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CARLOS T. CARTER

Gun violence

We continue to mourn the loss of the many individuals we have lost to gun violence. Everyone has been impacted in some way, knowing neighbors, friends, and family who have lost loved ones to such horrific and senseless violence. And we know how much our Black communities are disproportionately impacted.

In this month's health page, we focus on what we can do to create safer and more connected communities together. Dr. David Brent emphasizes talking more about gun safety and about mental health supports for our young people. What thoughts do you have for increasing talk within our Black neighborhoods about gun safety and mental health?

Carlos: We absolutely need to be talking about how having more guns do not make us or our neighborhoods safer. Whether in schools, after school programs, churches, libraries, and living rooms, we all have a responsibility to talk about the horrible impact of guns on our communities especially young people, and reducing guns in our communities. Simultaneously, we have to also continue to address the stigma and silence about mental health, and ensure that our young people and their families have access to and actually receive culturally responsive mental health care.

Dr. Daniel Salahuddin also underscores the need to increase mental health resources, especially for our neighbors who have lost loved ones to gun violence. What are ways that the Urban League can help families get connected?

Carlos: The Urban League has been dedicated to nurturing the resilience of individuals, families, and communities. We recognize that the histories of chronic disinvestment and disenfranchisement of our neighborhoods have created profound inequities. Thus, our ability at the Urban League to connect community members to mental health resources, economic opportunities, stable housing, and nutritious food, among many other things, are a critical part of increasing the positive supports that our neighbors deserve. As Dr. Salahuddin notes, we have to stop normalizing gun violence and its consequences on our health and well-being.

The Urban League is at the forefront of supporting community resiliency, and we are committed to doing this work collectively with the many partners engaged in creating a more just and equitable region.

Carlos T. Carter is President & CEO of the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh.

4 steps to protect Black youth from gun violence

Gun violence is a complicated issue in our country. However, some facts are straightforward: Exposure to gun violence—homicide, suicide, and accidents—profoundly affects the behavioral health of children and adolescents.

While no group of children has been spared from gun violence, Black youth bear the biggest burden of gun-related homicides. While White children are more likely to die by suicide, gun-related suicide for Black children is rising and, for the first time, exceeding the rate of suicide in White children.

How can parents, guardians, family and community members protect Black youth?

1. Practice gun safety
“Research shows people are not going to get rid of guns in their homes,” says Dr. David A. Brent, Distinguished Professor of Psychiatry, Pediatrics, Epidemiology, and Clinical and Translational Science and Endowed Chair in Suicide Studies at Pitt.

With this in mind, Dr. Brent encourages gun owners to practice gun safety on children's behalf. “For example, store guns empty and separate from ammunition in a safe place away from kids,” he says. Gun locks on each weapon provide

an added layer of protection.

“Taking these steps is important for children's safety and health,” Dr. Brent notes. “They're essential for a child who's having behavioral health issues, like depression, or is experiencing a mental health crisis.”

2. Promote conversations about carrying weapons

While about half of U.S. gun owners carry weapons as protection against crime, many scientists who study gun violence agree that guns make society more dangerous.

According to the Harvard School of Public Health, in homes with guns, there's an increased risk of gun-related suicide and homicide, especially against women.

“Carrying a gun for protection can ruin two lives,” says Dr. Brent. “Yours and the other person in the confrontation.”

Open, honest, and non-judgmental discussions about the risks and responsibilities of carrying firearms can help people make informed decisions about gun ownership and usage.

Community-based programs like Reimagine ReEntry and the CommUnity Hospital Violence Intervention Project, promote non-violent conflict resolution and de-escala-



DR. DAVID A. BRENT

tion techniques that lead to safer environments for everyone.

3. Address youth mental health

“Gun violence is traumatic and takes a toll on kids' health,” says Dr. Brent. “Children who experience it often develop PTSD the same way people do in combat. The trauma puts them at a higher risk for engaging in dangerous behaviors, like substance abuse. They're also more likely to experience social isolation, depression, and other disorders.”

Dr. Brent leads the ETUDES Center, which consists of a team of approximately 40 researchers from UPMC, Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, and other institutions to develop new ways to bridge mental health disparities in children and adolescents who live in marginalized communities.

“We're creating technology-based tools we hope will help reduce youth suicide for kids who don't have equal access to psychiatric services,” says Dr. Brent. “We're providing the services in primary care where there's less stigma and where marginalized youth and families feel more comfortable getting treatment.”

In Dr. Brent's study, Black youth make up 35-40 percent of the participants. They and their family members/caregivers provide input for interventions. “We're counting on their lived experiences to help us design technology that makes a difference,” says Dr. Brent. Families that are interested in learning more about ETUDES can ask their doctor for a referral. Or they can email Dr. Brent at brentda@upmc.edu.

4. Take advantage of mental health resources to create a safe environment

For children who've experienced gun violence, or who struggle with emotional and behavioral issues like substance use, anxiety, and mood disorders, Dr. Brent encourages parents to create safe environments that begin with a visit to a doctor.

“Any clinic or pediatrician associated with Children's Hospital can

get access to behavioral health delivered in a pediatric setting,” notes Dr. Brent. “Pediatricians can get in touch with psychiatrists in real time through a program called TiPs. That includes psychiatric assistance and help creating a care plan.”

For children in a mental health crisis, Dr. Brent recommends Resolve. Resolve is a free, 24/7 crisis service available to Allegheny County residents. It includes child and adolescent home, school, and community support. Special care is available for kids who've been identified at high risk for psychiatric hospitalization or out-of-home placement.

Resolve services are sponsored by Allegheny County and UPMC Western Psych. No referral or appointment is needed. A walk-in center is located at 333 North Braddock Ave. The intake number is 412-864-5065 (non-crisis) and 1-888-796-8226 (crisis).

