MOTHERS AND SONS

Policing, Community Safety, and Violence in a Somali Community in Toronto

A report for Midaynta Community Services based on interviews with 100 mothers

For a project supported by the Toronto Police Services Board to Midaynta Community Services

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with Meghan Dawe, Harmata Aboubakar,
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This report describes experiences of violence and policing among mothers in a Somali community in Toronto. It draws on interviews with 100 mothers, most of whom had a child that died or was gravely injured in gun violence. The mothers we spoke with expressed grief and severe disappointment about policing in Toronto. Most said the police response to needs in their community was inadequate. Many believed the police were callous about the violence and indifferent to their experiences of policing. Many mothers also believed policing in other parts of the city was much better, and several expressed hope that policing in their community would improve. Some offered ideas about what the Toronto Police Service could do to make their community safer. A few had specific suggestions for how the Chief of Police could lead the way forward.

Acknowledgments

This report has been a collective endeavour. We are grateful above all to the mothers and the community leaders who generously shared their time, insights, experiences, and perspectives with us. Their contribution and engagement were central to this work and made it possible. Interviews with mothers were conducted by Todd Foglesong and Ron Levi, and Harmata Aboubakar, Ori Gilboa, and Marie-Aminata Peron, all graduate students in the Department of Sociology at the University of Toronto. We are also grateful to Marva Wisdom for her guidance and leadership, to Timiro Aganeh for her significant contribution in working closely with the mothers and providing interpretation support, and to the many members of Midaynta Community Services who were deeply involved in allowing this project to launch and to succeed, including Mahad Yusuf, Amina Noor, Farhia Abdi, and Ubah Farah, and the many staff members who supported our interviews and time with Midaynta Community Services. We also wish to acknowledge the Toronto Police Services Board, whose support to Midaynta Community Services made this research possible. In writing this report, we are thankful for early research assistance from Firdaous Sbaï, and for the assistance and insights offered by Meghan Dawe, Research Associate for the Global Justice Lab, Cassie Heward, a current student in the JD and MGA programs and intern with the Global Justice Lab, and Anna Alemany Gilleland and Esther Yoon, recent graduates of the Peace, Conflict, and Justice program at the University of Toronto. Any errors in writing or analysis are, of course, our own.

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Introduction

This report describes what we heard from Somali mothers about violence and policing in their community. In the first half of 2024, we interviewed 75 mothers of Somali youth whose children had died in violence or were injured during encounters with the police. In the second half of that year, we conducted focus groups with 25 mothers and 9 community leaders, for a total of 109 research participants. Because a small number of mothers needed to leave soon after their focus groups, only 91 of these participants were able to answer a series of closed-ended questions we discuss below. We also had recurring conversations with the leadership team of Midaynta, a community service organization that helps residents secure housing, health services, and employment training.

The interviews were designed to support the Memorandum of Understanding Midaynta signed with the Toronto Police Services Board in October 2019. The MOU was a response to what the TPSB called "alarming rates of youth violence among Somali-Canadians" which resulted in "community trauma and fragmentation." Its goal was "to continue to build trust with the TPS and its members, and to drive proactive and vital collaboration between members of Toronto's Somali community and the TPS." The MOU recommended a "survey" to learn more about the experiences and perceptions of police among members of the Somali community, including their ideas about what a "community focused scorecard" for such improvements might contain. This report complements any such survey.

The mothers we spoke with expressed enduring grief about their children's death, and many were bewildered by the violence in their community. Some were especially perplexed by the prevalence of guns and drugs and wanted the police to explain how they got there. Most mothers were dismayed by the response of the police to the death of their children. Few felt comforted by the police, and few believed the police cared about their community or the violence they experienced. Several mothers described interactions with detectives in charge of the investigations of these incidents as antagonistic. Few of the fatal shootings were followed by an arrest or prosecution, leaving what one mother called a "thirst" for justice.

Negative experiences with the police extended beyond problems of violence in the community. Some mothers said officers were rude and demeaning during traffic stops. Several said officers were dismissive or hostile when responding to calls for assistance. Others said officers were intimidating during deployments to their area. Many mothers felt police were insensitive to their needs as Muslim women, ignoring requests to cover up during an interview and mediate officers' interactions with their children. A few mothers told us their sons were beaten during an arrest or other encounter with the police. One mother, who said both her sons were beaten, showed pictures of the injuries of the younger son who had been arrested on charges of drug and gun possession a year prior to our interview.

Despite these experiences, none of the mothers repudiated the idea of policing. Instead, what mothers wanted most was better policing, which meant not only more effective prevention of crime and violence, but also a demonstration of care for their community. One mother said, "I want to see police around, because the area is like shooting all the time." Another told us through a translator, "She's saying we're not asking for no police officers. We're just asking for better treatment from the officers in the way they, in the relationship that they have with us." One mother explained why this was important: "If there's no police, people stopping people, everybody will do what they

want. Police are the ones who keep us safe. We don't mind if [police intervene] if somebody does something to be arrested."

When we spoke with staff at Midaynta about these views, they said mothers' grief about violence and dismay about policing was part of a generalized belief that the "system" of government had failed them. In fact, the word "system" was used 128 times in our interviews by 33 of the 75 mothers. It referred to more than policing and included the state of the schools for their children, which most found inadequate, as well as the lack of community safety and shortage of institutional support for their families, including housing, recreation, and job opportunities. Several mothers drove school buses to compensate for the insecurity they sensed before, during, and after school. Midaynta staff said that worry and distress were pervasive among the mothers, and their participation in our research was the reflection of a desire to make things better rather than dwell on the past.

These findings might not surprise researchers who study attitudes about policing among immigrant and diaspora communities, especially on the edges of large cities or areas of concentrated poverty. Most researchers who study policing in such communities find abundant dissatisfaction with the police as well as fear, distrust, and strategic avoidance. Some scholars detect a pattern of "legal estrangement"—the alienation of minorities from a system of law they find oppressive. Others perceive a kind of "legal cynicism"—a habit of relying on police and other government institutions only when it is to their advantage (or to someone else's demise). And some scholars have treated negative views of policing among residents in similar settings as the effect of a frustrated desire for belonging and integration, a betrayed hope for upward mobility, or a wish to right the imbalance between under- and over-policing. Still other scholars treat the views of residents in these communities as humanitarian appeals for recognition and respect.

We are not sure Somali mothers' experiences are best understood this way. The mothers we spoke with were bitterly disappointed with the police. Some felt deceived since their experiences clashed with their image of policing and expectations of what the police would be like in Canada. But the mothers we spoke with were certain that policing was better in other neighbourhoods and eager to experience it, too. Their dismay about policing thus coincided with a hope that policing would improve in their area soon.

Mothers also had a firm sense of what the priorities for the city should be in the future. Many had specific suggestions about what the police could do differently; some speculated about what they would do first if they were chief of police. Several mothers participated in community meetings with Neighbourhood Community Officers that took place in police division buildings and were convened under the auspices of the MOU. Most of these mothers had to overcome their children's fear of and objections to such encounters. Not all mothers were enthralled by the meetings; some found them banal, but several mothers continued to attend them, convinced of their importance for their community.

Some readers may ask whether a single policy recommendation can be distilled from this report. We hesitate to advance a policy proposal here because the main purpose of the MOU between Midaynta and the TPSB, as described by the Board, is to promote "a different way of thinking and collaborating on community safety." This report therefore recommends listening to mothers' reflections and suggestions as an initial step toward such new thinking. This also explains why we quote mothers at length on their experiences of safety and insecurity, community and incorporation, and advice for policing, including aspirations for the future.

In this spirit we make two additional recommendations about how this report may be read and its findings considered for future policy and strategy.

First, these findings will benefit from being considered in conjunction with the TPSB's own new report on "What we Heard" (2025).[1] That report solicits ideas about the state of policing from a wider array of individuals and groups across the city, including officers, whose views of violence and policing in these communities are not examined in our report. How perceptions across community groups align or diverge, and on what issues they are close or far apart, could be the basis of further discussions between Midaynta and the TPSB. These patterns could be developed as an index of trust and confidence in groups and neighbourhoods that rely heavily on policing for public safety. They might supplement measures of attitudes toward authority across neighbourhoods that we understand the Toronto Police Service once used to gauge sentiment about policing, and offer a community-based complement to a future dashboard, scorecard, or index of community safety and wellbeing developed in the city.

Second, this report urges new attention to the collective settings in which people make sense of their experiences of policing, violence, and safety. In our interviews, mothers often used the word "we" when describing personal experiences. They recounted talking about policing to many close relations—neighbours, cousins, parents, daughters, sons, and friends back home—some of whom may have absorbed, and influenced, their own views. And yet many of the central tools for registering public sentiment about policing and community safety today are individualized. Individual views are important, but they are also produced and circulated through social connections and mediums, which is one reason why much social science research today underscores desires for recognition at the level of a family, group or community. Similar research documents a collective drop in neighbourhood civic engagement in the aftermath of police violence alongside, paradoxically, persistence of patterns in calls for police assistance by residents in disadvantaged minority neighbourhoods.[2] For this reason, we believe others' meetings with NCOs under the auspices of the MOU could be seen as a collective setting in which to structure deliberations about the present and future of policing in Toronto.

Methodological Note

This research project stems from a grant from the Toronto Police Services Board to Midaynta, which hosted the interviews. The research team covered all its own costs for personnel and transcription. All the mothers we interviewed were invited to meet with us by Midaynta, which used a snowball sampling method to recruit research participants. We cannot determine whether their experiences of violence and beliefs about policing resemble those of other mothers and residents in the city.[3] The geographic portrait of their places of residence below, however, suggests that mothers' experiences and views of the police came from a range of neighbourhoods primarily in the Northwest part of Toronto.

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[1] Among its recommendations, "What We Heard" emphasizes the need for dialogue and engagement in building future policing plans and policies. https://www.tpsb.ca/files/TPSB%20What%20We%20Heard%20Report.pdf

[2] See e.g., Desmond et al. 2016; Hagan et al. 2018; Campeau et al. 2021; Bell 2017.

[3] Many of the mothers we interviewed had multiple children. Most had lived in Toronto for a long time, with 95% reporting that they have lived in Toronto for more than 10 years. Several said they "grew up here." Most of their children were born in Canada, which, as we describe in section three in *Talking Back*, was the source of disagreement about how to interact with the police.

To guide each conversation, we designed an interview protocol, reproduced in full in the appendix. The interview was designed to take 30 minutes, but well over half of the interviews lasted an hour; some stretched to 90 minutes. A few mothers talked to us with the help of a translator provided through Midaynta, though most spoke to us in English—either throughout the conversation, or after a few minutes of discussion.[4] We recorded the conversations. Only one mother asked us not to record her remarks. We took contemporaneous notes and later transcribed the interviews.

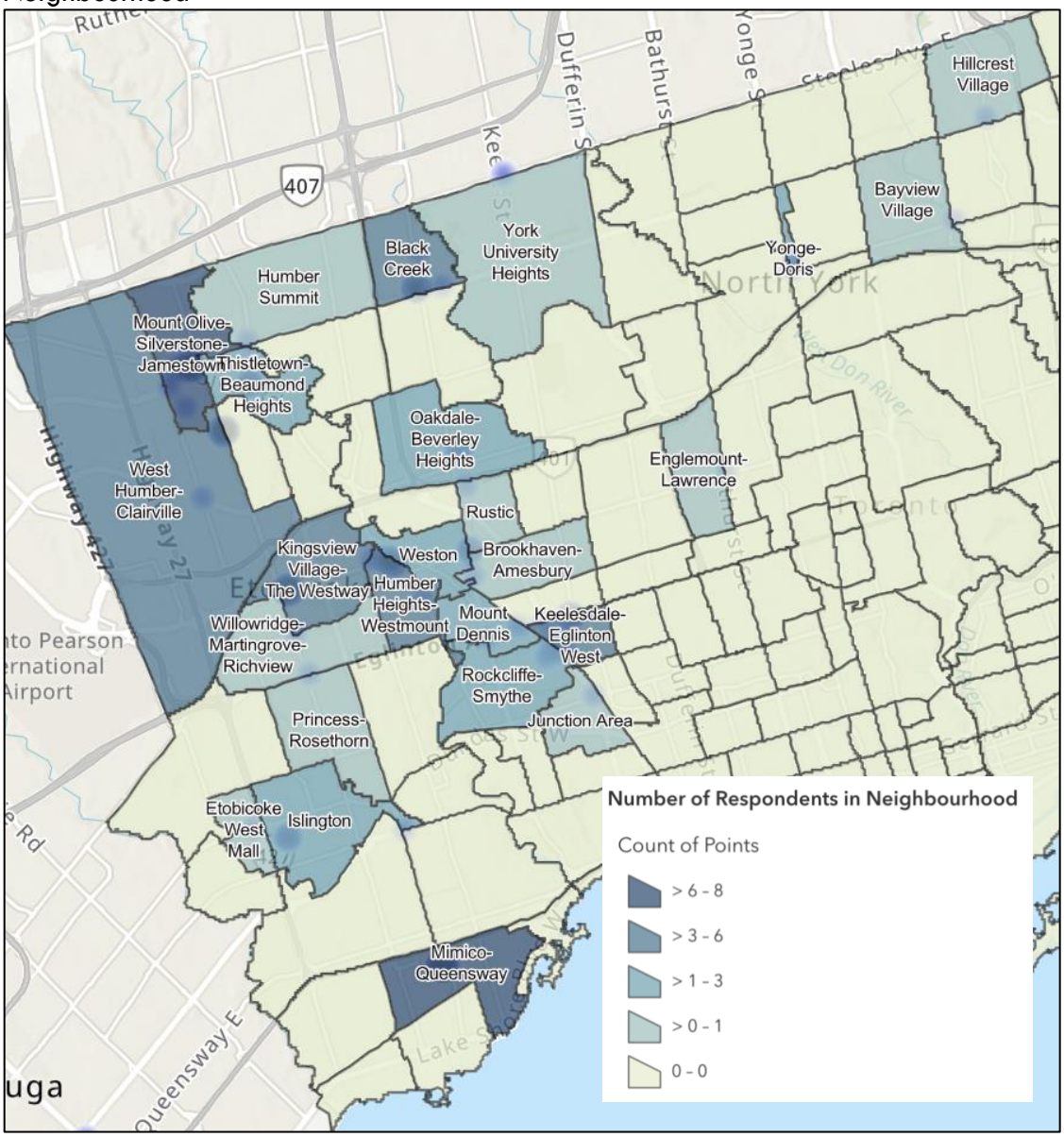
A few mothers cried during the interviews. Several paused to compose themselves before resuming the conversation. One asked to end the interview early. The grief behind these experiences must have affected how they talked about their feelings, perceptions, and beliefs about violence and policing in their communities. We have not tried to isolate, edit, or discount for those feelings as if they were a distortion. Nor have we corrected grammatical mistakes in English. We believe the pauses, repetitions, and other elements of speech that appear in all transcripts of recorded interviews with people that have upsetting, and traumatic experiences are indicative of patterns of thought and reckoning that are core to the subject of this report.

Residential Locations and Neighbourhood Contexts of Interview Participants

Instead of soliciting specific addresses, we asked mothers: "In what neighbourhood do you live currently?" Most of the mothers we interviewed reside in the northwest and central-west areas of the City. Six mothers told us they lived just outside the city limits, in Brampton, Mississauga, Peel, and Vaughan. The most common respondent neighbourhoods in Toronto were Mount Olive-Silverstone-Jamestown, which is home to eight interview participants; Mimico-Queensway, with seven; and Humber Heights-Westmount, Kingsview Village-The Westway, and West Humber-Clairville, with six respondents each. Figure 1 below highlights the 25 of Toronto's 158 neighbourhoods in which the mothers resided; the degree of shading denotes the prevalence of participants in each neighbourhood.

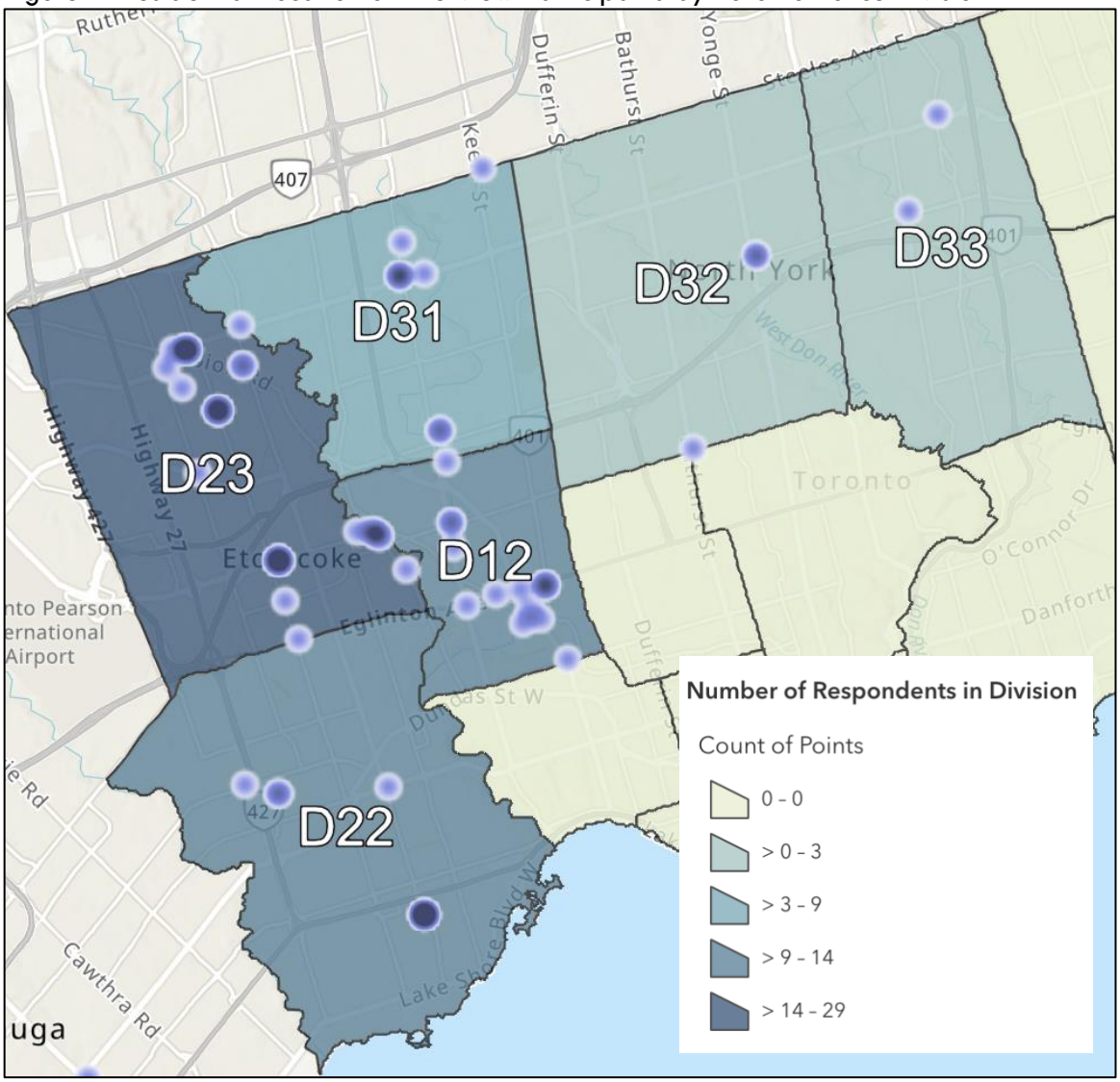
[4] Some of the mothers who asked to use a translator spoke English well but preferred to talk in Somali, at least initially. A few mothers switched back and forth between Somali and English.

Figure 1. Residential Location of Interview Participants by Toronto Neighbourhood



To identify the police divisions corresponding to the location of residences of the mothers we interviewed, Figure 2 overlays their place of residence with the boundaries of six of the Toronto Police Service's sixteen divisions. More than one-third of the mothers resided in the area policed by Division 23. Another substantial portion lived within the boundaries of Divisions 12 and 22.

Figure 2. Residential Location of Interview Participants by Toronto Police Division

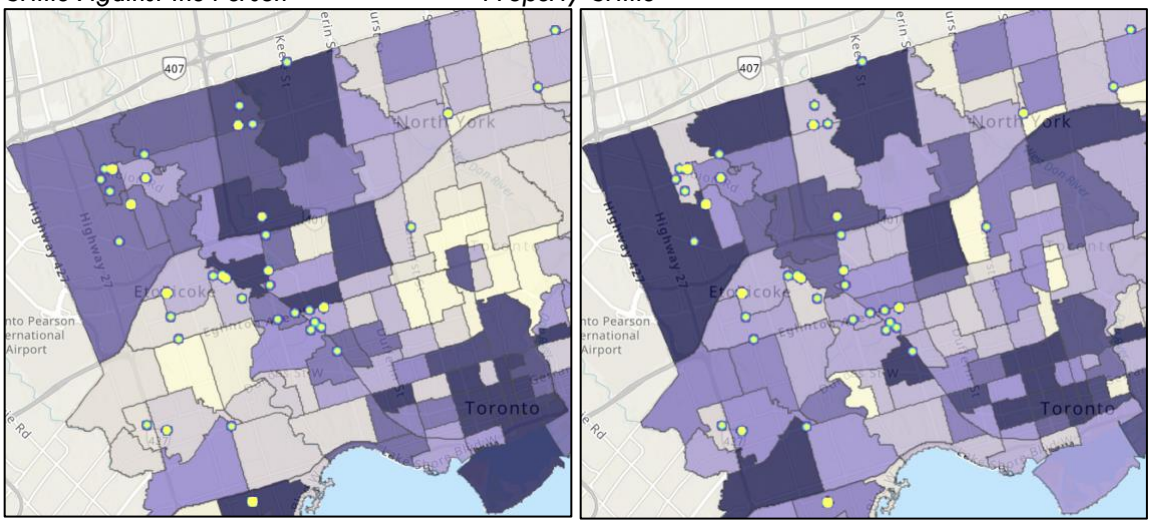


To appreciate mothers' sense of belonging in their community, and to ground their views in measures of safety, violence, and policing in the social ecology of Toronto, we analyzed the relationship between the location of their residence and common indicators of neighbourhood crime and well-being.

Figure 3 highlights the elevated crime rates in participant neighbourhoods compared to other Toronto neighbourhoods based on publicly accessible TPS data. In 2024, the year we interviewed the mothers, rates of crimes against the person are, on average, 18% higher in these neighbourhoods (1,031 per 100,000 versus 876 in other neighbourhoods), while rates of property crime are 14% higher (973 versus 856). Nearly one-third (32%) of participant neighbourhoods fall in the highest quartile for crimes against the person, accounting for 39% of individual respondents. For property crime, participant neighbourhoods are more evenly distributed across quartiles, with 24% in the highest quartile.

Figure 3. Participants' Residential Locations by Neighbourhood Crime Rates

Crime Against the Person *Property Crime*



Note: Darker shades of purple indicate higher neighbourhood crime rates. Rates range from 172 to 4,052 per 100,000 for crime against the person, and from 356 to 3,036 per 100,000 for property crime.

Neighbourhood Well-Being

We examined broader neighbourhood conditions through a composite well-being index that we constructed from neighbourhood-level Census data (Figure 4). The City of Toronto has developed a framework for assessing neighbourhood well-being through composite indices that combine multiple socioeconomic indicators across different domains. However, the most recent data available through the City's web application were collected in 2014. Following this approach, we developed a well-being index using 2021 Census data for Toronto's 158 social planning neighbourhoods.

The index is composed of four equally weighted dimensions: economic security, housing conditions, educational attainment, and social and labour market integration. We weighted indicators and dimensions equally, reflecting standard practice for constructing composite indices when there is no strong empirical or theoretical basis for differential weighting. The selected indicators represent core measures of neighbourhood socioeconomic conditions validated in Canadian urban research using similar methodologies (Pampalon et al. 2009, 2014; Matheson et al., 2012, 2023). Together, these four dimensions provide a comprehensive assessment of relative neighbourhood well-being across Toronto.

Within each dimension, component indicators were averaged and equally weighted to create dimension scores. The four dimension scores were then combined with equal weights to produce the final composite well-being index, which ranges from 0 (lowest well-being) to 100 (highest well-being). For each indicator, we standardized values to a 0-100 scale. For indicators where higher raw values indicate disadvantage (e.g., low-income rate, major repairs needed, single-parent household), we inverted the scale by subtracting the percentage from 100 to make higher standardized scores consistently represent more favorable neighbourhood conditions.

Dimensions of Neighbourhood Well-Being

Economic Security is composed of three equally weighted measures: median after-tax income, low household[5] income rate, and low family[6] income rate. These three measures capture distinct aspects of economic security at different units of analysis—individual earnings, household poverty, and family disadvantage—which together provide a comprehensive assessment of neighbourhood economic conditions. We validated the internal consistency of this dimension, by confirming that these three indicators form a coherent dimension (Cronbach's α= 0.83).

Median income represents personal employment income among earners aged 15 and older. To make this measure comparable with percentage-based indicators, we applied a linear transformation, converting median income to a 0-100 scale centered around the mean income for Toronto ($37,879.75). Low household income rate represents the percentage of individuals in households with low income based on the low-income measure, after tax (LIM-AT). LIM-AT defines low income as 50% of the Canadian median adjusted for household size (Statistics Canada 2021c).[7] Low family income rate represents the percentage of individuals whose family's adjusted after-tax income falls in the bottom decile of the distribution.

Housing Conditions is composed of three equally weighted measures: core housing need, dwellings requiring major repairs, and overcrowded dwellings. These measures capture overall housing stress, physical conditions, and spatial adequacy, providing a comprehensive assessment of neighbourhood housing quality. This dimension is internally consistent (α = 0.77).

Core housing needs represents households living in housing that falls below standards for adequacy, suitability, or affordability, and who would need to spend 30% or more of their before-tax income to access acceptable alternative local housing (Statistics Canada 2021d). Dwellings requiring major repairs captures the percentage of households living in dwellings in need of substantial work, such as defective plumbing or electrical wiring, or structural repairs to walls, floors, or ceilings.[8] Overcrowded dwellings represents households living in housing that does not meet the National Occupancy Standard which determines required bedrooms based on household size, composition, age, sex, and relationships.[9]

Educational Attainment is composed of two equally weighted measures that reflect the concentration of highly educated residents and those facing educational barriers: university

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[5] Statistics Canada (2021a) defines a household as "a person or group of persons who occupy the same dwelling and do not have a usual place of residence elsewhere in Canada or abroad."

[6] Statistics Canada (2021b) defines a census family as "a married couple and the children, if any, of either and/or both spouses; a couple living common law and the children, if any, of either and/or both partners; or a parent of any marital status in a one-parent family with at least one child living in the same dwelling and that child or those children. All members of a particular census family live in the same dwelling."

[7] Statistics Canada (2021c) defines the low-income measure, after tax (LIM-AT) as "a fixed percentage (50%) of median adjusted after-tax income of private households. The household after-tax income is adjusted by an equivalence scale to take economies of scale into account. This adjustment for different household sizes reflects the fact that a household's needs increase, but at a decreasing rate, as the number of members increases."

[8] Response categories include regular maintenance needed, minor repairs needed, and major repairs needed (Statistics Canada 2021e).

[9] Housing suitability measures whether a private household is living in suitable accommodations according to the National Occupancy Standard (NOS); that is, whether the dwelling has enough bedrooms for the size and composition of the household. A household is deemed to be living in suitable accommodations if its dwelling has enough bedrooms, as calculated using the NOS (Statistics Canada 2021f).

credentials and no formal educational credentials.[10] The internal consistency of this dimension is particularly high (α=0.96), reflecting that these two indicators capture opposite ends of the educational distribution and are therefore highly correlated.

Family and Labour Market Integration is composed of two equally weighted measures: single-parent households[11] and unemployment rate.[12] While these indicators have lower internal consistency than the other dimensions (α = 0.58), reflecting that they measure distinct forms of participation (in family structures versus labour markets), we combine them into a single dimension because both capture important but distinct forms of social and economic participation that are impact neighbourhood well-being.

Well-Being in Participant Neighbourhoods

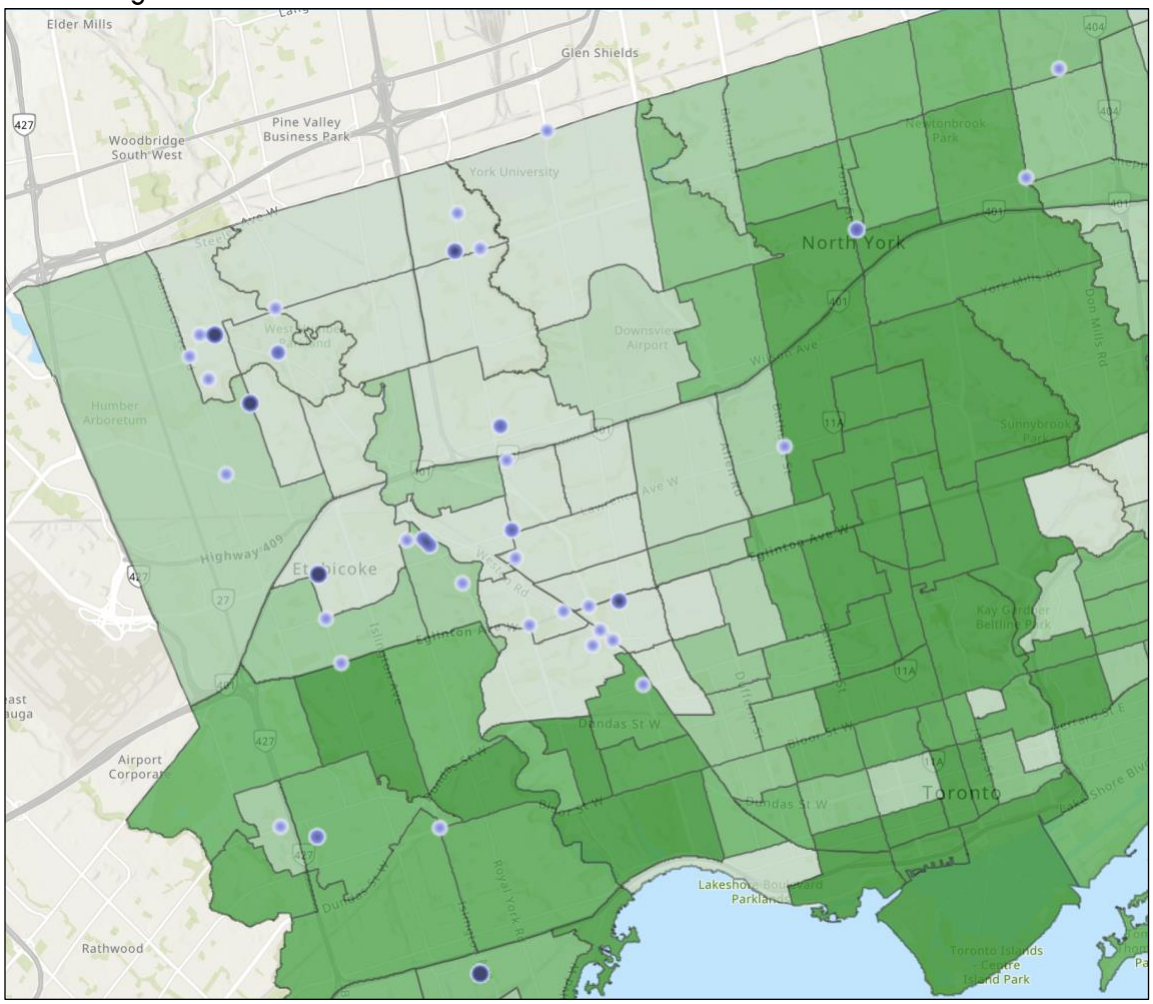
The neighbourhoods where the mothers we interviewed live score significantly lower on overall well-being compared to other Toronto neighbourhoods (76 versus 80, $p<0.001$). More than half (52%) of participant neighbourhoods fall in the city's lowest well-being quartile, with only 8% in the highest quartile. Among individual respondents, 55% live in neighbourhoods in the lowest well-being quartile.

[10] Educational attainment measures highest level of education for individuals aged 15 and over. University credentials represents the percentage with a bachelor's degree or higher (Statistics Canada 2021g). No educational credentials captures the percentage with no certificate, diploma, or degree, meaning they have not completed any high school diploma or equivalency certificate, nor any postsecondary certificate, diploma, or degree.

[11] This measure captures the percentage of households defined as one-parent-family households (Statistics Canada 2021a).

[12] Unemployment rate represents the percentage of the labour force aged 15 and over who are unemployed, indicating the extent of labour market participation and attachment within neighbourhoods (Statistics Canada 2021b).

Figure 4: Interview Participants' Residential Locations by Neighbourhood Well-Being

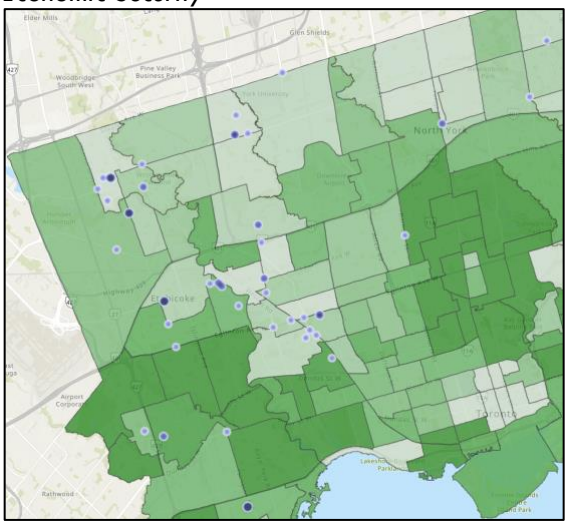


Note: Darker shades of green indicate higher scores on the neighbourhood well-being index. Scores range from 68 to 90.

