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Perspectives on Weapons-Carrying Among Ottawa Youth Ages 14-21

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In Partnership With



Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| 1. Acknowledgements | 2 |
| 2. Executive Summary | 3 |
| 3. Introduction: Research Approach and Methodology | 6 |
| 4. Factors in Weapons Carrying | 11 |
| 5. Individual and Interpersonal Motivations | 17 |
| 6. Systemic Motivations | 23 |
| 7. Interventions | 26 |
| 8. Recommendations for the Ottawa Street Violence and Gang Strategy Partners from MFSO Researchers | 34 |

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2. Executive Summary

This report is the result of research undertaken in 2019 by the Research and Education Department of Muslim Family Services of Ottawa (MFSO), in partnership with Regroupement ethnoculturel des parents francophones d'Ontario (REPFO), to explore perceptions of, and motivations for, weapons carrying behaviour among youth in Ottawa ages 14-21. This research was solicited by Crime Prevention Ottawa (CPO) as part of the Ottawa Street Violence and Gang Strategy.

MFSO used a qualitative research methodology and gather data from six focus groups totalling 51 youth, as well as 16 individual interviews with professionals and community members who work with youth. MFSO's findings were the result of analysis of the transcripts of these focus groups and interviews, totalling approximately 18 hours of audio recordings.

Our research team identified findings in four areas: factors in weapons carrying, individual and interpersonal motivations, systemic motivations, and interventions proposed by focus group and interview participants. These four areas were identified by grouping themes that emerged from our analysis of the transcript data.

We identified essential factors in weapons carrying including an overarching emphasis by all participants on knives, with a secondary emphasis on the presence of guns, as well as brass knuckle, tasers, and improvised weapons (screwdrivers, metal water bottles, etc.). A variety of geographic settings were identified by participants, but mainly included public spaces where conflicts between youth might emerge, including malls, parks, and the walk home from school. No clear data on perceptions of risks and safety emerged in transcript data. An absolute consensus amongst youth participants underscored a universal and deeply held refusal amongst youth to report, or *snitch*, on their peers.

Individual and interpersonal motivations identified in the transcript data were complex and varied. Important elements of these findings include an emphasis by participants on self expression, self-promotion, and the cultivation of a social media persona as key motivations for weapons carrying, over the need for self-defence. Revenge and retribution were also identified as key motivators for weapons-carrying behaviours. The role of Snapchat and other social media platforms was central to all the conversations with youth. Many youth also emphasized the role of domestic violence and childhood trauma in the family home.

Several systemic factors clearly emerged across focus group and interview participants. Significantly, migration trauma amongst newcomer youth was

identified in many conversations, in addition to the persistent presence of racism, especially anti-black racism in the school, policing, and criminal justice systems. Both these factors were identified as contributing to the alienation and isolation that often lead youth to weapons-carrying and other illegal activities. Poverty was also an overarching contributing factor identified by participants.

A rich array of suggested interventions was brought forward by research participants, including suggestions for peer mentorship, community policing, social services, educators, and ethnic and religious communities.

The recommendations and conclusions of the researchers were entirely drawn from the contributions of research participants and include recommendations for existing services, followed by recommendations for new resources, and concluding with recommendations for future research:

1. New partnerships, new resources: To significantly scale up public investment in the resources available for social and community services and strategic partnerships that support youth and families;
2. Engaging parents and families: To ensure that all existing youth services also seek to engage parents and families;
3. Augmenting peer to peer mentorship: To expand programs that provide training and support for youth to mentor one another;
4. Increasing investments in youth entrepreneurship opportunities: To offer increased entrepreneurship opportunities for youth to counteract pull of the illegal drug trade;
5. Community police engagement: To continue to take a community policing approach that repairs mistrust between youth and police;
6. Increased culturally-responsive and trauma-informed supports for youth: To significantly increase counselling and mentorship services available in multiple languages, that take into account migration trauma and racial trauma as factors;
7. Engage youth and youth mentors in conversations about values: To engage youth in critical and reciprocal conversations on issues that matter to them;
8. New initiatives to address anti-Black racism at all levels: To urgently address anti-Black racism, including instituting mandatory anti-racism trainings and new increases in hiring Black professionals;
9. Engaging places of worship and ethnocultural associations: To increase capacity and offer training to cultural and faith community leaders and to build closer partnerships;

10. Further study on how knives are acquired and used by youth;
11. Ottawa-specific studies on the cumulative effects of racial trauma on the lives of Black and other racialized youth in Ottawa;
12. Further Study on the role of Snapchat and other social media in weapons-carrying behaviour;
13. Youth-guided research: To encourage youth to propose areas of research and to engage youth ages 16 to 21 to guide and lead research projects.

3. Introduction: Research Approach and Methodology

This report is the result of research undertaken between July and December 2019 by the Research and Education Department of Muslim Family Services of Ottawa (MFSO), in partnership with Regroupement ethnoculturel des parents francophones d'Ontario (REPFO), to explore perceptions of, and motivations for, weapons carrying behaviour among youth in Ottawa ages 14-21. This research was solicited by Crime Prevention Ottawa (CPO) as part of the Ottawa Street Violence and Gang Strategy. MFSO responded to CPO's call for research proposals for this project in order to approach the research questions in a way that is both methodologically rigorous and informed by a wide diversity of voices in the Ottawa community.

As indicated in a recent federal government report, much of the research on violence and youth, both theoretical and empirical, comes from the United States.¹ Although American-based studies are beneficial, considering the historical, political, cultural, and demographic differences between the two countries, it is important to research issues and contexts specific to Canada,² as well as to research at a local level. A lack of research on this issue leaves a gap in both understanding the reasons for carrying weapons by youth and identifying ways to address the problem, thereby limiting the development of effective policies and programs for prevention. In the National Capital region, the Ottawa Street Violence and Gang Strategy has identified “concerns around the presence of weapons and the possibility that there is a culture of carrying weapons among youth and young adults in affected neighbourhoods” as one of its principal priorities for 2017-2020.³ The same strategy also identifies as a priority “better responses to ‘low level’ violence that contributes to fear and perpetuates the cycle of more serious violence”, and that such violence includes “daily street harassment, intimidation, retribution, assaults, weapons carrying (knives and guns)”.⁴ This research aims to understand how research participants, including youth and frontline workers, perceive these factors and their relation to the weapons carrying amongst a subset of Ottawa youth.

¹ Dunbar, L. (2017). Youth Gangs in Canada: A Review of Current Topics and Issues. Ottawa, ON: Public Safety Canada.

² Ezeonu, I. (2014). Doing gang research in Canada: Navigating a different kaleidoscope. *Contemporary Justice Review*, 17(1), 4-22.

³ Bania, M. Ottawa Street Violence and Gangs Strategy: 2017-2020. Crime Prevention Ottawa, 2017, p. 9.

⁴ Ibid., p. 6

The purpose of this report is to present a preliminary understanding of the motivations and perceptions of youth based on both focus groups with youth and through key informant interviews with adults who work closely with youth in the Ottawa community. This research, as defined by Crime Prevention Ottawa, seeks to “explore weapons carrying behavior among youth and young adults” and to “explore the motivations behind this behavior and the perceptions around risks and safety youth have regarding weapons carrying”, as well as to suggest interventions and recommendations related to reducing weapons-carrying behaviour among youth. This statement of purpose thus indicated four areas of focus for the project:

- Perspectives of youth and young adults (ages 14-21) on weapons-carrying behavior in Ottawa;
- Perceived motivations behind weapons-carrying behavior;
- Perceptions around risks and safety regarding weapons-carrying among youth; and
- Interventions and recommendations, drawn from participant responses, for addressing weapons-carrying behaviour among youth.

It is important to note that this report does not offer data or conclusions on the prevalence of weapons-carrying behaviour among Ottawa youth. No part of the research should be read as offering conclusions on how often youth in our city are carrying weapons. In a qualitative study of this kind, valuable insight can be gathered from youth and frontline workers in the community. However, without quantitative data collection, no accurate picture of the statistical prevalence of weapons-carrying can be drawn.

As CPO's research requirements asked for a qualitative research methodology involving focus group and key informant interview methods, participants were recruited to offer in-depth perspectives on the research questions (see Appendices A and B for these research questions). These participants attended either anonymously-recorded focus group discussions for youth, or key informant interviews with adult individuals who frequently work with youth. We conducted six focus groups from September to November 2019 (See Table 1 below), each with 5 -10 youth participants. These rich focus group discussions were supplemented by 16 key informant interviews, conducted between August and December 2019. These interviews included police officers, educators, social/community workers, and community leaders (See Table 2 below). The questions that guided both the focus group discussions and key informant interviews were pre-approved and co-authored by MFSO and CPO.

