Using the Socio-Ecological Model to Understand Increased Risk of Gun Violence in the African American Community

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Abstract
Gun violence is a major public health issue of growing concern in the United States (U.S.) with 48,830 lives lost to gun related violence in 2021, documenting the highest number of gun related homicides and suicides ever recorded. The African American community is disproportionately impacted by gun violence and members of this community are almost 14x more likely to die by gun homicide than their white counterparts. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has identified a socio-ecological framework as a lens through which to better understand violence and inform potential prevention strategies to address it. This model identifies four levels (individual, relationship, community, societal) which help to enhance our understanding of the complex interplay between individuals and their environments. Here, we use this model to understand why the African American community experiences elevated risk of gun violence in the U.S. and propose strategies for prevention. Understanding the issue of gun violence beyond individual level risk, this analysis highlights the interplay

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between multiple levels including the ways in which societal level factors influence violence. While this paper provides a lens through which to understand the multi-leveled factors that contribute to gun violence in the African American community, it also serves as a call to action for policymakers, scholars, and agencies to develop culturally informed policy and programming efforts specific to those who are most impacted.

Introduction

Gun violence is a major public health issue of growing concern in the United States (U.S.) (Davis et al., 2023; Santilli et al., 2017). In 2021, gun-related fatalities reached an all-time high at 48,830 lives lost, documenting the highest number of gun homicides and gun suicides ever recorded, following another record-setting year just the year before in 2020. Relatedly, while in 2014 the gun homicide rate reached a 40-year low, by 2021 it had spiked by 83%. In the span of just two years, between 2019–2021, the gun homicide rate in the U.S. increased an astounding 45%, gun suicides by 10%. In 2021, 81% of homicides and 55% of suicides were by firearm. In addition, gun violence continues to be the leading cause of death for children, teens, and young adults (Davis et al., 2023). A recent study found that firearm fatalities among U.S. children increased 87% during the ten-year period between 2011–2021 (Mannix et al., 2023).

In addition, gun violence disproportionately impacts the African American community (Beard et al., 2017; Davis et al., 2023; Jacoby et al., 2018; Krieger et al., 2017). In 2021, African Americans were almost 14 times more likely to die by gun homicide than their white counterparts. While representing only 2% of the U.S. population, young African American males between the ages of 15–34 years accounted for 36% of all gun-related homicides and African American females of the same age experienced a gun homicide rate nine times that of their white counterparts (Davis et al., 2023). Relatedly, African American women are significantly more likely to be killed by a firearm than white women (Waller et al., 2024).

The impact on children is especially disheartening. The African American community experiences a disproportionate number of young lives lost to gun violence and youth exposure to guns and gun violence (Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Solutions, 2023b; Mariño-Ramírez et al., 2022; Parham-Payne, 2014; Schuster et al., 2012). More children of color are lost annually to gun violence with disparities in the number of African American children lost relative to their population here in the U.S. (Davis et al., 2023; Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Solutions, 2023b; Mariño-Ramírez et al., 2022; Parham-Payne, 2014). The impact is significant for both gun homicides and suicides. In 2020, despite representing only 15.2% of U.S. youth,

African American youth accounted for 47% of youth firearm deaths. Relatedly, between 1999–2020 gun related deaths for African American youth increased by 39% compared to an increase of 16.4% for white youth (Mariño-Ramírez et al., 2022). Over half (51%) of African American teens who died in 2021 were killed by a gun (Davis et al., 2023). More recent data reflects that African American children and teens experience a gun homicide rate 20x higher than their white counterparts (Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Solutions, 2023b). Firearms are the most common method of suicide among African American male youth and 40.9% of African American youth overall commit suicide via firearms (Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Solutions, 2023a). In 2022, for the first time on record the gun suicide rate among African American teens surpassed that of white teens (Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Solutions, 2023b). And finally, African Americans are also more likely to experience a gun-related homicide at the hands of police officers than their white counterparts (Mesic et al., 2018; Siegel et al., 2019).

It is clear from the above statistics that the African American community is among those disproportionately impacted by the widespread availability of guns and the epidemic of gun violence currently plaguing the U.S. However, the full scope of the increased risk experienced by this community has yet to be holistically documented. It is crucial that we fully understand the totality of the increased risk of this violence on an already vulnerable population here in the U.S. Darden and Godsay (2018) propose use of an ecological approach to understanding and addressing gun violence against African Americans. Along these lines, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the nation's leading organization in addressing public health concerns, has identified a socio-ecological framework as a lens through which to both better understand violence and inform potential prevention strategies to address it (Dahlberg & Krug, 2002). This model identifies four levels (individual, relationship, community, societal) which help to enhance our understanding of the complex interplay between individuals and their environments. The individual level includes factors such as biology, personal history, attitudes, beliefs and experiences. The relationship level examines close relationships including those with partners, family, and peers. The community level includes those settings in which people engage, including schools, neighborhoods, workplaces, etc. And the societal level looks at the broader society and the climate that encourages and/or inhibits violence, including norms and policies that maintain social inequalities (Dahlberg & Krug, 2002). Here, we use this model to understand why the African American community experiences elevated risk of gun violence in the U.S. and use this information to inform strategies for prevention.

