

Mayor John Tory
Office of the Mayor
100 Queen St. W., 2nd floor
Toronto, ON M5H 2N2

June 15, 2020 [updated on June 16]

OPEN LETTER from Community Organizations Urging Action to Address Rising Gun Violence in Toronto

Dear Mayor Tory and Council:

As organizations concerned about the wellbeing of Torontonians, we are deeply troubled by the rising gun violence in our city. As of May 31, 2020, gun violence incidents in our city have increased 19 per cent compared to the same period in the previous year. Gun homicides have increased 23 per cent. Black communities are disproportionately impacted. Devastating accounts of young Black men losing their lives are becoming an everyday occurrence. We cannot idly stand by while our youth, families and communities continue to suffer.

Despite the current realities of the pandemic, and the additional pressures facing the City, we cannot push the pause button on gun violence.

Gun violence has affected too many families in our city. Too many mothers have grieved the loss of their sons. Too many siblings have lost brothers and children have lost their fathers.

As recent events in the United States and Canada demonstrate, anti-Black racism continues to harm and destabilize Black communities. The root causes of gun violence have as much to do with the inequitable distribution of wealth and opportunity, which are clearly gendered and racialized, as it does with the availability of firearms and the lack of opportunities for Black youth.

It is imperative that we acknowledge the current lived experiences of Black communities and provide culturally appropriate solutions to this dire problem. Having an anti-Black racism office at the City is a step in the right direction, but it is not enough. Gun violence continues to rise. We are deeply concerned what the next few months will reveal.

Vital to this discussion are actionable solutions that serve Black communities – they include reducing investments in policing, redirecting that funding towards enhanced investments in supportive social programs including youth programs, extensive supports for survivors of gun violence, and the creation of a violence prevention strategy specifically tied to the City's COVID-19 recovery efforts.

Gun violence cannot be reduced through policing measures. There is a systemic pattern of Black communities in our city being disproportionately policed and criminalized, causing community-wide trauma, anxiety and fear. A public health approach to community violence is needed, as is the strengthening of our social safety net.

Substantial investment in youth and family programs are critical to creating positive opportunities for youth. Youth programs foster civic engagement and can help youth feel safe. Being engaged in groups can help youth develop important personal and interpersonal skills, which supports confidence and improves self-esteem. Moreover, when youth are engaged in youth programming, the risk of involvement with unsafe activities such as violence, drugs or alcohol is reduced, because youth are engaged in more productive uses of their time. Engaged youth generate positive changes within their communities.

COVID-19 has laid bare the inequities facing Black communities. The trauma experienced by those who have been survivors, victims, and co-victims of gun violence has not abated, and the root causes of such violence – including poverty, inequality, anti-Black racism, the lack of affordable housing and child care, and the lack of affordable, culturally-sensitive mental health services for both adults and youth – have not been adequately addressed. These supports are critical to promoting collective healing and reducing inter-generational trauma.

With guidance from community partners, we call on you to create sustainable and long-term solutions to gun violence that are connected to the City's pandemic recovery efforts.

We urge you to

1. Enhance investment in city services that support the creation of affordable housing, child care, and community programs and spend less on police services. Right now, the breakdown of an average \$3,020 property tax bill is \$703.31 for the Police Service & Board and only \$149.94 on Shelter, Support & Housing.
2. Offer increased and permanent base funding for free, community-based youth programs for Black boys, girls and gender-diverse youth.
3. Create permanent and extensive supports for survivors, victims, and co-victims of gun violence including mothers and siblings of gun violence so they can access culturally-responsive mental health and other services in order to process trauma, grieve, and heal.
4. Address the structural conditions of community violence and create a violence prevention strategy as part of the City's pandemic recovery efforts.

Please let us know where you stand on these issues. We hope you show leadership and the will to explore long-term solutions to gun violence in collaboration with community partners and grassroots organizations.

Signed,

***Access Alliance Multicultural Health and Community Services
Agincourt Community Services Association***

Alliance for Healthier Communities
Barbra Schlifer Commemorative Clinic
Black Legal Action Centre
Build and Builders Development Corp
Campaign 2000
Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture
CMHA Toronto Branch
Collective Impact
Communities for Zero Violence
ConveneToronto
Dixon Hall
Educare Selfcare Studio
Family Service Toronto
Faith in the City
Focus Media Arts Centre
Fred Victor Centre
Full Bellies Breastfeeding Support
Gabes Red Balloon Foundation
Hope in the Six
Iranian Canadian Congress
Lady Ballers Camp
Millennial Womxn in Policy
Mornelle Alls - Stars Coalition
Mothers for Peace
North York Community House
Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants
Out Of Bounds: Grief & Trauma Support
Pan African Centre for Climate Policy
Parkdale Activity Recreation Centre
Progress Toronto
Project: Restore FIBI (Families Impacted by Incarceration)
Racial Health Equity Network
Scadding Court Community Centre
Scarborough Civic Action Network
Social Planning Toronto
The Library for Social Change
The Neighborhood Group
Think Twice
Toronto Neighbourhood Centres
West Scarborough Community Legal Services
WomanACT
Women's Habitat
Yorktown Family Services
Young Women's Leadership Network

YouthLink
YWCA Toronto
Zero Gun Violence Movement

CC

All 25 members of City Council