Both the focus groups and interviews focused on reflections and insights around issues related to weapons carrying behaviour among Ottawa youth, rather than asking specific questions around personal experiences. This was important especially for gaining the trust and openness of youth who may be hesitant

about implicating themselves personally in a discussion of sensitive topics. Both focus groups and key informant interviews ranged from 30 to 75 minutes. All were audio recorded to capture data accurately and were transcribed using automatic transcription software that was then attentively corrected and proofread by researchers. The transcriptions will be held for two years in a password protected folder in an external hard-drive that is also password protected. Both this hard drive and the consent forms signed prior to participation are held in a locked cabinet on our research premises.

Our recruitment of focus group participants followed the existing networks of CPO and MFSO and emphasized obtaining a diverse cross-section of Ottawa youth. Because of time limitations, we often organized focus groups at times and in venues at which youth are already present. In total, 51 youth participated and shared their insights. Several dimensions of youth identities were identified by CPO and MFSO at the outset of the research as being important to the composition of focus groups. These considerations are listed below together with MFSO's original recruitment goals:

- both male and female youth (though with a research focus on male youth explained further below): *4 male groups, 2 female groups.*
- both newcomers and youth born in Canada: *at least one group primarily representing newcomer youth.*
- various neighbourhoods: *groups representing the east, south, and west ends of Ottawa, as well as the city centre.*
- both affluent and economically marginalized schools and communities: *at least one group from an affluent or suburban area of Ottawa*
- ethnocultural diversity: *ensuring all groups have participants from a diversity of ethnocultural backgrounds.*
- both French and English language groups: *two Francophone and four anglophone groups.*

All of these criteria were met by the six groups recruited, with the exception of the recruitment goals related to female youth representation. Due to the limited time frame of the research project, several limitations arose in the gathering of data. For example, though a Francophone focus group of female youth was organized with our Francophone research partners at REPFO, several attempts at organizing an Anglophone focus group of female youth were unsuccessful. Our focus group participants were thus overwhelmingly male; however, as several focus group discussions and key informant interviews detailed, weapons carrying behaviour among young women is perceived by youth to be a markedly less significant phenomenon in Ottawa (see section 5.3.5 below).

Religious affiliation, race, ethnicity, or other identity did not factor into research participant recruitment.

Table 1: Focus Groups

| Code | Focus Group Name | No. of Youth | Neighbourhood | Language |
|-------------|----------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------|
| FFFG | Francophone Female Focus Groups | 6 | East Ottawa | French |
| FMFG | Francophone Male Focus Group | 7 | East Ottawa | French |
| CNFG | Centretown Newcomers Focus Group | 9 | Centretown | English |
| SUFG | Suburban Focus Group | 9 | Suburban (outside of greenbelt) | English |
| PWFG | Prince of Wales Focus Group | 10 | South Ottawa | English |
| AVFG | Alta Vista Focus Group | 10 | South Ottawa | English |
| | TOTAL | 51 | | |

Our recruitment of key informant interviews also relied heavily on existing networks of both CPO and MFSO, supplemented where needed and possible by a snowball methodology of referrals to further interested key informants. For example, talking to one educator allowed us to gain access to other educators interested in being interview informants. Important considerations in the recruitment of key informants included the following, albeit with less defined goals than in the case of our focus group recruitment:

- At least two to three key informants from each of the following professions:
 - police officers
 - educators (teachers or principals)
 - social or community workers (especially those working with youth and involved in intervention programs)
 - community leaders (especially faith communities)
- At least two to three Francophone key informants

- Ethnocultural diversity of key informants
- Gender balance among key informants

Table 2: List of Key Informant Interviews

| CODE | Category | Language |
|--|---|-----------------|
| SC1 | School Counsellor | English |
| PSP1 | Public School Principal | English |
| PSP2 | Public School Principal | English |
| ET1 | Educator/Teacher | English |
| ET2 | Educator/Teacher | English |
| OPS1 | Ottawa Police Service | English |
| OPS2 | Ottawa Police Service | English |
| CJIW1 | Criminal Justice Intervention Worker | English |
| CJIW2 | Criminal Justice Intervention Worker | English |
| CJIW3 | Criminal Justice Intervention Worker | English |
| SCW1 | Social/Community Worker | English |
| SCW2 | Social/Community Worker | French |
| SCW3 | Social/Community Worker | French |
| CL1 | Community Leader (A cultural community) | French |
| CL2 | Community Faith Leader (Christian) | English |
| CL3 | Community Faith Leader (Muslim) | English |
| <i>Recruitment diversity:</i> Gender balance- 5 women and 11 men (31% / 69%) Ethnocultural diversity – Ten informants from communities of colour (62.5%) Francophone representation: 3 informants (19%) | | |

An in-depth secondary source review and an environmental scan of existing models of weapons-related intervention were also outside the scope of this research. The findings and recommendations below could be further developed by putting them into conversation with scholarly literature on themes including violence, masculinity, cultural difference, migration trauma, and much more. Comparison and connection to evidence-based interventions and existing initiatives in Ottawa would also be a beneficial next step. The

recommendations and conclusions of MFSO and REPFO were entirely drawn from the contributions of research participants.

This report presents our research findings in five sections:

- 1) Factors in weapons-carrying
- 2) Perceptions of risk and safety
- 3) Individual motivations in weapons-carrying
- 4) Systemic factors
- 5) Interventions suggested by participants.

The findings were compiled through the analysis of the transcripts of both youth focus group discussions and key informant interviews. During the analysis, we began to connect major themes emerging from participant responses. These themes were then gathered in the subsections detailed below. It is important to note that some of these themes, such as types of common weapon observed, emanated directly from the research questions asked in both focus groups and key informant interviews (see Appendix A and Appendix B). Others, however, emerged as new themes as a result of them reoccurring, unprompted, in multiple transcripts; racism and discrimination in the school system is one example of a theme that emerged despite being absent from the original questions.

Please note that the references to focus groups are made below using a coding system along with a time stamp from the transcript. Please see Table 1 to identify these codes. Interviews are referenced using an individual's interview code followed by a time stamp. Please see Table 2 to identify these codes.

The report concludes with a section on the research team's own recommendations and conclusions, based entirely on our own analysis of the data collected from focus group and interview participants.

4. Factors in Weapons Carrying

4.1 - Common Weapons: Knives

A consensus emerged amongst focus group discussion participants and key informants regarding their observations of knives as the weapon of choice among Ottawa youth ages 14-21. A common theme was echoed among youth participants who all emphasized that knives are preferred by youth due to ease of access.⁵ Several youth participants observed that this ease of access is also in

⁵ FFFG, AVFG, FMFG

part due to cost.⁶ One participant noted that it was possible to obtain “like 10 knives for like 50 bucks.”⁷

This ease of access is increased by the everyday omnipresence of knives for other uses, such as for preparing food or for outdoor activities.⁸ Several youth noted outdoor equipment stores or dollar stores as places to purchase knives easily.⁹ Other youth pointed out that it is not, from their perspective, every youth who owns knives that intends to use them for violent purposes, suggesting that “some people...collect knives or something just for their own personal fun or whatnot.”¹⁰

The perspectives of key informants on knife usage among Ottawa youth were, with few exceptions, largely aligned with those expressed by youth focus group participants.¹¹ One educator/teacher noted that knife-carrying seemed to take place over a cross-section of class and neighbourhood. Contrasting the neighbourhood in which she teaches to a more affluent suburb, she noted that “the kid that lives in Barrhaven is heading to school with a knife, too.”¹² Educators and social workers alike noted that they had most commonly observed pocket knives, such as Swiss Army knives, and 4-5-inch folding blades.¹³ Like youth participants, key informants pointed to ease of access being a factor in the frequency of knife use.

Youth Perspectives

les couteaux, on peut les acheter en ligne.

- Francophone Female Focus Group, 07:23

les couteaux sont plus accessibles, mais ils sont aussi moins chers. Une arme à feu, ça coûterait beaucoup plus cher. Et c'est plus difficile à se procurer. Alors les couteaux, c'est ce qu'on voit le plus.

- Francophone Female Focus Group, 08:11

The thing is too is that it's actually really easy to get a knife. You could literally go on Amazon and you buy brass knuckles or knives if you wanted to.

⁶ “the gun is more expensive to get than the knife” – CNFG, 10:51

⁷ SUFG, 24:59

⁸ CNFG, 10:59; FFFG, 06:54

⁹ SUFG, FFFG, 08:33

¹⁰ SUFG, 07:32

¹¹ SC1, 02:45, as well as OPS1 and OPS2

¹² ET1, 14:03

¹³ PSP1, 03:14; CJIW2, 03:09

Key Informant Perspectives

A knife is easier to get. It doesn't require you to do anything, you probably have one at home.

- Educator/Teacher 1, 02:39

I was there as a child, as a youth, too... it was for me, easy to have a knife on me rather than the gun. And the idea was, in my mind at least, I would do less time if I had a knife or a stabbing weapon than a firearm.

