From Punishment to Prevention:

REFRAMING THE NARRATIVE ON STREET-BASED YOUTH VIOLENCE IN OTTAWA

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VIVICresearch

A Note from CRSD and OCCH

In 2020, our organizations, the Centre for Resilience and Social Development (CRSD) and the Ottawa Coalition of Community Houses (OCCH), united with a shared mission to address the root causes of youth street violence in our city.

Recognizing the limitations of existing enforcement-centric strategies, we opted for a more equitable, holistic, and community-centered approach. We acknowledged that systemic inequities were at the core of the issue. While youth support programs remained important, we were committed to a more fundamental transformation, including open dialogues and systemic change.

Collaborating with Vivic Research, we delved into the systemic factors affecting youth caught in street violence, recognizing that viewing the problem through a public health lens would provide us with the knowledge necessary to advocate for preventive, community-based solutions. Engaging directly with affected youth and families, we gained valuable insights into the role of systemic inequities and a lack of opportunities.

Our collective goal was to shed light on the social factors contributing to youth street violence in Ottawa and amplify the voices of those affected. CRSD and OCCH aimed to advocate for systemic change, striving to improve health, equity, and safety outcomes for all children and youth in Ottawa.

Executive Summary

The following report is intended to recontextualize the conversation around gun violence and youth street-level violence to decouple policing narratives from community voices. Vivic Research collaborated with the Centre for Resilience and Social Development (CRSD) and the Ottawa Coalition of Community Houses (OCCH) to conduct focus groups and surveys. The consultations aimed to gather perspectives from youth, adults, and service providers about the underlying causes of youth violence and potential non-carceral, community-based solutions to address it.

This report consolidates the findings from our conversations by theme and compares them to the current narratives around gun and youth violence that are put forward in local media and rely heavily on police accounts. Often, these articles predominantly focus on the police perspective in discussions surrounding gun and youth violence, featuring quotes from police chiefs and other law enforcement officials, while voices from the most impacted communities are underrepresented. We also explore how the police's role in data collection and resident surveys allows them to exert control over the narrative and selectively position themselves in the conversation.

Building on our previous work that explored the root causes of youth violence and identified police and prisons as drivers of the conditions that breed violence, we explore what alternatives could be put forward for the Ottawa community.[i]

Our main findings from this work are summarized below.

1. Youth identified that they did not feel safe in their communities and perceived police as an additional danger to them and their communities.
2. Youth and adults identified access to employment opportunities and financial security, a reduction in police presence in youth spaces, and access to skill-building and recreation programs as the most effective ways to prevent street-level youth violence in their communities.
3. Individuals living and working in impacted communities identified a lack of available services that explicitly offer support to youth involved in street-level violence without implicating the police or CAS.
4. Communities affected by youth violence and service providers acknowledge the necessity for community-based approaches that address the social context and offer upstream support to youth, their families, and communities.
5. The current media narrative on street-level youth violence primarily reflects the police's perspectives and priorities, rather than centering the knowledge and experiences of those impacted.
6. Independent collection, analysis, and distribution of data are necessary to reduce police services' control and influence in conversations and responses to street-level youth violence.

Introduction[1]

The following report explores street-level youth violence in Ottawa from multiple perspectives. In this report, we define street-level youth violence as violent acts perpetuated by youth (people between the ages of 13 and 25) concerning their participation in illegal markets (including buying and selling of drugs, stolen goods, possession of weapons, and the use of weapons with the intent to harm others, etc).

The impact of street-level youth violence extends to both individuals involved in interpersonal violence and their surrounding communities. However, it is crucial to situate instances of interpersonal violence within the broader context of the state's violence and systemic neglect toward specific communities. The discussion has often been framed solely through the perspective of the state, particularly policing institutions. However, these narratives are neither helpful nor productive in finding meaningful solutions to address the safety and well-being issues at hand.

Ottawa is a unique context within Canada, and the response that evolves here will need to reflect that reality. Home to over 1 million people as of 2021, 20% of all Arab people in Ontario lived in Ottawa and 11% of all Black people in Ontario lived in Ottawa. [ii] Ottawa is one of three urban centers home to more than 1,000 Inuit.[iii] 25% of all immigrants in Ottawa are refugees, compared to 15% nationally. With over 1 in 5 working adults in Ottawa employed in public administration, the average income surpasses both the provincial and national averages. However, despite this prosperity, a significant portion of the population faces limited access to income, exacerbated by unequal wealth distribution and systemic barriers. These factors contribute to the deepening tensions within communities.

This research highlights the growing recognition among impacted community members that current narratives around youth violence and approaches to address the issue rely too heavily on law enforcement and the criminal legal system. Many advocates are calling for non-carceral and non-police responses that tackle the root causes of violence while promoting community-based solutions.[iv] These alternative approaches prioritize addressing the underlying social and economic factors that contribute to street-level youth violence by investing in poverty alleviation, education, job training, and mental health services. Moreover, there is a growing demand to develop transformative justice approaches that adopt a health equity framework that prioritizes healing, grief support, accountability, and community-building instead of punitive measures.

The report is divided into four sections. The first section provides an overview of the methodology used in this report. The second section explores how the portrayal of gun and youth violence in the media bolsters police narratives and excludes the communities most impacted from meaningfully participating in the conversation. The third section summarizes the findings from the consultations we held to recontextualize street-level youth violence through the lens of youth, adults, and service providers directly impacted by the issue. The fourth and

[1] This report was co-authored by Inez Hillel and Farnaz Farhang. Vivic Research would like to thank the Centre for Resilience and Social Development and the Ottawa Coalition for Community Houses for the facilitation support the community consultations that were foundational to our research. The views expressed in this report are those of the authors.

final section highlights work done in other jurisdictions that could serve as inspiration in the Ottawa context.

