

IS 594

May 1, 2022

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More Investing, Less Arresting: A Public Health Model for Reducing Gun Violence in Detroit

Executive Summary

The organization Faithfully Organizing Resources for Community Empowerment (Force) Detroit works with a network of community organizations to provide culturally relevant care to those most affected by gun violence in the city of Detroit, MI. We found Force Detroit's model to be based on a public health approach to violence. Such an approach mirrors how public health agencies address communicable diseases, and it necessitates an investment in community infrastructures as well as in the treatment of the root causes of violence. We suggest that Urbana, IL follow their example by operating under an anti-racist framework; prioritizing investments into community mental health support systems and educational resources; recognizing community leaders as experts; and supporting community-driven initiatives. Importantly, the above must be done while also de-emphasizing the presence of law enforcement and disinvesting from the use of surveillance technologies.

Background

Like many cities across the United States (U.S.), Detroit has a painful history with gun violence due in part to issues of poverty, overcriminalization, and structural racism. In recent years, several community organizations have developed strategies and action plans to address these issues. We contacted Force Detroit because they are a dedicated coalition of organizations, activists, and peacekeepers. Force Detroit has surveyed over 1,000 residents to-date, and their organization is continually engaging the residents of Detroit, including by having so far conducted over 12,000 listening sessions along with numerous hosting events, and by supporting the people and groups who seek to work toward the goal of reducing gun violence in their communities. Force Detroit's expertise and extensive work provide an important model for how Urbana can address the root causes of gun violence in our communities.

To learn more about the resources and community commitments required to address the complex issue of gun violence, we interviewed three members of Force Detroit via Zoom. (N.B. Interviews, as they appear in this paper, have been edited and condensed.) James "Screal" Eberheart Jr.'s role at Force Detroit is that of Organizing Technician, which represents his entrepreneurial drive and the opportunities he makes possible through his community activism. Dajuan "Zoe" Kennedy is a Public Health and Safety CVI Specialist who was formerly incarcerated and who uses what he has learned to interrupt violence in his community. Alia Harvey-Quinn is the Executive Director, and she has a long history of working in the non-profit sector along with a dedication to social justice practice that centers upon viewing community members as experts.

Defining the Problem

Americans are all too familiar with gun violence. The rate of gun homicide per capita in the U.S. is more than double the average of all other countries and ranks at the top of nations with the highest socio-demographic index (Barton & Nass, 2021). As the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated structural and social conditions, interpersonal violence rose to levels unprecedented in recent history. Research shows a 30% increase in shootings across the U.S. during the period from March 1, 2020 to March 31, 2021 as compared with the prior year (Ssentongo et al., 2021).

The recent increase in gun violence has disproportionately affected marginalized communities due to racial and ethnic inequities in housing, economic instability, lack of access to healthcare, and other vital community support services (Schleimer et al., 2022). This has been especially true of Detroit, where residents now face a 1 in 44 chance of being a victim of violent crime (Neighborhood Scout, 2022). Detroit also has the distinction of being the poorest city in the U.S., with a poverty rate of more than 34% (World Population Review, 2022) and an unemployment rate of nearly 20% (Detroit Metro Area Communities Study, 2022).

Our research demonstrates that community gun violence is the result of a public health crisis. Increasing law enforcement may temporarily be seen to address the symptoms of this crisis, but it will not solve the underlying conditions that breed the root causes, including poverty; lack of jobs, housing, food, and healthcare; deficient and crumbling infrastructure; substandard public schools; over-criminalization; and structural racism. These conditions lead to a normalization of trauma and a sense of hopelessness that characterize too many inner-city neighborhoods, creating fertile ground for criminal exploitation as the only visible path out of poverty. Gun violence is always tragic and unacceptable, but given these conditions it should not be surprising that it has become endemic among these communities.

Structural Poverty and Systemic Racism

“Coming into this world I was not prepared for what society has for me. I am a target. Of predatory lenders. Of a governmental structure that doesn’t recognize me. Of corporations that use my identity to make money. I wasn’t prepared for the onslaught and how to deal with it.”

— Zoe

We recognize that the mere suggestion that systemic racism still pervades American life can be politically divisive. As researchers, we also understand the data:

- Nearly 20% of Black people in the U.S. live below the poverty line, compared with about 8% of White people (Statista, 2021).
- On average, Black households in the U.S. earn only half as much as White households, and own only about 15% as much net wealth (Aladangady & Forde, 2021).
- Black Americans fare far worse than White Americans in health coverage, health access, health status, and health outcomes (Hill et al., 2022). They disproportionately suffer a wide range of physical and mental health issues including hypertension, depression, maternal mortality, cardiovascular disease, lower survival rates from cancer, and higher death rates from COVID-19 (American College of Physicians, 2021).

