The Lab Report

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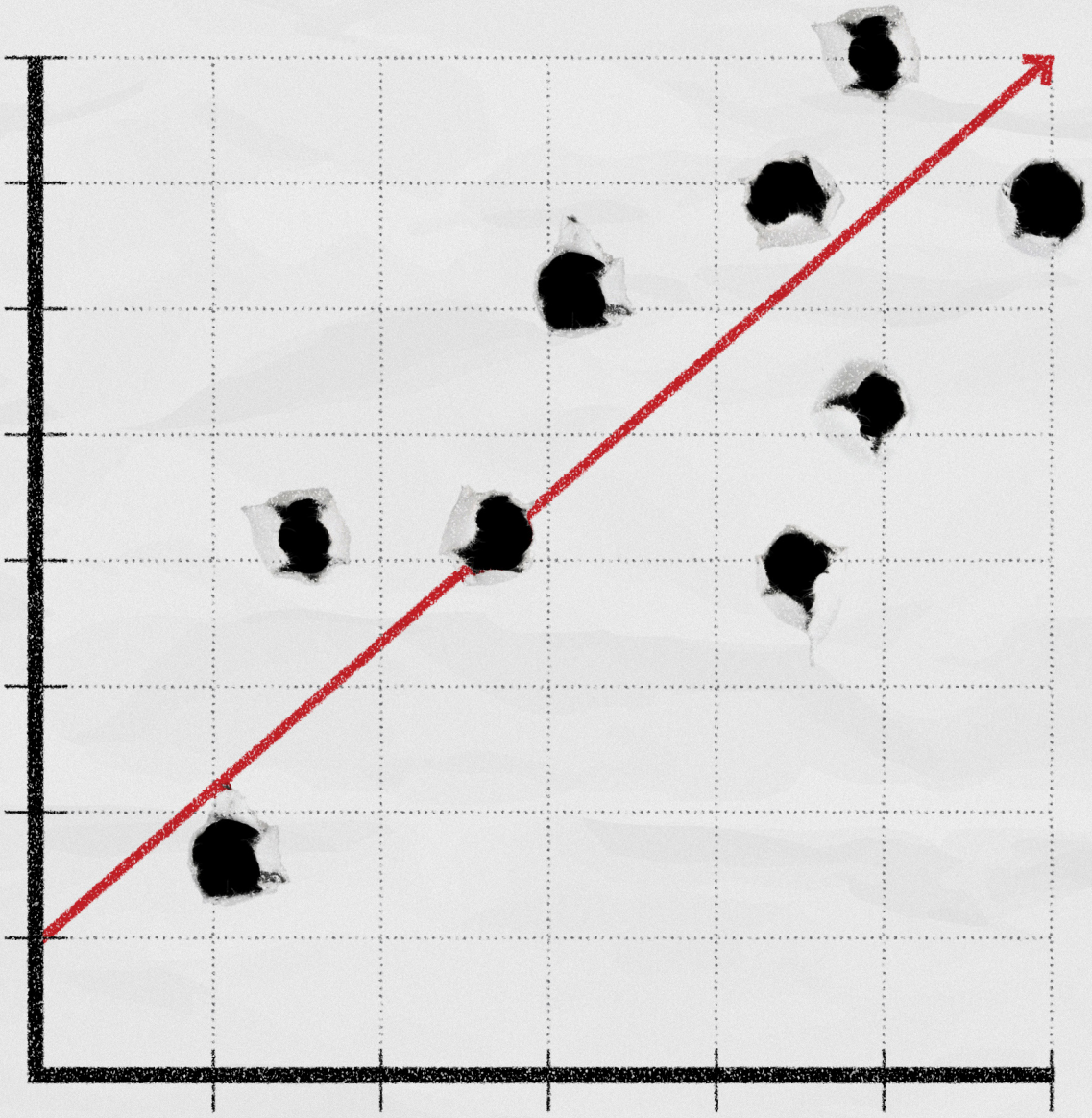

The Rise in U.S. Gun Violence

Causes and Policy Responses

College of Liberal Arts

Public Policy Lab

Public Policy Lab

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Contents

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From the Editors

Every day more than one hundred Americans die by firearm. Whether through accidents, suicides, homicides, or police-involved shootings, every year tens of thousands of Americans lose their lives to a gun. Perhaps most alarmingly, firearms are now the number one cause of death among children aged one to nineteen years old, a significant majority of which are violent assaults. In 2022 there were 2,262 shooting victims in Philadelphia; 473 of these vistims died from their injuries. However, gun deaths are not exclusively a matter of urban violence as gun-related deaths continue to rise in rural communities as well. While gun violence appears endemic in the US, its effects are not felt equally by all with notable disparities based on race, ethnicity, age, and sex, among others. What is clear is that gun violence represents a clear and present danger to American communities.

The causes of gun violence are complex with economic, cultural, institutional, constitutional, psychological, and sociological roots, to name just a few factors. Similarly, the potential policy responses to this crisis and the willingness of the population to entertain, let alone enact, them are equally diverse. Few issues garner as much impassioned debate as gun safety reform in the US. Further, in a country where guns are estimated to outnumber the total population of people and where a deep-seated culture of gun ownership is pervasive, serious questions persist about the efficacy of any given policy proposal to stem the tide of violence. And yet many agree: Something must be done.

In this issue of *The Lab Report*, we bring together researchers and advocates to examine the rise in US gun violence. Through their research, advocacy, policymaking, and lived experiences, the diverse perspectives of these essayists provide unique insights into the causes of gun violence and the policy responses we might pursue as a result. Their invaluable insights offer us a glimpse into the tragic reality of gun violence today as well as ways forward.

Jennifer Carlson begins her essay by pointing out that American gun violence is an outlier when compared to our "peer" nations. After interrogating both the high rates of gun ownership in the US and our under resourced and underdeveloped social safety net, she chronicles the evolution of racialized attitudes about gun ownership and personal safety. She argues we must move beyond a singular focus on "the guns" to solve our current crisis and instead empower communities to intervene before gun violence happens.

Reuben Jones lives with the effects of gun violence every day, both in his personal and professional lives. As the executive director of Frontline Dads, Inc., he is on the ground in communities most affected by gun violence. In his essay, he calls for a "Community Investment Plan," targeted to the Black and Brown communities that have endured historic oppression and ongoing disinvestment and have been overly burdened by the traumas of gun violence.

Elizabeth Glazer highlights the unique role that local governments can, and must, play to end gun violence. Rather than relying on a "force-first" approach to public safety, she argues that local governments should invest in community resources like jobs, parks, and schools to (re)build communities and reduce the reliance on police as providers of social

services rather than law enforcement. Well-administered cities can restore not just faith in local government, but in the very pillars of a democratic society.

Why is it so easy to access guns? Jason Gravel answers that question through an analysis of social networks, exploring the ways some people can leverage their connections to access firearms, even when they are prohibited by law from purchasing them. Through a contagion model, he examines the ways that not just guns and violence but also fear, grief, and trauma travel through networks. It becomes clear then that the solution to gun violence requires intervention at the community level, rather than the individual level.

Caterina Roman draws the connection between gun violence and illicit drug markets. Using Philadelphia's Kensington neighborhood as an example, she charts the correlation between rising fentanyl use, overdose deaths, and gun violence. To resolve these co-occurring crises, she calls for a coordinated response and the use of opioid settlement funds to aid not just the health effects of illicit drugs, but the community effects—particularly rising rates of gun violence—as well.

Gun violence is a topic wrought with emotion, trauma, and intense debate. But it is indisputable that people and communities are suffering greatly, and something must be done. Temple University itself has felt the tragic effects of gun violence. The lives lost in our community represent just a fraction of those lost in our city, state, and nation, but these losses weigh heavily on our university. In homes, schools, houses of worship, and neighborhoods across the country, too many are grieving similar losses. The authors of the following essays offer concrete steps that can be taken to begin reducing gun violence and saving lives.

Judith A. Levine
Colin J. Hammar

WHAT IS SO EXCEPTIONAL ABOUT GUNS IN AMERICA?

Jennifer Carlson

There is a question that often nags at American advocates for greater gun regulation: Why can't the US be more like the UK, Canada, or Australia when it comes to gun policy? In each of these countries, just a single heinous act of gun violence—the Dunblane Massacre in Scotland, the Montreal Massacre in Canada, and the Port Arthur Massacre in Australia—galvanized politicians and the public into not just entertaining but also enacting sweeping gun regulations. Each of these countries enjoy levels of gun violence almost unimaginable to Americans: There were just 297 gun homicides in Canada in 2021 and for the past few years, annual gun homicides have hovered between thirty and forty in the UK and Australia. The most recent data for the US? Nearly twenty thousand gun homicides in 2020 alone, with African Americans twelve times as likely as whites to die by gun homicide. Even per capita, the US rate dwarfs that of Canada, the UK, and Australia. The US's out-of-step and egregiously unequal rates of gun violence alongside its basic lack of action with respect to gun policy raise a vexing question: If other countries can do it, why can't we?

More than Guns: Interrogating Inequality in US Society

Gun-centric comparisons between the US and other countries can provide a powerful means of galvanizing public outrage regarding gun violence and reminding Americans that gun violence is neither inevitable nor tolerable. However, it rests on a faulty presumption: that the US is fundamentally like its so-called "peer" nations except for its record on guns.[1] But that is simply not true. Intertwined with its outlier status on guns, the US is also an outlier on other fronts: the scale of its carceral system, the rate of police-perpetrated homicides, its levels of income and wealth inequality, the rate of child poverty, the level of affordability and accessibility of the healthcare system, its decline in life expectancy, and other measures that differentiate equal, safe societies with robust social supports from unequal, insecure societies with withering social safety nets. Indeed, when it comes to issues of safety and security as well as equality and justice, perhaps the US is a lot less like the UK, Canada, and Australia than it is like Brazil, Venezuela, India, or Columbia—four nations that, together with the US, comprised 65.9% of all gun deaths in 2019 globally.

