



Viewer's Discussion Guide

Introduction

"Violence has not died down like it should. Violence is still here. It's still strong."
-- Terry Shumlai

Violence is an epidemic, says the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, as much of an epidemic as AIDS, and as prevalent as heart disease and cancer.

Violence is complex and multifaceted. There is domestic violence, child abuse, random violence, violent behavior around alcohol outlets, and youth violence. Each has unique causes. Each may have unique solutions. The communities that have made the biggest dent in violence have used a multiagency approach — local public health departments working hand-in-hand with police departments, youth violence-prevention organizations and citizen groups.

Gun violence in California, though far from eradicated, has declined significantly in the last 10 years. New local gun-control laws have become an integral part of violence-prevention programs that bring together community groups, police, public health departments, the courts, the schools and youth. Before these citizens take action, they talk about the issues.

KQED provides this guide to help you begin discussing gun violence in your community groups, churches, schools or work.

The documentary *GunShots* shows how people who want to prevent gun-related violence can begin by examining and targeting changes to its three major components:

- The gun — the agent of injury or death and ease of availability
- The people — the victim and the perpetrator
- The environment — the place where the deaths or injuries occur

This three-part approach has been used to successfully reduce deaths and injuries from car crashes (car, driver, streets or intersections), and from tobacco-related heart disease and lung cancer (tobacco, smoker and tobacco producer, restaurants, work place, etc.).

This guide provides discussion points for community members who are looking for ways to reduce the gun violence that devastates families and neighborhoods.

The Gun

“Listen, America’s in total denial about gun violence.”

– Former BATF agent Jay Wachtel

Most of the firearms used to injure and kill, notes *GunShots*, are handguns. Begin by trying to find out if this is true in your community. It also would be valuable to track down the number of gun dealers operating in your community and how many guns they sell.

According to the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, 56% of gun dealers operate out of their homes. In California’s Contra Costa County, the Health Services Department, with BATF help, enforced a local law that prohibited gun dealers from operating out of their homes.

In 1995, the Contra Costa County’s Board of Supervisors also passed an ordinance that required gun dealers to operate only in business districts, and more than 500 feet away from schools, day care centers, other gun dealers, places of worship, and alcohol outlets. The number of gun dealers dropped from 700 to 250. (Contra Costa County Health Services Department, Prevention Program, 510-313-6808 <http://www.planeteria.net/home/cccpgv/kitchentable.html>)

The Brady law requires a waiting period to purchase a gun so dealers can do a background check, but *GunShots* points out there are no such requirements for guns sold at gun shows. If guns shows are held in your community, try to find out if most sellers come from outside the community as well as how many guns exchange hands.

What laws, if any has your community passed regarding guns? Are they enforced? If your community has banned the sale of handguns, how far do people have to drive to buy handguns?

President Lyndon Baines Johnson wanted a national system of gun registration, similar to how vehicle identification numbers and drivers licenses are registered. For 30 years, Congress has prohibited the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms from registering gun owners. Do you agree with gun advocates who say that gun registration would impede our Second Amendment rights? Try to find out how many guns your local police or sheriff’s department confiscates every year. What happens to those guns?

According to *GunShots*, there’s a gun in one in three American households. Does that statistic sound correct for your community?

The People

“She was just my heart. He’s taken that all away from me. And so that hurt me. It really, really hurt me.”

-- Minnie Barrett, Lynette Allen’s grandmother

To evaluate the effect of gun violence on people — those on either side of the gun — community members first need to gather information about how many people die or are injured by guns locally, then try to determine where the perpetrators get their guns. The question is relevant whether the violence is premeditated, or the gun “holder” is a suicide or a child who accidentally shoots another child or adult.

Are efforts being made in your community to track the origins of gun sales? How is this data being used? As *GunShots* reported, Youth Alive and the Oakland Police Department used ATF tracing data to convince the Oakland City Council to hire more personnel for the weapons unit.

According to *GunShots*, one or more adults are responsible for the gun being in the possession of a minor. Do law enforcement educators address the storage of firearms in the home?

Most youth violence occurs between the hours of 3 p.m. and 9 p.m., and most youth gun violence occurs away from school. Does your community have after-school programs and violence prevention programs for youth that provide mental and physical stimulation, adult supervision and mentors?

