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OPINION

Why we need to focus on gun violence as a public health crisis

Current “tough on crime” strategies are not working, since the rate of violence has not drastically reduced over the years.

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Fri., July 15, 2022 |  3 min. read

The perpetrators of gun violence in Toronto are getting younger, and the number of daylight robberies and shootings have created a general atmosphere of uneasiness and fear. The average age of those linked to gun violence in Toronto between 2015 and 2020 was 25 years of age, but in 2021, that average dropped to 20. It's not surprising that people are growing concerned.

After high-profile incidences, politicians often provide [press releases](#) talking about more funding needed for policing to be “tough on crime.” This is usually followed by [massive raids](#) conducted in low-income, racialized communities presented as “gang” hubs. Is this strategy working? The answer is no, since the rate of violence has not drastically reduced over the years.

We can look at the United States, where massive investments in policing — guided by the ideology of “if you do the crime, you do the time” — does not reduce crime. In fact, it [perpetuates a punitive system](#) embedded with systemic racism at every level of the justice system, from racial profiling to disparities in granting of bail and receiving of tougher sentences.

Without a comprehensive set of resources and supports to help the [transition of incarcerated individuals back into community](#), they are much more likely to reoffend and be reincarcerated.

Incarceration costs ultimately hit the taxpayer. It costs Correctional Service Canada an average of \$111,202 annually to incarcerate one man and twice as much to incarcerate one woman — with only \$2,950 of that money spent on education per prisoner. There are also [major burdens on the health-care system](#) associated with recovering from gun violence injuries.

In Ontario, over the 15-year period from 2003 to 2018, there were [5,486 children and youth injured or killed by firearms](#), with nearly 91 per cent of those injured surviving. In Canada in 2008, there were 201 homicides by shooting; the associated health-care costs amounted to [\\$7,149,138](#). With 277 firearm-related deaths in 2020, the health-care costs for that year are even higher.

How do we detangle the complex intersection of gun violence with poverty and racism? The answer lies in investments in reforming systemic inequities impacting communities. This involves understanding [violent crime as a public health crisis](#), not a moral one.

Community organizations and agencies play a key role in disrupting stereotypes about racialized neighbourhoods and providing support systems to address the immediate needs of community members. From a public health approach, the focus has to be on equity of access, ranging from accessing mentors to relevant programs and social support services. Two major crime deterrence

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Recent investments by various levels of government align with a public health approach to reducing gun violence in partnership with community agencies:

- Toronto Mayor John Tory announced the city will receive up to \$12.3 million from the federal government's \$250-million Building Safer Communities Fund. The funds will be distributed to local organizations to support children, youth and young adults who are involved with or at risk of joining gangs.
- Toronto's [TO Wards Peace program](#) seeks to locate the most vulnerable persons susceptible to gun violence, and provide them with mentoring and support in accessing relevant social support services. Rooted in [evidence-based programming](#) that borrows best practices from the United States, the program utilizes the concept of placing "violence disruptors" (outreach workers) at the heart of the community. Grassroots organizations leading this project are the [Youth Association for Academics, Athletics, and Character Education](#) (YAAACE) in Jane and Finch, and [Think2wise](#) in Rexdale.
- Public Safety Canada's [Peace Core New Narrative Initiative](#) is federally funded and implemented by YAAACE. It seeks to curtail violence by providing holistic services to members in northwest Toronto. The four pillars of the program are: family supports, learning and education training, case management/public safety, and employment and reintegration support.

Treating gun violence and violent crime as a treatable public health crisis rather than moral malaise is an example of strength-based thinking that prioritizes public safety. This entails investing in lowering wealth disparity; increasing housing, employment and educational opportunities; and providing funding for community agencies to support the needs of local communities.

It's time for Canada to move beyond tried-and-failed punitive approaches to prioritizing a public health community-driven approach. Otherwise, the lack of access to opportunities and the cycle of poverty, violence and crime will continue to have intergenerational ramifications.

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