Biting the Bullet: Community, Safety and Gun Violence in Toronto

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

'Biting the Bullet: Community, Safety & Gun Violence' is meant to interrogate common perceptions around gun violence as well as understand its impacts, especially as a vulnerability and product intersecting with other social identities and life experiences. It complements the ongoing work of the BAM Collective's Community Safety and Inclusivity Portfolio. It concentrates on the lived experiences of those who dealt with the impacts of violence and the social conditions that contribute to violence. It also sought out the narratives of advocates across the different domains of art, transit, correctional systems, and youth rights. This research employed many sources and forms of knowledge. Primary data consisted of surveys, focus group consultations, and one-on-one interviews. Secondary sources consisted of police-reported crime statistics, an extensive literature review across relevant topics, media outlets, and government publications and reports.

Key themes revealed in this research included the following:

1. The Collective and Individual Grief and Trauma of Violence
2. Intersections of Victimization and Perpetration
3. Belonging as a Protective Factor in Fostering Safety

Survey results highlighted the perceptions Toronto's residents held concerning belonging and violence, and how the two interact:

1. 88% of survey respondents felt that violence was increasing in Toronto.
2. 89% agreed a sense of belonging is a potential solution to reducing violence.
3. 1 in 4 reported considering leaving Toronto due in part to social isolation.

Both historical and present trends of violence reveal the uneven applications of the law and policies based on identities and the disparities in supports for victims and survivors of violence. Likewise, social isolation and violence act as exacerbators for one another; without social connections, individuals and communities are more vulnerable to violence, and one of the lasting impacts of violence is being alienated from loved ones, community, resources and opportunities.

This report offers four key strategies to address the many dimensions of gun violence:

1. Wraparound Supports
2. Meaningful Routes to Belonging
3. Investments in Public Services
4. Community Stakeholder Engagement

These recommendations rely upon the collaboration of key stakeholders, including government, researchers, community networks, and individual buy-in. Effective approaches to gun violence also require critical data collection that is community-led and community-owned.

1. INTRODUCTION

Gun violence has been an increasing area of concern in Toronto for government and communities alike, gaining traction in the past 5 years after a record-high number of violent deaths in 2018.[1] The reverberations of gun violence have shaped the contours of many residents' lives, especially those that have co-existing vulnerabilities. While there is no single profile that can ultimately predict who will be affected by gun violence, it is associated with a convergence of individual, family, neighborhood, and socioeconomic risk factors that interact over one's life cycle.

Understanding the many life dimensions gun violence permeates, it is critical to situate it in the context of Toronto's social phenomena–from community housing policies to transit systems–the public nature of this violence requires the public's perspectives in addressing it. It is necessary to analyze violence's private impacts as well. Violence attacks intimately, and even when episodic, is known to be strongly linked to long-lasting trauma and grief. Chronic exposure to violence, both directly and at-large, often significantly disrupts one's life course entirely.

This discourse involves many different voices as the consequences of gun violence are felt across systems and networks. It is important to acknowledge and explore the community building and mechanisms of belonging that occur outside of institutional spaces, and the counter-narratives that challenge common perceptions of marginalized individuals and communities.

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[1] Andrea Davis, "'The Real Toronto': Black Youth Experiences and the Narration of the Multicultural City," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 51, no. 3 (2017): 725–48, https://doi.org/10.3138/jcs.2017-0039.r1.

2. METHODOLOGIES

This research consisted of a multi-pronged approach to collecting data. This work was rooted in the principles of community-based research and sought the voices of the many stakeholders within the discourse of community safety in Toronto. This work consisted of both primary and secondary data. First-hand accounts were collected through individual interviews (N=12) with service providers and community advocates, a focus group of 10 mothers who had lost their sons to gun violence, and an online survey (N=1670) open to any Toronto residents. Key sources of secondary information were Toronto Police Services databases, media sources, and government policies and reports, largely from the City of Toronto. This was also supplemented with a literature review of academic and scholarly sources that were topically and geographically relevant.

Limitations that arose within this research primarily involved lack of cash honoraria and the availability of data. Many participants within this research were in the midst of coping with trauma, grief, and other implications stemming from their experiences of violence; these implications also regularly included financial constraints. In organizational efforts to contend this, research participants were offered gift cards as a form of honorarium. While this acted as a step in the proper direction, providing the option of cash (which many preferred), as well as a larger sum, would further affirm the value of their stories and allow for a broader scope of research. In these instances, compensation was not purely symbolic; it was not feasible for participants to offer the limited time they had available for unpaid work. Likewise, to ask participants to relive these narratives without providing them any supports would be an exploitative act that

goes against the very goals of this research and the values that guide it. Addressing this involved shifting many of our inquiries in both language and data collection, to use a strength-based approach that emphasizes the self-determination and resourcefulness of individuals and communities in the face of their adversities.

Another limitation was the lack of data in certain areas of this study. Three major technical barriers arose within this research. Race-based data collection has yet to be implemented in many government or higher institutional settings, which made it difficult to understand the variances in experience between different groups beyond an anecdotal level. There is also a gap in longitudinal studies that examine the implications of violence throughout life cycles. To grasp the ways in which violence metastisizes over an entire life course, from early exposure in childhood to the grief often felt by older caretakers, long-term research that follows people as their own positionalities shift is necessary. In addition to this, respective enforcement, community, government and media data sources have distinct frameworks and definitions for violence and safety. These varying definitions make it difficult to directly compare or correlate the depth of violence as well as the efficacy of programs addressing it. Devoting efforts to fixing these limitations and gaps would provide better-informed data that could support improved resource direction and intervention, inform more nuanced policy, and an overall needed understanding of how drastic violence's effects are.

3. ISSUES, EVIDENCE & KEY FINDINGS

3.1 Historical, Political & Socio-cultural Trends of Gun Violence

The ways in which violence intersects and interacts with different identities, neighborhoods and communities in Toronto is the product of a complex web between

numerous entities, including law enforcement, community housing, and other agencies that shape the daily livelihoods of the city's residents. A useful framework to contextualize the current social landscape of Toronto is David Hulchanski's *Three Cities within Toronto* neighborhood analysis, which divides the city into three territories by income polarization: City #1 of growing wealth; City #3 of growing poverty, and City #2, the middle-income city, which is gradually shrinking. Low-income and high-minority neighborhoods make up a large portion of City #3.[2] Notably, the neighborhoods Regent Park and Jane and Finch, which belong to this category, have long been used as synonyms for violence in media, government, and everyday vernaculars.

