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CARLOS T. CARTER

## Gun Violence

This month's health page highlights gun violence and recognizes the overwhelming complexity of this nationwide problem. As we continue our discussion around the Social Determinants of Health, we are centering gun violence as a crisis of public health. Carlos T. Carter, President and CEO of the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh, shares his thoughts:

What are some of the root causes and social drivers of gun violence? There are many social drivers that contribute to violence in our community. This is a country with an obsession with guns and, unfortunately, guns are valued more than the lives of our children. We claim to be a civilized country, but America ranks second in the world for gun violence deaths. You can probably get access to a gun faster than achieving a true living wage job. It is not lost on me that structural racism also plays a major role in the rampant gun violence, which includes redlining and underinvestment in our communities. These forces of evil facilitate hopelessness and self-destructive behavior. We can and must do better!

What is the Urban League doing to address them?

Through our various programs and services, the Urban League works to remove barriers that perpetuate poverty. Through our Center for Economic Self-Reliance, we are committed to connecting people to training opportunities and helping to remove barriers that impact their ability to thrive. We provide support for our neighbors to obtain suitable housing and provide home ownership counseling to prepare them for homeownership. We also support the wellbeing of families through our Family Support Centers.

Additionally, we leverage our Black Male Leadership Institute (BMLDI) and Black Female Leadership Institute (BFLDI) to build upon the strengths of our teens by empowering them to be productive citizens who love and value themselves and their communities. They are mentored by caring adults who guide them towards being strong civically minded leaders who create positive change in their community. Finally, we continuously support responsible and evidence-based gun legislation that will make our communities safer.

This summer, the Urban League's annual State of Black Pittsburgh is returning after a brief hiatus due to the pandemic. This year's edition of the conference will both highlight the good work being done by organizations such as ours to address systemic poverty, including gun violence, while also identifying possible roadmaps to tackle these issues even more effectively. This edition will also coincide with the first-ever Youth Changemakers Conference which will be uplifting Pittsburgh's emerging generation of leaders, equipping them with the skills they need to tackle our region's biggest challenges today. The Conference and the State of Black Pittsburgh will be June 29 and 30. To get involved with the Conference, anyone can visit our website: <https://ulphg.org/event/youth-changemakers-conference-featuring-state-of-black-pittsburgh/>.

Why should we all consider gun violence a public health crisis?

Gun violence is a literal cancer on our community that continues to eviscerate the minds and bodies of our people. The fear and trauma it creates is devastating and all too tangible. Gun violence is taking away the mothers and fathers of our community, perpetuating the cycle of poverty. Finally, it creates a level of stress and desolation that is unparalleled. It is killing our bodies and spirits. Enough is enough!

## Adult support networks help protect youth from violence

Black and Brown adolescents who live in urban neighborhoods are at a higher risk of witnessing and experiencing violence, including gun violence, compared to White adolescents.

These inequities are the result of structural racism and systemic disinvestment in communities. This condition can limit opportunities and resources, especially to make safe, positive, and lasting connections with others in places like community centers, schools, churches, and libraries.

To address the factors that cause these disparities — and promote equity and reduce violence for Black and Brown youth — Dr. Alison Culyba, Assistant Professor of Pediatrics at the University of Pittsburgh, is leading an intervention program called Strengthening Connections for Change (SCC).

The program was created with input from Pittsburgh youth, adults, and community collaborators. It is part of The Pittsburgh Study, which brings community and academic partners together to develop and test strategies to promote anti-racist youth thriving in our region.

SCC brings together teens ages 13-17 and key supportive adults in their lives. SCC is being evaluated through a community-partnered pilot trial funded by the National Institutes of Health.

SCC's goal is to strengthen teens' support network, build leadership skills, foster community engagement, and challenge attitudes and behaviors that help teens avoid violence. "The hope is that by making intergenerational partnerships stronger, we can reduce violence and help teens build skills to thrive," Dr. Culyba explains.

SCC is based on a similar program in Flint, Michigan, which helped youth develop skills to implement change in their communities. The Flint study revealed that when youth participated in empowering activities, they were more likely to avoid risky behaviors and grow to become productive, healthy adults.