Of course, another key fact distinguishes the contemporary US from its "peer" nations at the time the latter passed sweeping gun control: The US far outpaces the rest of the world in civilian-owned guns per capita, rates buttressed by a robust, and increasingly diverse, culture of legally-sanctioned gun ownership, carry, and use. But thinking through what constitutes the US's "peers" with respect to gun violence forces us to consider that the problem of gun violence in the US cannot be reduced to the sheer prevalence of guns in America. Yes, the fact that there are more guns than people in the US means that, even if the vast majority of American gun-owners are law-abiding, gun harm will be more prevalent than in a society in which guns are scarce. But gun prevalence should serve not so much as the "obvious" answer to the question of American gun violence (as it often is treated) but rather as a means for reckoning with the core challenge that those invested in reducing gun violence must face: how to craft *not only effective but also politically feasible* gun policy. Given this broader context of structural inequality alongside gun prevalence, US gun policies must not only account for the specific dynamics

1. Geopolitical comparisons, including the grouping together of certain nations as "peers," are often animated by presumptions about hierarchies of nations (hence, the now-outdated "first world"/"third world" terminology). As Charles Mills (and others) notes, such hierarchies reflect racialized ideas, rooted in colonializing/white supremacist thinking, which continue to shape geopolitical orders. For that reason, I place quotation marks around "peer" nations to recall the contingent (and problematic) dynamics of such comparisons, and I emphasize structural similarities and differences rather than normative presumptions in making geopolitical comparisons.

underlying gun violence as a social problem in the US. But also, those policies—no matter how effectively crafted—must also traverse a very different political path to passage and enforcement than in so-called "peer" countries. The most effective gun policies for the US will not matter if they either are not passed, are not enforced, or are enforced in ways that reproduce disparities—particularly racial disparities—in harm.

From this perspective, the prevalence of guns might serve instead as an invitation to reframe the very question of guns in America: Why do so many Americans—roughly a third of American adults, including millions of first-time gun owners in 2020 and 2021—turn to guns? If you directly ask US gun owners, the overwhelming answer is "self-defense"—an apparently straightforward assertion of one's desire for safety and security via guns. But this concern was not always so urgently connected to gun ownership. In decades past hunting was given as the number one reason for gun ownership and, as recently as the 1960s, a majority of Americans appeared to favor a handgun ban—handguns, of course, being the preferred firearm of self-defense.

The War on Crime and the Politics of Guns

American attitudes on handguns would begin dramatically shifting starting in the 1960s when the American Dream of community cohesion and upward mobility began transforming into an American nightmare of insecurity and inequality. Not that the possibility of realizing this dream ever really existed for most Americans cut out of mainstream opportunities; it did not. But the 1960s was a moment in which the promise of upward mobility began to stall even for the white middle class: The social safety net started to unravel, and crime soon transformed into an ever-more central social concern. Rather than prompting a rethinking and reimagination of the American social contract, however, these changes were experienced by those invested in traditional US social hierarchies as both disorienting and threatening. Sociologists Angela Stroud and Jonathan Metzl highlight how the perceived decline of white masculinity in particular shaped both the hardline approach, led by the National Rifle Association, that mainstream gun rights politics would take in the 1970s onwards as well as the everyday appeal of guns to white conservative men who felt threatened both from below (by racialized minorities, women, sexual minorities and other marginalized groups) and from above (by the so-called liberal elites in media and politics that, presumably, coddled the former). Amid a broader reconfiguration of white supremacy that unfolded around the Civil Rights Movement, crime provided a colorblind language to both capture the anxiety of whites fretful at the prospect of racial transformation as well as the fears of racially marginalized communities experiencing surging violence first-hand. Rather than tackle the underlying patterns of inequality undergirding these clashing trepidations (as well as the white apathy—and antipathy—that allows the suffering of racialized others to be tolerated), the so-called "War on Crime" encouraged Americans to fear one another, transforming racial politics in America by hyper-criminalizing racialized minorities under what Michelle Alexander would call the "new Jim Crow."

Turning strangers (and sometimes neighbors) into threats, this shift in attitudes also incited a broader reorientation to public policy that would increasingly imagine and address social problems as problems of crime, particularly social problems associated with communities of color. Under this strategy of "governing through crime" (to use Jonathan Simon's framework), punitive approaches have been taken up to deal with a wide array of social problems such as poverty, immigration, even school discipline, bloating the criminal justice system and recruiting non-criminal justice actors—social workers, case workers,

teachers—into the project of punitive sanctions. Gun violence was no exception to this trend. Disproportionately impacting people of color in socioeconomically marginalized communities, gun violence is as much a public health issue as it is an issue of crime as community public health experts such as Joseph Richardson, John Rich, and others show. But as with other solutions to social problems faced disparately by people of color, responses to gun violence have taken the shape not of *gun control* but of *crime control*: stop and frisk policies aimed at clearing streets of guns; mandatory minimum sentencing and sentencing enhancement laws that criminalize people who commit crimes while in possession of a firearm—whether the gun is used illegally or not; and felon-in-possession laws that criminalize otherwise law-abiding possession by virtue of the possessor's felony status, including for non-violent or drug-related crimes. One jarring statistic: African Americans were over-represented by more than four-fold among New York felony gun possession cases in 2020.

Scholars and practitioners, including legal scholar James Forman Jr. and DC Attorney General Karl Racine, have criticized such laws insofar as they disparately impact African Americans, expand the reach of the criminal justice system, and provide little of the social support necessary to address the underlying factors that facilitate gun violence. Writing about a proposed Maryland bill that would increase penalties for illegal gun possession, Heather Warnken and Joseph Richardson warn about the profound harms of incarceration on individuals, families, and communities: "Much like the disastrous war on drugs, we will not incarcerate our way out of the epidemic of gun violence." The US may not have "peer"-nation style gun control, but the brand of gun control that has existed—punitive criminal justice sanctions—disproportionately entangles marginalized Americans into a criminal justice system that ultimately yields more harm than protection (not to mention disenfranchises them from a constitutional right—to keep and bear arms—that has been rendered ever more central to full exercise of US citizenship). And while incarceration stands to derail individual lives, tear apart families, and leave community resilience withered, this system rarely works to the benefit of victims: Murder clearance rates barely surpass fifty percent, with homicides involving African American victims most likely to remain unsolved. Victims who survive gun violence, meanwhile, are typically given few tools and sparse support as they return to the very contexts that led to their violent victimization in the first place, ramping up the risks for protracted trauma as well as subsequent violence while failing to address the community-level factors that made gun violence possible in the first place.

This contradictory combination of state intrusion and state abandonment opened the door for another major consequence of the War on Crime with respect to the distinctiveness of US gun politics: the embrace of guns as an everyday tool of safety and security amid the presumption of social insecurity and state inefficacy. Fear of further violence alongside profound legal cynicism helps explain why gun carry is so prevalent among communities that experience routine gun violence. One study found that Black men who survived gunshot wounds saw gun carry as a means to restore and repair a profound loss of safety. Black boys and men—who comprise half of gun homicide victims—navigate a singular landscape of gun crime as compared to other groups. And yet, I heard echoes of this same dilemma—that Americans must not only navigate a context of insecurity, but they must figure out how to do so on their own—in my interviews with gun carriers, with gun sellers, and even with public law enforcement. After all, this is precisely what happened in 2020 and into 2021 as civil unrest unfolded, pandemic insecurities ruled, and democratic instability threatened. In that context of so-called unprecedented uncertainty, gun sales surged to record-breaking levels, and not just among the white conservative men who comprise the typical profile of the

American gun owner. The number of first-time gun buyers spiked, as did women, racialized minorities, and even liberals who were buying guns in noticeably larger numbers. African American gun purchasing increased, according to the National Shooting Sports Foundation, by nearly sixty percent in the first six months of 2020 alone. Gun sellers, fifty of whom I interviewed during 2020 for my book *Merchants of the Right*, told me time and time again that gun buyers across demographics were flocking to their stores in search of safety, security, even what one gun seller described as a "guarantee": "When you have uncertainty, you have to have a guarantee, and the only guarantee in this country is the right to protect yourself." Amid the terms of the War on Crime—an outstripped emphasis on criminal insecurity as a central social problem alongside withering social services that send people the message that they are ultimately on their own—Americans have responded by turning to one of the few tools of security available that is so concrete they can literally hold it in their hands.

Was this response to the War on Crime yet another example of the US's outlier status? Perhaps, but perhaps not. There was no comparable gun run in Canada, the UK, or Australia, but in Brazil, 2020 gun sales surged exponentially.

Current US Responses to Gun Violence: Same Old Song or a New Tune?

As we would soon learn, 2020 was not only a record-breaking year for gun sales in the US but also for American gun violence: Though the overall gun death rate was still lower than its peak in the 1970s, 2020 saw the highest year-to-year increase in gun homicides since 1968. As gun crime surged in homes and streets across the US, debates surrounding gun restrictions were ignited by headline-grabbing mass shootings that had eerily abated during 2020 only to burst back into public consciousness as pandemic lockdown restrictions eased. Not a single one of these shootings led to the kind of gun control that passed in the aftermath of similar acts of violence in Canada, the UK, or Australia. Entire classes of guns would not be banned; there would be no national firearms buy-back program; and sweeping reform of the background check system—such as making background checks universal for all gun sales, something inordinately popular with the public—would not come to fruition. Nevertheless, after back-to-back mass shootings in Buffalo, New York, and Uvalde, Texas, the US Congress moved in mid-2022 to pass what many had long deemed impossible: a bipartisan gun reform bill. Largely leaving intact the basic US premise of broad gun availability, the bill fell far short of what many gun violence prevention advocates had hoped for. Indeed, juxtaposed with the US Supreme Court's endorsement of constitutional protections on gun carry in the *Bruen* decision released just two days prior to the signing of the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, the bill could easily be seen as once again distinguishing the US as an outlier in its indifferent response to gun violence.

