Uplifting Youth Voices Against Violence in the Community

A COMMUNITY RESEARCH INITIATIVE

PART 2 RESEARCH REPORT

Contents

Research Team

STUDY CONCEPTION AND DESIGN:

Mahad Yusuf

Muna Ali

Yasmin Yusuf

Sneha Abraham

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Farida Farah

Sabrin Ali

Salman Cisman

Abdurrazzaq Siddiqui

DATA COLLECTION:

Salman Cisman	Mohammed Abdullahi	Ahmed Mohamed	Abdullahi Hassan
Nadia Sameer	Abdullahi Abshir	Adnan Guled	Zakaria Ismail
Ismail Guled	Ahlan Hersi	Abdurrazzaq Siddiqui	Hajjra Yonis
Amiira Yusuf	Sabrin Ali	Shukri Dirie	Sagal Muhidean
Farida Farah	Muna Ahmed	Faduma Farah	Liban Guled
Yasiin Alasow	Harun Mohamed	Abdullah Osman	Zakaria Mohamed

TRANSCRIPTION:

Mowlid Kolmiye	Ahlan Hersi
Hajjra Yonis	Farida Farah
Sagal Muhidean	Sabrin Ali
Abdullahi Abshir	

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF RESULTS:

Amiira Yusuf	Ahmed Mohamed
Farida Farah	Abdurrazzaq Siddiqui
Yasiin Alasow	Faduma Farah
Abdullahi Abshir	Hajjra Yonis

DRAFT REPORT PREPARATION:

Sneha Abraham	Ahmed Mohdhar	Nadia Hassan
Sixbert Himbaza	Sabrin Ali	Muna Ali
Yasmin Yusuf	Yasiin Alasow	
Hibaq Warsame	Abdullahi Abshir	

All researchers reviewed the results and approved the final version of the report.

Introduction

Over the last decade, the rate of gun and gang related violence in the Somali community has continually been increasing disproportionally in comparison to other ethnic groups in Canada. This disproportional growth is even more worrying when the statistics and trends show the homicide rates in Somali-Canadian youth increasing but the ages of the victims decreasing, alongside the increased rates of unsolved homicide cases (Aden et al). Somali-Canadian youth take up a disproportionate percentage of homicide cases relative to the rest of the population of Toronto (Aden et al). In 2006 alone, Somalis made up 0.64% of the general population but they had more than 2.22 times the expected homicide rate (Aden et al). In 2012, this number rose to 15.8 times and again continued to rise to 23.2 times in 2014 (Aden et al). Overall, this increase in gun violence is also noticed by the youth in our focus groups who stated that this has led to "gun violence… becoming more common" in the Somali community such that, "now people are getting hurt who are not even involved".

While studying the existing crisis of gun violence in the Somali-Canadian community, it is important to also reflect on its root causes. The Review of the Roots of Youth Violence state 5 risk factors that "create that state of desperation and put a youth in the immediate path of violence" (McMurty & Curling, 2008). These risk factors included "social isolation, lack of self-esteem, lack of empathy, impulsivity, and feeling oppressed, voiceless and hopeless" (McMurty & Curling, 2008). Though these risk factors have been statistically validated, it is important to contextualize them within the systemically violent institutions that shaped them and led to the current crisis being faced in the Somali-Canadian community.

Youth Violence: Rooted in Historically Violent Systems

mind, a distinction is created between the various forms of bureaucratic or legitimate violence and acts of violence at an interpersonal level, thus allowing for critical scholars to explore what crime is and what and who criminal laws in Canada target. (McMurty & Curling, 2008)

The current perspective of crime is formed on the structure of the political economy which places emphasis on class, ethnicity, race and gender. The society we live in has "structural forces, cultural ideologies, and social processes which create, sustain, and exacerbate social problems" such as "racism, sexism, poverty, state/corporate violence, and criminal injustice" (Dutta et al.). Thus, scholars of the critical race theory move the focus away from crime being an individual or communal abnormality by arguing that the formulation of crime encapsulates all forms of oppression and harm including "violence committed by corporate and governing agencies" (McMurty & Curling, 2008). Therefore by this definition, structural violence includes any action that leads to racism and social inequality (Dutta et al.).

When discussing structural violence it is also imperative to discuss systemic racism and the key role it plays in the roots of violence. In Ontario, those living below the poverty line are forced to live in segregated parts of cities, with this being documented by United Way Toronto (MacDonnell et al., 2004). Following the erosion of the middle class, escalating property values and rents, and the overall lack of affordable housing, those who are poor have no other choice but to move into subsidized housing.

The extreme deficit of affordable housing in Ontario is due to a myriad of factors, including the economic shortcomings of past governments and policies like the removal of rent controls for renovated housing and vacancy decontrol (Ali et al., 2020). These policies have not only led to decades of monopolized rental property ownership but has also led to 98,000 Ontario households not being able to pay their full rents during the COVID-19 pandemic (Crosby, 2021).

With the lack of affordable housing, people turned to government subsidized housing in order to stay off the streets. The government however, created isolated subsidized housing neighbourhoods, withdrew support and funding for social housing initiatives, and failed to create economically integrated communities (McMurty & Curling, 2008). As a result, the government created socio-economic ghettos that were "often located in less green, less clean and... failing communities" (External Advisory Committee on Cities and Communities, 2006). As such, these neighbourhoods then

become places that reinforced the "penalties of poverty" (External Advisory Committee on Cities and Communities, 2006), further isolating and marginalizing the

very same people who sought government support to improve their situations in the first place.

The negative and pervasive impact this has had on the community becomes hard to ignore when the neighbourhood has become a place that residents want to escape from. Some reasons include but are not limited to: members starting slightly

better paying jobs and getting disqualified for assisted housing or members who want and are able to get away from their neighbourhood going to safer neighbourhoods with better schools and shorter commute times (McMurty & Curling, 2008). As a result of the constant flux of outward migration, the community continually loses strong members and role models for the youth that remain in the community.

In addition to this, more profitable and bigger businesses tend to avoid these places which results in the lack of affordable stores in these neighborhoods. Residents then have to face choices between making the time-consuming and expensive effort to travel and buy nutritious food or settling for more unhealthier choices. This trend of businesses and services avoiding these areas extend into all areas of consumerism thus adding more financial barriers for the community. This systemic isolation from accessing basic services deprives these neighbourhoods of local job opportunities and community role models. As a result, some of our participants stated that the community gains teachers

who are "insensitive [to] a lot of students [with different] backgrounds, individualities and personal needs", therefore becoming another barrier of success to Black youth's education.

Furthermore, public services like education or healthcare that are located in these neighbourhoods are often under-resourced, leading to substandard services as most of the senior service providers (in education and healthcare) want to work in less stressful environments. Those that do stay tend to become stressed due to the non-ideal working environment, experience burnout and leave. As a result, due to either high turnover or the inexperience of their staff, public services offered in low-income neighbourhoods tend to be of lower quality (McMurty & Curling, 2008).

On top of facing isolation on different levels, residents living in these neighbourhoods face discrimination in other areas as well. They are oftentimes not called back for interviews just for having an address or postal code in lower socio-economic areas. This stigmatization can also be found in other circumstances, like policing and education, which compounds the difficulties faced by residents and ends up becoming yet another obstacle impeding their success (McMurty & Curling, 2008).

The combination of the negative circumstances faced by residents of these communities where poverty is concentrated and there is a lack of a strong social structure encourages crime. Adan (2016) uses the social disorganization theory to explain the correlation between crime and community structure. This disorganization stems from systemic barriers and cultural challenges facing the community. Henceforth, all of the root problems explored in this section became barriers that demotivated youth living in these marginalized neighborhoods, leading them to feel that there is no way out of their circumstances leading to them deciding to make bad choices, resulting in the youth gun violence crisis among the Somali-Canadian community explored in this paper.

