

*The following remarks were given by [Patricia E. Campie](#), a principal researcher at AIR, at a Congressional Briefing called *Violence and Violence Prevention*, held on Tuesday, September 27, 2016 at the Rayburn House Building at the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. For more information, including a video of Dr. Campie's remarks: <http://cebcp.org/outreach-symposia-and-briefings/violent-crime/>.*

Root Causes of Urban Gun Violence

In 1975 Sameroff and Chandler introduced the transactional model of human development providing a scientific basis for the long held observation that nature and nurture influence our behavior. Giaconia's research in 1995, and later confirmed through the now famous Adverse Childhood Experiences, or ACES, study found that as many as 40% of adults may have experienced at least one traumatic event resulting in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) by age 18. Those experiencing four different types of traumatic events are 4-12 times more likely to suffer from chronic conditions such as heart disease, as well as depression, and even suicide. And a string of new studies from the field of epigenetics indicates that exposure to physical or psychological trauma in small mammals may trigger molecular reactions at a genetic level that can be passed on to later generations. Meaning that a grandchild may exhibit trauma-induced behaviors reminiscent of its grandparent, even though the grandchild was not exposed to the traumatic event. If this research can be replicated in humans, I think we can all agree that the consequences would be profound. Simply put, human behavior is a complex mix of self and setting.

Much in the same way, the places where we grow up can have long-lasting effects on our behavior and well-being prospects. Since the United Kingdom's Black Report was released in 1980, the evidence continues to grow that social factors, such as poverty, war, high crime, joblessness, weak ties to formal institutions and lack of access to basic resources have the power to determine a person's health prospects including their life expectancy. In the United States, communities marginalized by these social inequities also endure histories of disparate treatment based on race and ethnicity that results in greater use of exclusionary discipline practices in school, deeper involvement in the justice system and more children separated from their families and placed in the foster care system. Rob Sampson's work has shown us that even when individuals from these hard hit communities overcome the odds, excel in school, graduate from college, and move to more advantaged neighborhoods— they still earn less salary, on average, than their White peers. There is a persistence to these inequalities that are tied to race, the neighborhood context people come from and which can follow them through their lives.

Further, the shared experiences we have within our communities may affect our expectations for what we consider to be "normal" behavior. Norms of delinquency research by Wright and Fagan indicates that youth may report greater delinquent behavior than they actually commit if they live in an area that is characterized by concentrated disadvantage and community norms are more accepting of delinquent behavior. Social norms research examining the use of drugs and alcohol finds a similar effect, in that college students are more likely to over-report their own binge drinking if they think their campus peers are themselves binge drinking at the same rate. Our research team is now studying this issue with respect to norms of violence and actual violence in areas of concentrated disadvantage.

So what does any of this have to do with urban gun violence? Well. That is the actual question I'm asking us to consider. Is our behavior, even violence, being influenced by the places where we grow up, the traumas we or our families have experienced, the shared histories of our families and neighbors?

While crime in general has been falling in most categories for many years now, gun violence, especially among older youth, has persisted in cities with high rates of concentrated poverty. Homicide is clustered

in these places, where it remains the leading cause of death for black males ages 15–34, and most of these deaths involve guns.¹ In 2012 Flint, Michigan, had the highest homicide rate of any city with a population at or above 100,000 persons and was also the country's second poorest city as judged by children living in poverty.² In Philadelphia homicide rates are increasing for the third year in a row and just over 12 percent or almost 185,000 Philadelphians, including about 60,000 children, are living on around \$10,000 a year.³ In the inner cities that experience the most firearms violence, relationships with police are often strained where communities feel targeted or even abandoned by the justice system.⁴ And the clearance rate for these homicides, or number of homicides for which a perpetrator is held accountable, is strikingly low in these communities, where I've heard residents tell me they are either afraid to speak for fear of retaliation or they are afraid the police will implicate them or their families if they come forward. In each case the result is the same - violence continues, becoming a normal part of life.

