

OTTAWA PEOPLE'S COMMISSION

PART I

**WHAT WE
HEARD**



30 JANUARY 2023

The Ottawa People's Commission is a grassroots effort to promote healing and justice after the convoy occupation of Ottawa-Gatineau in 2022. OPC is a program of Centretown Community Health Centre.



CENTRETOWN
Community Health Centre
CENTRE DE SANTÉ
Communautaire du Centre-ville

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This report reflects the opinions of OPC's four independent Commissioners and is not necessarily reflective of the opinions of Centretown Community Health Centre.



Overview

"There was so much that went wrong and was overlooked during this occupation. There was so much hate and violence on display. It was upsetting for our elders to see such disrespect for our ceremonies and for the protocols that are to be followed in our territory. There was so much misinformation. Communication was poor and people were so fearful. This should not have happened. We must learn from this experience. We must listen to the people who went through it. We must make changes so that we do not go through something like this again."

— Sheldon Kiishkens Ross McGregor, Kitigan Zibi
Anishinabeg First Nation¹

OCCUPATION AND HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSE

Throughout most of February 2022, the thousands of people who live and work in downtown Ottawa endured several weeks of widespread human rights abuse, amidst a climate of threats, fear, sexual harassment and intimidation marked by racism, misogyny, antisemitism, Islamophobia, homophobia, transphobia, and other expressions of hate and intolerance. The impact was, inevitably, greatest on the most vulnerable individuals and communities.

All of this was the consequence of a self-described Freedom Convoy of protesters, many of whom arrived and remained in big rig trucks, pickups and other vehicles and took over and blocked the streets and neighbourhoods of downtown Ottawa for much of the month. It was by any measure unprecedented; nothing remotely similar had ever before occurred in the city. The United We Roll pro-pipeline protest in 2019, which had similarly brought trucks to Parliament Hill, stayed in the capital for two days and had nowhere near the same disruptive impact.

On Saturday, January 29, 2022, hundreds of Freedom Convoy vehicles and thousands of protesters converged on downtown Ottawa. Convoy participants had come from communities across the country, initially motivated by opposition to the

¹ Sheldon McGregor is an apprentice in the Sacred Fire Ceremony and works with Algonquin Nation elders in transmitting knowledge through traditional processes. He offered a welcoming prayer at the first public hearing of the Ottawa People's Commission on the Convoy Occupation on September 21, 2022.

COVID-19 vaccine mandate for commercial truckers crossing the Canada/US border. Trucks had been making their way to Ottawa for about ten days before they arrived, gathering more participants and supporters as they advanced across the country. While convoy organizers claimed there was diversity among the participants and supporters, and that was true to a limited extent, it is clear that the overwhelming majority of people involved in the protests were white males.

As the national capital, Ottawa is accustomed to frequent protests and major outdoor public events such as Canada Day celebrations, including many that are large and disruptive. Residents and local businesses accept and even welcome that. As the Freedom Convoy assembled in central Ottawa, focused on Parliament Hill and the surrounding area, Ottawa police indicated that like other large-scale protests they were anticipating this one to continue through that weekend and then to largely dissipate. That proved to be far from the case, an outcome that was likely foreseeable given the information that had been circulating on various social media channels in advance of the convoy's arrival. Instead, an entrenched occupation had begun.

A large swath of the city's downtown core, extending to other parts of the city as well, would remain overrun for more than three weeks, under circumstances that many residents described as a siege or occupation. As the convoy evolved, its demands grew beyond opposition to cross-border vaccine mandates for truckers to include a wide range of issues related to COVID public health protocols and other grievances. While the protest was directed at the federal government, many of the demands related to matters more relevant to provincial governments. There was even a memorandum of understanding released by some convoy leaders calling on the federal government to be replaced by a combination of convoy organizers, opposition parties, the Senate and the Governor General.

Ottawa is located in the unceded and unsurrendered lands of the Algonquin Anishinabeg people. However, convoy organizers did not reach out to or consult with Algonquin elders about their plans to occupy the city's downtown core. Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants in the convoy carried out various ceremonies, in Confederation Park and elsewhere. But they did not first consult with or respect the ways of local elders. Members of local First Nations and other Indigenous peoples who live in the Ottawa area were particularly upset to see slogans and symbols that are sacred or important to Indigenous peoples, including posters and flags carrying the message of "Every Child Matters", visibly displayed on trucks and elsewhere in the convoy.

It did not take long before many streets were completely blocked by trucks and were entirely un navigable. Driveways and entrances to residential parking garages were inaccessible. Essential public transport throughout the area, including the vitally important Para Transpo used by the elderly, and people with disabilities and other mobility limitations, was either cancelled or substantially reduced.

Residents expected and assumed that they would be protected and assisted by police and other public officials. Instead, they felt abandoned. They watched as trucks were directed into the downtown or to the parking lot at the City-owned baseball stadium on Coventry Road in Overbrook. They looked on as police and bylaw officers took no action to enforce noise, parking and various public safety bylaws or to intervene in or follow up on reports of incidents involving threats, racism and assaults. They witnessed friendly exchanges between some members of the police and convoy participants, while their own approaches to police for assistance were often met with indifference or an indication that they could do nothing as they were awaiting orders.

Instead, residents were left to cope with a chaotic and dangerous situation largely by relying on their own resources, mobilizing to support each other through friendships and neighbourhood networks, bolstering public safety through community walks and patrols and even hiring private security, and organizing their own counter-protests to dissuade or block more trucks from entering the downtown core and joining the occupation. Pro-bono lawyers worked with the community to bring a court application for an injunction to halt the blaring of truck horns.

Many people were forced to make difficult choices between not going outside, and virtually imprisoning themselves in their home, or leaving their home and neighbourhood to stay with friends and family elsewhere if that was an option. Those choices were most acute for those facing the greatest vulnerability or heightened risk of abuse, including people with disabilities, people dealing with mental health challenges, the elderly, and women, racialized, and 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals.

Not only did residents feel abandoned, they found it difficult if not impossible to obtain reliable official information providing updates about the constantly evolving security situation, so that they could make informed decisions about whether and where it was safe to go out, and what to expect next. Even business owners and staff with the Business Improvement Areas that support them were unable to obtain accurate, meaningful and current information from officials, to help them make appropriate decisions about whether to remain open and how best to ensure the safety of customers and employees.

Instead, residents and business owners had to piece together their own information through media reports, social media channels, informal community networks, and word of mouth. Many people were left feeling uninformed about what was happening, adding to the anxiety and confusion they were experiencing.

Over the weeks of the occupation residents and businesses had to contend with incessant blaring of truck horns at harmful decibel levels, noxious diesel fumes from idling truck engines, verbal and physical taunts and assaults for wearing masks in public settings, racist, homophobic, transphobic and misogynist threats and insults, and exposure to flags, banners and signs with hateful, antisemitic and racist symbols, including swastikas and Confederate flags, and obscene messages such as F__ Trudeau. They lived in fear about the dangers posed by propane tanks in close proximity to open fires, barbecues and fireworks, and the uncertainty of knowing whether firearms or other weapons were hidden in any of the trucks.

The disruption to people's lives was extensive. Vital support agencies working with vulnerable groups, including people with disabilities, the elderly, and street-involved populations, suspended or scaled back their operations. Churches and other religious institutions assisting homeless populations suspended or scaled back programs because of concerns about the safety of their clients, volunteers and staff.

A significant number of grocery stores, pharmacies and other businesses offering essential services closed. That had implications for people's ability to get food and renew prescriptions. Deliveries were also cancelled and curtailed, which had serious implications, for example, for people depending on home delivery of oxygen supplies. Many people had to cancel medical and other crucial appointments, either because offices were shut or it was impossible or too frightening and intimidating to travel to the appointment. More widely, a substantial number of restaurants, shops and other businesses had to close due to the combined impact of access to their premises being blocked and concerns about public safety.

Many residents in the area have been working from home or are university and college students attending online courses during the COVID-19 pandemic. They found it virtually impossible to take part in online meetings and classes, particularly given the noise from the horns.

There was an alarming impact on the mental health of residents throughout central Ottawa. People experienced dramatically heightened levels of anxiety and depression, particularly from the combined impact of being trapped in their home, the incessant noise, a menacing and dangerous atmosphere on the streets around them, and feeling abandoned by authorities. All of that built on existing mental health challenges arising from COVID-related public health restrictions and social isolation over the previous two years. Many people had thoughts of and even attempted suicide.

The occupation had serious implications for the safety and well-being of children and young people. Convoy participants demonstrated in front of a daycare. Nazi flags were seen on display near schools. Some schools had to close because of safety concerns. The exhaust from trucks parked very close to the windows of one school gave rise to serious health concerns for students and teachers inside. And a truck laden with fuel and combustible materials parked adjacent to a high school constituted an even greater threat.

The impact extended as well to the health and well-being of people's pets, for whom the noise and the inability to go outside became a source of disorientation and stress. That was cruel and harmful for the pets, and also a source of considerable anguish for their owners, often adding to mental health challenges.

All of this, yet residents describe being repeatedly gaslighted about their experiences. Numerous public officials, including senior police officers, frequently referred to the protests as being peaceful or mainly peaceful. There were many comments in social media and elsewhere suggesting that anyone who chooses

to live in downtown Ottawa should expect and be ready to cope with the disruption of protests in the nation's capital.

Convoy organizers insisted it was unfair to blame them and other protesters for any "unauthorized" racist or hateful flags or banners displayed at the protests. They instead described the protests as being overwhelmingly positive and marked by a spirit of celebration and unity. To the extent that organizers recognized some detrimental impact on downtown residents they insisted the blame lay not with them but with the federal government for having imposed vaccine mandates and refusing to meet with protest leaders.

Other Freedom Convoy blockades and protests followed in other parts of the country, particularly at Canada/US border crossings. That included blocking the Ambassador Bridge, linking Windsor, Ontario and Detroit, Michigan, between February 7 – 13, and the border crossing between Coutts, Alberta and Sweetgrass, Montana between January 29 – February 15.

As it became clear that the police, particularly Ottawa's municipal police, were unprepared and unable to respond to the magnitude of the threats associated with the convoy and as concerns mounted about the economic consequences of blocked border crossings, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau took the extraordinary step of invoking the federal Emergencies Act on February 14. It was the first time that legislation had been used since its adoption in 1988.

A mass policing operation, involving the RCMP, Ontario Provincial Police, the Ottawa Police Service, and other police forces, began concerted enforcement action on February 17 and by the evening of February 19 protesters had been largely dispersed in downtown Ottawa. On February 21, the House of Commons approved the government's earlier decision to invoke the Emergencies Act. The Act was subsequently lifted by the Prime Minister at 5 pm on February 23.

ESTABLISHMENT AND MANDATE OF THE OTTAWA PEOPLE'S COMMISSION

The Ottawa People's Commission on the Convoy Occupation (OPC) was launched in June 2022, motivated by a widely felt need for healing and accountability in the aftermath of the convoy occupation. As community members came together, it became clear that there was still extensive trauma, stemming from the harms people had experienced and their feeling of having been abandoned. There was also frustration that official reviews launched by governments did not offer a space for community members to share their experience and provided little opportunity to hold governments to account for their failure to protect the rights of residents, workers and business owners.

OPC has operated as a program of the Centretown Community Health Centre (CCHC), which has worked with local residents to bring this vision of a People's Commission to life.

The OPC's mandate is to provide local residents with a venue to share their personal experiences of the convoy's impact on their lives and livelihoods and to offer recommendations as to steps that would avoid or minimize the risk of a similar ordeal in the future.

The OPC does not officially oppose or support the Freedom Convoy itself. As such, Commissioners made it clear to people making presentations that there would be no debate about vaccine science and mandates, or about masking and other public health protocols. The Commission required individuals providing information to be members of the Ottawa/Gatineau community who were impacted by the convoy occupation, and asked that they focus on that community impact in their presentations and submissions.

The OPC's four Commissioners, Leilani Farha, Monia Mazigh, Alex Neve and Debbie Owusu-Aykeeah, began to hold public sessions in September,

continuing through to mid-December. Over the course of 14 hearings and eight community meetings, held both online and in person, they have heard from and engaged with over 200 people, including more than 75 written submissions. Most sessions were open to the public. While the overwhelming majority of individuals who provided testimony, commentary and submissions described the convoy's harmful impact, a number of people also spoke of ways that they felt that impact had been positive and beneficial to them.

The OPC differs from other bodies established to review the response to the convoy, including the Public Order Emergency Commission (the Rouleau Inquiry), Parliament's Special Joint Committee on the Declaration of Emergency, and the Convoy Protest Audits being carried out by the Office of the Auditor General of the City of Ottawa. Those reviews are all underway pursuant to legislation, namely the Emergencies Act itself, or motions passed by Ottawa's City Council and Police Services Board.

Unlike those official processes, the OPC cannot oblige governments to respond to its findings and recommendations. It does not have the legal authority, powers or resources available to those bodies, such as the power to issue subpoenas and compel the disclosure of documents.

Yet given the OPC is a community-generated initiative, offering an analysis of the impact of both the convoy and the response of police and government to the harms arising from the convoy from the unique perspective of the city's residents and business-owners who lived through that experience, it is our expectation that governments will review this report closely and give serious consideration to the recommendations it contains.

THE FAILURE TO TAKE A HUMAN RIGHTS APPROACH

Unlike the Rouleau Inquiry, Parliamentary Committee and Auditor General, the OPC has not examined how operational decisions were made about police deployment, decision-making processes in place municipally, provincially and federally, or the funding and organization of the convoy. We do not have the powers, mandate or resources to do so. We also do not take a position on whether or not it was appropriate and justified to resort to the Emergencies Act, although we note that many residents described to us the relief they felt when that step was taken.

The OPC has remained focused on the people of Ottawa's experience of the convoy and its impact on their daily lives. In doing so, the OPC has used a human rights framework which upholds the importance of the right to peaceful protest while also recognizing that a wide range of human rights of residents, workers and business owners in Ottawa and Gatineau were at stake during the convoy occupation.

We have concluded that there was a wholesale failure on the part of all three orders of government to respond to the convoy in a manner that recognized their responsibilities to uphold the human rights of people living and working in the impacted communities. We acknowledge and strongly affirm the importance of respecting rights related to protest, in particular the freedoms of expression and peaceful assembly. But there are recognized limits on those rights, notably when it comes to public safety and respecting the rights of other people, particularly the safety and rights of the most vulnerable members of the community.

Significantly, protest rights, crucial as they are, do not stand apart from or override the rights of people living and working in the area impacted by protest. The essential right to equality and non-discrimination of community members, and other rights such as those related to housing, health, food, livelihood, education and security of the person, must be respected at

all times, whether a protest is underway or not and regardless of how disruptive a protest may be.

That is where we have seen a colossal abdication on the part of the municipal, provincial and federal governments. It is starkly evident that none of those governments have developed an overarching human rights framework to guide decisions about programs and services for residents of downtown Ottawa, nor do they conduct a regular assessment to identify and understand the human rights needs of the diverse communities who call central Ottawa home.

Without a solid human rights approach in place, it is therefore not surprising that when faced with a crisis situation like the convoy occupation, human rights considerations did not figure prominently, if at all, in the response from governments or police. That lies at the heart of the feeling of abandonment poignantly described by so many residents.

This report is organized around the themes of occupation, violence, abandonment and community mobilization. Those themes correspond to human rights obligations, guaranteed in international law, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and federal and provincial human rights laws.

In Canada, the responsibility to uphold those rights is shared by all orders of government. However, the mechanisms for ensuring meaningful and well-coordinated human rights implementation among those governments have long been ineffective. The response to the convoy occupation has starkly demonstrated that to be the case, as there was little evidence of collaborative action by the municipal, provincial and federal governments, even in the midst of a crisis, to ensure the rights of Ottawa residents were being upheld. The complexities of federalism and jurisdictional jealousies or disagreements among governments can never be an excuse for failing to uphold human rights. But far too often, including during the convoy occupation, that has been the case.

