

# **Reducing Gun Violence in Birmingham, Alabama**

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## **The Issue: Gun Violence**

While even the suggestion of mild gun control sparks heated debates, gun violence continues to thrive in the United States. In 2020 alone, there were 43,560 people who died from gun violence, an increase from 2019 despite most of the country being under lockdown orders for large portions of the year (GVA). As of August 1 of this year, at least 25,912 people have died because of gun violence (GVA). Gun violence deaths are separated into four main categories by the CDC: Homicide, defensive gun use, unintentional, and suicide (CDC). Of these four categories, the vast majority of mortalities come from homicide and suicide, with suicide accounting for over half (GVA). Any initiative aimed at addressing gun violence must take into account the majority share of gun violence mortalities attributed to suicide. Additionally, approximately 75% of all homicides in the U.S. involve a gun and 50% of all suicides involve a gun (Gramlich, 2017). Given these statistics, it is unsurprising that gun related deaths are the leading cause of premature death in the United States (APHA).

Given America's high rates of gun violence related injury and mortality, it is unsurprising the US also leads the world in gun ownership rates (BBC). There is a correlation between gun related mortality and gun ownership with one study finding a strong connection between higher numbers of gun ownership in a state and a higher rate of suicides involving a gun (BBC). As of October 2020, 44% of adults in America reported having a gun in their home (Gramlich, 2017), but it is difficult to know the exact number of firearms in the US as there is no national database or tracking system and the establishment of a database is a divisive political issue. Even with the lack of a national database, most estimates have the number of guns in the US around 390 million and having 120.5 guns per 100 residents, the highest rate in the world (BBC, 2021). When compared to other similar countries, the US has the highest rate of gun violence and it is

not even close (Gramlich, 2017). For all of the aforementioned reasons and more, gun violence is a major public health issue.

Gun violence does not happen in a vacuum and the conditions that drive it are complex and have been perpetuated for generations. The lack of economic opportunity and social mobility are two major factors in breeding gun violence that contribute to the “pockets of violence” that make up the majority of gun related deaths (King, 2021). Furthermore, there is a strong correlation between gun violence and race and poverty, highlighting the disproportionate number of African American who die from gun violence in comparison to their white counterparts (Hagedorn, 2019). These facts cannot be divorced from the long-term patterns of systemic racism and disinvestment from African American communities in cities and towns across the country (King). It is within this context that gun violence must be addressed and any long-term solution must acknowledge the roles that decreased economic opportunity and social mobility play.

Even with gun violence being a major public health issue and recognized by half of Americans as a very big problem (Gramlich, 2017), there are significant barriers to addressing gun violence at every level of government. There are very few gun control related policies that both political parties agree upon, making it difficult to address gun violence on a federal and state level. Furthermore, the establishment of the Dickey Amendment in 1996 halted all funding to research on firearms that may advocate gun control being conducted at the CDC, resulting in a halt on all gun research done at the leading public health agency in the country (Raphelson, 2018). The 25-year absence of gun violence research from the CDC is negligent on the part of Congress for continuously including the Dickey Amendment in its budgets as gun related mortalities have risen and little action has been taken. With the federal government, and most

state governments, taking little to no action to address gun violence, communities are suffering the consequences with their local government having very few options to act. Most states have strict preemption laws preventing city and town governments from passing any laws that regulate firearms (Giffords, 2021). One of these states is Alabama, which has only taken steps to loosen gun control policies in recent years by establishing lifetime handgun permits and introducing legislation that would no longer require concealed carry permits and legislation establishing civil penalties against officials that enforce any federal gun laws enacted after January 1, 2021 (Sharp, 2021)). Meanwhile, Alabama had the second highest gun related death rate in the country in 2017 and its most populous city is the focus of this piece, Birmingham (Gramlich, 2017).