Gun violence became an especially prevalent issue in Toronto the year 2005. From June to September, there were 25 gun-related homicides and it was declared the "Summer of the Gun."[3] This violence, as with any social ill, infected different sectors of society differently; homicide statistics from 1995 to 2005 show that 45% of homicide victims in Toronto are Black men, although they only constituted 8% of the population during this time.[4] Many of these crimes occurred in the neighborhoods that comprise City #3**,** which in response, the city implemented the Priority Neighborhoods program, intended to improve the social, economic and physical conditions of the respective areas.[5]

This jump in violent deaths also came at a critical juncture: a looming federal election and rise in media coverage inspired the *Toronto Anti-Violence Intervention*
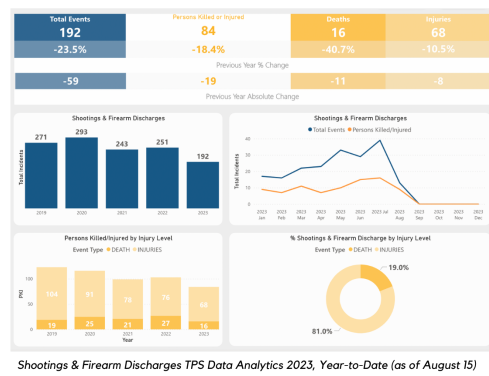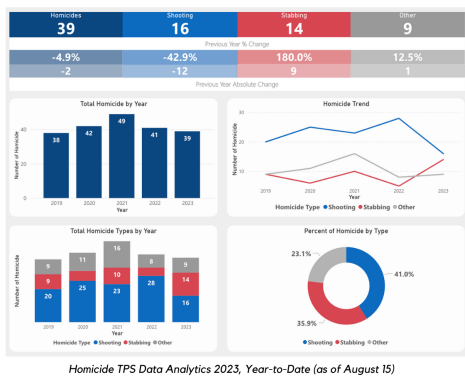
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[2] John David Hulchanski and Larry S. Bourne, *The Three Cities within Toronto: Income Polarization among Toronto's Neighbourhoods, 1970-2005* (Toronto, ON: Cities Centre, University of Toronto, 2010).

[3] Andrea Davis, "'The Real Toronto': Black Youth Experiences and the Narration of the Multicultural City," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 51, no. 3 (2017): 725–48

[4] YWCA Toronto, *The Forgotten Victims of Gun Violence* (Toronto, ON: YWCA Toronto, 2019).

[5] Andrea Davis, "'The Real Toronto': Black Youth Experiences and the Narration of the Multicultural City," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 51, no. 3 (2017): 725–48

Strategy (TAVIS). An aggressive policing initiative, this policy was the umbrella which all the city's safety protocols fell under. For Toronto's racialized residents, this was synonymous with hyper-surveillance, carding,[6] and a sweeping criminalization of their entire communities.[7] There is no verifiable data that speaks to the efficacy of TAVIS.[8] In fact, the years following the completion of the program were the city's most violent; 2018, referred to as the "Year of the Gun" showed the highest record of homicides, and 2019 saw the highest recorded amount of shootings.[9] The pandemic of gun violence collided with the pandemic of COVID-19, and violent crime remained at high levels. It should be noted, however, that it is difficult to get a true measure of the violence at the time due to a drop in reporting crime to police and the inability to gauge a collective sense of shifts in community behavior.[10]

Homicide TPS Data Analytics 2023, Year-to-Date (as of August 15)

Shootings & Firearm Discharges TPS Data Analytics 2023, Year-to-Date (as of August 15)

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[6] In Toronto, "carding" refers to a police intelligence gathering policy involving the arbitrary stopping, questioning, and documenting of individuals when no particular offence is being investigated
[7] Rahma Siad-Togane, "Spatial Marginality and Toronto's Priority Neighbourhoods." *Plan Canada* 61, no. 1 (2021): 24.
[8] There is no information on TAVIS available on Toronto Police Service Open Data Analytics or Community Reports and when consulting community sources, they also spoke to the lack of any statistics or positive behavioral shifts connected to the program.
[9] Toronto Police Service, "TPS Crime Statistics - Homicide," Toronto Police Service Public Safety Data Portal, accessed August 11, 2023, https://data.torontopolice.on.ca/pages/homicide.
[10] Julianne Regalado, Anastasiia Timmer, and Ali Jawaid, "Crime and Deviance during the Covid-19 Pandemic," *Sociology Compass* 16, no. 4 (February 24, 2022): e12974, https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12974.

In 2023, shootings and homicides have both decreased by nearly 24% and 5% respectively,[11] but the nature of violence has shifted and created a heightened sense of fear in the city.[12] This year has seen a tripling in stabbing homicides and a rise in daytime shootings.[13] Even areas within neighborhoods–like schools and playgrounds–typically respected as 'safety zones,' have been breached.[14] This makes safety a difficult concept to measure, as objective measures of crime, such as homicides, are not directly comparable to subjective measures, such as perceptions of safety or victimization, since they capture different dimensions of neighborhood crime.[15] This could be a contributing factor as to why 88% of survey respondents (N=1471) agreed to varying extents that violence was increasing in Toronto. There is rationale to these perspectives, as all other major crime indicators have increased compared to 2022 (outside of homicide) at a cumulative rise of 20%.[16]

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[11] Toronto Police Service, "TPS Crime Statistics - Homicide," Toronto Police Service Public Safety Data Portal, accessed August 11, 2023.

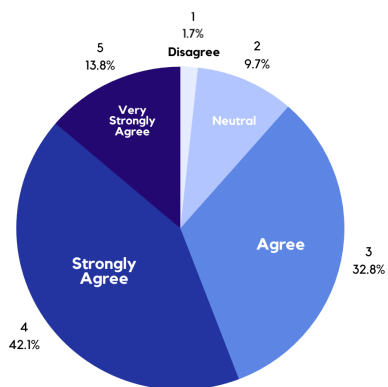[12] Adam Boessen et al., "Social Fabric and Fear of Crime: Considering Spatial Location and Time of Day," *Social Networks* 51 (2017): 60–72, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socnet.2016.12.001.

[13] Toronto Police Service, "TPS Crime Statistics - Homicide," Toronto Police Service Public Safety Data Portal, accessed August 11, 2023.

[14] Louis March, in discussion with the author, Toronto, June 23, 2023.

[15] R.R. Deusdará Rodrigues, M. Szklo, and A. de Moura Souza, "Association between Homicide Rates and Prevalence of Cardiovascular Risk Factors in the Municipalities Included in the Study of Cardiovascular Risk Factors in Adolescents," *Public Health* 187 (2020): 103–8, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.puhe.2020.08.004.

[16] Toronto Police Service, "TPS Crime Statistics - Major Crime Indicators," Toronto Police Service Public Safety Data Portal, accessed August 11, 2023, https://data.torontopolice.on.ca/pages/major-crime-indicators.
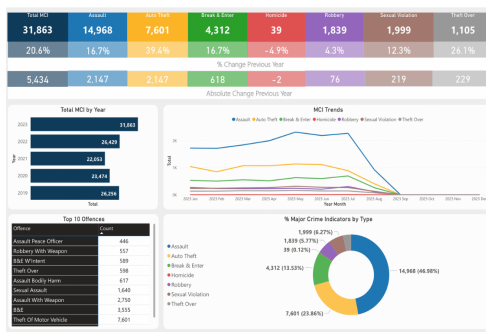
Major Crime Indicators TPS Data Analytics 2023, Year-to-Date (as of August 15)

Do you feel violence is increasing in Toronto?

