020 that Administration provide a report on options and possible next steps for developing a CSWB strategy for Strathcona County. Council's motion followed a recommendation from the COVID-19 Citizen and Community Support Task Force, who recognized the pandemic's immense impact on well-being in the community.

The CSWB project is both a conversation and a plan. We started by reaching out to residents and organizations to hear their challenges and hopes. Next, we'll collaboratively build a strategy outlining how we can best work together to proactively reduce crime, substance use, mental health challenges, violence, poverty, homelessness and more. This isn't a linear path. It's a journey of listening, evolving and listening some more. It's about recognizing our unique strengths and identities as Strathcona County residents, while also acknowledging our weaknesses and checking our blind spots. Overall, the goal is to lessen risk and harm, while promoting safety, well-being and resilience.

Simply put, this is a moment for us, as a community, to turn and face the horizon — and imagine what kind of world we'd like the sun to come up on.

Strathcona County is developing a Community Safety and Well-being strategy as the next step in our mission to collaboratively address the social needs of our community, building on the work of *Community Talk* (strathcona.ca/communitytalk) and the *Social Framework* (strathcona.ca/socialframework).

Why a “What We Heard” report?

In October 2021, the County’s CSWB project team launched a series of focused stakeholder engagements, meeting with local groups and organizations to explore their experiences of safety and well-being in the community.

The *What We Heard* report is our communication back to engagement participants, sharing the key findings from these conversations. It’s important that we report back to the people and organizations who shared their time, thoughts and experiences with us. This helps further inform understanding of safety and well-being and supports work in the County. The report is also available to all residents as a summary of the project to this point. This ensures residents can engage in future phases of the CSWB project from an informed perspective.

The report outlines five key categories that arose repeatedly in engagement conversations and describes how these challenges and opportunities are interconnected. We share quotes from these

engagement conversations to ensure our analysis of the sessions is grounded in the voices of community members and the real experiences they shared. Each category also includes data, statistics and research to provide further context and increase understanding of the findings.

The categories in this report summarize findings from the first phase of engagement — the conversations with stakeholder groups. Moving forward, we will host additional opportunities for residents to share their thoughts, including a phase focused on lived experiences of the categories identified in the first round of engagement.

Ultimately, our goal is to learn from and build on the engagement findings to develop a CSWB strategy, which will include priorities for safety and well-being in the County.



Project approach

Engagement phase

Our CSWB team conducted conversational engagement sessions, with the intention of using learnings from these meetings to inform project priorities.

We worked to create open, welcoming environments for groups of residents to share their perceptions, experiences and observations on safety, well-being and inclusion in Strathcona County, as well as their future vision and priorities around these topics (see Appendix A for a list of engagement questions).


Over five months, we met with over 300 individuals from 66 different groups and organizations. Our team engaged with healthcare workers, first responders, schools, businesses, faith communities, social services, seniors' groups, rural and urban community groups and networks of new Canadians and immigrants (see Appendix B for a complete list of participating organizations).

While some stakeholder groups accepted engagement invitations for online or in-person engagements lasting up to an hour and a half, many other groups were only available for half hour conversations (in-person or online). Shorter engagements were often added to a group's regularly scheduled meeting. With this in mind, we designed the facilitation process to be flexible, with questions that could be further explored or collapsed to focus on pressing or priority issues.

In engagement conversations with some established committees, our team used a causal layered analysis technique to identify underlying contributors to safety and well-being. Engagement facilitators led participants through a series of probing questions designed to deeply explore the layers of these topics, delving into the problem, systemic causes, perspectives, principles and assumptions that inform the system, and finally, the underlying constructs or beliefs behind the culture, emotion and stories.

The engagement facilitators took detailed notes in each engagement conversation, carefully capturing participants' words in written transcripts to be analyzed in the next part of the engagement process, the data analysis phase. We removed all participant identifying information during the analysis process.



300  **The team spoke with over 300 individuals from**
66  **66 different groups and organizations.**

Data analysis phase

The data analysis team members on the CSWB project then analyzed the notes from the engagement sessions, combing through hundreds of pages of transcribed conversations. We used a process called qualitative content analysis, a thorough and systematic method for making sense of qualitative data, such as detailed notes of conversations. This approach is often used to create an understanding of complex ideas and experiences, such as community safety and well-being.

