



← Amanda Ostroff, right center, and Claire Ellermeyer, left center, both freshmen at Fox Chapel, Pa., high school attends a gathering in Market Square in downtown Pittsburgh Saturday, March 24, 2018. (AP Photo/Gene J. Puskar)

EDUCATIONAL FORUMS

Protecting Our Region's Children from Gun Violence

February 2024

This report was primarily written by Barbara White Stack (Consultant) and Michael Yonas (The Pittsburgh Foundation), with additional writing and editing by Neil DiBase (United Way of Southwestern PA) and Briana Mihok (Institute of Politics, University of Pittsburgh). This report was designed by Kristin Raup (The Pittsburgh Foundation). All images were used with permission.

FROM THE COALITION PARTNERS

Dear Partners, Neighbors and Friends,

In the aftermath of yet another cycle of gun violence on a broad scale, including the mass shootings in Buffalo and Uvalde, our organizations – the Pittsburgh Foundation, United Way of Southwestern Pennsylvania, and the University of Pittsburgh’s Institute of Politics - came together to begin a discussion of how best to utilize our collective voices in the community to raise awareness about this crisis and propose action-oriented next steps. Unfortunately, like every other community in America, Southwestern Pennsylvania has not been spared the dramatic increase in episodes of gun violence. This crisis persists – from the shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue to the daily violence in our neighborhoods – despite the tireless work of grassroots community-based organizations and government leaders.

After much consideration, we decided to co-host a series, “Protecting our Region’s Children from Gun Violence,” to raise community awareness and elevate the work that so many have been doing in our community for years to combat this epidemic of violence. Over three evenings in 2022 and 2023, hundreds of community stakeholders and leaders joined with local and national experts to examine the impact of gun violence on our children and their communities, how communities can come together to prevent, and respond, to this public health crisis. The sessions were informative, challenging and a call to action for all of us to utilize the tools at our disposal to prevent and respond to this crisis.

We have compiled the summaries from these forums, along with some action-oriented next steps and recommendations in the pages that follow. Our hope is that these learnings will be useful as we collectively respond to the leading public health crisis impacting children in our country. We are committed to staying engaged in the months and years to come. While we do not have all the answers to solve this crisis, we know that we must do what we can to work in collaboration to keep our neighbors, and especially our children, safe.

Sincerely,

Lisa Schroeder

President & CEO, The Pittsburgh Foundation

Bobbi Watt Geer, Ph.D.

President & CEO, United Way of Southwestern Pennsylvania

Samantha Albier

Director, University of Pittsburgh Institute of Politics

Mark A. Nordenberg

Chair, University of Pittsburgh Institute of Politics

A Coalition Seeks to Protect Our Region's Children from Gun Violence

Even in a country sadly accustomed to gun violence, the news in early 2022 was horrifying. An 18-year-old gunned down 19 children and two teachers at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas; a 19-year-old opened fire at a Buffalo grocery store, killing 10; and in Pittsburgh, two young men killed a toddler in a drive-by shooting and an 18-year-old was charged with shooting to death a 15-year-old just outside his school.

In the midst of this, the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported a heartbreaking statistic: for the first time ever, firearms killed more children aged one and older than any other cause of death. In 2020, the CDC said, gunshot wounds displaced car crashes as the top killer of children.

These events prompted three Pittsburgh organizations to ask the question: how can we work collectively to protect our children from the impact of gun violence? The non-partisan trio – The Pittsburgh Foundation, the University of Pittsburgh's Institute of Politics and the United Way of Southwestern Pennsylvania – accepted that challenge and joined forces to work on increasing public awareness of the work being done to address this crisis and the need to do even more to keep our children safe. The following executive summary provides an overview of the programs – collectively titled [Protecting our Region's Children from Gun Violence](#) - that emerged from that partnership.





FORUM I: Invisible Wounds: Identifying and Addressing the Trauma that Gun Violence Inflicts on Our Children

← Pictured L to R:
Rev. Paul Abernathy, Valerie Dixon, Julius Boatright and John Woodrow Cox. (Photo credit: Renee Rosensteel)

The Pittsburgh Foundation sponsored the first forum on Nov. 15, 2022, in partnership with Pittsburgh Arts & Lectures. Held at the Carnegie Lecture Hall, it was titled [Invisible Wounds: Identifying and Addressing the Trauma that Gun Violence Inflicts on Our Children](#). Lisa Schroeder, president and CEO of The Pittsburgh Foundation, opened the forum by describing the suffering inflicted by gunshots: “Each shooting that results in homicide or wounds generates trauma that travels outward, like a radioactive cloud.” Keynote speaker, author and reporter John Woodrow Cox, pointed out that the situation is even more dire as gunshots traumatize even those children who don’t hear them or don’t have a relative or friend killed by them.