- Educator/Teacher 2, 05:00

You go to Canadian Tire, you can just legally purchase a hunting knife. Right. Which are fairly big, you know, you can buy pretty big knives... they're easy to order online as well. Amazon, you can easily order knives. So, a lot of youths... order knives online.

- Criminal Justice Intervention Worker 2, 03:49

4.2 - Common Weapons: Guns

Youth perspectives on gun carrying among their peers contrasted with their observations about knife usage and access. Youth often juxtaposed knife and gun use, arguing that knives are used because guns are not as readily available. Comparative statements arose frequently in the data.¹⁴ Nonetheless, youth pointed out, and seemed worried about, the presence of guns in their communities.¹⁵ For many youths, guns were more closely connected to involvement in drug trafficking or other illegal activities.¹⁶ Becoming socialized into groups engaged in illegal activity was underlined by many youths as increasing their chances of picking up guns.

Several youths pointed out that, due to difficulties accessing real firearms, some youth will use replicas to intimidate in the place of real firearms. This phenomenon was also noted by community and intervention workers.¹⁷

¹⁴ "the gun is more expensive to get than the knife." – CNFG, 10:51

¹⁵ SUFG, 21:32

¹⁶ CNFG, AVFG

¹⁷ CJIW2

Several key informants echoed youth observations on the accessibility of guns.¹⁸ Other key informants differed from youth participants, observing that they had frequently heard of guns in the community among youth, though these were less accessible than knives.¹⁹ Both community leaders and social/community workers pointed out one avenue through which guns can be more easily accessed by youth: the phenomenon of renting weapons temporarily for violent use and then returning them to their owners.²⁰ They also emphasized that guns are still readily available, even if barriers exist to their acquisition. A community leader observed that youth are often loaned weapons in informal ways by peers.²¹

Youth Perspectives

You've taken their drugs, you've taken their money, you owe them, [now] you have your gun.

- Centretown Newcomer Focus Group, 30:32

I've encountered a few people, actually a few people will say that they have real guns, but they'll be carrying around a fake gun or something like that.

- Suburban Focus Group, 09:52

Key Informant Perspectives

Everybody knows how simple and easy it is to get a gun.

- Social/Community Worker 1, 21:38

4.3 - Common Weapons: Other Weapons

Weapons in this research were originally defined to include guns/firearms, knives, and replicas. However, as the focus groups and interviews progressed, the list of mentioned weapons expanded to include brass knuckles and pepper spray, as well as improvised weapons such as screwdrivers and metal water bottles.

Though mentioned far less frequently than either knives or guns, focus group participants mentioned other weapons as being present in the experiences of Ottawa youth. Many youths noted that these weapons were often improvised

¹⁸ CJIW2, 03:49

¹⁹ SCW1, ET2

²⁰ CL3, SCW1

²¹ CL2, 04:43

on the spot.²² Several youth participants noticed that young women tend to use weapons other than knives or guns, such as tasers, or improvised weapons, such as metal water bottles, in self defense.

Youth Perspectives

ceux qui n'ont pas de couteaux, des armes à feu ou des répliques peuvent improviser avec d'autres armes.

- Francophone Female Focus Group, 18:41.

Par exemple ma bouteille d'eau, ça peut être une arme si je vais quelque part et je me fais agresser, je peux avoir un réflexe de prendre ma bouteille d'eau et me défendre avec. Une bouteille de jus, une bouteille en métal, peu importe ce qu'on a sur nous. Même un stylo peut être une arme. Tout le monde a une arme sans s'en rendre compte.

- Francophone Female Focus Group, 17:51

Key Informant Perspectives

brass knuckles, chains, belts, things like that, just off their person, because they're there and you're going to have one and it can quickly become a weapon and be used to inflict harm and damage.

- Public School Principal 2, 02:44.

4.4 - Geographic and Social Settings

A variety of geographic and social settings were identified by youth as being common contexts in which youth might carry weapons, but nearly all such observations were linked to one of the following geographic or social settings:

- Downtown (the vicinity of Rideau Street/Rideau Centre was especially noted by youth);
- Schools (to a limited extent);
- Night clubs and their environs;
- On the walk home from school (especially noted among educators);
- Parties (nearly unanimously seen as a common setting for weapons-carrying behaviours);

²² SUFG, 10:39; PWFG, 03:06 - 03:09

- Neighbourhood public spaces, especially when a group of youth enter a neighbourhood perceived as belonging to another group and a confrontation occurs.

4.5 - Perceptions of Risk and Safety

The present research did not yield a clear finding in relation to understandings of risk among youth. Responses regarding risk and safety among focus group participants were inconclusive. Though many focus group participants mentioned that they felt some youth are ill-informed about risks, all considered themselves to be well informed about the risks associated with carrying weapons.

Answers varied widely among participants, with some emphasizing potential legal consequences, and others the risk of bodily harm. Several participants claimed they would not be scared of people carrying weapons, and seemed to correlate the acknowledgement of risks with an admission of fear.

In contrast to the focus groups respondents, most of the key informants thought that youth have a very limited understanding of risks related to carrying weapons.²³ One criminal justice intervention worker especially emphasized the lack of awareness among youth of the consequences of displaying weapons usage on social media.

Youth Perspectives

Si on parle de fusil n'importe qui, c'est non. Je me sens pas confortable. Mais si c'est un couteau, c'est si mon ami a un couteau avec lui et puis, on est au centre-ville, je me sens normale si je sais qu'elle n'agit pas d'une façon stupide ou si je sais par expérience qu'elle sait comment l'utiliser. Et puis, elle ne fait pas des choses qui pourraient devenir dangereuses. Je n'ai pas de problème.

- Francophone Female Focus Group, 45:53

4.6 - Reporting to Authorities: A Consensus Against “Snitching”

Among all the youth participants in the focus groups, there was no individual who stated that they would be willing to report a peer or a stranger to the authorities. There was a unanimous consensus among youth participants that *snitching* is dangerous and unjustifiable. All youth participants had a negative reaction to the idea of reporting weapons-carrying behaviour to the authorities.

²³ OPS1, SCW1, SC1, CL3, CJW2

Some of these negative reactions were closely linked to deeply held negative perceptions about the police. Others expressed fear that reporting to the peer to authorities could result in significant retaliatory violence directed at them or their loved ones.

However, several youths stated that if they saw someone in public endangering people with a weapon, they would call the police. They drew a distinction between everyday youth carrying weapons and an extraordinary situation involving a mass attacker.

Youth Perspectives

Ici il y a un mot : *snitch*. Ça veut dire si tu parles aux autorités, ils peuvent te tuer toi, ou te blessé, ou si c'est pas toi, un membre de ta famille.

- Francophone Male Focus Group, 44:32

5. Individual and Interpersonal Motivations

For Ottawa youth it's hard to only pinpoint [weapons-carrying behaviour] in a socioeconomic conversation. It is hard to claim it being your peer or friendship group only. Is it bravado and you just trying to be cool? Is it access...Amazon sells guns? I mean I don't know. Can you get it easily online, in spaces where there is no way to check or monitor and therefore you feel like you can do that? All of the above. I think that is a collision, a perfect collision...

- Educator/Teacher 1, 10:48

As stated by the key informant above, weapons-carrying among youth cannot easily be attributed to one factor alone, but rather emerges as a complex web of interconnected factors, some of which we discuss here and in the following section.

5.1 - Self-Protection

The topic of fear and self-defence often emerged during the focus group discussions with youth, and this was identified as a potential factor behind weapon carrying behaviour. Some observed weapons as an important means for youth to defend friends and peers. However, many youth had an underlying skepticism about the need to carry weapons for the purposes of self defense.

According to many key informants, one of the most common reasons for carrying weapons is protection. For example, a criminal justice intervention worker states that when youth are asked why they carry weapons they often

mention that they do not wish to be only person in a difficult situation without a weapon.²⁴

Youth Perspectives

Yeah, I'd say [a major reason is] defence. But oftentimes here in Ottawa, it's ridiculous... let's say I'm friends with one guy and he's getting [into] a verbal argument with somebody, you're picking up a knife and you're like "fight for my boy!" you know?

-Prince of Wales Focus Group, 05:01

Key Informant Perspectives

In that community there was a fear of being jumped. That was the primary reason why for the majority of kids that we confiscated knives from: the fear of being jumped ... where the knives have been confiscated, [it has] been from that notion that a kid needs to protect themselves.

- Public School Principal 1, 02:30

Hearing from caseworkers and individuals I've spoken with myself, a lot of it has to do with protection. So either based on where they spend most of their time, where they're living or who they're hanging out with, they feel they need to carry something because they don't want to show up somewhere and someone else has something and they have nothing.