3.2 Present-Day Municipal, Provincial & Federal Policies

Currently, there are ongoing policies focused on gun violence at all three levels of government in Canada, with each jurisdiction taking their respective approach to prevention, intervention, and reaction. At the federal level, a key act is *Bill C-21*, an "Act to amend certain Acts and to make certain consequential amendments (firearms)," which is meant to place a national 'freeze' on the sale, purchase or transfer of handguns.[18] It focuses on expanding the technical definition of what constitutes assault-style firearms, establishing new firearm-related offenses, strengthened penalties and creating "red and yellow flag" laws to prevent offenders from accessing weapons.[19]

These measures come at a much-needed time; in 2021, Canada had the third highest rate of firearm homicide among populous high-income countries.[20] Yet, gun control groups have noted that there are major loopholes within the bill; one being an exemption for "Individuals who train, compete or coach in a handgun shooting discipline

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[17] Survey participants were given a scale of 1 to 5 to respond to questions (1 = Disagree, 2 = Neutral, 3 = Agree, 4 = Strongly Agree, 5 = Very Strongly Agree)

[18] Bill C-21: *An Act to amend certain Acts and to make certain consequential amendments (firearms),* 1st session, 44th Parliament, 2023

[19] Ibid.

[20] Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, *Rates of Firearm Homicides per 100,000 Population Among World Bank High Income Countries with Population Greater than 10 million*, (Washington DC, 2021).

that is on the programme of the International Olympic Committee."[21] Without accompanying qualifiers as to how someone verifies their Olympic involvement, this can allow for anyone to claim that their weapon falls under this category. In addition to its national freeze on handguns, *Bill-C21* outlines anti-smuggling measures, largely between the United States and Canada. This policy mandate, which has historically been under the Ministry of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, is now under the purview of the Ministry of Public Safety, and has been the main site of collaboration between different levels of government. Cross-agency investigations have included the Canadian Border Services Agency (CBSA), Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), Ontario Provincial Police (OPP), and municipal enforcement networks, notably the Toronto Police Services (TPS), with 85% of its crime guns arriving from the United States.[22] Advancing technologies have also challenged both policy and enforcement strategies; a growing concern is the use of 3D printing to produce weapons. The guns manufactured through this technology are completely untraceable and are geared towards violent uses.[23]

At the municipal level, an overarching policy that has shaped the City of Toronto's strategy in preventing violence is the SafeTO Plan. The 10-year strategy was initiated by the *Community Safety and Policing Act* of 2019, a provincial legislation that mandated every municipality across Ontario to prepare and adopt a Community Safety and Well-Being Plan.[24] Adopted by Toronto City Council in 2021, SafeTO outlines 4

[21] Ibid.
[22] Andrew Russell and Tracy Tong, "Where Are Ontario's Crime Guns Coming from? New Data Shows Top U.S. Source States," Global News, May 21, 2022, https://globalnews.ca/news/8845131/ontario-crime-guns-new-data-top-us-source-states/.
[23] Angela Daly et al., "3D Printing, Policing and Crime," *Policing and Society* 31, no. 1 (March 28, 2020): 37–51, https://doi.org/10.1080/10439463.2020.1730835.
[24] City of Toronto, "SafeTO: A Community Safety and Well-Being Plan," City of Toronto, Toronto, 2021.

priority challenges and 7 goals that are further sectioned into 26 priority actions. Based on a 6-month period of consultation, it includes factors that prevent violence and mechanisms in coping with its implications. Many community advocates are optimistic at the goals outlined, with a clear emphasis on community engagement and consultation at all stages of planning, implementation, and evaluation. In regards to gun-related crimes, the plan also calls for the creation of the Toronto Office to Prevent Gun Violence.[25]

GOALS	Reduce Vulnerability	Reduce Violence	Advance Truth & Reconciliation	Promote Healing & Justice	Invest in People	Invest in Neighborhoods	Drive Collaboration & Accountability
PRIORITY ACTIONS	1.1 Enhance Multi-Sector Mental Health and Vulnerability Supports	2.1 Develop a Comprehensive Multi-sector Gun Violence Reduction Plan	3.1 Advance Indigenous-led community safety and well-being priorities	4.1 Become a Trauma-Informed and Responsive City	5.1 Engage Residents and Build Community Capacity to Lead	6.1 Embed Transparent and Accountable Monitoring and Reporting Practices into Integrated Place-Based Planning	7.1 Develop a Comprehensive Strategy to Share, Integrate and Analyze Data Across Multiple Institutions for the Purpose of Informing Real-Time Policy Development and Service Planning
	1.2 Implement Life Stabilization and Service Navigation Supports	2.2 Develop a Comprehensive Gender-Based and Intimate-Partner Violence Reduction Strategy	3.2 Develop an implementation plan to guide the City's response to the calls for Justice from the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls	4.2 Embed Anti-Racism and Human Rights-Based Approaches into Policy Development and Service Planning across all City Divisions, Agencies and Corporations	5.2 Enhance Programs and Services that Promote Child and Family Development and Well-Being	6.2 Add more Safe and Culturally-Accessible Community Spaces and Advance Indigenous Place-Making	7.2 Advance Policing and Law Enforcement Reform
	1.3 Embed the Community Crisis Support Service as a Well-Resourced, First-Response city-wide Service				5.3 Invest in Youth Outcomes to Ensure Equitable, Positive Youth Development		7.3 Strengthen Multi-Sector Collaboration through Partnership and Integrated Investments
	1.4 Strengthen, Align and Expand Capacity of Collaborative Risk-Driven Approaches to Reduce Risk of Harm and Victimization	2.3 Strengthen Community Crisis Response Protocols to Better Support Victims and Communities Impacted by Violence	3.3 Strengthen Meaningful Engagement with Indigenous Organizations and Communities by Leveraging Lessons Learned on Relationship Building	4.3 Strengthen Access to Community Justice by Prioritizing Culturally-Responsive Reintegration and Restorative Practices, including Justice Centres		6.3 Implement Place-Based Economic Empowerment and Development Approaches	7.4 Develop and Implement Robust Communication Approaches to Advance SafeTO Goals
	1.5 Advance Strategies, Programs and Services that Reduce Harm Related to Substance Use				5.4 Increase Equitable Access to Supports for Seniors	6.4 Enhance Local Cultural Development	

SAFETO Community Safety & Well-Being Plan Goals and Priority Actions

While there is cooperation on certain policies, this research shows large areas of improvement in both coordinating and collaborating on efforts. In May of this year, the federal government announced $390 million earmarked for programs and initiatives to

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[25] Ibid.

"stop gun violence before it starts."[26] Yet, community advocates have not heard any follow-up as to how this money can be accessed.[27]

3.3 Collective and Individual Grief and Trauma

A major theme in this work as both an implication and contributor to violence was the grief and trauma felt at both the individual and community level. Within the context of many people's narratives, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) could not adequately describe their experiences: "There is no 'post' [...], it keeps going on."[28] This sentiment was made visceral throughout the research process. In one instance, the excitement of a Healing Trip meant for mothers who lost their sons to homicide was interrupted by the news of a daytime shooting the prior afternoon, of a young man whose mother many of the women on the trip were familiar with.[29] The chronic and cyclical nature of violence felt by Torontonians, especially those already made vulnerable by socioeconomic and politicized identities, makes it so that any progress made in the coping and healing process is continually disrupted and reversed.

