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GUN VIOLENCE IN UNITED STATES OF AMERICA SYSTEMATIC REVIEWS AND META-ANALYSES

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ABSTRACT

The present study conducted systematic reviews and meta-analyses of relevant literature and data relating to gun violence in United States of America and found that the current concern about gun violence arises from a growing understanding of the adverse economic, physical, mental, and behavioral health effects that result from community exposure to high rates of gun violence. Therefore, it is noted that gun violence has become a major socio-economic and public health issues in United States of America due to the fact that it has eroded the quality of life of majority of the citizens. The study therefore established that interventions and strategies to address the problem of gun violence should address the intransigent causes of American gun violence - dying cities, inequality, deteriorating family structure, and the all-pervasive economic and social consequences of a history of slavery and racism that provides a generally acceptable strategy for reducing incidents of gun violence.

Keywords: Gun violence, Systematic reviews, Meta-analyses, Community policing, Neighborhood, Violence exposure, Criminal justice.

Contribution/ Originality

The purpose of this study is to enhance an understanding of the concerns that gun violence pose to contemporary United States of America society. The current study may have implications for policy makers and administrators seeking strategies to address the problem. Therefore, this study contributes to existing literature by seeking to provide a better understanding of the widespread incidents of gun violence in the United States of America.

1. INTRODUCTION

Gun violence is a major social problem in many urban—and, increasingly, suburban and rural—areas of United States of America (Wilkinson and Fagan, 2002; Wilkinson *et al.*, 2009). It has been noted that as a result of the many problems that gun violence poses to society at large,

most parents are frightened to send their children to school in most urban areas. The situation has become so severe that children are actually practicing drills so they are prepared in case a gunman enters their school. The massacre of 32 people at the Virginia Tech campus in 2007 which led to the death of 32 students, the numerous incidents of shootings in schools all over the country recently and the daily street shootings further explained the dangers of gun violence to our society. Therefore, finding ways to continue to reduce the prevalence of this scourge is a central challenge for criminologists and law enforcement personnel (Kraska, 2004).

The growing epidemic of gun violence has eroded the quality of life in the communities and, in many areas of this nation, has transformed once-peaceful neighborhoods into combat zones, where people are afraid to leave their homes. This is a motivating factor that led the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) to launch its Gun Violence Reduction Initiative, with the aim of better focusing United States Attorneys' violence prevention efforts and help States and jurisdictions respond more effectively to this national crisis through effective violence prevention programs across the country (International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2001). This initiative includes partnerships with the Department of Justice and the Chicago-based Joyce Foundation.

Gun violence imposes significant costs on children, families, and American society as a whole. But these costs can be difficult to quantify, as much of the burden of gun violence results from intangible concerns about injury and death (Cook and Ludwig, 2002). Some of the common effects associated with exposure to gun violence, include sleep disturbance, anger, withdrawal, posttraumatic stress, poor school performance, lower career aspirations, increased delinquency, risky sexual behaviors, substance abuse, and desensitization to violence (Reich *et al.*, 2002). It is important to note that all of these effects can make children and youth more prone to violence themselves, feeding a continuing cycle of violence within some families, peer groups, and communities.

Psychological costs of gun violence are also clearly documented (Reich *et al.*, 2002). Similarly, Garbarino (1999) found that individuals who experience violence are prone to mental and health problems, such as post-traumatic stress disorder and sleep deprivation. These problems increase for those who experience gun violence as children (Cook and Ludwig, 2002). Just as the economic costs of gun violence are substantial, so are the psychological costs. Those exposed to gun violence, whether they are victims, perpetrators, or witnesses, can experience negative psychological effects over the short and long terms and it can significantly impact on their quality of life (Reich *et al.*, 2002). Research by Wolfe *et al.* (1986) indicated that people who have been directly involved with or victims of gun violence reported health and emotional difficulties along with family and social problems.