Youth Violence: Causes & Effects

To further understand the roots of violence, we now pivot to examine the specific structural causes that lead to it. One of the major topics to discuss is safety, and looking at how the social conditions in subsidized neighbourhoods are designed for crime. These neighbourhoods often lack spaces where residents can meet to socialize and build strong connections. Without these spaces, communities become disorganized and disconnected as people stay indoors and fail to make positive social relationships with fellow community members (McMurty & Curling, 2008). Throughout the last century, the design trends were to create groups of apartments/houses which were surrounded by large open spaces that formed a small pocket for the community, separate from major roads and busy traffic. As a byproduct of this style in construction, residents of those neighborhoods were also isolated from key services and businesses. As a result, due to the lack of strong social structures and external pressures, residents tended to withdraw from public life and left those public spaces unused. As a consequence, criminals started to freely operate in these unused spaces creating the perfect environment for crime to grow, which in turn led to a further decrease in usage of public spaces by residents.

In an ideal situation where the police-community relationship is positive, people would report these criminal activities to police services in order to get support. However, citizens in those neighborhoods do not have that fundamental strong trust in the police and therefore do not trust the police enough to report criminal or suspicious behaviour. This is a result of two factors: the widespread anti-Black racism in policing, and the community's perception of negligent policing. Firstly, the widespread distrust between the police and Black people is a result of the constant anti-Black discrimination within policing that has come to light over the last decade and a half due to the increase in widespread use of technology. This sentiment of distrust was frequently expressed by many of the participants in the focus groups, which we will introduce later in the paper, who mentioned that when they saw the police they felt wary as a general habit, even if they had not done anything wrong.

Secondly, when residents report a crime or suspicious behaviour and the police don't immediately intervene, this further emboldens the criminals. In addition to this, many participants of the focus groups felt like the police are negligent with majority of them stating that, "they don't prevent the crimes nor do they bring support or education to these issues...they just antagonize".

As crime increases in these neighbourhoods, it makes residents feel more unsafe which results in further social isolation as people stay indoors. This results in parents not sending their children to after-school programs, resulting in children not forming positive social relationships with others at a young age. Youth also face a lot of pressure to join or support gangs for their own safety because they feel that there are no other opportunities for them.

In addition to the housing and criminal justice systems, the education system also disadvantages Black youth by placing barriers to their academic success. In Ontario, the Education Act suspends or expels youth from school without full consideration of their circumstances and oftentimes also without proper support to maintain their education. The Ontario Human Rights Commission, as well as the majority of our participants, agreed that this act disproportionately impacts racialized students.

This rigid approach does not take into consideration the mitigation factors that lead to these behaviours. These behaviours stem from "students inability to control his or her behaviour or understand the consequences of the behaviour because of a disability" and students' "reaction to racism and racist bullying" (McMurty & Curling, 2008). Therefore, the Safe Schools provisions' zero-tolerance policy doesn't take into account the "ethno-racial, socio-economic and cultural context of the students and their families" (McMurty & Curling, 2008, Turner, 2019). As a result, Black students "suffer from low expectations, hyper policing of their bodies, [getting] streamed in classes below their academic skills, harsh discipline, and [the] pathologizing of Black families and cultures" (Ann E. Lopez, 2021).

Therefore, the long-term consequences of this act include harming the educational development of youth who already face socio-economic barriers, racism and isolation. This leaves impacted youth with no job skills or marketable education, leading them to become prime recruits for gangs or drug dealers. Youth who are on the streets or malls during the day come into contact with a lot of police supervision and this increased policing also leads to youth being criminalized at an earlier age (Bhattacharjee, 2003).

Youth Violence: Addressing the Gap

While there is a deficit in studies that deal with the scope and experience of violence in Somali-Canadian communities, there have been a few studies that examine their struggle with racism, discrimination, poverty, and crime. While some studies focus on the broader intergenerational challenges facing Somali-Canadians with education, employment, and criminality, others looked at the general experiences of the marginalized minorities, specifically focusing on the effects of over-policing and how this led to over-criminalization (Aden et al).

As of yet however, there remains two gaps that have yet to be addressed: 1) centering youth voices in the conversations about gun violence, and 2) having research that specifically focuses on the crisis of gun violence amongst Somali-Canadian youth. This report intends to help fill these gaps in research by using data and analysis gained through the study completed to make the youth gun violence crisis among the Somali-Canadian community in the GTA more well-known.

Background

Midaynta Community Services

Midaynta Community Services is a registered Canadian charitable organization in Toronto that has operated since 1993 and became a non-profit organization in 1995. Over the years, Midaynta has been providing culturally appropriate services to marginalized youth, refugees, immigrants, and racialized communities through its counseling, capacity-building workshops, mentorships, and support services. Midaynta Community Services' core area of work is to address and prevent violence in the Black Community in the GTA. Through focus groups and research projects, the organization has continuously engaged with its community to recognize their needs and create programs to address specific concerns to build safer neighborhoods. The weekly workshops for youth provided by Midaynta Community Services are tailored to empower youth and create opportunities for them to find their strength and capability. Other programs offered by Midaynta include programs and services for seniors, a youth mentorship program, a Student and Family Advocate program, Project Turn Around, settlement and immigration services, Youth Outreach work and gang prevention and intervention work.

Midaynta believes in the "provision of high-quality community social services that promote and build a better and prosperous society" (Midaynta, n.d.). Their values include "being accessible, equitable and accountable to the community; advocating for largely underserved and marginalized communities; working in partnership and collaboratively with other service providers to make a difference; serving clients regardless of race, national origin, ethnicity, culture, gender, sex, sexual orientation, age, ability or religion; and endeavoring to unite the communities by creating a socially cohesive environment" (Midaynta, n.d.). These values push the organization to continue to expand their network with organizations like the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) and Toronto Police Services (TPS) and improve their service delivery to unite the community together and provide opportunities and supports for community members.

Purpose of Project Real Talk

The purpose of Project Real Talk is to hear the voices of youth regarding youth violence and how it affects their community. Midaynta Community Services held focus groups to get youth to express their concerns and opinions on community safety, the relationship between the police and the community, anti-black racism, and the effects of gun violence on their communities. Coming into the focus groups, the participants were asked questions regarding how gun violence was being addressed in their community and their comfortability surrounding police interactions with the community and its members. Project Real Talk is a community research initiative that speaks to the youth in order to gain access to and understand their first-hand experiences. By listening to them, the project team can address youth violence by bringing recommendations such as early prevention or building support systems to support youth needs in their community which offers youth a different path.

Speaking to the youth, we can determine what they believe the root of youth violence is or find out which youths are targeted by youth violence and are engaging in it. With that, we can address or support the impacted youth before they get engaged and prevent it from occurring again. Since Black youth are at the center of this crisis, Project Real Talk targeted Black youth between the ages of 16 to 25 years old for this study.

Project Turn Around

Project Turn Around is a project that received funding from the Ontario government to help address youth and gang violence. Facilitated through Midaynta Community Services, Project Turn Around serves Black youth in the northwest of Toronto by opening up opportunities for youth at risk to turn their life by acting as a prevention program and giving various supports depending on the needs of the individual youth. In short, the program was developed as a gang prevention and intervention program targeted

towards at risk Black youth, focusing on the Somali, East African, Black and Caribbean communities in the Northwest Toronto who are between the ages of 12 to 20 who are at risk of or already involved in the criminal justice system. Due to the increased rates of gang violence over the last three decades, preventing crimes from happening is the project's aim and they support Black youth by "providing young people with support to develop a positive goal-oriented lifestyle to help them exit gangs and navigate the criminal justice system" (Midaynta Community Services, 2019).

Since its launch, Project Turn Around offers programs that deliver a wide range of services to both youth and their families including "one-on-one case management; individual and group counselling; anger management; gang prevention awareness education; psychoeducation; drug and alcohol harm reduction strategies as well as opportunities to gain job readiness skills, and develop life skills to support short term and long-term goals" (Midaynta Community Services, 2019). Project Turn Around receives referrals from probation offices and targets programs to those

who are on probation or at-risk of gang involvement to prevent and intervene when necessary by giving them the support they needed.

