

LOCAL DEATH REVIEW TABLE

Report and Recommendations

File No.: 2019-9188
May 2021

CHILD AND YOUTH DEATH REVIEW AND ANALYSIS





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Due to restrictions on information about young persons under the *Youth Criminal Justice Act (YCJA)*, Local Death Review Tables (LDRT) do not consider any information about whether or how young persons have been dealt with under that Act. This limitation may result in gaps in both the review and the subsequent findings. Recommendations or other information relating to the youth justice sector may be included regardless of whether an individual was dealt with under the YCJA.

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Introduction

Each report resulting from a Local Death Review Table begins with a short summary of the strengths of the young person. While it is impossible to paint a picture of all aspects of the youth, it is important to share a sense of their strengths and uniqueness, so they are honored for who they were in their life, before examining the events and circumstances surrounding their death.

Picture big brown eyes that danced with laughter when he was having fun and enjoying life. Yet, these same eyes sometimes hid the sadness of trying to make sense of his new home in Canada and the challenges of finding a place each day in school and the community.

He was deeply loved by his mother, family, friends and his community members here in Canada and back home. He was very bright academically and was chosen by his teacher to be a part of an academic competition where he'd get to showcase his skills. He will never get to wear the special clothes that his mother bought him for that event.

He was the centre of his mother's world and she would have done anything for him. When she brought him to her cultural theatre rehearsals, he would naturally watch over the younger children around. The other community members loved having him attend and everyone could see the close relationship between mother and son.

He loved his family, books, video games, playing with his friends, his community. After his mother, it was his school, teachers, and classmates that were the centre of his world. He cared a lot about what others thought of him because like all youth, he wanted to be included. He tried to fit in and to find a place and sometimes found himself on the outside of the group struggling to be included and to be seen.

He had great courage in talking to those professionals that offered him support, a courage that would be hard for even an adult to find. When he didn't know what to do he looked for help and support as he tried to navigate the complexities of school and life that so often adults take for granted.

He wanted those around him to be proud of him, he did not want to be seen as a burden. Like all youth he wanted to fit in, to be included, to be loved and to be safe.

When he left this world, he left a big space, especially for his mother – his best friend. What he also left was an example of the courage that it can take to ask for help and the real lived impact of experiences of bullying and how deeply it can hurt when one is not heard, understood, or listened to.

This is a youth that will never be forgotten and while he was with us for a short time he touched so many in ways that are unexplainable. He had a smile with a brightness that could light up the darkest corners of the world.

This introduction was created by the Child and Youth Death Review and Analysis (CYDRA) team at the Office of the Chief Coroner (OCC) and is intended to summarize information about the life of the deceased young person gathered by the team during the Local Death Review Table (LDRT) process. Sources for this information may include case file records, family members, service providers and community members.



Circumstances Surrounding the Death

On a Friday evening in 2019, this young person was discovered by a passerby in the shrubbery at the base of an apartment building across the street from his own. He had obvious injuries and emergency services were immediately called. This young person, who was unidentified at the time, was transported to a children's hospital trauma centre where after significant resuscitative measures he was determined to have succumbed to his injuries.

Meanwhile, after awaking from a nap, his mother found a note signed by her son indicating that he may have had intentions of self-harm. Shortly after notifying police of both his absence and the note, his mother was brought to the hospital where she positively identified him.

It was determined by closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras that he had gained entry to the nearby apartment building by following in behind other residents. He then proceeded in the elevator to the rooftop pool deck where he was observed by witnesses to approach the edge of the building and look down. After veering out of the view of any available witnesses or the CCTV cameras, he then descended from that level.

Cause of Death:	Multiple blunt force trauma due to descent from height
Manner of Death:	Suicide

Information Sources Used for This Review and Report:

- Coroner's Investigation Statement
- Post-mortem report
- Child welfare records
- Education records, including Ontario Student Record (OSR)
- Hospital records
- Police reports
- Interviews with family and community members

Findings Summary

This young person was born in a South Asian country to a married couple and was their only child together. Details of the familial history and life in their country of origin are largely unknown and based on narratives gathered by the engaged supports and services within Canada.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that from a young age he was directly exposed to recurring intimate partner violence¹. Although detailed information about his life and experiences prior to emigrating is limited, he was reportedly diagnosed with childhood depression as a result of the exposure to the violence, and following his parents' divorce as a young child was adversely impacted by the stigma that can often be attributed to divorced women in South Asian culture and communities. This young person was reportedly isolated and bullied as a result of the shame and stigma that can result from divorce and a break in family honour.

After several years of the violence, discrimination and seemingly subsequent trauma, this young person's mother made the difficult decision to leave their home country and immigrate with her son to Canada, leaving behind family, friends, their home. At 11 years old he arrived in Canada with his mother and settled in a large city in Ontario, hopeful and excited for a life of greater opportunities. While his father remained in their country of origin, this young person maintained contact with him via video calls on weekends.

Upon arrival to Canada this young person was enrolled in the public school system for grade 5 while temporarily residing with another family. After several weeks he was transferred to a new school within the same Board of Education when his mother secured their own housing in a different part of the city. Given the time of their arrival, he spent only a few months in school before the academic year concluded; however, his report card indicated that despite that, he did very well and was noted by his educators to have an "exceptional breadth of knowledge" and received evaluations of Excellent in a variety of assessment categories. His academic success continued throughout subsequent report cards.

In the classroom he was seated with other students of the same culture and language, who also happened to live in the same (or neighbouring) apartment building as he did. This seating arrangement was reportedly planned by the classroom teacher in an effort to provide some familiarity and cultural connection. Over the summer break and into the following academic year he became regularly engaged with these peers both in and out of the school setting,

¹ The term "intimate partner violence" describes physical violence, sexual violence, stalking, or psychological harm by a current or former partner or spouse. *Center for Disease Control and Prevention: Violence Prevention*. (2020). Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/intimatepartnerviolence/index.html>

however, the relationship was not a uniformly positive one. Reports from family suggest that a power imbalance developed whereby among other things, this young person was reportedly pressured to complete their homework assignments or face consequences including threats and intimidation.

