

GUNS AND GANGS: TORONTO FIGHTS BACK


Introduction

Focus

This *News in Review* story focuses on the escalation of gun violence in 2005. There was a dramatic increase in the number of shooting deaths in the city, and most of the victims were young black men. This story explores the nature of the violence in Toronto and across Canada, possible reasons for gang membership, and potential solutions to the problem.

Update

Within hours of the New Year, Toronto police found yet another young male victim of a shooting.

 Sections marked with this symbol indicate content suitable for younger viewers.

It was all over in a minute. Fifteen-year-old Jane Creba was shot and killed while shopping with her parents in downtown Toronto on Boxing Day. They were shopping on Yonge Street, just north of the Eaton Centre, when two groups of young men started arguing. Guns were pulled, shots were fired, and seven people were hit. All of the victims were innocent bystanders, unrelated to the two groups.

The Boxing Day shootings came at the end of a bad year for Toronto. Gun violence escalated in the city in 2005. At year's end, there had been 78 murders in Toronto, 52 by shooting. This is a dramatic increase over the 27 shooting deaths the city experienced in 2004. And while the Boxing Day shootings demonstrate that anyone can be a victim of gun violence, the vast majority of gunshot victims in 2005 were under the age of 30, as were the shooters.

Most of the young victims who died in 2005 were young black men killed in gangland-style shootings. When rival gangs fight for a piece of the lucrative drug trade, guns are their weapons of choice. And as guns become more prevalent, shooters become more and more brazen. This was demonstrated by the Boxing Day shootings that took place in the middle of hundreds of shoppers, and the shooting death of Amon Beckles, who stood smoking a cigarette on the steps of a church while attending a funeral.

With each additional shooting death there were greater demands for action.

Prime Minister Paul Martin and party leaders in the midst of a federal election campaign promised to get tough on criminals, introduce new legislation to ban handguns, and devote more money to policing and law enforcement. But even as these promises were made, community groups, religious leaders, academics, and black youth called for a broader approach to the problem. Citing poverty, systemic discrimination, and the lack of hope among many black youths as the major contributors to gang membership and gun violence, these groups were looking for long-term solutions that would attack the root of the problem in the city.

While politicians made promises and citizens debated the causes of gun violence, some communities implemented their own solutions to the problem. The Malvern community in Toronto is one such community. Much of the gun violence that occurred in 2005 occurred in Malvern. As a result, the community has been plagued by negative publicity, and many of the citizens who live there live in fear and with little hope. But no community is all bad—or all good, for that matter. So a group of teenagers were given cameras and asked to look for the beauty in their community. In addition to learning valuable photographic skills, they also discovered another side to their community, one that wasn't all bad. Will this experiment change things in Malvern? Likely not on its own, but change can come from small steps.

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Video Review

Respond to the questions as you view the video. Be sure to check with your teacher for any questions for which you did not find answers.

Did you know . . .
Toronto's bloodiest year for murders was, in fact, 1991, when 88 homicides were committed.

1. Briefly describe what happened in Toronto on Boxing Day 2005.

2. What happened at the funeral of another young man killed in a shooting incident?

3. From what groups do most of the killers and their victims come?

4. Briefly describe the Malvern experiment.

5. What was the reaction of the young people to the photography exercise?

6. How did the project affect community-police relations?

7. What is a drive-by? _____

8. How effective will community programs like the Malvern photo club be in curbing gang violence?

9. How safe is your community? Explain.

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The Boxing Day Shootings

On December 26, 2005, two groups of young men confronted each other outside a Foot Locker store on Yonge Street in downtown Toronto. Before long, guns were pulled and shots were fired. Seven people were hit. One young woman, 15-year-old Jane Creba, was killed. She had been shopping with her parents. The six others injured, one critically, included an off-duty police officer. All of the victims were innocent bystanders, while the young men involved in the shooting appeared to be involved in rival gangs.

Although the Boxing Day shootings seem like just another violent crime in a long year of violent crime in Toronto, observers are particularly concerned about the brazen nature of the shooting. After all, it took place in the heart of Toronto's shopping district, and in the middle of hundreds of shoppers. Does the fact that the shootings occurred there demonstrate that the shooters feel they will not be caught and convicted for their actions? Or does it show that the shooters do not care who they hurt when they have a score to settle against a rival? Or does the shooting simply show that the young men involved are so filled with fear, and so quick to pull their weapons, that they are unable to

foresee the consequences their actions will have on others?

