

# THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair



Gun violence in Canada has a high cost: both in lives and dollars. Last June, Trudeau met with teenagers in Toronto after announcing a new National Day Against Gun Violence (2023). THE CANADIAN PRESS/Nathan Denette

## How to quell the sharp rise in youth violence in Canada

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In Toronto, rising public fears of violence on transportation and in neighbourhoods are underscored by alarming statistics: shootings have surged 58 per cent compared to last year. There were 28 fatal shootings in the first half of 2024, up from 16 in 2023.

Amid our grief for the victims, another sobering fact emerges: The average age of those involved in gun violence in Toronto has dropped from 25 to just 20.

This trend reflects a troubling cycle of increasing youth involvement in the criminal justice system, with youth firearm arrests skyrocketing by 161 per cent over the past two years. There has also been a rise in the number of youth charged with violent crime involving daylight shootings and carjackings.

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**Read more: [How can we slow down youth gun violence? – Podcast](#)**

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Many of these youth often come from vulnerable circumstances, some caught in cycles of violence, opportunistic crimes and retaliatory shootings motivated by neighbourhood politics. As youth violence escalates, there is a pressing need to reevaluate how we address this issue.

## **Tackling violence**

The debate on how to respond to reducing crime and violence typically revolves around two perspectives.

Traditional approaches tend to emphasize punitive measures, a tough-on-crime response similar to what we have seen in the United States. Alternatively, some advocate for a more lenient approach that addresses the root causes of violence. This includes examining factors that turn people to criminality in the first place.

However, emerging evidence points to a third strategy: a data-driven public health approach that tackles the root causes of violence using evidence-based interventions.

Violence directly or indirectly has a profound impact on Canadian lives and the economy. The average cost of holding a youth in custody is about \$1,444 per day. There are also costs associated with recovering from being a victim of violence as well as keeping people incarcerated. At approximately \$6 million dollars per homicide, in direct and indirect expenses, gun violence is costing Canadians billions.

Given the significant costs of being tough on crime and keeping people behind jails, a third option could be beneficial for everyone.

## **The data-driven public health approach**

Data-driven public health strategies that involve multiple stakeholders have proven effective in reducing violence.

At its core, it is about fighting crime smarter — not harder or tougher. It is about allocating funding and resources with consideration for context, circumstances and unique community needs.

Cities like Glasgow, Medellin, Boston and New York are seeing significant reductions in crime using this approach. They use data to identify risk factors, apply targeted interventions, and implement preventive strategies to reduce poverty and unemployment and increase access to culturally responsive, healing-centred social services.

This approach is not anti-police nor soft on crime.

By prioritizing prevention through targeted interventions and community support, Canadian cities can shift towards creating safer, thriving communities while making better use of taxpayer dollars.

This approach not only aims to reduce crime but also addresses the social determinants that contribute to violence, ultimately benefiting all Canadians.



A protester holds a sign saying 'Sons stop shooting our sons.'

### **Not anti-police**

The public health approach involves the police, judges and other members of the justice system working together with community agencies, residents and researchers as liaisons.

This collaborative approach involves data sharing and referrals. Two prime examples would be the Florida Pre-Arrest Diversion Program and the Toronto Police 9-1-1 Crisis Call Diversion Pilot Program.

Florida's Pre-Arrest program diverts eligible individuals from the criminal justice system before arrest, offering them tailored support services instead of incarceration. It has successfully reduced reoffends, minimized criminal records, and promoted community trust by focusing on rehabilitation over punishment.

In Toronto, the Diversion Pilot Program diverts mental health-related 9-1-1 calls to trained mental health professionals. It aims to reduce police involvement in non-criminal crises. It has improved crisis response, reduced strain on police resources, and enhanced safety and support for people in crisis.

Critical to the success of these programs is training and mentorship of people with lived experiences impacted by incarceration, homicides or violence. They have the respect of their peers living in vulnerable communities which allows them to navigate such spaces with trust, increasing the likelihood of others listening to them.

Such training exists at the University of Chicago with the Community Violence Intervention Leadership Academy, a first of its kind to train community violence intervention leaders from across the U.S. Violence Intervention graduates are trained to implement strategies that can potentially reduce violence by up to 50 per cent in impacted communities.

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**Read more: [Paying more for policing doesn't stop or reduce crime](#)**

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## Get ready to pivot

Institutions need to track the impact of different strategies over time, and if the data shows it is not working, pivot and try alternative strategies. Community activists and front line workers continue to push for trauma-informed, healing-centred practices as well as solutions grounded in lived experiences, with culturally reflective approaches particularly for Black and Indigenous people who are over-represented in the justice system.

As of September 2023, the U.S. has established an Office of Gun Violence Prevention. Although a similar office in Toronto has been established as part of the 10 year SafeTO strategy, there needs to be a provincial and national office that guides institutions to work smarter and share data effectively across institutions.

## Better use of funding = Reduction in violence

To create sustainable change, we must engage people and communities at risk of crime based on the factors they are exposed to. Major risk factors for violence include limited access to economic opportunities, family instability and neighbourhood disadvantage. Without interventions that address these risks, vulnerable youth and adults are more likely to engage in criminal behaviour or reoffend.

A key vital component of violence prevention is trauma-informed case management. Many youth and young adults involved in violent crime experience deep trauma. This often stems from exposure to violence, unstable home environments and intergenerational poverty. Trauma-informed approaches that prioritize healing better address the root causes of emotional and behavioural challenges.

By incorporating this into community-based programs such as those offered by Youth Association for Academics, Athletics, and Character Education and Think twice in Toronto as part of TO Wards Peace, we can more holistically support the needs of youth leading to better choices and coping mechanisms.

It is time to invest in long-term, data-driven solutions that support groups and communities most at risk through smart spending of money and allocation of resources. This will shed insights into where to invest, how much, through what type of resources, and more importantly in what ways to be effective with a meaningful impact.