

## Silent Gunshots: The Deafening Toll of Gun Violence in America

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### Description

In the United States (U.S.) mass murders have been cyclical. They make dramatic media headlines in the ongoing 24 hours news cycle then quickly fade into the background until the next massacre occurs. On June 17 2015 a gun man murdered nine persons in a Charleston South Carolina church. This terrorism was reminiscent of the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing that murdered four little Black girls in Birmingham on September 15, 1963. As a country we once again mourned. However, in 2014, 176 persons were shot in churches and 74 killed [1]. In the U.S. 2012 was the year of the gun. On December 14, America was yet again thrown into terror. Twenty 6 and 7 year-old children and six adults were slaughtered at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut by a gunman using semi-automatic handguns. The Newtown massacre was the second deadliest school shooting in U.S. history and one of the deadliest mass shootings worldwide. On July 20, terror rained down on dozens of folks watching the “Batman” premiere in the city of Aurora, Colorado. Less than three weeks later, Wade Michael Page, a 40-year-old army veteran, murdered six worshipers who were attending prayers at a Sikh temple. Schools and places of fantasy and faith have become slaughter houses in America. The human toll of gun violence in this country is astounding and undeniably deeply troubling. America’s firearm death rate is eight times higher than that of other industrialized nations and is frankly a humiliation. Annually, there are approximately 32,000 gun deaths per year, among which 60 percent are suicides, 3 percent are accidental deaths, and the remaining 34 percent classified as homicides [2].

More than 85 Americans die from gun violence daily—annually, another 73,000 are wounded and virtually millions are impacted by the psychological and social consequences of gun violence. Firearm deaths are the leading and second leading cause of mortality for African Americans and Hispanics ages 15 to 23 respectively [2]. We spend up to \$229 billion in direct and indirect costs (e.g., suicide, legal and medical fees, mental health care, emergency services, police investigations, security enhancements, long term prison costs) every year due to gun related murders and injuries [3]. For the past 16 years, I have been conducting research on the effects of community violence on the developmental trajectories of youth. From these studies, we know that guns represent the most pervasive form of community violence. Youth exposed to community violence are more vulnerable than their counterparts for experiencing depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD) or symptoms. That these youth also have a higher numbers of school absences, more problematic experiences with teachers and less positive peer group interactions. In addition, youth exposed to community violence are at increased vulnerability (especially boys) for joining gangs, using alcohol and drugs and engaging in high risk sexual behaviors which place them at greater odds for contracting sexually transmitted infections (STIs) [4]. My research shows that the linkages between the exposures to community violence and multiple youth concerns are not spurious but interrelated [4].

After countless surveys and interviews, we also know that most youth cope with such exposures by avoiding areas in their communities that are “hot spots” for violence or by trying to focus on school success to move out of high crime neighborhoods in order to make a better life

for themselves. Girls often adopt more passive coping styles than boys. Our findings also indicate that the vast majority of community violence occurs as the result of guns [5]. However, the larger picture of the costs and sequelae associated with gun violence is often lost when we look at acts of violence such as these most recent massacres, Columbine, and the 16 other mass gun murders in America since 1991. We fail to connect the dots that gun violence is related to a sequel of compounded mental health, academic, drug use, juvenile justice and public health concerns that concerns and has deleterious effects on us all [4]. Consequently, we easily compartmentalize these occurrences of gun violence and fall short of acknowledging our own culpability in the larger equation and solution to this problem. Few of us react as defiantly when our youth are murdered daily on American streets, especially when it involves white-on-white, brown-on-brown, and black-on-black gun slayings. Where in such instances is the national coverage, the rallies and the impetus to hold our elected officials accountable? There are too few examples. We vehemently rally and protest when such killings “are bold enough” to cross racial lines such as the recent Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and Freddie Gray cases. Without question these cases are abhorrent and injurious to us, evidenced by the countrywide protests of people from all works of life affirming that “Black lives matter.” However, how are we able to go about privileging in such strange ways certain types of violence such as those that cross racial lines as “abnormal” and in other instances making “abominations” such as black-on-black violence as acceptable? What message are we sending our youth about the value of certain human lives?

Last July 4 weekend, 52 persons were shot and 7 murdered in Chicago - a footnote for many. This flurry of violence is not confined to Chicago but present in many of America’s cities—St. Louis, Detroit, Baltimore—and the list continues. Too often, extreme violence has become a common occurrence in many of America’s cities. However, we are foolish to think that if we ignore the senseless gun violence taking place in our inner cities that it will not have a contagious effect on our pristine and protected city areas. For an illustration, we only need to look at Chicago and a rash of gun violence taking place on our affluent “Magnificent Mile.” When it comes to talking about mass murders, there is no shortage of discussion about the culpability of the National Rifle Association, the media and popular culture, the lack of common-sense federal gun policies, and politics and political ineptness, not to mention our appetite for violence as a culture and that we fail to have public discussions about mental illness. No doubt we can add many other items to this list.

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But when will we connect the dots and realize that addressing all senseless gun violence is not an inner city, black, white, or poor issue but an American concern? Without doubt, both sides must come to the table—the powerful gun lobbyists and those who advocate for stricter gun control. This is not only about protecting our second amendment rights but also enacting sensible gun control laws and necessary measures to protect our way of life as Americans and ensure our future national security. Persons also have the right to live and not be shot by random acts of senseless gun violence. Metal detectors have already become fixtures in our airports and many of our schools. It is time to say enough.

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