We created codes for each individual thought shared by engagement participants. Then, we grouped codes related to one another in some way into categories. Codes that ended up in the same category often described multiple components of the same experience or idea, or similarities or differences related to an experience or idea. For our last step in the analysis process, we gathered as an analysis team to look for the underlying meaning that connected categories.¹

Our analysis method resulted in a rich picture of the major issues, trends, concerns and opportunities raised across engagement sessions. This analysis honours the voices and experiences shared in the conversations and thematically represents them.



Additional research phase

To further understand the issues, trends, challenges and opportunities shared in engagement sessions, our CSWB team searched for other relevant data, scanning the following sources:

- Strathcona County internal data sources, including SCOOP surveys, Strathcona County engagement data and Strathcona County administrative data
- Alberta Provincial Government open data
- Alberta Municipal Census data
- Statistics Canada data sources, including 2016 Federal Census of Population data and as available, 2021 Federal Census of Population data
- Published, peer-reviewed research articles containing relevant data
- We also worked with partners, including the local RCMP, to identify available data that provides more context for the engagement findings

Data points from the above sources have been included in the following sections to help contextualize the findings.

Engagement results

Reading the results

When we set out to learn about safety and well-being in Strathcona County, we intentionally met with people of diverse ages, genders, ethnicities, religions and worldviews. When we analyzed our conversations with these individuals, shared experiences and challenges arose from the data, fitting into five key categories.



We will present these categories one by one, delving into each category and highlighting real experiences shared by residents. However, while we explore each category individually, it's vital to understand these topics are interconnected and build upon one another to create systemic challenges, meaning they cannot be understood or addressed in isolation.²

In the following pages, we explore the five key categories raised across engagement sessions:

- **Community safety**
- **Complexity**
- **Mental health and addictions**
- **Basic needs**
- **Connection**

As we explore these five interconnected categories, we hope to follow a process that helps us deeply understand these topics and begin effectively addressing them. Just as we spoke with diverse groups in our engagement conversations, we will draw on diverse sources of expertise and knowledge to help us understand and act on the social issues we're noticing in our community.

This is called a co-creation approach, where we work with community members from many backgrounds to understand complex problems and seek creative solutions together. As the CSWB project moves forward, the co-creation approach will help “stimulate public innovation and enhance our collective capacity for societal problem-solving.”³

In spring 2023, we will host an event that immerses community members in the findings from engagement sessions, inviting residents to learn more about the findings and collectively reflect on the themes raised in this report. By continuing to work together, we hope to build a community that is resilient and well-equipped to meet future challenges.⁴

Community safety



When we hear the words “community safety,” we may think of crime rates, policing and municipal policies. And, while these issues and services do affect our sense of security, they don’t offer the full picture of what it *feels* like to be safe in Strathcona County.

In our engagement sessions, we set out to learn what kinds of attitudes, experiences and environments empower residents to work, worship, parent, play, live and love without fear. This is what we heard:

“Since I arrived in Canada, I lived in a number of different cities before moving to Sherwood Park. From all my experiences in Canada, this was the best place to settle because it felt safe. It’s more like where I came from back in my home country. I know my neighbours. I’ll shout across the fence — ‘Join us!’ and they’ll do the same for me.”

“As a parent, I think connectedness is one of the major aspects of safety. With my kids, I know they’re safe and doing well when they have relationships of trust and support from many different sources.”

“People in the rural context depend on each other without outside support. Out here, we rely on our neighbours even if they aren’t right next door.”

“Inclusion is so linked to safety. If you feel included, you feel safe.”

“Safety is not just being tolerated, but knowing that you are truly accepted.”

“I think of safety as if there’s someone to hold me or to hold a space for me — something or someone I can lean on.”

While these experiences differ, the sentiment is the same — that really, safety is about good relationships — a community where people can show up as their authentic selves without fear of harm, rejection, exclusion or discrimination. We want to belong and feel connected to the people and places we call home.



An overwhelming number of the County's residents report feeling safe here; 89 per cent of community members responding to the County's 2021 Public Satisfaction Survey said community safety is good or very good,⁵ and the County's crime rate sits notably lower than the provincial rate.⁶ And yet, our engagement conversations revealed not everyone in Strathcona County has equal access to connection, acceptance, belonging and feelings of inclusion and safety. Our data analysis team found that identity factors such as age, gender and race affect how safe or unsafe people feel in the County.

