

# Hamilton is getting a reputation for hate, and critics say the city hasn't done enough to fight it

Expert says city should be a 'cautionary tale' for other Canadian communities

Samantha Craggs · CBC News · Oct 08, 2019



*The issue of hate in Hamilton came to the forefront at a June 15 Pride celebration, when several people were injured in a violent clash between protesters and counter-protesters. (Youtube/Scotsmanstuart)*

***This story is part of **Exposing Hate**, an ongoing series examining the nature of hate in Canada: how it manifests, spreads and thrives and how Canadian institutions, law enforcement and individuals are dealing with it.***

It's a bright Saturday morning on the Hamilton city hall forecourt, and the crowd is split down the middle. Members of the yellow vest movement and far-right groups stand on one side. Rainbow flag wavers with signs displaying slogans like "Diversity is strength" are on the other.

"You all hang with Nazis," a man with the rainbow flag bearers shouts at a woman standing with the yellow vests. "When you hang out with Nazis, you become one."

"We want to see Canada free and great again the way it used to be," the woman hollers back. "Jesus is the Lord over Canada."

This could be any Saturday morning in any city in Canada before too long, says Tina Fetner, a McMaster University researcher who studies social movements.

"It's very important for Hamilton to be a cautionary tale for other cities," Fetner said. "I'm very certain that this is going to be knocking at the door of other cities across Canada. This is something that is a larger phenomenon than Hamilton. It's happening all over Western Europe and North America."



*A heated exchange breaks out at a rally outside Hamilton city hall that was attended by white nationalist Paul Fromm.*

She and others see Hamilton, where confrontations like this have been escalating for months, as an example of what not to do to when dealing with the tension and violence that have accompanied such demonstrations.

Members of the yellow vest movement — which started in France to oppose rising fuel prices but expanded to include far-right grievances over issues such as immigration and accommodation of minorities — gathered weekly in front of city hall for six months before city council voted in June to look at how to handle the demonstrations.

At their height, the protests have included as many as 40 people. They've drawn members of better-known far-right groups such as Soldiers of Odin, Wolves of Odin and Proud Boys to the Ontario city of 530,000 people 70 kilometres southwest of Toronto. Some weekends, only a half dozen regulars assemble. Self-described white nationalist Paul Fromm has been spotted at the protests.

Hamilton had Canada's highest per-capita rate of hate crimes for the last three out of five years, according to Statistics Canada. There were 17.1 hate incidents per 100,000 people, with those incidents ranging from graffiti to assault.

So far this year, there have been 76 hate crimes or incidents, which is four per cent less than this time last year, according to the city's hate crimes unit. Of those, 73 were classified as "incidents," meaning the crimes displayed some hate or bias, but police haven't determined if that was a motivating factor. In the other three, police have determined that hate was a motivating factor.

### **WATCH | Tensions escalate into violence at the Pride festival in Hamilton this June:**



*Counter-protesters in pink face masks who identified as anarchists get in a scuffle with some of the people who came to disrupt the June 15 Pride celebrations in Hamilton. (Scotsmanstuart/YouTube)*

It's hard to know why Hamilton's statistics are so high, but the answer might partially lie in the definition of hate crime itself.

Police departments across the country use varying definitions of "hate crime," and officers use that definition to determine which crimes to include in the statistics.

Hamilton Police Service's definition is comprehensive, calling a hate crime an offence that "was motivated solely, or in part, because of bias or prejudice." Other police services, such as the Quebec provincial police, have no definition at all.

For some Hamilton residents, hate toward minorities and marginalized groups is, in the words of LGBTQ resident and activist Graham Crawford, "a civic crisis."

## Tensions escalate at gay pride festival

Shouting matches between activists denouncing hate and advocating immigrant rights and supporters of the People's Party of Canada, which wants to reduce immigration to Canada, escalated on Sept. 29 when a [violent scuffle broke out](#) in a crowd of about 100 at a talk by the party's leader, Maxime Bernier.



*Cameron Kroetsch, who sat on the Pride Hamilton board of directors, says police took too long to respond to the violence at the June Pride celebration. (Richard Agecutay/CBC)*

But that confrontation paled in comparison to the one that occurred on June 15 at the Pride festival.

A group crashed the festival in Hamilton's sprawling Gage Park with homophobic slogans displayed on signs and broadcast through a loud speaker. A number of people in pink masks identifying themselves as anarchists manoeuvred a portable barrier to block them. Punching, shoving and hitting broke out between the two groups. Several people were injured.

Mayor Fred Eisenberger, who didn't attend the Pride celebration, tweeted his disappointment with that happened the next day. He released a formal statement more than a week later.