Review of Risk Factors

Individual-Level Factors

The individual level looks at those individual level factors that increase African Americans' risk of experiencing gun-related violence. As reflected above, this

community experiences a disproportionate number of lives lost to gun violence. While being a victim of gun violence can result in mortality, research shows that many people who suffer gunshot wounds survive their injury (Raza et al., 2020). Hence, the high rate of gun violence experienced in the African American community means that there are significant numbers of surviving victims living in the community suffering the consequences of this violence.

Consequently, many will need adequate supports following gun violence victimization. However, research supports that African Americans, especially African American men who experience the greatest disparities as it relates to gun violence, face significant barriers to receiving services to address the consequences of their victimization. Such barriers include transportation concerns, due to such factors as risk of revictimization and debilitating traumatic stress symptoms, and lack of culturally sensitive services that center the lived experiences of African American men (Rich & Grey, 2005; Richardson et al., 2020, 2021). In addition, many young African American men struggle post-injury with navigating post-traumatic stress, including fear of revictimization, while reintegrating into the communities where they were victimized and feeling they have limited protection (Rich & Grey, 2005; Richardson et al., 2020). Given a history of problematic experiences and a fractured relationship between the African American community and law enforcement, many of these men lack faith that the police will help protect them. Hence, many feel the need to take measures to protect themselves from revictimization including taking an aggressive stance to save face and earn respect in response to their initial victimization and/or arming themselves to stave off future victimization. Some also turn to substance use to self-medicate their traumatic stress. Ironically, such measures may actually increase their risk of revictimization (Cooper et al., 2000; Rich & Grey, 2005).

Social implications of victimization exist as well. In a longitudinal study of African American youth living in a high-poverty area, researchers found that those who experienced violent victimization were significantly more likely to later carry a gun (Spano, 2012; Spano & Bolland, 2013; Spano et al., 2012). This has implications for subsequent gun violence.

Individuals are also impacted by their exposure to gun violence, even if they are not victims themselves. Increased rates of gun violence in the African American community means increased risk of such exposure (Beard et al., 2017; Jacoby et al., 2018; Krieger et al., 2017; Santilli et al., 2017; Shapiro et al., 1998; Smith et al., 2020). In a study of African American 8th graders living in a low-income urban area, Quimby et al. (2018) found that nearly half (45.9%) of participants reported some exposure to guns. Another study of African American adolescents on the south side of Chicago, IL also found exposure to gun violence to be prevalent amongst participants (Voisin et al., 2011). This exposure can also result in detrimental mental health outcomes, including a heightened state of fear. In a study including a diverse sample of school-aged children, Burnham and colleagues (2013) found that death and dying fears were highest among African American children, compared to white and Latinx counterparts.

Jewett et al. (2021) found that boys of color were more likely than their white counterparts to have experienced violence and report feeling unsafe at school. A study assessing perceived safety of low-income African American youth living in Baltimore, MD found that violence, especially shootings and other gun-related incidents were the most common reasons given for feeling unsafe. Such fear could result in an increased likelihood of carrying a gun for adolescents, which could lead to further violence as Lane et al. (2004) found in a sample of African American adolescents that fear of victimization was independently associated with intention to carry a gun. Shapiro et al. (1998) also found that gun exposure was linked to more favorable attitudes towards guns, especially among African American participants, in their study of 1164 3rd–12th grade U.S. students.

Exposure to gun violence could also lead to other problem behaviors such as delinquency, as McGee (2003) found in her study of 500 African American high school students in the state of Virginia. Quimby et al. (2018) also identified a link between gun exposure and delinquency and aggression, while Shetgiri et al. (2016) found an association between violence exposure (seeing someone get shot or stabbed) and subsequent weapon involvement (weapon-carrying, pulled a gun/knife, shot/stabbed someone) among African American youth. African American male youth who live in areas of high crime have been found to suffer from increased PTSD symptoms that include hypervigilance, nightmares, insomnia, and emotional numbness which can lead to a cycle of increased violence (Carswell, 2022). Ross et al. (2023) also found association between community violence exposure and likelihood of carrying a gun among African American young adults. Hence, multiple factors at the individual level contribute to increased risk of gun violence in the African American community.