The OPC is presenting its final report in two parts. This first part is primarily a reflection of what we have heard during the course of our hearings, community consultations and meetings, and through written submissions. As such Part I of our report very importantly and appropriately is primarily in the words of the people who shared their experiences and insights with us². Part II, which we expect to release in late March, 2023 will offer fuller analysis and propose relevant recommendations.

² OPC has verified the identities of all those who are quoted. To protect their privacy, some have chosen to use only first names or remain anonymous.

What we heard

IT WAS AN OCCUPATION

Many terms have been used to describe what played out on the streets of downtown Ottawa, starting at the end of January and continuing through much of February 2022.

- Organizers and participants who came to the city from all parts of the country talked enthusiastically about the Freedom Convoy or more generally a truckers' convoy. They describe it as a festive gathering along the lines of the annual Canada Day celebrations on Parliament Hill.
- The police, other authorities and the media often spoke of those taking part as protesters involved in a demonstration, sometimes specifying it to be an anti-vaccine protest, other times describing it as a wide-ranging protest against a variety of government measures, including but extending beyond public health measures associated with COVID. Some of those descriptions insisted, incredibly, that it was a peaceful or mainly peaceful protest.
- A number of commentators have questioned whether it was tantamount to sedition, particularly in reference to the manifesto released by some convoy organizers calling for the Trudeau government to be replaced by some sort of amalgam of the Governor General, the Senate, opposition parties and convoy leaders.

The testimony we have heard and submissions we have read makes it clear that for the residents of Ottawa this was much more than a benign convoy, and was very different from a peaceful or even legitimately provocative and disruptive protest or demonstration. Consistently people describe what they went through as an occupation, and that they felt invaded and under siege.

People felt occupied in that their communities were taken over by force and without their agreement, both physically by way of blocking streets with large trucks and other vehicles, and by accosting people for wearing masks, as well as psychologically through such methods as blaring horns and displaying symbols and messages of hate, racism and discrimination.

It became clear to residents that the occupying individuals and groups, some of whom had installed themselves directly in front of homes or businesses, or were blocking access to their driveways or parking facilities, were intent on shutting down mobility and access in downtown neighbourhoods, making it impossible for people to live their normal, daily lives. People felt trapped and imprisoned in their homes, fearful to go out on the streets.

A large number of businesses, including the entire Rideau Centre, were forced to close for much of or even the duration of the occupation, because access to their premises was blocked, supplies could not be delivered or it was unsafe for customers and staff.

And significantly, it quickly became clear to residents that the convoy was not leaving. This was not a normal demonstration on Parliament Hill which disperses at the end of a long day of protest. People had come to stay – 24 hours per day, week after week, sleeping in their trucks, and often bringing their entire family with them – seemingly ready to remain for as long as it would take to satisfy their demands. In this sense residents felt as if they were pawns, being held hostage by an occupying force.

Occupation is admittedly a loaded and highly-charged term. But the People's Commission considers it to be an apt and accurate description of what people endured.

The ordinary dictionary meaning of an occupation is the "act of moving into a country, town, etc. and taking control of it using military force." What we heard from people were indeed numerous descriptions of a force moving into downtown Ottawa and taking control of the area.

The convoy was obviously not a military force in the sense of being part of a country's armed forces and it was not constituted with enlisted soldiers and recruits under a military command structure. Yet with time it became clear to many people that there was a quasi-militarized structure behind how the convoy was organized, and how its participants were being supplied from staging areas. Residents witnessed that firsthand and described to us how, for instance, the efficiently organized process of distributing fuel, seemed similar to what would be expected in maintaining supply lines for a military force. People also repeatedly talked of their fear that convoy participants could at any time exert dangerous and even lethal force, be it using the trucks as weapons, the risk of propane explosions or the fear that there might have been firearms in some of the trucks.

Under international law, in military terms an occupation describes a situation when territory is taken over and essentially comes under the authority

of a foreign power. There is clear recognition that this is a situation ripe for abuse and exploitation, so much so that international treaties, particularly the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949, have been agreed to by states, including Canada, to deal with the many human rights and safety concerns that arise during an occupation. That is not to suggest in any way that this was equivalent to a military occupation or was governed by international humanitarian law; but some of the underlying parallels are certainly there.

In Canada, to talk of occupation resonates powerfully and directly with the situation faced by Indigenous peoples, whose lands and territories have indeed been taken over and come under the authority of an external force, particularly the large parts of the country, including Ottawa, which have never been ceded or surrendered by First Nations, Inuit or Métis people through a treaty.

As such it is important to understand what happened in Ottawa as effectively being the occupation of already occupied lands. The affront and distress of such an experience, therefore, carries double the harm for Indigenous peoples in the city and surrounding territories. We heard from Indigenous elders, activists and community organizations about how troubling that was. Local and regional Indigenous leaders and elders were not consulted by convoy organizers or participants, nor was their traditional welcome sought. Protocols around Indigenous ceremonies were not respected or followed, and Indigenous banners and messages, such as the powerful "Every Child Matters" mantra, were co-opted and misused.

Downtown Ottawa was indeed occupied by the convoy. Residents describe the nature and impact of that occupation in very powerful and personal ways.

A video compilation of testimonies OPC heard is available [here](#).

"This was not a protest anymore, it was just saying we can do this and there is not a darn thing you can do about it so live with it."

— Sue

"I felt trapped in my own apartment, felt threatened by the occupiers using the parking lot directly facing my building as a mustering point, and had ongoing headaches, likely due to the noise and fumes."

— Anonymous

"If those truckers had been Black or Indigenous, they would have been cleared out."

— Sarah

"I took it upon myself to walk up Kent Street every morning to get the lay of the land. What I saw there was a neighbourhood living in fear."

— Allan

"It is an occupation. And the occupiers are domestic terrorists. But because they are Angry White Men, they are allowed to have the run of our city, immune to the laws and policing that is always so judiciously (and often viciously) doled out on more vulnerable members of our community – Indigenous folks, Black Canadians, queer folks, women, immigrants, the unhoused, the unwell, the downtrodden. This failure to hold these angry white men accountable for their violence and hatred has starkly revealed the rot that quietly underpins so many of our government and policing institutions. This is a devastating failure of justice which will have ripple effects across the entire country, and the fabric of our democracy."

— Amy

"These protestors claimed to defend the freedom of all people, yet brazenly ignored the voices of others. What about my freedom to enjoy life in my community? What about my freedom to walk down a street in my own neighbourhood unharmed? What about my freedom to sleep at night, concentrate on work, or breathe the air outside? What about my freedom to simply exist without encountering violence and hate?"

– Anonymous

"No protesters have the right to shut down the livelihood and threaten the residents so that they become prisoners in their own homes. The blaring of truck horns traumatized families and seniors that lived in the downtown core. This three-week threat will have long lasting trauma on those residents and their children for years to come. The convoy protesters have no right to do this amount of destruction. This should have never been allowed to get out of hand."

– Diane

"They took away all of our freedoms to enjoy the city, to enjoy our local communities and to support local businesses."

– Amanda

"Over the next few weeks, they established a presence that they described as peaceful and lawful. They were entitled to rights that we do not have as Indigenous people. They were allowed to set up on public streets, close public streets, have their children in unsafe environments (there are many Indigenous children in much safer environments that have been apprehended by child welfare), make persistent and unexpected noise that is outside of the acceptable noise by-laws for the City (which is a form of psychological torture); have firework displays without a permit, have parties all night (again outside of the by-laws), build and set up apparatuses (hot tub, food canteen, open fires, bouncy castle) without a permit, and without them being dismantled by City officials."

– Ottawa Aboriginal Coalition

"I will never be able to look at the Canadian flag the same. Whether people are flying it or wearing it, now, for me, it's a symbol of the occupation. I find myself watchful, looking over my shoulder, fearful in a way I was never before."

– Christine

"To me, this was not a protest but an occupation. I was negatively affected by the event itself, the rhetoric surrounding it, and by the lack of response to it. I also felt that some exercises in soliciting "balanced" opinions, such as the City audit of the event, were a further way to minimize the impact of people who live downtown, and legitimize the lack of response from the City and province by trying to show that different people experienced the event differently and all opinions on it should be evenly considered. ... I had no choice but to be impacted, as this is where I live. The experience of a participant in this event and someone who had to live through it cannot be treated equally, as they do not impact in the same way."

– Lisa

"I really call them weapons, those trucks. I've been quite direct in saying that."

– Mathieu Fleury

"People could not move freely in the city. Many people couldn't go to the Good Companions Senior's Centre because of blockades, and couldn't socialize with their usual circle."

– Jessica

"Closer to my own office and home, the occupation took the form of angry-looking men in pickup trucks racing around with Canadian flags attached to the back, ISIS-style. For most, this not-unlawful activity probably seemed merely harmless, pointless, and maybe a little idiotic. For me, and I suspect many others, it had a darker character. Those whose property was vandalized for displaying rainbow flags, for example, will know what I mean. Trauma on those residents and their children for years to come. The convoy protesters have no right to do this amount of destruction. This should have never been allowed to get out of hand."

– Allan

"The convoy occupation was anything but a love fest. Our local businesses had to close and residents feared venturing out as they normally would and going about their regular daily activities. We were all impacted by their presence in one way or another. Everyone has been struggling in their own way after COVID came. The last thing the businesses and residents of downtown Ottawa needed was to be dealt another heavy blow from a group of irate and volatile convoy people."

– Stephanie

"I noticed how organized and well-funded the protest was. Every morning at the corner of Kent and Nepean, I witnessed a gathering of 40-50 or so protesters, listening to a man wielding a clipboard. He was doling out the information like 'get your laundry here by 11 AM every morning so it could be done the next day,' 'fuel will be delivered at this time so you need to let us know,' 'please avoid engaging in debates over the rally to avoid any negative news.' This information was delivered like a military briefing."

– Cliff

"On weekends, the convoy vehicles were so tightly squeezed together on Kent at Somerset that there was no way emergency vehicles would have been able to get through, if residents required them. This created unacceptable (additional) navigational challenges for our City's emergency services. Completely unsafe."

– Stephanie

"As a service provider and understandably working with people, we could hear the horns non-stop as we were continuing to try to provide counseling, listening to the concerns of clients who were coming in to get very much needed health care. We heard from clients who lived in the area about the stress of not being able to sleep or work from home because of the incessant noise and odours from the diesel from all the vehicles. And I had staff calling me asking for help, asking to escalate reports to Ottawa Police Services because clients have called to file complaints and report about incidents that had happened to them on the streets and were not getting any calls back from OPS to respond to the many incidents of harassment, violence, and defacement of their buildings." impact in the same way."

– Michelle Hurtubise

"There is a schizophrenic man who went up and down my block once or twice a day. He also frequently slept in that parking lot across the street. I have not heard or seen him since the convoy. This gentleman did not suddenly decide to enter a shelter so I really question – my block was his home so where is he now? And why was he driven out of his home?"

– Pat

"The police stood idly by and did nothing, so the first night I went out to protest alone on the Hill. A group of police officers came up to me and said, quote 'we know you're up here trying to speak your mind against all this, but if you stay here any longer, we can't guarantee your safety.' I told him that I had the right to be there and that I would not be moving away. They casually stood at the corner watching everything happen, and in some cases took photos with the convoy protesters. This blew my mind. This made me feel alone, and reinforced the general community sentiments of residents that OPS had completely lost control of the situation and could no longer properly enforce the law."

— Mat

What we heard

IT WAS VIOLENT

The right to peaceful protest lies at the very heart of a vibrant democracy. It stems from such essential rights as the freedoms of expression, opinion, peaceful assembly and association, all of which are guaranteed under the Charter of Rights and are enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights instruments binding on Canada.

Downtown Ottawa is no stranger to protest. It comes with being the national capital and thus home to Parliament, the Prime Minister's Office, the offices of MPs and Senators, government departments and numerous embassies. Any and all of these locations may serve as the site for protest, such as the expansive lawn in front of Parliament where recent protests have focused on Indigenous rights, racism and the environment, or the target for protest, such as protests at the US Embassy in opposition to former President Trump's "Muslim Travel Ban", the Russian Embassy with respect to Ukraine, or the Chinese Embassy regarding that country's treatment of Uyghurs. Protests in Ottawa may also, as is the case with any large city, focus on such local concerns as policing, racism, and homelessness. City Hall and the headquarters of the Ottawa Police Service, both centrally located, are a frequent site of protest. Also centrally located, beside City Hall, is the Canadian Tribute to Human Rights, known as the Human Rights Monument, where demonstrations and vigils are often held

and where protest marches frequently begin or end. Demonstrations may draw a handful of protesters, or many thousands may turn out. They may last for less than one hour, a full day or extend over several days. They may be held in one location or move from one place to another. They may have sought necessary permits in advance or may go ahead without authorization from relevant officials. They may have little impact on people living, working and passing through downtown Ottawa, or may be disruptive, including when streets are closed or intersections blocked to traffic.

And very significantly, protests may deal with issues that are controversial and contentious, and may involve the expression of unpopular or upsetting views. Over and over again, we heard from local residents that they are ardent champions of the right to protest and frequently organize or take part in protests themselves. They recognize and are even proud of the fact that so many protests take place in downtown Ottawa, in their neighbourhoods.

They emphasized however that the right extends to peaceful protest. It may be loud, edgy, confrontational, provocative and disruptive. It may or may not have official authorization. But ultimately, it must be peaceful. That is precisely what is protected and upheld under the Charter and international human rights standards. Many people stressed how upsetting it was for them to hear police and other public officials commend convoy participants for not resorting to violence and

describe the protests as largely, generally or mainly peaceful. They asked how safe it could be for individual residents when armed police did not believe they were safe to intervene except in overwhelming numbers.

They were also deeply hurt by reporting that focused on the supposed fun side of the convoy, such as bouncy castles, hot tubs and music; or descriptions of the unity and diversity of the participants. Overwhelmingly, the community's experience of the convoy was anything but peaceful. We heard instead, extensive descriptions of violence. Physical and psychological violence that was pervasive, harmful and frightening. Acts of violence and threats of violence. Violence that many described as terrorizing and traumatizing.

In these accounts we have heard of people being violently assaulted and accosted on the street, including people with disabilities and in wheelchairs. We have heard of violent incidents associated with COVID-19 mask requirements, such as aggressive threats and angry slurs against people wearing masks, forcefully ripping masks from people's faces, and numerous heated exchanges when convoy participants were asked to wear masks in stores, coffee shops and other establishments. We have heard of the ugly and insidious violence of misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, anti-Black, anti-Asian and anti-Indigenous racism, antisemitism, Islamophobia, slurs against people with autism and disabilities, and other discrimination and hate. This hate was often expressed in flags, banners and posters displayed by convoy participants, including Nazi and Confederate flags. Or it was expressed through the violence of hatefully defacing residents' and small businesses' property, such as pride flags and posters. We have heard of rampant violence through hateful messages and doxing on social media. We have heard of residents being followed unreasonably closely by trucks or by people walking behind them, in a manner meant to intimidate them. And we have heard of angry and violent confrontations against journalists.

We heard also of how violent the main tactic of the convoy – bringing large trucks and other vehicles into the downtown core – was for residents. We heard several accounts of trucks accelerating and rushing towards residents as they crossed a street, in what appeared to be acts of violent intimidation. The constant blaring of horns, for hours on end, at decibel levels that cause excruciating pain and may lead to tinnitus and loss of hearing, was experienced as violence. The effect of diesel fumes from trucks left running in residential areas was similarly experienced as violence, particularly for people with asthma and other respiratory problems.