The burden of this trauma is exacerbated by how violence seems to delegitimize grief. Many mothers whose sons died due to gun violence noted how they found themselves in defensive stances in the midst of their loss.[30] Traditional models of grief cannot be applied within the context of gun violence. Take, for example, the most commonly referred grief model, the Kübler-Ross Grief Cycle, outlines five stages:

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[26] Public Safety Canada, "Government Announces $390 Million to Help Stop Crime and Violence," Canada.ca, May 8, 2023, https://www.canada.ca/en/public-safety-canada/news/2023/05/government-announces-390-million-to-help-stop-crime-and-violence.html.
[27] Anonymous Participants 1-10, Mothers of Peace Healing Circle, Niagara Falls, July 26, 2023.
[28] Anonymous Participants 1-10, Mothers of Peace Healing Circle, Toronto Centre for Learning & Development, July 17, 2023**.**
[29] Mothers of Peace Healing Circle, July 26.
[30] Ibid, July 17.

denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance;[31] the layer of violence makes each stage of grief differ significantly in duration, intensity, and complexity due to both the traumatic nature of the death, and the complex practical, legal and financial repercussions following the death.[32] While denial is meant to refer to the internal inability to accept the circumstances of loss, violence adds another layer of denial by external sources; focus group participants noted how they had to continually maintain their son's status as a victim.[33] They reported being isolated, not only by public opinion, but also the loss of family, friends, and other networks based on assumptions that their sons' deaths were somehow related to their actions or affiliations. One participant described how instead of dealing with the rumors around her son's murder, she decided to cut herself off from her entire family: "I don't leave the house anymore. I don't trust anyone anymore."[34] In this sense, victims and survivors of violence experience a multiplicity of griefs; not only have they lost their safety and loved ones, but also their communities and reputation. This social detachment positions these community members in physical and psychological danger; without access to knowledge and resource sharing, they are made further vulnerable to being victimized again.

This concept, coined by Dr. Kenneth Doka as 'disenfranchised grief', makes it so that the significant loss one experiences is not "openly acknowledged, socially validated, or publicly mourned."[35] Disenfranchised grief subjects the bereaved person to limited recognition, which in turn, leads to little social sympathy or support. This is

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[31] Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York, NY: Scribner, 1997).
[32] Jeanna M. Mastrocinque et al., "I'm Still Left Here with the Pain," *Homicide Studies* 19, no. 4 (June 10, 2014): 326–49, https://doi.org/10.1177/1088767914537494.
[33] Mothers of Peace Healing Circle, July 17.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Kenneth J. Doka, *Disenfranchised Grief: New Directions, Challenges, and Strategies for Practice* (Champaign, IL: Research Press, 2002).

reflected in the lack of programs dedicated to providing ongoing supports for individuals and communities who are reeling from the impacts of violence. When a traumatic incident of violence impacts a community, the city funding largely consists of the Community Crisis Response Fund & TCHC Violence Reduction Funds, both of which provide one-time assistance for an event, healing, or training.[36] Focus group participants reported limited programs following the death of their son; Victim Services provided funding for up to 10 therapy sessions limited at $100 per session.[37] The average costs of sessions for mental health professionals in Toronto range from $180 to $250 each session, without considering relevant specialities like bereavement counselling.[38] Many survivors reported this group of mothers being the only one specific to their particular experiences of grief, leaving them without coping mechanisms and communities of shared life stories. A mother reported that one mutual aid group she attended offered the opportunity to become a facilitator, "only if one was able to express no emotion" in relation to their experience. Despite this restrictive lens, the mother signed up for facilitator training but received no follow-up or further information despite there being a great need for group leaders.[39]

The lack of emotional infrastructure and trivialization of loss has drastic impacts on the life outcomes of entire communities. Scholars, policymakers and community stakeholders now recognize gun violence as a public health concern given its well-documented reverberations on physical, mental and spiritual well-being. When exposed to violence in their neighborhoods, individuals have exhibited greater indicators

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[36] Toronto Community Housing. Regent Park Road Map to Healing & Recovery, 2021.Toronto. City of Toronto.

[37] Mothers of Peace Healing Circle, July 17.

[38] The Therapy Centre, "How Much Does Therapy Cost in Toronto?," The Therapy Centre, May 26, 2023, https://thetherapycentre.ca/how-much-does-therapy-cost-in-toronto/.

[39] Ibid.

of biological stress,[40] and are more vulnerable to greater chronic physical illness, acute conditions, and poorer mental health.[41] Mothers who lost their adult child to homicide attributed heart disease, cancer, insomnia, and other physical ailments to the stress of dealing with the murder of their loved one.[42] Beyond the direct survivors of homicide, those that witness or hear about violence in their neighborhoods have reported shifting their behaviors out of fear, including limiting walking or exercising in their area and even leaving their homes in general.[43]

Exposure to violence also shapes educational and employment outcomes. Youth are especially vulnerable to these repercussions; violence has an acute impact on children's ability to regulate behavior, maintain attention and control impulses in the classroom setting.[44] In work settings, job-related stress can set off a chain reaction of trauma symptoms, as one major symptom of trauma is a reduced ability to handle stress.[45] In this sense, violence cements individuals and communities in perpetual states of grief, for the loss of their loved ones and the loss of their futures.

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[40] Lauren A. Magee et al., "Addressing Mental Health Needs of Secondary Homicide Survivors through a Social Determinants of Health Framework," *Homicide Studies*, March 28, 2023, https://doi.org/10.1177/10887679231163099.

[41] Daniel C. Semenza and Richard Stansfield, "Non-Fatal Gun Violence and Community Health Behaviors: A Neighborhood Analysis in Philadelphia," *Journal of Behavioral Medicine* 44, no. 6 (June 3, 2021): 833–41, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10865-021-00232-y.

[42] Glenda Hinkson, Camille Huggins, and Akeem Modeste-James, "Mothers' Physical and Mental Health Status after the Homicide of Their Adult Children in the Small Island State of Trinidad and Tobago.," *Traumatology* 26, no. 4 (2020): 336–43, https://doi.org/10.1037/trm0000264.

[43] Daniel C. Semenza and Richard Stansfield, "Non-Fatal Gun Violence and Community Health Behaviors: A Neighborhood Analysis in Philadelphia," *Journal of Behavioral Medicine* 44, no. 6 (June 3, 2021): 833–41.

[44] Patrick T. Sharkey et al., "The Effect of Local Violence on Children's Attention and Impulse Control," *American Journal of Public Health* 102, no. 12 (December 2012): 2287–93, https://doi.org/10.2105/ajph.2012.300789.

[45] Randy A. Sansone, Justin S. Leung, and Michael W. Wiederman, "Five Forms of Childhood Trauma: Relationships with Employment in Adulthood," *Child Abuse & Neglect* 36, no. 9 (September 2012): 676–79, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2012.07.007.

3.4 Victimization, Perpetration, & Restorative Justice

Less discussed within the conversation of violence are the intersections of victimization and perpetration. Often understood as a binary rather than an overlap, these two identities also challenge notions of justice. Both positionalities, of criminal and crime victim, have shared vulnerabilities. Who is considered deserving and undeserving of safety can often be answered by whose bodies and cultures are structurally and systemically considered safe or unsafe.