In the fall, early in grade 6, one of several significant incidents involving this youth and his peers occurred which appears to have influenced the trajectory of the remaining academic year. Following a series of arguments both in and out of school that appear to have stemmed from conflict over a sports ball, this young person was physically assaulted. The exact timeline and details of the events leading to this incident are not completely understood, but what is known is that the opposing youth involved were those that the teacher had purposely sat with this young person as a newcomer, that the conflict led to their mothers becoming involved in the disputes and finally, that without adults present, this young person was kicked so aggressively in the abdomen that he was subsequently brought to a nearby hospital for assessment of potential injuries.

This incident presented significant concern and fear for both this young person and his mother and both the police and the school administrators were immediately notified as a result. The police investigated the issue and suggested to the mother that mediation would be best done by the school as due to the perpetrator's age, charges could not be laid.

After corresponding by email, this young person's mother attended the school for a meeting with the administrator(s) the next business day to discuss the recent incidents. During this meeting it was suggested, and then agreed, that a referral for the school board's Social Work Services be made. The intake documentation indicated that the nature of the assessment and counselling services to be provided was related to self-advocacy skills, social skills and the exploration of emotions. There was no indication of potential impact of the incident that brought the mother into the school, in fact, anecdotal reports suggest that the assigned social worker was not made aware of the incident until several months later.

Within a few days this young person had his first meeting with the assigned social worker. The available records suggest that over the next 7-month period, there were approximately 7 counselling sessions that took place. During these sessions they discussed things such as anger management strategies, friendships with peers, life at home and specifically frustrations related to his desire to play video games – for which his mother had been resistant. There is evidence that a trusting and open relationship had been developing between this young person and the social worker.

The social worker also had approximately 4 meetings with the young person's mother whereby they discussed the family's history, concerns for his somewhat aggressive behaviour related to conflict over video games, and resources available in the community that could assist with parenting strategies and exploring past trauma. On several occasions it was noted that this young person's mother had reportedly been exploring the option of sending him to live with his father in their country of origin out of fear for his future in Canada.

Reports from both this young person and his mother during this time suggest that they were occasionally having difficulties getting along, for example arguing and disagreeing on various matters. On one occasion during what this young person reported to be an argument with his mother, he accidentally telephoned emergency services (9-1-1). Police later attended the home in follow-up to the call, however, as a report was not completed by the attending officer(s) the details of their conversations with the family cannot be verified. Anecdotal reports suggest that the officer(s) spent time conversing with this young person about his behaviour and his discontent with his mother's reluctance to purchase video games for him.

Throughout the remainder of the academic year, several documented incidents of conflict occurred with peers at school. Within one month of beginning the social work sessions, an incident occurred during gym class where a group of students, male and female, targeted this young person. One month after that, another incident occurred again during gym class. There are also reports of additional incidents that are not documented. Although the counselling sessions had been occurring approximately twice a month, just shortly after the 9-1-1 call incident the sessions ceased for a period of over two months. The reasons for this are unclear however, it is understood that school-based social work services carry large case loads and may be significantly under-resourced.

Approximately one month before this young person's death, the counselling sessions restarted, and the same concerns appear to have persisted. During one session this young person reported that his mother had recently physically disciplined him during an argument, which prompted the social worker to report to the local child welfare agency. As a result, a child protection investigation was commenced concerning physical force and caregiver conflict.

Within days the child welfare agency contacted this young person's mother and arranged home visits. During this time the child welfare worker learned of the family's history of violence and trauma prior to immigrating, including this young person's ongoing issues with peer conflict. This young person revealed that he had lied about his mother's use of physical force because he was mad at her. The safety assessment determined no concerns for the child's safety or environment and no indication that he was physically disciplined. Despite learning of the

history of mental health concerns and exposure to domestic violence, the child welfare agency did not identify any need for further follow up or assessment.

Weeks later, the child welfare worker and the school social worker discussed the findings of the child protection investigation. Although the school social worker urged that the family likely required more support than what was currently being provided, the child welfare agency was of the opinion that the school-based social work services were adequate to address the current needs and as there were no child protection concerns, their file would be closing. Despite this determination and limited interaction thereafter, the child welfare agency did not officially close the family's file until after this young person's death.

The day before the conversation between social workers took place, another incident had occurred in school whereby this young person was involved in verbal and physical conflict with the same youth from previous incidents. This other youth was reportedly significantly larger in size and, understandably, this factor in addition to their previous negative history triggered fear for this young person. His mother communicated this to the school via email. In response to the incident, the school administrators reportedly discussed strategies with both youth and suggested that should there be a major safety concern, this young person could be moved to eat his lunch in another location.

That was Tuesday. On Wednesday, this young person came into the possession of a handheld gaming device that belonged to another student. The reports of how this occurred are conflicting – some suggest that he took it himself, others suggest that the youth from the previous day's incident stole it and presented it to this young person as a "peace offering" following their recent conflict. Given the previous incidents of bullying experienced via this same individual there is also the possibility that the gaming device was given in order to target this young person and get him into trouble. This young person took the gaming device home that night and without revealing it to his mother, set it up and started to use it. He deleted the owner's information and history on the device and opened his own account with his own email address. It appears unlikely that he was consciously attempting to hide or act with malicious intent.

By Thursday after school he decided, on his own, to return the device to the student who it belonged to. These two young people appear to have been somewhat friendly although the extent of their relationship is unclear; however, that evening when the student's parents became aware of what had happened and who had been in possession of the gaming device, they emailed the school administrators expressing serious concerns. This included accusations of manipulation, hacking of personal information and theft.

The same day, unaware of the gaming device, this young person's mother contacted the child welfare agency. He had assured her that in his previous discussions with the child welfare worker they advised him that they would be there to help whenever needed. The details of the conversation cannot be verified from the agency's perspective as for reasons unknown, the call was not documented. Reportedly, his mother was seeking assistance, indicating she and her son were afraid due to the ongoing conflict with peers, but was advised that the agency did not deal with bullying directly and that she should refer her concerns to the school board for assistance.

