

Open Letter to the Toronto Board of Health

July 16, 2018

Dear Members of the Toronto Board of Health,

We, the undersigned, are writing to ask the Toronto Board of Health, the City of Toronto, the provincial and federal governments to take a public health approach in order to bring an end to community violence, including gun violence, in the City of Toronto. For too long we have become complacent with the level violence, the lives lost, and the trauma that follows in the wake of every act of community violence. Many of us who are signing this letter have lost family or friends and we are asking for drastic measures before more people and communities feel the trauma of losing someone to a senseless act of violence.

We wish to begin by thanking the Toronto Board of Health for recognizing that exposure to community violence is a Social Determinant of Health and for the steps it is taking based on the motion passed on March 5, 2018. These are important steps in recognizing that gun violence and other forms of community violence are symptoms of deeper social problems, and that if we do not address those deeper problems the cycle of violence will continue.

Chief among the roots of community violence is the growing gap between rich and poor. International epidemiological studies show that in countries and jurisdictions where the gap between rich and poor is greater, the homicide rate is higher. And as the gap has grown in Toronto and in Ontario we have followed this international pattern with more shootings and more gun homicides.

There is a strong link between poverty and gun violence. If you overlay the maps of shootings in the city of Toronto with the maps of low-income communities you will see an almost exact match. The research shows, and people who grow up in low income communities state, that the link is due to various characteristics of poverty including the shame of poverty. Two decades ago we had a debate about cutting welfare rates from poverty levels to destitution. We argued about how much peanut butter and jelly and pasta people could survive on. Adjusted for inflation if welfare rates had remained steady, the rate for a single person would be \$1,050 per month, instead it's \$721. We also cut funding for social housing to the point where two decades later we are closing social housing because, through a lack of maintenance, many units have become uninhabitable. Shortly after these cuts to social assistance and housing, we had the first "summer of the gun".

But it's not just poverty, if you overlay the map of shootings and areas of the city that are poorly served with recreation and community centers and with transit, you will again see a match. In one low income community that does not have a recreation or community centre, teenagers have said that they go and hang out at McDonald's until they get kicked out, and then they go and hang out at Tim Hortons until they get kicked out because there is no place for them to go to. When our society treats teenagers in this way it should not be a surprise when some of them find a sense of belonging and respect among the gangs and groups that carry guns.

As well as the growing gap between rich and poor and the gap in services between high and low income communities, other contributing factors to the cycle of violence include trauma, discrimination, the

availability of guns, and a troubled relationship with the police. The research shows that every incident of community violence leads to fear, anxiety, depression, PTSD, and lower survival expectations among young people. We know that if we do not treat this trauma, it feeds back into the cycle of violence. The number of shootings rose from 180 in 2014 to 392 in 2017, but we did not double the budget for social and psychological supports. Compare this response with the supports provided to end the SARs epidemic in 2003, which infected 240 and led to 44 deaths in the GTA. Last year, there were 591 victims of gun violence and 39 deaths, but because they are primarily from low income and racialized communities, there is not nearly the attention or support provided. Like SARs, gun violence is an epidemic, and if we do not treat it with the same determination that we responded to SARs, gun violence will continue to spread.

The lack of response to the shootings that affect low income and racialized young people in the inner suburbs reflects our broader and often unconscious discrimination. Our decisions to not prioritize transit, recreation and community centres in low income communities also reflects an often unconscious discrimination that leaves those most vulnerable out of the decision making process.

As well as trauma and discrimination, the availability of handguns feeds into community violence. More than 50% of the handguns used in crimes on our streets are bought legally in Canada. No one should be able to make an argument against stricter gun laws without first speaking to a parent who has lost a child to gun violence.

The troubled relationship between the police and the communities that need them most also contributes to the cycle of gun violence. People in low income communities are reluctant to come forward with information about perpetrators of shootings because it means they will often be the next target. On the other hand, the police have the most dangerous job in the city, they are the ones going after the people who are carrying and committing crimes with guns. They also have the incredible responsibility where a momentary error in judgment can lead to unnecessary death. Although the police reach out to low income communities through community initiatives, other police actions, such as carding and profiling alienate the communities that need their services most. We need a healthier relationship between the police and low income communities. The lack of trust on both sides that can only be addressed through greater dialogue and an openness to change.

It must be pointed out, however, that the police alone cannot bring an end to gun violence in this city. We only have to look south of the border to see what happens if we make the police our main response to community violence. The United States has three police officers for every two we have in Canada, they have 645 people per hundred thousand in jail vs 135 in Canada. But even with all these police and all of these arrests their homicide rate remains four times what it is in Canada. The American experience shows that we cannot arrest our way out of this problem.

If we want to bring an end to gun violence in this city, we need to ask ourselves with every political decision whether the decision will increase or decrease the gap in income and services between rich and poor, whether we are adequately dealing with the trauma, the discrimination, the availability of guns and the troubled relationship with police that contribute to community violence.

To this end, we ask that, in addition to the steps being taken currently, that Toronto Board of Health:

- 1) Encourage the city to take the necessary steps to reverse the widening gap in income and services among residents of Toronto,
- 2) Ask the Province of Ontario to increase social assistance rates to reverse the cuts made in the late 1990s, and to re-establish funding for social housing.
- 3) Ask the Province of Ontario to continue the work of Bill 175, the Safer Ontario Act, to develop a better relationship between communities and the police.
- 4) Ask the federal government to regulate the sale of handguns to reduce the availability of handguns and to save lives.

It is possible to end community violence in Toronto. There are 3,000 shootings a year in Chicago, there are 400 in Toronto, there are three in Helsinki, Finland. The difference in each of these jurisdictions are the result of public policies. To eliminate gun violence will take a change of course. We must recognize in our decision-making processes that all people deserve to be treated with respect that the inequities in income and in services feed into the cycle of violence and if we do not address those inequities the cycle of violence will continue. It is our choice.

Yours sincerely,

Louis March
Zero Gun Violence Movement

Chris Glover
MPP – Spadina-Fort York

Dr. Wendy Cukier
Professor Information
Technology Management
Ryerson University

Zya Brown
Founder
Think Twice

Evelyn Fox
Communities for Zero Violence

Reverend Sky Starr
Higher Healing Counselling
Services

Dr. Jooyoung Lee
Associate Professor of Sociology
University of Toronto

Arthur Lockhart
Professor Social and Community
Services
Humber College
Founder - The Gatehouse

Kelly Whetter
Communities for Zero Violence

Elizabeth Correia
Youth Counsellor
Deva-In-You