Many scholars have studied gun violence (Krug *et al.*, 1998; Kahn *et al.*, 2001; Ruddell and Decker, 2005; Phillips and Maume, 2007; Kirsten, 2008; Piquero, 2009). Kahn *et al.* (2001) study found that deaths from guns and other firearms remain a major problem in contemporary American society despite advances in health care to save the lives of the victims and community

development efforts at addressing the problem. Additionally, Kahn *et al.* (2001) noted that United States of America has the highest youth homicide rate among the 36 wealthiest nations in the world, as well as one of the highest overall homicide rates worldwide. Krug *et al.* (1998) study on gun violence pointed out that in the United States of America, homicide which is a leading cause of death among all adolescents occurs mostly through the use of guns. Consistent with these findings, additional research on gun violence is needed as part of the efforts at continuing to addressing the problem (Hochester and Copes (2008).

Justifying the seriousness of the concerns that gun violence poses to urban communities in United States of America, Tardiff *et al.* (1995), using files of the chief medical examiner, reviewed all 4,468 homicides occurring in New York City in 1990 and 1991 and found that the most frequent settings for violence were streets and other outdoor places (49.6%) and victims' homes (19.3%). Firearms were the cause of death for 49.6% of homicides in homes and 80.3% of those on the street. Victims killed on the street were likely to be male, ages 15-24, and African American. The authors concluded that further research on prevention and intervention strategies is needed.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW SUMMARY

Many studies (Shaw, 1993; Kleck, 1997; Ryan *et al.*, 1998) have been carried out to discuss and analyze the impact of gun violence on contemporary society, and the various conclusions that each of these studies reached demonstrate that gun violence is a hotly-debated and controversial issue in United States of America. It is the conclusion of Chermak and McGarrell (2004), Cook and Ludwig (2000), Lizotte *et al.* (1996) and Sheley and Wright (1998) that the cost expended on both public and private prevention strategies is enormous, and has a largely negative fiscal impact on society. One major contribution of these studies is that they were able to expand on the costs and implications of being a gunshot victim, or losing a loved one to violence (Shaw, 1993; Kleck, 1997; Ryan *et al.*, 1998; Barkin *et al.*, 1999).

The availability of guns and other firearms is closely connected to the large numbers of shootings that result in injury and death in United States of America schools. Gun-related violence has been attributed as the major cause of violent death in United States of America schools since 1992 (Sheley and Wright, 1998). The result of Sheley and Wright's work clearly showed the relative ease of access to guns for those without a firearms license, who have no business owning guns. This ease of access further endangers society, and Sheley and Wright (1998) emphasized the seriousness and dimension of this problem, especially among juveniles and youths. This finding has been validated by Lizotte *et al.* (1996), with the conclusion that due to the accessibility of black markets for gun trading, juveniles and youths now have easy access to guns and other firearms.

Similarly, Lizotte *et al.* (1996) Rochester Youth Development Study reports on gun possession among adolescents using a prospective longitudinal design. The study found that gun-carrying patterns are not constant over the years; young men are likely to carry guns on an

irregular basis. Having delinquent values, the ownership of protection guns by peers, gang membership, and drug selling are all correlates of illegal gun carrying. Family income and race/ethnicity were not significantly related to gun carrying behaviors (Lizotte *et al.*, 1996). The problem with the above line of argument is that it overemphasizes the fact that access to guns directly correlates to the prevalence of gun violence in society. This is far from the case, as many people have access to guns and have not used a gun to commit violent acts.

According to Vernick *et al.* (2007), potential harms associated with gun ownership and gun violence within society extend beyond those who purchase or possess firearms. Aggregate levels of gun ownership and carrying could potentially have dramatic effects on the social ecology and safety of a neighborhood, affecting both gun owners and non-gun owners (Vernick *et al.*, 2007). On average, it has been stated that high-income nations with a relatively high prevalence of gun ownership, such as the United States of America, have more homicides than do other high-income countries with fewer guns after controlling for differences in age structure, racial/ethnic heterogeneity, and levels of government social support (Hoskin, 2001).

