

# FACT SHEET:

## UNDERLYING CAUSES AND CONTRIBUTING FACTORS OF COMMUNITY-LEVEL GUN VIOLENCE

AMNESTY  
INTERNATIONAL



**T**he causes of gun violence in communities of color are multi-faceted and there are deep-seated issues around poverty, discrimination, and economic, social and cultural rights. Firearms used in violent crimes across the USA, including those used in communities of color, have often been trafficked, or deviated out of the legal commerce stream and into the illegal market. Many community-level gun homicides remain unsolved and unprosecuted, resulting in impunity for the perpetrators, and feeding the cycle of gun violence. Tackling entrenched firearm violence in the community is a complex problem.

Communities of color have a long and complicated history of disadvantage and marginalization in the USA, which contributes to the disparate impact of firearm homicides. Urban centers are largely populated by communities whose neighborhoods frequently lack economic opportunity and access to services and where young people feel the need to protect themselves by carrying a firearm due to a lack of police protection and the presence of community-level gun violence.

Patterns of persistent firearm violence can both inhibit access to basic services, such as

health, housing and education, and entrench deprivation, which degrades those services over time. At the same time, firearm violence also causes a range of health problems throughout the affected community, increasing the burden on under-resourced services. Victims of firearm violence and their partners and wider families often lack access to adequate psychological and physical care and proper follow up to address these issues. This could range from long-term medical and financial support for those with physical and psychological disabilities caused by firearm violence, to the provision of counseling for those traumatized by the effects of firearm violence on themselves, their friends, family and wider community.

The full enjoyment of all human rights requires a holistic approach which looks not just at individual violations but at patterns of violations embedded in specific socio-economic realities. The USA has a duty to ensure that it does not discriminate on any of the grounds protected by international law and that it takes measures to remedy the legacy of discrimination and ensure that rights are enjoyed equally by everyone. This includes actively prioritizing marginalized communities in order to remove obstacles to their realizing the full spectrum of rights.

Reducing access to firearms is a key element in reducing future gun violence in communities. As part of the strategy to address high levels of firearm violence in the USA, federal, state and local governments should tailor policies to tackle the multiple, reinforcing interactions and disadvantages that have led to this chronic insecurity, paying particular attention to the specific needs of these communities. Where patterns of firearms possession and use lead to chronic insecurity, the government has an obligation to protect life and ensure security for all.



## BACKGROUND

Community-level firearm violence in the USA disproportionately impacts communities of color, particularly young black men. Firearm homicide was the leading cause of death for black men and boys aged 15-34 in 2016, and it was the second-leading cause of death for Latino men and boys in the same age range. In 2016 alone, 5,431 black men and boys aged between 15 and 34 were victims of firearm homicide; they were more than 10 times more likely to die from firearm homicide than white men and boys of the same age group.

### KEY STATISTICS:

- In 2016, African Americans represented 13.3% of the USA population but accounted for 58.5% of gun homicides.
- In 2016, a black male aged 15-34 was more than 10 times more likely to die from firearm homicide than a white male of the same age group.



## HUMAN RIGHTS CONCERNS

Human rights are freedoms and protections that belong to every single one of us. They are based on principles of dignity, equality, and mutual respect – regardless of age, nationality, gender, race, beliefs and personal orientations. Human rights obligations can be seen as standards for governments, through which governments or state officials must respect, protect and fulfil the rights of those within their jurisdictions and also abroad. They are not luxuries that can be met only when practicalities allow. The disparate impact of gun violence on urban communities of color raises serious concerns about the protection of human rights including the right to live, to security of the person, to freedom from discrimination, and to equal protection of the law.

## Possible Solutions to Address Community-Level Firearm Violence

The solutions to community-level firearm violence in the USA are varied. They include:

- Enacting legislation which works to undermine the illegal firearm market thereby restricting access to trafficked firearms
- Prompt investigation of all firearm-related deaths so that those responsible are held accountable
- Implementation of programs and initiatives aimed at reducing high levels of firearm violence in communities where gun violence is prevalent and addressing the long-term socio-economic impact of gun violence



Research indicates that long-term, adequately-funded, evidence-based projects tailored towards specific social, economic and cultural contexts, and working in partnership with the affected communities, can achieve sustained reductions in firearm violence. In fact, several federal and state-funded and supported evidence-based violence intervention and reduction strategies have proven effective in decreasing gun violence. By focusing efforts on a concentrated group—engaging community members, offering support, direct services and mentorship to individuals at high risk for engaging in gun violence – many cities have provided alternatives to violence. Most importantly, they have been able to combat and reduce gun violence while simultaneously providing life-altering opportunities for individuals living in high-crime neighborhoods.

