LOOK AT MY LIFE:

'Sparks' for Firearm Possession Among Young People in Toronto

Summary of Research Findings

TORONTO   **LAIDLAW FOUNDATION**   **Amadeusz**   **HUMBER** Applied Research & Innovation

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The full research paper can be found online at:

http://amadeusz.ca/research-2/

"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 doesn't everyone already do it? Why doesn't everyone have a million dollar job? It's not as easy ."

- Youth Research Participant

ABOUT THIS RESEARCH

The City of Toronto's Toronto Youth Equity Strategy, in partnership with Humber College, Amadeusz and The Laidlaw Foundation conducted research on 'sparks' for firearm possession among young people in Toronto.

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 involvement in serious violence and crime to break down the systemic barriers that are obstacles to their future success.

Data was collected in two different ways: through a literature review, and interviews with 10 youth who have been incarcerated for possession of a firearm in Toronto. This report is a summary of what we found. A full report of the findings is also available.

Why Did we do the Research?

We conducted this research to answer the following questions:

⇒ What does the research say about the risk and protective factors for becoming involved in crime and for firearm possession?

⇒ What are the experiences of young people in Toronto who have been incarcerated for possession of a firearm?

  ⇒ What were the different sparks that young people experienced in their lives, and how did they impact their involvement in crime?

  ⇒ What are the issues that young people who have previous charges for possession of a firearm are facing when trying to reintegrate back into the community?

ABOUT THIS RESEARCH

Who Did the Research?

The research was funded by The Laidlaw Foundation and Humber College, Applied Research and Innovation.

The City of Toronto's Toronto Youth Equity Strategy contributed in-kind resources and support.

Faculty from Humber College, School of Social and Community Services, Child and Youth Care Program led the design of the research project and conducted the research.

Amadeusz contributed outreach, coordination, training, in-kind resources and support. Amadeusz is a non-profit organization that aims to foster opportunities among young people who are incarcerated to create positive change in their lives and communities.

How Was the Research Done?

Amadeusz recruited participants through their current caseload. Ethics approval was obtained from Humber College. The principal researcher conducted 1 hour in-depth semi-structured interviews with 10 young people who had been incarcerated on more than one occasion for multiple charges where one or more was firearm possession charge. Participants were 90% Black and 10% Latino. Participants were 90% male with an average age of 23.8.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

What did the Research Say?

The research identified the following risk and protective factors that contribute to young people becoming involved in crime, including:

⇒ Experiencing trauma

⇒ Family environment

⇒ Lack of relationships with non-family adults/mentors

⇒ Negative peers

⇒ Negative school experiences

The research identified the following systemic barriers:

⇒ Poverty and lack of community safety

⇒ Racism

The research also identified barriers young people face after being incarcerated:

⇒ Accessing employment—impact of criminal record and lack of education

⇒ Returning to the same environment, with little support

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

What did Young People Say?

Young people interviewed for the study identified many of the same risk and protective factors found in the research:

Pre-Charge/Incarceration — Positive Sparks:

⇒ Relationships with non-family adults/mentors

⇒ Family support

⇒ Employment

⇒ Community & extra-curricular activities

Pre-Charge/Incarceration — Negative Sparks:

⇒ Needing protection in their neighbourhoods

⇒ Poverty

⇒ Racism

⇒ Issues with the criminal justice system

⇒ Impact of trauma

⇒ Negative peers

⇒ Lack of positive parental figures

⇒ Lack of engaging activities & community programs

During Incarceration — Positive Sparks:

⇒ Access to education

⇒ Relationships with non-family adults/mentors

⇒ Family support

During Incarceration — Negative Sparks:

⇒ Lack of family support

⇒ Rehabilitation / lack of reintegration supports

Post Incarceration—Positive Sparks:

⇒ Relationships with non-family adults/mentors

⇒ Employment

Post Incarceration—Negative Sparks:

⇒ Needing protection

⇒ Lack of support & guidance

⇒ Negative peers

⇒ Lack of family support

⇒ Obtaining employment with a criminal record

What Does the Research Say About the Causes of Crime and Gun Possession?

Researchers consistently find several factors present in young people's lives that contribute to them becoming involved in crime. In most cases, young people experience multiple factors that put them at risk, and few protective factors that would support them in following a positive path. The risk factors are:

Experiencing Trauma [1, 2, 3]

"Traumatic stress damages neurological pathways in the brain necessary for healthy functioning." (Oudshoorn, 2015: 91). Adverse childhood experiences increase the likelihood of violence among males.

Family Environment [4, 5, 6]

Most of the incarcerated youth who participated in Barnert et al.'s study (2015) came from chaotic and broken homes.

Lack of Relationships with Non-family Adults / Mentors [7, 8, 9]

Consistent involvement with one or more adults that are not parents contributes to young people stopping their involvement in criminal activity.

Negative Peers [4,8, 10]

Having friendships with positive peers makes it less likely that a young person will go to prison.

