

Remembering Lost Lives and Collective Healing from Trauma: Homicides, Incarceration, and Pain-Driven Advocacy in the Jane and Finch Community

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ABSTRACT

This article serves as a vessel for knowledge mobilization and activism as research, intertwining remembrance of lost lives and communal healing by sharing collective pain amongst the authors and bolstering mutual support. Guided by personal encounters with violence including death, homicides, and incarceration, four authors comprising a teacher, social worker, and two community activists, unveil their 20-year+ advocacy journey in the Jane and Finch community in Toronto, Canada including their involvement with programs and services through the non-profit organization Youth Association for Academics, Athletics, and Character Education (YAAACE). The pain and suffering are shared as symptoms of systemic trauma inflicted on the community and how the trauma is perpetuated through institutional neglect for racialized under-resourced communities. The conversations are examined through an intersectional and Critical Race Theory lens, centering life experiences associated with trauma and systemic violence. Lived experiences and emotions are shared as valuable data through duoethnography as a methodology, emphasizing how inspiration is harnessed from the pain and trauma to guide community advocacy. Effective coping and healing strategies are outlined from various vantage points. Overall, the article contributes to filling in the research gap by centering racialized personal narratives in the Canadian context, offering nuanced lessons for integrating research and activism, and showcasing tangible ways to support the needs of youth and families through community-oriented, trauma-informed approaches.

KEYWORDS

Racialized, healing, trauma, activism, and Jane and Finch

INTRODUCTION

Grounded in the ethos of research as activism (Eizadirad et al., 2023; Fanon, 1961; Freire, 1970; hooks, 2003; Lorde, 2017), this article delves into the intricacies and intersections of personal narratives, collective struggles, community healing, and advocacy spanning two decades from four community perspectives. Four authors comprising a teacher, social worker, and two community activists from different generations, unveil their 20-year+ advocacy journey in the Jane and Finch community in Toronto, Canada including their collective involvement with programs and services offered by the non-profit organization [Youth Association for Academics, Athletics, and Character Education](#) (YAAACE). This article serves to mobilize knowledge with intentionality, intertwining the threads of remembrance and healing, to confront stark realities of homicides, incarceration, and pain within Jane and Finch and particularly mapping out the wounds of constant exposure to systemic oppression and community neglect (Eizadirad, 2020). Through the theoretical frameworks of intersectionality and Critical Race Theory (CRT), we navigate the contours of trauma, systemic violence, and community-driven advocacy, to fill the research gap by amplifying marginalized voices, centring counter-narratives about the roots of violence and what Jane and Finch embodies, and discussing solutions that lead to thriving communities (Eizadirad; 2017; Kumashiro, 2004; McMurtry & Curling, 2008).

Our exploration is not merely an academic exercise but an act of remembrance. It is a process of honoring our journey and the lives we got to cross paths with before they left us too early (#RIP). This exercise and sharing are a form of research as activism: a testament to the lives lost and the enduring scars etched upon the collective psyche of Jane and Finch. Through the prism of shared pain and mutual support, we traverse the difficulties of processing and overcoming trauma, seeking solace in the collective journey toward healing and empowerment (Crime Beat TV, 2020; Eizadirad et al., 2023; Sharpe, 2022). We draw upon personal narratives, statistical realities, and scholarly insights to illuminate the path forward and alternative solutions that address the roots of violence. From the stark statistics of overrepresentation in the criminal justice system (Colour of Poverty- Colour of Change, 2019; Government of Canada, 2022; Chan et al., 2017) to the manifestations of institutional neglect, our exploration names and talks about the personal and collective pain caused by the violence and injustice in the Jane and Finch community (Khenti, 2013; McMurtry & Curling, 2008).

In navigating this terrain, our methodology embraces the transformative potential of duoethnography, a collaborative storytelling approach that foregrounds lived experiences, centres emotions from a trauma-informed pedagogy, and challenges dominant narratives (Norris et al., 2012). Therefore, we share our lived experiences, emotions, and traumas experienced/experiencing as valuable data, but also as a form of demonstrating empowered vulnerability (Delgado & Stefancic, 2011; Henry & Tator, 2012). Through the interplay of personal reflections, thematic analyses, and community dialogues we unravel the complex intersections of trauma, healing, and pain-driven advocacy and activism within Jane and Finch. The pain and suffering shared are examined as symptoms of systemic trauma inflicted on the

community and perpetuated through institutional neglect and apathy. As we embark on this journey of remembrance and healing, we invite the readers to accompany us on this transformative odyssey, igniting flames of hope and empowerment at the personal level as well as within Jane and Finch and beyond. As a collective, the experiences of the authors offer nuanced lessons on integrating research and activism, showcasing tangible ways to support the needs of youth and families through community-centric, trauma-informed approaches (Falkenburger et al., 2018; hooks, 2000).

Methods and Methodology: Storytelling by Weaving Critical Race Theory, Intersectionality and Duoethnography

Our research methodology, anchored in Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Intersectionality, situates the authors' lived experiences at the forefront of challenging dominant narratives about the Jane and Finch neighbourhood and amplifies counter-narratives from racialized voices, often on the margins of society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2011). CRT is pioneered by legal scholars and civil rights activists like Derrick Bell (1993), Kimberle Crenshaw (2001), Richard Delgado (2013), amongst others who posit that racism is not merely individual acts of prejudice but rather often embedded within the social fabric of institutions and structures (Aylward, 1998; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Thobani et al., 2010;). Intersectionality, conceptualized by Kimberle Crenshaw, highlights the interconnected and intertwining nature of social identities such as race, gender, class, and sexuality, emphasizing how they intersect and diverge to shape individuals' lived experiences relative to accessing privilege and power (Cho et al., 2013; Henry & Tator, 2012; Reece, 2020; Simpson, 2017). For our purposes, CRT and Intersectionality, as a complementary duo, illuminate the complexities of social structures and power dynamics that govern Jane and Finch. They shine a light on how power is dispersed and enacted in inequitable ways, contributing to the marginalization of racialized communities in terms of lack of access to opportunities.

