

# HL11.1 Attachment 2

## Attachment 2: A Review of Local Research on the Impacts of Community Violence

### Introduction

Much of the public health impact of community violence comes from residual effects of non-fatal experiences borne by those who directly and indirectly experience violent events (e.g., witness, know someone who was hurt or killed) and the longer term detrimental effects on the economic, social, and built environment of communities.<sup>1, 2,3,4</sup> Studies from other jurisdictions have shown the range of impacts community violence has on individuals, families, and communities, including:

- Negative impacts on physical and mental health (e.g., elevated blood pressure, anxiety, posttraumatic stress, and aggression), which can lead to other health problems;<sup>4,5,6,7,8;9</sup>
- Limits on health-promoting behaviour such as reduced participation in outdoor activities and physical activity due to fear of violence;<sup>10</sup>
- Social, educational, and economic challenges in the short-term, and long-term economic consequences such as losses in long-term earning potential;<sup>11,12</sup>
- Increased risk of behavioural, emotional, and learning problems among children and youth;<sup>13,14</sup>
- Disruption of educational attainment (e.g. high school or post-secondary) which negatively impacts future occupational and economic success of youth (both victims and perpetrators);<sup>8,15</sup> and
- Economic impacts in neighbourhoods experiencing gun violence, including reduced growth of businesses, and lower home values, credit scores, and home ownership rates.<sup>16</sup>

Very little is known about these effects in Toronto as there are very limited population-level data on the impacts of exposure to community violence beyond deaths and physical injuries treated in hospital. However, several research studies examining this topic have been conducted in Toronto. Toronto Public Health conducted a review of this local research to help shed some light on the impacts of community violence.<sup>1</sup>

### Methods

A systematic search of the published and grey literature was conducted to identify local research. The search strategy was developed in consultation with a TPH Librarian and was refined through an iterative process. Key informants were also approached to help identify additional research studies. Table 1 below describes the search parameters.

The published literature search identified 315 articles published between 2014 and 2019.<sup>2</sup> After two staff screened the title and abstract, two articles were identified as relevant and included in this review. As very few relevant articles were found, no timeline restrictions were used for the grey literature search. For grey literature that did not include an abstract, the table of contents and/or executive summary were screened to determine relevance. Through key informants and the grey literature search, we identified an additional eight relevant studies to review. The parameters of our search strategy will likely have missed some local studies, such as community-based research that has not been published or

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<sup>1</sup> The literature search also included local studies that examined the extent of exposure to community violence in Toronto without necessarily assessing its impacts. These studies were reviewed and incorporated into the "Extent of exposure to community violence" section of the Staff Report, if they had been completed in the past 10 years.

<sup>2</sup> We restricted the timeframe of this search. As it can take more than two to three years for a study to get published after completion, the selected time frame enabled capturing research done in the past 10 years.

## Attachment 2: A Review of Local Research on the Impacts of Community Violence

uploaded to the internet. There are also some studies currently in progress for which we could not yet obtain data or could only obtain unpublished preliminary findings.

<b>Table 1: Literature search parameters</b>		
<b>Research Question</b>	What are the physical and mental health impacts and other impacts of community violence in Toronto?	
	Published Literature	Grey Literature
<b>Timelines</b>	January 2014-Jan 2019	Not specified
<b>Databases Searched</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ovid MEDLINE(R) and Epub Ahead of Print, In-Process &amp; Other Non-Indexed Citations, Daily and Versions(R) &lt;1946 to January 08, 2019&gt;</li> <li>• SocINDEX with Full Text</li> <li>• Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Google.ca</li> <li>• Custom Search Engine for Canadian Public Health Information</li> <li>• Custom Search Engine for Canadian Public Health Associations</li> </ul>
<b>Keywords</b>	<p><u>Types of violence:</u> Bombing or bullying or "child abuse" or gang or "gun violence" or "violent crime" or "community violence" or "crime victims" or "drug trafficking" or "elder abuse" or "ethnic violence" or "gender based violence" or violence or firearms or homicide or murder or "human trafficking" or "juvenile delinquency"</p> <p><u>Types of impacts:</u> impact or "Physical health" or "mental health" or injury or wound or homicide or death, or trauma or PTSD or stress</p>	<p><i>Based on consultation with the TPH Librarian, the search terms were refined to this smaller list:</i></p> <p><u>Types of violence:</u> gang or "gun violence", "violent crime" or "community violence"</p> <p><u>Types of impacts:</u> impact</p>
<b>Inclusion Criteria</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Location of study: Toronto or Mississauga, Hamilton, Markham, or Vaughan</li> <li>• Primary studies</li> <li>• Language: English</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Location of study: Toronto or Mississauga, Hamilton, Markham, Vaughan</li> <li>• Primary studies</li> <li>• Language: English</li> <li>• File type: PDF</li> </ul>
<b>Exclusion Criteria</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus only on intimate partner violence, family violence, elder abuse, child abuse/maltreatment, and/or suicide; or only on violence related to war, political conflict, natural disasters, and/or severe weather/climate change</li> <li>• Evaluations of interventions</li> </ul>	

As the purpose of this review was not to make generalizations but to help identify the research that has been done and the kinds of impacts that have been studied, critical appraisal or quality assessment of each study was not deemed necessary.

