Introduction

Every year, gun violence results in thousands of deaths and an even greater number of injuries in the United States. In 1993, the United States reported more than 1.5 million fatal and nonfatal firearm-related crimes following a dramatic rise in violence during the mid- to late 1980s (Blumstein and Wallman 2000; Bureau of Justice Statistics 2017; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2017; Cook and Ludwig 2000; Cooper and Smith 2011; Planty and Truman 2013). Over the next decade, firearm violence much like all violent crime experienced a sharp decline through the mid-2000s, followed by a more modest decline. By 2016, firearm violence had dropped by about 70 percent, with fewer than 500,000 fatal and nonfatal firearm-related crimes. And yet, despite decreasing levels of gun violence, many scholars have raised concerns about its impact, particularly in urban communities, where residents experience much higher rates of gun violence than residents of non-urban communities. Young African American males are especially vulnerable to gun violence in these areas, experiencing nearly ten times the rate of fatal firearm violence of their white counterparts (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2017; Fowler et al. 2017; Wintemute et al. 2001). Not only do these individuals suffer from gun violence itself, but the exposure to such violence can also lead to significant consequences in terms of education, health, incarceration, family instability, and social capital that impacts the individuals, the families, and their communities (Cook and Ludwig 2000; Irvin-Erickson et al. 2016; Reich et al. 2002; Thompson and Massat 2005).

More recently, the rise in both fatal and nonfatal firearm violence has drawn the attention of numerous scholars, policymakers, and practitioners looking to understand the true nature and trends in gun violence in order to develop effective policies aimed at reducing gun violence. Scholars have debated the size and scope of the increase as well as the causes, presenting different arguments to explain the rise in violence after a long period of decline. With the increase heavily concentrated in a few large cities, scholars have started to empirically evaluate what led to this rise while considering how local conditions impact violence (Mac Donald 2016a; Rosenfeld et al. 2017). Concurrently, state and local policymakers and practitioners have been working towards the development and passage of gun control legislation and the implementation of violence prevention strategies that engage local families, schools, and communities at large (McDevitt and Iwama 2017; Yourish et al. 2013). While efforts to reduce firearm violence vary significantly from place to place, it is important to evaluate each of these approaches in order to develop a comprehensive strategy that achieves safety in all communities, including homes, schools, and other public spaces (Braga et al. 2009; Sherman 2001; Webster et al. 2013).
Overall, the exposure to gun violence continues to plague the everyday lives of too many urban residents and their communities. Understanding the patterns and trends in gun violence is the first step toward developing effective policies and practices. Discussions with local community leaders, policymakers, law enforcement officers, and scholars who live with and examine the impact of gun violence also serve as valuable resources to inform legislation and strategies on how to reduce gun violence given the variety of local contexts. This chapter begins by providing an overview on the different sources of publicly available data on gun violence. Using national-level data, we discuss the patterns and trends that illustrate the wide disparities that exist among victims of gun violence in terms of age, gender, race, and ethnicity. While national data indicate that young African American males are particularly at higher risk of being shot, some studies have shown that this phenomenon is best understood by examining these patterns and trends in a few urban communities. Therefore, we review research on trends in major cities where gun violence is more prevalent to illustrate the variability across different areas. Next, we examine a variety of different strategies that have been adopted by policymakers and practitioners to reduce gun violence, including increased penalties, prosecution of firearm offenses, laws regulating access to firearms, enforcement of violent offenders, and services offered to at-risk individuals. Finally, we offer a closer examination based on a study that was conducted following the passage of the 2014 Massachusetts Gun Violence Reduction Act. Like many other gun control bills, the Massachusetts Act sought to improve the safety of communities (McDevitt and Iwama 2017). However, following input from community leaders, law enforcement officials, policymakers, and pro- and anti-gun control groups, Massachusetts legislatures crafted a bill that received support from a broad range of individuals in an effort to improve the safety of all communities. We conclude with a brief discussion on the need to explore the impact of gun violence as well as efforts to reduce gun violence in order to prevent future increases in violence and reduce its consequences among victims and communities.

**Major Sources of Information on Gun Crimes**

Data and information on gun violence are collected by the following sources that provide different levels of information on fatal and/or nonfatal firearm injuries: the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System (WISQARS) and the Bureau of Justice Statistics’ (BJS) National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS).\(^1\) Owing to the varying data collection methods and reporting systems by each data source, the estimates of gun violence are shown for different time periods based on data availability and measures of reliability. While interpretations of the data collections may vary, it is important to provide dependable surveillance data for program and policy decisions on gun violence and, therefore, we conclude with a discussion on how to continue to improve on existing data and information on gun violence.

