



# Unsanctioned Street Parties: A Challenging Municipal Issue

Each year, municipalities across Canada find themselves bracing for what have become recurring, large-scale unsanctioned street parties, often tied to university events like St. Patrick's Day or Homecoming. While these events may begin as student-led celebrations, they regularly escalate into gatherings that strain municipal resources, disrupt neighbourhoods, and pose considerable public safety risks.

Municipalities such as Halifax, Ottawa, London, Hamilton, Waterloo, and Kingston have all seen variations of the same challenge: thousands of participants crowding into residential areas, leading to excessive noise, property damage, injuries, and police intervention. For many of these cities, there is no easy fix.

## Attempted Solutions

### Fencing and Physical Deterrents

Some cities have attempted to fence off well-known gathering locations. In Waterloo, for example, fencing was used to prevent access to Ezra Avenue, historically the epicentre of street partying. While this didn't stop the celebration, it shifted the crowd to a nearby street.<sup>1</sup>

### Calendar Adjustments

Western University attempted to defuse street party culture by shifting its Homecoming date from late September to

October, starting in 2016. Students responded by creating their own event: "Fake Homecoming," or FOCO, which continued to draw massive crowds independent of the official date change.<sup>2</sup>

### Court Injunctions

In 2025, the City of Waterloo obtained a superior court injunction to prevent the St. Patrick's Day gathering altogether. Despite this, hundreds of partygoers still congregated. The cost of policing the event reached \$308,000, with most expenses tied to overtime and planning.<sup>3</sup>

For more information, please read our case study on this **Claim Case Study: City of Waterloo v. Persons Unknown**.

### Sanctioned Alternatives

Events like Purple Fest, held simultaneously with FOCO at Western, represent attempts to redirect students to controlled, licensed events.<sup>4</sup> While this may reduce the size of street gatherings, it doesn't eliminate them.

### Ticketing and Summons Programs

Kingston's "University District Safety Initiative" empowers police to issue tickets or court summonses directly to participants engaged in nuisance behaviour. This approach is more targeted than general bylaw enforcement and offers some deterrent effect, but the extent of its success remains debated.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> How the unsanctioned St. Patrick's Day parties have played out over the last decade

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/london/western-university-homecoming-unsanctioned-street-parties-2024-1.7336251>

<sup>3</sup> Waterloo's St. Patrick's Day party costs taxpayers \$308K despite court injunction - CambridgeToday.ca

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/london/london-ontario-western-university-purple-garden-fake-homecoming-1.4836766>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.cityofkingston.ca/bylaws-and-animal-services/bylaw-enforcement/university-district-safety-initiative/>

## Cost and Complexity

Responding to unsanctioned street parties represents a significant financial burden for municipalities, with costs typically ranging from \$65,000 to over \$300,000 per event depending on size and duration. The financial impact extends beyond immediate policing to include emergency services, fire department responses, bylaw enforcement, and cleanup operations. These events are not confined to one night; planning begins months in advance, and municipal staff are often diverted from routine work to prepare and respond. What was once considered an exceptional expense has become a recurring annual cost that municipalities must now budget for as a permanent line item.

## Legal and Evidentiary Challenges

Beyond the immediate costs and logistical challenges, municipalities face complex legal hurdles when addressing misconduct at unsanctioned street parties. The heavy use of social media to document and organize these gatherings creates both opportunities and obstacles for municipal authorities. While digital evidence can help identify participants and document violations, social media posts can be unreliable, easily manipulated, or deleted after incidents occur.

Additionally, the high levels of alcohol consumption typical at these events can compromise witness credibility and memory, making it difficult to establish clear facts about incidents. When combined with group dynamics where participants may influence each other's recollections or reporting, municipalities often find themselves with incomplete or conflicting accounts of what actually occurred.<sup>6</sup>

These evidentiary challenges mean that even when clear violations occur, successful prosecution or bylaw enforcement can be difficult to achieve, further limiting the effectiveness of legal deterrents.

## Looking Forward

Progress lies in proactive, coordinated planning and shared responsibility. While unsanctioned events may persist as

an issue, the extent to which they cause a nuisance remains manageable. Many efforts to stop these events have not eradicated them; however, different strategies have often reduced the number of participants and/or allowed the municipality to contain and better monitor these events. For example, Waterloo Regional Chief Mark Crowell stated that, despite costs remaining high and expectations for the injunction not being met, "there were major successes this year (2025), including no serious injuries or property damage".<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, London Police's Project LEARN exemplifies effective proactive planning, this initiative increases police presence downtown and around Western University and Fanshawe College during the first weekends of each academic year, focusing on nuisance parties, open alcohol consumption, and underage drinking. Launched in 2007, Project LEARN demonstrates how sustained partnerships between law enforcement, municipal authorities, and post-secondary institutions can protect public safety while helping students celebrate responsibly.<sup>8</sup>

Beyond proactive measures, academic institutions also play a crucial deterrent role through disciplinary consequences. Following a significant riot at Fanshawe College around 2010-2012, the institution suspended eight students involved in the disturbance<sup>9</sup>, demonstrating how post-secondary schools can actively discourage problematic behavior by ensuring students face academic consequences for their actions during unsanctioned events.

Effective municipal response requires structured post-event debriefings to identify successful strategies and areas for improvement. Maintaining partnerships with post-secondary institutions enhances information sharing and joint planning capabilities.

6 R. v. Fardy, 2023 NSSC 252

7 <https://www.cambridgetoday.ca/local-news/waterloos-st-patricks-day-party-costs-taxpayers-308k-despite-court-injunction-10531630#:~:text=It's%20estimated%20the%20gathering%20peaked,increase%20from%20387%20to%20456>

8 <https://www.londonpolice.ca/en/community/project-learn--partysmart.aspx>

9 <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/london-s-fanshawe-college-suspends-8-students-for-riot-1.1249299>