This project was completed in partnership between Vivic Research, the Centre for Resilience and Social Development (CRSD), and the Ottawa Coalition for Community Houses (OCCH). The objective of this project is to better understand the lived realities of youth in Ottawa who experience street-level violence, either as participants, survivors, witnesses, or any combination of those positionalities. This is the second report we have produced collaboratively. The first report, titled "Rethinking Youth Violence: Understanding and Unpacking the Structural Causes of Youth Street-based Violence", explored the ways that youth violence can be prevented by transforming the social conditions that perpetuate violence at interpersonal, community, and state levels.

Methodology

This report relies on qualitative data collected through surveys and focus groups to provide an alternative narrative to the current conversation on street-level youth violence by centering the voices and perspectives of youth, adults, and service providers that are directly implicated in the issue.

The consultation process started in May 2022, engaging youth between the ages of 15 and 19 through focus groups. 18 Black and racialized youth were engaged for two hour-long sessions to share their perspectives on youth violence and share insights as to what their dream community would look and feel like. The second phase of the consultation, which took place in September 2022, involved surveying service providers in the Ottawa region. The aim was to gather insights regarding the services they offer, identify existing service gaps, understand the complex needs of the individuals they serve, and identify barriers they face in delivering care and services. In the final phase of the consultation, conducted in December 2022, a survey was distributed to individuals aged 18 and above who have either personally experienced youth violence or have loved ones with lived or living experiences of youth violence. The survey was designed to capture their experiences utilizing supports, their experience with the various institutions that are involved in this area, the drivers of youth violence at a community level, and the direction for change.

The findings from the consultations are contrasted against media coverage in local news articles. A brief media analysis was conducted to examine the coverage of street-level youth violence in newspapers including the Ottawa Citizen, CTV News, City News, and CBC News. Our analysis explores the ways in which police are depicted as the principal stakeholders through the use of quotes and imagery, and subsequently framed as the ones responsible for resolving the issue.

Limitations of our study include the small sample size of individuals consulted and the focus on local newspapers which may not fully capture the nuances of the broader conversation at the provincial and national level. Although we acknowledge the methodological limitation of having a smaller sample size of youth participants, we decided to conduct focus groups facilitated by trusted adults. This approach was chosen to prioritize the comfort of the youth given the sensitive nature of the questions we posed. By creating a safe and familiar environment, we

were able to hear more insightful responses as the youth felt at ease sharing their experiences. Due to limited resources and scheduling challenges, we opted to survey the adults for this research instead of conducting focus groups. However, we acknowledge that many adults may experience a sense of exhaustion from engaging in these processes without witnessing tangible change. In the end, the small sample size allowed us to ensure that participants had appropriate avenues for fair compensation and created an environment where we could genuinely reflect upon and hold space for the contributions of everyone involved.

We hope that these findings will provide valuable insights into how street-level youth violence is portrayed in the media and the contrast between how the issue is lived and discussed in the impacted communities. We envision this document as a starting point to reflect the appetite for conversations on approaches to preventing and addressing youth violence, favouring innovative, non-carceral solutions instead of continuing to rely on policing and punishment.

Police Control and Influence: Shaping the Narrative on Gun Violence

The following section examines how the current discourse on gun violence is dominated by narratives perpetuated by the police. We explore how the police determine their position in the conversation, and subsequently, we delve into the media's role in reinforcing those narratives. By conducting a closer examination of the existing narrative, we can uncover inconsistencies and contradictions intentionally created by the narrative to ensure that the police maintain a position of authority and control. These discrepancies may perpetuate a narrative that reinforces the need for a dominant police presence while downplaying the potential for alternative solutions and community-led approaches.

The Erasure of Police in the Gun Violence Narrative through Selective Definitions

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines a shooting as "the act of shooting a gun".[v] According to their definition, the person or the reason behind the gun being fired does not determine whether it qualifies as a shooting. Conversely, the Ottawa Police Service (OPS) defines a shooting as any instance where a gun is illegally discharged within the city, irrespective of injuries or fatalities.[vi] The difference between both definitions is straightforward - the OPS does not incorporate "legal" gun discharges in their definition, which means they do not count such incidents. This exclusion is intended to cover activities like hunting but it also means that instances where police discharge their guns are excluded from their definition. The media, despite its earlier criticisms of the term, generally adopts the definition and language used by the OPS.[vii] Consequently, the entire conversation around gun violence is restricted to a conversation around shootings perpetuated by non-police actors. This illustrates how the police have successfully distanced themselves from being labeled as instigators of gun violence when the subject is raised.

By challenging this misleading distinction and reintroducing the police into the conversation, we can recognize that the use of firearms by police is not a minor issue. In 2020, the only year for which police violence data (referred to by police as "use of force") is made publicly available, the OPS discharged a gun 23 times (at an animal) and pointed their gun at an individual 202 times.[viii] In one-third of those instances, the person having a gun pointed at them was Black, despite Black victims of police violence being less likely to be involved in situations most