Furthermore, duoethnography serves as our primary method of sharing, comparing, and contrasting the experiences of the authors and centering counter-hegemonic narratives through storytelling (Mulvihill & Swaminathan, 2022). This involves interweaving multiple lived experiences with purpose and intentionality (Norris et al., 2012). Originating from the field of qualitative research, duoethnography offers a transformative space where authors engage in reflective dialogue and sharing of personal experiences, insights, and perspectives. Sawyer and Norris (2012) describe the methodology as such:

In duoethnography, two or more researchers work in tandem to dialogically critique and question the meanings they give to social issues and epistemological constructs...They then engage with cycles of interpretation which involve data analysis, abduction, data situation within personal stories and cultural meaning, dialogic and collaborative critique, and an articulation of new perspectives and insights. (p. 2)

Duoethnography among the four authors facilitated the co-creation of counter-hegemonic narratives (Eizadirad et al., 2022), which are alternative stories that challenge prevailing discourses and offer nuanced understandings of complex social phenomena. This approach enables an exploration of personal experiences and community trauma, crucial for understanding systemic issues impacting the Jane and Finch community (Falkenburger et al., 2018), where all authors either lived or worked. We aim to challenge dominant narratives perpetuated by mainstream discourse saturated with deficit and stereotypical thinking about racialized, low-income communities such as Jane and Finch (Eizadirad, 2023), and amplify racialized voices that highlight the structural and systemic oppression and their root causes. This commitment to centering marginalized voices aligns with the transformative potential of research as activism to catalyze tangible change within communities. By embracing vulnerability and authenticity, we transcend the traditional researcher-subject dichotomy (Woods et al., 2021). We aim to foster genuine understanding, empathy, and solidarity to serve as catalysts for transformative action, inspiring further advocacy efforts. Our commitment to research as activism is rooted in the belief that knowledge generation and mobilization, through various platforms and mediums, must be accompanied by ethical engagement and meaningful action.

Characteristics of the Jane and Finch Community: A Case Study of Institutional Abandonment

The Jane and Finch community in Canada is within the City of Toronto's Ward 7, known as Humber River-Black Creek, which includes several communities in and around Jane and Finch with a total population of 111, 200 (Statistics Canada, 2021). The Jane and Finch community is shaped by a complex history of systemic inequities and intergenerational, institutional neglect contributing to its current landscape associated with lack of opportunities for its residents (Eizadirad, 2023; Curtis et al., 1992). The community has experienced an extensive history of disinvestment in social supports and services starting from the 1960s to 1970s when there was rapid construction of community housing, most of which were in the form of high-rise apartments. This rapid development and influx of residents, particularly racialized new immigrants, was not accompanied by adequate social infrastructure such as schools, transit, and recreation facilities and spaces to support the residents for thriving as a community. Instead, the lack of economic and social opportunities accompanied with poor infrastructural investments contributed to increasing rates of poverty and consequently the rise in violence (Color of Poverty-Color of Change, 2019; Eizadirad, 2017).

Black youth experience the implications of living in poverty and constantly being exposed to violence within the community (Eizadirad, 2016; James, 2017; Owusu-Bempah & Jones, 2023; Parsaud, 2021). They experience higher rates of poverty and violence with elevated levels of school pushouts and incarceration compared to other demographic groups, perpetuating the vicious cycle of the school-to-prison pipeline (Color of Poverty-Color of Change, 2019; Dei et al., 1997; Government of Canada, 2022; Reece, 2020). A comprehensive report by Carl James (2017)

titled *“The Schooling of Black Students in the Greater Toronto Area,”* sheds light on the disparities in high school graduation rates and postsecondary enrollment among Black students compared to their white peers: only 69% of Black students graduated high school, a significantly lower proportion compared to 84% for their white counterparts. Furthermore, only 25% of Black students were confirmed attending Ontario universities compared to 60% for other racialized students and 47% for white students. The school-to-prison pipeline exacerbates these challenges as marginalized youth face disproportionate disciplinary measures and punitive actions at all levels of schooling in Ontario (Black Legal Action Centre, 2022; Maynard, 2022).

From a spatial analysis, the communities in Toronto’s northwest experience greater systemic disparities and institutional neglect rooted in deficit thinking (Eizadirad, 2020; Toronto District School Board, 2023). Below are various statistics about the demographics of the Humber River-Black Creek neighbourhood compiled from various sources:

- 78% are visible minorities compared to 56% city-wide.
- Black (25%), South Asian (14%) and Southeast Asian (10%) are the most predominant visible minorities.
- \$37,240 is the average income which is \$24,810 less than the Toronto average
- 31.4% of housing is subsidized housing.
- 64% of the residents are first generation immigrants, significantly higher than the Toronto-wide average of 53%.
- 28% are refugees, a higher number compared to the Toronto average of 18%.
- 41% of its residents have a post-secondary certificate, diploma, or degree compared to the City-wide average of 62%.
- 58% labour force participation rate compared to 64% City-wide average (City of Toronto, 2021, Statistics Canada, 2016; Statistics Canada, 2021).

As a collective, these statistics demonstrate how residents of the community experience poorer social determinants of health in comparison with the rest of the city (City of Toronto, 2019; Toronto Neighbourhood Centres, 2020). As a result, such communities are identified as Neighbourhood Improvement Areas. This designation refers to neighbourhoods whose residents face structural barriers in five key areas: economic opportunities, social development, healthy lives, participation in decision-making, and physical surroundings (City of Toronto, 2014).

As it relates to the experiences of students at school, the Toronto District School Board (2023) Learning Opportunity Index (LOI) ranks schools based on external community challenges affecting student achievement. The rankings are updated every three years with the latest published in 2023, with one list for all elementary schools and another for secondary schools. The LOI acknowledges that learning conditions differ due to systemic barriers impacting the community where the school is situated. Schools in racialized communities such as in Jane and

Finch consistently rank in the top twenty schools on the LOI index. This indicates that such schools experience more systemic barriers which impacts teaching and learning conditions and extent of access to opportunities for students to achieve to their full potential.

