

# The Impact of Community Violence Exposure on Newcomer Youth

TYES Frontline Workers' Toolkit



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# LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The community that is now known as the Jane and Finch Community has been inhabited for generations beyond our knowing. We begin by acknowledging that the land we are on is the traditional territory of many nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples and is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples. We also acknowledge that Toronto is covered by Treaty 13 with the Mississaugas of the Credit.

We recognize and deeply appreciate their historic connection to this place. We also recognize the contributions of Métis, Inuit, and other Indigenous peoples have made, both in shaping and strengthening the country, our province, and our community, in particular.

Today this region is home to many indigenous people from across Turtle Island, including many survivors and intergenerational family members who have been impacted by the legacy of the residential school system.

As settlers, this recognition of the contributions and historic importance of Indigenous peoples must also be clearly and overtly connected to our collective commitment to make the promise and the challenge of Truth and Reconciliation real in our communities, and in particular to bring justice for murdered and missing indigenous women and girls across our country.



# ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF THE UNITED NATIONS INTERNATIONAL DECADE FOR PEOPLE OF AFRICAN DESCENT 2015-2024:

We also acknowledge the United Nation's Declaration of the International Decade for People of African Descent 2015-2024.

The objectives of this decade are to:

- *Promote respect, protection and fulfillment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by people of African Descent*
- *Promote a greater knowledge of and respect for the diverse heritage, culture and contribution of people of African descent to the development of societies*
- *Adopt and strengthen national, regional and international legal frameworks*

We are halfway through the decade and as a community and a Region, we must continue to work collectively to achieve the objectives of the declaration. We are, therefore, calling on everyone – individuals, organizations, elected officials, governments – to learn more about the reason for the declaration and to make a commitment to address at least one of the objectives.



## BACKGROUND

This toolkit was created by the Youth and Settlement team at The Spot Youth Centre – Jane Finch Community and Family Centre in partnership with the City of Toronto through the Toronto Youth Equity Strategy (TYES). The Toronto Youth Equity Strategy (TYES) aims to build resiliency and access to supportive systems for youth most vulnerable to involvement in serious violence and crime (MVP youth). TYES includes 28 recommendations and 110 actions the City of Toronto will take to provide better services and outcomes for vulnerable youth.

TYES was adopted unanimously by City Council in February, 2014.

The TYES Creative Report can be found online at: [toronto.ca](http://toronto.ca)

TYES is on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram at: **TorontoTYES**

The Jane/Finch Centre is a multi-service, community-based organization with a strong focus on poverty reduction through resident engagement, capacity building and anti-oppression. We have a long history of innovation and response to community needs and priorities. For over 40 years, the organization has been strategically building the health and well-being of Jane and Finch in collaboration with residents, community leaders, community groups, organizations and partners from within the local community and beyond. With a resident-led Board of Directors, the Centre has always been a passionate and strategic organization which has won numerous best practice awards.

The information and resources shared in this toolkit are learnings from our work with youth in the Jane Finch community. In 2017, Statistics Canada reported 61.5% of Humber River – Black Creek area residents are immigrants or non-permanent residents. Statistics Canada also reported 30.5% of these newcomers fall under the Refugee stream (Statistics Canada, 2017). Our work at the Jane Finch Community and Family Centre is shaped by the experiences of our participants, and thus compelling us to build capacity and learn to meet the needs of our participants.

For more information about The Jane Finch Community and Family Centre:  
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## OBJECTIVES AND GOALS

The goal of this toolkit is to support an understanding of how newcomer youth experience integration into their neighbourhoods and how community violence impacts them differently than youth who were born and raised in Canadian culture. This resource provides a breakdown of the newcomer youth experience, stressors that are specific to newcomer youth and how those stressors shape their experiences, and questions to consider when working with newcomer youth. This toolkit does not aim to share a step-by-step process of how to work with newcomer youth, instead, it aims to raise key considerations to supplement an understanding of the newcomer youth experience.