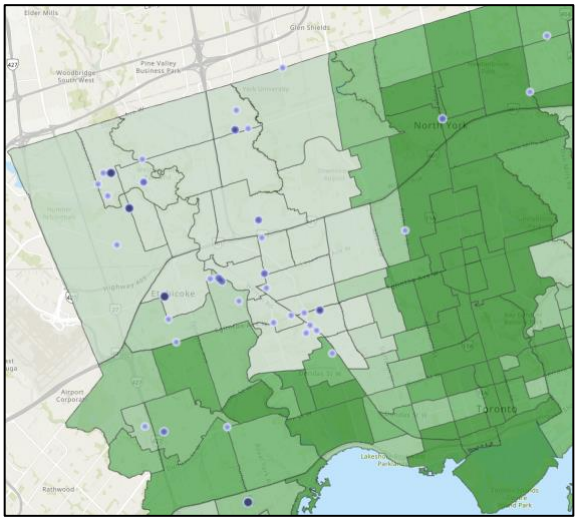
Disparities in well-being are most pronounced in the realm of education, with participant neighbourhoods scoring nearly 10 points lower than other neighbourhoods (55 versus 65, $p<.001$). More than half of participant neighbourhoods fall in the lowest education quartile, and are home to 64% of respondents. Participant neighbourhoods also score significantly lower on both housing conditions ($p<.05$) and family and labour market integration ($p<.001$). There is also a small gap in economic security between participant and non-participant neighbourhoods (73 versus 75), though this difference is not statistically significant.

Figure 5: Interview Participants' Residential Locations by Indicators of Neighbourhood Well-Being

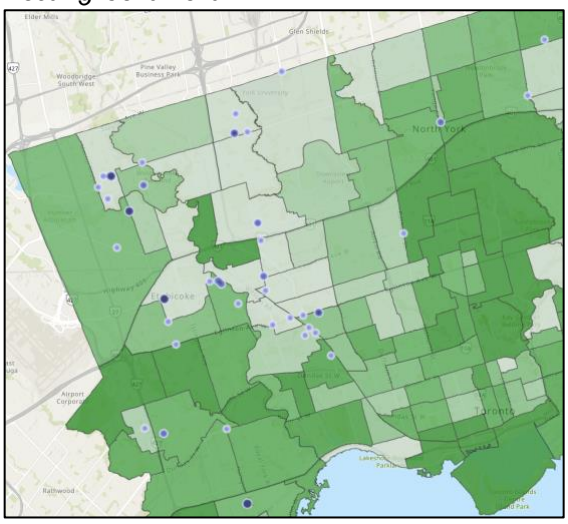
Economic Security



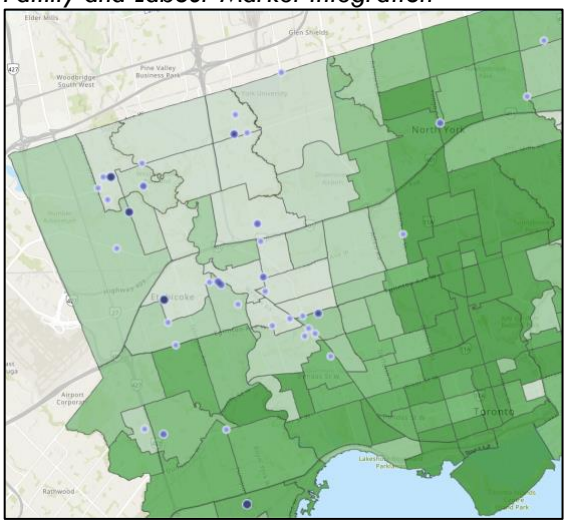
Education



Housing Conditions



Family and Labour Market Integration



Note: Darker shades of green indicate higher scores on the four indicators that compose the neighbourhood well-being index. Neighbourhood economic security scores range from 64 to 89; education scores range from 39 to 87; housing scores range from 74 to 97.

Together, the maps reveal that the mothers we interviewed are geographically concentrated in neighbourhoods with higher crime and lower well-being across multiple indicators. This clustering reflects broader patterns of neighbourhood inequality, where economic marginalization, educational disadvantage, and exposure to crime become spatially concentrated (Sampson 2009, 2011). These neighbourhood contexts provide important background for understanding the views and experiences participants shared in their interviews.

Section 1: Community and Violence

Neighbourhoods and Belonging

We asked mothers about the neighbourhoods they lived in, motivated by research that finds a sense of place and belonging shapes how residents interpret their experiences and perceive government.[13] Most of the mothers we interviewed said they have lived in the greater Toronto area for several decades, and many moved several times over this period. To get an impression of their feelings about neighbours and attachment to the community, we asked what they liked most about their neighbourhood. Our first question was simply: "Which neighbourhood do you live in currently?" We were surprised by how mothers named their place. Many referred to an intersection such as "Weston Road and Lawrence" or "Jane and Finch." One mother told us: "I lived in the Weston and Lawrence area before; now I live at Kipling and Bloor." Another said, "I live in the Rogers and Weston Road area." Some mothers referred to the police division that served their areas.

> Interviewer: And which neighbourhood do you live in?
>
> Respondent: Uh, 23 division.

These mothers may have named the police division rather than a specific neighbourhood because they believed we were there to learn about policing. Other mothers may have referenced intersections instead of naming specific neighbourhoods because we appeared unfamiliar with the area in which the interviews took place. Still, we were struck that few mothers invoked the names that the city uses to denote neighbourhoods such as "Mount Olive" or "Maple Leaf" and "Falstaff," and we wondered what this might indicate about their relationship to other residents and sense of belonging to a community. A couple of mothers used the derogative term "Jungle" to describe Lawrence Heights. Our interviewer was troubled by the sobriquet. "I thought there was a big move not to call it 'the Jungle,'" though the interview participant maintained that the neighbourhood continued to be referred to this way.

When we asked, "What's good about your neighbourhood?", some mothers mentioned the convenience of the location, the proximity to shopping malls, and the ease of mobility on the roads that came from living in that area.

> Interviewer: So, I'll ask you mainly about this area of Jane and Wilson. So, what do you like most about your neighbourhood?
>
> Respondent: Oh, it's close to the highway. Close to the supermarket. Close to the mall. It's, it's good. Uh, in the centre of, uh, close to the transfer, like the, uh, so I love for that.

Some mothers referred to the amiability of residents, the circulation of people outdoors, and the care taken to maintain the physical environment. For instance, one mother who had recently

[13] Neighbourhood-level studies of crime and policing have regained prominence over the past three decades, after falling out of favor over the latter half of the 20th century. Much of this research underscores the importance of place in shaping residents' experiences of community and government. Rob Sampson, one of the most well-known scholars of community cohesion and conflict in large cities, finds that neighbourhoods exert a lasting and independent influence on well-being, crime, and perceptions of order and disorder (Sampson 2011, 2013).

moved to Etobicoke told us: "It's friendlier than Mississauga. Like, there everyone's really hostile and you also don't see people outside. It's not as dense, you know? But here, it's just, people are happy. They care about outfits, and they mow their lawns on a regular day."

Most mothers explained the appeal of their neighbourhood in terms of calm and quiet. For instance, one mother said: "So the area I live in is normally, um, a calm neighbourhood and mostly it's people who own the house, the houses." One woman who had moved many times over three decades of living in Toronto said she preferred Scarborough because "it's quiet, very quiet." Another said the quiet and proximity to an area she later told us had a concentration of Somali immigrants were equally important. "What is it about the neighbourhood that I love?" she asked. "Uh, it's quiet. And the community's not too far away."

Community Solidarity and Social Decay

Most mothers defined community in terms of the ethnic composition of residents. This was true even for those who lived in racially mixed and ethnically heterogenous areas. One mother said, "I like the sense of community, right? A lot of people refer to it like 'little Jamaica,' and like, um, there's a lot of Portuguese. It's just like, especially in the summer, it's really nice." Many mothers appreciated the concentration of Somalis in their community. One person said, "Eighty percent of us are Somali," when explaining why she liked her neighbourhood. Another told us:

> *The neighbourhood is, uh, is like a majority of is us. Because every door we know, uh, we grew together. We know each other. We helped; we watched each other. We greet each other. Uh, we can identify from the rest.*

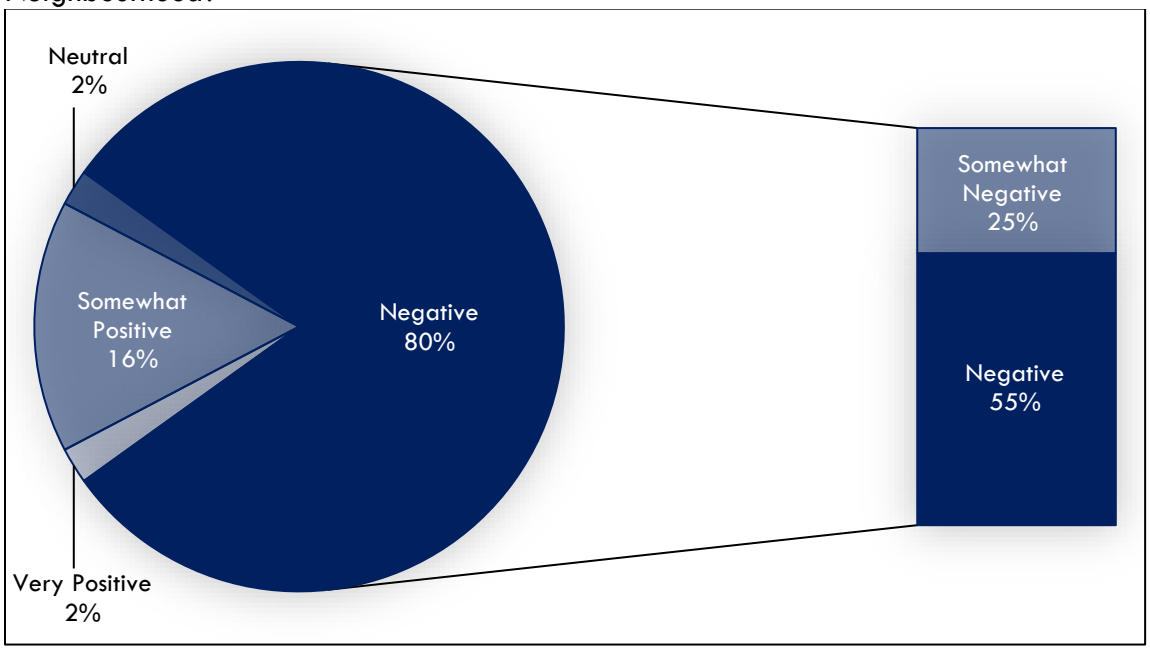
Another mother said the ethnic similarity of residents produced a sense that they could rely on neighbours: "Uh we know each other like in the neighbourhood. Like I, you don't feel bad to go knock your neighbour's house to ask for something." Another said, "So mostly when we are Somalis, we know each other and we come, you know, we are closer to each other, but other people from different cultures, we say hi to each other. But it's not that we are as close as, as you know, other Somalis."

Not all mothers expressed unconditional enthusiasm about their neighbourhood, even when most residents were Somali. For instance, one mother who lived in "East Mall" told us:

> We have both good and bad people. Yeah. And we are very close, close to each other, and yeah, we are very close to each other.
>
> Interviewer: And what's distinct about the good and the bad people in your neighbourhood?
>
> Respondent: We all live there. There, there are certain people who have certain characteristics and certain who have good characteristics.

We also asked them to describe the relationship between the police and the people in their neighbourhood. As we show in Figure 6, the vast majority of mothers we spoke with—80%—characterized it as negative or somewhat negative.

Figure 6. How Would You Describe the Relationship Between the Police and the People in Your Neighbourhood?



In addition, mothers' perceptions of where they lived were connected with their impressions of the relationship between police and neighbourhood residents. Among the questions we asked mothers were whether "people in your neighbourhood are willing to help their neighbours," and "How would you describe the relationship between the police and the people in your neighbourhood?" As we explore in Figure 7, over half of the mothers (55%) reported negative relationships between police and residents in their neighbourhood. This contrasts directly with their sense that their neighbours are there for them, with 78% agreeing or strongly agreeing that their neighbours are willing to help and only 5% of mothers disagreeing.

Figure 7: Relationships with Police and with Neighbours

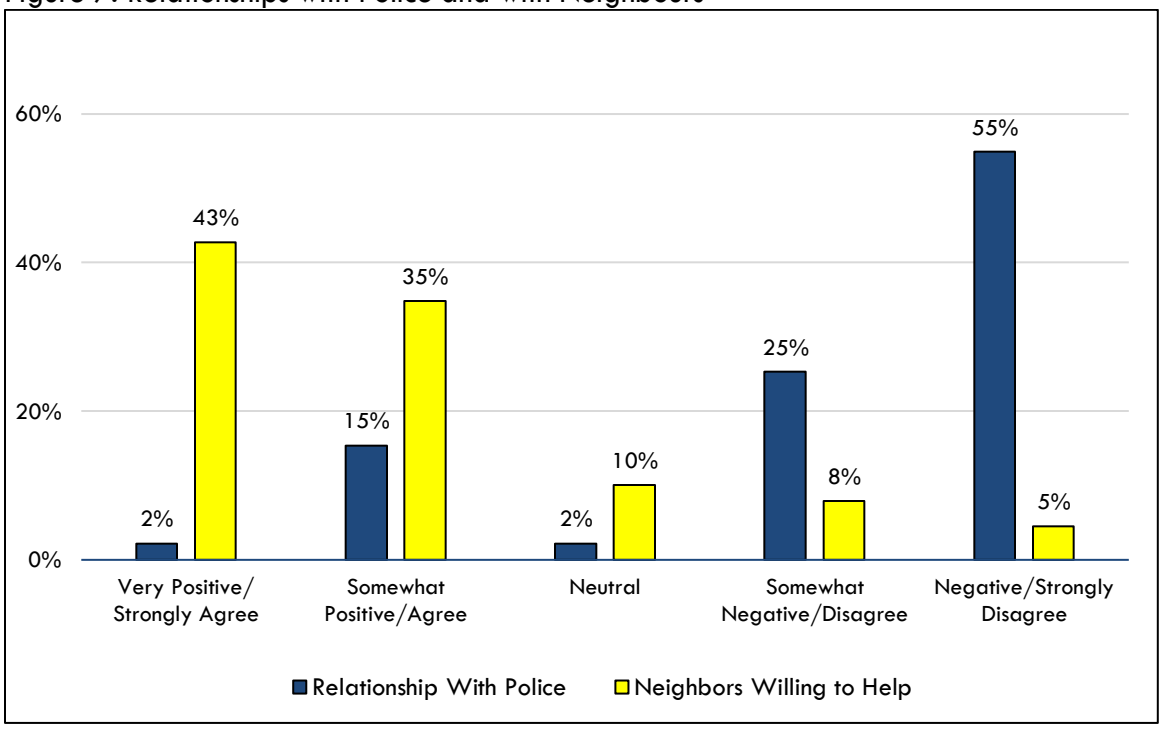
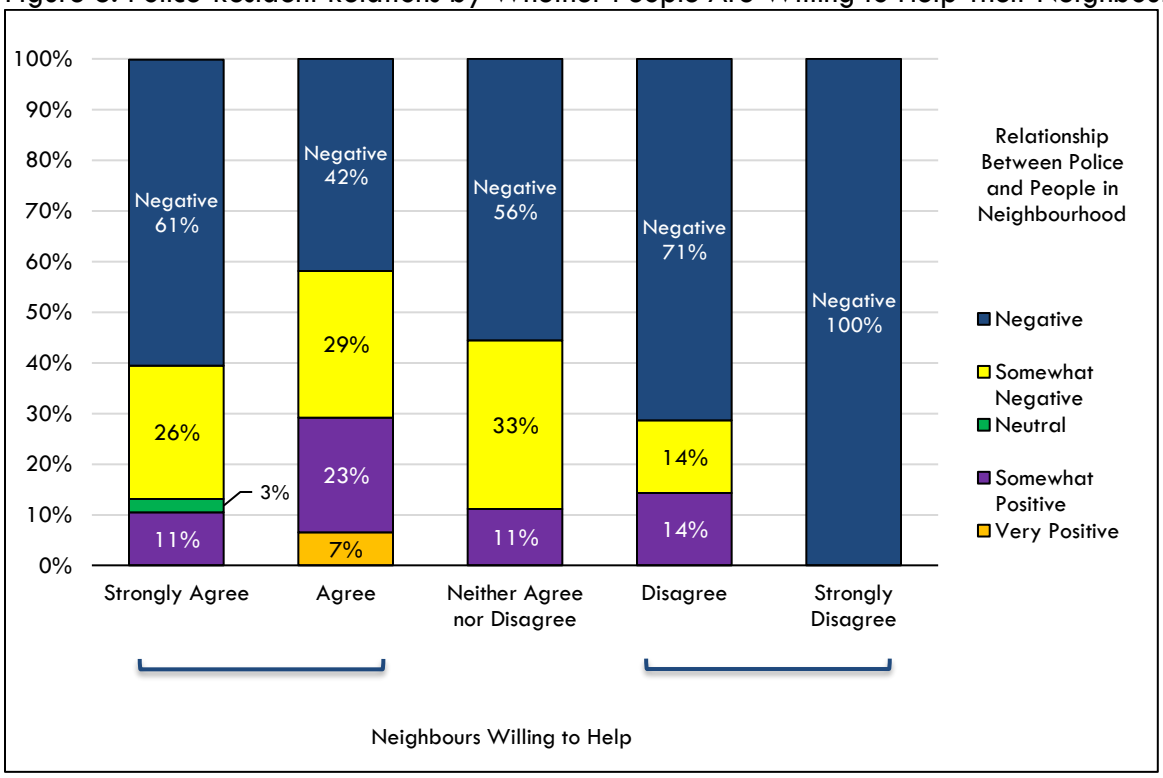


Figure 8 illustrates the relationship between these two measures of community safety—informal relations between residents and relationships between residents and the police. We see that police-resident relationships are perceived as strained across the board—even among mothers who believe that neighbourhood residents are willing to help each other where they live. Yet we also see that police-resident relations become aggravated as perceptions of neighbourhood trust decline, suggesting that mothers in the most strained *settings between neighbours* also express the most strained relationships between *police and residents*. We cannot assess any causal relation here, but we note the connection between these two dimensions of community safety.[14]

[14] Much research on crime and neighbourhoods in North America emphasizes the importance of "social capital," finding that trust among neighbours tends to be lower where there is more residential heterogeneity (Sampson and Connell 1999). Criminologists have extended this idea with the concept of "collective efficacy"—the combination of social cohesion and shared willingness to intervene in minor conflicts and resolve neighbourhood problems for the common good (Sampson et al. 1997). High levels of collective efficacy are associated with lower violent crime and better mental health outcomes (Sampson et al. 1997; Upenieks et al. 2022), but also with greater cooperation with police. When neighbours are connected and willing to work together, they are also more likely to reach out to the police or other authorities when problems arise (Sampson 2012).

Figure 8: Police-Resident Relations by Whether People Are Willing to Help Their Neighbours



When we asked mothers *what* they disliked about their neighbourhood, their accounts often connected these elements of community safety. Several mothers worried about the prevalence of drug use, which drew the attention of police, not all of whom could be trusted to treat residents fairly:

> *Okay, so, I have kids, they are teenagers, and I like the area I live in, but I see that, um, drugs are becoming free now and kids are using it everywhere (parks, school toilets). I also see that the police is more, um, the police is watching over us more, and I see that there sometimes there are certain types of racism within the police, how they treat people.*

Several mothers lamented the poor state of parks and schools and the decay of public housing in their area. They believed conditions were much better in other areas of the city and that the decay was a consequence of government neglect and indifference. "We come from a marginalized community for sure," one mother said. "We're like the last for everything, and definitely not a priority for a lot of services from the government. The school's just terrible. They don't really care." Another said that in the winter "you can drive for two days, and people have to take turns going over like the snow ploughs and stuff, and it's just not stuff you see in like other neighbourhoods." Yet another said:

> *We don't have proper funding for government housing, the houses are falling apart and they just band-aid it. Like, we're just not having access to a lot of things. Whereas in other communities, you see a lot of like, dentist offices, doctor's offices, chiropractors. Until I moved to [this area], I didn't even know that that was a thing.*

Many mothers believed the poor social infrastructure led to delinquency. One mother said, "We don't get to have certain things like community center, or a 'healthy release' for the kids so they turn to bad outlets." Another said, "What worries us sometimes is, um, people they drink, especially in the weekend. Um, when they drink, there's fights and that's something that worries us." Many mothers believed that these problems as well as minor conflicts that originated in schools with truancy and misconduct among adolescents escalated into crime and the intervention of the police. "There are a lot of issues at school for Somali males, who are sometimes suspended more," one mother said. "Which is more board of education matter than police but again leads to issues later on with the police."[15]

Few of the mothers thought schools served the needs of their children, and several thought schools were the seedbed for future conflict with the police. One mother told us: "in middle school, if things don't resolve, or they get kicked out of school, so now already you are in that, you have that record building up, right, and then you'll be known to the police." Another described the gradual escalation of the problem:

> *Let's just say you push a kid; you are already labelled as a bad behaviour. You get to middle school, they write you up some things like, it's like already it's in the system, right? And then you get to high school and then they call the cops on you.*

Several mothers said that problems in school cemented the reputation of the community and fostered prejudice about their neighbourhood, at times even among Somali mothers. "When you think of people like, in a quote unquote 'troubled community,'" one mother said, "you think Jamaicans and Somalis. That's the first thing to come to mind for a lot of people." Another mother told us, "When my aunt bought a house, they were starting school, and she saw like three of four Somalis in the school. She was really upset about that. She's like, 'We have to leave. Like, this is not good.'"[16]

Fear and Insecurity

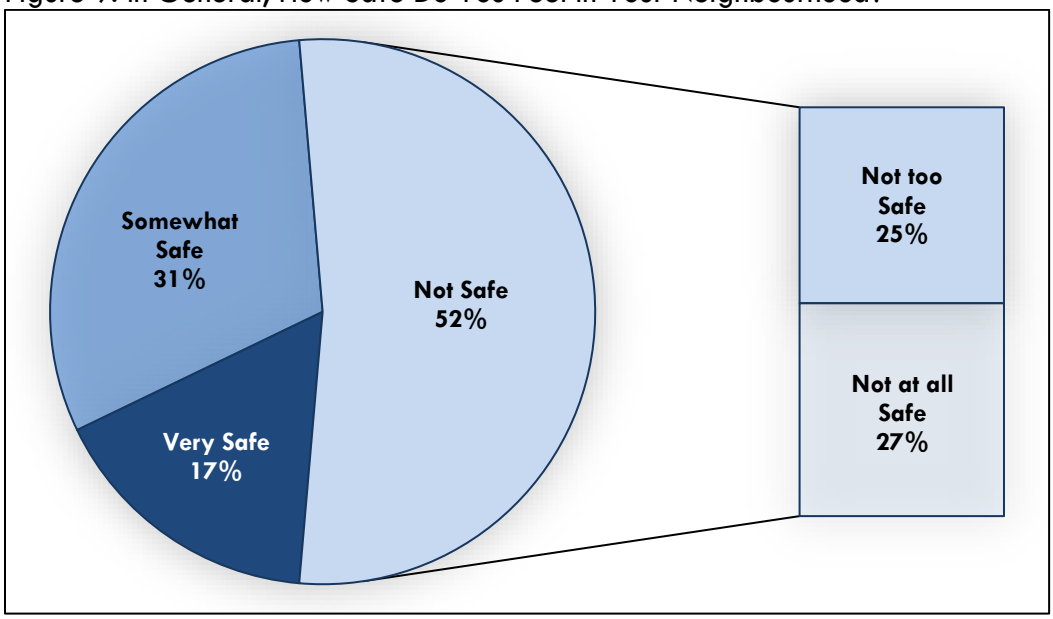
Few mothers said they felt safe and secure in their community. As we report in Figure 9, over half of all the mothers we spoke to said they feel not too safe or not at all safes in their neighbourhoods, and fewer than one in five felt very safe.[17]

[15] Representing 1.5% of students, data from the Toronto District School Board indicate that Somali-speaking students account for 3.5% of suspensions of expulsions (Zheng 2020).

[16] Many social scientists have found that government disinvestment in communities and structural shifts in the economy—such as the decline of stable manufacturing jobs and the rise of precarious service work—concentrates poverty and weakens community bonds in many urban minority neighbourhoods (Hagan 1993; Moore 1991; Anderson 1990; Sullivan 1989). These changes not only strain family and intergeneration ties but also shape how racialized communities are perceived, reinforcing stigmas and limiting access to resources. This broader context may help explain some of the concerns the Somali mothers shared about their neighbourhoods.

[17] Research in criminology and urban sociology has found that fear of crime reflects more than just personal victimization—it is shaped by perceptions of vulnerability, social disorder, and institutional neglect. These fears tend to be more acute in neighbourhoods marked by poverty, racialization, and low social cohesion, and they can limit residents' sense of security, daily movement, and trust in authorities (Skogan 1986; Hale 1996; Sprott and Doob 1997; Brunton-Smith and Sturgis 2011).

Figure 9. In General, How Safe Do You Feel in Your Neighbourhood?



One mother who said she personally felt "somewhat safe" in her neighbourhood explained that it nevertheless was unsafe for her children. "It's pretty safe, actually, where I live," she said, adding, "It's one of the best Toronto community housing buildings. And I take my kids out, but I take them other places to go play. Right? I'm not comfortable with my kids playing in the area." Another mother who said she felt "somewhat safe" gave the same reason: "Because we are older, we feel safe. But I'm not going to play basketball outside. I'm not going to the park. I'm not going, like, outside sitting with the friends and smoke or talking, chatting. No, I'm staying in my house." [18]

Many mothers registered extreme concern for the safety of their children. "I do take [my children] to the park," one mother said, "but I don't take them to where I live. If they want to go to play to the park, I rather drive them far from where I live, going to use other park, other area, just to be safe." Another mother told us she was so fearful for their safety that "my kids never went to get a donut without me." When we asked another whether she let her kids play alone, she said:

> Never. My kids. Never. They never went to the park. Never.
>
> Interviewer: They never went to the park?
>
> Respondent: No.

One mother likened the extreme insecurity she felt in her neighbourhood to the insecurity she felt "back home" in Somalia, both of which were "nightmares":

[18] Several mothers shared many kinds of "neighbourhood wisdom"—a hyper-local form of street knowledge that one researcher observed in Toronto's Lawrence Heights neighbourhood and interpreted as a way to navigate the specific risks of gun violence (Berardi 2021). Unlike general "street smarts," this wisdom is rooted in a specific area's social dynamics, history, and geography, and is identified by researchers as crucial for self-protection in the absence of reliable police support. This finding sits alongside research in Los Angeles, which demonstrates how residents can also become "copwise," as a way to avoid unwanted police contact and aggressive policing (Stuart 2016).

> *Really, it's kind of terrified to live where we live right now. Uh, as a mother right now and as a young lady who came here, lived there, I witness a lot of terrible things. If I go back a little bit, we came from civil war. We already traumatized the whole purpose. We came here is for security. The whole reason why our parent immigrated here has to have life. That includes securities, number one; education, number 2. And then when we came here, that's not what we ended up. We ended up exactly what we run from; except it's the people who we don't know the country. We don't know the language, we don't know the culture, we don't know. Uh, we came here unprepared. It became a nightmare, a nightmare dream that we can't wake up until this day after 30 years.*

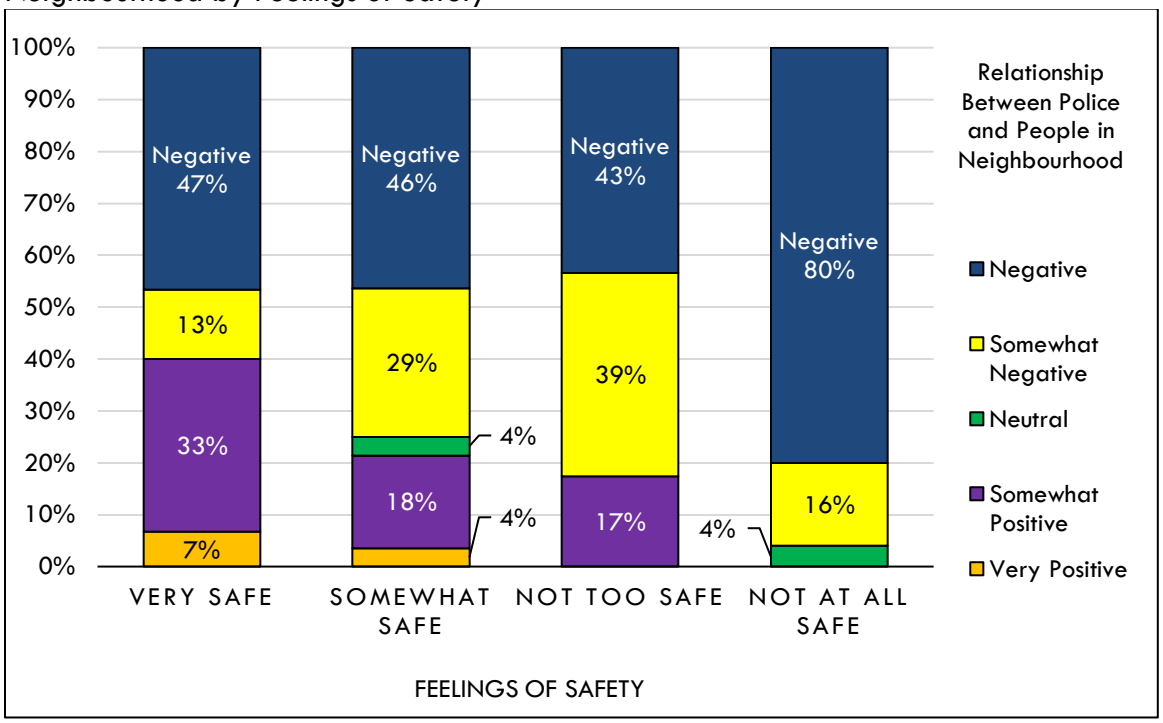
Several mothers told us the frequency of gun violence was the main reason for their insecurity. One mother said, "Nobody feels safe. Because it's shooting, shooting, shooting. A lot of people got scared and moved out." Another mother said, "I feel like gang violence is at an all-time high." Yet another said she felt very unsafe:

> *because every other day it's when you hear about a shooting, or you hear about something that's going on. Before you even hear the suspect or you even see the suspect, you like, I bet you it's Somali. I bet you it's Somali and it ends up being Somali. I don't know what's going on in our community right now. But I definitely believe that drugs and music is a big influence.*[19]

These assessments of neighbourhood safety are also related to how mothers describe the relationship between the police and people in their neighbourhood. Across the mothers we spoke with, even those in neighbourhoods where they feel very safe, mothers report negative relationships between police and residents. This is aggravated as feelings of safety fall. In Figure 10, we see that as feelings of safety decline, mothers are more likely to report somewhat negative or negative impressions of police-resident relationships, running from 60% where mothers feel very safe to 96% in neighbourhoods where they feel least safe. Notably, negative perceptions of police-resident relationships are most prevalent within neighbourhoods in which residents feel not at all safe.

[19] Many researchers have found that witnessing or experiencing shootings can trigger chronic hypervigilance (Stuart 2020), while ongoing exposure to such dangers activates stress responses in children and families, leading to toxic stress. Some researchers find this biological condition disrupts brain development and other systems, contributing to long-term physical and mental health disparities (Shonkoff et al. 2021; Charles et al. 2013).

Figure 10. How Would You Describe the Relationship Between the Police and the People in Your Neighbourhood by Feelings of Safety



A statistical chi-square test confirms that, despite the small sample size of mothers (n=91), how safe people feel in their neighbourhood is linked to how they judge the police-community relationship ($p<0.05$). We want to draw particular attention to this final column, in which 80% of mothers in the least safe neighbourhoods describe the police-resident relationship as negative. The statistical finding is driven mainly by this dramatic shift at the lowest levels of safety.

Violence and Grief

Most mothers spoke with great sorrow about the death of their children. "He's not with us anymore," one mother said of her first son, whose violent death was followed soon by the death her "second boy, who passed away after one years, half after him." One mother, two of whose sons also were killed in gang violence, said she was nearly incapacitated by grief.

> *Like the last five years I was in bed. I couldn't get up; I couldn't get up. I was very, very sick. I get bad blood pressure. Now I'm losing my kidneys. So, uh, I experienced a lot. A lot. Now I'm getting tired, even if I wanted to wash my hair, I can't. I don't have no energy. I can't do it. So, I can't, I can't do nothing for my kids. Imagine I used to have a restaurant. I used to have a PCO therapy. I used to run around; I used to have a studio. I used to do active. I, I used to be active.*

One mother expressed sorrow not only for her child, who had died in a gun fight with another boy, but for the sons of all mothers who had killed other boys:

> *I feel sorry for the kids in the, uh, the one who is killing. I'm the one who know. Both of them is our kids. It doesn't matter. And every mother, the one who I feel sorry for the mother who,*

who his son was locked up, 25 years old, imagine. And he, one of them has a shot in the, uh, in the, in the back. And he has a bag to be and to go. And he's 25 years in jail. Now, imagine. Do you think I feel good? No. At all? No, I don't. So, both of the sides, we are losing. Our son's the one who's dying. Ours, the one who locked up in, that is ours. And, and we worrying about the one who in the house.