Mending a Crack in the Sky

Mending A Crack in the Sky (MCIS) is a healing initiative in partnership with Midaynta Community Services that was founded in 2015 and helps address youth violence through culturally sensitive crisis response and support. It's objective is to raise awareness and combat youth violence while seeking justice for their injured, incarcerated, or murdered children. Moreover, the initiative ensures a safe space for community members to grieve, engage, and heal through culturally appropriate techniques when a crisis erupts by developing a healing action plan. It is a dynamic community collective that consists of a dedicated group of mothers who are passionate about transformative community change and activism. The group of mothers have been addressing male youth violence in the GTA, focusing on high priority neighbourhood which includes police divisions 12, 13,

22, 23, 31, and 32, participating in monthly meetings with Toronto Police Services and Toronto Community Housing to address concerns in these six high priority divisions. The mothers have successfully hosted healing forums in Lawrence Heights.

MCIS expands community safety through the Peer-to-Peer Crisis Support programs where victims who have suffered from gun violence are given the support they need. MCIS engaged with the Toronto Police Service Board (TPSB) to present on the crisis facing the Somali community, which led TPSB to approve a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the TPSB and Midaynta Community Services on February 12, 2020 which stays in effect until December 31, 2022. The purpose of the MOU is to establish a formal and equal working relationship between the TPSB, the TPS, and Midaynta Community Services, who are all interested in improving community safety. MCIS and Midaynta Community Services work in tandem with TPS to continue improving the safety of the Somali youth in the West-End of Toronto that are being impacted by gun violence. Earlier in 2021, MCIS was one of the recipients of the Mayor's Community Safety Award, which was presented to them by Mayor John Tory for improving the safety of the Somali community in Toronto and continuing to open doors for Somali youth and families.

Gender-Based Violence Program

Midaynta Community Services earlier this year also introduced a new program called the Gender-Based Violence Program (GBV), which serves as a culturally relevant prevention program targeted towards Black or African-Canadian youth between the ages of 12 to 20 years who reside in the Northwest of Toronto. The program focuses on providing knowledge of gender-based violence and doing prevention workshops to help reduce gender-based violence related offenses among the Black community. To study gender-based violence, the program provides prevention and intervention support programming, one-on-one or group counselling sessions, GBV educational awareness workshops, and youth mentorship opportunities. This initiative aims to reduce gender-based violence and also "promote confidence, resilience and positive identity development and paths into adulthood among youth" (Midaynta, n.d.).

Methodology

The scope of this study, known as Project Real Talks, aimed to look into solutions to decrease gun violence and improve community safety. The project's name is derived from a slang term for an honest or personal chat between friends among teenagers. This exploratory qualitative study design was approached from a critical race theory with a specific focus on intersectionality and systemic racism viewpoint by the researchers. Naomi Blumberg, Tommy Curry Critical race theory state: "critical race theory (CRT), intellectual movement and loosely organized framework of legal analysis based on the premise that race is not a natural, biologically grounded feature of physically distinct subgroups of human beings but a socially constructed (culturally invented) category that is used to oppress and exploit people of colour." Through focus group conversations, this paradigm was utilized to validate the many realities that kids who encounter community violence confront. This study intended to provide the youth a voice in its quest to find community solutions and prevention measures that highlight the lived realities of youth violence among Black youth. As a result, critical race theory had an impact on the unearthing of young people's stories as expressed in their own words.

The Canadian government supported this initiative as part of the Summer Jobs Program for youth. Midaynta Community Services hired twenty-five young people of African descent between the ages of 15 and 29 for a 16-week summer work initiative to carry out this project. These student workers, some of whom came from communities impacted by communal violence, were assigned to Midaynta Staff-led teams. The aim, design, and implementation of the project were all inspired by the young researchers' lived experiences and community knowledge, transforming it into a community participatory action research effort. The project's objective was to raise young voices to address youth violence in the GTA and the disproportionate loss of life to gun violence among African-Canadian youth in the Somali community. To learn more about possible solutions to this problem, young researchers interviewed youth aged 16 to 29 who identified as Somali/African/Muslim/Black from impacted communities in the Greater Toronto Area and asked the following question: What improvements could be made to ensure the safety of your community?

Recruitment

The entire initiative was planned and conducted through virtual interactions through the utilization of technological devices due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Youth researchers used a number of approaches to recruit participants, including social media, outreach phone calls, emails, and word-of-mouth, to create an inclusive sample design. To be considered for the project, students had to identify as Somali/African/Muslim/Black, be between the ages of 16 and 25, and live in a community affected by communal violence in the Greater Toronto Area. Potential participants performed a screening phone call conducted by research staff after expressing interest in the study to confirm their demographic parameters, get more comprehensive information about the study, and complete the informed consent process. 108 participants were selected, all of which were then sent an email with a consent form to sign and return, a secure google form survey to fill out their demographic information and select a date they are free to join one of the focus groups, as well as a Zoom link to sign up for their desired focus group date or the option of filling out a 33 question survey. 53 of the 108 participants opted for the live focus group session, while the remaining 55 selected the 33 question survey option. As per the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Human Research Involving Humans (2018), all participant information (i.e. video recordings, transcriptions, interview notes, and excel files) was stored in password-protected and encrypted folders on Midaynta Community Services' firewalled and anti-virus protected servers.

Data Collection

Video-chat software was used to conduct community focus groups (Zoom). Due to "its relative ease of use, cost-effectiveness, data management tools, and newly strengthened security safeguards," Zoom, "an innovative video conferencing platform," showed tremendous potential in its usage as a tool for qualitative data collecting (Archibald et al.,2019). During the 16-week summer employment program, five focus groups lasting roughly 90 minutes each were held over a one-week period. Midaynta hired young researchers who underwent training in qualitative research techniques and data analysis to lead the focus groups. Participants were asked to respond to questions from a semi-structured interview guide on gun violence, safety, community resources, police engagement, peer groups, the role of family, and school. The MCIS project created the interview questions, which were then reviewed by the young researchers. Questions placed on the survey were shorter but divided into more specific categories.

Ethical Considerations

Due to the delicate nature of the conversation, maintaining secrecy and privacy was critical. Each participant was given a random number identity to use as their screen name before the start of each focus group, and the software's video capability was disabled. Participants were requested not to mention any personal or private identifiable information (such as names) of people who were not present during the conversation. Participants were urged to follow Midaynta Community Services' fundamental principles of compassion, cooperation, equality and equity, social justice, and diversity in their actions. Participants were told and reminded that participation in the study was entirely voluntary and that they may opt out at any moment. During and after the group talks, mental health counsellors were on hand in case any participants were experiencing emotional distress or need further assistance. For their participation in the study, each participant got a $20 gift card through email, as well as high-school volunteer hours if desired.

Data Analysis

Data analysis began as soon as the focus groups were completed. The focus groups' audio recordings were transcribed by and reviewed by youth researchers who were present at the focus groups and who also took notes of their own. During a consultation session with a University of Toronto PhD student, youth researchers and Midaynta personnel were taught how to perform a thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was a clear option for this study because of its accessibility and flexibility, making it a valuable qualitative analysis approach that is simple to learn and implement for new researchers like those involved in this project. (Braun & Clarke, 2006). "It is a foundational qualitative method for identifying, analyzing, organizing, describing, and reporting themes found within a data set" (Nowell et al., 2017). Ten of the twenty-five young researchers were chosen to be part of the data analysis team, which was then divided into pairs.

