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GTA

Why gun violence is still high in Toronto, even amid the pandemic lockdown

By **Wendy Gillis** Staff Reporter

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Fifteen-year-old [Jeremiah Ranger](#) had just been shot dead, the third high-school-aged boy killed by gun violence this year. Within two days, yet another young man would [be gunned down](#), Toronto's 15th gun death in 2020.

As a group of bereaved mothers and community advocates working to end gun violence gathered for a virtual meeting earlier this month, the urgency of their objective was apparent — and for some, too close to home.

“When stuff like this happens my immediate thought — especially when it’s the younger ones that are 15 and 16 — goes to the mothers,” said Evelyn Fox, the mother of 26-year-old Kiesingar Gunn, who was killed in 2016 by what police believe was a stray bullet.





“When there’s shootings that are like my son’s, it just brings you right back in the moment.”

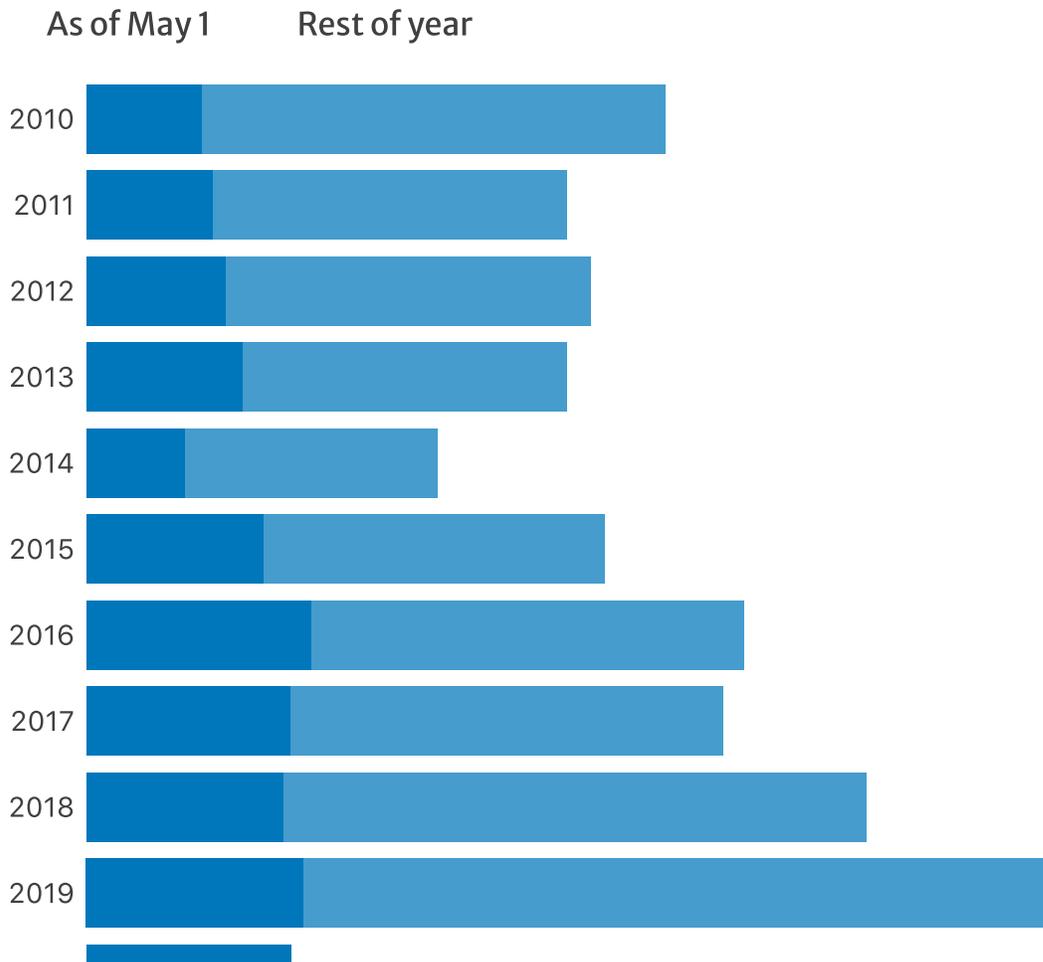
In recent years, politicians at all levels of government have announced plans and funding to combat growing gun violence within the Greater Toronto Area, although some efforts have not proven successful. But this year, as money and attention have been diverted to the fight against COVID-19, violence-prevention experts, youth workers and advocates worry the issue has fallen off the radar.

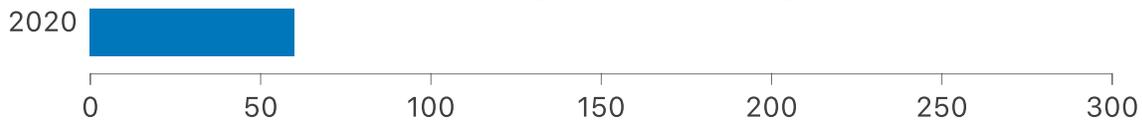
“The attention that this would usually get – it’s not happening,” Louis March, founder of the Zero Gun Violence Movement, said in response to a question from the Star during the meeting, in which people took turns speaking by video over a Zoom chat.

