WHY SOCIAL SCIENCE?

Because Gun Violence Requires Social Science Solutions

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America's gun death rate is unacceptably high – it is well beyond that of any other developed country. In 2020, there were 45,222 gun related deaths, with 24,264 (54%) of those being suicides and 20,958 (46%) being homicides. Within America, gun violence is the leading cause of death for children (defined as persons being under the age of 18), and it is among the top 5 causes of death of those under the age of 44. These staggering statistics are why many social scientists have labeled American gun violence a "public health crisis".

While these numbers are staggering and the loss of life profound, there is good news. Gun violence is preventable and, in particular, the tools from the social sciences can help us reduce and prevent gun violence. Social science offers a broad array of skills to inform solutions and each social science tool is necessary. Due to the enormity and complexity of gun violence, the many disciplines of social science must be used in conjunction with each other to effectively prevent gun violence.

Before thinking of solutions, we must first unpack the term "gun violence". Gun violence is in our private homes and public spaces. In America, it cannot be avoided. It is community gun violence, which disproportionately occurs in our nation's cities and disproportionately claims the lives of young men of color. It is suicide, which disproportionately claims the lives of older, white men – especially those living in rural areas. Gun violence is mass shootings, which even though this accounts for less than 1% of all gun violence, traumatizes our children and undermines our collective feelings of public safety. Gun violence occurs when a gun is negligently left behind and a child gains access, sometimes resulting in tragic outcomes. Gun violence is an officer involved shooting, which may include an officer being targeted in the line of duty or an officer using force inappropriately or illegally and killing someone. Gun violence is non-fatal gun injuries that often don't make it into our statistics.

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Fields such as public health and emergency medicine have contributed much to our understanding of how and who in America is impacted by gun violence, but the sheer pervasiveness of gun injury and death is why we need the social sciences to truly address this crisis. The social sciences can help inform policymakers and practitioners committed to reducing gun violence by documenting its scope, providing understanding on why such violence occurs, discovering and measuring solutions, implementing those solutions, and communicating those solutions.

Social Scientists Describe Gun Violence

Without social scientists, we would not know the scope of gun violence. We use demographic techniques to understand who bears the burdens of the many ways gun violence manifests in America. It is data scientists that help us understand how and where gun violence is trending or intensifying.   Social scientists also help us collect data, integrate data, and fulfill data needs that can be used to effectively target resources to a given area or group of people.

Social Scientists Help Us Understand Why Gun Violence Happens

Gun violence occurs for many reasons, but we cannot begin to think of solutions without understanding the "why" of the problem. All too often, gun violence is mischaracterized as a personal decision to commit violence against oneself or others, but this fails to acknowledge the systems and structures in which people exist. Social science demands that we understand the social institutions and structural conditions that contribute to a person engaging in gun violence.

For example, chronic disinvestment in our nation's cities has led to a cycle of poverty, crime, and social disparities that perpetuates community gun violence. We must understand (and take care to not overstate) the role of mental health in contributing to suicide and mass shootings. We must also understand how society and culture contribute to intimate partner and family homicides.

Social Scientists Help Solutions Evolve

In order to effectively respond to and ideally prevent gun violence, we need to measure the efficacy of our interventions. This includes understanding the effect of policies intended to reduce gun violence, estimating the effect of more local interventions through field experiments or other high quality research designs, and understanding how solutions meet communities' needs. We have an obligation not just to measure the impact of programs but to use data and expertise to continuously improve our responses. This intervention evolution might mean strengthening existing programs, diverting funding away from ineffective intervention, investing in novel programs, or any combination thereof.

Social Scientists Communicate

Scientific findings are meaningless if they are not shared and disseminated to broad audiences, which includes policymakers, practitioners, journalists, and the public at large. Social scientists look for ways to have meaningful conversations, and we provide training relevant to the conversation. This could mean training a physician about how to talk to their patient about secure firearm storage, creating age-appropriate trainings for schools regarding active shooter responses, or communicating policy nuance to the broader public.

Social Scientists Imagine a World Without Gun Violence

Embedded in our search for solutions is a vision we likely share with many Americans: a world without gun violence. We more formally call this vision the counterfactual. The social scientists contributing to making this counterfactual a reality hail from the fields of communications, criminology, data science, demography, economics, implementation science, public health, psychology, political science, sociology, and social work – to name a few. Social science brings information from rigorous study to inform decisionmakers about how to fashion public and private resources – inclusive of financial, organization capacity, and human skill - to effectively reduce and prevent gun violence.

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