



# THE FORGOTTEN VICTIMS OF GUN VIOLENCE

*A YWCA Toronto Report Examining the Gendered Impacts of Gun Violence*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## ABOUT YWCA TORONTO

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YWCA Toronto is dedicated to improving the lives of women and girls.

We help women and their children escape and recover from violence, move out of poverty, and access safe and affordable housing. We also work with young girls to build their leadership and critical thinking skills. Our Association serves over 13,000 individuals in more than 30 programs every year.

YWCA Toronto operates in communities that stand on the traditional territory of the Huron-Wendat and Petun First Nations, the Seneca, and most recently, the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation. The territory was the subject of the Dish With One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant, an agreement between the Iroquois Confederacy and the Ojibwe and allied nations to share peacefully and care for the resources around the Great Lakes.

Today, the meeting place of Toronto is still the home to many Indigenous people and we are grateful to have the opportunity to work on this territory as we strive to build a more equitable and just city for all residents.

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## TERMINOLOGY

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### CO-VICTIMS

Co-victims are people who have survived a homicide and/or have familial ties to the homicide victim. For every homicide victim, there are approximately six to ten family members who survive the homicide.<sup>1</sup>

### VIOLENT LOSS

Violent loss refers to the violent and unexpected death of a person. Violent death can be due to homicide, suicide, or a fatal accident.<sup>2</sup> In this report, violent loss refers to killing by guns or another weapon.

### DISENFRANCHISED GRIEF

Disenfranchised grief is a term coined by Dr. Kenneth J. Doka, defined as “grief that results when a person experiences a significant loss and the resultant grief is not openly acknowledged, socially validated, or publicly mourned.”<sup>3</sup> Disenfranchised grief subjects the bereaved person to limited recognition that leads to little social sympathy or support.<sup>4</sup>

### PARTICIPANTS/RESIDENTS

The terms “participant” and “resident” are used interchangeably throughout the Report to refer to individuals accessing YWCA Toronto services and/or residing at YWCA Toronto housing sites.



## I. INTRODUCTION

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*“I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own.”*

— Audre Lorde

2018 marked one of the deadliest years on record for Toronto with 406 shooting incidents and 51 gun homicides.<sup>5</sup> The significant spike in gun violence and gun-related deaths sparked a vocal response from City Council, the media and community members.<sup>6</sup> Residents, in particular, questioned the accuracy of Toronto's reputation as a safe city.<sup>7</sup> Homicide rates due to guns have risen since 2015, rendering shootings the most common method of homicide in Canada.<sup>8</sup>

The increase in violent deaths has affected many residents in our city and disproportionately impacted Black communities.<sup>9</sup> Homicide statistics from 1995 to 2005 indicate that 45 per cent of homicide victims in Toronto are Black men, although they only constituted 8.4 percent of the population during this time.<sup>10</sup> Although there is research exploring the connections between gun violence and entrenched poverty, institutional racism, ease of gun access, poor housing conditions, and police discrimination, the impact of gun violence on women and girls, particularly Black women and girls, is scarcely explored and understood.<sup>11</sup> The lack of intersectional gender analysis has minimized and rendered invisible the very tangible and destructive ways guns impact communities in Toronto. Sadly, women and girls are the forgotten victims of gun violence.

While anti-gun violence advocates strive to eliminate the root causes, there is also a dire need to address the current and ongoing impact of gun violence on women and girls in our city. A limited amount of research exists on the bereavement process for Black women. These studies, in particular, have noted the lack of data on the meaning-making process for Black mothers and teen girls.<sup>12</sup> While gun violence affects an entire community, the trauma and loss felt by Black women is often excluded and minimized in conversations led by politicians, journalists, police and community leaders.

In Toronto, Black women and girls receive limited public empathy or social services to deal with their trauma related to violent loss and to support them in their grieving journeys.<sup>13</sup> This is a trend that must be

reversed if these communities are going to heal from trauma and mourn the often senseless deaths of young men. As such, it is important to view the impacts of gun violence through an intersectional gender lens. It is often women in racialized communities who are left to reconcile the deaths of their children or family members and 'pick up the pieces' in the wake of violent loss.

This report examines several YWCA Toronto programs to understand how the communities the Association serves are impacted by gun violence and to identify policy and programmatic opportunities for better supports. The first section provides an overview of academic literature on the impact of violent loss on particularly Black women and girls. Efforts were made to incorporate Canadian-specific research. The concept of 'disenfranchised grief' is introduced in this section to describe the loss experienced by racialized communities. The second section of this report examines the impacts of gun violence, violent loss and disenfranchised grief on YWCA Toronto participants, as reported by staff at YWCA Toronto's Bergamot Apartments, Girls' Centre and Teen Mothers' Program. The last section comprises of a list of programmatic and policy recommendations designed to build safer and healthier communities for women and girls in Toronto.

In order to effectively address rising gun violence in our city, we absolutely require substantial government investment in affordable housing, social assistance programs, well-paying jobs, and opportunities for youth – particularly marginalized youth – in tandem with stronger gun control legislation. Additionally, community resources that offer Black women and girls safe spaces to grieve, heal, and connect with one another – particularly those offered from a trauma-informed, anti-racist, and anti-oppressive lens – are much needed. Sustained government investments to fund such programs are long overdue.

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\*We acknowledge the richness and diversity of Black cultures and communities, and we resist monolithic conceptualizations of Blackness. The term "Black" is used in this report to refer to individuals who self-identify as Black or as having African heritage. The term is intended to assist in centering this Report in the experiences of Black women and girls. Anti-Black racism and Black disparities in health, economic, political, and social outcomes are very real phenomena in our society that require active redress.



## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

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*“I can be changed by what happens to me  
but I refuse to be reduced by it.”*

— Dr. Maya Angelou

## A. MOTHERS

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### VIOLENT DEATH AND BLACK MOTHERS

A child's death is categorized as the most severe and stressful experience for parents.<sup>14</sup> Violent death induces the risk of psychological suffering, increasing the risk of post-traumatic stress disorder and stress-related illnesses.<sup>15</sup> Violent death "produces direct and countless indirect victims" who must restructure their lives to deal with the traumatic impacts of the loss.<sup>16</sup> This restructuring is a consequence of the loss of a child to gun violence that leaves parents in a state where they are unable to find meaning.<sup>17</sup> Bailey et al. claims that meaning-making is a significant and central part of grieving because it is the process of making sense of a death.<sup>18</sup> Meaning-making is a critical part of the bereavement process.