Like countless communities across Canada, there are systemic structures and ideologies that push some people to the margins. Community members identified increased student conflict, bullying and discrimination, including actions targeted at those in the 2SLGBTQ+ community, as well as a rise in sexual assaults amongst teens.

Engagement participants also highlighted a notable uptick in gender-based violence in the community. The local RCMP shared that urban Strathcona County faced a 57 per cent increase in reported sexual assaults, from 47 incidents in 2020 up to 74 in 2022, according to their data. During the same period, there was a 64 per cent increase in sexual assaults in rural Strathcona County, from 11 in 2020 to 18 last year.⁷ The risk of intimate partner violence is also increasing as a result of the pandemic, both in Canada and around the world. In spring 2020, Statistics Canada found 1 in 10 female respondents reported feeling concerned or very concerned about the risk of violence in the home.⁸

89% 

of community members responding to the County's 2021 Public Satisfaction Survey said community safety is good or very good.

"Youth are in a state of crisis. Sexual exploitation is the new bullying. It seems the number of files around online sexual exploitation and abuse have gone up significantly."

"We've noticed an increase in domestic violence. We continue to see these numbers climb when people reach out for financial assistance to leave a situation. With people at home, more isolation, pressures of finances and job loss — it all contributes to stress, tension and more domestic violence."

"For a lot of trans people in the County, there is a fear that people aren't going to be welcoming."

A lack of safety is not unique to sexual and gender minorities or those experiencing domestic violence. More than 25 per cent of members of visible minority groups in Canada report being sometimes or often harassed based on race, ethnicity or skin colour, compared to 10 per cent of those who are not a visible minority.⁹ For some in the County, these are not just statistics — they're experiences.

"People of colour are treated differently here; experiencing discrimination and feeling unsafe."

"My little sister was bullied on the bus. They told her she was a terrorist. Not much was done. My family made the choice that she should take off her hijab for her safety."

"And names! People say here, 'Sorry I don't know how to pronounce [your name]...' That's rude to me. You don't want to make an effort to learn my name? People say I'm sorry I don't know your name, that comes off as I'm not accepted. So, I changed my name to a Canadian name."

“One thing about my experience living in Canada is the language barrier. We all have an accent, but people begin to make you feel as though you are speaking garbage because of your accent. If I can take time to listen to you, there’s no reason why you shouldn’t take time to listen back. I take time to learn and strain my ears and learn what you are saying, and I expect it the other way — you take the time to learn and hear what I have to say. Over time you develop thick skin, and you expect this treatment.”

Alongside these challenges, residents in CSWB engagement sessions also raised concerns about polarization and how differing beliefs on vaccination and masking created division in families and communities. These sentiments align with a national survey conducted in March 2022 by the Canadian Hub for Applied and Social Research. It found that 40 per cent of survey respondents have had reduced contact with friends or family because of differing views, with arguments about the pandemic being the most frequent cause of disconnection, followed by arguments about politics.¹⁰

“Part of the issue comes in through how we watch people on social media interact. We don’t know how to communicate compassionately with each other.”

“There’s very little tolerance for differences of opinions. The conclusion is: ‘That’s what you think, and this is what I think,’ not even agreeing to disagree.”

***“Family and friendships
have been disrupted because
of beliefs about COVID.”***

Some participants shared that as we work to further understand safety in Strathcona County, we must address the harmful attitudes, actions and systemic structures that make some of our friends, family and neighbours feel unsafe. One engagement participant shared the future they imagine in our community:



***“My hope is that myself and my
family, as well as those we interact
with, can have what we need and
feel accepted for who we are — that
we can live without that fear.”***

Complexity



Life used to be so much simpler.

In the past, this refrain may have brought groans from teens and young adults. Today, this sentiment isn't reserved for the nostalgic among us — we all experienced a global pandemic and watched our day-to-day lives become complicated in ways we couldn't have imagined. Now, we're still facing the impacts of the pandemic and the changes to our jobs, families and social norms. For many, life is significantly more complex than it was just a few years ago.

