THE MINNESOTA GUN VIOLENCE RESEARCH SUMMIT

Empowering Change through Research and Collaboration

VIOLENCE PREVENTION PROJECT
RESEARCH CENTER
HAMLINE UNIVERSITY

WHAT IF WE COULD COLLABORATE AND INNOVATE TO REDUCE GUN VIOLENCE WITH EVIDENCE-BASED SOLUTIONS?

Welcome to the Minnesota Gun Violence Research Summit.

Years ago, as researchers dedicated to understanding the complexities of gun violence, we found ourselves grappling with the limitations of isolated approaches. We saw firsthand how fragmented efforts could only go so far in addressing such a profound issue. Our journey led us to realize that true progress requires a unified, multi-faceted approach—one that integrates research, policy, and community action.

Through our work and observations, we recognized a pressing need for a platform where diverse expertise could come together. This realization spurred the idea of this summit: a gathering designed to bridge gaps, foster collaboration, and drive actionable solutions.

This question is central to our mission today. We believe that by uniting our knowledge and resources, we can develop more effective strategies to prevent gun violence and make meaningful progress in building safer communities.

Throughout this summit, you will have the opportunity to engage in critical discussions, learn from leading experts, and explore innovative approaches. We encourage you to use this time to share insights, build partnerships, and contribute to a collective effort that goes beyond traditional boundaries.

Thank you for joining us in this vital endeavor. Together, we can work towards a future where our combined efforts lead to real, lasting change.

Sincerely,

Dr. Jillian Peterson
Dr. James Densley
Co-Authors, The Violence Project
Co-Directors, Violence Prevention Project Research Center

OUR TEAM

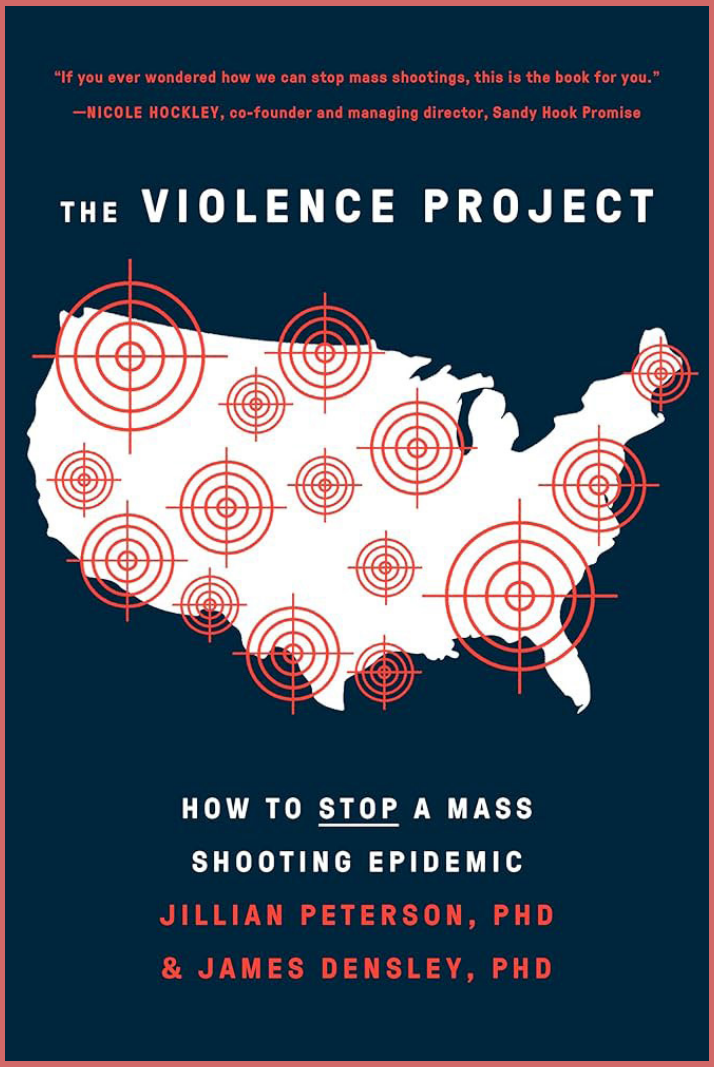
Dr. Jillian Peterson
Executive Director

Dr. Jillian Peterson is a criminology and criminal justice professor at Hamline University and director of their forensic psychology program. Jillian launched her career as a special investigator in New York City, researching the psychosocial life histories of men facing the death penalty. She earned her PhD in psychology and social behavior from the University of California, Irvine, and went on to lead large-scale research studies on mental illness and crime, mass shootings and school shootings, which have received global media attention. Jillian is a sought-after national trainer and speaker on issues related to mental illness and violence, trauma, forensic psychology, and mass violence. She is trained in restorative practices, violence mediation, crisis intervention, de-escalation, and suicide prevention.

Dr. James Densley
Deputy Director

Dr. James Densley is a professor and department chair of criminology and criminal justice at Metro State University. Born and raised in England, James' first job in the United States was as a special education teacher in the New York City public schools. After earning his DPhil in sociology from the University of Oxford, he quickly established himself as one of the world's leading experts on street gangs and serious youth violence, including violence online. James is the author or editor of 11 books and over 150 journal articles, book chapters, essays, and other works. He has been an invited or plenary speaker on four continents, and his work has attracted acclaim, awards, and global media attention.

Check out our 2025 Legislative Report



The Violence Project: How to Stop a Mass Shooting Epidemic
By Jillian Peterson & James Densley

Winner of the Minnesota Book Award, an examination of the phenomenon of mass shootings in America and an urgent call to implement evidence-based strategies to stop these tragedies

"Groundbreaking." —Rachel Louise Snyder, bestselling author of No Visible Bruises

WHAT IF WE COULD TRANSFORM GUN VIOLENCE PREVENTION IN MINNESOTA?

Gun violence is a growing crisis affecting communities across Minnesota, with recent data revealing a significant rise in both gun-related homicides and non-fatal shootings. From the bustling streets of Minneapolis and St. Paul to smaller rural towns, this crisis impacts our schools, public spaces, and mental health. Our studies show that one in five Minnesotans has been threatened with a gun, 13% have witnessed a shooting, and 4% have been shot themselves. These numbers represent real experiences of our friends, families, and neighbors.

It's clear: gun violence is NOT just an abstract issue occurring "somewhere else."

This summit is designed to be a catalyst for change, offering more than just a forum for discussion. It presents a unique opportunity to explore the complexities of gun violence, from its underlying causes to effective prevention strategies. Our goal is to move beyond conventional approaches and seek innovative, evidence-based solutions that can be applied across our state.

Today, we will engage with a variety of perspectives and expertise, sharing insights and learning from successful efforts within our own region. This summit will serve as a collaborative space where we can collectively envision and work towards a Minnesota where gun violence is significantly reduced.

This is a call to action for everyone involved. Addressing gun violence requires a united effort from all sectors of society. By coming together, we can develop a more comprehensive and impactful approach to prevention.

We hope you find the sessions and discussions both enlightening and motivating. Your participation is crucial to advancing the change we seek.

EVENT SCHEDULE

MORNING

8:00 AM — **REGISTRATION AND BREAKFAST**

8:30 AM — **WELCOME**
Jillian Peterson
Executive Director, The Violence Prevention Project Research Center

8:40 AM — **EXPERIENCE SPEAKER**
Bryan Muehlberger
Daughter killed in 2019 Saugus High shooting

9:00 AM — **OPENING ADDRESS**
Jillian Peterson and James Densley
Co-Authors, "The Violence Project"

9:30 AM — **BREAK AND REFRESHMENTS**

9:45 AM — **PANEL 1: SCHOOLS**
David Reidman, K-12 School shooting database
Shannon Hill, St. Paul Public Schools
Rudy Perez, President of NASRO

10:45 AM — **BREAK AND REFRESHMENTS**

11:00 AM — **PANEL 2: COMMUNITIES**
Andrew Evans, Superintendent, BCA
David Pyrooz, U Colorado Boulder
Brooke Blakey, Office of Neighborhood Safety
Rob Doar, MN Gun Owners Caucus

AFTERNOON

12:00 PM — **LUNCH**
Networking & tabletop conversation questions

12:40 PM — **EXPERIENCE SPEAKER**
Nicole Hockley
Son killed in Sandy Hook Elementary shooting

1:00 PM — **PANEL 3: HOMES**
Alicia Nichols, Domestic violence expert
Megan Walsh, Gun Violence Prevention Law Clinic
Stefan Gingerich, MN Violent Death Dashboard
Jordan Haltaufderheid, DPS ERPO

2:00 PM — **BREAK AND REFRESHMENTS**

2:15 PM — **EXPERIENCE SPEAKER**
Tommy McBrayer
Gun Violence Survivor
Founder, Don't Shoot Guns, Shoot Hoops

2:30 PM — **PANEL 4: SOLUTIONS**
Rep Kelly Moller, Chair of Public Safety
Derek Lumbard, HCMC Trauma Surgeon
Justin Terrell, MN Justice Research Center
Lisa Geller, MPH, National ERPO Resource Center

3:30 PM — **WRAP-UP**
Networking & Refreshments

4:30 PM — **CONFERENCE CLOSE**

EXPERIENCE SPEAKERS

Bryan Muehlberger

Founder, The GracieStrong Foundation

Bryan Muehlberger founded The GracieStrong Foundation in honor and memory of his daughter, Gracie Anne Muehlberger, who was tragically killed at the young age of 15 in the November 14, 2019 Saugus High School mass shooting. The Foundation's mission is to empower youth to find their voice and purpose, aiming to prevent violence by building confidence and fostering positive change. Bryan's advocacy for youth empowerment reflects his commitment to preventing future tragedies. He also serves on the advisory board for the Violence Prevention Project Research Center, where he contributes his knowledge, passion, and experience to inform our research initiatives.

Tommy McBrayer

Gun Violence Survivor & Founder, "Don't Shoot Guns, Shoot Hoops"

Tommy McBrayer is the Founder and Executive Director of Don't Shoot Guns Shoot Hoops (DSGSH), an organization dedicated to using sports and community engagement as tools to prevent violence and provide positive outlets for youth. Under his leadership, DSGSH has become a vital resource in promoting non-violence and empowering young people through mentorship and athletic programs. His work has been recognized with several awards, including the 2024 Dough Pitch Winner, 2023 Malcolm X Achievement Award, 2023 Outstanding Leadership Award, and the 2023 Faith Community Service Award. Additionally, he was named a 2022-23 FInnovation Fellow. Tommy's commitment to creating safe, supportive environments for youth has made a lasting impact on the community.

Nicole Hockley

Co-Founder and CEO of Sandy Hook Promise

Nicole Hockley is the Co-Founder and CEO of Sandy Hook Promise, an organization dedicated to preventing gun violence through educational programs and advocacy. After losing her son Dylan in the Sandy Hook Elementary School tragedy, Nicole became a leading voice in the fight against gun violence. She has spearheaded the development of initiatives like the Know The Signs programs, which focus on early intervention and community education. Under her leadership, these programs have expanded significantly, aiming to prevent violence before it occurs. Nicole's work integrates community-based strategies and public advocacy, and she serves on the advisory board for the Violence Prevention Project Research Center, contributing her expertise to advance the Center's mission.

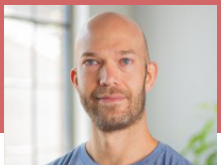
SPEAKER NONPROFITS

The GracieStrong Foundation was established in honor of Gracie Anne Muehlberger, who's life was stolen during a senseless shooting at Saugus High School on November 14, 2019. Its mission is to empower youth to find their voice and use it to create a better world. The foundation believes this can be achieved by helping young people develop a deeper understanding of who they are and what they stand for, while also building their confidence. By guiding youth in discovering their identity and purpose, the GracieStrong Foundation aims to nurture future change makers who will leave a lasting, positive impact on the world around them.

Don't Shoot Guns, Shoot Hoops (DSGSH) is a nonprofit organization focused on ending gun violence by fostering community connections and positively impacting people of all ages through the game of basketball. DSGSH creates safe spaces for individuals to come together, share their stories, and find support. Through its programs, the organization works to address social injustices and promote healing and unity in communities, using basketball as a tool to inspire change and build stronger, safer neighborhoods.

Sandy Hook Promise is a national nonprofit organization dedicated to preventing gun violence by empowering young people and uniting communities. Founded by family members who lost loved ones in the Sandy Hook Elementary School tragedy, the organization is based in Newtown, Connecticut, and works to honor all victims of gun violence. Through education and awareness programs, Sandy Hook Promise helps youth recognize warning signs and equips them with the tools to take action. By fostering collaboration among individuals who prioritize the safety of children, the organization aims to create lasting change and prevent the senseless loss of life.





SCHOOLS PANEL

Shannon Hill

Violence Prevention Specialist, Saint Paul Public Schools

Shannon Hill serves as a Violence Prevention Specialist at Saint Paul Public Schools, Minnesota's second-largest school district, where she implements strategies to enhance school safety and reduce violence. She leads the application of the CARE team model, a collaborative approach developed in partnership with the Violence Prevention Project Research Center, to address and prevent violence in educational settings. Shannon's work involves leveraging evidence-based practices to create supportive learning environments for students. Her extensive experience includes roles in Memphis City Schools and Minneapolis Public Schools, and she holds a law enforcement certification from Hennepin Technical College. Her expertise is critical in advancing effective violence prevention strategies.

Rudy Perez

President, National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO)

Rudy Perez is the President of the National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO) and serves as the Assistant Chief of Police for the Golden Valley Police Department. A graduate of the FBI National Academy, Rudy has a career spanning over two decades, including 23 years with the Los Angeles School Police Department. He has been instrumental in developing and implementing comprehensive safety protocols and training programs for school resource officers. His work focuses on enhancing school safety through effective law enforcement strategies and community collaboration. In addition to his leadership at NASRO, Rudy is actively involved with the California Coalition of Law Enforcement, representing thousands of police officers across the state, and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security Academic Partnership Council, where he plays a significant role in shaping national school safety initiatives.

David Reidman

Founder and Director, K-12 School Shooting Database

David Riedman founded and directs the K-12 School Shooting Database, which provides comprehensive tracking and analysis of school shooting incidents. His database offers critical insights into patterns and trends of gun violence in educational settings, supporting the development of targeted prevention strategies. David's work emphasizes the need for accurate data to inform effective violence prevention measures and contributes to a deeper understanding of school violence. He is also an assistant professor at Idaho State University. As a data scientist, he collaborates with Dr. Jillian Peterson and Dr. James Densley on research initiatives and serves on the advisory board for the Violence Prevention Project Research Center (VPPRC), where he helps guide strategic efforts.