Relationship-Level Factors

The relationship level examines close relationships that individuals have, including those with partners, family, and peers/friends (Dahlberg & Krug, 2002). The literature supports significant increased risk of gun violence in the context of interpersonal relationships within the African American community. Starting with intimate partnerships, African American women experience higher rates of intimate partner violence (IPV), including intimate partner homicide, than white women (Breidling et al., 2014; Gillum, 2021; Lee et al., 2002; Morrison et al., 2022). We also know that women who experience IPV are at greater risk for intimate partner homicide and experience higher levels of abuse if their perpetrators have access to firearms (Kafka et al., 2021; McFarlane et al., 1998; Stansfield et al., 2021). Using a national sample of 286 large U.S. cities, Stansfield et al. (2021) found that cities with higher rates of licensed firearm dealers also had higher risk of intimate partner homicide. Similar results were found for state-level analyses (Stansfield & Semenza, 2019).

Many women have experienced threat of firearm use or actually been shot or shot at by an intimate partner (Sorenson & Schut, 2018; Sullivan & Weiss, 2017). Sullivan and Weiss' (2017) research with a predominately African American sample of survivors

found that nearly a quarter (24.2%) of participants reported experiencing threat with a firearm during the course of their intimate relationship and 12.5% experienced fear that their perpetrator would use a firearm against them within the 30 days prior to their interview.

Disproportionate rates of gun violence experienced in the African American community means that African Americas are more likely to experience, and subsequently be impacted by, the loss of loved ones as a result of gun violence. In a study of six low-income neighborhoods in New Haven, Connecticut, researchers found that African American participants were more likely than Latinx and white residents to have heard gunshots in their neighborhood and to have experienced loss of a loved one due to violence, including gun violence (Santilli et al., 2017). Another study of African American adults residing in an inner-city community in the Midwest found that 74% of respondents personally knew someone who had been shot while 37% had actually seen someone get shot. In addition, 34% had experienced having a gun pulled on them (Price et al., 1994). Related to this, one's social network is a significant factor in one's risk of victimization. In their study of an African American community in Chicago, IL, Papacristos and Wilderman (2014) found that the closer one was to a victim of homicide, the greater their risk of being a homicide victim.

Community-Level Factors

Perhaps the greatest risks for African Americans experiencing gun violence exist within the context of their communities. As indicated above, African American children experience high and disproportionate rates of exposure to guns and gun violence (Quimby et al., 2018; Schuster et al., 2012; Voisin et al., 2011), largely a factor of racial/ethnic disparities in structural disadvantage (Ulmer et al., 2012). Schuster et al.'s (2012) study of urban fifth-graders and their parents found that African American children were more likely to have witnessed a threat or injury due to gun violence than white children. Such prevalence of violence has led many youth to resign themselves to living with the rampant crime that plagues their community spaces (Voisin et al., 2011). In addition, public recognition of the tremendous loss of young life that the African American community experiences related to gun violence is limited as news media neglects to cover such gun violence against children in predominantly African American communities with the same level of empathy, rage, and "calls to action" that often accompany school shootings involving predominantly white children (Parham-Payne, 2014; Rubinstein et al., 2018). The plague of violence impacting this community is often framed in such a fashion as to blame the victim (the community), attributing such violence to cultural and individual shortcomings (Parham-Payne, 2014; Watson et al., 2020). Consequently, inadequate resources are devoted to curbing gun violence in these communities.

Increased rates of violence, including gun violence, in African American communities also leads to increased policing of schools in African American communities, fostering the school-to-prison pipeline that hypercriminalizes African American youth

and places many into the penal system (Bailey et al., 2017; Vera Sanchez & Adams, 2011; Wald & Losen, 2003; Watson et al., 2020). African American youth often face heightened police presence in route to and from school, as well as security cameras, metal detectors, random searches and heavy police and security guard presence in schools. This increased policing places even nondelinquent youth and those victimized by violence at increased risk for criminalization (Vera Sanchez & Adams, 2011). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2016), African American youth are 2.2 times more likely to be subjected to school-related arrest or to receive a referral to law enforcement than white students. Increased policing in schools means African American youth are more likely to have encounters with police and consequently, the penal system. Such encounters increase African American youth's risk of being labeled a juvenile offender, which itself increases their risk of violence. Chassin and colleagues (2013) found in a longitudinal study of juvenile offenders that African American youth were at increased risk of premature mortality generally and homicide specifically, compared to their white and Hispanic counterparts, with gun carrying being a significant risk factor.

