

Look at My Life:  
'Sparks' for Firearm  
Possession Among  
Young People in Toronto

## Acknowledgments

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# Summary of This Research

Gun violence and crime in Toronto is an ongoing problem. Effective initiatives and policies must address the factors that lead a young person to being in possession of a firearm. The research reveals several issues that young people face that lead them to becoming involved in crime and violence including adverse childhood experiences; family issues; lack of positive role models; negative school experiences; lack of positive peers; and systemic issues including poverty and racism. Young people who possess firearms experience many of the risk factors, and few protective factors that could support them in following a positive path. Young people who are found to be in possession of a firearm often come from communities with high levels of violence, and they feel that they need a gun for protection.

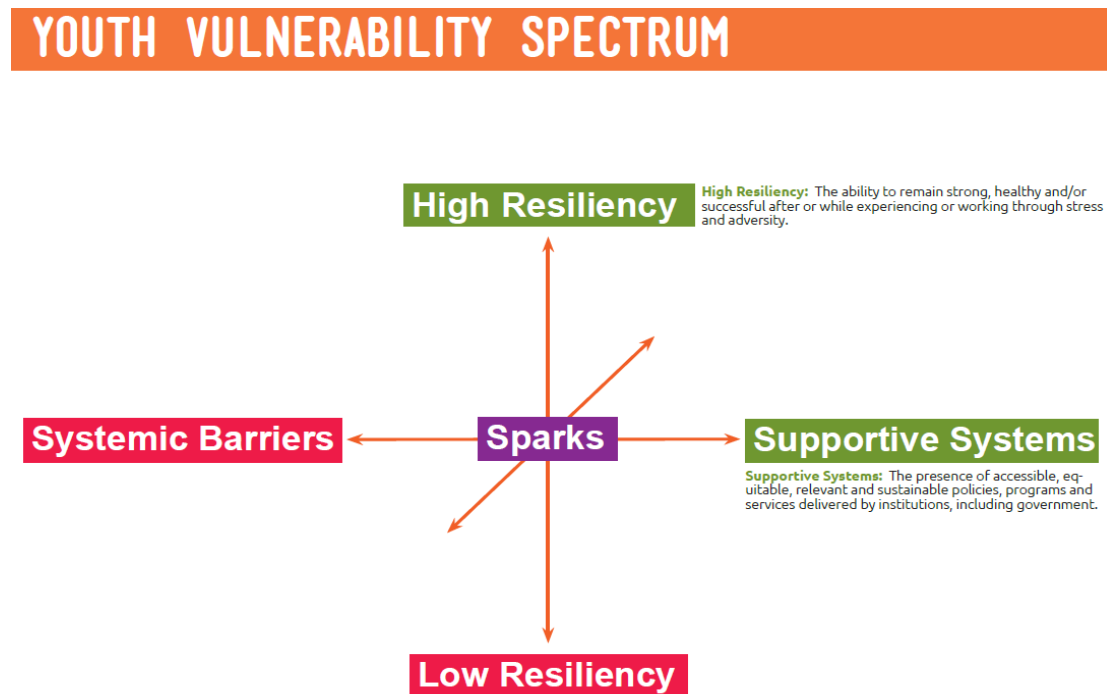
The Toronto Youth Equity Strategy (TYES) refers to 'sparks' as events in a young person's life that can be positive or negative and that can either increase or decrease resilience and systemic barriers. TYES aims to serve youth who are most vulnerable to the involvement in violence and crime to break down the systemic barriers that are obstacles to their future success.

The purpose of this research was to collect local data to develop an effective approach to reducing firearm possession among young people in Toronto. Young people who had been charged and incarcerated on more than one occasion for multiple charges including firearm charges were interviewed to identify what they felt were the sparks in their lives that lead to them obtaining a gun. Together with the existing research, the data will inform initiatives and policies to address the reasons that young people possess firearms.

# Introduction

Toronto is generally regarded as a safe city. However, gun violence and crime does exist, and at the time of writing there has been a spike in shooting incidents in the city. Evidence-based initiatives and policies are needed to address the issue by focusing on the root causes of gun violence and crime. The Toronto Youth Equity Strategy (TYES) was developed in 2014 by the City of Toronto's department of Social Development, Finance and Administration to ensure that youth who are most vulnerable to the involvement in serious violence and crime in Toronto have better access to supportive systems to encourage their positive development and success. The purpose of TYES is to reach and serve this group of youth and break down the systemic barriers that are obstacles to their future success. Through TYES, the Youth Vulnerability Spectrum was created which refers to 'sparks' as "events that take place in a young person's life that can be positive or negative, that can either increase or decrease resilience and systemic barriers for vulnerable youth" (City of Toronto 2014: p. 15). TYES visualizes sparks as a graph in relation to resilience and support (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Youth Vulnerability Spectrum



Risk and protective factors that are present in the lives of young people contribute to a spark happening. For instance, a risk factor such as experiencing gun violence could contribute to obtaining a gun to protect oneself, and then consequently being charged with the possession of a firearm. Given the multitude of high risk factors found among young people who possess a firearm, or become incarcerated due to gun possession, it is imperative to understand how these risk factors play a role and impact young people.