The Environment

“I would rather close the door before the horse bolts. Going after armed criminals is going after the damage has been done.”

-- former BATF agent Jay Wachtel

An unhealthy environment spawns violence. Once you’ve determined the prevalence of gun violence in your community, you can begin looking at ways to prevent it.

According to violence epidemiologists, neighborhoods with an overabundance of alcohol outlets (stores selling alcohol and bars) have more violent crime than neighborhoods with proportionally fewer alcohol outlets. Identify these outlets in your neighborhood. Compare your crime rate with nearby neighborhoods that have fewer outlets — or more outlets. In many communities, groups concerned about escalating neighborhood violence have lobbied successfully to stop new outlets from opening.

Other environmental elements may affect violence. Consider the number of college placement courses, after-school programs, counselors and graduation rates in your local schools. Evaluate community services: parks, libraries, after-school programs, recreational activities, street lighting. And look at the physical environment, including an excess of abandoned cars and litter.

In California, about 50% of juvenile offenders and 70% of adult parolees are caught in the cycle of crime and return to prison. Does your community offer mentoring programs for people who get out of prison or youth detention? How much of your community’s budget is spent on violence-prevention programs?

There are more gun-related suicides than instances of gun homicides each year. Identify what mental health services your community offers. Identify what suicide prevention or counseling services your community offers. Are there programs specifically for youth, women, and the elderly?

The Costs of Gun Violence

“It’s become very clear to those of us who work in treatment that if we’re going to further decrease the number of people who die from gun violence, we have to decrease the number of people who get shot in the first place.”

—Dr. Garen Wintemute, emergency room physician,
violence epidemiologist

Gun violence’s most immediate and obvious costs are human — the tragic, traumatic effect on family and friends. Other costs are material and many are less apparent: the emergency response that includes police, ambulance, fire department emergency squad and detectives to investigate the shooting.

If a shooting victim is injured, there are emergency room charges, surgery, hospital stays and rehabilitation that can mount into the tens of thousands of dollars. Few shooting victims have health insurance, so the community pays for treatment. If the victim dies, the family must pay for a funeral. Nationally, most victims are young men, and they often leave families behind with one less person to provide income.

If there is a perpetrator, the community also bears the cost of putting that person on trial and, if convicted, of paying for years of prison.

The U.S. Department of Justice estimates that when one youth leaves high school for a life of crime and drug abuse it costs society between \$1.7 million and \$2.3 million [<http://www.ojjdp.ncjrs.org>]. One year of state youth prison costs Californians \$41,700 [<http://www.cya.ca.gov/facts.html>].

By contrast, one year of participation in a youth violence-prevention program costs \$3,000 [source: Youth Alive].

One act of violence can have far-reaching effects. In *GunShots*, assistant district attorney Rebecca Hardie describes how Sean Twomey's gun sale resulted in a branch bank robbery. The main bank closed the branch, depriving that Oakland neighborhood of banking services. The robbery caused other businesses to close. People put bars on their windows and armed themselves out of fear. Residents moved away. Employment opportunities plummeted for youth because the only businesses left were liquor stores, bail bonds and junkyards.

What business have closed due to gun violence in your community? How have you, a friend, or loved one been affected by gun violence?

Your Local Media

Lynette Allen's death, *GunShots* points out, got a few inches in the local newspaper, and no one considered how the gun ended up in the hands of teenagers.

Look at your local newspaper, radio and television stations' coverage of violence and crime. Is it unbalanced, reporting events primarily from a police and courts perspective, and neglecting to mention public health and violence-prevention efforts to reduce violence and crime? Does your local newspaper report efforts to curb gun violence? If not, how would you bring it to their attention?

Your Efforts

Each act of gun violence results in a damaged community. It is the conscientious effort on the part of the individual to participate in gun violence prevention that will work towards a solution. Whether it's talking with youth to help them understand the causes of violence and how to safely resolve their emotions or actively lobbying for stricter gun control laws at the state and national level, it's each person's effort that will stimulate a change. There are many organizations in the Bay Area and throughout the nation that work actively to prevent gun violence and spread awareness about the epidemic. Your concern and involvement will foster safer communities. For more information on how to get involved, go to the *GunShots* Web site: www.kqed.org/tv/productions/baywindow/guns/.

Contact your local representative to find out what gun legislation is pending.