Increased gun access in these communities also increases risk for youth gun carrying, a known risk factor for firearm violence and youth mortality (Loh et al., 2010; O'Connor et al., 2023; Shetgiri et al., 2016). In a predominantly African American sample of urban youth (n = 3050, 58.9% African American), Loh et al. (2010) found that one third of the sample reported having access to a handgun and being African American was a unique predictor of such access.

In their respective communities, African Americans are at increased risk for exposure to community violence generally and gun violence specifically (Beard et al., 2017; Burgason et al., 2015; Jacoby et al., 2018; Krieger et al., 2017; Santilli et al., 2017; Ulmer et al., 2012). Such disparities have been found to be a factor of disparities in structural disadvantage experienced by African American here in the U.S., which disproportionately places them, through residential segregation, in socioeconomically disadvantaged communities which experience increased rates of violent crime, including gun violence (Bailey et al., 2017; Beard et al., 2017; Burgason et al., 2015; Jacoby et al., 2018; Krieger et al., 2017; Ulmer et al., 2012). As a result, research supports that African American victims of crime are more likely to be victimized by a gun wielding assailant and to sustain injuries from gun violence, as demonstrated by an analysis of national data (Burgason et al., 2015).

What is also disturbing here is the potential increased risk for African Americans who also live in non-predominantly African American neighborhoods, as research supports the presence of implicit biases which lead non-African Americans to more often perceive African Americans as threatening and attribute danger to inconspicuous, non-dangerous objects when primed with African American bodies/faces (Lundberg et al., 2018). In addition, research has also found explicit bias against African Americans to be a significant predictor of gun ownership (Gearhart et al., 2019). Such associations, facilitated by negative stereotypes of African Americans perpetrated by the media (Debrosse et al., 2023; Gearhart et al., 2019; Parham-Payne, 2014),

contribute to acts of gun violence perpetrated against African Americans by ordinary citizens and police, including being shot and killed in one's neighborhood while exercising (running) or holding a cellphone (Dowd, 2021; Fausset, 2022; Jany, 2023; Levenson et al., 2018), meaning African Americans are unsafe and at increased risk of being shot in predominantly African American and in predominantly white neighborhoods.

African American women, men, and children are all at increased risk of police violence and its associated consequences due to the high rate of policing of African American communities and elements of structural racism which perpetuate dangerous stereotypes of African Americans (Alang et al., 2023; Bailey et al., 2017; Boyd, 2018; Debrosse et al., 2023; Jacoby et al., 2018; Mesic et al., 2018; Parham-Payne, 2014; Robinson, 2017; Siegel et al., 2019; Watson et al., 2020). Consequently, African Americans are also more likely to experience a gun-related homicide at the hands of police officers than their white counterparts (Mesic et al., 2018; Siegel et al., 2019). As reflected here, research supports that the African American community as a whole experiences elevated risk of gun violence in the U.S.

Societal-Level Factors

Finally, it is important to note that increased risks experienced at the other lower levels (individual, relationship, and community) have their roots in larger systems and structures at the societal level. It is the implicit and explicit racial biases identified above, fueled by historical racism, structural disadvantage, dehumanization of African Americans, and negative stereotypes perpetrated by the media that result in the disparities revealed. These biases also suggest that gun owners are more likely to be vigilant towards people of color generally and African American specifically that results in the increased and unique vulnerability (Bailey et al., 2017; Debrosse et al., 2023; Gearhart et al., 2019; Lundberg et al., 2018; Parham-Payne, 2014; Watson et al., 2020). It contributes to the reason that African Americans are more likely to experience violence at the hands of police, ordinary (white) citizens and each other. It may also foster self-harm among members of this community, as a study by Bond et al. (2023) found experiences of everyday discrimination to be associated with firearm ownership among African Americans and that these gun owners also experienced significantly more suicidal ideation than non-firearm owners. The reality of disproportionate loss and suffering related to guns and gun violence that is experienced by the African American community has deep historical roots embedded within the structure of our nation, including norms and policies that have maintained identified social inequalities, and hence will require attention at the societal level to effectively address this significant public health issue.

