UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO | SCHOOL OF CITIES

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Strengthen youth programming for public safety

Big issues: youth violence prevention, community safety, city services

THE IDEA

- **Strong youth programming should be permanent**, not just **piloted.** Funding free evening and after-school arts, recreation, and mentorship programs in the parts of Toronto designated as Neighbourhood Improvement Areas must be a standing City commitment, delivered through the community centres, libraries, and local organizations already there.
- **The programs exist but the funding doesn't last.** The City has already targeted prevention in these neighbourhoods through its Youth Violence Prevention Grant, but organizations are only funded for up to three years, and the grant is currently closed until 2027.[1] This spring, the looming end of two federal funding streams pushed council to cover a $6.2-million gap from a reserve, before Ottawa renewed one of the two funds in March with an expanded, three-year commitment. The other, smaller stream was not renewed, leaving the City without a mechanism it had relied on for coordination and research. The result is that young people build trust with a program, then find the door locked when the money runs out.
- **Local programming is a lever that the City controls.** Gun control and bail sit within federal and provincial jurisdictions, but community programming is squarely municipal, and far cheaper than the emergency care, courts, and incarceration that follow a shooting.

HOW IT WOULD WORK

Replace the patchwork of short-term grants with one permanent, multi-year funding stream, coordinated centrally within the City. The scaffolding already exists: FOCUS Toronto, co-led by the City, United Way, and the Toronto Police Service, already brings more than 250 agencies together to coordinate help for people experiencing significant challenges or vulnerabilities.[2]

"The aim should be to coordinate the bureaucracy the city already has rather than build a new one."

- Julius Haag, Sociology

Concentrate the money in the neighbourhoods the City has already flagged as most in need; keep community centres and libraries open into the evening, when young people are the least supervised, building on the library-hour extensions in Mayor Chow's 2026 budget; and deliver programming through the local organizations young people trust, including credible-messenger mentoring, in which people who have survived violence work with those experiencing vulnerabilities, as the City's TO Wards Peace program aims to do.[3]

WHY THE EVIDENCE SUPPORTS IT

- **Enforcement-first responses do not move the needle.** Adding police has limited impacts on crime rates – rather, it mostly serves to make people feel more safe. Ontario's 2008 report *Roots of Youth Violence* warns that the province "cannot arrest its way out" of youth violence, and identifies economic exclusion as a central root cause.[4] Studies show that sustained, community-driven prevention is more effective than reactive enforcement.[5]
- **Structured programs work, as shown in randomized trials.** At the University of Chicago Crime Lab, the Becoming a Man program cut violent-crime arrests by 44 to 50 percent during the program and raised on-time graduation, though the low arrest rates faded once youth left, demonstrating the argument for sustained rather than one-off programming.[6]
- **The riskiest hours are the ones left uncovered.** The Roots report specifically recommends turning over schools and community spaces in the most disadvantaged communities to structured programming once class lets out, covering the after-school-to-evening window when young people are the least supervised.[7]
- **The mechanism is documented in the field.** Project Blowed, a hip-hop workshop in South Central Los Angeles, showed how a creative space gave young men an alternative to gang life, replacing physical violence with rapping.[8]

"These spaces create an alternative world where the notion of how you get respect gets shifted away from being someone who gets respect for being tough or violent."

- Jooyoung Lee, Sociology

IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

- **Sustained and predictable funding is the point.** Promising programs – such as Prevention Intervention Toronto, a federally funded 36-week intervention for youth experiencing gang-involvement following the 2005 "year of the gun," – often conclude as they lack a clear mechanism to extend their funding and mandate.[9] A standing, multi-year commitment is what ends that cycle of uncertainty.
- **The budget balance is lopsided.** The Toronto Police Service's 2026 net budget rose to $1.43 billion, a 7 percent increase.[10] Simultaneously, preventative programming decreased, and residents in budget consultations named policing as their top choice for reduced investment.[11] The pattern runs deeper: one analysis found that 99 percent of Ontario's community safety grant funding went to police, and less than one percent to community organizations doing preventive work.[12]
- **The cost is real, but the alternative is more expensive.** Reactive spending — emergency care, the justice system, incarceration — dwarfs the price of an evening program; a modest 2019 proposal to build youth spaces, estimated at roughly $3.1 million, was rejected based on cost.[13] This is a reallocation toward prevention, not a new frontier of spending.
- **Mind the perception gap.** Toronto shootings in 2026 are at their lowest level in five years, even as the Salsa on St. Clair shooting in July reignited the conversation on public safety.[14] A permanent, targeted program is the answer for the neighbourhoods carrying the everyday burden that rarely draws that attention.

For a fraction of what the City spends responding to violence after it happens, it can keep the lights on where violence hits hardest: stable, year-round spaces where young people find mentors, skills, and a reason to be somewhere other than the street. The infrastructure is already there. It just needs to stop being temporary.

CONTEXTUAL NOTE FOR THIS BRIEF

The shooting at July's Salsa on St. Clair festival pushed public safety into the focus of the mayoral race, and with it the familiar reflex: hire more police. But in Toronto, shootings are at their lowest level in the last five years, and the harder problem, keeping prevention funded between political cycles, is one that more officers won't solve.

Gun violence is concentrated in a small number of underserved neighbourhoods, and those are the very places where the programs meant to prevent it keep opening and closing with the funding cycle.

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