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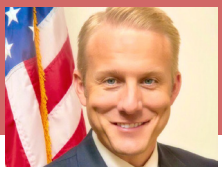
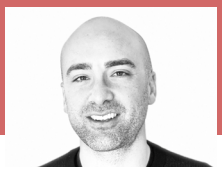

COMMUNITY PANEL

Drew Evans

Superintendent, Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension

Drew Evans is the Superintendent of the Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension (BCA), where he oversees statewide law enforcement and criminal investigation efforts. Since his appointment in 2015, Drew has managed the BCA's three divisions: Minnesota Justice Information Services, Investigative Services, and Forensic Science Services. His leadership includes coordinating responses to violent crime, enhancing data collection and analysis, and improving public safety through effective strategies and collaboration. Drew's extensive experience includes prior roles as BCA Assistant Superintendent, special agent, and detective, and he also serves as the Governor's Homeland Security Advisor for Minnesota. His work is integral to shaping state-wide responses to crime and advancing violence prevention initiatives.

David Pyrooz

Professor of Sociology, University of Colorado Boulder

David Pyrooz is a Professor of Sociology and Interim Director of the Prevention Science Program at the University of Colorado Boulder, specializing in community violence, gangs, and criminal justice policy. His research offers critical insights into gang dynamics and broader community violence, contributing to a deeper understanding of these issues. David's extensive academic work and publications support evidence-based approaches to violence prevention and intervention. His expertise is instrumental in shaping discussions on effective strategies to address violence through sociological research.

Brooke Blakey

Director, Office of Neighborhood Safety

Brooke A. Blakey is the Director of the Office of Neighborhood Safety for the City of St. Paul. With over 20 years of experience in criminal justice, public safety, and community engagement, Brooke has led the implementation of the City's comprehensive community-first public safety strategy. Her leadership has contributed to a significant reduction in gun-related violence in priority neighborhoods through innovative programs and strategic community partnerships. Brooke is committed to leveraging community and data-driven approaches to enhance safety and provide holistic support for victims and families affected by violence. Her extensive background includes roles with Metro Transit Police, Ramsey County Public Defender, and the Minnesota State Fair Police, reflecting her dedication to public safety and community trust.

Rob Doar

Senior Vice President of Government Affairs for the Minnesota Gun Owners Caucus

Rob Doar serves as Senior Vice President of Government Affairs for the Minnesota Gun Owners Caucus, where his work focuses on public safety and firearms policy. With over 15 years of experience as a citizen activist and lobbyist, Doar has been involved in legislative efforts concerning gun rights and public safety at the Minnesota Capitol. He has contributed to the development of policies that address the intersection of Second Amendment rights and public safety concerns, offering testimony and strategic guidance on these issues. His work frequently involves collaboration with other organizations on matters of public safety and participation in public safety policy discussions. Doar's academic background includes Mitchell-Hamline School of Law, a B.S. in Criminal Justice from Bemidji State University, A.S. in Law Enforcement, and a certificate in Public Safety Leadership from Century College.

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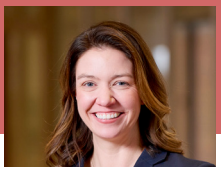

HOMES PANEL

Alicia Nichols

Domestic Violence Expert, Onboard Consulting, PLLC

Alicia Nichols is a leading expert in domestic violence prevention and restorative justice with over two decades of experience. Her work involves implementing strategies to address gender-based violence and promoting restorative justice practices. Alicia's national efforts in violence prevention and her expertise in domestic violence contribute to effective intervention and prevention strategies. Her focus on restorative justice and comprehensive approaches highlights the importance of addressing violence through multifaceted solutions.

Megan Walsh

Director, Gun Violence Prevention Law Clinic, University of Minnesota Law School

Megan Walsh is a Visiting Assistant Clinical Professor of Law and the Director of the Gun Violence Prevention Law Clinic at the University of Minnesota Law School. Her role underscores the intersection of law and public safety in addressing gun violence through strategic legal advocacy. She supervises Clinic students in litigation to advance gun violence prevention through the court system and in defending Minnesota gun laws against constitutional challenges. She also writes and teaches on the Second Amendment, with a focus on the intersection of domestic violence and gun violence.

Stefan Gingerich

Senior Epidemiologist, Minnesota Department of Health

Stefan Gingerich is a Senior Epidemiologist with the Injury and Violence Prevention Section at the Minnesota Department of Health. He serves as co-principal investigator on the Minnesota Violent Death Reporting System, where he analyzes the epidemiology of suicide, homicide, and firearm violence. Stefan's work is crucial for understanding and addressing violent deaths through comprehensive data analysis. Prior to his current role, he worked as a public health microbiologist at the University Hygienic Laboratory in Iowa and as a senior research analyst for StayWell, where he focused on best practices in employee health management. His extensive experience in public health research and data analysis informs violence prevention strategies and public safety policies.

Jordan Haltaufderheid

Chief of Staff, Minnesota Department of Public Safety

Jordan Haltaufderheid serves as Chief of Staff at the Minnesota Department of Public Safety, focusing on strategic statewide public safety initiatives encompassing prevention, intervention, and enforcement. His work includes overseeing DPS's legislative portfolio, the implementation of Extreme Risk Protection Orders (ERPOs), and other preventative measures against gun violence. Jordan's background in emergency management and public administration supports the development and execution of effective safety policies. His role highlights the importance of policy implementation in enhancing community safety through strategic measures and working with a wide range of stakeholders.

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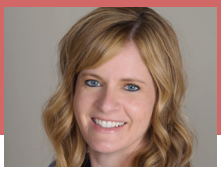
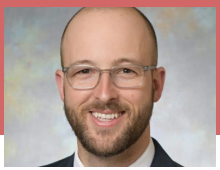

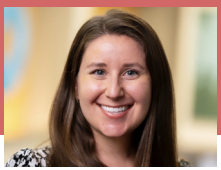

SOLUTIONS PANEL

Kelly Moller

Minnesota State Representative

Kelly Moller is a Minnesota State Representative from Shoreview, serving the cities of Arden Hills, Mounds View, and New Brighton. First elected in 2018, she is currently the Chair of the House Public Safety Finance and Policy Committee. Under her leadership, the Minnesota Legislature has enacted significant legislation, including laws requiring criminal background checks on gun transfers, establishing an extreme risk protection order law, banning devices that convert guns into fully automatic firearms, and securing funding for both violence prevention and gun violence research. Kelly also works as a prosecutor handling felony-level appeals and has served at both the county attorney's office and the Minnesota Attorney General's Office. Additionally, she has been the executive director of a nonprofit focused on victim advocacy. Her career has been marked by a commitment to addressing the profound impact of gun violence on victims and communities.

Dr. Derek Lumbard

Director of Trauma Research, Hennepin Healthcare

Dr. Derek Lumbard is a surgeon-scientist specializing in Trauma and Surgical Critical Care at Hennepin Healthcare, where he also serves as a Research Scholar with the Hennepin Healthcare Research Institute. He holds an Assistant Professor appointment at the University of Minnesota's Department of Surgery. Dr. Lumbard completed his medical education at the Medical College of Wisconsin, followed by a general surgery residency at Hennepin County Medical Center and a Surgical Critical Care fellowship at UT Health San Antonio. His research primarily focuses on injury control and violence prevention, with a special emphasis on firearm-related injuries. Dr. Lumbard's work aims to advance trauma care, enhance injury management strategies, and deepen the understanding of the impacts of violence, supported by a recent K award from the Minnesota Center for Learning Health System Sciences.

Justin Terrell

Executive Director, Minnesota Justice Research Center

Justin Terrell is the Executive Director of the Minnesota Justice Research Center, where he is dedicated to transforming the criminal legal system through leadership development, racial equity, and systemic change. His work includes advocating for impactful policies such as the Ban the Box initiative, which improves reentry opportunities and addresses recidivism. As a longtime advocate, Justin focuses on bringing diverse groups together, identifying shared values, and building pathways for change. His commitment to violence prevention is reflected in his efforts to develop comprehensive strategies that address the root causes of violence and promote equitable justice practices.

Lisa Geller, MPH

Director, National Extreme Risk Protection Order Resource Center

Lisa Geller, MPH, is the Senior Advisor for Implementation at the Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Solutions and Co-Lead of the National ERPO Resource Center. Her work focuses on advancing evidence-based gun violence prevention policies, including extreme risk protection orders and domestic violence protective orders. As Co-Lead, Lisa provides training and technical assistance to law enforcement, prosecutors, judges, clinicians, and community organizations involved in the ERPO process. She also serves as a mayoral appointee on the District of Columbia's Domestic Violence Fatality Review Board. Lisa earned her Bachelor's degree in Political Science from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where she graduated Phi Beta Kappa, and her Master of Public Health (MPH) in Health Policy and Injury and Violence Prevention from the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

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ADDITIONAL SPONSORS

Thank you to our generous sponsors for your vital support in making this summit possible. Your commitment to advancing violence prevention and fostering safer communities is essential to our mission. Your partnership empowers us to address the critical issues of gun violence and work towards impactful, evidence-based solutions. We are grateful for your dedication and support.

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ABOUT VPPRC

The Violence Prevention Project Research Center (VPPRC) is dedicated to reducing violence through research that is both accessible and geared toward action. Our mission is to generate knowledge that informs, empowers, and drives effective policy and practice to foster safer communities. We focus on a range of critical areas, including mass shootings, school and college homicides, violence in places of worship, and homicide trends in urban settings like Minneapolis and Saint Paul. Our work also includes national surveys on gun violence exposure, aiming to address its pervasive impact across various demographics.

At VPPRC, we believe that research must be paired with practical solutions. We offer comprehensive training programs designed to equip individuals and organizations with the necessary tools to prevent violence within their communities. By integrating our research findings with actionable strategies, we strive to create meaningful and positive change. Additionally, our collaborations extend beyond isolated solutions to address systemic factors contributing to violence at individual, institutional, and societal levels.

Our student researchers are integral to our mission, working diligently to support our research efforts and keep our databases up-to-date. Their contributions ensure the relevance and accuracy of our findings. We invite you to explore our research, training opportunities, and collaborative projects to learn more about our commitment to addressing violence and promoting effective prevention strategies.

For additional information, please visit our website.

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RESEARCH CENTER
HAMLINE UNIVERSITY

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Exploring the Overlap: Suicidal Thoughts and Homicidal Acts Among Incarcerated Offenders

Jillian K. Peterson & James A. Densley

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Exploring the Overlap: Suicidal Thoughts and Homicidal Acts Among Incarcerated Offenders

Jillian K. Peterson[a] and James A. Densley[b]

[a]Hamline University, Saint Paul, MN, USA; [b]Metropolitan State University, Saint Paul, MN, USA

ABSTRACT

This study explores the intersection of suicidality and homicidality through psychosocial life-history interviews with 18 people convicted of murder or manslaughter incarcerated in Minnesota. During in-depth qualitative life-history interviews about their childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, the participants revealed significant adverse childhood experiences and mental health issues. A majority of them were on the suicide spectrum before committing homicide. Hopelessness and previous suicide attempts were prevalent, highlighting the complex interplay between suicidality and violent behavior. These findings underscore the need for comprehensive mental health support and early interventions to address ACEs, suggesting that integrated care could mitigate the risk factors for both suicide and homicide. This study contributes to understanding the nuanced relationship between these behaviors among perpetrators of homicide and emphasizes the importance of holistic approaches in prevention and policymaking.

ARTICLE HISTORY
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Accepted 13 December 2024

The intersection of suicidal ideation and homicidal behavior is complex and multifaceted, necessitating a nuanced exploration to fully understand the underlying psychological, social, and situational dynamics. The present study delves into this intricate relationship by conducting in-depth qualitative life history interviews with incarcerated homicide offenders, shedding light on the often-overlooked link between prior trauma, mental illness, and suicidal tendencies leading up to their crimes. The concept that suicide and homicide may be two sides of the same coin (Bills 2017) serves as the cornerstone of our inquiry, providing a lens through which we examine the duality of inward and outward-directed aggression.

Understanding the overlap between suicide and homicide has long been a central issue in social science generally and violence research specifically. Durkheim's (1951) seminal work first noted the complex interplay between these forms of violence, observing, "Suicide sometimes coexists with homicide, sometimes they are mutually exclusive, sometimes they react under the same conditions in the same way, sometimes in opposite ways" (p. 355). Later, Henry and Short (1954) framed suicide and homicide as expressions of aggression directed inward or outward, respectively – a view echoed in Freudian psychoanalytic theory, which posits that suicide unconsciously internalizes aggression, while homicide externalizes it (Freud 2004; Palmer 1972). These frameworks emphasize the importance of exploring how suicidal ideation and attempts may precede homicidal behavior, providing a comprehensive understanding of violence as both an internal and external phenomenon.

Despite the robust theoretical groundwork, empirical studies have predominantly focused on aggregate-level analyses, examining the correlation between suicide and homicide rates across different regions or countries (Unnithan et al. 1994). These cross-sectional designs, while informative, often

CONTACT Jillian K. Peterson Jpeterson68@hamline.edu The Violence Prevention Project Research Center, Hamline University, 1536 hewitt Avenue, Saint Paul, MN 55104

fail to capture the individual-level nuances and temporal dynamics of these behaviors. Previous research has primarily considered violence as a precursor to suicide, neglecting the potential for suicidality to serve as a precursor to violence or homicide (Conner et al. 2001; Van Dulmen et al. 2013). Notably, Van Dulmen et al. (2013) utilized longitudinal data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health to demonstrate the bidirectional relationship between violence and suicidality from adolescence into young adulthood, highlighting the reciprocal nature of these phenomena and their stronger association among males.

The current study aims to fill a critical gap in the literature by specifically examining the role of suicidality and prior suicide attempts among homicide offenders. Through qualitative life history interviews, we seek to uncover the personal narratives and lived experiences that elucidate the pathways from suicidal ideation to homicidal actions. The paper proceeds as follows. We first review the existing literature on the relationship between suicide and homicide, synthesizing empirical findings and theoretical perspectives to examine the complex relationship between these forms of lethal violence, emphasizing the psychological, sociological, and biological dimensions. Next, we describe our methodological approach, including participant selection and data collection techniques. We then present our findings, highlighting key themes that emerged from the interviews. Finally, we discuss the implications of our results for theory, practice, and future research, offering insights into potential interventions and preventive measures to address the intertwined issues of suicidality and homicidal behavior.

Psychological perspectives

Psychology has long explored the overlap between homicidal and suicidal behaviors, with particular emphasis on shared underlying psychopathologies (Freud 2004). The overlap between suicide and homicide is most evident when perpetrators die by suicide immediately after their crimes (Nock 2014). Although this phenomenon is relatively rare in the general population of murderers in the United States, where only 4% die by suicide during their crime (Eliason 2009; Lankford 2015), it is more prevalent among mass shooters (Lankford, Silver, and Cox 2021). In a comprehensive analysis of 200 mass shooters over nearly six decades, Peterson and Densley (2021) found that a third had prior suicidal tendencies, 40% died by suicide during their act, and about 20% instigated their deaths at the hands of law enforcement. For this reason, Peterson et al. (2024) argue that mass shootings, often seen as isolated acts of violence, should be contextualized within a broader "deaths of despair" framework (Case and Deaton 2020), as perpetrators often plan these acts as a final, desperate gesture. Murder-suicide is equally common in family annihilations, the most frequent form of mass shooting (Geller, Booty, and Crifasi 2021), often involving a male perpetrator who kills his female partner and her children, typically at the point of separation (Harper and Voigt 2007).

