

Y.A.A.C.E

BLACK YOUTH VIOLENCE & TRAUMA FORUM

NOVEMBER, 26 2025



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

We strongly believe that, given the urgency and the ongoing crisis affecting Black communities in the GTA with respect to homicide and violence, the Black Youth, Violence, and Trauma Forum was long overdue. Over a full, robust, and engaging day, we celebrated Black youth excellence and centred the lived experiences of young people navigating significant stressors and trauma, largely rooted in persistent structural factors such as violence, income insecurity, neighbourhood disparities, homelessness, and systemic racial discrimination. The Forum acknowledged that efforts are already in progress across the region and provided a platform to amplify and connect those initiatives.

The Forum explored the dimensions of Black youth homicide, including trends, patterns, implications, and solution-focused strategies. Youth participants shared powerful insights into the scope and impact of trauma on their lives, along with concrete recommendations for action. Although it was not the main focus of the day, the issue of gender-based violence emerged at different points during the Forum. Discussions also engaged practitioners, researchers, advocates, and community leaders, generating proposals to strengthen alignment across research, planning, community capacity building, clinical practice, service delivery, and public policy. The Forum was an opportunity to bring together people and organizations who have been diligently doing the work, creating opportunities to deepen collaboration and share lessons learned.

Digital realities were recognized as a critical factor in supporting youth, and the Forum introduced Urban Violence Traumatic Stress Disorder (UV-TSD) as a clinical framework to better understand and respond to the persistent violence Black youth experience. Held on November 26, 2025, the Forum brought together more than 40 leaders, practitioners, young people, community partners, and funders from across the Greater Toronto Area for an intensive full-day session.

This inaugural Forum marks the start of a growing community-based coalition committed to building a coherent strategic framework to transform how systems respond to the mental well-being of Black youth, including those at risk of or experiencing trauma. It is the first in a two-part series designed to reshape how systems understand, respond to, and prevent trauma affecting Black youth. Invited participants represented a diverse ecosystem of support that included crisis workers, frontline practitioners, clinicians, managers, educators, advocates, funders, researchers, faith partners, and youth leaders, collectively establishing a shared platform for coordinated, innovative, and community-driven action.

The key recommendations from the forum emphasize the importance of a youth-centered approach, with young people actively driving initiatives and being meaningfully involved in all aspects of the work. Mentorship is highlighted as a crucial component, focusing on culturally grounded guidance and group mentoring as safer and more reliable options. Additionally, there is a strong call for developing a broader parenting network to support parents of Black children and to strengthen rapport between parents and organizations. The significance of spiritual growth and healing within the community is also underscored, alongside the need for collaboration with faith-based institutions that can foster connectivity and support.

To create impactful change, the recommendations advocate for streamlined public policies at the provincial level that incorporate education and provide a robust framework for scalable and sustainable initiatives. Coordinating services more efficiently across the city and province is essential to enhance service delivery and meet the diverse needs of the community effectively. Overall, the forum stresses a collaborative effort involving youth, parents, and institutions to build a supportive and resilient environment for young people.

This effort continues in **Part 2 (Spring 2026)**, which will focus on skills building, application, capacity development, and measuring impact.





