

THE IMPACT OF GUN VIOLENCE ON CHILDREN & TEENS

“I’M GLAD I MADE IT TO SEE 18.”

When Davonte was asked what he wanted for his birthday, he didn’t ask for a big celebration, he only said, “I’m glad I made it to see 18.” He was shot and killed less than one week after turning 18. He had previously spoken before the Baltimore City Council on youth violence prevention.

Children and teens in the US experience staggeringly high rates of gun deaths and injuries. They are also harmed when a friend or family member is killed with a gun, when someone they know is shot, and when they witness and hear gunshots. Gun homicides, non-fatal shootings, and exposure to gun violence stunt lives and, because of their disproportionate impact, reflect and intensify this country’s long-standing racial inequities.

Black and Hispanic children and teens are impacted by gun violence at higher rates than their white peers, in part because of deliberate policy decisions that created segregated neighborhoods and underinvestments in their communities.¹ Exposure to gun violence has an impact on children’s and teens’ psychological and mental well-being and affects their school performance, among other factors. When neighborhoods and schools are not safe from gun violence, entire generations of American children are affected.

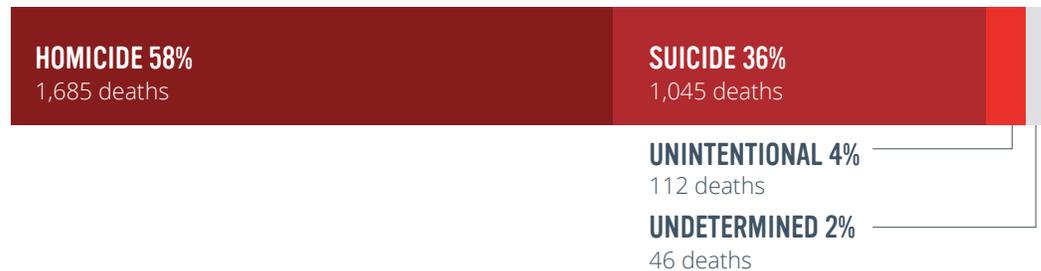
WHEN NEIGHBORHOODS AND SCHOOLS ARE NOT SAFE FROM GUN VIOLENCE, ENTIRE GENERATIONS OF AMERICAN CHILDREN ARE AFFECTED.

KEY FINDINGS

THE DEADLY IMPACT OF GUNS ON AMERICAN CHILDREN AND TEENS

Annually, nearly 2,900 children and teens (ages 0 to 19) are shot and killed, and nearly 15,600 are shot and injured — that’s an average of 51 American young people every day.² And the effects of gun violence extend far beyond those struck by a bullet: An estimated three million children witness a shooting each year.³ Gun violence shapes the lives of the children who witness it, know someone who was shot, or live in fear of the next shooting.

Child and teen gun deaths per year, by intent⁴



Firearms are the second leading cause of death for children and teens.⁵ This is a uniquely American problem. Compared to other high-income countries, American children aged 5 to 14 are 21 times more likely to be killed with guns, and American adolescents and young adults aged 15 to 24 are 23 times more likely to be killed with guns.⁶

When American children and teens are killed with guns, 58 percent are homicides—about 1,700 deaths per year.⁷ Children are particularly impacted by the intersection of domestic violence and gun violence. For children under age 13 who are victims of gun homicides, 85 percent of those deaths occur in the home, and nearly a third of those deaths are connected to intimate partner or family violence.⁸ Between 2009 and 2017, 86 percent of child victims (17 and under) of mass shootings died in incidents connected to domestic violence.⁹ Data drawn from 16 states indicate that nearly two-thirds of child fatalities involving domestic violence were caused by guns.¹⁰

Another 36 percent of child and teen gun deaths are suicides—over 1,000 per year.¹¹

And firearm suicide has been rising dramatically: Over the past decade, the firearm suicide rate among children and teens has increased by 76 percent.¹² For people of all ages, having access to a gun increases the risk of death by suicide by three times.¹³ Research shows that an estimated 4.6 million American children live in homes with at least one gun that is loaded and unlocked.¹⁴ The combination of suicidal ideation and easy firearm access can be lethal. When children under the age of 18 die by gun suicide, they are likely to have used a gun they found at home: Over 80 percent of child gun suicides involved a gun belonging to a parent or relative.¹⁵

Gun violence manifests in a myriad of ways in American schools, and school shootings have created new anxieties for the younger generation of students. According to an Everytown analysis, there have been at least 405 incidents of gunfire on school grounds from 2013 to 2018.¹⁶ Of these, 260 occurred on the grounds of an elementary, middle, or high school, resulting in 109 deaths and 219 injuries.¹⁷ While mass shootings like the incident at Sandy Hook — and, more recently, Parkland and Santa Fe — are not commonplace, schools are more likely to experience homicides and assaults, unintentional shootings resulting in injury or death, and suicide and self-harm injuries. All incidents of gun violence in schools, regardless of their intent or victim count, compromise the safety of students and staff.