The risk factor overlap between suicide and homicide provides further insight into their connection. Moffitt's (1993) dual neurodevelopmental pathway distinguishes between adolescent-limited offenders, whose criminal behavior typically ceases as they mature, and life-course-persistent offenders, who continue their criminal activities into adulthood. Life-course-persistent offenders exhibit both biological and environmental risk factors from an early age, including neuropsychological problems such as ADHD, disrupted attachment, maltreatment, poverty, and cognitive deficits (Carlisi et al. 2020; Dodge and Pettit 2003; Moffitt 2005). These risk factors significantly overlap with those associated with suicidality (e.g., Wenzel and Beck 2008), such as impulsivity, aggressive tendencies, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), and violent victimization (CDC 2024). Multiple large-scale studies confirm that ACEs increase the likelihood of violence against others (delinquency, bullying, physical fighting, dating violence, and weapon carrying on school property) and violence against oneself (self-mutilation, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts (Duke et al. 2010), with a dose-response relationship indicating greater risk of suicide attempts and completion with more ACEs (Brodsky and Stanley 2008; Choi et al. 2017; Felitti et al. 1998).

Impulsivity and anger play important roles in both aggression and suicidal behavior. Aggression can be classified into reactive aggression, driven by anger and impulsivity, and proactive aggression, which is instrumental and goal-oriented (Berkowitz 1993). Reactive aggression is traditionally seen as underlying the link between aggression and suicidal behavior. However, Conner, Swogger, and Houston (2009) found that both reactive and proactive aggression were associated with previous suicide attempts, with proactive aggression being particularly significant for men. Impulsivity, characterized by risk-taking, sensation-seeking, disinhibition, and lack of planning (Moore et al. 2022), is integral to theories of suicide (e.g., Baumeister's (1990) "escape theory") and is a core symptom of ADHD, a known risk factor for both violence and suicidality (Carlisi et al. 2020; Furczyk and Thome 2014). Additionally, trait anger is associated with increased violence and suicidal behavior (Plutchik and Van Praag 1989), as evidenced by studies linking higher trait anger with increased suicide attempts among boys (Ammerman et al. 2015; Daniel et al. 2009). The serotonin aggression hypothesis suggests that low serotonin levels in the brain are linked to impulsive aggression, influencing both suicide and homicide (da Cunha-Bang and Knudsen 2021; Nock 2014).

Depression and personality disorders are prevalent among homicide-suicide perpetrators (Liem and Nieuwbeerta 2010). These individuals frequently experience profound despair and hopelessness, mirroring the emotional states commonly associated with suicidal ideation (Eliason 2009). Beck's (1967) hopelessness theory posits that hopelessness is a key cognitive vulnerability for suicide. Longitudinal studies, such as those by Kuo, Gallo, and Eaton (2004), have confirmed that hopelessness is an independent risk factor for suicidality. Hopelessness also influences violent behavior, although it is less studied. Demetropoulos Valencia et al. (2021) found a significant positive relationship between hopelessness and youth violence, while Brezina, Tekin, and Topalli (2009) highlighted how anticipated early death, or "futurelessness," contributes to high-risk behaviors such as crime and violence (see also, Caldwell, Wiebe, and Cleveland 2006). These relationships are reciprocal; violent victimization and witnessing violence can increase adolescents' perceptions of premature mortality, leading to risky behaviors that reinforce the cycle of violence and despair (Borowsky, Ireland, and Resnick 2009; Tillyer 2015).

Psychosis has also been identified as a potential factor in both homicidal and suicidal behaviors (Peterson et al. 2022). Schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, particularly when untreated or mixed with substance use, can contribute to the risk of both self-directed and other-directed violence (Taylor and Gunn 1999). The concept of "dual harm" individuals, who exhibit tendencies toward both self-harm and aggression toward others, has gained traction in recent years, underscoring the psychological overlap between these behaviors (Slade 2019). From a familial perspective, the transmission of suicidal and aggressive behaviors is related (Brent et al. 1996).

Sociological perspectives

Sociological theories contribute to understanding the situational and environmental factors that link homicide and suicide. Durkheim's seminal work on suicide highlighted the role of social integration and regulation, suggesting that social isolation and anomie can precipitate both suicidal and homicidal actions (Durkheim 1951). Contemporary studies have extended this framework, examining how social stressors, such as economic hardship, relationship breakdowns, and societal disintegration, can elevate the risk of both outcomes (Stack 2000). Notably, the concept of "fatalistic suicide," where individuals feel over-regulated by oppressive conditions, parallels scenarios of intimate partner homicide-suicide. This phenomenon is particularly evident in cases of domestic violence, where perpetrators, often overwhelmed by perceived control and powerlessness, resort to extreme violence as an escape from their circumstances (Dixon, Hamilton-Giachritsis, and Browne 2008). The interplay between societal norms, cultural context, and individual vulnerabilities forms a critical nexus for understanding these tragic events. For example, the "psychache" model posits that unbearable psychological pain is a common denominator driving individuals toward both self-destruction and outward

violence (Shneidman 1993). This model emphasizes the need for comprehensive public health interventions targeting emotional distress and coping mechanisms, but also social stressors, such as poverty and domestic violence (Vijayakumar et al. 2008).

Building on the existing literature, the current study aims to explore the interconnected themes of suicidality, impulsivity and anger, adverse childhood experiences, and hopelessness. We employ psychosocial life histories with 18 homicide perpetrators from the Twin Cities who committed their crimes between 2018 and 2022. Through in-depth life history interviews, we seek to uncover the nuanced overlap between suicidality and homicide within this group. Notably, prior suicidality and suicide attempts among general homicide offenders remain largely unexplored, highlighting the importance and novelty of our investigation. This study endeavors to fill this gap, providing a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between these behaviors.

Materials and methods

Recruitment

This qualitative study is part of a larger mixed-methods project examining over 600 homicides in Hennepin and Ramsey Counties, Minnesota, between 2018 and 2022. These counties include the state's largest cities, Minneapolis and Saint Paul. In collaboration with the Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension, we analyzed National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) records and gathered additional information from media, police reports, and trial documents to contextualize each case. These data allowed us to identify eligible participants for the qualitative component reported here.

Participants were recruited from two Minnesota Correctional Facilities-one medium-security and one maximum-security. We initially contacted all six state prisons, but only two responded. The wardens at these two facilities provided lists of eligible individuals convicted of first- and second-degree murder or manslaughter for offenses that occurred in 2020 or 2021. Eligibility was further refined based on additional criteria: individuals actively appealing their cases or deemed unfit to participate (e.g., for health or behavioral reasons) were excluded. Minnesota Department of Corrections staff then distributed a recruitment letter to potential participants. At the medium-security facility, eight out of 13 eligible participants agreed to participate. The maximum-security facility housed about 100 eligible individuals, but due to staffing limitations and the scope of the study, the warden requested we limit our sample. Therefore, we randomly selected 20 individuals from the eligible list, and 10 consented to participate. The study received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the Minnesota Department of Corrections, ensuring ethical compliance. The principal investigators are experienced interviewers and qualitative researchers with extensive backgrounds working in prisons and with serious violent offenders, including in death penalty mitigation (BLIND).

Data were collected through open-ended, semi-structured interviews conducted over two days at each facility, with each interview, a combination of general and specific questions, lasting between 45 and 150 minutes (average of 90 minutes). Each interview began with the prompt, "Tell us about where you grew up," which helped participants feel at ease and allowed the conversation to flow naturally. From there, we inquired about their family, school, and work lives, followed by questions regarding their offending history and mental health. As the interviews progressed, we shifted focus to the circumstances surrounding the offense that led to their incarceration. Owing to prison restrictions, interviews were not audio-recorded; instead, one principal investigator interviewed while the other took detailed notes. Interviews were held in private rooms where correctional staff could observe but not hear, ensuring safety and confidentiality. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. All records were de-identified to maintain confidentiality, and consent forms were kept separate from the interview notes.

Table 1. Homicide circumstances and previous suicidality among 18 incarcerated individuals.

Homicide Circumstance	Age at time of homicide	Previous Suicidality	Self-Reported Mental Health Diagnosis
Drove intoxicated, killed woman on street	30–39	Attempt – gun in mouth 2 years before homicide	ADHD Depression
Drove intoxicated, killed passengers	50–59	Attempt – swallowed pills 30 years before homicide	Depression
Beat elderly man to death after altercation on public transit	20–29	Attempt – stood on bridge 2 years before homicide Attempt – made noose 1 year before homicide	None reported
Killed wife and shot himself	30–39	Attempt – cut wrists 20 years before homicide Attempt – overdoses 10 years before homicide	ADHD Anxiety Depression
Killed shop owner during robbery	30–39	Attempt – drank Visine 10 years before homicide	ADHD Anxiety Learning Disorder
Arson resulting in homicide	30–39	Attempt – took pills 5 years before homicide	Bipolar Disorder
Beat baby to death	20–29	Attempt – car into lake 5 years before homicide	Anxiety PTSD Schizophrenia
Shot and killed opposing gang member	Under 18	Anticipated early death	Anxiety Depression
Fight on street that escalated to shooting	Under 18	Anticipated early death	Anxiety Depression PTSD
Shot opposing gang member, killed bystander	Under 18	Anticipated early death	ADHD Anxiety PTSD
Shot and killed opposing gang member	Under 18	Hopelessness	Depression ADHD
Shot and killed man in his car during robbery	Under 18	Hopelessness	ADHD Anxiety OCD PTSD
Shot and killed drug dealer during robbery	Under 18	Hopelessness	ADHD Depression
Traffic altercation escalated to shooting	30–39	Hopelessness	ADHD Anxiety Depression
Escalated argument in grocery store led to stabbing	50–59	None reported	None reported
Escalated argument led to shooting – claims self defense	20–29	None reported	None reported
Stabbed girlfriend to death	20–29	None reported	Schizophrenia
Stabbed brother to death during fight	20–29	None reported	Unsure which diagnosis

Participants

All 18 participants were male, because the prisons only housed male individuals. Fourteen self-identified as Black and four were White. Their ages ranged from 18 to 62 years at the time of the interview, with a mean age of 27.3 years at the time of their offenses. Geographically, the participants

were primarily from urban areas in the Twin Cities: 10 were from Minneapolis, five from St. Paul, and three from suburban areas. They were incarcerated for a wide range of homicide crimes described in Table 1.

Ten participants used a firearm, two used a knife, two used a vehicle, two used their body, and one intentionally set a fire. Six of the 18 participants had no prior criminal history. For the 12 with a criminal history, their previous convictions ranged from one to 16. Three had prior domestic violence convictions, one was previously civilly committed, and eight had previous violent convictions. Each homicide had one victim. The victims' ages ranged from 4 weeks to 75 years (Mean = 32.9 years). Four of the victims were female and 14 were male. Nine of the victims were Black, six were White, one was American Indian, one was Asian American, and one was Latino. Seven victims were strangers to the perpetrators, three were gang/group related, one was the child of the perpetrator, one was a sibling, one was a girlfriend, one was a wife, and two were acquaintances of the perpetrator.

Data analysis

Inductive thematic analysis was used to identify and analyze patterns within the interview data, emphasizing participants' narratives to uncover key themes related to their experiences and the circumstances surrounding their offenses (Braun and Clarke 2006; Clarke and Braun 2014). This process began with principal investigators thoroughly familiarizing themselves with the data through repeated review of transcribed notes. The two principal investigators independently coded the data, highlighting significant segments pertinent to the research questions. Initial codes were compared, achieving a 95% agreement rate between the principal investigators, and discussed to identify broader themes, ensuring a comprehensive analysis. Themes were refined through iterative review, ensuring consistency and coherence across the dataset. This method captured the essence of the participants' stories and lived experiences. By drawing on "narrative criminology" principles (Presser 2016), we sought to understand how participants critically constructed their life stories.

Findings

This section highlights key themes that emerged from the interviews, supported by illustrative verbatim quotes (*in italics*).

Adverse childhood experiences

Several participants had mothers who were addicted to drugs and alcohol. Participant 7 said his mom was an alcoholic. Participant 5 said his mother was addicted to meth and fentanyl, and she eventually died of a drug overdose. Participant 14 also said his mother was a drug addict.

Participant 3 described his mom as an alcoholic who was in and out of jail, "*She was never sober*." Participant 3's father was also incarcerated from when he was 6 to 14.

Other participants had incarcerated fathers. Participant 16 said his dad was "*locked u*p." Participant 8 said his dad wasn't around due to "*street stuff*," because he was in jail. Participant 10 described his immigrant mother as a "*wildflower*" who had lived a hard life. He said his mother was an alcoholic who threw wild parties every night. He said he would go down at 4 am to try to tell people that it was a school night. He described his entire childhood as parties, loud music, fighting, and violence, "*I have extreme anxiety and PTSD from it*." Participant 10 also said he didn't have a great relationship with his dad, "*my pastor filled in for that*."

Participant 14 described his mom as a "*military mom*" who was very cold and strict. His uncle made his mom a wooden spanking paddle to beat him with because her hand would get sore. Participant 11 said his mom was "*slow in the head*" because his dad pushed her down the stairs in a domestic violence situation and damaged her brain when Participant 11 was a baby. Participant 12's mom died when he was 14, from complications due to untreated diabetes.

Participant 5 was raised by his dad owing to his mom's drug addiction. However, his dad was also addicted to meth, and they were frequently homeless. Participant 5 said that CPS took him for the first time at age 6. His dad and mom's dad were driving around drunk, and he was in the back seat. He was in and out of foster care the rest of his childhood, "*It's weird to live with complete strangers*."

Participant 6 was also primarily raised by his dad, who was 19 when he started caring for him on his own when he was six months old. He described an afternoon when he had to strip down to his underwear on the couch. Participant 6 thought he would get beat, but his dad laid out a rod, a gun, a belt and a bible. He said the belt wasn't working, so he would switch to the gun if he needed to.

Participant 15 was born addicted to heroin. He was in foster care from ages 5 to 11 at 7 or 8 different homes, he estimated. He said, "*Foster care was horrible*." One foster mom burned him with a curling iron, made him "*do sexual stuff to her*," and locked him in the basement. Later, as a teenager, his mom got clean from drugs, and he was living with her and his stepfather. "*I was doing good for a year, but then my stepdad was killed. They say it was suicide but that doesn't make sense*." He remembers it was raining. "*I've never seen so much blood. It was everywhere, like a horror movie. His guts were out*."