Shooting rates remain high in Toronto

Despite COVID-19, the number of people killed or injured in a shooting has not yet fallen.

 Hover





SOURCE: TORONTO POLICE SERVICE

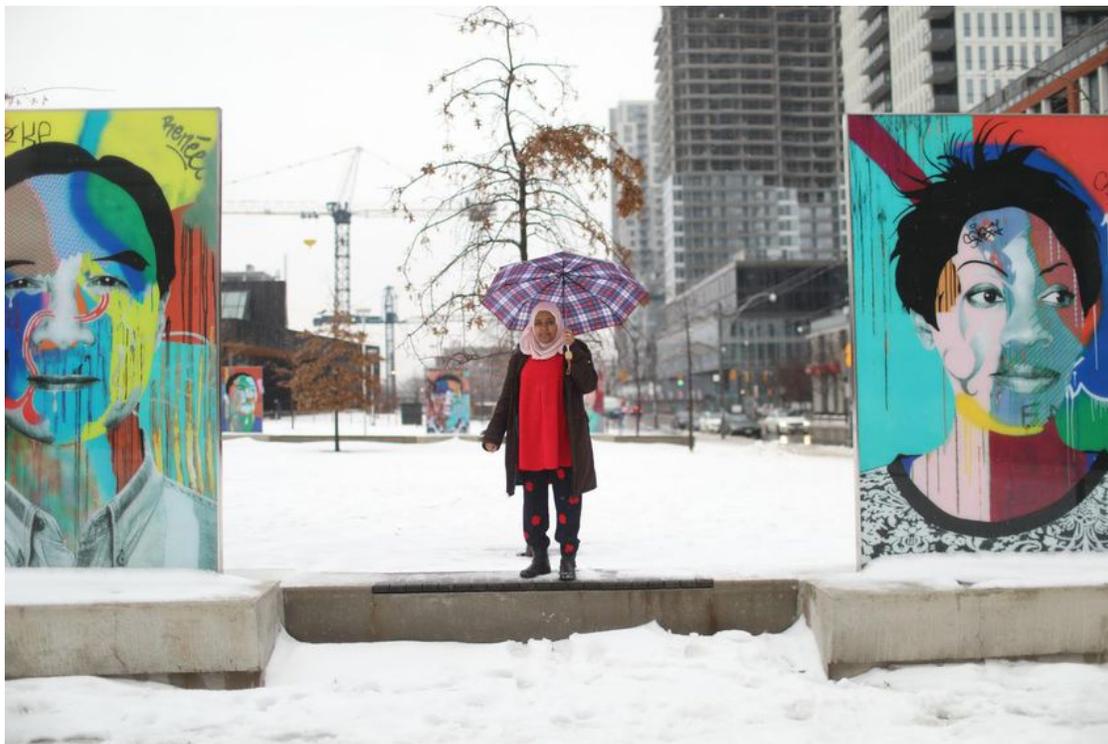
STAR GRAPHIC

The concern is especially acute as the city approaches the summer months, when gun violence has typically increased. And because the shootings are still happening throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, even as other types of major crime have dropped.

As of May 12, the number of shootings is up 13 per cent compared to last year, and 15 people have been fatally shot, the highest year-to-date number since 2016 and up from 14 by the same date in 2019.

And although the federal government moved this month to ban assault-style firearms, critics including Ontario Premier Doug Ford say that does little to combat the majority of urban gun crime. Meanwhile, a spokesperson for Public Safety Canada confirms the first allotment of the \$250 million to fight gun crime promised during the 2019 election has not yet been distributed.

“I’m not sure how many lives we have to lose to make a change to gun violence,” Sureya Ibrahim, co-founder of Mothers for Peace and a community leader in Regent Park, said during the meeting.



“Young people are dying.”

Why are shootings still happening during the pandemic?

Criminologists say the impact of COVID-19 on crime trends will not be fully apparent until longer-term data are available. But preliminary Toronto statistics show that while some crime categories have dropped amid the pandemic — including some robberies, assaults and auto theft — shootings have not.

Sixty-one people have been shot in the city this year, according to Toronto police statistics published Tuesday, and police have recorded 142 incidents of a gun being fired. This is up compared to last year — which saw 126 shootings, year-to-date — and is about in line with the averages over the last five years.

March, when social-distancing efforts began, saw the most shootings in a month this year; incidents of gun violence dropped slightly in April.

“These are very unusual times and it wouldn’t be surprising if, because of the pandemic, there might be significant changes to crime patterns,” said University of Toronto criminologist Scot Wortley, adding that crime fluctuates for a variety of reasons.