- Disparities in socioeconomic status are reflected in the educational experiences of Black Americans, including via lower test scores, higher dropout and graduation rates, lower enrollment in gifted programs and higher education, and disproportionate suspensions and expulsions (American Psychological Association, 2012).
- Black Americans represent 12% of the U.S. population and 38% of the total U.S. incarcerated population (Wagner & Sawyer, 2022).
- Black Americans die by police violence at a rate 3.5 times higher than that of White Americans (Jones, 2020).

These disparities have persisted across generations as a result of systemic racism (Gaskin et al., 2004). “People don’t understand how real it is,” Zoe told us. “We come into this world being told we ugly. We go to school, and we learn about the accomplishments of people after slavery. We are birthed into something and it’s an engine and it’s a machine to produce this.”

Early in Zoe’s life, he committed violence against fellow residents in his neighborhood, for which he was arrested and spent 14 years in prison. He told us that he was born into a world that had no place for him, and that assumed he had no value or future. Through cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and community support, Zoe came to understand that, “to avoid that, you’ve got to have a community loving on you. Because we don’t have the advantages other communities have.”

Alia relayed to us that Zoe’s experience is universal in her community. “To the extent that our brothers and sisters that have grown up in these conditions survive, every one of them has survived because they understand what Zoe is saying,” she told us. “Every one of them is figuring out a way to navigate this system, to not get swallowed by it. So they’re fighting to maintain their humanity, to show up as whole with their children, to the extent that that is possible. Everybody is wrestling with this. Literally, everybody.”

Two Strategies in Conflict

Based on our research, we see a sharp divide between two prevailing strategies for reducing community gun violence. One strategy is to increase policing and deploy new technologies to identify, arrest, and incarcerate people who commit violent crimes. The other strategy calls for increased investment in communities that have suffered trauma and multiple deprivations over generations, such as a lack of quality schools, health and mental care, jobs, and basic civic infrastructure like grocery stores, libraries, and recreational opportunities that are commonly taken for granted in other communities. With funding from the American Rescue Plan (ARP), many cities now have significant new financial resources, at least in the short term. Should they invest in improving the conditions and opportunities for people in disadvantaged communities? Should they heed the voices calling for increased resources for law enforcement and new surveillance technologies?

According to Alia, Detroit’s political leaders are aware of the contradictions between these two strategies. They understand that community trauma and decades of under-investment are root causes of community gun violence. But they are also under pressure to reduce the violence now, hence the argument for increasing law enforcement resources and surveillance to arrest and incarcerate more community members involved in or at risk of committing violence.

Decades of research, however, shows that increased incarceration rates have little effect on reducing crime, and may in fact increase violent crime in neighborhoods where incarceration

is concentrated (Stemen, 2017). As Alia notes, “When people go to prison, they’re coming home.” Black Americans are sentenced to state prison at nearly 5 times the rate of White Americans (Nellis, 2016). The threat of severe prison sentences is also unlikely to deter crime, according to research by the U.S. Department of Justice (National Institute of Justice, 2016). In fact, research has shown that prisons may increase recidivism (Drago et al., 2011; Cullen et al. 2011). Incarceration may temporarily remove perpetrators of violence from neighborhood streets, but it fails to stop all gun crime. Most importantly, it fails to address the broader forces that produce perpetrators of violence in the first place (Butts et al., 2015).

Proposed Solutions

“We are all connected in some way. We all have a level of responsibility, even if you’re not directly connected or haven’t experienced it. You might not have that personal experience, but it affected you and you don’t know it affected you.”

— Screal

Key findings:

- Take a public health approach to reducing community violence.
- Invest in community-led organizations and empower community members.
- Provide culturally relevant mental health services and educational resources.
- Decrease police presence and disinvest from surveillance technology.

Take a Public Health Approach to Reducing Community Violence

Like many other community organizations working to reduce gun violence, Force Detroit is invested in a public health approach to violence reduction. As they point out in their “Building Peace: A Vision for a Freer, Safer Detroit” report, “The CDC first declared violence a public health issue in 1979” (Force Detroit, 2021). Under this framework, violence is seen to be contagious just as an infectious disease is contagious. In Zoe’s words, “We look at violence as being contagious. Something has happened where they’ve been infected with violence. They’re going to harm somebody and infect them with violence. I don’t mean like it’s something wrong with them, I mean illness, like having a cold or a fever.”

Just as with infectious diseases, moreover, it is the case that even those in the community who are not themselves infected are affected by the impacts of those around them being infected — and that, as a result, everyone in the community has a responsibility in contributing towards forms of resolution. In Screal’s experience, this is particularly true in matters of addressing community gun violence: “I would say that we are all connected in some way. We all have a level of responsibility, even if you’re not directly connected or haven’t experienced it. You might not have that personal experience, but it affected you and you don’t know it affected you.”