Four participants experienced homelessness during their childhood. Participant 1's mom passed away when he was going into sixth grade after an overdose of medication. He lived with his grandmother briefly, but then she passed away from cancer when he was 15. After his mom and grandmother died, we would "*sleep outside*" or in a shelter. He would rob people a couple of times a week to get money for food and clothes.

Participant 4 said money was a struggle in their house growing up. They were homeless a couple of times and stayed in a shelter. Participant 5 said his family was homeless when he was 8 or 9. They lived at his mom's ex-boyfriend's house, then his dad's sister. Eventually, they lived in a shelter, but he was violent with a staff member, so they were kicked out.

Participant 7 said his family struggled financially when he was young and there was rarely food in the house. When he was 8, they were homeless for 2 years and lived in a shelter, "*It was a place to rest your head, but that was about it."*

Many participants grew up in neighborhoods plagued by violence. Participant 1 described his neighborhood as dangerous and violent, "*people dying, wild stuff*." He was threatened with guns growing up, shot at, and watched people get shot. Eventually, two of his best friends got killed in shootouts. He has two other family members incarcerated for murder – his cousin is serving 40 years, and his little brother is serving life.

Participant 17 said growing up in the projects he was exposed to "*drugs, guns, people dying*. Participant 4 said he was 12 years old when he first saw someone get shot. Participant 3 said he had personally been involved in 30–40 shootings in his neighborhood. Participant 7 had been in shootings about 10 times – shootouts or drive-bys with rival gangs. Participant 8 stated, "*The problem? It was my environment. It was "negativ*e." He later said, "*I never liked doing street stuff, but that's all I know. Violence, that's all you seeing*." Participant 15 said he was "*around violence*" a lot – in his foster homes, in the streets. "*I seen a lot of stuff no kids should see*."

Early behavior problems and criminal justice involvement

Almost all the participants mentioned early behavioral problems in elementary school. Participant 1 had to switch schools frequently because of fighting in elementary school. Participant 4 described himself as disobedient, adding "*I was suspended and expelled from a lot of schools."* Participant 5 said he got bullied in school. He was always getting in trouble and his dad would have to come and pick him up, which resulted in his dad losing his job.

Participant 7 only started attending school in third grade. He missed kindergarten through second grade, so he misbehaved to save face: "*I didn't want to be embarrassed*," he said. He described biting his teachers and needing to be restrained. Participant 8 described his elementary school kicking him out at seven years old, *"I kneed a kid in the face, broke his nose*." Participant 12 also got kicked out of elementary school for fighting, adding "*I really didn't get school. I didn't understand anything*."

Participant 13 was also kicked out of elementary school and sent to an alternative school, "*If you fought there, they locked you inside rooms*." Participant 14 said he had dyslexia and was bullied, "*It made me go crazy*." He was kicked out of at least three elementary schools. Participant 16 also said he was bullied because he was short, so he was constantly fighting. Participant 17 said he fought a lot in elementary school as well: "*I never started them, just reacted*."

A majority of participants also described criminal justice involvement from a young age. Participant 3 was 11 the first time he went to jail and was already carrying a gun regularly at that time. He went to juvenile detention again twice for shootings and robberies. Participant 5 started committing crimes at age 6. He described stealing mail and breaking into houses to steal Lego sets. Participant 8's criminal career started at 10 years old, and at the age of 12, he was arrested for a home invasion. Participant 15 was arrested for the first time at 12, which is when he started selling drugs and carrying a gun. Participant 15 also started selling drugs at age 12. By age 14, he was involved in a carjacking where he hit a pregnant woman over the head with a bottle.

Anger and mental illness

Several participants mentioned having anger issues. Participant 1 said he was "*a problem child*" with "*anger issues*." Participant 3 said that he was very angry as a teenager. Participant 8 said he gets so angry that he "*blacks out*." Participant 8 said he started fighting "*out of the womb*." Participant 12 said it was hard to make him angry, but when he did get angry, "*I would explode*." Participant 15 described himself as "*very angry*" and distrustful. Participant 16 said that ever since he was a kid, "*I would black out. Anger would take over. I've got real anger problems*."

Out of the 18 participants, 15 discussed prior mental health diagnoses, including depression, anxiety, ADHD, and PTSD (Table 1). Eleven of them reported a combination of these conditions. Participant narratives revealed the profound impact of these diagnoses on their lives:

One participant shared, "*I can't sleep*" (Participant 1), while another mentioned seeing a psychologist for depression at the time of their crime. Another participant took Prozac for anxiety at age 12 after being assessed at a juvenile detention facility. One individual, diagnosed in fifth grade with ADHD and depression, noted that therapy helped them learn to think before acting. Participant 5 described a complex array of diagnoses, stating, "*I was diagnosed with FASD, PTSD, ADHD, OCD, ODD, anxiety, attachment disorder, and trust issues*."

Participants frequently mentioned ADHD and anxiety. One participant diagnosed with ADHD, PTSD, and anxiety said, "*I see a therapist now and take A LOT of meds. It helps with my anxiety*" (Participant 7). At an alternative school, another was diagnosed with ADD, ADHD, and ODD, though their mother refused medication, opting for therapy at age nine. Another participant admitted, "*I'm impulsive. I've had anxiety forever, also ADD and depression*" (Participant 9). Some reported taking medication in prison but not outside, and one had experienced hallucinations. Medication histories included treatments like Ritalin, Adderall, and Wellbutrin for ADHD and Xanax for anxiety, in some cases dating back to as young as 4 years old. An additional participant, unsure of his exact diagnosis, said, "*You can ask my mom, she knows*" (Participant 16).

Three participants described being diagnosed with long-term serious and persistent mental illness. Participant 17 was diagnosed with bipolar disorder after a suicide attempt led to hospitalization. He vividly described his manic episodes: "*I don't sleep, can't sit still; it would last for a few days up to a week*." He likened mania to a "*super rollercoaster ride*" and believed his father also had bipolar disorder. He was convicted of setting a house on fire, resulting in a fatality, but did not describe being in a manic or depressed state during the incident.

Participant 12, diagnosed with schizophrenia, admitted, "*I don't know what schizophrenia is*." His experiences included multiple hospitalizations in psychiatric facilities for "*trippin out*," which he described as feeling like "*the world is against you*" and feeling watched and followed. These episodes began in elementary school, where teachers would take him on walks to calm him down. He mentioned slow brain development and had been hospitalized twice for competency restoration,

once for this murder and once for a previous crime. Convicted of stabbing his girlfriend to death, Participant 12 stated he "*was trippin out*."

Participant 18 had been diagnosed with PTSD, anxiety, and schizophrenia. During a required mental health assessment on probation as a teenager, he was diagnosed with schizophrenia, a condition his father also has. He described hearing voices and seeing shadows, which led to self-harm behaviors such as hitting, cutting, and stabbing himself out of frustration. Participant 18, originally from a country where mental illness is heavily stigmatized, explained, "*If you are mentally ill, you are just crazy*." Convicted of beating his newborn baby to death, he reported being in a psychotic episode at the time, driven by voices commanding him to act.

Hopelessness and Suicidality

Seven participants answered "yes" when asked if they had ever attempted suicide before the homicide crime for which they were presently incarcerated (Table 1). Suicide was attempted anywhere from one year to 30 years before committing homicide. Perpetrators with previous suicide attempts tended to be older. Participant 2 attempted suicide around age 18 after getting into a fistfight with his stepfather. He was living alone in an apartment at the time and took 200 Advil. A friend found him, and he went to the hospital to have his stomach pumped. Participant 10 described driving to a bridge and standing on the edge for a long time but changing his mind. Another time, he made a noose in jail, but a corrections officer found it before he could use it.

Participant 13 attempted suicide two years before his homicide. He described feeling, "*What's the point of everything?*" His two young kids were at his house that day. He got high in the garage and realized he couldn't afford Christmas presents for his children. He asked his mom to come over, told his kids that he loved them, took a gun that he had stolen from his ex-girlfriend, went to the garage, and cocked the gun in his mouth. His mom suddenly walked in and made him stop. She took him to the store to buy Christmas presents. That same participant described being put on the suicidal unit after he committed this homicide, *"My whole life was going to shit. I just wanted to be dead*." He was hitting himself in the head with anything he could find while on the unit.

Participant 14 cut his wrists after his grandma died when he was 16 years old. His mom found him and took him to the hospital. He had other overdose attempts after that, including after a close friend of his died. He took six fentanyl pills that day. He remembers feeling, "*I'm ready to fucking die*." Participant 15 was hospitalized in a psychiatric facility for attempting suicide by drinking Visine. He said he was "*feeling dark*" and "*my stomach was pumped for three days*."

Participant 17 described feeling depressed in his 20s and took "*baby aspirins*" to overdose. He ended up hospitalized in a psychiatric facility for several weeks. He took pills again in his 30s after his girlfriend broke up with him, but not enough to need hospitalization.

Participant 18 described driving his car into a lake at age 19 attempting to die by suicide. Participant 8 said he started to feel like "*life was nothing*," "*life was empty*." He was "*stressed and depressed. I was just lost*." Participant 9, when asked if he ever attempted suicide, said that he was never suicidal but would get a feeling of "*just being over it*."

At the same time, in addition to the seven participants with previous suicide attempts, an additional three participants anticipated dying early when asked about how they imagined their future before their crime. Participant 1 reported, "*I didn't think I'd survive for the future*." Participant 3 said "*Did I have plans for the future at any point? Hell no. I would die or go to jail*." Participant 7, when asked if ever thought about where he would be at 25, said, "*Either dead or in prison. You can't leave that life. All of our lifespans were real short*." Participant 14 said he "*knew his life would end with death or being locked up and he was prepared for that*." All three respondents perpetrated homicide before their 18th birthday.

Another four participants described feeling hopeless and like nothing mattered anymore in the period leading up to their crime, though not explicitly suicidal. Participant 4 said he felt that way after his best friend was killed at the age of 15, having grown up together, he felt angry at the world. Participant 5 described the hopelessness and chaos of his life when he was 15 years old, "*I would crash at people's houses and dig through cars all night. I never went to school. I started heavy drug use and*

everything became a blur." The crimes committed by perpetrators who anticipated early death and felt hopeless were more impulsive and part of a broader criminal lifestyle (i.e., gang membership, robbery).

Discussion

Building on research that has traditionally treated homicide and suicide as distinct phenomena, our findings illuminate the nuanced intersections between these behaviors. Using psychosocial life histories from 18 homicide perpetrators in Minnesota – a unique qualitative sample – we examined how themes of suicidality and violence converge within this group. Our findings revealed patterns of prior suicide attempts and pervasive hopelessness that frequently preceded participants' violent acts. Approximately half of the sample attempted suicide before committing homicide, with some making multiple attempts. Additionally, seven participants, most of whom were younger, exhibited a sense of "futurelessness," anticipating a short life or expressing profound hopelessness.

Despite the established role of mental health struggles, impulsivity, and futurelessness as risk factors for violence, prior suicidality among homicide offenders remains underexplored – a critical gap that this study begins to address. By examining suicidality in the context of homicide, we offer insight into how a trajectory shaped by early adversity, mental health challenges, and limited future orientation can culminate in violence. This study suggests that rather than existing as mutually exclusive behaviors, suicidality and homicidality can share underlying psychological and social roots. Indeed, the boundary between self-directed and outward-directed violence may blur under intense emotional strain, highlighting the need for integrated approaches to understanding and preventing both forms of violence.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. The small sample size and focus on the specific geographical area in the Twin Cities may limit the generalizability of the findings. The participant narratives are also retrospective accounts, which could be influenced by their current circumstances and perceptions, perhaps shaped by experiences and interventions in prison. Self-report data can be unreliable, however in this study the narratives were cross-referenced with official case files, court transcripts, media reports, and police reports. Future qualitative research should aim to include larger and more diverse samples to validate these findings and explore the life histories of those with similar risk factors for violence and suicidality who did not end up committing homicide. Longitudinal studies could also provide a more comprehensive understanding of how suicidality and violence interplay throughout development.

Mental illness

Nearly all the participants in this study had prior mental health diagnoses. However, it can be difficult to disentangle the role these diagnoses played in both their crime and prior suicide attempts and hopelessness. Many symptoms of mental illnesses are traits that motivate violence for individuals both with and without a specific diagnosis. For example, irritability and hopelessness are symptoms of depression that may contribute to both violence and suicidality for perpetrators with or without a diagnosed serious mental illness. Impulsivity, a symptom of bipolar disorder, is a trait that influences violence and suicidality among people both with and without a mental health diagnosis (Krueger et al. 2007). It's easier to examine the role of psychosis because delusions and hallucinations tend to be specific to a serious mental illness, and it is easier to conceptualize how these symptoms can directly motivate violence, through command hallucinations for example (McNiel, Eisner, and Binder 2000; Peterson et al. 2014). Only two of the 18 participants in this study described psychosis motivating their homicide, which is consistent with previous research (Peterson et al. 2014).

Suicide spectrum

Suicide is frequently viewed along a spectrum (Bersia et al. 2022), with van Heeringen (2002) proposing a pyramid structure to conceptualize its varying stages. At the top of this pyramid are individuals who die by suicide, followed by those who engage in nonfatal attempts. Below them is a larger group of individuals who experience recurrent suicidal ideation or have concrete plans. At the base of the pyramid is the largest group: individuals in the general population who have experienced suicidal thoughts at some point in their lives.

While "futurelessness" or an anticipated early death has been recognized as a risk factor for violence (Brezina, Tekin, and Topalli 2009), it has not been fully integrated into the suicide spectrum or pyramid. In a recent survey, Goodwill (2023) examined 264 Black young adults who reported suicidal thoughts within the past two weeks, identifying hopelessness about the future as their most common reason for considering suicide. The findings presented here suggest that recognizing futurelessness as part of the suicide spectrum – and as a critical intervention point – represents an essential direction for future research, not least because it could help differentiate those with transient suicidal thoughts from individuals whose despair is intensified by a pervasive sense of limited prospects. This distinction could be critical, identifying a group potentially at higher risk for both self-directed and outwardly directed violence. To deepen understanding, moreover, future studies could employ longitudinal methods to track how futurelessness evolves over time and across stages of suicidal ideation and behavior. Such studies could reveal patterns in how futurelessness intensifies or diminishes based on life circumstances, identifying key intervention points for preventing progression to more severe suicidal behaviors.

Relationships

Several participants highlighted major turning points that marked the onset of their trajectories toward violence, often triggered by the loss of influential figures who had provided emotional support and stability. These losses included the death of a mother (participants 1 and 12), stepfather (participant 15), or the departure of supportive figures like a godfather (participant 5) or pastor (participant 10). Consistent with this, previous research has shown that secure attachment and positive relationships, particularly with parents or mentors, can serve as powerful protective factors, buffering against both violent and self-destructive behaviors even when other risk factors are present (Lösel and Farrington 2012). FitzGerald et al. (2017) found that positive relationships with adults were negatively associated with suicide attempts among 2,794 American Indian and Alaskan Native high school students, for example, highlighting the importance of adult support across cultural contexts. Similarly, school bonding has emerged as a significant protective factor, promoting nonviolent outcomes and reducing suicide risk, with a meta-analysis of 16 studies confirming that school connectedness is associated with lower reports of suicidal thoughts and behaviors, even among high-risk youth (Marraccini and Brier 2017).