For Black mothers, meaning-making can galvanize them to become politically active, which is referred to as 'political mourning.'<sup>19</sup> Due to the invasive and widely depicted death of Black people, bereaved Black mothers' grief often becomes public and is publicly displayed. "A mother's grief can transform the marginalized, racialized, and oppressed from an object bearing grief to being a subject speaking grievance."<sup>20</sup> Activism offers a coping method for mothers' healing and meaning-making processes. While this may be regarded and promoted as positive, this sometimes disrupts Black mothers' right to grieve fully and in private.

The politicization of Black death can work to empower grieving mothers but can also interfere with the healing process.<sup>21</sup> The existing literature has identified different psychological outcomes and grieving processes for White and Black parents.<sup>22</sup> Race-based stigma and differences in racialized economic and social conditions all cause disruptions in the grieving process of Black parents and have significant psychological implications.<sup>23</sup> These effects are experiences of "intense trauma, disenfranchised grief, and withdrawal of social support."<sup>24</sup> The trauma is prolonged and intensified by social disparities such as poverty and discrimination that aggravate social, behavioural, and psychological disorders.<sup>25</sup>

For Black mothers, grieving is further complicated because of race-based stigma,<sup>26</sup> socio-economic status, gender, ethnicity, media representations of deceased

loved ones, and post-homicide encounters with the justice system.<sup>27</sup> Racism and sexism complicates Black mothers' experiences of coping and healing.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, Black mothers endure persistent social, psychological, and financial burdens as co-victims of gun-related deaths.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, as Black mothers deal with their bereavement processes and healing journeys, they must also manage the traumatization of their family, friends and community – while pushing for the positive legacies of their deceased loved ones.<sup>30</sup> This complexity is intensified due to the violent nature of their child's death and racist stereotypes about Black men, which complicates the meaning-making process for mothers.<sup>31</sup>

### SOCIAL NETWORKS

Social supports from personal relationships are significant in the bereavement process of mothers.<sup>32</sup> Extended social support from friends and family reduces symptoms of grief and helps navigate complicated bereavement processes.<sup>33</sup> Violent death alters the relationships that Black mothers once had with their friends, relatives, and their community because of the stigma attached to the murder of their child and victim-blaming. This is further complicated by feelings of guilt, and the bereaved blaming themselves for not being able to prevent the death of their loved one(s).<sup>34</sup> Bailey et al. found that when bereaved Black mothers compared themselves to other bereaved parents, they stated that the connection between Black males' death and gun violence led to the stigmatization of their child's death, which caused their community to treat their situations differently.<sup>35</sup> This is different from White bereaved parents who do not experience racial stigma around gun violence. The stigma of gun violence causes feelings of alienation, shame, and isolation specifically for Black mothers. These feelings lead mothers to avoid talking about their loss and heighten negative social interactions with friends causing fractured relationships during a time when social and community supports are critically important.<sup>36</sup>

Social supports for the bereaved significantly contribute to their ability to cope.<sup>37</sup> Black women rely on immediate and extended family members, friends, neighborhood supports, and faith-based communities as primary sources of support.<sup>38</sup> Black mothers also access formal supports offered by Black colleges,





Black community service organizations, mental health services, and religious institutions.<sup>39</sup> Formal supports for coping have been deemed to be effective in the assistance of grief, although there are barriers that prevent mothers and women from accessing formal interventions. Negative experiences and discrimination mean that Black families are prevented from seeking therapeutic supports due to stigma associated with Black death, the existence of racism within formal institutions, and cultural barriers in healthcare and social services.<sup>40</sup> An important factor that establishes meaningful and effective therapeutic interventions are therapists who can relate to the bereaved experiences and background.<sup>41</sup> In the research conducted for this report, these therapists seem to be few and far between.

### FAMILY

Studies suggest that Black women grieving violent loss experience altered family support and fractured relationships with their family members, close friends, and social networks.<sup>42</sup> The violent nature of their child's death impacts relationships with family members such as their partners, and exacerbates the dismantling of a functioning family unit.<sup>43</sup> Violent loss due to guns challenges Black mothers' relationships with their extended family members who sometimes change their behaviours and attitudes towards the bereaved mother.<sup>44</sup> Existing literature shows that when family members are most needed, bereaved parents find themselves alone because of family alienation.<sup>45</sup> As a bereaved Black mother explains, "you know some people of my family would not even call me back, to ask how I am doing, because to them it's like silence; he did something wrong and died."<sup>46</sup> The belief that Black men who die of gun violence are somehow culpable for their deaths alters the way that family members value the deceased, which impacts the ability of Black women to fully express their grief and find healing.

### FRIENDS

The intense distress experienced by the social network of the deceased leads to the loss of social relationships. In the words of one bereaved mother, "If I called, they would say I will call you back because they would think that I want to talk about my son. It changed a lot of relationships."<sup>47</sup> Black bereaved mothers experience changing treatment from their friends that impacts their ability to find healing and support.<sup>48</sup> In one study, mothers reported that their friends would avoid



speaking to them, visiting them, and speaking to them about the death of their child.<sup>49</sup>

### THE NEED TO PROVIDE WOMEN-SPECIFIC, SUPPORTIVE SPACES FOR HEALING

The loss of a child due to gun violence is a “traumatic and stigmatizing phenomenon” that requires immediate services to “improve the coping skills and mental health outcomes of survivors.”<sup>50</sup> Bailey et al. conducted a study that examines the impact of traumatic stress from gun-related loss on the resilience of Black mothers in Toronto.<sup>51</sup> The study consisted of 48 Black mothers aged 32-60 years who lost a child to gun violence and measured their traumatic stress, resilience, level of social support, cognitive appraisal, and quality of healthcare.<sup>52</sup> The study found that there is significant interest among bereaved mothers to lessen their traumatic stress through social support programs.<sup>53</sup> During in-person interviews with the participants, there was an expressed need for community-based programs, support groups and services that focus on trauma recovery.<sup>54</sup> Overall, mothers who received support during the bereavement process demonstrated more resilient coping skills. However, it was also found that Black mothers experience “withdrawal of support, changes in social relationships, and/or negative reactions from their social circles following their loss.”<sup>55</sup> Black mothers that found themselves unable to access supports, whether formal or informal, experienced higher levels of stress and ‘disenfranchised grief,’ a concept that will be explored in the next section.<sup>56</sup>

## B. DISENFRANCHISED GRIEF

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It is important to highlight the specific and unique experiences of grieving for Black communities to understand the way that their grief becomes disenfranchised by the media, police, and the larger community. Disenfranchised grief is a term coined by Dr. Kenneth J. Doka and refers to grief “that results when a person experiences a significant loss and the resultant grief is not openly acknowledged, socially validated, or publicly mourned.”<sup>57</sup> Disenfranchised grief occurs when a bereaved person receives limited recognition, social sympathy or public validation for his or her loss.<sup>58</sup> For Black Canadians, disenfranchised grief is an outcome of racist social constructions about the value of Black lives, the criminality of Black men, and social minimization of the loss experienced by bereaved Black women.<sup>59</sup>