On Friday, in response to the correspondence from the gaming device owners, the school administrators began investigating the allegations. This young person and several other students were questioned however, their stories were conflicting. Again, as the documentation was sparse, the exact details of each interaction cannot be understood with absolute certainty.

What is known is that this young person was questioned in the administrator's office for a period of time, without notifying his parent of the serious allegations, where he was asked to explain how he obtained the device and demonstrate how he gained access to the account in order to play. He insisted that the youth from the incident on Tuesday (and previous incidents) had given it to him after school as an apology for assaulting him. The gaming device had already been returned to the owner the day prior, and he was asked to explain his story at least twice and was told that his account of how he obtained the device did not make sense. At the end of the school day the school administrator then contacted this young person's mother to notify her of the incident. At some point during these interactions, the potential need for the involvement of police in the matter as a result of the various allegations, including theft, was suggested by the administrator.

Only hours later that evening, this young person witnessed his mother's telephone conversation with the parent of the gaming device owner. This conversation was reportedly stressful and confrontational, whereby her offers to reimburse any costs and rectify the situation were made without resolve. Following the call, this young person suggested to his mother that he had an idea for a potential solution, that he would be leaving to go speak to someone that might be able to help but would return shortly; however, he did not return home that evening. The note signed by him stated that he felt he had been a disappointment, was unpopular at school, and thus would not be missed by anyone. He thanked his mother and suggested she could better enjoy her life with him gone.

There is no history of any previous self-harm, suicidal ideations or suicide attempts in this young person. He attended the apartment building of the peer whom he claimed had given the gaming device to him, and this is where he died.

Family Perspective*

The Child and Youth Death Review and Analysis (CYDRA) team engaged with this young person's next of kin in Canada early and throughout the process of planning and convening the Local Death Review Table (LDRT). The objective was not only to notify the next of kin that a review would take place, but to hear and understand their perspectives and concerns and subsequently attempt to capture them in the review and the final report. With the permission and suggestion of the next of kin, several community members were also engaged in this process.

The perspectives and concerns of both the family and community members were represented at the LDRT by the LDRT's Amicus. The Amicus, or "external friend to the process", is an individual whose role is to represent the family and youth voices at the LDRT and ask critical and reflective questions of the service systems involved and those around the table throughout the review. The individuals enlisted to fill the role of the Amicus at various LDRTs are individuals who are external to the systems and organizations involved with the particular young person but who have extensive knowledge of and experience with the child and youth service sectors in Ontario.

Based on the engagement meetings with family and community members, many concerns were highlighted, including particularly related to this young person's experiences both in the school setting and with peers in the community; however, above all concerns what was also highlighted was a true depiction of who he was as a person, a son, a friend. He was extremely bright, level-headed and calm. He was wise beyond his years and very confident in his wealth of knowledge and academic skills, school was his "world". He was his mother's best friend.

The primary concerns and perspectives of the family and community members are outlined in the themes below.

Bullying

This young person's family and community members maintain that a theme of bullying throughout the final school year was evident, whether the school system recognized it or not. Following the first physical assault incident that was reported to school administrators early in the grade 6 school year, the bullying behaviour continued, and underlying this bullying were systemic issues of gender inequity including the young person's mother being criticized for being a single-parent and divorced. Despite being assured that this young person would be provided services in school to support ongoing challenges, the family asserts that the assigned social worker was not made aware of the first physical assault incident until the end of the school year. This young person's family and community members believe that the history of negative

interactions and bullying with various peers significantly impacted his ability to cope with the events immediately preceding his death, including his decision to attend to that specific apartment building before taking his own life.

Gaming Device Incident

Perhaps, the incident of greatest concern to this young person's loved ones was that of the gaming device. There is a belief that the handling of this incident is directly contributory to his death. The view is that in this incident he was led to believe that he had done something so wrong that he could not show his face to those around him, those who were so proud of him, nonetheless. He could not survive that day. The family and community members believe that if a different approach was taken to addressing and investigating the incident, it may not have been such a stressful and frightening experience for this young person.

This young person's family does not dispute the possibility that he may have in fact taken the gaming device himself, as he was a young boy who loved videogames and likely did not fully understand the consequences of what might unfold; however, before anybody could talk to him about this mistake, he corrected the issue himself by returning it. His family stressed the importance of adults in authoritative positions and those responsible for caring for young people to be more understanding and compassionate. Furthermore, there is a need for those in positions of power to look at all factors that build to an incident such as this to more fully understand the context. It was expressed that in this case, the school did not fully look at all of the issues related to this one incident including the interconnections of the bullying behaviour.

Investigation of the Death by Police and School Board

While any police investigations following the death are out of the scope of a review via the LDRT, the family and community members shared concerns of a perceived lack of thoroughness on behalf of the investigating police service. Despite evidence that this young person proceeded to the top of the apartment building alone, there is concern regarding how he so easily gained access to the rooftop terrace and exactly what transpired after he proceeded out of the view of CCTV cameras and witnesses. This young person's family believe there are factual inconsistencies in the investigative reports and are displeased with the police service's extent of engagement with the family to obtain factual context.

There are also apparent inconsistencies related to what the family and members of the community were told related to the school board's investigation of the school's handling of the events preceding the death. Reportedly, on several occasions the mother and her community members were told that the school board had conducted, or would be conducting, an internal

investigation. Upon requesting access to a report from any such investigation, the mother was reportedly advised that one did not exist. The LDRT process verified that as of the LDRT date there had been no formal investigation completed by the school board.

Underlying Racism and/or Discrimination

The family and community members stress the importance of the involved sectors examining factors of racism and inequity in their examination of the circumstances related to this young person's death, but also the broader experiences within this community, for example in school. The realities of this young person's racial and cultural identity should not be overlooked as a factor in his experiences with Canadian service systems and with peers.

For example, there were a number of incidents of bullying which included physical violence directed at this young person on school property, and the family and community members question whether these were overlooked and dismissed to the extent that there were minimal efforts made to handle these matters with the seriousness that they commended. The impacts of anti-racism and discrimination need to be considered within the context of this young person's experience and cannot be erased or diminished. This includes the importance of examining the dynamic of this youth being a South Asian, new immigrant, who was reportedly surrounded by predominantly white adults and the role that a lack of cultural awareness and responsiveness may have had on his experiences throughout the year, including the outcome of the various circumstances leading up to his death.

