Introduction

The issue of gun violence in America has taken center stage due to several tragedies taking lives – often the lives of youth – far too soon. Beyond these isolated and tragic incidents, however, is the persistent issue of homicide in black America. Gun violence most keenly affects black males in America, particularly those who live in high-poverty communities. Between 2000 and 2010, on average, 4,900 black males died each year from gun violence. During the same time period, 48 percent of the nation's homicide victims were black males, and most of them were youth and young adults. This issue of gun violence and its solutions must be informed by the experiences of black men and boys.

In January 2013, President Obama released a plan for protecting children and communities by reducing gun violence[i]. This plan has generated serious debate from both sides of the issue. The ensuing conversations about how to solve the issue of gun violence have been volatile. The President's plan includes reforms to close loopholes on background checks; banning military style assault weapons; increasing the ability of law enforcement to prevent and prosecute gun crime; ending the freeze on gun violence research; preserving rights of health care providers to talk with patients about gun violence; making schools safer by increasing the use of school resource officers and other measures; and improving mental health services.

Missing, however, from the President's plan is a solution to address what is surely the root cause of gun violence in most black communities – concentrated poverty. Gun violence in black communities is far bigger than the issue of gun reform and whether tougher gun control laws will reduce access to guns. Gun violence for young black males predominates in communities where residents live in concentrated disadvantage with high rates of unemployment, school dropout, and poverty. The absence of opportunities in these communities gives rise to criminal activity and the loss of too many young lives. Solving the crisis of gun violence in communities requires that America address the issue of concentrated poverty and geography. The rebuilding and strengthening of these communities through creating infrastructure to provide improved education and employment opportunities for black youth will significantly reduce issues of gun violence.

CLASP
policy solutions that work for low-income people

Gun Violence for Black Males 2000-2025

In a single generation, our nation is faced with the prospect of losing over 132,000 black men and boys to gun violence. Between 2000 and 2010, 53,850 black males died by firearms in America[ii]. We project that between now and 2025, more than 68,600 black males will face the same untimely death if we are unable to make significant progress in addressing gun violence. Moreover, for every black male who dies from gun violence, there are another 24 others who suffer non-fatal injuries – making the impacts of such violence even greater.[iii]

Table 1 reflects the projected numbers of lives lost across the nation and in several key communities. This projection is based on several factors:
* most recent nationally available homicide rates in each community[iv]
* percent of homicide victims in each community that are black males[v]
* national and state 10-year trends in number of black male deaths caused by a firearm as the weapon[vi]
* projected growth in each of the respective cities based on historical data[vii,viii]

Table 1: Projections of Black Male Homicides by Firearms, 2013-2025

City	Projections of Black Male Homicides by Firearms, 2013-2025	City	Projections of Black Male Homicides by Firearms, 2013-2025
United States	68,631	Jackson, MS	458
Atlanta, GA	846	Kansas City, MO	809
Baltimore, MD	2,002	Los Angeles, CA	1,083
Camden, NJ	396	Memphis, TN	844
Charlotte, NC	372	New Orleans, LA	2,294
Chicago, IL	3,670	Newark, NJ	836
Cincinnati, OH	532	Oakland, CA	966
Columbus, OH	646	Philadelphia, PA	3,229
Durham, NC	180	Richmond, VA	364
Houston, TX	596	Washington, DC	1,143
Indianapolis, IN	744	Wilmington, DE	215

Source: CLASP calculations based on an extrapolation of current trends in homicide rates, use of firearms, and population growth

The vast majority of these black men who are killed in gun violence are young, their lives taken far too early. From 2000-2010, 85 percent of all the black male homicide victims were under the age of 40. Analysis of the 2010 national homicide data reveals that more than half of these victims were between the ages of 13 and 29. This represents a significant loss for black families and substantial trauma for those living in violent
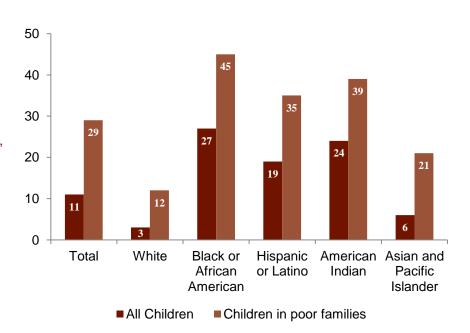
communities. Many of these young men are fathers and leave behind children and partners who face decreased financial stability in addition to the myriad issues that fatherless children must face. It is also a tremendous economic loss to the nation and each community, as talent and earning potential is gunned down in such large proportions.