### MEDIA REPORTING & DISENFRANCHISED GRIEF

Public policy and social behaviours towards the violent deaths of Black men are inextricably shaped by entrenched racial stereotypes about Black men being more prone to criminal and violent behaviour, and the implication that they are inherently dangerous.<sup>60</sup> The manner in which violence in Black communities is depicted by the media shapes mainstream discourse about the role of Blackness in violence. Losses are often depicted as an inevitable or natural outcome of ‘Black-on-Black’ crime.<sup>61</sup> Black Canadians have found it difficult to grieve loss given the widespread negative media coverage of their communities.<sup>62</sup>

The media participates in socially constructing an image of the deceased that grieving mothers often do not recognize. Such depictions center on gang violence and highlight the poverty and criminality of the neighborhood where the shooting took place.<sup>63</sup> In reporting a homicide due to gun violence, the media also generates fear of young Black men, and the communities they live in.<sup>64</sup> This frustrates bereaved Black mothers as their children's deaths are represented in the media in biased ways and often with little factual information.<sup>65</sup> This framing by the media perpetuates feelings of disenfranchised grief and raises "questions about whose lives are worth grieving and whose are not."<sup>66</sup>

In the study by Bailey et al., Black bereaved mothers in Toronto reported that racism had an impact on how the public and the media constructed the narrative around the loss of their Black child.<sup>67</sup> As stated by one study participant, "because my son was Black, there was a lot of stigma attached to his death because they claim he was known to the police."<sup>68</sup> Being "known to the police" is a popular narrative that the media constructs when Black men are victims of homicide, which plays into the racial profiling of Black men.<sup>69</sup>

Tony, a participant in another Toronto-based study that examined the issue, reported that the way that his deceased friend, Kevin, was represented by the media was problematic to his grieving process.<sup>70</sup> Kevin was framed as someone who was known to the police by the media, although Kevin was not a convicted criminal and was only known to the police because he was pulled over and his information was gathered and stored in the Toronto police database. Rather than humanizing the loss experienced by Black communities, some media outlets devalue the loss of Black lives by playing into racist tropes about criminality.

### **POLICE TREATMENT AND DISENFRANCHISED GRIEF**

Black Canadians have shared experiences of police scrutiny.<sup>71</sup> Black mothers who have experienced loss, in particular, share experiences of dealing with dehumanizing treatment by police.<sup>72</sup> Bereaved Black mothers expressed they are treated differently by police than others.<sup>73</sup> One mother reported that she was treated in an insensitive and interrogative manner:

The police wanted me to come downtown and said, 'Where were you when your son was killed?' They questioned me... They photographed me, and have me on TV... It's not like I lost a son, oh no, the way they treated me... I can guarantee that they don't have those two White mothers talking to them like that eh! Complete injustice. A couple days later after my son was shot... they have me there for 3.5 hours."<sup>74</sup>

The treatment and experience of this bereaved mother shows insensitivity on the part of police officers who interacted with her, which can be re-traumatizing. This leads to feelings of helplessness and disempowerment on the part of the mothers.<sup>75</sup> There is also an overwhelming experience of bereaved Black mothers who believe that police behaviour post-homicide made their ability to cope with violent loss more difficult.<sup>76</sup> One mother described having a difficult time dealing with the police, "my son being killed was hard, so hard. Dealing with the police was a nightmare... the way they talk to you it's like you are not grieving."<sup>77</sup>

## **C. TEENAGE GIRLS**

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### **VIOLENT DEATH AND TEEN GIRLS**

The violent death of a friend or family member can be traumatizing, and its violent and unexpected nature complicates the grieving process rendering it "very intense and deep."<sup>78</sup> This is particularly true for teenagers who are not well equipped to deal with violent loss and the corresponding grief that accompanies it. Enduring violent loss is not typically expected at such a young age and could have long-lasting impacts on a teenager's psychological, social and emotional functioning.<sup>79</sup> Young women therefore are particularly vulnerable to the negative impacts of violent loss and require specialized supports to overcome them.

Due to the disproportionate impact of homicide and gun violence in Black communities, Black teen girls experience the loss of friends and loved ones at greater numbers than other ethnic and racial groups.<sup>80</sup> Limited research has been conducted to examine the bereavement process, coping methods and the particular challenges faced by young Black women who must mourn the violent loss of their friends or loved ones.<sup>81</sup> This matter is further complicated due to the

phenomenon of disenfranchised grief and the lack of available safe and supportive spaces for young women.<sup>82</sup> Teenage girls must go through the typical biological, psychological, and social developmental shifts to adulthood, while dealing with the loss of murdered friends or family members.<sup>83</sup> While Black teenage girls are going through the typical process of meaning-making of themselves and the world around them, they must incorporate their bereavement experience as well. Due to the intersectionality of violent death, race, and gender, Black teenage girls' grief is more likely to become disenfranchised and minimized, disrupting the healing journey.<sup>84</sup>

### MEANING-MAKING FOR TEENAGE GIRLS

Traumatic death not only causes interruptions and restructuring of teenage girl's development processes, it also hinders the teenager's ability to make meaning of the loss of their loved ones.<sup>85</sup> Violent loss can lead to symptoms of trauma, experiences of distress, and symptoms of sadness and longing for reconnection with the deceased loved one(s).<sup>86</sup> A qualitative study examining the bereavement experiences of 21 Black girls aged 16-19 who lost a friend to gun violence in a Northeastern U.S. city found that violent loss impacts a young woman's sense of belonging and the construction of their understanding of core issues such as justice and fairness, sense of belonging, self-esteem, and mastery and control.<sup>87</sup> Teen girls who participated in the study had difficulty making sense of the death of their deceased friend, although some found comfort in religious beliefs.<sup>88</sup> These religious beliefs restructured their perspective on life and provided norms on the way life is supposed to work.<sup>89</sup> Overall, the study found that the ability of young women to construct meaning was central to their resiliency and ability to fully grieve the loss of their friend.