- Criminal Justice Intervention Worker 1, 03:58

5.2 - Self-Promotion and Expression and the Role of Social Media

While fear, self-defence, and protection were identified as important factors at the outset of many of our focus group conversations, the participants in almost every focus group quickly turned the discussion to how self-promotion, intimidation, and reputation are, in their view, more dominant reasons for carrying weapons. Such motivations are often expressed in vernacular language by concise and brief expressions charged with meaning (*stunting, profiling, that life, clout, flexing on* etc.). As focus group conversations progressed, there tended to be general agreement that an extremely significant factor behind weapon carrying is self-expression, the need to show off, or to have an intimidating reputation. When asked what they definitively

²⁴ CJIW2, 06:28

believed to be the principal reason behind weapons-carrying, most participants cited self-promotion and social status.

Key informants also agreed that displays of power, intimidation, and tending to reputation are common motivations in weapon carrying. One educator perceived that youth often state that they need a weapon for protection when the underlying motivation may be a need for acceptance and respect. A police officer emphasized the impact of negative role models in peer groups that influence risk-taking behaviour among youth.²⁵

Social media and pop culture were identified as major factors relating to weapon carrying for self-promotion. On social media, youth either show off weapons or even access new weapons. All focus group participants agreed that Snapchat was the most common social media platform for sharing weapons because the messages and photos erase easily, making it an instant, ephemeral, and highly effective platform for disseminating violent images or posing with weapons. One participant observed that Snapchat was favoured “because messages erase and it’s a lot harder to [track].”²⁶

Youth Perspectives

I'd have to say that the top reason is the status, the status one. Like if you do, people just want to be seen as the scary person who will want, don't want to get messed with. People want to instill fear on other people, and they want to feel powerful because that's what does, it makes them feel powerful and better than other people.

- Suburban Focus Group, 00:36

It's basically your friends, if your friends have [a weapon] then eventually you're just going to want to have one too. And it's just the influence that you get from other people.

- Suburban Focus Group, 31:36

Yeah, we see people, on people's [Snapchat] stories, smoking a blunt in a rundown Toyota, and they're pointing a gun.

- Prince of Wales Focus Group, 10:20

²⁵ OPS1

²⁶ PWFG, 11:06

In many songs nowadays, you know how people have guns and weapons and stuff. There's even songs about how people kill each other and stuff like that. So I think that became more popular because more people try copying these kinds of people, looking up to famous people hoping they might also, you know, become famous or get some hype attention.

- Alta Vista Focus Group, 08:22

Key Informant Perspectives

It's peer pressure. It's this idea of violence as a tactic, as a method towards a sense of coolness or respect. You know, this idea that carrying a weapon brings a certain level of respect...It's built up as part of a culture. It becomes a cultural ideology within the young people.

- Educator/Teacher 2, 08:10

5.3 - Gender Differences

Though our recruitment of female participants fell short of initial targets, our research still points to significant gender differences in weapons carrying behavior. According to the francophone female focus group, young women in Ottawa tend to carry defensive or improvised weapons, kept in anticipation of an attack or of sexual violence. Several male focus group participants perceived non-defensive weapon use as a primarily male behaviour.

Key informants who spoke about gender agree that girls generally do not seem to be involved in weapons-carrying. One police officer observed that young women are rarely caught with weapons. A community faith leader also observed that girls are not involved. Another police officer suggested that girls may be a part of a group in which weapons carrying is the norm, but not often.

Youth Perspectives

Je dirais qu'entre les filles et les garçons, les garçons vont plus avoir des armes et aussi pour les filles d'habitude j'ai vu que les filles vont avoir des taser, des « pepper spray », des choses pour se protéger. Mais quand c'est le cas, c'est plus comme des couteaux, des affaires comme ça, pour agresser mais en même temps pour se protéger.

- Francophone Female Focus Group, 32:08

5.4 - Revenge

Many youths pointed out that those they know to carry weapons do to avenge perceived wrongs done to them, or protect against retaliatory violence by those with whom they may have previously had conflict. Participants stated that youth might carry weapons because *someone did them dirty, it's payback, or to take revenge*. Weapons could often also be carried as a response to bullying and harassment, in order to avenge a bully.

Youth Perspectives

I also think the idea of revenge is a reason why some youths may carry weapons. Sometimes, uh, someone may get jumped or maybe get stabbed ...then they use that anger to buy a weapon and use it on the person that stabbed them ... and then the cycle continues. More people buy more knives and weapons and they use it for revenge.

- Suburban Focus Group, 34:52

Maybe bullying [is a motivation] because maybe someone is getting harassed and then they're like, "okay, I'm going to bring a knife just in case that guy comes again and tries to harass me".

- Prince of Wales Focus Group, 08:21

5.5 - Family and Home Environment

Several factors related to the home environment were pointed out by research participants as contributing to potential weapons-carrying behaviour. Future avenues of research could connect participant perspective to the rich scholarly literature on adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Abusive home environments and domestic violence were also brought up as a major contributing factor to weapons carrying among youth.²⁷ When asked about aspects of a youth's experience that might lead them to weapons carrying, many participants pointed to household violence. Some key informants also spoke about the impact of divorce on youths' weapons-carrying behaviour.

²⁷ ET2, 18:20

Several research participants pointed to parents and siblings as significant influences on a youth's decision to engage in weapons-carrying behaviour.²⁸

Youth Perspectives

Household violence. I swear. Like you, if you've grown up in like a violent environment and you're going to, I know for a fact you're going to be like more of an aggressive person cause that's like the type of like environment that you're exposed to 24/7 and then if things are like that at school too. Cause if you're violent at home you're probably going to get friends who are around the same type of personality at school. So now you're, now you're always surrounded by violence and then that like one thing leads to another.

...

Let's say you get home and I don't know, say yeah, your dad's like an alcoholic, whatever. And he beats you for no reason because he had a bad day or something like that. Like you're building a lot of anger within yourself and like you're just gonna, like lash out or something.

- Prince of Wales Focus Group, 13:39

Key Informant Perspectives

People might not think a divorce, what's that have to do with someone carrying a weapon? But then it could be the divorce and then depression or sense of sadness that comes over the child. A sense of loss or feeling, you know, not feeling nurtured or loved. And then finding another family or peers or group of people that will give them that sense of love and encouragement, security. And then if those individuals are involved in activities, they carry weapons, they become a part of that family as well.

- Educator/Teacher 2, 20:00

If you're a younger brother or sister to, an older brother, you're going to want to emulate that behaviour, right?

- Public School Principal 1, 04:58

Today I'm dealing with situations where kids might be scared to tell their parents that another parent has talked to them or done something in the community because they know their parents are going to go over and start a fight. The continuation of that is, is then when to carry a weapon. And, and

²⁸ CJIW1 09:56, ET2 18:20

there are places where you know, your kid's gonna get jumped and you're likely knowing that your kid's going to get jumped with somebody who has a knife. And so it stands to reason that, that there's a more of a tolerance [among these parents]

- Public School Principal 1, 12:18

6. Systemic Motivations

6.1 - Migration Trauma

Many research participants raised the alarm about the dire mental health struggles faced by newcomers to Canada, many of whom are suffering from traumas from their home countries or as a result of their migration journeys. Both youth and key informants pointed to the multifaceted psychosocial stressors pervasive to the immigrants' experiences.

Participants in several focus groups pointed out that they came from conflict societies, and so the sense of insecurity stays with them for some time after their arrival in Ottawa. Key informants also identified migration trauma as a significant factor in weapons carrying. A principal noted that "we have a lot of kids who come from different parts of the world where violence is significant and carrying a gun is a logical outcome."²⁹ One social/community worker noted that refugees or former refugees who have not adapted and integrated may be more prone to weapons carrying behaviours. A community faith leader also identified culture shock upon arrival as a further stressor.

Youth Perspectives

The first few months after moving here, I still had that notion when I just came here. I still had that the notion of maybe keeping a screwdriver in my back and all of that. Then it took awhile. After awhile it takes a while. Then you start to notice like, huh. Actually, there's nothing for me to be afraid of about. Then you're like, I don't actually need this.

- Centretown Newcomer Focus Group, 14:59

C'est sûr que si je change de pays, c'est normal ou si je peux prendre le cas des gens qui quittent le pays pour venir ici, quand ils traversent ils passent par la Libye et tout ce qui leur arrive, c'est sûr que quelque chose va se passer parce que pendant la traversée, ils voient des gens mourir. On les prend

²⁹ PSP1, 09:11

comme esclaves, on les brûle. Vraiment, si tu arrives à sortir de tout ça, si tu n'as pas vraiment été suivi par un psychologue ou quelque chose pour t'aider, c'est sûr que tu retournes dedans automatiquement

- Francophone Female Focus Group, 30:24

I grew up in the more dangerous side of Syria. And it was a common thing to see people carrying guns and knives, but it wasn't something to show confidence or boost ego or whatever... But here I don't see it as a potential threat to carry a knife or a gun.