**Centers for Disease Control and Prevention**

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports on fatal and nonfatal injury data, which it collects from a variety of sources. The fatal and nonfatal injury data collections are made available to the public through the Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System. The fatal injury reports are based on death certificates issued by hospitals, medical examiners, coroners, funeral directors, and other designated hospital staff/officials in all 57 jurisdictions (50 U.S. states, five U.S. territories, the District of Columbia, and New York City) in the United States, ensuring national representativeness. Found in the National Vital Statistics System (NVSS) of the National Center for Health Statistics (NHCS), the CDC reports on the causes of death reported by attending physicians, medical examiners, and coroners, as well as demographic information about decedents reported
Urban Gun Violence

by funeral directors who obtain that information from family members and other informants. The NCHS collects, compiles, verifies, and prepares these data for release to the public, which takes approximately 18 months after the end of a given year. However, the CDC changed the classification system for the injury mortality data collected in 1999 and later. In particular, the indicator for urbanization was not available prior to 1999. Because of the different coding system, caution must be used when comparing data prior to 1999 and afterwards. Therefore, the data on firearm homicides in metropolitan areas presented in this chapter include information reported in the CDC WISQARS website from 1999 to 2016.

Data on nonfatal injuries are also available through CDC’s WISQARS. This information is obtained from the National Electronic Injury Surveillance System All Injury Program (NEISS-AIP), which is operated by the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC). The data collection system, which began on July 1, 2000, collects information about all types and external causes of nonfatal injuries and poisonings treated in U.S. hospital emergency departments (EDs) regardless of whether they are or are not associated with consumer products. NEISS-AIP data are collected at 66 of the 100 NEISS hospitals located in urban, suburban, and rural areas. The hospitals provide data on about 500,000 injury-related emergency department cases each year, and the data are weighted to provide national estimates. Information on nonfatal injuries includes age, race/ethnicity, and sex as well as the cause/mechanism of the injury. However, since the NEISS-AIP did not begin collecting data until July 2000 and does not report on metropolitan areas, the data found in this chapter use victimization data reported from the National Crime Victimization Survey reported by the Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Bureau of Justice Statistics’ National Crime Victimization Survey

The Bureau of Justice Statistics’ National Crime Victimization Survey is a self-report survey in which interviewed persons age 12 or older are asked about victimizations experienced during the previous six months (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2017). Based on a nationally representative sample of U.S. households, the survey collects information on nonfatal violent crimes such as rape or sexual assault, robbery, and aggravated and simple assault. The survey was initially designed to complement official police statistics, such as the FBI’s Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) program, which includes only crimes reported to the police, and since it involves a survey of potential crime victims it includes information both on incidents that have been reported and on those that have not been reported to the police. Other information collected by the NCVS on crime incidents includes whether a weapon was used as well as the type of weapon that was used, including firearms. Furthermore, in order to increase the reliability and stability of estimates, BJS presents trend estimates of nonfatal firearm violence as annual one-year averages or two-year rolling averages, which facilitates comparisons over time and between the various different subgroups. The main differences between the NCVS and the NEISS-AIP firearm injury estimates are due in large part to their targeted sample population. The NCVS is a residential household survey that does not include the homeless or persons in institutional settings such as jails, prisons, mental health facilities, and certain other group quarters. Nevertheless, NCVS does include statistics on type of location, which we use to better understand disparities between nonfatal firearm injuries in urban and non-urban locations.

National Trends in Gun Violence

Between 1993 and 1999, fatal and nonfatal firearm violence experienced a significant decline, with rates starting at 7.1 per 100,000 and 7.3 per 1,000 persons, respectively (see Figure 26.1). In 1999, firearm homicides dropped to 4.0 per 100,000, but remained fairly stable over the next couple of years.
For example, firearm homicides registered small increases between 2000 (3.8 per 100,000) and 2006 (4.3 per 100,000) before declining again in 2014 to 3.6 per 100,000. On the other hand, nonfatal firearm violence continued to decline through 2004 to 1.9 per 1,000 persons. Despite a slight increase in 2006, nonfatal firearm violence dropped again through 2015 to 1.1 per 1,000 persons.

More recently, firearm homicides increased from 3.6 to 4.6 homicides per 100,000 persons between 2014 and 2016, sparking a national debate on what caused this rise in violence in the United States (Mac Donald 2016b; Rosenfeld et al. 2017). While nonfatal firearm victimization also experienced a slight increase between 2015 and 2016, scholars predict that the rise is short-lived and that the overall crime rate will return to historic lows (Grawert and Cullen 2017). Although it is unclear as to what led to this recent increase in gun violence, it is clear from patterns and trends that gun violence largely impacts the lives of young African American males living in urban communities (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2013). The following subsections take a closer look at these patterns and trends to understand the victims who are at a greater risk of experiencing gun violence.

Fatal Firearm Homicides

According to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, about 90 percent of all fatal firearm homicides took place in metropolitan areas. Looking at Figure 26.2, which compares the firearm homicide rate between metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas, the firearm homicide rate in metropolitan areas averaged about 4.3 homicides per 100,000. In contrast, the
firearm homicide rate in non-metropolitan areas averaged about 2.8 per 100,000 between 1999 and 2016. In 2016, the firearm homicide rate in metropolitan areas increased to 4.8, while the rate in non-metropolitan areas grew to 3.4 homicides per 100,000 persons.