### SUPPORT FOR TEENAGE GIRL'S BEREAVEMENT EXPERIENCES

Exposure to violence can have negative long-term implications on youth who do not access treatment

and services to cope with the effects of violent loss, particularly on youth who are from communities that experience high rates of gun violence.<sup>90</sup> In one study, Johnson found that Black girls facing grief accessed immediate and local supports such as: family, friends, teachers, clergy, neighbors, and other nearby resources.<sup>91</sup> Some teenage girls experienced disenfranchised grief because their parents were not involved with their grieving process.<sup>92</sup> Parents who are not involved with their daughters' bereavement process adversely affect the process.<sup>93</sup>

Social supports are significant for teenage girls. In the early 1990s, the UCLA Trauma Psychiatry Program studied traumatic experiences with guns on youth and observed that youth who were victims of violent injury and bereavement did not receive psychological assessment or therapeutic intervention.<sup>94</sup> They found that an appropriate and effective approach to coping included therapeutic group intervention programs such as trauma-focused groups that have been successful in treating violence-exposed youth.<sup>95</sup> Other useful interventions consist of school-led initiatives that involve mental health professionals leading groups for students who have been victimized by guns or have been exposed to gun violence.<sup>96</sup> Professionals are extremely helpful to assist teenage girls in re-establishing their development processes towards adulthood by guiding them through the process of meaning-making around the violent loss.<sup>97</sup> The literature suggests that social supports such as community services are vital to helping young women grieve, cope, and heal from traumatic loss.

Thus, meaning-making is central to the resiliency of women and girls after violent loss. Due to racism, sexism and other inequities, Black women and girls are more susceptible to disenfranchised grief, an experience that undermines the healing process. The literature also suggests that women and girls benefit from access to therapeutic interventions and that they rely on social supports in their healing journeys.



### III. IMPACTS ON WOMEN & GIRLS AT YWCA TORONTO

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*“The violence in the community is active and impacts us all.”*

— Bergamot Community Engagement Worker



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Although community support groups for Black women co-victims are sparse, the few programs that do exist in Toronto have documented a positive impact on grieving women.<sup>98</sup> One program led by the Reverend Sky Starr operates under a peer-support model that offers a healing space for women affected by gun violence.<sup>99</sup> Starr is a minister, therapist and community advocate who founded G-Social (Getting a Grip on Grief), a program funded by the Women's College Hospital that examines the needs of women in communities impacted by the loss of young Black men.<sup>100</sup> G-Social helps women with grief-related trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder by providing them with coping and healing strategies and tools.<sup>101</sup> Most of the bereaved Black mothers that attended the counselling sessions are from the Jane-Finch and Rexdale neighbourhoods.

Although these low-cost programs are effective, they remain scarce in a city where consistent funding for such programs is difficult to obtain or non-existent, and awareness about the gendered impacts of gun violence is lacking.<sup>102</sup> Indeed, for funding to occur, a need must first be articulated, and the needs of Black women are often articulated last.

While YWCA Toronto does not offer specific programs designed for women co-victims of gun violence, many of YWCA Toronto's program participants and residents are impacted by gun violence and receive assistance from staff. Some program participants are mothers and girls who grieve the violent loss of their family members; others are indirectly impacted by violence in their community. YWCA Toronto staff have been directly and indirectly impacted by gun violence as well. Given the increase in gun violence, staff and program participants' feelings of safety have been compromised. This section explores the experiences of front-line staff and managers at three YWCA Toronto programs: Bergamot Apartments in Rexdale, and the Girls' Centre and the Teen Mothers' Program in Scarborough.

## A. BERGAMOT APARTMENTS, REXDALE

Bergamot is an affordable housing apartment building in Rexdale comprised of 68 rent subsidized units for single women and women with children. The residents of Bergamot were previously precariously housed and many arrived fleeing gender-based violence. Approximately 79% of residents are racialized.<sup>103</sup> Bergamot strives to offer safe, permanent, and affordable housing to women, and women-led families. In order to make the housing affordable, rent is geared to income. The building is 100% rent supplemented and residents receive a subsidy based on their income. The building offers large one-to-four bedroom apartments with an on-site playground, a community room, and a comprehensive security system. The program features a Community Support Worker and a Transitional and Housing Support Worker who specialize in supporting vulnerable women as they transition into permanent housing. Staff members offer referrals, advocacy, community development activities, and housing supports to help residents improve their lives and transition into long-term, stable housing. An on-site licensed Early Learning Centre (ELC) also operates at Bergamot and offers high-quality childcare programs for children living at Bergamot, as well as to families in the neighborhood.

### THE IMPACTS OF GUN VIOLENCE

Bergamot is located in Rexdale, a district in the North-West of Toronto. Rexdale was identified as a priority neighborhood by the City of Toronto in 2005.<sup>104</sup> Due to the heightened levels of “risk of criminal and anti-social behaviour,” the City of Toronto, United Way Greater Toronto and the Toronto Police collaborates with the Rexdale community through an initiative called Furthering Our Community by Uniting Services (FOCUS) that aims to “reduce risk, harm, crime, victimization, and improve community resiliency and wellbeing.”<sup>105</sup>

Over the past few years, staff at Bergamot have become increasingly involved in community initiatives to improve community safety and reduce violence. Staff work closely with the assigned Community Development Officer (CDO) from the City’s Community Crisis Response Program (CCRP). Given Bergamot’s partnership with the CCRP, staff are in regular contact with the CDO and are notified of

all incidents of violence that occur nearby. Staff also attend meetings with the Community Safety Network – including the Somali Women and Children Support Network – that provides a space for women to discuss the impacts of gun violence in Rexdale. Through these partnerships and meetings, it has become clear that the gendered impacts of gun violence are devastating. As one staff member reports, “sisters, moms, and aunts are actually killing themselves because they are trying to handle the loss of their son, husband, cousin, and family members.”<sup>106</sup> Social isolation, the lack of community, mental health and financial supports, and the racial stigma associated with gun violence are creating poorer health outcomes for Black women in the Rexdale community. Despite high levels of violence, there has been no consistent programming that operates as a healing space for women and girl co-victims.

Although gun presence and gun violence are not a daily occurrence, violence in the community is active and impacts the safety of Bergamot’s staff and residents. With regard to community safety, front-line staff discuss with residents the need to be mindful of personal safety —being aware of one’s surroundings and cognizant of routes taken through the neighbourhood, as well as being mindful of unknown persons seeking entry to the building. The building has also taken precautions to ensure that the residential areas are secure, including security cameras to monitor the building, staffing of an on-site security guard, and upgrades to outdoor lighting.

### INTERSECTIONALITY

Bergamot houses a unique group of women. It is comprised of a large racialized population of single women and women with children, some of whom are newcomers. This complicates their experiences due to intersecting migrant experience with racial stigma, poverty, and gender inequality. There is a high demand for housing in Toronto and many women and families approach the building attempting to secure housing. These women navigate many bureaucratic systems attempting to secure safe, affordable housing with limited finances, often fleeing gender-based violence and poverty.

In the absence of a partner, women are solely responsible for the finances of their family and themselves. When poverty and violence intersect, it further complicates

the meaning-making process for co-victims because of their need to access housing, legal services, deal with transportation issues, and obtain family benefits and other services to which they are entitled.<sup>107</sup> For many of the women that reside at Bergamot trauma associated with domestic violence affects their health and financial security.