**This reflects only some of the key perspectives obtained from only those family members that were willing and/or available to participate in the review process and does not reflect the views of all existing family members.*

Youth Perspective

The Child and Youth Death Review and Analysis (CYDRA) model of Local Death Review Tables (LDRT) incorporates an element of youth perspectives where possible and appropriate. In efforts to capture the youth voice when reviewing the death of a young person in Ontario, the CYDRA team collaborates with local community service agencies to coordinate and facilitate youth engagement meetings that can inform the review at the LDRT and potentially the recommendations that are made for prevention efforts.

In preparation for the review of this young person's death, the CYDRA team worked with a local organization that specifically supports newcomers to Canada to bring together a group of seven local youth who identify with the South Asian culture and community. With their informed consent, the objective was to understand their insight on a set of specific topics that correlated to some of the experiences of the young person that is the subject of this review. For example, student experiences with peers and bullying and the impacts of being a newcomer – primarily from the perspective of South Asian culture. Additionally, the youth were asked for their suggestions on recommendations that could be made via the LDRT.

This is what was learned from these youth voices:

Bullying is understood by these young people to be 'negative behaviour towards a person(s) for a short or long period of time and can be anything that puts the person down and hurts them in any sort of way'.

They explained that bullying behaviour can differ depending on the demographics and is not exclusive to opposing races. Young people of the same or similar race, culture or religion can bully each other – it is not solely one race, culture or religion against another. In fact, young people who attended schools in Ontario where there was a predominant population of South Asian students reported that bullying was very much a serious issue. For example, the students who had come to Canada at a very young age and essentially “grew up” here would often target the students who immigrated more recently, those who were often negatively referred to as “refs”, short for “refugees”. They emphasized that being surrounded by peers of the same race, culture or religion does not protect a young person from experiencing victimization and bullying.

For newcomer students, socioeconomic status is often a target or foundational element for bullying. For South Asian students particularly, they emphasized that family structure and parental marital status can be an even more significant factor. Young people report that the

culture can be demeaning to women and mothers, particularly those who are alone, and can place extraordinary expectations on both women and young girls. They said South Asian young people who have divorced parents and/or single-mother households can be targeted for bullying both by peers in school and by the cultural community overall.

Young people acknowledge that being raised by a single-parent is tough – for both the parent and the child – and as a result of the added pressures young people can often feel that they cannot talk to their parent about certain issues. They asserted that in these kinds of situations, young people need other adults and peers that they can trust and turn to. Even in nuclear families, parents often don't understand or appreciate the issues of mental health and/or bullying that can affect children and youth. It may be rooted in a cultural stigma as well as a lack of education and awareness. All these realities are negatively impacting young people.

In school, young people believe that education staff do not seem to truly care about peer conflict or what students are experiencing, they seem to just want to shrug the situation off and get it over with. For example, teachers in the classroom are busy and often want students to apologize to each other and move on. Young people believe that regardless of where the bullying takes place, the education staff (e.g., teachers, counsellors, principals and vice-principals, etc.) should be the first point of contact for students and should be the most prepared to address the issue.

From the youth perspective, what many adults in the school setting do not understand is that bullying can and does happen amongst “friends”. Young people know that within peer groups, individuals can be teased or insulted while framing it as a joke. Education staff often disregard this behaviour because they seem to perceive the individuals to be friends, however, the perception of friendship can be a significant cover for bullying behaviour that is taking place within perceived peer groups. Further, when students speak to each other in a language other than English (or French), the teasing, bullying and aggression is so easily missed by staff.

Finally, these young people of South Asian background feel they need and want resources and supports both in and out of the school setting that are relevant to their unique culture including supports that destigmatize the access to mental health services and supports.

The recommendations suggested by the youth engagement group that related to the circumstances of this death review are found in the *Recommendations* section of this report.

Analysis

Key Issues Identified:

- A) Threat and (probable) fear of being labelled a thief and possible police intervention
- The potential public humiliation of being accused of theft and the threat of potential police involvement were likely a tipping point for this young person, who was already managing other significant stressors.
 - This young person was known to be very prideful, striving to do the best he can while making those around him proud. He was incredibly grateful for his mother's great efforts to bring him to Canada. There is also the potential cultural element, where South Asians can be known to "believe in saving face"ⁱ. All these factors likely produced an immense fear of the shame that could result, not just for himself but fear of shaming his family as well.
- B) The gaming device incident/allegations and the school administration's approach to addressing it
- The approach taken in response to the emails from a peer's parent was less than ideal and likely had some impact on this young person's sense of safety when faced with a difficult situation. The language used in the emails from the other parent was strong and the accusatory nature of the messaging was serious. While the school administration was obliged to address the allegations, in this situation the approach taken may have caused more harm than remediation.
 - Parents entrust their children to education professionals with an understanding that they take on the responsibility of keeping them safe, nurturing them and providing assiduous attention to their health and comfortⁱⁱ. The handling of this incident by the adults involved did not seem to consider this young person's safety at the forefront of the interventions.
 - The combination of issues (A) and (B) likely exacerbated the circumstances leading this young person to believe that his only option was to take his life.
- C) History of peer conflict and bullying
- The evidence from both organizational records and anecdotal reports is clear that for approximately one year leading to his death, this young person was experiencing various forms of conflict and bullying with peers. Every bullying situation is unique and young peoples' responses to bullying can be difficult to understand. During childhood and adolescence there is a primary need for friendship and a sense of belonging with peersⁱⁱⁱ. As such, the accumulation of

these negative dynamics and interactions very likely negatively impacted his sense of safety, overall mental and physical wellness and his level of hope and confidence that things would get better.

- The greater the level of social hopelessness in victimized young people, the greater the risk for suicidal ideationⁱⁱⁱ. In the months preceding his death, there were reports from the adults around him that suggested he was increasingly lonely – conflict with peers, changing friends, seeming lack of safeguarding by school staff, his mother as his only family member in proximity. These factors suggest that he may have been at higher risk for suicidal ideation or even experiencing suicidal ideation and not reporting it.