Transcripts were allocated to the team present at the focus group to read and apply "open codes" on. In this early stage of data analysis, the researchers used code words to code the data segments. The code words chosen helped to capture the essence of what was said or observed in entire paragraphs by looking for similar themes in language and concepts. The data analysis team then convened via video-conference to exchange their initial views of the data, debate and discuss code words, and develop completed open codes for data segments in the data set. The team evaluated their suggestions with notes from the interview and guidance from forefront-workers of Project Turn-Around. Following the completion of the open codes, teams traded their work and evaluated and modified the codes. The data analysis team collaborated to create broader coding categories and explore the links between the themes across the data in the following step of the process. After the entire data analysis team gained consensus through debate, these broader groups were formally approved.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

In total, our project saw a total of 108 participants, as approximately half (50.9%) of the participants participated via survey (N=55) and the other half (49.0%) participated via focus group (N=53). The participants were all Black youth, specifically with a predominantly Somali sample (70.4% on survey, 79.3% on focus group), with the other Black participants being of African descent as well. The Project successfully met our goal of setting our focus on male participation, to capture the male youth voices (64.2% male in the focus group, 54.5% male in survey) which are often not as loud in similar projects of this nature. As the information taken from the participants included their areas of residence, we were able to see the spread of participants among the GTA, which allowed us to highlight that the problems of gang violence needing to be addressed were not only a community issue but a racial/systematic one as well. The different forms of data gathered, both survey and focus groups, put a spotlight on similar gun/gang violence issues as shown in our findings.

Findings

Throughout this research project, several themes emerged that have proven to be of importance when discussing the systemic problems that Black youth face: the Black experience in education, gang/gun violence, safety and the lack thereof, mental health, and policing. Our report wishes to use the findings and analysis of the data to bring to light the several issues that stem from the hegemonic anti-Black systems that Canada has in place, and also discuss agency building as many in the African diaspora navigate through racism and other forms of oppression (Benjamin, 2003).

Black Experience Education

The first theme that stands out in the results is the Black experience in the context of education. Black youth are often met with anti-Black racism at an early age in the school system; a reality that is bound to affect the trajectory of any youth. Across all 5 focus groups, participants made it clear that the treatment they received was 'different' from their non-black students' counterparts.

Participant 16: I've faced barriers in school especially when it came to my educational progression. My dreams were often dismissed and my achievements discredited. It was very tiring to be honest.

Participant 28: I felt like I had a lot of barriers in school, being a black young girl like you couldn't really make mistakes and if you did you'd get way more in trouble compared to other kids in your class... When I was with my white friends I would still get targeted.

Participant 22: Teachers would always accuse us of "distracting" other students even if we weren't even part of a conversation.

The participants touched upon the anti-Black systemic issues that they experienced throughout their educational careers, which were only made apparent to them after self-reflection several years later. The participants' dialogue shows that the early education institutions in Canada manifested social orders with the intention of organizing an unequal relationship between non-Black and Black bodies (Wun, 2014). The quotations above are clear statements that show that participants felt that the system, and its vessels (teachers/educators) often perpetuated anti-Black rhetoric which can lead and did lead some of our Black youth into developing a feeling of otherness within their own Canadian society as well as other long lasting trauma.

Participant 26: Education is such a big role and I think that in high school it tells where you go next in life so if a black student doesn't get the proper opportunities as any other student that decides whether they're going to university or college or go into something [that's] not good for them.

Participants went on to speak about the lasting implication of an anti-Black school system. Being exposed to institutional trauma from a young age, even when one does not fully understand it at the

time, can have severe effects on a child's social development and approach to education which can lead one down a path of hardship and limitation as school is one of the first fundamental places children are able to develop a sense of self from. The feeling of being 'less than' and being othered creates further barriers. However, a few participants held different experiences as a Black youth in school.

Participant 1: I feel like the quality of education is based on the community itself.

Participant 44: Online school is making it easier for POC just because you are not only seen by the colour of your skin but by your talent.

With the change of style in education that was brought with the COVID-19 pandemic, from in-person to online learning, some Black youth have felt the difference in treatment from educators as many times their racial identity would be invisible in an online school setting. Through an anti-Black theoretical lens, this only further highlights systematic issues as the treatment a Black student receives should depend on whether their racial identity is known or hidden.

Through everyday teaching, learning, and opportunities given, educators manifest anti-blackness and anti-Black racism. Anti-Black racism academic studies urge the importance of reform/action to be taken to combat and confront this everyday issue (Lopez & Jean-Marie, 2021). The accounts given by the participants only further strengthen the need to address said issues.

Gang Violence

With the education system making many Black students feel unwanted and marginalized, it is no surprise to many that Black youth turn to other paths in life, paths that accept them and do not make them feel othered for their ethnicity. It is unfortunate that many times there are societal pressures to go down the paths of criminality and violence. For example, youth sometimes feel that even if they try their very best to avoid a criminal path, others not of the same ethnicity make Black youth feel like it is almost expected of them. The system currently in place marginalizes, isolates, dehumanizes, criminalizes, and stops Black youth from integrating into the general society because it already views them as inherently

violent/gang affiliated. This process becomes its own cycle, Black youth being systemically rejected by society because they believe they're criminals, this then leading Black youth to feel that they have no other option which causes them to turn to criminal behaviors. Our participants spoke on the matter with high levels of passion and a lot of data was gathered on the topic of gun/gang violence and the glorification of that lifestyle.

Participant 16: People join gangs for either one of these reasons: finding a community, feeling safer, access to financial stability or access to drugs.

Participant 8: Young individuals join gangs, in my opinion, to feel connected and involved with people they can consider family.

Participant 32: … maybe the feeling of security of being in a gang, feeling like you're protected.

Participant 26: Security and a sense of power.

Being a Black youth growing up in Canada may feel isolating at times, and seeing how our anti-Black systems are set up to marginalize the Black bodies, it is only natural for said youth to go out and try to find a sense of belonging elsewhere on their own. The quotes from the participants above highlight the paths that Black youth, who are feeling loneliness and hopelessness from their situation, take and how they eventually end up in gangs and doing gang activity. Gang activity in the eyes of the participants in this report can be seen as the Black youth's last resort to a sense of community/family; many state that finding a sense of security and safety is the catalyst. With the results gathered, an interpretation can be made that the ongoing involvement of criminal activity by Black bodies stem from the marginalized anti-Black systems of the society; gangs and criminal groups are the only places that accepts them and is the only path without barriers. Unlike every other path, this path is accessible and welcoming. The only place they may feel safe and secure being Black in Canadian society.

Participant 12: In my opinion doing crimes is trendy and if you commit a crime you are cool.

Participant 43: I feel that it's just social media glorifying them.

With so many Black youth in the GTA turning to gangs and criminal activity as they feel unvalued anywhere else, is only natural to the Black youth looking in from the outside to glorify the sense of community and self-power that these groups hold. Gang glorification then leads to an increased level of interest in the criminal lifestyle. A variety of media also glorifies this lifestyle, often in the domain where the Black body is 'on top' and 'in charge' which is the sort of imagery attached to the gangs and guns that perpetuates the cycle of youth involvement in gangs.

Figure 1: Cluster bar graph displaying a black youths likeliness to be exposed to gang violence by neighborhood