Toronto neighbourhoods with higher levels of material deprivation (based on indicators of income, quality of housing, education, employment, and family structure) had many more Emergency Department visits for injuries resulting from assaults and from assaults involving firearms. The rate for firearm visits is nearly 10 times higher in the most deprived versus their least deprived counterparts.[46] Residential instability and victimization were also linked, with those who had changed residences more often in the past 5 years more likely to be victimized, both personally and their household.[47]

The lack of economic mobility and resources often intersects with race and ethnicity in Toronto. Black Torontonians are also vulnerable to harboring both identities of victim and perpetrator. Nearly 1 out of every 15 young Black men in Ontario experienced jail time, compared to 1 out of about every 70 young white men, with incarcerated Black people more likely to also live in low-income neighbourhoods.[48] Direct exposure to violence as a witness is also a key risk factor to engaging in violence later on. In fact, a study that examined Black youth found it was the best predictor as to

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[46] Toronto Public Health, Community Violence in Toronto - Trends and Selected Demographic Patterns, *City of Toronto*, 2020.
[47] Adam Cotter, "Criminal Victimization in Canada, 2019," Statistics Canada, August 25, 2021, https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2021001/article/00014-eng.htm.
[48] City of Toronto, "SafeTO: A Community Safety and Well-Being Plan," City of Toronto, Toronto, 2021.

whether an individual would later engage in gun-related crimes.[49] One mother in the focus group disclosed, "One of my sons was killed and my other is a killer."[50] Siblings of homicide victims are especially vulnerable to becoming perpetrators, often out of seeing vengeance as their only semblance of justice. This is a form of lateral violence, a type of anger enacted horizontally, directed towards members of a shared marginalized community, rather than its oppressors.[51] This is often the type of crime that receives mass media attention.

In cases like this, where the victim is a racialized youth, two potential narratives emerge: either the victim is framed as a "bad kid" whose poor choices lead to the violent incident, or the victim is labeled a "good kid" who was consumed by the inherently violent living conditions of the nearby racialized neighborhood.[52] Another critical dimension to the question of who is considered safe and unsafe is who defines these categories. This is one example of the imperative role the media plays in collective morality. As a central visual medium and key access point for the public to learn of ongoing events, the media largely "contributes to the construction and production of dominant memory," which in turn becomes fact.[53] Focus group participants reported that even in cases when their sons were minors, identifying information like their name and photo were released publicly.[54] This subjected them to alienation by their peers at

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[49] Zina T. McGee et al., "A Multivariate Analysis of Gun Violence among Urban Youth: The Impact of Direct Victimization, Indirect Victimization, and Victimization among Peers," *Cogent Social Sciences* 3, no. 1 (May 13, 2017), https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2017.1328772.
[50] Mothers of Peace Healing Circle, July 17.
[51] Theoni Whyman et al., "'Lateral Violence Stems from the Colonial System': Settler-Colonialism and Lateral Violence in Aboriginal Australians," *Postcolonial Studies* 26, no. 2 (December 16, 2021): 183–201, https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790.2021.2009213.
[52] Ardavan Eizadirad, "Is It 'Bad' Kids or 'Bad' Places? Where Is All the Violence Originating from? Youth Violence in the City of Toronto," Revie*w of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 38, no. 2 (2016): 162–88. https://doi.org/10.1080/10714413.2016.1155956.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Mothers of Peace Healing Circle, July 17.

school and public vilification. Defining "good" and "bad", "right" and "wrong" has powerful implications of resource distribution, access to opportunities, and interpersonal self-perceptions of one's self and the identities they harbor.

Correctional Statistics Canada (CSC) is a key stakeholder in collecting information concerning carceral systems and those involved. Its core focus on data is around mid and post-incarceration statistics, with the key signifier of progress centered around recidivism rates. There is little emphasis placed on life experiences prior to involvement with correctional networks. For instance, there is no standardized data on the carceral outcomes of youth involved in the child welfare system, but governmental consultation with the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) has suggested 95% of Indigenous peoples in jails have been institutionalized by child welfare agencies at an instance in their lives.[55] This parallels the fact that despite making up only 4% of Ontario's under-15 population, Indigenous children represent 30% of foster children.[56]

Community Safety Spectrum

[55] Shelley Trevethan et al., *The Effect of Family Disruption on Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Inmates* (Government of Canada Publications, 2001).
[56] City of Toronto, "SafeTO: A Community Safety and Well-Being Plan," City of Toronto, Toronto, 2021.

The Canadian Families of Correctional Networks (CFCN), an advocacy group for the loved ones of individuals involved in carceral systems, noted how accountability and support interact at both the individual and collective level to foster or limit safety.[57]

Marginalized communities often exist in quadrant 1, where they are held responsible for the crime, violence, and negative outcomes of their social spaces and neighborhoods without receiving any supports to prevent or intervene in these issues. They also are often situated in quadrant 3, where similarly there are few supports, but also a wholesale disregard for and neglect of their experiences. On the other side of the spectrum, affluent neighborhoods often exist in quadrant 4, where they are characterized by having access to necessities and the protective factors that foster safety, and any violence perpetrated in areas is seen as parasitic, not an indictment of any characteristic of their own. This is paralleled on the individual level; those being released from correctional networks who have little to no supports, but hold the moral responsibility of "proving" they are not "bad," are at a greater risk of reoffending. To prevent the victimization-perpetration cycle, efforts must be made to migrate individuals and communities into quadrant 4. The intersection of support systems and accountability, in a restorative rather than punitive sense, allows for interventions prior to serious acts of violence, and in the instances they occur, the time, space and resources to address it.

3.5 Belonging as Safety

Another major piece of this research was the pivotal role belonging held in violence reduction. The ways in which people access connection differ greatly

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[57] Louise Leonardi, in discussion with the author, Zoom, August 1, 2023.

depending on their social identities and resources. For marginalized populations who cannot rely on law enforcement for safety, belonging to a group can provide physical, financial, and emotional protection. Communities have come together, outside of institutional spaces, to create their own sense of belonging and solidarity.

Do you think that a sense of belonging is a solution to reducing violence?
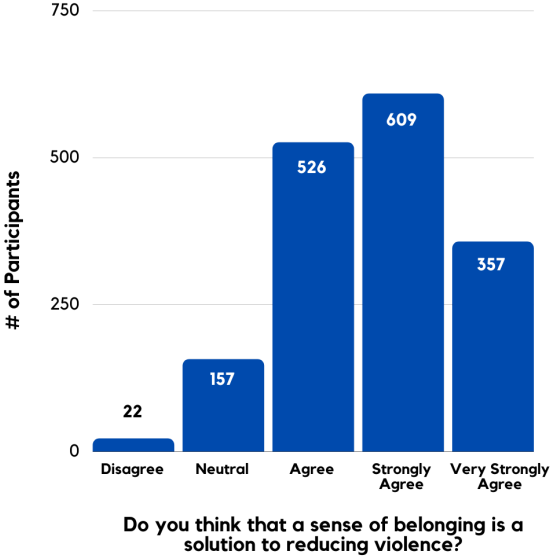
A case study of particular interest in the discourse of belonging is gangs. If we understand belonging to be a fundamental psychological need, then we must also accept people will seek it out in whatever ways they are presented - even if they are only given negative forms of connection. While achieving it in their own regard, they reflect the need to seek out and find social connectedness in whatever capacity one can. Estimates of individuals involved or at-risk of gang involvement in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) range from around 2,000 to 6,000. This disparity is largely based on a lack of consensus among academics, law enforcement agencies, government policy-makers, service providers, and criminal intelligence analysts with respect to

defining street gangs and gang-related activity.[58] The Toronto Police Service (TPS) have been known to use the term 'gang' to describe anything from "four boys playing dice on the corner to a full-fledged Hells Angel Crew."[59] In these zones of ambiguity, the discretion of a single officer becomes the law, allowing discrimination to remain disguised under the cover of 'public safety'. The category of "individuals at-risk of gang involvement" has also long been a grey area that has criminalized youth not guilty of anything, but being born in a particular neighborhood or community. Many mothers who lost their sons to gun violence reported the automatic association of their child's death to gang affiliation, and how this further stigmatized their death.[60] This, in turn, often has the opposite effect of incentivizing youth to participate in gangs; if they are already suffering the legal and societal consequences of being associated with one, they may as well receive the benefits of financial resources, protections, and social connectedness.

