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tpl : toronto public library

STAFF REPORT
INFORMATION ONLY

Safe and Welcoming Spaces Program: 2022-2026 Retrospective Update

Date: March 23, 2026

To: Toronto Public Library Board

From: City Librarian

SUMMARY

As a public institution, Toronto Public Library (TPL) strives to provide welcoming and open public spaces, while prioritizing the safety and security of Library staff and customers. In 2022, TPL established a multi-year Safe and Welcoming Spaces Program, incorporating a series of initiatives designed to foster safe and welcoming environments for all.

Significant progress has been made in advancing these key initiatives over the past four years. TPL has invested in additional staff resources and support, including the establishment of Library Safety Specialists, the rollout of staff training, as well as enhanced psychological support. TPL's public safety and security programs, including security guard services, have been upgraded and expanded. In addition, TPL expanded its social and crisis support services with the establishment of the Social and Crisis Support Services Program.

While actions to-date have achieved a positive impact, TPL continues to experience a rise in the number of incidents, and the impact of such incidents on staff and other customers can be difficult and challenging. Much more remains to be done, and the fostering of safe and welcoming spaces continues to be a key strategic priority for TPL.

This report provides a retrospective overview of the Safe and Welcoming Spaces Program activities from 2022 to today.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

There is no financial impact associated with this report beyond what has already been approved in the current operating and capital budget.

The Director, Finance & Chief Financial Officer has reviewed this financial impact statement and agrees with it.

ALIGNMENT WITH STRATEGIC PLAN

By providing a safe, welcoming and inclusive space for all, TPL can achieve its strategic priority of fostering shared community spaces so that all Torontonians are able to access, use, and benefit from TPL's services, programs and technology.

EQUITY IMPACT STATEMENT

TPL's Safe and Welcoming Spaces Program identifies and reinforces TPL's obligation to provide spaces and services that are welcoming and inclusive for all, especially for Indigenous and equity-deserving communities such as newcomers, persons with low-income, persons with disabilities, vulnerable seniors and youth, people living with mental health or addiction issues, people experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity, 2SLGBTQ+ community members, as well as Black and racialized groups.

DECISION HISTORY

TPL's Safe and Welcoming Spaces Program originated as an outcome of the Alternate Approaches to Safety and Security Discussion Table, which was established on the direction of the Library Board at the October 25, 2021 meeting.

The Table included representatives from the Library Board, Toronto Public Library Workers Union CUPE Local 4948 (TPLWU), Library management, the City of Toronto and community organizations.

The conclusions of the Discussion Table were endorsed by the Board at the May 24, 2022 meeting, along with a series of action plans that came together to form TPL's multi-year Safe and Welcoming Spaces Program. Updates on progress in implementing these action plans were provided to the Board on October 25, 2022, January 29, 2024 and January 27, 2025.

ISSUE BACKGROUND

TPL is committed to providing welcoming and supportive spaces for customers and staff across its 100-branch network. Toronto is a densely populated, complex urban environment with mental health, addictions and other challenges that have been further exacerbated during and following the COVID-19 pandemic. As one of the few public spaces open to everyone, TPL branches reflect the city in all its facets.

The number of safety and security-related incidents at library branches has risen significantly over the last seven or eight years, mirroring trends in the broader community (see Attachment 2, Chart 1 and Table 1). Similar increases have been experienced by many other public libraries and institutions across Canada.

Incidents include harassment, threatening or violent behaviour, trespassing and suspected overdoses. The impacts of such incidents on staff, and sometimes on other customers, can be difficult and challenging.

Incidents are concentrated in a minority of branches, mostly in the downtown core (see Attachment 2, Chart 2). The majority of library branches experience relatively few or no incidents.

Recent years have also seen a significant increase in the number of suspected overdoses in branches. As shown on Attachment 2, Chart 3, branches with relatively high numbers of suspected overdoses are in areas of the city with high numbers of overdoses in general (based on 911 calls)[1].

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[1] Source: Toronto Paramedic Services. Electronic Patient Care Record (Suspected opioid overdose calls by neighbourhood, Toronto, January 1, 2025 to December 31, 2025)

COMMENTS

This report provides a retrospective summary of TPL's Safe and Welcoming Spaces Program from 2022 to today, under four domains of action:

1. Staff
2. Spaces
2. Services
4. Leadership

1) Staff

Staff are the backbone and foundation of TPL, and the protection of staff health and safety is a core obligation and commitment of the Library. Since 2022, TPL has undertaken a series of efforts to further protect staff health and safety, guided by the recommendations of the Discussion Table.