The Pittsburgh program is designed to help youth grow the networks of adults they can turn to for support in their family, school, and community. "For a young person, a strong network of relationships helps them develop and apply skills

that can be life affirming for themselves and their communities," says Dr. Culyba.

SCC also builds on previous research by Dr. Culyba and colleagues that shows the protective power of adult supporters. These relationships lead to better school performance and lessened substance use and violence exposure.

Currently, SCC is being tested in Knoxville and East Liberty. The program is made up of 12, 2-hour sessions once a week. Sessions rotate between youth-only, adult-only, and youth-adult programs.

The content strengthens support networks between adolescents and adults, builds leadership skills, fosters community engagement, and promotes attitudes and behaviors that reduce violence victimization and perpetration. Group discussions explore identity, teen-adult relationships, social networks, and community involvement. Near the end of the sessions, participants design and carry out a community project that strengthens intergenerational bonds.

While all of this is happening, Dr. Culyba and

colleagues are tracking enrollment and attendance and evaluating how participants feel about the sessions and the sessions' effectiveness.

"SCC is an intervention that focuses on the transformative power of relationships to address violence and promote safety," says Dr. Culyba. "Most importantly, the program is doing this from a place of strength and assets that build resilience and empowerment for the participants and neighborhoods."

## Love a teen? 3 ways you can help them thrive!

Dr. Culyba offers advice on how to interact with the teenagers you love in a supportive way that conveys unconditional love.

Reflect and give voice. Think about what you love and value in your teen — the things that amaze you! Then share them with your teenager. Never forget that words have the power to uplift and transform. Your reflections also convey that you're a steady source of unconditional love, support, and acceptance. Hold your teen to high

standards. From a place of love, clearly set expectations about behavior, schoolwork, and responsibilities and communicate why they're important. Focus on growth and improvement. Encourage your teen to set challenges, learn from mistakes, and strive to do their best.

Maintain open and respectful communication. Create a safe and open place where your teen feels comfortable talking to you. Listen actively and don't be overly critical or

judgmental. Be respectful and try to understand their perspective. Provide guidance when needed. Remember, holding a teen to high standards in a loving way involves balance! You're challenging them to grow while providing the support they need to do that safely. Developing a strong relationship with your teenager requires patience, understanding, and a strong foundation of love and trust.

## Treating gun violence as a public health challenge

In the U.S., American citizens own more guns than the combined total of the next 24 countries with about 44%-50% of U.S. households having firearms. The U.S. also leads the developed world in firearm deaths, which have become the leading cause of death of children and adolescents.

While most firearms are owned and used safely, a small subset of them are used in acts of crime or violence, including suicide. Violence from firearms is especially complex for Black Americans who are disproportionately affected.

Gun violence is also on the rise in the form of mass shootings which are often labeled as acts committed by "mentally ill" individuals. According to University of Pittsburgh's Dr. John S. Rozel, Professor of Psychiatry and Adjunct Professor of Law, this label is misleading.

While mass shootings and

homicides receive significant media coverage, 54% of gun-related deaths in the U.S. are suicides, according to the latest data from the Pew Research Center. "These deaths are devastating for families, friends, and communities because they're often preventable and occur when a loved one is in a temporary crisis," says Dr. Rozel.

To reduce gun violence, especially gun-related suicides, Dr. Rozel believes we must treat the violence as a public health challenge, including training medical professionals and other trusted authority figures to better identify and help individuals who are at risk of harming themselves or others with a firearm.

For example, an evidence-based approach called Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management (BTAM) can help authority figures, such as schoolteachers and principals, respond

to information suggesting that someone is preparing to take part in serious violence. "Using BTAM, these figures can assess the risk and develop strategies to reduce it by connecting a person who's in crisis with mental health programs," explains Dr. Rozel.

To stop people from possessing a firearm while they're in distress, some states have Extreme Risk Protection Orders (ERPOs), which are laws that prevent people who show signs of being a threat to themselves or others from buying or possessing a firearm. While there is currently no ERPO in Pennsylvania, there is a private organization called Hold My Guns that may be willing to store people's weapons temporarily in a gun shop. "For example, when there's a mental health or domestic violence issue, individuals and/or families can use Hold My Guns to keep guns out of the

hands of an at-risk person until a crisis passes," notes Dr. Rozel.