Cox, a Washington Post enterprise reporter, researched the effects of gun violence on children for six years, and the resulting book, “Children Under Fire: An American Crisis,” was awarded the Goddard Riverside Stephan Russo Book Prize for Social Justice. At the first forum, Cox talked about how his research led him to a tragic insight. Gun violence victims include children who are in a school where a shooting occurs, even if they don’t hear or see any of the violence; children whose parent, sibling or neighbor is a shooting victim too, and children compelled to participate in constant active shooter drills in school that show little positive outcome, and in some, cause trauma.

Cox shared the stories of some of the children he followed as he researched his book. These include Ava, who at seven years old

About the Forum

Nov. 15, 2022
Carnegie Lecture Hall

Sponsor: The Pittsburgh Foundation

PANELISTS:

John Woodrow Cox
(Keynote Speaker)
Reporter, Washington Post and
Author of “Children Under Fire:
an American Crisis”

Valerie Dixon
Director of Family and
Community Support, Center
for Victims

Julius Boatright
Founder and CEO, Steel
Smiling

Paul Abernathy
Orthodox Christian Priest and
CEO, Neighborhood Resilience
Project

witnessed a South Carolina school shooting that left her dear friend dead. A teacher and another student were wounded. Ava believed that she was at fault for not saving her friend and began experiencing outbursts during which she would scream and thrash and deliberately injure herself. She couldn't look at any sort of depiction of a gun without losing control. This little girl ended up on powerful anti-psychotic drugs.

The author also described the serious harm that school shootings inflict on children, even when they are not exposed to any of it - not the shooter, not the blood, not even the gunshots. Still, some end up afraid. They ask if the shooter will get out of jail and kill them next. They want to know if a different shooter will get them tomorrow.

Cox also moderated a panel of advocates who aid victims and heal communities. Panelists included Valerie Dixon, who lost her 22-year-old son, Rob Dixon, to gun violence in 2001, and now works as director of Family and Community Support at the Center for Victims. Dixon shared that like her, people impacted by violence want to help others. She said, "There is nothing stronger than the voices of those impacted," and it was important to empower people to support each other within their own communities because people are more comfortable working with people they know. "The power of just the offer of a helping hand is astounding."

"Each shooting that results in homicide or wounds generates trauma that travels outward, like a radioactive cloud."

--Lisa Schroeder, President & CEO, The Pittsburgh Foundation

The panel included local expert Julius Boatwright, founder and CEO of Steel Smiling, which bridges the gap between black people and mental health services. Boatwright said self-care is important for adults, who must work on their own healing and personal wellness, particularly those who are stressed and anxious or dealing with their own post-traumatic stress and vicarious trauma. "We must assure that we are [all] whole and model

what it is like to be a whole, healthy human being," he said, "because kids can feel it when adults are stressed and anxious."

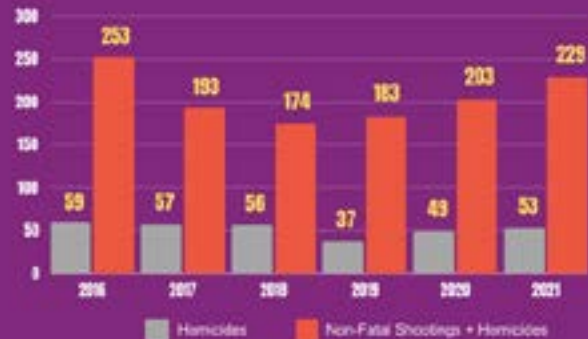
Orthodox Christian Priest Paul Abernathy, CEO at Neighborhood Resilience

Project, which is devoted to healing gun-violence disrupted communities, was also on the panel. He provided exceptional community-informed insights of the impact of gun violence and power of community support. Abernathy shared that "we can't talk about healing without reducing the violence." He said two steps are important. One is implementing strategies that have been shown to greatly reduce violence. The other is to interrupt the conditions that cause violence. If that isn't done, he said, "we are missing the point." Abernathy said government resources, from the local to the federal level, need to be coordinated. Without that, he said there is confusion and competition over grants, and that undermines creating and implementing a cohesive strategy.