The ten relevant studies were reviewed and the findings were compiled in a data extraction table which informed the summary presented here. Common themes across studies were identified and are presented as section headings in this document. To capture a wide range of impacts, both common findings across studies as well as unique findings were identified and are presented below.

## Attachment 2: A Review of Local Research on the Impacts of Community Violence

### Description of Local Research Studies

The ten relevant studies that were reviewed are summarized in Table 2 below. Overall, the local research primarily consists of smaller, qualitative studies, one ethnographic study, and two larger quantitative studies, all focused on Toronto. While the design of most of these studies does not allow for drawing generalizations about the impacts on all those exposed to violence, these studies do provide a sense of the range of potential impacts being experienced by Toronto residents and communities.

Although all studies touched on the impacts of exposure to community violence, most did not have that as their sole or primary focus. Most studies assessed individual level impacts among predominantly racialized groups and/or a particular neighbourhood in the city, relying on participants' reports of their own lived experience as well as participants' views on the impacts on others/their community. Only one study examined community level impacts using a community level indicator (e.g., neighbourhood level violent crime). Studies did not differentiate or examine impacts from different types of exposure to community violence (being a victim, witnessing, living in a community experiencing community violence).

<b>Author and Date of Publication</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Population</b>	<b>Study design</b>	<b>Research Question(s)/Focus</b>
Aden et al., 2018 <sup>17</sup>	Ontario; Toronto, Ottawa, and Kitchener-Waterloo	Somali-Canadians 14-30 years old;	Survey (n=102) and focus groups (n=50)	What is the scope and experience of gun violence and homicides among Somali-Canadian youth in Ontario?
Berardi, 2018 <sup>18</sup>	Toronto; Lawrence Heights	Residents, 16-87 years old, primarily Jamaican- and Somali-Canadians	Ethnography (n~100)	How do residents, particularly young Black men, manage the day-to-day realities of gun violence and victimization in their neighbourhood?
Chum & O'Campo, 2015 <sup>19</sup>	Toronto	25-64 years old	Survey (n=2411); Uniform Crime Reporting database	What are the impacts of neighbourhood level determinants on cardiovascular disease?
Dlamini, Anucha, & Lovell, 2015 <sup>20</sup>	Toronto; Jane and Finch	Youth; ~15-25 years old	Mobile speaker's corner (n=50)	How youth identify violence and its causes. How they experience and respond to violence. Youth's solutions to combat violence in their community.
Hannays-King, Bailey, & Akhtar, 2015 <sup>21</sup>	Toronto	Black mothers who have lost a child to gun violence	In-depth interviews (n=10)	What is Black mothers' experience with social supports in grieving the loss of their children to gun violence?
Mohamed, 2017 <sup>22</sup>	Toronto; two middle schools in Neighbourhood Improvement Areas (NIAs)	Teachers	Semi-structured interviews (n=3)	How do violent events in the neighbourhood affect students within the classroom?

## Attachment 2: A Review of Local Research on the Impacts of Community Violence

<b>Table 2: Brief summary of local research studies</b>				
<b>Author and Date of Publication</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Population</b>	<b>Study design</b>	<b>Research Question(s)/Focus</b>
Scott, Gopal Chambers & Wolak, 2018 <sup>23</sup>	Toronto	Youth charged at 15-30 years old	Semi-structured interviews (n=10)	To uncover the personal stories of young people who have been charged and incarcerated on more than one occasion for multiple charges including firearm charges.
Toronto Public Health & Toronto Children's Services, 2018 <sup>24</sup>	Toronto	Children; 6-12 years old	Focus groups (n=107)	Perspectives, experiences and ideas of children on safe and nurturing environments in Toronto's public spaces.
Weekes, 2006 <sup>25</sup>	Toronto; Scarborough	Youth; 15-30 years old	Semi-structured interviews (n=7)	What are the impacts of gun violence on the Black community in Scarborough? Why is gun violence a problem in Scarborough and how can it be resolved?
Wortley, 2019 <sup>26</sup> (in progress/ preliminary findings)	Toronto; primarily NIAs	Youth; 16-24 years old	Quantitative/Qualitative Interviews (n=492)	Toronto youth perceptions of crime and experiences with guns, crime and victimization.