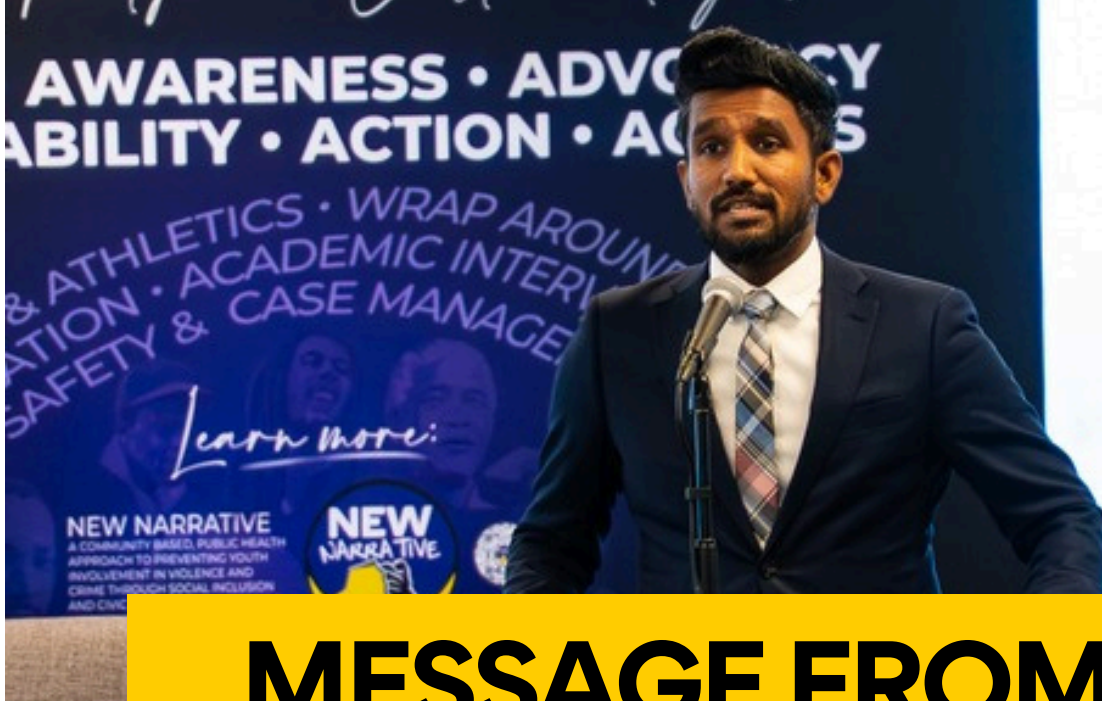
INTRODUCTION & CONTEXT

Addressing Black youth violence and trauma in Toronto is critical because these issues are deeply rooted in systemic inequities that continue to shape the lives of young people. Black youth are disproportionately impacted by racism in education, policing, housing, and employment, which heightens vulnerability to violence and limits access to supportive resources. **Statistics Canada's 2019 General Social Survey reports that almost half (46%) of Black individuals aged 15 and older indicated that they had faced at least one type of discrimination in the five years before the survey, in contrast to 16% of the non-Indigenous, non-racialized demographic.** The consequences extend beyond individual experiences, affecting families and communities through cycles of harm, grief, and diminished opportunities. Without intentional action, these inequities perpetuate environments where trauma is normalized.

Gender-based violence, particularly physical, financial, emotional, and online violence, poses significant traumatic stress, especially for young Black women and femme-identified individuals. Several factors contribute to this issue:

- Stigma and shame in publicly addressing this issue and along with a culture of silence and avoidance
- Lack of sufficient culturally responsive clinical and programming supports
- Rapid expansion of social media tools and algorithms with few meaningful safeguards in place
- Poor service coordination across the sector

The grief carried by survivors and families is profound, yet too often overlooked in policy and practice. In addition, digital platforms and social media increasingly act as accelerants, amplifying conflict and trauma among youth. Addressing these realities through forums, community-driven strategies, and trauma-informed and culturally responsive interventions is essential to foster healing and build capacity. By prioritizing Black youth voices and experiences, we can begin to move toward safer, more equitable systems that support resilience and long-term change.



MESSAGE FROM THE MINISTER

HON. VIJAY THANIGASALAM
ASSOCIATE MINISTER OF MENTAL HEALTH AND ADDICTIONS

- Shared an example of when community and government comes together, change can happen Amani satellite offices across the province.
- We need to continue to work together and listen to those working on the ground.
- 40% of youth report that they wouldn't have gotten the help they needed without the Youth Wellness Hubs Ontario.
- As a result the province of Ontario is expanding the Hubs into 32 Regions in Ontario.
- The Minister recognizes that Black youth mental health and well-being is necessary, and will be connecting with the Y.A.A.C.E leadership team.