Relatedly, the Benevolent Childhood Experiences (BCEs) scale offers an innovative way to measure the impact of positive early-life experiences that may counterbalance the effects of adverse childhood events. Developed by Narayan et al. (2018), this tool assesses key factors like having a caregiver who fosters a sense of safety, positive friendships, meaningful beliefs, and supportive adult relationships, including teachers and neighbors. By focusing on benevolent experiences rather than solely on trauma, the BCE scale broadens the scope for understanding resilience in the face of risk. The scale's emphasis on emotional safety, social support, and meaningful adult connections aligns closely with evidence that positive relationships can mitigate the risks of violence and suicidality, making it a promising tool for future research.

More research is warranted to understand the nuanced role that these protective relationships play, particularly in high-risk individuals who have experienced significant loss. Longitudinal studies could provide insights into how supportive relationships buffer against negative outcomes over time, and

how their absence might accelerate pathways to violence or self-harm. Additionally, research on interventions targeting relationship-building – such as mentoring programs or initiatives to strengthen school connections – could identify practical strategies to reduce violence and suicidality. Exploring how benevolent childhood experiences interact with adverse events to influence both suicidal and violent behaviors could inform comprehensive prevention efforts and interventions that leverage positive relationships and social connectedness as central components of resilience.

Conclusions

While violence has been studied as a precursor to suicide, suicide attempts have not been examined as a precursor to homicide. Nearly all participants in this study fell somewhere along the suicide spectrum before committing homicide, although the timing varied for each individual. This novel finding highlights the significant overlap between suicidality and violence, and how they both may be connected to trauma, mental health, hopelessness, and futurelessness. Additional research is needed that focuses on larger samples and longitudinal designs. These findings have important implications for how violence and suicide risk are assessed, and potential new avenues for prevention and intervention of both suicidality and violence.

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THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigor, journalistic flair

Students kneel in front of a makeshift memorial on Sept. 5, 2024, in front of Apalachee High School in Winder, Ga., where two students and two teachers were shot and killed the day before. Jessica McGowan via Getty Images

Georgia high school shooting shows how hard it can be to take action even after police see warning signs

Published: September 6, 2024 8:31am EDT

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Most school shootings don't just happen out of nowhere – there are typically warning signs.

A year before a 14-year-old boy was arrested for allegedly opening fire in his high school math class in Winder, Georgia, on Sept. 4, 2024 – killing two teachers and two students – authorities visited his home to investigate several anonymous tips about online threats to commit a school shooting.

When they interviewed the boy, who was 13 at the time, he denied making the threats. The father told police there were hunting guns in the house but that the boy didn't have "unsupervised access" to the weapons.

The FBI said in a statement on the day of the shooting that there was "no probable cause for an arrest" and that local law enforcement "alerted local schools for continued monitoring of the subject."

Teachers at the school had been supplied with special identification cards with panic buttons a week prior to the shooting. While authorities credit the ID cards with preventing the shooting from being worse than it was, the action still came too late to stop the killings.

In many ways, the story mirrors dozens of similar stories that we, a sociologist and psychologist, have collected in recent years in our effort to study the lives of mass shooters. It typifies what we believe is one of the biggest challenges that schools face when it comes to averting school shootings: recognizing and acting upon warning signs that school shooters almost always give well before they open fire.

In our database of U.S. mass shootings since 1966 – defined as incidents in which four or more victims were murdered with guns in a public location and with no connection to underlying criminal activity, such as gangs or drugs – there have now been 15 shootings at K-12 schools. The first took place in Stockton, California, in 1989.

Seven of those school shootings occurred in the past decade, including the second and third deadliest on record: Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas, in 2022 (21 dead) and Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, in 2018 (17 dead). The deadliest in history occurred in December 2012, when 20 children and six adult staff members were murdered at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut.

In all, 138 people were killed in the attacks and at least 177 people were injured.

What we know about mass school shooters

When the Columbine High School massacre took place in 1999, it was seen as a watershed moment in the United States. At the time, it was the worst mass shooting at a school in the country's history.

Twenty-five years later, it ranks fourth.

Despite the billions of dollars invested in school safety since Columbine, school shootings have become more frequent and more deadly. Beyond the mass shootings that grab the headlines, a gun goes off in an American school almost every day.

Our research and dozens of interviews with school shooting perpetrators, survivors and first responders suggest that part of the problem is law enforcement and school officials. Influenced by myths and misinformation about Columbine, they still don't know enough about mass school shooting trends to recognize the warning signs.

The majority of mass school shootings were carried out by a lone gunman, with just two – Columbine and the 1998 shooting at Westside Middle School in Jonesboro, Arkansas – carried out by two gunmen.

The choice of "gunmen" to describe the perpetrators is accurate – all but one of the mass school shootings in our database were carried out by men or boys. The average age of those involved in carrying out the attacks was 18 — the youngest was 11 and the oldest was 32. As juveniles, a majority of school shooters used guns borrowed or stolen from parents, caregivers and other significant adults in their lives.

After every school shooting, people say "we never thought something like this could happen in our community." However, mass school shootings happen most frequently in small suburban or rural communities like Winder, Georgia. There, the suspect is a 14-year-old student at the school. This is unsurprising. Most school shooters have a connection to the school they target. In our database, we found that 15 of the 17 school shooters were either current or former students.

For most perpetrators, the mass shooting event is intended to be a final act. The majority of school mass shooters die in the attack. Of the 17 mass school shooters in our database, eight were apprehended. The rest died on the scene, nearly all by suicide – the lone exception being the Robb Elementary shooter in Uvalde, who was shot dead by police.

Preventing the next school shooting

Inspired by past school shooters, some perpetrators are seeking fame and notoriety. However, most school mass shooters are driven by despair and generalized anger; over 80% of school mass shooters showed signs of a crisis before the shooting, including depression, mood swings, agitation, isolation, trouble with daily tasks and other noticeable behavior changes.

Most importantly, over 90% leaked their plans ahead of time to others, preempting their attacks by leaving posts, messages or videos warning of their intent. School shooters communicate their intent to do harm in advance as a final, desperate cry for help.

The key to stopping these tragedies is being alert to these warning signs and acting on them immediately. Even if investigators don't have enough evidence for an arrest, they can continually monitor students and help connect them to school- or community-based services or interventions, including peer-mentoring or mental health treatment. Simply criminalizing or punishing threats increases the risk for violence by worsening grievances with the school.

At the same time, parents can be reminded to keep guns secure. Almost all shootings by children and teens can be prevented by safe storage of firearms and accountability for adult gun owners. When a weapon is stored separately from its ammunition, locked and unloaded, it is much more difficult for someone to quickly use it in a violent attack.

Portions of this article originally appeared in previous articles written by the authors and first published on Feb. 8, 2019, and May 25, 2022.

OPINION > **OPINION COLUMNISTS** • Opinion, Opinion Columnist

Opinion: The grim legacy of Columbine after 25 years

No other American shooting resonates as profoundly as Columbine High School

A rose is left beneath a placard along a stone wall that has quotes from those affected by the 1999 Columbine High School shooting, at the Columbine Memorial at Robert F. Clement Park on April 20, 2021 in Littleton, Colorado. 12 students and one teacher at Columbine High School died. The thirteen victims of the massacre were: Rachel Scott, 17, Daniel Rohrbough, 15, Dave Sanders, 47, Kyle Velasquez, 16, Steven Curnow, 14, Cassie Bernall, 17, Isaiah Shoels, 18, Matthew Kechter, 16, Lauren Townsend, 18, John Tomlin, 17, Kelly Fleming, 16, Daniel Mauser, 15, and Corey DePooter, 17. (Photo by Helen H. Richardson/The Denver Post)

By **DAVID PYROOZ** | Guest Commentary, **JAMES DENSLEY** | Guest Commentary and **JILLIAN PETERSON** | Guest Commentary

PUBLISHED: April 15, 2024 at 9:56 AM MDT

This April marks the 25th anniversary of the Columbine High School massacre, a watershed moment in American history that has become emblematic of a harrowing chapter in our national narrative on gun violence and mass shootings. The tragedy of Columbine, where two students embarked on a meticulously planned attack, leaving 13 dead and 24 injured, was not just a moment of national mourning but a turning point that shifted the American psyche.

We are criminologists who study gun violence. This January, we surveyed 10,000 Americans about their experience with and exposure to mass shootings.

We asked each of them a poignant question: "Please name the first mass shooting that comes to mind that occurred in your lifetime?" The question was open-ended. There was no drop-down menu of options to choose from. We simply wanted to know the event they associated with a mass shooting.

Astonishingly, 35% of respondents — over 3,500 people — cited Columbine. No other event, not even the gut-wrenching school shootings at Sandy Hook (10%), Parkland (5%), or Uvalde (2%), which were the next most cited, respectively, came close to this level of recall, despite Columbine predating them by years. The deadliest mass shooting in U.S., history, where 60 concertgoers were killed in Las Vegas in 2017, was listed by 2% of respondents.

A pair of young girls comfort one another during the Memorial Service for the victims of the Columbine High School shooting. An estimated 70,000 people attended the service at the Mann Theatre on Bowles Ave. on April 25, 1999, in Littleton. (Photo by Craig F. Walker/The Denver Post)

The significance of Columbine transcends its tragic tallies. It has become what social scientists call a framing event for how Americans perceive and process the horror of mass shootings, a shorthand for terror. Like the moon landing in 1969 or the attacks on September 11, people remember precisely where they stood on April 20, 1999; Columbine is a cultural anchor.

Part of the reason is that Columbine was among the first mass shootings in the digital age, receiving unprecedented media coverage that not only brought horror into every American living room but also set a template for infamy, inspiring a dark subculture that glorifies the perpetrators. As we document in our book, The Violence Project: How to Stop a Mass Shooting Epidemic, this phenomenon has led to a cycle of emulation, where subsequent shooters seek to replicate or surpass previous atrocities. The result is a chilling blueprint for violence that has been copied time and again.

Columbine both defines and distorts our understanding of mass shootings and school shootings. The myths that sprang forth from his tragic event, seared into the national consciousness, from the influence of violent media to the image of bullies and black trench coats, simplified complex motives, amplified fears, skewed public discourse, and ultimately obscured the path to genuine solutions.

Columbine catalyzed a seismic shift in how schools, communities, and law enforcement respond to the threat of mass shootings. It spurred a multi-billion-dollar school security industry and instilled a generation with the protocol to "run, hide, fight." But our fortification of schools, unproven surveillance technologies, and "good guys with guns" have not stopped school shootings nor even slowed them down. There have been 394 school shootings since 1999.

Strikingly, our data highlight a generational divide in Columbine's legacy. From Millennials to the Silent Generation, Columbine was listed anywhere from 3 to 10 times more often than any other mass shooting, but for Gen X specifically — in their 20s and 30s when the shooting occurred — Columbine came immediately to mind for 52% of respondents. For Gen Z — not yet alive for the shooting — it came to mind just 8% of the time, although still more than more recent tragedies at Parkland and Uvalde.

For Generation X, now navigating their 40s and 50s, the specter of Columbine looms large in their collective consciousness. But for their children, the legacy of that tragedy is not just a shadow in their minds–it's a palpable part of their daily existence. This younger generation confronts the aftermath of Columbine through tangible, everyday rituals: participating in lockdown drills, walking through metal detectors, and shouldering bulletproof backpacks as they enter their schools. They bear the weight of a harrowing event they have no direct memory of, a chilling inheritance felt through the

A Chatfield High School student places flowers at the Columbine High School massacre memorial on Monday, April 20, 2020, at Robert F. Clement Park in Littleton, Colorado. (Photo by AAron Ontiveroz/The Denver Post)

We must never forget Columbine – the victims, the survivors, the first responders, and the community forever altered by its shadow. But only by looking forward can we turn the page on the copycat violence, confusion, and consequential policy it spawned. We've learned a lot about the root causes of mass shootings since Columbine. Yet, these root causes–despair, trauma, isolation, the pursuit of infamy, and the ease of obtaining firearms—persist, largely ignored, and unremedied.

On this somber anniversary, let us confront the complexities of gun violence and make the changes necessary to relegate school mass shootings to history.

By developing systems for crisis reporting and intervention, providing strong mental health resources and support in schools, starving mass shooters of the oxygen of publicity, implementing measures for the safe storage of firearms, and limiting access to them, especially for teenagers and individuals in crisis, we can prevent the recurrence of such tragedies and leave the next generation with a new legacy.

David Pyrooz is an associate professor of sociology at the University of Colorado Boulder. James Densley at Metropolitan State University and Jillian Peterson at Hamline University are the co-directors of The Violence Project.

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Los Angeles Times

OPINION

Opinion: Here's what is so unusual about the Wisconsin school shooting — and what isn't

Abundant Life Christian School in Madison, Wis., on Tuesday, a day after a shooting that left three dead. (Morry Gash / Associated Press)

By James Densley, Jillian Peterson and David Riedman

Dec. 17, 2024 1:50 PM PT

The Dec. 16 shooting at Abundant Life Christian School in Madison, Wis., has shocked the nation, not only for its horror but for its unique profile. This time, a teenage girl opened fire inside her school, killing a teacher, another student, and apparently herself,

and injuring six others. Although female school shooters are exceedingly rare, the patterns that lead to such tragedies are painfully familiar.

School shootings are a uniquely American crisis. According to the K-12 School Shooting Database, which tracks whenever a gun is brandished or fired on school property, there have been 323 such incidents on school property in 2024 alone.

The public's attention often focuses on the gender of the perpetrators. After the March 2023 mass shooting at the Covenant School in Nashville, the shooter's transgender identity was much discussed. After other school shootings, "toxic masculinity" has been highlighted, along with the well-documented fact that the majority of mass shootings are perpetrated by men and boys.

WORLD & NATION

Teacher and a teen student killed in shooting at a Christian school in Wisconsin

Dec. 16, 2024

In our recently released K-12 school homicide database, which details 349 homicides committed at K-12 schools since 2020, only 12 (3%) of the perpetrators were female. There have been some notable cases involving female school shooters. In 1988, a female babysitter walked into a second-grade classroom in Winnetka, Ill., and told the students she was there to teach them about guns; she opened fire, killing an 8-year-old boy and wounding five other students.

In Rigby, Idaho, in 2021, a 12-year-old girl plotted to kill 20 to 30 classmates. Armed with two handguns, she walked out of a bathroom and began firing in the hallway, wounding two students and the custodian. A teacher heard the shots, left their classroom, and hugged the shooter to disarm her.