Library Safety Specialists

A key recommendation of the Discussion Table was to consider alternatives to supplement the use of security guards to prevent and address incidents. In response, TPL conducted a benchmarking review of best practices and innovations being used at other public libraries and established a new staff role of Library Safety Specialist (LSS). This role focuses on supporting branch staff in fostering welcoming, compassionate, and safe environments, using trauma-informed practices. LSS's engage with customers, explain and enforce the rules of conduct, develop effective working relationships with library customers, monitor library spaces for appropriate customer behaviour, and de-escalate situations as required. LSS's also facilitate learning opportunities for staff, both on a local level in the branches where they are based, and on a system-wide level through Mental Health First Aid, Opioid Overdose Prevention, Recognition and Response, and other training programs. TPL's team of LSSs have proven invaluable in library branches. TPL recently increased the team to fourteen Specialists and has extended coverage to additional areas of the city.

Staff Learning & Development

The Discussion Table identified staff confidence and competence as two key outcomes to consider when providing staff with training. TPL addressed this recommendation by developing a comprehensive Safe and Welcoming Spaces

Learning Path, which provides a structured, role-based curriculum to enhance staff skills, knowledge and capability to foster safe and welcoming spaces.

New and enhanced learning programs introduced in the last few years include:

- Mental Health First Aid
- Workplace Violence Prevention & Response
- Human Rights and Harassment
- Trauma-Informed Practices
- Enhanced Rules of Conduct training
- Opioid Overdose Prevention, Recognition and Response
- Conflict De-escalation

In a recent staff survey[2], 61% of staff indicated that these learning programs have increased their knowledge and skills in providing welcoming spaces (see Attachment 2, Chart 5).

Psychological Health and Safety

The Discussion Table *Report* noted the significant potential repercussions of incidents on staff well-being and recommended additional training and support for staff mental health. In response, TPL launched in 2024 a new multi-year Workplace Mental Health Action Plan. Actions completed to-date include:

- Establishing TPL's Workplace Psychological Health and Safety Policy
- Conducting TPL's first staff mental health survey
- Adding enhanced psychotherapy coverage and extending coverage to additional staff groups
- Launching an enhanced Employee Assistance Program in 2025, including additional post-incident support services
- Establishing through collective bargaining new Post-Violent Leave provisions
- Ensuring staff and guards are trained on Mental Health First Aid, Conflict De-Escalation and Trauma-Informed Practice

Other initiatives are planned in 2026 and beyond.

Staff Communications & Engagement

In 2022, TPL senior management initiated a series of branch town hall meetings focused on safety and security. Over the last few years, over three dozen branch

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[2] TPL 2026 Strategic Plan Progress and Impact Staff Survey, preliminary unpublished results

town hall meetings have been held at library branches across the city, with a particular focus on branches experiencing relatively high numbers of incidents. These meetings provide an important vehicle for two-way, in-person dialogue and joint problem-solving between branch staff and senior TPL leaders, and many recent improvements were the result of ideas generated at these branch town halls. Ten more town halls are scheduled to take place in 2026.

Joint Union / Management Initiatives
TPL and TPLWU CUPE Local 4948 share a common commitment to protecting the health and safety of staff, including psychological safety and well-being.

TPL has a well-established, multi-site Joint Health and Safety Committee Program across its 102 work locations, including a central Subgroup on Workplace Violence, Regional Committees and the Central Joint Health & Safety Committee. These Committees play an important leadership role in workplace health and safety, including the Workplace Violence Prevention and Response Program.

As part of the 2025-2029 Collective Agreement, TPL and the Union agreed to incorporate additional health and safety measures, including establishing minimum branch staffing levels to avoid situations where individuals are working alone, along with additional protective measures for staff who engage in outreach outside of library branches.

2) Spaces

Over the last five years, TPL has undertaken a series of measures to further enhance public safety and security in our facilities, beginning with the establishment of an internal Public Safety Unit in 2023, providing broad oversight of all system-wide security programs, security guard services, building access, cameras and related areas.

Security Guard Services
Following the Discussion Table, TPL conducted a full review of its use of security guards, resulting in the transition to a new guard supplier, Cancom Security, with enhanced security guard training in areas such as mental health first aid, trauma-informed service and equity. TPL now has eight dedicated mobile rapid-response security units, and an additional two supervisory units for emergency support. The establishment of these mobile units has been an important step to enable faster and more fulsome response to incidents, which is often critical in effective de-escalation and resolution.

Physical Site Security

In 2024-2025, TPL conducted a comprehensive review and upgrading of physical site security measures, including security cameras, site fob access, fire alarm, and related systems and processes. Over the last few years, TPL installed over 200 new security cameras, with cameras now in place at 67 branches. TPL's new Security Camera Policy was approved by the Library Board on December 1, 2025. Ongoing system and equipment upgrades will continue to be prioritized based on need. TPL has also established new physical security design and construction guidelines for branch renovations and new builds.