D) Impact of potential trauma related to historical exposure to domestic violence and life as a newcomer to Canada

- This young person's exposure to domestic violence is understood to have been quite significant despite the limited details of his life prior to arriving in Canada. His history of trauma and potential desire to protect his mother may have played a role in how much he was able to cope with the challenging events that were unfolding. The impacts of trauma can be lasting.

DI) Lack of trauma-informed practice across systems

- Despite the multisectoral professionals involved quite clearly documenting their awareness of this young person's/family's history with domestic violence, there appeared to be a lack of understanding of the potential impact of that trauma and incorporating it into practice. In fact, one agency's documentation indicates that the issue of depression related to the domestic violence was not explored as it had occurred several years ago and was not thought to be a current concern. Evidently, the involved agencies need to undertake additional work to understand the lasting impacts of trauma on young people.

Supplementary Concerns Identified:

F) Missed opportunities to collaborate between education and child welfare sectors

- The involved child welfare agency and school missed several opportunities to effectively communicate and collaborate to ensure an informed approach to supporting this young person and ensuring his safety and well-being.

G) Divorce, family dynamics and help-seeking from a cultural context

- Divorce is understood to be stigmatized in conservative South Asian families, especially for the woman, who can often be socially isolated by other women in the community. Unfortunately, as well, children can often bear some of the burden of this stigma. If this young person was socializing with other South Asian peers (which there is evidence that he was), it is not unlikely that this stigma, coupled with his vulnerable pre-teen age, may have impacted the bullying he experienced and even his own bouts of aggression^{iv}.
- Personal and family issues including mental health needs can be viewed as burdens to bear in silence, where talking about these issues is stigmatized. While some attempts were made to refer the family to various community supports, as newcomers with little to no family supports in the country, they were likely faced with many barriers to being appropriately supported and it is important for service providers to recognize that these families could likely benefit from or need more direct assistance from the professionals around them^{iv}.

H) Response to parental call for help related to peer conflict

- The day before this young person's death his mother called the involved child welfare agency requesting help as both she and her son were fearful of the ongoing conflict with peers. This was a missed opportunity for the agency to offer support and explore the young person's safety and well-being at the time given that this 'call for help' would have been indicative that the recurring issues may have been escalating. What is perhaps most distressing is that the youth himself influenced his mother to make this call as he believed, based on previous conversations he had with the agency worker, that the agency was there to protect and help him with these sorts of issues.



Recommendations

Recommendations are suggested and discussed at the Local Death Review Table (LDRT) after the presentation of information from all parties, including a presentation by the Amicus on behalf of family and youth perspectives. Following the LDRT, the Child and Youth Death Review and Analysis (CYDRA) team reviews all information and meeting minutes and drafts preliminary recommendations which are then shared in draft form with the members who participated in the LDRT. Those who participated in the LDRT have the opportunity to comment, from their individual perspective, on the draft recommendations to ensure that the suggestions made at the LDRT are appropriately reflected. While all attempts are made to collaboratively develop recommendations with Office of the Chief Coroner (OCC) and the participants of the LDRT, the final recommendations are of the OCC.

As a result of the review of this death the following recommendations are made:

Documentation practices and protocol

To the Ministry of Education

1. Develop and implement standardized documentation requirements for school administrators and staff across the sector and establish these requirements as a Policy/ Program Memorandum. School administrators and staff should be required to diligently and completely record all interactions, actions, and decisions with students and their family members as they pertain to conflict with and between students and when bullying is alleged. These requirements should aim to meet the documentation standards of other sectors dealing with children and families such as healthcare or child welfare.
 - Standardized documentation requirements and practices should be utilized in follow-up actions to assess student well-being and risk. This should include a requirement of periodic review of documentation to ensure compliance.

Rationale:

It was noted that from the available education records related to this young person that there was inconsistent and incomplete documentation. The LDRT's assessment of the incidents that occurred and the subsequent actions or interventions related to this young person's experience in the education setting relied on minimal records and notes, which were generally handwritten in personal handbooks and/or in incomplete sentence form. In addition to the challenge of clearly understanding the circumstances and events in retrospect, better documentation would

likely improve the opportunity for education professionals to recognize significant trends and issues involving their students. The LDRT concluded that the school staff did not recognize a pattern of conflict or bullying. In addition, the interaction that occurred between the young person and the school administrator related to the gaming device incident, which appears to have had a significant impact on the young person just prior to their death, is not sufficiently documented for the LDRT to clearly understand all the details of the interaction.

To the involved Children's Aid Society

2. Revisit policies and protocols for intake staff regarding appropriately identifying if a caller has an open file, referring to the assigned worker, and ensuring that a family with an open file is provided some support with any issue that they may be dealing with, regardless of if it is technically the organization's or sector's mandate (for example, bullying).
 - If the issue is not within their mandate, they should partner with other agencies to coordinate and provide support. For example, if the concern is related to bullying, the child welfare agency should connect with the school (and other community resources with expertise, as appropriate) to address the request for assistance and find ways to provide support, not dismiss. If concerns continue to be referred to the child welfare agency, they should revisit these with the school (and the others) to ensure something is being done to protect the young person's right to safety.
3. Revisit training and protocols for proper documentation of all incoming and outgoing calls and correspondence.

Rationale:

In the days before this young person's death, his mother had contacted the child welfare agency for assistance related to ongoing conflict and bullying that her son was experiencing. For reasons unknown, this phone call was not documented by the receiving staff as would have been expected by the agency's standard practice. If the staff had searched the agency's database for a record of the caller's information (as per agency expectations), they would have determined that this family had an open file with the agency at the time. This should have been a flag to the individual(s) that this was potentially a family requiring additional support. Although bullying would not typically be considered a matter exclusively dealt with by the child welfare sector, given that the family had an open file with the agency there was a missed

opportunity to look into the needs further and explore ways the agency could have supported the family and the appropriate collaterals in addressing the concerns. The ambiguity around this interaction due to the failure to document it highlights the importance of proper and diligent documentation practices in all interactions with young people and their families.