The constant threat of explosion posed by the combination of propane tanks, jerrycans of fuel, large trucks, open fires, barbecues and fireworks in enclosed spaces, was experienced as violence. The uncertainty as to whether convoy participants had guns in their vehicles was experienced as violence. And the menacing possibility that large trucks and other vehicles could at any time be used as weapons, was experienced as violence.

This was not just inconvenient and upsetting for people. For many people the impact of this violence had serious mental health consequences. The OPC heard numerous accounts from people who experienced mental health crises during the convoy, including anxiety and depression, which for some people led to thoughts or even attempts of suicide.

People were so concerned about the violence that they had to take extraordinary steps to stay safe. Journalists covering the convoy hired security guards for protection while they were doing their job; something that seasoned reporters told us they have never before had to do in Canada. Condominium buildings hired security firms to patrol their lobbies and parking areas. Community walks were set up to accompany vulnerable individuals. Many people who had the option to leave downtown Ottawa and stay with family and friends outside or in other parts of the city did so. Most people, however, had no choice other than to remain and many described to the OPC that they became virtual prisoners in their homes, too fearful to go outside.

While this happened one year ago, the impact of the violence continues. Numerous people described to the OPC that they continue to suffer hearing and respiratory problems associated with the convoy. Many people made it clear that they are still fearful, easily triggered by the sound of a horn, or seeing a Canadian flag on a passing truck. That has certainly been the case when protests associated with the convoy have returned, such as Rolling Thunder in May, or been rumoured to return, as was the case with Canada Day or talk of a Convoy 2.0 follow-up protest to mark the first anniversary.

In the Commission's view, none of this is a community's normal experience of or response to a peaceful protest. This is a community's experience of and response to violence – violence rooted in extremism and hate. And those at greatest risk of this violence, therefore, were the most vulnerable members of the community.

For more privileged members of the community, it was perhaps the first time they had ever felt unsafe in their own neighbourhood. But for others, this was not their first experience of violence, hate, racism and other human rights abuses. In fact, many individuals living in central Ottawa experience such human rights harms on an ongoing basis as they navigate an environment filled with threats, often from police as much as fellow residents. Given that reality, the intensified and inescapable climate of violence they faced during the convoy occupation was all the more traumatizing.

A video compilation of testimonies OPC heard is available [here](#).



“The intimidation for wearing a mask while outdoors was non-stop.”

— Pat

“A truck is a means of moving from one destination to another and during the convoy, the trucks were a nuisance, blocking the downtown turning our scenic capital into an eyesore but it was more than that. Trucks can be used for transporting objects. Trucks are heavy. Here’s the thing that for me separated the convoy from peaceful acts of civil disobedience. During the occupation, I never knew what was in those trucks. We didn’t know at the time how it was going to end. Were there materials in those trucks that could hurt somebody?”

— Andrea

“During the course of the occupation, the participation of protesters carrying symbols of hate like the swastika, the Confederate flag, and those carrying anti-LGBTQ and anti-trans messaging without any actions by protest leaders or protest participants to remove these elements said to me and many others that this was a protest that accepted and promoted hate.”

— Fareed

“The convoyers and their supporters were drunk and drinking in the streets, cooking on open fires. Fireworks going off on Rideau Street, fuel containers all over the streets. The streets completely blocked by trucks including laneways. The constant noise was exhausting and nerve racking. It was lawless.”

— Evelyn

"Many people in the building missed medical appointments. Para Transpo couldn't come."

– Anastasia

"I went to the corner store and this lady holding a sign went behind me and started pushing me in my wheelchair towards the intersection."

– Troy

"The most permanent, personally damaging thing for me was that they had decorated their new home with signs everywhere comparing themselves to the Holocaust and its victims. Paper stars of David and fabric ones attached to clothes were littered everywhere. Seeing them compare themselves to my grandfather and our family just infuriated me."

– Portia

"I was operated on and my friends brought me back on the 29th, up Nicholas, went to turn left on Laurier and the streets were closed. I walked six blocks afterwards. While I was on the bridge, I also had protesters coming at me because I was wearing masks."

– Pierre

"The second I set foot in Confederation park, three men literally jumped up in front of me. One of them immediately grabbed my arm because I was taking pictures of the campervans that obviously they were associated with. These three people grabbed me by the arm. They physically lifted me, pushed me, and I spoke to them the entire time. I spoke to them as evenly as I could manage to have a bit of a conversation with them but I was wearing a mask and that ultimately triggered them. They asked me why I was wearing a mask and then started yelling epithets at me and wondering why I was supporting Trudeau, that I had been brainwashed and that I should get out and not come back. Meanwhile, all of this had been observed by four police officers in a cruiser and a National Capital commission constable, and none of them made any motion to come and provide assistance; they did not leave their vehicles. I was obviously fully adrenalized at that point and asking them why it was that they [police] were just sitting watching when a citizen was being accosted in a public park. Why were they just watching? They made it very clear actually that they were under very clear orders to simply observe."

– Tim

"If I walk too close to a fuel tank, my oxygen could become an accelerant, possibly leading to an explosion. There was danger from matches, barbecues, stoves, space heaters, candles, etc, to say nothing of smoking. There's danger from pumps, engines, fires and pressures. I could be killed through these explosions. Clearly the streets of Ottawa were a danger for me during the occupation so I was imprisoned for the duration, at home. And home was not safe. Exhaust and diesel fumes belched up into my apartment. My home became dangerous for my breathing along with a nauseating smell of burning rubber along with the incessant blaring of air horns. It affected all aspects of living: sleeping, eating, reading, working, hearing, thinking, conversation... only fear thrived."

— Audrey

"I have been called a c*nt while walking to the compost bin beside my building. I have been spat at while walking down the street. I have suffered multiple panic attacks after weeks of horns blaring their hate and violence into my home day and night. I am completely undone: socially, psychologically, professionally, personally. I can't accomplish many basic life tasks."

— Amy

"On the second day of the convoy, I was awoken by the sounds of a truck down the street from my building. The truck was repeatedly honking at 7 AM directly in front of a daycare. I work as an emergency call centre operator and I was coming off the overnight shift. The truck was causing me to be unable to sleep but unfortunately I couldn't call in sick due to the current labour shortages. I was petrified the entire night that I would make a mistake due to sleep deprivation."

— Mathew

"The constant cacophony of horns, percussive sounds, loud idling of engines just below our building, and the occasional, unexpected explosion of fireworks took their toll on our calm and our well-being; not to mention the presence of individuals in our immediate vicinity, who were pumped up to challenge, bully and gang up on anyone supporting the public health measures. The haphazard transportation of flammable products in the street below our building to refuel the illegally parked vehicles was also a source of stress and anguish."

— Paul

"On my way to Bank Street, three protestors stopped me on the sidewalk and requested that I "do the dragon dance". I did not comply, prompting them to verbally issue me the options of either dancing or being beaten. When I tried to force myself past, I instead had to endure an assault that included blunt objects (I think one was a bat and one might have been a pipe) to a background of honks and cheers from bystanders. While I wish I could say I walked away unscathed, this would be a lie. I had visible bruising on my face, arm, and side, that took a week to heal. In the aftermath of the incident, I submitted a police report to the Ottawa Police Service in early March, which was later rejected. I have not had the mental or emotional strength to follow up on this."

— Justin

"Throughout the occupation, I could not shop at my supermarkets as they [protesters] were gathered around the entrances and blocking people going in with masks."

— Gaye

"My 89-year-old father was at the General Hospital ER and I couldn't get out of my parking garage to get to him because it was blocked with trucks."

— Anonymous

"Staff and parents were harassed and were honked at by truckers when they were walking their children to childcare. This impacted parents' ability to go to work and school. There were preschoolers in tears and one asked, 'why are the people who hate us still here?'. After they left, this same one asked, 'are they going to come back?'"

— Ottawa Aboriginal Coalition

"The STORM (Street Team OutReach Mobile) van and the food van could not get downtown to deliver food, medical supports, and personal hygiene products to community members who are living on the street or working on the street. Minwaashin Lodge staff being harassed by white men was triggering and reminded them that it is not safe to be an Indigenous woman."

— Ottawa Aboriginal Coalition

"I've had back surgery and sometimes rely on grocery delivery which was not possible during the occupation. Many seniors and wheelchair-bound residents of the building felt trapped as well. Complaining was futile as the police did nothing!"

— Anonymous

"As a female small business owner in Centretown, I was afraid to go to my office during the occupation. I heard many stories of my friends and colleagues who live downtown as to the harassment and intimidation they were experiencing, especially young women, BIPOC persons, and our LGBTQ+ community members."

— Lisa

"The most significant impact was a 60 per cent decline in people coming into Wabano to get their vaccines due to cancellations. They were afraid to come downtown."

— Ottawa Aboriginal Coalition

"Residents also had to endure the stench of diesel fumes mingled with the odour of fecal matter and roast pig. Some parking lots were used as open air toilets. Other areas outside of the downtown core were used as gathering places for drinking and honking at all hours (e.g. Lansdowne)."

— Anonymous

"Every time I left my apartment, I was confronted and either told to remove my mask as it was not needed anymore, as the mask mandate was no longer in effect since the convoy had arrived to save us, or to take it off as it was useless. Whenever an individual would approach me, whatever protesters were in earshot would quickly come and tell me to remove my mask. I felt swarmed at every instance. In one instance, as a man was telling me to take it off, he was reaching for my face to remove it himself. That was the last time that I left my apartment on foot until the protest was ended."

— Evelyn

"They also had signs stating that vaccines caused autism, comparing COVID to the flu and asking people if they would rather an autistic child or a 'retarded' one. They insulted me and every other autistic person by saying that they would rather have a dead child than one like me. They perpetrated the belief that vaccines cause autism and that it was better to be dead than to be disabled, and said it was better that I be dead than to be disabled."

— Portia

"The constant noise, smoke, and often frightening horn blasts wreaked havoc on a population that is greatly impacted by mental illness. I understand that the people with better financial situations suffered under this occupation, and I by no means mean to disrespect the plight that they suffered, but the disadvantaged have no options for escape, none. They had no other place to go."

– Cliff

"Big rigs parked on Queen Elizabeth Dr. were kept running 24-7, right beside homes where children lived. Diesel fumes filled the air, various liquids dripped from the rigs on the road, honking occurred, garbage was left."

– Christine

"The protests and occupation severely affected Knox Church's weekly take-out meal distribution for our neighbours in need on the Saturdays of January 29, February 5, 12 and 19. Approximately one third of our guests did not show up, we presume due to anxiety and fear about the protests."

– Jim

"Outsiders were watched, weighted and often singled out. I was chased down Lyon Street by three large men spewing obscenities at me about masks. This happened because I was alone."

– Allan

"My brother's best friend, who lives in Hintonburg, took down her Trans flag. Pick-up trucks with regalia had been circling her block all weekend and she didn't want to draw attention to herself."

– Anonymous

"I had three cancer operations in three weeks during the convoy occupation. My daughter helped me go to the grocery store because my prepared meals had run out. We had to walk the gauntlet of protesters jeering at us, totally disregarding our rights as citizens just because we were walking with masks."

– Pierre

"The use of the Every Child Matters imagery and posters was distressing and confusing for many people. The attempt to link this anti-government occupation with the discovery of the unmarked graves of Indigenous children was disgusting."

– Ottawa Aboriginal Coalition

"Having seen social media posts of Ottawa Police members fist bumping, high-fiving, speaking fairly highly of and providing supplies to convoy participants, it was my assessment that if there was an incident, convoy participants would not be the ones to experience police violence. It would be the most marginalized members of our community."

— Ro

"After February 2nd, we fled the city. We paid out of pocket to rent rooms elsewhere. Even though we were gone, my feeling of "fight or flight" was in full effect. I was still on high alert for violent confrontations everywhere we went. It took months for this feeling to fade away."

— Anonymous

"It was very apparent that we're an Islamic Care Centre and they smashed our window."

— Abdulrahman

"The sound was non-stop. You can feel it in your chest with the transport trucks. It's like a shock through your whole nervous system and it was non-stop."

— Rachel

"I had a convoyer dox me and put my information on the internet because I was putting info out for people to see what was really going on and they wanted to silence that. That's when the threats and doxxing started. People were telling me they were parking their trucks outside my house, and waiting for me to walk my dog outside."

— Anonymous

"I felt unable to walk safely on my neighbourhood streets. I do not have a car and must shop at my neighbourhood stores. The invaders, I will not justify their presence by calling them demonstrators, were in the shops, unmasked at a time when we were asked to be masked, loudly harassing shoppers who wore masks. Management when approached said they were helpless to do anything as police were not responding to their calls. The air was full of diesel fumes and the persistent honking of horns was maddening."

— Judy

"I wear a mask for my own health reasons and moreover, I'm a secondary caregiver to my 85-year-old mom who has Alzheimer's so I wear a mask to protect myself and others. I was personally harassed by convoy supporters in the neighbourhood who followed me and screamed and yelled at me for wearing a mask, moving close up to my face. Then they started to videotape my angry reaction to the harassment. They taunted me and told me they would post my reaction on Facebook and dox me."

— Dawn

"I ran into one just now, my entire body seized up from fear and anger and I almost blacked out! That is just one line from text messages that were going back and forth between friends and neighbours in Overbrook who are experiencing the terror and fear of being invaded and occupied by this far-right so-called Freedom Convoy."

— Anonymous

"I was spat at on January 29th. Someone tossed a frozen full beer can at me as I was reporting."

— Evan Solomon

"I live on Parkdale Avenue which is adjacent to an on-and-off ramp. I'm an intensive care nurse who has worked and seen the worst of COVID and other critical care patients. Parkdale Avenue has a lot of health care workers that live in that area and during the initial phase of the occupation, trucks of all sizes were racing down Parkdale, honking their horns the entire first weekend. They were driving on sidewalks, with no regard for the people that lived in that area or their safety. I only work night shifts and I was working that weekend and I got absolutely zero sleep going into work with those incessant horns. It's not so much about me. The patients that I cared for got a nurse that was exhausted. Calling in sick was not an option because of our shortage so I went in. I was probably 36 to 40 hours without sleep caring for critically ill patients."

— Heather

"I have never had to use a security guard in my life in Canada in 30 years of reporting."

— Evan Solomon

"Fireworks were set off at the level of my balcony between high-rise buildings. That was not okay. There are three people with disabilities in my building: one blind person, two people with wheelchairs. Para Transpo was suspended for the entirety of the 22 days that they occupied. The blind person has to navigate this world using hearing. I have the privilege that I went out and bought the most expensive set of noise-cancelling headphones that I could find. He didn't have that privilege. That was not okay."

– Paul

"I have a chronic pain condition. I also run air fans and white noise in my apartment to just help with the tinnitus that I have and I could still hear them through all the barriers that I put up. I put earplugs in my ears. I could still hear it. I couldn't sleep, I lost my appetite. The emissions of the pollution were very bad for my asthma. My dog kept barking non-stop and was shaking."

– Dawn

"There was a grave concern about having to deal not only with sexual harassment but sexual assault. I know there are a lot of women downtown who experienced sexual harassment from these occupiers."

– Erica Ifill

"Metcalf Street was everything the journalists said it was – parties, it was laughing, it was fine. However, you'd go over a few streets to Kent Street and it was a completely different vibe. It was menacing, it was hostile, and it looked like at any point in time violence could erupt. I realized that Metcalfe was the veneer, Kent was real."

– Erica Ifill

"I was verbally threatened by three protesters. The incident was recorded by a local resident walking past. I'll never forget how the loudest person's unmasked face shouted directly into mine from about four inches away 'get the hell out of my face!'"

– Jim

"What was most amazing to me was how the police were only comfortable walking in groups. I'm a single person who lives by myself. Where is my option to walk in a group? The people with authority who generally can respond to calls on a single person or a partner basis, all of a sudden had to start walking our neighbourhood in groups. That, to me, spoke volumes."

– Kim

"I figured for the first couple days or so, that's not a place where I should be for my own safety as a black woman who is a journalist."