What is needed, therefore, are the kinds of interventions that can lead to transformation in the lives of all members of the community. Force Detroit’s strategy is based on addressing the root causes of community violence, such as trauma, fear, poverty, and the absence of accessible and well-targeted mental health services. Meaningful action on these root causes requires working partnerships among all stakeholders, including members of the community, faith

leaders, political leadership, the police, and data-driven and well-managed community outreach and intervention programs.

Invest in Community-led Organizations and Empower Community Members

Central to all of our interviews was the importance both of implementing community-led solutions and of recognizing community leaders as experts in being able to do so. Terminologically, many of these principles fall under the umbrella of what Force Detroit describes as community violence interruption (CVI). Alia told us that members of the community understand more about the specifics of violence in their communities than anyone else. “In every space, there are different hotspots for violence,” she said. “It could be a community park. It could be a particular house. It really takes somebody who navigates that community on a regular basis to lift up what those hotspots are.” Assistance and resources from outside the community are vitally needed, but ultimately insufficient without what Zoe refers to as “community IQ.” “The community approach is someone identifying and being able to meet the needs and concerns of every community member in these neighborhoods and participating in consistent engagement with high risk community members,” he said. “It’s having a community IQ and understanding that everybody’s input counts.”

This kind of engagement requires deep relationships. “Relationships are critical,” said Alia. “You have to have a deep enough relationship with people who are attracted to high risk lifestyles to persuade them to rethink how they’re living their lives. That’s the only way to do this work without further criminalizing people and further traumatizing the community.” For the city to help, they need to empower the community members and activists who are already doing the work and who can access the places which city officials cannot necessarily access. This includes developing an office of neighborhood safety and recognizing that Zoe and others are experts in this work. In Zoe’s words, this means allowing “them to really be leaders,” and to “support them the same way you support these local departments.” According to Zoe, a lot of this work is already being done, as organizations like Force Detroit are “known for making sure the money gets to the boots on the ground.”

When asked about what kinds of aid or resources those seeking to support community-led organizations could most helpfully offer, Scream suggested “uplifting the stories authentically of those who were impacted, that are directly impacted now,” and “assisting in the authentic ways of whatever lane that you are in.” “I wholeheartedly feel we all need to just stay in our lanes of what we do,” he said. “If you’re not a protester, if you’re not a marcher, you don’t have to do that. But if you’re a writer, write that authentic story, of the people, not from the perspective that you feel that readers need to hear — like some media does — but really tell the authentic story of community.” This focus on the community is essential, he told us. “I truly believe that community has the solutions to our own issues. We truly believe that community has the solutions.”

Provide Culturally Relevant Mental Health Services and Educational Resources

“The first biggest thing” to do, Scream told us, “is invest into mental health. I think the mental aspect covers everything.” He noted that there was a particular lack of investment in mental health resources within the Black community: “We don’t get the proper treatment and resources that we need to continue to move forward. We don’t highlight, or take time to even

know these resources, and allow our community to heal through those things. It's like, go back to work, go to school." There is, in other words, little to no mental health support offered to members of the community even in the wake of trauma. Rather than being empowered with the necessary tools and systems needed "to continue to move forward," members of the community are simply told to "go back to work" or go back "to school," all without having had the opportunity to have their challenges properly addressed.

Zoe noted that, rather than getting important information about mental health skills and resources as part of his formal education as a child and young adult, he instead received that information in prison. "I was like Batman," he said. "I had to get all this stuff together, learn how to use all this stuff, and use it to the best of my ability. Not to fight crime — I'm fighting the thoughts." He expressed a desire to have received information about mental health resources earlier in life, and he cites this lack of access as one of the reasons why community violence occurs: because individuals in those situations lack the skillsets to do otherwise. Encouraged by the benefits he has now received from mental health support systems — and in particular by the benefits of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), which he describes as having been significant in helping him along the way — Zoe is now working to develop a CBT curriculum that will assist other members of his community. As part of this curriculum, he is utilizing movies as a pedagogical device because movies are effective at offering depictions of real-life situations. "You have to understand human nature," he explains. "Human nature is all imitation. It's all watching somebody and doing what you saw."

Screal reiterated that key areas of investment need to be in mental health services and in education. "We really have not invested into the educational system inside of our Black communities," he points out, noting that it is essential to "just educate people." Both he and our other interviewees emphasized the need to expand the definitional frameworks of education to include not just education within the context of formal educational institutions, but also education as it occurs outside of those institutions and within the day-to-day life of the community. In Screal's words, "Community learns education outside of school systems. Our first teaching environments are our own households and our own communities. We don't go straight to school right out of our mother's womb."