In the literature review, we present the risk and protective factors present in the lives of young people most vulnerable to the involvement in serious violence and crime. We then present the sparks that the young people we interviewed identified at three specific points in their lives; before, during and after incarceration for firearm possession. We hope to give a voice to this group in order to create a deeper understanding about the issues that lead young people to possess firearms. Together with the existing research, the results will inform effective policies and initiatives to reduce firearm possession among young people in Toronto.

# Literature Review

There is extensive research that examines the risk and protective factors present in the lives of young people who become involved in violence and crime (Barnert et al. 2015; Forster, Grigsby, Unger & Sussman 2015; Kim, Gilman, Hill & Hawkins 2016; Kurlychek, Krohn, Dong, Hall, and Lizotte 2012; McMurtry and Curling, 2008). These factors include adverse childhood experiences; relationships with non-family member adults / mentors; family environment; school experiences and educational attainment; peers and mentors; and broader systemic issues including poverty, inequality and racism. Individual risk factors on their own are unlikely to contribute to criminal involvement, however multiple risk factors, particularly in the absence of protective factors, create the conditions for young people to become involved in crime and violence.

The review begins with current research findings on gun violence and resilience, followed by the causes of crime and gun possession, and post-incarceration risk and protective factors.

## **Gun Violence**

Gun violence is a serious issue in many inner city neighbourhoods across North America. Butters, Sheptycki, Brochu and Erickson (2011) found that among youth who are vulnerable to involvement in violence and crime living in Toronto, 40% said they could get a gun in three hours or less. There is a need to prevent gun violence not just to prevent loss of life, but also for economic and social reasons. In Canada, the estimated economic and social cost of gun violence is \$3.1 billion per year (Zhang and Qin, 2012). There is hope however, as the factors that lead to crime and violence are well known and several cities are implementing effective solutions that are resulting in significant reductions in gun crime.

## **Reducing Gun Violence**

In a single year, a violence reduction program in Massachusetts cost \$2 million and resulted in \$15 million in savings. The state now has the nation's lowest gun death rate (Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, 2017). Although the scale of the problem cannot be compared to the United States (U.S.), the causes of, and solutions to gun violence are similar. Interventions in the U.S. that are effectively reducing gun violence and associated costs share six key features: 1) A focus on high-risk people and places; 2) evidence-based strategies; 3) robust state-level coordination; 4) regular program evaluations; 5) long-term, stable funding; and 6) community input and engagement (Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, 2017).

In Canada, research suggests that community-based solutions that address complex social problems, rather than 'tough on crime' strategies, are what community members know and want as effective solutions to crime, including gun and gang violence (Comack and Silver, 2008).

## **Youth Resilience**

When trying to understand how sparks impact the lives of young people, it is important to understand resilience; the ability to live through life's obstacles and come out stronger (Ungar, 2013). Ungar (2005) writes about how resilience can take different forms for different people, depending on the situation they are living in and the resources available to them. He gives the example of a young person from a poor, violent community joining a gang for protection. Although this may not be a widely acceptable example of resilience as gangs have bad reputations of violence and crime, for that young person, living in that context, they was doing the best they could with the resources that were available to them (Ungar, 2005).

## **Causes of Crime and Gun Possession**

### *Adverse Childhood Experiences*

Young people who are involved in violence or crime and those in conflict with the law often share the similarity that they have been exposed to violence, abuse, or neglect which has caused them trauma. Reavis, Looman, Franco and Rojas (2013) found that for each adverse childhood experience, there was a 35-144% increased risk of violence among males. It is important to understand how a young person's brain reacts to trauma to understand why they are unable to think ahead about the consequences of using a gun. When an individual experiences trauma, it affects their brain and how they function, particularly young people who have not yet reached full brain development or maturity. The area responsible for memory and emotional response known as the amygdala, becomes aroused or hyper-reactive and will begin to overreact in the future even when stimuli is minimal (Oudshoorn, 2015). "Traumatic stress damages neurological pathways in the brain necessary for healthy functioning." (Oudshoorn, 2015: 91). For those youth, the increased perceived level of threat results in less thoughtful and more reactive responses (Perry, 2004).

### *Family Environment*

Family environment is an important factor that contributes to a young person's likelihood of becoming involved in the legal system. These are the environments where most of children's early development happens and are largely where their attitudes and beliefs are formed (Jain and Cohen, 2013). Barnert et al. (2015) found that the young people in their study who were incarcerated came from chaotic and broken homes.