- Suburban Focus Group, 30:31

6.2 - Poverty

Poverty was identified by many focus group participants and key informants as a motivating factor in weapons-carrying behaviour, especially in relation to the often quickly profitable trade in illegal drugs. Involvement with drug trafficking was brought up in multiple focus groups as a factor that leads to weapons-carrying, especially in relation to guns. Key informants also identified that involvement in drugs and gangs can lead to weapon carrying.³⁰ Drug trafficking was noted by participants as being a problem across the socioeconomic spectrum, affecting both marginalized and affluent areas.

One social/community worker emphasized poverty, social housing, housing conditions, and the physical infrastructure of neighbourhoods as all being external factors contributing to weapons-carrying. A community faith leader (Muslim) also pointed to the financial instability of families as being a significant cause of youth becoming involved in drug trafficking. A community cultural leader also reflected in detail about the effects of poverty on families and the way economic marginality is an impetus for becoming involved in violence and weapons-carrying. Many other key informants echoed these observations in relation to poverty and economic status.³¹

An educator/teacher observed the reason for weapons carrying are often more complex and cannot always be ascribed simply to poverty or any one factor: "So we'd say, 'Oh it's cause you know, socioeconomically, they're poor' ...But the kid that lives in Barrhaven is heading to school with a knife, too." A youth

³⁰ CJIW3, SCW1, SC1, OPS1

³¹ CJIW2, 36:19

participant put the contradictory nature of more economically advantaged youth carrying weapons succinctly: "They fall in the wrong crowd and think it makes them cool, [but] they already have money!"³²

Key Informant Perspectives

People are getting jumped for money. So money is a hard place to come by when you're in a poor area of town and 20 bucks goes a lot farther there than it might in Stittsville, if you will. And so protecting that money, bus passes, cigarettes, all of the commodities that kids are having access to and possessing... if you lose a pack of smokes, or a vape for that matter. A Juul is a hundred bucks. If you lose that and you have no money, that's a bigger conundrum than for a kid who has access to money. And so there's a greater need then to protect that.

- Public School Principal 1, 09:11

Most of the youth that would commit crimes you will see they will come from a difficult family background as you may know. Yeah. So he comes from single family, family where there are poverty issues, frustrations.

- Community Faith Leader (Christian), 07:47

6.3 - Racism and Discrimination

Youth focus group participants were resounding in their observation of racism, and particularly anti-Black racism, and how it adversely affects their lives, particularly in the school system. Many youth participants felt they were frequently singled out unjustly and treated differently by teachers, school administrators, and guidance counsellors on account of their race. They felt that they were punished more harshly than their white peers. One participant perceived that at the end of the school year white youth were given the disproportionate share of the awards and black youth were largely excluded.³³ Many youth felt they were also singled out in a racist way once they had left school premises, especially by police officers.

Though some key informants felt that racism was an issue of less prevalence in Ottawa society,³⁴ many key informants emphasized that experiences of racism affect youth profoundly and push them further into the social alienation that often leads to dangerous weapons-carrying behaviour. A social/community

³² PWFG, 07:26

³³ FMFG, 1:16:59

³⁴ CL1

worker remarked that there is a racialized disproportionality when it comes to those youth who are involved with, and are the victims of, weapons-related violence:

Key Informant Perspectives

when we look at the victims, I mean, the final impact tells you this full story right there...they're all racialized kids...There are pockets of young white youth as well who are involved in that stuff, but they're not the principal victims of gun violence or the people who are arrested by the police on charges.

- Social/Community Worker 1, 01:02:38

Quand on parle de la discrimination, très souvent les jeunes Noirs ils reçoivent de la discrimination à l'école. Ça peut être de la part des enseignants, soit la direction ... Donc, c'est un peu comme c'est tout une équipe. Ça peut décourager les jeunes.

- Social/Community Worker 3, 10:04

Youth Perspectives

the Black community...they get really stereotyped a lot. And sometimes this could push to aggravated behaviors as well because sometimes youths will not know how to deal with it.

- Centretown Newcomer Focus Group, 21:56

Il y a des arrestations comme puis c'est la personne qui a fait la faute, mais il se fait arrêter par injustice ou par racisme [...] on sait que le racisme existe. Puis ça se voit vraiment.

- Francophone Female Focus Group, 21:15

7. Interventions

In this section we have outlined some of the suggested interventions brought forward by youth and key informants in the course of the present research. Many of these suggestions are rooted in the central priorities of making youth feel heard and giving them options with which to occupy their free time in

positive and productive pursuits. Key informant interviews with community leaders and educators also often emphasized that students who sense that people in their lives are supportive are less likely to carry weapons and engage in violent acts. These interviews indicated that building a social capital among students, community members, and service providers and establishing communication can develop a sense to students that there are positive ways available for them to resolve problems. Furthermore, it can also develop a sense of belonging among youth and prevent alienation. As mentioned above, scholarly research also suggests that students who have adults support are less likely to carry weapons and those who carry weapons often report less support from peers and friends. One public school principal echoed this view, stating that in his view youth are less likely to carry weapons or engage in aggressive behaviour if they feel safe and heard and know there are people who can help them.

7.1 - Positive Peer Influence

Many youths emphasized the importance of positive peer influence and the centrality of promoting healthy friendships. Youth participants were virtually unanimous in indicating that they would rather speak honestly with a friend than report him or her to the authorities (“But first I’ll speak with him because we have a good relationship, you can’t just go [to the authorities], you speak first ... Like maybe if you tell him, maybe he’ll take your advice.”)³⁵

7.2 - Police

Key informants emphasized that the most useful police approaches are collaborative and engaging measures rather than purely punitive ones. One social/community worker asserted that police should collaborate with grassroots community groups and not dictate the terms of engagement. The same worker underscored the need to build relationships and trust with youth, so they feel comfortable to disclose their experiences and ask for help when facing troubles.

Another important aspect to policing underscored by many key informants was the importance of proper training in order to equip police with the tools they need to engage more productively and positively with communities and to build trust. In addition to suggesting interventions, a criminal justice intervention worker emphasized the hurdles police must overcome to regain the trust of youth who may often see them as adversaries (“I think for the police it’s hard to reach a target population that doesn’t want help from you, I guess. That views you as strictly negative”).³⁶ An educator/teacher similarly underscored the

³⁵ CNFG, 55:45

³⁶ CJIW2, 29:47

important of building collaborative rather than martial police presence in communities.

Key Informant Perspectives

I think that the role of the police in this would be...not only by enforcing the law, but at the same time by giving them workshops, sharing with them and even sports activities that they play with them, you know, some sort of fair... And that's where the youth would see that, you know, police are approachable people. Police are not there only to put them in jail, but they're there to be friendly.

- Criminal Justice Intervention Worker 3, 15:46

So the awareness that police now have around, you have a de-escalation training. That you have more eyes on you than before, I hope will provide greater incentive to use your other skills and training than the ones that are around your waist. So being smarter with using the psychology of your policing ability, than the weapons of it...Hire less cops, build less jails, hire more social workers.

- Educator/Teacher 1, 32:27

So speaking to police presence, the idea of increasing more police presence in the neighborhood or community that may have a high rate of youth carrying weapons, I don't think is effective. I don't think you need more. I just think you need the right partnership with the community...you need dialogue and understanding between youth and that should be started from young. You need ambassadors. So yeah, doesn't work. I've never seen it work where there's just more police presence, never. And even in the most gang riddled environments in Canada and US, to speak specifically of North America, it's never worked. It just creates a more militarized presence and a sense of fear.

- Educator/Teacher 2, 24:13

7.3 - Social Workers, Community Workers, Social Service Agencies

Key informants overwhelmingly emphasized social and community workers and social services agencies as being one of the most significant and positive forces for countering weapons carrying behaviours. A social/community worker as well as focus group participants emphasized the need for increased resources for targeted counselling programs and exit plans for youth who are willing to leave

the illegal drug trade. In his view, there is a stark lack of resources relating to weapons-carrying behaviour. The same social/community worker continued by emphasizing the complexity of addressing weapons-carrying behaviour in a community service setting, especially in relation to gun carrying. An educator/teacher emphasized the importance of allowing youth to help shape community service interventions, especially given the legacies of oppression that often affect social work. The same educator/teacher and a community cultural leader also emphasized that social programs could take place effectively through arts interventions that engage youth in self-expression and provide an outlet for creative energies.

Youth Perspectives

[Intervening] in a way where a person has a chance to recover from it, a person has a chance to go to university after ... they don't ruin their chances or go in their criminal history and stuff like that. So there should be some kind of way in which a person can get a chance, but not get away with doing it obviously, but maybe some kind of rehabilitation centers or something like that
– Alta Vista Focus Group, 39:24

Key Informant Perspectives

We've done nothing about weapons. Yeah. And I don't know anyone who's doing anything about it. And the reason being is that, that people who are already openly carrying are not going to be coming to a community agency... People who are carrying are not coming to a community service...they've kind of graduated from that level...they moved on.