### Summary of Findings

#### *Physical Health Impacts*

Chum and O'Campo examined the association between neighbourhood-level exposure to violent crime and cardiovascular disease in Toronto. They found that living in neighbourhoods with higher levels of violent crime was associated with increased odds of cardiovascular disease even after controlling for possible confounders like age, visible minority status, education, and after tax family income.<sup>19</sup>

#### *Emotional and Psychological Impacts*

Being afraid and not feeling safe were the most commonly reported impacts of community violence across the local research studies.<sup>17,20,22,24,25</sup> For children and youth, feelings of fear, anxiety and nervousness seemed to escalate after a violent event in their neighbourhood.<sup>22,24</sup> Children's fear included worrying about the safety of their loved ones. A father of two young girls described that when he leaves the house his daughters say, "Be safe daddy. Love you."<sup>18</sup>

In a couple of studies, fear was described as a constant in participants' lives.<sup>20</sup> Berardi described the constant state of fear and sensory alertness seen amongst participants in Lawrence Heights as "hypervigilance," which shaped how participants moved through their lives.<sup>18</sup>

## Attachment 2: A Review of Local Research on the Impacts of Community Violence

In a small qualitative study with three teachers, one teacher talked about students' sadness and how upset they were after the murder of a grade nine student. Similarly, after a young man known by the students was killed, the teacher described the students as looking sad and hopeless.<sup>22</sup> In an ethnographic study in Lawrence Heights, one participant talked about being traumatized by knowledge of a fatal shooting in his neighbourhood when he was a child and that the trauma is still present in adulthood.<sup>18</sup> Another participant in the same study talked about how those in their neighbourhood experience a premature loss of innocence and are robbed of their youth because of being exposed to community violence.<sup>18</sup>

Researchers also found that some participants feel powerless in the face of community violence, resigning themselves to it.<sup>20</sup> In Berardi's study, this came through in one participant's description of not having a dream for the future.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, in one of the studies, participants felt they had become desensitized to gun violence because of repeated first or second hand exposure.<sup>25</sup>

### *Changing Behaviour*

In a study with children ages 6-12 by Toronto Public Health and Children's Services, some children talked about hearing gun shots, witnessing fights in parks and community centres, and bullying. When violence was mentioned, children talked about not wanting to walk around in their neighbourhood, feeling less comfortable accessing community spaces such as parks, playgrounds and community centres. A few groups of children associated community centres with risks of violence and with people dealing drugs or doing drugs outside the centre. Some children described being very aware of whether or not the places they visited had security features, including security guards, fences, security cameras, metal detectors, controlled entry, and knowing that a place was gun free. The authors noted that in areas with higher incidence of violence, children think about safety risks and need reassurance from others. Police presence elicited mixed feelings for the children. While in

### Box 1: Impacts of community violence

#### *Physical, emotional and psychological*

- Increased odds of cardiovascular disease
- Feeling afraid and unsafe for oneself or a loved one
- Anxiety and nervousness that escalates after a violent neighbourhood event
- Hypervigilance (state of always being alert to potential dangers)
- Feeling powerless and desensitized
- Anger and resentment about loss of control and restrictions on mobility

#### *Changing behaviour*

- Following "street code" to maintain safety and survival
- Avoiding public spaces, such as parks and community centres
- Not staying out late or staying home at night
- Constant planning of routine everyday activities (e.g., dog walks)
- Altering social ties (staying away from the "wrong" people; making "better friends") and avoidin guns
- Moving out of the neighbourhood

#### *Responses to violence*

- Not reporting experiences of violence (as victim or witness) to the police
- Carrying a gun, joining a gang, or pursuing street justice for self-protection
- Uniting with others in community to take political action

#### *Family and community impacts*

- Breakdown in family relationships and social support systems
- Stigmatization of neighbourhoods from media coverage of gun violence
- Racial profiling by police
- Securing police presence and moving community activities and gatherings indoors to ensure safety
- Divisions in communities on how to respond to violence

## Attachment 2: A Review of Local Research on the Impacts of Community Violence

some ways, seeing police provided an increased sense of security, they also alerted children that "something was up", and thus simultaneously created greater anxiety.<sup>24</sup>

In many of the research studies, participants talked about changing their behaviour to avoid community violence: minding one's own business, changing who they associate with and staying away from the "wrong" people, avoiding areas perceived as being unsafe or sticking to areas where there is a police presence, not staying out late or staying home at night, and even moving to live in neighbourhoods perceived as safer.<sup>20,25</sup> In one study, participants spoke of learning and following a "street code" to maintain their safety and survival, and the need for constant planning even for routine everyday activities such as visiting friends, deciding where to smoke, when and where to walk your dog, and where to play.<sup>18</sup> Participants also discussed anger and resentment that their individual agency was limited and they could not move freely around their communities because of violence.<sup>18,25</sup>

### *Responses to Violence*

Local research revealed the different ways in which participants reported taking individual action in the face of community violence.