In engagement sessions, we spoke with service providers who support County residents. Throughout our conversations, they repeatedly noted a marked increase in both the intensity and number of challenges residents are facing. When community members come through the door, their needs are complex. They're often not dealing with one or two isolated issues, but multiple, compounding challenges, which could include mental health concerns, family violence, relational disputes, struggles to meet basic needs and more.

“Some people were already close to crisis and now this has taken the legs out from under them. The pandemic added pressures and that created cracks. It's exposed things. It's amplified the needs of some who are struggling — even those with strong family and friend systems.”

“Complexity of needs is getting worse over time. People come in for support with mental health, diabetes — six things in one visit. It's overwhelming.”

“For some students who are struggling, when you look at what's occurred, it's not just one thing — there are so many different things that are contributing.”

Beyond these individual challenges, data from engagement sessions revealed a perception that the system of support for residents is also becoming more complex. This results in challenges for service providers as they work to align available services with residents' needs. Engagement participants shared that some systems are overwhelmed, and individual service providers, when operating within their mandates, are not always able to respond to all the needs expressed by participants. Both the complexity of needs and the system's capacity limits add pressure to family caregivers and professional service providers, leading to burnout.

“We've seen a real difference with session length because people are hurting so much. It's not just one thing — it's multiple things.”

“We're spending hours on the phone trying to navigate through this.”

“Stress is building for everyone — even those who are resilient.”

“I think everyone is having a harder time than they're letting on. Who is helping the helpers? It's taking a heavy toll.”

“A lot of parents are overwhelmed and experiencing increasing anxiety. They're having a hard time responding to their children's needs as a result.”

As engagement participants shared these challenges, they also pointed to Strathcona County's unique strengths that enable our community to face these difficult times with resilience. Over the past several years, local community organizations built trusting relationships through Strathcona County's *Social Framework* (strathcona.ca/socialframework), a network of local organizations committed to working together to best support the community.

With a collaborative culture that many communities strive for, organizations in the County are experienced in creating an effective, responsive safety net for residents. These relationships between local partners led to several collaborative projects, including the Community Drug Strategy and two award winning initiatives — the *Opioids Don't Discriminate* Exhibit and the *Violence, Trauma and Suicide Prevention Protocol*.

"I commend the County for Opioids Don't Discriminate. That was remarkable. It deeply addresses rooted needs that lead to substance abuse disorders. Part of safety is being willing to have those hard conversations and connecting people to resources and each other."

Many local service providers identified these relationships between organizations as high priority, sharing they would like to become even more knowledgeable about one another's work and further collaborate in innovative ways.

"The Social Framework Leadership Table is very, very important. We are all there and we learn what's going on in the County. The wraparound services are there. We're close!"

"Partnerships have been our savior this year."

"We have done some things really well in COVID. We've improved relationships and connections to partners and stakeholders. There is a real opportunity not to lose this."

"There seems to be a desire for more collaboration between service groups. Working together, we can achieve great things."



Mental health and addiction



Sweaty palms, racing heart, lingering sadness, apathy, frustration, trouble sleeping, another drink before bed — mental health struggles can look and feel like so many different things. And, while none of us is alone in experiencing these challenges, it can be difficult to identify our feelings, share them with others and get the support we need to make it through the tough days.



Data from engagement conversations revealed an increase in stress, fear, anxiety, depression, anger and thoughts of suicide among residents — at times tied to pandemic-related factors. Between 2020 and 2021, there was a 29 per cent increase in mental health-related occurrences in urban Strathcona County and a 10 per cent increase in occurrences in rural Strathcona County, according to data from the local RCMP.¹¹

These statistics align with the stories and perspectives offered by residents during engagement conversations:

“Low-grade anxiety has been a big part of the last two years — feeling anxious around the pandemic, job security, lack of social connections, a rise in the cost of living. There’s a sense of anxiety underlying our day-to-day lives.”

“Mental health challenges and addiction are hidden but they’re there in spades. It will begin to affect everything we’re doing.”

“One minute I think and feel one way and the next minute my view changes. I considered myself an easy-going, stable person before this. The uncertainty brings out anxiety and insecurity in so many of us.”

↑29%

increase in mental health-related occurrences in urban Strathcona County.

“People are in bad spots right now. They’re unemployed, can’t find work and depression kicks in. We see the photos on the wall and know they once were happy, healthy people.”

