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STAR/IJB INVESTIGATION

The hidden hate on campus: We tracked incidents at colleges and universities and found a growing problem

The scope of the problem is far greater than previously known, according to the data gathered by the Star and the IJB.

By Robert Cribb Staff Reporter, Charles Buckley Investigative Journalism Bureau

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The scope of the problem of acts of hate on Canadian campuses is far greater than previously known, according to the data gathered by the Toronto Star/IJB investigation.
toronto star photo illustration

This story is part of Surviving Hate, a collaborative journalism project that seeks to fill the gaps in Canadian hate crime data. The project is co-ordinated by University of Toronto's Investigative Journalism Bureau and Humber College's StoryLab. Contributors of other Surviving Hate stories include Canada's National Observer, CBC, TVOntario and JSource.

The students found the threat posted steps from their bedroom doors.

It was left at the lounge room of the fourth floor of Queen's University's Chown Hall dormitory, home to a community of Indigenous students and their allies. Shortly before, Indigenous and Pride flags had been stolen from the common room's walls, and the students had posted messages pleading for their return.

Instead, the students received a typed note.

"We took your flags and you wailed and cried ... Now you'll pay the price," it read. "Lock your doors and hide your keys. We'll scalp you all, we'll make you bleed."

The October 2019 threat rattled students, some of whom had moved to university hoping to escape the bigotry and intolerance they faced in their hometowns. The stolen Pride flag had belonged to Siân Ruttan. It was from her first Pride she had attended, and she had written her name and phone number on it.

"A lot of people weren't feeling safe," said Ruttan, then a first-year student studying music and education. "I just remember this one person telling me that she thought she left all of this at home, and that broke my heart."



Siân Ruttan's Pride flag was among the flags stolen from a fourth-floor common room at Queen's University's Chown Hall dormitory in 2019.

Freelance

The incident triggered investigations by university administrators and local police, all while a string of hateful vandalism continued on campus.

Three years later, there have been no charges or disciplinary actions in the Chown Hall incident. Ruttan has since dropped out of Queen's, in part because of what she calls a lack of vigorous investigation and lingering frustration that the perpetrators may still be on campus.

“There wasn't enough justice,” she says. “When there's no punishment, that's just giving the people who did it more strength to do it again.”

On university and college campuses across the country, there have been more than 500 incidents of hate-motivated vandalism, harassment or violence since 2014, according to data obtained from more than two dozen schools by the Toronto Star and Investigative Journalism Bureau.

From torrents of racist online messages, to racist and incendiary graffiti on campus, to Indigenous cultural symbols vandalized, hate incidents on campus are largely happening with impunity.

Campus hate has ‘become normalized’



Dr. Barbara Perry is the director of Ontario Tech University's Centre on Hate, Bias and Extremism.

Jason Liebrechts/Torstar

Perpetrators almost never face punishment. At the large universities and colleges, where officials were told of more than 100 hate-motivated incidents, only six cases resulted in discipline against perpetrators, the investigation found.

The scope of the problem is far greater than previously known, according to the data gathered by the IJB/Star investigation. “Hate has become normalized,” says Barbara Perry, director of Ontario Tech University’s (OTU’s) Centre on Hate, Bias and Extremism, who reviewed data collected by the Star/IJB investigation. “Something real is happening.”