— Erica Ifill

"Over the course of the convoy, I spoke to dozens and dozens of reporters who felt both intimidated and dehumanized in many regards by the protesters. Some were spat on, had beer cans thrown at them, and some were even doxed online. I can also share how many were threatened with physical harm or in many cases death for the simple fact of doing their jobs and that's right across the spectrum but particularly for female journalists and journalists of colour."

— Brent Jolly

"I got personally threatened a lot. People had my address. They were threatening to come to my home and we had to move our daughter out of our home for some time. It wouldn't have even occurred to me to call police at that time."

— Catherine McKenney

"There is an iconic element to the Rideau Centre that is a reflection of all the businesses that are impacted, which is the local workforce. People who have jobs in the Rideau Centre weren't able to get paid. Businesses had the ability to open and restrictions were changing which was building momentum for many of those businesses ahead of the March break period. The Rideau Centre usually closes one day a year, which is Christmas Day. They are open 364 days a year. For the first time in our history, they were closed for more than a week. They were closed for 23 consecutive days."

— Mathieu Fleury

"Very much like victims of intimate partner violence and victims of coercive control, people who were subjected to the harms of the convoy experienced psychological torture – not being able to sleep, not feeling safe in your home, threats and harassment. They experienced abuse, whether that's verbal or non-verbal. It can be yelling or physical intimidation without actually saying anything. It can be doing the right thing like wearing a mask and still feeling afraid that you'll be harassed and belittled."

— Anonymous

"The gaslighting was that the protest was non-violent. It was quite obvious on the two excursions I went down to the convoy that people's freedoms and safety were impacted by the actions of convoy participants, resulting in non-consensual participants being injured in many, many ways."

— Anonymous

"Those who are supposed to help, whether that's the government or police or Children's Aid, actually enable, whether directly or indirectly, the abuse that's happening. In this scenario, I would suggest that Ottawa citizens would be the equivalent of victims of intimate partner violence and coercive control. Their reports of violence were dismissed and ignored by police. Often the police actually advised them to do things like 'don't wear masks if you don't want to be harassed', like 'don't upset him if you don't want to be hit' or 'did they actually pull your mask off, did they actually hit you?' The class action would be an example of the requirement that is placed on individual victims to go forward with a court case. We live in a western society and that society is grounded in victim blaming."

— Anonymous

"Our centre was vandalized in the early morning. Security footage indicates an unknown individual smashed our window with a hammer. We have reported this incident but they were not able to apprehend the attacker."

— Abdulrahman

"Shopping for groceries became a dangerous game for us. We were sworn at, stared at, we were mocked for wearing masks. I had to go to medical appointments in the middle of the occupation zone and did all I could to walk near the idling police officers to avoid being assaulted like others were."

— Mark

"I was walking south on Kent Street and a truck came and drove on the sidewalk approaching me and I just stood my ground and the driver just kept going. And at the last minute, he kind of drove back into the street. There were police at the intersection half a block away. If I remember correctly, it was between Slater and Laurier. So what was the point of reporting anything? I just kept seeing them and they were looking at the trucks. They just never seemed to be looking at residents."

— Andrea

"When we went to walk around to try to get a sense of what was happening, there were issues immediately. We were wearing masks and took them off after about a block of walking because of people yelling at us. My partner is of Lebanese descent so he has darker skin, and people were yelling things at us like 'you better watch your back,' 'you better take care of her,' 'what is she doing with you?'. We approached police officers afterwards asking if anything was going to be done with all the people yelling things at us and they told us again, as early as that first weekend, that they weren't going to be doing much because they didn't want to instigate or further inflame any of the protesters."

— Julia

"I consciously changed the way I behaved with my partner when I went out. I felt surrounded by hateful people."

— Anonymous

"There was a truck with an anti-trans slogan written on its body. It was parked there for days. My neighbourhood is home to many queer persons and seeing this kind of hate speech, it was extremely upsetting."

— Dawn

"I came down to the lobby of my building and the security was there and they were stopping us and they said the door was locked, that if we absolutely needed to leave they could unlock the door and escort us out but that they needed to lock us back out again afterwards because there had been threats."

— Paul

"This was a time when even outdoors we wore our masks. We were asked to wear a mask to keep ourselves safe. But if you were wearing a mask, often that was a sign and you could be harassed. People on LRT had been harassed for wearing a mask, in that neighbourhood, in that red zone. So even though we would look for each other and identify each other with masks as being safe, often we would also take off our masks not to be at risk. I often remember the look in people's eyes above their mask, something I'll never forget, that fear when we would make eye contact. There were times I'd take off my mask too outside because it made you a target. That was a neighbourhood that had been set up in a way that they just couldn't win."

— Catherine McKenney

"I was a victim of harassment by convoy occupiers, I was subjected to breathing in choking diesel fumes. I was a witness to my neighbours being harassed, taunted, and screamed at. I was assaulted by a convoy occupier at the corner of Kent and Somerset. He drove his pickup in while I was crossing the road. I had yelled at him to watch out since I had the right of way. He chose to drive his truck directly into me as I scolded him. Both he and his passenger were laughing and smiling as he did this. I was able to roll out of the way before being dragged under the truck. A split second later another convoy occupier truck roared by me at a great speed. That truck was very very close to hitting me. My husband witnessed all of this and we filed a police report. There was an investigation of assault with a deadly weapon but I was unable to identify the suspect in the lineup. This experience was highly traumatic."

— Megan

"My Jewish neighbour discovered garbage bags of human waste dumped on the snow atop of her small front garden, right in front of her living room window. Nobody else on our street had such a thing of that type occur."

— Stephanie

"We heard from somewhere that new cars were coming in. One of my good friends and I decided that we were just going to go stand and protest at the police station and stand in the crosswalk so they would have to drive around us. A truck came through and hit me and pushed me back about 20-50 metres. The cops saw the truck hit me and push me. This was after an initial truck that we blocked actively revved up and pushed into a disabled senior woman who was sitting in her walker. The cops did nothing. They came up to me and asked "are you alright?" I said "I'm not physically injured." They proceeded to stand there. They didn't talk to the person in the truck. They didn't note the licence plate. That's when I realized someone was filming and I asked them to send me the video. Afterwards, police wouldn't let me file a police statement."

— Anonymous

"What really stuck with me as an immigrant myself and from the experiences of other newcomers, experiencing the convoy was traumatic because it mirrored things people fled from."

— Anonymous

"Without any provocation or threat, a security guard charged at me from several feet, put his hands on me and shoved me to the ground. As soon as he did so, several OPP officers swarmed over me, picked me off the ground, and led me to a police cruiser. I have very little recollection of a few seconds as I was in a state of concussion. Unbeknownst to me at the time, I had also suffered nerve compression in the neck that will now result in disk removal and fusion surgery. I am of the belief that the injury to the neck was due to the shove, and the concussion was due to a blunt hit to the head as I was being swarmed by police. As I was being led inside the OPP police cruiser, still in a state of confusion, I was hearing the police discuss charging me with assault. I could not make any sense of this and repeatedly told the police that I was shoved to the ground by a security agent and that I would want to have that individual charged for assaulting me. One of the two OPP officers told me to shut up and that they did not care, that if I wanted to go that route, I could do so another day. I repeatedly requested they explain exactly why they would be charging me as I was in a state of confusion. At no time did these two OPP officers ask about my injuries."

— Anonymous

"My 13-year-old neighbour was standing on Carling Avenue after school, waiting for the bus to bring her back home. There were a few girls at the stop. A pickup truck with male convoy supporting twenty-somethings began yelling out at the girls to 'take it off, take it off!' The girls who wear school uniforms were also masked. In the context of the way the twenty-somethings were behaving, it was more about 'stripping', period! Once the bus arrived and the girls boarded, for a bit, the truck stayed alongside – and the convoy twenty-somethings continued to target and yell at these young girls (even though they had boarded the bus)."

— Stephanie

"I'm hearing the horns constantly, incessantly, every day. I'm trying to get my schoolwork done. I'm just trying to not go crazy sitting in my apartment."

— Brynn

"It felt so personal that they had traveled across the country, parked in front of our houses, to assault us daily with sound, set off fireworks in our street near houses and windows, traipse around with hate symbols and make us feel afraid to leave our home after dark or at all."

— Rachel

"I, myself, a disabled senior had a bullhorn pointed in my face and had negative comments yelled at me about wearing a face mask and taking vaccines. I was pushed by a young protester wearing a Canadian flag as they walked down the street."

– Cliff

"You need to see us. Because we have been left behind. This occupation is White Supremacy on steroids – and you have left us to languish in their torrent of hate and violence."

– Amy

"What I witnessed horrifies me as a Canadian and as someone who wore a uniform for every Canadian."

– Clayton

"Seeing that Nazi flag being flown and hearing people say "oh it's only one flag, why are you making such a big deal out of it for?" From a Jewish person's perspective and the history that we have, it's very alarming that it's being flown on Parliament Hill and that the people there seem to be completely comfortable with it. And the police were just standing around not doing anything. It's a symbol of hatred and genocide, and it struck fear in my heart."

– Susan

What we heard

THE PEOPLE OF OTTAWA WERE ABANDONED

The responsibility of governments to uphold and respect human rights is by no means limited to the crucial obligation to refrain from directly committing human rights violations. Governments also have an essential responsibility to take steps to keep people safe from human rights abuses committed by private groups and individuals. It is an expectation and a duty that goes to the heart of the relationship between governments and people. And it carries both proactive and reactive dimensions.

It is painfully clear that all three orders of government – municipal, provincial and federal – and the police forces within their respective jurisdictions, abysmally failed to live up to that core obligation to keep people safe from human rights abuses during the convoy occupation.

It is an obligation often referred to as the duty of due diligence. It does not mean that government efforts will always be successful. Even when governments and police forces take all possible efforts, they will not always be able to prevent human rights abuses and other harms from being committed by private groups and individuals. Nor will it always be straightforward to bring such abuses to an end when they are occurring. But there is a good faith duty to take all reasonable steps to do so; and an expectation that governments will try their hardest and do their very best to keep people safe.

When governments abdicate their responsibility to keep people safe or fail to take that responsibility seriously, they have essentially abandoned their core human rights obligations, and they have abandoned the communities to whom they are accountable. Throughout our hearings and community meetings, the OPC has heard wrenching and anguished accounts of precisely that: abandonment.

The sense of abandonment began in the days leading up to the occupation, as plans for the convoy were being shared on social media and trucks were assembling across the country and starting to travel towards Ottawa. Many residents were aware of and following these reports with growing alarm, and were disconcerted to hear police and government officials appear to be either unaware and uninformed, or dismissive and unconcerned, about the mounting threat.

People were then stunned as they watched a truly vast number of vehicles, including large rig trucks, be directed, by police, to use recommended exits off Highway 417, which transverses the city, onto streets that took them directly into Ottawa's downtown core. And to then essentially be allowed to park where they liked, regardless of parking bylaws, even when doing so was blocking streets to the point of making them impassable, and obstructing driveways and access to residential parking facilities. Residents in Vanier and Overbrook were incredulous as the large parking lot at the baseball stadium on Coventry Road was turned over to truckers to essentially use as a base camp and staging area.

People's outrage grew as they witnessed firsthand or saw accounts on social media of encounters between some police and convoy participants in which officers were expressing enthusiastic support for the convoy and posing for selfies.

Not surprisingly, once trucks and other vehicles were entrenched in these locations, essentially turning them into encampments, the challenge of removing them became a daunting one. All of this took place in the midst of winter in Ottawa, when mobility on streets and sidewalks, and access to driveways and parking lots, are already considerably constrained and challenged by snowfall, snowbanks, snow clearance and cold weather.

All of this happened without any consultation with residents or local councillors and seemingly little regard for the needs of people living in these neighbourhoods. The OPC heard repeatedly that this police strategy to essentially welcome and accommodate the truckers, seemingly with no restrictions, left residents feeling as if they did not matter.

The sense of and reality of abandonment both deepened rapidly.

Downtown residents heard constant warnings from police and other officials, posted on social media and repeated in radio and television broadcasts, urging people to "avoid downtown Ottawa." The advice seemed to forget that for thousands of people they could not avoid the area, as it was home. It carried such a strong message of abandonment.

Residents, rightfully, expected police and bylaw officials to take action to punish and curtail criminal acts and to enforce parking, noise, idling, fire and other public safety bylaws. They assumed that they would see a strong and decisive response from governments to what had quickly become a major crisis. But that was not the case. They had been abandoned.

The OPC heard an extraordinary number of accounts from people about efforts to report infractions and offences committed by convoy participants. People engaged directly with police or bylaw officers on the street and in parks, including while an assault was happening or in the immediate aftermath, when racist threats had been uttered, while horns were blaring, when jerrycans of fuel were being visibly transported, when open fires were blazing, or when people were threatened, intentionally struck or nearly struck by vehicles from the convoy. They reported death threats. People tried to make reports to police or bylaw officers through online forms, phone calls or even going into the Ottawa Police Service headquarters.

Almost without exception, in all of these attempts to encourage police to act on criminal complaints, or bylaw officers to enforce municipal bylaws, the response was inaction. Often people simply received no response. Many people were told by police that they were not taking enforcement action in the red zone and were waiting for further orders. They were told that the police did not have sufficient resources to respond, or that they were not doing so because there was concern that taking action against convoy participants risked inflaming the situation. Bylaw officers asked people to describe the vehicles that they were concerned about and when it became clear that it was, for instance, a truck taking part in the convoy, people were told that was a police matter. But when people then followed up with police, they were referred back to bylaw officers.

Some residents were actively dissuaded or discouraged from pursuing complaints when they attempted to do so. Police would point out that they had not been physically hurt or would question whether there was sufficient photographic or eyewitness evidence. This was also the experience of people who received wellness visits from police responding to calls from people concerned that someone they knew was having a mental health crisis and might be suicidal. In one such case the police

did respond but were aggressive and impatient with the person concerned, leaving an impression that the matter was unimportant to them. In those instances described to the OPC in which residents did succeed in lodging an official report, generally there was no follow up unless and until the complainant again contacted police to request an update, sometimes many weeks later.

The OPC was particularly alarmed to hear of what appears to have been a near total absence of community policing during the occupation. At a time when the dangers and harms faced by residents, businesses and organizations in central Ottawa, particularly in the red zone, were obvious, police should, at a minimum, have been regularly checking on those who were at heightened risk. That would have been expected for instance with apartment and condominium buildings where a high number of elderly, disabled, low income or racialized individuals live. It would have been expected with organizations and agencies working with street-involved and homeless populations, 2SLGBTQIA+ youth, women escaping situations of violence and abuse, and other vulnerable groups. But there appears to have been a total collapse of any effort to do so. We heard from some residents and community advocates, who did have prior connections with police community liaison officers, who were told by those officers that they had been redeployed to focus on the situation on Wellington Street, in the immediate vicinity of Parliament Hill. Some of those officers reportedly checked in with their community contacts in their free time, as they were not allowed to do so while on duty.

The abandonment of particular communities had specific impacts. The Muslim community, which had planned to mount a solemn in-person vigil on January 31 to mark the fifth anniversary of the terrorist attack at a mosque in Quebec City, was told that police could not assure the security of the event and that it should be cancelled. It was held online instead, to the community's considerable disappointment.

The residents of downtown Ottawa were not only abandoned by police, but by their governments. Of serious concern is the impact on people with disabilities of the widespread cancellation of a range of essential programs and services, including Para Transpo. Members of the disabled community were distressed by a seeming disregard for the impact of suspending or scaling back these supports and the apparent failure to explore alternatives, including with police assistance if necessary, to keep such programs and services running.

