ADVOCACY POSITION STATEMENT
January 2026

WUSA ADVOCACY POSITION STATEMENT:
Student Safety

ISSUE:

Student safety at the University of Waterloo is a dynamic and complex challenge that is defined beyond physical safety to include mental health, psychological safety, and careful considerations of the lived experiences of all our diverse student communities. The University of Waterloo's size, diversity, and recent events have established a clear need for a comprehensive, intersectional, and long-term approach to ensure all students feel safe and protected on campus.

RESPONSIBLE AUTHORITY:

- University of Waterloo
- University of Waterloo senior administrators
- University of Waterloo staff and faculty
- Undergraduate Students
- Regional and Municipal Partners

DETAILS:

The University of Waterloo is home to a large and diverse undergraduate population, bringing a wide range of identities, lived experiences, and relationships to campus spaces. While most students report feeling safe on campus overall, recent WUSA research demonstrates that safety is not experienced uniformly across the student body.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to student safety. Different student identities shape how individuals experience campus environments, access supports, and engage with safety mechanisms. As a result, safety concerns intersect directly with students' mental health, sense of belonging, and ability to participate fully in academic and social life.

This position statement draws primarily on findings from WUSA's *Student Safety & Mental Health Report (2024)* and is informed by internal WUSA research examining student experiences with campus safety mechanisms. Together, these findings highlight the importance of and equity-informed, student-centred approach to safety.

IMPACT / ANALYSIS:

What We Know About Student Safety

Overall, most undergraduate students report feeling safe on campus. Survey data indicates that 71% of students feel ‘safe’ and an additional 17% feel ‘very safe’ during a typical day on campus. These findings establish that, at an overall level, the University of Waterloo is generally perceived as a safe environment.

However, perceptions of safety vary significantly by context. Time of day plays a critical role in shaping student experiences. While 96% of students feel ‘safe’ or ‘very safe’ during the day, this figure drops substantially at night, with only 46% reporting feeling ‘safe’ or ‘very safe’ and 16% reporting feeling ‘unsafe’ after dark. These findings demonstrate that safety on campus is not a static condition, but one that fluctuates based on situational and environmental factors.

Who Feels Less Safe on Campus

Although most students report feeling safe overall, safety is not experienced equitably across the undergraduate population. Certain student groups consistently report lower perceptions of safety than their peers.

Students who are more likely to report feeling less safe include:

- Gender non-conforming students
- Students with disabilities
- Cisgender women
- International students
- Racialized students

Gender non-conforming students report significantly lower perceptions of safety both during the day and at night. Students with disabilities are less likely to agree that the University prioritizes student safety or takes appropriate action in response to safety concerns. Cisgender women report feeling notably less safe at night compared to cisgender men, and international students report elevated safety-related stress.

Importantly, students whose identities intersect across multiple equity-denied communities face compounded safety risks. These students are less likely to agree that they feel free from harassment, can be themselves on campus, or that their values are respected, indicating that safety concerns are closely tied to broader experiences of equity, diversity, and inclusion.

Internal WUSA research further mirrors these findings, demonstrating that the same student groups who report lower feelings of safety on campus are also less

comfortable engaging with campus safety mechanisms (such as Special Constables). This consistency across datasets highlights that inequities in safety are systemic rather than limited to a single situation or group.

Where and When Students Feel Unsafe

Students' sense of safety is shaped by location, time of day, and situational context. Certain campus spaces are consistently identified as areas of concern.

Students most frequently report feeling unsafe in:

- Bus stops and parking lots
- Walking paths
- Underground tunnels

Situational factors that heighten feelings of unsafety include walking alone at night, being near unfamiliar individuals after dark, attending evening classes, and limited awareness of available safety resources. Notably, 66% of students report feeling unsafe when walking alone at night, and 63% report feeling unsafe near strangers at night.

These concerns persist even among students who otherwise describe campus as generally safe, illustrating that safety is often conditional and context-specific rather than absolute.

Psychological Safety, Student Well-Being, and Mental Health

Psychological safety refers to the belief that individuals can express concerns, ask for help, and advocate for themselves without fear of punishment, dismissal, or marginalization. On university campuses, psychological safety shapes students' ability to access support, engage in learning environments, and maintain a sense of belonging.

While many students report that safety concerns do not significantly impact their mental health, this is not the case for all populations. Students with disabilities, gender non-conforming students, international students, and racialized students are significantly more likely to report that safety concerns negatively affect their mental health.

Qualitative findings describe how ongoing safety concerns contribute to anxiety, hypervigilance, and avoidance behaviours, such as altering routines, limiting time on campus, or disengaging from academic and extracurricular activities. These impacts compound existing mental health challenges and undermine students' sense of safety and belonging.

Internal WUSA research indicates that when students who already feel less safe are also less comfortable engaging with Special Constables, this can further exacerbate stress and reluctance to seek support. In this way, perceptions of safety infrastructure interact with student mental health in complex ways, particularly for equity-denied students.

Considerations for Improving Student Safety

The evidence demonstrates that improving student safety requires approaches that move beyond overall perceptions and address inequitable experiences. Safety initiatives that do not account for differential impacts risk reinforcing existing disparities.

Data points toward the importance of:

- Addressing physical environments where students feel unsafe, particularly during evening and nighttime hours
- Improving awareness, clarity, and accessibility of safety resources
- Ensuring that safety mechanisms are experienced as supportive and trustworthy by all students
- Recognizing student safety as a mental health issue as well as a security concern
- Consulting students whose lived experiences reflect the greatest safety gaps

POSITION / RECOMMENDATION(S):

The Waterloo Undergraduate Student Association supports initiatives that encourage:

- preventative, proactive, and holistic approaches to safety, such as community-building initiatives, consent education, bystander intervention training, and early intervention programs that reduce risk before harm occurs.
- ongoing consultation with marginalized and at-risk student groups to ensure safety initiatives reflect lived experiences, build trust, and prioritize the needs of students who consistently report lower feelings of safety.
- infrastructure and environmental design improvements including upgraded lighting, safer walking routes, accessible pathways, and improvements to transit adjacent spaces, with a specific focus on nighttime safety and areas repeatedly identified as unsafe.
- expansion of non-enforcement-based safety programs including community safety roles, Integrated Mobile Police and Crisis Team (IMPACT) teams, mental health embedded responders, and collaborations with counselling services, offering alternatives to traditional policing models.

The Waterloo Undergraduate Student Association discourages initiatives that involve:

- a one-size-fits-all or reactive safety policies that overlook the disproportionate risks faced by marginalized groups or fail to incorporate mental health, environmental design, or accessibility considerations.
- transferring responsibility for safety onto individual students through programs that make students solely responsible for protecting themselves—such as reliance on buddy systems or apps—instead of institutional responsibility for safe environments.

References

Representative Survey Platform (RSP): Student Safety Report. (2024, June 28). Waterloo Undergraduate Student Association. https://wusa.ca/document/rsp-student-safety/