However, correlation does not equal causation. Whether or not these things amount to root causes of gun violence is still an open question and will only be answered once funds are made available to study these crucial questions as we would any other leading cause of death. That doesn't mean we are not funding gun violence prevention strategies -we are. Perhaps the most common gun violence strategy over the past decade has been "focused deterrence" models that target high-risk offenders and their communities.⁵ These strategies, including CeaseFire, use a combination of conflict de-escalation, police suppression, offender notification, and referrals for supportive services to engage offenders who want to change their lives. Braga and Weisburd's systematic review of these strategies reported mixed results. While community-level crime rates were reduced in many of the studies, there was no clear linkage between these reductions and implementation of specific intervention components, mainly because individual rates of offending are rarely measured or tied to participation, where a dose-response, causal relationship can be established.⁶ This lack of measurement at the individual level of impact is a consistent theme in the gun violence research literature, including a review our own team did in 2014 and three additional studies by Papachristos, Fox, and Butts, respectively. To be fair, the focused deterrence approach does not claim to address root causes of gun violence at an individual level, so while conflicts may decrease in the community for a time the seeds of conflict may be lying dormant within individuals or neighborhoods and re-appear when program intensity wanes or underlying violence drivers worsen.

But are there effective gun violence strategies that can work on these underlying issues? The state of Massachusetts launched such an approach called the Safe and Successful Youth Initiative (SSYI) in 11 cities. SSYI is designed to impact root causes of violence by improving an individual's behavioral capacities, relationships with others, and environmental opportunities. This is achieved through a combination of services and supports that offer mental health services to address underlying trauma, cognitive behavioral therapy to correct criminal thinking, outreach mentors and wraparound case management supports, as well as educational opportunities, housing support, and subsidized employment with local businesses that can lead to unsubsidized, permanent jobs. Our research team at AIR and WestEd contends it is the interplay between the individual, relational, and environmental changes participants' experience that leads to gains in financial, psychological, social, and emotional wellbeing. And, that these improvements to the root causes driving crime translate into reduced involvement in gun violence and other illegal behaviors. Unlike focused deterrence strategies, SSYI involves no suppression role for police or messaging about swift legal consequences for future violence. Our research team evaluated the intervention's impact from 2010–2013 and found 5.5 fewer violent victimizations per month in treatment cities,⁷ intervention participants were 40% less likely to be incarcerated than their peers and⁸ prevention benefits (e.g., justice and health care) in the two largest cities (Boston and Springfield) were estimated at just under \$14 million.⁹ Our team continues to study

SSYI in the context of concentrated disadvantage, police-community relationships, and norms of violence and our results will be finalized at the end of this year, providing a window into this intervention's outcomes over a continuous seven year period.

Understandably, the criminal justice system is mainly focused on reducing the incidence of crime by focusing on the illegal act itself. However, sustainable prevention efforts depend on our understanding the individual, neighborhood, and social causes at the root of these crimes, and then having the strategies, capacity, and motivation to do something about them.

¹ Fox, J. A., & Swatt, M. L. (2008). *The recent surge in homicides involving young Black males and guns: Time to reinvest in prevention and crime control*. Boston, MA: Northeastern University.

² US Census (2014) Accessed at: <http://www.census.gov/acs>

³ US Census (2014) Accessed at: <http://www.census.gov/acs>

⁴ Police Accountability Task Force. (2016, April). *Recommendations for reform: Restoring trust between the Chicago police and the communities they serve*. Chicago, IL: Office of the Mayor. Retrieved from https://chicagopatf.org/wpcontent/uploads/2016/04/PATF_Final_Report_4_13_16-1.pdf

⁵ Braga, A. A., & Weisburd, D. L. (2015). Focused deterrence and the prevention of violent gun injuries: Practice, theoretical principles, and scientific evidence. *Annual Review of Public Health, 36*, 55–68.

⁶ Braga, A. A., & Weisburd, D. L. (2012). The effects of 'pulling levers' focused deterrence strategies on crime. *Campbell Systematic Reviews, 6*.

⁷ Petrosino, A., Campie, P., Guckenburg, S., Fronius, T., & Vivano, L. (2015). Cross-sector, multi-agency interventions to address urban youth firearms violence: A rapid evidence assessment. *Aggression and Violent Behavior, 22*, 87–96;

Petrosino, A., Turner, H., Hanson, T., Fronius, T. & Campie, P. (2014). *The impact of the Safe and Successful Youth Initiative (SSYI) on city-level youth crime victimization rates. An interrupted time series analysis with comparison groups*. Boston, MA: Massachusetts Executive Office of Health and Human Services.

⁸ Campie, P., Vrinotis, M., Read, N., Petrosino, A., & Fronius, T. (under review). A comparative study using propensity score matching to predict incarceration likelihoods among youth in the SSYI gun violence intervention.

⁹ Bradham, D. & Campie, P. (2014). *Massachusetts Safe and Successful Youth Initiative (SSYI) benefit-to-cost analysis*. Boston, MA: Massachusetts Executive Office of Health and Human Services.