

**Forum:** United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization

**Issue:** Ensuring access to mental health aid to children exposed to gun violence

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## **Definition of Key Terms**

### **Gun violence**

The use of a gun to shoot one or more individuals and cause injuries or fatalities.

### **Mental health**

A state of well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn and work well, and contribute to their community.

### **Psychological trauma**

Trauma is an emotional response to a highly distressing event. Shock and denial are common directly after the event, though there are also long-term affectations that cause disruption, and in many cases disability, for the individual.

### **PTSD**

An acronym for post-traumatic stress disorder, PTSD is a psychiatric disorder that may occur in people who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event, series of events, or set of circumstances. An individual may experience this as emotionally or physically harmful or life-threatening and may affect mental, physical, and spiritual well-being.

### **Impunity**

Freedom from punishment or from the unpleasant results of something that has been done. This is also the term used in the legal world when speaking of people who committed crimes and were either not tried for them or were not convicted.

## Background Information

### Causes of Gun Violence

Gun violence is predominantly carried out by men and predominantly targets men, with 81% of global gun-related homicides affecting men and 90% of all homicides (whether gun-related or not) committed by men. In the case of gun violence, gender is a highly relevant factor given the social pressure for masculinity to be expressed as toughness, and by extension, violence. This gender norm is likely to push many men to use more violent means by reinforcing the idea that less violent means are “more feminine” and thus inferior or not “commendable” enough.

Social norms affecting women also cause the death of young children as they're the perpetrators in most cases where their child, if up to the age of 1, may be killed. This is sometimes due to single mothers feeling like the social shame and stigma of being a single mother makes one immoral or unfit for society. However, after the child surpasses 1 year of age, it becomes more likely for their father to murder them. In the case of both parents, this is often through violent attitudes toward the infant or disciplinary measures which are excessively aggressive.

In the following paragraphs, I'll be almost exclusively talking about homicide, and though not all homicides involve firearms, almost  $\frac{3}{4}$  do, which means that the causes (and solutions) for homicide are very similar to those for gun violence. Most cases of homicide are not caused or affected by substances, with only a bit over  $\frac{1}{3}$  homicides being carried out under the influence of a substance. Of that figure, 90% is attributed to alcohol, with 6% attributed to various drugs and 4% to other psychoactive substances.

Income inequality is also highly linked to higher rates of homicide, with countries that have a very small middle class or no middle class at all having the highest rates of homicide. It's also noteworthy to mention that more prosperous countries do not necessarily achieve lower rates of homicide. In the words of the UNODC, "for if the benefits of economic growth are not evenly distributed, those who miss out may very well decide to resort to violent and criminal activities."

Resource scarcity, which is linked to income inequality, is also connected to rates of homicide. Resources such as water supply, land (specifically arable land), cattle and sheep, and fish and fishing areas. Often, resource scarcity does not cause more crime or homicide on its own, as it's often interlinked with corruption in government, systematic unequal distribution of resources, and political marginalization.

Poor education or a complete lack of access to it has been found to be a risk factor that may lead youth to participate in gang activity, organized crime, or individual homicide incidents. Not only does poor education reduce the chances of employment, but it also makes youth less resilient against crime, which in turn causes those who turn to homicide to create more unsafe environments for students as well as destabilize communities and their wellbeing. This all creates a vicious cycle where there's a lack of access to quality education due to the instability brought forth from homicide rates, feeding again into higher rates of homicide from those who didn't have access to quality education.

Other factors such as sudden job loss and the stress associated with it amongst youth can also be a cause for individual incidences of homicide.

The appearance of violence in cinema aimed at children and adolescents, whether involving firearms or not, is also an important trigger for more violence. A study conducted in the US in 2015-16 found that children aged 8-12 who are exposed to a film that features gun violence are more likely to be interested in using guns than those who are not exposed to them. The APPC (Annenberg Public Policy Center) of the University of Pennsylvania found that PG-13 movies including gun violence make more at the box office than those rated R in films from 1985 to 2015, with an upward trend. These two factors combined indicate that more exposure to gun violence in film will cause higher rates of gun violence by the children exposed to this content. Gun violence is not only limited to films, but also video games and social media. Video games such as Call of Duty, Fortnite, and Grand Theft Auto, all of which include gun violence, have spiked in popularity in the past few years. The Youth Violence Prevention Center has found that the use of violent video games is linked to an increase in violent behavior, especially when talking about younger children. One of the behaviors that children exposed to violent video games may participate in is bullying, which in turn is a risk factor for more violence.

## **Global Context**

In 2019, over 250,000 people worldwide died because of guns. 66% of this figure is due to deaths in Brazil, the USA, Venezuela, Mexico, India, and Colombia (from highest to lowest number of deaths). The majority of worldwide deaths by firearm were homicides, comprising 71% of the deaths. The remainder of deaths were due to suicide (21%) and gun accidents (8%). Mass shootings and school shootings are a much rarer occurrence despite the extensive media coverage they receive. Almost 90% of those killed by guns were men.

