

5-1-2021

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Dominique Davis

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Recommended Citation

Davis, Dominique (2021) "A 2020 Public Health Crisis—But Not the One You’re Thinking of: Why Gun Violence Has Spiked During the COVID-19 Pandemic & What We Can Do About It," *Seattle Journal for Social Justice*: Vol. 19 : Iss. 3 , Article 29.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.law.seattleu.edu/sjsj/vol19/iss3/29>

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A 2020 Public Health Crisis—But Not the One You’re Thinking of: Why Gun Violence Has Spiked During the COVID-19 Pandemic & What We Can Do About It

Dominique Davis

When I founded Community Passageways, a 501(c)(3) based in South Seattle, my primary goal was to create holistic and restorative approaches to working with young people who committed serious harm and were charged with felonies. Without question, many of our youth—particularly young men of color—are victims to an oppressive criminal system that treats young white children as individuals with promising futures who should not be derailed by mistakes, while adultifying and dehumanizing young children of color, casting them as irredeemable. These inequities stem from so many other root causes: a movement of mass criminalization, perpetuated by the prison industrial complex, that has traumatized and locked away countless individuals who should be our community’s leaders and role models; over-policed neighborhoods predominantly comprised of people of color; and created a targeted lack of access to economic opportunity stemming back hundreds of years. I could go on and on, and I know that this journal is full of deep, insightful analyses on many of these issues.

But one other important and extraordinarily complex issue that our team at Community Passageways seeks to tackle, in addition to diverting young people from the criminal legal system, is reducing gun violence. The COVID-19 crisis has made this work all the more urgent. The pandemic has exacerbated gun violence in Seattle, which Community Passageways addresses through four main components: community-based mentors

(Ambassadors), responsive programming, access to services, and legal system navigation.

I. BACKGROUND

We saw nationwide and statewide surges in gun sales in March 2020, when the first rounds of pandemic restrictions were imposed, and again in May and June 2020, after the murder of George Floyd sparked nationwide protests centered on racial justice.¹ According to estimates by the Brookings Institution, nearly three million more firearms were sold between March and June than would have ordinarily been sold during those months.² Half of that surge occurred in June alone.³ In Washington, where a ten-day waiting period and background check are required for the purchase of a firearm, metropolitan areas saw vast increases in background checks for gun sales. In the first seven months of 2020, Seattle processed 9,426 background checks for gun sales, a 55% increase over the city's average for an entire year.⁴

However, these statistics do not provide a full picture of firearm accessibility in King County. A flood of illegal guns has hit our communities this year. I have been told by young people that guns are both cheaper and easier to get than marijuana. To make matters worse, gang recruitment has intensified. With kids out of school—many of whom lack the resources or a stable home situation from which to attend school remotely—kids are spending more time on the streets. Not to mention, their mental health is suffering without positive stimulation and meaningful human connection.

¹ Phillip B. Levine & Robin McKnight, *Three Million More Guns: The Spring 2020 Spike in Firearm Sales*, BROOKINGS INST. (July 13, 2020), <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/07/13/three-million-more-guns-the-spring-2020-spike-in-firearm-sales/> [<https://perma.cc/3QC8-JSQR>].

² *Id.*

³ *Id.*

⁴ Dyer Oxley, *Gun Sales Continue to Surge Across the Seattle-Area*, KUOW (Aug. 10, 2020, 8:24 AM), <https://www.kuow.org/stories/the-surge-seattle-area-gun-sales-continue-to-rise-higher/> [<https://perma.cc/8VEW-8TVP>].

Much of the programming, sports, and jobs that used to occupy their time have ceased to exist. For many young people, this has meant more time exposed to negative influences, whether on social media or in-person. As a result, young people have become more vulnerable to gang recruitment. Unsurprisingly, with increased gang involvement comes increased gun violence.

In Washington State, a person is killed with a gun every fourteen hours, and more people are killed with guns than die in car accidents.⁵ Gun violence and the pandemic are disproportionately impacting low-income communities and communities of color.⁶ Beginning in 2016, the King County Prosecuting Attorney Office (KCPAO) began applying a public health approach to reduce injuries and deaths from illegal shootings with support from Public Health—Seattle and King County and eight local law enforcement agencies: Seattle, Auburn, Des Moines, Federal Way, Kent, Renton, Tukwila, and the King County Sheriff’s Office (including unincorporated King County and sixteen contract cities/agencies).⁷ This is known as the “Shots Fired” project.⁸

Trends in the Shots Fired data have confirmed what communities and community-based organizations working with marginalized youth and families intrinsically knew. In 2018, 71% of firearm homicides and 59% of non-fatal shootings occurred south of Seattle city limits.⁹ Of the 246 shooting

⁵ *Gun Violence in Washington*, ALL. FOR GUN RESP., <https://gunresponsibility.org/gun-violence-washington/> [<https://perma.cc/X73Y-TYUX>].