The factors that contribute to family being a root cause of violence include single-parent families; absent fathers; teenage parents; parents who engage in substance use; and parents who experience immigration and settlement issues (McMurtry and Curling, 2008). Sykes, Gioviano and Piquero (2014) report that parental incarceration is also strong predictor of aggressive behaviour and youth incarceration. Reich, Culross and Behrman (2002) found that when guns are present in the home, it is likely that a youth



will also end up possessing one. So although family can be a strong potential protective factor, where in the ideal situations it shelters youth from involvement in crime, it also has the potential to be a risk factor.

#### *Relationships with Non-Family Adults / Mentors*

The literature highlights positive mentors and role models outside of the family unit as a protective factor for involvement in crime (Carr and Vandiver 2001; Sykes et al. 2014). Carr and Vandiver (2001) also note that having a positive relationship with at least one adult plays an important role in building resilience.

#### *Peers and Friends*

Peers can also represent a source of either risk or support (Barnert et al., 2015). Young people are more likely than adults to commit crimes in groups as a result of peer pressure or a mob mentality, and are more willing to engage in risky behaviour if they see that their close friends are as well (Sullivan, 2004).

#### *School Experiences and Educational Attainment*

Todis et al. (2001) report that the majority of young people in the legal system have been labeled as having emotional disorders in school. As young people struggle in class, they are more likely to act out, skip class, and drop out (Christle, Jolivette, and Nelson, 2005). Zero tolerance policies in schools also leads to many young people being suspended or expelled with no constructive activities to do outside of the traditional education system (McMurtry and Curling, 2008).

#### *Systemic Barriers*

There are systemic barriers that create conditions of inequality and exclusion that can lead young people to feel like they need to carry a gun. These barriers include poverty (which dictates the neighbourhoods where people can afford to live, and the violence that they experience), racism and inequality.

### *Poverty and Living in Underserved Neighbourhoods*

Ruggles and Rajan (2014) report that one main reason for youth gun possession is feeling unsafe; they viewed owning a gun as a mode of protection. Young people living in underserved neighbourhoods are at a higher risk of victimization and exposure to violence, which increases the likelihood of turning to guns for protection (Spano and Bolland, 2013; Butcher, Galanek, Kretschmar and Flannery, 2015). Spano and Bolland (2013) found that violent victimization is a stronger predictor of carrying a gun than pre-existing violent behaviour, thus it would seem that feeling threatened, whether it be real or perceived, is a determinant of firearm possession among young people.

Poverty is the reason that most people have no choice but to live in an underserved neighbourhood. Poverty also means that if people cannot provide for themselves or their families in traditionally accepted ways, they will likely resort to other ways including illegal activities. Young people in Bernert et al.'s (2015) study reported that the biggest problem in their neighbourhoods was poverty. Dlamini, Anucha and Lovell (2015) state that “[S]tudies on urban violence have posited that there is a relationship between community characteristics and youth violence, a suggestion that has laid the foundation for the commonly held belief among police (and the general public) that crime occurs in particular areas (disadvantaged neighbourhoods) and among particular people (lower class, ethnic/racial minorities)” (p.5).

### *Inequality and Racism: Feeling Targeted by Police*

Why don't young people seek help and protection from the police? Young people from marginalized or racialized backgrounds historically don't have positive relationships with police. Wortley and Owusu-Bempah (2011) found that Black respondents in Toronto reported being stopped and searched by the police much more so than those from other racial backgrounds. The youth involved in Dlamini et al.'s (2015) research project in Toronto's Jane-Finch neighbourhood also felt that their race and ethnic background had an influence on how police interacted and reacted to them.

Racial discrimination has a criminogenic effect (Burt, Simons and Gibbons, 2012); the systemic and social barriers created by discrimination as implemented through institutional policies and practices can lead to conditions whereby racialized people are at an increased likelihood of engaging in delinquent behaviour and committing crimes. The media has contributed to the general public's negative perception of young people involved in, and at risk of violence and crime (Butters et al., 2011). This can easily be seen in contemporary news in the way that young Black males are portrayed within media narratives with biased and stereotypical ideologies (Eizadirad, 2016).

### **Post-Incarceration Risk and Protective Factors**

People leaving prison face many barriers including accessing to employment and the fact that they often go back to the same environments as before they were incarcerated with little support to help them get on the right path.

#### *Access to Employment*

Employment has a significant impact on recidivism (Abrams, 2012; Sykes et al., 2014; Ashkar and Kenny, 2008). However, finding meaningful and sustainable employment is challenging with a criminal record or without an education (Fiedler and Mann, 2012). Not all young people have access to education while incarcerated in Ontario (George, Gopal and Woods, 2014).