Vernick *et al.* (2007) noted that another harm associated with the easy availability of firearms in some United States of America states is illegal gun trafficking. Guns used for crime in cities and states with more restrictive laws, such as New York City, are more likely to have first been sold by out-of-state retailers in places with less stringent laws. In particular, cities located in states with restrictive licensing; often coupled with firearm registration laws, have a much smaller share of crimes originating from in-state dealers than other cities (Vernick *et al.*, 2007).

Similarly, it has been noted that in most cases, guns owned by law-abiding citizens also contribute to illegal gun trafficking and gun crime within communities. An estimated 500,000 firearms are stolen from American homes every year, and thus directly enter the criminal market (Cook and Ludwig, 1996). Also, evidence suggests that higher rates of gun ownership within communities actually increase the risk for home burglaries, perhaps because firearms are an attractive item for burglars to steal (Cook and Ludwig, 2003).

According to Vernick *et al.* (2007), just as the individual-level harms associated with guns are not evenly distributed, some communities bear a disproportionate burden of gun-related violence in comparison to others. On average, more urban, poorer neighborhoods – often with a higher proportion of African Americans – have higher rates of gun violence and all of the associated social harms (Reiss and Roth, 1993; Cook and Ludwig, 2003). Firearm-related suicides and unintentional shootings also have a large impact on communities, as well as individuals. These deaths and injuries generate police, medical, and lost productivity costs for communities at large. They are, of course, also associated with emotional and other less-easily quantifiable costs for survivors. Overall rates of suicide in the U.S. and Canada are similar, although a direct comparison of race-specific rates is not possible with readily available data. According to Cook and Ludwig (2000), estimate based on United States of America (U.S.A) data suggest that the

elimination of unintentional shootings and gun suicides in 1997 would be worth as much as \$20 billion.

Lowering a society's risk of gun violence enhances the freedom of individuals to choose where to live, work, go to school, recreate, and interact with others without the fear of violence limiting those choices (Vernick *et al.*, 2007). Furthermore, according to Carlson (2006), violence among youth has developed into a significant public health issue and remains at the forefront of discussions about prevention, intervention, and treatment efforts. The fiscal costs to society associated with illnesses, disabilities, and premature deaths from violence are estimated to be billions of dollars every year (Miller and Cohen, 1997). It is important to note that much of the current concern about gun violence arises from a growing understanding of the adverse physical, mental, and behavioral health effects that result from community exposure to high rates of gun violence.

Images of violence and crime portrayed by the media greatly affect the public's perception of the issue. Citizens are constantly flooded with violent images in both news reports and in movies. In his book titled "the 11 myths of media violence", Potter (2003) argued that American society has become extremely violent. The media, especially television, portrays attractive characters using physical force to solve their problems, and thus contributes to the problem of violence in society. Potter's book also reveals that as many as 3,000 studies have been conducted in order to justify evidence that exposure to violence in the media may lead to various negative effects.

Anderson *et al.* (2004) program evaluation study outlined and reviewed the background, history, use, and applications of the National Incident Management System (NIMS) for organizing any critical emergency responses to a terrorist attack, disaster, or other critical response requirement. The study found that media violence produces long-term effects via several types of learning processes that support beliefs about social behavior by reducing individuals' normal negative emotional responses to violence.

Furthermore, concern about gun crime and violence is widespread, and as argued by Cook and Ludwig (2000) in their book titled "gun violence, the real cost" clearly articulated that it affects the way many people live their lives. It has been estimated that gun violence accounts for about 80% of approximately \$100 billion in national social service costs each year (Cook and Ludwig, 2000). Additionally, studies have reached the conclusion that firearms have been a leading cause of violent deaths in American schools since 1992 (Logue, 2008). Logue further argues that firearms laws are one of a number of approaches that can be used to reduce firearm-related violence.