Internal review in response to certain deaths

To the Office of the Chief Coroner, Regional Supervising Coroners' Offices

4. When non-natural deaths occur which may be related to circumstances connected to the education system, e.g. the young person's recent experiences in the school setting, the Regional Supervising Coroner should request the involved school board to conduct an internal organizational review, and this review may be used to inform the coroner's investigation.
 - a. To inform this decision making, introduce a requirement that Regional Supervising Coroners direct the investigating coroners to inquire as to the circumstances of the young person's educational situation as a part of their investigative inquiries.

To the Ministry of Education

5. Regarding the above recommendation, all school boards in Ontario should be prepared to receive such requests to conduct an internal organizational review from a Regional Supervising Coroner. This may require a review of the student's history, social and/or emotional risks, overall well-being, organizational policies and procedures, and how these may have impacted the circumstances leading up to the death. This work should be documented in a tangible output such as a summary or report.

Rationale:

The review of this young person's life and death highlighted an opportunity for the education sector to respond to and learn from the deaths of young people and the potential connections to their experiences in the education system. This young person's death immediately followed a week at school that consisted of at least two contentious incidents with other students which required intervention by various school staff. Additionally, there was a history (inadequately documented) of other contentious issues earlier in the school year. The sudden and unexpected death of this young person by unnatural means presents an opportunity for those primarily responsible for providing service to them to explore and reflect on the circumstances and interactions leading up to the death from fact-finding and lessons learned perspectives.

Information confirmed by both the young person's family and representatives of the involved school board indicated that although the school board had communicated that an investigation of sorts would take place following the death, this did not occur and therefore there is no documentation (summary, report, notes, etc.) indicating what was done, if anything, to verify and learn from this unfortunate situation. In the future, school boards could contribute to meaningful learning for example by reviewing education records, interviewing staff and carefully documenting these steps following the sudden and unexpected death of a student.

Suicide risk assessments related to bullying

To the Ministry of Education

6. All school boards to implement a practice standard for conducting suicide risk assessments in response to every report of or confirmed incident of bullying, as defined in Policy/Program Memorandum (PPM) No. 144, and that this requirement be incorporated via an amendment to PPM No. 144 and within a board of education's Bullying Prevention and Intervention Plans. This should also include a process for regular monitoring and review of these assessments.

Rationale:

Youth who are victimized experience a range of short- and long-term difficulties, both internalizing problems (anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation) and externalizing problems (aggression, delinquency, misconduct and attention problems). For victimized youth, the greater the level of social hopelessness the higher the risk of suicidal ideationⁱⁱ. Although this young person was involved with school social work services throughout the academic year, the state of their mental health and well-being, particularly in the preceding months, remains largely unclear and undocumented. There is however a combination of both documented and anecdotal evidence suggesting that this young person experienced recurring incidents of peer conflict and bullying both on and off school property since the beginning of the academic year.

Given the significant impact that even isolated or minor incidents of bullying can have on a young person, one concrete way that the school system may assess a victimized young person's mental state and well-being is by ensuring that each of these incidents are taken seriously and by conducting a suicide risk assessment in response. Had this approach been in place for this young person throughout the school year, those around him may have had an understanding of his potential mental state, his ability to cope and any potential risk for suicide.

To the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services and the involved Children’s Aid Society

7. All child welfare/child and family well-being agencies in Ontario to implement a practice standard for conducting suicide risk assessments for any young persons with an open file who are known or believed to have been impacted by incident(s) of bullying.

Rationale:

Given child welfare workers close interactions with young people and their families during investigations and in providing ongoing services, they would be in an ideal position to identify need for suicide risk assessments in response to reported or confirmed experiences of bullying. For example, it is evident in the available records that the child welfare agency’s workers were aware of this young person’s negative experiences with peers, particularly reported by his mother through various interviews and interactions. This could have been an opportunity for the agency to collaborate with the school or others as appropriate to coordinate a suicide risk assessment and better understand the impact that this young person’s experiences were having on his mental health and overall well-being.

Culturally responsive services and cultural allies

To the involved School Board and Children’s Aid Society

8. To address issues of racism, cultural bias and other forms of oppression that can emerge in a bullying context, should build a network of cultural allies by engaging community agencies with expertise that can offer front-line staff and decision makers with culturally relevant information so that a young person’s experience can be a culturally safe experience. Front line workers need extensive understanding of all the aspects of family life, including cultural identity and experiences in the larger context – understanding the bullying, navigating systems, connecting with collateral systems, etc.
 - For the education sector, this should include for example, reviewing Bullying Prevention and Intervention Plans from an anti-racism and anti-oppressive approach.
 - To incorporate this planning, at a practice level, frontline workers should be encouraged and enabled in developing inter-agency relationships with one another for the purposes of encouraging collaboration and referrals in individual situations. At a management level, leadership should identify and cultivate institutional, inter-agency relationships.

9. Provide education and training to staff on the cultural context of newcomers and ethno-linguistic communities with an understanding that help-seeking can be associated with stigma for some communities and cultures.

To the Ministry of Education

10. All school boards should consider how to best develop and implement a process whereby when working with newcomers, with the consent of the family, the school board connects with and involves a settlement agency that can provide advice and conduct screening of the student's/family's needs to explore their adjustment, support systems, etc. This information could be captured in the overall well-being reports maintained by social work services and could be utilized by the assigned social worker for ongoing follow up throughout the year as part of the family's support plan, giving them a more holistic understanding of the student's/family's well-being.

Rationale:

The LDRT identified several areas of missed opportunities across the sectors related to understanding and addressing the cultural context of this young person's experiences. Various factors, for example being from the South Asian community, a family potentially stigmatized by divorce and single-motherhood, and having only been in Canada for a short period of time, would have been critical to acknowledge and understand when interacting and providing meaningful service to this young person and their family. Those in both the education and child welfare sectors inadequately appreciated the impact that the cultural complexities could have had on the peer conflict and bullying, the willingness or lack thereof to seek help, and the potential shame of being labelled a "thief".

