

Rethinking Youth Violence:

UNDERSTANDING AND
UNPACKING THE STRUCTURAL
CAUSES OF YOUTH STREET-
BASED VIOLENCE

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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 examines the root causes of community-level street-based violence, including gun violence, that implicates individuals between the ages of 13 and 25. The purpose of this report is to explore ways that youth violence can be prevented by transforming the social conditions that perpetuate violence at interpersonal, community, and state levels. The introduction of this report defines and contextualizes youth street-based violence and its relationship to intimate and state violence. The first section identifies poverty, racism, and prohibition as root causes of youth violence and proposes policy solutions. The second section explores the need to replace carceral responses to violence that only further entrench harm. This report does not propose specific community-based interventions that would react to violence that occurs but rather focuses on the structural shifts that are needed to prevent youth violence.

Introduction¹

Violence occurs at intimate, community, and state levels. Although the definitions of these types of violence are fluid, intimate violence is broadly recognized as violence that occurs within a romantic or familial relationship. Community violence, which includes street-based violence, is a form of interpersonal violence that occurs in public areas and the persons involved are not intimately related (da Villa, 2019). State violence, in the broadest sense, includes genocide, political violence, and juridical violence (Torres, 2018). The changing nature of the state has led to a redefinition of state violence to include structural inequalities, citizen surveillance, and punitive social policies as entrenched forms of state violence (Torres, 2018; Wacquant, 2010). As a settler colonial state, Canada is built upon structural and explicit violence against Indigenous peoples which is enforced and maintained through practices of exclusion and assimilation (Crosby & Monaghan, 2016). The inherently violent nature of settler colonial states is critical to understanding the causes and expressions of violence at community and intimate levels (Whynacht, 2022).

Different Perspectives on Relationships to Violence

Current binary understandings (victim or perpetrator) of violence underplay the reality that an individual can be a victim, perpetrator, witness, or any combination of these identities, often all at the same time. Therefore, any one label will incompletely summarize a young person's experience with youth violence. For example, a person who is incarcerated for intimate partner violence and has been exposed to community violence would be a victim of state violence, a perpetrator of intimate partner violence, and a witness of community violence. However, the experience of state violence is not always as explicit as police brutality or violence experienced while incarcerated. For example, a child who experiences food and housing insecurity due to inadequate income assistance, deregulated housing markets, and poorly funded social programming would also be a victim of state violence.

Direct and indirect childhood exposure to violence is linked to life-long adverse health, behavioural and emotional effects (Moffitt & Klaus-Grawe, 2012). Research on childhood exposure to violence suggests that the cumulative level of violence experienced is a greater predictor of adverse outcomes later in life than whether the exposure to violence is direct or indirect (Zimmerman & Posick, 2016). The experience or witnessing of violence from childhood abuse and/or socio-economic factors constitutes a traumatic experience, which can increase the likelihood of youth involvement in street-based violence (Totten, 2010). Results from focus groups with men with histories of perpetrating intimate partner violence identified adverse childhood experiences, trauma, structural forces (exposure to community violence and supports), and macro forces (criminal justice policy) as underlying processes that contributed to their behaviour (Voith, Topitzes & Berg, 2020). Furthermore, participants reported that involvement in community violence coupled with exposure to toxic stress during childhood contributed to the social learning of patriarchal masculinity which furthered intimate partner violence norms. The impact of the macro forces should not be downplayed; they reflect the

¹ This report was authored by Vivic Research Economist and Co-founder Inez Hillel. Vivic Research would like to thank Mandi Pekan, Sabrina Teklab, and Farah Aw-Osman from the Center for Resilience and Social Development and Beth Tooley from the Ottawa Coalition for Community Houses for the research and financial support they provided for this project.

ways that state violence, in this case, mass incarceration and legislated poverty, contribute to feelings of hopelessness, isolation, and fear that create the conditions for violence at the intimate and community level (Voith, Topitzes & Berg, 2020).

Defining Youth Street-Based Violence

The World Health Organization defines youth violence as a public health problem that can have serious, lifelong impacts on an individual's physical, psychological, and social functioning (World Health Organization, 2020). Youth violence includes peer-on-peer fighting, bullying, physical or sexual assault, intimate partner violence, knife and gun violence, and exploitation (Maxwell & Corliss, 2020). In this report, we focus on community-level street-based violence, including gun violence, that implicates individuals between the ages of 13 and 25.