However, that interpretation would be—pardon the pun—jumping the gun. Rather than the same old song, innovative approaches—such as community violence intervention (CVI)—took center stage in the bill. CVI refers to interventions to interrupt gun violence before it happens and to address the deeper psychological and social ramifications when it does. CVI programs directly challenge the ongoing socioeconomic conditions that make gun violence possible for those most at risk: people living in underserved and overpoliced areas of concentrated gun violence, particularly boys and men of color in those communities. Reducing reliance on the criminal justice system as the go-to "solution" to gun violence, CVI initiatives instead expand community-level social services and economic support, intervening in street-level disputes before they escalate to gun violence and providing trauma-

informed care to gun violence survivors to both prevent further violence and to mend the wounds—visible and invisible, psychic and social—that gun violence leaves in its afterlife. Some groups, like the Chicago organizers profiled in the documentary *The Interrupters*, swear off ties with public law enforcement as a matter of centering the needs of those communities experiencing vulnerability to both gun violence and the criminal justice system. Others selectively work with law enforcement to ensure that trauma-informed services are delivered as quickly as possible to gunshot wound survivors and their friends and families. Some are focused on the streets; others provide care in hospitals. Crime Survivors for Safety and Justice has developed a model for Trauma Recovery Centers that provide wraparound services to address the multifaceted needs of survivors and impacted loved ones.

At their best, CVI programs do the hard work of changing cultural, social, and economic conditions that facilitate gun violence at the street level. *And this is hard work*. A recent study led by David Hureau shows that CVI workers, often gun violence survivors themselves, are exposed to levels of gun violence that far exceed public law enforcement and experience pervasive secondary trauma—dynamics that must be addressed if CVI initiatives are to become centerpieces of US gun prevention efforts. And there is reason to hope that they do. These initiatives are effective: Though implementation parameters vary, cities across the US have seen reductions in homicides and shootings ranging from thirty to sixty percent. But as the bill's name indicates, it is not just that these initiatives are effective at reducing gun violence; it is that they are also politically feasible.[2]

Reckoning with US Gun Violence

Reducing the centrality of guns in America as the singular response to insecurity, alongside facing up to the socioeconomic conditions that make gun violence possible, is how gun violence will ultimately get solved in this country. But because of the way guns are embedded in American life—from bottom-up everyday politics to top-down social policies—it is unlikely that the path that gun policy takes will mirror that in so-called "peer" nations. We are indeed out of step with them—with regard to not just gun violence and gun prevalence but also the politics and policies, often embedded in anti-Black racism, which have led to a withered social safety net and an overreliance on criminal justice "solutions." These factors are, of course, interrelated: The War on Crime shaped how guns are regulated—we have crime control, rather than gun control—and has, alongside the withered social safety net, deepened the appeal of guns as everyday tools of safety and security.

Reckoning with the reality of gun violence in the US—particularly for those most likely to be its victims—must entail recognizing that American gun violence is about more than just "the guns." The lack of a social safety net and the overreliance on punitive measures interlock in ways that disproportionately put boys and men of color—particularly Black boys and men—at the intersection of multiple vulnerabilities and harms. Among "peer" nations, the US is unique in this predicament—and its path out of it will, most likely, also need to be unique. And that is where initiatives like CVI come in, precisely because they remind us of the power of ingenuity in transforming the parameters of US gun policy to effectively and feasibly reduce gun harm without further collateral damage.

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2. With political feasibility, of course, should come caution. As with community policing two decades ago, CVI initiatives run the risk of being captured by public law enforcement interests, undermining the premise of their effectiveness as harm-reducing initiatives. The diversity of programs that fall under the mantra of community gun violence means that expanded funding could lead to dampened efficacy, as organizations rebrand their activities without adopting the core premises of CVI.

WASH, RINSE, REPEAT: THE CRISIS OF GUN VIOLENCE IN PHILADELPHIA

Reuben Jones

As a gun violence prevention advocate with a specific expertise in urban violence, I am deeply concerned about the rise of gun violence in Philadelphia, the root causes of gun violence, and the impact of gun violence on the psyche of families, victims, and survivors across the city. From 2013 through 2017, I served as the social services coordinator for Philadelphia's Focused Deterrence, a gun violence reduction strategy that contributed to the city's lowest gun violence rate in fifty years (246 homicides in 2013). I also served on the mayor's transition team in 2015 and was recognized by President Obama with a President's Volunteer Service Award in 2016. I obtained my master's degree in human services/counseling from Lincoln University in 2009 where my thesis focused on breaking the cycle of juvenile recidivism and intergenerational incarceration. I currently serve as the executive director of Frontline Dads, Inc., where I coordinate a gun violence prevention program (Peacemakers). I also serve as the campaign and policy lead for Dignity and Power Now. On a personal note, I have lost numerous friends, family members, neighbors, and young people to gun violence, including my own sixteen-year-old nephew. As a Black man in Philadelphia who has been directly impacted by gun violence, I have a personal stake in the prevention of gun violence. I have spent a lot of time doing outreach on dark streets that most people would not dare travel. I have been in rooms with people who have shot people and people who have been shot. I have seen the impact from a thirty thousand-foot view and up close, in person. I have hugged grieving mothers while their tears flowed and I have counseled people who have taken a life, filled with regret. I understand the toll that gun violence has taken on this city. I also understand the toll that poverty, neglect, and trauma have taken on the marginalized communities in this city. I want to put an end to it and ensure the wellness and safety of all Philadelphians with a comprehensive strategy to address the gun violence crisis.

Introduction

Philadelphia is experiencing a gun violence crisis of epic proportions. Over the last ten years, there has been a significant increase in gun violence homicides across the city. The city's leadership has not been able to stifle this trend even with an influx of violence prevention funds aimed at incorporating community efforts to help prevent gun violence. As we approach a critical mayoral election, it is incumbent upon us to reach consensus on how to effectively reduce gun violence in this city. This gun violence crisis impacts every aspect of our lives including commerce, tourism, and overall morale of the city. It is important for us to create a long-term, sustainable solution for us to thrive as a city and make all our residents safe. After careful analysis of this current crisis, I am proposing that the city of Philadelphia commit $10 billion over the next ten years to a "Community Investment Plan" to address gun violence and to provide much-needed resources to neglected and marginalized communities where gun violence is rampant. These financial resources would specifically address three areas to help prevent gun violence: 1) prevention; 2) intervention; and 3) support. These resources would be used to create short-term solutions to address the immediate crisis and comprehensive, long-term solutions that will change the culture of violence.

Prevention starts with providing therapy and grief counseling to every student in Philadelphia. Many students in Philadelphia have lost loved ones, friends, and classmates to gun violence, but there have been woefully insufficient resources provided to support those young people who walk past bloodstains and chalk outlines on their way to school. Just recently, a man was murdered across the

street from our building at Broad Street and Susquehanna Avenue, where three schools converge (Tanner Duckrey School, TECH Freire Charter School, and the Philadelphia Military Academy). The deli where the shooting happened never closed, and many students walked past, around, over, and through the bloodstains to get to the bus and subway on their way home. The violence was normalized, and those children were never offered any grief counseling or therapy to address the trauma they experienced.

A community-based intervention would bring those resources necessary to help young people in their grief process and would help to address their trauma through counseling/therapy. A large part of the challenge of gun violence is the trauma it creates. This trauma has been normalized in Philadelphia and young people generally accept their fate and feel they do not have a high life expectancy. The only way to begin to unravel the impact of compounded trauma is to start at the very beginning, which is education. If we begin to invest in young people's wellness starting at kindergarten, then they will grow to become more well-adjusted adults and able to process these human emotions in a healthier manner. The second step is to teach conflict resolution in the schools at early ages where students will learn how to successfully navigate conflicts without violence. This approach must be a part of a comprehensive curriculum rather than relying on a few select programs to support a few select students. Every student in every grade in every school in Philadelphia (public, private, or charter) needs to be able to resolve conflicts without violence. Additionally, young people should also develop coping skills to deal with loss, anger, rejection, and failure. There should be support structures to help build their self-esteem, improve their decision making, and form their own identities. To eradicate gun violence, we must intentionally pour into young people and provide the tools necessary for their success. And this must happen without the barrier of limited resources. If we rely on students accessing programs provided by sporadic resources, even in the best-case scenario we will still end up with many students who have not developed those skills who will be attending the same schools and living in the same neighborhoods continuing to cause harm. Those same students will likely grow up to be adults with no conflict resolution skills or the ability to navigate emotionally challenging situations. To change the culture of violence, we must provide the resources necessary to help change the way people think. We cannot change the behavior if the thinking remains the same. We may not see immediate results in this strategy, but the goal is to invest in young people in a way that will create long-term impact so that we do not continue this cycle of violence.

The intervention component would teach conflict resolution to some hard-to-reach populations. We must be intentional about providing services and support to those who are most at risk for gun violence. The goal would be to embrace the reality that they are all a part of the city, and we all need each other for the city to thrive. Therefore, helping to remove barriers for them to join the mainstream would be critical in changing the culture of violence. We could use services such as Cradle to Grave to teach them the impact of gun violence and how their choices impact the city. We could incorporate programs like Mothers in Charge, the CHARLES Foundation (Creating Healthy Alternatives Results in Less Emotional Suffering), and EMIR (Every Murder is Real) to introduce them to mothers who have lost sons to violence in Philadelphia, so they understand the consequences of their choices. Many shootings stem from an argument or disagreement. Mixing poor conflict resolution skills with anger, trauma, scarcity of resources, and the availability of guns can be a deadly and dangerous combination. Dealing with this specific population will help to reduce the immediate crisis of gun violence. And we must accept that gun violence disproportionately impacts Black and Brown communities;

therefore, we need to allocate resources to those specific communities to change the culture of violence.