#### *Back in the Same Environment, Facing the Same Barriers, With Little Support*

Other factors that affect a young person's transition back into society include access to housing and a stable home life (Abrams, 2012). Youth are often released back into the same environments where they were arrested in the first place (Halsey, 2006). This lack of preparation for transition back to the outside creates a cycle of incarceration (McMurtry and Curling, 2008). Mann's (2014) research found that access to counseling in prison, and support to access education, housing, employment and

addiction or mental health services had a positive impact on changing young people's trajectories once they were out of prison.

The literature tells the story of the factors that are present in the lives of young people who become involved in crime, including possessing a firearm. These young people experience multiple risk factors and few protective factors. They lack positive parenting figures to show them the right path; they've experienced trauma in their lives that leads their brains to always be on high alert; they have negative social circles and educational experiences; and they face systemic barriers including being born into poverty so they live in neighbourhoods where violence is common. Based on the research there are a range of factors that need to be addressed if we want to reduce gun violence and crime.

# Qualitative Interviews

## *Method*

The data for this article was collected from June to December 2016. Research ethics approval was obtained from Humber College. The purpose of the research was to uncover the personal stories of young people who have been charged and incarcerated on more than one occasion for multiple charges including firearm charges. Qualitative research methods are used in this case to identify and theorize the key issues that arise (Creswell, 2016). A convenience sampling strategy was used to recruit participants for the study. Project partner Amadeusz, an Ontario non-profit organization that aims to foster opportunities for young people who are incarcerated to create positive change in their own lives, recruited participants through their current caseload. The criteria for participation in this study were:

- Young people who self-identified as having multiple charges gained on different occasions, at least one of which was a firearm charge;
- Young people who identified as being between the ages of 15 to 30 when they were charged with firearm charges;
- The firearm charge must have occurred in the City of Toronto.

A sample of ten participants was recruited and consented to be interviewed. Participants identified as 90% Black and 10% Latino. Participants were 90% male with an average age of 23.8. One-hour semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted by the principal researcher and consisted of 19 open-ended questions related to the sparks that young people identified as playing a role in their firearm possession charges. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The researcher then coded the transcriptions for the major themes that emerged. The analysis is organized according to the time at which sparks occurred in participants' lives: pre-charge/incarceration, during incarceration and post-incarceration before subsequent charge(s).

## **Limitations**

It is important to recognise that the findings of this research are not generalizable to the entire population of young people who are most vulnerable to involvement in serious violence and crime in Toronto. As ten participants is a small sample size, we must make sure not to assume that all young people who have been in possession of a firearm and subsequently incarcerated for related charges have had similar experiences.

## **Pre-Charge/Incarceration**

### **Positive Sparks**

Data from interviews was coded into the following key factors that were identified as positive sparks in the lives of participants before they were incarcerated: relationships with non-family adults / mentors; family; employment; and involvement in community and extra-curricular activities.

#### *Relationships With Non-Family Adults / Mentors*

Participants discussed supportive teachers, youth workers, and coaches in their lives. In talking about a teacher, one participant states: *He was always there for us, as a teacher, and then aside from that, as a person who cared for us.* Another participant reported that one of his teachers helped him get a summer job, which was very beneficial for him. Sports coaches can also play a role in positive youth development. One participant stated *I had a basketball coach for a couple of years that believed in me. That was positive. Cause you needed that as a young boy, especially an older man to tell you a couple of positive things.*

## *Family*

The majority of young people who were interviewed had positive relationships with their families. One youth reported: *The supportive level I had, it came from all over. It came from community centres, it came from religious people, it came from family friends, but most importantly it came from my family. They never judge me, they never doubted me and they supported me 100 per cent. So when you have strong family support you're just a stronger individual period.*

Another youth explained why the support of his father was so important: *My dad and I were never that close but since I got charged he was there for me you know what I mean? He was there for me every day, put his house up on the line for me you know? If people don't have that and they feel like they have to fight it alone that breaks them...but when you have that family support you would sleep better at night and you won't stress over certain things and you just move forward to try to better your life.*

## *Employment*

Employment was a positive spark in several young people's lives because it gave them money and something positive to do that would keep them out of trouble. Comments included: *Going to work for the summer like things like that I feel like helping me change. If I never had my job I'd literally be right in the community standing around.*

## *Community and Extra-Curricular Activities*

Many of the participants talked about how they were often just hanging around with nothing to do, which led to them becoming involved in or exposed to violence. One participant explained how making the basketball team had a positive effect on him because it gave him something to do. He explained how one time he was hanging around outside with an older crowd of people. His friends decided to go to the community centre to play basketball so he went with them. Soon after he left he heard a gunshot. Someone had been shot right where he had been hanging around. Having somewhere to go meant that he wasn't there when the shooting occurred.

## Negative Sparks

The negative sparks that occurred in participants' lives before they were incarcerated were systemic barriers (needing protection, poverty, racism, issues with the criminal justice system); impact of trauma; negative peers; lack of positive parental figures; and a lack of engaging activities and community programs.