- Social/Community Worker 1, 28:19

it's a high-risk game, right. For you to bring people together and say, "why do you carry guns?" You need a huge safety apparatus and teams to understand it and how to deescalate and how to have that relationship and you know, how do you build the relationship?

- Social/Community Worker 1, 29:27

you have institutions like Children's Aid Society who have a history of...saving families, but also destroying families because of anti-black racism and other forms of prejudice and misunderstanding. So those organizations need training as well too. You're a social worker, it doesn't mean your training's done if you got your Master's [degree].

- Educator/Teacher 2, 48:18

I feel that outlets are needed for people to express themselves. Art at its core, fundamental value is a platform where you're encouraged to express yourself. You're encouraged to find yourself, find your highest self, find your true self through art... And to share your experience... It leaves behind a legacy of stories and opportunities for people to say "this is me and this is who we are". So, arts organizations should be a part of, I think, this concoction of supporting youth.

- Educator/Teacher 2, 57:03

7.4 - Educators (Teachers, Principals, and School Administrators)

All youth focus groups emphasized academic success as key for their peers to avoid weapons carrying and other illegal or violent behaviours. Focus group participants also mentioned the importance of teachers' interventions into troubling behavioural patterns, and the potential of teachers and coaches as mentors to youth. This engaging, non-punitive approach in the school setting was echoed by a criminal justice intervention worker.

Key informants such as a police officer thought that it would be effective for teachers to address issues around weapons directly in class settings. A community faith leader (Muslim) also emphasized teachers as second only to a youth's family in terms of exerting a potential positive influence. One public school principal indicated during the interview that there is a need to raise awareness among students, parents, as well as school staff about the education system itself. Often students, parents, and even school staff know policies and rules and regulations but encounter barriers navigating the system. The same principal suggested that students, parents, and school staff should be able to navigate the system and have the knowledge about their rights as well. If students and parents are not able to seek help from a staff member of the service provider, it is important that they know where else and who else they can approach for help. Similarly, if a school staff member or service provider is not able to help a student or a parent it is important that they know where to refer them for better help.

Several key informants emphasized the ongoing work of overturning oppressive structures in the education system in order to improve student success. This concern was also raised by many youth participants in the focus groups, particularly amongst Francophone youth.

Youth Perspectives

When the student is motivated in school and is a student athlete, he is more focused on his grades and when he achieves then it's like he doesn't want that, he is so motivated to keep going with them, he doesn't want to lose his grades.

- Prince of Wales Focus Group, 14:29

there could be teachers that aren't quick to just tell a principal or something ... and just talk to [youth]... if you have a big role model and he has wisdom and he sits down with you and he's like, "don't do it. Like I'm telling you right now, you're going to get in more trouble than it's worth". And the person with the gun trusts that this guy isn't just going to go rat him out...

- Prince of Wales Focus Group, 29:10

approaching the person seeing why they're carrying the weapon. If [teachers] are having a one-to-one conversation, not really giving them the consequences right away will help the person. Try to understand why the person has [a weapon], try to help them out in that situation. [Punishing] just antagonizes a person even more, and makes them more mad

- Alta Vista Focus Group, 38:36

Key Informant Perspectives

teachers [should] pay attention to their students and instead of judging them and punishing them ...getting them, you know, suspension on this and that, channel those energies in a positive way. So, the school is to have this training and then conflict resolution and, how to do all these things early on

- Criminal Justice Intervention Worker 3, 18:40

If we look disproportionately at our statistics, more racialized people are being suspended, more racialized people are failing our school systems...So I think having a conversation around race and how the colonial structure of education has, has really perpetuated a problem and hasn't been able to address that problem. That needs to be put on the table as well.

- Public School Principal 1, 22:34

7.5 – Communities

Key informants highlighted the centrality of communities to lead effective interventions. One social/community worker underlined that communities must be at the tables where decisions are made and noted that in Ottawa, bureaucracy often acted as a roadblock to community engagement. A community faith leader (Muslim) suggested that faith communities, social workers, and schools could work together to address the phenomenon of weapons carrying. He also mentioned that the network of Ottawa mosques should work together in a coalition to address issues of violence and weapons. An educator/teacher also articulated a role for faith communities. One criminal justice intervention worker recalled instances of effective community intervention from his own experience in the Sandy Hill area. Another criminal justice intervention worker further emphasized the importance of multifaceted neighbourhood approaches grounded in the knowledge and initiative of the communities themselves.³⁷

Key Informant Perspectives

where I used to live in Sandy Hill area, we established a homework club where many, many students were going, younger people in elementary school and high school. And by having after school programs...keep them busy from having all this time on their hands when they could be, available or vulnerable for this kind of recruiting.... Also, you know, families working together and helping each other. And I think the agencies and the crime prevention program orientations that we did in the neighborhoods and our awareness to the patterns, what symptoms to look when your child is skipping class.

- Criminal Justice Intervention Worker 3, 10:10

7.6 - Parents and Families

A social/community worker expressed succinctly the consensus among key informants and youth focus group participants, that "we got to be there for families...if you're not able to, these young men particularly are coming from homes and those homes themselves are deprived of many things. Whether it's economic, or it's social connections. Maybe there's, you know, a single parent who herself is working."³⁸

³⁷ CJIW2, 41:39

³⁸ SCW1, 33:44

Youth, too, frequently mentioned the influence of parents and the importance of positive parental influence. One police officer underlined a lack of parental awareness on the issue of weapons carrying, and that raising awareness amongst parents who may be ignorant of their children's exposure to weapons is vitally important. A second police officer agreed that parents are sometimes too naive about their children's activities. A community faith leader (Muslim) emphasized that the best way to reduce weapons-carrying begins within families. He also underscored his own observations from pastoral care that fragile, abusive, or unstable families are rife with violence and weapons-carrying. A community cultural leader asserted that parents getting divorced and other familial disruptions could lead to youth being drawn into illegal activities. A social/community worker emphasized that integrated family support is needed before youth begin to become attracted to illegal or violent behaviours.

Youth Perspectives

it's like a lot of stuff that has to do with like how they were brought up as kids. Like if their parents were not really there. For example, some people I know their parents aren't strict. Like they have like no boundaries. So...they become really reckless. So, they're just like, "Oh I can do whatever I want. So, they go buy a knife, they go get whatever they go hang out with the wrong people".

- Suburban Focus Group, 32:06

Like me and my parents, immigrants... I look forward to getting good grades and staying a student athlete, but it's also to the fact like they've worked so hard to put themselves in this situation to make my life easier. And I'm like, if I do that kind of stuff, what am I doing? You're just throwing it away. Exactly. And just the disappointment...

- Prince of Wales Focus Group, 17:56

Key Informant Perspectives

I will say that it's from the house. Where they are raised, they are being raised, right? So, if I noticed that I have a young boy who now starts misbehaving, as a parent I would approach my boy to try to speak with him. If there's frustration already, if my son is rebelling about the fact that okay, maybe my father is an intellectual, but he cannot provide for our needs or if there's a conflict between my father and my mother, now my father has left the house. Now we found ourselves being raised by our mother. So all of these issues of single-family phenomenon like I said, so all the barriers in the society. It's

rebellious them in some, some sort of way. So now if they cannot affirm themselves in the community where they are living, of course, they will rebel ... they go out and find other people who tell them, "okay, you don't have an identity, we are going to give you an identity. Now how you going to affirm this identity is by being violent and then you make yourself known".

- Community Faith Leader (Christian), 19:26

8. Recommendations for the Ottawa Street Violence and Gang Strategy Partners from MFSO Researchers

The recommendations and conclusions of MFSO were entirely drawn from the contributions of research participants. Future research work could seek to put these recommendations in conversation with existing literature and models. The following recommendations are numbered and then grouped into three parts: recommendations for existing services, followed by recommendations for new resources, and concluding with recommendations for future research.

8.1 - Recommendations for Existing Services

i) New partnerships, new resources

Recommendation: *To identify pilot projects and existing interventions with youth and their families that have worked, and significantly scale up public investment in the resources available for social and community services and strategic partnerships.*

Many key informants emphasized that social and community services focused on youth and their families, and especially young racialized men, need more investment, and that quantity is needed, as well as a multiplication of existing efforts. Most key informants emphasized the need for less investment in punitive measures, and significant increases in the types and scale of social and community service interventions related to weapons-carrying behaviour for young racialized men. Informants frequently felt that investment in policing and criminal justice system responses to weapons-carrying are frequently given a greater emphasis than social and community service interventions. Participants also emphasized the power of community partnerships. Existing partnerships should be strengthened, and community organizations representing racialized and marginalized communities should be brought to the fore in order to better serve youth. These representatives, though sometime not professional

practitioners, will be invaluable in combatting isolation and alienation amongst youth.