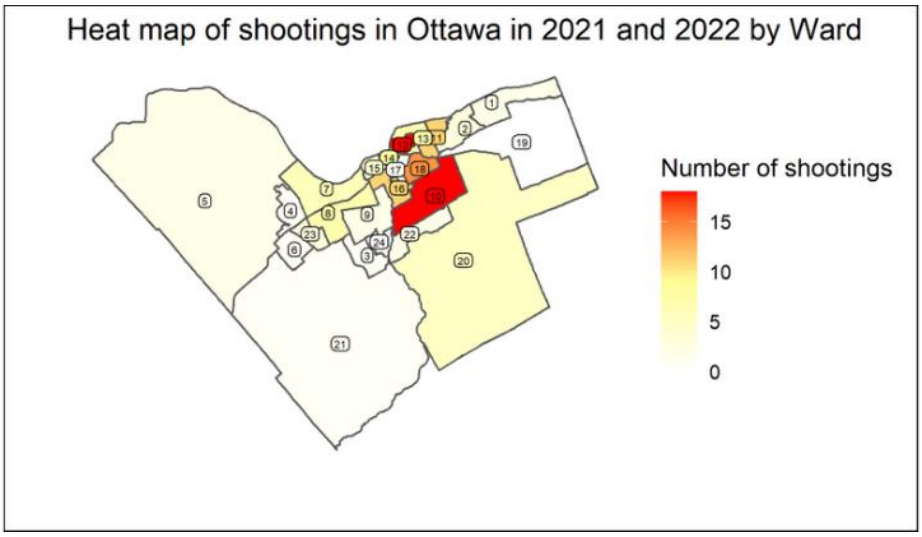
commonly associated with police violence. News reports from previous years illustrate that 5 people were killed and five more were injured in OPS shootings between 2007 and 2019.[ix]

Police Control of Crime Data and the Impediment to Objective Dialogue

As police services strive to present themselves as data-driven and evidence-based, the collection of data has become increasingly important. Alongside gathering information through police reports, which now include data on race, police also engage in the practice of issuing public surveys to support their prioritization decisions. However, in both instances, the emphasis tends to be on the quantity of data collected rather than the quality.[x] As a result, the police can position themselves as experts based on surveys that restrict residents from expressing their perspectives on who they believe is best suited to address safety concerns.[xi] This limitation impedes any meaningful conversation that would acknowledge and validate the safety needs of residents living in impacted areas while also allowing space for those who may have concerns about police presence as a safety issue.

To delve deeper into this point, we combine the data on shootings from 2021 and 2022 provided by the OPS, along with the findings from the OPS' annual report on crime trends for the same period.[xii] We map the distribution of non-police-perpetuated shootings across wards, aiming to emphasize the areas and communities most affected by these tragic incidents. This analysis allows us to subsequently compare the perceptions of safety and primary concerns expressed by residents residing in these impacted areas.

Figure 1: Concentration of Non-police Shootings in Ottawa by Ward, 2021 and 2022

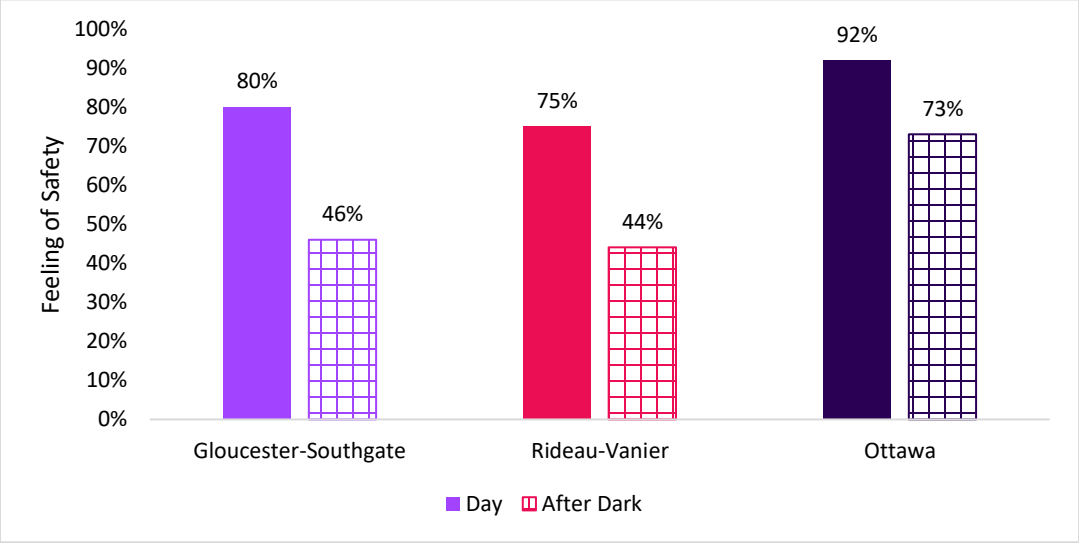


Source: Ottawa Police Service Data on Shootings

The two wards most impacted by gun violence in 2021 and 2022 were Gloucester-Southgate and Rideau-Vanier. Data were only available for those two years; however, it is important to note that gun violence is not static and different areas are impacted in different years. This map is used to explain the impact of gun violence on the communities in which it occurs at any given time, rather than to suggest that these locations are the only ones impacted. The presence of

gun violence has a clear impact on feelings of safety in these areas, with residents reporting feeling considerably less safe than in the rest of Ottawa.