Establishment and Growth of YAAACE: Advocating for Access to Culturally Reflective Programs and Services

In response to entrenched inequities impacting the Jane and Finch community, YAAACE was founded in 2007 by one of the authors, Devon Jones, to offer youth and residents access to structured programs in ways that are affordable and culturally responsive (Eizadirad, 2020; hooks, 2003). YAAACE envisions thriving communities with positive life outcomes for all. Devon was intentional in addressing the polarization that divided the neighbourhood along Finch Avenue by providing a neutral space where youth could access structured programming free from neighbourhood politics that pressurized youth to choose sides. Ardavan became connected to the Jane and Finch community through YAAACE and by attending York University for 5 years (2007-2012) which is adjacent to the community. During this time period, Tamasha and Greg were living in the community as residents and engaging in various advocacy efforts. They both later worked at YAAACE: Greg as a Social Worker and Tamasha as a Community Safety consultant. By establishing a physical presence in the heart of Jane and Finch, YAAACE facilitated fostering a sense of community and belonging among Black youth through education and basketball.

As of 2021, YAAACE operates out of a high school located at 45 Norfinch Drive where they have access to a range of classrooms and the gymnasium for community use. The space was secured through a collaborative community-led school deputation process where the public and Catholic board trustees approved the use of the space as a community hub to support community needs. YAAACE principles anchored by Africentricity embodies a commitment to Black empowerment and community healing. YAAACE offers a range of programs and services related to academics, family supports, job readiness, housing supports, athletics, expanded opportunities, and violence prevention and intervention. The objective is to ensure students and clients have access to a caring adult, whether a teacher, coach, caseworker, or mentor particularly outside of school hours on weekday evenings and weekends where is greater exposure to risk factors (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022; James, 2012; Khenti, 2013; Sharpe, 2022; Waller, 2019). As a Black-led, Black-focused, and Black-serving organization, YAAACE is dedicated to addressing the systemic barriers that hinder the progress of Black identities and under-resourced communities and advocating for solutions that address root causes of systemic oppression (YAAACE, 2024). As of 2024, YAAACE serves approximately 1000 clients and participants annually.

Moreover, YAAACE advocates for innovative solutions to address the systemic roots of violence, recognizing that true change requires a multi-faceted approach that addresses social, economic, and institutional factors involving multiple stakeholders. More recently, YAAACE has

implemented the TO Wards Peace initiative in partnership with the City of Toronto and the New Narrative program funded by Public Safety Canada. Both programs use a public health model to address factors that contribute to youth being vulnerable to involvement in serious violence and crime (City of Toronto, 2019; Waller, 2019). The Violence Disruption Workers of TO Wards Peace and the Community Resource Engagement Workers of New Narrative all have relevant lived experiences with violence and/or incarceration. They are hired as mentors and case managers to support youth and their families in vulnerable circumstances. They support clients in accessing family supports, navigating systems, accessing learning and education opportunities, job readiness training, employment, and safety planning and mental health supports through a care coordination plan and other services to address their immediate needs and long-term goals for life stabilization.

Coding and Analysis of the Data

Our data coding process, guided by our duoethnographic approach that encouraged sharing of lived experiences and emotions, unfolded through iterative discussions and reflections among the authors (Sawyer & Norris, 2012; Woods et al., 2022). The four authors engaged in a collaborative exploration of their experiences and perspectives through a series of discussion and written reflections over a month led by several guiding questions (see Appendix I for list of questions that guided the conversation). The coding of the data was a rigorous process aimed at identifying key concepts and categorizing them into meaningful themes that reflect the lived experiences and perspectives shared (Miles et al., 2014; Plano Clark & Creswell, 2015). The approach focused on open coding to initially explore the data without predefined categories, allowing emergent themes to surface naturally from the narratives collected. This involved a thorough immersion in the data to identify significant statements, phrases, or incidents that captured essential aspects of the participants' experiences related to systemic racism, impact of experiencing trauma related to violence and incarceration, healing efforts, and various advocacy efforts.

During open coding, each piece of data was scrutinized line by line, aiming to identify discrete concepts or ideas. This involved breaking down the data into manageable segments and assigning descriptive labels or codes to these segments based on their content (Clarke & Braun, 2017; Plano Clark & Creswell, 2015). For instance, phrases like "barriers," "empowerment initiatives," or "community relations" were identified as initial codes reflecting different aspects of the community's challenges and strengths. Following open coding, the next step involved axial coding, where initial codes are systematically organized and interconnected to develop broader categories or themes to tell a more comprehensive narrative. This process sought to establish relationships between codes, examining how they related to each other, and contribute to overarching patterns within the data (Miles et al., 2014; Plano Clark & Creswell, 2015). For example, codes related to barriers, educational disparities, and socioeconomic inequities were grouped together under a broader theme of "Structural Inequities." Similarly,

codes highlighting community strategies, grassroots advocacy efforts, and leadership initiatives were categorized under the theme of "Community Advocacy and Activism." Overall, coding was not a one-time event but an iterative data analysis process that involved constant comparison and refinement of codes and themes. This iterative approach ensured that the themes accurately reflected the complexity and richness of the community narratives shared while maintaining methodological rigor.

To ensure consistency and accuracy, coding was conducted independently by all the authors and then shared, and any disagreements were resolved through collaborative discussions. This process involved revisiting the data, discussing differing interpretations, and reaching a consensus on the final themes. Throughout the coding process, the researchers remained reflexive, acknowledging their own positions, biases, and preconceptions (Miles et al., 2014; Plano Clark & Creswell, 2015). This approach enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the systemic issues and their root causes, particularly how it contributed to each authors' advocacy efforts within Jane and Finch. With all the authors being involved and working at YAAACE in different capacities, it made the engagement process more organic and authentic. The participants weaved their voices including the intersectionality and departures of their various lived experiences to illuminate shared themes. As Clarke and Braun (2017) explain,

Themes provide a framework for organising and reporting the researcher's analytic observations. The aim of TA [Thematic Analysis] is not simply to summarise the data content, but to identify, and interpret, key, but not necessarily all, features of the data, guided by the research question. (p. 2)

Several themes emerged reflecting the complexities of codes identified related to trauma, pain, healing, advocacy, and community empowerment. By using direct quotes and in some cases paraphrasing big ideas from the conversations, the dialogue aligns with the duoethnographic methodology, emphasizing the co-constructed nature of storytelling. Through constant comparison and iterative analysis, patterns and connections emerged, leading to the identification of three major themes:

- Exposure to Trauma Being the Catalyst for Community Engagement and Pain-Driven Advocacy,
- Community Empowerment through Personal and Collective Healing, and
- Collective Memory and Honoring Lost Lives and Success Stories.