BLACK YOUTH ARE MORE LIKELY TO BE EXPOSED TO GANG VIOLENCE BY NEIGHBOURHOOD YOU LIVE IN (N=47)
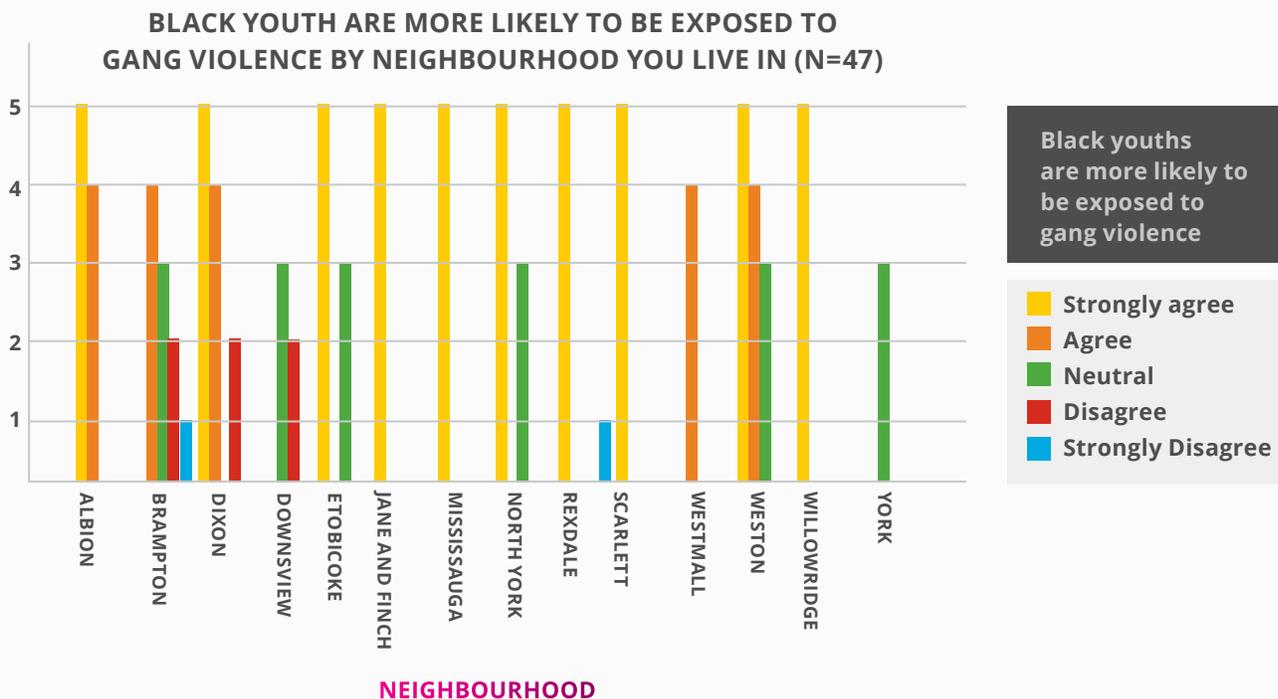
Even as a youth who is defined as a 'good kid', who attends and excels in school, and stays out of any kind of trouble, .the data gathered shows that simply being of a Black racial identity increases the odds of being exposed to gang violence (refer to Figure 1) whether in the form of a bystander, a victim, or participant. The graph is divided based upon the neighborhood of residence to emphasize the fact that throughout the GTA, Black youth are more susceptible to exposure to gang violence in comparison to other ethnic groups. The data shows that more than half (50.9%) of our survey participants agree with the statement that "Black youth are more likely to be exposed to gun violence over the course of their lives than other minorities".

The ongoing gang violence in the Black, and more specifically the Somali community, is a massive problem that is close to the hearts of many youth that identify as Somali. The participants are aware and have stressed that the current youth gun violence issue facing the Somali community is not an isolated issue, but rather an issue that is intertwined with the anti-Black racism embedded in the very society that the African diaspora have found themselves calling home for generations.

Safety

No issue, especially when speaking on a community at the macro-level, is independent from other mitigating factors. In fact, many issues are interwoven and serve as a catalyst for other more serious issues. With anti-Black institutions in place in Canadian society, we can see why many Black youth turn to gangs and gang violence as they are essentially looking for a place to feel safe and be accepted as they are. Although it may give Black youth a feeling of belonging, it also creates and prompts criminality and violence which harms

the safety of the community at large. The lack of safety in the community is felt even by the residents that have no criminal ties and relations, simply because the violence is taking place on their doorstep.

It is important to add that these connections are not linear but are interconnected in a web. Through this report, we hope to show how these ongoing issues are interconnected.

Participant 16: Nowadays gun violence is becoming more common. Now people are getting hurt who are not even involved. It's become retaliatory in nature and the violence is more directed to the community.

Participant 20: In my community to be honest we feel like we can't trust each other.

Participant 25: Yeah, I think it's hard to feel safe, because everyone who seems to be dying lately, or it's on the news is another Somali person who looks like me. So at any given time, from a distance, I would just look like a normal Somali guy. Could I be mistaken as somebody else? It's just a lot of thoughts running through my head. And I'm pretty sure many other brothers could agree.

The quotations above show the fear that is felt by residents of these communities for the sole reason of their looks and location of residence. The pain of losing family, friends, and community members to gun violence as well as the overwhelming feelings of paranoia of not knowing what is to come next has left the community teeming with trauma and distrust. Many participants went on to speak of the lack of safety they felt in their own homes, increasing with the newest variable of the public health concern with COVID-19 becoming a normal aspect of our life. Participant 16 saying "Covid 19 has impacted [us] by creating more stress in [our] life. The global problems, loss of life, and struggles increase this stress." These factors compounding to result to the addition of more tension to the already volatile levels of community safety. The alarming revelation is that these youth feel alone in this matter, they report feelings of being lost and not knowing where to turn to for support because the problem seems never-ending. This fact is supported by the data we have retrieved. In the survey, only a small percentage (2%) of people claimed to feel unsafe within their communities, while the focus group shared an opposite result, with the majority of the participants

stating otherwise. The discourse in the focus group portrayed participants having a consensus regarding the lack of safety in their communities and the feelings of having no one to turn to support their burdens.

Participant 1: I wouldn't personally know who or where to turn to for help.

Many participants also discussed the lack of a social support group, stating that other than their family circle, they were alone and had little to no outside support. With the COVID-19 crisis, we saw the ways in which we would once cope as a community evaporate since isolation had become a major step in warding off the virus, making many feel more isolated than ever.

Mental Health

With the increased rate of violence in these Black and POC majority communities alongside the rapidly falling levels of safety, the residents living in these communities find it hard to keep and maintain good mental health. The feelings of pain, loneliness, and looming violence are powerful and they create environments of trauma that more often than not go untreated. With the anti-Black systems in place, these mental health problems go unaddressed which only perpetuates the mental health struggles that the Black population, and more specifically the Black youth, are going through.

Participant 28: It's heartbreaking. I feel like both the active shooters and the victims are both broken and lost. What hurts most is the innocent people who get caught in the crossfire. It's a cycle.

Participant 37: My community is normal, nothing going on. We don't talk, everyone just does their own thing. My neighbors keep to themselves.

The Black youth acknowledge that these problems are prevalent and make the conscious choice to carry the burden alone for numerous reasons: 1) the youth feel as though they have no one to turn to and are not aware of resources that are available, as a third of the participants (33.3%) via survey were not aware of Black community organizations in the GTA that could help them if they were experiencing negative impacts from violence in the community, and 2) society diminishes trauma that stem from gang/gun violence as we see

many Black community service organizations being underfunded and regulated heavily. Society promotes the 'head down and tough it out mentality' which the youth follow just to find themselves alone with their burdens and trauma that are too hard to bear. Anti-Black policies and ongoing violence also deeply affects the Black communities in general, not just the individuals directly involved in youth gun and gang violence. Studies have shown that this type of collective trauma must be understood as an urgent public health crisis, a crisis that, from the data we gathered, is still not being addressed (Waldron, 2020). In fact, with COVID-19 having a large impact on lower-income communities, the crisis of mental health is worsening.

Participant 19: ... a lot of people are feeling stressed and mental health issues have increased during the pandemic. So I'm worried about that trend, what's going to happen to these people who are indoors.

Participant 22: I think my community became a bit isolated at first it was really quiet and I barely even saw people I knew.

With COVID-19 being an easily transmittable virus, isolation and social distance has been the advised course of action by our health officials. These steps, while essential in combatting the viral spread of this pandemic, have also had serious mental health implications which are particularly noted in the low-income, black and POC communities. A study conducted by Dr. Sandra Thomas of University of Tennessee looked at the mental health effects of COVID-19 on the Black and Hispanic communities in the USA, and the results proved relevant. The deaths caused by COVID-19 effects the greatly impacts the entire family, and as the average POC family has larger family sizes than that of families of a Caucasian background, a fact that is definitely true for the Somali diaspora in Canada, this causes a disproportionately massive spike of what Dr. Thomas' study referred to as, "post-pandemic mental health disorders" (Thomas, 2021). The results of our project agree with Dr. Thomas' claims as many participants spoke on anxiety, depression, and isolation that has been heightened during the period of the pandemic.