A particularly glaring failure on the part of both police and government, which contributed significantly to the feeling of abandonment, was the lack of regular information updates and advice. People repeatedly told the OPC that they needed and expected a steady flow of official information, particularly at municipal level, but instead had to turn to media, social media and other unofficial sources in order to understand what was happening, carry out their own risk assessments, and make daily decisions about whether or not it was safe enough to go to a medical appointment or the grocery store.

People expected to hear from the municipal government about a plan for marshalling a community response to the occupation; but that was not forthcoming. They expected to hear about when and how the City's emergency response protocols would be activated; but that did not happen. Many people also stressed how upsetting it was to hear little if anything from the provincial government.

The OPC also heard of the City's stunning degree of disinterest in and lack of support for the class action lawsuit launched in the name of courageous downtown resident Zexi Li, mounted by a tireless pro bono legal team from Champ and Associates. That lawsuit, which was the basis for an injunction that was issued against the incessant and harmful blaring of truck horns, received no support from City lawyers or officials. The City of Ottawa ultimately sought and

obtained its own broader injunction, dealing as well with parking concerns, several days after Zexi Li's legal team had already done so.

Many people told us how relieved they were when the Emergencies Act was invoked by the federal government on February 14, more than two weeks after the occupation had begun. At the same time, many people told us that it was not lost on them that the primary motivation for doing so appeared to have been the economic impact of the blockade of the Ambassador Bridge between Windsor and Detroit, more so than the human rights abuses and public safety concerns faced by those in downtown Ottawa.

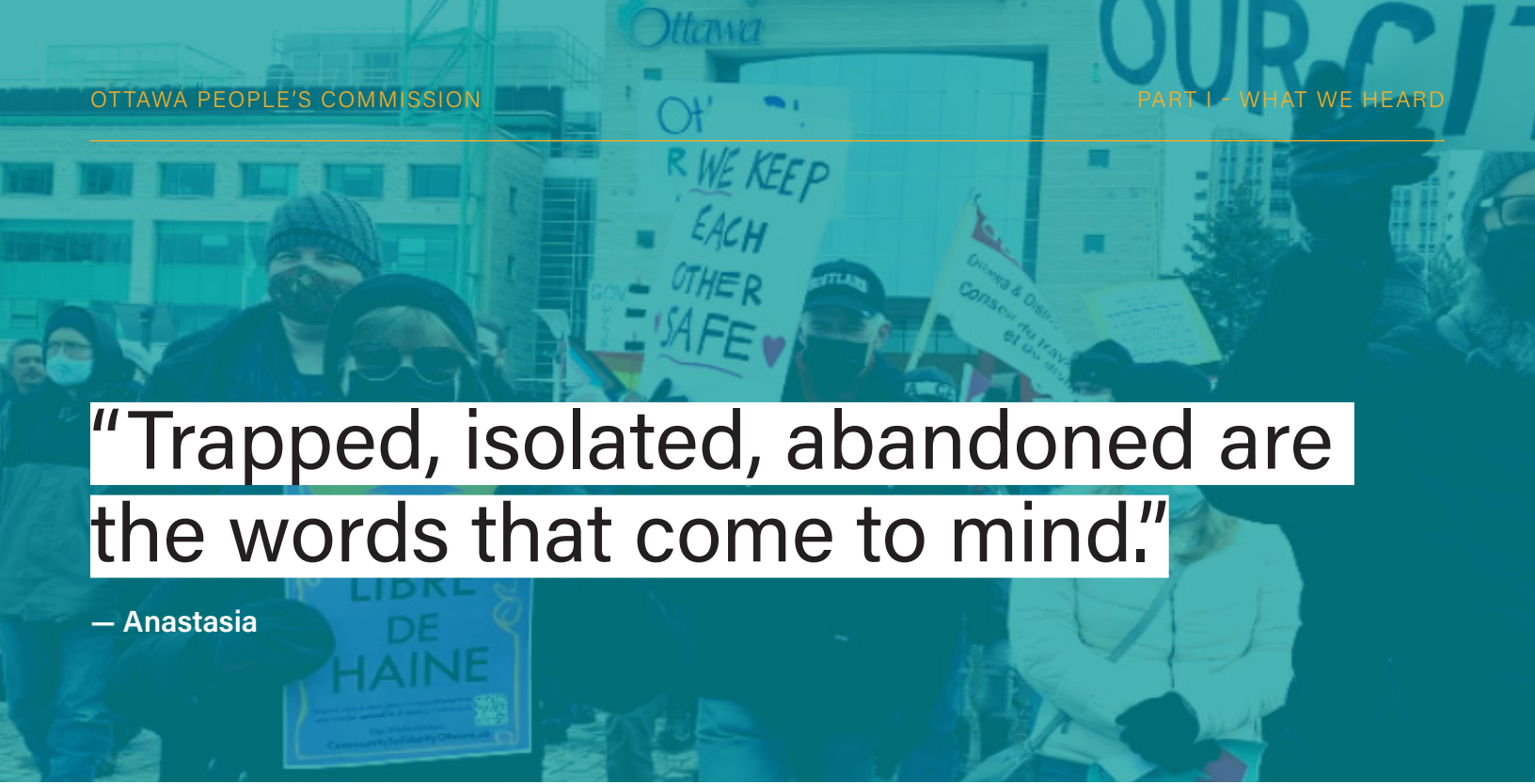
People did not, by any stretch, tell us that they do not want protests to occur in downtown Ottawa, nor even that participants in the convoy should not have been allowed to protest in the city. Quite the contrary, many people ardently described how important the right to protest is, and recognize how vital it is that it be defended and respected. They do not understand, nor do they accept, however, that protesters should be allowed to terrorize and traumatize a community, or be able to abuse the human rights of people living in neighbourhoods where they mount their protest, and that there should be no accountability or consequences for doing so. Many people referenced with incredulity the statements from former police chief Peter Sloy in the early days of the occupation, asserting that the Charter of Rights protected a seemingly unhindered freedom of movement for people driving large trucks.

Residents told the OPC they do not accept that a community should be abandoned to its own fate and devices when something as harmful and traumatizing as the occupation occurs. Many of them have, notably, experienced, witnessed or heard about swift, aggressive and even violent police enforcement action with respect to other protests, in Ottawa or elsewhere, which may have been disruptive or even temporarily slowed down or blocked traffic, but did not in any way

involve the hate and human rights abuses on display during the convoy occupation. Those protests, often involving racialized and marginalized communities, raising such concerns as anti-Black racism, disrespect for Indigenous peoples, homelessness and the climate crisis, have been handled very differently, leaving a troubling apprehension of double standards which served only to intensify the feeling of abandonment experienced during the convoy occupation.

There were some exceptions. The OPC heard, for instance, from residents and business owners who were deeply appreciative of the responsiveness of downtown City councillors, particularly Catherine McKenney and Mathieu Fleury, as well as Ottawa Centre MPP Joel Harden. Catherine McKenney was singled out for praise both for their responsiveness to calls for assistance, but also their proactive efforts to organize community walks and other initiatives to keep people safe. Mathieu Fleury's initiative to organize daily briefings with government, police and business representatives was very much welcomed by downtown Business Improvement Areas. Notably, in our sessions with Catherine McKenney and Mathieu Fleury, they both repeatedly used the word abandonment to describe what happened to the people of central Ottawa during the convoy occupation. The People's Commission very much agrees.

A video compilation of testimonies OPC heard is available [here](#).



“Trapped, isolated, abandoned are the words that come to mind.”

— Anastasia

“I have never felt so unsafe and stressed in my life. I felt completely abandoned by our police force.”

— Anonymous

“I felt very ignored and left out by the police and the City from the get-go. This is a little bit of a problem from before with Ottawa that when something happens they tell downtown residents to avoid downtown, don't drive downtown, just don't go there. They completely ignore the people who live downtown who cannot leave.”

— Lisa

“The condo's board decided to hire private security after calls to police led to nothing.”

— Evelyn

“Despite all of the daily impact on my life, I can honestly say one of the things most hurtful to me, and harmful for all Canadians, was the repeated mantra from the media and supportive politicians that “this is largely a peaceful demonstration.”

— Pat

“It literally felt a lot longer than three or four weeks. It was living hell. I couldn't go to the grocery store, I couldn't go to work because I had no way to get there and my fear was that something would happen and they'd cancel the bus routes and I'd be stuck.”

— Troy

"There are living, breathing people who live in these buildings in downtown Ottawa. And you need to see us."

– Amy

"The saddest thing is that the Ottawa Police Services did nothing. They did not issue noise violations for blaring horns or blocking of roads. Rather, they joined in to have selfies taken with protestors. Further to that, they were handing out parking tickets to people who were unable to get to their streets while the protest vehicles blocking roads faced no consequences."

– Anonymous

"To watch the police do nothing was the worse part. I was made to feel like I would never feel safe again. How would I ever have faith the police would protect me, us, the community ever again?"

– Evelyn

"This hit the rooming house and homeless communities with the force of a hurricane. It was a real injustice to people living at the edge of society and people struggling on a day-to-day basis with addictions and mental illness."

– Allan

"I saw mobs of people standing around in shut-off streets, open-air barbecues, mammoth playgrounds for children, and petrol cans everywhere. And most disappointing, I saw the police doing nothing. They were fraternizing with the very element creating the disruptions to our daily lives."

– Mario

"I was shocked to see basic planning in advance was not done by the City, and the mitigation of the protest impact was not only omitted but the convoy was encouraged to take up residence in the streets."

– Anonymous

"This was a situation that we should have been protected from by our civic officials. Our municipal, provincial and federal governments failed the citizens of Ottawa."

– Diane

"It was a three-week invasion. I saw police cars escorting the trucks downtown and joking with the invaders. None of the aggressive and offensive behaviour was stopped, except by citizen action."

– Judy

"I work with people who have physical and developmental challenges. Daily, they would express their fears of the convoy, and told me about the hardships the convoy was causing for them, including their inability to travel around the city in the manner they were used to. The people I work with told me of their Para Transpo rides being re-routed or canceled, family visits and activities curtailed, their fears of boarding buses and the LRT when unmasked and aggressive convoy terrorists were present. The people I work with suffered when their care-workers could not travel to the residences where clients live because of convoy activity. Often, this affected meal availability and hygiene care."

— Anonymous

"Messaging continued to gaslight and ignore residents, with media reporting mostly on 'peaceful' protesters, despite residents reporting excessive noise, yelling, harassment, and antisocial behaviour like urinating in public. Again, it felt like the City, police, and media were ignoring the people who lived here and had no choice in the event, to support and facilitate participation by those who were able to choose to come party and then leave as they wished."

— Lisa

"During the Freedom Convoy, disabled people were left without access to food, medical appointments, and services that they would normally access. This is unacceptable and can never happen again. An entire population going without food and support is not an acceptable outcome ever."

— Ro

"ODSP failed. When you create a system where people are getting less and less money every year with inflation, there's no money for emergencies and so there was no money. There's no money for delivery, groceries. There's no money to take an Uber, so people are left scraping out the cabinets because they are always on the verge of starvation and I wish that was hyperbole but it's not."

— Ro

"I had zero trust in the police because I was watching from my window as they also blocked access, they also interacted with the occupiers, they refused to enforce the laws."

— Lisa

"I no longer have any trust in any of our police forces. I no longer have a feeling of safety in my community."

— Beth

"How can we trust their judgement if they choose to avert their gaze and attention from the well-being of residents for three weeks? To ignore, to not acknowledge, to pretend it wasn't happening, and then to not provide any targeted services, community town halls, or any serious reflection, review, and apology in the months that follow. How can we trust that the City will be there when we need it?"

— Jessica

"The messaging around the first weekend of the event left me feeling ignored and as if the City and police service conveniently forgot that people live downtown. Messages from the City and police to "avoid downtown" focused on people driving and people coming from elsewhere. There was no consideration of what people who live here could do, or what would be done to minimize interruptions for residents. It seemed the City and police were more concerned with minimizing traffic disruptions than with disrupting the lives of downtown residents."

— Lisa

"Seeing the thousands of convoy noise, pollution, littering, public toileting, and parking infractions being ignored and no citations being given, I knew that By-law was not functioning during the terrorist occupation and so I did not bother to report the numerous convoy parking, noise, pollution, lane blockages, and offensive, racist messaging that I saw almost daily."

— Anonymous

"The police inaction was offensive to me. I felt completely unprotected and in danger. It maddened me that until commercial activity was threatened and affected by the blocking of the bridges, no level of government, federal, provincial or municipal, cared about what was happening to the citizens living in downtown Ottawa other than a couple of municipal councillors who daily walked the streets. More concern was shown over buildings, monuments and commercial trade than people. It was a horrific experience. I have completely lost faith with our elected and paid officials to keep me safe."

— Judy

"We contacted our elected officials several times to seek action to end the occupation, but their responses pointed to the OPS as the agent responsible for deciding on actions. Yet in his daily televised conferences, the chief of police consistently indicated a lack of capacity to address the issues, until his eventual resignation. It is only when the Emergencies Act was implemented that we saw actions taken that provided relief, calmed our anxieties, and restored normalcy to our daily lives."

– Paul

"I left my home twice (with my pets in tow) due to fear, anxiety, and feelings of helplessness, as I watched my neighbourhood transform. I felt abandoned by the police, who I once thought were there to keep us safe and protected."

– Mary

"The neighbourhood was living in a state of siege and felt cut off. There was no delivery into this neighbourhood, there was no service from OC Transpo, Para Transpo, there was no service from taxis or Uber or anything. There were no police so there was very much a sense of lawlessness and being cut off from the rest of the city."

– Tim

"I don't think the police have a resource problem, they have a resource allocation problem. As I've said before, Black people continued to be harassed and stopped during the occupation, so obviously there's a lot of police dollars going to that but there aren't a lot of police dollars going to hate. (...) It all goes together and connects. So I started feeling abandoned, too. Again, the Ottawa police, even out of this, continues to abandon its citizens because I pay taxes to them, too."

– Erica Ifill

"I saw the police chief give vehicles and trucks charter rights that only citizens, human beings, possess. He said it over and over again in public statements. Those false claims emboldened the actual protesters or insurrectionists with misinformation."

– Terry

"What was the point of reporting anything? I just kept seeing them [police] and they were looking at the trucks. They just never seemed to be looking at residents."

– Andrea

"On the street, there were bonfires, there were propane tanks beside the bonfires amongst a whole bunch of vehicles. And as I'm walking up Kent, I'm like I cannot believe this is happening but what am I supposed to do about it? I thought the responsible thing to do is to call 3-1-1. 3-1-1 directed me to call 9-1-1. When I called 9-1-1, the operator said that they were aware what was going on on Kent Street and the fires were probably lit because people were cold, so I felt like an idiot for even bringing it up because the authorities clearly were aware but nothing was going to happen."

— Kim

"We couldn't help but tell ourselves that the reason the world allowed this far-right 'Freedom Convoy' to park in our backyards was because the people of Overbrook and Vanier don't matter to anyone in the world or the city. People in prominent positions in the city still forget to mention and include us when they're out there telling their version of the events."

— Anonymous

"I was anxious, stressed, and afraid due to the event, and then I felt abandoned by the City and police, frustrated with the lack of response, and helpless to change anything. I felt like I did not matter, and like the City, province, and police were more interested in minimizing any negative media than intervening."

— Lisa

"It was like they were holding us hostage and the different levels of government that they were trying to negotiate with didn't care about us. It felt like no one cared what was happening. I called the police every day and asked if they were doing anything. They would respond that it was a peaceful protest to which I disagreed. I would ask every time if my complaints were being written down. Each time the answer was no. I called my local councillor, my MP, MPP and no one got back to me; only a kind office assistant for my local MP who could only listen to me. He was very nice but he couldn't do anything."