***“One of the most
organized forums he has
seen coming out of
Scarborough.”***

-Hon. Vijay Thanigasala

***“When we see a program is
successful and we get good
feedback from our young
people, we invest...”***

-Hon. Vijay Thanigasala

KEYNOTE ADDRESS



DR. TANYA SHARPE

Professor & Endowed Chair,
Social Work in the Global Community
Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work
University of Toronto

Sharpe's research provides scholars and practitioners with frameworks to understand how our socio-cultural factors shape the grief experience of Black survivors of homicide victims. With over 28 years of committed research, she has actively collaborated with Black families and friends of homicide victims, ensuring their voices and stories are heard. Her work transcends academic inquiry, as it has profound real-world implications not only in the United States and Toronto but also across the globe.

Dr. Sharpe approaches her research from her heart, focusing on the urgent need for culturally responsive interventions that can help survivors articulate their grief in meaningful ways. The keynote address provided insights into her research and the need for culturally responsive and trauma-informed support for Black survivors of homicide victims.

"Black people are grieving the pervasive murder of family and friends on a global scale they also experience collective trauma as a result of seeing the constant brutal erasure of us over social media screens played over and over again" - Dr. Tanya Sharpe

KEY FINDINGS AND HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE KEYNOTE

- We are facing an epidemic, and there is a disproportionate number of homicide victims who are Black.
- **An average of 701 murders occur each year in Canada, and the number is often higher in Ontario**
- **2014-2024 Ontario experienced, on average, 234 homicides;** during that same period, Toronto consistently experienced the highest number of homicides in the province (70)
- A Report On Gun Violence in Canada,

<https://socialwork.utoronto.ca/news/report-reveals-alarming-rise-in-gun-violence-in-canada-urges-shift-in-national-response/> establishes a framework aimed at enhancing both data, statistics, and the stories of those most affected by gun violence, using a public health and social justice perspective to offer us eight **(8)** recommendations for a call to action.

- Intergenerational trauma and structural violence affect Black youth, especially those who are survivors of homicide victims. These young individuals often face adverse childhood experiences and various forms of violence. Media normalization of Black homicide impacts their emotional responses, leading to issues with sleep, self-esteem, trust, and safety, which are vital for healthy development.
- Traumatic grief in Black youth can manifest as signs and symptoms such as depression, suicidality, violence, social isolation, and substance abuse. This grief is often a result of repeated exposure to traumatic injury, anti-Black racism, and homicide
- Professionals have a duty to create culturally responsive and trauma-informed interventions for young Black survivors of homicide victims.
- We urgently require a thorough public health strategy that not only addresses the trauma from homicide-related loss but also works to reduce homicide rates among Black communities.

“When structural barriers exist that systematically deprive Black people from access to equitable education, employment and housing opportunities, their safety and well-being are compromised and while we understand these inequities, we often fail to understand that the slow and yet deliberate death of Black people experienced through social inequities is a form of violence.” - Dr. Tanya Sharpe

SUMMARY OF FORUM ACTIVITIES

Panel 1: Trends, Data and Implications

Moderated by Stacey-Ann Buckley

Liban Hassan Turstee, Dr. Travonne Edwards and Brandy Tannenbaum from the BRAVE Program

- Social media is a digital accelerant to violence and it disproportionately affects Black youth and has led to the death of Black boys
- Desensitization of violence and death (normalizing black death)
- Capture more successes through data and evaluation. Grassroots organizations are doing important work but lack the framework and capacity to capture their success and share it with others.
- Intentionally incorporate stability and support into programs for youth ex. Housing, employment etc.
- Need for funding programs vs pilots to support
- Document positive experiences of youth and families by utilizing mixed research methods.



"If you are hungry, you will put your survival needs first"

Dr. Trevonne Edwards



Panel 2: Centring Black Youth

Moderated by Niyeka Thomas

Mohamed Amin Mohamoud, Elijah Williams, Kaison Stone and Jermauri Collins

- Black youth are emerging as advocates for change, using their experiences and resilience to lead and mentor others. They identified the lack of positive male role models and essential life skills as barriers.
- The arts, especially music and media, were highlighted as powerful tools for healing and self-expression.
- Discussions emphasized the need for lasting skills and generational wealth and resources passed down to empower youth.
- Digital resilience was discussed, focusing on equipping youth to navigate social media safely and thoughtfully, and the need for stronger policies to address online harm.