Because firearm violence is an important public health concern for both the individuals and their communities, it is important to develop a clear understanding on the characteristics of the victims whose lives are claimed by firearm homicides each year. For example, the firearm homicide rate for males in metropolitan areas was about six times the firearm homicide rate for females living in the same types of communities between 1999 and 2016 (see Figure 26.3). While the female homicide rate averaged around 1.2 homicides per 100,000, the male homicide rate averaged around 7.5 homicides per 100,000 over the same time period. Between 2014 and 2016, the firearm homicide rate jumped from 6.5 to 8.4 homicides per 100,000 males, while the female homicide rate remained at around 1.0 homicides per 100,000 females.

Like other violent crime patterns, firearm homicide rates tended to be higher among African Americans relative to persons belonging to other races and ethnicities. As shown in Figure 26.4, African Americans have the highest average firearm homicide rate (17.8 homicides per 100,000) than other racial/ethnic groups. And, more recently, they experienced a significant increase between 2014
to 2016 from 19.9 to 20.7 homicides per 100,000 African Americans. Hispanics have the second highest firearm homicide rate, with an average of 5.0 homicides per 100,000. However, in 2012, the firearm homicide rate for Hispanics fell below the rate of American Indians/Pacific Islanders to 3.8 after experiencing a decline that started in 2005. The firearm homicide rate for Hispanics has since fluctuated between 3.0 and 4.0 and experienced a slight increase to 4.2 per 100,000 Hispanics in 2016. While the average firearm homicide rate for American Indians/Alaska Natives is about 3.8 homicides per 100,000, it has fluctuated between 3.0 and 5.0 while gradually increasing since 2007 and rising to 6.2 homicides per 100,000 American Indians/Alaska Natives in 2016. On the other hand, whites and Asians have experienced little change, with an average firearm homicide rate of about 1.5 per 100,000 persons each across the time period.

Figure 26.5 illustrates the firearm homicide rates across individuals of different age groups. Not surprisingly, individuals under the age of 12 and ages 50 and over experienced little change from 1999 to 2016, with the average rates well below 2.0 per 100,000 persons. On the other hand, persons 18 to 24 years of age were more at risk of being victims of a firearm homicide. Between 1999 and 2016, the firearm homicide rate averaged about 13.4 homicides per 100,000 persons between 18 and 24 years of age and 9.2 homicides per 100,000 persons between 25 and 34 years of age. Both age groups also experienced a substantial increase between 2014 and 2016 in comparison to other age groups. The rates for other age groups were 3.2 homicides per 100,000 persons for ages 12 to 17 and 4.3 homicides per 100,000 persons for ages 35 to 49. These age groups experienced only a slight increase between 2014 and 2016 and remained below 6.0.
Figure 26.4  Firearm homicide rate in metropolitan areas by race/ethnicity, 1999–2016.


Figure 26.5  Firearm homicide rate in metropolitan areas by age, 1999–2016.

Nonfatal Firearm Victimization

According to the National Crime Victimization Survey, the rate of nonfatal firearm violence declined across urban, suburban, and rural areas in the United States (see Figure 26.6). As with firearm homicides in metropolitan areas, the average rate of nonfatal firearm victimizations in urban areas (4.3 per 1,000 persons) is nearly double the average rate in suburban (2.4 per 1,000) and rural areas (1.8 per 1,000). While all areas experienced an overall decline in nonfatal firearm victimizations, individuals living in urban areas experienced a slightly larger decline (78.0 percent) than in suburban (76.9 percent) and rural (66.7 percent) areas from 1993 to 2016. By 2016, the nonfatal firearm victimization rate had dropped to around 2.0 victimizations per 1,000 persons living in urban (2.2), suburban (1.5), and rural areas (1.8).

As shown in Figure 26.7, the nonfatal firearm victimization rate for both male and female victims declined between 1993 and 2016 by about 80.8 percent and 66.7 percent, respectively. From 2002 to 2016, the nonfatal firearm victimization rate for males and females remained at its lowest level, below 3.0 per 100,000 persons. In 2016, the nonfatal firearm victimization rate was reported to be 1.9 per 1,000 males and 1.6 per 1,000 females.

As shown in Figure 26.8, non-Hispanic blacks and Hispanics consistently experienced higher rates of nonfatal firearm violence than non-Hispanic whites from 1993 to 2016. However, the rate of nonfatal firearm victimizations for non-Hispanic blacks and Hispanics declined by about 80.3 percent and 83.7 percent, respectively, from 1993 to 2016. On the other hand, the rate of nonfatal firearm violence for non-Hispanic whites has declined by about 70 percent since 1993 and

Figure 26.6  Nonfatal firearm victimization rate by type of location, 1993–2016.
remained below 2.0 victimizations per 1,000 persons after 2001. In 2015, the rate of nonfatal firearm violence reached its lowest at 0.7 victimizations per 1,000 non-Hispanic whites. Persons categorized as other non-Hispanic race/ethnicity also saw a dramatic decline over the time period of about 93.6 percent, with rates for nonfatal firearm victimizations starting at the same point as for non-Hispanic blacks (15.7 per 1,000) and dropping to 1.0 per 1,000 non-Hispanic other race/ethnicity.