The Problem

Communities do not feel safe. The Philadelphia story is a tale of two cities, divided by resources and accessibility. One world thrives while the other is neglected. North Philly feels and looks different than Chestnut Hill. But the people in North Philly want the same protection, public safety, education, comfort, cleanliness, and respect as those living in Chestnut Hill. The public school system is dominated by Black and Brown students, and the school district only has a seventy percent graduation rate. The county jail has a troubling racial disparity: 90.2% of inmates are Black or Brown. In a city where the Black and African American population is approximately forty-three percent, disproportionately 72.5% of the county jail population is Black. Philadelphia has been labeled as the "poorest big city" in America. According to the US Census Bureau, approximately twenty-three percent of Philadelphians live in poverty. At the same time, the poverty rate for Black and African American residents is around twenty-eight percent. These data suggest a very ominous existence for African Americans in Philadelphia. It is easy to connect the dots and see how these factors are all related and contribute to the current gun violence crisis. Thus, the need to make an investment in rebuilding African American communities and investing in their residents becomes critical.

In 2022 there were 1,789 shootings (473 fatal) and approximately seventy-seven percent of the victims were African American males. Fifty-eight percent of them were under the age of thirty. In recent years we have seen the homicide rate climb to over five hundred victims (562 in 2021, 516 in 2022). And yet, our mayor has refused to declare a gun violence state of emergency. I suggest that not only is there a gun violence crisis, but there is a leadership crisis. A failure to lead boldly has exacerbated a culture of violence that has reached epic proportions. The city is gripped in fear. People are crying out for help. Some have even called for the mayor to resign. Some have called for an influx of dollars to be spent on violence prevention programs, expanded policing, cameras, and a range of other ideas to stop the bleeding. I once heard Scott Charles, trauma outreach manager at Temple University Hospital, use the metaphor of a leaky pipe in your house with a bucket under it. It fills up until you empty the bucket. You can keep emptying the bucket, or you can cut off the water supply and fix the leak. I think in Philadelphia it is time to cut off the water supply and fix the metaphoric leak of gun violence.

The problem of gun violence did not start in 2021. It did not start with the pandemic, the crack epidemic, the Trump presidency, Bill Clinton's crime bill, or Ronald Reagan's "War on Drugs." It did not start with the riots of the sixties, Jim Crow, or segregation. Throughout American history, African American men have been demonized in literature, pop culture, music, and movies, e.g., D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*. The government has sanctioned the constitutionality of racial discrimination through the Supreme Court's upholding of the "separate but equal" doctrine. This constant bombardment of dehumanization, negative imagery, racial propaganda, political agendas, and second-class citizenship has led to an internalized self-hate and trauma that has resulted in fratricidal violence. The lack of resources added with neglect and confined living quarters with no hope while being demeaned, demoralized, dehumanized, and held powerless have created a culture in which violence has been normalized to resolve conflicts. But the violence is just a symptom of a larger problem that is deeply rooted in the history and trauma of slavery, injustice, and oppression. We can never escape that fact. And until we recognize that and take responsibility

for healing the impact of slavery, we will only continue to empty the bucket rather than fix the leak.

The sad reality is that the government has manufactured poverty in African American communities through racist practices and policies that have had an economic impact for generations. The practice of redlining has crippled African American communities through lack of investment, purposeful neglect, and perpetual poverty. Redlining has remained one of the most effective ways to deny access to capital and home ownership, thus denying opportunities for generational wealth. In other words, people who were descendants of slaves were not worthy of investment. They were neglected. They did not deserve the same quality of life as their white counterparts. Therefore, they were relegated to a life of poverty and second-class citizenship which breeds dysfunction, depression, self-esteem challenges, and violence. President Franklin D. Roosevelt himself contributed to this institutional racism by creating segregated housing in his New Deal in which his administration started public housing projects for working-class white families while denying the same opportunities to African American families. This was an effort to combat the housing shortage due to the Great Depression and create opportunities for white families to rebound. Black families were often displaced because of this practice because white housing was often built in residential areas near the jobs while Black families were pushed to the outskirts of town. Later the Federal Housing Administration created programs that encouraged white families to move to suburban areas by providing loans and affordable mortgages while they restricted Black families from buying houses in these areas. This practice has led to housing inequality, educational disparities, credit discrimination, and a wealth gap due to the lack of property ownership. These discriminatory policies have had such a devastating effect on Black communities that still today, the median net worth of Black families is only a fraction of the median net worth of white families in America. In 2019 "black wealth stood at $60,125.58 compared to $338,092.80 for non-black households." This is due in large part to home ownership, or lack thereof. As a result, an underground economy is born. A new culture is developed. New rules apply. And we end up here.

Solutions

The problem with gun violence is that we have normalized it in a way that does not allow healing to break the cycle. We continue to wash, rinse, and repeat. And then we are surprised when some heinous act occurs. We have seen a rash of violent acts recently as we witness an uptick in gun violence across Philadelphia, especially in North Philly. We accept the trash strewn up and down the streets. We accept the dilapidated buildings crumbling in residential neighborhoods. We accept the poverty-stricken neighborhoods filled with blight. We accept failing schools and applaud when we close schools to save money while building prisons to "protect the public." We accept drug use so much that Kensington serves as a feeding ground for addiction, media, tourists, and people traveling to buy drugs from this world-renowned open drug market. We accept these things in specific neighborhoods when it relates to specific people. Rather than investing in the wellness of young people unilaterally. Rather than investing in public safety unilaterally. Rather than investing in criminal justice unilaterally. And the survivors continue to live with the compounded, residual trauma without the skills or tools necessary to be able to process it all in a healthy way until it becomes their turn to victimize somebody. We ignore the underlying cause of the violence and continue to treat the symptoms with band-aids and short-term solutions. Sometimes it is just because people do not know exactly what to do and they rely on their instincts about what has always been done (with little success),

and sometimes they just do not care. But this cycle of violence can be turned around if we start providing outlets for people to grieve and resolve their hurt. If we begin to teach people how to process their anger and provide alternatives to violence, then we can resolve conflicts peacefully and reduce violence across the board. It may take a generation (or two), but eventually we will get there. One thing we cannot do is continue to buy buckets to empty the water with. We can buy the prettiest bucket in the world, made of platinum and full of bling, but the pipe is still leaking. We must fix the leak and stop the flow of water.

One way we can stop the leak is to address those areas that are most directly impacted by gun violence. *The Philadelphia Inquirer* has identified fifty-seven blocks in the city on which ten or more people have been shot since 2015. Imagine that. We could dramatically reduce gun violence in this city just by addressing the gun violence in these specific areas. It is a no-brainer. These blocks are many of the same blocks that were "redlined" in the 1930s. Coincidence? I think not. But rather than continued neglect, we could infuse resources that will address blight, lighting, trash and illegal dumping, and vacant lot cleanups. We could: provide resources to marginalized communities and invest in grassroots leadership; prioritize city services to address the needs in those areas; incorporate community patrols; invest in non-police-based response teams, social workers, and mediators; provide substance abuse treatment; empower block captains to become first responders (with compensation); provide jobs for youth in those areas; and provide incentives for people to take care of their own communities. These are all simple solutions but effective ones that will yield incredible results if we commit to long-term solutions.

Conclusion

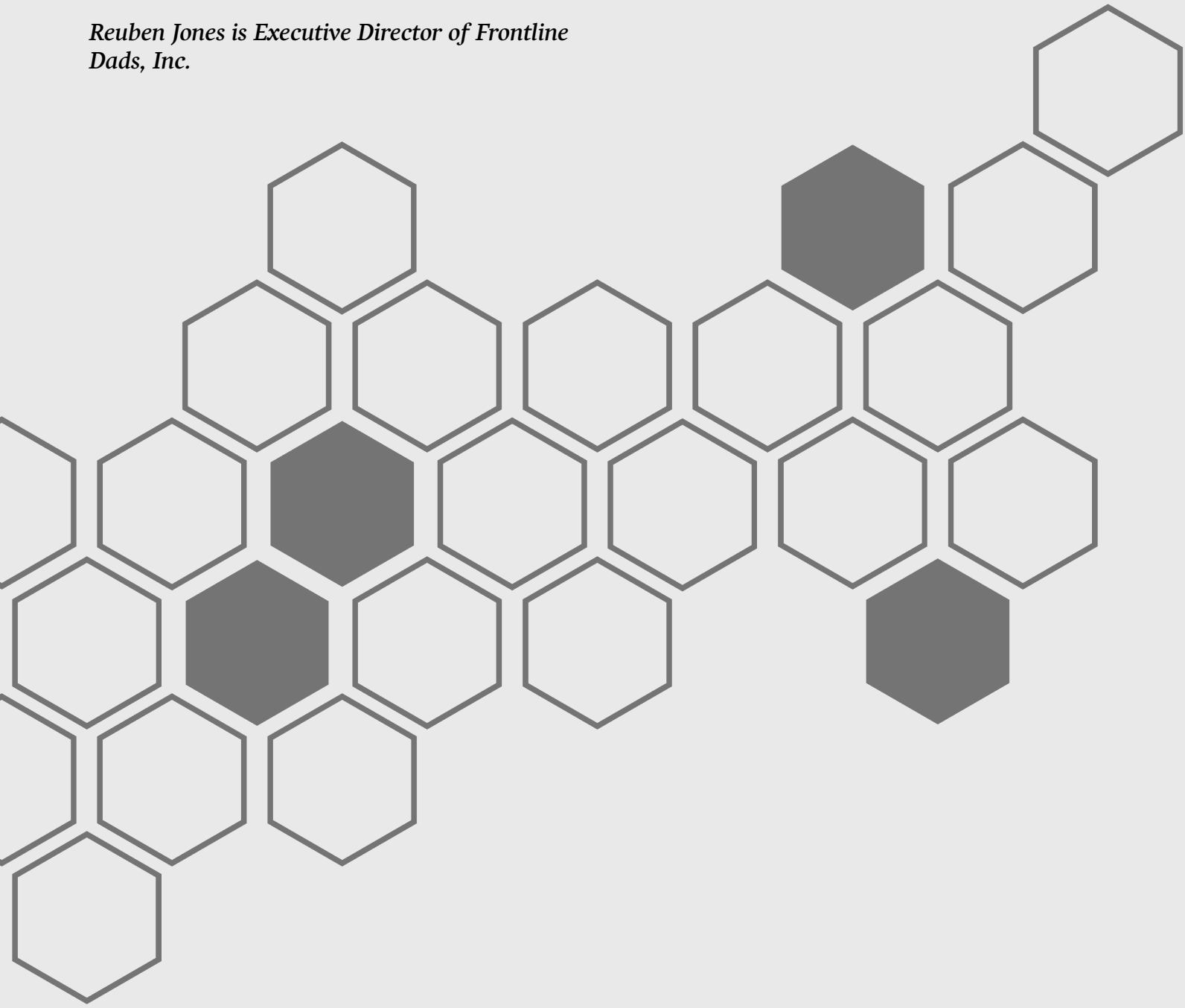
Many people will respond to the gun violence crisis with a demand for more police, stiffer prison sentences, and even calling in the national guard. But none of these suggestions will get to the heart of gun violence nor prevent it. Police do not prevent violence; they respond to it. The National Guard does not prevent gun violence, they protect property. We have had mandatory sentences in Pennsylvania forever and that has not stopped gun violence. Neither has the death penalty. We must accept that we cannot police our way out of a gun violence crisis. We cannot arrest our way out of it. We must be conscientious and intentional to get to real solutions. Right now, much of the public does not trust the police to protect them so adding more police to the mix would not help. What will help is the community feeling valued and respected enough to be treated with dignity. Calling the National Guard will only exacerbate the gun violence crisis by creating an antagonistic relationship with armed military personnel patrolling city streets. That will not make people feel safe. What makes people feel safe is being seen, valued, respected, and not feeling invisible. Perpetuating the lines of oppression will not make people feel included in society enough to care about their fellow citizens, neighbors, and community members. The only way to do that is to include people and treat them as human beings with the full rights and privileges of citizenship. Yes, we must hold people accountable for harm against the community. There must be concrete, immediate consequences for causing harm. But we can utilize community accountability rather than incarceration and other punitive measures. We cannot continue to perpetuate the systems of oppression that have traumatized generations. The more we invest in people, the more people become invested in the community and in each other.

