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Through a Child's Eyes: Gun Violence Among Youth in Chicago

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By Melissa Anderson

According to the *Chicago Tribune*'s RedEye Homicide Tracker, Chicago saw 41 homicides in the first two months of 2014, 37 of which were caused by shootings. Recently, this author had the opportunity to survey ninth through twelfth grade students of Gage Park High School on their recent experiences with gun violence in Chicago. Located on the southwest side of the City, Gage Park High is surrounded by some of the most dangerous neighborhoods in the city. The area is also very diverse. Of the 1288 students that attend this public high school, ninety-nine percent are minority students, forty-eight percent black and fifty-one percent Hispanic, and ninety-two percent are economically disadvantaged. This last figure is determined by each student's eligibility for free or reduced-priced lunches. The students' insightful responses to the survey provide a look into what it is like to be a young person growing up in violent pockets of Chicago.

The majority of students surveyed agreed that gun violence was a problem among youth in Chicago Public Schools. The students felt that gun violence took the lives of hundreds of innocent people a year with a special emphasis on younger children. The students recognized that a large number of young people "lose their childhood" to gun violence, no matter if they are the one shooting or the one being shot at.

Students were asked what they believed to be the root causes and effects of gun violence. When considering the causes of gun ownership, one student commented, "teenagers these days are trying to get guns from anywhere they can just to look cool among their friends." Other students suggested that gun ownership was essential in order to feel safe in their often unsafe neighborhoods.

When questioned about the effects of gun violence on youth, students described several consequences. First, students agreed that young people involved in gun violence were more likely to abuse drugs and alcohol. For example, one student commented that young people "use drugs to shield themselves from the violence." Additionally, students speculated that exposure to gun violence may lead to a higher probability of mental health issues such as depression and anxiety. One student projected that this may be attributed to the fact that gun violence causes young people to be increasingly "aware of the danger present in their environment and how soon their life could end."

Students were further asked to address the emotional effects of losing a friend or family member to gun violence. Students indicated that "they were likely to carry guilt and go through depression" as a result of the loss, ultimately causing them to miss school and receive poor grades. One young woman who reported losing family members to gun violence expressed the pain that it had caused in her life, stating, "everyday is a challenge to continue." Each of these effects indicates that gun violence not only afflicts those directly involved, but also indirectly affects the community at large by creating a generation of young people with severe dependency and mental health issues.

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The survey further requested students to discuss their personal experiences with gun violence; their responses were insightful. One young man reflected, "I was just walking home when some teens decided to pull out a gun and start shooting on my block. I panicked and started running. While I was able to make it home untouched it made me think about how fast my life could be gone." That same student shared his second experience with gun violence stating that it was not as frightening since at that point he had "become used to it, because gun shots were typical to be heard in the night." The idea of a youth being desensitized to violence reflects its prevalence in the community and the sense of hopelessness many of these children face.

While some students found their experience with gun violence did not affect them, others felt that it had prevented them from feeling safe. They felt that "anyone anywhere might want to hurt them." This made it hard to trust people and they were forced to constantly "watch [their] back." One student blamed her experience with gun violence for causing her to be "terrified of guns." As a result of their constant fear of danger, students speculated that young people may "turn to gang involvement" in order to feel safe from gun violence. This demonstrates that young people in violent areas may not see gangs as a source of violence but instead as a place of refuge where they are protected against outside threats.

When asked about the legal consequences of gun violence, students were able to identify both punitive and rehabilitative solutions. The majority of students agreed that those who engage in gun violence should be put in jail. Students recognized that while jail time does not address the problem directly, it is important inasmuch as it "support's society's need for safety." These students suggested that incarceration serves not only to take violent offenders off the streets, but it also serves the dual purpose of forcing the individual to "think about what they did" and help them "learn from their mistakes." The students thought that programs offered inside jail should be corrective and focus on determining "why the individual decided to shoot people" and on "how we can make that person better" in order to prevent future violence.

Students conceded that while incarceration was an appropriate response, it might not fully correct the problem since many people "come out [of jail] and do the same things." Therefore, students suggested more rehabilitative solutions that could be used in addition to imprisonment. These solutions would serve the interests of both the violent individual and the victim's family. For example, students thought that the offender should have to apologize to the victim or his or her family. This outward display of remorse would help the family to cope with the loss of their loved one. Additionally, students suggested that offenders be required to do community service. They acknowledged that requiring individuals to work off their debt to society not only saves the community from the huge expense of incarceration, but it also instills a sense of responsibility on the offender.

While the problem of youth violence is often addressed after-the-fact, preventative measures may be more successful at lowering the risk of involvement in violence. Students reflected on programs currently in effect that lower rates of gun violence among youth. In general, they pointed to various after school and summer programs, which keep students safe while not in school. Namely, the class credited

programs like Becoming a Man and CeaseFire with reducing violent behavior among youth.

Students identified the Becoming a Man program as one that addressed dropout rates and violence prevention for at-risk male students in grades seven through twelve, offering both in-school programming and after-school sports. CeaseFire, another anti-violence program, is the local branch of the national initiative Cure Violence and sends former gang members into targeted neighborhoods to defuse conflicts before they erupt into violence.

In addition, students cite the not-for-profit organization After School Matters (ASM) as yet another solution for lowering violence. ASM offers Chicago high-school students activities in the areas of art, science, sports, technology, and communications. One student found that ASM helped reduce violence by "engag[ing] students in fun activities to pass the time."

While such extra-curricular programs help lower violence in Chicago communities, students recognize that there is only so much these programs can do. One student noted that that while after-school activities can keep people busy for a while, there is still plenty of time for violent activities.

When asked how their school could help lower violence rates, students suggested implementing open gyms after school and adding more after-school sport programs to help get out aggression. In addition, they thought that increased parental involvement was important in lowering the risk of violence. They surmised that if the school implemented a program to educate parents about gun violence then parents would be better equipped to keep their children out of harm's way.

While extracurricular programs may assist to reduce gun violence after school, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) have already taken measures to keep students safe during the school day. For example, CPS has launched the Safe Passage Program to increase children's safety as they come and go from school each day. As a part of this program, CPS has adult volunteers who monitor the paths that many students take to school. In addition to Safe Passage, schools are equipped with entryway metal detectors and security guards. As a result of these measures, students reported feeling safer in school, despite the staggering level of violence in the surrounding community.

When asked about whether or not they felt that gun violence contributed to high drop out rates, the students overwhelmingly said no. Between 1999 and 2011, thirty-eight percent of CPS students dropped out without graduating. Students credited other factors for the high drop out rates such as familial responsibilities. For example, many students have to provide childcare for younger siblings or are pressured to get a full-time job to help provide financially for their families. One student explained that even though many parents work two jobs, it typically was still not enough, so the pressure would be placed on students to drop out and help support their families.

Along with familial responsibilities, students believed that the local culture was to blame for the high dropout rates. "When you look around at the people who surround our blocks and neighborhoods, it's usually drug dealers and people smoking blunts, which really [takes] a toll on the mindset of the urban youth." This same student went on to explain, "When most of the kids on your block don't graduate you think, how could I?

You begin to develop the same mindset where an education comes second and money is above everything." Another student thought that dropout rates while not an effect of gun violence, was a cause of it and argued that after students drop out they have nothing else to do so they start "gang banging and selling drugs," which in turn leads to gun violence.

While gun violence is a problem among Chicago youth, there is hope. In 2013, violent crime in the City was at a nearly 30-year low. However, given that half of Chicago's murder victims are between the ages of ten and twenty-five, much must be done to specifically target and reduce violence occurring among school-aged children.

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