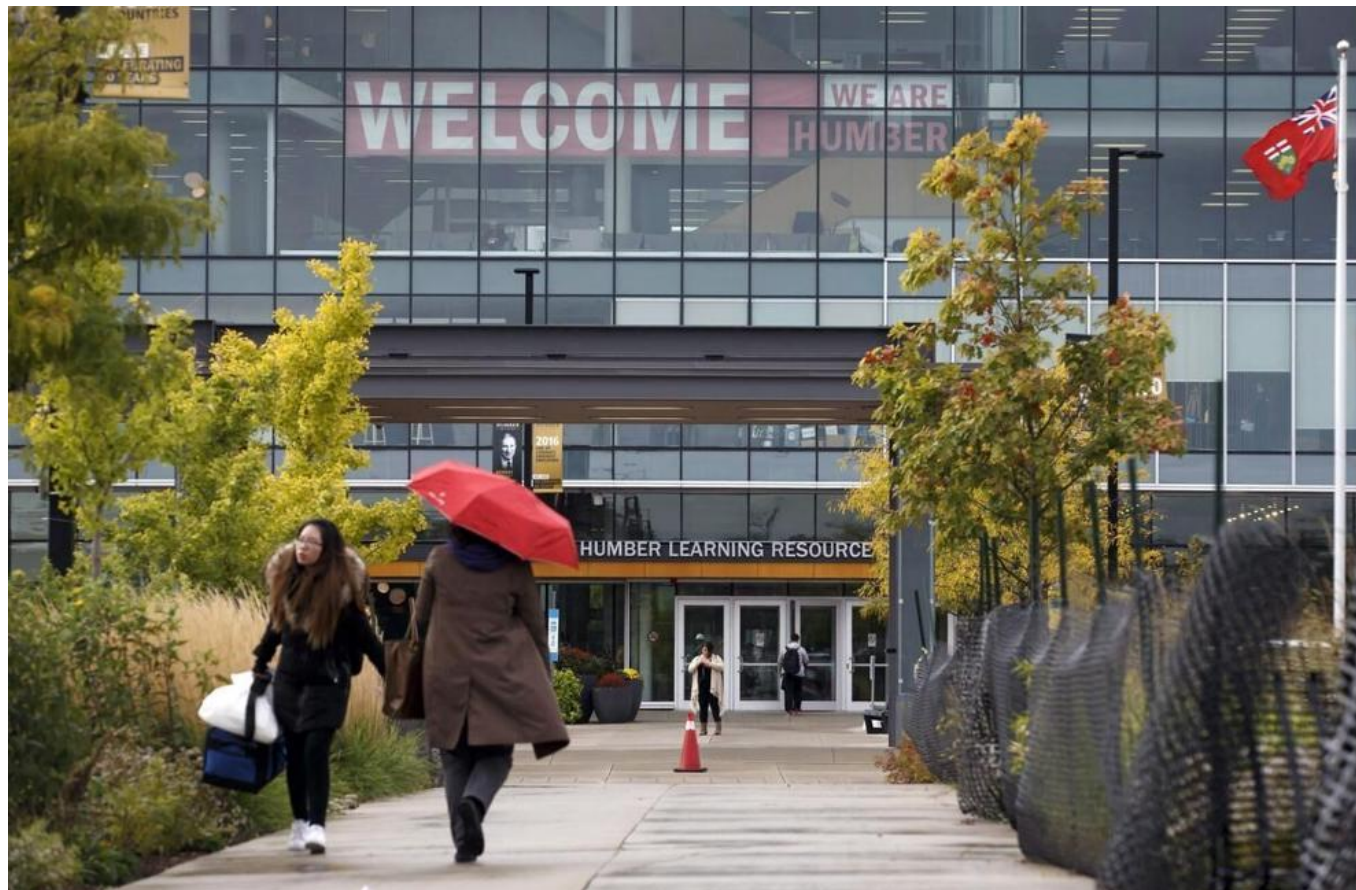
Until now, the only window offering a view into campus hate incidents has been police reports collected by Statistics Canada. Since 2014, those total 236 from schools across the country. That’s far below the number of incidents logged inside the 26 institutions that provided data to the IJB and Star, which cover varying periods of time between 2010 and 2022.

Those 539 incidents, however, don’t capture the full depth of hate on Canadian campuses. At least a dozen post-secondary schools do not appear to track campus hate incidents. And the lack of centralized, standardized data means universities and colleges are grappling with the problem in silos.

Too often, experts say, the schools are putting their own reputations ahead of being honest about the metastasizing cancer on the campuses.

“There’s sort-of an unwillingness to peel back the curtains,” Perry says. “A lot of universities, A: they’re not transparent about their data and B: don’t quite know what to do with hate crime.”

Not all campus hate incidents meet criminal threshold



Toronto's Humber College leaves the decision to victims on whether to report a hate incident to police except if there is a broader public safety risk.

Cole Burston

The gap between those publicly reported numbers and the much higher internal school figures is attributable to a number of factors.

While schools often report suspected hate incidents to police at their discretion, some such as Toronto's Humber College leave the decision to victims and intervene only when a broader public safety risk is apparent. There were 26 incidents recorded by Humber from 2015 to 2020, but only one investigation by law enforcement in that time, according to Toronto police data.

Even when school officials do report incidents to law enforcement, it falls to the discretion of police whether to investigate. In some cases, incidents deemed by schools to be hate-based attacks against students may not meet the threshold of a criminal charge.

At the University of Guelph, 62 recorded hate incidents between 2013 and 2021 led to two charges laid, according to the school.