Several mothers told us they didn't understand why there was so much violence in their community. One said simply, "We don't know what is causing our kids to have this amount of hatred for each other." Another said, referring to the police, "We are waiting for them to tell us," hoping they might have the answer. Another mother who described fighting and shootings as common in her neighbourhood told us she had no idea why it took place.

Interviewer: And do you have any idea why this violence is happening?

Respondent: I have no idea. Yeah. I have no idea.

Interviewer: And is it, is the violence getting better? Is it getting worse? Is it the same?

Respondent: I think it's getting worse.

A few mothers believed gun violence had its roots in frayed families, with absent fathers and destructive parenting styles. One young mother told us, "I think it's the way Somali mother treat their sons. They get away with the law, and I feel like they just come from places where it's just easier to find yourself in trouble." Another young mother told us, "Like the daughter's being told, like, 'Go to school, do that,' and like the boys are kind of just, you know, off willy-nilly doing what they gotta do." Yet another young mother said the indulgence of boys and strict regimen for girls was part of the problem:

So, it's like the girls won't get in trouble as much because it's like moms are a bit more stricter to them. 'Cause they feel like, listen, you have, we look at it this way. Um, girls have to work just as hard, like in the way that we see women is like, girls have to just work harder just as much to even get to what people look at the boys to be the bare minimum.

A few mothers suggested that the violence had deeper roots in the poor social and economic conditions of the neighbourhoods in which they resided. One mother said, "if it's like a low-income community, then you're bound to have issues because people are just kind of trapped in the same cycle. Their parents are in the [welfare] system. So, they don't have a lot. And the kids get into trouble." Another mother said:

Like, um Somali boys are definitely, like, involved in a lot of conflict. Not to say it's always their fault, but just with the communities they grow up in. Somali boys are trouble itself, but I definitely think the issue is certain communities.

Interviewer: And what are the root causes of violence?

Respondent: Um, like poverty, you know, no good education, discrimination about us, you know, no a lot of opportunity for the young kids, you know.

One woman said that there was something unhealthy in the character of her community, implying that violence was contagious: "Our son was like 15, 14 at the time, and he was like such a great

kid. And it's so weird, 'cause like as soon as he started that school, he became friends with those Somali guys, and like everything went downhill for him. We're not good in our community ourself." Another said, "I feel there's no danger in the community, but I feel there's unfortunate circumstances in the community that puts youths and the police in conflict."

a) Gangs and Turf

Several mothers told us that shootings and lethal violence were the result of otherwise ordinary disputes between people from different neighbourhoods that rapidly escalated into battles over "turf." Some said that rivalry between gangs were inflamed by taunts recorded in music, which catalyzed a cycle of violence and retribution. For instance, one mother told us: "I believe the killings and the things that happen are more on over turf. And over, um, colours."

> Interviewer: You mean the red and blue?
>
> Respondent: Yeah. Yeah, red and blue turf or whatever. Okay. And then they take cheap shots at each other in the music. Oh. And then when they see each other, it's a shootout. They're getting their stripes, right? As in like, go kill your rival or go do this. And then, then they go back into music, and they say, oh, I just smoked your friend. And then it goes back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. It just never stops.

Another mother said the intensity, volatility and unpredictability of violence originated in older, unresolved grievances:

> *It just kind of fluctuates, because some of the deaths and problems that's happening today are still coming from conflicts way back when the information that was going around, whether it was a fight, whether it was misjudgment, whether it was like, you know, whatever happens.*

Many mothers believed that gun violence was impersonal, the result of routine conflicts that, fueled by teenage torpor and economic deprivation, were interpreted as an offense against a neighbourhood or dramatized as a "feud" between "blocks" within a neighbourhood. One mother explained:

> *There's this thing going on with the rap culture where they're beefing blocks. So, like, let's say like in Rexdale, there's, there's housings. And then there's, Jamestown has beef with Orpington. But Orpington and Jamestown are literally like a few minute walk. And then they have beef with like, Mt. Olive has beef with Jamestown, and then they're in the same subgroup. Even downtown Toronto. Like Regent Park has beef with, like Peel, like, not sorry, Peel, uh Spadina area. That's what they call the block. So that's what they have like, like cross beef within like, so close to each other. Even, uh, on Jane Street, Chalk Farm has beef with Falstaff. Okay. So, it's, it's a hot mess. And then Jungle has beef with Dixon. So, it's like a soap opera with guns in a messed-up way, to say the least.*

Several mothers believed the violence was indiscriminate. "It's just a neighbour to neighbour," one mother said. "They don't care. I think the one who they killing is, they just killing somebody in that neighbourhood." Another mother said, "It is not anywhere now. They shooting everywhere. They don't even care who there, who's not there, you know, bus stop anywhere." Yet another mother

said, “Like they don't have to be affiliated with a particular group. It's just the fact that they live in that neighbourhood.” Still another mother said:

> These kids now here, they don't care. Either is Somali or Muslim. They don't care. Yeah, that's true. They see enemy. They see enemy. That's it.
>
> Interviewer: And the enemy is the neighbourhood?
>
> Respondent: Not same neighbourhood. The other neighbourhood.

One mother told us about her 33-year-old son, the oldest of three male children, who was killed when he was mistaken for his younger brother—who also was later killed (the perpetrators of the second homicide were sentenced the day before our interview). Sometime between morning and evening prayers, she said, her eldest son picked up a friend in a different neighbourhood and was then followed by unknown men—who she surmised saw this as an unacceptable trespass on their turf—who then shot him at an intersection on Weston Road. She insisted this was a case of “mistaken identity,” believing that one group from another community was “out hunting” for the youngest child from another neighbourhood. She also was incensed that the police could not identify the perpetrators since there were cameras near the intersection.

b) Block Ops

To describe violent clashes in their community, a few mothers invoked the phrase “block ops,” which we were told derived from video games and spy craft that structured the recruitment of participants. “A lot of this violence is just the enemy ‘block ops,’” one mother told us. “Yeah, yeah, yeah. ‘The op.’ Like, yeah. That's what they call it; that's like the terminology.” Another mother described how targeting and recruitment in such block ops play out:

> *It's, it's tit for tat. Basically, I'm gonna get somebody from the block, basically. And they send young, young, young shooters, like that's what they're called, shooters. Like I'm a shooter. Like, it's a cool thing. And sometimes they get initiated. They're like, okay, the next person that walks down the street, you have to kill them. You have to, and then they kill each other. They're shooting each other at malls. 'Cause everyone wants to go get the top gear. Why is there shootings at malls? Because they see their supposed opping.*

Another mother suggested the dynamics driving such ‘ops’ derived from laws of commerce in illicit markets, which were significant sources of income in poor neighbourhoods that had few lawful opportunities for earning money:

> *Uh, the boys are trying to be like, like I am the, like gangster. I'm the top G, I'm bad. I'm this, I'm that. And so, it's like when they get into the gangs, like the older heads, like the 20-year-olds and the 30-year-olds are telling the children, basically the teenagers that don't have a criminal, that can't get a criminal record, they're like soldiers in a sense. So, if you're not 18 yet, you can't really have a criminal record. They think. So, they will send them on missions like young as 12, 13, 14, 15, 16. They're the ones that are running the streets. They're being given loans to pay, like to sell whatever, to sell coke. Like weed now is like, that industry's gone because there's dispensaries on every corner for cheap. So that, that's wiped out. So now it's like, okay, what are we gonna move on to?*

The same mother narrated the logic behind this illicit economy from the perspective of a participant, suggesting that it was ravenous and spiralling out of control:

> *We're gonna move on to Percocet, we're gonna set, uh, fentanyl, we're gonna do cocaine. Because those are, they're, it's man-made. Like they're making it, right? It's demand and supply. And right now, there's a recession going on. That's what's happening. Right. There's a lot going on with the drugs, with the prostitution, with everything, because we're in a silent recession. No one's talking about it. And people are starving to death. It's like, either I'm gonna rob somebody, I'm gonna steal a car, send it to, to like the Middle East somewhere, to Dubai, or to Nigeria. So, it's like, what am I gonna do? Am I gonna do selling, stealing cars, giving drugs to the poor people? Like, there's different avenues of illegal money, right?*

Another mother imagined that police were involved in the violence in this market. She said:

> *Because if, if you're a police officer, or a scientist that drugs or gives teenagers to sell it, what are you expecting for, for, for them? Even somebody else gonna pose a teenager. The same police officer can turn back, right? That's how I understand it. He can turn or ask somebody else, 'oh, can you go just shoot him?' Because now he's gonna ruin my business. Yeah. So that's why when I hear, oh, this, this guy gets shoot for what if you, if you looking for a reason, it doesn't have like a concrete reason for that teenager to get shot or killed. Just maybe because they want him to be silent. And there's no other way to make him silent unless to shoot him.*

Another mother suggested that hunger and economic deprivation were essential conditions in this market, and that they easily could be sated and solved by the government if it wished to:

> *'Cause you know, um, how do they organise people who do the crime? They organise from young age. They give what they like, they give fun, they give food, they give like, uh, time. So, I don't think the government of Canada cannot afford that. Yeah. Because we support any other nation is around the globe if they have a crisis. So, this is our crisis.*

Some mothers thought the police treatment of youth greased the chains causing conflict:

> *Like in the neighbourhood, the police have already started harassing them, start picking them up. Like they start like, kind of like giving them this kind of like scared interrogative like mechanism that puts them in fear. So, it's like as, as my son is still young now, and what I see from the other kids in that community, it's one of those things that I look at where I'm like, as he grows older, is this something that I'm halfway about too? As soon as they enter that pre-teen stage is when things start to kind of become a little bit of limbo.*

Another mother believed that the relationship between private security and public policing was an important link in this chain:

> *It starts with the security officer [from the convenience store] who calls the police officer. Police officer comes, they take to the child to, you know, 21 division. And then once the child go in, the division starts another journey there. This destination just turns, like it's a train that missed the track. Then it's just going downhill.*

Another mother described a chained sequence of events that embroiled youth in the criminal justice system, beginning with isolation in public housing and ending in prison.

> Interviewer: And, and so why is this violence happening?
>
> Respondent: Oh, really, I, I really don't know, because it starts with the housing security officers giving, like trespassing, like, you know, ticket, saying you can't come down. How can you tell a child who lives like almost 23 floors building that they can't come down to the playground? But because he's going to school, he is gonna play the ground, he's gonna play around his building. And then that takes it to the next step. They're calling on police. And when the police come, it, all they know is like somebody's complaining. They're complaining against them. So, then that starts with the rule of, you know, going into, as a young adult to go on first jail and then go prison and then, you know, all that kind of thing.

Yet another mother portrayed violence as the result of a process whose sequence and structure paralleled that of ordinary injustice. She relied on a hypothetical to demonstrate her concern:

> Let's say you just, well, you are driving, you get a ticket. And it was unfair ticket. You take it to the court and the court just says, 'Hey, it's you against the officer.' And the officer says, 'You know what? She was doing this and did that.' And that's that, because he has to protect his right, right? And you are saying like, I wasn't doing it. But anyway, it happens. The, the judge says, 'No points, but I gave you the ticket to pay.' But that shows it on your insurance. So, you can't convince the insurance. And whenever, next time the, the officer puts in your plate, they see you had a ticket before. You have already history.
>
> Interviewer: And, and how does that, um, how does that cause violence in the Somali community? Or is that a separate issue?
>
> Respondent: No, that's a separate issue. Right? Because let's say there's a fight, yeah? A fight going on and you cannot know who is that. And then all of a sudden two people are fighting and the police get involved. And the police, they cannot tell who's who and then shooting happens and they start shooting too.
>
> Interviewer: So, you're saying that the violence, it fluctuates, but …
>
> Respondent: It, it's fluctuated, and it can come in any corner.
>
> Interviewer: Any corner?
>
> Respondent: Because what I've seen is like not seen like, you know, at the news. Right. Sometimes, you know, the police comes, and they hear [gun]fire. And they have a right to protect themselves. And they open a fire. And once they open a fire and it got worse, so more people died in instead of getting sick. And I'm not saying like they coming to do that. But that might happen. So sometimes it is not safety and it's not harm. So that something is the nature. Nobody can do anything about it.

While some mothers attributed their insecurity to gang violence and the circulation of illicit drugs, others associated the problem with the police. Through a translator, one mother said, "The police were given the strength and the power to protect the community but not use it against the community. So, they, instead of making the community feel safe, they're making the community to feel fear."[20] Another mother said, "I can't talk for the people in the community," qualifying her claims, "but for me, myself, I'm scared of the police. I don't feel safe." Another said:

> We have fear of the police for ourselves and our children. Nowadays, uh, they stay inside.
>
> Interviewer: And the children stay inside because of the police?
>
> Respondent: Yes. They're scared when they see the police and even when they see their cars, they, they run home.

When we asked mothers why young people fear the police, one mother told us that the children expect contact with the police will get them into trouble:

> *Because the young kids, the police was meant to keep them safe. So, they, when issues happen, the young kids cannot go to the police because they're fearing that the police might put them in danger themselves and they might hold them, uh, uh, uh, they might hold accountable for any, uh, for mistakes that they did, even for the innocence. Also, they're worried like, oh, what if I'm guilty for something I haven't done?*

One mother told us she had recently moved away from an area in Toronto that was particularly scary. When we asked, "Why was it scary?", she replied, "24 hours. Police was always there 24/7. They were targeting the kids who have cars. They were focusing more on that area. Focus. Yeah, they were focusing. And then I got scared with my baby and I transferred." Another mother told us:

> Every time we see the police outside, we think it's out to get us. You know, every time the kids go outside, oh, he's gonna get arrest him, you know?
>
> Interviewer: So, you only feel unsafe when you see the police, or do you always feel unsafe?
>
> Respondent: No. Police. We have; the area otherwise is normal. Yeah. It's not that bad an area.

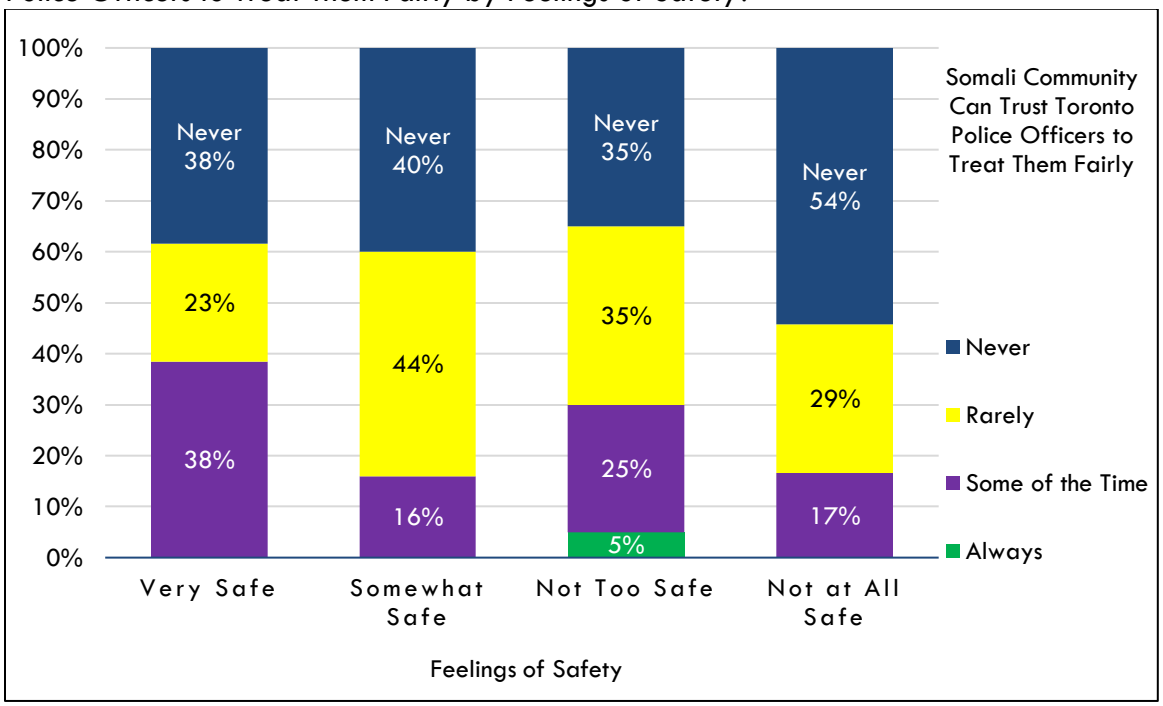
In order to learn how mothers assess the relationship between the police and the Somali community—as distinct from the relationship with neighbourhood residents—we asked mothers, "Overall, do you believe people of the Somali community can trust Toronto police officers to treat them fairly?" This question allows us to detect how mothers evaluate the actions of police officers,

[20] Research on Chicago shows that police violence, especially when visible and repeated, erodes perceptions of safety and beliefs about government, largely by shaping the memory and narratives through which communities make sense of injustice (Ralph 2013). These narratives emerge from unanswered questions about violence as well as witnessing traumatic incidents. We detect some evidence of this in conversations with Somali mothers, who often used the pronoun "we" and spoke not only of personal tragedies but of shared grief within their communities.

rather than adjudicating the quality of the relationship, by emphasizing the degree of fairness police offer Somali community members.

As with mothers' impressions of police-resident relationships earlier in this report, Figure 11 demonstrates that even among those who feel very or somewhat safe, approximately 40% of mothers express that Somali community members can *never* trust police officers to treat them fairly. Among those mothers who feel the least safe where they live, this grows to 54% who say that Somali community members can *never* trust Toronto police officers to treat them fairly, with only 17% of mothers in this circumstance indicating that community members can have trust in police fairness even some of the time.

Figure 11. Do You Believe People in the Somali Community Can Trust Toronto Police Officers to Treat Them Fairly by Feelings of Safety?



When we asked whether the presence of police improve things or make things worse, one mother told us: "Oh, for us it's like they, here, they, they, they want to arrest case. It's trouble, it's not safety for us." One mother who was new to Toronto and had left Edmonton after living there for 20 years when her son was killed, and no arrest was made said she felt safer there.

> Interviewer: Because of the community?
>
> Respondent: Because of the way the police talk to you.

Several mothers explained that the way police responded to incidents of gun violence in their area was an important source of their insecurity:

Because what we encounter and what we witness, what we witness is the gun violence. When I left the Humber Boulevard one day, we were sitting in the backyard having a fun running there. We heard 'bam, bam,' young boys chasing each other. For me, seeing a street guy got shot in the butt and fall down, you know I have that image, I can't get rid of it. After having that image, the police interrogation was worse than what I see. The intimidation, the degrading, the way they speak to you, they don't even speak to you like a human being. They intimidated you. When they came to us, they say, 'What have you saw?'

Another mother said:

It's the way they approach everybody. They say, 'Are you sure? You know, lying is not good. This, this, this, this.' And everybody backs up because we get later on, we get together and then everybody, when we say the police, you could tell like what happened. It really bothers us. We want our neighbour to keep safe. We want to tell, but we can't tell because we scare the way they said it. We might be in trouble, and we don't want to be in trouble in the system or the law.

Defining Community Safety

Mothers spoke of community safety in two ways: some defined it as a sense of tranquility in places where residents collaborated with and protected one other and where people could trust state officials; others described it as the absence of crime and confrontational policing.

Fear of guns and crime was prominent in the minds of most mothers. "Community safety is a safe place where you don't hear gunshots," one mother said. Another said it exists when there are "no shootings," and a place where residents "come from hard work, they want to put their chair outside their door and relax." Yet most mothers talked about community safety as the presence of social solidarity rather than the absence of crime and violence. One said, "when you know somebody's having the same problem as you, you come together. That's community safety." Another said it was a "tightened community" that could speak in "one voice" despite differences within or between neighbourhoods. Still another mother said, "Community safety is like a carriage with the horse, like marriage. It means, like, working together to protect what keeps us safe. One person cannot do that."

Mothers discussed their own experience as well as the experience of their friends and family in other neighbourhoods when we asked about community safety. One noted that if "something similar were happening everywhere, in Dixon and within my community at large, I wouldn't feel safe because I know this is happening to other people, and it's just a matter of time that it would come to my home." Many mothers believed the deficit of safety in their community was peculiar to them. "There are other communities that are safe," one mother said, adding, "*but in the Somali community, we are not safe. And I don't feel safe even I'm within the Somali community because I know what's happening to other people, and it's just a matter of time that would come to my home.*"

Some of this sense of insecurity was related to witnessing violence, the presence of guns in their neighbourhood, and fear of having a purse stolen. "My daughter cannot go by herself anywhere at night," one mother said, or "even take the bus home," because of a fear of crime. Mothers also lamented that people's everyday lives were full of this insecurity; one simulated an exchange among residents that suggested lethal violence was normalized: "Oh, so and so happens,

something happened at Jane and Finch, imagine there was two gunshots down here. It's just normal to them—how many people got shot, whose son got whatever."

Community safety was compromised by gangs, who took advantage of jobless youth that were "groomed" into illicit economies such as fencing stolen goods and selling drugs. One mother described how gangs preyed upon her son's economic precarity: "If you don't give him lunch money, someone else will." And yet many mothers treated these problems as a symptom of their insecurity rather than its underlying cause, and several attributed their persistence to policing:

> *If you listen to the news, most of the neighbourhoods, nothing happened to them. You don't hear they had a gun fight, or somebody got killed last night or somebody happened to me, this, this and this. You will never hear. In other communities, they're protected from the police. We are all in Canada. We are all in the GTA, right? Why some neighbourhood nothing happened at all. And why do we have this? Because there the police were doing their job.*

Many mothers thought antagonistic relations between the police and youth worsened their insecurity. "If people see police," one mother said, "they avoid them. I don't think them being around helps anything." Another said:

> *I do get that they want to put, like, authoritative figures like in the neighbourhood, so they can instruct, like, some sort of like, fear to people that are doing crime, but it just makes everybody else feel uncomfortable too. 'Cause like now you're walking on eggshells. Like even the people that should be excited that police are in the neighbourhood and stuff, they walk on eggshells.*

One mother believed the police undermined social solidarity through secretive operations and by always being "undercover":

> *It just looks, to me, it just kind of seems like their goal is to just arrest as many people as possible. And that's why they're undercover. If they were genuinely looking to protect our neighbourhood, they would do so, I feel, like loud and proud. No one wants to do anything, like shoot someone or something like that, in front of the police. It just seems malicious.*

Mothers described to us a constant sense of fear of crime among residents as well as a fear of the police, which thwarted their capacity to achieve community safety. "The same police that you would run to for help," one mother explained, "can cause new problems, and if you're running away from them, *that* is a problem." The result of this skepticism and fear, another mother told us, is that residents "call community agencies to seek their help before getting the police involved." One mother relayed a story she attributed to another mother who came across a gun while cleaning her house and confiscated it. When we asked why that person didn't report it to the police, she replied, "What do you think is going to happen to my son? I don't mind my son to be charged for the crime he committed. But what I mind is, will they punish him more than he didn't commit?"

Section 2. Experiences of Policing

Positive Experiences

Most mothers were surprised when we asked them, "What is your best experience of the police?" Some seemed perplexed by the question. Still, a few told us about specific encounters with the police they believed were good. One mother told us through a translator that she was once "shot at by a 14-year-old," which was a terrifying experience. She then quickly explained, "But the best part was how quickly the police came. The response time. I was quite taken aback. I didn't expect police to be on my side, give me reassurances and calm me down and respond so quickly as fast as they can."

Other positive experiences involved the compassionate handling of traffic offenses, the deft resolution of a family conflict, and in one case parking a patrol car outside the house until day light after a midnight shooting nearby. For instance, one woman told us she was once stopped in her car by an officer who was friendly and said that she thanked him for "giving me a ticket and a smile at the same time. It's not like a great experience. But it's, that's the best time we have." Another mother said her best experience was *not* being ticketed by an officer who stopped her for using a cell phone while driving. As the officer began walking back to the patrol car, the mother expressed her surprise:

> I'm like, 'Thank you so much, officer, you're the best.' And he's like, 'You think so?' And I'm like, 'Yes!'
>
> Interviewer: He said, 'Do you think so?'
>
> Respondent: 'Yeah.' He's like, 'Really?' 'Yeah.' Maybe a lot of people don't like them poor guys.

One mother responded to our question, "What was the best experience you have had with the Toronto police in the past few years?", with a story of her friends' protracted interaction with the police, which followed her call to the police about her son, who was hitting his siblings. The mother narrated how her friend relayed how two officers arrived at their home, with the male officer taking her son to one room and the female officer leading her and another friend to a different room:

> So, she said the female officer took us to another room and she was talking to us, and said, "How can I help you today? What would you like for me to do for you?" [The mother] said, 'I want you to remove my son from the home.' Then the female officer says, 'Did you forget that your son is on probation, and is doing probation in your house? Instead of him leaving the house, is it better that you take your kids, and you leave the house?' Later, the son told the mother that the officer who led him to the side was a good officer and told him, "Your mom is helping you. Is it good that you are hitting your siblings whilst your mom is helping you and that we take you to prison again?" When the boy said 'No,' the officer replied, 'If your mom calls us again, we're gonna take you back to the same place that your mom took you out of.' The prison.
>
> Interviewer: And her son stayed at home after that?
>
> Respondent: She said after that he stayed at home, uh, with peace.

Interviewer: He didn't hit the kids anymore?

Respondent: No.

Whether officers demonstrated care and compassion for residents figured in many appraisals of the police, especially whether the police protected relationships within families and between neighbours. One woman told us she was grateful for the police officers who visited her home after her son had been suspended from school for being late and getting into an altercation with another boy. "One time I had issue with the school," she said, "and they came, so that was good." Although she did not say exactly what her son had done, nor what specifically the officers did to help, she believed the officers calmed her son and diffused tension in the family.

Some mothers focused on the demeanor of officers when appraising the relationship between the police and their community. One mother said simply, "Some police is very rude."

A few mothers personalized their relationships with police by dividing them into "good cops and bad cops," a trope common among residents with mostly negative views of the police in other cities.[21] One mother told us, "Sometimes they are good and sometimes they are not. It depends on the people who come to you." Another mother said, "There are some good and some bad police." Still another mother told us:

> I can't say that all Toronto police are negative people because I've seen some great police officers doing an amazing work. But unfortunately, there are a pool of bad apples who are tainting the rest of 'em.
>
> Interviewer: What distinguishes them?
>
> Respondent: It could be young, nice and old. And it could be vice versa. It's how God makes people. It does not depend on age.

A small number of the mothers we interviewed believed relations with the police in Toronto were good or improving, yet few offered specific reasons for that impression. For instance, when we asked, "Do the people in the neighbourhood get along with the police?", one mother replied, "Uh, in general, I see that, yeah. Okay. Yeah, they are connected." Another who said relations were a bit better today said, "Now we just pass each other through the streets. 'Hi.' 'Bye.'" Two mothers who thought policing was getting better did not refer to recent or specific interactions with the police and instead contrasted their sense of policing today with negative perceptions of policing in the past. One told us, "Before, they come in, grab the kids."

A few mothers said that routine meetings with officers in the division corresponding to her community were alleviating concerns about policing in the neighbourhood. "Especially now that I'm working with the mothers," one said, "I feel the relationship is becoming a little less aggressive." One mother thought that fear of the police was diminishing because of these meetings, which take place under the auspices of the MOU. She said, "When the kids see the police, sometimes they're afraid. But now we are talking about relationship, it's better." When we asked about how people

[21] "Officer exceptionalism" is one of four strategies Monica Bell (2016) says that mothers in marginalized communities use to make sense of dissonant experiences of the police, distrusting the institution yet relying on it in moments of acute need. Mothers place trust in individual officers, seeking help rather than punishment, and using police as intermediaries in navigating other systems.

in their neighbourhood talk about the police, one mother referred to these meetings, even though they had not eliminated fear among kids.

> Interviewer: Are there positive stories people tell about the police in the neighbourhood?
>
> Respondent: Hmm. Honestly, um, just the fact that these moms, um, joined them now. That's the only positive thing I heard. But the kids, they think their mothers are crazy for getting involved with the police. Because they, they're scared too, right? They're scared.

Negative Encounters with the Police

All the mothers we spoke with had negative experiences of police, beyond their encounters with detectives. Some told us the police are slow to respond to calls for help and are rude and intimidating when they arrive. Some said officers treated them with disdain, especially during traffic stops. Others said police were violent. A few said the police spend more time searching for culprits and collecting the bullet casings than saving the lives of children injured by gun fire and comforting the survivors. Many believed the police were indifferent to their suffering and careless about the consequences of their work.

a) Stops

Several mothers told stories about how their own children as well as the children of other Somali mothers were stopped and searched by the police without apparent justification. Adults were stopped arbitrarily when they were driving; youth when they were playing sports or walking in groups. One mother recalled witnessing what appeared to her to be arbitrary stops, and the experience left a lasting impression and though it took place many years earlier. "It was a long time ago, but they had this tac division or something," she said. "I don't know what it was, but they would randomly just grab people off the streets and search them and say it was like a tac thing or whatever. Like they were allowed to do that!"[22]

Several mothers were upset by the demeanor of police during traffic stops, which they described as intimidating. For instance, one mother described the behavior of an officer who stopped her in traffic, "So rude guy. He was so aggressive that he made me, like, he intimidated me. So, I was so scared. He asked me, 'gimme, gimme your, um, ownership and everything.' So, I got scared." Another mother said, "When you are dealing with a nice police officer, you are calm, and you can do things in a calm manner. But when you are dealing with this aggressive person, you lose it." Another mother said that such aggression alienated residents:

> *Like when you, if you aggressively interrogated the person, sometimes they feel crushed, cannot say anything and look like a guilt. And if the police officers, they come to you, they're already, you're gonna feel that cloud of their power. You're gonna feel heavy. You're gonna, you just want to say, 'Hey, what did I do now'?*

[22] Survey data show that black residents in Toronto are significantly more likely than white or Chinese residents to be stopped, searched, mistreated by police—even after accounting for factors like income, age, and neighbourhood crime rates. These disproportionate encounters, along with both direct and vicarious experiences of racial profiling, fuel perceptions of unfairness and deepen distrust in police within black communities (Wortley and Owusu-Bempah 2011).

A few mothers told us that officers took the opportunity of a traffic stop to ask questions of their passengers, which they believed were unlawful and a sign of possible prejudice. For instance, one woman recalled how one of the two officers in a patrol car questioned her adolescent brother while he was in the passenger seat: "I was like, during a ride check? Why are you asking my little brother who's just sitting there whether he's be drinking? Like, he's not driving."

One mother said she objected to such a line of questioning during a stop, leading the officer to concede its impropriety:

> *Like one time me and my friend are stopped at roadside checks. My friend, she's driving. I'm sitting in the passenger seat. Mind you, we don't drink. But that's beside the point. And then like, 'Ladies, evening. What are you, how are you doing?' 'Good.' 'Where are you coming from?' And then there's two police officers. I, one is asking this question, the other one is on the other side of the window: 'What movie? What time was it?' I just looked at this window. It was just like, 'Hey, I could have all the drink in the world. I'm not driving. Why are you asking me questions?' And he started laughing. He goes, 'You're absolutely right.'*

Most mothers believed there was no justification for these stops, although a few acknowledged that the behavior of youths might be attracting police attention. "They might be just playing, but they might be getting into trouble, too," one observed. Still, she insisted that the police could be more careful, discerning, and professional when enforcing the law. Another mother believed the prevalence of crime in the neighbourhood explained why stops take place:

> *It's not a coincidence. People who live there, it's mostly other nations and Somali nations. So, when something is always happening in your neighbourhood, you just gonna be stopped no matter who you are. So, I can't say like, 'Somali people is being stopped all the time.'*

Many mothers felt that they had been treated discourteously by police officers. "Sometimes when we call the police and they come, they are very rude," one mother told us. Another mother relayed the experience of a friend whose daughter had been arrested by the police: "Even when she would call the police herself, um, inquiring about her daughter, they, the officer would talk to her very rudely. So, they don't treat people very well." Another mother said that a police officer ignored her request to know what he told her daughter after she called the police to settle her down: "What made me sad was because they did not help me in a good way. I wanted them to help me talk to my daughter [with whom she had argued]. They took her to the side but wouldn't tell me what they discussed."

One mother relayed her experience of an encounter with an officer who responded to their call for help for a sister who had been in an altercation with a group of girls:

> *The cop came. And then when the cop came, my sister was there crying. The police, they come in inside and they want to ask some question. My sister was really frightened and crying. I tried to talk to him, and he says something, he says, 'Excuse me, I'm not talking to you. I'm talking to your sister.' I say, 'I understand, but she's no state of talking. I, as you can see, she's very emotion.' 'What do you want?' he says, 'I'm talking to her.' He says, 'Do you want to press charge?' There's no, like, sympathy. There is no, no like, we are human being. He has*

no sympathy putting his two hands in his belt and standing there saying, 'Do you want to press charges or not?'"[23]

Several mothers told us they believed the police were insensitive to the needs of mothers in a Muslim culture, which requires wearing a hijab in public settings. One mother told us:

I did not ever have anything with the police, but, um, there was a lady in my neighbour and uh, she had a fight with another woman, and the police came when they came. Um, as you can see, Somalis, we have hijab. So, she had hijab. Uh, she didn't have hijab on. Her hair was out, and she requested the police officer, please let me get the hijab. But he did not listen. He was very aggressive and go to her. He misspeak with her and like did that in front of her kids. But you have to respect hijab. Respect.