WORLD & NATION

Police chief says motive for Wisconsin school shooting was a 'combination of factors'

Dec. 17, 2024

The earliest case in our records was in 1979, when a 16-year-old girl opened fire at Cleveland Elementary School in San Diego, killing two and injuring nine. This was when the American public was first introduced to a female school shooter. Her infamous explanation for her actions — "I just don't like Mondays" — is etched in pop culture. But it was less about a flippant attitude and more about despair. At a parole hearing years later, the shooter admitted the truth: "I wanted to die." She saw her attack as a way to be killed by police.

Her story reflects what we now know: Most school shooters are suicidal, in crisis and driven by a mix of hopelessness and rage.

Decades of research reveal a consistent set of truths. School shooters are typically insiders, meaning they are current or former students. They know the routines, security measures and weaknesses of their schools. And while investigators don't yet know what led to the Madison shooting, school shootings are almost never spontaneous acts of violence.

Instead, in most cases, school shootings are the culmination of a profound unraveling, a last and terrible cry for help. More than 90% of the perpetrators show clear signs of a crisis in the months or weeks leading up to their attacks — depression, mood swings, agitation, isolation or an inability to manage daily life. And crucially, more than 90% leak their plans ahead of time, sharing warnings with peers, posting ominous messages, or even voicing their intent outright.

OPINION

Op-Ed: We have studied every mass shooting since 1966. Here's what we've learned about the shooters

Aug. 4, 2019

With each school shooting, we tend to concentrate on details: the rare female shooter, the high-profile massacre, the immediate response of authorities. But if we step back, we tend to see the same story repeated again and again. A student insider. In crisis. Suicidal.

Finally, there is access to guns — the bridge between crisis and catastrophe. As of Tuesday afternoon, we don't know where the Madison shooter got the gun she used. In Wisconsin, it is illegal for someone under the age of 18 to possess a firearm, although there are exceptions.

In nearly every school shooting, the weapon is obtained from the shooter's home or from a complicit adult. This was true in 1979 when the Cleveland Elementary shooter used a rifle given to her by her father as a Christmas gift, and it remains true in the data today. When firearms are stored securely — locked, unloaded and separate from ammunition — the risk of impulsive violence drops dramatically. Yet this basic precaution is far too often ignored.

Parents and guardians must understand their role in preventing tragedy. Safe gun storage is the simplest, most effective way to ensure that guns do not fall into the hands of teens in crisis. Many states have implemented laws holding adults accountable when

their firearms are accessed by minors. For the purposes of that law in Wisconsin, a child is defined as someone 14 or younger. The shooter was 15.

OPINION

Op-Ed: Why mass shootings stopped in 2020 — and why they are now roaring back

March 23, 2021

At the same time that families must be vigilant, schools must foster environments where students feel safe reporting troubling behavior without fear of punishment or stigma. This year alone, several teenage girls have made threats of violence against their schools, sometimes coming alarmingly close to taking real action. On Sept. 7, a 15-year-old girl in Temperance, Mich., was arrested after sending a group text threatening a school shooting at Whiteford Agricultural Schools. Two weeks earlier, on Aug. 26 in Austin, Texas, a tip to the FBI led to the arrest of a 17-year-old girl, disgruntled and openly plotting a shooting at her former elementary school. In March, an 18-year-old woman was taken into custody after threatening to "shoot up" a school in Knoxville, Tenn.

Yet if we simply criminalize threats without intervening meaningfully, we risk amplifying the very grievances that lead to violence. We must address the broader culture of despair and anger that typically fuels these attacks. Social isolation, bullying and untreated mental health issues are not trivial adolescent struggles — they may be precursors to violence for those who see no other way out.

School shootings should not be remembered for the novelty of any of their details, but as reminders of what we already know and what we can prevent. We cannot erase the trauma that these events cause, but we can act on the lessons they offer. The warning signs are usually visible. The tools for prevention exist. And every school shooting we fail to stop is a tragedy we could have prevented.

James Densley is a professor at Metropolitan State University and co-founder of the Violence Prevention Project Research Center at Hamline University. Jillian Peterson is a professor at Hamline University and co-founder of the Violence Prevention Project Research Center. David Riedman is a professor at Idaho State University and creator of the K-12 School Shooting Database.

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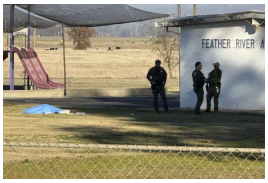

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Murder in a time of crisis: a qualitative exploration of the 2020 homicide spike through offender interviews

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Murder in a time of crisis: a qualitative exploration of the 2020 homicide spike through offender interviews

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how the COVID-19 pandemic and the civil unrest following George Floyd's murder influenced the 2020 homicide surge, focusing on individuals already at high risk for violence. Based on life history interviews with 18 people convicted of homicide in Minnesota, the research explores how the disruptions of 2020 intensified pre-existing vulnerabilities, accelerating pathways to lethal violence. Participants reported that the breakdown of social order, loss of routine, and economic instability created conditions that rapidly escalated violence within their lives and communities. This qualitative analysis complements existing quantitative research by offering a detailed account of the micro-level experiences behind the homicide spike, revealing how large-scale societal disruptions can shape individual trajectories toward serious violence. Findings underscore the need for policies that address structural inequalities and ensure continuity of social supports and mental health services during periods of widespread upheaval to prevent future escalations in violence.

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COVID-19; George Floyd; homicide

In 2020, the United States experienced an unprecedented 30% increase in homicides, the largest annual rise in over a century since records began (Gramlich 2021). Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) show that the murder rate jumped from 6.0 per 100,000 people in 2019 to 7.8 in 2020, with firearms involved in 77% of cases (Gramlich 2021). This dramatic spike has sparked extensive debate and research into its causes (Regalado, Timmer, and Jawaid 2022).

Explanations for the surge include the widespread social and economic disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, including the closure of schools and essential community services, which increased stress and reduced access to support systems (Lopez and Rosenfeld 2021; Rosenfeld and Lopez 2020). Reduced proactive policing and eroding trust in law enforcement following the murder of George Floyd on 25 May 2020, also likely contributed (Kim 2023; Nix et al. 2024; White, Orosco, and Terpstra 2022). Moreover, studies have shown that record numbers of gun purchases (Schleimer et al. 2021) and heightened legal cynicism – whereby individuals lose trust in government institutions (Moule et al. 2022) – fueled rising violence.

While homicide rates generally exhibit slow, gradual changes over time (Rosenfield 2024), the unprecedented surge in 2020 demands a deeper understanding of its underlying mechanisms (Lopez and Rosenfeld 2021). Existing research has focused primarily on macro-level trends in gun

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violence (e.g., Boehme, Kaminski, and Nolan 2022; Kim and Phillips 2021; Larson, Santaularia, and Uggen 2023). In contrast, this study adopts a micro-level perspective on homicide specifically, exploring how these 'exogenous shocks' – significant, large-scale disruptions external to the individual (Rosenfield 2018), such as a global pandemic or high-profile death in police custody – impacted the lives of individuals already vulnerable to criminal behavior, particularly in the epicenter of the unrest: the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and Saint Paul, Minnesota.

George Floyd's murder sparked serious civil unrest across the Twin Cities, leading to riots, looting, and $500 million in property damage, including the burning of the Minneapolis 3rd Police Precinct (Phelps 2024). In response, Governor Tim Walz activated the Minnesota National Guard – the state's largest deployment since World War II. This period also saw a sharp increase in homicides: the number of murders in Minnesota rose by 58% from 117 in 2019 to 185 in 2020, and increased again to 201 in 2021, with 70% of these homicides occurring in the Twin Cities. This study qualitatively examines the perspectives of 18 individuals convicted of homicide during this period, providing a micro-level understanding that complements existing quantitative research and offers insights to inform policies aimed at preventing similar violence in the future.

Literature review

Understanding the homicide spike in 2020 and 2021 requires situating it within developmental and life-course criminology's focus on the intersection of time and place (Elder 1985, 1994). This framework emphasizes how historical and geographical contexts shape individual trajectories (e.g., Pyrooz et al. 2024). As Neil and Sampson (2021) argue, 'when you are' and 'where you are' are as crucial to life outcomes as 'who you are,' since the timing and location of social events influence experiences and developmental paths. Historical exogenous shocks, like the U.S. prohibition of alcohol production in 1920, had profound effects on organized crime in Chicago, for example, restructuring power dynamics and amplifying inequalities within criminal networks (Smith 2020). Large, shared experiences – such as the prohibition or pandemic – serve as 'turning points,' distinct from the individual events typically explored in the turning points literature (e.g., marriage, employment, or incarceration; Sampson and Laub 2005). These broader events create unique temporal and spatial contexts that can amplify social inequalities, destabilize local structures, and alter life courses in ways few studies have explored.

In addition to the breakdowns in daily routines and weakened social controls emphasized by routine activities theory (Cohen and Felson 1979), life-course criminology thus provides a robust framework for understanding how large-scale disruptions intersect with existing vulnerabilities. Research shows that disruptions in 2020 disproportionately affected economically disadvantaged and predominantly Black neighborhoods near protest sites (Muhammad 2020). Reductions in police presence and increased social disorganization further destabilized these communities (Cassell 2020; Cheng and Long 2022). The concept of 'cumulative disadvantage' (Sampson and Laub 1997) illustrates how exogenous shocks exacerbate preexisting inequalities, as time and place interact with individual circumstances to amplify strain and vulnerability. As Agnew (1992) argues, sudden shifts in social, economic, and community contexts can generate new forms of strain, which may lead to a rapid escalation in criminal behavior as a maladaptive coping mechanism (Cubukcu, Darcan, and Aksu 2023).

This study extends the literature by examining how the COVID-19 pandemic and civil unrest following the death of George Floyd functioned as turning points, reshaping life trajectories in ways that accelerated pathways to homicide. Unlike much of the existing research, which has focused on macro-level trends and aggregate data (e.g., Lind et al. 2024), this study delves into individual-level experiences to reveal how the extraordinary pressures of 2020 influenced personal trajectories toward violence. The findings illustrate how exogenous shocks do not uniformly affect communities or individuals (Hoeboer et al. 2024), highlighting the importance of considering context-specific factors. By integrating insights from life-course theory, this study provides a nuanced understanding

of how time and place converge to influence pathways to violence, particularly for those already situated in contexts of extreme instability and disadvantage.

Methods

This qualitative study is part of a larger mixed-methods project examining over 600 homicides in Hennepin and Ramsey Counties, Minnesota, between 2018 and 2022. These counties include the state's largest cities, Minneapolis and Saint Paul. In collaboration with the Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension, we analyzed National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) records and gathered additional information from media, police reports, and trial documents to contextualize each case. These data allowed us to identify eligible participants for the qualitative component reported here.

Study recruitment and participants

Participants were recruited from two Minnesota Correctional Facilities: one medium-security and one maximum-security. We initially contacted all six state prisons, but only two responded. The wardens at these two facilities provided lists of eligible individuals convicted of first- and second-degree murder or manslaughter for offenses that occurred in 2020 or 2021. Eligibility was further refined based on additional criteria: individuals actively appealing their cases or deemed unfit to participate (e.g., for health or behavioral reasons) were excluded. At the medium-security facility, eight out of 13 eligible participants agreed to participate. The maximum-security facility housed about 100 eligible individuals, but owing to staffing limitations and the scope of the study, the warden requested we limit our sample. Therefore, we randomly selected 20 individuals from the eligible list, and 10 consented to participate. The study received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the Minnesota Department of Corrections, ensuring ethical compliance. The principal investigators are experienced interviewers and qualitative researchers with extensive backgrounds working in prisons and with people convicted of serious (violent) offenses, including in death penalty mitigation (Peterson and Densley, 2021).

The study involved 18 male participants, ranging in age from 18 to 62 years at the time of the interview, with a mean age of 27.3 years at the time of their offenses. Fourteen self-identified as Black and four as White. Geographically, the participants were primarily from urban areas in the Twin Cities, with 10 from Minneapolis, five from St. Paul, and three from suburban areas. They were incarcerated for a range of homicide-related offenses involving firearms (10 cases), knives (two cases), vehicles (two cases), physical force (two cases), and fire (one case). Their victims ranged in age from infancy to 75 years, with a mean age of 32.9. Of the 18 victims, 14 were male and four were female. They were predominantly Black (nine), followed by White (six), with one American Indian, one Asian, and one Latinx victim. Relationships between perpetrators and victims ranged widely: seven involved strangers, three were linked to gang or group affiliations, and the remainder involved close relations such as a child, sibling, girlfriend, spouse, or acquaintance.

Data collection

Data were collected through open-ended, semi-structured interviews conducted over two days at each facility, with each interview, a combination of general and specific questions, lasting between 45 and 150 minutes (average of 90 minutes). Each interview began with the prompt, 'Tell us about where you grew up,' which helped participants feel at ease and allowed the conversation to flow naturally. From there, we inquired about their family, school, and work lives, followed by questions regarding their offending history and mental health. As the interviews progressed, we shifted focus to the circumstances surrounding the offense that led to their incarceration. This included asking what was going on in their lives at that time, which

served as a segue to discuss the broader context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the aftermath of George Floyd's murder. Although these topics emerged organically from earlier discussions, they were also probed more specifically to understand their direct impact, ensuring we captured participants' perspectives on these critical events. Owing to prison restrictions, interviews were not audio-recorded; instead, one principal investigator interviewed while the other took detailed notes. Interviews were held in private rooms where correctional staff could observe but not hear, ensuring safety and confidentiality. Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Analytical approach

We used inductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) to identify patterns within the data, focusing on themes related to the participants' experiences and their paths to homicide. The principal investigators independently coded the data, achieving 95% agreement, and refined the themes through iterative review to ensure consistency. This approach provided a comprehensive understanding of how external pressures, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and civil unrest, shaped their actions and led to violence.

Findings

This section highlights key themes that emerged from the interviews, supported by illustrative verbatim quotes (*in italics*).

Pre-2020: vulnerability and instability

The 18 interviewees described lives marked by early instability, exposure to violence, and entrenched criminality long before 2020. Many had been raised in environments of parental substance abuse and incarceration, which led to unstable upbringings. Interviewee 3 explained, '*I didn't have no guidance, I did what I wanted to do*,' encapsulating the lack of direction many interviewees faced in their youth.

Their early environments were characterized by constant violence. As Interviewee 8 said, '*That's all you're seeing*,' referring to the violence that permeated their neighborhoods. These interviewees often were involved with the criminal justice system early, getting into trouble in elementary school. Behavioral issues, mental health diagnoses, and associations with delinquent peers escalated during adolescence. Interviewee 7 recalled how he was expelled from school after posing with a gun and posting the image on social media, reflecting a common trajectory toward more serious criminal involvement.