“Violence is what happens in the moment, trauma is the one that lingers, trickles down, affecting everything” Youth



Panel 3: Hearing from Practitioners

Moderated by Felix Cabrera

Rita Asare, Cindy May, Jemmelia Morgan, Daina Niles, Timiro Aganeh

Frontline practitioners reflected on the intersecting issues affecting young women and girls, boys and young men, LGBTQ+ youth, and youth exposed to gender-based and intimate partner violence.

- Practitioners stressed that lived experiences guide their work, with collective responsibility for safety planning.
- Increasing protective factors like mentorship and support networks strengthens resilience and reduces vulnerability
- Trauma-informed approaches are holistic, designed to meet the nuanced needs of Black youth and families, and advocate for healing through understanding and empowerment

“Principle over priority and passion over policy”
-Forum Attendee



Presentation: Urban Violence Traumatic Stress Disorder (Nene Kafele)

Nene Kafele introduced Forum attendees to the concept of **Urban Violence Traumatic Stress Disorder (UV-TSD)** and described it as extreme emotional and psychological distress experienced by Black children and youth in urban settings due to persistent exposure to violence, racism, and structural inequities. Its symptoms mirror those of PTSD but are often exacerbated by ongoing trauma, including intrusive memories, avoidance, hypervigilance, aggression, and social withdrawal. The disorder is linked to increased suicide rates, persistent racism, exposure to gun violence, and barriers to culturally responsive care.

Presentation Highlights:

Approaches to Healing and Renewal

- Advocate for mental health literacy
- Promote early intervention and utilize culturally grounded therapies, including Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT)
- Provide strong wrap-around services for Black youth and families
- Address ongoing sources of trauma, including multi-strategic planning, advocacy and policy change and economic regeneration

Healing-Centred Clinical Interventions

- Address harm and restore well-being for Black children and youth
- Shifting clinical and program structures away from harm, discipline, punishment, and confinement toward restoration, hope, and healing
- Strength-based, holistic, and grounded in African-derived culture, identity, and values

Building Resilience and Toughness

- Encourage Black youth to confront challenges such as poverty, violence, racism, exclusion, homophobia, and gender oppression with a strong moral compass rooted in social and economic justice
- Drawing on cultural traditions, faith, supportive social networks, positive role models, and maintaining physical well-being helps reinforce community strength, self-reliance, and holistic growth

Trauma Resilience Priorities

- Make sure Black youth are challenged intellectually and emotionally, encouraged to be curious, reflect, and provided with opportunities for continuous learning.
- Foster cognitive and emotional flexibility, helping youth develop a clear life purpose and practical steps for growth, and promoting realistic optimism grounded in both reason and spiritual faith.

Panel 4

AI realities, imperatives and implications for violence-related trauma for working with Black youth (Dr. Jean Jacques Rousseau)

- Highlighted how social media can act as a system that escalates violence among youth and cliques and emphasized safety planning and online violence prevention
- Recognized the importance of lived experience, focused inquiry, and stakeholder dialogue.
- Stakeholders, including youth, parents, teachers, and police, must play a role in strengthening protective factors to de-escalate conflict
- Social media is described as an anonymized system lacking rules or limits, complicating accountability and intervention
- Main goal is to better understand social media processes and their impact on community safety and youth well-being

Presentation: The Digital Imperative:

Digital Violence Accelerants (DVA) and youth (Dave Mitchell and Devon Jones)

- Life-altering impacts of social media as a powerful accelerant of digital violence
- Safety in our communities is compromised by the cycle of violence fueled by the “get back culture”
- This issue is matter of public safety that calls for bold policy and legislative change
- Big tech companies can play an integral role in this transformation by empowering young people to become moderators
- Youth can learn to utilize AI tools and their own lived experience and intuition to identify social media safety concerns, making a lasting impact in creating a more secure online world and community for everyone



Workshop: Vicarious Trauma, Compassion Fatigue: Self-care and Collective Care (Brother Kofi)

Vicarious trauma or compassion fatigue refers to the emotional and psychological impact that can occur when individuals are exposed to the traumatic experiences of others, particularly in caregiving or support roles. This is common among professionals such as social workers, therapists, and educators, who regularly encounter stories of trauma and pain. Continuous exposure can lead to feelings of distress, anxiety, or hopelessness, ultimately affecting our well-being and effectiveness in our roles.