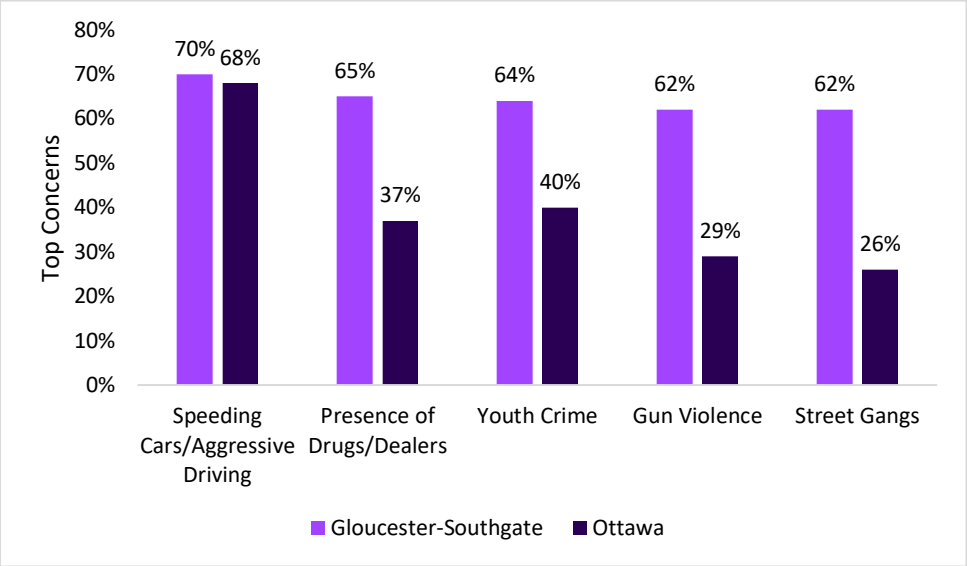
Figure 2: Feelings of Safety during the Day and Night in Gloucester-Southgate, Rideau-Vanier, and Ottawa in 2021



Source: Ottawa Police Service, Annual Report, Crime Trends by Ward, 2020-2021.

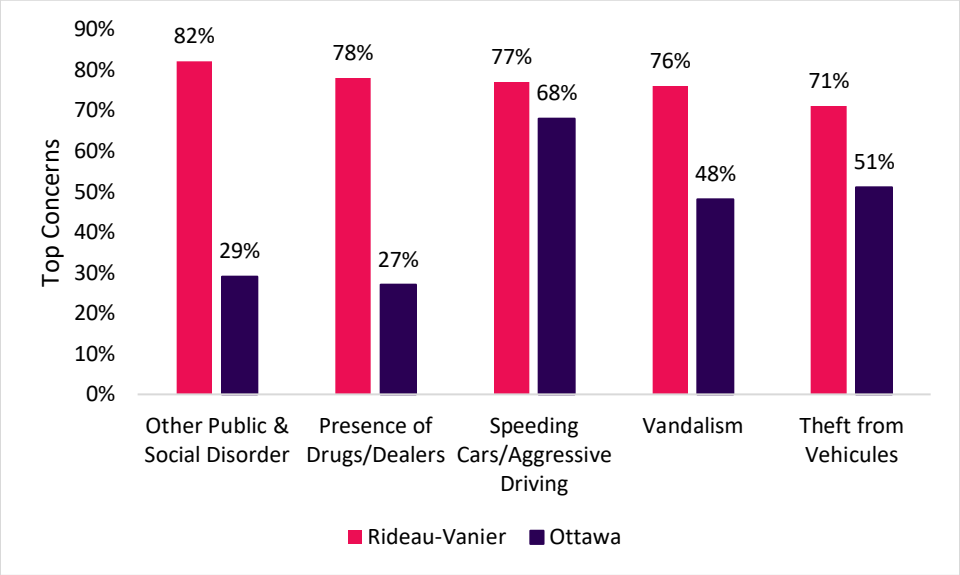
The finding that residents feel unsafe in their neighborhoods is indeed significant (Figure 2). In theory, these feelings of safety, or lack thereof, are likely to be indicative of the primary concerns experienced by residents in their respective wards. However, it is important to note that the options provided to residents in these surveys are selected by the police, which reflects their framing of the issue. This framing may introduce bias and shape the responses residents can choose from. For instance, survey questions often employ vague terminology such as "gangs," "dealers, and "social disorder." Such language not only carries inherent biases but can also lack clarity, potentially limiting the accuracy and depth of residents' responses.[xiii]

Figure 3: Top Five Concerns in Gloucester-Southgate and Ottawa, 2021



Source: Ottawa Police Service, Annual Report, Crime Trends by Ward, 2020-2021.

Figure 4: Top Five Concerns in Rideau-Vanier and Ottawa, 2021



Source: Ottawa Police Service, Annual Report, Crime Trends by Ward, 2020-2021.

To explore the limitations of these types of questions, we look at the top five ward concerns reported in Gloucester-Southgate and Rideau-Vanier (Figure 3 and Figure 4). We consider several follow-up questions that we cannot answer based on the limitations of this police-issued survey.

1. Are police violence and surveillance also a source of fear/concern for residents?
2. Do residents want to see police respond to these concerns?

3. Could resident concerns around drugs and drug selling be related to the toxicity of the supply? The lack of harm reduction services available?
4. Could resident concerns around speeding cars and aggressive driving be related to desires to see bike and walking infrastructure prioritized?
5. Do residents include police violence in their conceptualization of gun violence?
6. How are residents meant to distinguish between youth crime, gun violence, and street gangs?
7. Do residents worry about police involvement in situations related to "social disorder"?
8. Does this survey allow residents to voice concerns about corruption, wage theft, and other harmful behaviours that harm community safety?
9. Do residents perceive these surveys as a way to communicate with police or do they view this as a neutral avenue to share concerns about their ward?
10. Which residents feel comfortable answering these surveys? Are residents who trust the police more likely to complete the survey? Would a resident who is disillusioned by policing complete the survey?

Starring Role: How Crime Reporting Casts Police as the Protagonists

Critical criminologists have highlighted how the media's framing of "crime" coverage sets the parameters of public interpretation.[xiv] Uncritical media reporting on gun violence situates police as the key stakeholders and those who hold the solution to violence, through the intentional use of imagery and quotes.