“To lose someone you love to gun violence—or to see your child suffering because of it—is something no one should experience,” says Dr. Brent. “That's why we're trying to inform people and create solutions that make mental health services more equitable.”

Creating a mental health framework for individuals and communities hurt by gun violence

Gun violence is a public health crisis that deeply impacts the wellbeing of people and their communities. In Pittsburgh, no group is more affected by gun violence than young Black men. They are 60 times more likely to die from gun violence compared to the city-wide average, and 50 times more likely compared to the U.S. average. As a result, they are over-represented among those with non-fatal gun injuries.

While Pittsburgh has hospital-based violence intervention programs that help individuals cope and recover from non-fatal gun injuries immediately after an incident, they're not designed to help months later when mental health issues like PTSD may occur.

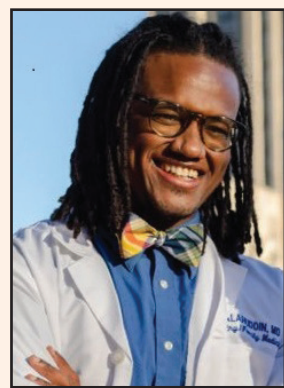
In 2023, the increasing amount of gun violence in Allegheny County prompted the Department of Human Services to make a \$50 million commitment to violence reduction initiatives through 2028. The money is funding various countywide and commu-

nity-based organizations that support these initiatives, including mental health services. The Neighborhood Resilience Project (NRP) is serving as the county convener, or “quarterback,” to coordinate these efforts.

Dr. Daniel Salahuddin, Assistant Professor of Family Medicine and Psychiatry at Pitt, and his researchers are helping as well. He and his team are creating a game plan for the NRP and its teammates that will help reduce gun violence through better mental health.

“We're mapping out the behavioral health services and other related supports that already exist in Allegheny County especially as they relate to young, Black men and gun violence,” Dr. Salahuddin explains. “We're creating a better understanding of what's out there and what's not. With the map, stakeholders will be able to clearly see the assets we have, as well as the gaps.”

The map will give the NRP and the entire col-



DR. DANIEL SALAHUDDIN

laborative a framework for developing additional behavioral health services that are welcoming and culturally relevant. “The research creates an opportunity to assess and address social and structural barriers that prevent people who've experienced violence from getting the mental health services they need to recover and live healthy lives,” Dr. Salahuddin adds.

To date, Dr. Salahuddin's team has interviewed 12 community organizations out of 30. So far, the team has talked to community activists;

organization directors, presidents, and CEOs; social workers; and therapists. “It's humbling,” he says. “There's a lot of dedicated people doing good work. On their behalf, we're condensing the information they're giving us into a concise summary of results that's easy to understand and use in real time.”

What has the team found so far? “None of what we're finding is a surprise, but it IS difficult to swallow,” Dr. Salahuddin says.

An overall theme is the glaring lack of investment in communities. “It comes down to how much attention is received in a Black or Brown community vs a White community—and what that says about the value of Black and Brown lives,” says Dr. Salahuddin. “A key aspect of preventing gun violence includes meeting people's basic needs and helping them access resources.”

Other themes include the general lack of mental health support for those who are impacted

by gun violence and the ripple effect the violence has on people who both witness and perpetrate the violence, as well as their families, friends, and the community at large.

There's also the theme of normalization. “When someone is shot and killed, people's grief becomes entwined with chronic trauma,” he adds. “This can make people numb to violence. It becomes a normal part of life. However, it's NOT normal and should never be.”

For Dr. Salahuddin and team, the emerging themes are why the study is so important. “The study and the funding are bringing organizations together to collectively create a culturally-aligned mental health plan for Pittsburgh's underserved communities,” says. “Finally, we have more tools and the means to break down barriers to accessing appropriate mental health services, reducing gun violence, and restoring people's wellbeing, resiliency, and sense of self.”

Healthy Village Learning Institute uses African-centered process to transform participants' lives

Located in McKeesport, the Healthy Village Learning Institute is a community organization where people can participate in culturally-aligned programs and services.

The village focuses on academic success, per-

sonal and community responsibility, technology competencies, manhood and womanhood rites of passage, Elders support, youth employment, adult employment training, African Arts, and health and wellness initiatives.

The institute was founded in the basement of St. Paul African Methodist Church in 2012 where its members began building a program that emphasizes positive African identity.

One of the programs is Let's STOP the Gun Violence. In it, Healthy Village Learning Institute serves as the community component of the McKeesport Alternative Police Strategies (MAPS) project.

Other programs and services include:

The P.O.W.E.R. (Positive Outcomes With Excuses Removed) Process—Created for children and youth, the process offers strength-based, African-centered character develop

Diversion Process—

Provides first-time or low-level offenders with a second chance.

S.T.R.E.A.M. Process—Prepares children, youth, and adults for present and future demands Science, Technology, Research, Engineering, Arts, and Math.

Innovative United Methodist sponsored Urban Camping and Retreat Center—Offers non-traditional, practical applications for understanding and participating in urban and global community issues.

African Museum of Culture, Art, and OUR-story—Features a museum that connects to the roots of the African experience globally, delivering truth, tragedy, and triumph that

teaches all cultures. International Rites of Passage (age 8-Elder)—Designed for young men and women in Allegheny County.

Community Mothers and Fathers (age 21+)—Supports and empowers village parents.

Council of Village Elders—Celebrates Elders' wisdom and lived experiences.

Summer and After-school Scholars Process—Designed to improve academic achievement.

To learn more about the Healthy Village Learning Institute, visit avlweb.org. On the site, be sure and scroll down to watch YouTube videos that capture the Healthy Village experience.

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