Social workers can be best served by giving them some *more social workers* to work their cases instead of being overworked. So, I'd actually like to see that model switched. Hire less cops, build less jails, hire more social workers, and empower them to do the work that called them to the job versus being like case hustlers.

- Educator/Teacher 1, 32:27

ii) Engaging parents and families

Recommendation: *To ensure that all existing youth services also seek to engage parents and families.*

We recommend services be proactive in engaging parents, guardians, and their families. They should be integrated from the outset into the logic models of youth programming. Faith and cultural communities can be useful networks for engaging parents. Education on the intergenerational differences between youth and parents should be a central focus, as sometimes parents and guardians are not aware of the realities of youth (social media, pressures to join in antisocial behaviour, etc.).

Très souvent, les parents sont occupés et ils n'arrivent pas à mieux encadrer les enfants et les jeunes. Les parents viennent ici [au Canada], le problème d'immigration. En même temps, tu as l'âge de 40 ans, 50 ans, c'est maintenant qu'il faut aller à l'école [des langues]? Il y a des enfants à encadrer et en même temps il faut travailler pour s'en occuper des enfants. Du coup, les parents n'ont pas le temps pour encadrer les enfants.

- Social/Community Worker 3, 27:52

iii) Augmenting peer to peer mentorship

Recommendation: *To expand programs that provide training and support for youth to mentor one another.*

Many youth participants in our research indicated that they would rather intervene with a friend engaged in risky behaviour rather than report him or her to authorities. This a response to the prevalent attitude amongst youth against

snitching. This suggests to us that youth may be trusted and willing advisors to their peers. Youth indicated that they would be often more likely to listen to a respected peer than a dreaded authority figure. We recommend that such peer to peer mentorship should be implemented in both socioeconomically marginalized and affluent communities.

It might be hard, but there are people who really need a good influence and you get somebody that just talks with them straight up like, "yo, what are you going through right now?"

- Prince of Wales Focus Group, 29:21

iv) Increasing investments in youth entrepreneurship opportunities

Recommendation: *To counteract the pull of the alternative economy offered by the illegal drug trade by offering increased opportunities for entrepreneurship for youth.*

Our research indicates that often the progression from knives to firearms is motivated by engagement in the illegal drug trade. Some key informants and youth participants suggested increasing economic opportunities for youth. While these measures are essential, we also recommend such opportunities harness the creativity, self-expression, and ingenuity of youth, as these are often qualities that find an outlet in illegal activities. Entrepreneurship, in addition to waged employment, could serve as an alternative outlet. If youth are attracted to an economy of illegal drugs in Ottawa, our research strongly indicates that guns will be present as a tool in this economy. Licit avenues of entrepreneurship allow youth to harness the energies channelled into *that life*, and to redefine these energies in positive and life affirming ways.

v) Community police engagement that centres and takes guidance from youth

Recommendation: *To continue to take a community policing approach that repairs mistrust between youth and police*

Research participants, both youth and key informants, unanimously emphasized the need for interpersonal engagement and deep listening between police officers and youth, and for community policing initiatives to take guidance and insight from youth concerns. Many participants agreed that such an approach is

much more effective than simply mobilizing increased police patrols in certain areas.

Police officers have to break down the barriers, we can go there by name but with no uniform; the uniform is a deterrent, they know who you are, they will know the cops, the police for the, you know, the healing to happen.

- School Counsellor, 59:24

Les gens voient assez mal la police; ils disent parfois qu'ils sont méchants. Mais non, dans la police il y a des programmes, n'est-ce pas? Et puis nous avons la police qui devient police communautaire et la police doit comprendre sa communauté, comment interagir avec les gens de sa communauté.

- Community Leader (Cultural), 56:10

vi) Increased culturally-responsive and trauma-informed counselling and mentorship supports for youth

Recommendation: *To significantly increase culturally-responsive trauma-informed counselling services available in multiple languages, as well as an expansion of mentorship programs, and for all these services to take into account migration trauma and racial trauma as factors.*

Despite valuable extant resources in the community, there is a dire need for more counselling and mentorship supports for youth in the community that reflect the diversity of Ottawa youth. Our research suggest that youth are inspired by the presence of people *who look like them* in positions of authority, knowledge, or mentorship. We heard this insight again and again from both key informants and youth participants. In contrast, the overarching whiteness of policing, social services, and education systems in Ottawa can often serve to alienate racialized youth further when attempts are made to intervene or when help is sought. Key informant Social/Community Worker1 emphasized that systemic changes are necessary as current systems are most often built with white people of European heritage in mind; such systems need to be adapted to the on-the-ground realities of Ottawa's diverse cultural communities. Furthermore, existing services need to understand migration trauma, both direct and intergenerational, more thoroughly, as well as the cumulative effects of racism on the lives and mental/spiritual health of Black and other racialized youth (racial trauma).

Les jeunes [noirs] se sentent un peu oubliés. Ils sentent qu'ils ne sont pas dans leur propre pays des fois. Ils disent « On est jamais accepté, même si on est Canadien, il y a toujours la discrimination. » Il y a la colère ... il y a les effets...il y a beaucoup de jeunes qui ne travaillent pas, même s'ils sont très éduqués. Alors ça, ça peut amener la colère.

- Social/Community Worker 2, 18:30

8.2 - Recommendations for New Resources

vii) Engage youth and youth mentors in conversations about values

Recommendation: *To engage youth in critical and reciprocal conversations on values and attitudes around issues that matter to them.*

We have observed the need to engage youth, especially young men, in more open conversations about the issues that affect them every day, including attitudes around pop culture, masculinity, race, and self-expression. These conversations could also lead to frank discussions on revenge-seeking, aggression, public persona, artificially constructed toughness, and power struggles between peer groups, among others (expressed, as mentioned above, with terms such as *stunting*, *profiling*, *that life*, *clout*, *flexing on* etc.). An important aspect of this recommendation is for these conversations to be reciprocal: adults are engaged in a learning process with youth, and are also open to having assumptions and preconceived notions overturned. As researchers, we found our conversations with youth to be engaging, enlightening, and educational. We recommend that youth are given the opportunity to educate adults about their realities, to help us better understand the pressures, triumphs, and tragedies affecting their lives. Such conversations should take place in both socioeconomically marginalized and affluent communities.

Organisez les groupes de discussion. Organisez les groupes d'échange. Amener les étudiants, les élèves, à échanger, à donner leurs points de vu, à être valoriser à travers leurs idées et leurs pensées.

- Community Leader (Cultural), 51:31

viii) New initiatives to address anti-Black racism at all levels

Recommendation: *To urgently address anti-Black racism as an overarching and urgent priority for educators in Ottawa, including instituting mandatory anti-racism trainings for all teachers, guidance counsellors, school administrators, police officers, social workers, and other people in positions of authority in the city, and new increases in hiring Black professionals in these positions.*

We applaud recent steps by Ottawa school boards to begin collecting race-based data in schools, and steps by the City of Ottawa to create an anti-racism secretariat. Addressing discrepancies and discrimination in discipline in both Anglophone and Francophone schools, and in all school boards, towards Black children and youth by white teachers and school administrators, is an overwhelmingly urgent need. Black youth participants in focus groups, as well as many key informants, reported the alienation, frustration, and hopelessness that discrimination can cause amongst Black youth. Often these youth feel targeted, typecast, and heartbroken by being singled out, demeaned, and differentially treated. We feel such interventions will address much of the alienation that derives from discrimination and drives antisocial behaviour, and will encourage school success, a major factor in avoiding such behaviours. Furthermore, many youth participants underscored that they often do not see themselves reflected in those holding positions of authority. The recruitment of Black professionals at *all* levels of the education system and the social and community service sectors (frontline, management, senior management) is a matter of urgency.

Les jeunes Noirs sont dans des écoles où tout l'administration est blanche, on le sait. Toute l'administration est blanche, et tous les étudiants sont noirs.

- Francophone Male Focus Group, 1:11:18

ix) Engaging places of worship and ethnocultural associations

Recommendation: *To increase capacity and offer training to cultural and faith community leaders, especially women leaders and mothers, to work with youth and their families to address weapons-carrying behaviour and related social issues, and to build closer partnerships between client-serving agencies and churches, mosques, and ethnocultural associations.*

Faith communities and ethnocultural groups are rich sources of both mentorship and culturally informed knowledge and are severely underutilized. Though leaders of such communities may not have specific professionalized experience in social work, policing, or education, they possess intimate knowledge of

communities and are able to both engage youth and command respect. They often provide de facto services that are similar to social work or counselling through their pastoral work or through community outreach. New training programs that increase the capacity of these leaders, and ensure a gender-balance in the leaders receiving these trainings, are essential to ensure that leaders can sustain the often exhausting unpaid or underpaid work they do. Often close with the parents of youth, such leaders can also mobilize parents and the wider community to address antisocial or violent behaviour amongst youth.