These themes collectively illuminate the shared journey and commitment of the authors to confront and address the multifaceted systemic barriers impacting the Jane and Finch community.

Theme 1: Exposure to Trauma Being the Catalyst for Community Engagement and Pain-Driven Advocacy

The theme of "Exposure to Trauma Being the Catalyst for Community Engagement and Pain-Driven Advocacy" emerged in all the narratives of the authors in different ways. It highlighted the trauma experienced within the Jane and Finch community by minoritized identities (Chan et al., 2017; Colour of Poverty- Colour of Change, 2019; Eizadirad et al., 2023; hooks, 2000; Lorde, 2017). In alignment with Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2011) and its emphasis on centering lived experiences through storytelling (Eizadirad & Wane, 2023; Henry & Tator, 2012; Simpson, 2017), the conversation amongst the authors started by going down memory lane and reflecting origin stories from birth to now. The direct quotes in this subsection are longer than the rest of the themes as it is important to humanize the authors and the authenticity of their experiences from an intersectional lens. This is done with intentionality to provide an opportunity for the readers to understand the authors, where they come from, and how they show up as their authentic selves for the Jane and Finch community.

Tamasha: I was born into a family of seven to two parents that migrated to Canada in the 1970s after Family Reunification was introduced. This policy made it easier for immigrants from ethnic regions and Jamaica to move their families to Canada. My parents would work and take up residence in Jane and Finch upon arrival to Canada. By 1981, when I arrived as the 5th child, there had been many changes in the family including financial challenges. My mother had become a stay-at-home mom leaving one income to support the family. Due to our financial circumstances, we were accepted into a Toronto Community Housing unit and my mother given Ontario Works government assistance. At 9 years old, we had our first encounter with the Children's Aid Society due to a series of compounding factors including a matriarch who was falling ill and diagnosed with diabetes and schizophrenia, and a school system that did not understand how to support a child with a disability or respond in culturally responsive ways to Afrikan identities. I was placed in foster care where I experienced the insidious residual effects of slavery- self-hate. Assimilation meant my locs were cut and hair hot combed to resemble a European standard of beauty. My faith (Rastafari) was stripped and Christianity forced upon me. I was forbidden to speak in my native Jamaican tongue (patois) or eat a diet I was accustomed (Ital or vegan). African cantered values- Ujima (Collective work and Responsibility), Kujichagulia (Self Determination) and Nia (Purpose)- along with my parents' strength in the face of adversity while navigating unjust and foreign systems provided the bedrock for my advocacy. At the age of 13, I started being an advocate and activist, volunteering with the Parks and Recreation Division of the City of Toronto where I advocated and supported newcomers to access programming due to unfamiliarity with the system. I have stayed this course both professionally and personally into adulthood and continue to lead community efforts to challenge systemic inequities.

Devon: In 1999 I began my work as a schoolteacher at Brookview Middle school which is an elementary school in the Jane and Finch community. As a 24-year-old Afrikan male, I wanted to start my career teaching in a Neighbourhood Improvement Area (NIA) based on my personal challenges in the school system as a student. When I arrived in Jane and Finch, I was shocked at the level of systemic apathy, lack of institutional accountability, scathing rate of academic attrition, and the physical and psychological vulnerability of students based on constant exposure to violence. This was worsened by the culture of reciprocal violence and lack of safe spaces for students based on the random and indiscriminate nature of gun violence. I was and continue to be appalled at the lack of social infrastructure and resources afforded to children and youth who reside in the Jane and Finch corridor. In response, I combined my role as an educator and community activist to support children by making sure they know I see them, I hear them, and will be there for them every step of the way: not just during the good times but just as much, if not more, during difficult times including going through the courts or when incarcerated.

Greg: As a Black man who grew up in the Jane Finch community, I have experienced and witnessed many issues that impact people around me and myself. The community faces various micro and macro issues rooted in the intersection of violence, poverty, discrimination, stigmatization, and glorification of violence by the media. Based on these factors as well as my own identity, I was inspired to engage in advocacy work within the Jane and Finch community. As such, I became the co-founder of a restorative justice education program called *Learning Beyond Adversity* which has existed for 20 years. It is designed to help youth have academic success while navigating the nuances of community violence and systemic oppression. Furthermore, in 2016, I founded *Educare* which is a private practice that helps youth and families navigate mental health and trauma through self-care and healing supports. Educare provides individual and family counselling and psychotherapy as well as mental health and self-care advocacy through workshops, speaking engagements, and partnerships with community organizations. Through these initiatives, I am intentional in challenging and breaking down projected images and socio-culturally constructed norms about the Jane and Finch community which too often are saturated with stereotypes. I use a strengths-based, solutions-focused, trauma informed, anti-oppression, anti-racism framework to deliver compassionate counselling. This has become my form of advocacy and calling to better the community by supporting others in their coping and healing journey.

Ardavan: Being an immigrant to Canada, having arrived in 1998 as a family of four from Iran to Toronto on a cold October day, basketball really saved me from going down a path of making poor choices and becoming involved in the criminal justice system. It became a tool that taught me how to manage my emotions, stay disciplined, and connect with caring adults, particularly

at a time when as a teenager I lost my grandmother, my best friend got incarcerated shortly after, and numerous friends died due to gun violence. I did not know how to cope well with the intersection of all these stressors over a short period of time and it led to negative behaviours at school and with my family and peers. As a result, I attended 3 high schools within 4 years. After completion of high school, I chose to go to York University which is within walking proximity to the Jane and Finch community. I attended York University for 5 years starting in 2007 where I began my tenure of being a youth mentor, basketball coach, and later a certified teacher in programs offered by YAAACE. This was the start of my journey being involved in the Jane and Finch community, and using what I was learning in school around the language of social inequities, to apply it in the community realm to callout systemic oppression and mobilize people to do something about it as a form of activism. My post-secondary education, including my Masters in Social Justice, gave me the language and the tools to further deconstruct my experiences, name it, and use the knowledge to advocate to shift the conversation from blaming the hood for its problems to blaming systemic oppressions and deficit thinking as roots of violence.