“Not every investigation has a criminal code charge/judicial discipline charge,” reads a statement from a Guelph spokesperson.

When it comes to meting out internal punishments for hateful acts, universities and colleges say they are often unequipped. In many cases, they can’t identify perpetrators who successfully hide their faces from security cameras. In other cases, incidents fall outside the scope of student codes of conduct because the perpetrators are not students or faculty.

“Institutions are not law enforcement,” reads a written response from University of Manitoba, which did not provide data on hate-inspired incidents or punishments. “When an individual behaving inappropriately falls outside the jurisdiction of an institution, there is little that can be done in the way of disciplinary action or sanction.”

Hate incidents rising with students’ return

While incidents of post-secondary hate naturally dwindled as campuses emptied for COVID-19 lockdowns, incidents are returning along with students.

At Algonquin College in Pembroke, Ont., a mural celebrating diversity was defaced with graffiti in August, echoing similar vandalism to a mural about Indigenous cultures at the school’s Ottawa campus in 2020.

The vandalism “caused anger and deep disappointment across the college community, and indicated more work needs to be done,” a school spokesperson said. No arrests or charges have come from the 2022 case.

In September, anti-Semitic graffiti was discovered at a McMaster University health sciences building, local police say. The school did not respond to a request for comment on the specific case, but in a statement, Hamilton police wrote that the service’s hate crime unit “continues to investigate the circumstances surrounding the mischief.”

Canadian schools have 'duty to create' safe environment



Former Ontario Human Rights Commission chief Ena Chadha wrote an open letter to post-secondary schools warning of the dangers of allowing hateful conduct to go unaccounted for.

Rick Madonik

Campus hate crime is difficult to track. Not only is incident data siloed in dozens of institutions, often, it isn't collected at all.

In the wake of a cluster of hateful incidents reported on campuses in 2020, former Ontario Human Rights Commission chief Ena Chadha wrote an open letter to post-secondary schools warning of the dangers of allowing hateful conduct to go unaccounted for.

"Academic service providers are subject to a duty to investigate and ensure that prompt steps are taken to prevent any further harm or discrimination to their community members," the letter reads.

"Your institutions have the duty to create safe and inclusive places to study," she wrote in an update the following year.

Now chair of Ontario's Human Rights Legal Support Centre, Chadha says that while post-secondary institutions are trying to address rising hatred, there remains a lack of data collection and public accountability.

“Unless you're actually studying what are the manifestations of hate-mongering, you're not going to know who the victims are,” she says. “It's all going to seem like anecdotal, isolated aberrations, but they're not.”

How Canadian colleges and universities track hate on their campuses

Canada does not require centralized data collection or transparency about the scope of hate-related incidents on post-secondary campuses. So for this investigation, we did it ourselves.

The IJB asked 80 Canadian colleges and universities across 13 provinces and territories for data on incidents of hate-related vandalism, harassment and violence between 2010 and 2021.

In all, 26 institutions either provided meaningful data directly, or had already published it on their websites. Another 15, including L'Université du Québec à Montréal, Dalhousie University in Halifax and Yukon University in Whitehorse, were not able to provide hate-specific numbers.

Several institutions provided incomplete data.

Institutions including Queen's, Université de Sherbrooke and York University in Toronto declined to provide data on the number of investigations launched or punishments ordered for hate incidents.

“Disclosing statistics [on the outcome of cases] could potentially be used to identify specific cases, including those being actively adjudicated,” reads a statement from York, which logged a total of 92 reported hate incidents between 2014/15 and 2020/21.

At Queen's, where case outcomes are not tracked, a spokesperson said many of the incidents involve graffiti but no identified suspect, and “resolution involves removing the offending material and providing supports to affected students as appropriate.”



The University of Waterloo, with just over 42,000 students, counted only two incidents of hate on campus between 2010 and 2022.

Mathew McCarthy

The number of reported hate incidents varied widely between schools, even among those of similar size. The University of Guelph, with roughly 31,000 enrolled students last year, recorded 76 incidents between 2010 and mid-2022. The University of Waterloo, with just over 42,000 students, counted only two incidents in that time.

In a statement, a University of Guelph spokesperson wrote that the difference “could be attributed to many factors,” including potentially varying rates of reporting, options for filing complaints and categorization of incident data.

Stephanie Ye-Mowe, president of the Waterloo Undergraduate Student Association, said the gap could be attributed to a lack of standardized reporting across Ontario universities, as well as a difference in culture. “I’m wondering if ... there are some things that just aren’t being caught or acknowledged, because it isn’t being interpreted as a hate crime.”