One major factor impacting gun violence may be changes to the “illegal economy” amid COVID-19. With violence often linked to the illegal drug and firearms trade, Wortley said the closure of Canada’s border with the United States may have heightened the stakes.

“Has it shrunk the illegal economy and, therefore, is there more competition for the limited resources? And in this case, are there more ruthless participants in that economy?” he asked.

Roderick Brereton, a community advocate and youth worker, said the answer to both is an adamant yes.

For the crime-involved youth he works with from Brampton to Oshawa, a decrease in the availability of drugs means there’s little access to money — and debts are being collected.

“It’s very, very precarious at this point in time in the streets,” Brereton said.

Despite the closure of the U.S. border to all non-essential travel, criminals are still attempting to smuggle guns. According to data provided to the Star by the Canadian Border Services Agency, the total number of firearms seized in February, March and April of

this year dropped from the same months last year — to 99 from 129 — but border agents nonetheless still confiscated 23 guns in March and 18 in April.

Toronto police Chief Mark Saunders said it is too early to tell how the closure of the U.S. border has impacted the flow of guns into the city. Last year, Toronto police traced 80 per cent of handguns used in crimes back to the U.S., he said in a written response to the Star’s questions.

“We do know that access to illegal firearms is still occurring,” Saunders said.

What is happening to combat gun violence during the pandemic, and as summer approaches?

Considering its population and diversity, Toronto has done “remarkably well” by world standards when it comes to gun violence — but that “doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t strive to become even safer,” Wortley said.

Until long-term problems are addressed, including poor education and employment prospects for the city’s disadvantaged populations, “we are going to have these incidents occurring, if not increasing, over the next decade.”

The concern among many community advocates and crime-prevention experts is that the social conditions that lead to violence — including poverty, inadequate housing and education, and a lack of community supports — will be exacerbated by COVID-19. Some already worry about the consequences of [the closure of hubs and drop-in centres](#) for youth.

“A rise in poverty and inequality and a reduction of services for adults and youth increase the likelihood of violence, we need long-term progressive policies to address these issues,” said Jasmine Ramze Rezaee, manager of advocacy with the YWCA Toronto, which offers services to help families bereaved by gun violence and recently authored a report [on the gendered aspects of gun violence](#).

“For women who have lost a loved one, the persistent lack of government investment in community supports and silence on gun violence right now is really disheartening.”

In an interview, Mayor John Tory said that while he appreciates those people who “keep us on our toes,” concerns about gun violence not being a priority are “not well-founded.”

Among the city’s efforts to address the root causes of crime are new grants that will see \$2 million in funding go toward community agencies for youth violence prevention projects.

While gun violence “hasn’t been in the news as much because of the pandemic, it certainly has been a keen focus of attention on my part and that of the police chief,” Tory said.

In his written responses to the Star, Saunders said that during COVID-19, Toronto police’s commitment to tackling gun violence “has not changed.” The force’s centralized shooting response team is continuing to respond to all firearm and shooting incidents and conduct thorough investigations, he said.

As for plans over the summer, the objective remains “to be where the community needs us, to be visible and to be disruptive to street gangs.”

At a [meeting about gun violence in January](#), GTA mayors and police chiefs called for smarter investments in programming for families and at-risk youth, with Tory specifically saying federal funding to do so was needed “now.”

Asked about the status of new federal funding, intended to be split into \$50 million a year for five years, a spokesperson for Public Safety Canada said earlier this month the government “remains committed” to the funding, but “the specific allocation details and mechanism of this new funding is currently under development.” She could not estimate when the funding will be available.

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The mayors also called for changes to allow Canada's border agency to collaborate more efficiently with local police. A spokesperson for the CBSA said it has "renewed its engagement with partners e.g.: Greater Toronto Area, the RCMP, and international partners, to deter and interdict the illegal importation of firearms."

"This is one of the agency's top priorities," the spokesperson said.

Asked about the federal government's move to ban assault-style weapons during a press briefing Saturday, Premier Doug Ford said the money would be better used towards stopping guns at the border.

"The only way to truly tackle gun violence is to crack down on the illegal guns being smuggled in daily at our borders," Ford said.



Crime-prevention experts disagree; there are many other ways to tackle violence. These include well-known and research-backed approaches to address the root causes of crime, said Irvin Waller, a professor emeritus in criminology at the University of Ottawa and author of "Science and Secrets of Ending Violent Crime."

Waller advocates for a public health approach with the aim to intervene before crime takes place, one that would see partnerships between social services and health practitioners. He stresses the importance of a dedicated crime-reduction unit that would diagnose the reasons for gun violence and propose actions to be taken.

A public health approach is taking place right now, amid COVID-19: "What they are doing is looking at epidemiology and risk factors, and then developing science to cope with it," he said.

The big difference between COVID-19 and gun violence, however, is that "we know what to do," he said. There's no waiting on a cure or a vaccine.

"We know what would work on this stuff," Waller said.

With files from Tess Kalinowski



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