Gun violence is a complex issue that is just as varied as the individuals perpetrating it. We do not have a one-size-fits-all approach. I believe that each of these approaches presented can be incorporated alongside a myriad of other approaches. If we can slowly heal perpetrators one at a time while simultaneously investing in

the prevention of gun violence, then we begin to win this fight.

My question regarding gun violence is: Are we brave enough to acknowledge the underlying causes of violence, or are we cowards who run to find convenient answers without ever really delving into long-term solutions because of all that we will have to undo? To undo what has been done, we must first acknowledge it. Do we course correct, or do we simply wash, rinse, and repeat?

Reuben Jones is Executive Director of Frontline Dads, Inc.



WHO CONTROLS CRIME: THE UNTAPPED POWER OF CITIES TO REDUCE GUN VIOLENCE AND INCREASE DEMOCRACY

Elizabeth Glazer

Why did broken windows policing take off in cities across the country as a strategy to reduce crime but summer youth employment and lighting dark places are viewed as "nice to haves"? The evidence backing up jobs and lighting is compelling and specific, with short-term effects that are demonstrable and long-term effects that strengthen civic life. Broken windows policing, as practiced, has short-term effects that have been controversial and long-term effects that have proved corrosive to democracy.

Deciding what mix of strategies cities use is not just an academic inquiry. The answer can provide a new and effective way to reduce crime now, increase the safety and well-being of residents for the long haul, and strengthen democracy. All three examples—jobs, lighting, and policing—after all, are civic services, resources that mayors "own" and can deploy even though that is rarely done as an integrated strategy. Even in budget-constricted times, a mayor uniquely has recurring funding, networks of services that cover the city, and staffing in numbers and degree unmatched in the private and non-profit sectors.

New York City, for example, has a recurring budget of approximately $100 billion (see Figure 1 below). It is true that fourteen percent is devoted to law enforcement. But another thirty-nine percent funds services (education and youth programming, among others) that both enhance civic life and make us safer. And a $67 billion capital budget covers parks and public places, among the pieces of a city's infrastructure that can make us safe. Because budgets are policy choices, cities are well positioned to be the arterial structure of reform. After all, the government's sole function is to provide for the well-being and safety of its residents.

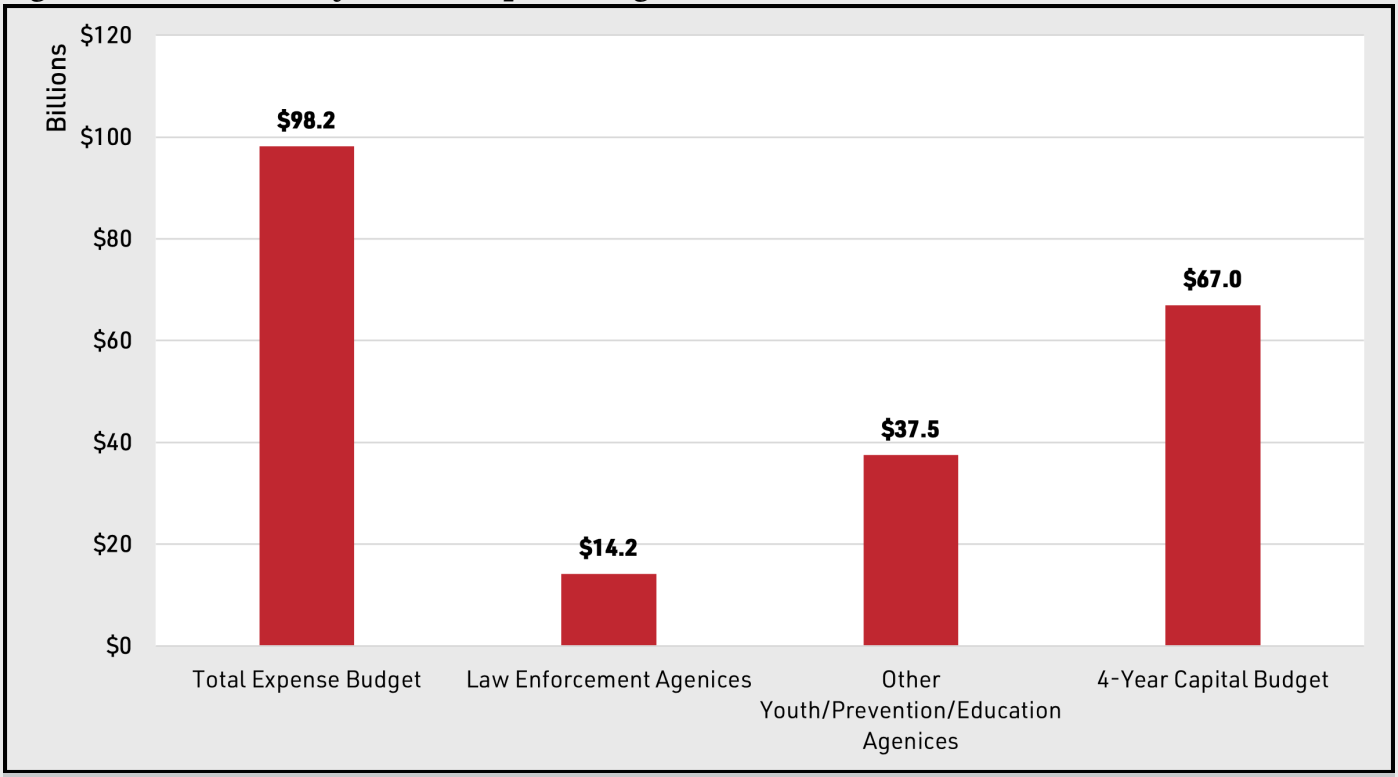
But over the past few decades, those policy choices have been buffeted by a different current. American cities have gotten used to police as the "owners" of crime reduction strategies, and Americans have gotten used to thinking that, although the causes of crime are many, the answer to crime is largely singular: Call the police. And to be sure, police, properly deployed, are important in reducing crime. Although experts still dispute why crime declined over the past thirty years, the evidence is clear that policing mattered and still does.

As with many issues, societal fissures widened under the pressure of the COVID-19 pandemic. A massive increase in shootings—in New York City doubling in one year—at a time of extreme social untethering spurred calls on one side for more police and on the other for more services. The evidence calls for a mix of strategies in which civic and civilian control dominate. For all that policing matters, there have been malign effects as well, which call into question the sustainability of a model that relies first on force for the regulation of an increasingly large part of neighborhood life. That malignancy, often short-handed by referring to "mass incarceration," has been well-documented, and over the past decade there has been a general moderating of how and for what we use this most extreme remedy.

This one fact stands in for how this approach has reverberating effects across generations, ripping apart the social and economic connection of families and hollowing out neighborhoods: In New York City today, one third of Black men living in poor ZIP codes are jailed by age thirty-eight, men who overwhelmingly do not finish high school. These are the same neighborhoods in which shootings, and the social conditions that incubate violence, have concentrated for decades. In these neighborhoods, while the number of shootings has dropped dramatically over the past thirty years, the shooting rate remains a stubborn four to five times the citywide average.

There is also another more pernicious effect that occurs when society defaults to force to ensure safety—especially when there are other options. A "force first" approach disproportionately affects young men of color. At its height, New York City police stopped almost seven hundred thousand people in a

Figure 1. New York City FY22 Adopted Budget



Source: Law Enforcement Agencies: NYPD, Department of Correction, Probation, District Attorneys and Special Narcotics; Other: Department of Education, Parks, Youth and Community Development, NYC Housing Authority

year—about the population of Boston—almost entirely young men of color, concentrated in just a few neighborhoods. The heavy reliance on police did not start with broken windows policing, but, as practiced in New York, it is a synecdoche for the unintended consequences when police begin to occupy neighborhood life.