When we asked her how this experience affected her views of the police she said, "We were very sad. We talked about it. Everybody was sad." She then told us how police disregard for their beliefs and customs about parenting affected children:

When we tried to speak to them, first of all, usually when they have a kid, they dis the parent, they focus on youth. In our culture, that's very disrespectful. When you standing beside your parent, whatever you have, you should number one address to the parent. They don't do that. Number one, they address youth, and they dis the parent. Right? That is a problem. And then when the parent try to speak on behalf of you, they dis the parent; they, 'Excuse me, I'm not speaking to you.' In our culture, that is very, very bad. You never shush the parent. And then the kid started, number one, you dis the parent, the kid get already build it up inside.

Another mother told us that such experiences were common during searches:

I've heard from families where their houses were busted into without a warrant, and as a Muslim lady, you have to wear your hijab. So, at those times, if they knock the door, of course they [residents] will take a hijab and open the door. But where they just break [down] the door and [mothers] have to leave without covering, that kind of affects them at lot. They have explained to them [the police] that 'I am not refusing to cooperate but do have cultural and religious responsibility to cover myself.' At other times they said, "I have to take my own car" [because of the prohibition of being alone with unknown man] but they said 'No, you have to leave with me.'

Several mothers said that insensitivity to customs and conventions in the community corroded respect for the police:

The problem was we were there, and we requested him, you are arresting her. Let's put this head scarf on her because we are Muslims. This is our religion perspective. And he did not listen. And also, he was, um, doing this in front of the kids while the kids were crying.

Many mothers were surprised that their experiences of policing did not match their ideals. Several were disillusioned. One said:

[23] The mother later told us the daughter did not press charges against the girls who hit her because the officer "scared" her with information about how she would have to file a complaint with the court and expose herself to possible trouble. "That's how the case left," she explained.

That's why we heart break. We came from our country. We think it is a safe here. And then we thinking the justice. Our kid, when they died, we don't know who killed. But the other kid, when they died through this with some problem, they find the person. No, the court is done. Our kid zero, they died. No answer.

b) Use of Force

Several mothers said the police treated their children violently when they were stopped or arrested. "They don't act professionally when they see our kids," one mother said. "They always shown them violent. The police traumatize them. So that's why the kids are scared with the police." Another mother said through a translator:

> *What they see is whenever the police are arresting somebody instead of, uh, quietly or in a calm manner, arresting them and putting them in the vehicle, they'll barge in the house, grab the person forcefully, also beat them at times. And she says what they hear is as neighbours, they'll see this happen and they'll also hear the other neighbours screaming. And so that's what they see.*[24]

One young mother said a younger friend had been treated brutally by the police during an arrest:

> *They just grabbed my friend, he was just coming home from school, and they literally beat the shit out of him, threw him on the ground and they were beating him with like, uh, those batons or whatever and they were searching 'cause he was fighting back. They kicked him and were saying racist things, and he's like 'why are you doing this?" and they were just like, yeah, un, 'cause we can. We're TAC and we're allowed to stop. Later I was just like, I hate them. Like, who are these people? Like, they're just animals with badges. They're literally the worst."*

One mother said she was attacked by plain clothes or undercover police in the underground parking lot of her apartment building. She used the present continuous tense, as if it was happening in real time, to relay how the officers had parked in between her car and a barrier:

> *I'm going to get my purse. I'm carrying groceries. Like I'm going to get my purse. I left my purse in the car. I'm not gonna leave my purse the whole night. I feel somebody grab me from behind. And now I feel like I, now I'm entirely 'cause, I, I'm in an underground garage, like I said, like this is something that scares me now. I'm like, I'm in my seat trying to push this person off. I think that I'm being kidnapped. Like what am I supposed to assume if somebody grabs you from behind?*

One mother was upset by the force used to arrest her son, who she said was 12 at the time. "He was a very young boy with a small body, like a small built body," she said through the interpreter:

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[24] From our interviews, we can detect that for many Somali mothers with whom we spoke, direct and vicarious experiences of police violence contributed to lasting trauma and trenchant disillusionment with the state's role in their lives. In recent work, criminologists Kramer and Remster (2022) extrapolate from experiences such as these to describe "slow violence," which they think of as routine, cumulative harms of contemporary policing that go beyond physical force and undermine health, belonging, and trust in public institutions.

> *One police could have arrested him and could have handled the situation easily. But four men, three to four men, like beat him violence to put him pin him on the floor, which was unnecessary in the middle of the neighbourhood community. So that's the worst experience she has."*

One mother told us she was informed about her son's arrest a full day after the incident and was upset by the delay as well as the injuries her son suffered in the course of the arrest:

> They told me that 'We arrested your son.' But then I learned that they beat him up. They broke his leg. Under the knee. And then the ankle. They told me they found guns and drugs. [He was later convicted and sentenced to 11 years].

Another mother showed us pictures of her son's injuries after he had been arrested for possession of narcotics and a gun. She said she initially lodged a complaint but later withdrew it because "I don't want trouble."

Several mothers relayed stories of other people's experiences of violent encounters with police, as if they were ongoing or happened to them, and ascribed ill motives to the police. One mother told us:

> *I don't have a relationship with the police. Okay. Because my husband was a victim. of police brutality in a way. Like growing up, he would get arrested, and we were literally just talking about this a few days ago. And I had no idea I was gonna be talking about this today. Right? You know? And, um, he basically, the police, whenever they would, um, arrest him. Yeah. They would beat him up. Oh, badly. Like really bad. And like the stories he would tell me is really sad. And sometimes they would, they won't even have anything on him. They'll arrest him just because they're arresting a bunch of people at the same time. At the same time when they see him, and they put him in a van and they all just start beating him up. His mom, his mom literally would go see him in jail. And his whole face is different.*

Several mothers recalled a series of raids and no-knock searches on people's houses and apartments in 2019, which damaged property and left lasting impressions on several mothers. One who spoke to us with the help of a translator said:

> *You don't see any professionalism from them. And she says sometimes you won't even be able to tell if they're grown men and the way they behave. Um, and she's seen, um, a lot of the high times you see houses that they've broken into. Everything has been, uh, broken all over the place. And she's talked about the houses in Dixon, um, when they harmed the, the people and, uh, also the whole residence as well.*

One woman we spoke to recalled being terrified when a smoke bomb was thrown into her house, which damaged the walls and frightened the children. One mother complained that an officer insulted her daughter, a young mother, in front of her children during a search of their house, which she called a "raid." Another complained that during a similar operation the police arrested the youngest son in the family without showing the warrant. One woman suggested that the combination of the use force, intimidation, and suspicion fueled distrust of the police:

> *They don't have a good reputation with the, with the community, because number one, the way they approach us is not, uh, it's not really human. Number two, intimidation. They intimidate you. Number three, they create doubts on you. When you say what you know, they put doubt on you.*

One mother described the police as merciless:

> *The way they knocked the door was very bad. Like the way they knocked the door. And I don't know how they're trained, but they have no mercy. The police has no mercy. How so? Yeah, there's no mercy. Even when they come in the neighbourhood or in the area or in the building, we all get shocked.*

c) *Detectives*

Many mothers relayed particularly negative feelings about police detectives, along with a sense of abandonment.[25] Several said detectives rarely returned calls or solved crimes. One mother told us:

> Every time I talk to the detective, he ignores my… [Pause]. He took my son's belongings. It's been three years. I don't have his belongings back. Whenever I try to connect with him, I don't feel respected. I don't feel supported. It is just problem after problem.

Another mother said, "My son, he died. Nobody call me back. He died in 2020. Until now, I know nothing."

One mother said she thought disappointment was the collective experience of detectives among mothers whose children had died: "You expect the police or the detective who is working with the family [on the case of their deceased son] to kind of provide you with information, but mothers don't find it much helpful." Some mothers were upset not only with the absence of progress in the investigation of their children's homicide, but by the carelessness with which detectives dealt with delicate situations. One woman relayed what happened when a detective who wanted to speak to her son about an incident came to her house:

> *He said, 'Oh, he's a very tall man.' He didn't say, 'Come out, I want to talk to you.' He just said, 'You know, your son, his, his car has a lot of cracks. A lot of cracks.' Yeah. 'He's not good boy either.' But that's not his car! He don't know the story. He… that's not his car! So, everybody, everybody hear it, like, like saying the boy, he was like, he a drug dealer or something. He's not. But even if he is, he's not supposed to tell whole, whole wide world. He's supposed to take me to another room to tell me what he wanted to, why he can't.*

[25] Most accounts of policing do not differentiate between residents' experiences, or expectations, of different sets of police officers. When it comes to police detectives, the most thorough account we know about comes from South Los Angeles, where journalist Jill Leovy (2014) finds that police detectives are often competing for resources, other than the few who enjoyed elite positions downtown. "Detectives," in Leovy's analysis of the Los Angeles Police Department, "were fighting an invisible war" (88) and "had to push day after day" (338).

One woman, who was a social worker and grief counselor, told us that mothers suffer additional loss from delays in detectives' responses to their requests for information, which she thought was the result of indifference rather than overwork:[26]

> I have a client who lost her son. Because of the trauma, she couldn't live in her unit anymore. She was living in public housing and wanted a transfer. It took a long time for the detective to give her support letter just to indicate what was happening. He said the case was still under investigation. But he could have just written a letter.
>
> Interviewer: Could it be the shortage of personnel?
>
> Respondent: No, for me, it's another explanation: it's not caring. Just not caring.

Avoiding the Police

Negative experiences of the police, along with the bitter sentiment they caused, led many mothers to avoid the police. They said the same was true of their children. One told us, "So in our neighbourhood, when the kids see the police, even those who are educated, who are in universities, as soon as they see the police, they run away. They run. Like they try to avoid the police." Another mother said it was difficult for their children to avoid such encounters: "Even if a kid is just playing around, police officer will come and they will ask, what are you doing here?"[27]

Several mothers told us that interactions with the police exposed them to danger, including the risk of deepening or widening the nature of the problem they hoped to solve, and possibly of being implicated in a crime. One mother said, "Like, you call the police and somehow you'll be in trouble." Another mother regretted contacting the police because the interaction led to her being threatened with criminal charges. She said, "I know I should call the police, but I don't. One time I called, and they threatened *me*." Another said, "When people ask for help from the police, those people who ask for help get into problem from the police; the police start interrogating them, like, 'What did you do?' or 'How did you end up in this situation?'"

One woman who had called the police to help solve a conflict with her husband, from whom she had separated and who assaulted her while retrieving personal items, said their failure to remove the man (who was still a legal occupant) created more danger for herself later. She said of the police: "They don't really do much for me. I've been in fear, not because I don't trust the police, 'cause I'm scared of them. When you call the police, they don't do their job, and your stirred up all this trouble and then now, now I'm in danger."

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[26] A recent study drawing on interviews with homicide detectives in the UK and USA found that clearance rates are reduced by dismissive perceptions of the willingness of residents to cooperate with police and compound resident's fear of the police. This research also found that detectives quickly conceded to the difficulty of obtaining testimony from witnesses wary of the police and interactions with other government agencies (Brookman et al. 2018).

[27] Social science researchers have found a practice of "system avoidance" in communities where distrust in legal institutions is common, and especially in marginalized communities where police and justice agencies are seen as unresponsive or harmful (Hagan 1994; Goffman 2009; Brayne 2014; Hagan et al. 2020; Sendroiu et al. 2022). The avoidance may include "systems" such as schools, hospitals, and workplaces and persist even after conditions improve, especially in racially segregated areas, with people with-drawing from interactions with public institutions, reinforcing a sense of exclusion and disconnection (Stuart et al. 2015; Desmond et al. 2016; Brayne 2014). Some have found that immigrants with no prior negative contact with the criminal justice system may avoid such record-keeping institutions out of concern over the risk of ending up in government records (Asad 2020).

Many mothers told us that reporting violent crime, especially a shooting, might require an interaction with officers that would expose them to the risk of reprisals, which compound their fear. One woman dealt with this fear by asking the police to avoid revealing her location and identity as the person reporting the crime. It did not work:

> *One night, I, I hear a gunshot. I was sitting in the living room and I run through the window, and I saw a car sitting between the two building and the doors open. There is a bunch of kids come to the inside the building. And the door, the driving door was open. And I just look at it and I see leaking, something leaking from the car. And I thought, 'That's blood.' So, everybody, we were, a couple of us was home. And they advised me not to call the police. And I just said, 'We might save that person.' You know? He, I don't know. I just, and I just, just, I trust my inner sense feeling. And I just call. And I talk to an operator. Yeah. I told her, 'Please, I'm begging you. I'm just, I cannot tell you nothing more.'*

Another mother relayed a similar story. She had called the police after hearing gunfire and seeing someone who she believed was injured. She pleaded with the police official to whom she reported the incident not to divulge her location and identity:

> I said, 'I can't see, I can't see a human being running. I cannot tell you even if it's a girl or boy. And please don't send police to my apartment,' 'cause automatically they can see where you live. Yeah. 'Please don't send nobody please. I'm begging you. I just call to just save somebody hurting.' Yeah. 'Please don't send police to me.' 'Cause the neighbourhood, the door pick, they can watch and see who is coming to you. Whatever. They asking you, the police. They can't hear. Right? So, I don't want to be the snitch. That word. I hate it. So, I then we were just sitting home. They came, they came. Somebody was, they get, that person took, they put in, um, bathroom watching window. We saw a woman and man come to work our building. And my family, my friend, they said, 'Oh, they coming.' Mm-Hmm. To you. I said, 'I don't think so.'
>
> Interviewer: They came to you?
>
> Respondent: Yeah. The police opened. I said, 'What?' They said, 'Somebody called from here.' I said, 'No.' 'Who is home?' I said, 'Me and my kids.' They said, 'Yeah, somebody called here.' I said, 'No.' That was someone, no, somebody called from [your home].' And I just said, 'Nobody called from my home.' Lying in front of them. Yeah. To protect myself. To protect you. Yeah. Then I, I went inside. I just, I was front of them and I just back and I hold the door. I said, just, 'I'm begging you just go call me.' They went downstairs; they call me. They listen. I tell them, 'Let me tell you, if you come back, I'll never open my door.'

A few mothers suspected the police were not just indifferent to this risk but actively fomenting violent conflict in their neighbourhoods. One mother said the police conspired with the gangs to put their children in further danger: "Some of the cops go into neighbourhoods and tell the other gangs, you know. I see in my own eyes." Another mother told us:

> *There was somebody in my neighbourhood who actually told police that '<u>that</u> home and <u>that</u> individual in <u>that</u> home was the one that shot at us because of <u>that</u> informant.' Now the police went back to the neighbourhood and said, 'Guess what? You know, so and so told us that this house has guns in it. This house is the one that shoots. Well, guess what? We were*

able to arrest him. And we, you know, we got a charge.' They said the name of the guy who snitched! And my kids said, 'You see, you always want to cooperate the police, mommy. Look what he's calling the guy who tell them that's what they're gonna do to us.' I said, 'You are right.'

Several mothers believed the police not only failed to protect their children from harm but intentionally exposed them to danger. One mother explained that she disliked the police "because they always bother my kids." Another mother told us that when they see the police, the perceive them as "hunting down their boys." When we asked why relations with the police were poor in their community, one mother said: "Just we have this sense of police trying to, you know, arrest our children, you know, to come to area to bully us sometime, you know, we have that." Another mother believed the police had a practice of returning adolescent boys to their community in the middle of the night, even though they had been arrested earlier in the day and not charged. She believed this practice might have been conceived to protect the boys, by preventing others from noticing that they had interacted with officers, but it left them scared and vulnerable: "I tell my kids 'Be aware. Don't call them. They will give you bad records.'"

In addition to keeping physical distance from the police, many mothers were disinclined to call the police for help.[28] One mother told us through a translator that there was a social convention of not calling the police:

When—especially when she was new to the neighbourhood—a lot of the neighbours would tell her, don't call the police. 'Cause they don't want the police coming to their area, so she said, I didn't understand why initially they would say, don't call the police. But she said later on she understood that is because they fear the police. The kids also tell her, um, that they also fear the police. And that is with the work that they do as mothers, that they tell them, uh, 'Don't work with the police, don't go near them. Why are you standing next to them?' That's what they say.

Some mothers only recently developed a practice of avoiding contact with the police. One woman told us she no longer called the police for help, even though:

> We used to call every day because kids would be throwing things or getting into a fight with somebody or there was always something going on.
>
> Interviewer: What was the purpose of calling the police in these cases?
>
> Respondent: People fighting.
>
> Interviewer: But was there a sense that they could stop it? Was there a sense that, …
>
> Respondent: Of course. What do you call police for? For protection. Right. But, um, I find that they tend to take longer.

[28] Several researchers in the US find that high-profile incidents of police violence trigger sharp declines in 911 calls, especially in black neighbourhoods, as well as other forms of disengagement from law enforcement (Desmond et al. 2016). Public health findings on the long-term mental effects of chronic stress (Charles et al. 2013) suggests that routine exposure to violence in policing erodes individual well-being and collective civic participation.

Some mothers said they would hesitate before calling the police because they believed their appeal for help would not be taken seriously. One told us:

> *I really hesitating to call the police because the end of the day, it's like, uh, I know what they saying. And that's a report. It doesn't, it never go up. So, the report is kind of like, uh, the, that's what I believe they tear it up and put on the garbage…. They don't need more work or more, um, back and forth questionnaire, or that's what I'm, that's what I'm, that's what I'm thinking about it.*

To understand the scope of the reluctance to call the police, we asked several questions about the situations in which they would or would not call the police, such as if they were robbed or their home was burgled. One young mother told us categorically: "No. I got robbed on Facebook and my mom tried to tell me, 'Call the police.' I was like, 'Girl, *what*?!" We also asked whether neighbours would be upset if they called the police. One said, "Maybe, it depends on the situation. They might say, 'You just caused us to bear problems for nothing.'" Another mother explained her reasoning in detail:

> *I got into an argument and like some girl brought 20 girls to come and fight me and I was like, oh shit. I don't want to fight 20 girls. Like, should I call the police? So, I thought to myself, like, 'I can't call the police. Like, I don't want to be, I can't…' I got out of it anyways. Not gonna say how, but I got out of that and didn't end up calling the police. So, that was the time I hesitated…. And I'd rather call anybody else than the police, honestly. Because the police will just flip it on you and make it your fault somehow.*
>
> Interviewer: But have you ever seen that happen? When the police, like, flipped it on a person who called them for help?
>
> Respondent: No, but I just know that they would do that.

One mother told us she feared calling the police "even if my kids are fighting," because they would arrest her children rather than resolve the dispute: "I wouldn't call. I have a fear of them having criminal records." Several mothers told us their sons avoid speaking with police for fear of being perceived to be cooperating with them and possibly revealing incriminating information about neighbours. One said:

> *Because you know, police will see him as an informant. Snitch. Other, other, people might see him as snitch, ask 'why are you talking to police? What's going on? What's that? What's that interaction about?' You know? So, it's not even just him not wanting to, it's the other people who may misunderstand what that communication was about.*

This logic extended to the mothers who needed to protect their relationships with others in the community, which could fray because of contacting the police. One mother explained that she would be left alone to deal with the consequences if she called the police:

> *One of the other reasons why I don't like to call police all the time is I, I don't want to put myself in a situation where I'm gonna have to go to court and I'm gonna have to, you know, be a, you know, a witness to a potential situation. So, I avoid those interactions because at the end of the day, I know that I'm the only one who's gonna be dealing with that. None of*

my family would be supporting me. So, I don't want to add extra burden on myself. And I don't want, I don't want to jeopardize something that I said.

Relying on Others

Some mothers said they would rely on others for help instead of calling the police. "It's better to call security at Metro Housing," one mother said. A young mother told us that elders could play this role better than the police:

> *Like, we have this thing where it's like we feel like we can handle it within ourselves. Like within the, if it's within a community thing, we can handle it within ourselves. It's like, if it's like an, like a fight or like things like that or like, you know, it's like an altercation. We feel like we can come to like, we feel like we have this ability that we can come sit down off the respective elders and handle it within ourselves and not get the police involved.*

Another young mother told a similar story about elders.

> *I feel like we've been so, kind of, like, prone to sitting with the elders. 'Cause one thing about our community is that we've always respected our elders. So, when an elder says that 'we want everybody to sit down,' we don't look at it as like, we have the option of saying yes or no. You show up. You know what I mean? So even if we do have disagreements, off of respect for elders we won't say no when they call us and say 'we need you guys to come in. We need you guys to come sit down with us.' We go.*

Several mothers said there also were less benign sources of informal authority in the community that would help resolve problems with crime and violence, and that they might intimidate them if they called the police. For instance, one mother said: "If somebody in my neighbourhood seen me talking to the police, they say, 'Oh my God, what's she doing?' They call my son right way." Another told us:

> I remember one day I called the cops and these idiots in my neighbourhood were throwing eggs at my car for whatever reason. And the cops came, and people got cleaned. You know what I mean? So, one of the guys later came to me and he's like, 'Hey, you know, you like my sister. Don't do that shit again, because I lost money. Next time call me.' I said, 'Alright.' And I did.
>
> Interviewer: And what happened? I guess he handled the situation, right?
>
> Respondent: But it worked. It did. That's all I'm asking. Even the security guard would tell you, 'I'll call those guys in the corner.'

A few mothers spelled out the repercussions of distrusting the police and instead relying on such informal authority. One said simply that the community becomes less safe when they don't call the police they distrust:

> *Like, definitely not being able to trust the police is a big factor in like why there's crimes. It really bothers us. We want our neighbour to keep safe. We want to tell the police [what we know], but we can't tell because we scare the way they said it. We might be in trouble, and we don't want to be in trouble in the system or the law. So that's what everybody, that's why*

people shut their mouths. If we, I see gun, I'm not gonna tell if somebody shoot, I come like face to face. I'm not gonna tell the police because I'm more fear the cop than the shooter. And that's why now we have so many crimes, so many younger boys are dying it.

Another mother said crime was not the only consequence, but also further alienation from the justice system:

That's why a lot of crime is happening. And it's not getting recorded 'cause it's not getting reported. People do want to report it, but the people they weighed it, they put it on the scale, 'Which one is greater? What you are getting? What are the person doing to you? Or, what the cop might do to you?' And it's not only the cop when you go into the court, even it's worser than the cop. People don't talk when you go in court. I went two time in court. You wish you never got there, there worse than the cop.

Distrust of the police along with alienation from the justice system were not the only reasons mothers said they would call others. Some said they feared a reprimand and possibly retribution from informal authorities for calling the police. For instance, one mother told us what might happen to mothers who call the police against the wishes of such authorities:

They, and anybody who even talks to them is labelled as a snitch. You know what I mean? Nobody believes that person, even if that person didn't even give them information. So that person can also be a target for something else. Do, do you understand what I'm trying to tell you? Yeah, yeah. So, there's this like, there's no trust, there's no, like, there's no better way to, to say this. It's, it's a horrible thing that these kids cannot even trust the, the law enforcement. They can't, they can't protect them.

But the fear of retribution from within the community was linked to the distrust of the police's ability (or willingness) to protect them:

It's like, if you, if you open up your mouth, suppose you saw something and you weren't a part of it, you can't disclose that. Because if you do, the police won't protect you when you're getting gunned down the next day or the next morning.

Interviewer: Protect you from danger within the neighbourhood?

Respondent: Within the neighbourhood, outside neighbourhoods, whatever. So, it's like they might as well keep going the cycle of violence instead of breaking it and telling the truth because they don't. 'Cause if police approach you and tells you things and then they'll be like, 'Oh, your friend said this,' they're not gonna protect you. Right. They should protect the witnesses. Right. Then the more people would come forward and then the crimes would stop. But they, it just seems like they're not helping them. They kind of putting them against each other.

We also asked mothers whether their children would call the police "if they need to." Few said yes. One said emphatically:

No, no, no, no. No. Seriously, it's like, um, my son, he passed away in Vancouver. The white man killed him. We, we don't have a problem for the person who killed him. But we have a problem for the police because they have to be investigating and no investigation was

going on, and no investigation was moving on. And that's what my boys, they telling me, they said, 'Mom is the, the police, they are crook.' And that's what they said to me. And they said, 'What happened for your son?' And, uh, what I felt it, it is like a, this killing, it's like boys were killing and they have guns and stuff like that. Because if you, if I have my rights, it's no way I can come to you and I point to you the other situation or revenge. Right. But that's what's missing. The, uh, the position is, you know, that's why it's the, all the time. It's a revenge. It's gonna come back for in black society and the black, uh, uh, uh, uh, youth, because he did not see it. The right, his brother died. So, nobody's like, uh, is done whose fault it is.

Interviewer: So, who do the kids call instead?

Respondent: Revenge. Revenge. That's what they call it, revenge. So, it's no, no justice system. No justice system. No. It, it starts from the police go to the court. It's not just a system. I have a, one of my son, he is in troublemaker, always. He's in a fight. Always, always, always. But the problem it is he have a DNA, they took a DNA, right? That's what really pissed me off. Still, you have a DNA, but when it was harmed in Vancouver, where's the DNA is the police taking all the time? Where's that DNA? Why? It doesn't go for the bank information bank.

Calling the Police

Despite negative experiences with the police and fear that the police might not help them or expose them or their children to greater jeopardy, several mothers told us they nevertheless would call the police for help.[29] Some said they had recently called the police. One mother who had repeated negative contacts with officers, including one instance which resulted in her son's imprisonment, said she believed the police might have improved since her last experience. "I was in a problem, and I was hoping maybe they changed, too," she told us. Others said they would call because it was their civic duty. "It doesn't matter whether [the police] are good or bad, or school is not good. We have to call them," one told us. Another said simply, "You have to call the police. You have to involve them."

Another mother acknowledged that relying on the police for help could be a positive experience in dire circumstances: "I mean, I do feel a bit more safe when they're around. I'll be honest. Just because, obviously, if there's somebody that's gonna come with like a gun, I would want the police to be there and stop them."

A few mothers said that they would call the police under certain conditions, such as if they feared for their own safety. One mother said, "Here, unlike in the States, I would call the police like if I'm scared for my safety." Another mother told us: "If I am in a situation where I'm in danger and my

[29] Several researchers have found that, despite fear and distrust, people may still call the police in moments of crisis (Hagan et al. 2020; Bell 2017). Some scholars describe this practice as "ambivalent dependence" (Bell 2017); others refer to it as a *dual-process model*, where individuals consciously distrust police but turn to them when no alternatives exist (Hagan et al. 2020). In both views, calling the police is a constrained decision, made not out of trust but necessity. Papachristos, Meares, and Fagan (2012) similarly find that individuals embedded in high-violence networks may avoid police due to concerns about legitimacy and fear of state surveillance or retaliation yet still engage law enforcement when informal mechanisms fail to provide protection.

kids are in danger, of course I would call." She then added that she had recently called the police and was surprised by the compassionate and diligent response to her needs:

> *I did call the police when my neighbour's house got shot up. I called and they came, and they helped us. They stayed with us until the sun came out because we asked them to. We were young, and I told them to just stay with me. That was nice of them.*

Several mothers said they would call the police if they had no other recourse. One said, "I have no other choice. If something happens to me, I have to call them." Another said, "Even, even, even if you know they are bad. But you don't have no, nobody else. You have to call them." Another told us:

> *I feel that they would do nothing. But still, because I don't have another choice, I have to call them. 'Cause I live in the country and that is who we have to go when we are in need. … I always ask for God not to make me need the police because of the way they treat people.*[30]

Still, several mothers told us they would hesitate to call because of uncertainty about what might happen, which coincided with and caused fear. For example, even after a traffic accident in which she was injured, one woman paused before calling 911, which she assumed meant the police, fearing a solo encounter. Instead, she first called her family: "I just wanted there to be more people around me, like it's not just going be me, you and we're in the boonies and we're calling the police." One mother told us through a translator that she would call the police, though it would involve fear and uncertainty. "Sometimes, yes," she says, but she's scared that they might accuse her or that something might happen to her if she does call them.

Some mothers spoke of the decision to call the police as driven by despair: "I think the police is not all of them is not bad, but, but if you need help, where you gonna call?" Another mother said that a decision to call the police was agonizing:

> *You know, that's the things. It is like, even your enemy, sometimes you feel like your friend. Right. So that's what I feel it. Like, it's, even though it's my enemy, but I don't know where else I can run or where else I can, uh, what can I do?*

Another mother said doubt and distrust of the police made her feel helpless.

> Interviewer: So, are there times now when you choose not to call the police?
>
> Respondent: It's, uh, useless. And my son, he told me it's, uh, he or you know, told me, he says, mom, um, one of the police, he saw it. He says, 'You know that police, mom? And I said, 'Yeah.' He says, 'He punched my stomach.' I said, 'How? Why?' Who I can run? Tell me who I can run. Who can I run? Who?

Explaining Experiences

[30] These accounts reflect different ways that mothers make sense of relying on the police. Some show what has been called *situational trust*—trust that emerges not from confidence in the institution, but from the immediate need for protection (Bell 2017). Others speak to the absence of alternatives, where calling the police is less a choice than a necessity (Hagan and McCarthy 1997). Still others express a cautious hope that police might respond with care or acknowledgment, despite histories of mistreatment (Campeau et al. 2021).

We did not ask mothers to give explanations for these experiences of policing, but many offered them anyway. No single theory emerges from their remarks. Instead, we detect five ways mothers explain their experiences with police.

a) Discrimination

Many mothers thought the police held discriminatory beliefs about Somali youth, and possibly the Somali community as a whole. One mother who recently had moved to Brampton, where she said relations with the police were "very positive," believed that police in Toronto were targeting people of her race and color:

> I never get a ticket in Brampton, but whenever I come [to Etobicoke), it's like I'm… out of no reason. They just gonna stop me [for a license plate renewal].
>
> Interviewer: And this doesn't happen in Brampton?
>
> Respondent: No, actually, because we don't find the police that much in around our area.

Another mother who had moved to Brampton in part because of the gun violence in Toronto and the way the police handled those situations told us:

> *My neighbours actually are quite positive, have positive interaction with police in Brampton. When they do neighbourhood patrols, we know that they're here to ensure our safety. We look out the windows, we know that we're safe. And there's somebody, you know, keeping six, essentially. But in Toronto, I have a complete opposite, um, effect. As soon as we see police out the window, we're thinking, oh God.*

Several mothers contrasted their views of the police in Brampton to those in Toronto. One said simply, "I find the police in Brampton are more receptive to, to me, in terms than Toronto is." Another explained the difference in starker terms:

> *That's why I love, uh, Peel region police. They're respected. At least they don't lie. They don't make stories. Okay. Arrest. If my son is wrong. I'm not saying they're angels, but sometimes you going too far. My son, they, they're working very hard to convict him. Like, 'Why? What did I do?'*

Several mothers believed the police patrolled their neighbourhoods with a generalized racial animus, not limited to Somali youth. "It's not only, uh, Somali community [that suffers from prejudice]," one mother told us:

> *Other communities who are black are also affected by the police. So, my son, when he was, when he was in high school, we have a free gym in the plaza, but he was in the gym with his friends, so they were I guess all okay. So, all the kids were black except one white. And the police came, and they asked him, why are you with them? And he was like, they are my friends. So, I, I am with my friends.*

"Sometimes our kids will be stopped by the police because they're looking for someone who's black," one mother said. Another mother said her kids were targeted because of their skin color; she feared for their reputation among peers:

> *Our kids, black kids, are targeted by the police. Sometimes they [the police] might be working with other kids on the street and then our kids will be attacked, um, just to say, I need to ask you something, or you look like somebody. And it's, uh, embarrassing for our kids when they are targeted on just because of their colour. And it's also embarrassing to them because other kids are looking at, and if even though they haven't done anything, they feel that, um, it's embarrassment coming from the other kids as well. So, this kid has been stopped by the police. And what would his peers think of him?*

One woman insisted she was stopped on account of a stereotype about the type of cars people in her race and community tended to drive:

> *I'll give you an example. So, I drive a Range Rover. Okay? My car is a hundred thousand dollars, $98,000. So just recently I went to, um, I made a stop at Martin Grove and Dixon Tim Horton's to use the washroom and get coffee. As soon as I parked my car, there was a police officer leaving, came back, parked beside me, got out and did something with the VIN number at the front of my dashboard to whatever, take a picture or something. And I said to him, 'Why'd you do that?' He goes, 'Oh, because a lot of people are changing the VIN numbers. Cars are stolen.' I said, 'Oh, okay, interesting.' Then I go 'Say I was blonde, white woman, would you have done that to me?' And he said, 'Yeah, I would.' I said, 'Liar, you wouldn't, you're envious, 'cause you see a tall black woman not with a hoodie driving a hundred thousand dollars car 'cause you don't have it. So, you're envious.' He's like, 'You can say whatever you want.'*

Some mothers supposed that animus against their religion compounded racist beliefs. One mother was shocked by the combination of contempt she felt:

> *I'm shocked. I expected, uh, we have been told that there is, um, fairness. Um, I don't know if it's because of my color that I'm being, that this is being done to me or if it's because of my religion, but it's not normal. And I live in an environment where crime's not that serious, but I do tell my boys, you know, at the end of the day, you are black, and you are Muslim and you are Somali. You know, I do tell my boys that. In that voice.*

Another mother told us that she tells her youngest son to cooperate with the police in any circumstance and provide any information they ask for, regardless of the reason for being stopped, because she feared he will be mistreated on account of his race and skin color:

> *My son, who was born here, disagrees with me and says 'I'm Canadian. I know my rights, why should I provide police with information [when other Canadians don't have to]? Why is it different from my friend?' But at the end of the day, I feel like they're racist.*
> *They're gonna see our skin color first before anything. And they're never gonna be there for us at the end of the day.*[31]

b) Indifference

[31] These conversations between mothers and sons reflect patterns documented in a recent study with Somali youth in Toronto. Somali youth describe feeling like "easy targets" for both anti-black racism and Islamophobia, with one stating, "I fear for my mother… she is always afraid my brothers and I will arrested get for nothing" (Ilmi 2025).