Implementing evidence-based violence reduction programs in communities where there is a persistently high level of firearm violence should include active engagement and partnership with all relevant stakeholders – such as local authorities, including those providing health and education services, law enforcement, civil society, local businesses and community leaders – regular evaluation of impact, and a commitment to consistent, stable funding for firearm violence reduction/prevention. Unfortunately, despite the success and numerous available models for these programs, lack of funding and lack of political will have prevented sustained and adequate implementation of these initiatives.

## EVIDENCE-BASED GROUP VIOLENCE INTERVENTION MODELS AIMED AT REDUCING COMMUNITY-LEVEL GUN VIOLENCE

The following are examples of some strategies that are reported to have been effective in countering gun violence.

### **OPERATION CEASEFIRE, FOCUSED DETERRENCE GROUP VIOLENCE INTERVENTION MODEL:**

This problem-oriented strategy was created by criminologist David Kennedy, who now leads the National Network for Safe Communities. Through implementation of the program, the city of Boston decreased its youth murder rate by 61%. Operation Ceasefire and other programs affiliated with the National Network for Safe Communities work with community members, local officials, law enforcement, direct service

providers and others to identify a small group of individuals most at risk of being involved in gun violence, whom they then invite to scheduled “call-ins,” which are in-person meetings. During the meetings, community members, victims of gun violence, direct service providers and law enforcement officials speak with participants about gun violence and its impact, offering Operation Ceasefire benefits and programs to those who agree not to engage in further gun-related activity.

*Continued on page 5*

Individuals who choose not to participate in the program or not to refrain from engaging in gun violence are made aware that future involvement in gun-related violence will be met with swift legal action. The US Department of Justice National Institute of Justice gave Operation Ceasefire its highest rating for effectiveness, but has not increased the funding required for the program to be implemented by cities that desperately need it.

However, the program is not without its critics, who cite its use of police data and arrest records to target individuals, use of aggregated data to target individuals for arrests rather than focusing on rehabilitation, and challenges with implementation in communities where community trust in the police is already strained.

### **THE CURE VIOLENCE PUBLIC HEALTH APPROACH TO GUN VIOLENCE:**

The Cure Violence model utilizes a public health framework to assess gun violence. Created by Dr. Gary Slutkin, a physician who studied infectious diseases, the program aims to treat gun violence like an epidemic, by focusing on the way violence is spread from person to person and interrupting violent cycles proactively.

The program offers rehabilitation opportunities both for the “violence interrupters”, often former gun violence perpetrators themselves, and for individuals seeking an alternative to violence. The program has been criticized for failing to provide information to law enforcement regarding investigations and potentially furthering police-community mistrust. Proponents of the program argue that the firewall between law enforcement and program staff is critical to ensure the safety of workers, the effectiveness of the strategy and trust by community.

### **HOSPITAL-BASED TRAUMA/VIOLENCE INTERVENTION:**

This approach is based on the premise that patients admitted to the hospital for gunshot wounds, particularly those who are repeat admissions, may be at high risk of being victims or perpetrators of future gun violence and are likely to be open to modifying their behaviors. With adequate support, connection to direct services, and counseling, these patients leave the hospital with a tailored plan for alternatives to gun violence.

In one of the few control group studies conducted on such programs, the R Adams Cowley Shock Trauma Center in Baltimore, Maryland, carried out a targeted study of two groups totaling 100 patients, admitted to the Trauma Center between 1999 and 2001, all of whom had previously been hospitalized for a violent injury and had prior involvement with the criminal justice system. One group received intervention services, the other did not. The study demonstrated that the group who received hospital-based intervention services was six times less likely to be hospitalized for a subsequent violent injury than those patients in the group without intervention. Additionally, individuals in the group without intervention were three times more likely to be arrested for violent crimes than those who had received hospital-based intervention services.

