

Mississippi Urban Research Center
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Special Report

**Examining Gun Violence Homicide Rates Across America:
Trends, Factors, and Potential Solutions**

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Abstract

This study examined homicide gun violence rates nationally and in Jackson, Mississippi. Its purpose is to identify key trends, factors, and potential solutions taken by cities across the United States to address gun violence issues. Gun violence is defined as violence committed with the use of firearms. This study utilized a descriptive/explanatory research design to quantitatively describe the gun violence problem and then present qualitative explanations regarding its possible causes. Quantitative data was obtained primarily from the Pew Research Center and U.S. Center for Disease Control. Qualitative data was collected through a review of gun violence research literature. Data analysis consisted of preparing trendlines of collected data for the years 2016 through 2020, and conducting a narrative analysis looking for common themes emerging from the research literature. Study findings revealed a consistent upward trend since 2019 in the number of gun homicide violence incidents in large American cities. Young African American males and Hispanic/Latino males composed the majority of perpetrators and victims of community gun violence homicide. Gun violence homicide rates are greatly influenced by factors such as poverty, poor education, and a lack of resources and opportunities. Findings also indicated the COVID-19 pandemic and changes in gun laws at the national and state levels have affected the availability of guns and the enforcement of gun laws. Successful solutions implemented by U.S. cities to reduce gun violence homicide rates involved the engagement of city, state, and federal officials, along with community members and organizations, in the funding, implementation, and coordination of services addressing this multi-faceted problem.

Key words: gun violence, homicide, crime, community, males, Jackson Mississippi

Purpose

This study examines homicide gun violence rates nationally and in Jackson, Mississippi for the purpose of identifying key trends, factors, and potential solutions to reducing those rates. This study highlights actions taken by cities across the United States to address their gun violence issues, and makes recommendations on interventions that could possibly help reduce gun violence homicides in Jackson, Mississippi. Gun violence is described as violence committed with the use of firearms such as an assault rifle, pistol, shotgun or machine gun (Amnesty International, 2021). Gun violence includes homicide, attempted suicide, suicide, and violent crime (AAFP Home, 2019). Research in this area is critical to understanding the rise in community gun violence. According to the Educational Fund to Stop Gun Violence (2021), Community gun violence is described as intentional acts of interpersonal gun violence committed in public places by individuals who are not intimately related to each other. This form of violence disproportionately impacts communities of color, especially youth and young adults. (Educational Fund to Stop Gun Violence, 2021).

Background

Since March of 2020, death due to gun violence in large U.S. cities has been on the rise impacting predominantly African-American and Hispanic/Latino neighborhoods with the highest rate increases among individuals age 10 to 44 who were non-Hispanic Black males (Gramlich, 2022). According to a recent study conducted by Pew Research Center, “the nation saw a 30% increase in murder in 2020, the largest single-year jump in a century” (Gramlich, 2022). Statistics from 2020 also revealed 79% of all murders involved a fire arm (Gramlich, 2022). This was preceded by a 25% increase in homicides nationally which occurred between 2019 and 2020 (Wilson & Romano, 2021).

The vast majority of the killings appeared to have occurred in large cities. According to Hutchinson (2021), as many as 12 major cities in the United States surpassed annual homicide records in 2021. The total number of homicides (521) in Philadelphia, PA, in 2021 eclipsed the nation’s two largest cities New York (443) and Los Angeles (352). This resulted in an overall increase of 13% from 2020 (Hutchinson, 2021). Chicago, the third largest U.S. city, led the nation with a total of 739 homicides at the end of December 2021, an increase of 3% from 2020 (Hutchinson, 2020). Furthermore, Hutchinson (2021) reported three other large cities (Columbus

Ohio, Indianapolis Indiana, and Louisville Kentucky) also eclipsed their homicide records. Other large U.S. cities that surpassed their homicide records set in 2020 include Albuquerque, New Mexico; Austin, Texas; Baton Rouge, Louisiana; Portland, Oregon; Rochester, New York; and Tucson, Arizona (Hutchinson, 2021).

The following graphs visually present the trends in “Homicides by Gun Violence” for the years 2016-2020. Collectively, the graphs show a rise in gun homicide.