Given the multiple oppressions faced by women at Bergamot (racial stigma, poverty, experiences of domestic violence, etc.), the threat of gun violence compounds existing vulnerabilities. Although Bergamot offers safe and affordable housing, residents cannot escape the dangers associated with the presence of guns in their community. Exposure to incidents of gun violence challenges the ability of community members to feel safe in their neighborhood. Mothers are fearful of their children going outside to play and of their potential involvement with gangs. Some mothers are concerned about their high school sons being peer pressured by gang members; alternatively, their sons fear that not interacting with gang members at school may create problems for them. One mother reported to staff “you know I told my son not to say hi to the gang members at school but he’s like ‘mom, I have to, because if I don’t then that’s an issue.’”<sup>108</sup> This makes it difficult for mothers at Bergamot to extend the security offered at Bergamot to their kids when they are out in the community. These nuances – compounded by multiple other challenges – raise much frustration, fear and anxiety that particularly Black women must deal with.

## SUPPORTS

In response to recent incidents of gun violence in the community, staff facilitated debriefing sessions with the CDO that residents found helpful. Staff have also successfully applied for two small grants to provide therapeutic interventions for residents. Staff indicate that residents at Bergamot want community supports that speak to the challenges related to poverty, racism, and disenfranchised grief. However, funding for such programs is piecemeal, reactive or simply does not exist. Often the supports that are advertised in the community as accessible are not affordable for residents on fixed incomes. While helpful, small bursts of funding ultimately do not represent a long-term service or solution for women affected by gun violence at Bergamot – or in the community.

## B. YWCA TORONTO GIRLS’ CENTRE, SCARBOROUGH

A recent report released by YWCA Toronto titled ‘Girls Matter,’ highlights the importance of girl-specific services.<sup>109</sup> YWCA Toronto’s Girls’ Centre provides developmentally appropriate programs and activities for girls aged 9-18 in Scarborough. The Girls’ Centre constitutes a girl-positive space that fosters leadership skills, builds self-esteem and equips girls to live safely in their communities, make new friends, and think critically about the world around them. All the programs at the Girls’ Centre are free and provide TTC fare, snacks and meals.

The Girls’ Centre features a Girls’ Council, a Girls’ Talk Mentor program, a drop-in service, and an individual support program that is solution focused and strengths-based. The Centre provides a secure space for girls to connect with peers in the community, learn from





positive role models, and discuss challenging topics in a safe and supportive environment. The Girls' Council is very active in the community and participates in conferences, workshops and other events. The individual support program offers girls one-on-one assistance with goal development and helps foster connection to community resources while strengthening participants' capacity to manage stress. The girls who regularly access services at the Girls' Centre report feeling more empowered to speak up and advocate for women's rights.<sup>110</sup>

### IMPACTS OF VIOLENT LOSS ON GIRLS

The Girls' Centre is located near three city-identified priority neighborhoods in Scarborough. Several Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC) complexes are located nearby and 85 per cent of the participants are racialized girls of Caribbean, Black, Middle Eastern, and South-Asian descent. Participants attend from various parts of the city but mostly from the priority neighborhoods nearby. Similar to the Rexdale neighborhood, this area of Scarborough faces issues related to violence, housing instability, poverty, racism and other structural inequities.

Staff report that some of the girls accessing services at the Centre have been directly impacted by gun violence, as well as violent loss due to knife and machete violence. Some participants have lost close friends and schoolmates to gun violence; others have grieved the loss of family members, community members and neighbours. Some participants have also been involved with guns; for example, staff report that some girls have been involved with "safekeeping" their boyfriend's handguns. This puts girls at a greater risk of being victims of gun violence and being prosecuted for storing illegal guns. According to staff, guns have become a day-to-day reality for some of the participants.<sup>111</sup>

### BEREAVED YOUNG GIRLS

Earlier in 2019, several participants at the Girls' Centre witnessed the violent killing\* of their classmate in front of their school. These participants came to the Centre afterwards to share what they had witnessed. Due to the existing relationship with staff, the girls felt comfortable enough to trust staff with their traumatic experience. Many students were impacted by the violent loss of their peer. The school administration responded immediately by inviting grief counsellors to support

students; however, according to staff, the girls' did not respond well to the help that was offered by their school. As one staff member explains, "I think that there is a lot of animosity towards schools, teachers, administration that existed beforehand so there is not a lot of trust with the social workers either. Plus when they bring in the trauma social workers the students don't know them as they are strangers."<sup>112</sup>

When young girls are co-victims of violent loss, they are sometimes not receptive to formal supports because the counsellors available after a traumatic experience are individuals they do not know, do not trust, and that are not from the community.<sup>113</sup> The fear of being judged and the lack of trust (due to the lack of an established relationship) means that many girls will not confide their feelings to grief counsellors. What makes grief more complex for racialized bereaved young girls is the fear of being judged and stereotyped because of the racial stigma attached to violent loss. Disenfranchised grief, therefore, impacts young girls including participants of YWCA Toronto's Girls' Centre.

When asked why participants respond better to Girls' Centre staff members than formal support, a staff member explains, "Often they [formal supports] don't reflect the demographic, so they [the participants] will convene, come here to the Girls' Centre where it is a safe space to talk to each other and to us."<sup>114</sup> Although staff members are not formally trained to deal with trauma or the impact of gun violence, the girls still prefer adults they know over professionals they do not. In response to this particular incident, Girls' Centre staff facilitated several sessions with participants who witnessed the homicide, as well as a group of girls who were more broadly impacted. These groups constituted a helpful therapeutic intervention – a nuanced service participants would not have been able to access elsewhere. This specific example highlights the importance of building relationships and establishing rapport when securing trust with adolescents.

### SUPPORT AND DISENFRANCHISED GRIEF

According to staff, limited supports exist for girls who are co-victims of violent loss or girls that are impacted by guns. Participants are hesitant to seek support from their parents because they feel their parents will

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\* This homicide involved a machete.

not understand their situation and will restrict them from going out. Girls may feel they are punished for witnessing a death because parents are often more hesitant to let them participate in the community. Understandably, parents become extremely protective of their children and fear for their safety after an incidence of gun violence, which unfortunately leads many girls to not find comfort in sharing their traumatic experience with parents. These girls tend to find comfort in the Girls' Centre where they can access support from other girls and receive non-judgmental assistance from staff. Staff have been able to provide assistance to grieving participants despite not having any specialized training, which admittedly limits their ability to provide the kind of services needed for participants to properly meaningfully make and grieve. This type of trauma-support also comes at a personal and emotional toll for staff. Staff members emphasize that the girls would really benefit from having a qualified, specialized mental health worker or counsellor at the Girls' Centre; someone who could help build the relationships needed to make therapy successful in crisis situations and ensure the Centre is properly resourced to deal with the issues the community faces.

