



Gun Violence: A Public Health Crisis

As an urban safety net health system with one of the nation's busiest Level I trauma centers, the Cook County Health & Hospitals System is on the front lines of Chicago's epidemic of gun violence. CCHHS' Stroger Hospital, located on the city's near west side, is home to the first comprehensive trauma unit in the U.S., established in 1966. Today, the unit sees more than 5,000 visits each year.

- In 2017, CCHHS' Stroger Hospital on Chicago's near west side cared for more than 1,100 patients with gunshot wounds.
- CCHHS spends an average of \$30,000-50,000 to treat a patient who has been the victim of gun violence.
 - CCHHS spends \$30-40 million annually to treat gunshot wounds. This only includes the cost of initial hospital treatment, not the extensive outpatient or rehabilitation many patients require.
 - 75% of gunshot patients have health insurance.
- Due to the large volume of penetrating injuries treated at Stroger Hospital, medical personnel from the U.S. armed forces rotate through the trauma unit prior to deployment to train and collaborate on advanced medical treatments for catastrophic wounds.

Addressing Gun Violence at CCHHS

- CCHHS convened a research cohort of medical professionals to compile and review gun violence data in 2016. The group's initial findings about the relation of gun violence and hospital admissions for stress-sensitive conditions are being submitted for publication this year. The results gleaned from this research will help drive CCHHS' violence-intervention initiatives.
- Violent injury is a recurring medical problem. Youth injured by violence are among those most at risk for future violence and injury. Healing Hurt People-Chicago (HHP-C) was established in 2013 as a partnership between Stroger Hospital, the University of Chicago Comer Children's Hospital and Center for Nonviolence and Social Justice at Drexel University in Philadelphia to provide violently-injured youth support and address the psychological trauma that can drive the cycle of violence. HHP-C trauma intervention specialists provide psychoeducation and support services to injured youth and their families, including assessing safety and other basic needs to reduce high-risk behaviors, help patients stay safe and create futures for themselves.

Youth violence and trauma are inextricably linked. Gang-involved youth reported exposure to an average of 10 different types of traumatic stress, mostly chronic, beginning on average at age 6, according to a 2012 survey. Exposure to ongoing violence shapes a person's personality and developmental capacities, including their ability to regulate emotions and to read safety and danger cues.

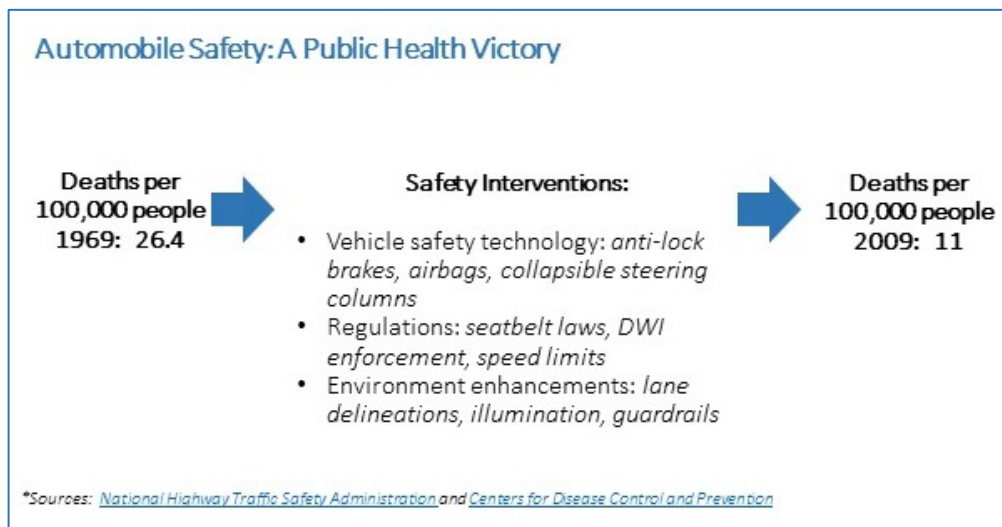
HHP-C makes a positive impact on patients: increasing their safety, providing opportunities for support and peer learning, helping them to enroll in or stay in school, find jobs, navigate medical systems, and linking them to social services and trauma-specific mental health services. For participants who received HHP-C services for at least six months, 84% experienced decreases in PTSD symptoms, 89% exhibited increased self-efficacy, 80% engaged in less aggressive behavior, and only 8% of youth were reinjured, none seriously.

Addressing Gun Violence as Society

For nearly 20 years, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the nation's leading public health authority, has been unable put resources toward gun violence research due to restrictions driven by the powerful gun lobby and lack of funding.

Research provides a better understanding of public health issues and allows researchers to develop effective mitigating interventions. Ad hoc, siloed programs that aim to address a broad public health crisis are not as effective as a collaborative of evidence-based interventions.

A public health approach must be applied to gun violence in the U.S. if we, as a society, hope to reduce gun-related morbidity and mortality. As we have seen with car safety, it can be done.



Yet, while car-related deaths have declined sharply in the U.S., deaths caused by guns have increased since the 1960's. In Illinois, more people are killed by guns than by cars. In 2014, 924 people were killed in car crashes, and more than 1,167 people were killed by firearms in Illinois, according to the Illinois Department of Transportation and CDC respectively.

Gun violence is a symptom of complex socioeconomic disparities that disproportionately impact disenfranchised communities. Although there is no single solution to the problem of urban violence, it is clear that any public health response to violence must include approaches that understand the role trauma plays in shaping behavior and promote opportunities for addressing and healing from trauma. Other factors that must be considered are educational and economic opportunities, as well as federal gun laws.