Figure 1 Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

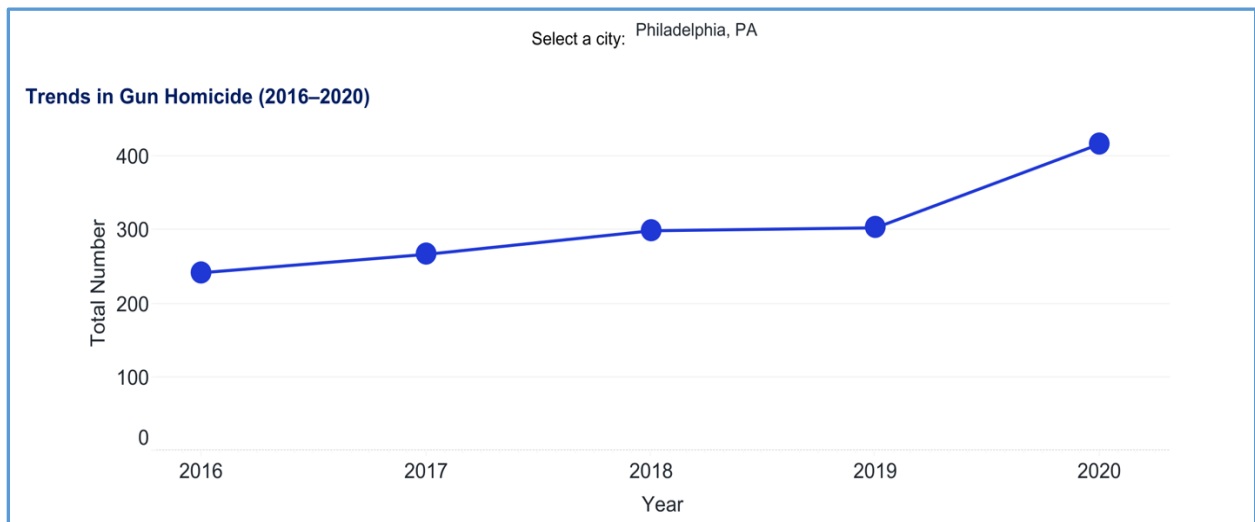


Figure 2 Chicago, Illinois

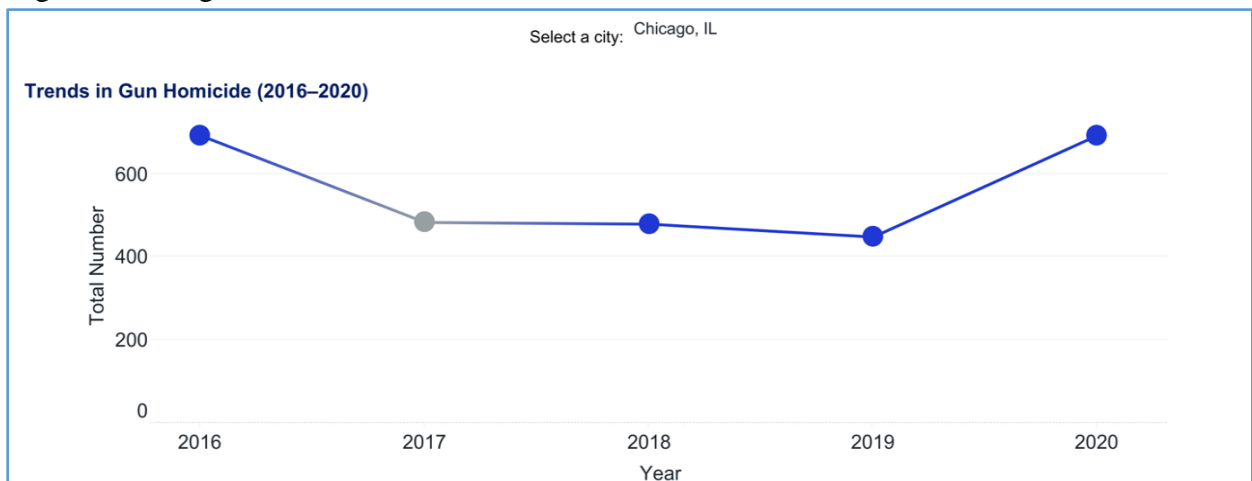


Figure 3 Columbus, Ohio

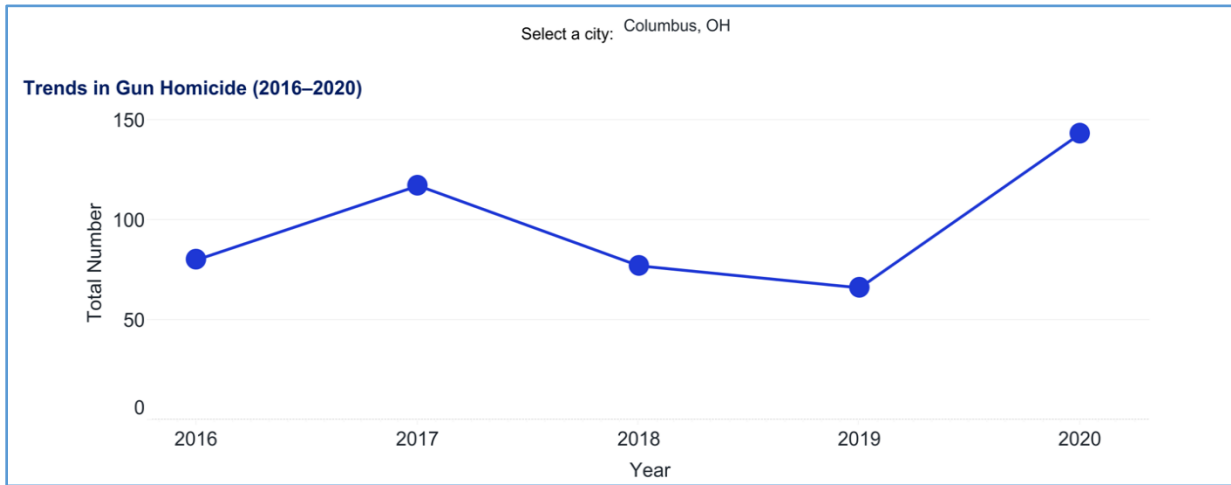


Figure 4 Indianapolis, Indiana

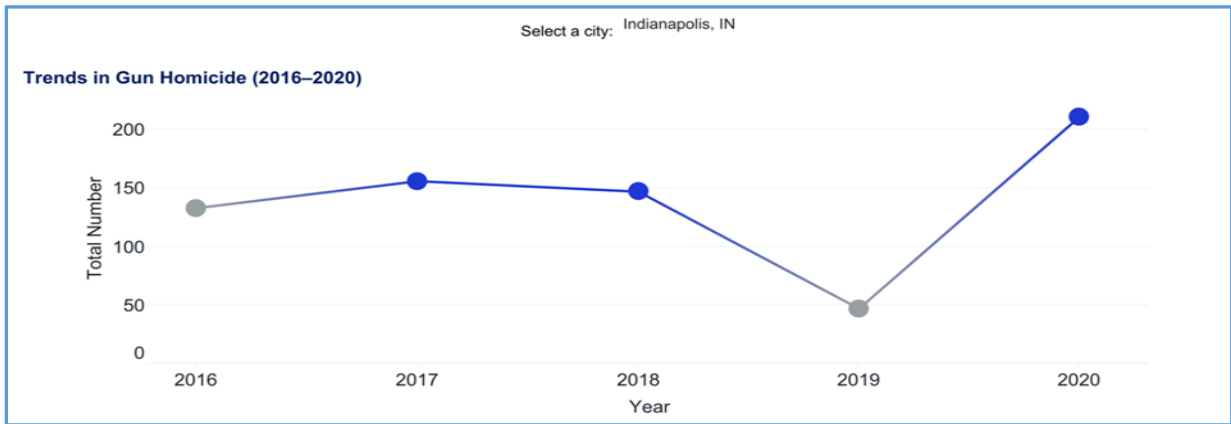