“Stress is a big one. There’s varying degrees of what’s causing it. With the cost of everything, people seem to be more edgy than they have been.”

“Neighbours are complaining about neighbours — being unkind to one another.”

While people of all ages expressed challenges related to their mental health, community members repeatedly shared particular concern for children, youth and young adults. These age groups experienced unprecedented loss through the pandemic. Cancelled activities, online school and missed milestones all contributed to more stress, anxiety and depression, with national data confirming youth and young adults experienced the most significant declines in mental health since the pandemic began, compared to other age groups.¹²

Engagement participants also noted that young people were already experiencing mental health struggles before COVID-19, and that the pandemic exacerbated those challenges, including for those in the 2SLGBTQ+ community.

“Anxiety that existed prior to COVID has now exploded. There are kids that are paralyzed because of how COVID has manifested. Frontline mental health needs are really significant concerns for a lot of our younger kids.”

“Kids are not ok. The amount of youth mental health concerns is astounding.”

“When families come through intake, our team is identifying children and youth at a higher urgency level than the past, with challenges including suicidal ideation and anxiety.”

“For the most part, every part of marginalization that we see within the general population is observed at an amplified rate for queer and trans folks, [including youth and young adults]. This includes things like substance abuse, sexual violence, alcoholism, smoking and domestic violence in the home.”

Mental health challenges are also linked to substance abuse, as individuals reporting poor mental health are up to four times more likely to report increased substance use and abuse since the pandemic began.¹³ Residents and service providers in engagement sessions observed an increase in substance use, addiction and drug-related harm in the community.

“Mental health and addiction are taking up most of our time. People with addictions are in the community — living in homes, not on the streets.”





“Today, mental health is a very different conversation that you can have in public. It’s not a bad thing to say, ‘I’m on meds’ or ‘I go to counselling.’”

“It’s okay to not be okay.”

For residents facing mental health and addiction challenges, it can feel difficult to seek help when they are not aware of or can’t access affordable and responsive support services. In addition, many of the people, organizations and services we would normally lean on are dealing with increased demands for support and may also be overwhelmed.

“More and more people are saying counselling is great — that everyone can benefit from it. We need continued availability and accessibility, and communication about how to access it.”

Provincial data indicated a 117 per cent increase in EMS responses to opioid related events in the County between 2018 and 2021, from 12 events in 2018 up to 26 in 2021. The rate of drug poisoning deaths in Strathcona County tripled from 4.1 in 2018 to 13.2 between January and October 2021.¹⁴

“The opioid crisis isn’t just in the city of Edmonton. It’s also a Strathcona County problem. We see a lot of overdose calls, and not just in houses, in public spaces too.”

As engagement participants opened up about mental health and addiction struggles, they also pointed out a message of hope, sharing that there is less stigma around talking about these challenges and seeking the help they need. More people in our community understand that we all have mental health, and that it can move on a continuum from less healthy to healthier. While we all have our own unique stories, we have many shared experiences too.

“There’s less ability to access ongoing counselling, especially if you don’t have benefits. Even the wait times to get mental health support through other resources are too long for a lot of people. People are in desperate need of support but there is nothing that is low cost and long-term.”

“I like the pay-what-you-can for counselling approach. Do people know about Family and Community Services’ counselling? Perhaps the awareness isn’t there. We need continued communication. If someone is brave and wants to take a step forward, how can we move them to the next step immediately?”

Basic needs



Struggling to meet basic needs is all-consuming. When we're focused on survival — getting food on the table, making rent, keeping ourselves and our families healthy — there's so little mental and emotional capacity left to focus on other areas of well-being.

Financial well-being has significant impacts on physical, mental and social health, as well as overall well-being, according to new information released in 2022 by the University of Alberta's Centre for Healthy Communities.¹⁵ Adults and families experiencing financial strain face a great risk for other difficulties, such as cardiovascular diseases, food insecurity and mental health challenges like anxiety, depression and low self-esteem. This widens socioeconomic and health inequalities.

In engagement sessions, Strathcona County residents identified the importance of having basic needs met when it comes to experiencing well-being and feeling safe in the community.

"People need to know they are safe and secure and have basic needs like sleep, roof and food met."