⁶ See Joseph R. Betancourt, *Communities of Color Devastated by COVID-19: Shifting the Narrative*, HARV. HEALTH BLOG (Oct. 22, 2020, 10:30 AM), <https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/communities-of-color-devastated-by-covid-19-shifting-the-narrative-2020102221201> [<https://perma.cc/CK6W-J6ZA>]; *Impact of Gun Violence on Black Americans*, EVERYTOWN RSCH. & POL’Y, <https://everytownresearch.org/issue/gun-violence-black-americans/> [<https://perma.cc/3QVM-HKQZ>].

⁷ *Crime Strategies Unit*, KING CNTY. (Nov. 13, 2019), <https://www.kingcounty.gov/depts/prosecutor/criminal-overview/csu.aspx> [<https://perma.cc/X8S4-L25P>].

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ Sara Jean Green, *Homicides, Assaults with Firearms Spike in King County, Reflecting National Trend, Prosecutors Say*, SEATTLE TIMES (Oct. 26, 2020),

victims in 2018, 86% were male; 37% were under the age of 25; and 76% were people of color, predominantly Black.¹⁰ In 2019, the percentage of the 235 shooting victims who were male, under the age of 25, and people of color all increased.¹¹ The top three neighborhoods that saw an increase in shootings were Brighton-Dunlap, New Holly, and Rainier Beach, with ten more shooting incidents each in 2019 than in 2018.¹²

In 2020, these trends have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.¹³ According to KCPAO gun violence data from January through September, there were 767 total shootings, a 15% increase compared to the three-year average for the same period.¹⁴ The number of people fatally shot increased by 58%; at the beginning of August, there were more homicides than the entirety of 2019.¹⁵ So far, fifty-nine people have lost their lives to gun violence this year.¹⁶ 197 people were shot and survived.¹⁷ Countless families, friends, and whole communities have been continuously brought to their knees by gun violence.

<https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/crime/homicides-assaults-with-firearms-spike-in-king-county-reflecting-national-trend-prosecutors-say/> [https://perma.cc/NW67-ATKC]; KING CNTY. PROSECUTING ATT'Y'S OFF., 2018 KING COUNTY FIREARM VIOLENCE (Feb. 2019), <https://www.kingcounty.gov/~media/depts/prosecutor/documents/2019/other/ShotsFired2018.ashx?la=en> [https://perma.cc/JQZ3-QWVT].

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ Sara Jean Green, *Seattle Shootings Rise 6% in 2019 over 2018, with the Greatest Increase in South and North, Police Say*, SEATTLE TIMES (Jan. 10, 2020), <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/crime/seattle-shootings-rise-6-in-2019-over-2018-with-the-greatest-increases-in-south-and-north-police-say/> [https://perma.cc/NW7P-P2RZ].

¹² *Id.*

¹³ KING CNTY. PROSECUTING ATT'Y'S OFF., 2020 KING COUNTY FIREARM VIOLENCE Q1-Q3 (Oct. 2020), <https://kcprosecutor.medium.com/2020-king-county-firearm-violence-q1-q3-6e3c086bce48> [https://perma.cc/GD3V-99FC].

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ *Id.*; see also Green, *supra* note 11.

¹⁶ *Id.*; KING CNTY. PROSECUTING ATT'Y'S OFF., *supra* note 13.

¹⁷ *Id.*

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a substantial impact in our region, exacerbating risk factors for violence including a lack of jobs and educational opportunities, increased stress and mental health concerns, and limited access to healthcare. The feelings of anxiety and depression brought on by isolation due to COVID-19 are compounded by the despair caused by the disproportionate toll the pandemic is having on Black lives, which is further stressed by economic downturn.

Seattle is not alone in experiencing this phenomenon. The National Commission on COVID-19 and Criminal Justice, which has collected data from twenty-seven U.S. cities with populations greater than 250,000 people, including Seattle, determined homicides were 42% higher and aggravated assaults increased by 15% in the summer of 2020 compared to the same period in the prior year.¹⁸ In response to this, King County Prosecuting Attorney Dan Satterberg said, “The increase in violence, looking back now is not surprising given the stressors of this year;”¹⁹ Satterberg continued, “What I think is happening in 2020 is all the conditions have amplified despair and anxiety and uncertainty and fed the conditions that lead to violence as a response to shame.”²⁰ I agree with him on this front.