As shown in Figure 26.9, nonfatal firearm violence, like fatal firearm violence, disproportionately affects persons aged 18 to 34, who are more likely to experience gun violence than their counterparts. These patterns also reflect similar patterns of violent crime rates. In 1993, persons aged 18 to 24 had the highest nonfatal firearm victimization rate at 16.9 per 1,000 persons, followed by persons aged 12 to 17 (10.4 per 1,000), persons aged 25 to 34 (9.4 per 1,000), and persons aged 35 to 49 (6.5 per 1,000). Persons 50 and over had the lowest nonfatal firearm victimization rate in 1993 with 1.5 per 1,000. Yet, from 1993 to 2016, the rates of nonfatal firearm violence declined by about 78 percent for victims aged 18 to 24 and by about 61 percent for victims aged 25 to 34. By 2016, persons aged 18 to 34 continued to have the highest rate of nonfatal firearm violence at about 3.7 per 1,000, and persons 50 and over continued to have the lowest nonfatal firearm victimization rate at 0.5 per 1,000.

Overall, the findings from the data highlight the magnitude and importance of the problem of firearm homicides and nonfatal firearm injuries, which affect a disproportionate number of individuals who are male, are young in age, and belong to a racial/ethnic minority group. Although the rates of firearm violence have declined in the long term, recent increases found in the data emphasize the
Figure 26.8  Nonfatal firearm victimization rates by race/ethnicity, 1993–2016.

Figure 26.9  Nonfatal firearm victimization by age, 1993–2016.
need to continue examining and improving on data collection efforts in order to inform future policies and practices aimed at reducing gun violence.

As noted earlier, these patterns and trends in gun violence vary widely across the United States, with metropolitan areas largely contributing to the rise and fall in gun violence. Even among metropolitan areas, however, these homicide rates vary tremendously from place to place. Looking at the recent homicide increase, Rosenfeld and colleagues (2017) illustrated significant disparities in the rise in homicide across various major cities (see Figure 26.10). Using city-level homicide data from the FBI’s Uniform Crime Reports, it is clear that major cities such as Boston and Chicago witnessed a rise in homicides between 2015 and 2016. For example, Chicago homicides increased by 60 percent between 2015 and 2016, with the vast majority of these committed with a firearm (Rosenfeld et al. 2017). On the other hand, New York City homicides decreased by 4.8 percent between 2015

![Figure 26.10](https://example.com/figure26.10.png)

**Figure 26.10** Percentage change in homicides between 2015 and 2016 by major U.S. city.

*Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation, Supplementary Homicide Reports, 2015–2016.*
and 2016. Other reports on firearm violence have shown similar disparities, with a handful of major cities accounting for the rise in violence in the national-level data (Kegler 2013).

As a result of these wide disparities among major cities, studies have identified different factors that influence the rise and fall in firearm violence, including changing demographics, illegal drug market changes, local law enforcement practices, increased incarceration rates, community policing efforts, and improving economic conditions (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2013; Morgan and Pally 2016; Rosenfeld 2017). Scholars have, as a result, recommended different approaches to reduce gun violence and address the consequences it has on the victims and communities experiencing higher rates of gun violence. We discuss some of the initiatives that have been adopted by various states and localities as a part of an effort to reduce gun violence in the United States.

**Policy Initiatives to Reduce Urban Firearm Violence**

Gun violence is a widespread, complex, and multifaceted problem that affects both victims and their families, as well as the communities in which they live. As the statistics cited above indicate, gun violence may be decreasing in many American cities but it remains a persistent problem that disproportionately impacts young African American males. Across the country, a number of programs and strategies have been tried to reduce the gun violence (see Braga et al. 2001; Decker and Rosenfeld 2004; Kellermann et al. 2006; Kennedy et al. 2001; Lizotte and Zatz 1986; McGarrell et al. 2002, 2009; Tita et al. 2005; Webster and Vernick 2013). These strategies range across increased penalties in an effort to deter firearm violence, prosecuting serious firearm offenses federally, restricting access to firearms for people with a history of serious criminal involvement, enforcement programs focusing on the most violent offenders, and comprehensive programs that provide a wide range of services for at-risk individuals and their families.

**Penalty Enhancement Statutes**

One strategy for reducing firearm violence in urban communities involves increasing penalties for crimes committed with a firearm (Lizotte and Zatz 1986). The statutes often take the form of what have been called penalty enhancement statutes. In other words, the penalty for the crime, if the person is convicted, is increased if the crime is committed with a firearm. In 1974, Massachusetts enacted one of the first gun control laws in the United States with a mandatory minimum sentence for crimes committed with a firearm (Knight 1981). The law, which passed following an increase in gun violence in Boston and other major cities in the United States, required that individuals convicted of carrying an unlicensed firearm would have to serve at least a one-year prison sentence and banned plea bargaining in such cases. In 1980, New York State adopted similar legislation, which required that individuals convicted of carrying an illegal firearm would be subject to a mandatory minimum of one year in jail (Basler 1982). This penalty increased to three and a half years in 2006 in large part owing to efforts by the Mayor of New York City at the time, Michael Bloomberg. The federal government and many other states have since adopted similar legislation requiring that, if the defendant used or possessed any firearms in connection with the crime, the sentence would be enhanced according to the federal or state’s sentencing guidelines (Burman 2004).