Although stops today are down to about eleven thousand per year, the practice has left a kind of phantom limb syndrome further exacerbating the already uneasy relationship between police and poor Black and Brown neighborhoods and, not just police, but government in general. The sociologist Monica Bell has described in detail how this sense of "estrangement" from civic life, and cynicism about the operation of the law, persists and is re-enforced. The criminologist Rod Brunson has also shown in vivid detail how deep the gulf is particularly between young men of color and the police.

The actions of police teach lessons in citizenship. The historian Ben Justice and the legal scholar Tracey Meares described the overt and covert curriculums of democracy. The one taught in civics classes elevates the ideal of police who "protect and serve," in a society in which equality is the order of the day. But the covert curriculum, experienced by neighborhoods in which people of color largely live, is quite different. Practices such as stop and frisk "[show] certain citizens [those stopped and those observing] clear signals that they are a special, dangerous and undesirable class." Tom Tyler has demonstrated the direct relationship between the degree to which trusting the police not only affects the likelihood of whether people will obey the law but also whether they will engage in other civic activities, like voting.

With this troubled history and present, it is then strange that the remit of police power has expanded so far. Today, particularly in poor neighborhoods, police have almost become the government: The New York City Police Department employs a beekeeper and a tree-cutting unit and runs employment and mentoring programs and neighborhood

basketball games.

Among police and city leaders, the backbeat explanation is that these activities are intended to repair community relations. But it is a greasy flagpole sort of reasoning that ignores a central and immutable inequality between police and residents: The police are armed and, in a necessary concession of democracy, are even given the right to take the life of a person to keep others safe. This necessary inequality builds in barriers that make the "we-are-just-like-you" efforts of police a head-scratcher. The path towards better relationships based on respect is gained not on the basketball court but in the provision of the high-quality services that only the police can provide: solving cases.

Over the past few decades, a formidable body of evidence has been produced by researchers working with cities and their residents. The theme that runs through all of this research is that when government attends to strengthening the social fabric—ensuring neighborhoods have the resources for good schooling, jobs, well-maintained parks and public places, among other markers of strong communities—violence goes down. And it is not just that violence is reduced in the moment, but rather that it creates a virtuous cycle of reduction that has a durable effect through generations, because those who do not touch the criminal justice system in the first place are more likely to avoid it in the future.

Here are a few examples. The physical face of the city matters. From something as simple as turning on the lights to something more complicated such as remediating empty lots, the results are equally compelling. In New York City, a randomized controlled trial of lighting dark areas in public housing yielded a thirty-six percent reduction in felony crime, a reduction that persisted over a three-year follow up period. In Philadelphia, a series of ongoing studies have shown the impact of a range of changes to the city landscape, including greening lots reducing violent crime by forty percent. And investing in physical change has a wholesale, neighborhood-wide effect, as the scholars John MacDonald and Charles Branas have shown.

Extending the social safety net also has a direct effect on violence. While the United States does not have the comprehensive system of some other countries, looking at the evidence behind the pieces we do have is heartening. In health care, Medicaid expansion is associated with a twenty to thirty percent reduction in the arrest rate for violent crime. Jobs for youth can reduce violent crime arrests by thirty to forty-five percent. Improving the quality of schools can decrease crime by half among the highest-risk youth.

Closer to the operations of the criminal justice system, there is compelling evidence that what is done during the course of a criminal case, and significantly what is **not** done, can have major impacts on safety now and far into the future. In Chicago in a randomized controlled study, people at the highest risk of shooting and being shot were enrolled in a program that combined paid work and behavioral cognitive therapy, resulting in a sixty-four percent reduction in arrests for shootings and homicides. In Boston a randomized controlled study examined what happened when prosecutors decided not to pursue criminal prosecution for nonviolent misdemeanors. They found that non-prosecution resulted in a fifty-three percent reduction in future criminal cases.

These results should not surprise us. Our safety depends on different levels of control. The formal control offered by police has an effect on crime but comes at a hard-to-control cost that cautions how broadly it should be used. There is another kind of organic control that each of us knows from our daily experience. What makes people and places safe in the main are the million and one connections that bind us together in an unspoken set of understandings and informal rules. The expectations of our families and our neighbors—their approval and disapproval—checks our behavior, what the sociologist

Robert Sampson has called "collective efficacy." Sampson and other researchers have documented that these connections, and the organic rules of behavior that spring from them, including the presence of neighborhood institutions, reduce homicides.

Creating these kinds of conditions is within the control of mayors—both moderating the use of police for the situations most suited to their powers and marshalling a city's significant resources to invest in programming (for example, summer youth employment) or civic improvements (for example, street lighting). Mayors considering how to get the most safety for every dollar spent, and along the way lay a foundation for a durable peace, should be heartened by the conclusive evidence, such as the examples laid out above, about how to create these kinds of baseline conditions.

What does all this add up to? Mayors have strong tools to reduce gun violence. But it will take political courage to shift the center of gravity away from a model of public safety that defaults to police and coercion and towards a model that strengthens social ties through civic services and participation. This new model should look at every possible idea that can defeat violence and mobilize all of the relevant resources of government, the nonprofit sector, and the business community. And it should look to return policing to its proper and honored role as one of many civic services, with the entire enterprise of ensuring safety firmly under civilian leadership.

Advice to Mayors

- **Governance matters.** Vest the authority to create and execute an integrated public safety plan in one civilian leader who has both the formal power to bring law enforcement and other civic services to the table (e.g., a First Deputy Mayor or a Deputy Mayor for Justice Policies and Operations) but also the skills, background, gravitas, and respect that will bring together the multitude of others not within government on whom safety depends.

- **Place matters.** Pick your spots. Violence and distress concentrate in a few places in every city, and they are intertwined. Focus coordinated resources on these places and follow up relentlessly with a clear-eyed approach to what is working and what is not.

- **People and operations matter.** Honor each participant in this synthesized approach for what they can do best, whether police, neighborhood groups, or others. But do not ask them to do more. Police should not be beekeepers. Community groups dedicated to mediating disputes that can escalate to violence should not double as employment counselors or accountants if that is not their core skill set. "Training" and "management" are not bromides but must be attended to and cultivated to ensure success.

- **Research matters.** Be relentless and clear-eyed in understanding in real-time and for the long-term what is having an effect and of what kind. Allocate dollars for assessment research even though in the instant moment the clamor will be that all funds go to programs.

- **Understanding matters.** Be radically transparent. It is not just that the public has a right, it is that the public has ideas on how to solve problems, and transparency—whether things are going well or badly—breeds trust.

It will be hard, but it is high time.

Elizabeth Glazer is the founder and co-editor of Vital City.

GUN VIOLENCE, CONTAGION, AND THE STRENGTH OF WEAK TIES

Jason Gravel

If I asked you to go buy a gun today without going to a store, buying it online, or asking someone to buy it for you, would you be able to do so? I am not sure if I could, and I suspect many reading this essay would be in the same boat. Yet, guns are not hard to find for those who really do want them, even for people who cannot access them through legal means because of a felony conviction, being underage, or other conditions that prohibit them from purchasing guns legally—a group I refer to generally as prohibited possessors.

It is often assumed that prohibited possessors—especially those with a criminal record—obtain guns through thefts, legal loopholes, or relying on organized gun trafficking. Research on prohibited possessors finds little evidence that these are the primary means of acquiring guns illegally. For instance, my colleagues and I interviewed 140 individuals with a gun conviction in Los Angeles jails to ask them about their experiences of acquiring guns while prohibited. Prohibited possessors we interviewed grew up and lived in communities with high rates of violence. They perceived gun carrying as a life and death decision, and so did many other members of their communities. They told us guns were so easy to find in their communities that they often did not even have to seek them out; guns would simply be offered to them by people needing quick cash. When they sought out guns, they would turn to a trusted friend or family member to directly buy or borrow a gun; otherwise, they bought them from friends of friends and other acquaintances.

So, why do prohibited possessors find illegal guns more easily than others? They are simply more likely to have social relationships they can leverage to find guns. We are all connected directly or indirectly in one large social network through which information, beliefs, and opportunities flow. Where someone is positioned in that network dictates what they can access and what they are exposed to. Opportunities to acquire guns illegally clusters in some regions of this larger network. So does the risk of violent victimization: A study in Chicago found that seventy percent of all shooting victims in the city over a six-year period could be found in social networks that included only six percent of the city's population. Just like guns themselves, gun violence appears to spread like a contagious disease in relatively small regions of social networks.

In this essay, I describe how social networks facilitate access to illegal firearms and how these same networks allow gun violence to spread. I also argue that there are important structural features of social networks that could be leveraged to increase both the effectiveness and efficiency of interventions to reduce gun violence. Specifically, I describe the "strength of weak ties" hypothesis and how it can be applied to understand illegal gun markets and the contagious nature of gun violence. I argue that gun violence interventions are missing powerful opportunities to change behaviors by being too focused on individuals and ignoring their embeddedness in social networks.

The Strength of Weak Ties and Illegal Guns

In the 1970s, sociologist Mark Granovetter was interested in how people get and change jobs. He found people were more likely to find out about job opportunities through personal contacts than any other methods. He also found that friends and family members, what he described as strong ties, had limited potential in providing valuable job information. Weak ties—acquaintances and friends of friends—provided more efficient pathways to hear about job opportunities that job seekers would not otherwise hear of themselves. Granovetter realized that this observation was a specific case of a more general phenomenon in social networks and formalized his argument in a famous paper entitled "The Strength of Weak Ties."

To understand where the strength of weak ties comes from, we must first understand what makes strong ties special. Strong ties have advantages: The affinities we have with our close friends and families provide mutual trust, influence, and social support. For those reasons, strong ties are highly influential and occupy an outsized proportion of our lives. The benefits we get from strong ties come from two well-known forces in social networks. The first is the tendency for our strong ties to know one another, a concept called transitivity. Given the time we devote to our strong ties and our emotional connections to them, it is highly likely that our closest friends and family will meet and get to know one another. The second force—homophily, the tendency to gravitate towards similar others—makes it more likely that our closest friends will also share a strong tie. Our social relationships—especially strong relationships—tend to be similar in age, gender, racial/ethnic backgrounds, income, personality, beliefs, life experiences, and so on. Transitivity and homophily combine to produce dense clusters of strong ties among similar people.

