

Special Section Editorial: Improving the Social Work Response to the Gun Violence Epidemic

**Peter Simonsson
Patricia Logan-Greene
Karen Slovak**

Firearm violence remains a critical and significant social problem in the United States, causing harm and distress across systems to victims, their families, and larger communities. This special section focused on manuscripts from social work scholars that could encapsulate the status of research on firearm violence within our discipline. In this introduction, we will describe the manuscripts we received, as well as discuss emerging themes in the broader firearm violence research community and the importance of social work scholars' role in the literature and prevention efforts.

Despite recent increased scholarship and policy focus on firearm violence, rates of homicide and suicide involving firearms remain high in the US. In 2021, deaths involving firearms reached an all-time high of nearly 50,000, with suicide accounting for 54% of those firearm deaths (Gramlich, 2023). While firearm-related suicides primarily involve rural White males ages 40 and above, community firearm violence has a greater impact on inner-city Black and Hispanic/Latino males between ages 16 and 24 (Office of the U.S. Surgeon General, 2024). However, the debate about firearm violence and the primary victims is often politicized, resulting in skewed perceptions regarding the causes of and remedies for this widespread, challenging, and complex social problem (Simonsson & Solomon, 2021). Moreover, public attention to firearm violence usually spikes amid media coverage following public mass shootings, which only account for a tiny proportion of the total annual firearm deaths and injuries (Schildkraut et al., 2015), despite being tragic and terrifying to the populace. This disproportionate media attention on mass shootings warps the discussion of policy remedies and also minimizes the true toll that firearm violence takes on vulnerable communities – often precisely the communities that social workers are dedicated to and trained to serve.

Social workers are optimally positioned to address firearm violence for several reasons. First, considering that a confluence of underlying factors contributes to both firearm perpetration and victimization, the social work profession's utilization of the bio-psycho-social-spiritual framework and historical positioning in trauma-informed care and social justice is well suited to the comprehensive approach that addressing firearm violence requires (e.g., Lee et al., 2018; Saad et al., 2017). For example, community firearm violence can be understood as stemming from multiple factors that all increase the risk for violence: biological factors including intoxication or head-trauma tendencies; psychological factors such as trauma and antisocial tendencies; social factors including unemployment, exposure to violence, and poverty; and/or spiritual factors like alienation, the loss of hope, and detachment from a cause larger than one's individual life. Second, social justice is a core

Peter Simonsson, PhD, MSW, LCSW, Assistant Professor, Director of Violence Prevention, Department of Urban Health and Population Science at Lewis Katz School of Medicine, Temple University, Philadelphia, PA. Patricia Logan-Greene, Associate Professor and Associate Dean for Academic Affairs, School of Social Work, University at Buffalo, Buffalo, NY. Karen Slovak, PhD, LISW-S, LGSW, DSW Core Faculty, Social Work, School of Public Service Leadership, Capella University, Minneapolis, MN.

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tenet of the profession, and this perspective is critical when situating firearm violence in larger historical and political factors. For example, the role of trauma as a risk factor for violence perpetration is well established (e.g., Sharpe, 2015) and certain communities in the US are more likely to suffer trauma due to generational poverty, historical racism, and growing up in disinvested areas. In addition, the demographics of those involved in firearm violence (primarily males) makes the social justice lens increasingly important in firearm violence research, and social worker scholars have both an opportunity and an obligation to ensure that the production of firearm knowledge includes emphasis on relevant social justice perspectives and relevance for all those impacted by firearm violence (e.g., Conrick et al., 2023; Swanson, 2020; Webster et al., 2020).

From a more practical perspective, social workers have unique insights into the needs and vulnerabilities of those who are at risk for firearm violence. For example, macro social workers provide services and advocate for policies across multiple systems (e.g., child welfare, criminal-legal settings, mental health facilities, community organizations), engaging with stakeholders in each of these domains. This experience, coupled with micro social workers' clinical expertise in engagement and trust building, singularly positions social workers to elevate the perspectives of those directly impacted by firearm violence, a much-needed perspective in this area. In addition, their community embeddedness allows them to engage communities often determined to be difficult to reach by other generalist social scientists (Arsovska, 2012) in more participatory, social justice-oriented research. Furthermore, academic research still heavily favors traditional quantitative methodologies as those best suited to generate "evidence-based practice." However, for many vulnerable communities, the stories about firearm violence, its harms, and remedies are most powerfully told using qualitative research such as narrative approaches. Social work's skill set and emphasis on active listening and understanding individuals within their social environments positions social workers as especially adept qualitative researchers who can deeply explore the lived experience of individuals and families who have been impacted by firearm violence. With recent focus on narrative methodologies, social workers who focus on interpersonal engagement and contextual understanding are ideally situated to capture rich and nuanced data about vulnerable people's lives.

As we hope we have made clear, social work is in a perfect position to conduct and lead developments in firearm-violence research and advocacy, and this special section showcases some meaningful and exciting examples of our profession's capacity for thoughtful and nuanced contributions to the field.

In the first article, *Aspholm, Aguilar, and St. Vil* examine the structural conditions that have created economic hardships and despair among vulnerable middle-aged White men, who have the highest rates of suicide, and younger Black males, who have the highest rates of homicide. The findings suggest that the social forces that result in despair can lead to firearm violence for both groups, and that the remedies need to involve macro solutions to reach the roots of the economic and social conditions that create dislocation.