While these statutory changes have become very popular across the U.S., there is a lot of disagreement about the impact it has on violent crime (IOM and NRC 2013; Yablon 2015). Earlier studies found that the impact occurred prior to the passage of the legislation, suggesting that the effects were as a result of the threat of the passage of the legislation rather than the imposition of the sanctions in the legislation itself (Pierce and Bowers 1981). Other studies have also found that for a variety
of reasons young urban males are less affected by the threat of a longer prison sentence than other groups. It may be that these young men do not think they will be arrested, or some have suggested that many young urban males do not think they can escape the cycle of violence and incarceration that has impacted so many of their peers. Yet studies have also shown that the enhanced penalties are not utilized as often as proponents would have expected and, therefore, the reduction in gun violence has been minimal (Lizotte and Zatz 1986). Given these concerns, as well as studies highlighting racial and gender disparities in the application of firearm penalties, researchers have suggested the adoption of alternative approaches to reduce gun violence (IOM and NRC 2013).

**Access to Firearms**

A second area of initiatives to reduce firearm violence involves attempts to restrict access to firearms for individuals who might use the firearm to commit crime. The idea of such statutes is that people with a history of criminal involvement or serious mental illness should be prohibited from acquiring firearms. In order to implement this requirement, the federal government initiated the requirement that anyone who wishes to purchase a firearm must undergo a background check via the National Instant Criminal Background Check (NICS) in 1994. Since the system began, the FBI has processed more than 270 million instant background checks. Individuals who have been convicted of a felony, individuals who have been involuntarily committed to a mental health institution, or individuals who are subject to a domestic restraining order or have a prior conviction for domestic abuse are prohibited from purchasing a firearm. According to data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics, between 1994 and 2015 background checks were performed on nearly 197 million applications, and more than 3 million applications have been denied for persons who are legally prohibited (Karberg et al. 2017).

While this system is very helpful in limiting access to firearms by members of the groups described above, there are a number of limitations that make the system less effective. One of the most significant problems is that the system only requires federally licensed firearm dealers to run these background checks. This means that individuals who purchase firearms from a source other than a federally licensed firearm dealer are not required to undergo a background check. This includes private citizens who sell firearms and transactions that occur in many gun shows across the country. Therefore, an individual with a history of violence as evidenced by an aggravated assault conviction, for example, could be turned down by a federally licensed firearm dealer because that person failed the background check but the same individual could go to a gun show and purchase a firearm from a non-federally licensed firearm dealer. The system has a number of additional limitations, such as prohibited individuals getting someone else to purchase the firearm for them, commonly called a straw purchaser.

Frustrated with the limitations of the national background check system, many states have set up their own licensing criteria that seek to address the limitations with the federal system. States including Massachusetts, Hawaii, California, and New York among others have set up statewide firearm licensing criteria that restrict access to firearms for some individuals. In Massachusetts, a license is required to purchase a firearm, and a local police chief can deny a license to an individual whom the local police chief deems unsuitable. For example, an individual in respect of whom the local police have responded to calls about intimate partner violence but who has not been arrested or had a restraining order applied may be denied a firearm license. As a result, the police chief can have some discretion about who can and cannot purchase a firearm in that town. A major limitation in these types of restrictions is that they vary dramatically from place to place and a person who is turned down for a firearm license by the local police chief could simply drive to a nearby state without a licensing requirement and legally purchase a firearm.
Understanding the Supply of Firearms

An important element of a comprehensive approach is to understand the sources of firearms used in crimes in a community. As indicated above, states across the country have a patchwork of laws defining who has access to a firearm. The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF) maintains a database of each firearm sold in the United States since 1998. If a gun is used in a crime, the local police department that is investigating that crime can request a trace of that firearm from ATF. This trace will identify the original manufacturer of the weapon as well as where that firearm was originally sold from and the name of the first purchaser. This information can be used by law enforcement to identify the ways that those involved in firearm violence in their community acquired their guns. For example, this trace analysis can identify the firearm dealers who have sold guns that have been used in crime. Once a dealer has been identified as having been the source of multiple firearms that were used in crime in a community, the local community can make efforts to close that dealer or at least make the dealer more accountable for the firearms he or she sells.