Poverty, Place and Homicide Rates

Though the majority of poor[1] people in the United States are white, poor white individuals are far less likely to live in neighborhoods of concentrated disadvantage than blacks. Analysis of the range of communities in which white children live as compared to black children reveals that 27 percent of black children compared to 3 percent of white children live in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty, defined as having a poverty rate of at least 30 percent (see Figure 1).[ix] Even African American children in middle class families are far more likely than whites to grow up in high poverty neighborhoods.[x] Research on the relationships between concentrated disadvantage, race and ethnicity, violence, and health finds that most of the difference in rates of violence and health between racial and ethnic groups can be accounted for by differences in the communities in which these groups live. People who live in communities of concentrated disadvantage are more likely to experience violence and to be the victims of violence.[xi]

Figure 1: Percent of children living in concentrated poverty, by race, Hispanic origin, and family poverty level, 2006 -2010

Source: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, *Children Living in America's High Poverty Communities: A KIDS COUNT Data Snapshot (2012)*
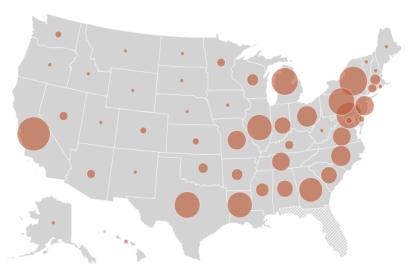
[1] The poverty threshold for a family of three, one adult and two minor children, is $18,498 per year. (US Census Bureau, 2012)

Homicides in America are concentrated in the South, the Midwest, and the East Coast.[xii] Black male homicide follows a similar pattern, with clearer concentrations in a few Midwest states and with California being the only west coast state with high proportions of black male deaths (see Figure 2)[xiii]. Analysis of data for these states reveals homicides are concentrated in particular cities within those states that either have concentrated poverty, or have pockets of high poverty within them (see Table 2). As compared to the national average, these communities have homicide rates ranging from double to over nineteen times the rate for the United States. In large communities like Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York City, the per-capita homicide rates are lower due to the wide variation in neighborhoods and socioeconomic levels within these cities. This masks, however, the very high rates of homicide that exist in neighborhoods of extreme poverty. In the South, there are several very small, often isolated cities of extreme poverty that are not listed here due to their size. Figure 3 shows a clear linear relationship between rising poverty and rising homicide in select communities from the states with high incidence of homicide.
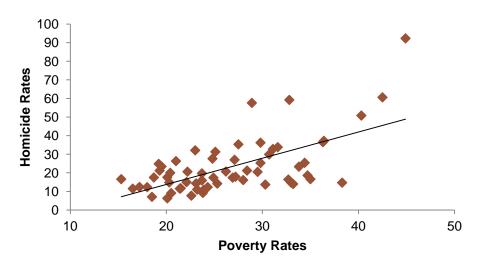
Figure 2:
Mapping of Black Male Homicide Victimization, 2000-2010

Source: The Wall Street Journal, "Murders in America Database," accessed March 2013

Figure 3:
Relationship Between Rising Poverty and Homicide Rates in Select Communities

*Source: CLASP plot of community poverty rates (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011 American Community Survey)
versus homicide rates (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2011 Crime in the United States)*

Table 2: City Homicide and Poverty Rates, 2011

State	Cities With Highest Homicide Rates*	Homicide Rate per 100,000 people	Percent of People in Poverty
United States		4.8	15.9
Alabama	Bessemer	36.2	29.8
	Birmingham	25.3	29.8
	Phenix City	21.2	19.3
	Montgomery	15.0	22.1
California	Oakland	26.3	21.0
	Richmond	24.8	19.2
	Stockton	19.7	23.7
	Compton	17.4	24.9
	Vallejo	15.3	16.6
	Los Angeles	7.7	22.6
Delaware	Wilmington	32.1	23.0
Georgia	Atlanta	20.7	26.2
	Albany	16.6	35.0
	Macon	14.0	33.2
Illinois	East St. Louis	92.3	44.9
	Harvey	59.2	32.8
	Chicago	15.9	23.7
Indiana	Gary	37.2	36.4
	Indianapolis	11.5	21.4
Louisiana	New Orleans	57.6	28.9
	Baton Rouge	27.6	24.8
Maryland	Baltimore	31.3	25.1
Michigan	Flint	50.8	40.3
	Detroit	48.2	40.9
Mississippi	Jackson	29.9	30.7
	Gulfport	17.6	20.1
Missouri	St. Louis	35.3	27.5
	Kansas City	23.4	19.5
New Jersey	Camden	60.6	42.5
	Newark	33.8	31.6
	Atlantic City	32.8	31.1
	Trenton	27.0	27.1
	Irvington	25.9	20.4
New York	Hempstead	14.8	20.3
	Rochester	14.7	33.0
	Buffalo	13.7	30.3
	New York City	6.3	20.1