As a result, available statistics on the problem have further justified the seriousness of the issue. It is important to note that data from National Institute of Justice (2013) indicated that during the 1980s and early 1990s, homicide rates surged in cities across the United States. Handgun homicides accounted for nearly all of the overall increase in homicide rates from 1983 to 1993, while homicide rates involving other weapons declined during that time. Homicide rates

among 18–24 year olds have declined since 1993, but remain higher than they were prior to the 1980s (National Institute of Justice, 2013).

Furthermore, data emanating from the Violence Policy Center (2000) reveals the seriousness of the concern generated by gun violence from 1990–1997. Out of the 160,000 homicides committed in the United States, more than half (55%) involved a handgun Violence Policy Center (2000). It is the position of the Center that this block of 89,000 handgun homicides is larger than that of all other weapons used in homicides combined.

Nonfatal Firearm Violence, 1993–2011

Year	Firearm incidents	Firearm victims	Firearm crime rate	Firearm crimes as a percent of all violent incidents
1993	1,222,701	1,529,742	7.3	8
1994	1,287,190	1,568,176	7.4	8
1995	1,028,933	1,193,241	5.5	7
1996	939,453	1,100,809	5.1	7
1997	882,885	1,024,088	4.7	7
1998	673,304	835,423	3.8	6
1999	523,613	640,919	2.9	5
2000	483,695	610,219	2.7	6
2001	506,954	563,109	2.5	7
2002	450,776	539,973	2.3	7
2003	385,037	467,345	2	6
2004	405,774	456,512	1.9	7
2005	446,365	503,534	2.1	7
2006	552,035	614,406	2.5	7
2007	448,414	554,780	2.2	7
2008	331,618	371,289	1.5	5
2009	383,390	410,108	1.6	7
2010	378,801	415,003	1.6	8
2011	414,562	467,321	1.8	8

Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics, National Crime Victimization Survey, 1993–2011.

As indicated by the above table compiled by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, National Crime Victimization Survey, depicting cases of nonfatal firearm violence from 1993 to 2011, 467,321 persons were victims of a crime committed with a firearm in 2011. Also, in the same year, data collected by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) show that firearms were used in 68 percent of murders, 41 percent of robbery offenses and 21 percent of aggravated assaults in United States of America (National Institute of Justice, 2013). Most homicides in the United States are committed with firearms, especially handguns (Cooper and Smith, 2011). A further examination of the data from National Institute of Justice (2013) revealed that homicides committed with firearms peaked in 1993 at 17,075, after which the figure gradually fell, reaching a low of 10,117 in 1999. Gun-related homicides increased slightly after that, to a high of 11,547 in 2006, before falling again to 10,869 in 2008 (National Institute of Justice, 2013).

Additionally, as a percentage of all violent incidents (i.e., rape, sexual assault, robbery and aggravated assault), between 1993 and 2011, nonfatal gun crime has ranged from a high of 8 percent to a low of 5 percent. In 2011, firearm crimes comprised 8 percent of all violent crimes (National Institute of Justice, 2013). According to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, there are approximately 81,300 nonfatal injuries and 31,672 deaths every year involving guns. That works out to about 308 shootings and 86 deaths every day.

3. STRATEGIES AND INTERVENTIONS

Lewin *et al.* (2005) found that measures addressing the problem of gun violence should target illegal firearm ammunition sales to urban youth through undercover investigations of local businesses and the issuance of health department violation and abatement notices. It is expected that such measures will regulate ammunition sales and reduce the number of outlets eligible to sell ammunition. Furthermore, it is expected that by interrupting a source of ammunition, it is possible to reduce gun violence.