When asked what would be helpful in addressing community violence, Zoe had the following answer: "What would help? Education. And when I say 'education,' I mean a real education — not just English and math." Screal suggested entrepreneurship as being among the skillsets that would be most valuable to members of the community: "The most helpful to reduce community violence is to really invest into the community inside of, for one, entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship is very big inside of our community. Those skillsets taught me a lot about mediation. It taught me a lot about like actually learning myself." As it often did during our interviews, the topic of mental health was also raised, this time within the context of investment into educational systems. "Who teaching us emotional intelligence?" asks Zoe. "We get rewarded for being tough."

Decrease Police Presence and Disinvest from Surveillance Technology

Throughout the course of our interviews, it became increasingly clear that surveillance technologies are not helpful in addressing gun violence because they do not address the root causes of violence. As Zoe explains, "You're trying to punish somebody, but you're not dealing with the root cause." The issue, moreover, is also one of misdirected funds. In Zoe's words,

“You’re putting all this money into catching someone, instead of putting all this money into preventing someone.”

More impactful and productive, according to Alia, is a framework of “deeply investing in transformation”: “Transformation costs about 10% of what it costs to help a community through an incident of gun violence.” When asked whether surveillance technologies such as license plate readers or cameras were helpful in addressing gun violence, Scream responded, “No. No. Look at those cities that has that tech, has license plate readers, gunshot statistics — it is reactionary. You’re not in the front of something. You’re knowing and identifying these things after it happened. It’s not solving the problem. It’s only giving you the ability to documentate the story of what’s going on. And it’s over-criminalizing a community.”

Research on recent surges in gun violence in American cities convincingly demonstrates that we cannot arrest our way out of these issues. Mass incarceration in the U.S. costs at least \$82 billion per year, and this increases to some \$182 billion when related costs involving the judicial system, policing, prosecutors, defense attorneys, and costs to families are accounted for (Wagner & Rabuy, 2017). It is clear that the carceral approach to public safety has utterly failed. Alia asks, “What would it look like for our communities to reimagine safety in such a way where neighbors meet each other’s needs?” Zoe tells us that “the community approach is not the police.”

We asked our Force Detroit interviewees if there could be a middle ground, where investment in community public health would be combined with stepped-up surveillance technologies to identify and isolate the perpetrators. This is the approach being pursued by the city of Champaign, IL, which has provided support for community violence intervention along with expenditures for shot detectors and license plate readers. Alia responded by saying that “the root of what is producing violence in communities is not going to change through surveillance. Investment in people, helping them to get mental health support, making sure that they have hot meals, quality education, meaningful entrepreneurial opportunities. That’s real violence intervention work.”

But, we asked, would technology not help in the short term to catch and isolate perpetrators of community violence? In response, Alia pointed to the importance of building trust. “There is an inherent distrust in communities of color around issues of surveillance. And it is highly likely that the surveillance will stop people from trusting in the support.”

In contrast to emphasizing criminalization, a public health approach to violence reduction recognizes that members of the community who commit acts of violence are also themselves victims of violence. In Zoe’s words, “We in psychological, social, economic, spiritual warfare. We’re targets. Ain’t no question about that. I’m telling you that we are targets. Not just as people, but as a social construct.” What is needed, therefore, are the kinds of interventions that can lead to transformation in the lives of all members of the community.

Recommendations for Urbana

Approaches for addressing gun violence are highly dependent on the circumstances and history of each community, but based on what we learned from the work of Force Detroit we offer the following recommendations for the City of Urbana:

- Recognize that community gun violence is a symptom of a crisis in public health, and adopt a violence reduction strategy based on a public health model so as to address the root causes of that violence.
- Fund and support community-led groups and initiatives. These may take many forms and can include models of community violence interruption.
- Invest resources into quality mental healthcare services, educational resources, and affirmations of belonging, as these contribute to a healthier community.
- Disinvest from surveillance technology.

Finally, we recognize that the Urbana City Council has recently received proposals for investments in surveillance technologies such as license plate readers. To reiterate our findings on this point, we encourage the Council to consider the harms that these technologies cause to marginalized individuals and communities, as trauma is intertwined with violence and the othering of individuals merely feeds the cycle of violence rather than contributes towards ending it.

Conclusion

The myriad factors which contribute towards gun violence, many of which are closely intertwined, are difficult to address. While it is perhaps tempting to simply purchase a technological solution that aims to make residents feel safer in the short term, the violence will only continue spilling over from one area to another until the root causes of that violence are addressed. Force Detroit's public health approach to community violence is an example of what can happen when communities are invested in and when people are shown the care they deserve. Community investment offers a path to healing, while criminalizing individuals perpetuates trauma in communities that are already marginalized and under-resourced. Simply put, based on the research and interviews we have conducted, our recommendation is that there be more investing and less arresting.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the members of Force Detroit — and, in particular, to James “Screal” Eberheart Jr., Alia Harvey-Quinn, Dajuan “Zoe” Kennedy, and Karisha Vanzant — for their time and expertise.

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