The divestment of youth spaces, lack of skill development, and visceral need for protection have created a void which gangs have filled.[61] According to the RCMP, although the average age of a gang member was 23 between 2014 and 2016, the average age of their first criminal offense was 16.[62] On average, the same kids saw their first school suspension at 13 years old.[63] Although many youth in the justice system

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[58] Scott Wortleym *Identifying Street Gangs: Definitional Dilemmas and Their Policy Implications*, Public Safety Canada, (Ottawa, ON: 2010).

[59] Adam Campbell, "My Life in Street Gangs," Toronto Life, September 11, 2019. https://torontolife.com/life/my-life-in-street-gangs/.

[60] Mothers of Peace Healing Circle, July 17

[61] Christine Valdez, "Posttraumatic Distress and Treatment Barriers among Former Gang Members: Implications for Improving Access to Traumatic Stress Resources in Marginalized Populations," *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 34, no. 2 (January 22, 2021): 309–21, https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.22651.

[62] Dario Balca, "How Gangs Are Recruiting Elementary School Children," CTV News, July 4, 2018. https://bc.ctvnews.ca/how-gangs-in-surrey-are-recruiting-elementary-school-children-1.3998964.

[63] Ibid.

incur charges after their 18th birthday, there is little communication between youth and adult justice systems, and few, if any, formal programs exist to support young people at this transitional stage.[64] Many individuals who are introduced in headlines and courtrooms as hardened criminals were first youth reaching out for help. Before they were given the moniker "criminal" they were, and are our neighbours, students, children, people. Ultimately, these kids were opportunists without opportunities. The urgency and concerning degree of violence that stems from gang culture is well-agreed upon, but the social isolation it is usually borne out of is seldom recognized as a violence itself. One in four survey participants stated they considered moving from Toronto, often citing a sense of disconnection from their surroundings and fellow residents among the myriad of reasons.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Wraparound Supports

The compounding effects of violence require services that take into account both the short-term, immediate needs and long-term psychological dimensions. "One homicide can encompass the medical care cost of the victim and/or perpetrator, loss of future earnings of the victim, and possible property damage."[65] Wrap-around supports are a team-based, collaborative approach to service delivery. The concept of wrap-around programming is used to describe any program that is flexible, family or

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[64] Carla Cesaroni, Chris Grol, and Kaitlin Fredericks, "Overrepresentation of Indigenous Youth in Canada's Criminal Justice System: Perspectives of Indigenous Young People," *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Criminology* 52, no. 1 (May 30, 2018): 111–28, https://doi.org/10.1177/0004865818778746.
[65] Glenda Hinkson, Camille Huggins, and Akeem Modeste-James, "Mothers' Physical and Mental Health Status after the Homicide of Their Adult Children in the Small Island State of Trinidad and Tobago.," *Traumatology* 26, no. 4 (2020): 336–43.

person-oriented and comprehensive, usually through the collaboration of a number of organizations working together to provide a holistic program of supports.

The current reality of resources is that many do not take a trauma-informed approach to serving communities. This practice is meant to recognize, understand, and empathize with the impact of trauma by acknowledging and addressing potential triggers, consulting with clients as to how to best approach their unique scenarios. One of the key programs for crime survivors across Ontario is the Victim Quick Response Program (VQRP). This is the central resource, especially for funeral costs, crime scene cleanup, support for serious injuries, and immediate safety expenses such as replacing broken windows and locks, or getting a cell phone.[66] This program, while effective in practice, has many implementation issues. Most expenses have to be reported 45 days following the crime, which in the midst of grief and violence, may not be enough time for victims to reach this part of the process. You also cannot be receiving any other form of public assistance, including the Ontario Disability Support Program and Ontario Works.[67] This essentially positions already vulnerable Torontonians in deciding whether to properly lay their loved ones to rest or pay their rent. Also, to access funding, crimes have to be reported to the police.

Across Canada, only 31% of crimes are reported to the police due in part to the fears victims may hold in exposing others in their network to hyper-surveillance and enforcement.[68] Victims are thus faced with another dilemma: publicize their narratives of violence for resources, or suppress it for the sake of protecting themselves and others.

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[66] Community Legal Education Ontario. "Victim Quick Response Program+." Criminal Law, April 2023.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Greg Moreau, Brianna Jaffray, and Amelia Armstrong, "Police-Reported Crime Statistics in Canada, 2019," *Juristat*, October 2020, 4–69.

The funding from VQRP is also not usually provided to the victim or witness of a violent crime directly, but to an intermediary, usually a service provider. This places another barrier in the way of accessing necessary supports, and can be another stressor depending on the nature of the relationship victims hold with their respective service providers.

4.2 Meaningful Routes to Belonging

A key demographic in violence prevention and intervention efforts are Toronto's youth. Vulnerable to both victimization and perpetration, youth violence is a symptom, and a vacuum of opportunities the cause. In some neighborhoods, community advocates say basketball courts have nets ripped off and community centres are closed before school even lets out.[69] Without the safety of streetlights, youth have to congregate in the shadows. Youth violence is best addressed through a collective action approach, which includes expanded employment and skill development initiatives, supports geared towards healthy families and their wellbeing, increased educational attainment, and positive social inclusion.[70] For instance, evidence shows that youth workforce development and employment programs, including summer jobs programs, can reduce youth involvement in violence by as much as 45%.[71]

Also important in designing intentional routes to belonging are meaningful *spaces.* Research has found that expanding the domains for informal contact between

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[69] March, interview with author.

[70] Mariame Kaba, J Cyriac Mathew, and Nathan Haines, eds., *Something Is Wrong: Exploring the Roots of Youth Violence* (Chicago Freedom School, Project Nia & Teachers for Social Justice., 2010).

[71] Sara Heller, Harold Pollack, and Johnathan M. V. Davis, "The Effects of Summer Jobs on Youth Violence," *Office of Justice Programs' National Criminal Justice Reference Service*, August 2017, https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/grants/251101.pdf

neighbours fosters a sense of social connectedness and safety.[72] These arenas, often referred to as *third spaces,* such as parks, libraries, and places of worship, are already often familiar places, and can meet the many dimensions of communities' needs.[73] Access to nature has also been documented as having mitigating impacts on violence in urban settings.[74] Community groups have said that in some cases, local permitting processes or insurance made these public spaces unavailable to them.[75] Effective partnership between the City and these networks could facilitate social gathering and communion otherwise not possible. These spaces also go beyond a physical place of gathering. In the wake of the pandemic and with shifts to how newer generations come together, online platforms and social media have also become domains of connection. Learning how to best navigate online spaces should be conducted in consultation with youth, whose media literacy and understanding of online norms could help broaden their communities.