The Boxing Day shootings were also considered horrendous because the shootings occurred in such a public place. Many of the other gun homicides that plagued Toronto in 2005 occurred in housing projects in particular areas of Toronto: like Jane and Finch in north-west Toronto and the Malvern community of northeast Toronto. Most of the victims were young black males. Although people living outside of those neighbourhoods were concerned by the escalation of gun violence in the city, they may not have felt personally threatened if they lived outside of those "hot spots." The shootings on Yonge Street, however, brought the issue of gun violence closer to the larger population of the city. After all, anyone willing to pull a weapon and shoot on Yonge Street on Boxing Day would likely be willing to shoot anywhere, at any time.

As police sift through the crime scene, and academics analyze the root causes of gang violence and the increase in the use of handguns as a weapon of choice, it is important to not forget the victims of these crimes.

Analysis

1. Do you agree that the Boxing Day shootings demonstrate that gang members are becoming more fearless? Explain.
2. What do you think the impact of the Boxing Day shootings will have on each of the following?
 - (a) parents
 - (b) young people
 - (c) witnesses to crimes
 - (d) laws regarding handguns
 - (e) feelings of safety and security for Torontonians
 - (f) tourism in Toronto

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The Malvern Experiment

The Malvern community became infamous in 2005. Much of the press coverage surrounding guns and gangs was based in this part of Toronto. One of the problems with negative press coverage is that the positive aspects of a community or city are forgotten or overlooked. But no community is all bad or all good. This fact is what motivated one man, Michael Coteau, to try to help some kids in the community see Malvern in a new light and share this new view with the community.

Coteau is the Image Co-ordinator of the Malvern Family Resource Centre. He applied for and received a small grant to put cameras into the hands of teenagers. He hoped that by having teenagers learn about photography he could help them gain hope about their future. As well, he hoped that by projecting the pictures to the community he could help people to see that Malvern is a great community.

Dubbed The Malvern Experiment, the program involved Coteau teaching a group of teenagers, over a six-week period, the power of photographic images and how to take pictures. The teens set off into the community with the goal of finding beauty within their neighbourhoods. What they found surprised them: images of children being cared for by loving parents and caretakers, flower boxes and well-cared-for properties, the beauty of sunlight and shadows. Although the beauty had been there all along, people had stopped seeing it because of all the images of violence in the media. People living in Malvern found that they were looking for crime and evidence of chaos whenever they left their homes. They had stopped seeing anything else.

To help the kids learn the finer points of photography Coteau brought in

professional help. This help came from an unexpected source: the police. Constable Gordon Hayford is a community liaison officer with the Metro Toronto Police Department and a professional photographer. He taught the kids about Photoshop and, by being involved in the project, showed them that the police aren't all bad either. This was another of Coteau's goals, to help break down barriers between the youth and the police. Black youth tend to be very distrustful of police, which helps to explain why they are reluctant to help in police investigations.

So how did the experiment work? Probably the best way to answer this question is through the words of those involved in the project. As they looked at their pictures they said:

"I see community walks. I see park clean-ups. I don't see that on the news. I see the gunshot here on the news. Another boy murdered in Malvern, but you'll have parks being cleaned. People going to school. People getting scholarships. But all I see on the news is who got shot today. And who got stabbed today or who got into a fight today or who got robbed. I see on the news. That's how I get my . . . I see more violence on the news than I do in Malvern itself and I live here." — Courtney Woolcott, teen-aged participant

"Actually it's made me see more of the positive sides to Malvern because before it was all about the drive-bys and stuff, and it's like, oh, wow, there's more to it . . . We saw them, like, all the time. So before actually a lot of people who live here thought a lot of bad things about Malvern. But the photo club, when you actually go out and start talking to the people, start

looking around, you actually see that there's more to it than there appears. That it's just a few bad things about it. But overall, it's actually a pretty nice neighbourhood." — Nadia Hosu, teen-aged participant

"I feel that I can make more of a difference in my community now than I ever could just out there running around catching bad guys. But I get more personal satisfaction out of having seen what I can do with some of these kids and seeing what I can do with people and make them feel better about where they live and what they do and how better to protect themselves and make sure that they don't get victimized

again." — Constable Gordon Hayford, Metro Toronto Police Department

"[After working with Constable Hayford, I can] actually explain details, actually got better at it and I took better pictures. Like, the rest of my pictures, they're not that good 'cause that time I didn't know about it, but when I came and he explained it to me, that's when I was actually able to take these kind of pictures, really close and really nice, which is more explainable." — Sylvester Cancam, teen-aged participant who wants to be a graphic artist.