So how do we address this growing despair, anxiety, and uncertainty and decrease violence?

Like COVID-19, gun violence is a pandemic that has to be treated from a public health perspective: as a disease that, if left untreated, will spread like any other disease. Research has shown that individuals who have gunshot victims as part of their social network (i.e., a relative, friend, acquaintance,

¹⁸ *Impact Report: COVID-19 and Crime*, COUNCIL ON CRIM. JUST. (Nov. 30, 2020), <https://covid19.counciloncj.org/2020/11/30/impact-report-covid-19-and-crime-2/> [<https://perma.cc/B6HH-G6HC>].

¹⁹ *Prosecutors: Homicides, Assaults Increase in King County*, AP NEWS (Oct. 26, 2020), <https://apnews.com/article/virus-outbreak-homicide-shootings-violence-washington-3f5a8704e379faf459826d568efaff8d#:~:text=Prosecutor%20Dan%20Satterberg%20said%20the,the%20same%20nine%2Dmonth%20period> [<https://perma.cc/LGP7-YSKL>].

²⁰ *Id.*

or neighbor) are at an extremely elevated risk of being victims themselves.²¹ As part of a public health approach to firearm violence, KCPAO is using Social Network Analysis (SNA) to analyze the relationships between victims, witnesses, and perpetrators of gun violence to identify those who are at the highest risk of being victims or perpetrators of gun violence.²²

II. SOLUTIONS

Gun violence continues to be a community health crisis in communities of color. As noted by the American Public Health Association, “[p]reventing death, disability and injury from gun violence requires a public health approach that involves data collection . . . [and] research to understand which policies and programs are effective in decreasing gun violence [and] initiatives to implement those measures that are shown to work.”²³ How do we know what policies and programs work until we try something different from the status quo? Members of the impacted community are the best situated to know what needs to change.

At Community Passageways, we couple the strategies identified by SNA with focused deterrence strategies; that is, we seek to instill a perception in high-risk individuals that the costs of continuing on their current paths are higher than the benefits of establishing a new way of life. We are a community-based organization working to create alternatives to the criminal legal system and heal our communities. Our commitment to working with the community, other community-based organizations, and critical legal system

²¹ See generally Andrew V. Papachristos et al., *Social Networks and the Risk of Gunshot Injury*, 89 J. URB. HEALTH 992 (2012).

²² KING CNTY. PROSECUTING ATT’Y’S OFF., 2018 KING COUNTY FIREARM VIOLENCE (Feb. 2019), <https://www.kingcounty.gov/~media/depts/prosecutor/documents/2019/other/ShotsFired2018.ashx?la=en> [https://perma.cc/JQZ3-QWVT].

²³ AM. PUB. HEALTH ASS’N, GUN VIOLENCE IS A PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS, https://www.apha.org/-/media/files/pdf/factsheets/200221_gun_violence_fact_sheet.ashx?la=en&hash=F18D18BB89294AE9EFAA2EB5C0B00B073C65863F [https://perma.cc/7R53-S22H].

partners is vital to develop focused strategies to protect young men of color from continuing to be disproportionately affected by firearm violence. By working with community members who have experienced incarceration firsthand, we provide the opportunity for culturally appropriate deterrence, as well as access to opportunities that encourage and support positive life changes and personal healing.

For these interventions to be successful, they must be developed with community providers. To prevent future firearm violence, KCPAO has conducted a new analysis of law enforcement data over the last several years, working closely with a targeted steering committee of community members, community-based service providers, public health professionals, and law enforcement representatives to provide oversight and help inform interventions. We now have the opportunity to put this analysis and proposed interventions into practice.

In our new Deep Dive program, we work with twenty-five high-risk, young men of color who range from fifteen to twenty-seven years old and who are primarily located in South Seattle and South King County. Their involvement in future violent crimes may be positively impacted by community-based mentorship, coaching, focused deterrence, and access to stable employment. This model is predicated upon national research that concluded certain actions and associations within an individual’s environment are a precursor to continued criminal behavior,²⁴ and that research allows us to identify individuals who may benefit from prevention-focused interventions. We have worked with this cohort in the Deep Dive program over the course of the last year and have seen most of the participants cultivate their brilliance in ways that cannot be understated.

²⁴ Anthony A. Braga & David L. Weisburd, *Focused Deterrence and the Prevention of Violent Gun Injuries: Practice, Theoretical Principles, and Scientific Evidence*, 36 ANN. REV. OF PUB. HEALTH 55–68 (Mar. 2015), <https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/full/10.1146/annurev-publhealth-031914-122444> [<https://perma.cc/HJJ6-L6P4>].