Washroom Overdose Sensors

In 2023, TPL commenced a pilot study to determine the efficacy of washroom motion sensors to assist in early detection of a potential opioid overdose. These devices alert staff and security guards if a washroom has been occupied for an extended period of time or if no movement has been detected, so a wellness check can be conducted. Based on the successful results of the pilot, TPL has begun deploying the devices across branches, with over 55 sensors currently in place across 22 locations, and deployment continuing through 2026 and beyond.

Rules of Conduct

On January 27, 2025, The Library Board approved revisions to TPL's Rules of Conduct Policy to incorporate positive, clear, and inclusive language that conveys customer responsibilities in a trauma-informed way. The revised Policy clearly outlines the shared responsibilities of customers and staff in maintaining a safe and welcoming environment, and provides clear definitions of violent, harassing and disruptive behaviours.

Revisions were also approved to the Rules of Conduct - Exclusion, Reinstatement and Appeals Policy, to more clearly describe the consequences of an exclusion, to address the exclusion of customers under the age of 18, and to incorporate restorative practices into the exclusion review and appeal process.

High Risk Customer Alerts

In response to staff concerns and suggestions, in 2025 TPL launched a new Customer Alert process to better alert staff in situations where a customer repeatedly trespasses onto library property following an exclusion for violent or threatening behaviour. Such situations have risen in recent years at TPL and other public libraries. The Customer Alert enables staff across the system to recognize these customers and take appropriate early action.

3) Services

TPL offers a range of free services, programs and resources that can help those who need social, mental health and crisis support. Through welcoming and familiar spaces, TPL meets Torontonians where they are and makes it easier for them to access the help they need.

Social & Crisis Support Services

First identified as a service need following a 2019 Community Needs Assessment, TPL's [Social and Crisis Support Services Program](#) began as a pilot and was a 2020-2024 Toronto Public Library Foundation (TPL Foundation) fundraising priority. The service began pilot operation at four branches in June 2023, supported by funding from the TPL Foundation, and received ongoing funding from the City of Toronto as part of the TPL 2025 Operating Budget.

Through this program, TPL provides low-barrier access to social and crisis supports at twelve downtown branches through partnerships with Toronto Community Crisis Service anchor agency Gerstein Crisis Centre. Crisis Workers and programs assist customers facing intersecting vulnerabilities such as mental health challenges, substance use, low income, and homelessness or precarious housing. In 2026, services will expand to branches in Scarborough and beyond the downtown core, through partnerships with Toronto Community Crisis Service anchor agencies.

Programs in this initiative include:

- [Finding Recovery through Exercise Skills and Hope (F.R.E.S.H.)](#) peer-led program
- [Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP)](#) eight-week mental health recovery educational program
- [SafeTALK](#): three-hour suicide awareness and prevention workshops

Connections to Community Resources

TPL's recent efforts have also focused on further expanding relationships with key community partners and resources. Key initiatives include:

- Establishing a partnership with the [Toronto Community Crisis Service](#)
- Strengthening relationships between TPL and key City tables and groups, including the Furthering Our Community by Uniting Services ([FOCUS](#)) Table, the Specialized Program for Inter-Divisional Enhance Responsiveness ([SPIDER](#))

Table, Community Coordination Plan ([CCP](#)) Clusters and the Toronto Alliance to End Homelessness ([TAEH](#)) Forum.

- Participating in [Toronto Shelter & Support Services](#) Interdivisional & Agency Shelter Committee
- TPL's [Community Librarians](#) placements in seniors housing and newcomer agencies

4) Leadership

TPL Leadership

Following Board endorsement of the Discussion Table Action Plan in 2022, TPL established a governance and oversight framework for the Safe and Welcoming Spaces Program. Key initiatives include:

- Establishment of the inter-divisional Safety and Security Leadership Team (SSLT), comprised of senior TPL leaders, to guide and monitor Program implementation.
- Establishment of a Senior Manager, Welcoming Spaces, to chair SSLT, provide overall leadership to the Program, and directly oversee the Library Safety Specialist team.
- Establishment of a Manager, Public Safety position to oversee TPL's physical safety and security program.
- Annual updates to the Library Board on progress in implementing the Program.
- Establishment of Joint Labour/Management processes for ongoing discussion of psychological health and safety, optimal staffing levels, workload management and related topics.

Monitoring and Evaluation

TPL closely monitors a number of key metrics to assess the effectiveness of its efforts to foster safe, welcoming and inclusive spaces. Current metrics include two key areas:

- Analysis of incident data trends from TPL's online Incident Records Management System (IRMS)
- Staff feedback obtained from staff surveys, branch town halls, joint health and safety committees, and other sources.