— Rachel

"Many businesses, including the main grocery store for the area at Bank and Somerset, closed at times. This was disruptive, and there were no official ways of ensuring that people could access food and medications"

– Lisa

"A friend and I went for a walk about five days into it. There were three community police officers along Slater whom my friend stopped to ask questions such as and including, "Why aren't the police doing anything?" First, they said there was nothing they could do/nothing could have been done to prevent it. Then one officer had the gall to throw that question back at us, "What would you do!?", angrily. To which of course we responded, "you could have set up roadblocks, you can start handing out fines, arresting people, stop being chummy with the offenders, etc." They didn't like that and we were basically made to feel like we were bothering them and that we shouldn't be questioning their actions/lack of action."

– Anonymous

"The first weekend when the protesters arrived that date is a solemn one for Canadian Muslims. It's the day when a white supremacist gunman walked into a mosque in Quebec City in 2017 and gunned down six Muslim men who were worshipping. January 29 2022 marked the fifth anniversary of that horrible day and Canadians United against Hate along with members of Ottawa's faith communities planned to hold an interfaith vigil. I was in regular contact with councillor Catherine McKenney and a liaison officer from the Ottawa Police discussing issues of location, logistics, and participant safety as the weekend approached. There were frequent communications to discuss social media chatter from protesters who were threatening violence. I was advised by the Ottawa police liaison to cancel the event given the increasing likelihood of violence by protesters and concerns for the safety of attendees."

– Fareed

"I did contact police and the response I got was 'sorry, we can't come to where you are right now, you're on your own, we don't have resources to help the people of Ottawa! I was blown away!"

– Troy

"Our most challenging day was likely on February 5 when we decided to continue holding our COVID vaccination clinic on the Saturday for children 5 to 12. We had been planning this for several weeks and we knew that for many families we were the most convenient and accessible location for vaccinations. There were individuals setting open fire pits in front of our offices while drinking beer and so, concerned for the safety of individuals coming for appointments, I called Ottawa Police to address the fires in front of our building and was told in no uncertain terms that there would be no response because we were in the red zone. In response, I tweeted a picture of the fires that were happening and saying that we had been told that there would be no response and within an hour there was a response from police and bylaw who thankfully did move the individuals with the fires along but also ticketed a family who had been parked in an accessible spot to bring their kids to vaccination."

— Michelle Hurtubise

"All of the focus was on Wellington Street. Everybody including police felt that their responsibility was to Wellington Street and nobody considered what was happening in the residential area even after weeks. I remember once calling the community police officer that had been assigned to me and I said "look I have to go to this building, people are really worried, will you come with me?" She said "I'd love to but I just got reassigned to the occupation so I have to go up to Wellington. I said "the occupation is happening on Metcalfe too, it's where I'm asking you to come." So even in their minds, when they were responding to the occupation, they were responding to Parliament, what was happening up on the Hill on Wellington. I'm not certain that even to this day that there is a clear recognition of what happened to people."

— Catherine McKenney

"Transit was just a lockjam with all the detour routes and cancellations. We had many residents, a couple of examples on Rideau Street, they needed Para Transpo. They couldn't get Para Transpo in the zone, they couldn't get to Para Transpo... and these were for grocery shopping, doctor visits. They were not just wanting to get on a bus. These were for essential access and services."

— Mathieu Fleury

"Because the City abandoned the response to a police command structure, if someone was calling 3-1-1 and someone had been parking illegally, for instance on a sidewalk in Lowertown, the operator of 3-1-1 would ask a question: "please describe the vehicle". I have never heard that in 12 years. You call 3-1-1, say "there is someone breaking the parking by-laws", they send by-law and they deal with it. It became a script from 311. If the vehicle happened to have 'freedom' or flags, they would take in the complaint and pass it on to the command centre. The command centre only cared about Wellington Street."

– Mathieu Fleury

"When people weren't allowed to bring fuel in anymore, I saw people walking in giant cans of gasoline and saw, literally down the same block, a parked OPP car. I went and told them "hey, those people that you can literally see right there are bringing fuel in". They told me it wasn't their jurisdiction and I should talk to OPS. So I walked another half block until I saw an OPS car, told OPS, and they told me it wasn't their jurisdiction and I should go to OPP. I don't think anyone knew what was going on."

– Anonymous

"It was not okay that the police directed the traffic to Kent Street, to Lowertown, and to Overbrook, the three poorest parts of town. It is not okay that the occupation happened in Somerset Ward which is the poorest ward in town. It is not okay that Chief Sloly and Mayor Watson allowed this to continue."

– Paul

"On one occasion, a vehicle inched right up towards myself and another pedestrian. Immediately after that, on my walk home, there were a couple of cruisers right by the station and I told them about what had just happened. They said 'well did you get hurt?' and I said 'no I didn't get hurt, but this is what happened', but there was nothing further done or asked of me."

– Jim

"Many of the concerns and anecdotes of this report were relayed to various OPS members who often parked there. Though the officers were respectful and empathic, their constant refrain until the final weekend of the occupation was that they didn't have adequate resources to deal with the challenges of the occupation, and they could only respond in accord with directives from their higher authorities."

– Jim

"We had no or little help from the police or the City. I complained about the noise to the City of Ottawa By-law on January 30th with no effective action or response from by-law officers – no follow-up. I made calls, filed online reports about the noise, nothing. I reported the trucks parked on Queen blocking the Lyon Street OC Transpo bus and idling their engines. There were gas cans littered on that street. I took photos. Nobody gave a crap. No one came, nothing was done. I asked an officer on patrol to investigate. She called it in. I waited for an hour outdoors, nothing. I even called the RCMP about the gas cans. Nothing was done."

– Dawn

"At one point, I had to venture out of my apartment to buy food at the grocery on Metcalfe and Lisgar. As I approached Metcalfe, the fumes were choking from the huge trucks and the blaring horns were deafening. There were no police in sight. A group of truckers entered the grocery store and loudly proceeded to make their way through the store. A shopper approached them and asked them to mask. They proceeded to loudly harass her. I went to get the store manager who told me he could not do anything, the police were not responding to any of his calls."

– Judy

"If anything, area police, security agencies, and political officials designated to uphold peace, order and good government failed downtown Ottawa residents. They did not perform well and block the hundreds of vehicles entering downtown to get near Parliament Hill."

– Ken Rubin

What we heard

THE COMMUNITY MOBILIZED

As is often the case when a community faces hardship, during the convoy occupation Ottawa residents came together in a wide variety of ways to provide each other with assistance, support, protection and a sense of solidarity. The OPC heard repeatedly that for many people this remarkable, and often courageous, community mobilization was the only encouraging bright spot during the occupation.

The impetus to mobilize and to assist each other came as a direct response to three other dimensions that have been covered earlier in this report: occupation, violence and abandonment. Given that neighbourhoods had been occupied to the extent that streets were impassable, frightening and dangerous, given that people anticipated and were experiencing various forms of violence, and given that residents and business owners felt that they had been abandoned by police and government officials responsible for upholding the law; it was understandable and inevitable that community-level mobilization sought to fill that void, so as to provide both reassurance and practical support to those in need.

Many people launched or became involved in initiatives to provide protection to people who were at risk. This took the form of well-publicized community safety walks, including some that were organized by downtown City councillors, as well as unofficial and spontaneous accompaniment for

people who were fearful or nervous about walking through areas occupied by the convoy. People also made an effort to check in on neighbours who they knew were particularly vulnerable, including the elderly and people with disabilities.

Among the most serious challenges and concerns faced by many people during the convoy occupation was simply being able to access and obtain groceries and other necessities, including prescriptions and other critical health supplies from pharmacies. Most stores in Centretown were closed or operating with significantly reduced hours. The Rideau Centre was closed throughout the entire occupation, which was unprecedented in their forty-year history. It was intimidating and often not physically possible for many people, especially those with mobility limitations, to reach the few locations that remained open or to travel to other parts of Ottawa to obtain what they needed. Para Transpo, which is relied upon by many people with disabilities and the elderly, suspended its operations during the occupation.

People banded together, therefore, to assist those who were not readily able to access food, medicines and other essentials. That included remarkable efforts within the disability community to prepare and distribute meals to other people with disabilities. Within condominium and apartment buildings residents spearheaded informal arrangements to essentially share provisions with each other.

Many people were concerned about what they perceived to be a failure by authorities to properly assess and document human rights abuses and other harms associated with the convoy occupation. Alongside the coverage of the convoy by journalists from mainstream media outlets, who were often threatened, insulted and accosted while reporting, we heard about important community-level initiatives by journalists who focused on ensuring that the experiences of overlooked and marginalized residents received attention. We heard from people who spent a considerable amount of time monitoring social media, taking photos of the licence plates of illegally parked trucks, and documenting what was happening on the streets. The OPC has in fact been able to review and assess some of that information and found it to be very helpful.

Many people mounted or took part in protests about or even against the convoy. Some people did so in small numbers and even on their own, courageously standing in the heart of occupied areas near Parliament Hill or other locations in downtown Ottawa, with signs expressing opposition to the occupation. We heard from people who regularly protested in front of the headquarters of Ottawa Police Services, seeking to draw attention to the lack of enforcement action by police.

Community Solidarity Ottawa, which brought together activists from labour unions and community groups, organized a march from Lansdowne to the edge of Centretown that attracted thousands on February 12, and other events and rallies on subsequent weekends to resist the occupation and promote solidarity.

We also heard from a number of people who were involved in what came to be known as the "Battle of Billings Bridge" protest on February 13, a remarkable example of community mobilization that blocked a significant number of vehicles from entering the downtown core and joining the occupation.


Many programs and services offered by community

organizations were suspended or scaled back during the occupation because of safety concerns and also the inability of staff and volunteers to be able to reach the premises. We did hear, however, about determined efforts by some organizations to continue to offer some of their programs, particularly for vulnerable members of the community. Notably, they did so with little or no support or protection from police or government.

There was also community mobilization in the legal sphere. A truly herculean initiative to initiate a daunting class action lawsuit, in a very short timeframe, which served as the basis of a court application for an injunction to stop the blaring of horns, was a particularly inspiring example. Courageously led by a young woman, Zexi Li, on behalf of downtown residents, the case was brought by a small group of pro bono lawyers at Champ and Associates, located in Centretown. We heard of the many ways in which community members and volunteers assisted the legal team, including distributing information directly to truckers, offering help with legal advice and research, and even providing security patrols for the law office.

Amidst the trauma and harms that came with the occupation, violence and abandonment associated with the convoy, these many examples truly stand out as reminders of the considerable potential, tremendous value, and concrete impact of community mobilization.

A video compilation of testimonies OPC heard is available [here](#).



“For the duration of this occupation, I had my phone on 24 hours a day. I was scrambling to get food to people who were afraid to leave their home.”

— Troy

“I need you to understand that Centretown is not a bunch of empty office buildings. It is full of people.”

— Amy

“As tensions in the city escalated, the people at our rooming house made an unspoken rule to never roam the streets alone. If a guy went out, someone went with them. It just made everyone’s lives easier and none of us wanted to see our neighbours harassed, taunted, or god forbid, injured.”

— Allan

“My building is full of seniors so some of us residents got together to offer any sort of assistance we could to fellow neighbours, like picking up meds or food for them, etc.”

— Anonymous

“Devonshire Public School requested assistance of bodies on the streets for mornings and afternoons from the Hintonburg Community Association – after two mothers and their children were harassed for wearing masks by convoy participants. One incident occurred in front of the school, and the other close to Rosemount at Wellington. At seven o’clock in the morning, we stood out on the corners. We were not counter-protesting. We were just there to make sure that the parents of those young primary school children were not harassed or intimidated.”

— Stephanie

"We sustained a program that ran for six days each week throughout the occupation. Roughly 50 percent of our requests came from ODSP recipients. Many of our recipients had limited mobility using devices like wheelchairs and walkers. These recipients told me that the convoy made the city unsafe for them."

– Ro

"Q: You said you protested because you felt powerless and angry. Did you also feel scared?"

A: I did, absolutely I felt scared. I felt scared for people in my community but I feel like at that time people needed some sort of hope and some sort of symbol of resistance or some sort of somebody doing something, anything."

– Mat

"I've had wonderful citizens of this city wearing head coverings pull up in their vehicles, roll their windows down and thank us for being there [counter-protesting in front of OPS headquarters] when they did not feel safe."

– Clayton

"I started to get updates from residents closer to the staging area at the Hampton Inn parking lot. This is when I realized that we would have to be our own sources of intelligence if we wanted to survive this thing because there was zero communication coming from any level of government. We became glued to our smartphones and mobile devices. The sparse reporting on the occupation given by news outlets was providing a very broken picture of what was happening in our neighbourhood but it was at least better than nothing."

– Anonymous

"One thing that I witnessed during the occupation is that people were craving the space to have that story shared. People were dying to speak to someone who would listen. That Twitter space was supposed to be an hour, it lasted two hours and 45 minutes because we just felt that we needed to hear everybody."

– Erica Ifill

"Some of my amazing organizer friends in the Centretown Helpers Discord set up a worker relief fund that raised thousands of dollars for people in the downtown area and they did disperse that money so again we're seeing grassroots reacting much faster than any level of government did."

– Ro

"A beautiful thing that came out of the disaster of the convoy was neighbours coming together to support each other and developing bigger bonds. To me that was the overriding thing I walked away with, when all hell breaks loose you come together as a community and that's where you can find safety. That's where we found safety and action, it wasn't from our governments and it wasn't from the police."

— Judy

"Over the course of many intense days of work as we endeavoured to pull together all of the necessary plaintiffs, evidence, legal arguments and paperwork in support of the injunction application, the stress was incredible, including mounting concerns about our own safety. What was heartening, however, was how assistance kept coming from unexpected corners. Zexi Li courageously agreed to be the lead plaintiff. People volunteered to hand deliver legal notices to truckers. Residents shared tips and information and evidence. Commissionaires carried out security patrols of our law office in their free time. Lawyers in Ottawa and from across the country shared advice and precedents. We would not have been able to pursue the injunction without the community coming together."

— Paul Champ

"I had to regularly cross the red zone on foot so I made it a habit to record everything I could see and posted it on my personal social media. Over time, I acquired a rather large following which relied on my posts to understand if it was safe for them to work and visit downtown given that reporters themselves could not provide footage. I started receiving a lot of comments and messages from residents, particularly members of the LGBT community like myself, who were thanking me for keeping them informed."

— Mathew

"I didn't know that I was going to be joining a blockade to begin with. I thought I was just going to be joining a protest because I knew that I needed to do something. I couldn't sit by with one of the worst injustices that I've ever witnessed in my life personally up front."

— Paul

"[On the Battle of Billings Bridge] I think it was over a thousand people. We stood there all day, it was the most organic thing that I've ever participated in. It was not a planned event. There was no one organizer. These were folks who showed up and were at a breaking point with the lack of action by government, by the lack of action and complicity of the police in all of this. We're taking a stand and saying enough is enough. And I truly feel like that was the domino that knocked everything over, that led to the end of this occupation."

— Andrea

What we heard

THE CONVOY WAS NOT WITHOUT ITS SUPPORTERS

The OPC heard from Ottawa residents who were supportive of the convoy. Indeed, two hearings were devoted specifically to convoy supporters. As well, two witnesses in other sessions misled Commission staff in advance of their appearance, falsely indicating they were convoy critics, as they believed we would not be willing to hear from convoy supporters. Yet that was not the case.

The OPC's mandate is not tied to opposition to the convoy. We have been tasked with examining the impact of the convoy on affected communities in Ottawa. That includes not only detrimental impact, but the possibility of positive impact as well.

Supporters were urged to focus their comments and submissions on the question of the impact of the convoy on the community. The OPC's mandate does not extend to debates about vaccine science or the validity of COVID-19 masking and other public health protocols.

Convoy supporters generally described that the two years of COVID-19 restrictions, leading up to the arrival of the convoy, had been very difficult for them. Because of their opposition to vaccines, masking and other rules, they may have lost their jobs, suffered financially, faced difficulties operating their business, been required to keep their children home from school, been barred from various public events and

establishments, been unable to conduct research required for university studies, or been alienated from family, friends and neighbours. One convoy supporter said that she felt she had become a pariah.