Negative School Experiences [5, 11]

Academic challenges can lead to behavioural issues. As youth struggle in school, they are more likely to act out, skip class, and drop-out.

SYSTEMIC BARRIERS: POVERTY & RACISM

Poverty & Lack of Community Safety [5, 12, 13, 14, 17]

Poverty is one of the key factors that impacts crime in urban neighbourhoods. Poverty is the reason that most people have no choice but to live in an underserved neighbourhood, where violence happens more frequently.

Youth living in under-served neighbourhoods are at a higher risk of victimization and it is suggested that this increases the likelihood of turning to guns for protection.

Racism [4, 15, 16]

The youth involved in Dlamini et al.'s (2015) research project in the Jane-Finch neighbourhood stated that they felt their race and ethnic background had an influence on how police interacted and reacted to them.

POST-INCARCERATION BARRIERS

Accessing Employment—Criminal Record & Lack of Education [8, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22]

The best way to reduce recidivism is through employment. However, finding meaningful and sustainable employment is difficult with a criminal record or without a high school education. Many young people are unable to access education while they are incarcerated.

Back in the Same Environment, With Little Support [4, 5, 6, 18, 19]

Limited access to housing, and returning to a stable home life also make it harder for young people to transition back into society after being incarcerated. Lack of support to help transition back to the outside means that young people are at higher risk of involvement in violence and crime, which creates a cycle of incarceration.

The interviews with the 10 young people who have been incarcerated for firearm possession revealed the same risk and protective factors as we found in the research. Each of these factors may be present at different times in their lives. We broke it down into what the young people told us were sparks in their lives before they were incarcerated, during their incarceration, and after they were released prior to their next charges. For each of these factors we provide an example of what young people reported.

PRE-CHARGE/INCARCERATION

Positive Sparks:

Relationships with Non-Family Adults/ Mentors

⇒ *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

⇒ *...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

⇒ *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

⇒ *After school activities are good too for kids. Like even like school after activities basketball clubs stuff like that, community centres. Cause there's a lot of time I could have been outside…once like I was chilling in a particular spot right? And then my friends are like they're going to the centre to play basketball …I leave these older guys right and…I hear a shooting happen. Right where I was at with these older guys.*

NEGATIVE SPARKS:

Systemic Barriers:

Needing Protection in Their Neighbourhoods

⇒ *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 everyday and these guys are coming, people are coming shooting up the place. So it was for protection.*

Poverty

⇒ *My mom would keep me off of school so I could help her carry stuff from the food bank. Like poverty, yeah poverty is a big trigger.*

Racism

⇒ *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

⇒ *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 2 or 3 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.*

Impact of Trauma

⇒ *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.*

Negative Peers

⇒ *I guess my circle of friends...inadvertently had a negative impact on me.*

Lack of Positive Parental Figures

⇒ *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.*

Lack of Engaging Activities and Community Programs

⇒ *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. What are kids gonna be doing like? They're just gonna chill around and find bad stuff to do instead.*

DURING INCARCERATION

Positive Sparks

Access to Education

⇒ *I got my GED in jail with the Amadeusz program...that was like the first thing that I got that was meaningful to me.*

Relationships With Non-Family Adults / Mentors

⇒ *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

⇒ *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

Family

⇒ *My family wasn't really checking for me while I was there (jail). And so like, things like canteen money and stuff like that was hard to come by unless I had family, sorry not family, friends, like people that I knew, coming to drop me a change or sending me money.*

Lack of Rehabilitation / Reintegration Supports

⇒ *When a person comes into contact with the justice system...the opportunity presents itself to 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 is released it's too late.*

POST-INCARCERATION

Positive Sparks

Relationship with Non-family Adults / Mentors

⇒   *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

⇒   *The summer job… I think that really played a role like it changed my whole view of things. That was a good spark.*

Negative Sparks

Needing Protection

⇒   *When you continuously find yourself in situations like that (shooting in neighbourhood)…if you have options which is to move out which I didn't have that option. So my only other option was to get something to try and keep myself safe.*

Lack of Support and Guidance

⇒   *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

⇒ *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

⇒ *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

⇒ *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.*

CONCLUSIONS

The sooner we address the reasons that lead people to having a gun and provide them with the supports that they want and need to live a different life, the sooner we will have less gun violence and fewer young lives lost.

In addition to the research on the causes of crime and violence, there is evidence about what works to prevent it from happening. Young people who are incarcerated benefit from supports, specifically help to access qualifications, housing, employment, and to deal with substance abuse and mental health challenges. Young people who participated in educational programs while incarcerated showed lower rates of violent behaviour than those who did not.

The City of Toronto, through the Toronto Youth Equity Strategy, has already identified the issues and the actions that we need to take to effectively address the problems. **Young people need increased access to supportive systems to build their resilience**, and the research tells us this as well. More support systems need to be put into place for youth outside and inside the system to ensure that their exposure to risk factors decreases while their access to supportive systems increases.

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