## Systemic Barriers

### *Needing Protection in Their Neighbourhoods*

Among the young people who were interviewed, the reason for their gun possession was unanimously a need for protection. Participants spoke about growing up in neighbourhoods where they regularly saw friends, family and neighbours get shot or caught up in violent incidents. This put them in a mindset that equipping themselves with a firearm was the only way they felt they could protect themselves. This seems like a counter-intuitive mode of protection, but we must look at it from the point of view of these young people. Several participants recounted situations that led them to think that they needed a gun for protection including: *I just heard pow pow pow [and saw] a guy running and everyone was scared...and that's what kind of like sparked getting a gun and all that. I was thinking like I need this 'cause like if I'm standing outside every day and these guys are coming, people are coming shooting up the place. So it was for protection.* Another participant reported: *I've been shot at before...and, like, not being able to do anything but running in fear and, like, someone has you running in fear of your life. That's a feeling that I told myself I'd never wanna feel again.*

### *Poverty*

One participant discussed his experience of poverty by saying that it was hard not having what he wanted or what everyone else had. His mother could only get food from the food bank; sometimes she would keep him home from school so he could help her carry the food home. He felt that poverty was a big trigger to becoming involved in illegal activities.



## *Racism*

During the interviews, participants often brought up images they saw in the media and how they felt they were perceived by police and others based on the neighbourhoods they lived in. Through the images they see in the media, and how outsiders (police, people who are not from the same neighbourhood or socio-economic location) perceive them, many young people have internalized what behaviour is expected of them. Participants spoke about how this impacts them including saying: *I would say like it's the area. It's high risk you know what I mean? I would say it's racial profiling because of how people are dressing, what they look like... since then I've tried to change my appearance, I've tried to change my lingo, I've tried to change a lot of things cause at the end of the day I realized those are the things that the police are targeting.*

One participant spoke about systemic barriers and how he wants the situation to change so that marginalized young people don't have to face those barriers. *It's what you look like and where you're from. Like we're all coloured. In the poverty line you rarely see white people. You know you mostly see people of colour...they're being targeted you know what I mean? Now that I'm older and I've been through it I want that to change. I want there to be that's just a guy that's not a black guy it's not a brown guy that's just a guy.*

## *Issues With the Criminal Justice System*

Once young people become involved in the criminal justice system they face many challenges. One participant reported having a marijuana possession charge when they were 16, and that once they were in the system they felt that they were targeted. The young person had been told by police that the charge would be erased when they were 18 and no longer a young offender, but he found out that that was not true.

Another participant felt that he was not supported by people within the criminal justice system. He reported that: *When it comes to my lawyer...I feel like I was just another number like they didn't even care about me or my life knowing that it's my first charge and this could really scare me. Like they seen I was going to school and so forth and they seen that I wasn't the typical gang-banger that these guys usually represent but they still never fought for me like I wanted them to fight for me. Like you have people that are drunk...with millions of dollars. Driving drunk killing people and they're getting like two or three years in jail and they've murdered somebody. You have a firearm and never even shot it ...and you're giving them the same time. That doesn't make sense, this system is crazy.*

### *Impact of Trauma*

Several of the young people commented on what they were thinking at the time of the firearm incidents. One participant explained: *I wasn't thinking of the effects. Like I wasn't really thinking. I was just thinking about then and there.* Another participant reported: *While you're in the moment you don't think about the other thoughts. It's like nothing comes in your head once you're in that bad moment. It's like when you're there, do what you need to do.* This demonstrates examples of young people enacting a fight or flight response to potential or perceived danger. This aligns with the research on the impact of trauma on the brain and one's diminished ability to handle stress.

### *Negative Peers*

Several of the participants recognized that hanging around with other young people who were involved in illegal activities was bad for them. One participant reported: *I guess my circle of friends...inadvertently had a negative impact on me.* Another participant, when asked what led to the gun charges replied: *I was in a negative situation being around negative people.*

### *Lack of Positive Parental Figures*

Several participants were lacking one or both parents in their lives to help guide them down the right path. Comments included: *I feel like I was just kind of looking for guidance and answers to things my mom probably couldn't answer....so I went looking in the wrong places....if there was like some kind of strong support group maybe for children with single family homes or like maybe some place you could go, someone you could talk to.*

When asked about other supports that would have helped the negative sparks not to impact them, one participant replied: *Like a real father figure. Like I have a father but ...it's not like he was like a father figure where I could go to him and talk to him about certain things. I guess a youth worker would have been nice. I never had that...it would have been good cause I know they live in a positive world.*