Several mothers believed that police were indifferent to crime and violence in their community. This belief underpinned several stories (some were hearsay) about the response to gun violence, including instances when the police did not render assistance to a person who had been shot. "If it's a shooting going on," one woman said, "police never come, never until the whole gunshot is finished and whatever, it's run away. Run away." Another said, "What I hear in my neighbourhood is, um, normally they say even if somebody gets shot, they don't come early. They come late and then people normally die. They bleed out and die."

In one case, a mother described the police trying to handcuff the person who had been shot, assuming—incorrectly, the mother said—that they were the suspect. In another instance, a mother said the police let an injured boy lie on the street without providing medical attention, which led him to "bleed out." In another, a mother said the body of a boy who had been shot remain uncovered while he was deceased. One mother told of a situation she witnessed:

> *So, there was an incident. I was there, there was somebody, a boy shot, um, and he was bleeding. I tried to tie his wound to stop the bleeding. And when the police came, they pushed me and I requested them multiple times to, to let me please help him. But they were standing there, and the boy was bleeding out and dying, but they were doing nothing. So how can I expect, um, help from such people?*

Many mothers were despondent because they felt the police were not there to help them:

> *Like the idea that we all have about the police is that they do more harm than good in our community. Like, we don't feel like they, they they're there to help us. We feel like they're there to, in a sense investigate us, like harass us, assault us. Like that's the ideas that we get out of them. We don't feel as if like they're coming or want to help us personally.*

One mother lamented the absence of a relationship of care between residents and the police:

> *It's sad because like, I have no relationship with, I don't want to have no relationship with the police. I don't trust the police. The police are not there for the people. The police are there for themselves. That's what it is. They're not here for us. They're here for themselves. Right. Oh, 'I want the case,' oh, 'I got this.' Oh, 'I got that.' They'll lie to a person and put their life at risk. Yeah. Just so that they can close the case or get a victim and not victim a suspect or whatever. Yeah. So, it's never in favour for the people.*

One mother thought the police were not just indifferent but reckless about the repercussions of mothers being seen talking to the police in their community:

> *I think there was like an undercover police officer, but they just told me like, they're working with the housing. They call me outside and ask me a question if I know what happened the other day. I'm like, okay, somebody shoot like outside, and you guys call me outside and people are looking at me. You want me to answer? And then next time they're gonna shoot me!*

One mother described fear for her son's safety after a violent altercation with a neighbour that she believed the police did little to investigate. She suspected the police would have responded more effectively to a similar situation in a different neighbourhood and if her son had been the suspect:

I had a very bad experience recently with the police. A man in my neighbourhood who attacked my son, they fought. And uh, we, my culture is to respect your neighbours and not to say anything. So, when that happened, I did not call the police, told my son, 'Leave him alone.' And then that's how we, um, shut the case. That day, uh, my son went to work, and the guy has been waiting for my son to come back from work.

When my son came back from work, he threw, he parked his car in the neighbourhood and there were other five cars. He threw a bottle, um, a lit bottle, fire with fire. Um, he threw in my son's car, so the car burned. It burned the neighbour's cars as well. So, the police was called, the fire department was called. They came, we made the report. We told them this is what happened. This is the man who did it. We showed, um, the man's house, however, they did nothing. Um, so I, we waited that was over.

And then the next day they did not, the police did not come back to me. Uh, we went to the police next day, we asked them what happened, why there's no arrest on it. There's nothing, they did nothing. They did not listen to us. They did nothing. We went to the police, we asked them, there are cameras in the area. They did not check the camera. They went to the guy. But I don't know what they told him.

They, he was never arrested. He was not investigated. And nothing has been done. He still lives in the same place. There's, there hasn't been done anything. However, if the case was reversed, if, if it was my son who did this, I'm sure we would have been all arrested or bad things would happen. We did what we could. We complained and nothing is being done.

We asked mothers why they believed policing was unsatisfactory, but even without this prompt several mothers said the police were indifferent and condescending to people in their community. "We hope to help them help us," one mother said, "However, we feel that they, um, they ignore our needs, and they look at us as inferior and this is what hurts us." Another woman believed that the police disdained the conditions of life in her neighbourhood:

We have, uh, a lot of problem in our neighbourhood, but what I really don't understand, when you report something for police, they don't take something serious. Maybe because they think, like, people who live there, they have mental issues, they are poor, you know? So, but we do have a right. We do have a right. When something happen, it doesn't matter if I'm poor, if I'm rich, I have same rights with other people.

Several mothers thought policing for other people in Toronto, or those who resided in other neighbourhoods, must be much better. "I'm sure if you were to ask another demographic," one mother told us, "They would say, my God, I love the police." When we asked another mother "Do the police help your community?", she replied, "No, I think they help other people." The sense that they were excluded from good policing made some mothers indignant. One mother expressed her indignation in terms of rights and an appeal to equality:

We're educated. Yes, we're in the government, you know what I mean? We accomplished a lot as a Somali community. But like, why are we treated like not equally with the other communities? Why are our children different? Like, why are they not getting the same equality rights than other kids?

c) *Prejudice*

Some mothers believed neglect was woven together with prejudice. "It's a mix of racism and indifference," one mother said, explaining her views, "'Cause when they want to solve [a murder], they do solve. But the police aren't effective when it happens in our community." One woman said that when someone calls the police in the predominantly Italian neighbourhood where she now lives, "It's only one police came, but for me, before [when she lived in Rexdale], almost ten police came to my doorstep. Another told us that "dealing with the police is never really a positive thing, because number one, police have a target. Not target, but like, people feel like they're targeted by either their skin color, uh, or where they're from."

One mother insisted there was a prejudice against Somalis, not just a stereotype about poor immigrant communities:

> I feel like they take one person of interest in wrong with the whole community and put the whole community in that one bracket of that one person.
>
> Interviewer: You feel like it's particular to the Somali community or other communities, too?
>
> Respondent: No, I feel like it's particular to the Somali community. I've never seen anybody have this problem other than us.

A few mothers told us that Somali kids were singled out for persecution. One told us that her son was the only one charged when others were equally liable for the infraction, or more so:

> *And there were three other individuals in that car with my son when they were being pulled over. A Pakistani individual, a Jamaican individual, and my son. But, but what's interesting and ironic about it is, it's my son the only one that's facing the alleged charges.*

Another mother insisted that police "always stopped Somali kids."

> Interviewer: So how do they know who's Somali and who's not Somali?
>
> Respondent: Well, us Somali, we have different features, you know, you can even tell who Somali, they know who's Somali.

Some mothers believed the police had an unconscious bias against Somalis:

> *I feel like they do have a sense of bias towards the Somali community. Especially with 23 division. I feel like they look at us and they just, they look at us with disgust. I guess how I feel like when they come around, like it feels like they're, they look at us like they don't want nothing to do with this. They're looking at us like, oh my God, these guys got, like, I feel like that's the idea they have, but like, I feel like their unconscious bias or their, even their conscious bias is very open and it's, it's not something they hide.*

One woman told us through a translator that she believed the police was misinformed about their community:

> The police are given wrong information about the community. They have wrong perspective. The police has the power and has the skills to estimate if this person is wrong or right. If they ask simple questions, they can identify if this person is bad, but they're not willing to do that. They just estimate, oh, this person is automatically wrong, and they don't care. They're charging an innocent person in the process.
>
> Interviewer: Why do you think that is?
>
> Translator: She says she doesn't know why the police does that.

Other mothers said they believed poor relations with the police were the result of racial prejudice. "When they see us, they, they see something," one mother told us. Another mother believed that prejudice against the people in her community created contempt for the police:

> *We don't talk about the police unless something happens, and the only way they talk about the police is in a bad light. [Her community] don't like the police. They would just say they're just pigs and just useless and they don't help. And they're racist, and they hate Somali people, and they want to see us fail. And all of these things are true in my eyes. Honestly.*

One woman said she came to this same conclusion with regret:

> *You know, I'm, I'm the person who are believing it is, like, racism does not exist. But, um, when I seen it, it's a lot of things. It's, uh, what's the police, they are doing it or how they are. It's a racism exists. Sure. So that's the, you know, it's usually I was in denial, but when I came [to Canada], I found out it exists.*

d) Commitment

Another explanation for desultory experiences of the police was the belief that police were not committed to their vocation, which they believed was to protect their children from violence. Several mothers were dismayed that the police were unable to help them stop or settle altercations in school or in their family and community. One mother told us she had to "hide" her daughter at home because the police could not stop fighting in her school. Another mother described her disappointment after calling the police when she feared for the safety of her daughter after a fight at school:

> *I was hoping that [the police] will help my daughter and talk to the people who were harassing her, but they came, and they took a report and they send, and they send me the message. I got sad when I called them. That's, that was my worst day. Worst experience of the police. I had to take my daughter out of the school and out of the neighbourhood, secondary school. I took one hour of school. She take bus that is no safe.*

The mother later relayed that despite this experience, and against her mother's wishes, the daughter wants to become a police officer! "I can't control her mind," she told us.

Many mothers described the police response to their calls for help as perfunctory. One mother told us, "When they show up [after a shooting], they hand you a card, say 'Call me if you find out any information, goodbye.' And nothing else happens." Another said it was pointless to call the

police: “Every time when we call, we tell them something, they don’t do anything.” Another mother told us, “The police, they don’t do a lot. The police are scared of the kids. Yeah. They don’t do a lot. And another mother told us that people in her community believe “the police has abandoned us. They say they don’t do nothing. They always come late and when something happens afterward everything is [already] done.”

Several mothers complained about the poor “follow-up” by police. One person who described the relationship between the police and the people in her community as “very, very negative” told us that she received no follow-up after reporting several problems to the police. She disavowed having much experience with the police and instead told us:

> What I hear going on in the area. It’s like, uh, the people doesn’t believe, police doesn’t do their job. Like, the way, like let’s say you have a case or something, they don’t investigate. They don’t want to like, follow up or anything. Myself, it happened twice. And not twice, three times. Three times. Yeah. Three times. And I didn’t hear anything from them, so I felt like without point to report.
>
> Interviewer: So, you filed the report three times, and you never heard anything back?
>
> Respondent: Never heard anything.

Few mothers thought the police made a serious or sustained effort to stop or solve crime in their community. One mother told us, “Someone steal my bike. Someone break my car. I report those two things, and I didn’t get any follow-up.” In the first case, this mother later acknowledged, the police did eventually follow up, although it yielded nothing of value to her:

> They told me, they told me, ‘We’re gonna see the camera. You know exactly what time your son’s bike gets stolen?’ Was $600 bike. And yeah, they did they check the camera. They send me a picture. I saw the guy. But I don’t know where he live. I don’t know anything about it. I never met, I never saw him, the guy before. And then that’s it.

The same mother later recalled another time when she called the police after someone “smashed so many cars. Not only mine. It was around seven, I believe, that day. And I called the police, I report, I said, ‘There’s other cars smashed. Not only mine.’ They say, ‘No, you can’t report other people’s car. You have to report all your own car.’ I did. I didn’t hear anything back.”

When we asked mothers if they believed police could help stop crime and violence if they were more engaged in their neighbourhood, few said yes. One told us:

> It would help, but not by being more engaged and doing nothing. Be more engaged and try to solve a problem. I saw police officer outside [in our neighbourhood], but what he’s doing, we don’t know. So, we want them, but if they’re there, they have to do their job. They know their job. They, know what they’re supposed to do, not to be like opposite of what they’re supposed to do.
>
> Interviewer: And now they’re not doing their job?
>
> Respondent: I think that even, they’re doing, maybe 30 percent.

Some mothers believed the police were simply incapable of stopping crime and violence. One mother said, "There's a lot of shootings of Somali kids and black kids in general, and yet the police never seem to get those who are doing the shooting." Another said that their efforts to work with and help the police solve crimes were fruitless: "We give the information to the police. Right? But they can't do nothing." Another mother told us, "We have ideas [about who killed her son], but the police doesn't have nothing at all." Still another said, "There's the camera, the evidence, but they don't have nothing. I think the community just like thinks that the police are there to, like, just help. But they're kind of helpless."

One mother implied that criminals were more skilled than the police. She said, "[There is] a lot of break and entry in the neighbourhood. The police is there, they are available, but usually when these things happen, they're not. But again, I'm not saying it's their fault. Of course, the gangs know what they're doing. They're doing their jobs. So, I can't say it's just the police, but again, police are there." Another mother saw no purpose to the police if they didn't solve problems:

> *The kids go to jail, but they're coming back out, and then they're going back in jail. They're coming out and going back in jail because, like, what, what, what are they really doing?*

Some mothers believed the police were idle. One mother said, "The police are there, I mean they're there. They're not doing what they're supposed to do. They're not doing their job."

e) *Tests of Justice and Fairness*

A few mothers ventured other more intricate explanations for their negative experiences of policing. For instance, one believed mistreatment by the police was rooted in the unequal social status of police officers and Somali residents.

> Interviewer: So, you said before that part of the problem of having rights is if you're black, you don't have rights. Why do you think that the police treat black residents that way?
>
> Respondent: Realistically, I don't, I don't, I don't have, um, I'm not a wise person and I don't have a good answer. But the way I feel like it, it's like, uh, maybe [they think] 'I'm the best.' So, nobody likes to, when you are the best, you think everybody pulling you down. So that's the, that's a mentality because it's, uh, in back home, it's like, uh, my mom or my aunt or my father passed away when I was young. Uh, my uncle, they never came to me and said to me, you are a less human. Right? So always they tell me, you know, 'You are the queen. You are this, you are that,' you know? They are empowering me. So, and I empower my children, and this is what I believe it is. Like, I'm, I'm a better, so why you not listening to me? Because I'm better than you. So that's why you not, you don't want it. Right? So, you wanted to put me down. So, you want it to look good. So, this is, I'm not smart, but that's the way I'm thinking.

Another mother believed the nature of police work and the culture of subordination in police organizations generated animus against people in her community:

> *If I'm working with you, did you listen to me or did you listen to another person who did not hire you? So, it's the person who hire you and pays you. Right? So, you have to listen for that*

person. So, it doesn't matter for the color. You are so always, you have to obey the person who's putting to you, you know, bread on your, on a table. That's what you listen to.

One mother thought that police hostility toward people in her community, especially boys, was animated by fear rather than prejudice. Bravado and intimidation were part of officers' survival strategy:

> *And, uh, [the police] can get angry or, um, intimidating. Right? So, and then the, the situation being escalated. So, I said, you know, it's intimidation for nothing. It's just [them trying to be] cool. And that's, that's how they survive. So, it's like a survival tool. That's what I give it to them.*

One mother thought disdain for residents was inherent in the nature of policing. "It doesn't depend on anything," she said, explaining why Somalis experience poor policing. "Not skin color of the officer, nothing. There could even been a Somali [officer] who acts like that. It's just the police in general."

Among some Somali mothers, dismay about policing fueled cynicism. Some mothers told us that they believed the police were intentionally stirring up trouble. A few speculated that the police were responsible for the circulation of guns obtained by boys in their community.

> Interviewer: You don't know where they get the guns?
>
> Respondent: We know, but we don't want to say it because, that, when we had our kids, they didn't come with the guns.
>
> Interviewer: So, why are the cops planting the guns?
>
> Respondent: To erase our community.

One person was circumspect about this claim and treated it as rumor, but nevertheless insisted it produced fear of the police and a conspiracy of not communicating with them:

> I heard, like police is, they're the ones that who, uh, give the use of the teenager drugs to sell it. Mm. That's like was, oh my God, I couldn't believe I go, are they do that? Not they're supposed to like, protect. How would they do that? I was shocked, but I didn't see, I heard a story again, I repeat, I heard a story, so, but I don't know if the police can do something like that, that's like, I feel like it's almost, I don't know how to explain that to be honest, if the police do something like that, how we expecting to do, how our teenagers gonna grow up in the, or our kids gonna grow up in that neighbourhood about, because when you call police, you feel like you are safe, right? Yeah. Yeah. You want to report something, you report to them. So, let's say if you know something and you report some to them, and they're the one who are sending those drugs outside for our teenagers, and I want to, to report for drugs, I'm gonna be in trouble.
>
> Interviewer: You'd be in trouble. From whom? From the police, from your neighbours?
>
> Respondent: From the police! If they're the ones who bring drugs, uh, in our neighbourhood. Right. So, I'm gonna be in trouble with them.

Another mother said it was the children who spread this rumor: "Those teenagers, who are selling drugs, they tell their parents or maybe their siblings, I got this from police officer to sell it." One person who expressed doubt about the veracity of the story nevertheless insisted it might be true since it helped explain why so few of the murders were followed by the police apprehending a suspect:

> *Who do you think um, gets away with all this shit? It's the police. Like they're involved. Like they are, you know what I mean? Like all these criminal activities and all these drug-dealing and stuff. And you'd hear from these youngsters that, yeah. What do you think it comes from? Is the, the police, like, you know, they're involved. So, or politicians or things.*

Despite dismay, disappointment, and even cynicism, few mothers renounced the police. Several mothers said they tried to counteract prejudice against the police in their community, advising prudent relationships with the police.

> *I cannot tell my kids that the police is bad, because these people are responsible for us. I keep telling them that if you are in a situation that's unsafe, call the police. That is where we call. So, we respect, like, these are responsible people. So, I will never tell my kids they are bad.*

> *I hope nothing will happen for me to call police. But if something really, really, I have to call police, I'll call them. I tell my kids: I tell them, like, police is a safe, like, yeah. I, I never tell my kids like, uh, um, don't trust police. No, no, never. Never. Because if I tell them that, and they're gonna believe like, oh, police is not people to trust. So, for themselves, they're not gonna trust them. But usually most of the time, or all the time, I tell them if anything happened, call police.*

One mother agonized about the need for policing that so often involved mistreatment of young people in her community. She also was tormented the obligation to help the police – by providing information —so that they could be effective: "When we see with the way they are treating our kids, how you gonna help them?" And yet despite these doubts, she insisted on the necessity of policing and said she believed someone could have a positive experience with the police.

> Interviewer: So why do you believe you could have a good experience if you've never had one and you've had many bad experiences?
>
> Respondent: Because they are police, so we need them. So, everybody's not bad.

Several mothers struggled to reconcile their ambivalence about the police. Some surrendered to the trope of good and bad apples, as if that division was found in every profession and provided some cushion for their predicament. And yet others perceived that larger forces lay behind the trouble they experienced and would have to be changed, too, for policing to become better. One mother told us, "I don't have anything against the police, but I just hope that the system itself would change. You know what I mean? They're doing their job. Maybe there's good, good ones. Maybe there's bad ones. Just like every, every other job." Another mother started in the same vein, dividing the police into two halves before invoking the specter of some broader problem, an injustice that needed remediation:

I know all the police are not the same. They are good, and they are bad. The police are good because they are the ones that are making us safe that we can drive, and we can live peacefully because of them. However, there is great injustice, especially in my community. But if I myself am in the fault, then I expect the police to be justice and give me my punishment. I also don't want the police to be soft because if they are soft and they listen to whatever they are told they will not be able to do their job. I'm not saying they should punish everybody, but just whoever is at fault. They should not target other people.

Section 3: Talking About Policing

In this section, we relay how mothers talked about policing and violence in their community with others. We distinguish between (A) how mothers talked about police *with their children*, and what their children told them in return; (B) how mothers spoke *with other mothers* about such experiences, and then (C) what and how they spoke *with friends and relatives "back home"* about their lives.

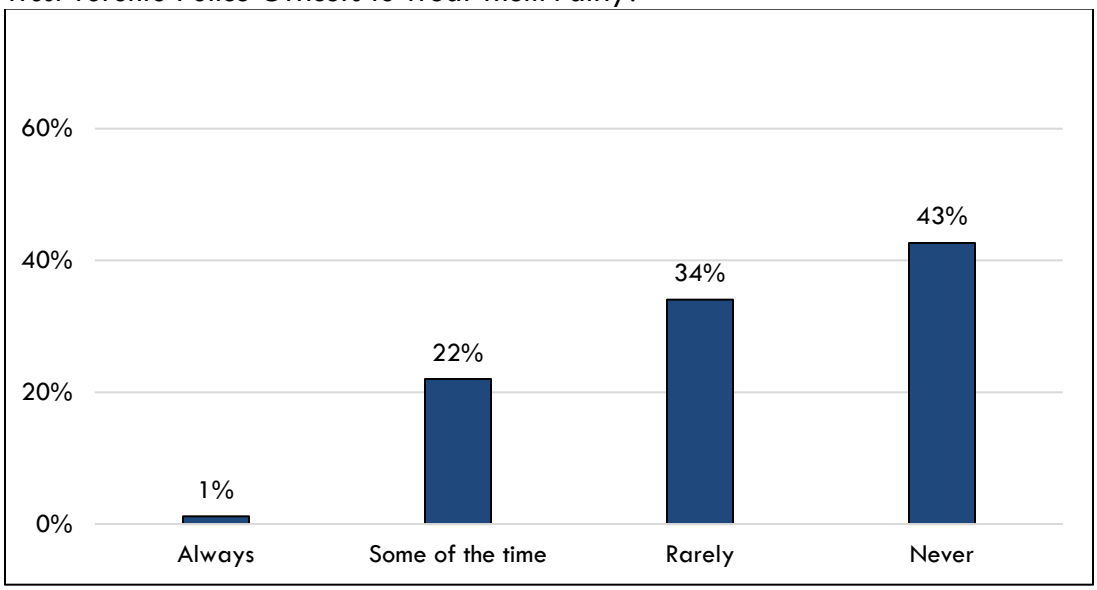
We emphasize the sharing of experiences in these ways because much of what we heard were in fact collective accounts of violence and policing. Many individual misfortunes were relayed as shared tragedies for the Somali community across the city. In some cases, it was difficult to discern whether a mother was relaying her personal experience or that of a friend. Mothers shared their experiences with others not only to make sense of their lives but also to establish habits and routines that promoted security and belonging.

What Mothers Tell Their Sons

We asked every mother we spoke to about whether the Somali community can trust the police to treat them fairly. As we see in Figure 12, their responses were clear; 77% said that their community can rarely or never trust the police.[32]

[32] These results diverge from findings in a survey of the general population conducted by researchers at Ryerson University for the PACER report in 2019. That study found that, on average, 53% of residents in Toronto believed that people of their "ethnic background could trust the police to treat them fairly." The report disaggregated responses by police division and discovered wide variation in such views across the city, with 34% of respondents residing in Division 43 expressing trust compared to 76% in Division 12 (Fearon and Farrel 2019).

Figure 12: Overall, Do You Believe People of the Somali Community Can Trust Toronto Police Officers to Treat Them Fairly?



Yet we also notice some important differences here. In our initial survey questions, we asked mothers whether they'd lived in Toronto for under a year, between 1-5 years, 5-10 years, or over ten years. Nearly all of our interviewees indicated that they had lived in Toronto for over ten years—and of those, nearly two thirds of mothers volunteered the number of years they had lived in the city. When we sort the views of respondents by the duration of their residence in Toronto, we can see that those who reported living the longest time in the city had more intensely negative views about whether Somali community members could trust the police. Among those who had been in Toronto for 21-29 years, only 13% thought they could be trusted some of the time. The most optimistic residents, as displayed in Figures 13 and 14, are those who had moved to Toronto between ten and twenty years ago.

Figure 13. Can Somali Community Members Trust the Police? (Selected Respondents*)

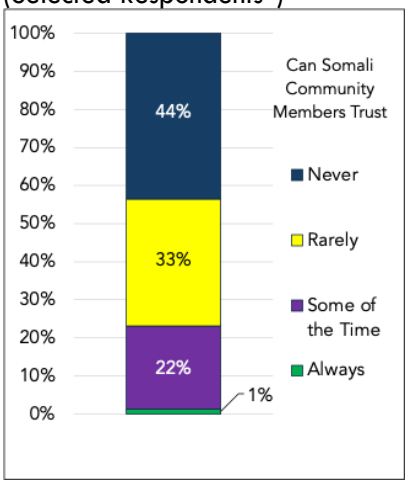
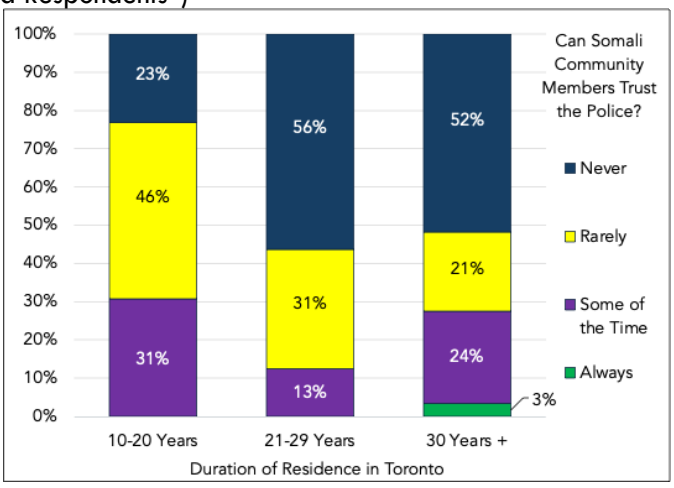


Figure 14. Can Somali Community Members Trust the Police by Duration of Residence in Toronto (Selected Respondents*)



* Analysis includes respondents who have resided in Toronto for 10 years or longer (95% of sample).

*Analysis includes respondents who have resided in Toronto for 10 years or longer (95% of sample).

Mothers spoke to their children about the police in three different registers. One was in the language of rules and principles, for instance, admonishing children to treat police with respect just like they would anyone else. A second register was pragmatic and strategic; it consisted of encouraging children to believe in the police and included downplaying risk of contact so that they might call them in a moment of need. A third register was prudential and precautionary; it involved advice about how to avoid or manage interactions with the police, which all mothers said were fraught with danger. The third register was by far the most common.

Principled

A few mothers told their children to always be polite and respectful in encounters with the police. For instance, one mother said: "I told my kids, my neighbourhood, 'Listen man, black, white, everything, you have to respect it.' Right? 'And that includes the police.'" Another mother told her children to reciprocate any decency extended to them by the police: "If the police greet them in a respectful manner, then they greet them back, and I say if you have any information, tell it to them." Another mother repeated this advice, albeit with a warning: "I tell my kids, um, when you see the police, you treat them well, you listen to them, and you calm yourself down. And no matter what they do, um, listen to them and answer their questions." The mother added to these admonitions a reminder to call if they had any encounter: "I tell them, 'If police stop your car or your police follow, you call me.'"

Pragmatic

Some mothers told their children white lies, claiming the police could be relied on even when they believed this was not true, or at least not always true, because they sensed it might help their children. For instance, one mother said: "You have to trick them into understanding that all cops are not bad, and that it's better to have a cop as a friend than a cop as an enemy." A mother with two children under the age of six said she wanted to avoid disillusioning them with negative images of the police:

> *I paint the image of the police being like saviours to them. I never want to put it in their mind that they are corrupt or anything like that, because I think that's a huge problem, especially when they're so young. Like they shouldn't be afraid of police officers. … And I think growing up very in, in, um, like certain neighbourhoods, you grow up feeling that like the police are not gonna help you…. So, I don't want to put that it, my experience of my, some of my negative experience with police officers onto my children. I want them to have a, I want them to not have that view of them, you know.*

Another mother talked to her daughters in balanced terms so as not to skew their expectations: "I explain to her that there's a duality in life. And, you know, some people may have a negative experience with police, but a lot of people have positive experiences with police." Other mothers dissembled for more strategic reasons. For instance, one mother explained why warnings about the dangers of encountering the police could be harmful:

I don't want to ruin their life. Just going to make their heart break. Okay? 'Cause they see the police as a helper. I'm not going to tell them the police are bad. I don't want to destroy them. Okay? Because if something is happening, I want them to call the police.

Prudential

Most mothers told their children to be wary of the police, to avoid them whenever possible, and to be careful and cautious in their interactions with officers. None of the mothers celebrated this prudence. A few lamented telling their children to be suspicious of the police, and a few tried to soft-pedal their caution since they believed there are good cops and bad cops. One mother said she would wait until her son is 10 years old before "having the talk," referring to the euphemism for informing black youth about the dangers of an encounter with the police.

Some of these admonitions sounded like personal coaching. One mother said, "So I kind of talk to them about taking care of yourself in case you see the police, because they need to know how they can protect themselves." Another said, "I always advise them, please stay out of trouble if the police asks you something." But even the mothers who depicted their warnings as a regrettable necessity (the regret being the fear they might instill or compound) said things full of dread. "It's really, don't, don't, don't, don't, don't," one mother explained, "because you know what happened to other people."

Much of their advice consisted of cautions about what not to do in an encounter. Many mothers told their children to be silent:

- "Don't talk; stay silent."
- "When they talk to you, uh, don't talk to them."
- "Just say your name, and don't ask any questions."
- "I tell them they have to tell them their three names and that's it."
- "Close your mouth. You don't know nothing. You don't say nothing. Any question they ask you, you don't know."
- "If police stop you, you have to be silent and stop and do whatever they told you to do."
- "Do not argue back with them, I tell them. Because sometimes the police might retaliate and beat up the kids."

There was a wide range of don'ts, which one mother called "survival tools," such as:

- "Don't panic."
- "Don't be lippy with them."
- "Don't carry anything in your pocket."
- "Don't look at them and mind your own business."
- "Don't be the kid that's holding a video or anything like that. Like just walk away, remove yourself."
- "Don't put your hand in your pocket, don't do nothing. Don't interact with him. Don't, you know, yell or be loud."

Some mothers gave advice about what their kids should say and do in such encounters. For example, mothers said things like:

- "Be polite."
- "Be calm."
- "Cooperate."
- "Be careful."
- "Behave well."
- "Put your things away, especially if you are alone, even in an accident."
- "Do as he says, with a soft voice."

> *I always tell them to follow the law, to not run away from the police, to answer any questions they ask because I know the police can stop you anytime. So, I always tell them, don't run away because when you run away, you are admitting them that you made some that you made a mistake.*

Some of these cautions reflected fear of the police as well as a worry for their children's welfare. One mother said she told her son, "Don't think they'll be nice just because they're the police." Another told hers, "They will deceive you." Yet another said, "You don't want to be a statistic."

The most common type of cautionary advice was to avoid encounters with the police. In one case this involved a mother counselling her children to "stay inside," because, as she put it, "authority is not your friend." "Stay away from them," another mother said, speaking about the police, "they're not your friend." Another said, "Don't go near them." Still another said, "I always caution them to be away from police. I told them, you know, every time when you see police, just leave. Yeah. Just leave. 'Cause these people, they make your business. Yeah. Just leave. Leave."

A few mothers told their children how to dress, or rather how not to dress: "I tell them not to wear hoodies, especially after 6pm, to prevent that identity mistake." Another said, "If we know you're going after six o'clock, you're not wearing a hoodie."

One mother advised her children to not get into altercations or try to break up fights because the police will not differentiate between the instigators and the victims: "If you see some group of boys fighting in the area, you should not involve yourself in it because the police will not separate who is who." Another said that there would be danger from both police and the community if they intervened in such an incident or stuck around: "If you talk to the police, you'll be a witness. You'll be enemy. So, you not winning on the side." One mother said simply, "Stay invisible." Another said:

> *I always told them, my kids, '[If] you saw something, you hear something, you are blind, you are deaf, you understand? Don't put your nose where it's not belong. Leave, walk away. You don't see, you don't hear, walk away. Don't even be nosy and look at it. No. Walk away. You see trouble. You see something wrong. Walk away. Walk.'*[33]

One reason mothers gave such advice was their belief that their children were in danger because of their skin color. "You're black," one mother reminded her child. Another mother advised her son

[33] These comments raise troubling questions about the boundaries of communities and the capacity of residents to resolve neighbourhood problems. If the advice is to "walk away" from conflict, even when the altercation involves someone from the Somali community, then the role of police intervention in their resolution might increase, despite the wishes of local residents.

not to "practice" his rights. "And I said, 'Don't practice your rights because it doesn't work.' I said, 'You don't have a right when you are a black, you don't have right.'" Still another said, "You have to obey every order, you have to say, you have to know one thing: we are black."