"Basic needs are the foundation of safety and well-being."

"When energy is taken up with income and housing, people are not able to achieve other things."

Basic needs include having food to eat, a place to live, clothing, bus fare or a vehicle, health care, funds for utilities, taxes and school costs, as well as participating in community life. To feel financially secure, people need to not only be able to cover these costs but have enough income for the unexpected, such as roof repairs, job loss or illness. The threat of being unable to buy food or pay rent is very real for some, such as seniors on fixed incomes and young adults who may struggle to find suitable employment. In the County, financial stability isn't the reality for all.

"People on fixed income are spending more money on rent and utilities, struggling to buy food. More people are struggling than in the past. The supply chain is driving prices up. More people need help in our County."

"I have an example that just happened: a senior who is living on their own. After paying rent they had only \$200 at the end of the month. That was to buy groceries, a bus pass and so on. Normally, it would take ten minutes to get an application complete, but I was on the phone with them for over 30 minutes because they were crying so hard. They kept saying 'I don't know what I'm going to do.'"

"Some local organizations are concerned with seniors and well-being. They seem to be overlooked. They are literally living on almost nothing at the end of the day. Medications cost so much. Rent is so high."

"At the end of summer, I drove food out to a rural family. It struck me as a situation with multiple barriers — having no vehicle, food insecurity, low income and no stable Wi-Fi to connect to services."



↑ 6.2%

Canadians' purchasing power is going down, while grocery and housing prices surge. In January 2022, food prices saw the largest yearly increase in cost since 2009, while housing costs went up by 6.2 per cent between January 2021 and 2022.¹⁶

With the pandemic's impact on the economy and the rising cost of living, some residents are facing greater financial pressure than in the past. From January 2021 to January 2022, the consumer price index saw a 5.1 per cent increase, while wages only increased 2.4 per cent in that same time.¹⁶

Canadians' purchasing power is going down, while grocery and housing prices surge. In January 2022, food prices saw the largest yearly increase in cost since 2009, while housing costs went up by 6.2 per cent between January 2021 and 2022.¹⁷

"People who never experienced any kind of vulnerability and hardship are now in that position."

"With anxiety around finances and economic situations — it's always been there but you hear it a lot more now."

"People aren't getting the jobs they were before. They are running out of every type of government support, and they've pivoted over and over, and the cards are going to be tumbling down."

As these financial pressures become more prevalent, we all need somewhere to turn for extra support. But it can be hard to know who offers a safe, listening ear when you're struggling to pay the bills or on the edge of losing your home. Not only is struggling to meet basic needs all-consuming, but there is also social stigma attached to not having enough. For some, these needs are new, and without knowing where to go for help, some families end up waiting to reach out until they are in acute need.

"People are afraid to share their story and their true experiences or challenges that they've faced."

"People think they need to be in dire straits to reach out for support. They need to take a risk to their reputation."

"Services aren't well connected enough for people to help them. There are so many barriers to getting out of poverty and getting employment."

In Strathcona County, residents also noticed tension around people experiencing housing insecurity, homelessness or living rough in the community. Engagement participants shared a range of responses:

“I’ve seen more poverty in the community. It’s really heart-wrenching.”

“There’s increased visibility of people with challenges.”

“We’re getting a number of people experiencing homelessness from outside our community. They like coming here because they feel safer, but it doesn’t make our residents feel safe.”

“There’s a group of people being left behind — a group living in poverty. We are an affluent community so it’s out of sight, out of mind. Most people here aren’t even aware that some in the community are experiencing homelessness.”



Connection



For many who call Strathcona County home, there's a sense that life is a little slower, quieter and kinder here than in a big city. Even though our population has reached 100,000, many residents shared that the community still has a small-town feel.

Really, this “feel” is about connection — being connected to neighbours and service providers and knowing who to call when times inevitably get tough. Engagement participants overwhelmingly mentioned connection more than any other concept in engagement sessions, and it's woven throughout the four previous categories.



As highlighted in our community safety category, engagement participants noted that safety and well-being cannot be understood and supported apart from connection and disconnection. Residents shared that feeling connected is inseparable from feeling safe, and research also shows people who have strong social relationships have a 50 per cent lower risk of death than those who are socially isolated.¹⁸ Those connections look like everything from organized faith groups to neighbourhood Facebook pages to community events like block parties.