### **Background**

Founded in 1871 at the junction of two rail lines, Birmingham, Alabama is a product of the Post- Civil War Era and Industrial Boom (Birmingham Times, 2020). Like many American cities, systemic discriminatory practices towards Birmingham's African American communities have led to widespread disenfranchisement and poverty creating pockets of violence that have been perpetuated for decades. It is no coincidence that neighborhoods with the highest rates of crime and gun violence are also some of the poorest with the least resources (food deserts, social support services, transportation, jobs, etc.) and are majority African American (Archibald, 2021). Given the many factors that contribute to higher rates of gun violence, it is no surprise that the topic of gun violence prevention is highly complex. Unfortunately, there is a gap in research on gun violence prevention and programs because of the Dickey Amendment preventing federal funding from going to any research that might have a pro-gun control result. (Rostron, 2018). This adds another layer to the issue by politicizing it. The bottom line is, 2020 saw

Birmingham's highest number of homicides and the majority of them involved a gun making it clear that the city must do more to effectively reduce gun violence (Robinson, 2021).

### **The Statistics**

	US	Alabama	Birmingham/Jefferson County*
Rate of Violent Crime (2003)	429 per 100,000	476 per 100,000	1,394 per 100,000
Rate of Violent Crime (2018)	429 per 100,000	520 per 100,000	1,912 per 100,000
Firearm Mortalities (2015-2019)	11.7 per 100,000	21.6 per 100,000	30.3 per 100,000

Birmingham specific statistics on crime rates, gun violence, and gun related mortality is limited, and most of these datasets only date back to the early 2000s. To add context, Birmingham's statistics will be compared to Alabama as a whole and the rest of the United States. Birmingham has high rates of violent crime that are consistently higher than the Alabama and US crime rates. When violent crime data began being collected in 2003, Birmingham had a rate of 1,394 per 100,000 compared to Alabama's 476 and the US's 429 per 100,000. Since 2003, violent crime rates have steadily increased to Birmingham having 1,912 violent crimes per 100,000 in 2018 compared to Alabama's 520 and the US's 381 (macrotrends). From 2017 to 2020, there were 446 homicides in Birmingham. Of these 446 homicides, 75% of the victims were young, African American men and 87% of the homicides were committed with a gun

(Archibald, 2021). In Alabama, gun related deaths have increased by 37%, gun related suicides have increased by 15%, and gun related homicides have increased by 79% from 2010 to 2019 (EveryStat). All of these increases significantly outpace the US's increases in gun related deaths, with the US's gun related deaths increasing by 17% compared to Alabama's 37%. From 2015 to 2019, Jefferson County, where Birmingham is located, had a total of 986 firearm mortalities with a rate of 30.3 per 100,000, the highest in the state (EveryStat). Of the 986 firearm deaths, 305 were suicide deaths and 667 were homicide deaths (EveryStat). All of these numbers illustrate that Birmingham has a violent crime and gun related crime problem that is well above the rest of the state and the nation.

### **What Has Birmingham Done/What is it Doing?**

Like many cities with high crime rates, the main tactics Birmingham has employed for many years are centered around the Birmingham Police Department ("BPD"). Some of the changes made to decrease crime include establishing the Birmingham Violence Reduction Initiative, utilizing PredPol predictive policing technology, starting an illegal firearm recovery initiative, installing gunshot detection technology, and creating a real time crime center (Guantt, 2021). The issue with most of these programs is that they are inherently reactionary and do little to actually prevent crime. Additionally, there is very little, if any, evaluation data for any of these programs, so it is difficult to know their efficacy outside of looking at crime trends for the city and the county.