With the gang/gun violence affecting the mental health and wellbeing of several if not all members in the community to some degree, COVID-19 has amplified this pressing matter to another level, a level that is too high for officials to sit back and do nothing. These communities need mental health aid as the mental health crisis has become a public health issue that should be treated just as seriously as COVID-19 is.

Policing

Do you believe that police officers all "protect and serve" their community? (N+45)
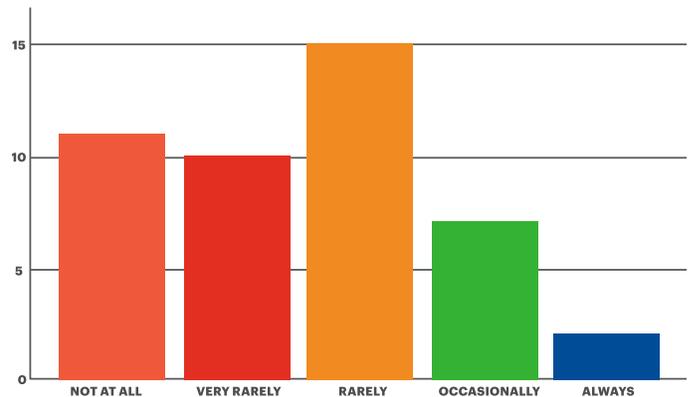

Figure 2: Likert scale on participants' opinions on whether police officers fulfill their mandate, "serve and protect", in their communities.

Canada's historical and ongoing anti-Black structures has several issues for the African diaspora community as explored in our analysis, damaging the safety and mental health of these marginalized populations living in precarious communities. Another major institution that adds to the oppression of the Black bodies is that of the police, or rather the improper or no policing of Black bodies. In the survey, about a quarter (28.9%) of participants believe that the police rarely fulfill their mandate to "serve and protect" their communities (refer to Figure 2) and about 20% reported that they did not believe police fulfilled this mandate at all. This is crucial in   highlighting the growing distrust between the Black community and the police as people feel like they are not receiving the same aid as other communities. From their perspective, the reason the police are failing to "serve and protect" is due to their pre-conceived notion of seeing these neighborhoods as nothing more than a hotspot for crime.

Participant 28: They [police] were laughing at the people talking about "Oh, you guys just know everyone who gets shot." And like, they troll you. So it's like, how can you like to have that relationship with people who don't even care about what you got going on?

Participant 2: I feel like the police don't genuinely care when they see [a] black on black crime.

Participant 4: I feel like more police being around in neighborhoods makes everyone feel anxious.

The quotes above summarize the feelings and thoughts that the participants have towards the police. The distrust is strong between the two parties and it is clear to see why the police are unable to create positive change. Historically, while using an anti-Black lens, we can identify that these communities have been systemically marginalized from the society they live in and the only authority figures who interact with them on a more general basis are the police. Therefore, when the police further dehumanize them by seeing whole communities as only criminals and creating fear because of the power they wield, their actions become systemic actions that further add to the isolation and marginalization of Black communities (Tator et al., 2006). However, the participants who had a positive outlook on the future had also given their solutions to improve the relationship between members of the police and the Black communities and it can be stated concisely as: be a part of the community. The police need to be members of the communities they serve and not just another stress factor that Black youth and families need to be wary and afraid of. We must break the chains of anti-black oppression from all fronts.

Recommendations

In this report, Black youth had the opportunity to research violence affecting other Black youth in hopes of a brighter future in which we seek to empower youth voices. Black youth have experienced constant inequalities and discrimination within all systems, whether it's education, mental health or the criminal justice system, oftentimes from a very young age. Youth respondents presented their recommendations to aid in combatting the deep-rooted practices in Canadian institutions that reinforce discrimination against individuals of Black-African descent. Below are the recommendations presented by youth participants discussing the topics of education, gang/gun violence, community safety, policing and mental health:

1. Provide resources and support in Education for equal opportunities and academic success.

Starting as early in their education, Black youth were never given a fair chance in life. The lack of educational success is based on an oppressive system in which Black students face implicit bias and discrimination through lower academic streaming as well as hyper punishment through exclusionary discipline (American Psychological Association Services). Black students are streamed into classes below their skill level resulting in disproportionate graduation rates. In addition to that, exclusionary disciplining causes a setback in their academic progression. In fact, a study conducted by the American Psychological Association Services has proven that the disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline creates a school-to-prison pipeline. Youth participants recognized the visible barriers that Black students face in the educational system and the consequences that lead to poor life outcomes. They put forth solutions to increase resources for students in marginalized communities and break down barriers in the educational system.

Participant 13: … I believe all the schools within the GTA should receive equal amounts of funding, the only difference has to be what the amount of each school has the students but when it comes to other resources such as textbooks, and other things the school needs to provide, I believe, like, all the schools they must receive enough funding. Especially lower income areas and communities. Coming from a lower income shouldn't determine what kind of education you receive, or that you won't have enough resources.

Participant 19: Something really important to me is the decriminalization of black bodies. So, I'm tired of the normalization of violence being synonymous with the black experience… We shouldn't even be talking about whether or not the person involved was innocent or not. First of all, somebody has lost their life, right? So, understanding that, because the benefit of doubt is always given to white [people]…There's a lot more reform that needs to happen in terms of the systems in place. I think educational reforms are also important, you know, giving accessible education that's not based on the amount of taxes certain neighborhoods give back to the government. That's really important, because schools should be teaching the same thing, but they're not getting the same funding…

Participant 21: I think we should have more school youth programs in our communities.

2. Provide community programming/initiatives to create positive environments and reduce violence in the communities

Gang Violence

Black youth have consistently been made to feel inferior and incapable of succeeding in life due to the systems that were put in place. Anti-blackness in the education system pushes Black youth out of education and into a world of crime and violence. Black youth have repeatedly been refused the right to their innocence, adolescence, and second chances. Having been denied these rights, Black youth feel as if they have nothing left to lose. As a result, they join gangs to redeem all of the rights and opportunities that the system has denied them. Joining a criminal gang provides a sense of belonging and acceptance for the youth in contrast to being rejected and oppressed by anti-Black systems. Criminal gangs glorify and perpetuate the ongoing violence we see in our black and especially Somali communities.

Community Safety

Inevitably, the prominent presence of criminal gangs that initiate violence in Black/Somali communities poses a great threat both directly and indirectly towards community members. The easy access and availability of deadly weapons such as firearms leads to an increase in the amount of lethal violence in the communities. Many community members feel a heightened sense of danger due to the unwarranted targeting of innocent youth because of their ethnicities and the neighborhoods they live in. Youth participants shared their recommendations on how to improve community safety by focusing on the foundation and the root of the issue itself.

Participant 40: Everyone has to be more involved. Educate Others. Guide the younger youth on the right path if [you] see them on the wrong path.

Participant 7: I would want to see less policing but more community services and more programming. There are ways to address the way the community is right now. It is not a viable solution, and it will not get the problem from the root. Whenever we give an income subsidy and provide community programming,

we see results of the initiative and positive outcomes coming out of those initiatives…

3. Police should build trust with the communities and collaborate to implement positive community initiatives

In the search for a solution, there has been an increased presence of police in Black/Somali communities facing the ongoing violence of gangs. The common response from the police whenever there is an elevated level of crime in Black/Somali communities, is to automatically increase the police presence. This is not a sustainable problem-solving strategy but rather a temporary one. The police have never been known to have a good relationship with the Black community. The prevalent anti-Black discrimination within the police causes the criminalization of Black youth and Black people in general. Youth respondents agreed that it is important for the police to build trust with the community and apply solutions that are aimed at improving and aiding the community rather than just policing and leaving.