Kirsten (2008) study focus on the contributions of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and their role in strengthening gun laws and reducing crime engendered from gun use. The findings noted that it is important for the civil society to take the lead in putting the issue of gun violence on the political agenda - both at the national and international level - first by raising public awareness about the nature and extent of gun violence (i.e., identifying the problem), and second by putting forward solutions to addressing the problem, ranging from mechanisms to improve controls over the supply of weapons to community-based violence reduction programs. However, research has found that decreased cocaine and alcohol consumption as well as the receipt of public assistance were associated with declining in gun violence crimes and homicide rates in New York City (Cerdá *et al.*, 2010). Therefore, the argument here is that substance abuse prevention policies and the expansion of the social safety net may work to significantly reduce gun violence and homicide rates.

Pridemore (2003) found that criminological research revealed that the causes and effects of violence occur at various levels in society and intervention strategies must be as clear as possible in defining its target. Based on this, Mercy and Hammond (1998) extended the work of Tolan and Guerra (cited in Mercy and Hammond (1998), who created a classification of violence prevention programs for adolescents based on a variety of risk factors that exist at different levels. Interventions can target individuals, families, schools, communities, and even nations. It is important to note here that research has suggested that Fritsch *et al.* (1999) other successful policy-based programs with regards to gun violence include the reduction of gang violence via the aggressive enforcement of curfew and truancy ordinances restricting handgun licensing (Fritsch *et al.*, 1999).

O'Shea (2007) argues that the concern about gun violence in the contemporary American society has led to the establishment of the Project Exile Neighborhoods program, which was the

centerpiece of the former President Bush administration's crime policy during his first term. According to O'Shea, the policy, which was moderately successful at addressing gun violence crime, conformed closely to the neoclassical school. It endorsed aggressive enforcement of existing federal statutes that required federal prosecution and minimum mandatory sentencing for any felon found possessing a firearm.

The importance of community policing in reducing incidents of gun violence has been recognized by sociology and criminology researchers. According to McDonald (2002), sharp decline that have been recorded in violent crime rates across major American cities can be attributed to the fact that many police departments have shifted from a traditional reactive form of policing to a community-oriented approach. Additionally, findings from the MacDonal study indicate that in addition to the effect of community policing on gun control and the decline in violent crime, proactive policing strategies related to arrest have also had positive effects on violent crime measures and were found to be related to reduction in violent crime over time. However, from another perspective, Eck and Maguire (2000) review of the existing studies on the role of the police in controlling violent crime reveals that forty-nine percent of these studies found no effect to exist at all, and only twenty percent found that more police resulted in less violent crime.

From a religious perspective, Atwood and Brueggemann (2008) argues that the church needs to develop a responsible civil discussion about gun violence in society and must pray that the current negative effect of guns in society will eradicate the belief that guns are necessary to save lives. According to Atwood and Brueggemann (2008), one possible measure to reduce the violence that is taking over cities and towns is for pastors and parishes to organize groups to visit neighborhoods where there have been shootings or killings. These groups could then hold worship services and promote the idea that the church deplors gun violence, and that there is a better way to solve anger and injustice than killing.

Stretesky and Pogrebin (2007) found that guns offer prison inmates protection and serve as an important tool in impression management by helping inmates to project a tough image. The study therefore provides greater insight into the way gang socialization leads to gun-related violence and has implications for policies that work toward reducing that violence. The study suggests that policies aimed at reducing gang violence should take gang socialization into account. Simply reducing gun availability through law enforcement crackdowns on violent gang members is probably not sufficient (Stretesky and Pogrebin, 2007).

4. METHODOLOGY

The methodology used to undertake this study is mixed methodology. It is mixed methodology because of the use of systematic reviews and meta-analyses to compile and assess the information relating to the concerns of gun violence in United States of America (Popay *et al.*, 1998). This design has been chosen because it limit bias in identifying and rejecting studies while

conclusions are more reliable and accurate because of methods used. Systematic reviews and meta-analyses are critical for evidence-based clinical and public health practice. The widespread and growing application of systematic reviews to synthesize evidence on key research issues makes it useful for health professionals and social researchers (Pai, 2014).