Scientific research also plays a vital role in preventing gun violence. Health care professionals must be trained and encouraged to advocate for evidence-based gun safety policies and interventions at the state and federal levels. "We're talking about things like universal background checks, domestic violence restraining orders, waiting periods, and laws that keep guns away from children," Dr. Rozel states. "We know from research that most people support these measures, including gun owners."

"Medical providers should discuss gun safety with patients just as they talk about other safety issues, such as using seatbelts, car seats, and bicycle helmets," says Dr. Rozel. "We also need to be outspoken about and mindful of the fact that gun violence affects Black

and Brown people unequally," he adds.

For gun violence survivors, the conversations would include counseling that may help stop retaliatory responses. These conversations should not be limited to medical settings. They would also take place in churches, barbershops, community centers, and schools. They would focus on proper firearm training, safe storage practices (trigger and cable locks, lock boxes, and gun safes) and how to recognize warning signs in at-risk family members and friends.

Dr. Rozel adds, "The regulations, research, and education — the important conversations that happen between people who legally own guns and people who don't — must be respectful and come for a common desire to reduce gun violence while upholding people's right to own guns."

## Violence Prevention Office promotes safe, healthy communities

Founded in 2016, the Allegheny County Office of Violence Prevention (OVP) takes a public health approach to gun violence, including creating a framework based on why gun violence occurs, what causes it, and its consequences on individuals and neighborhoods.

With this structure in place, people who work in public health can better understand the risk factors that lead to gun violence and take steps to stop them through prevention programs, policy interventions and advocacy.

Working with the Department of Human Services and the City of Pittsburgh, the OVP partners with stakeholders that have similar goals, such as other government offices, as well as non-profit, neighborhood and faith-based groups.

The OVP is led by a violence prevention community advisory board, which oversees:

- A trauma response group that supports psychological and emotional well-being for people who are affected by violence.

- A street outreach team that focuses on preventing potential conflict.

- The distribution of micro-grants that help to pay for violence-prevention strategies in at-risk neighborhoods.

- The office receives financial support from the Heinz Endowments and is tasked with putting into ac-

- tion the items in the Public Health Commission report from 2013.

## Did you know? Homicide impacts everyone.

According to research conducted by Everytown for Gun Safety and Support Fund, the cost of gun violence in the U.S. totaled \$557 billion, of which \$12.6 billion was paid by taxpayers.

These costs are broken into three groups:

- Immediate costs: Hospital treatment, ambulances and police re-

- sponse

- Future costs: Long-term physical and mental health care, institutional care, lost wages due to disability or death and criminal justice costs

- Quality of life costs: Pain and suffering throughout a victim's life

- In Allegheny county, the 61 homicides that happened in 2022 cost

- the state approximately \$750 million and taxpayers about \$46 million. (Source: OVP: Consequences of Gun Violence)

- For more information on gun violence impact in Pennsylvania, check out [Everystat.org](http://Everystat.org).

## Initiative supports, encourages, and empowers communities

Friends & Family Initiative (FFI), a 501c3 is a faith-based organization, is led by Founder/Executive Director Parrish Davenport and Hillary Hilton, Director of Programming. FFI's holistic mission is to support, encourage, and empower communities in the Greater Pittsburgh area with programs that serve entire families, not just one age group.

The organization got its start in Pittsburgh in 2015 when Parrish,

local community gospel choir director, began recruiting vocalists to form the Family & Friends Choir. Vocalists from various communities, ages 18 to 70, united with their voices and began performing throughout Allegheny County and outside the state.

The vocalists worked together and recorded an EP project in the studio featuring original music written by composers Nikki Thorpe, James Ziegler, and Parrish.

Following the release of the project, Parrish and the leadership team desired to do more than just sing. As a result, additional community programs evolved.

Today, FFI offers workforce development (resume building and interview skills) and youth leadership classes to the community. In addition, financial literacy workshops, facilitated by collaborative partner April Jones Next Level 412, LLC, are available to

help people learn how to manage their finances and credit.

FFI's goal is to help people of all ages transform their lives for the better and — in the process — create a sustainable community. Learn more about upcoming programs! Visit the Friends & Family Initiative website or contact the organization at [info@ffipgh.org](mailto:info@ffipgh.org).