Participant 32: To me, I would feel like they would be more effective if they actually maybe try by looking around more attentively or listening to the concerns the people in my community have and also just be there…present, like just not by like mentally be present in the area and also have like a sense of knowing what exactly is going on in the area instead of normally being blind or by choosing to be ignorant.

Participant 26: To make people feel safe they should engage more in the community rather than watching from a far so that they feel we can trust them in a way.

Participant 19: Honestly, they don't make us feel safer because they're just there to make everyone anxious. Our reaction to their presence is rooted in a long history of distrust. They should build trust with the community.

Participant 25: …the only change that I could see that would actually be effective is that police officers are only allowed to patrol or work in the areas that they live in. That way they have some sort of connection to the community. Or this would be a separate entity where community members protect themselves and police only come for crime investigation. That way you know the ones that are protecting you are your own.

4. Proper tools and resources to support youth, families, and communities along the path of recovery from trauma

Mental Health

The ongoing gang/gun violence in communities has had a huge impact on the mental health of both youth and their families. The violence has an effect beyond the direct victim as well, leading to negative effects for the community as a whole. According to research, it has been suggested that being a victim or witness to community violence foretells psychological distress in urban adolescents, particularly symptoms of depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, as well as aggressiveness (Dubé et al., 2018). Black youth and families have long suffered from the violence that plagues their communities both directly and indirectly. Not having the necessary support systems to heal from trauma further fuels the crisis of gang/gun violence which has already become a devastating cycle.

Due to their exposure to intergenerational trauma and present-day anti-Black racism, the Black community has historically been at a great disadvantage when it comes to their mental health, most of which transcends to the experience of mental health care inequity present today (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2021). Despite the significant presence of mental illness in lower-income communities where Black populations are predominantly found, these communities often have far less mental health support programs and assistance (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2021). Tools and resources to support youth, families, and communities along the path of youth violence prevention, early intervention, and recovery are essential. Throughout our research, youth participants repeatedly pointed out

their family and friends, and Black organizations such as Midaynta Community Services, as being their main support systems in which they seek help if they choose to do so at all. They acknowledged that gaps need to be bridged between community services and communities for Black youth and families to receive optimal support.

Participant 26: I think Black organizations try really hard and they think they are successful but I think at the same time I feel like the government doesn't really give them a chance, and so a lot of the time they're struggling to get funding and being able to function and being open to helping people. But then when they're so focused on getting funding, it kinda [kind of] takes away from their focus so they're not really able to do what they need to do.

Participant 19: I feel like the idea behind community organizations is that they would love to help everyone. But unfortunately, as the previous participant said, they don't have a lot of funding. So oftentimes, they can address all of our needs, and that's simply because of financial problems, right? They can, they don't have access to the resources and the facilities to help everyone. So that's very sad, because they do have the desire to help us, but they just don't have the ability to do so.

Participant 44: In my opinion, young people join gangs out of a need, they feel in gangs it brings them a sense of community I guess. They have someone to lean onto and I think this is a result of them not having the resources growing up and kinda [kind of] growing up in a broken household and that kinda [kind of] leads them to join these street gangs.

Conclusion

Based on the results and the thorough data analysis of the contributions made by Black youth across the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) regarding gun violence, community safety, the impact of COVID-19, policing, and race, the research team arrived to a variety of conclusions. The primary conclusions are discussed below.

Firstly, there is an enormous amount of information pertinent to the contributing factors of youth gun violence in the GTA. The results of the methods used to collect data proves that one sole issue is not the cause of this crisis of public safety and that it is in fact a giant net interwoven with issues that lead to these less than favourable outcomes for Black youth. For example, the earliest experiences of grooming youth towards violence begins in Canadian institutions of education. Across all groups surveyed, they often referred to being treated contrary to their peers at school and receiving harsher punishments for similar behaviour. As youth age, they are bombarded with the knowledge that their demographics (Black, immigrant, Muslim, male etc.) face higher rates of inequity, proven through their own experiences and the anecdotal evidence from their environments. This leads to them feeling a lack of power, community, and feeling isolated by the majority of the public. Black youth then begin to join gangs or form alliances in their factions to establish control, access financial stability and security.

This leads to the communal safety of these majority Black neighborhoods being compromised as a result of the school to prison pipeline that Black youth all across the GTA face. Groups and gangs come together more quickly where marginalization is higher, which leads to more than one gang formation. These groups then face infighting or begin to establish rivalries with other neighborhoods. These rivalries have often led to the murders of members in these communities which has left trauma and distrust in its wake. Communities feel a lack of safety in their own homes and communal areas, as gun violence has become more directed at the community due to its retaliatory nature. The

psychological torment of living in these conditions has allowed the further deterioration of the mental health of Somali youth, especially considering the pre-existing conditions amongst the youth.

Of the youth surveyed, the majority of them revealed that they had little to no maintenance of good mental health. As previously mentioned, many of the youth reported feeling discriminated against in school and feeling unsafe in their communities. Surprisingly, they also confessed to choosing to carry these burdens alone for various reasons. They explained that they had no one to turn to and no access to available resources. More than a third of the participants admitted that they remained unaware of Black community organizations specialized to provide mental health services in their own neighborhoods. Lastly, they felt that the society surrounding them diminished the trauma they face continuously from gang and gun violence. The ongoing youth violence has led to a collective trauma in these communities that should be weighed as a public health crisis, as it affects even those uninvolved and has the potential to spread further under the right conditions.

 COVID-19 was an extremely isolating phenomenon for many Somali and Black youth. The symptoms of the virus made it so that people needed to have less contact and more distance. Communities whose members were already beginning to distance themselves from each other due to the unstable, volatile and untrustworthy nature of gang and gun violence had another layer of forced separation added. The average family of colour in the GTA tends to be larger and have more members employed as essential workers. This meant the rate of infection and consequently deaths were much greater in these homes. These communities often have shared commodities like elevators or laundromats that are necessary, leading to the inability to avoid the spread of COVID-19, later creating an infinite loop of cause and infection. The ongoing issues of anti-black racism, gun and youth violence, and the addition of the pandemic,

created conditions that fed into the deterioration of mental health in these areas, which can be seen as the participants discussed anxiety, depression and isolation being their main take-aways from their lived experiences.

Another potential pandemic is that of Canadian policing. More specifically, policing within the GTA. The history of police in this nation is not one of glory or admiration. Its roots are deeply buried in the discrimination, marginalization and harm of Canada's indigenous population, and has since broadened its reach to include Black and other immigrant and/or marginalized communities. According to our results, nearly half of all the participants whose data was collected for this report believed that the police rarely or never fulfilled their mandate to serve and protect their communities equally and without discrimination. Their heightened distrust of police is crucial to the lack of healing in these areas as Black youth see police as adversaries or as antagonistic presences rather than the support they should be. The youth with more optimistic perspectives encouraged the police to become part of and engage with the community. The furthering of this relationship would then help decrease the tension between the Black communities and the police.

The research team then compiled recommendations and suggestions made by the participants that could potentially heal the communities effected by gun violence. They suggested that resources and support be provided in education to give those affected by anti-black racism equal opportunities for academic success. In order to reduce violence in the community, some of the suggestions included providing culturally sensitive programming and initiatives to help foster positive environments. Police are, once again, encouraged to build trust with the communities and collaborate to help support positive community initiatives. Lastly, participants emphasized the importance of providing the proper tools and resources to help youth and their families cope and begin to heal to communities that are the most impacted by youth gun violence.

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Appendix A

FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- How has your community influenced you for the better or for the worse?

- What is your experience as a young person of African descent growing up in Canada? For example, when was the first time you learned about your heritage? When did you first realize you were "Black"?

- What are some barriers you face as a person of color? (I.e. Barriers in school? Barriers in the community?)

[MAIN QUESTIONS ~ 45min]

- Without giving away any personal information, describe what your community is like?
  - Do you find that people know each other, Isolated or maybe people keep to themselves?

- What is your understanding of gun and gang violence in the community?