Mais on a besoin de s'outiller plus, d'une façon très professionnelle parce que pour y arriver à nos objectifs, c'est d'être [outiller] nous-mêmes. Que ce soient des leaders religieux ou bien culturels eux-mêmes. Ils ont besoin d'avoir certaines formations pour qu'ils comprennent et se sensibilisent de ces conditions [de la communauté].

- Social/Community Worker2, 31:26

8.3 - Recommendations for Further Research

x) Further study on how knives are acquired and used by youth

Recommendation: *To fund further study of on how knives are acquired and shared between youth.*

Our research clearly indicates that knife use and access to knives are perceived by many as problems in Ottawa. More study is needed on how youth use knives, how they are acquired, what kind of knives are favoured, and how we can address the problem of knife-related violence.

xi) Ottawa-specific studies on the cumulative effects of racial trauma

Recommendation: *To fund further study of how the cumulative psychospiritual, mental, and physical health wounds of racism adversely affect the lives of Black and other racialized youth in Ottawa.*

It appears that though work has been undertaken to understand to some extent the mental health issues faced by newcomers to Ottawa, less work has been done to study the cumulative effects of racism on the health of Black and other racialized youth in Ottawa. These studies, which should be informed by research

already completed in other communities, are urgently needed as we begin to understand the scale of the toll of anti-Black racism and other forms of racism on youth. We should not risk underestimating the accumulated frustrations, despair, and isolation that may result from being exposed repeatedly, and over long periods of exposure, to both subtle and overt dehumanization.

xii) Further study on Snapchat and evolving social media

Recommendation: *To urgently undertake further study on the role of social media platforms such as Snapchat in influencing weapons-carrying behaviour among youth.*

Further study is urgently needed on the ways in which social media influences weapons carrying in Ottawa, particularly on Snapchat. As noted above, the ephemeral nature of Snapchat makes it both appealing to those projecting the desirability of illegal or violent activities, in addition to making it difficult to monitor.

They watch it on Snapchat, they could watch someone lifting a gun on their Snapchat and they'll be like: "Yo that guy, he's actually pretty sick. He's pretty well known". A lot of people will be like: "he's pretty cool". There's so many that say they would just like to conform with what they see that person doing. So that's their motivation: "Oh if this guy does it, I should do it too, you know, cause he's cool. So that make me cool too."

- Alta Vista Focus Group, 08:49

xiii) Youth-guided research

Recommendation: *To craft a call for proposals aimed at encouraging youth to propose areas of research and to engage youth ages 16 to 21 to guide and lead research projects.*

Our team's engagement in this research involved many moments of insight offered to us by youth participants. We recommend that, in a similar vein to undergraduate research opportunities in postsecondary settings, youth in the 16-21 age bracket be encouraged to collaborate with researchers to develop questions that address their lived realities. Just as we, as adult researchers, could not predict the direction of the conversations that informed the present research, so too could youth provide welcome and unexpected guidance on future research directions.

Appendix A: Focus Group Questions

Youth and Young Adults Under 21 years old

Existence of weapons (Knives, firearms, replicas) carrying behaviour among youth and young adults (21 years old and younger):

1. In your experience, how often do you encounter youth who carry weapons (guns, knives, firearms, replicas)?
2. In your experience, what is the most common type of weapon (knives, firearms, replicas, etc.) carried among youth and young adults and why?
3. In your experience, in what settings/environments do youth and young adults carry weapons more often and why?

Motivations behind weapons (Knives, firearms, replicas) carrying behaviour among youth and young adults (21 years old and younger):

4. In your experience, why do youth and young adults carry weapons (Knives, firearms, replicas)? What are the motivations for carrying weapons?
5. How common is it amongst your social circles to carry weapons (Knives, firearms, replicas) and why?
6. In your experience, do youth and young adults who don't currently have weapons aspire to own them (knives, firearms, replicas)? If yes, why? If no, why?
7. In your experience, are there youth who may not want or like to carry weapons (knives, firearms, replicas etc.) but still carry one? If so, why?
8. In your opinion, what factors (can) contribute to or encourage weapons carrying (e.g. easy access to the weapons? The decreased chances of getting caught?)
9. What aspects of a youth's experience might lead them towards engaging in weapons carrying behaviour?
10. If a youth were ever to choose to carry or own a weapon (knives, firearms, replicas, etc.), in your opinion, what is the top reason(s) for carrying it?

Perceptions around risks and safety regarding weapons (knives, firearms, replicas) carrying among youth and young adults (21 years old and younger):

11. In your opinion, what are the consequences of carrying weapons (knives, firearms, replicas)?
12. In your opinion, what are the risks factors of carrying weapons (knives, firearms, replicas)?
13. In your opinion, how well do those carrying weapons (knives, firearms, replicas) understanding the issues around risk and safety of carrying weapons? (e.g. hurting themselves or others, risk of committing a crime, consequences of carrying weapons)?
14. What is your perception of those carrying weapon (knives, firearms, replicas)?
15. How safe do you feel being around those who carry weapons (knives, firearms, replicas)?
16. How often would those in your social circle tend to report or not report someone carrying a weapon (knives, firearms, replicas), in school or outside, and why?

Appendix B: Key Informant Interview Questions

Police Officers, Teachers, Community Leaders, Social Workers.

Motives of weapons (guns, knives, firearms, replicas) carrying behaviour among youth under 21 years old:

1. In your experience, how often do you encounter youth (under 21 years old) who carry weapons (guns, knives, firearms, replicas)?
2. In your experience, what is the most common type of weapon (guns, knives, firearms, replicas, etc.) carried among youth (under 21 years old) and why?
3. In your experience, why do youth (under 21 years old) carry weapons (guns, knives, firearms, replicas)? What are the motivations for carrying weapons?
4. In your experience, in what settings/environments do youth (under 21 years old) carry weapons more often and why?
5. In your opinion, how well do those carrying weapons (guns, knives, firearms, replicas) understand the issues around risk and safety of carrying weapons (e.g. hurting themselves or others, risk of committing a crime, consequences of carrying weapons)?
6. In your opinion, what external factors contribute to or encourage weapons carrying (e.g. easy access to the weapons? The decreased chances of getting caught?)
7. What aspects of a youth's experience might lead them towards engaging in weapons carrying behaviour?

Interventions and strategies to deter the behaviour:

8. What approaches have been taken by your agency or other agencies in Ottawa that you may know to address the issue of weapons (guns, knives, firearms, replicas) carrying among youth (under 21 years old)?
 - a. In your opinion, what approaches have worked, and why?
 - b. In your opinion, what approaches have not worked, and why?
 - c. Have you seen any research on the subject or relevant program evaluations?

9. In your opinion, what is the best way to reduce the weapons (guns, knives, firearms, replicas) carrying behaviour among youth (under 21 years old)?
10. In your opinion, what is the best approach to awareness-raising on the risks and safety issues related to weapons carrying behaviour among youth (under 21 years old)?
11. In your opinion, what role police can play in deterring the behaviour among youth (under 21 years old)?
 - a. How effective/ineffective is police involvement? Why?
12. In your opinion, what role can schools and/or teachers play in deterring weapons carrying behaviour among youth (under 21 years old)?
 - a. In your experience, has there been any involvement of teachers, schools, or school boards in reducing and discouraging weapons carrying behaviour among youth (under 21 years old)?
 - b. If not, why has there not been any involvement?
 - c. If yes, what approaches have been taken?
 - i. How effective/ineffective has the involvement of teachers, schools, or school boards been? Why?
13. In your opinion, what role can social workers and community or youth workers play in deterring weapons carrying behaviour among youth (under 21 years old)?
 - a. In your experience, has there been any involvement of social workers and community or youth workers in reducing and discouraging weapons carrying behaviour among youth (under 21 years old)?
 - b. If not, why has there not been any involvement?
 - c. If yes, what approaches have been taken?
 - i. How effective/ineffective has the involvement of social workers and community or youth workers? Why?
14. In your opinion, what role can the community play in deterring weapons carrying behaviour among youth (under 21 years old)?

- a. In your experience, has there been any community involvement in reducing and discouraging weapons carrying behaviour among youth?
- b. If not, why has there not been any involvement?
- c. If yes, what approaches have been taken?
- d. How effective/ineffective has the community's involvement been? Why?

15. We'd like to open up the interview to any additional insights you may have:

- a. Are there any other groups or professions that have, in your experience, been effective in deterring weapons carrying behaviour among youth (under 21 years old)?
- b. Are there any other insights you'd like to share in relation to weapons carrying behaviour among youth?



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