## UNDERSTANDING NEWCOMERS

In order to begin working with newcomers, youth workers must reject the one-size-fits-all approach. This approach eliminates the diversity and individuality that newcomers bring to Canada. To highlight this point, consider this: Canada accepts immigrants and refugees from 175 different countries. According to statistics Canada, from 2018-2019, the number of permanent resident newcomers who migrated to Canada was 313,601 (Statistics Canada, 2020). This number does not include refugee claimants, convention refugees, international students/ workers, visitors, and non-status migrants. Newcomers come from different backgrounds, and bring with them diverse experiences, circumstances, and expectations. The one-size-fits-all approach reduces their experiences down to the label: “newcomer”. Here are some key ways newcomers may differ from each other:

- Gender
- Race
- Country of origin
- Age at arrival
- Length of time in Canada
- Socioeconomic status
- Immigration status
- Personal history/ background
- Circumstances surrounding migration



## IMPACT OF IMMIGRATION STATUS ON NEWCOMER EXPERIENCE

Different immigration streams impact the experience newcomers have significantly. To gain a fulsome understanding of the impact, youth workers must understand the different immigration streams. Here is a brief breakdown of newcomers and the different immigration status they may hold.

### Permanent Resident

A permanent resident (PR) is someone who has the same rights as a Canadian Citizen, except the right to vote. Most newcomers coming through this stream have applied and paid fees to migrate to Canada. These newcomers or migrants also include sponsored family members or people who previously held convention refugee status. Permanent Residence (PR) holders can get Canadian citizenship after living in Canada for 3 years. However, citizenship can be denied to PR holders who may have criminal convictions. In extreme cases, PR holder may even be deported to their country of origin. This is extremely problematic, because people who have held PR status since childhood may still face deportation in certain cases, regardless of whether or not they have a connection to the country that has been classified as their home country.

### Refugee Claimant

A refugee claimant is anyone who has entered Canada and claimed refugee status. This could be a person with or without a Canadian visa. Some refugee claimants come via international airports, and some cross land borders through the United States of America.

Once a person claims refugee status they may apply for a work permit to support themselves while they are in Canada. They must then await a hearing date, which is where their case is heard in front of the Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB). If their claim is approved, they are granted Convention Refugee or Protected Person status, which allows them to live in Canada indefinitely and apply for Permanent Residence. However, if their claim is denied, some claimants may appeal the decision with the Refugee Appeal Division (RAD). If their appeal is rejected at RAD, they may seek judicial review at Federal court. The Federal Court may disagree with the decision of RAD, and declare that an error has been made, at which point the case will return to the Refugee Protection Division and is re-heard. If the Federal Court agrees with RAD's decision,



the claimant is given 30 days to leave Canada. In this case, a last resort Humanitarian and Compassionate (H&C) application may be filed, however, the removal order is not revoked and the claimant must leave Canada while their application is in process.

### **Convention Refugee/ Protected Person**

A Convention Refugee or Protected Person is someone who has been declared by the Immigration and Refugee Board to be unable to return to their home country due to persecution based on nationality, race, religion, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.

Convention refugees or protected persons may also be persons who are unable to or fear the return to their home country as they are personally affected by civil unrest, armed conflict, and violation of human rights in their home country.

### **Temporary Residents**

Temporary Residents are persons who are in Canada on a temporary basis, and are expected to return to their home country as their visa expires. These persons may include international students, international workers, and visitors.

### **Non-Status Persons**

Non-status Persons are persons who hold no immigration status in Canada. Non-status Persons may have entered Canada with temporary resident visas, and stayed after their visa's expire. They may also include persons that enter Canada without a valid visa. Non-status persons are most vulnerable as they are not recognized in the Canadian system. They are not legally permitted to work or attend school in Canada.