Incidents

As noted above, the overall number of safety and security incidents in branches has continued to rise over the past decade.

TPL branches exist within a broader societal context and reflect all facets of their local communities. External factors outside the control of the library significantly influence the number and impact of incidents in branches. While the goal is always to have no incidents, it's recognized that this goal is not practically achievable in the current social environment.

In this context, TPL strives to reduce the <u>number</u> of incidents where possible, while at the same time focusing on mitigating the <u>impact</u> of incidents when they do occur. TPL's recent efforts, such as the introduction of Library Safety Specialists, are key measures targeted at these goals. The introduction of the Incident Reporting and Management System (IRMS) was also a key step in enabling enhanced tracking and analysis of incident trends.

Attachment 2, Chart 4 illustrates trends in incident types from 2017 to 2025, indicating a significant rise in harassing and threatening behaviour by customers over this time period. This trend is indicative of broader societal trends, including increased polarization and incivility, and a rise in mental health and addiction concerns.

Staff Feedback

TPL's staff have always been at the centre of what the library does, and the lived experience of TPL's branch staff is at the core of its work to foster safe, welcoming and inclusive spaces. TPL's goal is to listen to staff and hear their ideas, concerns and suggestions, and to partner with staff to explore new ways to make TPL spaces welcoming to all. TPL achieves this goal through a number of means:

- Senior leadership branch town hall visits (see above)
- All-staff quarterly online town hall meetings (with open Q&A session)
- Branch Experience and other local or divisional staff meetings
- Staff surveys in 2022, 2024 and 2026

Recently, TPL conducted a staff survey to assess progress in implementing Strategic Plan priorities, including the Safe and Welcoming Spaces Program. Key results, as shown on Attachment 2, Chart 5, include:

- Over 50% of staff view TPL's Safe and Welcoming Spaces Program as strengthening safety and security in branches.
- Three-quarters of staff indicate that they feel confident in their ability to provide welcoming spaces.
- Two-thirds see the Safe and Welcoming Spaces Learning Path as beneficial in developing skills in this area.

These are positive results that affirm TPL's progress in addressing the Discussion Table's recommendation to focus on building both staff confidence and competence.

Library Sector & Municipal Leadership
TPL Board members and management play a proactive leadership role in this area among the public library community, both in Canada and globally. Key examples include:

- TPL Board advocacy in support of increased investments in mental health and addiction crisis intervention services.
- TPL leadership role in the Canadian Urban Libraries Council (CULC) - Safety and Security Working Group, with active participation of TPL's City Librarian as Chair of CULC's Safety & Security Team.
- TPL's City Librarian working closely with CULC and the Federation of Ontario Public Libraries (FOPL) on their advocacy campaign at the provincial and federal level, including being the media spokesperson for FOPL's campaign and attending meetings with government officials in collaboration with CULC and FOPL.
- Sharing of TPL learnings and best practices at public library conferences and through the CULC Safety and Security Toolkit.
- Participation in Ontario Libraries Association Super Conference sessions in recent years, on safety and security along with representatives of other Canadian public libraries.
- Participation in Toronto Community Housing's Community Safety and Well-Being Strategy consultations.

CONCLUSION

Creating and maintaining safe and welcoming spaces is an ongoing effort, requiring collaboration and commitment from all areas of the organization. Over the period from 2022 to 2026, TPL has made significant progress in advancing the recommendations of the Discussion Table on Alternate Approaches to Safety and Security. TPL continues to invest additional funds in safe and welcoming spaces initiatives, including expansion of the Library Safety Specialist team, expansion of Social and Crisis Support Services, enhanced security and guard services, and in many other areas.

While these steps are having a tangible, positive impact in branches across TPL, it's important to recognize that challenges facing public libraries are reflective of broader societal issues related to mental health, the opioid crisis and other factors, which require broader societal solutions. In the context of these societal challenges, TPL is committed to working with staff, the Union, community partners and other stakeholders, to ensure that library branches continue to be welcoming and safe for all.