Another mother who came to this country as a 20-year-old told us through a translator, "When her kid reaches the age of 10, she will sit them down and tell them you're, you're black and you're a Muslim. And even if you're, if you're right or if you're wrong, no one's gonna give you a chance. So be careful." Another said:

> *I remind them that, 'No, [you] don't have rights, 'cause look at your brother. Look what happened to him. Look at your other brother. Look what happened to him. So, you guys had rights. Your brother's gonna be where his rights put him, in this predicament.'*
>
> *I keep telling them, 'Listen, remember always that you have the tag of being a black boy living in north opal. So, whenever you see a police officer, assume the worst but behave the best. And your behaviour will always either put you in trouble or will save you. And remember not to destroy your life because one bad word you say, or one behaviour you do can destroy your whole life. And there are plenty of examples around here.'*

A few mothers, however, counselled their child to take their rights seriously. "If you feel that they're rude to you," she said, "or, uh, if you feel any prejudice or, or racism, uh, take their badge number and then you make a complaint." Another said she advises them that "if they don't tell you that there's their cameras on and it's being recorded, that you want them to be recorded, initiate that recording." One mother who told her children to avoid the police and warned them "don't let me ever get a call that says, oh, you had an interaction with the police," nevertheless told them they have to know and assert their rights:

> *I think that's the most important thing, because a lot of times people of colour or people who are not educated enough to know their rights, they let the police get away with way too much. You know, if I have done nothing wrong, first of all, do you have even probable cause to even stop me and ask me anything? 'What do you mean you want to see my ID for what?' But people always think, 'Oh my God, it's the police.' They get so scared. They get all flustered, then they give them information. They don't have to, you know? If you know your rights, then you're good to go. 'Cause then they start getting, 'Okay, oh, so this person's actually smart, so this person caught on. I can get away with certain things with this person.' You know? So, it's good to educate yourself and know what your rights are. If you're not in the right, wrong, you didn't do nothing wrong. There's no need for you to show you an ID for what, what are you suspected of doing?*

This mother then proposed a script for her child's imagined interaction with the police:

> *I say, 'Ask them, 'Officer, what did I do wrong? Can you explain to me what I did wrong?' You know, engage them and let them know that you're smart, you're not stupid.' So, I let my kids know that and be calm, be cool and be collected. Don't scream. Just, you know, be wise with your, if you articulate your words properly, then you know, it's, it's, it's, it resolves a lot of issues I find. 'Cause when I talk to them, I let them know, 'Don't play with me. I know my rights.'*

Most mothers advised their children to ignore impulses to contest the actions of officers. "I train my kid not to ask their rights," one mother said. "I always tell them, forget what right you have in here. Forget, I born in Canada. Forget what you feel at that moment." A few mothers acknowledged it was difficult to relay this message because it grated against their children's sense of themselves and their ambitions. "My son," one mother said, "feels like he's a Canadian kid. But I was telling him, 'You are a Canadian citizen, but still, you need to watch out because you're also Somali.' Yeah. 'Because you're Somali, because you're black.'" Another mother described the disappointment it caused or compounded:

> *It's hard to get through to them. But again, it starts with that, with them being comfortable in their own skin. Teach your child, 'You are black, you are not white.' It's hard. It's very emotional when I say that. But it is what it is. You know, there are certain things we can change. Certain things we can't change. Yeah. Um, it happened to me too. Like I grew up in the west world, the western world. And I always lived as, you mean I am the same as others. It's not true. And I don't think it'll ever be true. I know we have been taught that, but that's not the reality. So, I think if the child has that understanding, it'll save them from a lot of problems.*

Talking Back

Few mothers said their children listened to them or took this advice. Some talked back. One mother said bluntly: "Well, my two kids don't listen to me." Another said that her children feel "they know everything already." A few mothers said their children already practiced avoidance and kept a code of silence. "Like I don't tell my kids the stuff about that, you know, put your hands up. I don't do that. I'm sure they know, they're on social media, you know… [Laugh], everything."

A few mothers said their children would not only ignore their advice but insist on contesting the actions of officers. One said, referring to her son, "For him, he's like, 'Why? Why? I'm not doing anything wrong!' But I say, 'No. If a police officer stops me, he has all right to stop me.' So, I say, 'No, when a police officer stops you, you follow.'" Several mothers portrayed her children and their friends as defiant, revealing a gap between their generation's views about what is appropriate in encounters with the police. One mother said, "Some kids, they arrogant. You know, they say, 'Oh no, I have a right.'" Several mothers told us similar things:

> *They're like, 'We're innocent!' They're like, 'Why are you the…' The police ask them certain questions and they're innocent. They're like, 'Who are you to ask me? Why are you asking me wrong stuff?' They get agitated and the police gets angry at that, and they beat them up sometime.*
>
> *Me, if I get pulled over, I would never ask the officer say, 'Why you pulled me over? But kids here, they have that evil like, 'Okay, what's the reason you pulling you over?' Right. And trust me, the uniform, they'll find any excuse. But he said, 'Mom, we have right to know why they pull us over. The first question you should ask is like, 'Okay officer, why are you pull me over?'' But that's, I feel as a mom, that's when things will change. It will escalate.*
>
> *But then when the police come and the boys are in the corner, the boys stay in the corner. They don't run. They don't care. Or they are high. They say I have a right to stand here. That's my building or my grandma or my mother building.*

I tell them everything you have to respect. You have to listen to the police. You're their parent. You're their mother. But they also have, they also are in the world. They see things.

Interviewer: What do they say to you?

Respondent: They say whatever. I'm a black man. That's what they say, 'I'm a black man. Yeah. They can treat you whatever they want.'

Most of the older mothers we spoke with felt cut off from their children, which complicated their efforts to advise them about how to interact with police. "The kids," one mother said, "they don't communicate with you. They are shut." She continued:

They don't tell you anything. The parent, they don't know what's going on. And my grandson, he's 16 years old. I sit with him; I want to talk to him and at least he can explain to me what's going on at school. He say, 'Grandma, can you stop?' I don't want, I don't want, who knows what's going on. If your child is not talk to you.

When you know what's going on, at least I can give you advice. I can tell you, 'Don't go that street. There's some bad stuff there.' But if I don't know that street, what's going on? How I can give you advice?

Some mothers included avoiding "certain neighbourhoods" in their advice, in part because of the higher suspected presence of police in such neighbourhoods and thus the greater probability of an unwanted encounter. One mother said bluntly, "Stay away from police," adding:

Make sure that you're, you know, you're not in close proximity to police or close enough for police to have conversations with you. Um, certain neighbourhoods that you know, you know, there's more police interactions. Avoid those neighbourhoods and, you know, stay out of trouble. Just, you know, be vigilant.

Only one mother we spoke with shared the sentiment of her children, believing they had the right to be confrontational with the police. Her tone was truculent:

I tell 'em I'm not scared of no police. And they see how I talk to them. And the police know. We, we, we have a mouth on me. [Laugh]. A real good mouth. So, they know not to mess with me. And I have lawyer friends and I'm already in the industry, so I'm good. But these poor moms, they, they're not right. They don't know. They don't have friends. They don't like, you know what I mean? Like, they don't know the legal system. Like in order for you to know things, you have to learn. You have to study, you have to read, you have to acknowledge, you know what I mean? Not everybody knows there are 48 laws. They don't know the 10 commandments. They don't know there's certain things to go by. They don't know that. They don't have to give out their IDs. They don't know. They have, don't even need to respond to police. If they question them, they don't know they can walk away. They feel obligated and responsible to do it because it's what they've been told. Mm-hmm because of what they're, you know what I mean? If a police officer today and I'm just walking, why the frick are you talking to me the way I commit a crime, sir? Did I do something that you see that's illegal? And if I did something illegal, tell me what it is. And he has no answers. Thank you very much. And you bring up that phone and you start recording the motherfucker.

Few mothers expressed such hostility and commended confrontation. Most mothers lamented their inability to communicate with, learn from, and effectively advise their children about how to interact safely with the police.

What Mothers Tell Each Other

Mothers often exchanged stories with each other about upsetting incidents such their children fighting at school, witnessing a shooting in the neighbourhood, or having a confrontation with the police. Some told us stories about their friends' children being injured by the police. Others emphasized a general commiseration about their troubles with children and police:

> *Yeah, the mothers, they talk so many cries. Every four women or mother, when they come together, they cry each other because the way the kids running around and the, the police and how they interacted.*

Many mothers retold stories that had been relayed to them by other mothers in ways that made those experiences sound like their own. For instance, one mother narrated the frightening experience of another family in such detail that made her sound like a witness:

> *It was a very snowy day. And so, she took, uh, some of her kids to the, the daycare and the other kids were going to school. And when she was getting her kids ready to go to school after she dropped off her other kids to daycare, the police came, um, and broke into the, the neighbour's house. So, what she saw that they took the man outside and he was just wearing, um, uh, like a tank top. Um, so they took that man and his girlfriend, and they were barely wearing any clothes. And they, they, um, handcuffed them and then put them outside, and they told her, you can't go into your house.*

Few mothers told us that they shared such experiences or exchanged information about policing with people outside of their own neighbourhood, community, or immediate circle of friends. In a few cases, linguistic barriers impeded its travel, but more often these stories did not cross ethnic, geographic, or social boundaries for other reasons, including the perceived incommensurability of Somali experience. For instance, one young mother told us why she didn't talk about any experiences of the police in her neighbourhood with friends and colleagues at work:

> *Some parents will say, 'Hey, you know, like, be careful. I heard something happened in that community. Uh, just, just, just be careful with your kids.' Um, and when you start to hear that talk, uh, it scares you. Because we live in, in, in, in a country that, that many other communities don't have that discussion. They'll say, 'Good morning, how are you? How's your day?' 'Oh, I'm going to golf tomorrow.' So, it's like, I always like, you know, so it's just, it is really frustrating to just be having that conversation and then go to work and have, 'How was your weekend?' 'Oh, I went to Mexico.' 'Oh, okay. I went to swimming.' Okay. And, uh, you don't even want to answer what you did this week, because this week, um, you know, there was like a trauma in the community. So, you don't want to let, you don't bring that.*

Several mothers said there was little communication across different ethnic groups such as Jamaicans and Somalis, even among neighbours. One said there was more communication between Somali and Pakistani parents because of a common religion, but even then, this exchange was limited. For instance, through a translator, one mother told us there was little

interaction between neighbours in her area "because, um, where she lives, there's more Jamaicans than Somalis." Another mother told us through a translator, "In her neighbourhood there's more Jamaicans than Somali. So, they, they don't really talk about, um, the police to each other." For some mothers, this isolation was acute, leaving the impression that they were alone:

> To be honest with you, the building I live there's not a lot of Somali. Not a lot of Somali. My floor is, uh, from Ghana, Nigeria or Jamaica. In the building, maybe we are four, five Somali families. In my floor there no Somali. It's only me.
>
> Interviewer: But are these neighbours, people from Ghana, from Nigeria, are they scared of the police, too?
>
> Respondent: No, they don't, they don't scare the police. They're not scared. They know, even if they see police on my floor, they know it's my son. That's how it is.

One mother—who told us that she only exchanged information with other parents within the Somali community—had been inspired by what she heard from Jamaican mothers about an informal community legal defense fund they had initiated to handle problems created by contacts with the police, such as a traffic stop and ticket or an arrest and a bail application. She was impressed by their collective action, and implied that Somali mothers might at some point in the future follow suit:

> *When [the Jamaicans] have a problem with the system, the lawyers are ready. It's a good system to think that we, and we are starting, if we become 200, if we become 1000, we started that. 'Cause the police, we have to fight with them as illegal. We, because every community, when they come to this country, they have their problems, and they solve their problems. Only Somalia doesn't solve it yet. Even Jamaican, they solve their problems. Now. They are not like before.*

Another mother relayed an encounter with an acquaintance that reinforced her sense that the Somalis were alone in their problems, even if they were not distinct:

> *An Italian guy one time told me, you know, 'Hey, you Somali?' 'Yes, I'm Somali. How do you know?' 'I've been 1962. I was in Somalia,' he say, 'and I was working there, and I know, and you have a problem this country because we, and when they were mafia, you know, Italian mafia, when they were, we were had, you know, head-to-head in this country. But now it's your turn.' And I say, 'What do you mean, 'It's your turn'?' Because everybody who comes this country, they have a problem. You know, some Italian, India and now Somalia. And I say, 'I never thought that way,' but when you look at it, it's, you know, it's the same thing. Everybody, you know, they faces when they come new country.*

Only one mother told us she counselled other mothers to assert themselves during an encounter with the police:

> *Some of the moms, I teach them, you know, take a pen and paper, um, ask them for their business card. The police is stopping you. So, because a lot of time we don't remember if Joseph or John or, you know, because they are not Absam or Ahmed, you know? So, so that's why I asked them, you know, take them for their business card, so at least you know it.*

And then, uh, if that's incident and ask for incident number in the back of the, uh, the business card, they have to write it down. That's the advice I give to them.

What Mothers Tell Friends and Relatives "Back Home"

When we asked mothers what they told friends and family in Somalia about their life in Toronto, many referred to Somalia as "back home." A few told encouraging stories about Toronto and Canada. One mother focused on the array of opportunities she found here, though she started with the cold climate and said nothing about policing.

> Interviewer: So, if someone from back home told you, 'Oh, I want to come to Canada,' what would you say to them?
>
> Respondent: Of course you are welcome any time. It's very nice country, but its winter, very cold. Gonna have to deal with a cold. But it's got a very good side. There's a lot of opportunity, which is very true. Very true. We have a lot of opportunity. It doesn't matter if you are married, or don't marry, you have a grandchild, you can go to school, you can do something for yourself.
>
> Interviewer: And do you ever tell them about, you know, your encounters with the police or the violence that you hear about? Or do you not tell them that at all?
>
> Respondent: Actually, I don't talk about that.

Only one mother focused right away on policing when we asked this question. She unfavorably contrasted her experiences with the police here and in Somalia. "When I used to live back home," she said, "most of my family consisted of policemen. At that time, I actually liked the police. But then when I came here and I saw the police here, I, I got… fear. Even though the police may have good policemen, or, and bad policemen." Another mother said her relatives in Somalia asked her about policing in Toronto, explaining that "because of social media, they already know before you do, they comment and say, oh, you have the police beating you up. Why don't you just come to Somalia?" But few mothers talked about policing.

A few mothers said they talked with friends about cultural differences between Canada and Somalia. For instance, one mother said she was chagrined by the different social trajectories of young men back home and in Canada. "There," she said, "the person will talk about their son who will go drink, fish, bring that, go hug, walk around. And then they laugh at you when you say that 'My son, my son, is same age as [yours].' They say, 'My son almost getting married. But yours look still looking.' Different environment. There different life." Another mother lamented a "culture clash" for young Somali men coming to Canada, especially for those who were "fresh off the boat" and expected future wives to do "whatever he tell her to do." Another mother contrasted the sense of community back home with its absence here in Toronto. "Back home," she said, "they have a sense of community. Yes, they have struggles and would love to trade places with us, but... it's just different here. It's not good for your mental health."

Several mothers said they shared information about the strenuous economic conditions of their life here, which were, one put it, "not all roses," adding that it was not easy to disabuse their friends of beliefs that "everything's perfect" in Canada. One mother said "'It's not like that.' I let her know, 'It's not like that. It's, it's way more rougher living here than it is over there." Another mother

said, "sometimes they think you're lying because you're here and you don't want other people to come." Another said, "They don't believe them," referring to other mothers who talk about hardship, "because they think that they don't want them to come also because life here is good." Another said, "So they say, 'No. So, you're lying to us 'cause you don't want us to come.'" One mother, who was scathing about life in Canada, told us no one back home would believe her. "I tell people that it's shit," she said. "But it's funny because I think everybody back home, like, they hear 'Canada' and they think, 'Oh my God.' But it's like, 'No. It's shit here.'"

One mother—who had recently been assaulted and was informed by a victim advocate that her offender was now no longer under house arrest—said, "Honestly, like the people back home, they won't ever believe what we tell them. They think money grows on trees here." Another mother told friends back home about the scale of social inequality in Canada, and the ease with which a person can get "criminalized":

> I tell them it's bad. It's bad. Yeah.
>
> Interviewer: What, what specifically do you tell them?
>
> Respondent: Two things. Taxes. And Interest rates. The, the rich people got richer, the poor people got poorer. I say, the minute you do anything stupid; you'll be criminalized. You cannot work, you get gonna get frustrated, you get depression. Right. You'll be like going to mental institution. You just, you're departing without departing completely.

The incongruity between expectations and experiences grounded several mothers' accounts of how they talked to people back home.[34] One mother believed that life might be better "there than here" because she and her friends were compelled to accept things in Canada that conflicted with her sense of right and wrong:

> *I feel like they have it better there than here in a way, but at the same time they don't because of the, but um, this place, I'll be honest with you, like I see why our parents brought us here, but at the same time, I don't know, because Canada's not all it, like, I wouldn't recommend anybody to move down here, I'll be honest with you. Right? There's so many things that are, that we have to accept [but] that we don't have to accept.*

Insecurity and Violence

When we asked whether they spoke to friends and relatives back home about violence and insecurity, most mothers said they talked about their sons' risk of being injured by violence or involved in crime, but not about policing. Indeed, mothers said they relayed little about policing in Toronto when they spoke to relatives back home. Mothers were clear that they were making deliberative choices about what to convey; they were also attuned to what meanings they sought to ascribe to these events in those conversations, and the meanings of their experiences. For instance, one mother told us through a translator: "If it's a young teenage boy, she'll tell them not to come because you're running away from gun shootings and here is the same." A few mothers said they didn't speak to friends and relatives back home about their sense of insecurity here.

[34] In prior decades, sociological research on male Algerian migrants in France found that many new residents avoided sharing painful experiences of immigration and instead projected success or minimized their difficulties (Sayad 2004). We make no comparisons between these communities, though we are struck that the Somali mothers we spoke with in Toronto, by contrast, emphasized personal tragedies and familial hardship.

One told us, through a translator, "She doesn't want to worry them. Because they have this perfect picture about Canada, so she doesn't want to ruin that image for them." But most mothers spoke openly about their fears of violence and dread of the criminal justice system when portraying the life of their children here:

> *Sometimes I tell them that maybe you have tough life there for other things, but maybe it's better there for your children. Because here, for children, especially boys, it's very hard. You have your kid, a son. You are worried, you are sleeping. You never sleep. You never sleep better. You never, when you lying down, you, you know, like, you are always thinking, 'Where's my son? He's 21 years old. 20 years old. Why is he late? He went to work. He didn't, he didn't come. What happened? Where are you? Where? Where are you? Where? Where are you?' You know? It's too much.*

One mother advised friends who were struggling in Somalia to stay put, despite the troubles back home, because:

> *We say at least back home you were not scared that your son will die, okay? Or that your daughter will die. Right? I tell my family, 'Don't come to Canada. There's no life.' Because a lot of people came. Like my aunt, she came here with a lot of kids. They all destroyed. So, I say, 'Stay home. Okay? Starve. If you want to starve. 'Cause the money they giving you, it's not going to help you. Because every day they hear that somebody's dying. They say, 'Why are you guys there? Somalia is better than [Canada].' Which is true. Yeah. Back home is better.*

Another mother told us she would advise young people in Somalia to stay at home instead of moving to Canada because of the ease and speed with which an altercation would land one in prison:

> *I tell them we have a different culture. The culture we have is like, the kids have the freedom to, to learn their mistakes without having a huge case unless they kill somebody. In Somalia, so, let's say you fight, you punch, you'll not have a criminal record. But what's gonna happen is like, you get one, two, or three warnings at the same time. If you don't learn, you will get beat up, the same way you did. And then you'll learn your lesson. You have your experience, right? So instead, here, like you'll be locked up and sometimes get the beating from the other inmates, right? Yeah. There you'll be getting the beating outside. And you'll behave like everybody else. That's better to not be put in prison unless you are crazy and you just craving for the beating. So that, that, that's what it is. I say, 'The minute you do anything stupid, you'll be criminalized, you cannot work, you get, gonna get frustrated, you get depression. Right. You'll be, like, going to mental institution.*
>
> *Like, my mom a lot of the times like she'll, um, they'll be like, 'Oh yeah, like, how's Canada? Like you love it here?' And she was like, 'You can't raise a family here. You can't raise kids.' Like if you have sons, you're better off like not raising them here. Like, 'cause she thinks that they're either going to be part of like a gang or criminal acts or they're going to be like profiled as that. Okay. So even if you want to do your best and like, succeed and stuff, just 'cause we're in a neighbourhood that might have some sort of like gang related things, or like criminal activity, they automatically assume that everybody's involved in that, so you don't get a fair shot in life for the most part.*

It's, it's very sad because a lot of people came here to have a better life. Yeah. To go to school, become educated, have a job, and take out a business. Right? And when you end up feeling that you are excluded, you're marginalized. Your credentials back home are not recognized and, and your dad is hardly making ends meet and being a taxi driver and what have you. That has not only physical negative, but also psychological impact on you. Right? And, and when people ask us, they're like, how come half of the kids are dead and the other half in jail? What is happening? This is, this is crisis.

One mother whose son had been killed in Toronto worried about the recruitment of youth into violent gangs. She said, "Back home is not safe also, okay. But some place is safe. Okay? You can, you don't scare somebody. Shoot him. Oh. But here you scared." She added that it was okay for young men to move to Canada, but not boys, who "change right away. 'Cause you have, it's like, uh, if you have a friend, bad friend, you become like."

Many mothers rejected the idea that life for boys and young men was safer in Somalia. One told us through a translator that "Somalia has some also issues of shooting and gun violence. They are facing the same consequences, and the boys are dying out here and the life is not good. The boys are being killed in Somalia and the boys are dying. We are all, we killed. The same. There's no differences." Another mother said, "I'm not happy. Somalia, nothing is different." Another mother insisted there was an equivalence to the violence:

Dying is dying. Wherever you are. Yeah. If you are, if you are a youth in, most of the youth are in jail. Mm. Or are dying. Yeah. There's nothing different. Back home, many years, all the same. Almost same thing. Okay? We struggling here a lot. We thought we come here safety. Not to me, but when your children see there is friends, there is classmates who die, who you know. Yeah. Who is in jail, who's this. Yeah. Even for the brain is bad, you know?

Another mother told us that when she listens to the news from home she believes "it's the same as here. Our kids dying here and dying there. Same thing. If we want to run, where we can run?" She struggled to say whether she would advise her relatives not to come to Canada:

Because there's a violence. You run out and you come in another violence. I'm talking about just Toronto. Even though the violence is not only Toronto, is Edmonton, too. But as a Toronto, over 400 kids we buried the last eight, nine years. So, I don't want to tell them, run from the gun and come here from the gun.

Another young mother told us that her parents, who also relocated to Toronto, believed that life in Somalia was no less dangerous, but that it would be better had they all stayed back home:

Like, we left war and we're in war again. And I've been back home, and I've told people, 'I swear, I wish I could just give you, my passport. Let's trade lives. But I would never encourage anybody to be here. The violence alone gives you paranoia. Sleepless nights. It's, it's, it's a big trauma that, like, you, I don't think one can erase. I think you just become, um, numb to it or you become, you start to have a defense mechanism towards it.'

They say, 'Oh, um, maybe it's better they stay here in Somalia instead of going there. 'Cause most of 'em are dying over there. Or most of 'em are in jail over there.' And we've heard people who've lost their kids say, 'I should have just stayed back home.' So, when they lose the kid, they say this.

Another mother insisted life was much safer in Canada than Somalia in general, though not for the children. She relayed how friends back home who read news about a tragic incident involving a young girl in Toronto were worried that her daughter might have been the victim:

> *They, they ask me, say, 'What happened? Your daughter, what happened?' 'Another community,' I say. 'Canada is safe. A hundred percent because Canada is not shooting everywhere. Okay? Government. Government. No fighting Canada. No like Somalia.' But for children, especially Somali, headache.*

One mother said that many young boys had returned to Somalia, fleeing conditions here that were dangerous to their physical and mental health. Some committed suicide upon return, she said, and yet friends and family back home still believed conditions in Canada were worse:

> *You know Somalia, how many Somali boys run from here? Some of them become mental illness. 'Cause of the police, what they did. They're not normal. They're, they're, so, my family even said, why you guys choose there? I seen so many bad stories. We seen so many guys. Some of them killed themselves back home. So, they feel bad for us. You know, they pray for us. You know, they try to keep us in their prayers. And I'm hearing this, I'm hearing this from multiple families: 'Why are you guys continuing to live in Canada if they, if you guys don't feel safe there?' Like, they're questioning themselves as to 'Why? Why?'*

But not all mothers said they would discourage others from coming, and several wrestled with conflicting ideas about danger, difference, and opportunity. "Canada is not a place where you want to raise your kids," one mother said, adding:

> A lot of traditional Somali people would prefer to raise their kids back home because of exposure to things like gang violence, drugs, and alcohol, a sin in my religion. So, things like alcohol, and just ultimately, like exposure to bad crowds, bad people. Whereas in Somalia or in a, um, predominantly Muslim country, there's none of that.
>
> Interviewer: And so, if people from Somalia tell you or your parents that they want to come, would, would they encourage them to come? Would they tell them to stay?
>
> Respondent: Yeah, I think ultimately, I know my mom's been talking about trying to bring people from Somalia back to Canada, because, at the end of the day, like, despite there being exposure to bad things, there's also, um, what's the word I'm looking for? Opportunities.

The tension between opportunity and security shaped another mother's thinking who ultimately sided with opportunity. She put herself in some collective shoes and said:

> I guess it depends, right? I guess they would tell others to come because like when I really think about it, I'm like, opportunity wise, like if they want to leave Somalia, like yeah. For good reason. Like you should leave Somalia. It's not a safe place, yeah. Um, but definitely like, I guess let them know what they're walking into. And like certain things that's scary to come to Canada and like certain neighbourhoods and like, you know. Yeah. Still, like look out for and stuff.

Another mother who talked with relatives back home about incidents of police violence in Toronto, including the fatal shooting of a Somali boy, wrestled with this question about how to cope with the danger. She believed that by remaining here she could help fix "mistakes":

> *So, it's, it's just, it's that, it's that weird because somebody, some someone will say, 'But if it's Canada, is that horrible, then why, why you guys live there? Move somewhere else.' It's, Canada is, is, is amazing on a lot of stuff, you know, just so, uh, and, and, uh, and, and I think the best thing for me is to really tell where there are issues are and fix it, not run away our problems, because it will cut with us. If we run away from our problems, it will cut with us. And it, and I think Canada is sort of, for me, like an innovation where we make mistakes, but we have to fix our mistakes.*

Another mother who told us she would encourage others to come to Canada believed the "system" could be repaired: "I say we are waiting the system here, this Canada, this system so we are gonna fix it. The system, you know, we ask our government if they have to fix it, our, this system."

For other mothers, though, the combination of crime and racism was enough to discourage others from coming. "I don't advise nobody to come to Canada," one mother said. "Because you know what? The child is not safe, even if he goes to the elevator, 'cause she's black, they think it's criminal." Another mother said, "I say don't send any boy here. Why? Because police, they saw maybe a couple of bad things. And everybody they see when they see the colour, that's what people can believe." Another mother told us, "We don't have the same culture; we don't have the same skin colour. And, so, they treat you however they want to treat you."

A few mothers said that their children had gotten in trouble and now were unable to extricate themselves from the clutches of criminal justice, which eliminated opportunities.

> *Somebody called from back home and they want to come here and they're trying to do the group five sponsorship, whatever. So, my cousin, she told them, 'Don't come.' Yes, 'Don't come.' They're not going because he's a, he's a, he's a man, right? He's a young man. They're, you're not gonna have opportunity. You're gonna, it's better you stay where you are and start business over there and get married and have family back home, right? 'Cause of her experience and her, what happened to her with the whole police situation. 'Cause couple of her kids got into problems and there was a whole, so because of that experience, when people call from back home, she tells them 'It's not safe. It's not, especially if you're a male.'*

One mother told us that the mothers whose sons got into trouble here were now stuck in prison, unable to leave. In vain, her friends "tell us to move back":

> *They say, you guys don't have a life. You know, you run away from gun, you have a gun. Your kids are gone. Jail, gun, empty-handed. You coming back empty-handed. You leave your kids there because your kids cannot go with you when they have a criminal record on.*

Another mother told us through a translator that the despair from this trap was fatal:

> *They can't build a life here with all these charges against them and all the accusations. So, what kind of life do you have? They're charged. They also say that, uh, you are associated with people who stole from so and so. And they put that on the record. That person then starts*

to be that life. And then they end up killing, killing themselves because they don't have a life to live for.

I tell my son about stories back home. And here he's not even allowed to go on his own to just take a walk. And he's 20. Yeah. 20. And he keeps asking me, 'Why do you, why did you bring us here? Why are we here? If you had such good childhood, why are we, why are we not having that?'

The dominant reason mothers cited for their lament and ambivalence was insecurity, which was compounded by weaknesses in the system of justice. For example, one mother who told her relatives "Don't come, it's worse here" feared others would die in violence like her brother, who was killed by "a 17-year-old kid who come stab him to death." She explained the precarity in terms of "the system":

> There's mental people out in the world and it can happen anywhere in the world. But it is just sad the fact that the safety of Canada for having an underage 17-year-old kid walking around 5:30 AM in the morning and he's half white, half black. And he only gets five years in jail for doing a murder. A crucial murder where there is cameras everywhere that's seen him, what he's done. Yeah, of course the system's fucked up. But hey, who are we to say much?
>
> Interviewer: And what did the family in Somalia, what did they think of that tragedy?
>
> Respondent: That was heartbreaking.
>
> Interviewer: Could they make sense that that could happen?
>
> Respondent: Yeah. They did. Now everybody does. Now it's a wake-up call. Some people decided not to come. A lot of people decided not to come. 'Cause it's not safe. And the way that police handled it too, wasn't they just, yeah, they need a lot of work. The police need a lot of work. They need to like, they need to sit down and actually like, figure out what they, they need to do. The steps that they should start taking. 'Cause I get it's crime stopping. But you also have, they have a life too, right?

One mother told us she discouraged friends and relatives from coming to Canada:

> *Yeah, I tell 'em not to, not to come to this country. There's no point. It's, it's, it's the battle. Unless you're like coming here to do work and like staying focused and just grinding, I feel like to find peace and love and affection and all that goody stuff. It's back home.*

Section 4: Hopes and Beliefs

The final section of this report describes mothers' beliefs about the future, including their aspirations for better policing and greater community safety. Nearly all the mothers we spoke to were eager to share their ideas about how to reduce violence in their community and improve policing for the city. Some of their ideas reflected a desire for respect from the police as well as dignified treatment from a system of justice they perceived as opaque and unkind. Some expressed confidence in the capacity of their community to improve itself on its own, while others said there was a need for more outside resources and stronger relationships with government.

Some of the mothers' statements about the future echo the hopes and desires of others in similar contexts. For instance, Campeau et al. (2021) find that, despite fear of the police, residents in marginalized communities rarely reject policing and instead envision a reformed version that confers respect as well as safety. The mothers we spoke to in Toronto called for more caring and consistent policing, some of which they believed could come from better training and genuine knowledge about the community. They expressed a desire to be seen and heard, to obtain support for their community, and hoped that policing could help.

Hopes for the Community

Most mothers pleaded for greater safety in the community, which they steadfastly conceived of in our interviews as related (and mainly constrained) to crime and policing. None believed the police could produce such safety by themselves and some doubted the value of more police in their community. One said they need "more empathy, not more police." Another worried about collaborating with the police, fearing if we give information, will it come back us haunting all the time?"

Some mothers thought police could play a more positive role in their community by being "proactive," or being present "constantly," rather than only responding to crises and trying to apprehend suspects of a crime. "We have to work with the police," one mother insisted, "and, and parent together." Other mothers believed that community safety could be achieved through a different kind of partnership with the police and city. One mother said, "Community safety has to be all of us participating in our city. And the leader of that is the cops." Some mothers thought the police should play an auxiliary role in this partnership: "We take it upon ourselves to, to be our own security police and vigilant aunties. Like, we have our own neighbourhood watch. You might not even know it."

Few mothers thought the police should play a defining or central role in community safety. Some insisted "the community" determine what community safety is and deliver it. "Community safety?" one mother asked rhetorically. "What makes it is when the community come together and watch the neighbourhood and each other." Another mother was adamant the neighbourhood lead on community safety:

> *Community safety starts with the neighbourhood itself. For those that live in the neighbourhood to become police of the neighbourhood. It's not the police that can create community safety. It's the people that live in the neighbourhood that can create safety.*

A few mothers thought there must be a reckoning with problems inside the community before any such safety would ensue. One said that people needed to start talking openly about the problems that cause the violence in their neighbourhoods, and for some kind of external "intervention" to prompt or accompany its initiation:

> *We need to have some sort of an intervention. They need intervention. Trust me. 'Cause it's like, even at the mosque one day I was, I like, there was times that they used to bury like two, three boys prayer. And uh, I remember, 'cause I knew one of the kid, and I remember the Imam saying, 'Ladies and gentlemen, this needs to stop. You need to, you need to start talking to each other.' And that I will never forget. He said, 'This needs to stop.'*

Adopting the voice and posture of the Imam, the mother continued:

> *We cannot afford to bury one boy or two boys or three boys each day, each week. This is unacceptable. You guys need to stop being in denial and talk to each other, support each other. Don't hide your secrets from your next-door neighbour or your, you know, your, your friend. And be like, oh, oh my son, he's in school. He's about to graduate. Mind you, he's like the biggest drug dealer in the city. Or he went to Edmonton for work and he's not working. And that seems to be the story. I don't know if you ever heard that story.*

Many mothers believed there was a need for outside help to end cultural isolation, economic alienation, and government neglect. They said the shortage of good jobs, the presence of guns, drugs, and gangs, and the poor state of public housing contributed to teenage torpor and juvenile delinquency. "Our kids, they lost," one mother said. "They're not bad kids, but they don't know where they are. They hear something outside. They hear something. They confused." Another mother said "We need counselling groups for kids. We need to talk to these kids because nobody's there for them." There was bitterness about community housing, with mothers criticizing security in such environments and lamenting that "there's no accountability for those neighbourhoods, because it's run by the government." Other mothers thought there need to be a wholesale approach to improving community safety, including investment in community centers, schools, and social programs:

> *I think a few things will help community safety. Giving more funding to do, uh, community development. To do a prevention piece rather than the intervention. And more programming. Having restorative justice will also help out. Right. And, and, and, and to hold police accountable. Accountability piece has to be there. Right? And, and making sure that the youth are getting the same treatment. Not only Somali youth, but Somali youth, black youth, white youth, all youth. They're all Canadians. And they should be treated with respect and kindness. At the end of the day, they're kids, they will make mistakes. This is not to say the youth are angels or they're perfect, they're not. But how you interact with them can have a different outcome.*

A few mothers believed that violence could be diminished by the cultivation of better role models for mothers, fathers, and boys in families. Several thought psychotherapy would help mothers overcome grief and isolation:

> *I would say maybe give them maybe therapy or someone to talk to. I feel like a lot of them have like mental health issues. They don't know it and refuse to believe it. Because in our culture, like Somali culture, like, mental health is not a thing. I don't know how to explain it, but back home in Africa, like, they don't believe in that.*

Another mother prescribed therapy for all youth and adults alike:

> *It doesn't matter which community. Jamaicans. Poles. Hell's Angels. There's literally like white criminals who are you know, there's shit happening to them every day, too, you know? And I feel like they need therapy, too.*

One mother insisted that therapy might prevent the grooming of youth that were vulnerable and susceptible to the lure of brash and bigger boys:

These tough looking children or youth or guys or whatever, they're not as tough as they look. They are vulnerable, you understand? They're just worried about the bigger guys. And we don't know who the bigger guys are.