Homicides vs. Homicides Plus Non-Fatal Shootings in the City of Pittsburgh

2016-2021

Source: Allegheny County Department of Human Services





FORUM II: Saving Our Children from the Epidemic of Gun Violence

← Pictured L to R:
Samantha Balbier, Dr. Jamil Bey, Rev. Tim Smith and Dr. Elizabeth Miller. (Photo credit: John Altdorfer.)

The second forum, [Saving Our Children from the Epidemic of Gun Violence](#), was sponsored by the University of Pittsburgh Institute of Politics and held on April 18, 2023, at the Children’s Museum of Pittsburgh on the North Side. The session aimed to present gun violence as an urgent pediatric health crisis requiring rapid response. In doing so, the session attempted to provide a baseline understanding of national data related to child injury and mortality rates caused by gun violence while also exploring an array of contributing factors including gun policy, firearm injury prevention programming, and public health determinants of violence.

“None of us is safe, not at Walmart, not at church, not at school.”
-- Dr. Jamil Bey, President, UrbanKind Institute

Mark Nordenberg, Pitt Chancellor Emeritus and chair of the Institute of Politics, introduced the program and noted that the United States is the only large, wealthy country where firearms are the leading cause of death for children and teens. In fact, Nordenberg said, shootings are not even among the top four causes of child deaths in any other comparable nation.

Samantha Balbier, director of the Institute, agreed with Nordenberg, saying, “I can’t believe I am introducing speakers on the subject of gun violence in the same place where I have spent countless hours playing with my children.”

About the Forum

April 18, 2023
Children’s Museum of Pittsburgh

Sponsor: University of Pittsburgh Institute of Politics

KEYNOTE SPEAKERS:

Dr. Moira Szilagyi
Immediate Past President, American Academy of Pediatrics

Dr. Rosanna Smart
Co-Director, RAND Gun Policy in America research initiative

PANELISTS:

Reverend Tim Smith
Founder and CEO, Center of Life

Dr. Jamil Bey
CEO, UrbanKind Institute

Dr. Elizabeth Miller
Chief of Adolescent Medicine at UPMC Children’s Hospital of Pittsburgh

Keynote speakers were Dr. Moira Szilagyi, immediate past president of the American Academy of Pediatrics, and Dr. Rosanna Smart, co-director of the RAND Gun Policy in America research initiative. They talked about the frequency and consequences of shootings, recommendations for policy and practice change to prevent pediatric death and injury, as well as the current barriers to policy change.

Szilagyi made the case that gun violence can be addressed successfully much the same as other public health crises. “Like motor vehicle deaths, gun deaths are preventable,” she said.

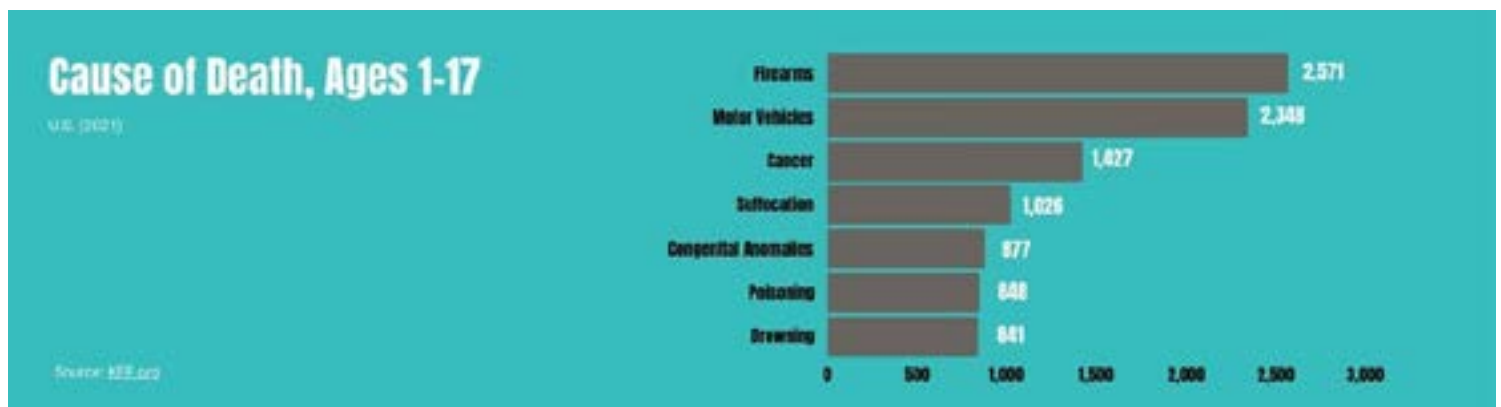
Smart described research results that suggested ways to do exactly that – prevent gun deaths. She said that while RAND has been able to identify several policies that are effective at reducing deaths and injuries among children, including safe storage practices and other child access prevention laws, more data is needed to determine cause and effect. Research in this area has been limited due to federal laws that prohibited research dollars from flowing to this issue over the past several decades.