Most community programs and services that are designed for newcomers specifically target Permanent Resident or Convention refugee immigrants who have been in Canada for less than 5 years. Fewer programs are targeted toward refugee claimants, and virtually no programs accommodate temporary residents or non-status persons.

## KEY CONSIDERATIONS: IMMIGRATION STATUS

Some questions to consider when working with a newcomer youth as it relates to the circumstances around their immigration:

- Was the youth or youth's family fleeing violence, war, persecution?
- Have they experienced discrimination due to their race, religion, gender, political opinion, or membership in a social group?
- Have they experienced or witnessed trauma?
- Are they emigrating from a country undergoing civil unrest, armed conflict, or war?
- Have they lost friends or family to the unrest or conflict in their home country?
- Were they forced to leave their home country?
- Are they able to return back to their home country?
- Were they able to bring their possessions or are they financially stable?
- Has their gender impacted their immigration to Canada?
- Did they immigrate with their family?
- Is their family still in their home country?  
Are they susceptible to persecution?
- Do they have the support of their family?



PHOTO BY CHARLOTTE MAY FROM PEXELS

## DETERMINANTS OF MENTAL DISTRESS AMONG NEWCOMER YOUTH

The struggles of newcomer, refugee, and immigrant youth are often multi-layered. Newcomer youth find themselves adapting and building new relationships in a completely new cultural context. Leaving behind a familiar culture, environment, friends, and family is considered to be a huge stressor for any youth. This stress in newcomers is often amplified by language barriers, marginalization of certain communities, and the existing societal disadvantages in their new country of residence. In Canada, these would be the existing racism, income inequality, discrimination of marginalized groups, etc.

### Why are Newcomer Youth more susceptible to being impacted by community violence?

#### Conformity and Acceptance

Youth are more likely, than adults, to conform under peer pressure, as they prioritize and hold the acceptance by their peers in high regard. A study conducted on newcomer youth in Canada states that “coming into a new social world, these youth value peer acceptance and desire to conform to the normal behaviour. This could motivate them to engage with deviant behaviour, including violence and aggression” (Christmas & Christmas, 2017). On the other hand, non-conformity can become a major stressor for youth as they can end up marginalized, excluded and ridiculed. In order to avoid exclusion, youth are likely to conform even to behaviours that may be harmful or unlawful.

#### Family Dynamics

Youth are also less likely to engage in violent behaviour when they have a parent involved in their life and decision making. These factors impact newcomer youth, low-income youth, and youth experiencing generational poverty disproportionately. Parents' of newcomer youth have added financial pressures to provide stability in a new country, creating an expanding gap between newcomer parents and youth. When parents experience unstable or insecure employment, they tend to have more than one job or a job that pays minimally resulting in longer work hours. This can lead to spending more time at work than home and leaving youth on their own, or even to care for younger siblings. With parents spending more time at work or managing their financially

stability, there is little space for youth to come to them for support and they are less likely to notice any changes in behaviour that the youth may be presenting.

Newcomer youth may also take on adult responsibilities such as taking care of younger siblings, assisting parents with language barriers and contributing their paycheques to the household, in order to maintain family stability. This ultimately impairs their integration, their ability to establish new relationships, and limits their opportunities to grow in a new environment. Having the burden of extra family responsibilities and/or limited financial resources means that the youth doesn't have extra time to join extra-curricular activities or after school programs that could greatly contribute to their growth and expand their horizons. Not having these opportunities means youth also miss out on potential mentors, coaches, and other positive influences in their lives outside their family. The extra responsibilities leave less time for school work and affects sleep, eating patterns, and stress levels, making these youth more vulnerable to failing courses or dropping out of school. In the Canadian context, there is stigma associated with youth having to take on parental roles and care for their family. This prevents them from reaching out to teachers or other school staff to ask for support.