A reoccurring factor in the shared responses of the authors was going through personal pain and trauma growing up while navigating vulnerable circumstances. This sparked their passion for advocating for others in similar circumstances impacted by constant exposure to systemic oppression. The advocacy became their therapeutic solace in dealing with harsh living conditions impacting their lives and the community, including the tragedies of losing family members and friends to violence or incarceration. For example, Tamasha's journey is rooted in her cultural heritage. She describes experiencing other systemic forms of oppression rooted in anti-Black racism where a judge wanted 99 years as part of sentencing her brother who was incarcerated at the time for what most white men would get 3 to 5 years for. Other traumatic experiences growing up included seeing a dead body at the age of 15, watching her mother subjected to a series of questions at court to prove to the judge she was capable of “controlling” her own son, vicarious trauma from jail visits, at 19 nearly being shot as two stray bullets went through her balcony door as she stood with her newborn in the living room, and later the death of her two brothers within a short span of time, one due to gun violence. Through these challenges, she bore witness to discrimination, racism, and inequality which galvanized her passion for advocacy and solidarity. Tamasha recaps how she feels reflecting all these experiences:

The community is in a constant state of peril where hyper vigilance and symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) are the norm. You learn to navigate neighbourhoods with the skill of sailors navigating choppy waters, otherwise you run the risk of being carried away by the tide. We are in a state of recovery, desperately putting in band aid solutions to stop the hemorrhaging, until we can remove the blinders of

apathy from the eyes of those in power, to see that the conditions and environments that we are in contribute to the violence we continue to have to heal from.

Devon's perspective echoes Tamasha's concerns about PTSD being the norm in the hood rooted in a lack of care demonstrated by institutions for children and their families living in low-income, racialized communities such as Jane and Finch (Khenti, 2013; McMurtry & Curling, 2008). He offered a critique of the Jane and Finch's systemic challenges, emphasizing the lack of resources and social infrastructure witnessed as an educator. Devon described some of the experiences that continue to haunt him today, reminding him of the importance of having to continue to advocate for the community and its needs:

Witnessing the bullet riddled body of Andre Burnett on the footbridge in Driftwood in September of 2005 with his pants pulled down to his knees and watching his eyes roll back in his head as he grasped for his last breath, with multiple elementary aged students witnessing this tragedy, was my inflection point and an incident that I can never forget. The fact that children were exposed to these frequent acts of violence, and how normalized and unaffected they were by them shocked me. Years later many of the students who witnessed that homicide were themselves caught up in the vicious cycle of reciprocal violence and gun play becoming victims or perpetrators of gun violence and homicide. This is when I knew something had to be done to provide alternatives for the youth. I see all their faces daily when I try to sleep at night. I can hear the distinctive scream and screech of their mothers. My coping mechanism is working tirelessly to build safer and thriving Black communities with aligns with the mandate and vision of YAAACE.

Greg was a resident of the Jane and Finch community for many years. He gravitated towards becoming a social worker as it aligned with his passion to help youth navigate community violence and systemic oppression, particularly healing from the constant exposure to the violence. His work in individual and family counseling, as well as his emphasis on a strengths-based, solutions-focused, trauma-informed approach provides support to those most affected by trauma inspired by his own upbringing and challenges experienced as a Black man. He reflects his life trajectory by explaining,

Events related to trauma and violence all started when several people in my community were shot in 2005 and 2006. One was my very close friend who ended up in a coma for two months before regaining consciousness. Then a short time later, three young people who were my clients died; one a murder victim and the other two involved in a car accident. If that wasn't enough, a young, racialized male was killed in a high school in the community. During this time, it was hard to be me. The personal and professional lines were blurred. I felt like I was blowing in the wind just going through a wave of emotions

and riding the lows. After wrestling with myself and trying to cope with the pain but failing, I took some time off work and sought help from a psychologist. I needed help to understand the environmental impacts of violence through vicarious trauma.

Whereas Greg invested in getting professional help to heal and cope with the trauma, Ardavan's story reveals the transformative power of sports and education as protective factors in altering his life trajectory and overcoming the pain of traumas he was experiencing. As an immigrant from Iran who was an English as a Second Language learner, basketball provided him with an outlet and a form of expression for managing emotions, making friends, and connecting with supportive caring adults, particularly during the early years of settling into a new country. His experiences associated with loss of friends, exposure to gun violence, and attending various racialized schools throughout high school spurred his involvement in community activism, beginning with coaching basketball through YAAACE and later to teaching and leading social justice work. Ardavan describes his experience by emphasizing,

The first time you deal with death, when it is someone, you love dearly and have extensive memories with, it hurts the most. It cuts the deepest. This was the case when my grandmother passed away due to a rare form of cancer at a young age. I was in high school at the time. She was here in Canada for a visit when she got diagnosed in her 50s. We could not afford to pay the treatment bills due to her immigration status so we had to fly her back to Iran to start chemotherapy. She got very weak over the months where she could not swallow solid foods and had to be fed through a tube. My mother flew back to be with her during those difficult times. Not being able to go to Iran and be there for her physically always stayed with me. I will never forget the morning when I woke up and my dad walked into the room at 9 am and broke the news of her death to me. I felt numb and did not know how to cope with it. I did not know why this had to happen to her. This was my entry point in dealing with death, and shortly after with numerous friends being incarcerated or dying due to gun violence. I read lots of religious and spiritual books during that time to understand the meaning of life. This journey of trying to find answers by questioning everything established a foundation of critical thinking in me. Reading books by Erich Fromm, bell hooks, Malcolm X, and religious texts related to Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism helped me recognize and accept death as part of the cycle of life.

All authors emphasized that exposure to violence, based on where you live, is a major risk factor impacting development, access to opportunities, and life trajectories (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022; James, 2012; Khenti, 2013). Over the last 15 years, Toronto Police Service (TPS) 31 Division, which includes the Jane and Finch community, has consistently had the most shooting occurrences, as well as the highest number of victims

(Toronto Police Service, 2024). The outcomes are tragic for Black youth who are dying at a much younger age. The average age of those linked to gun violence in Toronto between 2015 and 2020 was 25, but in 2021 that average dropped to 20 years of age (Adam, 2022). Data collected by Statistics Canada (2023a) shows that racialized people are disproportionately impacted by violence, particularly as victims of homicides (see Table 1).