Wortley's study of youth found that only about 40 percent would report witnessing a violent crime and about 60 percent would report their own victimization. Reasons for not reporting included a lack of trust in police and feeling like police do not care or cannot protect them.<sup>26</sup> Similar findings were reported in other studies.<sup>18,25</sup>

In a few studies, participants reported that they had decided they needed a gun to help protect themselves because of the violence they saw in their neighbourhoods.<sup>18,20,26</sup> For some, feeling the need to carry a gun continued after release for firearms-related charges as they still feared becoming victimized by violence.<sup>23</sup>

Local research also demonstrated a range of other individual responses to gun violence. For example, some youth living in the Jane and Finch neighbourhood communicated that they believed in speaking out, including to the police, when they experienced or witnessed violence.<sup>20</sup> Research in Scarborough found that some youth responded to gun violence by making "better" friends, avoiding guns, and turning to religion.<sup>25</sup> As well, some reported that they became more political as a response to gun violence.<sup>25</sup>

### *Impacts on Families and Communities*

The majority of studies focused on the impact of community violence on an individual level; however the family, social, and community impact of violence was demonstrated in a few studies.

In a study of Black mothers' experiences of bereavement after a child's death from gun violence, mothers described that they experienced a breakdown in their family and social support systems, in part due to the stigma of a death from gun violence. This led mothers to experiences of social isolation.<sup>21</sup>

People in Lawrence Heights reported that because of violence there are changes to community programs, events, and celebrations with the aim of making them safer; for example youth activities are programmed indoors and community barbeques are organized with the local police division.

## Attachment 2: A Review of Local Research on the Impacts of Community Violence

In the interviews with Black youth in Scarborough conducted by Weekes, participants felt that gun violence has led to racial profiling by the police. Participants described that they have been followed, questioned, detained, and generally "harassed" by police. Participants also felt that gun violence has led to their Scarborough neighbourhood and the Black community being negatively stereotyped, which has been perpetuated by the media.<sup>25</sup>

In Weekes' research, some participants felt that the Black community has come together through their political advocacy to end gun violence, while others thought that gun violence was dividing the community.<sup>25</sup>

Based on his ethnographic study, Berardi<sup>18</sup> concludes that the lack of investment in addressing unabated community violence can have broader implications on neighbourhoods and communities. For instance, young people's mental and physical preoccupation with keeping safe and avoiding violent victimization can limit their ability to pursue valuable opportunities for upward mobility, including, but not limited to, education and employment. Berardi describes these conditions as contributing to a culture of surviving, rather than a culture of thriving, which can further perpetuate economic and social marginalization of communities.

### Conclusions

While study design of most of the reviewed studies does not allow for drawing generalizations about the impacts on all those exposed to violence in this city, the findings discussed provide a sense of the range of impacts being experienced by some Toronto residents. Overall, this local research suggests that community violence in Toronto is having negative effects on physical and mental health, including increasing the risk for cardiovascular issues and producing fear, resentment, powerlessness, and hypervigilance. Community violence also restricts residents' mobility, limiting people's choices and negatively affecting everyday life. Residents spoke of the persistence of violence contributing to stigmatization of neighbourhoods and racial profiling, all of which can erode the social fabric of communities, and can lead to more violence. Residents are coping in different ways with ongoing violence, ranging from avoidance to confrontation, and from isolation to uniting with others to take political action. Local studies also point to the intersections of community violence and racism, such as, how racism creates conditions for community violence as well as exacerbating the effects of community violence.

While local research findings echo what we know about the impacts of exposure to community violence from studies in other jurisdictions, they do not provide a complete picture of the full range of impacts studied elsewhere. In addition, though local research reveals some of the impacts experienced by particular groups and neighbourhoods in the city, gaps exist in our understanding of the impacts of community violence on the broader Toronto population. Other areas of research that have not as yet been explored locally are the impacts of different forms of exposure (direct vs. indirect) to violence and the effects of cumulative exposure. Finally, there is also a gap in our understanding of the impact of community violence on the broader social determinants of health, including education, employment, use of community amenities/services, and the economic vibrancy of communities disproportionately affected by community violence.

## Attachment 2: A Review of Local Research on the Impacts of Community Violence

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## Attachment 2: A Review of Local Research on the Impacts of Community Violence

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