Evidence Brief

Youth Weapon Carrying

How Did We Compile This Evidence?

We searched YouthREX's online Library for Youth Work, and searched online academic databases using the following key terms: "youth," "weapons carrying," "weapons," and "violence."

Context: Youth Violence is a Social Issue

The evidence supports an understanding that the "deep roots of youth violence (such as poverty, racism, issues in the education system, family issues, lack of economic opportunity for youth, issues in the justice system, etc.) interact with young people's vulnerability" (Toronto Youth Equity Strategy, 2015, p. 14). Poverty and social exclusion have been identified as key causes of youth violence (Toronto Youth Equity Strategy, 2015).

The **Vulnerable Youth Spectrum** (Toronto Youth Equity Strategy, 2015, p. 15) is
> intended as a tool for service providers working with youth most vulnerable to involvement in serious violence and crime to assist them to understand that multiple and intersecting factors impact an individual youth. Depending on a young person's level of resilience, the nature of the systemic barriers she faces may have different impact on her life than on another young person's. **Sparks**, events that take place in a young person's life that can be positive or negative, can either increase or decrease resiliency and systemic barriers for vulnerable youth. The Spectrum helps service providers identify how programs and systems can become supportive and assist youth in building resiliency. (Toronto Youth Equity Strategy, 2015, p. 15)
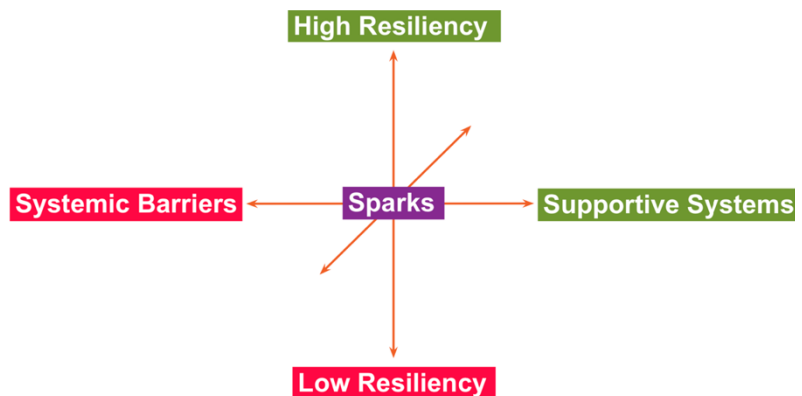
Several **risk** and **protective factors** have been identified for youth vulnerability to violence, which could include weapon carrying:

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a) Victimization

Young people who are involved in violence and crime, or who are in conflict with the law, "often share the similarity that they have been exposed to violence, abuse, or neglect which has caused them trauma" (Scott et al., 2018, p. 8). The evidence indicates that weapon carrying among youth can be understood "as a protective phenomenon arising from prior victimization" (Bègue et al., 2016, p. 466; see also Brennan, 2019; Worthen & Button, 2017; Carter et al., 2013). In fact, young people who reported having carried a weapon also reported more experiences of victimization (or knowing someone who had been recently victimized) than those youth who reported never having carried a weapon (Fontaine et al., 2018; see also Wallace, 2017; Bourque, 2016). Young people who grow up witnessing violence or who experience violence can share "a sense of hopelessness as well as diminishing a sense of a meaningful future" (Dlamini et al., 2015, p. 7).

Some youth are more vulnerable to victimization than others, or may perceive a higher threat of victimization. Youth who are bullied, for example, may "carry weapons to feel safe or for self-protection. Bully-victims (those who bully and are victims of bullying) are potentially at even higher risk of weapon carrying because they share the characteristics of the bully and the victim" (Lu et al., 2018, p. 1). Over half of homeless youth participating in a 2015 study described carrying weapons for protection (Bender et al., 2015, p. 360). The evidence indicates that LGBTQ2S+ and racialized youth are more likely to be concerned about safety at school (Worthen & Button, 2017; Jackson, 2015); for these youth, "school weapon-carrying practices are closely related to feeling vulnerable, threatened, or targeted" (Worthen & Button, 2017, p. 807). However, it is important to recognize that "identity-related victimization (rather than identity itself) leads to deviant outcomes and criminal coping" (Worthen & Button, 2017, p. 825).

b) Systemic Barriers to Opportunity

Poverty, racism, and inequality are systemic barriers to opportunity (Scott et al., 2018; Dlamini et al., 2015) that can result in youth vulnerability to violence.

These barriers can also impact a young person's family environment, resulting in risk factors identified by the evidence (for example, parents who are engaged in substance use, parents who experience immigration and settlement issues, and parental incarceration). Youth are more likely to possess and carry weapons when weapons are present in the home (Scott et al., 2018).