State	Cities With Highest Homicide Rates*	Homicide Rate per 100,000 people	Percent of People in Poverty
North Carolina	Rocky Mount	20.6	22.2
	Fayetteville	12.3	18.0
	Durham	11.7	21.5
Ohio	Youngstown	25.4	34.4
	Dayton	23.3	33.8
	Cincinnati	20.5	23.7
	Cleveland	18.6	34.7
	Canton	16.4	32.7
Pennsylvania	York	36.5	36.3
	Philadelphia	21.2	28.4
	Reading	14.7	38.3
	Pittsburgh	14.3	23.1
South Carolina	Columbia	12.3	24.3
	Charleston	9.1	20.5
Tennessee	Memphis	17.9	27.2
	Chattanooga	14.2	25.3
Texas	Killeen	11.5	16.5
	Dallas	10.9	23.9
	Houston	9.2	23.8
Virginia	Richmond	26.9	17.4
	Danville	16.1	28.0
	Portsmouth	12.4	17.2
Washington, DC		17.5	18.7

***cities with populations larger than 25,000*

Sources: Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2011 Crime in the United States; U.S. Census Bureau, 2011 American Community Survey

Communities of concentrated disadvantage have long lacked the infrastructure and resources to make them viable places to live, work, or raise a family. The stress of poverty and absence of opportunities for a solid education and economic self sufficiency makes growing up in these neighborhoods difficult for young people, in particular young black males. As a result, these black males often find it difficult to follow the typical path toward adulthood. Thirty-two percent of youth that are disconnected from education in the United States are black.[xiv] These young people have no high school credential and limited skills, significantly limiting any employment prospects. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, only 12 percent of black male teens are employed, less than half the rate of white male teens.[xv] More than 25 years ago, researchers and economists stated that major shifts in policy making and investment in education and employment training were needed in urban communities and predicted that failure to do so would result in increased unemployment and crime[xvi]. Despite those warnings, investments in youth have decreased considerably over the past few decades, and we see the current results in the form of higher gun violence.

When young people have positive life prospects and goals, they make more sound decisions, such as staying in school, not taking drugs, not getting involved in illegal activity, delaying pregnancy, and parenting. Black males in these communities rarely see positive prospects or futures before them. Only the most resilient are able to overcome the devastation in their communities and families to graduate from high school, complete college, move forward into careers and stable lives. The vast majority are left to their own demise. The best solution for reducing gun violence is investing now to transform our most dangerous cities into safe, thriving communities where black male youth have real opportunities to be educated and employed, and have the ability to support themselves and their families.

Rebuilding Communities to End Gun Violence

Distressed communities with concentrated poverty need resources and support to build the necessary infrastructure to support the healthy development of black males and their families. Healthy communities offer a variety of opportunities that promote healthy development. They include: 1) cognitive development – school instruction, out-of-school activities, community environments and informal learning; 2) physical development – safe physical recreational facilities like parks, community centers, and streets, as well as physically safe schools; 3) social/emotional development – healthy and safe environments for social interaction, formation of positive peer groups, and caring adult supervision; 4) cultural development – cultural institutions and opportunities to explore and appreciate the history and pride of cultures represented in the community; and 5) vocational development – organizations that provide exposure to work and careers, and the ability to earn money.[xvii]

To address the issues of lack of opportunity that often lead to increased violence, communities need to focus efforts on providing quality education and employment programs in proportion to the number of young people who need them. In addition, communities need to provide supportive services to address poverty barriers and the trauma of witnessing or experiencing violence, both of which hinder achievement. Research demonstrates that these efforts – when done to-scale in communities -yield positive education and employment results, while also reducing crime. From 2000 – 2005, the United States made significant investment in 36 urban, rural, and Native American communities through the Department of Labor's Youth Opportunity Program. The goal of Youth Opportunity was to build an infrastructure to provide programming at a scale that would improve education and labor market outcomes for youth ages 14-21 across the entire community. Over this five year period, 92,000 youth were served in many of the nation's most distressed communities. An independent evaluation of the program found that it reduced the overall number of youth who were not connected to school

or work, reduced the number of high school dropouts, and increased the labor market participation rates of black youth. The evaluation further found that this community-based approach provided opportunities for youth to be productive, as well as reduced crime, juvenile delinquency, and gang activity.[xviii]

The federal government has a significant role to play in assuring that policies are crafted and sufficient resources are appropriated to address issues of education and employment in distressed communities. The federal government plays a critical role in creating flexibility in systems to reduce barriers to service, providing guidance to systems on effective practices to reach the target population of black males, and providing clarifying language on opportunities to use resources in non-traditional ways that effectively serve black males. In like manner, state and local systems must be willing to think outside the box and be creative about how to reach males, providing services and supports in a culturally responsive manner that will put young black males back on a path to a more successful and prosperous adulthood.