### *Lack of Engaging Activities and Community Programs*

For young people growing up in unhealthy family situations and/or under-served neighbourhoods, a lot of their time is spent in negative environments. Even if they have supportive adults in their lives, or they access positive programs, it is often not enough to counteract the situations that they are living in. One participant explained: *The thing about youth workers...at the end of the day they can help you but they can't be with you 24/7. You wake up in the morning and you go outside, you're back in the same environment. Like he'll bring me to a program like once a week...imagine the rest of the week, friends are getting shot, police are harassing you, you need money to do this and that like. We didn't grow up with a lot of programs...we have one centre that doesn't do nothing. We go there and play ball and that's all. What about the other 4 days of the work week like? What are kids gonna be doing like? They're just gonna chill around and find bad stuff to do instead.* When asked what supports could have prevented them from becoming involved in illegal activities one participant reported: *Programs. I feel like not even just programs, more opportunities. Because...if you have nothing to do, all you're doing is chilling around and you're in an area where not a lot of good happens.*

*So it's more like I feel like if I was busy enough certain things wouldn't have affected me as much.*

## **During Incarceration**

### **Positive Sparks**

There were two positive sparks that participants spoke about that helped them during their incarceration: access to education, and support from others including family and non-family adults / mentors.

#### *Access to Education*

Most people don't have access to education when they're incarcerated, particularly on remand. Through the Amadeusz program, they are able to access programs to complete their high school education and attend post-secondary schooling. All of the participants who accessed the program talked about the positive impact that it had on them. *I got my GED in jail with the Amadeusz program...that was like the first thing that I got that was meaningful to me.* Another participant told us about his success in completing his GED saying: *I went to jail with one credit...I found out about the Amadeusz program and then I got on the waiting list...I end up doing the test and pass everything the first time and yeah I got my GED.*

#### *Relationships With Non-Family Adults / Mentors*

Support from others was a positive spark for young people during their incarceration. *I met an elder man who reminded me of my grandfather's character who gave me a lot of positive energy. I've learned a lot from him. I was coming from getting into fights and going into the hole before I met him like because I was so angry.* Another young person received positive support from several people which he felt made him stronger. *My dean, my teachers, everybody was so supportive of me. They never*

*judged me. They just said I want you to take your experience and help these youth that are going through it today. And you know that right there meant a lot because that makes a person stronger when they see you have a whole school system behind you that's supporting you, that's writing letters, that's giving you everything you want in the sense of to help you better yourself.*

### *Family*

Several young people spoke about the important role their family played throughout their lives and experience with the legal system. One participant spoke about how during his incarceration his mother continued to support him: *My mother would like, send me money orders, come visit me, hand the phone to whoever I wanted to talk to. My mom was probably the biggest support.*

### **Negative Sparks**

The negative sparks that young people experienced during their incarceration included family, lack of support from legal professionals, and lack of rehabilitation.

### *Family*

One participant had a very negative family experience, citing that family was at times more of a barrier than a support, as her relationship with her mother was “very volatile”. She went on to state: *My family wasn't really checking for me while I was there (jail).* When asked about what supports could have helped keep her out of the legal system, the participant spoke about the need to have more family and parental support programs and services.

### *Lack of Support From Legal Professionals*

Another theme that was common among participants was that they felt they had very little support from professionals they met during their experience in the legal system. One participant spoke about how it was a mistake to put so much money and

trust into a lawyer because it felt like they did not care to win the case. Others spoke about how they were treated by prison staff on the inside. One participant recounted how his lawyer would often miss court dates.

### *Lack of Rehabilitation*

Many of the young people who were incarcerated recognize that there are issues that led to them becoming involved with the criminal justice system that they would like support with. Comments included: *What's the word they use? Rehabilitating you. I think that's what they use but in some sense none of that ever happens.* Participants reported that they felt like being in prison was an opportunity to help people get on the right path. One participant commented: *When a person comes into contact with the justice system...the opportunity presents itself to sort of assess like what are their needs – education-wise, what are your employment needs? Are there issues in your family that have contributed to this? Also housing ...you should be engaging with people as they are still incarcerated...if you wait until a person has already been released it's too late.*

## **Post-Incarceration, Pre-Subsequent Charge(s)**

### **Positive Sparks**

Only two participants identified positive sparks in their lives after they were incarcerated: a relationship with a non-family adult, and employment.

#### *Relationship with Non-family Adults / Mentors*

One participant talked about the support they received from a teacher after they were released saying: *There was this program that I had to go to before I could actually go back to school. There was a teacher there. It was like me and a couple of other students and this teacher, she would help me with my work...it helped got my mark up a little bit...cause...my marks was dropping.*

### *Employment*

One participant who was able to access employment discussed the positive impact it had on him: *The summer job... I think that really played like a role like it changed my whole view of things. From before I would say 'whoa 9-5 sounds hard', or like it's boring like I wouldn't wanna be like doing that. But now that I did it it's like I could do this...so I'm trying to stick on that page really. That was a good spark.*

### **Negative Sparks**

After participants were released from prison they experienced negative sparks including fear (still feeling like they needed protection), lack of support or guidance, negative peers, lack of family support, and obtaining employment with a criminal record.