CONTACT

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SIGNATURE

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ATTACHMENTS

Attachment 1:   Safe & Welcoming Spaces Program: Key Milestones 2022-2026

Attachment 2:   TPL Safety and Security Incidents: Table and Charts

Safe & Welcoming Spaces Program: Key Milestones 2022-2026

|		
Discussion Table on Alternate Approaches to Safety & Security established by Library Board	2021	
	2022	-Board endorses Discussion Table Report -Multi-Year Action Plan established -Branch safety & security town halls commence -Toronto Community Crisis Service engaged -De-Escalation Training launched -Online Incident Management System launched
-Library Safety Specialist roles established -Social & Crisis Support pilot commences -Public Safety Unit established -Washroom overdose sensor pilot began	2023	
	2024	-Enhanced security guard service launched -Mobile rapid-response guard units deployed -Library Safety Specialist roles expanded -Safe & Welcoming Spaces Learning Path launched -Mental Health First Aid training launched -Violence Prevention & Response training launched -Rules of Conduct & Exclusion Policies revised -Psychological Health & Safety Policy established -Staff mental health survey conducted
-Trauma-Informed Practice training launched -Enhanced Opioid Overdose training implemented -TCCS partnership expanded -New Security Camera Policy established -Staff EAP and psychotherapy coverage extended -Staff post-violent incident support enhanced -Washroom overdose sensor program launched	2025	
	2026	-Library Safety Specialist team expanded to 14 -Expand Social and Crisis Support teams -Continue rollout of washroom overdose sensors -Advance Workplace mental health action plan -Human Rights and Harassment Program rollout

Chart 1: TPL Incidents 2017 – 2025

Safety and Security Related Incidents
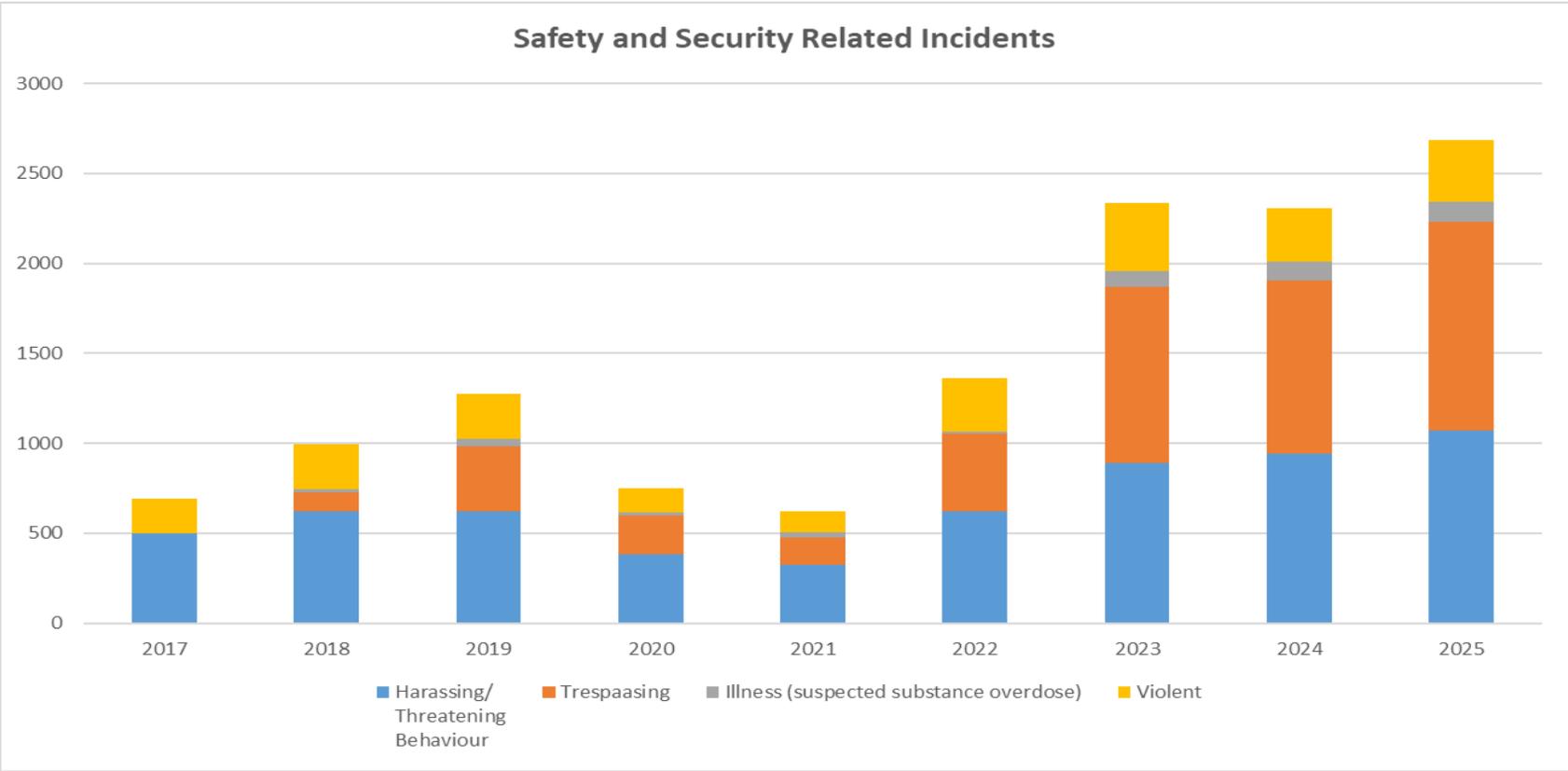
Table 1: Number of Safety and Security Incidents by Year (2017-2025)