Cultural allies can be utilized by frontline workers who may be working with children, youth and families of cultures that the workers don't necessarily understand, particularly when they are newcomers. A professional – educator, social worker, etc. – cannot be expected to entirely understand each of the cultural realities and potential impacts of those that they are servicing as an individual from that culture with expertise and lived experience can. A network of cultural allies could be consulted for insight and guidance so that appropriate planning and provision of service/care can be provided to young people of diverse backgrounds and cultures and particularly those that may be newcomers. Had those providing service in both the education and child welfare sectors been provided advice or sought collaboration from those with cultural expertise, the missed opportunities in ensuring the well-being of this young person and their family could have been mitigated.

Additionally, this young person’s family was provided with a list of other community resources that they could refer to for additional support by the school social work services; however, anecdotal evidence suggests that these suggestions were not utilized. Although the reasons are unclear and may be personal or unrelated to culture, it is important to recognize that “help-seeking” can be stigmatized in various cultures and therefore culturally relevant strategies may be needed when guiding young people and their families to supports and services, particularly for newcomers.

Collateral communication and collaboration

To the involved Children’s Aid Society

11. Review and revise organizational policies and expectations of staff to thoroughly engage with collaterals to gather complete information and understanding of young persons, families and the dynamics prior to deciding to close a family’s file and/or conclude an investigation.

Rationale:

The LDRT found that when the child welfare agency engaged with school social work in relation to the child protection investigation, they appeared to be more incident-focused than would have been ideal and most beneficial to servicing the young person and family. The child welfare agency seemed to have been solely focused on the aspect of the potential discipline that led to the referral, rather than utilizing the opportunity of collateral communication and collaboration to gather more insight and understanding of the family’s history, potential traumas and other issues that may have been impacting the young person and their family at the time. Had the child welfare agency looked beyond the report of discipline that was determined to be unverified, they likely would have been able to support the young person and their family with the broader challenges they were experiencing.

To the involved Children’s Aid Society and School Board

12. Consider conducting a joint review and assessment of their communication, collaboration and partnership practices, based on the circumstances of this death.

Rationale:

It was noted in the available records that the child welfare agency and the school board only connected on one occasion – about one month after the initial referral was made – to discuss

the concerns related to this young person. The LDRT concluded that there was minimal collaboration between the sectors in terms of informing one another and working together to ensure that all the family's needs were being supported. The two organizations could benefit from evaluating their practices and approaches to collaborating to the greatest extent possible to meet the needs of the young people and families that they are meaning to support.

Early notification of trusted adults

To the Ministry of Education

13. All school boards to ensure that parents/guardians are notified immediately of any incidents of conflict involving their child(ren) prior to any investigation or disciplinary actions being taken by administrators or staff. Children and youth should have early access to a trusted adult in matters of conflict, regardless of their apparent role in the conflict.

14. All school boards shall forbid the use of potential police involvement as a threat when managing disciplinary interactions with minors in the educational setting. If police involvement is truly a potential outcome of a disciplinary interaction, it should be first communicated to the parent/guardian. In circumstances where the young person must be informed of potential police involvement, it should be done so in collaboration with their parent/guardian/trusted adult and not to the young person alone.

Rationale:

On the day of this young person's death, he had been brought into the school administrator's office as part of their investigation into the claims made around the gaming device. Due to inadequate documentation practices, the entire details of these interactions between the young person and the staff could not be confirmed by the LDRT, however, it was verified that the young person's parent was not notified of the incident nor the school's interventions until after the fact, at the end of the school day. Anecdotal evidence suggests that at some point it was communicated to the young person that as a result of allegations of theft, the police could potentially become involved.

The delayed notification of the young person's parent likely caused unnecessary stress and fear for him which could have been mitigated if it had been a requirement that a trusted adult – parent, guardian, etc. – be notified early on when dealing with matters of conflict, particularly with serious allegations, such as theft, and even more so if the allegations are potentially false.

It is also important to recognize that being accused or questioned about such serious allegations would have likely resulted in significant shame and fear of public humiliation. Any young person would likely be significantly impacted by this experience, but it is important to recognize how the cultural context and realities of being a newcomer may have emphasized this potential shame and fear.

In the future, these risks could likely be mitigated if school administrators and staff were required to notify parents/guardians before taking any action or intervention with serious incidents and allegations so that the opportunity for a trusted adult is provided, and secondly to ensure that potential law enforcement involvement is never solely communicated to a minor, particularly one who has not been given access to a trusted adult.

Trauma-informed practice

To the involved Children’s Aid Society and School Board

15. Social workers and child protection workers to be given mandatory trauma-informed training including the impacts of historical trauma. A primary principle of providing trauma-informed practices is to ensure that those involved have a full sense of safety in the context. Children who are bullied are not safe.

16. All front-line staff to be given more in-depth training and support in understanding the complexities of bullying – the many different forms of bullying, identifying and addressing bullying, and appropriately supporting young people and their families who may be impacted by it. This training should be informed by young people with lived experience – young people are and must be rightfully considered the experts here.
 - There is a need to make the connection between incidents that may appear isolated and the impact that even seemingly minor experiences can have on a young person’s relationships and sense of safety. Young people need to feel safe in school, at home and in the community.
 - There is also a need to understand that bullying is not solely an interracial issue but can often occur within individual cultures, races and communities. It can also happen between friends – or those who appear to be friends – and therefore is often missed by adults.

Rationale:

This young person was involved with both school-based social work and child welfare workers preceding his death, however, the LDRT noted that both sectors seemed to have lacked a trauma-informed approach to assessment and service provision. This young person was likely impacted by a variety of trauma related to exposure to domestic violence, the isolation he experienced as a result of the cultural stigmas, the experience of being a newcomer to Canada and also the bullying and assault he experienced with peers. Throughout the interactions with both sectors, the potential historical trauma that was likely impacting his well-being was overlooked.

Youth voice and leadership**To the involved School Board**

17. Include youth voice and youth leadership in all decision making to the greatest extent, including but not limited to decision making regarding approaches to student conflict and bullying and the supports required from the youth perspective. This should not be tokenistic and must encompass a meaningful side-by-side approach with youth as decision makers alongside adults.