Local expert panelists included Reverend Tim Smith, Founder and CEO of the Center of Life in Hazelwood, who said that, for him, gun violence meant presiding over an overwhelming number

of funerals for young men and boys. “These kids had great potential but had little opportunity and little access to resources and education,” Smith lamented, “Some of these kids went to schools where they got a substandard education. And that sometimes means you are kicked out of school and face police and prisons. We need to understand that every human being needs to have a sense of belonging and security.”

Dr. Jamil Bey, community-based researcher, discussed the negative impact social media has on adolescent development and socialization. Dr. Bey echoed Smith, saying, “Let’s study what we have done as a society. What have we done as a society to give everyone opportunities?” He noted that gun violence is a danger to everyone, not just communities suffering from disinvestment and poverty. “None of us is safe, not at Walmart, not at church, not at school.”

Dr. Elizabeth Miller, chief of Adolescent Medicine at UPMC Children’s Hospital of Pittsburgh said. “As a pediatrician, the last six months have been the hardest ever.” She said she had lost more patients to gun violence than in her entire career. And she sees the ripple effects in so many of the people she cares for. She discussed longer term solutions to community vibrancy and what that means for the vitality of children and adolescents.





FORUM III: Mobilizing Communities for Action: How Organizations Can Come Together to Prevent Gun Violence

← Pictured L to R: Bobbi Watt Geer, Anna Hollis Kander, Anthony Smith, Sean Garrett, Ed Gainey and Josh Fleitman. (Photo credit: Michael Drazdzinski.)

Bobbi Watt Geer, president and CEO of United Way of Southwestern Pennsylvania, opened the third forum with this entreaty to the audience: “help us chart a better future.” Held June 13, 2023 in the James E. Rohr Auditorium in The Tower at PNC Plaza, Downtown, the forum sponsored by United Way was titled [Mobilizing Communities for Action: How Organizations Can Come Together to Prevent Gun Violence](#). The session was moderated by Anna Hollis Kander, CEO of Amachi Pittsburgh.

A panel of four experts from Pittsburgh and across the country spoke and answered questions. They were Sean Garrett, president and CEO of United Way of Metro Chicago; Josh Fleitman, campaign director for CeaseFirePA; Anthony Smith, executive director of Cities United; and Pittsburgh Mayor Ed Gainey.

All said that gun violence is a conundrum that can’t be easily or quickly resolved by an individual, a group, or an exciting new program. It will require, they said, long-term commitment to a holistic plan created and enacted by a coalition of stakeholders. Those should include, the speakers said, faith leaders, young people, law enforcement, philanthropy, nonprofits, political figures, and corporate chiefs. Garrett shared that “we have to work together in partnership. . . the only way is when we stack the pieces together, the business sector, philanthropy, the public sector and community groups.”

Fleitman said that: “we are witnessing the mass traumatization of a generation, with long-term individual and societal consequences.”

About the Forum

June 13, 2023
The Tower at PNC Plaza

Sponsor: United Way of Southwestern Pennsylvania

MODERATOR:
Anna Hollis Kander
 CEO, AMACHI Pittsburgh

PANELISTS:

Sean Garrett
 President and CEO, United Way of Metro Chicago

Josh Fleitman
 Campaign Director, CeaseFirePA

Anthony Smith
 Executive Director, Cities United

Ed Gainey
 Mayor, City of Pittsburgh

He agreed with Garrett, stating “that without coalitions, organizations compete with each other for a slice of a small funding pie. “We can create a platform to bring groups together and team up and put voices together to increase the size of the pot for everyone to do that work.”