As such, convoy supporters told the OPC that the arrival of the convoy in Ottawa felt akin to liberation for them, and that they were uplifted by the fact that a significant number of people in the city were actively and publicly expressing views similar to their own. They felt welcomed, after two years of feeling excluded. Many convoy supporters described the atmosphere in downtown Ottawa as being similar to Canada Day celebrations, referring for instance to times when a crowd of people would spontaneously sing O Canada. They stressed that children were welcome and that many families took part.

Convoy supporters generally disagreed with assertions that the convoy had harmful impacts on the community. They said their own experiences of taking part in the convoy were uniformly festive, celebratory and inclusive. They rejected suggestions that the tone of the convoy was in any way aggressive, racist or violent. Some indicated that they had welcomed convoy participants into their own homes.

Such concerns as the impact of impassable streets and incessant horns were generally dismissed as inconveniences or annoyances which should be expected in the downtown of the nation's capital – or that paled in comparison with their own suffering

during two years of COVID lockdowns. When asked about the impact of Confederate and Nazi flags, and other banners and posters with racist or hateful messages, convoy supporters said those were exceptional occurrences not reflective of the views of the majority of convoy organizers and participants.

To the extent that some convoy supporters agreed, to a limited degree, that conditions may have been difficult for some downtown residents, they generally insisted that the blame for that lay not with the convoy but with government officials for imposing COVID-19 vaccine and masking mandates in the first place, and for refusing to meet with convoy leaders once the convoy was underway. Most convoy supporters expressed strong disagreement with the invocation of the Emergencies Act and the subsequent police enforcement that led to the dispersal of convoy participants and the removal or departure of trucks from the downtown core.

"Myself, I lived in fear for two years, I was discriminated against for two years and I feel that the truckers freed me from all that."

— Christine

"I know that there were many protests before January but they were totally ignored by the media. That is why people like me were frustrated. We were not being heard. I believe that people cheered on the trucks, by the side of the road in the dead of winter, because it gave them hope. I was so happy to welcome them to Ottawa. I wish I could have done more."

— Anonymous

"The Freedom Convoy was the proudest I have ever been to be Canadian. Peaceful people coming together, supporting each other, to speak against a government that has done such wrong and criminal acts against its people."

— Julia

"The trucks were loud, and it was very hard to sleep, I will admit that... I'm sure that having trucks parked outside of your building honking, even through the day, even if it's not while you're sleeping but the other 18 hours of the day, I'm sure that that is jarring to your sense of life while you sit at home. I'm sorry that all those people in the downtown core got caught in the crossfire between the government and people not being able to discuss this."

— Zachary

"All I want to say is that I went almost everyday and it was the best experience in my life. It gave me hope! That was a peaceful protest. So much love, smiles and unity. Such a positive experience!"

— Anne

"When I went to Parliament on the day the truckers arrived, it was loud and these people looked into my eyes and they told me 'you have value, you do.' 'You did not deserve to be fired and you did not deserve to be treated like a pariah.' 'I will stay here until someone comes and talks to us because this is such an injustice that I can't just sit by,' and I can't express to you how much this meant to me in that moment after months of just feeling beaten down"

— Stephanie

"It's hard to put into words my experience of participating in the Freedom Convoy in downtown Ottawa. There was this air of hope surrounding us. Finally, people who just wanted freedom of choice were assembling together and felt free for the first time in two years."

— Beth

"The trauma was the months before where my job was lost, where I had to make decisions that were very difficult and that implicated myself and my family. The Convoy as a result was part of the healing for me."

— MBL

"I am also very sorry to the residents of Ottawa who had their lives turned upside down for those three weeks of the convoy, who had their homes filled with exhaust and had loud noises enter their homes. I'm very very sorry for all of it."

— Stephanie

"I received free hugs, hot dogs, and hot chocolate. I saw supporters, teachers, farmers, doctors, and nurses hand in hand cleaning up the streets, feeding the homeless, and giving out free haircuts. I witnessed one lane for emergency vehicles being kept open at all times and I was given free earplugs. Never once did I feel unsafe due to the Freedom Convoy. In fact I felt a sense of pride and hope in my country that I haven't felt for a long time."

— Christine

Commissioner's Reflections

MONIA MAZIGH: INVISIBILITY

At the OPC's first day of public hearings, an Ottawa resident emotionally recounted to the audience some of her experience with the convoy. I remember being stuck with one short story she shared with us.

"There was a schizophrenic man in my neighbourhood. In the day, he used to walk around and at night he slept in the parking lot. The parking lot was his home. When the convoy came to town, the man disappeared."

I was very moved by this story. What happened to that man? Was he supported by some mental health services during those three long weeks? Was he scared or intimidated by the new environment that had "occupied" his neighbourhood? Where did he disappear?

I will likely never know what happened to this man, nor would the woman who lived in his neighbourhood and was used to seeing him on a daily basis. But I know very well what happened to me.

On February 13, 2022, I was scrolling my Twitter feed and trying to figure out how the ongoing "Ottawa occupation" by hundreds of truckers was being handled by City officials, police officers and politicians. One of the tweets mentioned that some

residents were about to join a protest near the Billings Bridge shopping centre at the intersection of Bank Street and Riverside Drive.

I was tempted to join the protesters. In the last two decades, as a resident of Ottawa, I have joined many protests in the streets of downtown Ottawa. Some of them were more tense than others. But even when police officers would follow us and take pictures of us, I never felt intimidated. Even when we chanted solidarity slogans in front of the US Embassy with the RCMP officers surrounding us in their patrol cars, I didn't feel scared. In one of those protests, a few steps from Parliament Hill near the Centennial Flame, I vividly remember being shocked at seeing parliamentary security forces holding military guns and staring at us. But even that didn't prevent me from continuing the protest with my fellow citizens.

But that day in February, sitting on my living room couch and reading the tweets about protesting, aware of the presence of the trucks, and contemplating the idea of joining them, I felt scared. What if the headscarf that I wear as a visibly Muslim woman was interpreted by some of the truckers as a provocation? What if I was physically or verbally attacked?

After a long hesitation, I decided to stay home. I wasn't sure I would be safe. Taking a personal and difficult decision, I erased my presence from the public. I became invisible. I deliberately disappeared from the public space.

This idea of “disappearance” from the public space came to haunt me after I heard the story of the schizophrenic man who disappeared from his neighbour’s sight.

Whether against his will, for his own safety, or whether, like me, of his own free will, the convoy had made, not only him but literally thousands of people “disappear”, scared to go out, feeling like a hostage in their own home, or deciding to temporarily move to stay with family or friends in other parts of the city.

Although I don’t live in Centretown or Lowertown or any parts of the red zone, or in other impacted neighbourhoods like Vanier or Overbrook, and even though I consider myself to be privileged, I didn’t want to be “visible”. Deep inside me, I understood that my presence wouldn’t be welcome. I had to stay home.

The Ottawa occupation forced many residents to take themselves out of the public space so they could feel safe. But at what cost?

Between the end of September and mid-December 2022, I had the privilege and the honour to hear many stories from Ottawa residents who were severely impacted by the convoy of truckers. Several of those testimonies were resonant with this sense of “self-erasure”, with disappearance.

Meanwhile, the streets which used to be shared by different people from different socio-economic backgrounds or diverse ethnic groups became populated by people who behaved like they were entitled to live in and occupy the surrounding neighbourhoods without the consent or approval of the residents.

This “occupation” gave rise to a sense of lawlessness. Many times, residents told us about “not leaving their apartments” or cancelling their medical appointments or not going for their daily walk. If they dared to go out and walk to the grocery store to quickly grab some milk or bread, they would be inevitably followed by a group of protesters, on foot or driving their terrifying

trucks, who would mock them for wearing masks or frighten them with speeding trucks and dangerous moves. I recall one resident telling us “it felt like they owned the place”. “They” referred to the protesters who spent three weeks occupying the streets, dangerously setting fires, drinking during all hours of the day, and defecating and urinating in the snow and on private properties (even on the National War Memorial).

The “usual” consequences for such unacceptable and abhorrent behaviour were not enforced by any level of policing: not by the Ottawa Police, the OPP, or the RCMP. The civic expectations that we grow up learning about, regarding obeying the laws, sharing the public space, and respecting others were gone. Those norms also disappeared. Worse, when some of the residents tried to reach out to institutions like the Ottawa Police Service, by-law officers or politicians, they rarely received any response or assistance. They very rarely felt heard.

The convoy occupation did not only have huge impacts on people living and working in those central neighbourhoods, but Ottawa businesses also suffered too. We heard from Mathieu Fleury, former City councillor for the Rideau-Vanier ward. He talked of the fact that the Rideau Centre, an iconic Ottawa commercial centre that is usually open all year round had to be closed throughout the entirety of the occupation. This forced closure made the centre’s many employees, shoppers and visitors, and even the “homeless people” who rely on it as a place of warmth and company, all “disappear” from the city.

What I first thought was a personal impact, due to my own visibility, stopping me from joining the Billings Bridge protest, was in fact the norm for countless residents of Ottawa who became “invisible” overnight, all because another group of Canadians decided that they deserved to be seen and deserved to be heard very loudly with air and train horns emitting noise in the range of 100 to 150 decibels.

The experience gives rise to so many questions. How can we live in a democratic country and accept each other's divergent opinions and points of view without infringing on each others' rights? What should be considered a "state of emergency" such that the City of Ottawa triggers its comprehensive emergency preparedness plan, as it normally does in cases of flooding or other natural disasters? What is considered to be a "peaceful protest" and what is a disturbance of public order? How can we ensure that our City officials communicate efficiently with police services and with affected residents? And finally in the capital region of a federal country, like Ottawa, how can we make sure that the relevant agencies work together to protect the "reasonable" right of those who protest while also upholding the right of residents to live freely and peacefully?

These are fundamental and crucial questions that our report will try to address. I certainly continue to reflect on these questions, keeping in mind what we have heard from those who lived it firsthand. We will eventually present recommendations, based on the wisdom and experience of downtown residents, in hopes of preventing similar protests and events degenerating in the same way, keeping thousands of residents invisible, imprisoned and trapped in their own homes.

Commissioner's Reflections

ALEX NEVE: THE ABANDONMENT OF HUMAN RIGHTS

We do not matter. We do not count. We have been abandoned.

That is likely the most common sentiment we have heard, over and over, during these past months of hearings and community consultations. Abandoned. I would not be able to count how many times that has come up.

We have heard that from the residents of Centretown, Lowertown, Vanier and Overbrook. We have heard that from the downtown business community. We have heard that from the City councillors who represented them.

And every time we have heard it, I have been struck how deeply that sentiment speaks to a failure of human rights. Over the course of more than three decades of frontline human rights research I have carried out across Canada and around the world, that anguished and raw sense of abandonment is what I have universally heard expressed, as I have investigated unjust imprisonment, forced displacement, armed conflict, discrimination and inequality, torture, and other human rights violations.

That is no surprise. After all, it truly goes to the heart of human rights. Human rights are, at their core, a reflection of human dignity. To have one's rights recognized and upheld is to feel acknowledged and

respected. It is to feel dignified and included. To have one's rights trampled and violated is to feel disregarded and dismissed. It is to feel stripped of dignity. It is absolutely to feel abandoned.

That is certainly so when authorities themselves commit the human rights violations. Could there be any more glaring example of contempt for human dignity and abandonment? But it is equally true when the abuses are committed by private groups and individuals, and officials do not care or try hard enough to provide protection. In both instances, the state is responsible for upholding human rights. In both instances, the failure to do so callously abandons people and communities to their own fate.

It is a sombre realization, to know that thousands of people, only a 15-minute walk from where I live, not only felt but truly were completely abandoned, in the face of what for many of them was the most disruptive, threatening and fearful experience of their lives. Abandoned by police, by government, by public officials and, in a sense, abandoned by society at large.

In some ways, for many people being abandoned was more galling and upsetting than the harms and violence of the convoy itself. It was unfathomable.

People were not abandoned because they did not look for assistance and support. They were not abandoned because they remained silent and were somehow complacent.

Far from it.

They repeatedly approached police and bylaw officers on the street. They submitted numerous complaints about harassment, assault and public safety concerns by phone, online and by going directly to the police station. They took to social media, and were interviewed by journalists. They mounted their own public protests or counter-protests. They pleaded for help from their elected representatives: municipal, provincial and federal. They made calls to the social service agencies they normally rely on for support. And they turned to each other, especially when it became clear that authorities were not going to assist.

A few officials did heed these urgent pleas. We have heard that in particular with respect to the downtown City councillors at the time, particularly Catherine McKenney and Mathieu Fleury. Some agencies valiantly stayed open and did their best to provide assistance.

But overwhelmingly, almost universally, these requests for help and calls for action went unheard and were ignored; abandoning a community of thousands, residents and business owners alike, to cope on their own.

I was so struck by the stark example, described to us by Michelle Hurtubise, the Executive Director of the Centretown Community Health Centre, of the stunning response she received to a compelling request for police assistance. The Centre was carrying out an important COVID vaccination clinic for children between the ages of 5 to 12 on the second Saturday during the occupation. However, as that Saturday morning came around, convoy participants had set up on the street and sidewalk in front of the centre, where they parked their vehicles, lit an open fire with propane tanks nearby, and were drinking beer.

Understandably worried about the evident safety and security concerns, with dozens of young children soon to show up, Michelle made a phone call to ask

the police to intervene. Her request was inexplicably rebuffed and she was told that because the centre was situated within the red zone, they would not be taking action. The police's absurd position seemed to be that those who were most likely to need their support were the ones expressly excluded from receiving it, because of geography. Abandoned. It was only after Michelle took to her personal twitter account that the police, likely feeling rather embarrassed, did send someone to assist.

If dozens of children could be abandoned, who could count on being protected?

The Centretown Community Health Centre's experience played out similarly for many other individuals and organizations who made repeated requests to police or bylaw offices for assistance, including when they had been assaulted or threatened. What they consistently heard back, however, was that police were waiting for their orders, were on standby, were just observing, and did not want to risk provoking the convoy participants and inflaming the situation. All of that against a backdrop of reports of truckers being directed and even escorted into the downtown by police, and of some officers having chummy conversations, laughing and even taking selfies with convoy participants.

We had focused sessions with residents in various apartment and condo buildings at the very heart of the occupied section of downtown, who were clearly extra vulnerable. Many were elderly, with limited mobility. A significant number were living with disabilities and faced challenges buying groceries, filling prescriptions, and using accessible transportation. Many of the people living in Centretown and Vanier are racialized or from the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, and of course easily half of the area's residents are women; all of whom were at heightened risk of being targeted for harassment and abuse by some convoy participants.

We asked whether they had heard proactively from police? Had community police officers reached out

to ensure they were safe, and to ask whether they had any pressing security needs? We kept asking the question, perhaps hopeful that someone would describe a positive experience. None did. All talked instead of being abandoned because they clearly did not matter enough to the powers that be.

I absolutely realize and accept that the convoy occupation presented police and government with complex and unique challenges. No matter how complicated or unique, however, there is no excuse for overlooking human rights responsibilities. In fact, those are precisely the times when a commitment to human rights is more important than ever.

What has become distressingly evident to me, however, is that human rights were simply not in the frame at all as plans for anticipating, responding to and resolving the convoy crisis were being developed and operationalized.

Yet, when officials abandon human rights, they abandon people. I have heard, witnessed and documented that abandonment in communities around the world. It is never understandable and definitely never acceptable, anywhere. Certainly not in Ottawa.

Commissioner's Reflections

DEBBIE OWUSU-AKYEEAH: HYPOCRISY

Having lived in Ottawa for over a decade, I have become accustomed to the various stereotypes of our beloved "government town". Stereotypes that this is a quiet city, very individualistic, and lacking imagination, which often push young people, creatives and activists to move to other cities. From the outside looking in, it might be hard to imagine community-centricity being a part of the culture here – let alone during times of crisis.