Figure 5: Images Used in Media Coverage on Gun Violence in Ottawa, 2021 and 2022

Source: From top left to bottom right: Ottawa Citizen[xv], Ottawa Citizen[xvi], Ottawa Citizen[xvii], CTV News Ottawa[xviii], CTV News Ottawa[xix], CBC News Ottawa[xx], City News[xxi], Ottawa Citizen[xxii], City News[xxiii]

Figure 5 displays some of the stock imagines in articles published in Ottawa newspapers on shootings. This imagery reinforces the notion that police are the only people who respond to these instances. Rather, we know that when people are hurt during a shooting EMS will also be on the scene, despite never being prominently featured in news coverage. In addition, local

organizations that support youth and other individuals who are impacted by gun violence are also not centered in the imagery.

When the article intends to provide purely factual information on an incident that occurred, most reporting is simply transcribed police press releases.[xxiv] In many cases, there is virtually no difference between reading a police press release and reading the news (Figure 6).[xxv] Consequently, the media operates much like a pro bono PR firm for the police might rather than offering their analysis and investigation into the matters they are reporting on. Some researchers have theorized that this phenomenon is a consequence of the simultaneous decline in the number of specialized crime reporters and the increase in public police communications.[xxvi] Other researchers have explored the inverse relationship between the quality and quantity of media after identifying the noticeable increase in news articles that include entire sections copy-pasted directly from press releases.[xxvii]

Figure 6: A Comparison of a Police Press Release and Media Article in City News

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: Monday, April 24, 2023 11:00 am

(Ottawa) — The Ottawa Police Service Guns and Gangs Unit is investigating a shooting that occurred on April 22nd in the 1-100 block of Clarence Street.

At approximately 3:00 am, police were called to the area and located a 20-year-old with gunshot wounds.

His injuries are considered non-life-threatening.

Investigators are looking to speak to any witnesses who may have information about the shooting or may have cell phone video or security footage.

Anyone with information about this incident is asked to contact the Guns and Gangs Unit at 613-236-1222 ext. 5050.

Anonymous tips can be submitted by calling Crime Stoppers toll-free at 1-800-222-8477 or at crimestoppers.ca

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By CityNews Ottawa
Posted Apr 24, 2023, 5:14PM EDT.

The Ottawa Police Services (OPS) is investigating a shooting in the Byward Market that left one person injured.

Police officers were called to Clarence Street around 3 a.m. on Saturday, April 22, where a 20-year-old man was found with non-life-threatening gunshot wounds.

Investigators want to speak with any witnesses to the shooting, or anyone who may have cellphone or security footage. Anyone with information about this incident is asked to contact the Guns and Gangs Unit at 613-236-1222 ext. 5050.

Anonymous tips can also be submitted by calling Crime Stoppers toll-free at 1-800-222-8477 or at crimestoppers.ca

Source: Ottawa Police Service, Press Release April 24, 2023, and City News Article, April 24, 2023

It is also important to note that both the press release and the news article include a call for individuals with information to come forward and report to Crime Stoppers or directly to the police. This practice of police services soliciting information from the community persists despite

research finding that even being perceived as cooperating with the police can increase the risk of violence.[xxviii]

Recent news articles from June 2023 report that in a targeted shooting, bystanders were injured.[xxix] The articles do not mention that prevention efforts do not differ based on the outcomes of the violence – the same efforts that prevent injuries against bystanders prevent injuries against individuals who were the targets of the violence.

The subsection below provides a deeper analysis of how the use of police quotes allows the police to control the narrative.

Accountability Juggling Act: Police's Art of Taking Credit while Dodging Blame

When media make extensive use of police officials' quotes in an article, it allows police to speak directly with the public and reaffirm their perspective in multiple outlets, effectively reaching a much wider audience. It also allows police to put forward multiple contradictory statements that are never reconciled in one statement. On one hand, police narratives put the onus on communities to address their safety needs, mitigate their exposure to risks and harms, and address their own needs, amidst deteriorating social supports and access to their basic needs.[xxx] Simultaneously, police consistently try and reaffirm their position and legitimize their growing budgets by fuelling fear around safety concerns, and insisting it requires a police response without any evidence as to how they will address those needs.[xxxi] These mixed messages reinforce a culture of control without guaranteeing any real safety outcomes.

1. When an increase in violence is reported, police will invoke the systemic causes of violence to shift responsibility to address the issue from the police to the broader community. This allows them to cultivate fear among the general public without conceding that their current measures have been ineffective.
2. When a decrease in violence is reported, police will remind the public of "successful" police operations, suggesting that the level of crime is correlated with police operations. This allows them to justify maintaining current spending despite the decrease in crime or otherwise communities would likely see the violence increase again.

In this subsection, we examine two news articles in detail to demonstrate clearly how these narratives play out in the media.

In December 2021, the Ottawa Police Service released the data they collected on shootings for that year. With 82 recorded shootings in 2021, two more than the previous highest number of recorded shootings in 2018, police warned of a "violent crime trend".[xxxii] The then-police chief Peter Sloly is cited in the vast majority of these articles, often the only person referenced by name to whom quotes are attributed. The language of "trend" is used without ever referencing shooting numbers in 2019 or 2020, therefore giving readers no context as to when this "trend" has become visible in the data. To explore this in more detail, we focus on one article in the Ottawa Citizen, titled "Ottawa police report record number of shooting incidents in 2021".[xxxiii]

In this article, we can make several important observations.

1. The article references a violent crime trend three times, always in a quote from the Chief of Police, giving it weight to appear factual when it is not supported by any

information that would otherwise allow the reader to believe that there is a trend (e.g., historical data).
2. Former Chief Sloly accurately observes that the underlying factors require more than a police response, however, no further attention is paid to what that would look like in practice.
3. Former Chief Sloly highlights that referring to targeted shootings as "gang activity" can be problematic, and even highlights the racist nature of the framing. He does not acknowledge that the Ottawa Police Service has a Guns and Gang division, nor that he and the OPS actively uses the language of "gang" regularly in their communications. Only a few months earlier, Insp. Carl Cartwrights presented to the Ottawa Police Services Board the evolution of "gang" activity, which he referred to as "gang sprawl" during his presentation.