- In your opinion, what draws young people to engage in crimes
  - What about gun violence?
  - In your opinion where do you think guns that end up in different neighbourhoods come from?

- Why do you think young people join gangs?
  - What are the benefits of joining a street gang?

- Why do you think so many Black youth are being targeted by others in their community?

- How do you feel when you see so many Black youths being harmed?

- Do you consider violence to be normal in the Black community?

- How has COVID-19 impacted you?
  - Mentally & Physicall?.
  - How did you manage?
  - Who was your support group?

- How has COVID-19 affected your community?

- DO you think that there has been more violence in your community during the pandemic?
  - DO you feel more or less exposed to gun violence during COVID-19?
  - Does your community feel less safe because of impact of COVID-19?

- Do you feel safe from violence in the community?
  - Do you feel a sense of security/safety in where they live?

- How do your friends feel about being safe in the community?

- By seeing a lot of cases about black people being harmed do you feel safe walking in your own neighborhood?

- Where would you turn for help in anything that you need as a young person?

- Are there any community organizations, mainstream or culturally-rooted groups you feel could help you, if you were experiencing negative impacts from violence in the community? Explain. If you do not want them involved, why not?

- Have Black organizations been successful in addressing the needs of young people? If not, why not?

- As a young person who would you say is your support system?

- Do you go to the Mosque or any other religious community? What is the role of spirituality in your life, if any?

- Did you face any barriers this previous covid-affected school year? If so, how did you manage?

- Do you believe that the existing education system does not bring out the full potential of black youth? If so, what actions can students take to address this issue?

- What do you believe the government's role in education should be?

- In your opinion, who do you feel cares about the problems that youth generally face?

- What is the role of the police in your communities?

  - Do you find their role important to your community?

- Do you believe that police officers "protect and serve" their community?

- Do you want to see more or less police in your neighbourhood?

  - Do you feel less or more safe with more police in your neighbourhood?

- Do you feel comfortable calling the police when you're in danger or in a bad situation?

  - Would you call the police if you witness a serious incident in your community?

- What are some of things you think the police does wrong in your community/neighbourhood?

  - What should the police do more to keep or make you feel safe?

  - What changes could be made to keep/make your community safe?

- What role do you think parents, or other family members should place to keep young people safe in the communities?

- What message do you have for Somali mothers and other family members who would like to help young people as best as they can?

[ENDING QUESTIONS ~ 15min]

- If you sat with the Mayor or Premier or Prime Minister now, what would you want them to know that is important to you?

- Do you have faith in the future generations to make positive change? Do you have faith in your own future?

- What's the one think that you think would make your community/neighbourhood better if it was changed, introduced or addressed?

[Thank you]

Appendix B

Consent form
Project Real Talks
Focus Group Participant Consent Form

Name: _____ **Date of birth:** _____

(Day/Month/Year)

I agree to contribute to the research study, "Project Real Talks" conducted by staff members from Midaynta Community Services. I am aware that this project concerns the discussion of youth violence in Toronto communities and the disproportionate loss of life by African Canadian youth in the Somali community to gun violence. I understand that my comments will be used for research purposes to determine how youth view the role of key components that could contribute to our safety.

Participation

I am aware that focus group discussions will occur virtually via video chat software (Zoom), lasting 1 hour each on the following dates & times:

- **Tuesday, August 3rd, 2021 at 2 pm**
- **Wednesday, August 4th, 2021 at 2 pm**
- **Thursday, August 5th, 2021 at 2pm**
- **Monday, August 9th, 2021 at 5pm**

The focus group discussions will be audio-recorded in order to accurately capture what is said. Participants may request that the recording be paused at any time. Participants may choose how much or little they contribute and may choose to leave the focus group at any time. I understand my participation in this research is voluntary, and I am free to refuse to participate or withdraw from the research at any time. My refusal to participate or withdraw my consent will not affect services/resources received from Midaynta Community Services in any way.

Code of Conduct

During the course of the focus group discussions, I will not mention any personal, or private, identifiable information (such as names) of individuals who are not participating in the focus group. In addition, I agree that all conversations which take place in the focus group should not be discussed with anyone outside of the focus group and its participants. Furthermore, I agree to uphold guidelines for behavioral conduct during the focus groups which include speaking and listening with respect, minimizing background noise, disabling video features, and using audio-only to communicate during the discussion.

Security & Privacy

I understand that information will be collected and stored on secured computer hard drives within Midaynta Community Services at their main office location, 2150 Islington Avenue with the necessary protections and security features required under the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans - TCPS 2 (2018).

Ownership of Research Data

I give Midaynta ownership of the tapes and transcripts from the focus group and understand that tapes and transcripts will be kept in Midaynta's possession. I understand that information or quotations from Project Real Tasks research will be used in other ongoing programs like Mending a Crack in the Sky [MCIS] and the Memorandum of Understanding MOU] with the Toronto Police Services Board [TPSB].

Potential Risks

I have been advised of the potential risks and burdens associated with this research which are expected to be minimal. I am aware that if I have any questions about this research project I can contact the Youth Mentorship Coordinator/Event Coordinator, Muna Ali at (munaali@midaynta.com), or the Program Manager, Amina Noor at (anoor@midaynta.com), or the Family Support Counsellor, Sneha Abraham at (Sabraham@midaynta.com).

Limits of Confidentiality

I understand that no records of information about me will be released by my interviewer without my permission, except under certain circumstances:

-If I present a danger to myself or another person

-If I disclose that any vulnerable person (elderly person, dependent adult, or a young person (16 years and younger) may be at risk of abuse or neglect.

-If a valid subpoena is issued for my records, or my records are otherwise subject to a court order or other legal process requiring disclosure

By signing below, I am consenting to:

- Participating in 1 focus group discussion via Zoom for 1.5 hours using Audio only.
- Having this zoom discussion audio recorded to help researchers accurately remember what was said
- Being contacted by Project Real Talks research staff for research purposes only

I confirm that:

I am at least 16 years of age.

I will have access to the internet and a personal electronic device on the date & time of my assigned focus group

Name of Participant (printed)   **Signature of Participant & date**

_____   _____

Name of Researcher (printed)   **Signature of Researcher & date**

_____   _____

Appendix C

Recruitment script

Hello its _____. This summer I have teamed up with Midaynta Community services and we are working on a project, called Project Real Talks, where we conduct community focus groups with black youth ages 16-25 that are impacted by gang and gun violence. We are looking for participants to join the focus groups to do a quick confidential group discussion that would help us gather information and ensure that youth voices are heard. We will be conducting these focus groups on Tuesday, August 3rd, 2021 at 2 pm, Wednesday, August 4th, 2021 at 2 pm, Thursday, August 5th, 2021 at 2pm and Monday, August 9th, 2021 at 5pm. Participants will be receiving one 20$ gift card each after the focus group.

Project Information:

WHO?
We are looking for Somali/African/Muslim//Black Youth ages 16-25 from neighborhoods in the Greater Toronto Area impacted by gang and gun violence in our communities.

WHAT?
We are conducting community focus groups with youth to understand how to better protect our youth from gang and gun violence. Participants will be asked to answer questions in a private discussion via Zoom to voice their opinions, thoughts and feelings.

WHEN?
We will hold 4 different focus groups on the following dates & times:

- Tuesday, August 3rd, 2021 at 2 pm

- Wednesday, August 4th, 2021 at 2 pm

- Thursday, August 5th, 2021 at 2pm

- Monday, August 9th, 2021 at 5pm

The focus groups will take place virtually through video chat software such as Zoom. The focus groups will last for 1.5 hours each.

Each participant will receive a 20$ gift card for participating

WHY??
It is our goal that the information that will be gathered from this study will be used by our city to ensure that our youth are protected, and our voices are heard. We want to see positive change in our communities.

If interested in participating in this study, please contact the Project Real Talks staff at realtalks@midaynta.com

@midayntaYouth   @MidayntaCommunityServices   @midayntaYouth   midaynta.com