“When you have the ability to connect, things feel more open and welcoming.”

“We moved to Sherwood Park because it is a smaller community. We want to be able to get to know our neighbours and have connections.”

“Moments of connection are so important for building resilience — knowing I can be around people who treat me how I should be treated. It's important to see other people like you. It's important for all youth, but extra important for queer and trans folks.”

“For those of us working with people with disabilities, community connection is the number one protective factor.”

“I've had the same neighbour for years. She's become less mobile, and my family will shovel her driveway or send over food on a Sunday. I am going to assume others do the same. It's that small town feel.”

The engagement data also revealed the importance of true connection and relationship with a service provider — whether that be a bus driver, County staff member, volunteer or other individual.

“For our clients, it isn’t just a ride, it might be the only conversation they have all week.”

“As service providers, it’s about being there and being compassionate; showing people dignity.”

This is especially important in the context of the pandemic, and the social isolation that has had lasting impacts for many. Residents shared that informal networks diminished during the pandemic. We struggled to visit extended family, stopped bumping into one another at the gym and missed the hobbies, clubs and sports we used to enjoy. The disconnection is still felt by many, and some engagement participants raised particular concern for children and youth, members of the 2SLGBTQ+ community and seniors.

“I’m a senior. I was going to seniors’ societies, and they’ve all closed down. How do we encourage people to get out and meet other people again? When we share our mutual concerns — good, bad and otherwise — it develops the community in a positive sense.”

“Isolation has caused a lot of stress and anxiety, especially for seniors.”

“Some seniors have no transportation and no technology to make virtual connections. They’re left out on their own.”

“There’s an additional layer of social isolation to being queer and trans. They might feel like a resident, but that they don’t belong. They don’t want to have to justify or defend themselves.”

“People who were vulnerable before COVID are even more vulnerable now. There are widening gaps — seniors are more vulnerable to elder abuse. They don’t want to make waves or inconvenience people. If they have needs, they don’t want to bother their families.”

“Some kids may struggle more emotionally and socially because they’ve possibly missed a normal part of development, but kids are resilient.”

Beyond the importance of connections to neighbours, community members and service providers, engagement data also revealed the importance of knowing about and feeling connected to local support — knowing where to turn, who to call and how they can help.

“For me, well-being is how easily I can access information about what’s available.”

“People who need services the most don’t always have knowledge and access — they don’t know what they don’t know.”

“When we feel that isolation, I’d like to know what supports we can access. Having that safety net in the back of our head of where to go and who to call, whether it’s informal or formal support.”

Residents also raised a number of ideas and aspirations for creating stronger connections across the community.

“I love the idea of more community events, and events that are accessible and not too dependent on income.”

“If we look to engage youth, giving them an opportunity to talk about their community and how they can play a role, you’d be amazed with what they come up with and what they can do. It can transform our community.”

“We need to keep the creative spirit of COVID alive and ask residents what’s possible within our community. There are people from all backgrounds with lots of skills. It benefits everyone to get involved.”

What's next?

We opened this report talking about the importance of hope. Before ending the report, we would like to share an important additional finding that emerged from the analysis of the stakeholder engagement data: a message of hope.

Participants shared that the observations raised in the engagement conversations are creating optimism for our community's future. As we emerge from two years of pandemic challenges, we have an opportunity to embrace the tough lessons and make real change. We're doing it already. We're acknowledging the injustices embedded in our social structures. We're talking about racism, sexism and stigma. We're growing in resiliency. We see that we can't always be in control, that job loss and family conflict can affect any of us. We're growing in compassion and empathy. We're putting down the roots of individual and community resilience.

Together, individuals and organizations are seizing this opportunity and taking action to respond collaboratively to the engagement findings, leveraging the important work community partners are already performing that is supporting safety and well-being. In spring 2023, we will host an interactive community event as a next step in the conversation about community safety and well-being. We will

build on the information shared in this report, both on the strengths in the message of hope, and on the opportunities and challenges identified in the other categories outlined in this report. The event will be an immersive experience that provides an opportunity to collectively reflect on and strategize about the stakeholder engagement findings in this report, and on stories, data and research about safety and well-being in Strathcona County.