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**To have an impact on gun violence among youth in communities
of concentrated poverty, we must invest in five key areas:**

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Target federal and state investments to communities of concentrated poverty

Communities with concentrated poverty have large numbers of youth who will need intensive supports in order to be successful. Many of these communities have extremely low rates of high school completion and youth employment, especially for black males. Recognizing this need, federal, state, local, and private resources should be targeted to these communities to enable them to provide quality services at the required scale to meet the needs of their youth, such as violence prevention and intervention programs, trauma and mental health services, dropout prevention and recovery programs, and safe social spaces for youth. This financial commitment allows communities to develop or strengthen their infrastructure in order to effectively service the needs of their large numbers of youth with high-needs and support their education and employment outcomes.

Build community capacity

Communities need to build capacity across systems to create comprehensive service delivery mechanisms. Federal, state, and private resources should be used to create and strengthen these comprehensive systems that have the ability to serve large numbers of struggling youth. Sustainable cross-system partnerships between public youth-serving systems (such as school districts, child welfare, public health, Department of Labor, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), community providers, the business community, and private foundations are critical to developing mechanisms that work for all to provide rich opportunities for youth. These partnerships create a continuum of services and supports for young people. They also prompt systems to re-imagine they way they provide services and develop partnerships that are in the best interest of positive youth outcomes. Communities are then also able to leverage their community and public resources to better meet the needs of youth.

Re-engage and support students who are struggling or have dropped out

Communities need a comprehensive strategy for keeping black male youth connected to school or re-engaging them for completion of a high school credential. Successful completion of high school and preparation for postsecondary opportunities will keep black male youth on course for positive adult outcomes and divert them from negative influences. Flexible pathways back to education for black males who were disconnected from their education are also essential. Students who drop out recognize the value and necessity of a high school credential and are often actively seeking a way back to complete their education.[xix] Providing these pathways back gives black males a second chance to attain high school credentials and prepare themselves for employment or postsecondary education.
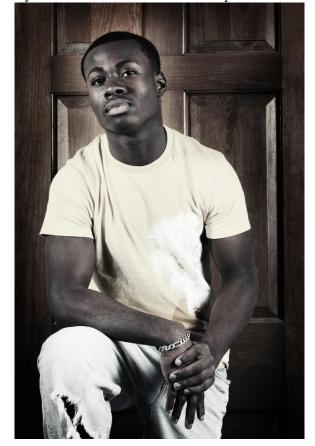
Expand opportunities for work

Communities need more opportunities for youth to be employed. Black male youth currently have the lowest employment rates in the nation. Having work during these ages is especially significant for low-income youth and is positively linked to staying in school, lower pregnancy rates, and higher wage earnings over time. In many communities of concentrated poverty, youth are competing with adults for employment opportunities. There must be significant political leadership and substantial policy and investment to create comprehensive youth employment policy that puts black male youth to work. A robust set of work experience and job creation strategies, including subsidized employment, internships, on-the-job training, summer jobs, and transitional jobs, are critical to advancing safety in communities of concentrated poverty.

Promote healing from trauma and adversity

Continually experiencing or witnessing violence has a significant traumatic impact on the lives of black males, potentially impairing their cognitive development, social and emotional well-being, and family functioning. Communities should approach their youth services in a manner that is informed by the realities of trauma, and work with young men on healing. These approaches should teach black males how to cope with loss, reduce the stress that they are experiencing as a result of violence, restore a sense of hopefulness and control over their futures, and improve their achievement to increase their life prospects. Imbedding these approaches in existing services such as schools, after-school/out-of-school programs, youth employment programs, or juvenile justice services enables communities to reach more youth, and impact both emotional wellness and achievement.

Conclusion

Gun violence is a complex issue. We do need strong, common-sense gun laws to protect the innocent from heinous acts of gun violence, as well law enforcement officials who are better equipped to protect our communities. We need effective mental health treatments for those affected by gun violence, as well as more research to inform future policies and practices. At the core of the issue of gun violence issue, however, is the largest problem that requires a multi-faceted set of solutions – concentrated poverty. We need to rebuild the employment and education infrastructure in communities of concentrated poverty to provide solid opportunities for black males to learn and work. Simultaneously, we must also acknowledge the decades of violent devastation that has plagued these communities and commit to helping black males understand, cope, and rise above those circumstances. In so doing, we will transform communities of concentrated poverty into viable places for black boys and young men to grow, develop, and thrive.

Endnotes

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