To continue to position themselves as an effective response to violence, police services must navigate increases in crime carefully. An increase in reported crime is an opportunity to leverage fear which allows them to access additional resources and funding. However, it also opens the police up to possible scrutiny about the effectiveness of their work in these areas. To mitigate those potential criticisms, police frame the root causes of crime as beyond their scope, effectively absolving themselves of any responsibility to prevent violence. Framed with the lens, the number of shootings that occurs is completely unrelated to policing. It is important to note that most critical criminologists agree that crime rates are not a reflection of policing or policing efficiency.[xxxiv] However, the criminologist perspective hinges on the reasoning that police enforce laws and criminalize individuals at their discretion, therefore they hold the power to determine which crimes and whose crimes are recorded. Consequently, they play a direct role in how crime statistics are produced, making it a biased measure of understanding safety and well-being needs.

When new data on shootings was released in September 2022, the "trend" in violent crime had seemingly been reversed, and police communications subsequently shifted gears. Now, the narrative shifts to distinguish between shootings, which decreased, and fatalities, which have increased. The previous year, the number of fatal shootings was not a focus of the reporting. The article we focus on here is from CTV News, and is titled "Gun Violence in Ottawa: Shootings Down but Injuries Up".[xxxv]

Based on this article we can make several important observations.

1. The underlying factors that Former Chief Sloly alluded to the previous year are no longer mentioned. Instead, Former Interim Chief Steve Bell cites an OPS-led investigation where 46 guns were seized to highlight the work being done by police in the area of gun violence.
2. Formed Interim Chief Bell highlights the gendered dimension of gun violence and says that the OPS is working to have femicide codified as a crime in Canada. Although beyond the scope of the project, this highlights the way that police play a political and legal role beyond enforcement. Police evade accountability by implying that they only enforce laws and cannot be responsible for bias in the legal system, however, this article publishes a clear admission that police play an important role in both defining the law and enforcing it.

Playing Both Sides: Police Appropriation of Progressive Language

Police are aware of the changing narrative surrounding crime and frequently find ways to appropriate progressive messaging to their advantage. For example, as the discussion on drug use has shifted from being viewed primarily as a criminal matter to a public health one, police have managed to position themselves in discussions about decriminalization. A notable instance of this can be seen in Vancouver, where the City of Vancouver moved towards decriminalizing simple possession, and the thresholds for decriminalizing drug possession were set by the Vancouver Police Service.[xxxvi] Similarly, on a more local level, this dynamic unfolded in Ottawa, where efforts to establish a non-police response to mental health crises, driven in part by instances of police-perpetuated killings of racialized individuals in crisis, resulted in the creation of the Ottawa Guiding Council for Mental Health and Addictions.[xxxvii] The Guiding Council was funded by the OPS and included police representation, granting them a seat at the table and a voice in the conversation.[xxxviii]

Due to their power and financial resources, police possess the ability to maintain a central presence in all conversations. Consequently, simply shifting the narrative on gun violence to one focused on public health will not be enough to eliminate police involvement in these matters. When discussing community-based responses, it is imperative to actively resist police engagement and influence by recognizing inconsistencies in the messaging. Two specific issues merit attention in this context, especially regarding the attempts made by the police to position themselves as community-based, trauma-informed, or prevention-focused to maintain access to youth spaces.

1. The police cannot engage in prevention work.

The primary objective of crime prevention is to eliminate situations that necessitate police involvement, rather than expediting the timeline in which police are brought into the picture. The OPS website mentions that their Neighbourhood Resource Team (NRT) officers are well-trained in crime prevention.[xxxix] Crime arises as a consequence of criminalization, and the mere presence of police inherently entails the potential for criminalization. Consequently, they cannot be included as part of a crime prevention initiative. Furthermore, police are an inherently reactive response because their primary tool is enforcement through the use of force, arrests, and laying charges. They use the threat of enforcement to maintain influence, while using the language of prevention to justify their involvement.

2. The police cannot operate with a trauma-informed or community-based approach.

Calls for trauma-informed and community-based service delivery are growing, driven by grassroots activists and supported by evidence-based research on best practices. Consequently, police services have started presenting themselves as capable of meeting these requirements. For instance, in 2021, the Ottawa Police Service posted a job advertisement seeking someone who could utilize community development, feminist, anti-oppression, and trauma-informed approaches to assist in preventing sexual violence and supporting victims.[xl] However, the suggestion that such an individual can be integrated into a police service while maintaining those approaches overlooks the evidence that police are found to be trauma-inducing in marginalized communities.

Research consistently demonstrates that police interactions have detrimental effects on the mental health of Black youth.[xli] Studies have also revealed that youth who experience police stops report heightened levels of emotional distress and posttraumatic stress symptoms, particularly when these encounters occur within a school context.[xlii] Furthermore, youth who have encountered police violence are unable to escape reminders of these traumatic incidents due to the pervasive presence of law enforcement, leading to frequent retraumatization.[xliii]

Reclaiming the Narrative: Insights from the Community

The following section consolidates findings from consultations with youth, adults, and service providers on their experience with youth street-level violence. Our findings highlight an unequivocal need for non-carceral prevention measures and interventions for youth violence. By redefining the conversation on street-level youth violence, we are then able to create space to meaningfully discuss root causes and potential solutions.