The below figure captures the multi-level risk factors identified above (Figure 1).
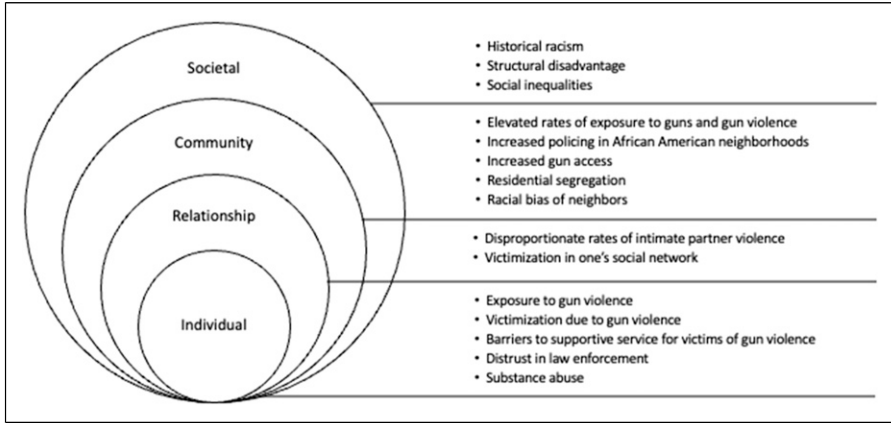
Figure 1. Risk factors associated with gun violence in the African American community. *Note*. This representation of the social-ecological model shows the risk factors associated with gun violence in the African American community across the individual, relationship, community, and societal levels.

Discussion

The research presented above supports the significant increased risk of exposure to guns and gun violence experienced by the African American community in the U.S. Guns and gun violence have detrimental impacts on the U.S. overall, with significant loss of life well documented, especially among U.S. children. However, research supports that some U.S. sub-populations experience a disproportionate risk of experiencing this violence and the African American community is one that experiences such elevated risk and consequences. The CDC provides a thoughtful and effective lens through which to understand the public health concern of guns and gun violence in the African American community, the socio-ecological framework (Dahlberg & Krug, 2002). As documented above, the African American community experiences exacerbated detrimental impacts and increased risk at all levels of the socio-ecological model (individual, relationship, community, society). This includes increased risk of gun violence victimization and revictimization, unique barriers to treatment/services, lack of trust in law enforcement, use of substances, and increased risk of exposure to gun violence at the individual level. At the relationship level, African American women's disparate experiences of IPV puts them at increased risk of intimate partner homicide, particularly by firearms, and victimization of someone in one's social network, experienced at disproportionate rates by the African American community, increases their own risk of future victimization.

Residential segregation disproportionately places African Americans in socioeconomically disadvantaged communities which experience increased rates of violent

crime, including gun violence. Higher rates of gun violence in these communities means greater risk of exposure to gun violence and the associated consequences. The increased rates of violence subsequently result in increased police presence in African American communities leading to increased contact of African American youth with the legal system, and increased rates of police violence, including police homicide, perpetrated against members of this community. Increased access to guns in these communities also increases risk.

African Americans are at increased risk of victimization related to gun violence regardless of whether they inhabit predominantly African American or predominantly white neighborhoods, due to implicit biases and structural inequalities. Such tragedy is often accompanied by little to no public concern or concentrated action as public narratives tend to paint African Americans as responsible for their own tragedy, as inherently dysfunctional while ignoring the impact of structural racism and social determinants. It is these societal level factors that perpetuate and exacerbate these disparities, demonstrating limited concern for African American lives.

As the socio-ecological framework has been proposed as a lens through which to both understand and address gun violence, Ross et al. (2023) propose that gun violence prevention efforts in such communities should address factors across levels of the ecological model. As many violence prevention efforts have sought to intervene at the individual level, what is clear from the magnitude and scope of this issue is that our efforts need to expand in scope, including efforts targeting family cohesion, building community assets, and enacting necessary policy to successfully address this issue for the U.S. as a whole and the African American community specifically (Ross et al., 2023). Efforts seeking to engage the African American community specifically need to be culturally specific and affirming, taking into account norms and values of the African American community as well as the impact of the structural violence they experience which increases their risk of exposure and victimization. It is imperative that these initiatives acknowledge the ways in which the African American community has been disproportionately impacted by gun violence and experiences disproportionate risk, and create culturally tailored interventions to address these disparities (Roche et al., 2023).

Implications for Prevention

Individual and Community-Based Interventions. The information presented in this article highlights implications for multilevel prevention efforts. Individual-level and community-based interventions are indeed important, especially for youth. Individual-level risk factors are well-documented. The literature supports that individuals exposed to guns and gun violence, directly or indirectly, are at increased risk for detrimental outcomes including gun carrying and further victimization. Simultaneously, the detrimental impact of structural racism is affecting African American youth during a critical period of development, as experiences of racism has also been associated with increased exposure to violence and victimization and behavioral risk behaviors (e.g.,

substance use) for this population (Surko et al., 2005). Relatedly, exposure to problematic portrayals of African American and other forms of structural racism may also lead to internalized racism, which has been associated with African American male youth's propensity for violence (Bryant, 2011; Debrosse et al., 2023). Hence individual level interventions should include efforts to address the trauma caused by exposure to community violence, including gun violence, as well as exposure to the structural violence of racism. Therefore, culturally appropriate mental health services should be available and accessibility fostered for African Americans that have experienced these harms. This should include routine assessment of experiences of racism for African Americans who have experienced victimization in addition to other routine assessments of trauma and other mental health outcomes (Surko et al., 2005).