### *Needing Protection*

Upon release, participants often still feared being victimized by violence, and therefore continued to equip themselves with a firearm. The young people in our study not only lived with discrimination based on their race and the neighbourhoods they lived in, but after being charged, they also had to live with the criminal label. *I would say I'm always gonna face barriers. Only because like growing up I always knew like there was always a prejudice towards my skin colour. Towards not only my skin colour but also where I'm from, by who my friends' friends are, by who they card you with.*

### *Lack of Support and Guidance*

Participants noted that a lack of support, and returning to the same situation/environment that they were in before being incarcerated originally were negative sparks. One participant explained: *If you're looking for employment...you would potentially need someone to help you advocate because you don't necessarily have that experience yourself. Employment, housing, education, all that stuff...would have helped me with my transition back into the community.*

### *Negative Peers*

A few participants spoke about falling back into negative peer groups as being a catalyst to being charged again. One young person commented about how he was purposely avoiding a particular friend that he knew would be a bad influence saying: *That's a situation that's harmful to me.* Another young person commented on what positive friends would have done in the situation: *Better friends wouldn't encourage you to continue and go do it. Better friends would have told you to stop, it's not worth it.*

### *Lack of Family Support*

Participants expressed a lack of support or guidance from family that might have helped put them on the right path after they were released. *There wasn't enough discipline. Like my mom still allowed me to go outside. She allowed me to do whatever I wanted to do. Like she said I'm too old to get beat so all she did was scream and that didn't do enough.* Another youth described his lack of contact with family saying: *I went for bail several times. Was denied every time and so obviously that meant that I had to stay inside, which meant that I couldn't finish school or I couldn't work to support myself. And so one of the other implications was that my family wasn't really checking for me while I was there...there's a distance created because they weren't coming to see me, they weren't really supporting me that much...there's no supports or anything to help you reconcile.*

### *Obtaining Employment With a Criminal Record*

Young people with criminal records often lack opportunities to join the formal economy. This can lead to turning to the informal economy (e.g. selling drugs) as a means of providing for themselves and their families. *Once you get certain conviction especially having a firearm charge ....it will be hard for you to get accepted into society. No one is gonna hire you with those type of charges.* When asked what supports would



have helped get him on the right path one participant suggested: *Trying to get work and stuff like that, trying to get back into society you know there's a lot more roadblocks when you have a criminal record...I feel like if there was some kind of supports for people coming out of those situations...that would not make them feel like they need to go back to anything that they were doing before that may have landed them in with a firearm.*

Ultimately we need to understand the environments that many young people experience and how this affects their development. One participant summed it up by saying: *This is all they know, and this is how they were brought to live. Like, how could you tell someone they're bad or they're not doing right for something that's all they really know how to do? I don't think everyone is physically, mentally brought up to live the way that society wants you to live. Like, go to school, education and once you finish school you're supposed to have your job. If it was that easy why don't everyone already do it? Why doesn't everyone have a million dollar job? It's not as easy.*

## Discussion

The risk and protective factors for crime are well documented. We know what sparks happen in young people's lives that set them on a path to resilience or vulnerability. The research consistently shows, and young people also report, that adverse childhood experiences including trauma, unhealthy family environments negative school experiences; lack of positive role models and peers; poverty and racism, are all experiences shared by many of the young people who become involved in violence and crime. Although many people experience risk factors, the young people who become involved in crime experience many of them, without the protective factors that provide them with the resources and support to avoid involvement with crime or violence.

With gun violence and crime specifically, the participants in this study reported that the main reason they get a gun is for protection. Young people who are most

vulnerable to the involvement in serious violence and crime face many systemic barriers like being born into poverty and the challenges that come with that; living in an underserved, high crime neighbourhood and lacking the significant resources needed to climb out of poverty.

When we look at it the other way around and ask what makes young people resilient, we find that it is supportive relationships and systems. It is important that we address these factors to save lives and to reduce the social and economic burden that is associated with gun violence and crime. We can look at initiatives and policies that are reducing gun violence and crime in other cities to identify solutions. What we've learned is that there are key factors that will enable us to do this work effectively and economically, including working with the people that we know are most vulnerable, and implementing evidence-based policies and programs. The cycle of gun violence will be broken if the right people are reached at the right time with the right intervention (Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, 2017).