Epperson, Cinque, and Lee examine the impact of a prosecutor-led gun diversion program in Chicago and factors associated with illegal gun-carrying among program participants. The growing interest in prosecutor-led and other gun diversion programs

which seek to reduce the burden of incarceration on vulnerable young people emphasizes the need for evaluation and research efforts. Epperson et al. found that participants in such programs who recidivate often resort to gun-carrying due to past trauma and fear of being victimized in dangerous neighborhoods.

The impact of social workers' knowledge about firearm access and safe storage is examined by *Rapp-McCall and Lucio* who found that social workers do not routinely ask high-risk clients and program participants about firearm safety and storage. The authors recommend that social workers receive further training in assessing and discussing firearm storage and safety with all clients, not only those at-risk for suicidal or homicidal ideations.

In *Nugent and Khalil* the focus was on the impact of violent political rhetoric on police killings of civilians. They utilized time series analysis with controls and found increases in lethal force against civilians following violent rhetoric from politicians. In an era of increasingly heated politics, this has implications for populations in frequent contact with police.

Taken as a whole, these selected articles highlight the expertise and knowledge of social work scholars who focus on firearm violence, showcasing social work's contribution to both research and practice in this area. While this special section helps to demonstrate social work's promise for firearm violence research, there are other trends that point in a positive direction for social work scholars as contributors to this field. For example, in recent years, social work scholars have presented firearm-related research at the American Society for Criminology Conference, the National Conference for the Prevention of Firearm Related Injuries, and, of course, the Society for Social Work and Research conference, where 25 posters and presentations focused on firearm violence in 2024, compared to fewer than 10 abstracts each year from 2009-2017. Finally, the recent formation of a Grand Challenge in Social Work specifically devoted to Preventing Gun Violence reflects the growing interest and commitment of social workers to engage and address the impact of firearm violence on society (Logan-Greene & Gutterman, 2023). While still new, this Grand Challenge has attracted significant attention, with promising signs that it will galvanize and synergize social work scholars' efforts related to firearm violence prevention grounded in social justice, strength-based, and person-in-environment perspectives.

However, these efforts should not undermine future initiatives to further increase social work's investment in firearm violence research and practice, and there are several areas where social workers can meaningfully contribute. First, Community-Violence Interventions (CVI) are expanding in scale and funding in urban communities as a response to elevated homicide rates. While community firearm violence is increasingly framed as a public health concern, social workers could add value in this space by emphasizing how community-based firearm violence remains situated in poverty, mass incarceration, alienation, lack of realistic and feasible opportunities, and that historical legacies such as institutional racism and oppression remains factors that contribute to street violence in urban communities. Public health frameworks are important, but often tend to focus on violence from a disease perspective while de-emphasizing the systemic, institutional, and historical conditions that contribute to problems like community firearm violence. Social

work can add perspective and lend wisdom, especially since social work is rooted in the belief that people and their environment interact in complex ways and thus, any solutions must address the social conditions in which vulnerable individuals are embedded as much as individual interventions.

Second, social work can play a critical role in studying and addressing rural suicide among White males suffering from disinvestment and alienation. Here social work has a unique opportunity to engage communities and raise awareness about suicide as well as addressing the systemic factors that make rural communities vulnerable to suicide (Mohatt et al., 2021). By organizing workshops and outreach, social work can also provide support and help reduce the stigma around help-seeking and mental health that often hinders middle-aged males from seeking services. At the micro level, social workers can provide counseling, offer emotional support, mental health screenings, and crisis intervention for those at-risk of suicidality.

Third, current discussions of firearm violence place substantial emphasis on individual-level risk and protective factors of those involved as either perpetrators or victims. For example, psychological scholarship can sometimes over-emphasize individual-level factors, such as criminogenic risks and needs, at the risk of undervaluing the influence of social environments and institutions in the life of vulnerable individuals. Here, social work has an opportunity to contribute via the bio-psycho-social-spiritual lens, and as a discipline social work is sensitive to how individual lives are shaped by their institutions, communities, and opportunities. Thus, studying suicide prevention in rural communities or homicide prevention in urban communities needs to account for how disinvestment in rural areas and alienation and lack of employment opportunities in the inner city contributes and interacts with a confluence of biological and psychological factors.

Finally, progress on issues related to firearm violence will require building meaningful relationships with the communities most impacted by it. Because social workers are embedded in vulnerable communities, as well as within institutions designed to serve them, they have a unique opportunity to address firearm violence both in terms of practice and scholarship. However, although social work already has a long history of engaging in qualitative and narrative-focused work, scholars with interest in firearm violence research should adopt and advocate for more participatory methods. A step away from traditional positivist methodologies toward more actions-focused and participatory research that involves community voices will also aid in dismantling systemic biases that plague both rural and urban communities. Social work should ensure that the next generation of social work scholars are well-equipped to engage in participatory action research and utilize those with lived experience at all stages of research and in the development of interventions to address firearm violence.

In conclusion, it is evident that social workers, both as scholars and practitioners, play a critical role in contributing to the prevention of firearm related deaths and injuries. While we believe the articles in this special section also demonstrate the value of social work's continued (and growing) attention to firearm violence, we also believe there are still more opportunities for meaningful engagement from social workers. By leveraging the unique

strengths and values of the social work profession, we can produce research with depth and alignment to social work values, that is also relevant for practitioners and policymakers.

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Author note: Address correspondence to Peter Simonsson, Department of Urban Health and Population Science, Lewis Katz School of Medicine, Temple University, Philadelphia, PA 19140. Email: peter.simonsson@temple.edu