We will use this momentum to create a community that is truly home to all of us. In this Strathcona County, people are optimistic about the future. We collectively experience beauty and work together creatively. There is diverse cultural and aesthetic richness. We are thriving and focused on what brings us joy and fulfillment.

Ultimately, this future Strathcona County is one where people do not live in fear. We trust and support each other, regardless of our background, circumstance, gender or race. We all have equal opportunity. This is the future we are all longing for.

"I hope that rather than focusing on the things that divide us, we can focus on the things that bind us — our similar hopes and dreams."



Appendices

Appendix A: List of engagement questions*

1. What are you noticing around safety and wellbeing in Strathcona County today?
2. How would you describe the sense of well-being in this community?
3. As you think about yourself personally, and the people that you serve, what enables people to feel included or have a sense of belonging in Strathcona County?
4. What impacts feelings of safety, or feeling safe, in this community?
5. Where do you see opportunities to increase safety, well-being and belonging in Strathcona County?
6. What would an ideal community look like...where residents and their families, and organizations and their employees feel safe and well?

*Please note, the questions listed above served as a starting point for all engagement conversations, but varied depending on the length of the session, participants involved, etc.

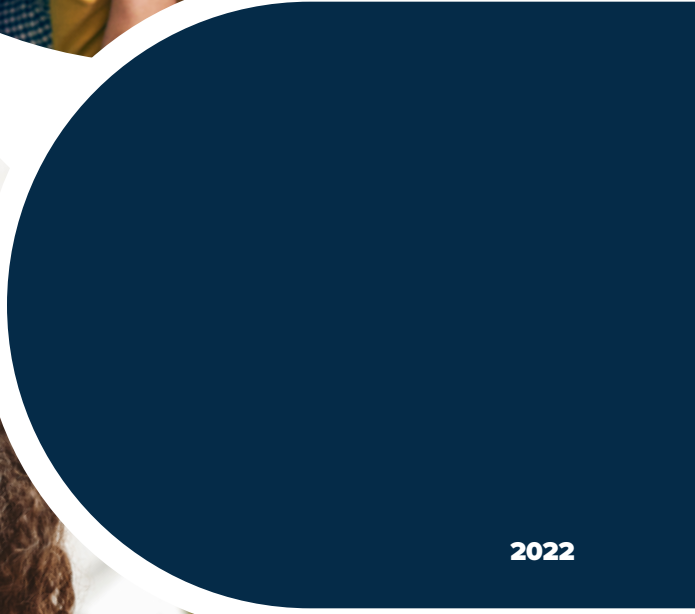
Appendix B: List of organizations engaged with

A Safe Place	Ministerial Association
Africans in Strathcona	Mobility Bus
Agricultural Service Board	Next Gen Steering Committee
altView Foundation	Northern Alberta Co-operative Housing Association
Ardrossan Recreation and Agricultural Society	Robin Hood Association
Baha'i Community	SAFFRON Centre
CASA Child, Adolescent, and Family Mental Health	Salvation Army
Chamber of Commerce	Sherwood Park Rotary Club
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints	Sherwood Park Strathcona County Primary Care Network
Community Adult Learning and Literacy Society	Strathcona County Community Drug Strategy Committee
Community Safety and Well-Being Steering Committee	Strathcona County Community Members
Council Advisory Committees: Accessibility Advisory Committee Community Living Advisory Committee Seniors Advisory Committee Youth Advisory Committee	Strathcona County Crime Watch Association
County Clothes-Line Foundation	Strathcona County Diversity Committee
Diversity and Inclusion Advisory Committee	Strathcona County Emergency Services
Drive Happiness	Strathcona County Family and Community Services
Elk Island Catholic Schools	Strathcona County Library
Elk Island Public Schools	Strathcona County RCMP and Enforcement Services
Family Resource Network Program Participants	Strathcona County Recreation Parks and Culture Safety Committee
Good Hope Community Hall	Strathcona County Transit
Government of Alberta Child and Family Services	Strathcona Food Bank
Government of Alberta Community and Social Services	Strathcona Youth Justice Committee
Heartland Housing Foundation	Victim Services
Josephburg Agricultural Society and Community Hall	Volunteer Strathcona
Masjid in the Park	WICS Winder Inclusive Community Services

Appendix C: References

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