Access to illegal firearms and drug use often began early. For many, significant turning points like the death of a parent or guardian further exacerbated their vulnerabilities. Interviewee 15 described discovering his stepfather had been murdered, recalling, '*I've never seen so much blood. It was everywhere, like a horror movie*.' Such traumatic experiences deepened their engagement in criminal activity as a coping mechanism.

Several interviewees cycled in and out of juvenile detention or jail, which further entrenched them in criminality. By 2020, many were already on precarious paths, shaped by adverse childhood experiences and longstanding systemic vulnerabilities.

2020: crisis and escalation

The events of 2020, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic and the civil unrest following George Floyd's murder, exacerbated these pre-existing vulnerabilities and pushed many interviewees into desperate circumstances that culminated in violence.

Interviewee 1, who had been homeless and involved in armed robberies before the pandemic, described how the closures of shelters during COVID-19 left him without any place to stay. '*I couldn't sleep, I was depressed*,' he said, noting how his mental health rapidly deteriorated. The situation became even more unstable following George Floyd's murder, with increased violence on the streets. '*I had to protect myself no matter what*,' he said, describing the night he shot someone in a confrontation near a homeless encampment. For Interviewee 1, the collapse of already fragile support systems, combined with heightened street violence, accelerated his path toward homicide.

Interviewee 2's crime was also shaped by the pandemic, though very differently. Wealthy and accustomed to luxury, the pandemic lockdown intensified problems in his marriage, leading to divorce. '*I was lonely and depressed*,' he explained, adding that he turned to younger friends and heavy drinking to cope. After a night of partying, he crashed his car, killing two passengers. He reflected that the pandemic stripped him of the social connections and structure that previously anchored his life.

Interviewee 18, who had been managing his schizophrenia and staying sober before the pandemic, lost his job when the bakery he worked at closed due to COVID-19. The loss of routine and the stress of unemployment caused his mental health to spiral. '*Everything collapsed*,' he explained, recalling how he stopped taking his medication and began experiencing intense paranoia and hallucinations. In this state, he tragically beat and killed his newborn child: '*That night the voices were saying you aren't good enough, she [the baby's mother] doesn't think you're worthy*.' His narrative highlights how the pandemic disrupted delicate balances in the lives of those managing mental health conditions, leading to devastating outcomes.

Interviewee 6 legally obtained a handgun permit under Minnesota law after the 2016 election, driven by rising fears of racial tensions and police violence. He purchased multiple firearms – a '*shotgun, handgun, and assault rifle*' – as he described the social atmosphere as '*toxic*.' His decision to carry a gun in public during the COVID-19 pandemic stemmed from escalating fears of '*martial law*' and a need '*to protect my family*.'

After George Floyd's murder, his anxiety deepened. '*I didn't feel safe. It was fine in the winter, but it was World War III in the summer*,' he explained. Seeing violent protests and looting, particularly at a nearby Target, reinforced his fears. Following a local crime-monitoring app, he noticed fewer police and more reports of break-ins, gun violence, and carjackings, leaving him convinced his neighborhood was unsafe.

Living with his girlfriend and her two sons, tensions escalated with the boys' father, involved in gang activity. One morning, feeling threatened during an altercation, Interviewee 6 shot and killed the father, marking the first time he had fired a gun at someone. His case shows how fear, civil unrest, and personal security concerns during the pandemic can lead individuals to fatal decisions, even those without prior criminal histories.

Interviewee 11 told us that COVID-19 heightened his agitation and stress levels, leading to increased confrontations and physical altercations. In this context, he stabbed and killed a stranger during a fight inside a grocery store. Interviewee 16, who stabbed his brother to death during a fight at home, similarly recalled how living on top of one another during the pandemic escalated domestic disputes, but also that '*after George Floyd, things were crazy*' on the streets. He vividly described how his cousin drove 350 miles from Milwaukee to Minneapolis just to participate in the looting. Interviewee 13's crime also stemmed from the unrest following George Floyd's murder. The disruptions of the pandemic escalated his substance abuse, leading him to drive intoxicated into a group of Black Lives Matter protesters, killing one.

For several interviewees, the events of 2020 created a cycle of violence that was difficult to escape. Interviewee 4's experiences vividly illustrate how repeated victimization and fear led to a deadly outcome. Initially, he viewed the pandemic as '*fun*' and a '*big summer break*' due to school closures. But after being shot at five times in under two years, he began carrying a gun for protection. The constant threat of violence weighed heavily on him, and after his friend was killed, he became

'*angry at the world*.' His rage, fueled by people disrespecting his deceased friend online, pushed him into a retaliatory shooting, leading to his imprisonment.

Interviewee 7, who had been shot twice during the civil unrest, described the pervasive fear he felt in 2020. "*People were waking up, hitting the streets. . . like 150 people in the parking lot, partying all day*. . . . *Running wild*, [wearing] '*ski masks, not COVID masks*' he recalled. He estimated being involved in at least 10 shootouts, with each violent encounter reinforcing the sense that carrying a gun was necessary for survival. His actions culminated in a fatal shooting, where an innocent woman was caught in the crossfire. Interviewee 3 added: '*All around, there was a lot of shit going on. Nobody give a fuck about no police*.' Interviewee 3 referenced two tragic cases: nine-year-old Trinity Ottoson-Smith, shot while playing on a trampoline, and six-year-old Aniya Allen, killed while sitting in her family's car. He said, '*Even little kids' getting shot*.'

Other interviewees echoed the sentiment that 2020 created a self-reinforcing cycle of violence. Interviewee 10 described how '*four of my friends got shot that summer, and one of them was doing the shooting*.' Interviewee 9 reflected that the influx of money from looting combined with government assistance checks worsened the situation: '*Too many people who never had money before was getting money . . . People didn't know what to do with it*.' Despite the '*quick money*,' Interviewee 8 felt growing emptiness and despair, largely due to constant violence. He dropped out of his COVID-enforced virtual school, dismissing it as impractical for his circumstances: '*I wasn't doing that*.' Without '*rules*' and '*routines*,' he described his life as '*nothing*' and '*empty*,' feeling '*lost*.' This eventually led to the shooting and killing of a drug dealer during a robbery planned on social media.

In the broader context of 2020, these narratives reveal how the convergence of pandemic-induced fear, economic instability, and social unrest led to increased violence, often in tragic and unintended ways. The quote from Interviewee 9, '*You can't ride the wave when the wave is riding you*,' encapsulates the experience of many interviewees who felt swept up in events beyond their control, pushed toward violence in a period marked by chaos and uncertainty.

Discussion

The insights provided by the 18 individuals convicted of homicide in this study illustrate how the COVID-19 pandemic and the George Floyd protests created a volatile environment that contributed to their involvement in lethal violence. These findings offer a unique perspective on the personal experiences of those affected by these 'exogenous shocks' (Rosenfield 2018), providing a counterpoint to the predominant focus on macro-level trends (Rosenfield 2024). While interviewees were already navigating complex life circumstances marked by trauma, economic hardship, and instability, the unprecedented disruptions of 2020 further exacerbated these challenges, pushing some towards deadly outcomes. However, framing 2020 as a deterministic 'turning point' oversimplifies the nuanced interaction between historical context and individual trajectories, as suggested by life-course criminology.

Life-course criminology emphasizes the importance of time and place in shaping individual pathways (Elder 1985, 1994). This study underscores how the timing of major societal disruptions can alter life trajectories, with outcomes depending on individuals' social locations within their cohort and geographic contexts (Neil and Sampson 2021). Rather than treating 2020 as a singular turning point, it is more accurate to view these events as amplifying pre-existing trajectories already influenced by structural inequality and personal instability. Many participants had longstanding histories of criminal involvement and exposure to violence. For example, Interviewee 1 was already struggling with homelessness and mental health issues when the pandemic struck, pushing him further into instability. Similarly, Interviewee 18's struggles with undiagnosed schizophrenia and addiction predated the pandemic, but the sudden loss of his job exacerbated his mental health crisis, leading to a tragic outcome. These findings align with the concept of 'cumulative disadvantage' (Sampson and Laub 1997), where early disadvantages compound over time, making individuals more vulnerable to later crises.

The events of 2020 can be understood as exacerbating these existing trajectories of violence, rather than serving as a distinct turning point. This perspective is consistent with Agnew's (1992) general strain theory, which posits that negative experiences such as job loss, social isolation, and increased stress can heighten the risk of criminal behavior. The societal disruptions triggered by the pandemic and civil unrest introduced new, substantial stressors that, when combined with past trauma, led to increased violence among those already at risk (Regalado, Timmer, and Jawaid 2022). As Hatchimonji et al. (2020) noted, 'Trauma does not quarantine' during a pandemic; rather, it proliferates under such conditions.

While routine activities theory (Cohen and Felson 1979) traditionally explains how the convergence of motivated offenders, suitable targets, and lack of capable guardians leads to crime, it does not fully account for how abrupt social disruptions can alter perceptions of safety and provoke extreme behaviors. In this study, participants viewed carrying firearms not as opportunistic, but as a necessary response to chaotic circumstances. For instance, Interviewee 6 described how the perceived 'lawlessness' following George Floyd's death compelled him to arm himself for protection, ultimately leading to a fatal confrontation. This suggests that theoretical frameworks need to better incorporate how exogenous shocks can transform perceptions of safety and self-defense, influencing the situational dynamics that drive violent outcomes.

Moreover, the absence of social supports and formal institutions left participants feeling increasingly isolated and trapped in cycles of violence. This dynamic resonates with theories of social disorganization and opportunity structures (Cloward and Ohlin 1960), where the breakdown of social routines and diminished police presence in certain neighborhoods increased exposure to violence and shifted normative behaviors. For example, Interviewees 4 and 7 described how the erosion of law and order led them to adopt new strategies for self-preservation, escalating conflicts in ways that might not have occurred under more stable conditions. These narratives offer a nuanced perspective on the 'Minneapolis Effect' (Cassell 2020), showing that changes in routine activities and social control do not merely create opportunities for violence but can also reshape threat perceptions and self-preservation strategies, ultimately contributing to the tragic outcomes observed in 2020.

Limitations and future directions

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. The small sample size, cross-sectional design, and geographical focus on Minnesota limit the generalizability of the findings. Moreover, the retrospective nature of the narratives may be influenced by participants' current perceptions and prison experiences. Notably, the study does not capture the experiences of those who faced the same disruptions and stressors but did not resort to homicide. This is a critical gap, as most individuals who experienced the societal upheavals of 2020 did not engage in lethal violence. Understanding why some individuals escalated to homicide while others did not is a challenging but essential theoretical puzzle that warrants further investigation. This study's findings point to several potential factors that may have mediated or moderated these pathways, such as pre-existing mental health conditions, histories of trauma and instability, and immediate situational pressures. Future research should aim to disentangle these complex interactions, perhaps through comparative studies involving both those who turned to violence and those who maintained pro-social behavior under similar conditions.

Expanding to larger, more diverse samples and incorporating longitudinal designs would allow for deeper insights into how crises like the pandemic influence criminal trajectories over time. Additionally, exploring the role of resilience and protective factors in buffering against the escalation to serious violence could provide valuable contributions to crime prevention strategies. By examining the full spectrum of responses to societal disruptions, future studies can build a more comprehensive understanding of the conditions under which individuals are pushed toward or pulled away from criminal behavior.

Implications for policy and practice

Focusing on Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota – the epicenter of the George Floyd protests – provides crucial insights into how overlapping crises interacted with local conditions to hasten violence. The intensity and duration of unrest in these areas likely had a more immediate and amplified effect on vulnerable individuals compared to other regions. While similar crises occurred nationwide, the geographic concentration of civil unrest in Minnesota exacerbated preexisting inequalities in policing, housing, healthcare, and employment (Phelps 2024). These conditions increased exposure to violence and limited access to resources that might have otherwise helped mitigate escalation. Policy responses tailored to address the complex and unique challenges faced by these communities are critical, not only to interrupt pathways to violence but also to provide preventative support that can reduce the overall risk of lethal outcomes in future crises.

The study demonstrates that while robust social and mental health support during crises is essential, these measures must be coupled with long-term strategies to address structural inequalities. Preexisting disparities played a key role in determining how interviewees experienced the pandemic and civil unrest, and without addressing these root causes, social support will be insufficient to prevent future violence. Structural reforms aimed at reducing poverty, improving access to mental health services, and providing stable housing will be crucial in building more resilient communities and reducing the likelihood of violence during times of societal upheaval. At the same time, Group Violence Intervention (GVI) and violence interrupters, which have shown success in reducing gun violence, could help de-escalate the tensions and cycles of violence exacerbated by large-scale disruptions (Braga, Weisburd, and Turchan 2018; Butts et al. 2015).

In sum, this qualitative study sheds light on the complex interplay between personal vulnerabilities and broader societal disruptions contributing to an unprecedented surge in homicides in 2020, previously only explored quantitatively. By focusing on individual experiences, this research provides a critical perspective that underscores the need for comprehensive support systems and proactive policy measures to mitigate the impact of future crises on vulnerable populations, helping them regain control over their lives even in the face of overwhelming societal disruptions. The findings call for a deeper understanding and a more empathetic approach to addressing the roots of serious violence in times of social upheaval, contributing to a richer understanding of the human dimensions of crime and violence.

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COMMENTARIES

Extreme Risk Protection Orders (red flag laws) in Minnesota – a year of evidence-based prevention

The data can show us whether the law that took effect at the start of 2024 is working as intended.

By James Densley and Jillian Peterson

FEBRUARY 15, 2025 AT 5:29PM

Extreme Risk Protection Orders save lives. (STEVEN M. FALK/Tribune News Service)

Opinion editor's note: *Strib Voices publishes a mix of guest commentaries online and in print each day. To contribute, click here.*

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On Jan. 1, 2024, Minnesota enacted its Extreme Risk Protection Order (ERPO) law, empowering law enforcement and family members to petition courts to temporarily remove firearms from individuals at risk of harming themselves or others. Commonly referred to as "red flag" laws, ERPOs are a proactive tool designed to prevent firearm-related tragedies, including suicides, mass shootings and domestic-violence-related homicides.

Now, with a full year of data available, we can assess whether the law is working as intended.

What the data tell us

Over the past year, 135 ERPO cases were filed in Minnesota, according to Minnesota Court Records Online. The data show that law enforcement officers initiated the majority (71%) of petitions, followed by family members (16%). Courts granted 95% of temporary petitions lasting 14 days and 78% of long-term ERPOs lasting between six and 12 months, suggesting that judges found substantial evidence of immediate risk in most cases. Notably, dismissed cases were more often filed by family members rather than law enforcement, which may indicate challenges in navigating the legal process for some families.

The effectiveness of ERPOs is evident in the range of crises they helped prevent. The overwhelming majority of respondents were male (93%) and white (83%), with an average age of 40 – older than the typical crime perpetrator. Notably, nearly a quarter (22%) had children living in their homes, highlighting the role ERPOs play in protecting vulnerable family members. Many respondents had prior involvement with the legal system or mental health crises: 58% had a history of suicidality, 41% had documented mental health issues and 40% had substance use concerns. Additionally, 15% had prior arrests, and 50% had civil court histories, often related to divorce or child support disputes.