4.3 Investment in Public Services

Preventative measures require long-term involvement in communities and neighborhoods rooted in relationship building, reliability of services, and knowledge of the ways in which different social identities act as risk or protective factors. Survey respondents held the perspective that violence is not isolated from the circumstances it is borne out of, and intersects with a plurality of social policy issues.

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[72] William C. Sullivan, Frances E. Kuo, and Stephen F. Depooter, "The Fruit of Urban Nature: Vital Neighborhood Spaces," *Environment and Behavior* 36, no. 5 (September 2004): 678–700, https://doi.org/10.1177/0193841x04264945.

[73] Felice Yuen and Amanda J. Johnson, "Leisure Spaces, Community, and Third Places," *Leisure Sciences* 39, no. 3 (June 1, 2016): 295–303, https://doi.org/10.1080/01490400.2016.1165638.

[74] Mardelle Shepley et al., "The Impact of Green Space on Violent Crime in Urban Environments: An Evidence Synthesis," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 16, no. 24 (December 14, 2019): 5119, https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph16245119.

[75] City of Toronto, "SafeTO Community Consultation Summary," City of Toronto, Toronto, 2021.

What Social Issues are Violence Connected To?
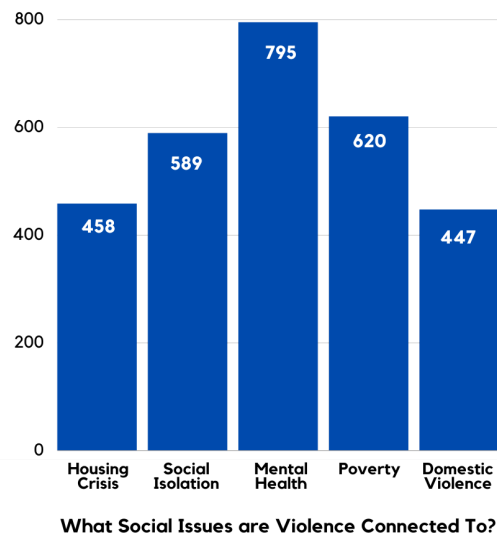
Many service providers noted that the sustainability of programming was seldom guaranteed due to hyper-specific grant criteria, high staff turnover, and the scarcity for funding between networks that often turned potential collaborators into constant competitors.[76] Agencies reported being overburdened by meticulous reporting and bookkeeping in the name of accountability for small grants across multiple funders, or rely upon the benevolence of donors that can bear influence on organizational missions, values, and areas of focus. The well-documented need for programming is not enough to guarantee its sustainability. For example, while gender-based and domestic violence has now been declared a pandemic by the city, and the Young Women Christian Association's (YWCA) programs have recorded efficacy in place-based, nuanced solutions, resources still remain scarce, with their shelters running at capacity at all times.[77] Those who fall outside this capacity are often rendered invisible, especially when these vulnerabilities exist among others. For instance, in Toronto, there are no

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[76] Geoff Doner and Andrea Battersby, in discussion with the author, Toronto, July 19, 2023.
[77] YWCA Toronto, *The Forgotten Victims of Gun Violence* (Toronto, ON: YWCA Toronto, 2019).

specialty programs for young black mothers, although they are the most likely to be the survivors and secondary victims of homicide.[78]

Beyond non-profit domains, grassroots networks, and community groups, there has been a parallel defunding in government services relied upon by our most vulnerable. Children and youth are especially susceptible to violence, particularly those involved in the child welfare system. In 2019, the Provincial Advocate for Children & Youth was cut under Doug Ford's Conservative rule, eradicating any government entity responsible solely for concerns around children. This is especially concerning knowing that prevention of violence occurs over an entire life cycle and begins in early childhood with programs to help caregivers raise emotionally healthy children, and ends with efforts to identify and intervene with troubled individuals who are threatening violence.[79] In addition to this, in SafeTO community consultations, the most universal demand was for an increase to Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) to meet the rapidly rising costs of living in Toronto.[80] The two programs respectively provide up to $733 and $1308 per month. Even combined, there is still a nearly $500 discrepancy between funding and the average $2500 rent for a one-bedroom apartment in Toronto.[81] Those who have appeals about their funding have reported receiving hearing dates from the Social Benefits Tribunals up to 16 months later.[82] One focus group participant stated that in the wake of her son's death, by the time she paid her

[78] S. Goddard-Durant et al., "Experiences and Needs of Young Black Canadian Mothers in Toronto: A Community-Based and Black-Centered Research," *Alliance for Healthier Communities*, 2023, https://doi.org/https://www.allianceon.org/resource/Experiences-and-Needs-Young-Black-Canadian-Mothers-Toronto-Community-Based-and-Black.

[79] Rachel Wamser-Nanney et al., "Childhood Trauma Exposure and Gun Violence Risk Factors among Victims of Gun Violence," *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy* 11, no. 1 (January 2019): 99–106, https://doi.org/10.1037/tra0000410.

[80] "Income Support from ODSP." ontario.ca. Accessed August 17, 2023.

[81] Zumper. "Average Rent in Toronto, ON and Cost Information." Zumper, n.d. Accessed August 11, 2023.

[82] Community Legal Education Ontario. "Ontario Disability Support Program." Steps to Justice, July 2021.

rent, she did not have money left to pay for utilities and had to rely on family and friends to take showers at their residences.[83] The lack of agency and dignity embedded in these programs is a form of policy violence, whereby the impacts of legislation place subsets of their constituents in positions of deeper poverty.

Another growing site of violence this past year has been on transit systems. The Toronto Transit Commission (TTC), the main network in the city, has seen a 60% rise in violent incidents since 2019.[84] The response to this rise was the deployment of Toronto Police Services to subway stations and an increase in rider fare, reportedly for the sake of investments in security. Transit advocates say a key solution to reducing violence is by increasing service and fostering mental supports housed in transit systems, rather than law enforcement.[85] While these acts of violence have largely been characterized as random, many of them link back to the lack of shelter spaces and mental health resources in the city. Addressing the lack of housing has been a major call for community advocates, with the City of Toronto reporting how eviction prevention programs are in high demand.[86] Beyond this, the adequacy of housing is often seen as a privilege rather than a right, but can be an effective antidote to preventing crimes at both the interpersonal and collective levels. Researchers found that structural repairs to homes of low-income owners in majority-Black neighborhoods were associated with a 23% reduction in total crime.[87]

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[83] Mothers of Peace Healing Circle, July 17.
[84] Toronto Transit Commission Chief Executive Officer, "Chief Executive Officer's Report – February 2023," Toronto Transit Commission, 2023..
[85] Monica Mason, in discussion with the author,, Zoom, July 20, 2023.
[86] City of Toronto, "SafeTO Community Consultation Summary," City of Toronto, Toronto, 2021.
[87] Eugenia C. South, John MacDonald, and Vincent Reina, "Association between Structural Housing Repairs for Low-Income Homeowners and Neighborhood Crime," *JAMA Network Open* 4, no. 7 (July 21, 2021): e2117067, https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2021.17067.