Breaking down some of the compounded stressors that make newcomer youth more susceptible to be impacted by community violence, some possible factors to consider include:

- Seeking acceptance in new environment
  - Unaware of the cultural norms in Canada
  - Lack of familiarity with Canadian weather
  - Anxiety due to lack of familiarity
  - Social Isolation – leaving behind family/friends/social circles
  - Struggles in building new meaningful relationships
  - Lack of social support groups
- Language barrier
- Consequences of violence may be different in Canada
  - Criminal convictions for physical violence
  - Distrust in authority and police
  - Involvement in crime without a fulsome understanding the law or the legal consequences

- Lack of support to bridge understanding and knowledge of societal norms
- Trauma (lived experience as victims or witnesses)
  - Post-traumatic stress disorder
  - Escaping persecution or war
  - Existing racism and discrimination in Canada
  - Breaking down of the image of Canada as a “safe place”
- Financial stressors of reintegration
  - Difficulty in finding employment
  - Lack of Canadian work experiences becomes an impediment
  - Lack of family support to pursuing higher education
  - Difficulty in networking within workplace/ industry
- Family dynamics
  - Extra responsibilities to support family
  - Interpreting and translating for parents
  - Caring for younger siblings
  - Contributing to household income

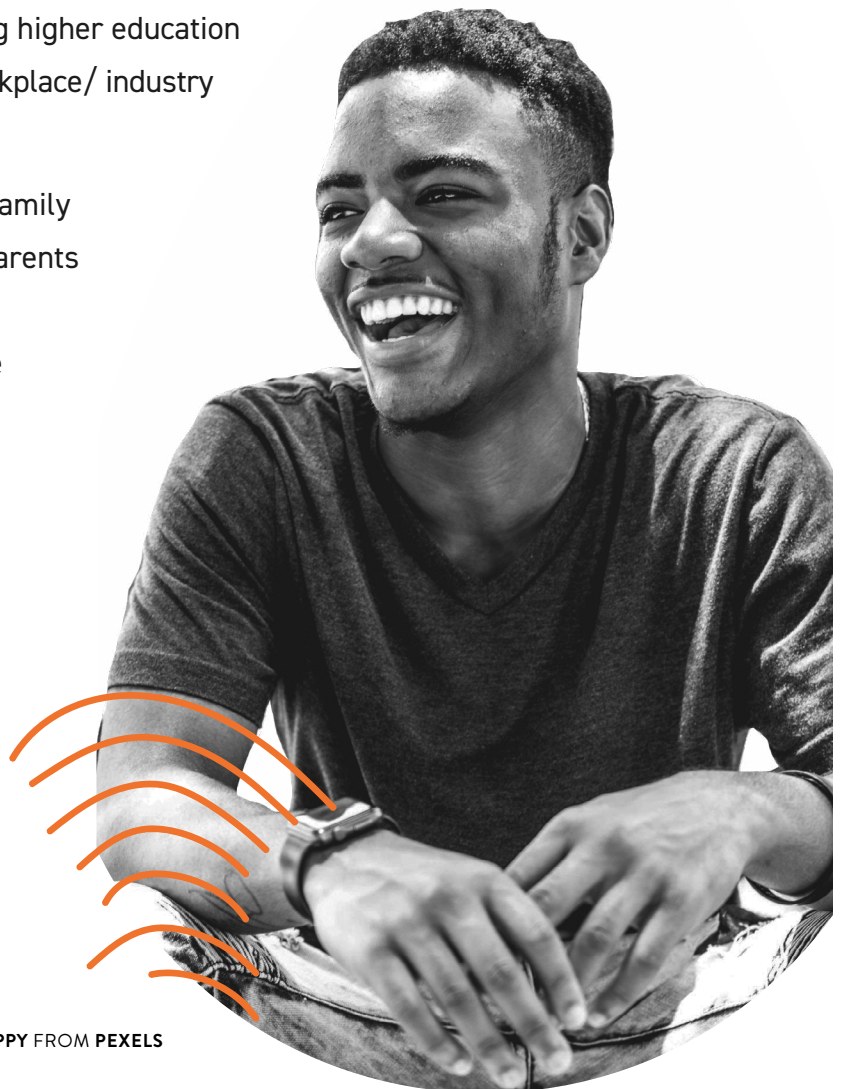


PHOTO BY NAPPY FROM PEXELS

## UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITY VIOLENCE EXPOSURE

Community violence exposure can be defined as witnessing acts of deliberate violence which are intended to cause harm to a victim that is not related to the offender or violence which occurs amongst community members. Community violence usually happens outside of a family household, and is most likely to occur amongst ethnic minorities, and low-income communities with a high rate of crime. This puts newcomer youth, especially Refugee youth, at a grave disadvantage. Many refugees settle in lower income neighbourhoods where community violence is more likely to occur than neighbourhoods that have a higher socioeconomic status. Also, witnessing or being a victim of community violence can have lasting impacts on youth and can result in the development of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress.

### Risk Factors:

- Ethnicity
- Socio-Economic status
- Underlying emotional and mental health issues
- PTSD
- Newcomer status

### Protective Factors:

- Strong social supports
- Parental supervision
- Good mental health
- Positive attitudes/ belief systems



PHOTO BY CHARLOTTE MAY FROM PEXELS

## THE BUILD UP TO VIOLENCE

In order to understand violence and community violence exposure, it is crucial to recognize that violence does not exist in a vacuum. Newcomer youth impacted by community violence may be the victims or the perpetrators. In both scenarios, perpetual violence in communities influences and affects all those who live and work in the community. Some of the elements that may build up to perpetuate violence in newcomer youth include:

- Many newcomer youth are subjected to bullying, along with the pressure of conforming to societal norms of their new environment
- They are caught between the intersectionality of trying to hold onto their culture as well as trying to assimilate into the new cultural norms of youth their age
- Pressure usually builds up when the proper protective factors are not in place and results in newcomer youth lashing out as they have no other means of expressing themselves
- Newcomer youth are met with many barriers, and their knowledge of the repercussions of crime and punishment in Canada may not be developed
- They may believe that violence is a suitable way of handling issues, as well violence may be a cultural norm with the youth they interact with. This may lead youth to handle situations in a violent manner

## INVOLVEMENT IN COMMUNITY VIOLENCE/ GANG CULTURE

Acceptance and peer pressure are key factors that may result in community violence. Youth are more likely than adults to conform to gain acceptance from their peers. Youth may find it difficult getting a job because of language barriers, lack of Canadian work experience, and a lack of understanding how job searching or resume writing works. Legal barriers to finding employment, such as: delays in paperwork, an inability to renew documents, lost paperwork (work permits, study permits, SIN#) pose another problem for newcomer youth. Navigating bureaucratic barriers can also be overwhelming and act as a deterrent to finding gainful employment.

Just being a young person may earn youth a negative reputation and many employers are not open to hiring youth, especially from certain communities. Postal codes indicate that youth reside in specific areas within the city that are more prone to systemic issues and barriers, which employers are aware of. If the youth is also a minority or person of color, these factors act as further barriers

There are problematic societal views adopted by some young men such as, needing to put up a tough front, not expressing themselves emotionally, as well as being a provider within the household. When this happens, young men are more prone to joining groups of other young men for security, and to have extra support if needed. These youth desire to be a part of something whether it be a community, a group, or a gang. It provides a sense of security that newcomer youth may be lacking, especially considering they are in a new environment trying to adapt. Visual representation matter so they are more likely to surround themselves with individuals who fit into their demographic. Being at an impressionable age, they may not understand the cultural norms of what is right and wrong, and may find themselves in compromising positions due to the friends and peers that they have chosen.

Youth may feel out of place in environments such as school so joining others is a chance for them to be accepted and understood. However, they may be exploited and brought into situations that prove detrimental to both their mental health and their overall safety.