Mayor Gainey, whose sister and niece both died from gun violence, spoke passionately about the need for action, pointing out that there had been more mass shootings than days in 2023. The mayor wants to reopen community centers into what he called “places of love” where young people and their families could feel safe, eat a hot meal, and talk to counselors as well as engage in recreation and skill building. The city needs places, he said, where young people “can get their problems out so they don’t feel they have to pick up a gun.” It’s important, the mayor said, to reach children when they are young. “I am trying to get to this child,” Gainey said, “In order to change this culture, you have to change the children.”

Smith told the forum, “We’ve got to have a vision for our children of Pittsburgh. What do we want

Pittsburgh to look like in 10 years for them? How do we come together collectively to make that happen?”

Following the question-and-answer session, Kander from Amachi said that after the three

forums, “We are mad and we are tired, but we are ready. We have new ideas. We understand what is working in other cities. Let’s take the next steps to understand what we can do together.” Geer of United Way of Southwestern Pennsylvania, said the forums have made her hopeful and thankful. They

have provided, she said, actionable ideas that anti-violence advocates can pursue. Now, she pledged, the organizations and advocates will strategize on next steps.

The three coalition partners are taking lessons learned from the forums to establish a vision for the children of Pittsburgh that excludes gun violence. The three organizations have developed recommendations for community action and will remain engaged to provide appropriate help in implementation.

“We are witnessing the mass traumatization of a generation, with long-term individual and societal consequences.”

--Josh Fleitman, Campaign Director for CeaseFirePA

Firearm Mortality Rate, Ages 1-19

RATE PER 100,000 POPULATION
U.S. (2021) AND PEER COUNTRIES (2019)



The United States has by far the highest child and teen firearm mortality rate among peer countries.

Source: EEF.org

Impact on Youth

On Aug. 17, 2022, CeaseFirePA, along with partners Greater Pittsburgh Coalition Against Violence and the Black Political Empowerment Project, called a news conference to report on a first-of-its-kind survey of 400 at-risk youth across Allegheny County. The questions centered on how they were personally affected by gun violence. Here are some of the startling findings:

57%

Have lost a family member to gun violence.



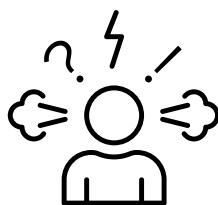
Almost Half

have personally witnessed gun violence at least once. Of that group, 22% have witnessed gun violence **four or more times.**



86%

Are concerned that gun violence will impact them and their family's health and safety.



84%

Feel that **"nothing at all"** or only **"a little"** is being done to address the violence in their neighborhood, school or classroom.

[View full results of the Youth Violence Survey](#)

Source: CeaseFirePA and Coalition Against Violence



Coalition Recommendations

- 1. Provide trauma and behavioral supports and resources for youth:** Support trauma awareness and intervention initiatives, in schools and communities, that support youth and families exposed to violence as both prevention and intervention effort.
- 2. Provide trauma and behavioral supports and resources for teachers and family:** Support trauma awareness and intervention initiatives for adults that surround and care for youth recognizing the direct and proximate trauma they experience in communities and schools.
- 3. Expand and tailor job training and counseling programs** in schools, communities, and through youth programs that have been shown to diminish gun violence.
- 4. Nurture and facilitate the coordination of violence prevention programs and initiatives** among foundations, government agencies and other organizations also funding them.
- 5. Open and properly support recreation centers** as places for youth to gather, create, be safe, feel safe, and receive support for emotional, social and physical health needs, with guidance and direction from youth.
- 6. Engage political and community leaders to develop a roadmap** for a safe, healthy and hopeful community in Southwestern PA.
- 7. Engage the private sector and community leaders** in a coalition focused on sustainable economic development and violence interruption efforts in priority communities.
- 8. Utilize storytelling to raise awareness about the impact of gun violence** and the lives that are impacted – both directly and indirectly – within our region.
- 9. Support the coordination of efforts among regional health systems** to encourage the development of a locally based public health approach to preventing gun violence.
- 10. Implement “Red Flag” laws** that allow loved ones or law enforcement to intervene by petitioning for a court order to temporarily prevent someone in crisis from accessing guns.
- 11. Make homes and communities safer** by promoting safe firearm storage practices.