Interpersonal violence is "said to be concentrated in neighbourhoods characterized by poverty, racial segregation, and a high number of single-parent families, many of which are headed by women" (Dlamini et al., 2015, p. 5). Aspects of the neighbourhoods in which youth live, including social order, safety, and collective efficacy, are "important predictors of illegal gun carrying by youth" (Harvard Injury Control Research Center, 2019). The "negative and stigmatizing portrayals

of low-income neighbourhoods" (Dlamini et al., 2015, p. 21) can be internalized by community members, which can lead to a denial of "opportunities for growth and development" (Dlamini et al., 2015, p. 22). The evidence points to the relationship between "limited social-economic resources and heightened safety issues" (Jackson, 2015, p. 24). As a result, access to employment, housing, stable supports, and recreational spaces are viewed as key protective factors, as are community, school, and extra-curricular activities for young people (Scott et al., 2018; Fontaine et al., 2018; Dlamini et al., 2015).

Interactions with police, or the criminal justice system more broadly (Scott et al., 2018), can increase the likelihood of youth violence and weapon carrying. Safety is a concern in underserved or impoverished communities (Scott et al., 2018). Youth from "marginalized or racialized backgrounds historically don't have positive relationships with police" (Scott et al., 2018, p. 10), and, therefore, may not seek out help and protection from law enforcement. In fact, young people who "may not feel protected by more traditional forces of social control, like police … use guns as a form of social control instead" (Wallace, 2017, p. 1297; see also Brennan, 2019); views of police are "notably worse among young adults who reported ever carrying a gun" (Fontaine et al., 2018, p. 9).

c) Relationships
i. With Non-Family Adults / Mentors
Positive and supportive relationships with adult mentors and role models (for example, teachers, youth workers, and coaches) have been identified as a protective factor for youth (Scott et al., 2018; Dlamini et al., 2015). Young people who carry and use weapons "tend to exhibit weak social ties to their parents, teachers, or friends" (Johnson et al., 2019, p. 4).

ii. With Peers & Friends
Friends can be a source of risk or support, as they can model and/or facilitate weapon carrying (Scott et al., 2018; Johnson et al., 2019).

Some evidence indicates that young people may carry weapons to gain social acceptance among their peers: "youth who carry weapons and youth who engage in a moderate amount of delinquency may benefit from increased popularity in adolescence" (Wallace, 2017, p. 1299). Young people who identified as members of gangs and who used weapons in acts or threats of violence "perceive themselves as more socially connected, and potentially as more popular" (Wallace, 2017, p. 1308). Therefore, the perception of increased connection or popularity may be a predictor for weapon carrying among some youth.

Summary of Evidence: Youth Weapon Carrying

1. Youth carry weapons for protection.
The evidence indicates that young people carry weapons as a form of protection – often as a result of having been victimized or bearing witness to victimization, or the perception of violence in their school or community and the threat of violence in these spaces (Brennan, 2019; Johnson et al., 2019; Fontaine et al., 2018; Scott et al., 2018; Dlamini et al., 2015; Carter et al., 2013). Some studies indicate that male youth are more likely to carry weapons (Brennan, 2019; Carter et al., 2013; WHO, 2002).

Interestingly, young people "substantially overestimated the percentage of their peers who carried guns and the likelihood that a respondent carried a gun was strongly associated with his perception of the level of peer gun carrying" (Harvard Injury Control Research Center, 2019); in addition, the evidence revealed that "[i]ncreased gun carrying *reduces* community feeling of safety" (Harvard Injury Control Research Center, 2019; emphasis added).

2. Youth who carry weapons may be at greater risk of violence and other harmful behaviours.
Weapon carrying corresponds with an increase in participation in violence and/or criminal behaviour (Emmert et al., 2018; Wallace, 2017; Carter et al., 2013; WHO, 2002), and there is a connection between weapon carrying and substance use (Emmert et al., 2018; Bourque, 2016; WHO, 2002). The findings of one study indicate that weapon carrying actually facilitates 'violent delinquency': "when adolescents carry weapons, they participate in significantly more violent delinquency than they do prior to carrying, and as soon as weapon carrying ends, violence drops to resemble initial levels" (Emmert et al., 2018, p. 353-354).

Key Findings: Two Best Practices

1. Help youth build resiliency.
The evidence emphasizes the importance of connecting young people to trauma-informed mental health services when necessary in order to support them in addressing the issues they may be facing; any young person who has been victimized – who has been exposed to violence, abuse or neglect – may have experiences of trauma (Scott et al., 2018).

2. Provide holistic and integrated supports to vulnerable young people.
Services that minimize risk factors and enhance protective factors are critical for young people. Although many of these services exist, "the systems that deliver them are often fragmented, not coordinated, and/or not accessible to the young people who need them most" (Scott et al., 2018, p.

27). Therefore, there is a need for holistic and integrated supports (Brennan, 2019; Scott et al., 2018; Johnson et al., 2018; Bourque, 2016; Ruggles & Rajan, 2014). These could include programs that strive to provide "a balanced approach to understanding student weapon carrying and use – one that recognizes the role of psychological difficulties (especially low self-control), social-interpersonal influences, and school climate" (Johnson et al., 2018, p. 14-15).

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