More mothers thought that new cultural programs and greater economic opportunities might distract youth from their torpor and territorialization of conflict, especially if such programs were available and accessed when children were still young. One mother told us:

I just think it needs to start from a young age. I don't think that you could anything about it once they're mature. But basketball, community service for young people would help. Just give them access to different things. So, they'll be so busy that they won't have time for [violence and drugs].

One mother believed such opportunities needed to be public to curb the physical and social isolation of youth, many of whom were addicted to vice-filled virtual games:

All these kids are gamers too. Like even incorporating that as well, I wouldn't even find that a bad idea. Like they're all gamers. Like, you know, even like incorporating that into like, kind of like a little like hangout thing. It's not too bad. 'Cause most of the time they're sitting at home in their rooms and it's like you're talking to their friends on an actual headset. Why not? Like why not incorporate that into like an in-person thing? You know what I mean? Make it more like in reality and not actually virtual.

Another mother said greater cultural and economic opportunity needed to be backed by enforcement as well as encouragement:

So yeah, enforcing, enforcing safety measures and enforcing ways to like, make sure that the younger generation is like actively involved in something else and distracting them with things that, like, you maybe feel like there's some importance to them. Um, I know that obviously sports is a big thing. Um, even just like trying to do the occasional like, you know, like just drop in, come hang out. Like, you know what I mean? Like, it happens, but like, it's not as common anymore. Like we used to have it, like our back our day used to have it, but it's not as common anymore because like people don't want to hang on.

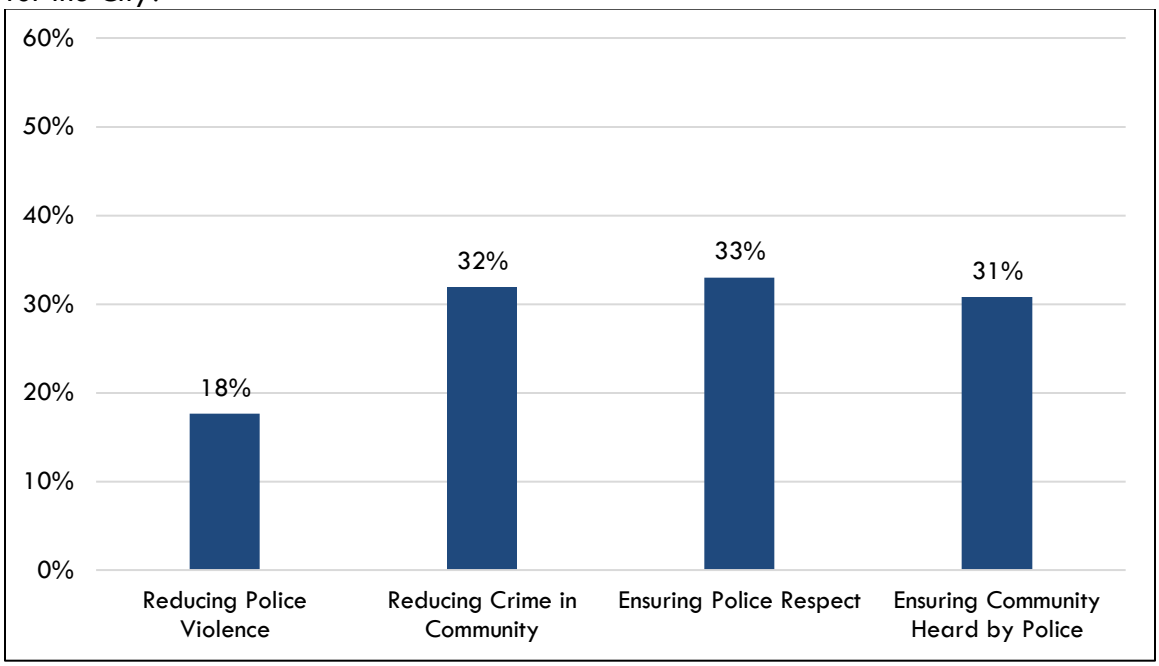
Priorities for the City

We asked mothers to tell us which of the following four possible priorities for the city were the most important to them.

a) Reducing police violence
b) Reducing crime in your community
c) Ensuring that the police treat all people with respect
d) Ensuring the community is heard by the police

In Figure 15, we report on what mothers think should be the highest priority of the above set of possibilities. Nearly one-fifth of mothers said reducing police violence should be the greatest priority, yet we note that this was the least common response to the question.

Figure 15: Which of the Following Do You Think Should Be the Highest Priority for the City?



Note: Due to multiple responses, columns do not add up to 100%.

This said, we also note that mothers' priorities seemed to vary depending on their own neighbourhood experiences. For example, as we show in Figure 16, in neighbourhoods where neighbours are less willing to help each other, our interviewees were more likely to prioritize that the community is heard by the police; and, as we show in Figure 17, in neighbourhoods where mothers felt least safe, they were least focused on prioritizing this need to be heard by the police.

Figure 16: Priorities for the City by Neighbours' Willingness to Help

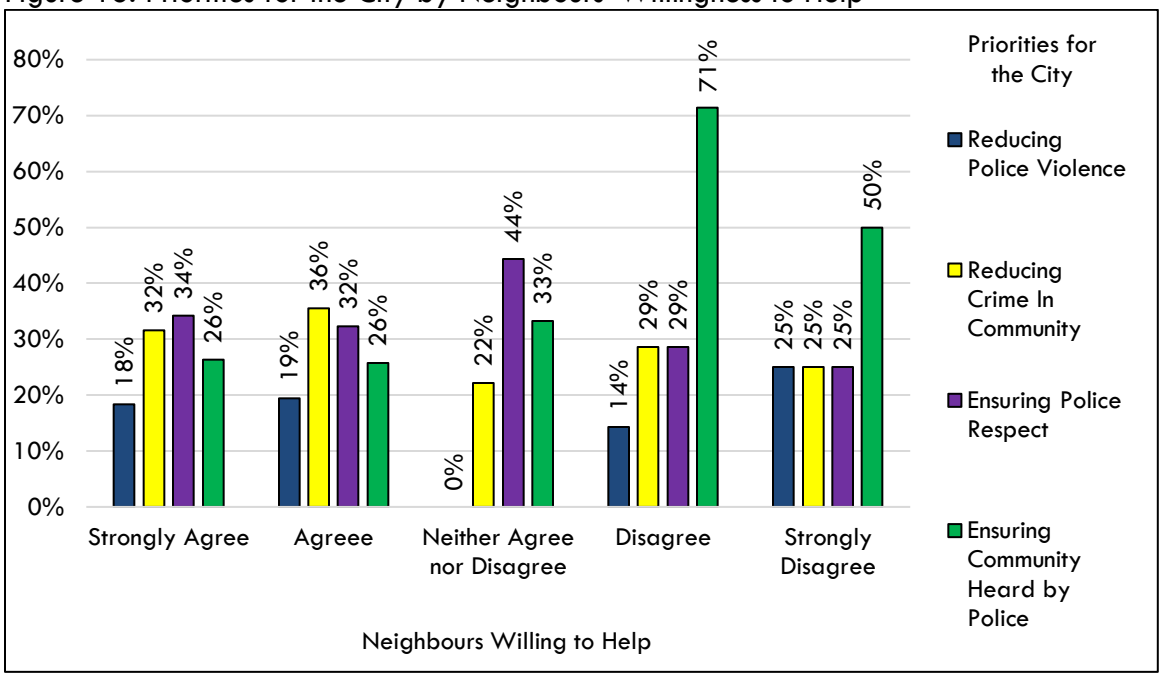
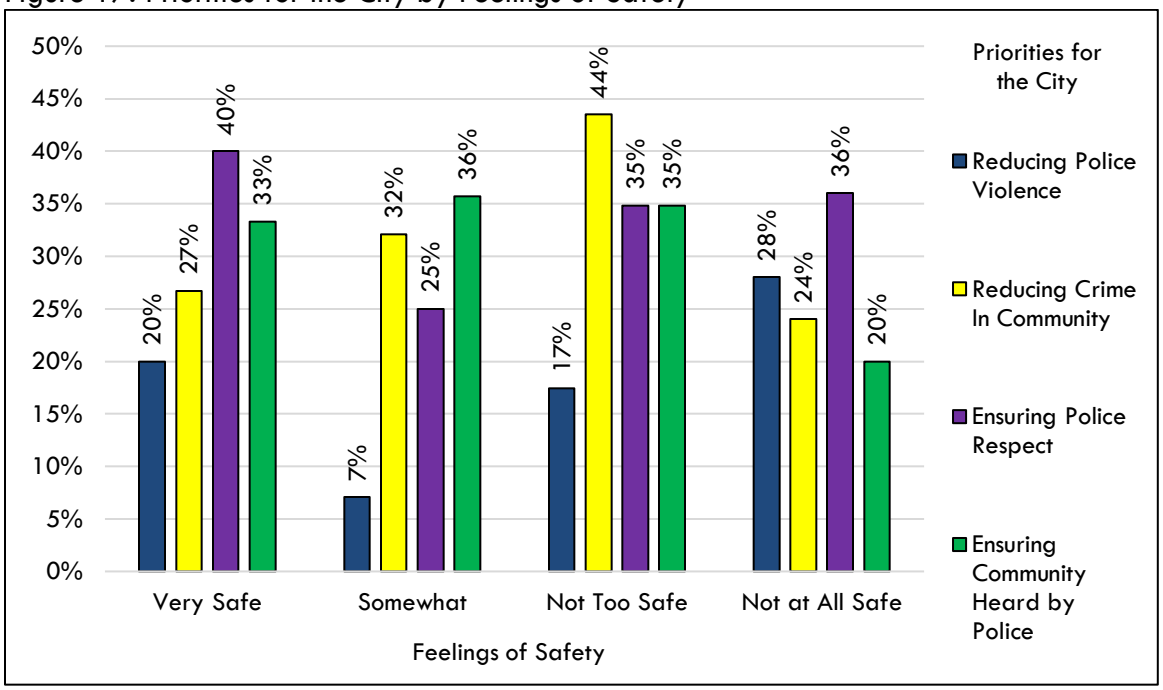
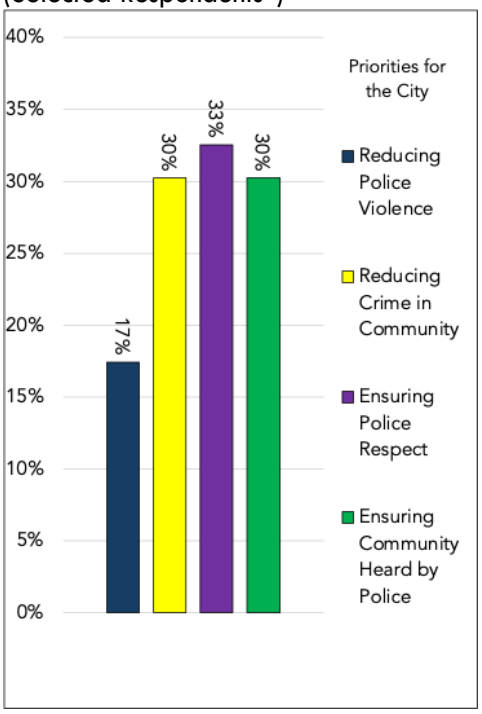


Figure 17: Priorities for the City by Feelings of Safety



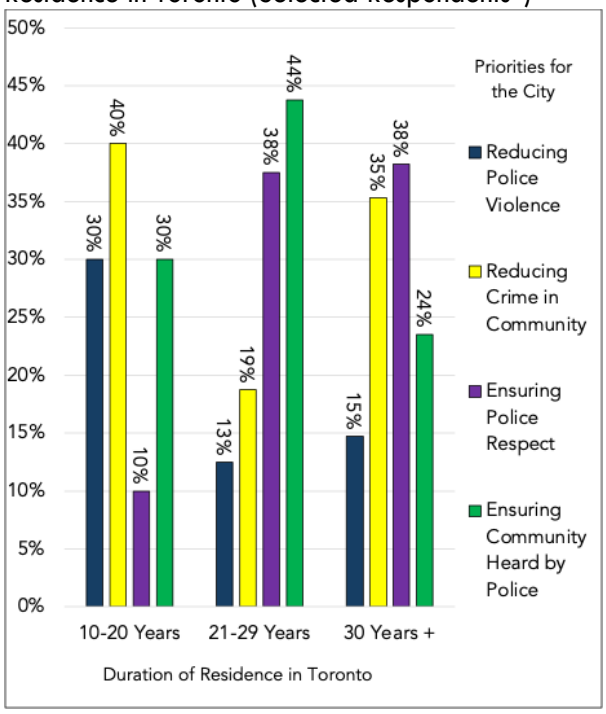
As we see in Figure 18, mothers are generally split on the most important priority to pursue—even among mothers who have been in Toronto over ten years, we see a lack of consensus on which ought to be the first priority for the future. There may be some relationship with experiences in the city, or potentially with age of children: for those mothers who volunteered more precisely how long they had lived in Toronto, those who have been in the city longer are more likely to prioritize ensuring police respect, and less likely to focus on reducing police violence (Figure 19).

Figure 18: Priorities for the City (Selected Respondents*)



*Analysis includes respondents who have resided in Toronto for 10 years or longer (95% of sample)

Figure 19: Priorities for the City by Duration of Residence in Toronto (Selected Respondents*)



*Analysis includes respondents who have resided in Toronto for 10 years or longer (95% of sample)

a) Reducing Police Violence

One woman—who initially hesitated and ended up prioritizing reducing police violence—explained her view as follows:

> *With crime, you know, at the end of the day, that's indicative of all of us as a community. But with police it's different. They're the ones with the badge. They're the ones with the gun. They're the ones with the power. And that's why. Yeah. It's number one.*

Another mother who prioritized reducing police violence believed a bundle of beneficial side-effects would flow from its diminution:

> *Reducing police violence is number one to be quite honest. And I think that's the biggest problem we have with them: reducing police violence. And why, if you ever had to say my second would probably be making your right voice heard. And the reason why I say this is because if the police does their job right, they reduce crime in our community. They take away who they need to take away, but they do it in a way that they're not tormenting or traumatizing us in the process.*

Another mother who initially struggled to choose among the options but settled on reducing police violence emphasized the interaction between police violence and violence in the community. When we asked, "What's the most important priority for you?", she replied unambiguously:

Reduce violence. To reduce the violence.

Interviewer: Of the police or in the community?

Respondent: Community *and* the police. Both the community and the police. Yeah.

Interviewer: And if you had to choose which one should be first?

Respondent: People should stop violence. So, yeah. Yeah.

Interviewer: Why is that?

Respondent: Because, because there's a lot of gangs and kids. It's very high. The guns.

b) Reducing Crime in the Community

Several mothers found it difficult to choose just one option since they considered all four important. When pressured to select just one, one mother agonized, saying, "This is like, oh my, is this like, uh, oh, no," before finally declaring: "I'll say b, b, b, but I want to take all of them." Another said, "Give me all of them. All of that is needed for our community. The safety, the police understanding us. We don't understand, they don't understand us, you know?" Yet another mother said, "I don't know which is more priority for me: to reduce the crime, which is, that's what we need, or the crime against the people? But I guess I'll go with the reducing the crime because we need to be safe."

One mother who agreed that "all four are good points" explained the logic and benefits of prioritizing option b:

> *Because the mother of all is reducing the crime. Because if the crime gets a reduction, everybody else will not remember what police looks like. Crime reduction is good for both [the community and the police]. A police officer will not make his family a widow, or his child or his mom without a father or without a mom. Yeah. Whoever is in serving the, uh, police because the more crime grows, the death is not gonna be assigned only one side. The more crime is lower, the more they can have their cake and tea drink it and just overwatch their society.*

Another mother who chose option b explained its special advantage differently—reducing crime would eliminate the need for residents to deal with the police:

> *Yeah, because, uh, a crime I believe is the root of everything. If there's no crime, we don't have to deal, like, with other stuff. I'm telling you, if you live in the neighbourhood, there's a every day you call police, 'Hey, somebody shoot. Hey, there's people arguing, there's people fighting. Police.' Sometimes they say, 'Oh, same neighbourhood phone call again.' I think they're not even gonna pick up. Yeah. Yeah. So, if we reduce the crime in our neighbourhood, it'll be better. It'd be more safe first. And you don't have to be involved with the police often because there's no crime. So, we don't need to deal with them. We're dealing with the police because we have crimes.*

c) *Increasing Respect*

A few mothers believed treating everyone with respect was the greatest priority. One said the reason was simple: "Because we don't have no respect from them." Another mother explained why respect was important: "Because we are human being; everybody has some respect at least." One mother's account of "respect" sounded like a desire for greater professional skill and restraint by police:

> *If you come in your house and break everything and then tell you, 'Oh, I'm sorry, we're looking for somebody else, a 19-year-old, his name's Jama,' when the only person named Jama here is my husband, who is 65, then that's not respect.*

Another mother said that the absence of "respect" from a detective compounded the grief she felt over her son's death. "The detective who has my son's case is not answering my phone," she told us. "He's not telling me anything last three years. That's disrespect. And that's why I am thirsty with respect." Through a translator, another mother explained that increasing respect for residents would reduce violence in society, and "respect" meant a favorable presumption about others:

> *She's saying if they treat people with respect and in a good way, that, um, then you won't see any violence come, she said. But if they already start with violence, then the person gets angry, and then that's when the problem starts.*

When we asked another mother what such respect might mean in practice, she said, referring to the police, "They should not intimidate you when they're talking to you. They should see your age. So, you are an elderly person. They should treat you like that." Another mother said simply, "We would like them to treat us equal and not to discriminate against us."

None of the mothers invoked an idea about conditionality that is heard often in conversations about respect in minority communities in other cities—namely, that you give only what you get, and vice versa. And yet one mother who believed respect was paramount insisted it be reciprocal. "We need the police," she said. "That is what keeps us safe. We understand that. And we should respect the police, but the police should also respect us."

d) *Being Heard*

Several mothers chose the last option: ensuring the community was heard by the police. A few offered categorical reasons for this choice. One said, "My mother always said, 'Listen to me.' So, we would like to be listened." Another said, "Because when you, when the person is listened to, they have that trust and that, that they will be listening, and they will give justice." Other mothers believed that listening to and hearing the community would demonstrate compassion and an appreciation of their hardship. For instance, one mother said being heard was important "'cause at the moment, they're hurting. Parents are in pain, they want help, but they're not getting it. So, they need more supporting and cultural sensitivity." Victims of crime, another mother said, needed to see such compassion by the police "not just with death investigations, but with breaking and entering; we need a more supportive response to these crimes."[35]

[35] The emphasis the mothers placed on being heard and treated with compassion seems to differ from what is reported in social psychological research, which suggests that people prize respect and fairness in police encounters. These studies suggest that elements of *procedural justice*—the sense that decisions are made with neutrality and

A few mothers said negative relations with the police were the consequence of not listening. "When you attack somebody without knowing the truth or without realizing that is wrong, what do you expect?" One mother suggested the potential for mutual misunderstanding was so great that the police should develop a response to so many mothers not speaking English fluently:

> *What I was thinking, maybe they need to find somebody maybe to interpret for them because maybe when they, or we, not they, I mean, we, including myself when we talk, maybe they don't get our message. We don't, they don't understand us.*

Another mother described the reciprocal alienation that could come from misunderstanding:

> *If I came to a police station, right, and I come to say something maybe happened in my neighbourhood. And I'm like, 'How are you?' I'm here, 'This is, you see?' And, uh, the police officer start looking at me like, 'Okay.' I keep going on, but he doesn't get the message. He doesn't understand me what I'm saying. And then him, he just, 'Okay, I hear you, miss,' and then close the file. And that's it. So, me, when I'm going home, I feel I'm already complain. Right. But the police maybe didn't understand me, and he didn't want to bother himself because he is already criticize you. So, he is not gonna bother himself to like, to go like, uh, deep for your case. Because he, he is already criticizing from, from the beginning, the way you enter the office. He like, 'Okay, he Somali again. Okay. It's always like, it is always them. They're always like, the victim here.' It doesn't make any sense.*

One mother insisted that any reciprocal appreciation or mutual understanding would require the police to relinquish any prejudice they have about them. Approaching the Somali community with a different attitude, she believed, would help remove a stigma that she believed went "both ways":

> *I think we need help in our community. And we want the police to, to know their rules, their, uh, the law and everything. So not like to think, 'Oh, this is, uh, like a, it is a bad neighbourhood.' That is not our flag. We have, uh, very educated people in our neighbourhood. We have doctors, we have nurses, we have police officers in our neighbourhood. It's not like they can put us down and not follow up with us because, oh, we are living in the community housing. No! We also need to work on more of the stigma of the police officers and, and the community. The stigma that the community feels, the community feels, or maybe the, the stigma that they have the assumption of the police of this community. It goes both ways.*

Wishes for Policing

We invited mothers to describe their ideas about how to improve policing in Toronto by asking them, "What's the first thing you would do if you were chief of police?"[36] A few mothers initially

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fairness—are the truest source of police legitimacy (Tyler 2017). Few of the mothers we spoke with emphasized fairness and neutrality; instead, they appealed for solidarity and commiseration. This resonates with recent sociological work suggesting that people carry with them a collective memory of policing and violence that engages with memories of community displacement, exclusion, crime, state disinvestment, and lack of recognition (Hagan et al. 2018; Levi et al. 2020; Nagin and Telep 2020).

[36] Interviews with court-involved individuals show that those most affected by the criminal legal system often offer sharp critiques and imaginative ideas for reform. Such reflections reveal how marginalized people envision more just

balked when we asked this question. One said, "I can't put the shoes. That's too big for me." Another said, "That sounds scary already!" But most mothers responded to this question enthusiastically. Their ideas for better policing revolved around the vocation of policing, which required a compassionate and caring work ethic as well as greater individual discipline and organizational accountability. It also required a change in the way their community was understood. For instance, a few mothers said they would model high moral principles. "If I to become a chief of police," one mother said, "I will treat everybody equally." Another mother agreed, although she believed modeling principled behavior would not be enough:

> *Everybody's going through training. Everybody's going through training. There's not a single person. I'm even know, I don't care if you're a detective, I don't care if you're an auxiliary cop. Everybody's going through training in these ideas and, uh, morals and visions that they have. Everybody's getting refresher from it.*

Several mothers said they would introduce more discipline. One said of their imagined subordinates, "I'll hold them accountable. I'll tell them, do your job. Do it this way." Another said she would "fire all the corrupt police officers" because:

> *They are making them all bad. You know, they're not bad, Toronto police, but some of them make them look bad. It's not easy job, I'm telling you, but God, some of those police officer, they do not deserve to be a police officer. I wish one day I can sit with the chief and tell what's going on. He thinks his officers are angels. They're not.*

A few mothers said they would pursue greater accountability in an adversarial fashion. "There are some police officers who turn off their camera," one mother said, adding, "I would have arrested those." Another mother said she would employ covert operations to "hunt down" corrupt officers and then, after obtaining information, deal with the teenagers who distribute their drugs:

> First, I will hunt down all those police officers that I know they're doing like drugs and other stuff before I go to those teenagers who sell them. I will hunt down, one by one, until I finish all of them and open the case for them. And then after I will deal for those teenagers.
>
> Interviewer: And how, how would you find out who the bad police officers are?
>
> Respondent: Put someone undercover, maybe.
>
> Interviewer: Put someone undercover?
>
> Respondent: Yeah. Because wherever, even in workplace, if you post someone undercover, you get all the information about your workers.
>
> Interviewer: So why would that be the first thing you would do? Why, why first hunt down these, these bad police officers?

legal institutions (Clair 2021). In that spirit, we asked mothers what they would do as chief of police to surface grounded, aspirational thinking shaped by lived experience.

Respondent: Because they're not doing their job. Right. They didn't take us for that. Yeah. When they take us, they say we are taking us to protect. Right. Yeah. So, if you're not protecting, so what are you doing? That's, you don't deserve the job.

A few mothers believed misconduct was not taken seriously by the chief. "We need to get tough on misconduct," one said bluntly. Another said that vigorous investigations of misconduct would produce "a bigger return on investment" than training officers differently. Another mother told us the reason police were unfair in their treatment of Somalis was because no one was demanding it:

Interviewer: Why aren't they "fair"?

Respondent: Because they need to be complained about.

One mother who thought there was an accountability deficit feared filing a complaint, believing it would trigger retaliation. Although she was distressed by the detective's unresponsiveness and the stall in the investigation of her son's death, she said she would not complain because, as she relayed through a translator:

I'm scared of the consequences, 'cause a lot of times police come after people's kids when you complain about them. This is why some of her friends didn't want to participate in this research. They say, 'No, we're not taking the chance to go and be known and then they'll come after us.' So, people are terrified by that."

A couple of mothers believed there was a deficit of managerial accountability in the organization of policing. Explaining how she would "hold them accountable," one mother proposed that under her commend there would be clearer lines of authority. "Like, there's one person, like every area, there's one person that, that the police goes under. A boss, who holds them accountable and tells them to do their job." Another mother who sensed a deficit in the structure of responsibility within the organization told us through a translator she would systematize "control" through clearer channels of reporting:

The first thing I would do is I would make myself aware and also control what is happening in every single division. The second thing I would do is I would create a process where each division would report to me, uh, so that I know what's happening. Okay. I would make a separate unit that would bring those reports, um, to inform me of what's happening in each division. Okay. Because we've seen that in each division, there's no form of control or rules, um, or nobody overseeing what they're doing. So, they do whatever they want. It's a huge problem.

When we asked, "What would they report?" the mother responded, again through the translator:

She's giving example if me and her were to have an, a dispute. Yeah. And then they bring the case forward. Yeah. She said if I was someone that the police know of and ever and have already arrested multiple times. She's talking about the example of her son when you stabbed, he the stabbing. Yes. Okay. So, she's saying they brought, um, CCTV footage from the Toronto community housing cameras. She's saying the footage. She's saying the footage where her son was getting stabbed that footage. Uh, didn't, they said they didn't have it. She said they had the footage of the other, uh, boy being stabbed and they were showing it to everybody. She's looking for a

word… Well-known. Well-known… She saying her son told her about that word. Okay. So, she's saying the term 'well-known police,' it means someone that's well-known by the police. So, okay, so she's saying because her son was already known by the police, somehow, they didn't show that footage, but she's saying, um, because of God. Um, that, and also by chance that when they were showing the footage of the other, uh, boy being stabbed, they see that he was the one taking out the knife first.

Other mothers said they would take more therapeutic approaches to improving policing. One said she would "train officers on microaggressions" to encourage more conscientious and compassionate interactions with residents. Several mothers said there was a need for "mental health tests" to prevent hiring people with temperaments ill-suited for the job:

I think they need to have, like, a psych evaluation before they get their badges or something. Honest to God. Like, I feel like they only hire narcissists. They might have some sort of like a disorder or something where they feel they need to just have the power over somebody.

Other mothers thought changes in personnel were essential to achieving a more humane, humble, and ethical form of policing. One said better vetting was urgent:

I'd conduct a psych evaluation test, stat! We need to find out they have any type of narcissism, bipolar disorder, whatever they may have. And then there would be a second round of tests. That way we'd be able to mend the relationships with the community.

A few mothers said the police needed different personnel. One said installing Somali residents inside the police force might help:

We have to put Somali police officers in there. You know, they have to go inside. We have to have somebody that represent us inside. A lot of Somali people has to go to the officer. To know what's going on. How we're being, being treated. They can see. They know.

Interviewer: And how are you gonna persuade them to join?

Respondent: My kids, no. But some people want to go. I know couple guys now he who sign up. The police? Yeah. Some people who didn't have, uh, experience with them, they signed up. But us who had the experience, really, instead of running to the police, we run away from the police.

Another mother, whose two sons had been arrested and beaten by the police and believed the police are "just out to get us," told us she tried to persuade her daughter to become a police officer. The daughter was surprised, so she told her, "You're gonna be a *good* police officer." Yet another mother who said they should recruit residents of Somali descent explained her reasoning, and why she believed youth might agree to join the police:

Like, the thing that I was telling you earlier, earlier about getting like trust from the community, being like, like involving them, hiring people that look like me. Like, because I feel like in Toronto itself, like I know there's certain other places that have Somali police officers. I've never seen the Somali police officers in Toronto. Have you? I know we had other, other, um, cities like Ottawa. There's like, they have a lot. They have a lot. Yeah.

> And like Minneapolis, like, I actually dated one of those idiots. So, hire more so that these young men could see somebody that looks like them. Somebody who can, who can do that restorative thing with them, you know, and say, 'Hey, don't do that again. Or else.' And it would be different because this person looks like them and, and they can even look up to them. Like if, if they, if they see, 'Oh, he did it, I could do it.' You know what I mean? 'I want to be like, you too.'
>
> Interviewer: The kids want to be cops?
>
> Respondent: Um, hey, if they start up as a young age and they, they get access to the same quality as other children. Why not? My kids grew up in Mississauga and they dream big.

Another mother initially expressed support for this idea but then backtracked, saying that it would not solve the problems: "I don't think there could ever be any peace between police and black people in general." Yet few mothers were so skeptical. Many believed major improvements could come simply from speaking with members of the community about their needs, treating adolescent boys with compassion, and reminding officers about the community vocation of policing. One person said:

> *Um, I would start with working with the community. Try to be more friendly with the community and to meet them and get to know them. Every community. To have uh, to have more police officers and to walk with the community and uh, to work the kids and the police to have, um, work in relationships.*

Establishing or repairing relationships with "the community" was paramount for many mothers, and some thought the chief must lead this renewal. "The chief," one person admonished, "should talk to the community and understand their challenges. If the police is one of those problems, talk to the police and educate them on how to treat the people." Another said the chief "should be respectful of people and do a lot of outreach." Two mothers said the chief should first end the condescension they felt from officers. "The police are not to treat one community like it's up or down," one mother insisted. "They're there for all people, not one community." Another mother thought humility was the key: "I think the first thing they need to do is realize they're not untouchable and they're also human as well, to go down from the sense of supremacy." She explained how as chief she would do it:

> *I would tell the people I'm working with; I would tell them to do the job. I'll tell them, 'Go do the job. Open your eyes. Find out what is causing the problem.' And I would say, 'One person can't do everything. Um, one person can't do anything. When people unite, they can do many things.' So, the chief has that power and would let people work and do the job.*

None of the mothers said that increasing the number of officers or greater physical presence in the community would help. For instance, when we asked one mother whether more detectives and more police would help, she said, "No. Every time the budget for the police goes up, but we don't see it on the streets." Few mothers also believed a boost in the number of Neighbourhood Community Officers would do much on its own, either. Instead, most mothers emphasized the need for moral regeneration, a change in the ethos of policing. One said, "I feel like some of their ideals and morals that they say that they upkeep, maybe a refresher on what that actually

means." Some had specific suggestions about the attitudes and demeanor that should accompany this outlook:

> *They should listen when they are called, they should listen. They should, um, de-calm the person and comfort and, you know? And not to scare you when you ask questions and not to mistreat you. They should make you comfortable. Um, so. to make you comfortable so that you can tell them what you feel and not to scare you and write the truth in the report.*

Several mothers appealed for greater compassion and humility in policing. "They need to go down from the sense of supremacy," one mother said. Another said:

> *Like, simply leaving (things) light, 'cause we're all human, you know… treat people fairly, especially when you're in a position of power, and just because you're generalized, and someone could really like ruin their life for real. Or treat people like you would a white girl. 'Cause there's this misconception that like black people are just tougher than they are in all aspects of the word, so even with boys, you just gotta be gentle.*

One mother said it would not take much effort to realize that kind of policing:

> *Really, like, like, you really only have to do the bare minimum not to be racist or something. So, it takes a lot to mess up. Really, like, as long as like you're not asking someone in the passenger seat whether he's been drinking when you stopped the driver for speeding.*

One mother believed that police officers needed simply to be more sensitive to basic human needs of people in her community. She characterized that idea as respect for equal rights:

> *First of all, they need, they need to be more understanding. Like, you know, we talk about this whole culture sensitivity and all this, right? But that's bullshit. Like, just do right by people, you know what I mean? You and I may be from a different worlds, but at the same time, we're humans. We share the same needs, right? So yeah, you can understand my culture and my needs and whatever and be sensitive towards that. But at the end of the day, it comes down to human, like human life. I should be able to get the same equal rights.*

Several mothers said justice and safety were inseparable. One said, "I want the police to help people to make peace *and* to be fair." Another said, "We would like to be safer, no shooting. We also would like the police to stop discriminating [against] our kids and just be honest and treat black and white the same." Still another said:

> *They should make the community safe. So, they should be peace, justice, no intimidation. They should not be intimidating minorities, uh, especially black youth, they should not discriminate between white and black youth. Uh, they should treat black youth the same way they treat white youth. Um, and they should let people live freely.*

One mother said that if police treated people like this, "you would have fewer people getting conditioned and groomed to sell drugs." Another believed that the police should do this or get out of the way: "Um, they should respect the victim. Behave, uh, behave them, treat them like human. Um, they should do justice. If he can't do it, they should let them get justice."