Table 1. *The number of homicides in Ontario by visible minority group from 2019 to 2022* (Statistics Canada, 2023a).

	2019	2020	2021	2022	Total homicide victims	
Racialized identity group	123	88	139	137	487	46%
Black	69	46	75	74	264	25%
Rest of the population	126	143	130	149	548	51%
Unknown racialized identity group	4	12	12	2	30	3%
Total number of homicides	253	243	281	288	1065	100%

Between 2019 and 2022, 487 out of 1065 homicides in Ontario occurred to racialized people. It is important to note that homicide is by far the costliest offence ranging between \$4.8 to \$5.9 million dollars in direct and indirect costs to taxpayers based on 2014 estimates (Public Safety Canada, 2015). Although these numbers are astonishing and alarming, there are real people behind them.

Overall, all four authors highlight the importance of recognizing and challenging systemic injustices. Their collective work across different spaces within the Jane and Finch community demonstrates a shared commitment to uplifting marginalized voices, fostering empowerment, and enacting positive change through pain-driven advocacy. Their diverse approaches to advocacy, ranging from education and counseling to sports and system navigation, reveal the multifaceted nature of their engagement in the community. Together, these narratives paint a picture of a racialized community confronting trauma and being on the journey of healing while striving for empowerment and justice.

Theme 2: Community Empowerment through Personal and Collective Healing

The theme of "Community Empowerment through Personal and Collective Healing" was identified in the narratives of the authors. Sharing their narratives in a deep personal manner as part of writing this article was purposeful engagement that facilitated their collective healing: recognizing and reminding them that they are not alone in what they are going through and that there is hope for a better future which starts with how they uplift others through advocacy and activism. They emphasized how their personal experiences with violence have profoundly

shaped their strategies for coping and healing and helping others become advocates and model vulnerability as a form of strength (Eizadirad & Campbell, 2021). When asked what coping strategies they invest in at a personal level to navigate constant exposure to personal and community trauma, each author highlighted various mechanisms including: self-compassion and setting boundaries, work-life balance, seeking professional help, mindfulness, meditation, creative self-expression, exercising, eating healthy, having a network of support, engaging in cultural and spiritual practices, and doing enjoyable activities driven by passion which on their part includes advocacy and activism.

When trauma is not processed or coped with constructively through appropriate and culturally reflective grieving, it can have profound negative impacts such as substance abuse or tragic outcomes like the use of violence for revenge or self-harming (Falkenburger et al., 2018; Khenti, 2013; Parsaud, 2021; Sharpe, 2022; Waller, 2019). The authors have harnessed the pain from their experiences to make their pain-driven advocacy part of their coping and healing. Their pain has propelled them toward a purposeful commitment to community empowerment, activism, and transformative change. By sharing their stories and being vulnerable in the process, they continue to heal and cope, but also inspire and model for others to harness their pain for positive outcomes to better themselves and their community (Eizadirad et al., 2022; Eizadirad & Campbell, 2021; Falkenburger et al., 2018).

The authors felt that this subsection should provide readers with a combination of qualitative narratives and quantitative statistics to situate and further ground how youth are impacted by the poor community conditions that gravitates them towards poor decision making, in some cases with tragic outcomes such as death or long-term incarceration due to lack of caring adults in their lives. Similar challenges were experienced by all the authors across different generations and spaces within the community. The authors mentioned many statistics about incarceration, poverty, lack of employment, under-representation of Black educators in schools, lack of a reflective curriculum content for Black students, and overall lack of investments and infrastructure in the Jane and Finch community (Carter, 2022; Eizadirad, 2017; James, 2017; Khenti, 2013; Maynard, 2022; McMurtry & Curling, 2008; Sharpe, 2022). They further emphasized how important it is to engage youth at a young age from a proactive, prevention lens to value who they are, listen to their concerns and frustrations, and provide them with opportunities and outlets to be leaders and change-makers in their communities.

In 2007, youth and gun violence were hot topics in Toronto with the death of 15-year-old Black grade nine student Jordan Manners on May 23 at C.W. Jefferys Collegiate Institute, a high school in the Jane and Finch community (Eizadirad, 2016). He died in the school hallway from a gunshot wound. He was a former student of Devon Jones who inspired him to establish YAAACE. Greg and Tamasha also knew the family personally, and Ardavan knew of the family through Devon. How the case was handled by the police and the media was very problematic, pushing a stereotypical narrative about the neighbourhood, particularly involving youth and

guns (Crime Beat TV, 2020; see “Crime Beat: The Legacy of Jordan Manners” for a short documentary that goes into more details: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W7reINgAdqI>). In the aftermath of Jordan Manner’s death, Dalton McGuinty, Premier of Ontario at the time approached Honourable Roy McMurtry and Dr. Alvin Curling to “spend a year seeking to find out where it (youth violence) is coming from- its roots- and what might be done to address them to make Ontario safer in the long term” (p. 1). This led to the 2008 publication of the *Review of the Roots of Youth Violence* report. It is a rare governmental response that outlines various risk factors that gravitate youth towards violence with a major focus on prevention rather than intervention. The report speaks truth by naming systemic inequities such as racism and poverty and how they intersect as risk factors to contribute to youth gravitating toward violence: “Alienation, lack of hope or empathy, and other immediate risk factors are powerfully, but far from exclusively, driven by the intersection of racism and poverty” (p. 19).

Since the Jordan Manners incident, in Toronto alone, the number of youths charged with homicide has surged from an average of 4.1 per year between 2013 to 2021 to 18 in 2022 (Statistics Canada, 2023a). Statistics Canada reported that 90 young people under the age 18 were accused of homicide across Canada in 2022, the most in nearly five decades compared to 33 in 2021 (Statistics Canada, 2023b). This dramatic increase is cause for concern. What is tragic is that stereotypical narratives continue to dominate the discourse about Jane and Finch, blaming its residents for the larger system problems that are rooted in institutional neglect of Black lives and communities (Maynard, 2022; McMurtry & Curling, 2008; Sharpe, 2022).