Source: All quotes from the CBC documentary, *Their Best Shot*, a profile of the Malvern community

Follow-up Activities

1. Although the problem of gun violence can seem to be overwhelming, solutions can sometimes be simple. The Malvern Experiment was the result of a \$5 000 grant awarded to Michael Coteau of the Malvern Community Family Resource Centre. But how do we measure the success of a program such as this? Make notes on the positive effects of this program in the following areas:

| Topic | Notes |
|---|-------|
| Self-esteem of the participants | |
| Future career options of the participants | |
| Image of the community | |
| Relationship between the community and the police | |
| Relationship between the community and the media | |

2. After reflecting on your notes, write a short statement about why this experiment should or should not be considered a success.

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Gangs and Guns in Toronto

Did you know . . .

Police in Toronto have discovered two DVDs made by rival gangs that have bragged about their violence. They are called *Premiere Edition Pt.2* and *The Real Toronto*.

Further Research

The Coalition of African Canadian Community Organizations is an umbrella organization representing nearly 20 different groups and agencies. The coalition organized a "summit on gun violence" in an attempt to stem the gun violence in Toronto. Details of the summit and other initiatives can be found at the Web site of the Canadian Association of Black Journalists at www.cabj.ca.

The year 2005 saw a frightening increase in gun violence in Canada's largest city. By year's end, there had been 78 murders in Toronto, 52 by shooting. Forty-one of the victims were under the age of 30. That is a 400 per cent increase from the previous year, where 18 people under the age of 30 died. In addition to the increase in gun violence, there has also been an increase in the boldness of those who use guns. Nothing exemplifies this boldness more than the shooting death of Amon Beckles, on the steps of a church during a funeral.

On Friday, November 18, Beckles was attending the funeral of his close friend Jamal Hemmings. Hemmings had been shot and killed on November 9, in or near a parking lot on Eglinton Avenue. Beckles—and investigators believe at least one other person—was with Hemmings when he was killed and was therefore a witness to the murder. For reasons we will never know, Beckles chose not to identify the shooter or shooters to police and lived in fear for the next nine days.

The scared 18-year-old did talk to his friends, apparently, and that is how investigators learned that Beckles was living in fear of the shooter(s). That is also how investigators learned that the shooter(s) chose to attend Hemmings' funeral. When Beckles stepped outside for a cigarette during the service, three others followed. Shortly thereafter shots were fired and Beckles died quickly on the church steps. The three shooters ran away.

The fact that Beckles was shot on the steps of a church during a funeral seems to have shocked even those who have

become used to gun violence in Toronto. Before this shooting, people still believed there were some limits on how far criminals would go. There were still some places that were safe and that could provide sanctuary from the danger of tough areas of the city. But Beckles' death has shaken that belief for many.

Solutions

The rise in gun violence in Toronto has resulted in a search for solutions. What steps can Toronto, or any other community in Canada, take to reduce gun violence? Like all social problems, there is no easy answer. Research into other social problems indicates that the best results come when governments, the police, religious leaders, educators, and community agencies work together. Here are a few possible solutions.

1. Handgun ban

Prime Minister Paul Martin has called for even tougher controls on handguns. If Martin's new proposal becomes law, only police, security officers and a select few sport shooters would be allowed to own handguns.

2. Break the cycle of poverty

Poverty leads to crime. Decent-paying jobs provide people with pride and options for the future.

3. More funding for community agencies

Youth centres provide many needed services, including a safe place for kids to meet others, play sports, and enjoy music. But community youth workers are poorly paid, and many agencies do

not have enough money to offer a variety of programs. If we want to keep kids out of gangs and crime we need to provide positive alternatives.

4. Diversity in policing

The Metro Toronto Police Department acknowledges that they need more black officers, and others from visible minority groups. When teenagers get to deal with an officer from their own community they are more likely to be co-operative.

5. Longer sentences for crimes involving guns

In the wake of the gun violence in Toronto, many people are calling for

amendments to the Criminal Code. Specifically, these critics would like to see amendments that would impose longer jail sentences for any crime where guns are used.

6. Changes in the education system

The education system has to do a better job reaching black youth. This may involve courses on black history, courses that acknowledge and analyze systemic racism, and courses that provide concrete employment skills in addition to academic content.

Activities

With a partner, or in a small group, complete the following:

1. Rank order the solutions from most effective to least effective. Provide reasons for your selections and be prepared to share your answers with the class.
2. Discuss this list of solutions and record one criticism for each. For example, for the first point, a criticism might be that imposing a total ban on handguns would not help to reduce gun violence because most handguns used in crimes are not purchased legally.
3. Review your list of solutions and criticisms and select the three that you believe will be the most effective.
4. Record two or three additional solutions not included in the list above.