A key aspect of reframing street and gun violence is broadening our perspectives of what gun violence looks like and how youth and communities can experience violence. Gun violence is defined as any act of violence committed with the use of a firearm, regardless of whether or not it is considered criminal (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). Media coverage of gun violence often relies on episodic (event-focused) framing, reinforces racial biases, and increases negative perceptions of mental illness (McKeever, Choi & Walker, 2022). A consequence of the current media coverage of gun violence is a limiting narrative that depicts gun violence as exclusively mass killings and so-called gang activity. This narrow framing ignores gun violence perpetuated beyond those circumstances, including gun violence perpetrated by law enforcement. In 2020, police reported 743 homicides, 148 of which were identified as gang-related by police. In the same year, on-duty police officers fired at 64 people, killing half (Malone, 2021). Recognizing that gun violence is not limited to interpersonal violence and extends to state violence can explain why the state is not the appropriate avenue to address gun violence in communities.

Understanding Youth Street-Based Violence

Youth street-based violence emerges because of unequal societal opportunities. The fluid and unpredictable nature of street violence adds a layer of complexity to developing reactive responses to violence. Adopting a public health approach means focusing on community-wide interventions as opposed to targeting specific individuals. This approach emphasizes the importance of prevention and finding innovative solutions that fundamentally alter the systems responsible for the conditions including adopting or changing legislation and societal norms (McKeever, Choi & Walker, 2022; Hemenway & Miller, 2013). Recognizing gun violence as a public health issue furthers the possibility to advocate for transformative change using a human rights-based approach. A human rights-based approach to health aims to actualize the right to health and other health-related human rights, including rights that address underlying determinants of health (World Health Organization, n.d.). The first section of this report focuses on poverty, racism, and prohibition as structural forces that can be transformed to prevent street-based violence. The second section explores how carceral responses further entrench street-based violence and introduces transformative justice as a way of embedding community-based prevention mechanisms.

Identifying the Root Causes of Youth Violence

Existing research identifies characteristics linked with youth violence, referred to as risk factors, predominantly at an individual, household, and community level (Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). Commonly cited risk factors for youth gun violence include but are not limited to drug use and trafficking in the community, anti-social and aggressive behaviours, low educational aspiration and attachment, exposure to toxic stress, peer and familial influence, economic deprivation, and familial violence and neglect (Public Safety Canada, 2018). However, the root causes of the risk factors identified by Public Safety Canada can be attributed to poverty, racism, and/or drug prohibition. Reframing the conversation around youth gun violence as a public health concern facilitates the shift from only looking at risk factors to considering preventative measures that transform the root causes of violence.

Root Cause of Youth Violence: Racism

Systemic racism, a social determinant of health, manifests as discrimination in all areas of a person's life, such as education, housing, employment, health care, child welfare, legal systems, and more (Braveman et al. 2022). The experience of systemic racism, including colonialism, drives youth violence by not only amplifying the impacts of poverty and drug prohibition (examined in the next sections) but by creating racial trauma, race-related stress, and feelings of hopelessness (Odafe, Salami & Waler, 2017).

Many of the identified risk factors that are associated with youth violence promote labeling youth in a way that advances negative perceptions of racialized persons and their communities. Research finds that exposure to negative stereotypes and harmful depictions in the media can influence the neural processing of incentives which could further reinforce outcomes that exacerbate inequalities (Welborn, Hong & Ratner, 2020). For example, research on perceptions of racialized children and teenagers finds that Black and Indigenous children were disproportionately perceived as lazy, unintelligent, violent, or having unhealthy habits by white educators and service providers (Priest et al, 2018). In educational spaces, the use of stereotyping language such as labeling racialized students "at-risk" and "disadvantaged", coupled with the absence of affirming language, results in greater reliance on punitive measures such as suspensions and expulsions (Lopez & Jean-Marie, 2021). Escalating the severity of the disciplinary intervention leads to the over-surveillance and policing of racialized students and increases the instances where punitive actions result in a student being placed in police custody (Allen & White-Smith, 2017).