The authors emphasized the importance of healing in the face of adversity and the need for proactive coping strategies to navigate the challenges posed by systemic inequities. This is significant because when communal healing occurs, it leads to safer communities (Battiste, 2013; hooks, 2000; Noddings, 2013). In response to stereotypical representations about the Jane and Finch community coupled with constant exposure to systemic violence through the intersection of poverty and racism, Tamasha shared how being able to invest in self-care and healing practices transformed her from a victim to a survivor. She notes, “My personal experiences with violence ignited my passion for advocacy. I made a commitment to never be silenced again and amplify the voices of those who have been silenced and marginalized.” Her approach to community empowerment is grounded in cultivating empathy, solidarity, and a deep sense of responsibility to create a world free from fear and violence. Greg emphasized the ripple effects of gun violence on individuals, families, and the community and the lasting impact on mental health and well-being. He underscores the significance of addressing these issues through healing and support further explaining, “Through my work, I realized that trauma caused by gun violence ripples out far beyond the victims. It impacts their family, friends, and the community.” His approach involves helping individuals manage trauma-related symptoms and cope with the psychological aftermath of violence as part of healing. Ardavan’s narrative highlights the transformative power of healing which as a process facilitates coping with stressors more constructively. He acknowledged the impact of pain and suffering, but also

emphasized the potential it offers for growth and gaining gratitude. Ardavan notes, "Experiences with pain, suffering, and trauma are double-edged swords. It can break you, even temporarily numb you because it hurts, but if you are able to cope constructively and heal, it makes you a better person with perspective. The pain and the healing journey become an integral part of who you are and how you show up. It becomes part of your story".

Together, these narratives showcase how pain-driven advocacy can lead to community empowerment. Each author's personal journey with violence has instilled in them a sense of purpose, activism, and determination to make a difference. Their approaches are marked by a commitment to systemic change, healing, and providing support to those affected by violence. As Tamasha states, "Amidst the turbulence of trauma and activism, self-care and collective care emerge as essential practices for sustaining well-being". This applies both at a personal and community level. Greg emphasized the need and support for harm reduction programs and trauma-informed care. Devon added the importance of access to culturally reflective programming and services in ways that are timely and affordable as offered by YAAACE. Ardavan emphasized that, "The impact is in the lives you improve, one youth and family at a time."

Theme 3: Collective Memory and Honoring Lost Lives and Success Stories

The theme of "Collective Memory and Honoring Lost Lives and Success Stories" is evident in the narratives of all the authors as they described the Jane and Finch community's strength and progress in the face of systemic challenges. Each author shared, through unique stories, how the community has embraced a collective memory to honor its history and foster healing and empowerment. For example, in the mainstream media violence is often pathologized to the individual behind the gun or knife, such as whether they were known to the police or a "good" or "bad" kid (Eizadirad, 2016). When biased narratives become normalized about certain cultures and neighbourhoods, the "good" vs "bad" logic oversimplifies the causes of violence. It leads to the stereotypical fixation of identities and communities. It blames victims or where they live for tragic outcomes and takes away from examining the systematic, structural, and institutional forms of oppression that perpetuate conditions for violence. But when you get to live and be part of the Jane and Finch community in different ways, you learn there is so much positivity and love within the space. Yet, this is often not the narratives that become hyper-visualized and amplified in the media. For people with connections to the community, they rep the hood, because the challenges they have gone through have made them who they are and they are proud of it (James, 2012; Owusu-Bempah & Jones, 2023). Therefore, the authors felt it is important to take some time to salute this history, honor lives lost which they have personal connections with, but also celebrate the progress made by the community in the face of intergenerational trauma and systemic oppressions enacted on the community. This is done with the intentionality with the purpose of paying it forward to help others in vulnerable circumstances.

Devon: I have been deeply impacted by the homicide of Jordan Manners aged 15, the homicide charge and subsequent death of Emmanuel Osaе aged 24 while in custody, homicide of Kwasi Skene Peters aged 21, homicide of S. Aubyn Rodeny at age 15, Treavel Jackson at age 19, Jahvante Smart at age 22, Oshe Whyte at age 16, Tyrone Nosworthy at age 18, Keeshawn Brown at age 18, Dimarjio Jenkins at age 22, Kwame Duodu at age 15, Olatoyebi Waheed at age 24, Shalldon Samuda at age 14, and countless others. They inspire me to continue community advocacy as my life commitment to create better institutions to serve the marginalized.

Greg: Tackling trauma caused by gun violence involves separating the issue into two themes: help individuals who have experienced trauma while also working to reduce gun violence. Many individuals I work with have a hard time managing their fears and anxieties because of the trauma caused by gun violence. Because of my lived experiences and pursuit of education, gun violence is a social justice and a public health issue I am determined to help address and provide healing to its victims and their families.

Tamasha: Violence, whether perpetrated by individuals or institutions, inflicts deep wounds that reverberate through the lives of its survivors. I have experienced a lot of death in my life but those that had greatest impact were Robert Mitchell, Jordan Manners, younger brother Jahmara Grant, brother Jibri James, Shaun Kinghorn, Ephraim Brown, Dimarjio Jenkins, mother Kathleen Grant, Tirzah, Judah, and Pharoah Blackman-Lall, Shyeim Bell, and Junior Douglas.

Ardavan: I am not much of a crier, but the two times I have broken down in tears is when I heard the death of my grandmother and when I heard my best friend Pedram Rabie was shot multiple times and in surgery, not knowing if he was going to make it. To add to that, I know what it feels like to be a racialized immigrant navigating settlement in a new country, similar to what most racialized people experience when they are placed in subsidized housing with poor living conditions in hoods across Toronto. I know what it feels like to be an English as a Second Language learner, trying to make new friends and not knowing how to communicate. I know what it feels like being made fun of for your accent or how you dress. I know what it feels like to see my dad going from being an agricultural engineer to making pizzas and delivering packages as a new career in a new country to support our family to start a new life in Canada. I know what it feels like to disappoint my parents by making poor choices at a time when I was not able to deal with stressors caused by death of people around me and friends being incarcerated. But just as much, I know what it feels like to pay it forward by completing my PhD and overcoming struggles and making my parents proud. I know what it feels like to see our family move from renting for many years to buying a townhouse. In retrospect, the journey has been a blessing and I give thanks for the struggle and the triumphs that make me who I am and push me to do more advocacy to make systems more equitable for people who are experiencing similar challenges in vulnerable circumstances.