As outlined, job security poses an issue, and due to the many barriers faced by newcomer youth, making income through illegal means may be the only viable option they see. In their mind's, the reward outweighs the risk, as they may want to provide for their families and ensure that they are living in better conditions than was found in their country of origin.

Young women are also at-risk of being exposed to violent gang culture due to their exposure to these environments. They may become involved because of a boyfriend, brother, and/or family member who is already involved in these activities. Young women have been used to hide drugs and weapons because they're less likely to be searched by police.

Young women also pursue the attention of young men who are making money as a means of gaining stability, if there are issues generating income.



These young women may be lured into human trafficking or commit criminal activities as a means of making money, and as a result may need protection from men due to the risk of a physical altercation or violence. Vulnerable young women can become entangled in relationships with older men who use the pretense of a relationship to involve them in sex trafficking. As a result, the effects of emotional, mental and sexual and/or physical trauma and abuse leave young women attached to those who traffic them.

## IMPACTS ON NEWCOMER YOUTH: LIVED EXPERIENCES

Interviewing newcomer youth who have experience living in Neighbourhood Improvement Areas (NIAs) across the City of Toronto, has provided a gauge of the impact that community violence has had on their relationships and outlooks within their given communities. Describing their experiences youth had the following to say:

- “I don't come out after dark because that's when most of the shootings and bad things happen, so I try to stay inside as much as I can”
- “There's not a lot of opportunities that we have so a lot of my friends end up selling drugs to make money and end up involved with the wrong people”
- “We're not gang members, we're all just friends who grew up the same way in the same 'hood, but when people see us they think we're criminals”
- “I can't find a job so I've had to rob people or sell stuff I'm not supposed to, to make money. I don't like it, but I don't see a lot of other options”

## PREVENTATIVE MEASURES: YOUTH PERSPECTIVE

When considering what preventative measures can be put in place to minimize the chances for newcomer youth having to deal with violence, it is important to get youth perspectives. Youth want to be seen and heard, and have a better understanding of what they are personally going through. Their engagement is important to ensuring the best decisions are being made to support them. Three key factors to consider are community, education, and mentorship.

### Community

- Show up for community events and when good things are happening not just during tragedy
- Let your presence be known and get familiar with the spaces youth are in this helps to build rapport.
- Do not put all teenagers in one box, each individual is unique
- Youth should not be supported in a linear or “cookie cutter” fashion.
- Consider alternative approaches. (Youth respond differently)
- Youth can feel closer to youth workers than teachers
  - Factors such as age, titles, and positions of authority can hinder a connection with youth.
  - Youth best respond to other youth on the basis of similarities and familiarity.
- Be someone who actually wants to talk to teens and genuinely get to know them
- Youth can determine people who want to support them from someone who doesn't.
- Reflect on your passion for supporting youth.
  - Don't belittle youth

### Education

- Educate youth about controlling their anger
- Educate youth about coping techniques for their mental health

- Understand teenagers and what they go through
- Learn about the differences of a teenagers mindset

### **Mentorship**

- You must get to know the youth first as an outsider
  - Know who you are supporting.
  - Some things will not be exposed on the surface level.
  - It takes time and work to try and understand youth.
  - “Keep the end in mind” what are you trying to support? Why are YOU supporting? How are you going to support? Who are you going to support?
- Youth will look for work ethics
  - First impressions matter (the energy you give youth will determine their relationship with you)
  - Youth like consistency, confidentiality, and consideration
  - Youth can point out your flaws.
- No lip service
  - What is promised is what's expected!
  - Be committed to support
- Don't be too strict
  - Create a space or environment that protects youth and supports their identities.
  - Factors such as tone and body language, can hinder your progress in building relationship.
  - Be ready to be vulnerable!
- Don't be someone that only cares for votes or optics when there is a crisis in the community.
- Help them!
  - Ask what they need and how you can help
  - Sometimes what we think is “right” may cause damage later.



PHOTO BY OMAR LOPEZ FROM UNSPLASH

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