Pervasive racial discrimination results in poorer quality care and services which feeds cycles of poverty and criminalization (Quinn, 2020; Williams, Lawrence & Davis, 2019). One example of the intersection between racial discrimination and structural violence is the overrepresentation of Black and Indigenous youth involved in the child welfare system (Ma, Fallon & Richard, 2019). The overrepresentation of Indigenous children stems from assimilationist policies that disconnect children from their culture and identity and the overrepresentation of Black children stems from the history of racism originating from slavery in Canada (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2018). Consequently, race alone is a factor that influences the likelihood of an investigation and apprehension from child welfare workers (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2018). Youth in the child welfare system are a traumatized population, resulting in worse

educational and employment outcomes, and increasing the likelihood of involvement with the legal system (Salazar et al, 2013; Gypen et al, 2017).

Eliminating racism in Canada requires addressing the ongoing colonization and dispossession of Indigenous peoples (Owusu-Bempah, 2021). Colonial structures that were established during the British and French occupation of the lands to subjugate Indigenous populations have evolved and changed but continue to exist to systemically marginalize certain populations. Consequently, eliminating racism requires the restoration of Indigenous self-determination that is not bound by colonial constraints (Jewell, 2020). Furthermore, increasing the positive representation of racialized persons in the media and society and reforming education curricula to accurately reflect history can shift public perception of racialized persons and provide positive psychological benefits for persons seeing themselves represented in a positive manner (Jewell, 2020). Poverty eradication, drug policy reform, and shifting away from carceral systems are additional examples of anti-racist structural changes.

Root Cause of Youth Violence: Poverty

Poverty is experienced both at an individual and community level, and it interacts with individuals' trauma histories resulting in negative personal and public health outcomes (Murray, 2006). Closely associated with income level, poverty is a social class that has material and psychological consequences that result in discrimination and social exclusion (Hudson, 2014). Socioeconomic status is the strongest predictor of educational outcomes for children, with children living in poverty being put at a strong disadvantage compared to higher-income peers (Levin, 1995). Poverty eradication is essential for preventing school-related risk factors, as low-income status is linked to negative labeling from teachers, lower educational attainment, and lower cognitive and behavioural readiness (Flessa, 2007; Ferguson, Bovaird & Mueller, 2007; Ullucci & Howard, 2014). Living in poverty exposes children and youth to chronic, toxic stress, which in turn increases their risk of exhibiting aggressive or other antisocial behaviours (Russell & Odgers, 2016). Exposure to neighborhood anti-social behaviour increases feelings of stress, fear, and persistent safety concerns which negatively impact mental health outcomes (Boyle, Georgiades & Duncan, 2019).

In Canada, low social mobility means that the experience of poverty is all too often generational. Data from Statistics Canada reveals that social mobility in Canada has fallen for the last five birth cohorts, with the lowest income quintile having the lowest social mobility (Connolly, Haeck & Lapierre, 2021). In addition, income inequality has increased over the same period which is consistent with the empirical theories that suggest that higher income inequality is associated with lower social mobility (Corak, 2013). At the same time, drug selling is an option for generating income for youth and adults who lack economic security and are excluded from the mainstream job market (Hepburn et al., 2015). In addition to being perceived as an avenue for economic opportunity, local drug scenes are also simultaneously spaces of belonging and dislocation for youth (Fast, 2013). It follows that the dispossession, trauma, and truncated economic opportunities that result from household and community-level poverty and systemic racism are factors that drive the prevalence of drug trafficking and selling in a community.

There exist multiple avenues to poverty eradication including programs such as basic incomes that lift everyone's income to the poverty line, progressive tax policies to reduce income

inequality, or initiatives that decommodify basic human rights, such as free housing. Anchoring poverty eradication strategies in a human rights-based approach means developing policies that ensure everyone's right to housing, health, education, justice, work, and food are protected (Canada Without Poverty, 2015). Past programs and policies that have adopted a human rights-based approach include Housing First programs in multiple Canadian cities and basic income pilot projects, all of which have shown positive effects in alleviating poverty (Quilgars & Pleace, 2016; Simpson, Mason & Godwin, 2017; Forget, 2011; Falvo, 2010).

Root Cause of Youth Violence: Prohibition

The racist roots of prohibition originate from the Indian Act which criminalized the sale of alcohol to First Nations but not to the non-Indigenous settlers living on these lands (Campbell, 2008). The first drug laws originated in 1908 following anti-Asian race riots in Vancouver and were used as a legal form of social discrimination against Chinese and Japanese men (Price, 2008). Today, Black and Indigenous drug users face the disproportionate burden of carceral drug laws as they are more likely to be targeted and criminalized for drug use due to systemic racism in policing and the court system (Maynard, 2017; Rankin, Contenta & Bailey, 2021). Criminalizing drug selling also harms marginalized populations, as homelessness and drug use are key factors that drive drug selling among youth (Hepburn et al., 2017). The repercussions of incarceration include legal discrimination toward people with criminal records, which furthers the systemic exclusion of formerly incarcerated people from society (Khenti, 2014).