The collective memory of such names, people, and experiences drives the author's advocacy and activism with intentionality. Tamasha emphasizes the community's strength, drawing on cultural pride and spiritual grounding as sources of strength and healing. She notes, "The durability of the Jane-Finch community never ceases to amaze me," referring to residents' ability to confront systemic challenges through collective action and solidarity. Tamasha highlights various community-driven initiatives such as youth-led organizations and cultural events that promote healing and empowerment. These efforts enable the community to reclaim spaces through counter-narratives (Eizadirad et al., 2022), fostering a sense of belonging. Devon approaches the theme with a critical lens, expressing skepticism about resilience theory which often asks vulnerable people or communities to adapt to systemic oppression through meritocracy discourse (Kumashiro, 2004). Nevertheless, he acknowledges the community's strength through initiatives like YAAACE which addresses systemic challenges by advocating for sustainable social infrastructure and culturally reflective programming. Greg expands on these ideas by emphasizing the importance of supporting youth through mentorship programs as well as the need for trauma-informed care. Ardavan centres the positivity in the Jane and Finch community, highlighting the support networks cultivated by parents, coaches, teachers, and caring adults. He notes that the neighbourhood has had to "cultivate community within the oppressive structures it deals with on a daily basis for survival but also countering negative stereotypes."

Overall, the perspectives shared through storytelling amongst the authors underscore the importance of celebrating the community's successes while challenging negative narratives. These stories and experiences shared collectively illustrate how the Jane and Finch community has drawn on its collective memory and cultural history to foster healing and better the community internally. Through grassroots initiatives, cultural celebrations, youth empowerment, and advocacy for systemic change, the community confronts trauma and challenges systemic barriers with strength and determination. By integrating the community's collective memory into their work, the authors have fostered a sense of belonging and empowerment within the Jane and Finch community. Ultimately, their efforts contribute to a more equitable and just society for all.

Future Areas for Exploration

There are several promising avenues for future research as advocacy work in the Jane and Finch community evolves. The authors emphasize the importance of continued investment in community engagement, holistic approaches to healing and empowerment, and data-driven interventions that address systemic challenges and their multifaceted root causes. The conversations highlight the need to cultivate the next generation of community leaders by prioritizing youth-led initiatives and culturally reflective mentorship programs. By empowering young people and providing opportunities for civic engagement and leadership, the community

can foster greater strength and sustainability. In addition, advocacy and activism through data-driven research can challenge inequitable policies and lead to interventions that dismantle institutional barriers in areas such as housing, education, healthcare, and employment. Using data to identify social gaps can help hold governments and institutions accountable, thereby effecting policy reforms in education, community safety, and the criminal justice system. Funding and access to harm reduction programs are crucial areas that should be prioritized. Lastly, coalition work that involves multiple stakeholders through solidarity can be impactful in challenging systems and amplifying community concerns that are often dismissed or not heard. This type of coalition work should involve various stakeholders including elders, youth, and community leaders working together. Overall, future directions for advocacy work in the Jane and Finch community should involve a focus on building capacity within the community, strengthening collaborative partnerships, and promoting systemic change through data-driven approaches. By prioritizing youth engagement, harm reduction, intersectional coalition work, and evidence-based interventions, Jane and Finch can continue to foster strength and strive for more equitable conditions and opportunities leading to a thriving community.

CONCLUSION

In this article, the authors have embarked on a profound journey of deep personal sharing as a form of knowledge mobilization with the purpose of creating awareness and documenting their activism efforts within the Jane and Finch community in Toronto, Canada. Through the lens of personal encounters with violence, they have modelled vulnerability as a form of strength by sharing their emotions and experiences as valuable data, offering a poignant reflection on the symptoms of systemic trauma that plague marginalized communities. By discussing effective coping and healing strategies from diverse perspectives, they have not only highlighted the strength of individuals and communities facing adversity but also the urgent need to address the roots of violence that function as systemic barriers perpetuating violence within the community. Their advocacy initiatives have served the intentional purpose of supporting people in vulnerable circumstances by curating hope for them at a low point in their lives and illuminating tangible pathways and alternatives through trauma-informed, community-centric approaches.

By amplifying the voices of racialized activists affected by violence and inequities with direct connections to the community of Jane and Finch, the article contributed to filling a crucial research gap providing a comprehensive examination of the daily realities of community activists and their personal journeys. By sharing stories of pain, past traumas, and celebrating their progress and success stories, the authors shed light on the challenges faced by marginalized communities, but also illuminated paths towards collective healing, social justice, and liberation. Their work serves as a call to action for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to work together to engage in transformative practices that centre research as activism. They advocate for working with community rather than doing research on community

that can at times be extractive and exploitative causing further harm without benefits to those involved as part of the research. This means being intentional, personally and as a collective, to address the root causes that perpetuate systemic trauma and working towards dismantling them. It also means not giving up and continuing to amplify policies and practices that create safer communities for all. Part of this is ensuring we uplift the voices of identities and communities most impacted by violence and injustice such as the Jane and Finch community.

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APPENDIX

Questions Used to Guide the Author Reflections

- 1) Origin Stories: What drove each of you to engage in advocacy work within the Jane and Finch community?
- 2) What events related to trauma, violence, and incarceration have stuck with you? How did you cope with it in the aftermath and how do you cope with it now?
- 3) Intersectionality of Experiences: How do your varied professional backgrounds intersect in your advocacy efforts?
- 4) Personal Impact: How have your personal experiences with violence shaped your approach to advocacy and community support?
- 5) Challenges Faced: What were the major obstacles encountered in your 20-year journey, both within the community and in wider societal structures?
- 6) Community Resilience: Can you share examples of the community's resilience in the face of systemic challenges and trauma?
- 7) Healing and Coping Mechanisms: What strategies have you found effective in coping with the emotional toll of this work, both personally and within the community?
- 8) Advocacy Initiatives: Could you highlight key advocacy initiatives that have made a tangible difference in addressing systemic barriers and violence within the community?
- 9) Impact Assessment: How do you measure the impact of your advocacy work, both qualitatively and quantitatively?
- 10) Lessons Learned: What lessons have you gathered from integrating research and activism, and how have these experiences shaped your perspectives?
- 11) Future Directions: Where do you see the trajectory of advocacy work heading in Jane and Finch, and what are the key areas for continued focus and improvement?