As noted above, even when mental health services exist, African Americans face unique barriers to accessing and benefitting from these services including lack of culturally responsive trauma informed care, transportation concerns, etc. Hence, such services should center the lived experience of African Americans and further facilitate their engagement by providing safe and reliable transportation to these services (Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Solutions, 2023a; Richardson Jr. et al., 2020; Richardson Jr. et al., 2021). Also noteworthy, bringing mental health services to the African American community may also be a promising approach that reduces barriers to access. Likewise, culturally informed efforts to assist those who have lost a loved one to gun violence may also be beneficial (Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Solutions, 2023a), given the identified association between loss of someone in one's social network and increased risk of future victimization. Existing literature notes that experiences of grief and loss related to gun violence in the African American community is complex and requires comprehensive approaches to increase access to mental health treatment and support.

Beyond mental health-based services, interventions are needed that counter the negative, harmful narratives that young African Americans receive about themselves and their culture from the larger society. Debrosse and colleagues (2023) encourage intervention efforts that seek to emphasize the strengths of Black youth and Black communities, support the agency of Black youth, adopt culturally relevant practices when working with Black youth, and foster the critical consciousness of Black youth to help them to better understand the ways in which social and political structures shape their realities. What also has the potential to be affirming to African American youth and empowering of African American communities are gun violence interventions based on models of community resilience, including those developed through the centering of youth voices such as Power Through Black Community and Unity (Grant et al., 2023). In addition, creating safe, supportive and empowering spaces for African American youth may also foster positive mental health outcomes that may reduce risk of gun violence, including gun suicide (Debrosse et al., 2023; Grant et al., 2023; John Jay College Research Advisory Group on Preventing and Reducing Community Violence, 2020; Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Solutions, 2023a).

Interventions that work at the relationship level also have potential for positive outcomes and capitalize on the cultural significance of family and family ties in this community. Johnson Jr. et al. (2016) advocate for communication interventions that engage fathers (biological and/or social fathers) and sons in effective communication around successfully navigating the challenging social environments that many inhabit. The researchers believe that such intervention has the potential to increase self-esteem and reduce victimization among African American and Latino youth and have broader community level impact through fostering civic engagement of fathers and sons towards overall improvement of their neighborhood spaces (Johnson Jr. et al., 2016). Such approaches may have potential given identified associations between parental disengagement and adolescent male gun carrying (Beardslee et al., 2019) and the importance of adult role models in helping African American youth counter negative stereotypes and navigate the challenging circumstances of their environments (Grant et al., 2023).

At the community level, multiple risk factors have been identified including increased risk of exposure to guns and gun violence, increased policing of African American neighborhoods, increased gun access, residential segregation, and racial bias of neighborhood residents. The unique experience of African American youth increases the likelihood of exposure to guns and gun violence, loss related to gun violence, and hypervigilance related to concerns of safety and victimization in schools and neighborhoods as a result of high crime and heavy policing (Beard et al., 2017; Jacoby et al., 2018; Krieger et al., 2017; Rich & Grey, 2005; Richardson et al., 2020, 2021). Hence, community-violence interventions that facilitate conflict resolution and create mental health and social supports are encouraged and show promise for reducing gun violence in communities heavily impacted (Davis et al., 2023; John Jay College Research Advisory Group on Preventing and Reducing Community Violence, 2020; Regan, 2009; Webster et al., 2023). For example, hospital-based violence intervention programs (HVIPs) have shown promising results using holistic, cross sector collaboration, and trauma informed care approaches to support victims of violence with the goal of reducing rates of trauma, recidivism and reinjury (Carswell, 2022; Purtle et al., 2013). According to Purtle and colleagues (2013) randomized control evaluations across five different HVIPs in different cities including Baltimore, MD and Chicago, IL found decreases in hospital recidivism, convictions and misdemeanor offenses, reinjury, substance use, and feelings of aggression. While such community-based interventions serve as evidence of the potential for such interventions to be part of the solution to the disruption of cycles of violence present in many African American communities, more funding mechanisms are required to further research into their development and implementation (Roche et al., 2023). Funding for other violence intervention programs at the community level across fields of public health, economics, psychology, social work, and law is also essential to decreasing the impact of gun and gun violence across this community.