It came too late and read like he "wrote it six months ago and put it in a drawer," said Crawford, who last year received the city's "citizen of the year" honour.

A group of individuals identifying as anarchists lashed out by planting signs on Eisenberger's front lawn that read: "Mayor doesn't care about queer people."

The response from the city's police department and its chief, Eric Girt, inspired more distrust.



*A peaceful protest outside an event for Maxime Bernier turned violent Sunday evening as supporters of the People's Party of Canada began to arrive and enter the venue.*

Cameron Kroetsch, a member of the Pride Hamilton board of directors, said police took too long to intervene in the fracas, even though Pride volunteers had told police in advance where the group with signs would likely appear.

By the end of it, they arrested three counter-protesters and, 10 days after the incident, one anti-Pride protester. The first Pride-related arrest was a transgender anarchist police said was part of the Pride violence but who a parole board later ruled wasn't in the park that day.

"Police are focusing on the wrong people," Crawford said.

Girt further angered his critics when he said police would have "deployed differently" at Pride if the festival had invited police to patrol there rather than urging uniformed officers to stay on the perimeter.

"This is not the way to build trust or to repair the damage you've done," Kroetsch tweeted.

In a later radio interview, Girt was asked about the police relationship with the LGBTQ community, and he referenced working together to address the problem of people having sex in public washrooms. He

also said police are obligated to uphold the constitutional right to freedom of expression, and made seemingly unrelated references to the decriminalization of anal sex. He later apologized.

## **Distrust between minorities and law enforcement**

The city has been dogged by other headlines that point to the presence of hate groups. The public learned in the spring that Marc Lemire, who has ties to a white supremacist organization, had worked in the city's IT department since 2005. (Lemire is no longer with the city.)

There's a perceived tone deafness among authority figures that's enraged people, Fetner said.

"I think that if you don't nip it in the bud with a very serious and clear statement of values, and then back that up by bringing people out into a large counter-protest to make it very clear that hate is not welcome in your town, then you may risk being a place where people gather like Hamilton has become."



*Recent rallies in front of Hamilton city hall have brought clashes between yellow vest supporters and their opponents, which includes anti-fascists in black masks. (Samantha Craggs/CBC)*

Kiel Hughes, 29, is black and LGBTQ. He says he started feeling the strain within the city in earnest in December 2016, one month after the election of Donald Trump as president in the U.S. Hughes left his Hamilton home for work one morning, he said, and found "n--ger die" written in the snow on his car.

"I just dropped everything that was in my hands and took a moment to try and collect myself," he said. When he got to work, he showed a coworker a photo and "her face was like she saw a ghost. She just grabbed me and hugged me."

Hughes reported the incident to police and flagged authorities again when he received a threatening message online. But he says he wouldn't go to police now. The targets of hate, he said, are often the focus of police.

"When you follow the news, you hear of this trans woman arrested, this gay person arrested, but you're never hearing about the other side getting arrested," Hughes said. "So I don't want to go down there and be the black one that's been arrested."

Police, he said, will "always look at my reaction but never the action that got my reaction."

Hamilton police spokesperson Jackie Penman says she's sorry to hear Hughes wouldn't feel safe reporting a hate crime to police.



*Hate has been growing online, says Tina Fetner, a sociologist at McMaster University. But lately, "pockets of physical organizations cropping up, like people coming together around protest sites and occasional rallies." (Richard Agecoutay/CBC)*

"Hamilton Police take hate crime seriously, and we would always encourage any person to report such incidents to police in order to initiate an investigation," she said in an email.

"We've made a concerted effort to reach out to our diverse communities to ensure citizens know where and how to report hate crimes/incidents, particularly where physical violence is involved."

Still, CBC News spoke to more than a dozen visible minority and LGBTQ residents in Hamilton, and they echoed Hughes's sentiments.

"What we constantly get from the mayor, and from the chief, is defensiveness, instead of 'Wow, people are really angry at me. What's happening here? What do I need to change about my behaviour?' " said Lyla Miklos, former chair of the city's LGBTQ advisory committee.

"It's all this, 'It's your fault because you're mad at me' kind of thing, and it's very frustrating to sit and watch."



*Residents have started counter-protesting in front of city hall with pro-diversity, immigration and LGBTQ signs. (Samantha Craggs/CBC)*

Not everyone feels the tension. Debanjan Borthakur, a McMaster University graduate student who is also a person of colour, was at the Gandhi Peace Festival at city hall last Saturday. He said he hasn't noticed an escalation of hate in Hamilton.

"That's my experience," he said. "Others may have a different experience."

The mayor spoke at that event, acknowledging the criticism of him and the police and telling the crowd he is "firmly denouncing all those that spew hate, no matter who they are."