| Year	Harassing/ Threatening Behaviour	Trespassing	Illness (suspected overdose)	Violent	Total	Annual Change
2017	497			196	693	
2018	623	102	18	249	992	43%
2019	624	357	43	248	1272	28%
2020	385	211	21	132	749	-41%
2021	325	151	31	116	623	-17%
2022	623	428	14	297	1362	119%
2023	887	981	88	381	2337	72%
2024	941	962	109	295	2307	-1%
2025	1068	1157	111	346	2682	16%
24 vs '25	13%	20%	2%	17%	16%	

Chart 2: Heatmap of 2025 Incidents by Geographic Area
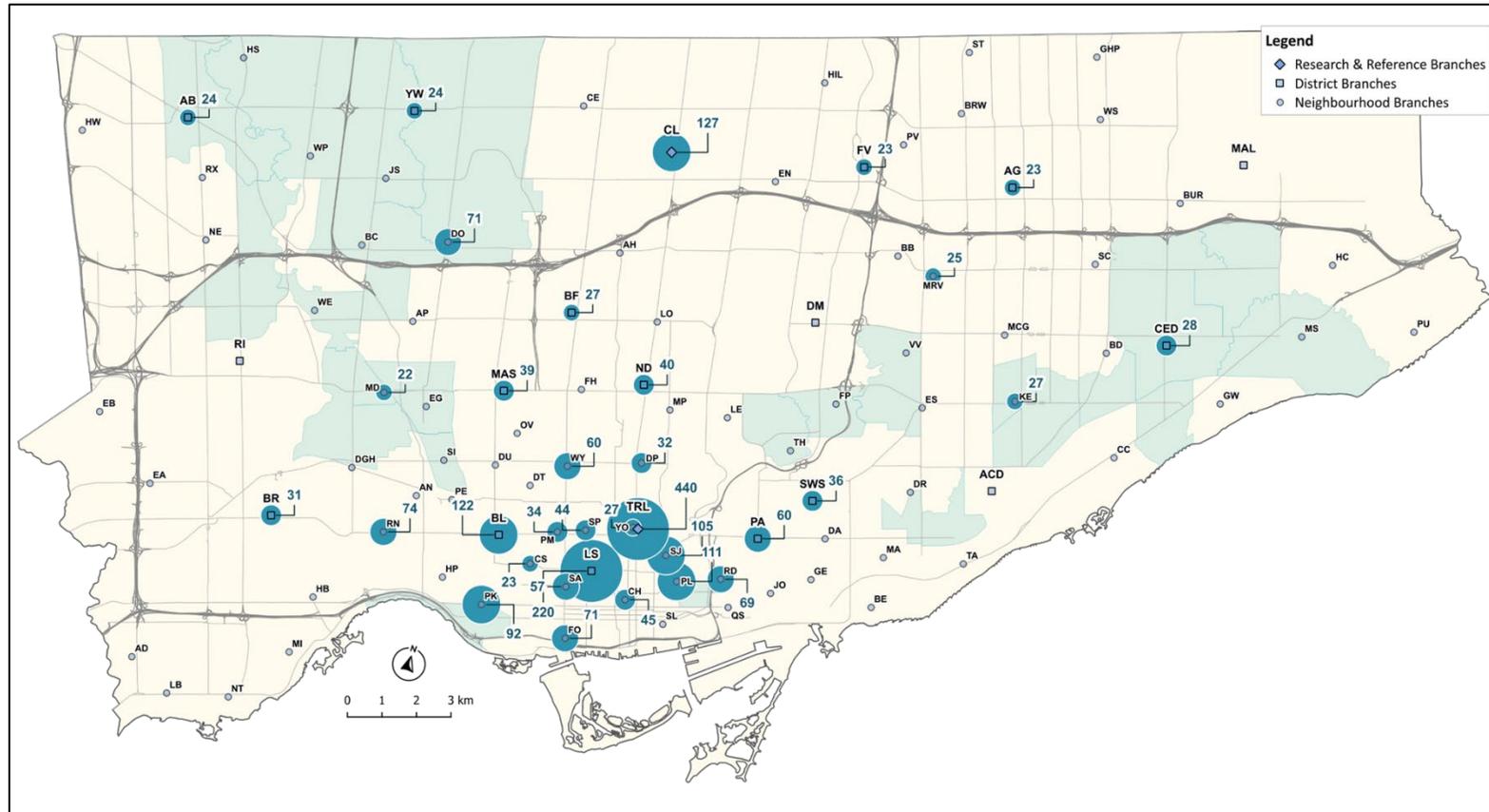
Chart 3: Suspected Overdose Incidents