Despite the important work advanced by the Girls' Centre, it receives no funding from any level of government. YWCA Toronto's Philanthropy department, community partnerships, and other initiatives spearheaded by the Association ensure that funding for Girls' Centre programs exist and that the Centre can remain open. Given the rise of gun violence in the community, the complex needs of the population accessing supports and services, and the importance of creating safe, empowering spaces for girls, it is clear that sustained funding for Girls' Centre programming is greatly needed. While Toronto's Youth Equity Strategy highlights the importance of drop-in spaces and other services geared towards youth to minimize youth involvement with guns, it is also important to highlight the needs of girl co-victims who require services and safe spaces to make meaning of their loss. Girls are forced to carry the emotional and sometimes financial toll of violent loss and require support mechanisms. Consistent government funding would enable the Girls' Centre to hire the specialized supports needed to ensure participants can access professional services in an environment conducive to the developmental needs of young women.

## C. TEEN MOTHERS' PROGRAM, SCARBOROUGH

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The Teen Mothers' program is a free support program for mothers aged 14-22 in Scarborough. The program provides mothers with an opportunity to build positive parenting skills, access resources, and connect with other young mothers in a welcoming space. Regular group meetings and check-ins are provided by the program worker and child care staff, as well as workshops on positive parenting, budgeting, nutrition, and education. For young mothers who face multiple challenges navigating family, educational, financial and other community responsibilities, the program offers a great opportunity for mothers to bond with their children in a relaxed and friendly environment.

### IMPACTS OF VIOLENT LOSS ON YOUNG MOTHERS AND THEIR CHILDREN

The Teen Mothers' program serves a unique demographic of teen mothers, young mothers, and expectant young mothers. These participants often lack adequate resources and preparation to become parents at a young age. The Teen Mothers' program aims to empower these women and build on their strengths so they can successfully care for themselves and their children.

Staff reports that some of the participants in this program are also impacted by gun violence and require greater and more specialized supports. Some program participants have lost their partner to gun violence. This trauma is particularly difficult for young mothers, a group of women who already face multiple compounding challenges and barriers. Not only is there a shift in family dynamics, the co-victims (mother and child) may be involved in court procedures and investigations. This disrupts the grieving process of the co-victims as they are left to navigate a legal system that can often be re-traumatizing.

Young mothers and pregnant women who are co-victims face fears in the community as they are often scared to reside in their current neighbourhoods but unable to move. These fears are founded on feelings of being vulnerable to situations that involve guns that may harm them or their children. The violent loss of a paternal figure can also have a significant financial impact on the family. Due to the unexpected nature of the violent loss, these young women have to primarily rely on themselves.



Staff report that many of these bereaved mothers receive payment from Ontario Works because they are unable to make ends meet and some rely on part-time, minimum-wage jobs to cover expenses. There are often no opportunities for mothers to receive any kind of financial compensation or assistance from the Victim's Witness Assistance Program if the deceased person was involved in a crime. Receiving financial assistance is critical to these mothers as they need to cover funeral costs, rent, and basic living expenses. These financial challenges are compounded for single mothers who stop receiving child support due.

Due to violent loss, some participants at the Teen Mothers' program are unable to pay their rent, which compromises their ability to keep their housing, raise their children, and maintain their mental health. Young mothers who lack resources to cope with violent loss can fall into cycles of poverty and housing instability, and are more susceptible to gender-based violence. These mothers are disproportionately racialized, and their children will often grow up poor. The consequences of poverty on child health are well established; poverty is almost always significantly associated with worse-case outcomes for children and limits their ability to reach their full potential.<sup>115</sup>

#### **SUPPORTS FOR BEREAVED YOUNG MOTHERS**

In a city where one out of four children lives in poverty, it is clear that teen mothers – and especially those who

are co-victims of violent loss – face a much higher rate of poverty, housing precarity, and other structural inequities.<sup>116</sup> It is important that these mothers receive the community supports needed to thrive, particularly through programs that focus on child care, employment, housing, and education, and help build a support network around the young mother. In the wake of violent loss, young mothers are the hidden victims left to pick up the pieces, care for their child(ren) and serve as a pillar for their child, household, and community with very limited resources and, often, legitimacy. YWCA Toronto's Teen Mothers' Program constitutes a safe refuge and a critical space for young women who desire to break the cycles of isolation and poverty – for the betterment of themselves and their child.

Staff at the Teen Mothers' Program work closely with bereaved mothers. When asked about social supports that are present for these mothers and families, staff explain that some mothers do not receive support from their family members or the family members of the deceased, which further complicates the mothers' meaning-making process and undermines the mother and child's ability to heal. In one instance, a mother was pregnant when her partner was fatally shot. The family members of the deceased denied the legitimacy of her child. The expectant mothers' grief was disenfranchised – not only because of the racial stigma associated with the loss of her partner – but because she was excluded from his family and received no recognition or support from them. She also did not receive any support from her own family and was left to grieve in isolation.<sup>117</sup> The Teen Mothers' program, and similar community services, provide young women who are quite vulnerable with the attention and support needed to improve health outcomes for both mother and child.

Thus, it is clear from the interviews that some communities YWCA Toronto serves are impacted by gun violence. YWCA Toronto is very much committed to promoting women's empowerment and resiliency by offering safe, affordable housing, community programs for young women, and various other services. While the Association strives to meet the needs of co-victims, it struggles to do so given the lack of government funding for programs geared toward the gendered impacts of violent loss, and a lack of funding more generally for programs focused on young women.



## IV. POLICY & PROGRAMMATIC RECOMMENDATIONS

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*“As a women’s organization that shelters and serves victims of violence, YWCA Toronto sees first-hand the harmful effects of guns in the lives of women and children.”*

— Heather McGregor, CEO YWCA Toronto

It is evident from both the academic literature and interviews with YWCA Toronto staff that the current social support system in Toronto is woefully inadequate in addressing the gendered impacts of gun violence. The lack of recognition that women and girls are affected by safety concerns in their community, and the lack of funding for programs that aim to support women and girls in their healing journeys, has come at significant social, financial, and health costs particularly for Black women and their children – a group that is already disproportionately impacted by economic and political marginalization.

This section focuses on several policy and programmatic recommendations that will enhance community solutions to violence. It is important that the City of Toronto, the Province of Ontario, and the federal government recognize the impact of violent loss on women and girls and create dedicated funding streams to support co-victims. Incorporating an intersectional gender lens will help formulate policy responses that are responsive to community needs. Without a gender lens, the impacts on women and girls will remain hidden and forgotten, resulting in devastating consequences for them, their families and their communities. Therefore, in tandem with addressing the root causes of gun violence, investment in supports for Black mothers and girls who are co-victims is urgently needed. Four key ideas will be explored in this section, including the importance of

1. Trauma-informed training and education;
2. Rotating or permanent staff with specific training in grief counselling;
3. Consistent funding for community programs to establish permanent support services for co-victims; and,
4. A federal ban on handguns and assault rifles.