- Participants were engaged in grounding, reflection, and skill-building to strengthen their emotional balance, resilience, and long-term sustainability in trauma-focused work
- Sharing their experiences and resources fostered a supportive environment where forum attendees committed to implementing strategies into their lives, reinforcing the importance of self-care and community support in their professional journeys



ANALYSIS

Failing to address violence and trauma among Black youth in Toronto deepens harm, fuels mental health struggles, widens educational and economic gaps, and weakens entire communities.

Continued Cycles of Violence

Exposure to harm raises the chance of repeating it, affecting future generations and growing community risk.

Mental Health Crisis

Lack of proper support leads to rising anxiety, depression, and trauma-related stress that can last a lifetime.

Educational Gaps

Unhealed trauma and anti-Black racism make learning harder, limiting opportunities and shaping long-term outcomes.

Community Breakdown

Ongoing harm and unresolved grief weaken trust and create disconnection, making collective support harder.

Economic Strain

Violence and trauma reduce participation in the workforce and lower productivity, affecting the wider economy.

Growing Digital Risks

Social media, fast-moving online content, and AI-driven harms intensify trauma and normalize violence on and offline.



“...if we are not intervening in the right way at the right time then the likelihood of coming back with a subsequent injury is extraordinarily high...”

**Brandy Tannebaum,
BRAVE Program,
Sunnybrook Hospital**



STRATEGIC THEMES

- Youth-Centred Approaches: Active youth participation in program design and leadership is non-negotiable. Mentorship, family engagement, and community ownership were prioritized.
- Cultural and Healing Frameworks: Healing-centred, culturally grounded interventions that integrate African-derived practices, faith, and ancestral traditions were seen as vital for authentic recovery.
- Policy and Systemic Change: Calls for province-wide policies to streamline services, integrate race-based data, and foster multi-sector collaboration reflected the urgency for structural reform.
- Digital and AI Integration: Participants urged for AI-supported monitoring, digital literacy programs, and community-based online safety strategies.

We need more policy, decision makers, and system representatives present at forums like these.

