

Reducing Gun Violence:

Is There a Role for Health Philanthropy?

Every year, approximately 30,000 Americans lose their lives to gun violence (National Center for Health Statistics 2006). Efforts to reduce this tragic toll raise important questions: How can gun violence be prevented? Would restrictions on access to guns make a difference? Should certain types of firearms be banned? Who should be able to possess firearms? What is the potential of gun safety education? Foundations can play a role in finding answers to these and other questions. They also have opportunities to develop, test, and replicate violence prevention strategies.

Talking about guns in America is always contentious. Many citizens hold strong beliefs about firearms and there are conflicting constitutional claims about the right to bear arms and the appropriate balance between individual liberty and public safety. Some people own firearms for personal defense; others legally use firearms for hunting and sporting purposes (National Research Council 2005). The sheer number of deaths and injuries caused by firearms, however, has prompted many to consider gun violence a public health epidemic, particularly among young people. In 2004 unintentional injury, homicide, and suicide – often involving firearms – were the three leading causes of death among youth ages 15 to 24 (National Center for Health Statistics 2006).

Recognizing the toll of violence prompted a shift in thinking in the early 1990s “from a focus limited to reacting to violence to a focus on changing the social, behavioral, and environmental factors that cause violence” (Mercy et al. 1993). This public health perspective calls for policies to be firmly grounded in science and attentive to unique community factors, and requires data for developing policies and strategies and for testing efficacy. This approach also emphasizes investing in prevention, addressing root causes, adopting a learn-as-we-go approach, emphasizing coordinated action, intervening early, and working with the community (Mercy et al. 1993).

In 2000, The David and Lucile Packard Foundation, The Annie E. Casey Foundation, and Joyce Foundation joined a consortium of federal agencies that asked the National Academies to assess the adequacy of data and research on firearms. The resulting 2005 report by the Committee to Improve Research and Data on Firearms indicated that much was known about the prevalence of firearm-related injuries and deaths, firearms markets, and the relationships between rates of gun ownership and violence. The committee found, for example, that higher rates of household firearms ownership were associated with higher rates of gun suicide, that illegal diversions from legitimate commerce were important sources of guns used in crime and suicide, that firearms were used defen-

sively many times per day, and that some types of targeted police interventions may effectively lower gun crime and violence (National Research Council 2005).

The committee found, however, that “answers to some of the most pressing questions cannot be addressed with existing data and research methods.” For example, despite a large body of research, the committee found no credible evidence that the passage of right-to-carry laws affected violent crime, and there was almost no empirical evidence that the more than 80 prevention programs focused on gun-related violence had any effect on children’s behavior, knowledge, attitudes, or beliefs about firearms. The committee therefore recommended that the federal government support a systematic program of data collection and research on these issues if policymakers have solid information for decisions about firearms and violence (National Research Council 2005).

OPPORTUNITIES FOR FUNDERS

Reflecting on the recent shootings at Virginia Tech, Ellen Alberding, president of the Joyce Foundation, issued a call for philanthropy to meet the challenge of addressing gun violence because “we have the resources to commit to important public problems; we have the freedom to take on tough issues; we have the flexibility to respond quickly; and we are, collectively, diverse enough to experiment with a range of solutions” (Alberding 2007). Foundations can help address the need for better data collection and research, convene key stakeholders, and support development and evaluation of violence prevention strategies.

➤ **Research and Convening** – “For relatively small sums, foundations can make a big difference by support for research exploring patterns of gun violence, such as how access to firearms affects domestic violence, the relationship between prescription drugs and suicide, or between alcohol and homicide,” according to Alberding (2005). She asserts that foundations can also play a convening role to connect researchers with law enforcement officials, doctors, community groups, policymakers, and others who need and can use this information to prevent future gun deaths and injuries. For example, the Joyce Foundation partnered with the International Association of Chiefs of Police to convene the *Great Lakes Summit on Firearm Violence* in April 2007. The purpose of the summit was to draw on the expertise of law enforcement leaders, elected officials, researchers, medical and public health officials, and others to develop a regional approach to reduce gun violence.

► **Preventing Violence Among Youth** – At the time The California Wellness Foundation was established in 1992, gun violence had become the leading killer of California youth. In response, the then-nascent foundation launched the Violence Prevention Initiative (VPI), a 10-year, \$60 million comprehensive grantmaking program dedicated to preventing violence against youth through a range of statewide prevention efforts. The foundation was motivated by the concern that preventing youth violence was not receiving adequate attention, along with a belief that applying a public health model could be effective in stemming violence.

Through components ranging from research, policy advocacy, leadership development, and community action programs, the VPI grantees “became the catalysts of a multi-faceted statewide movement to prevent violence against youth” (The California Wellness Foundation 2004). For example, the foundation initially funded 18 organizations to form collaboratives to explore the potential for reducing violence against youth through health promotion programs, to attempt to influence local policy, and to support statewide advocacy efforts. Their work included support for mentoring programs, gang intervention programs, prisoner reentry programs, community-based prevention, and after-school programs. Collectively, the initiative led to local and statewide policy changes, including new restrictions on firearms in more than 300 California cities and counties. The effort also developed grassroots leadership to prevent violence against youth.

According to the foundation, by the time the VPI ended, the number of youth killed by gun violence was about half that of what it was when they launched the initiative. The foundation acknowledged that it was “difficult to measure precisely to what extent the reduction was due to the work of the VPI grantees and to what extent it was due to the other organizations and individuals who had joined the violence prevention movement” (The California Wellness Foundation 2004). It added, however, “The compelling fact remains that thousands of young Californians were saved from gun violence during the life of the initiative.”

► **Focusing on Handguns** – In the mid-1990s, The Colorado Trust launched a statewide violence prevention initiative. This seven-year, \$8.9 million effort included components on handgun violence prevention among youth, violence prevention community grants, a public education campaign, and the Safe Communities-Safe Schools Initiative.

For the handgun violence component, the initiative commissioned a study that examined both national and state trends and patterns of youth handgun violence and found that teenaged boys represented the most at-risk population (Arredondo et al. 1999). Focus groups revealed the ease with which most youth in the state could access firearms and that self-protection was reported as the primary motive behind carrying and using handguns. The sheer volume of guns in circulation and easy accessibility to these weapons created a sense of hopelessness about blocking access to handguns. Finally, an extensive national review documented a prolifera-

tion of both violence and suicide prevention programs but found little evidence regarding their effectiveness. Without any model programs to emulate, the trust recommended that interventions be designed to focus on the most at-risk populations, with sensitivity to local conditions and a strong focus on evaluation.

The trust subsequently funded pilot projects to address youth handgun violence. Three Denver metro youth-serving agencies received \$150,000 each over three years, and youth participants were surveyed throughout the project. Additionally, evaluators conducted in-depth interviews and focus groups with the project staff regarding challenges and lessons learned. Although the results of the youth surveys did not show significant changes in behaviors toward handguns, the results of the evaluation provided lessons for community-based practitioners, funders, and evaluators.

► **Assuring School Safety** – Additionally, The Colorado Trust supported the development of the Safe2Tell Hotline, which encourages residents to prevent and report violence by making anonymous calls to a toll-free hotline. The Colorado State Patrol’s communication center answers and responds to anonymous calls to the hotline around the clock. As a result of these calls, law enforcement and school personnel have intervened in more than 400 instances, including interventions that directly resulted in prevention of 41 suicides and 19 threats of planned school attacks. The hotline was initiated in response to recommendations made by a commission following the Columbine school shootings. The program began in 2003, and the foundation has committed a second grant over an additional three years to build on the momentum of the program and to help ensure its sustainability.

SOURCES

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