Chronologically, the first of these efforts to be introduced to Birmingham is the ShotSpotter gunshot detection technology, which was first purchased in 2007 (Guantt, 2019). The technology is a physical device set up somewhere in a community that notifies the police every time it detects a gunshot (ShotSpotter). Since installing this technology, the BPD and City

Council has yet to release any of its data, reports on its efficacy, or if it has played any role in reducing gun violence (Guantt, 2019). Even more concerning is the recent revelation of police departments manipulating the ShotSpotter data to inaccurately associate people with certain gunshots detected (Feathers, 2021). This brings to light the fact that ShotSpotter technology has never been audited, so no one outside of the company knows exactly how the technology works (Feathers, 2021). Despite this troubling lack of transparency on behalf of ShotSpotter and the BPD, City officials and the BPD continue to insist that the technology is effective in deterring gun shots (Guant, 2019). However, vital statistics do not support this claim and instead show a rise in gun related deaths and injuries over the past few years (GVA). In fact, several studies of ShotSpotter technology have found it to be ineffective and one of these studies in St. Louis found it has not found any evidence that ShotSpotter reduces gun violence or police response times to gunfire (Feathers, 2021). If the technology is effective in reducing gun usage in some way, then the City should release that data to support their claims and their rationale for renewing their \$2.6 million contract with ShotSpotter.

One of these initiatives is the Birmingham Violence Reduction Initiative (“VRI”) started in 2015 under former mayor William Bell. Utilizing gun ShotSpotter technology, it targets neighborhoods and blocks with high numbers of gun shots so that the City can provide resources for these areas, the community can get feedback, and the police know where to focus efforts and where illegal guns may be (Finnie, 2017). However, this initiative was heavily criticized by the community for the police’s militarized actions, surveillance, and targeting of young black men (Finnie, 2017). The ultimate goal was to identify criminals before the crime takes place, however an outside study found, “the program lacked clear direction and failed to reduce homicide by firearm or nonfatal shootings” (Webb-Hehn, 2019).

In 2019 Birmingham purchased PredPol predictive policing technology that looks at data from police reports from the past five years to predict which areas are most likely to experience crime on a given day and what type of crime (Cromwell, 2020). This technology can then be used to help inform police where they might want to patrol that day, for how long, and how many officers to have in the area. One common concern for this type of technology is that it can create a feedback loop of over policing and can reinforce biases (Lau, 2020). While the technology itself may not be biased, the police reports it analyzes are and these biases could be amplified because of the technology (Lau, 2020). While Birmingham is just adopting this technology, many cities such as Chicago, Illinois; Santa Cruz, California; and Hagerstown, Maryland are banning it after many years of use have shown it to be ineffective, discriminatory, and an inappropriate way to view public safety (Cromwell, 2020). It is clear that strict oversight of the technology is essential for the PredPol technology not to reinforce biases, promote over policing (typically of poor, African American communities), and lead police officers to fall into “self-fulfilling prophecies” just because a crime is predicted for one area (Cromwell, 2020). Since the technology has been in use for less than a year in Birmingham, there are no reports on its impact in the city so far.

Opening sometime this summer, the Real Time Crime Center (“RTCC”) will be opening in the BPD headquarters with the goal of seeing crime happen in real time so as to respond quicker to incidents and get the closest units to the scene of the crime (Guantt, 2021). The RTCC is costing the City several million dollars in surveillance cameras, software, administration, and construction with the hope of responding to crime and maybe reducing crime in the city. Similar RTCCs have been opened in cities like New Orleans and the suburbs surrounding Birmingham (Guantt, 2021) and will utilize a combination of technology such as ShotSpotters gunshot



detection, PredPol predictive policing, surveillance cameras, and license plate readers (Maass, 2020).

### **What Birmingham Could Do**

Birmingham has a high gun violence rate but is limited in what it can do on a policy level to enact change. Wide sweeping laws that could decrease gun violence, such as waiting periods and background checks for all firearm purchases, are outside of the city's power due to state law, so these changes can only occur if the state government enacts it and given the state's actions in 2020 to loosen gun laws even further, this seems unlikely (Giffords, 2021). With the inability to pass gun laws at the city level, Birmingham should invest in and partner with gun violence prevention programming that involve community leaders, law enforcement, those at risk, and support services. The city could invest in gun violence reduction programs such as Group Violence Intervention, Hospital-Based Group Violence Intervention Programs, and the Gun Shop Project.