On a larger societal level, efforts need to be made to better attempt to rectify the consequences of social inequalities that have created circumstances whereby African

Americans are at increased risk for gun violence. Better investment in African American communities, which would lessen risk of exposure, and other efforts to dismantle the structural racism that remains pervasive and detrimentally impacts African Americans are warranted. African Americans continue to bear and wear the consequences of economic injustice and social deprivation resulting from structural racism (Bailey et al., 2017; Jacoby et al., 2018). Residential segregation has placed most African Americans in low-quality, disinvested, high-crime neighborhoods which not only increases their risk for gun violence victimization and exposure but also places them in areas with low quality schools and poor job opportunities, which detrimentally impacts their opportunities for advancement and greater quality of life. Hence, efforts to dismantle the institutional racism in the housing market that drives residential segregation and efforts to better place resources in the disadvantaged neighborhoods inhabited by many African Americans are warranted.

Larger multi-sectoral, place-based efforts that center equity and partner with African American communities have potential for greater impact toward reducing the above identified risks and overall improving the lives of African Americans (Bailey et al., 2017; John Jay College Research Advisory Group on Preventing and Reducing Community Violence, 2020; Roche et al., 2023). It is proposed that interventions which address structural inequalities such as poor schooling and low socioeconomic status may help to reduce identified racial and ethnic disparities in child health outcomes, including those related to gun violence (John Jay College Research Advisory Group on Preventing and Reducing Community Violence, 2020; Schuster et al., 2012). African American legislators themselves have identified that in addition to firearm specific legislative efforts, efforts to effectively address the epidemic of gun violence in African American communities must include efforts to address larger structural issues such as poverty that impact the African American community and contribute to gun violence (Payton et al., 2015). In addition, public health professionals have called for the need for increased firearms research and public health interventions to address the epidemic of gun violence and the devastating impact it has had on our nation's youth generally and on African American youth more specifically (Levine et al., 2012; Roche et al., 2023).

Scholars have identified the multilayered causes of this longstanding public health concern disproportionately impacting the African American community, including poverty, unemployment, incarceration history, structural racism, history of trauma, etc. (Alexander, 2010; Bailey et al., 2017; Carswell, 2022; Jacoby et al., 2018). Myopic and one size fits all interventions will not be effective in addressing the complex causes and impact of gun violence on this population. It is imperative that funding is allocated to the development and implementation of transdisciplinary teams and programs that are informed by contextual factors and historical knowledge of the impact of these issues on the African American community which increase their risk for gun violence victimization. Premachandra and colleagues (2022) highlight the importance of context in relation to creating effective intervention efforts for reaching target populations. Likewise, Yeh et al. (2023) emphasize the importance of social, cultural, and

environmental factors across messaging, interventions, and policies to optimize health for all groups.

Policy-Level Interventions. Gun violence is a major public health concern with bureaucracies, agencies, interest groups, scholars and advocates, all sounding an alarm about the importance of stricter firearm legislation (Carswell, 2022). Gun policy in the U.S. is a contentious, divisive, partisan issue and evidence of the role of politics in shaping health policy. Despite growing concern over gun legislation following thousands of lives lost to guns and gun violence each year, federal response has been negligible and virtually nonexistent for decades (Carswell, 2022; Roche et al., 2023). In fact, despite gun violence being deemed a public health issue in the early 1990s, in 1996, Congress banned the CDC from conducting research on gun violence citing that the organization should not be perceived as promoting or advocating for gun control (Carswell, 2022; Roche et al., 2023; Rostron, 2018). Consequently, political inaction sends messages to the public that gun access is valued more than the lives lost to gun violence. Moreover, those with political power wield it in ways that perpetuate harm and violence with funding support from those who oppose any form of gun control (Carswell, 2022).

Given the magnitude and complexity of this issue, policy-level interventions will be crucial to properly addressing this public health concern (John Jay College Research Advisory Group on Preventing and Reducing Community Violence, 2020). The implementation of firearm laws has the unique potential to reduce gun-related suicides and homicides. Knopov et al. (2019) found that states with permit requirement laws and universal background check laws had lower homicide rates among African American and white populations and laws requiring relinquishment of firearms or prohibiting people convicted of violent crimes were associated with lower African American homicide rates specifically. State level purchaser license laws (also known as permit-to-purchase laws) paired with criminal background check laws have been associated with reduced firearm suicides and homicides while repealing of such laws has been associated with greater firearm suicides and homicides (McCourt et al., 2020). Lee et al.'s (2017) systemic review also concluded that stronger gun policies, background checks and permit-to-purchase laws in particular, were associated with decreased rates of firearm homicide.