Investments in public services are not solely altruistic. In the long-term, they are the most effective and economic response to violence prevention. As one reaction to the affordability crisis, participants in the SafeTO community consultation suggested that correctional facilities are a substitute for housing at specific times of the year – often during winter. For some individuals in the consultations, it was a known fact that low-level offenses would increase in October as a means of having somewhere to be for the Christmas holiday season, with a meal and bed.[88] According to 2018 federal data, the average annual costs for each federal male prisoner amount to $115,000.[89] In that same year, the average annual spending per elementary and secondary student in Canada amounted to a little more than 1/10th of that at $12,000.[90] This is especially relevant when, according to Correctional Services Canada, Grade 7 is the average education level of newly admitted offenders serving sentences of two years or more.[91] Conservative estimates suggest gun-involved crimes cost Canadians more than $3 billion each year.[92] Taking a preventative stance in lieu of a reactive one broadens not only the individual's ability to participate in their own self-development, but contributes to collective improvement of governments' financial health.

4.4 Community Stakeholder Engagement

At the forefront of all these efforts is community stakeholder engagement. The same groups tend to be overrepresented in crime statistics and victimhood, but

[88] City of Toronto (2021) SafeTO Community Consultation Summary. Toronto

[89] Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer, "Update on Costs of Incarceration," Ottawa, 2018.

[90] Government of Canada, "Budget 2018: Equality Growth: A Strong Middle Class," Ottawa, 2018. https://www.canada.ca/en/department-finance/news/2018/02/budget-2018-equality-and-growth-for-a-strong-middle-class.html.

[91] Olena Hankivsky and Ashlee Christoffersen, "Intersectionality and the Determinants of Health: A Canadian Perspective," *Critical Public Health* 18, no. 3 (September 30, 2008): 271–83, https://doi.org/10.1080/09581590802294296.

[92] Canadian Press, "Justice Department Study Finds Firearms-Related Crime Cost Tallied at $3.1B in Canada," CBCnews, October 14, 2012.

underrepresented in leadership and authorship positions. Goal 5 of the SafeTO plan (5.1) is "to engage residents and build community capacity to lead."[93] But given the historical and ongoing erosion of the social contract between institutions and communities, there is a deep skepticism about any program or research not first verified by a source within the community. This is especially relevant in the case of safety initiatives, which have often been the trojan horse of law enforcement and policing.

Another area of improvement is in data collection. Demographic information across different sources ranges broadly. For instance, the Toronto Police Services collects race statistics, but not ethnicity; this limits the ability to see how different experiences of Blackness, like those from Caribbean and African diasporas, are respectively impacted. Race data is also identified by the arresting officer, not the individual being arrested, which can be highly problematic, especially in the case of Indigenous and multiracial individuals who often are not visibly their respective race.

There is likewise a discrepancy in individuals screening for depressive and post-trauma stress disorder criteria versus seeking care from a mental health professional. This speaks to a clear need for mental health supports that does not parallel the numbers of those who access them, partly due to fears around disclosing personal information.[94] Programs like the City of Toronto's Community Healing Project supports the development of mental health literacy and resiliency in youth 12-24 who have been exposed to community violence through peer support certification and trauma-informed community workshops.[95] They position community members who have

[93] Sarah Mah, Lori Diemert, Scott McKean, Sarah Collier, and Laura Rosella. "Planning for Community Well-Being: Prioritizing and Identifying Local Neighbourhood Attributes of Belonging." *International Journal of Population Data Science* 7, no. 3 (2022). https://doi.org/10.23889/ijpds.v7i3.2060.

[94] Lauren A. Magee et al., "Addressing Mental Health Needs of Secondary Homicide Survivors through a Social Determinants of Health Framework," *Homicide Studies*, March 28, 2023

[95] Blueprint, "The Community Healing Project: Year 3 in Review," City of Toronto, 2021.

already established relationships in marginalized neighborhoods and provide education on coping mechanisms for themselves and those around them. Current community engagement usually takes the form of post-initiative evaluation; to meaningfully engage, this involvement has to take place in the planning processes. For instance, a focus group participant noted how the amalgamation of the City of Toronto's three courthouses did not take into account the territorial animosities that could stoke further violence by encounters in the space."[96]

Those who are impacted by any given system should be at the forefront of its formation and transformation. Critical to this dialogue are direct survivors of gun violence. Many focus group participants noted that their most important coping mechanism was meaning-making and advocacy in the wake of their loss.[97] While there can be no reasoning equated to their children's untimely deaths, advocacy allowed the mothers to affect the systems that led to their loss. Deliberate community stakeholder engagement means committee positions in municipal government, consultation in the development of safety initiatives, and participatory budget-making whereby residents can have a direct say as to where public funds go.

5. IMPACT

This research, as it expanded to address new-found aspects of gun violence, aims to put different stakeholders in conversation with each other. These findings reveal there is a need not only to seek better answers, but look to develop better questions based on lived experiences of community members, service providers, policymakers, and other collaborators. Beyond this, these recommendations place an imperative on

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[96] Mothers of Peace Healing Circle, July 17.
[97] Ibid.

collaboration, which can help support more integrated communities. Neighborhoods are akin to ecosystems that grow best when spaces of connection and belonging are intentionally cultivated.

Most importantly, this work is meant to shed light on the ongoing work being done by communities through informal networks, mutual aid, and self-advocacy. Information sharing, from where to find more affordable groceries to housing rights, has been a **critical** catalyst of survival for marginalized communities. One way in which mutual aid takes shape is through informal savings clubs that go under many names like 'susu' and 'merry-go-round,' where recipients rotate who receives a lump sum of money.[98] Many of these participants would be ineligible for loans or borrowing money from institutions, and this allows them to have the ability to make larger purchases, from buying furniture for their homes to paying their children's tuition. These efforts to foster belonging are acts of resistance to the deliberate divestment of resources and common stereotypes perpetrated onto these populations. Their resilience should be celebrated, but not necessary, and the circumstances it is borne out of should still be critically analyzed.

6. CONCLUSION

Toronto, as a city of territories, is experienced differently across social identities; Racialized and gendered bodies are terrains of negotiating morality, access to opportunity, and especially relevant to this discourse, safety. Other positionalities such as migration, class, and dis/ability intersect, exacerbate and perpetuate one another as

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[98] Gertrude Mianda, "Francophone Sub-Saharan African Immigrants Organizing Tontines in Toronto: A Basis for Solidarity and Integration," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 52, no. 3 (2020): 7–26, https://doi.org/10.1353/ces.2020.0021.

vulnerabilities to violence. The individual and collective grief borne out of this violence is often mistranslated as random anger, which in turn gives way to a criminalization of those who need the most supports; in this manner, entire communities go unnamed, yet spoken for. Despite this, community members, service providers and survivors of violence have worked tirelessly to provide counternarratives to reductionist notions of their identities and stories.

Creating a sense of belonging through these informal networks, knowledge sharing, and resource navigation has been the main – and at times only – domains of safety that can be relied on by Toronto's marginalized communities. In this sense, belonging is both cause and effect – it acts as a protective factor in fostering safety and creating spaces where people feel secure, allowing for and enabling an increased sense of trust and togetherness. As violence is a process, safety is likewise. The latter cannot be understood simply as the absence of the former. It is ongoing, multifaceted, and rooted in collaboration between government, community networks, and individuals.

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