A second source of information on firearms used in crime is the National Integrated Ballistic Information Network (NIBIN) system. This system can trace the shell casings of bullets fired in a crime to determine if multiple shooting may have involved the same firearm. This technology can provide essential information to police agencies attempting to solve firearm homicides or firearm shootings. In many gang involved shootings the same gun may have been used in separate shootings by different members of the same gang. This information can help local investigators understand the dynamics of gang violence in their communities and may help them to intervene and prevent future acts of firearm violence.

Federal Prosecution

A number of jurisdictions have looked to prosecute certain serious firearm violations as federal offenses. If offenders are prosecuted federally, in most states they will receive a harsher penalty and often will be required to serve that sentence far from their home, thus limiting their access to family and friends who could have come to visit.

Operation Ceasefire

Following a record number of homicides in 1990, the Boston Police Department was looking for an innovative solution to slow the gun violence that had impacted the city. The Boston Police Department in conjunction with a research team from the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University developed an innovative program that targeted high-risk potential offenders. The program began with a problem analysis done by the Harvard research team, which demonstrated that the violence in the city was concentrated in a very small number of young men. Additionally, this analysis documented that firearm violence victims and offenders came from the same pool of individuals and that a large number of these individuals could be offenders or victims given a particular set of circumstances. Additionally, the problem analysis demonstrated that the vast majority of these violent individuals were known to the criminal justice system and that a large number of these individuals were members of Boston’s criminal gangs at the time. Often, these individuals had been on probation or parole previously or had been incarcerated. This analysis was used by members of a working group, including both Boston Police Department officials and members of the Harvard research team, to develop a new strategy to convince this small number of violent young men to cease their violence.

The Operation Ceasefire strategy involved a set of face-to-face meetings between those individuals identified as responsible for much of the violence in the city and members of law enforcement
and representatives of local service providers such as employment services. The meetings, named “call-ins,” would bring together a small number, between 10 and 20, of these previously identified violent individuals in a safe location and would make a presentation to them. The presentation had two parts. First, the young men would be offered services to help them get out of the cycle of violence. Services that would normally be offered included employment training, adult learning (GED) programs, and assistance in getting back into school for those who wanted that avenue. Additionally members of the local clergy attended and offered spiritual support and guidance. After the offers of services were made, members of law enforcement, police (including members of Boston Police Department’s gang unit), representatives of the District Attorney’s office, representatives of the Attorney General’s office, and representatives of the U.S. Attorney’s office would send a different message. Law enforcement representatives would encourage the attendees to utilize the services they had just heard about but if those individuals did not stop engaging in violence the full weight of the law enforcement community would be brought to bear on them and other members of their group. One unique aspect of this message was that the U.S. Attorney representing federal law enforcement would tell those in attendance that they could be prosecuted federally, which would entail longer prison sentences that would likely be served in a prison outside of Massachusetts.

The results of this program and other similar efforts in Boston were extraordinary. Research conducted by Harvard found that the Operation Ceasefire program was associated with a 63 percent reduction in youth homicides (Braga et al. 2001). These impressive results led many other cities to implement ceasefire type programs, although few achieved the same level of success as documented in Boston. In 2001, the U.S. Department of Justice established a national firearm violence reduction program, Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN). This national program, modeled in part on the Boston Ceasefire program, provided funding to each of the 94 U.S. Attorney’s offices across the country to implement a comprehensive anti-gun violence program, which was to include the U.S. Attorney’s office, the state’s Attorney General’s office, the state police, the local police, and local service providers who work with individuals at risk of involvement in firearm violence. Michigan State University did a national evaluation of the PSN program and found the implementation of the program varied across communities but that the project did reduce violent crime in PSN cities. The evaluation found that communities with strong leadership provided by the U.S. Attorney and buy-in from the multiple partner organization achieved the greatest success (McGarrell et al. 2010).

**Comprehensive Programs Targeting At-Risk Youth**

In 2017, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) released a report entitled *National Youth Violence Prevention Update* (OJJDP 2017). This report cited youth violence as a national problem and called for an interdisciplinary approach to ending youth violence which includes representatives from law enforcement as well as representatives from public health. These kinds of interdisciplinary comprehensive programs have been developed across the country and often focus on individuals involved in firearm violence. Many of these programs offer services and support to the entire family of the individual involved in violence. Those leading these programs understand that there is broader context that contributed to the decision of the individual to engage in violence. By engaging with parents, siblings, spouses, and others involved in the violent individual’s life these programs believe they have a higher likelihood of success than programs that only target the at-risk individual. Comprehensive interventions that include perspectives from criminology, public health (including substance abuse), education, and workforce development are believed to have a higher probability of success that any one of these approaches alone. The challenge of such comprehensive interventions seems to involve our ability to coordinate the various bureaucracies that are currently providing services to the at-risk families.
Local-Level Study: Massachusetts

On December 14, 2012, an armed 20-year-old, Adam Lanza, walked into the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, CT and fatally shot 20 children between six and seven years old, as well as six adult staff members. This event sparked outrage across the entire country, prompting a renewed debate about gun control in the United States. As new federal legislation proposals began to call for making background checks more universal and suggested banning the sale and manufacturing of certain types of semi-automatic weapons, state and local policymakers across the United States also filed legislation to reduce the likelihood that such an incident might happen in their local communities (Yourish et al. 2013).