GUNS AND GANGS: TORONTO FIGHTS BACK *Why?*

Here is a selection of responses to the rise in gun violence in Toronto. For each of them, state your response—i.e., whether or not you agree with the statement by checking off either Agree or Disagree. Briefly explain your views.

“Seventy per cent of Toronto’s homicides this year have involved guns, and a large portion seem also to involve black males. Between 1996 and 2002, 10 per cent of all violent crimes committed in Toronto were linked to young men of Jamaican origin. This is high, considering that Jamaicans make up only 3.5 per cent of the city’s population. One reason is drug wars. The drug trade in Jamaica, Canada, the United States, and United Kingdom is closely linked. Cold-hearted drug leaders, or ‘dons,’ use gun violence to express their rule of law. Break the ‘law’ and punishment is immediate and sure: You die. As the drug industry has gained strength in Jamaica, so has the trade in illegal guns.” — Glendene Lemard, *The Globe and Mail*, November 10, 2005

Agree ___ **Disagree** ___ **Explain** _____

“Enough hypocrisy, enough temporary solutions. It’s time for a definite solution: The legalization of the sale and consumption of drugs—with strict controls by the state. This would finish the gangs and their wicked influence over our most vulnerable citizens.” — editorial in the *Toronto Star*, December 1, 2005

Agree ___ **Disagree** ___ **Explain** _____

“But of the 48 gun slayings in Toronto so far this year—a record high—most of the victims were young black men and most remain unsolved. Why is nobody speaking up? ‘They’re scared of getting shot too,’ said one of five teen-aged schoolgirls sharing a lunchtime marijuana joint a few blocks from the church this week, amid a bleak sprawl of apartment buildings. ‘Amon was with Jamal when he was shot, right? So they’re scared it could happen to them, too. If a person knows something about it and someone knows that they know, they’ll try to get rid of them.’” — Timothy Appleby, *The Globe and Mail*, November 26, 2005

Agree ___ **Disagree** ___ **Explain** _____

“. . . while Toronto’s homicide rate remains among the lowest in the world, the seriousness of the violence in the most disadvantaged areas appears to be on the rise, and root causes must be addressed. . . . If you don’t deal with the social environment that is creating young men who will engage in this type of violence, you’re just going to have a problem that is going to increase or stay the same. . . . It’s almost like a job vacancy change. You have a housing project and you do a sweep, and you arrest all the gang members and you put them away. If you don’t change the situation in that housing project, the next generation is just going to come up and fill the shoes.” — Jim Rankin, *Toronto Star*, November 27, 2005

Agree ___ **Disagree** ___ **Explain** _____

"I listened in stunned disbelief, on hearing of murder committed on the steps of a church. . . . As I read the headlines of the newspapers, what emerged in me were feelings of tremendous inadequacy. I felt powerless to either solve this problem or to offer any new or creative solutions. Yet, there was a command implied within the headline, one that stated the 'Black community needs to do more.' . . . The white community is never called to task for the white criminals or sociopaths that reside among us. So why is it that when a black person commits a crime, the entire black community is indicted? It does not matter where in the province you reside; as long as you are black, you belong to this amorphous black community." — editorial in *Toronto Star*, November 24, 2005

Agree ___ **Disagree** ___ **Explain** _____

"At the very least, tougher sentences for gun-wielding thugs will keep them off our streets for a longer period. They may make a few people tempted by gang life to think twice before taking the plunge. But it would be naïve to expect tough sentencing to end gun crime. Most of the alienated young men taking up firearms and drug dealing as a way of life are unlikely to be deterred by the prospect of a few more years in jail. Rapper and former drug dealer 50 Cent captures the code of the streets in five words: 'Get rich or die trying.'" — editorial in *Toronto Star*, November 9, 2005

Agree ___ **Disagree** ___ **Explain** _____

"'Within that youth culture, loyalty and friendship are a profound value, but it's not balanced by perspective and judgment,' said Rev. Al Bowen, the street-smart pastor at Abundant Life who has known the Beckles family for years. . . . 'Those kids live in a fish globe, deciding what values are right, until the shark comes along and smashes the fish globe.'" — Timothy Appleby, *Globe and Mail*, November 26, 2005