Looking back at the multitude of stories we heard during the OPC's first phase, I cannot help but reflect on the many accounts from residents of the hypocrisy they witnessed from decision-makers. But, also Ottawa residents' direct, or indirect, response to the hypocrisy by showing in SO many ways that community keeps people safe – even in our quiet government town.

"As the 'convoy' settled into downtown Ottawa, it was difficult not to notice the troubling differences in the way police welcomed these 'protesters' and the militarized speed of police responses to BIPOC-led protests and to the confrontational way the RCMP approaches land-defenders including the Wet'suwet'en First Nation."

When I look at my initial reaction to the occupation, I couldn't help but think about the stark difference between municipal decision-makers' (specifically our mayor and Ottawa Police Service) response to what was a "protest" to the many actions I have participated in in this city and have even helped organize. Actions that other young Black, Indigenous, and marginalized folks participated in. It wasn't that long ago we witnessed the OPS response to Black and Indigenous organizers protesting police brutality by shutting down Laurier Avenue through a sit-in. Not for a month, but for a couple of hours. There was a much more direct and aggressive disruption of that form of dissent by OPS compared to what we witnessed during the occupation in February. This is one of MANY instances of this form of dissent being met with more brute police force. The fact that this example, but also the general comment around how this city treats different forms of dissent, was mentioned so frequently in the stories we heard shows that there is a collective sense and deeper understanding that these institutions fail us by intention and design.

I think it's important to draw the connection between the hypocrisy and the communities' response to it. It was a common theme with much to unpack.

"Doesn't escape you what their politics are and what their adjoining beliefs are."

We heard from so many different residents from many different backgrounds. What was clear from their narratives was that occupation impacted people differently based on their social location. What we heard, and this report, weaves together how those stories connect.

For example, the focus groups with members of Ottawa's 2SLGBTQIA+ communities. As a queer person myself, I felt really connected with the people who shared their perspectives, as they resonated so closely with mine. We heard stories and analysis from 2SLGBTQIA+ people, specifically those already tapped into monitoring rhetoric and ideology that may have surrounded the occupation. People who have been steps ahead of even our decision-makers when it came to the intelligence and ideological discourse that surrounded the occupation. Queer and trans community members were at the forefront of documenting and sharing it online. It was very important to hear how queer and trans people reacted to the hypocrisy and inaction they witnessed, on top of the homophobia and transphobia that permeated the occupation, with community response and mutual aid.

"Disabled people being told their lives don't matter."

This also brings me back to the session we had with community members with disabilities. A session that will forever impact me when I look back and think about how the occupation – similar to the pandemic – opened a curtain to the systemic issues and barriers that already exist within our city. Where the most marginalized people, impacted by physical access barriers and health challenges, required specific attention, service delivery, and information. They were abandoned in a specific way that shows how our municipal institutions are designed to be intentionally ableist. It forced these community members who

were navigating their specific access and barriers challenges, magnified by the physical occupation of the city, to support other disabled people to get food and counselling support. This all while experiencing, as one resident shared with us, "intensification of legislative violence against disabled people". It's why after this session I shared publicly that anyone running in the municipal election, they should pay close attention to the recorded testimonies of these incredible residents. There were so many fundamental policy lessons to be learned about how we should respond and how we care about the most vulnerable people in our communities in times of crisis.

"I will never forgive any of those guys."

We heard from Paul Champ, a human rights lawyer whose firm is representing downtown residents in the convoy class action lawsuit. I was shocked at how emotional his account was. I still feel sadness and anger when I look back at it. He told a story about not only local but cross-country mobilization of information and support to respond to the inaction and hypocrisy of City officials. From the submission of heartbreaking stories by Ottawa residents that fueled the urgency to lawyers as far as Alberta volunteering to provide legal research – communities came together in so many different ways to support each other in collectively responding to what was, and wasn't, happening during the occupation.

What shocked me about his account was what I have personally coined my, "ah-ha" moment: all the work that Paul and his team put into getting an injunction to end the honking was met with vindictiveness from City of Ottawa officials. It showed a further disconnect of City officials with residents that was intentionally driven by those with political power. The City froze Paul's team out of the initial stages of the legal process and acted in counter-purpose by withholding information. It seemed as if the City, incredibly, felt they were in competition with the community. This vindictiveness that targets community leaders and

groups who, through their activism, hold a mirror to the municipal decision-makers is not new. It is a pattern I have seen time and time again. It stifles positive action for the community and is driven by a toxic culture that exists "at the top" of decision-making in Ottawa. This is what caught me by surprise: If a respected white male lawyer can receive the same disdain and vindictiveness experienced by other progressive and marginalized community leaders, what does that say about the willingness of the City to learn from the mistakes of February 2022?

Ottawa is absolutely community-driven, resilient, and passionate about caring for each other – and yes, all while living in a "government town". The stories of the occupation unearthed so much about the power of collective remembering; about how we can inform change through our stories and collective power. What's needed, which this process and the final report will hopefully achieve, is accountability at the top to match the passion of the people.

Elected officials and senior municipal bureaucrats must recognize that residents of Ottawa are not their enemy or competition. They are not a nuisance or inconvenience. They are in service to residents and constituents. When decision-makers treat citizens working to make their city better with contempt, what we get is the utter failure of leadership we witnessed during the convoy occupation.

In reflecting on this, I can't help but think about the opportunities that are now presented to our newly elected City council and mayor. What is the commitment to real cultural change with the new leadership when, during the election, far too many citizens were treated like the enemy? One way to measure that will be through the response to the recommendations that come out of this People's Commission.

Time and a lot of advocacy will tell. I am cautiously optimistic.

Commissioner's Reflections

LEILANI FARHA: OCCUPATION

One of the things I love about Ottawa is the overall friendliness of the people who live here. You're in a line up at the grocery store and suddenly you're trading socials with the person in front of you; you have a household emergency and meals start arriving on your doorstep. I have taken up residence in a few cities in my life, and I'd say, Ottawa is pretty much unparalleled in this respect³. Protests – which are common here – have never disrupted that for me. Until Saturday 29 January 2022, when the trucker convoy arrived.

Almost immediately the city felt decidedly different to me, even in those first days where my only exposure to the protest was through social media, horn blaring heard from afar, and the putrid fumes on the Ottawa Parkway, near my home. It may sound flakey to say there was suddenly a different “vibe”, but, there was suddenly a different vibe, even in my neighbourhood. Hostility, anger, violence and divisiveness became an overlay to the city as a whole. The easy friendliness was somehow tempered. Spontaneous conversations with strangers that invariably occur, became constrained, a little uneasy – whose side are they on? Do they support the convoy or are they opposed to it?

After about a week, the “vibe” morphed into a daily reality, with hostility and anger on our city streets becoming an entrenched feature and media, government officials and local residents referring to the trucker protest as an “occupation”. This caught my attention. I am an Arab-Canadian human rights lawyer with deep connection to Palestine, and I have spent a great deal of both my personal and working life thinking about and advocating against occupation. I have visited the Occupied Palestinian Territories several times. When “occupation” was used to describe what was happening in Ottawa, I admit, I was skeptical. I have seen Israel's ruthless occupation of the West Bank and Gaza up close: the taking over of streets by occupying forces; the erection of checkpoints at major crossings prohibiting travel and severing one part of a region from another; physical threats and humiliation of the local population by occupying forces; the closing down of shops and economic activities and other obstructions of daily life and violations of fundamental rights of the local population such as access to food, medicines, healthcare, education and social supports; the disappearance of people; and an edgy atmosphere – that at any moment the situation could escalate and real harm could be perpetrated by the occupiers against the occupied.

³ I recognize this may not be everyone's experience of Ottawa, especially not for those members of disadvantaged and marginalized groups including Indigenous people, those from racialized communities, people living in homelessness and poverty, 2SLGBTQIA+, particular groups of women, migrants, persons of colour, etc.

I am mindful not to draw false comparisons or to overstate similarities between what the Palestinians suffer and what happened to Ottawa residents during the convoy last year. The situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories is a 55 year+ occupation with grave implications for international humanitarian and human rights law.

That being said, having visited the downtown core several times during the "protest", and having listened to many testimonies at the Ottawa People's Commission, "occupation" is not an unreasonable description of what unfolded for three weeks in the nation's capital.

The testimonies at the OPC hearings revealed some hallmarks of an 'occupation', in particular for those living in the red zone, and for others as well.

Takeover of an area. We heard that main arteries in the core, as well as many residential streets, were completely taken over by trucks and their owners who had not only moved their vehicles into the area but who had set up food halls and open fires on street corners.

Controlling movement. Many testified that mobility into and within the red zone was almost impossible, with trucks even blocking apartment building parking entrances, and that public transportation – including for persons with disabilities – to the downtown core had been suspended.

Intimidation and violence, especially of the already vulnerable. Trucks and truckers were at intersections, on the streets and in stores intimidating local residents including through hateful and menacing commentary, and acts of violence, especially against those wearing masks and those who could be identified as from marginalized groups.

Shutdowns. Shops were forced to shutter, some for the entire three weeks. Where they remained open, workers reported being intimidated and harassed by

members of the convoy.

Significant obstructions to daily life and violations of socio-economic rights. We heard countless reports of obstructions to daily life. Some reported finding it difficult to get to and from medical appointments, others were held hostage in their buildings, afraid or unable to leave, and thus could not access necessary medicines, or even food for themselves and their pets. Low-income residents living outside the downtown core including in Vanier, could not reach the city's three drop-in centres, all of which are in the red zone, preventing them from accessing necessary social supports including daily meals they rely upon for survival.

Disappearances. We heard that members of Ottawa's unsheltered homeless population were displaced from the public locations where they reside and some have not been seen since.

Constant threat of violence. We heard repeatedly that within the red zone residents and those working there experienced anxiety and had a constant sense of unease; that violence and more lawlessness could erupt at any time. Many wondered and worried every time they stepped outside their home, "what's in those trucks?", "what's in those jerry cans?"

The idea that government officials and police would allow Ottawa to be occupied in such a fashion is astounding.

Even more astounding, perhaps, is that at no time did any government officials, save two or three City Councillors, bother to inquire let alone address the needs of everyday residents of Ottawa caught in the cross-fire.

How difficult would it have been for government officials to map the downtown core to identify marginalized groups who might be living there and develop a protection plan; to determine which community services are located in the red zone and

create a plan to ensure they could be accessed; to ensure access to transportation so that those living in the red zone could attend medical appointments and undertake grocery shopping?

The bend-over-backward approach by all orders of government and the police to protect the right of free expression for convoy protesters, which reached absurd heights, stands in stark contrast with the utter failure by governments to ensure that the basic social and economic rights of local residents – particularly marginalized groups – were met. This was a complete abdication of governments' international socio-economic human rights obligations.

Sadly, from my vantage, this is government policy on repeat.

And so, as is often the case in the Canadian context, it was piecemeal, individual acts of charity that filled some of the gaps created by governments failing to meet their human rights obligations to the residents of Ottawa. We heard many stories of how in the vacuum of social support by any level of government, neighbours and friends supported each other, and strangers lent a hand. A volunteer food network was established, to ensure those who couldn't reach a grocery store had enough to eat; friends and family members outside of the red zone offered those trapped downtown alternative accommodation; resident-led safe-walking groups were established to help people get to appointments and buy supplies.

These acts of kindness restore my sense of 'friendly Ottawa.' But they do little to restore my confidence in our government officials to do what governments are supposed to: ensure human well-being and basic human rights, especially in a time of crisis.

Findings

Over the course of four months, the OPC has heard from over 200 people, through public testimony, community consultations, private meetings and written submissions. We are grateful and appreciative for the valuable input we have received. We are cognizant that the public space for discussing the convoy, and public health and other issues related to the convoy, can often be exceptionally polarized and toxic. It is no overstatement, therefore, to say that it is courageous to speak out in that context.

This Part I of our final report offers a compilation of what we have heard from Ottawa residents, organized under four broad themes that have emerged, as well as reflections from the four Commissioners. Part II will build on this and offer deeper analysis of what we have heard and recommendations going forward.

The Commissioners have identified a number of themes that came up frequently in what we have heard, leading to initial findings that will be explored more fully in Part II of our report. Those findings are fourfold:

- The convoy was indeed an occupation of downtown Ottawa, distinguishing it from conventional protests that are commonplace in the city. The **occupation** proceeded in disregard of and disrespect for the leadership and protocols of local First Nations, in land and territory that has never been ceded or surrendered. This characterization of the convoy

as an occupation has implications for how it should have been handled from the outset, and how the consequences for residents, workers and business owners in central Ottawa should have been understood and addressed.

- The convoy was unquestionably **violent**. It was not a peaceful, or mainly peaceful, event as has often been asserted. The strategy of using big rig trucks to blockade streets, and blare horns incessantly at harmful decibel levels, was a violent underpinning to the entire experience. Convoy participants assaulted and accosted residents for wearing masks, intimidated, threatened and insulted with racist, misogynist, Islamophobic, homophobic, transphobic and other taunts, and displayed antisemitic and racist flags, banners and posters. This conduct, and other similar activities constituted violence. A pervasive atmosphere of hate, anger and fear of a truck accident, propane explosion or other catastrophic event, added to the violence.
- The people of Centretown, Lowertown, Vanier and Overbrook were undeniably **abandoned** by police and government. Amidst a strategy that appeared to be designed to offer maximum leeway to the convoy and was focused on avoiding confrontation with convoy participants, for several weeks, police and bylaw officers virtually stopped enforcing the law. At the same time, residents and business owners were provided little or no information about conditions

on the ground and plans for resolving the crisis. This stands in sharp contrast to the swift and often aggressive enforcement action that marks police responses to other disruptive, yet peaceful, protests, and the strong communication from police and government during other crises or disruptive, large-scale public events.

- In the absence of police protection and bylaw enforcement, and faced with the cancellation or dramatic reduction of many essential public services and programs, there was exceptional **community mobilization** to address basic concerns about safety, and to help vulnerable community members access food, medical supplies and other necessities.

The Commission has also heard from some Ottawa residents who welcomed and even participated in the convoy. After two years of feeling ostracized because of their opposition to COVID-19 vaccine, masking and other public health protocols, the convoy's arrival bolstered their spirits. While their views and experience were clearly in the minority, their input is reflected in Part I of our report and will be further considered in Part II.

Our conclusion that the people of downtown Ottawa were abandoned by police, government and some politicians in the face of a violent occupation of their neighbourhoods, requiring community level mobilization to address safety concerns and provide basic needs, leads to our overarching assessment that the convoy and the response to the convoy represent a clear **human rights failure**.

We have heard dimensions of that human rights failure that are attributable to all three orders of government, municipal, provincial and federal, extending to both police and public officials. We have heard of a glaring failure to provide people with timely and reliable information about what was happening. We have also heard that the lack of clarity of roles and ineffective coordination among governments and police forces

contributed significantly to this human rights failure. Residents and business owners witnessed that incoherence and felt its consequences firsthand. The applicable human rights framework and related recommendations to ensure greater regard for human rights obligations by governments and police in the future will be discussed in Part II of our report.

The People's Commission is, at the end of the day, of and for the people of downtown Ottawa. And the work of the OPC has therefore only been possible because of what people have brought to this important initiative. That includes the tremendous work of our staff, the enormous contributions of our Steering Committee and other volunteers, the generosity of donors and supporters, the assistance from community partners and, above all, the courage of everyone who has come forward to share their views and experience. We are particularly appreciative of the role played by the Centretown Community Health Centre, the Commission's home.

The Commissioners have been honoured and humbled to have been asked to take on this role of hearing from the community about the impact of the convoy on their lives and livelihoods, and we are deeply grateful to everyone who has made it possible.