2025 TPL Branches with Suspected Overdose Incidents & Toronto Overdose Data

Research & Reference Branch

District Branch

Neighbourhood Branch

911 Calls by neighbourhood*

5 - 15
15 - 39
39 - 99
99 - 199
199 - 500

TPL Suspected Overdoses (2025)

1 - 2 (19 branches)
3 - 6 (8 branches)
7 - 12 (3 branches)
12 - 20 (1 branch)

1:125,000

0   5 km

* Neighbourhoods with less than 5 cases were suppressed
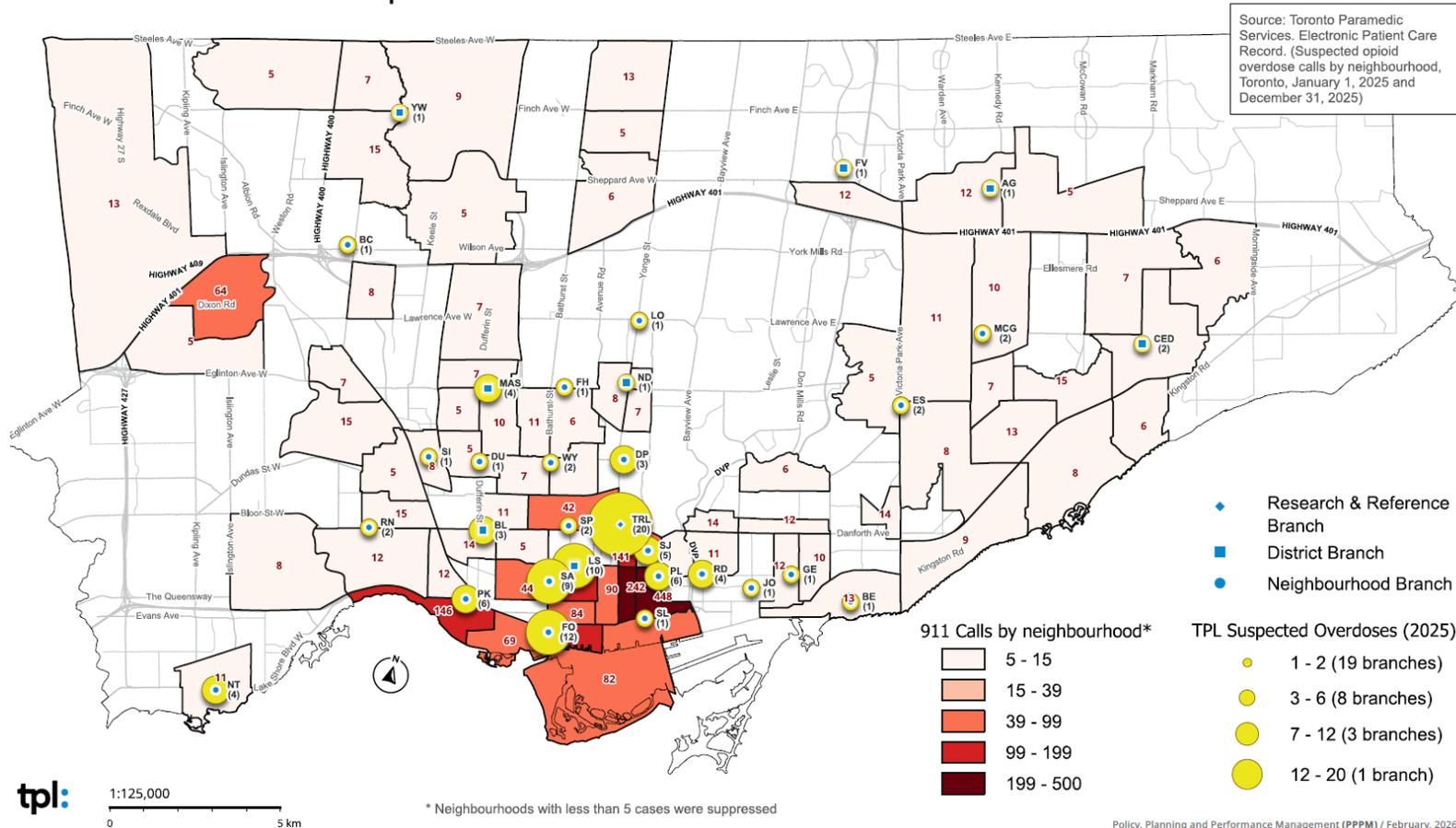
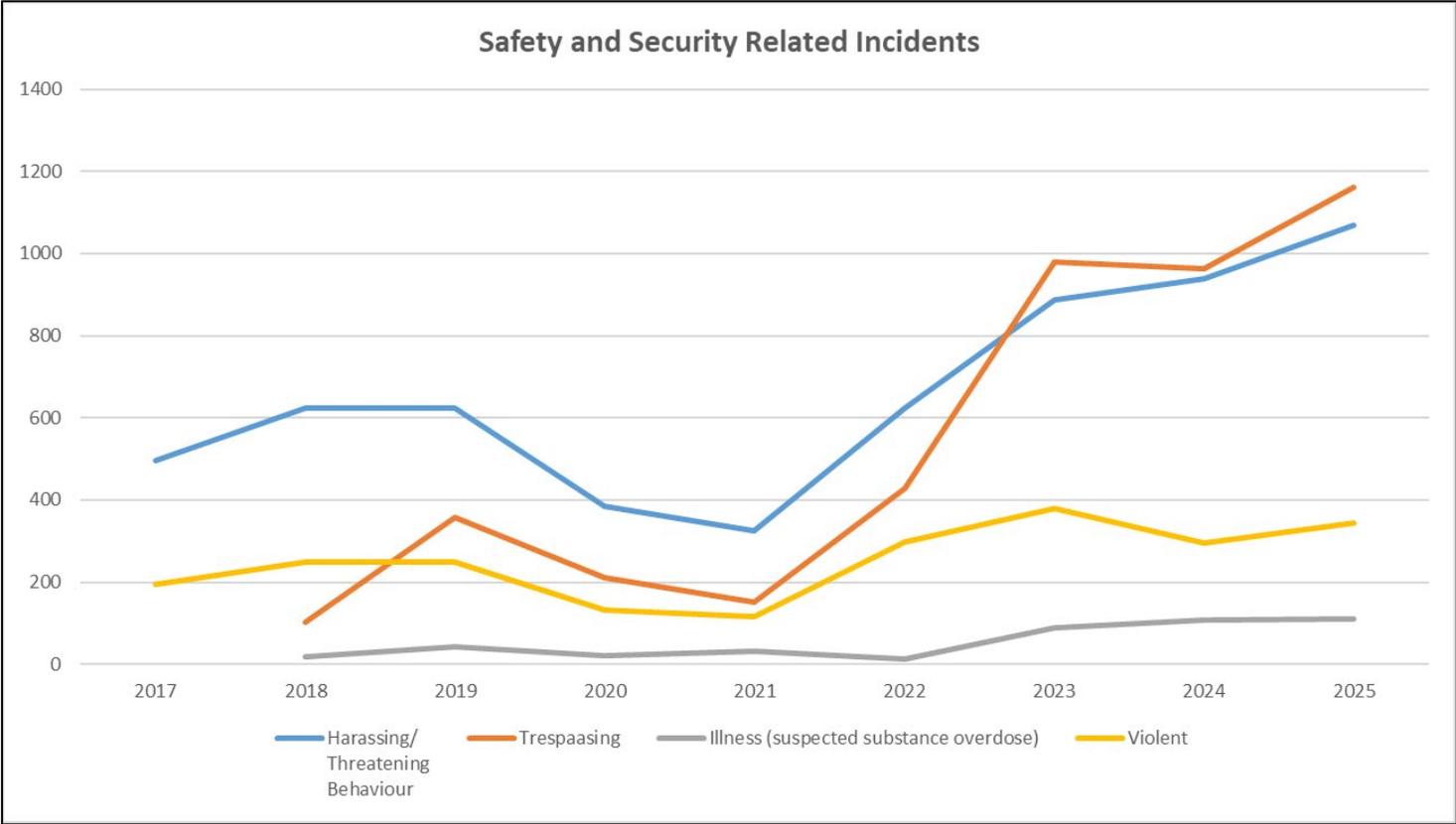**Chart 4: Trends in Incident-Type 2017-2025**

Safety and Security Related Incidents

Chart 5: 2026 Staff Survey – Safe and Welcoming Spaces Responses

	% Unfavourable	% Neutral	% Favourable
I feel confident in my ability to contribute to providing welcoming spaces at TPL	6%	21%	73%
The learning opportunities have increased my knowledge and skills in providing welcoming spaces	9%	30%	61%
I feel supported in my role to provide a safe and welcoming environment	17%	26%	57%
TPL's recent safety and security initiatives have strengthened TPL's overall approach to staff safety and security	18%	28%	54%