If gun deaths per country are calculated taking into account the population of the country, El Salvador, Venezuela, Guatemala, Colombia, and the USA are at the top of the list. Gun violence is especially prevalent in South America due to notorious gang activity, economic instability, and the thriving drug trafficking market, amongst others.

Over a billion firearms are currently in circulation around the globe, with 85% of those being in the possession of private individuals, 13% in military assets, and 2% owned by law enforcement.

When it comes to children and adolescents specifically, males are almost always over 50% of gun violence victims. This figure increases the older the children are, starting out with a more even distribution from ages 0-9 and gradually growing farther apart to the point where amongst teenagers 18-19 years old, males represent 89.3% of gun violence victims while their female counterparts represent a much lower 10.7%.

## **The USA**

Over 600 people die each day as a direct result of gun violence and these deaths are disproportionately common amongst people of color, boys, and members of many other marginalized communities. In the US in 2020, 60.9% of the people killed by homicide using a gun were Black despite the Black American population being less than 15%. Women also face more risks if their intimate partner possesses a gun, as it's exponentially more difficult to flee the situation.

Communities where gun violence or activity is common have a decreased access to healthcare and education, both of which are fundamental human rights. These same communities are also frequently impoverished and lacking resources, which leads to cycles of criminal behavior, trauma, and gun-related deaths. Often, these communities are Black due to the post-slavery segregation, which is an institutionalized system that keeps Black people in poorer financial and emotional situations through carceral punishment, overpolicing, and the creation of biased and targeted laws.

The USA is a case of particular concern because of its lack of mental health support available. This is largely due to how all healthcare is privatized and thus inaccessible to many people in dire need of it. Even the services that are available are not on par with those of countries in similar economic and technological development.

### **Effects of Gun Violence on Children**

Children exposed to gun violence very often experience psychological trauma, which may carry into their adult lives. This manifests as reduced brain development, mental illnesses such as anxiety, depression, and PTSD, and skill deficits of different kinds. Those children who are in neighborhoods, communities, or families where gun violence is prevalent are also likely to have less coping skills for their emotions, turning to uncontrollable anger and violence as a way to funnel their frustrations. Furthermore, children attending schools where a shooting took place had a lower average grade, were more likely to repeat a grade, were more likely to use antidepressants, and were less likely to become employed than those who were not exposed to a shooting. The desensitization to gun violence also causes a higher likelihood of inflicting violence on others and viewing

violence as a normal occurrence, which is likely to lead to more trauma and violence and less positive change in the community.

Mental illnesses like PTSD and CPTSD are highly comorbid with other conditions like mood, anxiety, and personality disorders, which all pose impairments in everyday functioning. All of the aforementioned disproportionately affect disabled children due to the lack of support that is often not in place for them. For instance, autistic children are more likely to become traumatized by violence due to a brain that gets overloaded with stimulation more easily.

The stigma and taboo around mental illness, specifically when it affects children, hinders the services that aim at helping children who struggle with mental illness, such as those who have been affected by gun violence. Because of this, social change is required to change the mindset of many adults into accepting that children with mental illnesses need to be able to talk about their experiences and how they have affected their lives. Access to proper treatment is also heavily reliant on the level of awareness parents and educators have of the warning signs of different mental illnesses. If symptoms are caught very late, the emotional affectation on the child will be greater.



## **Current Measures**

At the moment, both preventative and restorative measures are in place in different parts of the world.

## **Community Aid**

After five children were killed by guns in the early months of 2021 in Lebanon, UNICEF has taken measures to try to increase the safety of children in communities where firearms are common and/or present. They did this by raising awareness amongst caregivers in the community, providing therapy services to those children affected, and implementing more targeted measures to protect children at risk of gun violence. Community-based aid is especially important because it aims to heal generational wounds within that community and create a safer place for everyone, especially the children. It also takes into account the bigger picture, risk factors, and potential victims of violence instead of focusing solely on individual cases of violence, which are often rare.

## **Nonprofit Organizations**

Sandy Hook Promise, an nonprofit American organization was created in 2012 to help prevent children from being exposed to gun violence. They do this through a network of volunteers, free education in schools about preventing school violence and shootings, researching what prevention methods are most effective, and advocating for more gun laws being passed. Sandy Hook Promise are by far not the only organization fighting for positive change. IANSA is a global organization that has worked with the UN on multiple occasions and has successfully helped reduce worldwide gun violence through their policies.

## **Carceral Punishment**

The police and carceral punishment, the main worldwide measures meant to stop crime, are highly ineffective at their job. Between 2007 and 2016, an average of only 43 people were convicted for each 100 homicides across 43 different countries. This impunity may cause more homicides as over half of homicides committed are not met with any punishment. As the rates of homicide rise due to impunity, law enforcement agencies do not have enough bandwidth to deal with a lot of cases, thus causing more lack of conviction and impunity.