"I know in my heart that this is a welcoming and diverse city," he said.



## Balancing right to protest and protection for all

The city is looking at how to stop the Saturday protests. Earlier this year, council voted to improve its security cameras and collect data from demonstrations, and the city hired a new security investigator to analyze that information. Council will also review its trespassing bylaw this month.

Eisenberger said he's looking at getting a court injunction but that the city has to balance the constitutional right to freedom of expression with calls to shut down the protests.



*Kiel Hughes says he's been victim of a hate crime, but wouldn't report another one. He worries police would scrutinize his reaction to the crime, not the crime itself. (CBC)*

"We're doing everything we can, including looking at an injunction on the forecourt, that might prevent these groups from forming there," he said outside a police services board meeting this month. "I think that's a high hurdle, but we're exploring those opportunities."

Justin Long, a spokesperson for the Hamilton yellow vest group, told CBC News the group has switched to protesting at other spots around the city. That's to escape "attacks by Antifa," he said, using a term for the militant far-left protesters who often clash with far-right and white nationalist groups at demonstrations.

Groups like Soldiers of Odin and Proud Boys are there "for security," Long said.

The Soldiers of Odin have been described as "an anti-refugee vigilante group" by the Anti-Defamation League and have organized neighbourhood patrols in Quebec City and elsewhere claiming to protect locals from Muslim immigrants.

The Proud Boys say they're a fraternal organization that practises "Western chauvinism" but has appeared at far-right and white nationalist rallies in the U.S., including at the deadly August 2017 rally in Charlottesville, Va. Last year, accounts and pages affiliated with the group were banned by Instagram and Facebook for violating their policies on hate speech and organizations.



*'I know in my heart that (Hamilton) is a welcoming and diverse city,' says Mayor Fred Eisenberger. (Chris Young/Canadian Press)*

Long said the yellow vest group will keep protesting until Canada walks back its participation in a United Nations immigration pact. That pact outlines 23 points for treating migrants humanely and efficiently. But Long said it's evidence the government isn't listening to people.

"We're going to be protesting and raising awareness until we get some accountability from our government," he said.

## 'Dialogue is ongoing,' says mayor

Eisenberger has attended a weekly counter-protest against the yellow vest group, and some councillors have shown up several times. The mayor appointed two volunteers to advise him on LGBTQ issues, although one has since stepped down.

"We've had a number of meetings with the queer and trans community on an ongoing basis, so that dialogue continues," Eisenberger said.

"We've had meetings with the broader community, with the Muslim, the black, the Jewish, all the targets of hate in our community, and that dialogue is ongoing."

Eisenberger disputes that the city and police have been slow responding or let hate flourish.



*Justin Long, third from left, has been protesting with the yellow vests in Hamilton since December. He says his group isn't racist or homophobic, just concerned about a United Nations migration pact. (Laura Howells/CBC)*

"That's not who I am," he said. "That's not what I've done. And they can continue to share that narrative, but that's not what I believe."

The Ontario Office of the Independent Police Review Director is investigating a complaint regarding police conduct on the day of the Pride festival. Girt is also investigating three internal complaints. Eisenberger, who chairs the police services board, says officers are doing "a terrific job" dealing with the protests.

"These [issues] are not unique to Hamilton," he said. "They're happening, you know, not only here but across the country."

When asked about community mistrust, Girt said he wants to "move the dialogue forward." Police had one meeting with members of the LGBTQ community and plan to have more.

"We understand the hurt to this community," he told CBC News outside a police services board meeting. "It's a reason I apologized for the comments [on the radio]. I'm not looking to hurt the community anymore. We want to move in a positive direction."



*Hate in Hamilton, says Graham Crawford, is "a civic crisis." (Richard Agecutay/CBC)*

Statistics Canada numbers show an upward trend when it comes to reported hate crimes in Canada. There were 1,798 hate-motivated crimes last year, for example, compared to 1,295 in 2014.

## **'These are complex issues'**

While hate appears to be growing online, said Fetner, there are also "pockets of physical organizations cropping up, like people coming together around protest sites and occasional rallies."

"It's going to be really important to figure out a clear way to talk about freedom of speech rights, but at the same time still hold to your values."

Asked what his advice would be to other cities, Eisenberger told CBC News that "communication and dialogue is critical."

"The yellow vests claim that I'm not supporting them, and they have issues, and the anarchists are saying similar things," he said.

"These are complex issues, and they don't have any easy answers. And we're going to do everything we can to try and ensure that we continue to provide a safe community."

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# Exposing **HATE**

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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*With files by Chris Glover and Carly Thomas*