-Forum Attendee



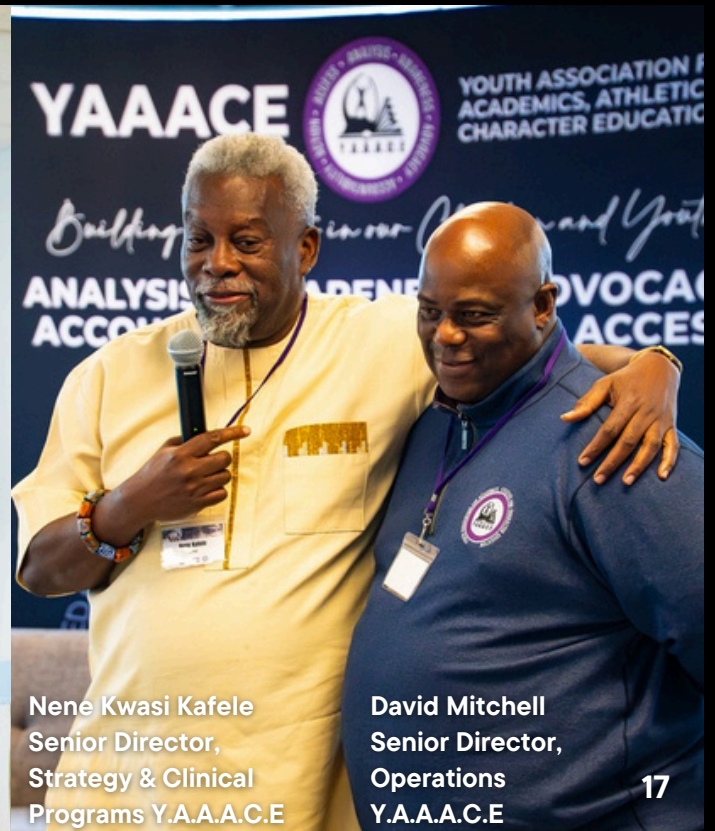
RECOMMENDATIONS

* The forum signaled the start of a movement rooted in community leadership, cultural pride, evidence-based frameworks, and systemic reform. The vision is to shift from reactive responses to proactive strategies that prioritize prevention, healing, and resilience. Based on the insights and discussions from the forum, several key recommendations have emerged to guide collective efforts. These strategies aim to empower youth, strengthen families and communities, improve system coordination, and create more culturally responsive and sustainable solutions.

* The following provides the main recommendations to move forward in supporting Black youth and reducing community violence and related traumas.



Devon Jones
Founding Director
Y.A.A.A.C.E



Nene Kwasi Kafele
Senior Director,
Strategy & Clinical
Programs Y.A.A.A.C.E

David Mitchell
Senior Director,
Operations
Y.A.A.A.C.E

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Embed Youth-Centred Leadership**
 - Ensure young people are significant drivers of all initiatives.
 - Position youth meaningfully at every stage of planning, decision-making, and implementation.
- **Strengthen Mentorship Structures**
 - Establish mentorship programs across organizations that integrate eldership, culturally grounded guidance, and youth participation.
 - Operationalize mentorship through group models that are safer, more reliable, and expansive in scope.
- **Expand Parenting Networks**
 - Build a robust, province-wide support and networking system for parents of Black children.
 - Prioritize strategies that strengthen rapport and trust between institutions and parents.
- **Prioritize Spiritual Growth and Healing**
 - Recognize spiritual development and healing as essential components of community well-being.
 - Collaborate with faith-based institutions as vital partners in fostering connectivity, resilience, and growth.
- **Advance Policy Alignment and Sustainability**
 - Develop streamlined, province-wide public policies that integrate education and other key institutions.
 - Ensure frameworks are scalable, sustainable, and capable of driving long-term equity-focused outcomes.
- **Improve Service Coordination**
 - Enhance efficiency by coordinating services across the city and province.
 - Create integrated systems that reduce duplication and improve accessibility for communities.

CALL FOR ACTION AND NEXT STEPS

This is a collaborative community-based effort initiated by YAAACE and including Sick Kids, PeaceBuilders, Amani Mental Health program (CAMH), Taibu Community Health Centre, Black Action Defense Committee, Towards Peace, Pride Toronto and Toronto Community Housing. The further development of this effort will be a collective effort from stakeholders.



66%

In the Canadian context, nearly 66% of Black individuals reported depressive symptoms in a 12-month period, a rate nearly six times greater than the rest of the population (Cénat et al., 2021).

Furthermore, preliminary polling data suggest that Caribbean and African people have elevated levels of suicidal ideation (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2023).

23%

Nearly 23% of Black youth in the country enter care through law enforcement or forced hospitalization.

CONCLUSION



300%

Providers: Black Canadians are 300% more likely than non-Black Canadians to go without needed mental health.

(CMHO)

4X

Black youth in Canada are also four times more likely to first enter the mental health care system through the emergency department, which suggests worse symptoms than white youth.

- Pathway to Care Project

The forum highlighted the urgent need for trauma-informed, culturally responsive, and community-driven approaches to support Black youth. By centering lived experiences, fostering resilience, and advocating for systemic change, the community can move toward healing and empowerment.

Forum discussions revealed key gaps in services, systems, and support for Black youth. These include limited access to culturally responsive mental health care, insufficient mentorship and positive role models, under-resourced community programs, and fragmented service coordination. Structural inequities such as poverty, inadequate housing, and educational and employment barriers, combined with systemic racism and negative community labeling, further undermine resilience. Participants also noted the need for stronger support to navigate digital spaces and to reconnect with ancestral and cultural roots.



**Transforming Communities through Innovative
Solutions**