Agree ___ **Disagree** ___ **Explain** _____

"Marina Brown, a congregation member, said people throughout the black community in Toronto's northwest Rexdale area were talking about the identity of the shooter. It was the subject of a conversation at her husband's barbershop, she said. But she said members of the community do not trust police to protect their identities if they come forward with information. Ms. Brown, who has lived in the area all her life and works for the Toronto school board, said there has been a steady deterioration in police-community relations. When she was a little girl, she said the police used to say 'Hi' to her. Now, she said, because she drives a late-model car, she gets pulled over by police and interrogated for no reason." — Michael Valpy, *The Globe and Mail*, November 22, 2005

Agree ___ **Disagree** ___ **Explain** _____

GUNS AND GANGS: TORONTO FIGHTS BACK

Gangs and Guns in Canada

Did you know . . .

Major rival gangs in Toronto are loosely connected to the Bloods-Cripps rivalry in the U.S.

Unfortunately, gangs and guns are not only a problem in Toronto. Many gangs organize around neighbourhood and ethnic or racial ties. Vancouver has a number of Indo-Canadian and Asian gangs, Montreal has Haitian and Jamaican gangs, Calgary and Edmonton have a number of Asian gangs, and Winnipeg is struggling with African and Aboriginal gangs.

Although the escalation of gun violence in Toronto in 2005 was primarily attributed to young black men involved in gangs, there are also Asian, Latino, and Tamil gangs in the city. The young black men involved in gangs in Toronto generally come from poor backgrounds, live in housing projects, and have been raised in single-parent households—often where the father is completely absent.

In contrast, gangs in the Vancouver area are primarily Indo-Canadian, Asian, and Persian. It is estimated that almost 100 men in rival Indo-Canadian gangs in Vancouver have been murdered since 1994, often in public, over drug deals gone bad. British Columbia has a lucrative drug trade that brings big money to those willing to bring marijuana over the U.S. border.

Unlike black gang members in Toronto, there is really no “typical” profile of an Indo-Canadian gang

member. Some are recent immigrants, but some are fourth-generation Canadians. Some have little education and come from poor backgrounds, but others are university-educated and come from affluent families.

Vancouver police are now working with different factions of the local Sikh community to try to tackle the complex cultural issues that may play a role in gang membership. One of these factors is the tendency to favour boys in the culture. Harbans Kandola, who heads a group called VIRSA (meaning “heritage” in Punjabi), developed an eight-week parenting course to help Indo-Canadian parents understand the difference between bringing up their children in India and the pressures those same kids face in Canada. Kandola says that giving a 19-year-old a \$50 000 car in Vancouver is equivalent to signing the young man’s death warrant. On a similar note, Vancouver police are now trying a new tactic that involves telling gang members’ families about their sons’ activities—since most of the men still live at home with their parents.

Criminologists argue that although the ethnic composition of gang membership varies across the country, one factor is consistent: gang members are young men with macho bravado eager to make big money in illegal drugs.

Discussion

In a small group, discuss why the vast majority of gang members are male. After your discussion, record your main points and be prepared to discuss your answer with the class.

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Activity: Community Pride Activity

As you have learned in this *News in Review* report, teenagers in the Malvern community of Toronto—one of the areas that has seen an increase in gun violence in 2005—were given cameras to capture positive aspects of their community. Those images were then broadcast to the community in the hopes that the pictures would remind people of all the good that exists in Malvern.

Other communities in Toronto that have been hit hard by gun violence and negative publicity have developed other community pride initiatives. For example, the Jane-Finch community of northwest Toronto held its first Walk for Peace at the end of October 2005. The more than 100 people who took part in the walk hoped that the event would help to undo the damage the city's shooting violence has done to their community's reputation. Wanda McNevin, program manager of the Jane Finch Community and Family Centre, said: "We've had so many negative incidents, and that's such a small part of our community. We need to remind people that there are way more good things about Jane-Finch than bad things."

Your task is to develop a community pride activity that would highlight the positive aspects of where you live. Once you have been divided into small groups do the following:

1. Brainstorm a list of possible community pride activities.
2. Select the activity you feel is the most "doable" and that you feel would have the greatest impact. Be prepared to explain your selection.
3. Write an outline of your activity. Use the chart below.

Our Community Pride Activity

| | |
|--|--|
| Group members | |
| The name of our activity | |
| Materials needed to conduct our activity (e.g., poster paper and art supplies, video cameras, tape recorders) | |
| The approximate length of time it would take to complete our activity | |
| The final format of our activity (e.g., series of posters, 10-minute video, PowerPoint presentation aimed at elementary school kids) | |
| Start date for activity | |