The implications of these basic structural forces on networks are that information flowing through strong ties lacks diversity and tends to be redundant. For instance, if a rumor is circulating among your friend group, it is likely that this rumor will be repeated to you by many of your friends because you all share the same set of potential sources. The strength of weak ties is they allow access to potentially novel information from other social circles. Weak ties act like bridges between densely connected clusters of strong ties and provide access to non-redundant information. Those on either ends of these "bridges" can access information from more distant parts of the network, information that they can pass on to their own connections. For those reasons, weak ties are critical to any process that involves the diffusion of ideas or behaviors. For Granovetter's participants, weak ties gave them access to job opportunities. For the participants in the study described in the introduction of this essay, weak ties provided access to illegal guns.

Our study on illegal gun markets in Los Angeles is not unique in showing how weak ties can facilitate the flow of guns within and between communities. For instance, a study in New York found street gang members have easier access to guns because they are not limited to their own personal networks; they can leverage the networks of their fellow gang members. Even outside of gang membership, individuals can reach significant social and geographical distances using "brokers" (i.e., individuals positioned on one end of a network "bridge") to access guns outside their personal network and their neighborhoods, cities, or states. The notion of "brokers" and out-of-state access to guns may conjure images of large-scale, organized criminal enterprises. However, once we consider the strength of weak ties argument, we can see that large-scale trafficking is not necessarily implied.

The Contagion of Violence

Guns are not the only things that flow through social networks: Fear, grief, and risky behaviors do too. Scholars increasingly use the analogy of contagious diseases to explain the concentration of violence in some communities. Violence seems to produce more violence just like a virus replicates itself as it infects new hosts. As potent as the practical implications of this analogy may be, our understanding of the mechanisms through which violence is contagious is rather limited.

For instance, the most obvious mechanism for the contagion of violence is retaliation, where one act of violence literally generates another. In most cases, we would expect retaliation to be carried out by someone with strong ties to the victim: Most acquaintances might not be willing to take up a gun and avenge a death. If violence went back and forth between individuals with strong ties to victims, outbreaks of violence would be short-lived and relatively easy to stop. For

something to spread in social networks, it needs a pathway to escape tight-knit groups and reach individuals not previously involved in a conflict.

The prototypical example of retaliatory violence occurs between street gangs. What makes gang violence particularly contagious is that it draws weak ties of the victim into the conflict. This is due to the typical social structure of these groups and the perceived benefits of a violent reputation. First, contrary to what Hollywood movies tell us, street gangs are not typically close-knit families. Just like many formal or informal organizations, street gangs tend to be made of loosely connected subgroups. Gang members typically have their friends within the gang (i.e., strong ties) while their primary connection to many other fellow members is limited to their shared membership to the gang (i.e., weak ties), just like you may have friends at your place of work but many more co-workers with whom you are simply cordial. Second, gang members perceive they have an incentive to retaliate against an attack on any of their own to prevent future violence. Thus, when a gang member is attacked, both strong and weak ties to the victim have incentives to retaliate. In other words, weak ties between gang members expand the number of potential actors involved in violence.

Street gangs and similar groups are responsible for a significant portion of violence in cities—the Philadelphia Police Department estimates that between twenty-five and thirty-five percent of shootings are group involved. However, violence can still be contagious even if street gangs are not involved. The general mechanism of contagion is that weak ties allow the risk of victimization to spread outside the immediate social circles of victims, which leads to a behavior change that heightens the risk of more violence. For instance, consider the spread of grief and gun-carrying behavior.

Friends and family members of a victim experience trauma that may predispose them to heightened aggression. Studies have repeatedly shown that exposure to community violence can lead to post-traumatic stress symptoms, such as hypervigilance, increases in fear and anger, and aggression, especially when the victim is a close peer. In the wake of a shooting, peers of the victim may decide to carry guns for protection, especially those living in the same community as the victim. These behavioral changes may lead to a chain of events that in and of itself leads to further violence. Consider a situation where a grieving friend decides to carry a gun for protection as they go about their day, encounters other youths in their neighborhood, and a minor disagreement ensues. On any other day, this encounter might at worst have led to a yelling match or a minor fistfight. However, when combining traumatic stress and gun carrying, this situation may turn into a deadly shooting, followed by another set of grieving friends and families. Here we have an example of violence leading to more violence without any retaliatory motive linking the two incidents.

Even without the intense grief among strong ties of a victim, changes in gun-carrying behaviors can spread through weak ties of the victims, potentially increasing the odds of severe escalation of minor conflicts. In neighborhoods where violence is concentrated, residents are constantly reminded of the dangers in their environment, but awareness is more acute with a personal connection to a victim, even if indirectly (e.g., the son of a friend, a neighbor, or a friend's cousin). The spread of gun carrying itself can motivate others to carry guns and perceptions of widespread gun carrying can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy. Our respondents in Los Angeles alluded to this. For them, the costs of getting caught for violating gun laws were severely outweighed by the perceived costs of navigating their neighborhoods without a gun—you are "damned if you do, damned if you don't," one respondent told us.

Leveraging Social Networks to Reduce Violence

Many of our approaches to reducing gun violence are overly individualized and thus fail to recognize the fundamental fact that individuals are embedded in complex social networks. By offering educational opportunities, job training, and other social services, programs seek to provide young people with hope and a way out of violence. What happens to hope for someone whose best friend gets shot? What happens when the friends that have supported that person long before any social program reached out to them decide to seek justice for the victim?1 Intervening at the individual level can surely be effective in some cases, but I argue it is a highly inefficient model to reduce gun violence.

The most promising approaches to reducing gun violence explicitly recognize the power of social networks. Focused deterrence policing is an approach that leverages the group nature of violence to ensure that deterrent messages are efficiently delivered to those most at risk. An important component of focused deterrence programs is to directly identify members of violent community groups who would be particularly vulnerable to increased police scrutiny and promise that violence by any member of the group would bring about such scrutiny. In doing so, law enforcement creates a mechanism through which members have an interest in preventing fellow members from engaging in violence. Another example is the Cure Violence model, which employs outreach workers to interrupt the contagion process associated with group-based retaliation. These workers spend countless hours in their communities engaging with young people to provide access to needed resources and mentorship, but also to remain informed of potential conflicts. If possible, they attempt to mediate and de-escalate conflicts; otherwise, they try to interrupt retaliatory cycles. Nevertheless, I believe these programs and others could leverage social networks even more to deliver interventions more efficiently.

Outreach workers are well-positioned to systematically map the friendship networks of youths in their communities, allowing them the spread of other behaviors besides retaliation. Mapping social networks could help identify weak ties and bridges. Using these newly identified weak ties to spread information would be an efficient route to raising awareness of available resources. Programs could dedicate efforts to fostering weak ties in both youth and parent networks. Weak ties could provide the social capital many communities desperately need to solve everyday problems, receive social support, be exposed to new perspectives and influences, and modify perceptions of safety.

Strong ties and the redundant information that flows through them matter too. If services and interventions were delivered to entire friendship groups, the trust and support that exists in these bonds could ensure enduring behavioral and attitudinal changes. There is only so much influence an external party like an outreach worker—the ultimate weak tie—can have on the lives of young people at risk of gun violence. These young people are willing to go to great lengths to help and support their friends, which can sometimes be their downfall when guns and violence are involved. Understanding the power of strong ties means being able to leverage these bonds while modifying the ways friends help and support each other.

Social networks provide an existing and powerful structure through which information, resources, and action can be spread. Sometimes what travels through networks has negative and even tragic results, as in the case of gang-related gun violence retaliation. But those trying to end gun violence can similarly use the structure of networks to achieve positive ends. The fact that grief, guns, and violence spread in some social networks tells us the infrastructure works; there is no reason these networks cannot be repurposed to spread hope and opportunities.

Jason Gravel is Assistant Professor of Criminal Justice at Temple University.

1. Roman et al. (2021) make a similar point about gang intervention programs. Asking youths to leave the gang often means leaving close friends behind, their main source of social support.

TACKLING OVERDOSE DEATHS AND GUN VIOLENCE WITH OPIOID SETTLEMENT FUNDS

Caterina Roman

A growing body of research shows that illicit fentanyl markets play an outsized role in firearm violence in Philadelphia. Pennsylvania is about to receive $2.2 billion of opioid drug maker settlement funding that is dedicated for drug abatement, treatment, prevention, and education. The timing is thus ideal for innovative thinking and evidence-based strategizing and programming to combat Philadelphia's violence-prone drug markets. Such efforts can create sustainable change that will reduce both violence and unintentional overdose fatalities.

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, studies have documented the stark uptick in intentional firearm violence across US cities. Although measures of nonfatal criminal shootings are not routinely collected by police departments, cities that do collect these data, such as Philadelphia, Chicago, and New York, indicate rapid increases by the end of 2020; for instance, in New York City shooting incidents increased from 776 in 2019 to 1,531 in 2020. Similarly, Philadelphia averaged 1,372 shootings per year in the three years before the pandemic (2017–2019), increasing to 2,232 in 2020 and 2,332 in 2021. Understanding the causal factors contributing to the problem is critical to generating solutions. Scholars and practitioners have offered a wide variety of reasons for the peri-pandemic uptick in firearm violence—loss of jobs which creates strain, youth with more idle time, a proliferation of guns on the street, and pullback in policing, among others. But the pandemic aside, the reasons for firearm violence have always been complex. This complexity, coupled with pressure on policymakers to show immediate results in alleviating firearm violence, has caused Pennsylvania and Philadelphia stakeholders to overlook (or ignore) the role of illicit drug markets in violence.