While it is impossible to calculate the amount of harm prevented, we were able to build key truces and alleviate conflicts that historically would have escalated to gun violence.

Our community-based mentors integrate their credible messenger status with a number of evidence-based interventions, including Multisystemic Therapy, Dialectical Behavior Therapy, Motivational Interviewing, and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, each tailored to the strengths and needs of the person with whom they are working. Community providers deliver unified anti-violence messages and alternatives.

As an organization, our approach is premised on the belief that when given hope, opportunity, a chance to heal, and the acceptance and support of their community, every young person can become a powerful, positive leader. We give our young people the tools and opportunities to overcome the trauma they have endured and give back to their community. As stated earlier, our work includes four main programs: community-based mentors (Ambassadors), responsive programming, access to services, and legal system navigation. We provide whatever our participants need to move forward, and we are there to walk alongside, support, and empower them.

A. Ambassadors

Upon a participant's agreement to join our program, we meet with them to get a full picture of what they need in order to thrive. These needs can include housing, legal services, finances, education, mental health support, substance abuse prevention, transportation, family reconciliation, domestic violence support, food, and clothing. The initial assessment also considers the participant's strengths and support system, so that we have a comprehensive picture of their lives. After the assessment, the participant is matched with an Ambassador who builds a supportive relationship with them. Ambassadors work collaboratively with participants to set and accomplish a range of goals, including finding a job, graduating, and positively interacting with their family and community. Ambassadors then engage family members to help

cultivate stability within both the young person being served and their immediate community. Depending on the situation, this may look like providing family therapy or educational support for parents or guardians to expand their understanding of mental health, trauma-related issues, and effective communication. These individualized case plans help guide Ambassadors and participants and are used as a measure of accountability through the entire process.

B. Responsive Programming

Participants meet regularly for culturally responsive programming through which they address their trauma, affirm their value, and develop the personal, professional, and technical skills they need to be successful. Bi-monthly healing circles allow our young people to address the trauma they carry within them—both their personal trauma and their legacy of race-based trauma—while focusing on identity and asset development. Asset building focuses on establishing the life and leadership skills necessary to thrive in educational, professional, social, and community settings. This is designed to be a shared experience, allowing young people to grow while building a supportive peer network.

C. Access to Services

In addition to strengthening the participant’s sense of worth, hope, purpose, and connection, this program also connects them to a wide range of services that meet their basic needs and goals, as outlined in their assessment, throughout the year. These services include access to housing, job training, substance use support, mental health access, educational support, and more. We also help young adults navigate barriers that they frequently face such as obtaining a driver’s license, recovering important documents (e.g., social security card), and obtaining health insurance.

D. Legal System Navigation

Additionally, Ambassadors support young people who are caught in the criminal legal system and are facing incarceration. For these young adults, Community Passageways provides court advocacy support and services, such as being present with young people in and out of the courtroom, including in meetings with court officials and at formal court hearings.

In addition to all of the above, our program participants receive stipends for their time and participation to honor their commitment to their growth and to provide a means for economic stability. We have seen great success with our first round of cohorts in the Deep Dive program: participants engaged in full-time employment, higher education, and apprenticeships; reunified with family and friends; and are generally living their lives in a healthy, safe, and productive way. I am consistently impressed by the brilliance, creativity, and passion of the young men we are working with, and I am excited to see where their refined skills, confidence, and healthy mindsets take them. And although it is nearly impossible to quantify preventative outcomes, our intervention has unquestionably reduced gun violence in our community. In a number of instances, the young people in Deep Dive mediated between other young people who were in conflict to prevent any potential violence. Our next cohort begins early next year. We hope to continue the program for many years to come, for as long as it is needed—but we hope to ultimately work ourselves out of work.

III. CONCLUSION

Beyond our programming, greater community involvement is critical. On June 7, 2020, we helped organize a march called “We Want to Live,” which started in Othello Park and ended at the Safeway on Rainier. Not only were we calling attention to police violence against people of color, but we were also uniting as a community to call for ending violence against each other. As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to wreak havoc on our lives, we will continue to work every day to undo the systemic oppression that has ravaged

and traumatized our community; we will continue to shift the narrative that leads so many of our youth to believe that they need to carry a gun to survive; and we will empower our young men to understand that they have boundless potential beyond street life. We cannot make change until we change how we treat each other.

I would like to give a shoutout to the many community leaders and partners we work with who help us to serve our community and reduce gun violence. We cannot do this alone, and we love and appreciate all of you.

To learn more about Community Passageways and the work we do, please visit: <https://www.communitypassageways.org>.