Though carceral punishment is the most common form of punishment for a crime, promising to keep criminals off the streets, ensure public safety, and bring down rates of crime, that is generally untrue. In the UK in 2018, the rate of adult reoffenders was 27.5%. Of this figure, each individual committed an average of 4 crimes after being discharged from prison. One of the reasons for higher rates of crime after prison is the exposure offenders have to more criminal elements while inside prison. There is a general lack of disregard for the individual needs of each imprisoned person, which often leads to emotional neglect. This means that prisons generally offer little to no rehabilitative programs or tools. There are also arguments that state that prisons are used as a way to disproportionately harbor ethnic and/or racial minorities, thus pushing them further into poverty and marginalization. This holds especially true in the United States. The UNODC points out that some important reasons why prison reform are crucial are: the violation of human rights in prison, specifically that of liberty, the disproportionate affectation of impoverished individuals being sent to prison, insufficient health of imprisoned persons, the disruption of communities and other social ties, and the economic strain the prison system causes.

## Access to Therapy Services

Children who have access to quality therapy have many options regarding what treatment they can receive, and this goes beyond regular talk therapy. PCIT (Parent-Child Interaction Therapy) can be particularly helpful for restoring or strengthening the bond between a child and a parent. CCPT (Child Centered Play Therapy) utilizes elements of playfulness as a way to create a safe environment for a child to process difficult emotions or situations in. CBT (Cognitive Behavioral Therapy) is helpful to help children identify negative thoughts and connect thoughts to actions. It's based on the premise that by changing one's thoughts you can change one's actions. DBT (Dialectical Behavioral Therapy) helps those in high risk situations or those who struggle with very extreme emotions, as might be the case for children exposed to gun violence. Other kinds of therapy that may be helpful include group therapy with other survivors of gun violence, art therapy, or family therapy. It's also important to choose a mental health professional who is knowledgeable or skilled in the area in which the child struggles with.

## **Relevant UN Treaties and Resolutions**

### **General Assembly Resolution 55/255 (2001)**

This resolution put into place the Protocol against the Illicit Manufacturing and Trafficking in Firearms, Their Parts and Components and Ammunition, which is a legally binding resolution that enforces the control and regulation of the manufacturing of firearms, especially when dealing with transnational exchanges.

### **Security Council Resolution 2117 (2013)**

The Small Arms and Light Weapons resolution aims to protect citizens, including children, from the violence caused by small arms and light weapons. This is specifically in the context of ethnic cleansing, genocide, war crimes, and other crimes against humanity. It is during these instances of violent extremism that children are very likely to be caught in the crossfire as well as develop mental illnesses like PTSD due to the overwhelming traumatic experiences they're witnessing.

### **Security Council Resolution 2427 (2018)**

This resolution aims to keep children safe during armed conflict, but unlike Resolution 2117, it talks specifically about protecting children from being recruited into non-State armed groups, such as guerrillas, and asks to treat former recruits as victims instead of enemies. The Security Council expressed due concern for children in armed conflict as they are often used as human shields and are more susceptible to being affected both physically and psychologically from aerial attacks, indiscriminate and excessive use of force, and landmines. The resolution also condemns other kinds of violence against children such as that of sexual assault and torture.

## **Security Council Resolution 2601 (2021)**

This resolution is centered around stopping attacks on schools and other education-related spaces, including all of the people they affect. It specifically asks for the right to education to continue even during active armed conflict. It was co-sponsored by 99 Member States.

## Possible solutions

Decreasing gun violence toward children (and everyone as a whole) requires a holistic approach as there is no one solution that will simultaneously fix everything. All of the following have been applied to a certain extent in different countries with varying degrees of success, and thus it's imperative that delegates are informed about the attempts to reduce gun violence in the past in order to determine what the best possible solutions are. Some of the following suggested policies focus on prevention of risk factors for homicide and other gun-related violence while others focus on the restorative aspect of the aftermath of gun violence.

Some possible policies that could be put in place to reduce gun violence against children are:

- The recognition of firearm violence as a threat to human rights and public healthcare, thus involving more public and private organizations in the inclusion of gun-related problems as relevant and imperative;
- Requiring a firearm license where the requirements needed to obtain it ensure the individual who possesses the firearm is properly equipped to handle it;
- Limiting the type and number of firearms individuals can own regardless of who they are. There must be certain types of firearms that no citizen can have and a national or international maximum;
- Mandatory and adequate training for the possession of any firearm;
- Allowing citizens to anonymously turn in unregistered firearms at police stations, where they remain anonymous and are not punished or fined for the possession of the firearm;

- Testing and researching alternative forms of justice that do not involve carceral punishment;
- Ensuring secure gun storage, especially in homes where children are present;
- Lack of access to firearms to children and adolescents. Includes selling firearms to them as well as access within the home should an adult be in possession of them through the regulation of the selling of arms and laws on safekeeping of firearms inside the home;
- Community-based prevention that seeks to unify the community and heal collectively;
- Adequate mental health support for those affected with professionals aware of the patient's sociocultural context (ie. Black patients attended to by Black professionals);
- Investing in gun violence research to understand the issue more thoroughly and implement measures that follow scientific findings;
- Working to dismantle patriarchal social norms which demand men are tough, self-sufficient and violent;
- Investing in accessible, equitable, and quality education worldwide;
- An increase in social awareness, specifically for parents and educators, of signs of mental illness in children;
- Pushing for social change to destigmatize mental illness, specifically regarding children.

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