In a statement, a University of Waterloo spokesperson wrote that the school’s incident-reporting system is “purposefully decentralized,” offering students a variety of avenues to seek accountability and “find support in a way that feels the most appropriate to each individual who has experienced hate.”

The United States government gathers incident data directly from the colleges and universities, which are legally required to submit hate crime statistics to a public national database tracking nearly 6,000 institutions and tallying more than 7,000 individual hate incidents between 2014 and 2020.

Abigail Boyer is associate executive director of the Clery Center, a non-profit that advises U.S. schools on their crime-reporting obligations. Boyer says even with the risk of creating unflattering data, it's crucial for school communities to understand what they're facing.

“If we are not addressing harms within our community, we're also going to have a retention problem,” she says. “You're not going to retain students if they are harmed.”

'Circling the wagons'



Chown Hall dormitory at Queen's University, where in October 2019 a threatening note was posted targeting Indigenous and LGBTQ+ students.

Freelance

The flag theft and death threat at Queen's were “not handled well at all,” says Perry, who was hired by the university in 2021 alongside fellow hate expert Irfan Chaudhry to examine the school's response to a pattern of 21 reported hate-driven incidents between 2017 and spring 2021.

In the Chown Hall case, community members had a confident theory on the potential culprit — something that was never thoroughly investigated, says Perry, who, with Chaudhry, conducted 26 interviews with Queen’s staff and student organizations as part of the review of the school’s handling of the case.

“Their sense of who was responsible was not taken into account,” she said in an interview.

Queen’s University did not address this investigation’s inquiry about theories on who was responsible. In a statement, a university spokesperson wrote that police and the university “investigated fully,” but that “regretfully, no perpetrator or perpetrators were ever identified.”

Perry’s report, published this fall after more than a year of internal review by the school, details a constellation of barriers to stamping out hate, from incidents dismissed as “minor” or “trivial” at schools across the country, to poor communication between Queen’s security and local law enforcement, to reporting systems that don’t allow graffiti to be counted as hate.

Though their audit focused on the school’s security department, Perry and Chaudhry wrote that the problem runs deeper at Queen’s, citing eight previous Queen’s reports or plans on racism and equity issues since 2004 that failed to address “continuing barriers.”

“It is clear from our discussions with students and staff across campus that it continues to be an unwelcoming and indeed threatening space for some communities,” the report concludes. “It was widely recognized that the context for the recent spate of hate incidents and hate crimes is embedded in the culture of the university.”