The shock of the pandemic, combined with increases in the availability of illicit and cheap fentanyl (and now "tranq"), has created an ever-evolving market for illicit drugs centered in the Kensington neighborhood of North Philadelphia that sows chaos and, in turn, is associated with high levels of firearm violence. New consumers seek respite from the trauma of the pandemic and increase demand, creating competition for street corners and customers. Lured in by high profits and the changing nature of drug markets, established lawbreakers already skilled in violence from other neighborhoods and new offenders move into the neighborhood. These new suppliers pursue their own self-interest, perhaps with no allegiance to a broader social organization that might have wanted to sell drugs more quietly under the radar of law enforcement. The majority of these drug markets are not small, disorganized groups of teenagers and young adults trying to make a quick buck—many of Philadelphia's active illicit opioid markets are organized, hierarchical criminal groups that bring in millions of dollars annually. Thus, this is not the type of drug market that can be removed simply by arresting the sellers.

The relationship between illicit drug markets and violence is not new—but it is difficult to study because data capturing the local distribution (i.e., smaller than city level) of illicit drugs rarely exist, and where they do, (dubious) government data sharing restrictions hinder collaboration with outside researchers. The research findings below, framed by my involvement in a US Department of Justice-funded study to evaluate the impact of a law enforcement-led initiative in Philadelphia's Kensington community, provide evidence for my argument that Kensington's agglomeration economy (see below) of illicit drug markets must be addressed collaboratively with extraordinary focus.

The History of Philadelphia's Drug Economy

Since the late 1960s, Philadelphia has been a leading regional and multi-state source of supply for high-grade heroin. The greater Kensington area comprises an "agglomeration economy," where drug markets cluster tightly

across the area and competitors may even occupy the same block on opposite corners. This clustering provides an economic benefit for both sellers and buyers. Sellers desire to be in these economies because they are highly profitable. Buyers can easily find their preferred product, minimizing their search cost. It is also possible that the clustering sends a signal that buyers (and sellers) may be safe from the police—the perception is that their risk of arrest is lower given the large numbers of ever-present buyers and sellers. One journalist equated Kensington's agglomeration economy to a farmers' market and street bazaar.

In 2016, fentanyl began to pervade Philadelphia's illicit drug markets; the increased availability and misuse of cheap and easily accessible fentanyl contributed to a sixty-five percent overall increase in Pennsylvania's overdose deaths between 2015 and 2017. Today, among the largest US cities, Philadelphia ranks at the top for overdose deaths, claiming 1,276 victims in 2021.

The association between increasing access to fentanyl and violence is not difficult to comprehend given that the profit margins for fentanyl are roughly nine times higher than for heroin. For fentanyl, an average kilo investment of $55,000 can lead to profits from street sales of $5 million—with one kilo generating five hundred thousand "dime" bags sold for $10 each. But prices fluctuate for a variety of reasons related to the drug supply chain and that volatility is associated with increases in violence. The high volume and extremely lucrative nature of drug sales in Philadelphia, when entwined with gun violence, create serious impediments to substantive change. Essentially, these deeply-rooted "organizations" resist the typical targeted drug enforcement efforts by police, and even with temporary closure or dismantling of one corner market (or even several), the challenge will be sustaining the closures amidst the vast numbers of these markets in one area.

The Kensington community in north central Philadelphia is a 1.4 square mile area that is home to roughly thirty-eight thousand people. At the time we began the US Department of Justice-funded Kensington Initiative evaluation in 2019, there were dozens of illicit drug markets in the greater Kensington area. Not surprisingly, Philadelphia's drug markets co-locate with overdose fatalities. A study that was an extension of our Kensington Initiative work found that street corners controlled by drug trafficking gangs or those that are situated centrally for easy access to multiple drug corners were associated with significantly more unintentional overdose fatalities.

The Pandemic, Drug Demand, and Consumption

During the pandemic, fentanyl became ubiquitous in Kensington drug markets, increasing the number of overdoses. The pandemic was associated with an increase in illicit drug seeking nationwide. A CDC population-level survey reports that thirteen percent of respondents indicated they started or increased substance use to cope with stress or emotions related to the COVID-19 pandemic. And demand for fentanyl increased during the pandemic:

- National-level clinical drug testing results show that, when comparing the pre-pandemic period (January 2019, through mid-March 2020) to the beginning of the pandemic (mid-March 2020 to May 2020), overall drug misuse was slightly lower during the pandemic, with the notable exception of fentanyl misuse.

- Positivity for non-prescribed fentanyl increased by thirty-five percent (from 4.3 percent to 5.8 percent) during the pandemic compared to the baseline. Positivity for non-prescribed fentanyl increased among patients also positive for amphetamines by eighty-nine percent; forty-eight percent for benzodiazepines; thirty-four percent for

cocaine; thirty-nine percent for opiates; and forty-four percent for heroin.

In Philadelphia, overdose deaths increased nine percent between 2018 and 2020. In 2020, there were 1,214 drug overdoses in Philadelphia. By the end of 2022, all illicit drug markets in Kensington sold at least some fentanyl. Fentanyl was involved in less than ten percent of drug overdose deaths in Philadelphia in 2010 but was involved in eighty-one percent of all drug overdose deaths in 2020. The one-year increase between 2019 and 2020 for fentanyl-involved deaths was twelve percent.

The Pandemic, Drug Demand, Consumption, and Violence

The pandemic fundamentally disrupted the Kensington drug markets in several ways, increasing both the size and the volatility of markets and leading to increased gun violence. Very recent research from other jurisdictions has shown that increases in overdoses predict future increases in homicide and firearm injury. A recent study conducted by Temple University graduate student Nicole Johnson and me found a relationship between neighborhoods with high levels of drug arrests and those with a high incidence of shootings. During the pandemic, the Philadelphia neighborhoods (measured as Census tracts) that were home to the top ten percent of drug arrests had the largest increase in fatal and nonfatal shootings. The overwhelming majority of these Census tracts with drug markets are in Kensington. While there are many causes of gun violence, when we examined a range of factors that typically have been associated with high violence, only the neighborhood drug market indicator and high levels of police investigatory stops were associated with increasing rates of shootings. During the peri-pandemic period studied (March 2020 through June 2021), **these Philadelphia Census tracts with drug markets—just ten percent of Philadelphia Census tracts—accounted for sixty-eight percent of all shootings**. These are the same neighborhoods that also witnessed a disproportionately high number of overdose fatalities—accounting for roughly thirty percent of the city's overdose deaths during the same period.

This aligns with prior studies showing that factors wrought by the pandemic—such as an increase in dealers and consumers, with consumers and dealers traveling further distances, as well as increases in the size of drug markets—are all factors associated with increased firearm violence. In addition, having multiple drug-selling groups on one corner, as is often the case in Kensington, or in close proximity to each other, increases violence.

A Plan to Improve Public Safety and Well-Being in Kensington Will Be a Win for the Entire City

Significant resources via the opioid recovery funds are available to beleaguered Pennsylvania communities. In Philadelphia, the focus must include a Kensington master plan for recovery and revitalization that is carefully targeted to simultaneously combat overdose deaths and firearm violence. As one stakeholder we interviewed for the Kensington Initiative evaluation put it, the amount of firearm violence makes it almost impossible to address the opioid epidemic: "We cannot do effective prevention, intervention, and treatment when people are ducking bullets."

There is an urgent need for innovative, geographically-focused efforts that combine private and public ventures to transform Kensington through large investments in human capital, pro-social outlets for children, harm-reduction focused social and victim services, permanent supportive and affordable housing, and other aspects of physical infrastructure. These large-scale efforts should be melded with problem-focused, intelligence-led policing specifically designed for organized, entrenched drug markets. This

requires investments in policing for long-term investigations of drug market organizations. Policing budgets for the Pennsylvania Office of the Attorney General and the Philadelphia Police Department should include dedicated funds for drug buys (i.e., purchase of illegal drugs, usually by a confidential informant and monitored by the police), overtime hours for investigators, additional intelligence analysts, advanced research statisticians, a larger capacity for wiretaps, more agents with knowledge of the area, and ample time to fully investigate these entrenched drug markets. The need for research to understand the variations across these drug market organizations, their specific operations, and their dealers and customers cannot be overstated. Partnering with federal agencies such as the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) should become commonplace so that analyses of drug routes and drug purity and toxicity inform both enforcement against suppliers and harm reduction strategies involving those consuming the drugs. And government agency leaders must support intelligence information sharing across agencies.

In other words, a master plan needs a comprehensive vision, coupled with complementary research and evaluation, that underscores the nuances of the inextricably entwined problems and can counter the supreme challenges that multi-partner, comprehensive strategies bring.[1] Long-term success can only derive from a coordinated strategy that, from the outset, delineates the goals, performance measures, and specific outcomes to be achieved with the opioid settlement funds and other resources that have been brought to the table. Historic and real-time administrative and intelligence data should be used to develop actionable objectives, followed by more data, research, formative feedback, and accountability.

A comprehensive master plan must begin by proactively and intentionally incorporating resident voices. That means purposeful strategies that empower residents on those blocks to be part of the strategy at all stages of development and implementation and in a manner that will increase resident trust of law enforcement, resulting in collaborative networks across resident and government stakeholders that truly embody collective capacity.

Philadelphia cannot continue to ignore the complex issues facing Kensington without severe costs for the entire city. And these are costs that the city is already enduring: reduced quality of life and life expectancy, increases in chronic disease and fear of crime, lower property values and overall stifled economic growth, and strained medical, educational, and criminal legal systems. Policymakers and the public should be reminded of these costs each time resource and budget decisions involve weighing Kensington-focused initiatives against other priorities. The solution has to be at the same scale as the problem. Philadelphia and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania must invest heavily in getting at the root of the interconnected opioid and gun violence crisis in Kensington so that innovative and evidence-informed strategies can be applied to solve it.

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1. More details on policy recommendations can be found in the final technical report on the evaluation of the Kensington Initiative.

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