### **RICHMOND FELLOWSHIP MODEL:**

This model, created by community activist and lawyer DeVone Boggan, involved the creation of the Office of Neighborhood Safety, which is independent from the police department, but works collaboratively with police in the initial phases of identifying high-risk individuals for targeted outreach and support.

Those who choose to participate are offered the opportunity to enroll in a fellowship program, known as Operation Peacemaker, which provides an intensive, comprehensive strategy for connection with social services, treatment, counseling, educational and professional development training and financial incentives. The innovative program has been very successful in decreasing gun violence, homicide rates and shootings in Richmond, California. It has garnered national recognition for its unconventional approach to gun violence, providing holistic support for impacted individuals, offering financial stipends for individuals who reach benchmarks and achieve personal goals and investing in the short and long-term success and growth of individuals, who in turn change the community. The program is now being implemented in other areas through the organization Advance Peace.

In Oakland, the Ceasefire Program was implemented in 2012, **when 126 individuals were killed in Oakland, and contributed to a reduced number of 74 homicides in 2017, the lowest rate in 17 years.**



In New Haven, the Project Longevity (Ceasefire model) program helped **reduce homicides from 34 in 2012 to 7 in 2017** over the course of five years.

## SUCCESS STORIES

**“Quality partnerships matter. We need partners with a common goal and clear role. We need to involve the community.”**

Reygan E. Harmon, Ceasefire Program Director,  
Oakland Police Department

The implementation of evidence-based group violence intervention models has successfully decreased gun violence in certain cities such as

Oakland, California and New Haven, Connecticut. In Oakland, for example, the Ceasefire Program was implemented in 2012, when 126 individuals were killed in Oakland, and contributed to a reduced number of 74 homicides in 2017, the lowest rate in 17 years. In New Haven, the Project Longevity (Ceasefire model) program helped reduce homicides from 34 in 2012 to 7 in 2017 over the course of five years. In Chicago, the most recent 2014 study of Cure Violence (Chicago Ceasefire)’s efficacy indicated a 31% reduction in homicides and a 19% decrease in shootings in districts served by the program during the evaluation period.

**The USA has a duty to take positive action to address gun violence, especially where models exist that could reduce it while making a long-term and life-changing impact on marginalized individuals.**

## **CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING GROUP VIOLENCE INTERVENTION MODELS & RECOMMENDATIONS**

Despite the success and numerous available models for these programs, lack of funding and lack of political will have prevented the kind of long-term consistent implementation these programs need. Even in cases where the models have drastically reduced gun violence, community leaders face challenges in maintaining them, sometimes leading to a devastating reversal of the program's gains, and a return to previous higher levels of gun violence.

The USA has a duty to take positive action to address gun violence, especially where models exist that could reduce it while making a long-term and life-changing impact on marginalized individuals. Although widely supported, some advocates fear that data gathered through the

programs to target individuals most at risk of being involved with gun violence could also be used by law enforcement officials to target these individuals through data-driven policing, for other types of law enforcement, including involvement in “gangs.” Accordingly, the design and implementation of these programs must include human rights safeguards including the right to freedom from discrimination, the right to privacy and the right to due process.

## **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

*Healing Communities in Crisis: Lifesaving Solutions to the Urban Gun Violence Epidemic*, Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence and PICO National Network, <https://lawcenter.giffords.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Healing-Communities-in-Crisis-URL.pdf>.

*Investing in Intervention: The Critical Role of State-Level Support in Breaking the Cycle of Urban Gun Violence*, Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, PICO National Network, the Community Justice Reform Coalition, <https://lawcenter.giffords.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Investing-in-Intervention-12.18.17.pdf>.

*Interventions for Reducing Violence and Its Consequences for Young Black Males in America*, Cities United, <http://citiesunited.org/resources-for-cities/interventions-for-reducing-violence-and-its-consequences-for-young-black-males-in-america/>.

*Engaging Communities in Reducing Gun Violence: A Roadmap for Safer Communities*, The Urban Institute and the Joyce Foundation, <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/80061/2000760-engaging-communities-in-reducing-gun-violence-a-road-map-for-safer-communities.pdf>.

**AMNESTY**  
**INTERNATIONAL**



Design and layout by Design Action Collective  
Cover art: Getty Images/bubaone