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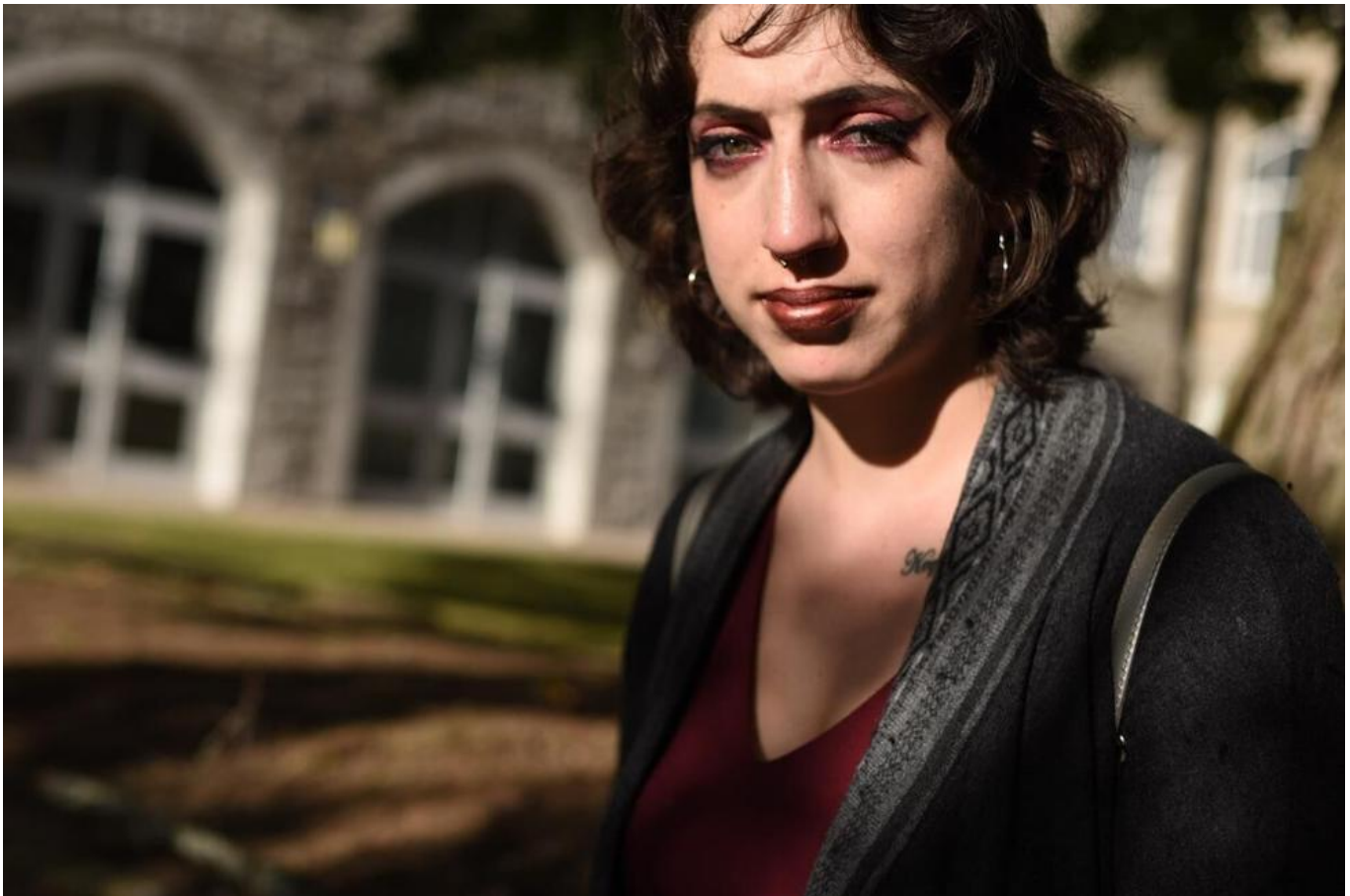
Part of the problem, says Perry, is administrators’ mindset.

“Let’s circle the wagons here and let’s ensure that we’re not too public about this, let’s not make too much noise, let’s deal with this internally,” Perry said in an interview.

“There’s a reputation to keep in mind.”

In a written statement, Queen’s University said the review was part of an effort to improve how it supports students and it intends to implement the review’s recommendations. “Queen’s is committed to making the university a safe and welcoming environment for everyone.”

No charges, and a lingering sense of injustice



Siân Ruttan dropped out of Queen's University in part because of what she calls a lack of vigorous investigation into a hate incident targeting Indigenous and LGBTQ+ students living in residence.

Freelance

In the aftermath of the Chown Hall incident, Queen’s principal and vice-provost Patrick Deane announced the police investigation into the death threat at Chown Hall had been closed, with no charges laid.

“This news I know will be received across campus with disappointment and sadness, perhaps also with anger and fear,” the January 2020 statement reads.

More disappointment and fear continued.

In June 2020, pride flags at the school's Indigenous student centre were slashed and the following month, the centre's teepee was vandalized. The following June, the centre was targeted in a Zoom hack of an Indigenous gathering honouring the 215 children found buried at the former Kamloops Indian Residential School.

Then, last October, more graffiti appeared including a swastika and a message calling for Jewish people to be killed. A culprit has not been identified, a school spokesperson confirmed.

Ruttan has turned the page on her time at Queen's, now training to become a personal support worker with plans to pursue nursing.

But there remains a lingering sense of injustice.

"The person that did that, they're probably still a student at Queen's. I'm not," she says. "I feel like I've been punished so much and there's nothing done about this."

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The Investigative Journalism Bureau is a non-profit investigative centre based at the University of Toronto's Dalla Lana School of Public Health. The investigation was conducted in further collaboration with Humber College's StoryLab, as part of the Surviving Hate project.

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Carleton University: Kajal Dhaneshwari, Malcolm Fraser, Lahari Nanda, Alima Sidibé, Rebecca Weston

Toronto Metropolitan University: Amany Abubaker, Ariel Brookes, Nishat Chowdhury, Maggie Feldbloom, Fiona O'Flynn, Viktoriya Kozoriz, Alina Snisarenko,

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University of King's College: Haylea Dilnot-Reid, Sarah Krymalowski, Joe Thompson



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