Addressing Systemic Racism and Racialized Violence to Reduce Firearm Injury and Mortality Inequities

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The adverse effects of firearm violence plague all US communities by race, ethnicity, sex, socioeconomic status, and geography in variable and distinct ways. In 2022, firearm injuries were among the 5 leading causes of deaths in the US, and, for the first time, firearm-related deaths surpassed motor vehicle crashes as the top cause of death for individuals younger than 19 years of age. The firearm homicide rates in 2022 were notably higher for American Indian or Alaska Native individuals (9.3 per 100,000), Black individuals (27.5 per 100,000), and Hispanic or Latino individuals (5.5 per 100,000) than for non-Hispanic White individuals (2.0 per 100,000).

Inequities in firearm injuries in major US cities increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. Black children were 100 times more likely and Hispanic or Latino children were 25 times more likely to sustain firearm injuries than non-Hispanic White children. Urban communities with concentrated poverty experience disproportionately more firearm homicides, crime, and associated trauma than less disadvantaged neighborhoods. Unfortunately, community firearm violence has been a long-standing issue in certain US populations and cities for decades. Eliminating these inequities requires a multifaceted approach that recognizes racialized violence as a consequence of structurally rooted systemic racism.

Systemic Racism and Racialized Violence

The disproportionate effects of community firearm violence within racially minoritized populations are rooted in historical and contemporary manifestations of systemic structural racism. Oppressive systems of power and marginalization create and concentrate inequitable community conditions associated with interpersonal violence. Factors such as poverty, unemployment, and underemployment create economic inequities that increase the likelihood of individuals turning to violence for survival or asserting power in their communities. Overwhelming evidence supports that racial bias in housing, education, and health care limit access to resources, and increasing exposure to risks in racial and ethnic marginalized communities can lead to grief and loss, higher levels of stress and trauma, and higher rates of interpersonal violence. Evidence also shows that protective factors such as high-quality and accessible education, housing, and economic and workforce opportunities can foster safe communities. To combat firearm violence and respond to this public health crisis, it is imperative that an equity lens is used to implement structural and community-level interventions.

Young’s framework of oppression suggests that racialized violence is a tool used by dominant groups to maintain power and control over marginalized communities. White communities have historically imposed various forms of violence on racial and ethnic minoritized communities as a means of social control. This includes colonization, slavery, and segregation. Recognizing violence as a form of oppression allows not only consideration of the immediate physical manifestations of violence, but also consideration of how broader power dynamics and systems of inequality interact to perpetuate it across multiple dimensions of society and at multiple levels of influence within it, especially in marginalized communities.
Promising Approaches to Address Inequities in Firearm Violence

Addressing systemic racism and racialized violence are essential in reducing firearm violence and creating safer communities for all individuals. Policies that are equitable and promote social justice and community empowerment are warranted and urgently needed.

Taken together, historical and contemporary policies interact to liberate and enhance opportunities for success of White populations, or impose and increase the likelihood of failure for racially and ethnically minoritized populations. Policy decisions, values, and behaviors associated with firearms provide an example of these processes. A systematic review of gun policies by RAND demonstrates that restrictive laws preventing child access to stored guns (loaded or unloaded) are associated with declines in violent crimes. However, to address systemic and racialized violence, the legacy of historical residential redlining, further exacerbated by policing and incarceration, needs to be addressed. These factors have contributed to the susceptibility of racially and ethnically minoritized neighborhoods in the US, increasing oppression through economic deprivation (eg, intergenerational wealth disinvestment; likelihood of and harsher criminal sentencing) and social deprivation (eg, separation of families and removal of individuals from the workforce). Policy reforms should consider investing in communities that have been historically deprived of resources.

An example of this would be providing opportunities for income mobility in communities with a history of residential redlining and high levels of firearm violence because this has been associated with a decrease in firearm injuries, especially for Black communities in the US.

Community-based violence interruption models are effective in preventing firearm violence in historically marginalized communities. A Violence Interrupter Model is designed to leverage trusted members of the community as "credible messengers," who identify members of their community who are likely to engage in violence and intercede through mentoring, teaching nonviolence, and changing group norms that promote violent responses to conflict. Other promising community-based models include Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles, California, which was designed to prevent violence through the provision of emotional support, job training, social services, and a rehabilitative community for individuals formerly involved with gangs or incarcerated. Further research is needed to evaluate the effect of multisector and coordinated approaches to firearm violence prevention. Promising community models in intimate partner violence homicide prevention (such as the Lethality Assessment Program and the Domestic Violence High-Risk Team) should also be considered for broader applicability.

Treating the Trauma of Gun Violence

We have learned from the experiences of treating patients with HIV that treatment of HIV is also prevention. A treatment model can be applied to firearm violence prevention because historical and cultural trauma is a fundamental cause of health inequities. Furthermore, there is evidence to support that exposure to firearm violence among youth should be considered an adverse childhood experience, which is a known risk factor for future violence and other health consequences. In recognizing exposure to gun violence as trauma, an approach to trauma that emphasizes culture, spirituality, civic action, and collective healing (Trauma-Informed/Healing-Centered Engagement) could be considered. One exemplar is Advance Peace, a program for Black youth that is designed to "explicitly use a healing-centered approach to address the traumas associated with violence as a means to reduce gun crime in urban communities." Another example that holds promise for the development of healing-centered interventions is the Community Engaged Healing Framework, which recognizes the devastating consequences of the intersection of racism and violence and proposes the need for healing as a community through activities of self-discovery, relationship building, and respite from the stressors of everyday living.

Since the killing of George Floyd and the COVID-19 pandemic, the urgency and societal climate to have conversations about racism and its historical truths have shifted dramatically and many...
organizations and communities have invested in racial justice initiatives. At the same time, political critiques against examining racism and firearm violence have limited how the public health crisis of violence is addressed. Regardless of new racial justice initiatives and the politics of racism and firearms, little progress has been made on the firearm violence epidemic. The tragic loss of life from firearms is compounded by the immense financial cost of firearm injuries, with an estimated annual financial burden of approximately $2.8 billion from emergency department visits and inpatient admissions.10 Responding to firearm violence through strategies addressing systemic racism and racialized violence could save the US millions of dollars and protect the lives of generations in many communities.

REFERENCES