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## 1. TRAUMA-INFORMED STAFF

### PROBLEM

In order to serve communities impacted by gun violence effectively, it is important for organizations to become trauma-informed. Staff members who interact in a frontline capacity with participants are susceptible to vicarious trauma and are sometimes the first point of contact with participants after traumatic loss. 118 Therefore, staff members are involved in the healing journeys of participants and must be properly trained to prevent the re-traumatization of co-victims and minimize unintended behaviour that delegitimize feelings of loss. Mishandling situations and interactions with co-victims can exacerbate and reinforce disenfranchised grief. Program staff are not trained trauma counsellors and they are under-equipped to deal with some of the challenges participants face given the level of complexity of issues present in the community – a phenomenon that can lead to professional burnout.119

### SOLUTION

In order to serve better the communities it works with, YWCA Toronto has taken the important step to become

a trauma-informed workplace. Launched in 2017, the Trauma Informed Education and Development (TIDE) project is a four-year initiative funded by the Public Health Agency of Canada designed to support an organizational shift toward Trauma-Informed Practice (TIP) across the Association.

TIP is a system-wide approach based on an understanding that many forms of violence and trauma are common. The majority of women who access YWCA Toronto services have experienced violence and trauma, and some staff members have experienced first-hand or vicarious trauma as well. This project responds to the need for consistent association-wide training, information sharing, and organizational change in the Association's response to violence and trauma.

TIP includes a universal understanding of trauma in all aspects of service delivery and prioritizes safety, choice and control. TIP is not about treating trauma; rather, it works at the participant, staff, agency and system level from the core principles of trauma awareness, safety and trustworthiness, choice and collaboration, and building of strength and skills.

The TIDE Organizational Change Framework has been developed to serve as a guide for an organizational shift at YWCA Toronto in adopting and integrating TIP across the Association. Shifts toward TIP are expected at the participant level, the program/site level and the organizational level. Currently, all staff have undergone trauma-informed training and while it is too early to measure the impact and effectiveness of this program, it signals YWCA Toronto's commitment to ensuring the well-being of employees and the communities it serves.

## RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that organizations in Toronto prioritize and invest in trauma-informed education and practice. Investment in TIP that is anti-racist and anti-oppressive, in particular, will enable staff to recognize disenfranchised grief and better support racialized women and girls. In addition, education around racial stigma and gun violence must also occur to work with vulnerable groups. Trauma-informed sessions should be led by trained educators who understand at least some of the complexities and challenges faced by the communities served and the types of scenarios staff encounter. By ensuring all staff are properly trained, harm towards Black women co-victims, in particular, will be reduced and staff will be better equipped to respond to challenging situations involving guns, disenfranchised grief and violent loss.

## 2. ROTATING OR PERMANENT GRIEF COUNSELLORS

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### PROBLEM

A recommendation that was brought forward by YWCA Toronto Girls' Centre staff is the importance of hiring a permanent and/or rotating staff member that is trained to provide grief counselling. When gun violence occurs in a community, frontline staff members inevitably respond to such issues despite limited qualifications in grief counselling. Registered grief counsellors and psychotherapists possess the necessary qualifications and training to provide therapy to co-victims accessing services. While grief counsellors and therapists are offered through external partners, reliance on external supports has negative implications for participants, particularly if they are young. These specialists usually do not have pre-existing relationships with participants, may be disconnected from the community, and might

not reflect the demographic of the community either. The lack of shared lived experience and established rapport provides ineffective solutions for co-victims and can exacerbate experiences of disenfranchised grief.

The Crisis Prevention Program by the City of Toronto provides support only immediately after incidents of violence. Women can receive support from this program for a limited period of time following an incident of violent loss, but the financial, social, and health implications of violent loss persist long after the initial shock. Co-victims are often unaware of services that might exist in the community heightening the experience of isolation and disenfranchised grief. Some of the services offered are not culturally sensitive and perpetuate racial stigma around gun homicide. Without access to on-going social supports – and informed, culturally-sensitive care – women co-victims become further marginalized and isolated in their own communities.

### SOLUTION

For these reasons, it is recommended that YWCA Toronto, and other community organizations providing frontline services, hire permanent staff trained in grief counselling. A permanent, rotating staff member – or several such employees – could effectively serve YWCA Toronto's facilities and ensure the communities YWCA Toronto serve have access to community-based counsellors as required. Such counsellors could provide meaningful grief and trauma counselling following incidents of gun violence and facilitate support groups for women and girls affected by gun violence on a permanent basis. Also highlighted by YWCA Toronto staff is the importance that grief counsellors reflect the diversity of the communities served and operate from an anti-oppressive and anti-racist framework.

### RECOMMENDATION

The hiring of permanent staff members trained in grief and trauma counselling to rotate across different sites and build relationships with YWCA Toronto residents and participants. It is also recommended that more community organizations in Toronto, particularly housing and other frontline service providers, prioritize hiring staff trained in grief and trauma counselling. It is important that such staff members reflect the diversity of the communities served.

### 3. PERMANENT SUPPORT SERVICES & CONSISTENT FUNDING

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#### PROBLEM

In response to two separate incidents of gun violence in the Rexdale community, YWCA Toronto staff at Bergamot were able to secure two small grants from the Community Crisis Reponses fund. With these grants, staff organized a dinner of hope, a self-care workshop, a healing walk, and a lunch for residents. A registered psychotherapist was invited to facilitate healing and art therapy workshops, including a session on deep breathing and mindfulness. According to staff, these sessions were well received by residents but cannot continue once the funding runs out.<sup>120</sup> Staff report that what would be helpful for many women at Bergamot is access to a permanent staff person or program that facilitates healing, connection, meditation, mindfulness, and one-on-one counselling. Given the socio-economic background of residents, most are not able to afford a psychologist or private practitioner.

#### SOLUTION

It is clear that consistent, sustained and significant funding by all levels of government is needed to help women and girls heal after violent loss. YWCA Toronto staff and residents cannot rely on small, piecemeal grants that offer temporary services to community members impacted by gun violence. Without government funding, services remain precarious and risk being cancelled and discontinued, or restricted in scope and availability. Hiring a grief counsellor, for example, requires considerable financial investment that will be difficult to obtain without some form of government funding.

Academic literature, and this particular investigation, suggests that bereaved Black women and girls will benefit from free, permanent programs and services that promote healing and meaning-making. Based on the demographic needs of women and girl co-victims, it would be helpful if such permanent support services operate from an anti-racist, anti-oppressive and trauma-informed lens. Women and girls impacted by gun violence may receive some assistance following the death of their loved ones, but these services end abruptly. Co-victims often find themselves alone with no access to programs to process their grief and reconcile life after violent death.