Choosing Our Words: 'Street-Level Youth Violence'

Research has shown that due to the lack of a clear consensus on how to define the notion of a "gang", the term is often used to reinforce negative connotations, which tend to draw on race and class stereotypes. [xliv] Despite these findings, the media, police services, and social service providers continue to use the language of "gangs", "gang prevention", and "gang violence". For example, the Ottawa Police Service has an active *Guns & Gangs Unit*, Crime Prevention Ottawa has a collective impact strategy called the *Ottawa Street Violence and Gang Strategy (OSVGS),* and Youturn's *On Point* program uses the language of "gang-involved youth".[xlv] During our consultations, respondents confirmed that they were occasionally required to identify themselves as "gang members" to access services. However, they described this requirement as a barrier to accessing those services, as they felt that they were being labeled as violent and misunderstood by the service providers.

Rather than continue to use this unclear and stigmatizing label, we opt to use the term *street-level youth violence*, which we define as violent acts perpetuated by young people between the ages of 13 and 25 concerning their participation in illegal markets (including buying and selling of drugs and stolen goods, possession of weapons, and the use of weapons with the intent to harm others, etc.).

Reframing Street-Level Violence as Health and Economic Inequity

Canada's social and economic institutions have excluded racialized, immigrant, and poor people from accessing the resources and opportunities needed to achieve financial stability.[xlvi] These structural conditions create an environment that constrains the choices and decisions made by youth. In an environment that emphasizes individual responsibility to achieve economic success, illicit drug markets, and the violence that accompanies them, can become viable options for youth who are otherwise excluded or disconnected from formal labor markets.[xlvii]

When it comes to identifying the root causes of youth violence, service providers and community members agree that poverty, systemic racism, and social exclusion are major contributors. However, many service providers and community members point to a history of criminalization in the family and negative peer influences. This perspective does not consider how these individuals were first implicated and places undue responsibility on peers and family.

While it is true that the influence of families, peers, and communities can affect the decision-making processes of youth, focusing solely on these individual factors narrows the perspective rather than situating these choices within the larger structural and societal contexts. By adopting a broader perspective on criminalization, it becomes clear that the harm inflicted by police and other carceral institutions on impacted communities is generational, and part of decades-long attempts to address street violence that have consistently failed. Despite this track record, these institutions still portray themselves as the solution to the problem.

Youth overwhelmingly expressed that drug decriminalization and regulation could reduce street violence by reducing the financial incentives for youth to engage in informal economic opportunities. This viewpoint was echoed by half of the adult survey respondents, but only one service provider shared this sentiment. Research indicates that the ongoing criminalization of drug use is a primary driver of violence in unregulated drug markets and the increasing toxicity and potency of the drug supply.[xlviii] Decriminalization and regulation are crucial steps toward reducing the number of drug toxicity deaths and decreasing the violence associated with unregulated drug markets.

Service providers and adults surveyed both recognized the significance of employment services, skill-building opportunities, and recreational services in preventing youth violence. However, community members and service providers agreed that these services alone cannot prevent youth violence without transformative change.[xlix] Social services are designed to address problems but lack the capacity to address the root causes of youth violence, such as poverty and systemic racism. They are merely short-term solutions to the outcomes produced by inequality. Ultimately, the redistribution of wealth is needed to ensure everyone's financial security and address the conditions that create youth violence.

Exploring Attitudes Towards Policing, CAS, and the Criminal Legal System: Insights from Youth, Adults, and Service Providers

During our consultations, youth participants identified institutional violence, with the police, Children's Aid Society (CAS), and the legal system being mentioned as sources of traumatic experiences and a threat to their safety and communities. Youth described the police as "unsuccessful", citing their inability to prevent violence and low solvency rates for gun violence once violence has occurred. The youth expressed that if they tried to take safety into their own hands to protect themselves and their families, they could be criminalized for those actions. Furthermore, youth participants stated that they did not see any opportunities to build trust with the police, recognizing that any level of police presence in their communities poses a risk of surveillance and criminalization. The youth explained that police presence can erode trust within a community by using coercive measures to compel youth to share information with them, thereby exposing the youth and their families to both police violence and retaliatory violence. This understanding of policing as a racist institution that inevitably harms marginalized and racialized people and communities is consistent with historical accounts of policing and supported by empirical evidence.

During our consultations with adults who have lived experience of street violence and/or who have a loved one with experience of street-level youth violence, we identified a similar pattern of distrust towards police and other carceral institutions. Survey responses indicate that

community members had the highest levels of distrust towards police, prisons, courts, and CAS, while they reported moderate levels of trust toward the education system. In contrast, respondents reported moderate to high levels of trust in social service providers and the people in their neighborhoods.

Despite two out of three service providers offering programming that connected service users with police officers, service providers also reported moderate to low levels of trust in the Ottawa Police Service. The prevalence of police partnerships in social service spaces was confirmed by community members who shared that OPS was involved when they accessed services for youth violence. In every case, the participant noted that OPS' involvement happened without their consent.

Although racialized and marginalized communities report little trust in police and other carceral institutions and identify them as a source of harm and violence rather than of safety, policing logics are still firmly intertwined with perceptions of safety as a broader concept within communities. Violence and harm have become understood to be necessary tools for enforcing safety, regardless of the contradiction it presents. This highlights the way that cycles of violence have become entrenched in settler-colonial and capitalist societies, and that the blueprint for violence is often the state and legal institutions.

Bridging the Gap: Addressing Discrepancies between Service Providers and Community Perspectives

Social service providers and community members alike were quick to address the gaps in service provision and the barriers within the non-profit and healthcare sectors. The most noticeable disparity between community and service providers was the perception of the role of social services. Service providers identified a need to grow the sector – expanding funding to meet the growing need for service delivery. Youth and adult community members alike identified increasing the capacity for friends, family, and neighbours to provide support and building toward long-term community self-determination. When community members were asked about their experiences accessing services for youth violence, most shared that the services were not helpful, and they felt they were being perceived as bad or violent people.