To the involved Children's Aid Society

18. Include youth voice and youth leadership in all decision-making to the greatest extent. This should not be tokenistic and must encompass a meaningful side-by-side approach with youth as decision makers alongside adults.

Rationale:

Young people must be acknowledged as experts in what is going on around them, particularly related to their interactions with peers, their overall experiences and needs. Young people know what is happening, who is involved and what needs to be done to support themⁱⁱ. The recent report titled [Building Healthy Relationships and an Inclusive, Caring Learning Environment](#) provided detailed action steps to increasing youth ownership and youth voice and provides additional context and recommendations that may be helpful to organizations, particularly school boards, that are aiming to prioritize youth leadership^v. When decisions are being made that impact young people, young people should be involved in the decision-making process.

Relational frameworks

To the Ministry of Education

19. All school boards to adopt a relational policy framework as a companion to 'Promoting a Positive School Climate'. A number of resources should be developed as a part of this work:
- A review of job descriptions for school administration and staff to include relational aspects as a core competency. As a result, job descriptions, starting with principal and vice-principal, should be examined and revised to explicitly detail a primary requirement for these professionals to build and foster relationships with and amongst students, above any other authoritarian or administrative requirement of the role.
 - The relational framework should be accompanied by a practical resource that can be applied to the entire school, the classroom and/or to students, and that this be developed using an anti-oppression and anti-racism lens.
20. Add restorative approaches to Progressive Discipline and Promoting Positive Student Behaviour to Policy/Program Memorandum No. 145 and that all schools in Ontario recognize that restorative approaches to conflict mediation require training, policies and procedures and should be grounded in relationship-based approaches to building a positive school climate (e.g., relational approaches over discipline).

Rationale:

This young person cared deeply about his relationships with his teachers and peers, and yet at times there was a greater emphasis on managing situations and behaviours without attention to the underlying circumstances that were occurring in school and the community. These were critical events that were impacting his well-being both in and out of school. At times, when faced with bullying and other forms of victimization he was treated with discipline or punitive approaches, and as a result the adults missed opportunities to fully understand what he was going through. Positive relationships between youth and adults within the school setting promote youth well-being and enable adults to understand the underlying dynamics and issues that can contribute to student experience. Without a strong foundation of positive and trusting relationships students are more likely to experience interactions with those in authority roles as disciplinary in nature when difficult situations arise. When youth feel punished as opposed to feeling safe to share their experiences with a trusted adult then adults may fail to hear the extent of what youth are experiencing and the impacts that certain situations are having on them. While this youth did have trusting relationships with many teachers and professionals in

the school context, these were not always the individuals that were responding to the situations related to victimization, bullying and other challenges he was facing. When students that are being victimized are not listened to or heard it is unlikely that they will feel safe to share information. A relational framework that clearly articulates expectations that schools integrate opportunities to engage and debrief with students, and that those in authority roles also place the development of positive and health relationships as the primary focus of all interactions is foundational to student well-being. A relational framework is needed to set the overall foundation and expectation of adult and student interaction.

Recommendations from Youth

To all school boards in Ontario via the Ministry of Education

21. Develop enhanced programs or initiatives focused on encouraging bystanders to speak up and speak out against bullying. Youth know that peers/classmates often witness bullying-type behaviour but do not report it to a trusted adult. This can be significant for victims of bullying who may be afraid to speak up themselves or who are not being heard when they do.
 - It is important to note that beyond just peers/classmates, bystanders may also be staff – teachers, lunchroom supervisors, bus drivers, placement students, caretakers, etc.
22. Find ways to enhance and expand bullying awareness and education campaigns so that they collaboratively involve the participation of students, staff, parents/guardians and community members.
 - Youth believe that parents can often be unaware, uneducated or neglectful of the issues around bullying and conflict in school making it less than ideal for young people to address these experiences with them. Youth suggest that in addition to expanded bullying awareness and education campaigns, an educational resource for parents should be provided to them at enrollment or the commencement of the academic year so that they may be better informed on how to identify, address and respond to experiences of bullying and conflict, and what to expect from the school if their child is involved in bullying (either as a perpetrator or victim).
23. Explore the benefit of the implementation of mentorship models including options for peer mentorship with attention to training and supports for mentors that focuses on

prosocial skills, relationship, etc. Mentorship is a key way that youth believe the school system can better support students who are experiencing bullying or conflict with peers.

- Young people need connections aside from their parents or family members as it can be difficult for young people to connect with them on certain topics or issues and may be easier to connect to external adults or youth.
- Every student in the school should have at least one adult (preferably more) whom they trust and feel confident in talking with about any problems.

Potential Limitations of This Review

This review was conducted through a project to reframe the OCC's model of child and youth death review, exploring more wholistic and collaborative approaches to learning from the circumstances and interactions preceding a young person's death.

Not all service providers or service sectors involved with this young person throughout his lifespan were involved in this review and not all records relating to his interactions were available or utilized for this review.

Further, not all family members were consulted for this review and those that were had full autonomy and discretion with what information they shared for the purposes of the LDRT.

ⁱ Mukherji, A. (2020). South Asian Domestic Violence Survivors in Silicon Valley Grapple With COVID-19 Lockdown. *The Wire*: April 3, 2020. Retrieved from <https://thewire.in/women/south-asian-domestic-violence-survivors-in-silicon-valley-grapple-with-covid-19-lockdown>

ⁱⁱ Pepler, D. (2021). Expert Opinion: Local Death Review Table 2019-9188. Retrieved February 2021.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bonanno, R.A., & Hymel, S. (2010). Beyond hurt feelings: Investigating why some victims of bullying are at greater risk for suicidal ideation. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, 56:3, 420-440.

^{iv} Dinshaw, F. (2021). Expert Opinion: Local Death Review Table 2019-9188. Retrieved February 2021.

^v Safe Schools: Bullying Prevention & Intervention Review Panel. (2021). Building Health Relationships and an Inclusive, Caring Learning Environment: Final Report of the HWDSB Safe Schools Bullying Prevention and Intervention Review Panel. Retrieved from <https://www.hwdsb.on.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Safe-Schools-Report-2021-Full-Report.pdf>