Reproductive justice requires that people be able to live and raise their families in safe, healthy communities. Yet, the threat of gun violence makes this impossible for many people. Over 33,000 people are killed by gun violence each year in the U.S. Fear of gun violence leaves many parents feeling helpless and unable to protect their children. As one young mother living in the Bronx said about incidents of gun violence around the country, “As a mother of three kids, I’m afraid of their future. I feel like no matter how I raise them and teach them to make the right decisions, I can’t protect them. . .”

Gun violence threatens health and safety and can undermine people’s feelings of community and trust. According to the American Medical Association, gun violence has become a public health crisis. The burdens of this crisis, though, are not spread equally across our society. Despite being less likely to own guns, people of color are more likely to experience gun violence. Gun violence and the fear of gun violence keep people from being able to make decisions about their lives and futures with dignity and autonomy. Reproductive justice must work to advance policies that address the causes of gun violence and support viable solutions to ensure that people in all communities can live and raise their families in safe environments, free from the fear of violence.

Guns Undermine Safety in the Community

The mere presence of guns makes communities less safe and can increase the risk, not only of gun violence, but also other forms of violence as well. States with higher rates of gun ownership have higher rates of gun homicides. And so called “stand your ground” laws, which make it harder to prosecute people who claim they used force in self-defense, have actually increased homicides in the states where they have been implemented.

Gun violence presents particular risks for women. Overall, women in the U.S. are 11 times more likely to be shot and killed than women in other similar countries. And the risk of homicide for women that experience domestic violence rises astronomically – by 500 percent – when the perpetrator of domestic violence has access to a gun.

The dangers of gun violence fall most heavily on communities of color. For example, 23 percent of Black young adults and 15 percent of Latino/a young adults report they have personally experienced gun violence in the past year, compared with only eight percent of white young adults.

Gun violence is the leading cause of death for young Black men and boys ages 15-24. In fact, more young Black men and boys die from gun-related homicides than from the next nine leading causes of death combined.

Stereotypes and implicit bias can also play a role in increasing gun violence. People may unconsciously fear certain racial/ethnic groups, causing them to perceive danger even when there is no risk. Studies have found that people will consistently shoot at images of Black men more quickly than they will shoot at images of white men and are more likely to shoot unarmed Black men than unarmed white men.

When combined with the presence of a gun, implicit bias can contribute to turning an encounter deadly. Theodore Wafer, a 54 year-old white man, shot and killed Renisha McBride, a 19 year-old Black woman, when she knocked on his door, seeking help after a car accident. Michael Dunn, a 47 year-old white man, shot 10 rounds into a car of four Black teenagers, killing 17 year-old Jordan Davis, all because Dunn objected to the volume of the music playing from the boys’ car.
Furthermore, studies have shown that police officers are not immune to the effects of implicit bias. But unlike most people, their job entails making quick decisions that can have deadly consequences. So far in 2016, 832 people have been fatally shot by police. In 2015, police killed 1,134 Black men in the United States. About 25 percent of those men were unarmed, compared to 17 percent of white men who were killed by police. These police shootings can erode any sense of community and breed distrust. A recent survey shows that less than half (44 percent) of Black young adults trust the police compared with 60 percent of Latino/a young adults, and 72 percent of white young adults. Bias may also prevent a victim from receiving justice because people claiming self-defense in a shooting are less likely to be convicted if they killed a person of color.

Guns Undermine Safety in the Home

The presence of a gun not only makes communities less safe, it makes homes less safe, as well. People with a gun in the home are more likely to be victims of a homicide. The presence of a gun in the home also raises the risk of unintentional death, particularly for young children. Children die at a rate of one every other day from unintentional firearm deaths – shot either by themselves, an adult, or another child. And 89 percent of these shootings happen in the home. For example, in 2016, Bryson Mees-Hernandez was staying with his two younger sisters at his grandparents’ home when he found a gun his grandmother had stored under her bed for protection. While handling the gun, Bryson unintentionally shot himself and died later in the hospital.

Further, the mere presence of a gun makes it more likely someone will successfully commit suicide, even among people who don’t have a history of mental illness. Most people who start a suicide attempt change their minds and abandon the attempt mid-way. But an accessible gun in the home also raises the risk of unintentional death, particularly for young children.

Families and Their Communities Need Gun Safety Measures

After a high-profile shooting in Orlando in June 2016, 92 percent of people in one survey stated that they supported expanded background checks for firearm purchases. And a recent survey shows that Black and Latino/a young adults overwhelmingly support measures to reduce gun violence – such as a nationwide ban on semi-automatic weapons and high-capacity magazines – and at least 50 percent of white young adults support these measures. Yet too often, politicians have failed to pass even the most popular gun safety legislation. For example, although legislation requiring background checks for all firearm purchases is the most popular gun safety measure, only eight states have passed these laws. And the federal government has repeatedly failed to pass this legislation. At the same time, federal law prohibits the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) from studying the causes of gun violence. Fourteen states have even passed or introduced laws that prohibit doctors from talking to their patients about gun safety.

Meanwhile, 306 people are shot every day in the United States. Forty-eight of those people are children and teens. The gun violence epidemic prevents people from having and raising families in safe and healthy environments. All communities need policies and measures that open the dialogue about gun violence as a reproductive justice issue and address real causes and solutions.

How You Can Support Gun Safety and Reproductive Justice

• Support measures to reduce gun violence such as:
  o Restrictions on semi-automatic weapons and high-capacity magazines,
  o Safe storage practices, and
  o Criminal background checks for all gun sales.

• Encourage an open dialogue about gun violence and gun safety.


See CATHY J. COHEN ET AL., supra note 5.

Id.


Id.


Id.

CATHY J. COHEN ET AL., supra note 5, at 7.


NATIONAL PHYSICIANS ALLIANCE & LAW CENTER TO PREVENT GUN VIOLENCE, supra note 27, at 4.

Ryan Foley, supra note 28.

Andrew Anglemyer et al., supra note 26.


CATHY J. COHEN ET AL., supra note 5, at 6.


Id.