Despite the economic opportunity that drug selling may present, it is closely linked to gun violence. However, research on law enforcement expenditure, historic crime trends, and changes in drug policy find that prohibition is the root cause of gun violence and homicide rather than the nature of drug trafficking (Werb et al., 2011). Drug law enforcement does not reduce drug market violence or street-level drug activity, but rather increases police brutality and has contributed to the erosion of trust between the police and civilians (Cooper, 2015). Furthermore, drugs produced in an illicit market cannot be regulated, resulting in a toxic and unpredictable drug supply responsible for deadly drug poisonings and the trauma associated with constant death in communities (Boyd, 2021; Tyndall & Dodd, 2020).

Prohibition is legislated through the federal Controlled Drugs and Substance Act. Ending the violence embedded in the drug trade and replacing the supply of illicit drugs with legal, regulated drugs can be done through policy reform (S.C. 1996, c.19). Drug decriminalization and legalization make evidence-based regulatory models for drug control a reality (Boyd, 2016). Evidence of the success of these policies includes the results from heroin-assisted treatment trials in Vancouver and the outcomes of decriminalization in Portugal, Finland, and Switzerland (Boyd, Murray & MacPherson; Slade, 2021).

Dismantling Carceral Responses to Youth Violence

Street-based violence, that arises due to societal conditions including poverty, racism, drug markets, and gun availability, is an example of community violence that cannot be addressed through individualized, state-led interventions (Kershner, 2007). Criminalization and settler colonial dispossession are interrelated processes, therefore carceral responses to street violence perpetuate violence and trauma and entrench racial disparities (Dobchuk-Land, 2017). Instead, solutions anchored in transformative justice can transform the conditions under which violence

occurs by undoing hierarchies of oppression, creating accountability, and providing healing (National Sexual Assault Coalition, 2019). Transformative justice is defined as a “political framework and approach for responding to violence, harm, and abuse” (Mingus, 2020). This approach to justice relies on the transformation of the conditions that create and allow violence to occur, including cycles of violence condoned and perpetuated by the state. A transformative justice response differs from mainstream responses to violence as it seeks to respond without creating additional violence.

Entrenching Cycles of Harm: Policing

When police respond to instances of street violence, they put entire communities at risk. Increased presence and police surveillance in low-income and racialized communities, known as over-policing, increases the risk of police brutality. Use of force data from the Ottawa Police Service illustrates that police use force disproportionately against Black, Middle Eastern, and Indigenous persons (Jacobs & Foster, 2022). This contradictory experience of over-policing occurs in tandem with under-policing, characterized by inadequate law enforcement responses when racialized persons are victimized or in need of help (Boehme, Cann & Isom, 2020). Clear examples of under-policing in marginalized communities include the national crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls and the overrepresentation of Black victims in unsolved murder cases (Palmater, 2016; Haritaworn, 2019). Both phenomena stem from the same root cause: racism contributes to the perception of racialized individuals as perpetrators and never victims, therefore racialized victims rarely receive the needed support from law enforcement. Furthermore, under-policing is heightened for people individuals who experience oppression along multiple axes including gender, sexuality, and class.

Entrenching Cycles of Harm: Incarceration

The mainstream perception of incarceration assumes that it reduces violence by removing offenders from society. In reality, it exposes incarcerated persons, often the victims of violence themselves, to state and lateral violence. The Annual Report of the Officer of the Correctional Investigator found that no progress has been made to address rampant sexual coercion and violence, pervasive reliance on the use of force, and the use of torture in the form of solitary confinement (Zinger, 2022).

Policies that increase police presence and surveillance in racialized communities, such as the practice of carding² or community policing, contribute to the over-representation of Black and Indigenous individuals in prisons and jails (Kyres, 2017). In 2019/20, 11.6% of youth found guilty of an offense were sentenced to custody. The majority (60%) were sentenced to probation (Statistics Canada, 2021). While probation may be perceived as a favorable, lighter sentence, it often leads to incarceration due to violations of administrative conditions (Department of Justice Canada, 2013).