Advice for the Chief

As these comments show, mothers thought compassion, discipline, equality, and safety were not separate pursuits in policing, and unlikely to be realized as distinct goals. To disambiguate and prioritize them thus risks an abstraction that mothers might have discouraged. And yet mothers were emphatic about the needs for improvement along several different axes of police work, so below we highlight five of them separately, as discrete pieces of advice for the chief.

First, the mothers want the Chief of Police to learn something about their community. "Get out," one mother said, instead of "sitting in a top chair." Another said, "I wouldn't stay in my little room," and instead go to communities to inquire whether "the police are delivering." "Become known in the community," advised a third, who added, "people don't know his identity." "Spend a week in the community," yet another mother recommended, doubting that reports and junior officers could be trusted to relay reliable and relevant information. "Find out what the communities are complaining about," another mother admonished, and inquire whether "anyone faced injustice." Ask residents, "What's your biggest problem?" and then prioritize the resolution of these problems. "Hear the community," insisted another. "Don't let the heart sleep." One mother insisted this listening and learning be reciprocal, suggesting that residents themselves are uncertain about the scope of the police role:

> *I would canvas the community, see what issues that they feel are the most important, and then try and figure what's within my scope, and making sure that the community understands what the role of the police are, and then how we can best help them within our role.*

By "canvassing" and "hearing" mothers hoped the chief might learn about the level of connectedness among mothers in the Somali community, the information they share with one another as forms of social support. What happened to one mother and family quickly became a community experience, as one mother explained: "If something's happening in Toronto it spreads so quickly again, as soon as you know, they hear news of a death. You know, it's on social media and through social media, then people post it on WhatsApp." The speed of the circulation of conversation and awareness around policing "would be surprising to definitely the police chief."

Second, mothers wanted the chief to recruit, hire, and train new people, as well as fire ones who did not "respect the uniform." Some officers might be "re-educated," but many mothers want the chief to recruit new officers, ones who have "empathy" for others and share a commitment to community policing. "It's crazy that there are people in the police who don't know the community," one mother said. Another mother recommended the chief cultivate a new "persona" for police officers by "working from the bottom up." The recruitment of new officers, another said, would advance "culture sensitivity" by "hiring more people who represent who and what Toronto is at least somebody who they think understands my culture, understands where I come from." The chief, said yet another mother, should hire people "who are independent" and teach them "how to respect people." Officers also need more humane working hours, one mother said, since dealing with "crazy situation after crazy situation —that's just too much on the brain." One mother saw teenagers in her community as a pool of potential recruits; all they needed were incentives: "They need to make these kids police officers. Pay for their education to become a police officer. There will be a big change in the community."

Third, mothers wanted the chief to demonstrate moral leadership and vindicate the vocation of policing. "Be honest, be sincere," one mother commanded. "Be a just chief of police," said another.

"Be courageous," said a third, noting the challenges and risks of policing ("It's not easy job being police, you can get killed today") and having to deal the teenagers with "pants falling down, assaulting and spitting you." Several mothers portrayed the chief as head teacher or principal. "The chief of police has to be someone who has to educate, first of all," one mother said. The chief must "teach officers anti-racism, and anti-oppression," but "get the training first, and then train others," said another. "You have to teach them not to use excessive force to the people," said another, and "not to behave aggressively to the youth." Imagining a debrief between the chief and a patrol officer, one mother said:

> *Ask your officers: 'Are you happy because you made an arrest or is it because it made a difference in your job what you did?' Because you know, if you arrested another black kid, you know how the community sees us, always that we already profiling black kids we're already putting, uh, black kids behind bars. So, what, what, what have you accomplished? Another young man is behind bars. No difference. So, what made you happy? Like, did you investigate it? Is this a real arrest? Is it a real thing?*

These mothers thought these ethics of policing could be taught, but that the lessons had to be reiterated. "You give them the training. You, you give them the uniform," but "when they go out, what they going to do that becomes beyond your control." Teaching and training, accordingly, had to prevent "trust broken in the community, since to gain that trust again takes a lot of work." The key was to achieve "no discrimination, and accountability for the police all the time."

Fourth, mothers wanted the chief to see police as engaging in some form of civic repair—and, at minimum, to acknowledge the alienation and difficulties faced by the Somali community. One mother connected past trauma with current policing practices, noting, "We need more professional people that deal with everyday people to come and assist the police," because:

> these people that have no idea about anything about your community, who you are, what you are, are just able to march into your house, like with guns bigger than your body, screaming, you know, in some cases, throwing gas bombs around all the smoke, you know, pushing elderly people, handcuffing them, you know, and, and in the ways that they even execute the search warrants is usually during the evening.

She noted that "you go into a state of shock and then these vulnerable people have escaped, like, you know, war, torture, harsh, harsh backgrounds. So, then it's like, it takes them back to that as well, right?"

Attention to poverty, trauma, and racialization had to be part of this civic repair. As one mother explained, "as racialized people… we are subjected to further harm. And nine out of 10 times we are criminalized in the whole process. So, I didn't commit a crime, but everybody made me and my children feel like we were criminals." For another mother, to succeed, the chief would have "to help the minorities that are suffering… those who suffer injustice." For yet another, this repair meant being "unbiased to all communities" and "no discrimination at all," so that "black, white, Muslim, Christian? Everybody. Same. Same, same."

At the same time, mothers asked the police to differentiate, not discriminate. "Make sure criminals are behind bars and where they belong," one mother implored, but "you know, but those who didn't do anything on innocent people, don't put them in one wash." We heard many concerns over profiling and stereotyping, and a calling out of what mothers saw as institutional

doublespeak: “Not only white people you have to, uh, you know, slap the hand, but other people has to be. You said I’m a colorblind, so you have to be colorblind to everybody. But when you want to you say I see the colour. No.” Some mothers noted this had the problem in reverse and ignored circumstances: as one mother expressed the problem, “Stop assuming they’re criminal because they are black,” and instead see that “they are scared because they’re black.” Many spoke to the need for the police chief to acknowledge that policing has limited opportunities for their sons, and to offer redress. One mother encapsulated this by concluding that the police “criminalized us. They put our boys mostly in jail… Boys are boys. Something minor. You can fix it… the boy cannot get job. Cannot go anywhere… Take out the criminal record for the kids.”

For many mothers this vulnerability connected to a need to recognize the unusual circumstances of the Somali community. This recognition didn’t require indulgence, though it did require discernment.

> *I would treat everybody fairly. I love this country. It is the country that accepted us. We are from a country that has been destroyed, and we would never want the same thing to happen to this country. And in order to prevent that, the government has to be fair, the police has to be fair. So, what I would do is to, I would punish those who break the law, but also not target the innocent.*

Another mother said it directly:

> *They have to know where we came from, and we are victims back home. They have to understand what we need here. They have to know we came for safety, and we came like, somebody was running, you know, from all the way in Africa. The reason we came here was safety. And we need our kids, they have to be protected ... so they should treat us in a way they should understand where we come from. So, they should treat us in a trauma-informed way. And they should also treat our kids equally. Equity, I think. So, they should treat them, keep in mind where they come from and, you know, um, the trauma they have.*

Mothers often asked the chief to consider the impact of the experience of criminal justice contact on opportunities for kids in the neighbourhood. As chief of police, one mother said: “We worry about our young boys and young kids,” who are “in jail for nothing that makes sense.” She said, “Kids, sometimes they do bad things. I’m not saying they’re innocent,” but young boys, they’re in jail nine years, 11 years, 15, 16, 20, 30, they’re all in jail.” This was contrasted by other mothers, who focused on building opportunities for young people as part of recognizing the circumstances of the neighbourhood. Many spoke about jobs and employment programs, and as one mother said, this could address the challenges that some young people experience in the community:

> If there’s no need to feed my family, there’s no like, you know, and some, some boys have that daunting task because it’s like, ‘Oh, my dad’s sick. Oh, my dad left us.’ So, it’s like that task is put on them. ‘How am I gonna feed a family if I’m a teenager? Am I not gonna sell drugs? To make fast money,’ right?

Fifth, mothers wanted the chief to hold officers accountable for their conduct. “You cannot just damage people and just take off,” one person complained. “The police has never had any accountability,” one mother believed, “because they think uniform is, uh, their protector.” Another mother insisted the chief needed “external investigations” for misconduct. Another said she would create an “undercover police that flow up the other police.” A third said, “I would have police’s

police," to "find out what they're doing or not doing." Others implored the chief to know how officers are acting "when you're not looking." There was a sense that given neighbourhood discussions, a police chief "would want to know within the police if what's they're saying is true or not." This was particularly important because, as mothers noted, much of what occurs is beyond the chief's control, so there must be some way to improve internal organizational accountability and hold officers to account: "Otherwise, they're not gonna stop... or what's the point?" With this, mothers wanted opportunities for police to learn about communities in Toronto by engaging in neighbourhoods. One mother suggested an "academic training for, police college," in which "I would make them spend a week in different communities. Like, that would be a curriculum," and "if they don't want to learn nothing from the community. I feel like that's a red flag."

Sixth, mothers wanted the chief to increase police presence and stop crime. "You know, without them we wouldn't be safe," one mother said. "Like, you know, knowing that if a burglar break in, you know, and you could call the cops, you know, if something happened, we have that sense of protection." "I will put more police officer on the street," another mother said. "Not only in Somali community. All. Not only Somali community have something; even Indians, they have crime. If they see police, less crime." They regarded more effective policing as focused on "to stop the guns and the drugs." Another mother believed that "when the kids see a cop, they would not shoot a neighbourhood when they know there's cops around." With this, mothers often concluded that what they regarded as differential policing was motivated by race and poverty:

> Crime happens everywhere, but as much it happens at government housing, it doesn't only happen out there... And then it feels like when things are happening, they're not there. They know where is the problem and where it's happening. Police even knows it. They pretending like they don't know. Trust me, they know they can find out anything they wanted. But who cares? You are a black person. That's how we feel. Yeah. That's how I feel.

Seventh, mothers believed that the chief must work closer with schools, community organizations, and Parliament to improve policing. "If I was the chief of police," one mother said, "it wouldn't even matter because I can't even bring that law, you know, this is not about the police, this is about the government of Canada," and government officials "need to ensure the police can go and get more funding for their projects or whatever they need to do." Another mother said, "The government's first response is to blame the police and for a lot of times for things that aren't really their fault." For several mothers, this included a relationship with schools, where "there are students who come to school who don't listen to their parents and who harass others."

Finally, several mothers advised the chief to pay closer attention to the reputation of police in the community and how policing is understood generally in society. "TPS is seen as a negative entity," one mother stated bluntly. "So maybe just working on somehow changing that narrative" by "you as a leader connecting to the community itself," even if "you might not be able to handle cases or handle things one-on-one or work with each and every single family." A few mothers said the chief should build relationships with youth that aren't about law enforcement, with games and outdoor programs, to achieve this result. "I would have more police officers to work with the community and uh, to work with the kid," one said. Some mothers thought this could change how police are seen by youth in the community: "You're just being a human being and getting to know these kids on a one-on-one level, playing basketball, whether it's computers or whatever, you know. Okay... youth and the police would get close. Like they wouldn't look at them as a threat. Okay. They'd be like, 'Hey, they're just normal people. When, when they're not in uniform, they're

normal people.'" This would reduce fear, one mother said, if "when you driving by in the summertime, you see kids or mothers are sitting there stop by, say, 'hi,' you know, introduce yourself. They'll see you coming by every time and you saying, 'hi,' waving a hand, they'll feel comfortable to talk to you."

The Memorandum of Understanding

Several mothers spoke favorably about regular meetings with police officers in divisions that served neighbourhoods with many Somali residents, many of which took place under the auspices of the Memorandum of Understanding that Midaynta signed with the Toronto Police Service Board. A few registered optimism about the future of policing because the meetings lent structure to interactions with the police beyond calls for service and involuntary encounters:

> *The fact that now Midaynta and the moms have a relationship with Toronto police service board with, with regards to the MOU, we now actually get to speak with police on a weekly basis or a monthly basis. Those interactions and those collaborations have kind of put a shift on the perceptions and the way we see police.*

One mother believed these meetings made the Somali community legible:

> *Before they didn't know who we were. They didn't know who the Somali community was. But now that we have a bit more, we're more high profile and we have things in writing, she feels like that's the reason why more police are a bit more cautious to perhaps be aggressive or be more firm with the young boys that they're interacting with. Because again, the backgrounds, you know, they're trying to change that narrative.*

Another mother said she sensed changes in the daily work of the police because of these interactions. When we asked for signs of the changes, one mother said:

> *What can attest to that change? One is when I would drive through the neighbourhoods before I would be questioned, I would be pulled over. But today I don't get pulled over. I don't get questioned. They smile at me as if they know me.*

Several mothers emphasized emotional aspects of the interactions with officers at these meetings. Not all the emotions came from the mothers. One mother told us that a police officer was emotionally moved by a presentation from Midaynta staff and left the meeting saying, "Wow, you're cool." Another mother said she believed their ability to express complaints at these meetings would improve policing, as it would for other groups with grievances. Through a translator, she said:

> *It's not just the moms, but other black neighbourhoods have similar grievances with police and, you know, other agencies and other community members have also rallied in, in ensured that communities are more safer. So, she's like, I don't think it's just Midaynta.*

Several mothers thought the meetings convened under the auspices of the MOU helped remove mutual misconceptions about police and residents. One mother said she believed the meetings were an opportunity to "build the relationship with the police," and that "through the agreement of the board members, the trouble that you would see in the city has decreased." She added, through a translator, "If there was a mutual understanding between community members, that's

when we can, um, make improvements." "Really, now is the time to solve the stigma of the community in the eyes of the police, and of the police in the eyes of the community," one person said, adding optimism about the momentum toward better understanding that came from these meetings, as well as a dose of caution about their effects: "[Mothers and the police], for the past three years, I think they were working together. Yeah. And then knowingly that what the outcome is not gonna be just like one time and stop all the problems."

Not all mothers were encouraged by the meetings, however. One mother took her children to these meetings initially but lost interest when she gained the impression that the police were using them merely to circulate information about crime:

> *I used to go like, uh, we, a long time ago, I stopped now, uh, uh, police had like a meeting. I believe it was every month. Like once a month we go there, we join, and they told us what's going on. Uh, they told us was like a group, like a gang group. And they told the sign, 'cause I have kids, I'm a single mom, so, and I have teenagers. I really want to know a lot about what going on. So, I used to go to those meetings. They told us about this sign, 'If you see this, this is what this mean. If you see this statue, this is what it means. This gang group.' And they have like, some like, uh, napkins, the colours, right? Yeah. Yeah, yeah. So, they told us, 'This is mean, this, this mean that.' So, we, I learn a lot from that.*

Another mother who initially attended these meetings stopped going when she felt interrogated by the police, pumped for incriminating information about drug sales in the neighbourhood. She started to doubt the officers at these meetings were the same ones serving in the neighbourhood officer program.

> Interviewer: So, you're saying they look like police officers, but they're not actually police?
>
> Respondent: It's hard to tell the difference. It's like, it's like a goat and uh, you know, and the lion. So, when you see like, uh, lion where goat is close, are you gonna trust or not you're gonna trust? But inside it is a lion. So, I was scared because I love to talk and when every meeting, I get a question [from the police]. So, I tell them, 'Hey, like, okay, so I don't know who's selling drugs.' Now I'm scared. I'm like, I am scared. I don't know who does that.

Another mother stopped attending these meetings when she felt that the police were using the interactions with mothers to identify suspects in drug sales. "How I'm gonna tell them that, how I'm gonna report that thing?" she said. "They're gonna tell them and they're gonna come to me or my kids. Yeah. That's scary."

Several mothers emphasized they had to overcome their children's suspicions before they could participate, and not always did they gain their approval. One mother relayed how her son insisted she not participate: "He told me, 'Mom, I don't want you to go.' I say, 'Why?' He says, 'If they take your name and your telephone address, the police is gonna come knock my door.'" Another mother told us through a translator how she struggled to reconcile her hopes and her son's fear:

> *If we as, as mothers and as people we work with the police, um, and build a relationship then the trouble that we experience is gonna decrease. But the kids, they don't believe her, and*

> *they keep telling her, 'Be careful of the police.' So, when she told her son, the one who was chased and then hit by the police car, um, that he, she was gonna work with the police, he got very upset, very upset with her.*

Another mother said, also through a translator, that "the kids will say, uh, so and so's mom is working with the police. Be careful of her. She might, uh, uh, tell, uh, she tell the police of you." Still another said the suspicion was legion: "They'll use the word snitch a lot," the translator recorded her as saying, speaking of the meeting debrief. "They'll say, uh, be careful of so-and-so's mom. She works with the police."

One mother said that a lot of skepticism had to be overcome to participate in these meetings, and that it would take more than the perpetuation of these meetings to reverse misgivings:

> *Because of the memorandum of understanding that we have with Toronto police, I do still feel a little bit reassured that there's still a little bit of dialogue. That's the only thing that's giving me a window of opportunity, to give me that confidence that yes, I know police is here, but at least perhaps because I'm, I'm one of the moms, I could have a conversation with them. But to be frank with you, in my 30 years of living in the neighbourhood, they've been quite hostile. It's always, they come into our neighbourhoods. They're conducting their investigation, but they treat as if we are a part of the criminality, even though we're just innocent bystanders who live in the neighbourhoods trying to take care of our families.*

Through a translator, another mother said fear of the police persisted, along with a legacy of suspicion and distrust in the community that poisoned the relationship:

> *When we experience the harm that they caused us, and we see the harm that they caused the neighbours and the people around us, there's no way that we can believe the police. So, she says she's a mother, uh, who's also a businesswoman. She said she works, uh, in a mall that has 44 stores. She said if police come inside that mall, every mother will hide inside her shop. She said when the police leave, they'll all come outside, uh, relieved, but then they'll wonder the one person who spoke to the police, what they said, another scared that the person who spoke to the police, if that the police might come back because of what they said.*

The Future and the MOU

We only asked questions about the MOU when mothers brought up the subject on their own initiative, but it came up frequently. This surprised us since the MOU itself seems remote to everyday experience, such as mothers' experiences with arresting officers, encounters with NCOs with whom they had developed cordial relations, and the advice that mothers give their sons about how to engage with the police. Yet mothers freely volunteered information about the MOU, suggesting it was in their view part of the explanation why there were now "fewer funerals" than before. The MOU also was viewed by mothers as setting a new example for their kids, many of whom also told us their sons were skeptical of the relationship with the police, for fear that their mothers would be seen as "snitches."

Our impression, in short, is that the Memorandum of Understanding is part of what encouraged mothers to share their experiences with us and to offer detailed and often difficult accounts of their experiences, disappointments, and aspirations for community safety as well as the constraints and opportunities they see on the horizon. It also may have offered mothers a sense of legitimacy

and perhaps even authority for approaching officers and being able to discuss situations with them, whether or not officers themselves were aware of this memorandum of understanding.

Mothers' accounts of the meetings might appear to confirm the adage of democratic policing à la Peel, as if "consent" to be policed generates legitimacy and trust. But some of the mothers said the meetings felt staged and one-sided, making them suspicious about the motives of the police. Others said there was too much sediment of distrust for it to be whisked away so easily. Nevertheless, what we detect in these remarks is that in contrast to their other experiences in other situations, the Memorandum of Understanding offered mothers a sense of public recognition, acknowledged formally in policy and official practices, something that others had or needed. This may be why one mother, reflecting on the process to date, asserted that "each country needs its own MOU."

So, what does the MOU mean for the mothers, and what is its value in policing?
One way to think about the MOU is as a prototype for a new way to collect advice and guide decisions about how and when police can best support community safety, especially in neighbourhoods with high levels of violence. From this perspective, the group encounters with Somali mothers under the auspices of the MOU seem like a more collaborative and participatory approach to community safety. Unlike brief depositions to the TPSB at monthly meetings, the discussions at these meetings extended beyond patterns in crime and misgivings about policing; they established a venue for deliberation about shared needs and priorities. There might be other examples of such deliberative modes of collaboration, and perhaps Chicago's new approach to problem solving and community-based policing (CAPS) is an analogue, though a closer comparison might reveal the distinctiveness of the TPSB's MOU.[37]
Another way to regard the MOU is as a means of restoring frayed relationships between a minority community and the police. From this perspective, the MOU might be seen as a relief valve for individual frustrations as well as a path toward the repair of "broken trust." If that's the right frame for thinking about the MOU, then we might want to compare the emerging experience in Toronto with approaches to the repair of frayed relations and the restoration of trust in policing other cities, including the practices of ombudsmen and complaint review boards, some of which have this mediative purpose despite the primarily plaintive forms of public communication. Comparisons with programs for the recovery of public confidence in policing in cities with more ruptured relationships, such as in Belfast, also might clarify how the TPSB's approach is distinct.[38]

Whatever the best lens might be for appraising the MOU, we should recall how attuned mothers were to the risks and uncertainties of closer collaboration with the police as well as its possible

[37] Chicago's CAPS program is one example of a participatory approach to public safety planning. Archon Fung (2004) analyzes CAPS as part of what he calls a "reinvention" of urban democracy, characterized by "accountable autonomy"—structures that give local actors discretion within institutional oversight. Gerald Frug (1999) similarly emphasizes the importance of empowering local communities in shaping city governance through participatory democratic practices. For detailed empirical research on the implementation and outcomes of CAPS, see Skogan (2006).

[38] Several cities have released official reports detailing efforts to rebuild trust in policing. In Washington, D.C., the *Annual Report of the Office of Police Complaints* outlines mediation and oversight efforts to improve accountability (Office of Police Complaints 2022). Cleveland's *Police Monitoring Team Report* documents reforms under a federal consent decree aimed at repairing community–police relations (City of Cleveland 2021). In Minneapolis, the *Community Commission on Police Oversight Report* tracks the city's response to demands for civilian oversight following the killing of George Floyd (City of Minneapolis 2023). Northern Ireland's *Annual Statistical Bulletin* reports on complaint investigations in a post-conflict setting, emphasizing transparency and reconciliation (Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland 2021). These reports offer relevant comparisons for Toronto's MOU, particularly in process design and public engagement.

benefits. To be sure, they noticed and appreciated the possible returns of the MOU for their families and neighbourhoods, including reform, and the capacity to influence policing priorities, and the moral recognition that is offered by the commitments in the document and regular meetings with the Toronto Police Service. But many of their sons claimed that might be "snitches," or duped into a collaboration that would cause them harm. Some mothers had to cope with the suspicions and resentment of community members who believed that the MOU has come too late for their own sons and families. Mothers also noticed how the MOU requires ever more dedication from them, with yet another shift of labour offered to police services and the city. For others, the persistence of the MOU was welcomed, and yet with it came a reminder that they are not yet fully incorporated in the polity; they need special recognition and extra opportunities to address unrelenting violence and insecurity. For the mothers we spoke with, the MOU was not merely a new approach to security and belonging, or recognition and respect. Mothers instead expressed how the MOU opened new conversations with multiple audiences: their sons, their neighbours, the police and the TPSB, and community members abroad about the future of the city, about fairness and justice, and about community safety.

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Appendix

Interview Protocol with Mothers of Somali Youth in Toronto, at Midaynta Community Services, Toronto, 2024

Note: These are semi-structured interviews. Some questions may be combined or elaborated upon depending on the conversation.

I Demographic Questions

1. How long have you lived in Toronto?

a. Less than a year
b. 1-5 years
c. 5-10 years
d. >10 years

2. Which neighbourhood do you live in? Follow-up: Where else have you lived in the city?

II Neighbourhood Questions

3. What do you like most about the neighbourhood? What are the biggest concerns that people have? Follow-up: If related to "safety," ask for detail.

4. In general, how safe do you feel in your neighbourhood?

a. Very Safe
b. Somewhat Safe
c. Not too Safe
d. Not at all Safe

5. People in your neighbourhood are willing to help their neighbours. Do you…

a. Strongly Agree
b. Agree
c. Disagree
d. Strongly Disagree

6. How would you describe the relationship between the police and the people in your neighbourhood?

a. Very Positive
b. Somewhat Positive
c. Somewhat Negative
d. Very Negative

III Community Safety

7. Are young Somalis safe in Toronto? Follow-up: Tell me about violence among young people in the Somali community. What sort of violence is happening? Is it better or worse than before? Follow up: What should be done about this? What would improve community safety?

8. What do you tell people in Somalia or elsewhere (where relevant to respondent, "back home")?

9. Tell me about your relationship with the police in your community. Do people in your neighbourhood talk about the police? What do they say?

Follow-up: Do the police improve community safety?

10. Tell me what you feel about the police. Have you ever called the police for help? In what situations? Why? Follow-up: Ask for examples. Follow-up: Are neighbours angry when you call the police?

11. Are there times when you choose not to call the police? Who do you call instead? What benefit is there? Follow-up: Ask for examples

12. How do you discuss the police with your children? Please describe a recent conversation. Do the kids believe you? Follow-up (where possible): What do their fathers say?

13. Tell me what your children experience with the police. Do your children tell you stories about the police? What do they say? Please describe the most recent conversation. Follow-up (where possible, given time): What is happening with the girls? Are they worried?

14. Overall, do you believe people of the Somali community can trust Toronto police officers to treat them fairly?

a. Always
b. Some of the time
c. Rarely
d. Never

Why? Do others in the community think so too? How does this affect community safety?

15. Can you describe the best experience you've had with a Toronto police officer in the last two years?

16. Can you describe the worst experience you've had with a Toronto police officer in the last two years?

17. What does it mean for the police to act "professionally," for you? If elaborating: What should be the job or the role of the police?

IV Hope

18. What is one thing that can be done to improve safety in the Somali community? Does it need to be the police, or someone else?

19. Which of the following do you think should be the highest priority?

a. Reducing police violence
b. Reducing crime in your community
c. Ensuring that the police treat all people with respect
d. Ensuring the community is heard by the police

Why is that?

20. If you became Toronto police chief, what is the first thing you would do? Why?

V Additional Information

Number of children and age range:

Total: ___
Boys: ____
Girls: ____

Year born, if indicated:

Focus Group Protocol with Mothers of Somali Youth in Toronto, at Midaynta Community Services, Toronto, 2024.

Note: These are broad dimensions. Some questions may be combined or elaborated upon depending on the conversation.

1. What are people's biggest concerns where you live? What do people worry about?

2. Are young Somalis safe? Tell me about your neighbourhoods and about violence. Follow-up: How did we get to this point?

3. What do you tell your kids about violence? About police? What advice do you give them?

4. Do you ever call the police?

5. What should be done about the violence? By whom?

6. We hear that there are fewer deaths and funerals than there were before. What has changed to make it better? Follow-up: What about the girls?

7. How do you cope with the violence, either from crime or policing? Follow-up: Which institutions do you trust?

8. What do you tell people in Somalia?

9. If you became Toronto police chief, what is the first thing you would do? Why? Follow-up: What is police professionalism for you?

10. What does the future look like?

Focus Group Protocol with Mothers of Somali Youth in Toronto, at Midaynta Community Services, Toronto, 2024.

Individual Questions to be asked at end of focus groups

1. How long have you lived in Toronto?

a. Less than a year
b. 1-5 years
c. 5-10 years
d. > 10 years

2. Which neighbourhood do you live in? _____.

3. In general, how safe do you feel in your neighbourhood?

a. Very Safe
b. Somewhat Safe
c. Not too Safe
d. Not at all Safe

4. People in your neighbourhood are willing to help their neighbours. Do you…

a. Strongly Agree
b. Agree
c. Neither Agree nor Disagree
d. Disagree
e. Strongly Disagree

5. How would you describe the relationship between the police and the people in your neighbourhood?

a. Very Positive
b. Somewhat Positive
c. Somewhat Negative
d. Very Negative

6. Overall, do you believe people of the Somali community can trust Toronto police officers to treat them fairly?

a. Always
b. Some of the time
c. Rarely
d. Never

7. Which of the following do you think should be the highest priority?

a. Reducing police violence
b. Reducing crime in your community

c. Ensuring that the police treat all people with respect
d. Ensuring the community is heard by the police

8. Number of children and age range:

Total: ___
Boys: ____
Girls: ____

Year born, if indicated:

Addendum: Response Written by Midaynta Community Services to the *Mothers and Sons* Report

Recommendations from Midaynta Community Services

Midaynta Community Services is proud to have championed the establishment and implementation of an MOU with the Toronto Police Services Board (TPSB). Following the release of the *Mothers and Sons* report in December 2025 as well as the *What We Heard* report, Midaynta submits a renewed commitment to the shared priorities of sustained, authentic partnerships that are rooted in respect and value for community participation.

The *What We Heard* report notes:

> *Newcomers want relationships that recognize power imbalances, cultural differences, and community resource limitations. Many newcomers feel that officers need to learn to make space for others by listening, sharing leadership, and engaging with humility.*

Midaynta Community Services supports Toronto communities, including newcomers and Black youth in neighbourhoods where community safety is a priority, and intentional, culturally grounded, trauma-informed policing and engagement is needed. We believe this can be achieved with action and accountability in continued partnership between our communities and Toronto Police Services.

We are proud of the gains made over the course of the initial MOU, but our position aligns with that of the *What We Heard* report. There is still a long road ahead of us, and we can go further together.

In alignment with the TPSB's goal of partnership over posture and evidence from the *Mothers and Sons* report, Midaynta Community Services proposes the following recommendations for a renewed MOU with TPSB:

1. **Community-led Trust Index**

   In partnership with the TPSB, Midaynta will lead the establishment of a "Trust Index": The TPSB has reiterated its commitment to transparency and accountability, and this is a shared priority of communities as evidenced in data reported in *Mothers and Sons*. The Report highlights the value of using community perceptions of trust to complement official safety scorecards.

   What TPS intends in the execution of their duties can matter less than the actual impact. Good intent can be lost in translation due to a lack of cultural awareness or trauma informed engagement. TPS has few tangible avenues for understanding and improving this dynamic without reciprocal dialogue and actionable steps for accountability and change.

   The community-led establishment of a Trust Index answers the call for authentic participation in safety solutions, and demonstrates partnership over posture in delivering intentional, culturally grounded, trauma informed engagement between police and the

communities depending on them. Importantly, the Trust Index is an opportunity to move beyond consultation to an incremental, but scalable approach that serves all Torontonians.

2. **TPS and Communities Collective**

A Toronto Police Services (TPS) and Communities collective will allow NCOs an enhanced, structured framework for community engagement and actionable strategies. The Collective provides a consistent avenue for reciprocal dialogue and partnership and can serve as common ground for the co-creation of the trust index. Further, the Collective would allow community members, particularly youth and Mother Outreach Workers, to authentically and meaningfully participate in informing trust building, transparency and partnership between the TPS and communities.

To assist the TPSB in its goal of ensuring officers approach their duties with a focus on culturally grounded and trauma-informed care, Midaynta's Mother Outreach Workers can be key partners in cultural education and the cultivation of shared understanding about the underlying socio-economic and historical factors that shape safety, wellbeing, and attitudes toward authority and policing in high-contact communities.

Similarly, in the spirit of reciprocity, this an opportunity for the Toronto Police Services to share their strategic goals and approaches in building trust and community safety through a trusted partner that can provide cultural translation for community awareness, buy-in, outreach, and support.

Achieving a shared understanding supports the inclusion of Mother Outreach Workers and youth in community representation on hiring, recruitment, and training panels. This would ensure that community voice and lived experience directly inform the selection of future NCOs. This is especially important for the selection of NCOs serving in more vulnerable neighborhoods with higher family support needs.

The Collective is also an opportunity to highlight, on an ongoing basis, what is going well and which approaches work best, especially in striking the essential balance between over-policing and community safety.

The *Mothers and Sons* report highlighted the sense of legitimacy the MOU and formal community collaboration lend to safety, the overall sentiment of being heard, and, importantly, the perceived and real reduction in homicides (e.g. reports of "fewer funerals"). This improved collaborative relationship and rebuilt trust with NCOs under the auspices of the MOU is a clear demonstration of a successful, authentic partnership. We look forward to an evolving partnership and continued success.

3. **Affirming What We Heard and Community Partnership**

Midaynta Community Services affirms the key findings of the What We Heard report, especially calls for greater investment in wellness, especially the psychological wellness and fitness of members, and the mitigation of toxicity and burnout in the service. These factors are inextricably linked to the quality of service and compassion that our communities receive. We posit comprehensive and ongoing reviews of members' fitness to serve,

investments in de-escalation and diversity training, strong leadership and oversight all contribute to reduced corruption, stronger trust, and sustained community safety.

Midaynta wishes to place on record our gratitude for the continued support of the TPSB. We reiterate our call for ongoing, formal collaboration in addressing systemic barriers that can be traced to the root of crime and community safety challenges, including socio-economic factors such as housing, community infrastructure, educational attainment and unemployment.

The *Mothers and Sons* report showed many mothers were geographically concentrated in neighbourhoods with higher crime rates and lower well-being scores. These areas fall significantly lower in economic security, housing quality, and educational attainment compared to the rest of the city.

Midaynta continues to work with multiple levels of government and various organizations toward dismantling these barriers and achieving our shared goal of community wellbeing and safety. We look forward to the TPSB's continued support in our prevention and intervention efforts, particularly through youth and family supports.

We share in the TPSB's view that community engagement is the basis for enhancing community safety and well-being that builds healthy, strong and inclusive communities. We ask that the board prioritizes the relationship between developing local capacity, including but not limited to funding for the TPS and Communities Collective, and the development of the Trust Index. We agree that special funding of this nature supports collaborative engagement on community safety issues of public interest and improving police and community relations.