NINETY-TWO PERCENT OF ALL HOSPITALIZATIONS OF CHILDREN FOR FIREARM INJURIES OCCUR IN URBAN AREAS.

Children and teens who live in cities are at a significantly higher risk of gun homicides and assaults compared to their peers in rural areas. Ninety-two percent of all hospitalizations of children for firearm injuries occur in urban areas (counties with over 50,000 residents).¹⁸ These injuries have lifelong consequences: Almost 50 percent of the wounded have a disability when they are discharged from the hospital.¹⁹ Fifteen- to 19-year-olds in urban areas are hospitalized for firearm assaults at a rate eight times higher than 15- to 19-year-olds in rural areas.²⁰ Urban and low-income youth are much more likely to witness gun violence than suburban and higher-income youth.²¹

THE DISPROPORTIONATE IMPACT OF GUN VIOLENCE ON BLACK AND HISPANIC CHILDREN AND TEENS

As with gun violence generally, impact among children and teens is not equally shared across populations. **Firearms are the leading cause of death for Black children and teens in America,²²** and they are 14 times more likely than their white counterparts to die by gun homicide.²³ Black children are 10 times more likely to be hospitalized for a firearm assault than white children.²⁴ Hispanic children and teens are three times more likely to die by firearm homicide than their white peers.²⁵

White and Black children may live in the same city yet experience it differently. Due to policy decisions that result in racial segregation and disinvestment in certain communities, gun violence is concentrated in Black neighborhoods within cities, many of which are marked by high levels of poverty and joblessness and low levels of investment in education.²⁶ A high concentration of these factors in a neighborhood is referred to as “concentrated disadvantage” and is a strong predictor of violent crime. Youth in neighborhoods that experience concentrated disadvantage can be isolated from institutions such as schools and jobs, increasing the risk that they will engage in crime and violence, thus feeding into this vicious cycle.²⁷

Black and Hispanic children in cities are exposed to violence at higher rates than white children. Exposure includes witnessing violence, hearing gunshots, and knowing individuals who have been shot. Black children in Columbus, OH, were exposed to 66 percent more violence, on average, than white children.²⁸ In Chicago, Hispanic children had 74 percent greater odds of exposure to violence, and Black children 112 percent greater odds, than white children.²⁹ When children in these cities are exposed to gun violence, their communities and schools often lack the resources to help them heal.³⁰

The disproportionate impact of gun violence on Black and Hispanic children and teens extends to schools. Among the 253 incidents of gunfire at K-12 schools between 2013 and 2018, where the racial demographic information of the student body was known, 64 percent occurred in majority-minority schools.³¹ **Although Black students represent approximately 15 percent of the total K-12 school population in America, they constitute 24 percent of the K-12 student victims of gunfire who were killed or injured on school grounds.**³²

Black students represent



HARM TO CHILDREN FROM VIOLENCE

- drug and alcohol abuse
- depression and anxiety
- posttraumatic stress disorder
- aggressive and violent behavior
- criminal activity
- poor performance in school
- reduced physical activity

While the above discussion shows the disparate experiences of gun violence by race and ethnicity, the data further shows that **gun violence is concentrated in specific neighborhoods in cities, with some schools and certain communities experiencing gun violence with an alarming frequency.**

- Of the schools covered by gunshot detection technology in **Washington, DC**, just 9 percent experienced nearly half of all gunfire incidents. Four schools, including two middle schools and two high schools, had at least nine incidents of gunfire within just 500 feet of the school.³³
- Similarly, in **Los Angeles**, 34 percent of middle school students in one neighborhood with high rates of violence reported exposure to firearm violence.³⁴
- At certain urban middle schools in **Texas**, nearly 40 percent of boys and 30 percent of girls have witnessed a gun being pulled.³⁵
- A study of 7-year-olds in an **urban neighborhood** found that 75 percent had heard gunshots, 18 percent had seen a dead body, and 61 percent worried some or a lot of the time that they might get killed or die.³⁶

THE FAR-REACHING EFFECTS OF CHILDREN'S & TEENS' EXPOSURE TO GUN VIOLENCE

Children are harmed in numerous ways when they witness violence. Children exposed to violence, crime, and abuse are more likely to abuse drugs and alcohol; suffer from depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorder; resort to aggressive and violent behavior; and engage in criminal activity.³⁷ Exposure to community violence, including witnessing shootings and hearing gunshots, makes it harder for children to succeed in school.³⁸