Díez et al. (2017) found that states that have laws in place prohibiting possession of firearms by persons subject to IPV-related restraining orders and required relinquishment of their firearms had 9.7% lower intimate partner homicides rates more generally and 14% lower rates of firearm related intimate partner homicides specifically. The Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Solutions has made recommendations for such firearms access laws such as permit to purchase laws, relinquishment laws, and safe storage laws as well as encouraging states to pass legislation prohibiting open carry of firearms in public places, to create stronger concealed carry laws and to repeal "stand your ground" laws (Davis et al., 2023; Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Solutions, 2023a). Given the multifaceted nature of this public health concern,

it is critical that policy regulations require collaboration across sectors to develop targeted interventions to decrease firearm access, loss, and injury.

A small step of progress has recently been made in legislative efforts to curb gun violence in the U.S. In 2022, following the Ulvade, TX school shooting and a racially motivated mass shooting in Buffalo, NY, the U.S. government responded. Congress passed the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act (BSCA), the first major gun legislation to be passed in 30 years. This law includes provisions related to expanding mental health resources for individuals, particularly youth who have been impacted by gun violence, and restricting access to firearms (Huff, 2022). Such legislation is evidence that federal policy, including resource allocation, has the potential to disrupt the impact of gun violence across multiple levels (individual, relationship, community and societal). At the individual (and community) level, the BPSCA provisions allocate resources to address the impact of gun violence on mental health outcomes by promoting mental health initiatives and school based mental health services. It is important that resources allocated via the BSCA to mental health initiatives in African American communities and schools be both trauma-informed and culturally responsive.

This policy also has significant implications for addressing the impact of this violence at the relationship level. As noted above, African American women are disproportionately impacted by IPV and thus are at greater risk for intimate partner homicide (Breidling et al., 2014; Gillum, 2021; Lee et al., 2002; Morrison et al., 2022). And firearm access among perpetrators of IPV is a risk factor for intimate partner homicide and increased abuse (Stansfield & Semenza, 2019). The BSCA provides expanded regulations restricting access to individuals convicted of misdemeanor crimes of IPV. However, there are opportunities for perpetrators to restore their access to firearms with only one count of IPV in 5 years (Huff, 2022). Hence, while this is a step in the right direction, it is critical to evaluate the extent to which this policy change will decrease the impact of IPV homicide and abuse generally and more specifically within the African American community. In addition, for individuals between the ages of 18 and 21, the BSCA expands background checks prohibiting access to firearms for those with juvenile carceral or mental health records, which has potential to address community-level impacts, to some degree (Huff, 2022). Policies such as this that seek to address this public health concern need to also be evaluated for effectiveness and to assure they are implemented with fidelity (Roche et al., 2023). While progress has been made in passing gun legislation, additional restrictions are needed.

Conclusion

As reflected above, research supports the detrimental impact and increased risk of gun violence experienced by the African American community and highlights the significance of this public health concern. This paper holistically documents the sheer magnitude of that risk, using a comprehensive socio-ecological framework. It is important to note that no single intervention will effectively address gun violence generally or specifically for the African American community. The information

presented here is a call to action for stronger federal policy changes restricting access to firearms, multileveled interventions to prevent and address gun violence, and research efforts to identify effective evidence-based practices to combat this issue with the needs of those who are most impacted in mind.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

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Dr. Tameka L. Gillum is an Associate Professor of Community Health in the College of Population Health at the University of New Mexico. Dr. Gillum has over 20 years of research experience in exploring and addressing intimate partner violence/dating violence (IPV/DV) within racial/ethnic minority and sexual minority populations, informing development of culturally specific prevention and intervention efforts, health clinic based IPV interventions and the mental health effects of IPV/DV victimization. Among other accomplishments, this work earned her the Outstanding Research Award from the national Institute on Domestic Violence in the African American Community (IDVAAC). Dr. Gillum is a community psychologist who conducts community-based research. Her most recent research involves investigating IPV in Kenya, East Africa.

Clarice Hampton (she/her) is a Ph.D. student in the Community Psychology PhD program at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. She received her Bachelor of Arts in Psychology from Binghamton University and her Master of Arts in Counseling and Community Psychology from Russell Sage College. Clarice is a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Health Policy Research Scholar. She is deeply committed to understanding the role of social and structural factors that impact health outcomes across marginalized groups. More specifically, Clarice seeks to uplift the voices of Black women who experience multiple forms of marginalization, particularly those living with HIV, by using systemic approaches to advocate for transformative change.

Chanté Coppedge is a senior counselor at the State University of New York (SUNY) New Paltz Psychological Counseling Center.