Who are the most vulnerable people? Referring to the research and the TYES vulnerable youth spectrum, the most vulnerable people include young people that have many risk factors and few protective factors. Research from the U.S. finds that up to 70% of gun crimes are committed by less than 0.5% of a city's residents and that programs that are effectively reducing gun crime are targeting vulnerable youth (Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, 2017). To be a participant in this study, one of the requirements was that young people must have been convicted of a firearm related charge and incarcerated two or more times. It was important for us to look at why this was occurring so often, so that we could uncover solutions for better supporting young people who had already experienced being incarcerated. Once participants were released from prison they experienced many negative sparks, and few positive sparks, which lead them to being charged and incarcerated again. These young people are vulnerable, and locking them up without providing them with the resources to change their lives is not solving the problem.

What are effective, evidence-based policies and programs? Effective programs address the root causes of gun violence and crime and provide young people with positive sparks and opportunities that make them resilient. This includes access to services including health, housing, family, education, employment, mentorship, positive peers, and community-based activities. Many of these services exist, however the systems that deliver them are often fragmented, not coordinated, and/or not accessible to the young people who need them most. TYES recognizes the problem of accessibility stating that “The City of Toronto offers many youth opportunities and programs, but many have significant barriers to entry” (City of Toronto 2014: 22). The Strategy includes actions to address the issues that were identified including that “Toronto Employment & Social Services will review the Investing in Youth case management protocols and procedures to ensure that youth who have been incarcerated are supported in their reintegration efforts. The program will also look for new interdivisional and community partnerships” (City of Toronto: 35); “The City of Toronto will ensure tools are in place to connect youth who are leaving correctional facilities with relevant City services” (City of Toronto: 35); and “The City of Toronto will embed a case management approach, where appropriate, in its programs serving youth most vulnerable to involvement in serious violence and crime. The City will approach the life situations that youth face without being confined by only one line of business or issue area” (City of Toronto 2014: 51).

When young people are incarcerated, they have no access to services in the community. Young people need access to a range of supports to address their needs while they are incarcerated as well as when they are released. They need support for them and their families. Studies have found that youth felt that if they knew they had a stable home environment to return to, they would be less likely to engage in antisocial behaviour (Abrams, 2012; Ashkar and Kenny, 2008; Barnert et al., 2015; Unruh et al., 2009). They also need to be connected to employment since it is the most effective way to reduce recidivism (Abrams, 2012; Sykes et al., 2014; Ashkar and Kenny, 2008; Halsey, 2006). Access to education is also critical. Fiedler & Mann (2012) found that

young people who earned their General Educational Development (GED) while incarcerated increased their chances of finding employment upon release. Armstrong (2002) found that young people who participated in educational programs while incarcerated showed lower rates of violent behaviour than those who did not participate.

Young people also need opportunities to develop relationships with positive peers. Todis et al. (2001) indicate that a key factor in criminal activity cessation was to associate with peers who were not involved in antisocial behaviours. Young people need advice and guidance, and many young people who are incarcerated lack positive role models. Todis et al. (2001) also note that one of the six factors that contributes to the cessation of illegal activity was consistent involvement with one or more adults that were not parents. Young people leaving prison could be connected to mentoring programs.

Finally, the research on young people involved in crime has found that over 90 per cent of youth involved in the justice system experienced trauma while growing up (Oudshoorn, 2015). Understanding how trauma impacts impulsivity and the decision to either possess or use a firearm, sheds light on the broader issues that contribute to the causes of gun violence among youth. Connecting young people to trauma-informed mental health services is important to address the issues they are facing which is also an action of the Strategy (City of Toronto, 2014).

Young people leaving prison are going back into the same situation that lead them to the circumstances where they ended up getting a gun. Providing young people who are leaving prison with the range of services to address their needs can address the challenges they face and lead them to more positive opportunities and experiences.

Examples of programs that are working with people coming out of prison include Australia's Extended Throughcare pilot project. Extended Throughcare focuses on supporting people returning to the community from prison by addressing risk factors including mental health issues, substance abuse issues, low levels of literacy and numeracy, interrupted education, sporadic employment history, and homelessness (Griffiths, Zmudzki, and Bates, 2017). The program aims to reduce reoffending, improve

community integration post-release, and improve the social and health outcomes of clients. The program is voluntary, begins pre-release, and continues for one year post-release. An evaluation of the program found that there was a 22.6% reduction in the number of people returning to custody. In terms of cost savings, the average total operating cost was \$4,700 per client. Compared to the high cost of custody, even a small reduction in recidivism would result in short and medium term cost savings in the criminal justice system and could also result in savings across other sectors (Griffiths et al., 2017).

Young people who are considered vulnerable outside of prison are the target of a range of interventions, however that changes once a young person is incarcerated. They lose access to the opportunities and experiences that we want them to have so that they develop into happy, healthy, and contributing citizens. We need to support young people while they are incarcerated with the same opportunities that they have access to in the community to ensure that their exposure to risk factors decreases while their access to supportive systems increases. If we want safer streets, we need to protect the young people who feel that they need guns for protection.

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