A structural perspective demands viewing violence as rooted in the social, political, and economic structures of society (Sande & Schwartz, 2011). This lens highlights the fundamental limitations of incarceration, which seeks to punish, incapacitate, deter, and rehabilitate

² Carding (officially Community Contacts Policy) is a police policy which involved stopping, questioning, and documenting individuals when no offence is being investigated.

individuals without addressing the root cause of conflict. Accounts from formerly incarcerated persons document the devastating impacts of incarceration on mental health, as well as adverse health effects from exposure to parental incarceration (Sugie & Turney, 2017; Lee, Fang & Luo, 2013). In addition, probation conditions restrict meaningful reintegration into society and greatly increase rates of recidivism to incarceration (Okonofua, Saadatian, Ocampo & Oxholm, 2021).

Due to the traumatizing and violent nature of prisons, coupled with unchanged societal conditions when a person is released from incarceration, the risk of violence and violent victimization increases upon a person's release. In addition to being at a heightened risk of dying by suicide or drug-related causes, research finds that formerly incarcerated persons are eight times more likely to die from violence compared with the general population, with women experiencing the greatest elevation in risk (Willoughby et al., 2021). Incarceration is also associated with a heightened risk of domestic violence (Coker & Macquoid, 2015).

Entrenching Cycles of Harm: Border Control

The 2017 federal government strategy relating to violence and gang activity included investments in border security to prevent firearms and drugs from entering the country (Ghoussoub, 2017). Investments in border security increase the capacity of the Canadian Border Services Agency (CBSA) to inflict violence against migrants without decreasing unauthorized movement across the border (Maynard, 2019). Refugees, persons with precarious status, and permanent residents all face the risk of being detained on non-criminal, immigration-related grounds, or deported (Gros, 2021). Racism is a key driver of immigration detention and deportation, and collaboration between municipal police and CBSA made possible by practices like carding increases vulnerability (Moffette, 2019).

Transformative Justice Pathways to Address Youth Violence

Understanding how existing policies and structures can exacerbate carceral continuums is critical to identifying areas where social change is needed. Street violence arises as individuals and communities seek to carve out equal opportunities for themselves in an unjust society. Guiding principles of retaliatory violence mirror punitive justice practices employed by the state.

Reallocating resources is a way communities can begin the process of interrupting cycles of violence. For example, shifting resources from police programming in schools towards programs and services that ensure schools are meeting students' complex needs allows educators to find meaningful solutions to bullying, harassment, and other violent behaviours they might observe (Muniz, 2021). Furthermore, structural changes that alter power dynamics can disrupt the narrative that marginalized communities require outside involvement or intervention.

Processes to respond to youth violence once a tragedy occurs must be created and led by the impacted community. Seeking community-based justice alternatives requires capacity building before developing safety, healing, and accountability strategies. In this approach, the participation of the community is critical in both preventing and responding to violence. In circumstances where violence occurs, a transformative justice approach requires centering the survivors of violence in the intervention, creating flexible accountability processes, and developing tools and opportunities to address conflict in a constructive manner (Creative

Interventions, 2012). Given the importance of prevention in changing conditions that lead to violence, implementing transformative changes is a slow process that occurs over time.

Conclusion

Street-based youth violence is a public health issue that is preventable through social transformation. Racism, poverty, and criminalization are traumatic experiences that marginalize individuals and communities which erode familial and community cohesion and create environments characterized by toxic stress and fear. Drug prohibition serves to legitimize police, prisons, and jails as responses to drug use and selling, and justifies the use of carceral interventions including police surveillance, mass incarceration, and deportation to target racialized communities. However, responding to community violence with state violence does not interrupt cycles of violence, nor does it prioritize healing for survivors or accountability for those involved in the violence. Rather, transforming the social conditions under which violence occurs requires preventative intervention, including poverty elimination mechanisms, anti-racism and Indigenous sovereignty strategies, and decriminalization and regulation of controlled substances. Transformative justice, unlike state-led responses to harm, can respond without further entrenching violence and harm. Furthermore, transformative justice empowers communities to build their capacity and develop tools to address instances of violence. Response to violence will vary depending on the context and the needs of the community, however, similar objectives such as diverting individuals from the existing court system toward community-based justice alternatives might exist across communities. Empowering individuals, families, and communities to lead their interventions while pushing for broader social change makes envisioning the end of youth street violence increasingly possible.

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