Community members and service providers differed considerably on the role of police in preventing youth violence – service providers highlighted building trust between the police and communities as a prevention measure, whereas community members supported reducing police presence in youth spaces.

From our consultations, it was clear that all surveyed were committed to working towards safer communities that are free from violence. However, the divergence in perspectives reaffirms the importance that the conversations are informed by people who are at the highest risk of state and community violence.

Overcoming Barriers: Moving from Top-Down Service Provision to Community-Centric Supports

Employment and mental health and addictions services were the most frequently accessed services by community members in Ottawa. The adults we surveyed also frequently accessed

housing services and youth services. When prompted about their experience accessing these kinds of services, respondents primarily highlighted challenges related to services not aligning with their religious or cultural needs, as well as long wait times. When prompted about their experiences accessing services related to street-level youth violence, respondents reported overwhelmingly negative experiences and described feeling racially profiled, policed, surveilled, mislead, and disrespected.

Service providers who were consulted shared the community members' concerns about long wait times as a barrier to referring clients to additional services they need. Lack of culturally appropriate surveys was less frequently identified as a barrier, however, service providers identified a lack of capacity within their organizations and others to meet the needs of the community. The limitations in capacity were attributed to inadequate funding levels, which in turn restricted staffing and resource allocation opportunities.

Concerning services specifically designed to deter youth violence, service providers most frequently offered support accessing basic needs, family support services, and mentorship programs. Of the service providers that offered support to youth currently involved in street-level violence, few offered a full spectrum of support services. This reality likely corroborates the experiences shared by community members who highlighted that when receiving support for street-level violence, they felt shuffled between services to try and find adequate support. Despite gaps in services available to target youth violence from an upstream and equity-based approach, a clear appetite for change among service providers was demonstrated. Nearly all highlighted the need to prioritize transformative system change to have the greatest impact on youth and their families' lives.

Next Steps

When discussions on street-level youth violence move beyond policing narratives, there is room for a broader conversation that includes transformative solutions. Non-carceral alternatives comprise a range of initiatives, including school-based prevention programs, trauma-informed care, and community-based violence prevention programs. The dialogue on alternatives to policing in youth contexts extends beyond Ottawa, and we highlight in this section the efforts of other jurisdictions to explore innovative responses. These examples are intended to inspire possibilities rather than provide a template for replication at the local level.

To demonstrate the potential to shift our approach away from police-centric responses towards evidence-based community-driven initiatives, we highlight three existing programs in other jurisdictions. These programs can serve as an inspiration and provide tangible examples of creative ways people are navigating social issues that are potentially violent in their communities without relying on systems and institutions that have proven to be ineffective and further perpetuate cycles of violence.

The most established and studied public health programs to prevent gun violence are the Cure Violence & Cure Violence Global programs, which originated in the US and now operate internationally.[l] The program uses evidence-based disease control and behavior change methods to reduce violence. The program employs trained violence interrupters and outreach workers to mediate conflicts, provide support to individuals at risk of violence, and promote

community engagement in violence prevention efforts. This approach is designed to operate independently of the police and prioritize community-led efforts over law enforcement to reduce violence. However, the program allows for collaboration with law enforcement if deemed necessary by community members.

In Oakland, the Oakland Unite program also takes a public health approach to prevent and intervene in violence.[li] Prevention initiatives include community outreach and engagement, school-based violence prevention programs, and neighborhood-based interventions. The intervention component focuses on individuals at the highest risk of being involved in violence and offers a range of supports, including street outreach and case management, crisis responses, and re-entry programs.

In Chicago, the Creating Real Economic Destiny (CRED) program aims to address the root causes of gun violence, such as poverty, unemployment, and lack of education to reduce violence in communities.[lii] To foster economic opportunities for youth, the program employs a three-pronged approach that includes job training and placement in the construction, hospitality, and manufacturing industries, mentorship and support from experienced coaches and mentors, and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy to help individuals identify and change negative patterns of thinking and behavior.

It is both possible and necessary to do things differently. As the police and complicit media sources continue to position policing as the only realistic response to violence, it becomes critical to highlight the flaws in their logic. So long as we continue to conflate surveillance and prevention, and punishment and justice, there is little evidence to suggest that gun violence be meaningfully addressed.

In 2019, the Safer Ontario Act came into effect, mandating that municipalities initiate local efforts toward community safety and well-being (CSWB). After a series of consultations, the City of Ottawa adopted its CSWB plan in 2021 and approved six priorities: integrated and simpler systems, discrimination, marginalization, and racism; financial security and poverty reduction; gender-based violence and violence against women; housing; and mental well-being. During the CSWB consultations with community stakeholders, consistent themes emerged, including calls to reallocate funding from the police budget toward community-based safety initiatives and support.

Addressing street-level youth violence falls within the priorities of the CSWB plan. An approach that moves away from relying on reactive, costly, and often harmful enforcement-based responses is in line with the CSWB plan and community demands for systemic change. This type of approach requires sustained funding going towards community-based services that operate independently from enforcement institutions. This way, individuals who have experienced harm from policing institutions can comfortably access the support they need.

Youth street-level violence is an outcome of the mutually reinforcing relationships between access to housing, food, social supports, education, and healthcare, and experiences of racism, classism, and systemic social exclusion.[liii] An initiative that targets only one of these factors cannot account for the complexity of the contexts in which violence occurs. Shifting away from the carceral mindset to adopt a health equity lens would require initiatives that directly involve

the impacted communities in the implementation and design of the necessary changes. This research adds to the growing number of calls for community-driven programs that prevent gun violence by addressing the root causes and transforming material conditions.[iv]

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