At the national level, then President Barack Obama formed a task force led by Vice President Joseph Biden to formulate recommendations on reasonable gun violence reduction measures, including universal background checks, reinstating an assault weapons ban, limits on high-capacity magazines, and support for additional mental health services in schools (Wilson and Rucker 2012). By 2015, none of these measures had passed in Congress (Wing 2015). An analysis by the New York Times found that, in the 12 months after the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, states passed 109 pieces of firearm legislation, which either loosened or tightened restrictions on firearms (Yourish et al. 2013). In a 2016 study from faculty from the Harvard Business School, the authors found that following a mass shooting the most common legislation to pass in states was laws that loosened restrictions on access to weapons (Luca et al. 2016).

In Massachusetts, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Robert DeLeo, took a different approach (McDevitt and Iwama 2017). The Speaker appointed a committee representing various constituents’ voices in the discussion of firearm violence and asked them to solicit opinion from across the state and the country in order to make recommendations about how the current firearm laws in Massachusetts might be strengthened. The members of the committee included a psychologist from Massachusetts General Hospital who was knowledgeable about the accessibility of medical records, a former state Inspector General who was on the state’s Firearm Control Board, a gun violence researcher from the Harvard School of Public Health, a former Assistant District Attorney who prosecuted gun violence cases, a faculty member from Boston College who was previously head of the State’s Department of Public Health, a local police chief who was serving as the President of the Massachusetts Chiefs of Police Association (MCPA), and a school superintendent who was serving as the President of the Massachusetts School Superintendents Association. This cross-section of experts reflected many of the areas where firearm legislation changes were being suggested.

While Massachusetts was already acknowledged as having some of the strictest gun control laws in the U.S., policymakers sought to strengthen the current legislation (Schoenberg 2014). The committee met for eight months and met with dozens of groups who held opinions on ways to make the Commonwealth of Massachusetts safer in terms of firearm violence without infringing on an individual’s right to bear arms. Based on the findings by the committee following the collection of data and information from interviews and focus groups as well as discussions among committee members, the committee drafted a report to the Speaker of the House that consisted of 44 recommendations involving firearm accessibility, firearm suicide, firearm renewal process, school safety initiatives, urban firearm violence, and provisions for limiting access to firearms for people who might hurt themselves or others as a result of an acute mental illness (McDevitt and Iwama 2017).

What made this approach different from what so many states had attempted was that the committee listened to concerned groups about ways to make the Commonwealth of Massachusetts safer in the area of firearm violence and they tried to fashion recommendations that would address the concerns within the framework of the current laws about access to and use of firearms in the state. For example, prior to the passage of the 2014 Massachusetts Gun Violence Reduction Act,
the state had a two-stage firearm licensing process. For Massachusetts residents to purchase a long gun (e.g., rifle or shotgun), they were required to obtain a firearm identification card (FID). The FID was issued by the local police department to anyone who was not a federally prohibited person. On the other hand, Massachusetts residents who wanted to purchase a handgun were required to obtain a license to carry (LTC), which was issued by the local police department. In considering applications for an LTC, the local police chief could take account of other information for individuals who did not meet the federally prohibited standards. As a result, a local police chief could consider information such as previous calls to the house that did not result in an arrest or an active restraining order. In such cases, an LTC applicant would not meet the criteria as a federally prohibited person and could be denied an LTC by the local police chief because the local chief believed the person to be “unsuitable” for a handgun license under the Massachusetts legislation. This resulted in the illogical situation where a person could apply for an LTC to purchase a handgun and be turned down by the local police chief but the same person could obtain an FID card and could then purchase a long gun. As a result, the members of the committee considered the situation and subsequently recommended that individuals applying for either an FID or an LTC should be subject to the same standards.

The committee presented the 44 recommendations to the Speaker of the House of Representatives in February 2014. The staff from the Speaker’s office crafted legislation that incorporated 41 of the 44 recommendations by the committee. The legislation was strongly opposed by a local gun rights group and a number of state legislators. These groups argued that, by increasing the discretion of local police chiefs to deny a license to an individual they believed to be unsuitable, many law-abiding residents would be prohibited from exercising their second amendment rights. It was also the case that a number of legislators felt that if they supported this bill they would be voted out of their office in the next election as a result of efforts from the gun rights groups. After a somewhat bitter battle, the legislation passed in the House and Senate, and the Governor signed the bill into law on August 13, 2014.

In 2016, the authors of this chapter were awarded a grant from the State of Massachusetts to do a study on the implementation of the 2014 Massachusetts Firearm Violence Reduction Act. The study concluded that in most respects the law was being implemented as intended by the legislature. In the most controversial area, the increased discretion given to local police chiefs to award firearm licenses, the study came to an interesting conclusion. The analysis revealed that, for those license applications impacted by the legislative change, there was an increase in the number of licenses denied. The percentage of licenses denied rose from 1.5 to 3.9 percent, but overall in Massachusetts after this legislative change still 97.4 percent of all firearm license applications were approved. This conclusion indicates that if states proceed in a thoughtful way they can enact firearm license schemes that limit access to firearms to the most dangerous members of communities without infringing on the rights of law-abiding gun owners.