Exposure to gun violence can also erode physical health. When children live in neighborhoods where gun violence is common, they spend less time playing and being physically active, with one study finding that children said they would engage in an additional hour of physical activity every week if safety increased in their neighborhood.³⁹

Stress related to gun violence affects student performance and well-being in schools. School-aged children have lower grades and more absences when they are exposed to violence.⁴⁰ High school students who have been exposed to violence have lower test scores and lower rates of high school graduation.⁴¹ One study estimated that Black children in Chicago's most violent neighborhoods spend at least a week out of every month functioning at lower concentration levels due to local homicides.⁴² In Syracuse, NY, elementary schools located in areas with high concentrations of gunshots had 50 percent lower test scores and higher rates of standardized test failure compared to elementary schools in areas with a low concentration of gunshots.⁴³

Black high school students in the US are over twice as likely as white high school students to miss school due to safety concerns.⁴⁴ In Chicago, following spikes in neighborhood violence, students reported feeling less safe, experiencing more disciplinary problems, and having less trust in teachers.⁴⁵

HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS WHO HAVE BEEN EXPOSED TO VIOLENCE HAVE LOWER TEST SCORES AND LOWER RATES OF HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION.

RECOMMENDATIONS

One essential way to protect American children and teens from gun violence in their communities and schools is to prevent people with dangerous histories from ever getting a gun. Recommendations for comprehensive gun safety laws include:

Background checks on all gun sales: The foundation of any comprehensive gun violence prevention strategy must be background checks for all gun sales. Under current federal law, criminal background checks are required only for sales conducted by licensed dealers. This loophole is easy to exploit and makes it easy for convicted felons or domestic abusers to acquire guns without a background check simply by finding an unlicensed seller online or at a gun show.

Extreme Risk laws: These laws, increasingly being adopted by states, empower family members and law enforcement to petition a judge to temporarily block a person from having guns if they pose a danger to themselves or others. Extreme Risk laws — also known as Red Flag laws — can help prevent suicide, too. That is meaningful because suicide accounts for nearly two-thirds of gun deaths in this country,⁴⁶ and the suicide rate among children and teens has been increasing exponentially in the past 10 years.

Responsible gun storage and child access prevention laws: Responsible storage laws require people to store firearms responsibly to prevent unsupervised access to firearms. A subset of these laws, known as child access prevention laws, specifically target unsupervised access by minors. Responsible firearm storage practices are associated with reductions in the risk of self-inflicted and unintentional firearm injuries among children and teens — up to 85 percent depending on the type of storage practice.⁴⁷

Keeping guns out of the hands of domestic abusers: Children are frequent casualties of domestic violence homicides when a gun is involved. Research also shows that the presence of a gun in a domestic violence situation makes it five times more likely that a woman will be killed.⁴⁸ It is imperative to keep guns out of the hands of domestic abusers to keep women, children, and their families safe. When abusers are convicted of domestic violence or subject to final restraining orders, they should be blocked from purchasing guns and required to turn in those they already own. We also need to close the “boyfriend loophole” by making sure those laws apply to abusers regardless of whether the violence is directed towards a spouse or a dating partner.

In addition to evidence-based gun safety laws, there are a number of programs and strategies that communities and schools can adopt to keep children and teens safe from gun violence, some examples of which include:

Threat assessment programs: Threat assessment programs—like the Everytown and AFT-endorsed Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines (VSTAG)⁴⁹—help schools identify students who are at risk of committing violence and get them the help they need in order to resolve student threat incidents.⁵⁰ The programs generally consist of multi-disciplinary teams that are specifically trained to intervene at the earliest warning signs of potential violence and divert those who would do harm to themselves or others to appropriate treatment. Several studies have found that schools that use threat assessment programs see fewer students carry out threats of violence and experience fewer suspensions, expulsions, and arrests.⁵¹ Importantly, studies have shown that VSTAG threat assessment programs generally do not have a disproportionate impact on students of color.⁵²

Safe and equitable schools: School communities must look inside their schools to make sure they are encouraging effective partnerships between students and adults, while also looking externally to ensure that they are a key community resource. Schools should review discipline practices and ensure threat assessment programs are not adversely affecting school discipline. They should work to become “community schools” by building effective community partnerships that provide services that support students, families, and neighborhoods. If and when employing school resource officers (SROs), schools should take steps to build relationships between communities and law enforcement.