Also, this method is appropriate for the current research because it provides the opportunity that enable quick assimilation of information on the issues of concern by researchers and as well as others such as policy makers (Popay *et al.*, 1998). For the purposes of this study, relevant literature and data on gun violence in United States of America in the last three decades were compiled to enable a thorough assessment of the situation. It is important to note here that systematic reviews and meta-analyses as a research design is valuable in criminal justice research due to its ability to greatly assist policymakers in identifying effective programs and interventions and are considered an important tool among those who advocate evidence-based policy (Davies, 1999; Nutley *et al.*, 2000; Petrosino and Lavenberg, 2007).

Systematic reviews has gained acceptance in criminal justice research as it provide the opportunity for researchers to attempt to gather relevant evaluative studies, critically appraise them, and come to judgments about what works using explicit, transparent, state-of-the-art methods (Petrosino and Lavenberg, 2007). Additionally, in contrast to traditional syntheses, a systematic review will include detail about each stage of the decision process, including the question that guided the review, the criteria for studies to be included, and the methods used to search for and screen evaluation reports. It will also detail how analyses were done and how conclusions were reached (Petrosino and Lavenberg, 2007).

Despite the fact that systematic reviews and meta-analyses as a study design has been criticized for mixing vastly different studies together (e.g., by including heterogeneous study findings (Eysenck, 1994) or by including studies of differing methodological quality to produce a single estimate of treatment effect, it continue to remain a valid study design in criminal justice based research due to the many advantages that it offers. Researchers and policymakers have found syntheses more compelling than single studies (Petrosino and Lavenberg, 2007). This is because a good review would presumably reconcile different studies that are often used by competing sides in policy debates. A good review would also pull together the relevant information so that policymakers or researchers would not have to spend time tracking and synthesizing data (Petrosino and Lavenberg, 2007).

5. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

The current systematic reviews and meta-analyses research has delved into the impacts of gun violence in United States. In doing so the study review past studies with regards to the consequences of gun violence in United States of America, paying special emphasis to the destruction caused to the society at large. The information obtained elaborate further on the magnitude of the problem of gun violence in the country.

The current study has shown that gun violence has become a serious national problem in the country, it has assumed serious dimension and it affect all segments of the society. As a result, there is a clear indication that gun violence has developed into a significant public health issue in the country (Lizotte *et al.*, 1996; Sheley and Wright, 1998; Anderson *et al.*, 2004; Carlson, 2006). Also, this study found that costs associated with gun violence are estimated to be billions of dollars every year therefore making it an economic issue to the society (Miller and Cohen, 1997).

It is important to note that much of the current concern about gun violence arises from a growing understanding of the adverse physical, mental, and behavioral health effects that result from community exposure to high rates of gun violence. Furthermore, information gathered from literature relevance to the scope of this research helped to shed new light and introduced new perspectives to the problem of gun violence. For example, Kleck (1997) study argues that interventions addressing the problem of gun violence should address the intransigent causes of American violence - dying cities, inequality, deteriorating family structure, and the all-pervasive economic and social consequences of a history of slavery and racism - provides a generally acceptable strategy for reducing incidents of gun violence.

Based on the data emanating from Bureau of Justice Statistics, National Crime Victimization Survey, 1993-201, most homicides in the United States are committed with firearms, especially handguns- thus further justifying the attention that has been devoted to finding ways to alleviate this social menace nationally. The National Institute of Justice (2013) data reviewed also indicate that teens and young adults are more likely than persons of other ages to be murdered with a gun. Most violent gun crime, especially homicide, occurs in cities and urban communities (National Institute of Justice, 2013).

The present study has equally shown that just as factors responsible for gun violence are multi-causal and diverse, solutions to the problem also warrant diverse approaches such as improving the conditions of poor, inner-city neighborhoods, addressing the need for adults, parents, counselors and others to provide positive role models for youths. Other solutions as noted in this research include community Policing (Reiss and Roth, 1993; Cook and Ludwig, 2003).

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