Addressing imminent threats

ERPOs were issued in response to a range of high-risk scenarios, with 36% of cases stemming from domestic violence-related incidents and 25% involving individuals experiencing psychosis. During a psychotic episode, one respondent feared his upstairs neighbor was controlling his mind and attacking him, so he pointed a gun at the ceiling. Law enforcement intervention ensured he received mental health care and had his firearm temporarily removed.

In 29% of cases, authorities intervened to prevent a potential murder-suicide. For example, one suicidal individual, who had sent a picture of himself holding a gun to his head and also threatened to kill his father, was prevented from accessing additional firearms through an ERPO.

Threats directed at law enforcement accounted for 17% of cases, reflecting the urgent need for intervention in volatile situations. For example, one man threatened to "go to war" with police, implying he would engage in a shootout. Officers intervened before he could act on these threats.

The data also reveal the scale of firearm removals. The number of guns seized per case ranged from one to 47, with an average of three firearms per respondent.

Beyond the numbers, however, individual case examples illustrate the tangible impact of ERPOs in preventing tragedies. In one domestic violence case, a respondent with a history of burning his wife with cigarettes, making death threats, and committing sexual assault had firearms removed from his possession. In another case, a student posted photos of an assault rifle and ammunition on social media, leading to concerns about potential school violence. A subsequent investigation found the student had previously injured himself while handling a firearm and had exhibited disturbing behavior.

Situations such as these demonstrate the versatility of ERPOs in addressing different types of crises – whether preventing mass violence, protecting domestic violence survivors or intervening in mental health emergencies. At the same time, the high rate of judicial approval suggests that these orders are being used responsibly and effectively, not just as a theoretical policy tool but as a practical, lifesaving intervention.

As usage of ERPOs increased over the year, particularly in the fall of 2024, it is clear that awareness and accessibility are key factors in the law's impact. More research is needed to examine disparities in ERPO petitions across different communities, barriers faced by family members seeking protection and long-term outcomes for those subject to ERPOs.

In our years of studying mass shootings, law enforcement and families often asked what they could have done – they recognized the perpetrator was in crisis but had no way to intervene before tragedy struck. Now they have a tool. By continuing to invest in firearm research (especially now that federal funding is uncertain and under threat) and expanding public awareness, Minnesota can ensure that tool is functioning as intended. The early evidence is clear: When used effectively, ERPOs save lives.

James Densley is a professor of criminal justice at Metropolitan State University and deputy director of the Violence Prevention Project Research Center at Hamline University. Jillian Peterson is a professor of criminology at Hamline University and executive director of the Violence Prevention Project Research Center.

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James Densley And Jillian Peterson

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The real threat to women's sports? It's not trans athletes.

Megan Peterson

The Minnesota Star Tribune

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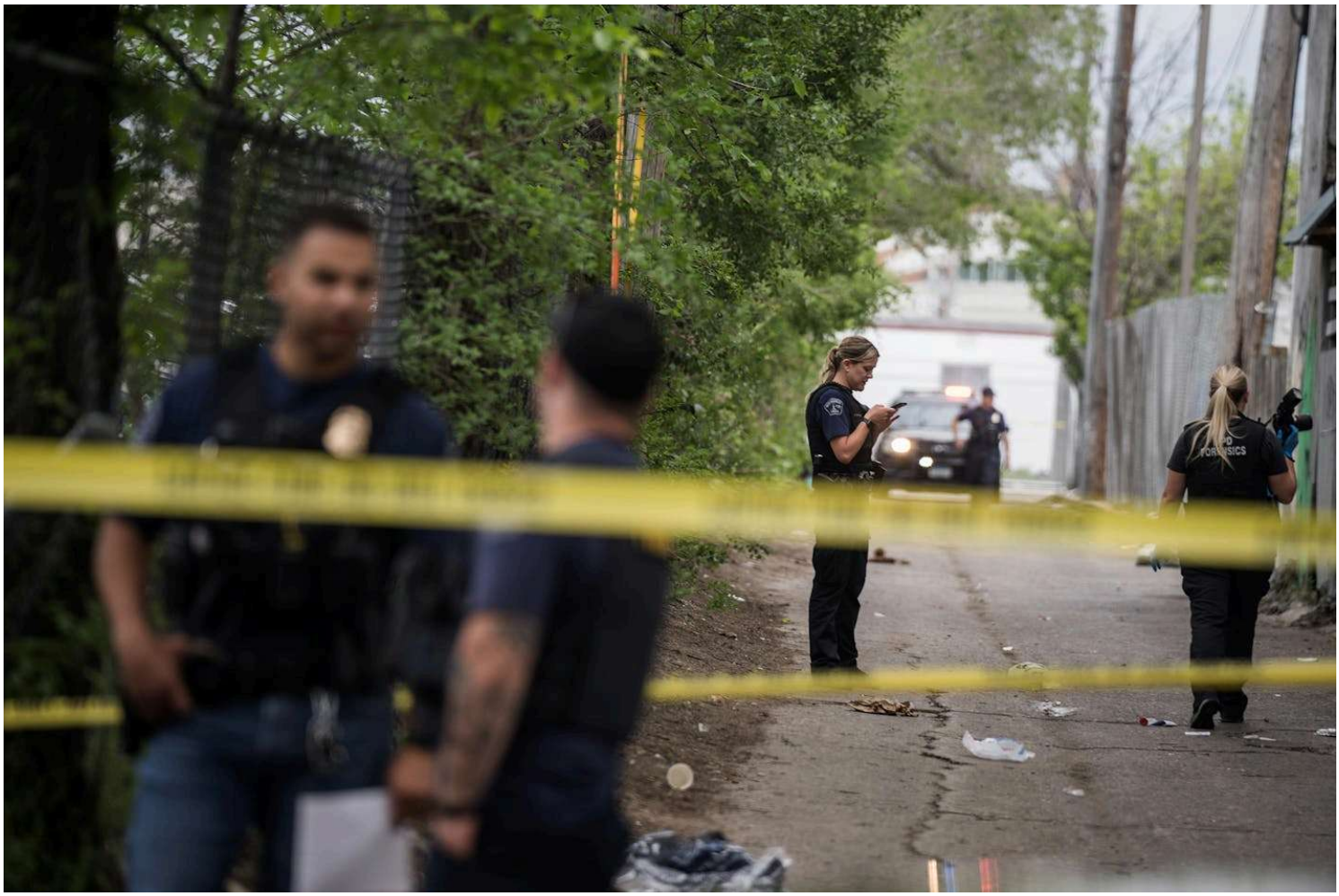
COMMENTARIES

Gun violence in Minnesota: What the numbers show

Our representative survey reveals a broad impact.

By Jillian Peterson and James Densley

SEPTEMBER 14, 2024 AT 11:52PM



Police investigate a shooting in Minneapolis on May 16. (Richard Tsong-Taatarii/The Minnesota Star Tribune)

Opinion editor's note: *Strib Voices publishes a mix of guest commentaries online and in print each day. To contribute, click here.*

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On Sept. 4, two students and two teachers were killed in a shooting at Apalachee High School in Winder, Ga. After every mass shooting, we hear the same refrain: *"We never thought it could happen here."* And while Winder, Ga., may feel half the world away, new data show

that gun violence is not an abstract issue that happens somewhere else. In fact, in Minnesota, it's a growing reality that touches every corner of our state, affecting our communities, schools, public spaces and mental health.

We are Minnesota-based professors who study gun violence. Our recent representative survey of over 1,000 Minnesotans aged 19 to 92 reveals just how deeply gun violence has touched our state. We asked them about their experiences with guns in their lifetimes. One in five Minnesotans reported being threatened with a gun and for 13% of Minnesotans, witnessing someone being shot is a traumatic memory they carry. Seven and a half percent have been directly shot at. And tragically, 4% of Minnesotans have been shot and injured. These numbers are more than statistics – they represent our friends, families and neighbors.

The impact is even more profound when we look at specific groups. Black Minnesotans are far more likely to experience gun violence. For example, 20% of Black Minnesotans in our survey self-reported having been shot at, compared with just 6% of white Minnesotans. Similarly, 14% of Black Minnesotans reported being present at a mass shooting where at least four people were shot, while only 3% of white Minnesotans say the same. These disparities speak to the urgent need for addressing gun violence as not just a public safety issue, but a matter of racial and social equity.

These issues are not confined to adults. Younger generations are growing up in a world where exposure to gun violence is more common than we might want to believe. Nine percent of Gen Z Minnesotans (born after 1997) have been present at the scene of a mass shooting and 2% have been injured in one. For millennials (born between 1981 and 1996), that number is 7%, with 3% injured. The future leaders of our state are living in a constant state of heightened awareness about their personal safety.

The mental health toll of this violence is staggering. Nearly half of all Minnesotans – 47% – are afraid of being shot in a public place. And of those who have been at the scene of a mass shooting, 90% report suffering from anxiety, depression or PTSD. Even those who weren't physically present but live in a community that experienced a mass shooting report significant mental health challenges. The everyday fear and emotional trauma that permeates the lives of so many Minnesotans is something we can't ignore. In a state where the debate over gun control has been front and center, this data takes on new urgency. This isn't about politics – it's about the safety and well-being of our communities.

Our new data make one thing clear: gun violence is not someone else's problem – it's all of ours. It affects people in rural communities, in cities and in suburbs. It crosses generational lines and racial boundaries. And while the solutions are complex, there are immediate steps we can take to address this crisis. For one, safe storage practices could help prevent many tragedies. While nearly one-third of Minnesotans reported owning a gun, only two-thirds of Minnesota gun owners reported consistently storing their firearms safely. The data show safe storage counseling, along with providing locks and safes, can be an effective preventative measure to reduce accidents and thefts that put guns in the hands of children or prohibited persons.

Our data further highlight the need for mental health resources, particularly for those who have been exposed to or affected by gun violence. Preventative mental health services, crisis intervention and ongoing support for those who've been impacted by gun violence are essential for Minnesota's recovery and resilience.

At the heart of this crisis is a collective call for action. Gun violence has touched far too many lives in Minnesota, and its ripple effects – on safety, mental health and community well-being – are undeniable. The data are stark, but also offer a path forward. Addressing this issue requires both individual responsibility and broader societal commitment.

On Nov. 1, we'll come together for the Minnesota Gun Violence Research Summit at Hamline University to discuss this research and explore nonpartisan, data-driven solutions to make our communities safer. We can no longer afford to ignore the reality of gun violence in our state. We must face it, and we must act.

Jillian Peterson is a professor of criminology and criminal justice and executive director of the Violence Prevention Project Research Center at Hamline University. James Densley is deputy director, and is a professor and department chair of criminology and criminal justice at

The Minnesota Star Tribune

COMMENTARIES

Isolation, 'psychache,' violence and self-destruction: What research shows

High-profile events of the last half-year have something in common.

By Jillian Peterson and James Densley

JANUARY 13, 2025 AT 5:44PM

Mourners visit a makeshift memorial for victims of the New Year's Day terror attack on Bourbon Street in New Orleans on Jan. 6. (EDMUND D. FOUNTAIN/The New York Times)

Opinion editor's note: *Strib Voices publishes a mix of guest commentaries online and in print each day. To contribute, click here.*

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In the past six months, public violence has dominated headlines with an unsettling frequency and diversity: political assassinations, a female school shooter and mass murder committed with a car. At first glance, these tragedies seem dissimilar and unrelated. Yet, a

deeper look reveals a disturbing common thread – each perpetrator planned their acts as desperate, final gestures with no intention of surviving.

Consider several cases that have unfolded recently:

The 20-year-old man who shot former President Donald Trump at a rally in Butler, Pa., over the summer and killed an attendee was fatally shot at the scene.

A 15-year-old girl who killed a classmate and teacher at Abundant Life Christian School in Madison, Wis., in December ended her attack with a self-inflicted gunshot wound.

Weeks later, a 42-year-old man drove a pickup truck into a crowd on Bourbon Street in New Orleans, killing 144 people, before dying in a shootout with police.

On the same day, a 37-year-old man was found inside an exploded Cybertruck outside Trump's Las Vegas hotel, dead from a gunshot wound to the head.

And in New York, the 26-year-old who murdered UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson could have hidden himself. Instead, he was found sitting in a McDonald's in Pennsylvania with his manifesto and murder weapon in his backpack – clearly with no plan beyond committing murder.

More than a century ago, sociologist Émile Durkheim argued that social isolation can drive both suicidal and homicidal behavior. Modern psychology extends this understanding through the "psychache" model, which suggests that unbearable psychological pain underpins acts of both self-destruction and outward violence. These tragedies aren't impulsive; they're rooted in a profound sense of hopelessness, where violence becomes a final, desperate act.

This insight has profound implications for public safety. Harsh punishments, including the death penalty, are designed to deter crime. But when perpetrators are already planning to die, the threat of punishment becomes meaningless. It's a lesson we've learned repeatedly with mass shootings – and one we must now apply to other forms of public violence.

In our latest research, we conducted life history interviews with 18 individuals who committed homicide in the Twin Cities during the 2020-21 murder spike. The cases varied – from gang retaliation to domestic violence to botched robberies – but a striking pattern emerged: Nearly every participant had experienced prior suicide attempts or pervasive hopelessness before their crimes. Among the younger participants, many of whom were teenagers at the time, a sense of "futurelessness" was palpable.

One participant stated: "Did I have plans for the future at any point? Hell no. I would die or go to jail." Another participant, when asked if ever thought about where he would be at 25, said, "Either dead or in prison. You can't leave that life. All of our life spans were real short." Both respondents perpetrated homicide before their 18th birthday.

Our interviews further revealed that many of these individuals had been holding on by tenuous connections – to pastors, school counselors or community support networks. Then the pandemic hit, severing those fragile threads all at once. What followed was a cascade of violence driven by isolation and despair.

One young participant dropped out of his COVID-enforced virtual school, dismissing it as impractical for his circumstances: “I wasn’t doing that.” Without “rules” and “routines,” he described his life as “nothing” and “empty,” feeling “lost.” This eventually led to the shooting and killing of a drug dealer during a robbery planned on social media.

If we’re serious about preventing violence, we must reframe our approach. It may not be intuitive, but the best prevention strategies don’t start with tougher penalties or more surveillance. They start with connection. Suicide prevention is violence prevention. When we rebuild relationships, foster community, and invest in mental health and support systems, we create the safety nets that prevent despair from spiraling into violence.

We must act with urgency and compassion. The more connected we are, the safer we will become.

Jillian Peterson is a professor of criminology at Hamline University and executive director of the Violence Prevention Project Research Center. James Densley is a professor of criminal justice at Metropolitan State University and Deputy Director of the Violence Prevention Project Research Center.

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