**Conclusion**

On February 14, 2018, five years after the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, 19-year-old Nikolas Cruz shot and killed 14 students and three staff members and injured many others at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. As with the public outcry following the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, community leaders, policymakers, practitioners, and scholars called for the passage of stricter gun control measures by federal and state legislators. While many members of the public agree that firearms should be restricted to prevent individuals with mental illnesses and those on federal watch lists from purchasing a firearm, the United States remains heavily split on how to address these issues and others associated to gun violence. For example,
results from a national survey indicate that the public is largely divided between gun owners and non-gun owners (Parker et al. 2017). Even among gun owners, public opinions are largely split along political party lines.

Nevertheless, one thing is clear: gun violence is disproportionately distributed in the United States by both race and place. Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System and the Bureau of Justice Statistics’ National Crime Victimization Survey show that young African American males continue to experience much higher rates of gun violence than any other group in the United States. This violence is much more pronounced in urban communities, where residents are more likely to experience and witness gun violence than non-urban residents. Furthermore, this risk increases for residents living in a handful of major cities in the United States. For example, studies show that only a handful of U.S. cities such as Chicago have experienced a spike in violence, while others such as Washington, DC witnessed a decline between 2015 and 2016 (Rosenfeld 2017). As a result, much of the rise and fall in firearm violence is in part due to changes in a handful of urban communities that make up a large portion of the firearm violence that takes place in the United States.

While these broad trends can be documented from the data sources identified above, it is important to note that there are significant gaps in our understanding of firearm violence even from the wide variety of available sources. We do not know, for example, the number of firearms possessed by individuals across the country, the role that gangs play in national estimates of firearm violence, or whether the storage of firearms in homes plays a role in preventing crime or in contributing to firearm accidents or suicides. We also do not know nationally how offenders acquire firearms and what role certain firearms such as assault weapons play in protecting victims of crime. Only by a careful re-evaluation of how firearm violence data should be collected will we be able to accurately provide policymakers with quality analysis of the character of the firearm violence problem across the U.S. and in select urban communities.

Nevertheless, there have been few rigorous evaluations to help us understand which policy options have been effective in reducing firearm violence. With that caveat in mind, it is useful to chronicle the various approaches to dealing with firearm violence that are being put in place across the U.S. Many states have increased penalties for the use of a firearm in a crime in an attempt to deter offenders from using firearms, which is an approach often favored by the National Rifle Association (NRA). The research on these strategies is mixed, however, suggesting that such laws might deter some individuals from using a firearm but might not deter others. It appears that individuals with a greater commitment to society, those who have a job or are in school, or those with a family might be deterred by these laws, in contrast to individuals who have less of a stake in their communities. A second area of policy initiatives includes attempts to restrict access to firearms for individuals with a history of violence or mental illness. Because these efforts vary widely from state to state, such restrictions might be ineffective if an individual with a history of violence can purchase a firearm from a neighboring state that has fewer or no restrictions. The third area of strategies is local law enforcement initiatives, such as Operation Ceasefire, which communicate directly with those individuals most likely to engage in violent activity. As described earlier, rigorous program evaluations on Operation Ceasefire programs that have been adopted in major U.S. cities such as Boston, Oakland, and Chicago have found significant reductions in firearm violence. However, efforts to replicate such programs in other jurisdictions have not found similar results. Finally, states and communities that adopt a comprehensive multi-disciplinary approach such as those providing services to at-risk families seem to offer promise in reducing gun violence.

While the solution to urban firearm violence in the United States seems elusive, access to better data on the extent, nature, and impact of this type of violence as well as the quality of research on the success of various interventions being implemented across the country would help policymakers
and practitioners fashion solutions that might save lives. Furthermore, studies have shown that successful interventions to reduce firearm violence must involve input from health and public safety communities, educators, and other community groups. As illustrated earlier, the 2014 Massachusetts Gun Violence Reduction Act, which sought to address gun violence following input from various different members of the community, can be successfully implemented by increasing the discretion of local law enforcement to determine who is legally prohibited from acquiring a firearm without restricting firearms to law-abiding residents. Through continued efforts in the collection of data and the evaluation of comprehensive prevention strategies that address the victims as well as the local environment in which the crime occurred, federal, state, and local leaders may be able to improve future efforts at reducing gun violence.

Note

1 Additional information on firearm violence can be found from other sources, such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s (FBI) Supplemental Homicide Reports (SHR), School-Associated Violent Deaths Surveillance Study (SAVD), the Survey of Inmates in State Correctional Facilities (SISCF), and the Survey of Inmates in Federal Correctional Facilities (SIFCF). However, owing to the limitations in detailed information, we do not include a summary of the firearm data found in these data collection systems.

References


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