

The Forgotten Victims of Gun Violence

Executive Summary

This report incorporates an intersectional gender lens to examine the impacts of gun violence on Black women and girls served by YWCA Toronto. While family members of victims, community leaders, civil society organizations and academics have urged governments to take a public health approach to gun violence prevention in Canada, which is vitally important, less attention has been paid to the impacts of gun violence on women and girls.

Black women and girls are often left to pick up the pieces after violent loss and are expected to grieve and heal in isolation with limited financial resources and social supports. Racial stigmas associated with gun violence thwart the healing process; structural inequities and racism intersect to complicate meaning-making for co-victims. Black women and girls are expected to remain pillars of their communities and families with little government or social support, which often comes at a tremendous psychological, emotional and financial toll. These are the hidden impacts of gun violence.

The differential impacts of gun violence must be acknowledged and addressed as many women and girls are co-victims of such violence – and often the forgotten victims.

Given the rise of gun violence in our city and recent incidents of such violence in the communities YWCA Toronto serves, we feel it is important to explore this pressing issue and draw attention to an aspect of the problem that is often overlooked by mainstream discourse and media analysis. By centering the story of gun violence in the experiences of Black women and girls, we hope to offer some concrete solutions that can help organizations such as our own offer better, more responsive programmatic supports to women co-victims.

Through an examination of academic literature and interviews with YWCA Toronto staff working in various communities across the city, specific organizational gaps and recommendations are identified to support Black girls, women and their children.

The report begins with a literature review that introduces the concept of disenfranchised grief and points to the need for greater social supports for Black women and girls. The second section examines the impacts of gun violence across three YWCA Toronto programs: a supportive-housing site in Rexdale, and two programs geared towards girls and young women in Scarborough. The last section proposes programmatic and policy recommendations including the need for 1) organizational trauma-informed training and education, 2) staff members with specific training in grief counselling, 3) core operational funding to establish permanent support services for co-victims, and 4) a federal ban on handguns and assault rifles.

While this report offers a preliminary investigation into this complex social issue, without greater research and action in this area, women will continue to be expected to pick up the pieces after violent loss while receiving little emotional, psychological, social or financial support – an inherently flawed model that exacerbates racial and gender inequities at the expense of Black women and girls in Toronto.

We urge all levels of government to create dedicated funding streams for women-centered support programs. The root causes of gun violence such as entrenched poverty, systemic racism, and a lack of affordable housing and good jobs must be addressed. Additionally, core funding for community programs that help Black women and girls heal and move from violence, as well as a ban on handguns and assault rifles, must be part of the solution as well.