Group Violence Intervention ("GVI") is a violence reduction strategy that brings in community leaders, law enforcement, and support services to have a discussion with groups that are identified as at risk for committing violence and being on the receiving end of violence (Giffords, 2021). GVI was created in Boston with their Operation Ceasefire program and it saw a 60% decrease in homicides and a 25% decrease in monthly assaults (Braga). Similar results were consistently found in cities that implemented GVI programs and it is consistently recognized as an effective strategy for reducing gun violence (Giffords, 2021). Some of the contributing factors to GVI's effectiveness include community leaders delivering the message to the at-risk groups, law enforcement warns the at-risk groups about the potential consequences if the violence continues, and social services providers are also involved to offer both short-term and long-term

support and opportunities (NNSCommunities). Additionally, most violent crime that includes gun violence and homicide is perpetuated by the same groups of people, who are in turn more likely to be victims of violence, and these are the groups that are targeted in this intervention (NNS Communities). By investing in a GVI program, the city could reduce gun violence and the cycle of violence in some of Birmingham's most at-risk neighborhoods while also involving community leaders, social services, and law enforcement.

Hospital-Based Violence Intervention Programs ("HVIP") capitalize on the fact that victims of violent injuries are likely to end up in a hospital and use this opportunity to intervene and connect the victims with case managers and social services (Giffords, 2021). HVIP have been shown to reduce gun violence injury recidivism, indicating their effectiveness in capitalizing on the opportunity and connecting victims with community services and support (Dicker, 2017). Due to HVIP's success in reducing recidivism, they also reduce associated health care costs, criminal justice costs, and lost productivity costs (Purtle, 2014). Implementing HVIPs in Birmingham's hospitals could be an efficient and cost effective method for reducing violence, especially given Birmingham is a major medical hub in the state of Alabama. Just this month, the Jefferson County Department of Health announced it would be implementing a HVIP in partnership with UAB with the goal of reducing gun violence (Jackson, 2021). Birmingham's City Government should follow the county health department's lead and invest in JCDH's HVIP, or establish their own program, so that this violence reduction program can be enacted in all of Birmingham's many hospitals and receive sufficient funding and support.

One program the City could implement to address the high gun related suicide rate is the Gun Shop Project. The Gun Shop Project was initially started in 2009 in New Hampshire to partner with firearm sellers, firearm activists, mental health and public health professionals to

educate and increase awareness of suicide prevention (Harvard). The main objectives were to create guidelines for gun sellers to avoid selling guns to customers that may be suicidal and providing posters and pamphlets on suicide prevention and safe gun storage in gun stores and firing ranges (Harvard). While investing in a project like this would not be costly, there is a lack of research on its effectiveness in suicide prevention. Should the City choose to implement the Gun Shop Project, they should partner with one of the many research institutions in the City to design a pilot program and investigate its effectiveness, before widespread implementation.

### **Conclusion**

In the absence of policy change, the City of Birmingham should invest in gun violence prevention programming to address its high gun violence rate in conjunction with the massive investments in crime solving technology they have over the past few years. Of the three programs discussed, HVIP is already being implemented in some capacity in the City and the Gun Shop Project lacks supporting evidence, so a GVI program should be implemented in the City. GVI has the most supporting evidence of its effectiveness in reducing gun violence and has been in use since the 1990s. Furthermore, GVI programs have also been shown to be cost effective with the potential economic costs of acts of violence being more than the cost of a GVI program (Sharp, 2014). The City should implement a GVI program to target the groups of people most at risk for committing violent crimes and for becoming victims themselves. Mayor Woodfin himself has noted, "There is a certain segment of people who are in the minority, a super small population in the community. They are shooters. They are killers. They have a reckless disregard for your life and my life and other innocent people's lives. And they are not going to stop shooting" (Archibald). If the City is serious in its ambitions of reducing gun violence, then they should invest in programs that go to the root of the problem and not just invest millions in

questionable police technology that is inherently reactionary and does little to prevent crime.

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