Although permanent spaces are crucial, the shape they take should be considered. An existing model by the Reverend Starr offers monthly grieving sessions where bereaved mothers meet and talk about grieving, their experiences, and coping with violent loss.<sup>121</sup> These sessions offer mothers a sense of support mitigating feelings of isolation and are led by a grief counsellor who is both a community activist and a Black woman, so mothers feel more comfortable exploring meaning-making without being stigmatized.<sup>122</sup> This type of program provides participants with appropriate supports that aim to enhance community connection, promote healing and eliminate disenfranchised grief.

Perhaps there is an opportunity for YWCA Toronto to develop more substantive community partnerships with grassroots organizations and cultural groups that exist in the community, and a greater effort should be made to reach out to specific intersecting identities that exist within the community, often at the margins. Without investment and prioritization of such community partnerships, YWCA Toronto risks operating in siloes from the community, which is harmful to its participants and the communities it operates in.

#### RECOMMENDATION

In order to provide effective services for participants at YWCA Toronto and elsewhere, consistent government funding for such programs must exist – and they currently do not. Although gun violence has increased in Toronto, the level of funding and services to deal with this issue has not. The needs of Black women and girls are particularly neglected given the lack of awareness around the broader impacts of gun violence. Therefore, the findings of this report suggest that a permanent government funding stream is urgently needed for programs that support women and girl co-victims.

### 4. FEDERAL BAN ON HANDGUNS & ASSAULT RIFLES

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YWCA Toronto has emphasized the importance of regulating guns as part of a larger strategy to prevent violence against women and promote safe communities. While this report has focused on the impacts of gun violence on women and girls in the communities YWCA Toronto serves (parts of Rexdale and Scarborough), the Association recognizes the wider

role of guns in controlling, threatening, and harming women and children, particularly in situations of domestic violence. Guns contribute to creating unsafe home conditions that force women and their children to seek shelter elsewhere. Many of the women and children served by YWCA Toronto’s programs are survivors of such gender-based violence. In all situations, access to a gun by an abusive partner significantly increases the risk of femicide.<sup>123</sup>



Figure 1. Factors that contribute to gender-based violence

For these reasons, YWCA Toronto has positioned itself as a leading voice in the national gun control movement. YWCA Toronto is a founding member of the Canadian Coalition for Gun Control, which was founded in 1989 in response to the Montreal Massacre, a misogynist mass shooting at École Polytechnique that claimed the lives of 14 women.<sup>124</sup> The Coalition advocates for stricter gun laws and has called for a ban on all handguns and semi-automatic assault rifles with its Trigger Change campaign.<sup>125</sup> Half of the guns used in gun homicides are registered weapons that can be traced back to Canadian owners.<sup>126</sup> This calls for a wider examination around the accessibility of guns – every illegal gun in Canada has a legal start somewhere.

YWCA Toronto submitted a policy brief to the federal government in 2018 that outlines the connection between gender-based violence and guns. More recently, the Association supported Bill C-71, which was

approved by parliament after a considerable amount of opposition. The bill — which, among other things, enhances background checks, forces retailers to keep records of firearms sales, and modifies the authorization to transport regime — signals a step in the right direction but falls short of an outright ban on handguns and assault rifles.<sup>127</sup> Time and time again, YWCA Toronto has emphasized that the lack of awareness about the differential impact of guns on men and women has left women out of the conversation.

Guns figure prominently in the cycle of violence, and gender-based violence is no exception. When viewed through an intersectional gender lens, it is clear that the impacts of guns – particularly for Black women, rural women, and Indigenous women – are devastating.<sup>128</sup> The victims are not just those who have to pick up the pieces in the wake of violent loss, it is the women and children who have to seek shelter because their homes are no longer safe, often with very limited financial resources. A 2018 UN report states that the home is the most dangerous place for a woman.<sup>129</sup> Guns can also be viewed as a tool of misogyny perpetuating violence against women and girls. Many mass shooters are motivated by misogyny and racism, and there is a documented link between men who perpetrate mass shootings and domestic violence convictions.<sup>130</sup>

When examining who is disproportionately impacted by gun violence, both in terms of victims and co-victims, it can be argued that the safety of Black communities, in particular, is valued less than the freedom to own a gun. The recently renewed debate about the role of guns in Canadian society begs the question, which lives are valued and which lives are not – and why? Why is safety such an elusive goal for so many racialized communities in our city? Since YWCA Toronto is committed to supporting the livelihoods, safety, and prosperity of girls, women and their children, it stands firmly in its position that all handguns and assault rifles should be banned.





## V. CONCLUSION & SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

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*“There is no thing as a single-issue struggle  
because we do not live single-issue lives.”*

*– Audre Lorde*

This report examines the gendered impacts of gun violence and specifically highlights the difficulties faced by Black women and girls who undergo complicated grieving processes following violent loss due to racism, sexism, socio-economic inequities and other challenges. These complexities are not fully addressed in existing services. While some programs offered by organizations such as YWCA Toronto can be very helpful, they are not specifically geared towards treating co-victims of gun violence and do not receive government funding for such programs. Grassroots initiatives, while vitally important, cannot be the only solution either. Gun violence – and its consequences – is a social issue that requires public attention and funding. It requires women and girls who are impacted by such violence to be part of the conversation and decision-making processes affecting their communities. It also requires political will from leaders to take a stance on this issue and ensure budget allocations reflect the interests of Black women and girls.

While banning guns is at the forefront of YWCA Toronto's stance on guns, advocacy for participants and community members who are co-victims of violent loss is crucial to advancing the mandate of the Association. Further research may want to focus on surveying the organization as a whole to determine the impacts of gun

violence on both participants and staff. A community survey of existing resources that gathers primary data through focus groups might be helpful as well to understand some of the needs, gaps and opportunities in Toronto. Lastly, a deeper exploration of what a trauma-informed, anti-racist, anti-oppressive and feminist space looks like will be helpful in designing empowering spaces for Black women co-victims.

The impacts of gun violence are multidimensional. Only by applying an intersectional gender lens can these impacts be fully appreciated. It is important not to lose sight of the women and girls who are left to recover after violent loss and who are expected to heal with few social supports as they navigate structural inequities. It is vitally important that the voices of Black women and girls are not lost in the discussion around gangs and guns – there is more to violence than guns, as our discussion about the role of guns and gender-based violence demonstrates, and there is more to justice than incarceration or rehabilitation. Justice for communities means safety, livability, clean air, quality housing, and good jobs. It means living in a society that sensibly balances freedoms with other commitments. And, it means creating viable opportunities for women and girls to grieve and heal in dignity.

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