Figure 5 Los Angeles, California

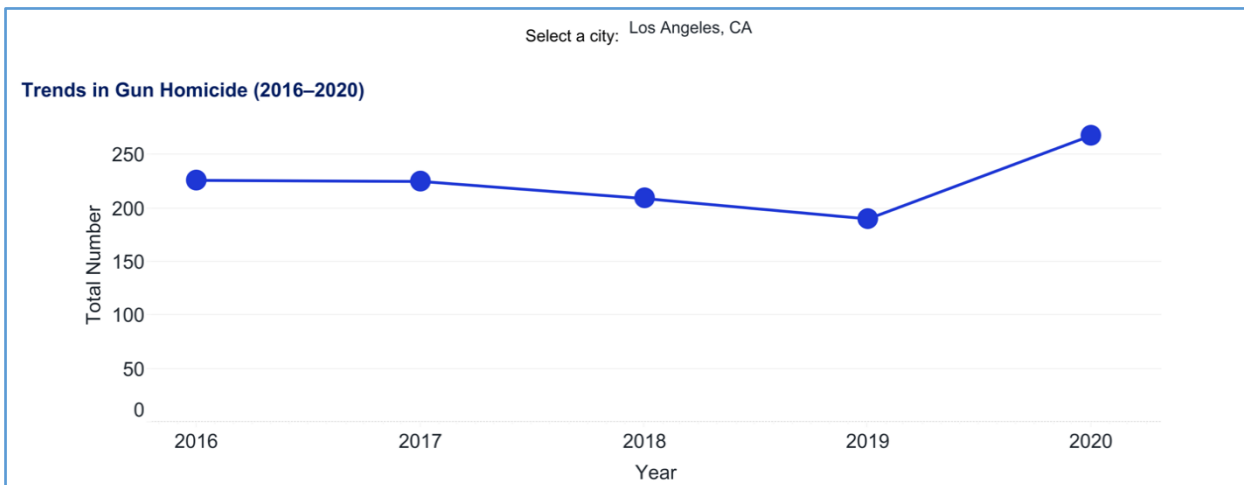


Figure 6 New Orleans, Louisiana

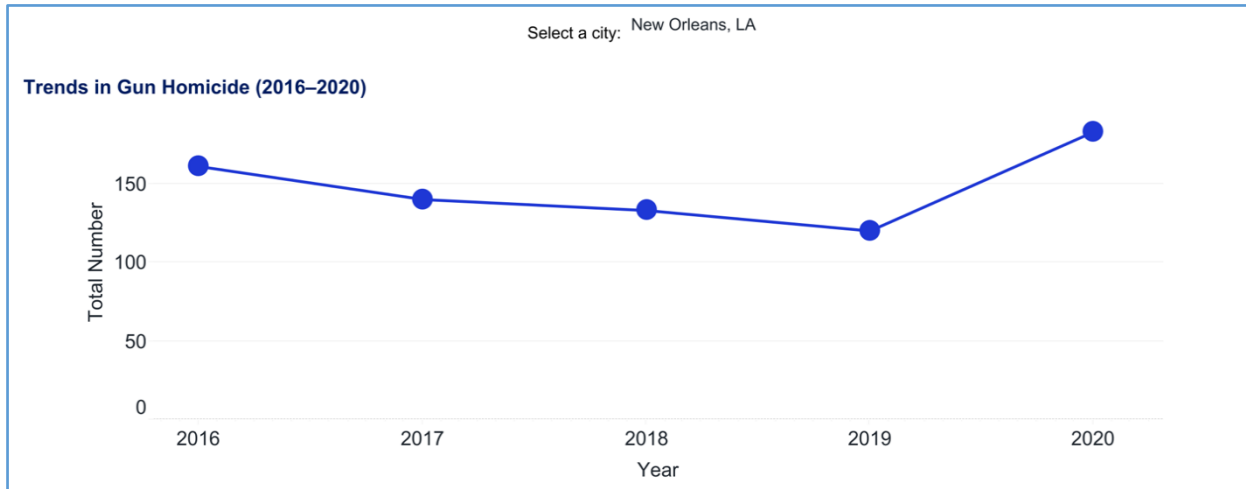
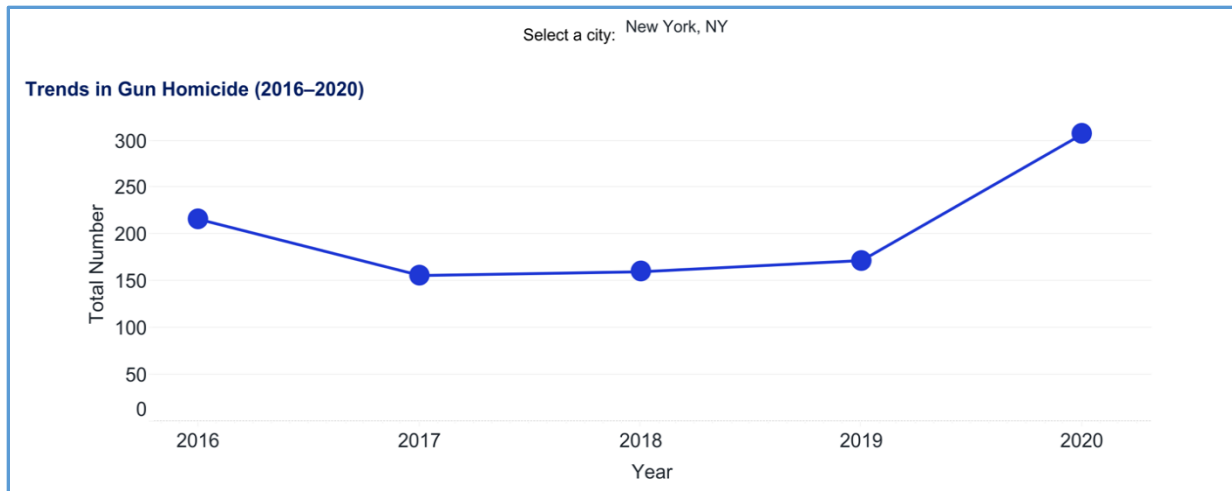


Figure 7 New York, New York



The next section of this study examines gun violence homicide rates in the city of Jackson, Mississippi, and seeks to determine if those rates are similar to the national rates presented earlier.

Gun Violence Homicides in Jackson, MS

As previously discussed, statistics show that homicide numbers have climbed across the country the past two years (Thebault et. al. 2021). Among cities with a population of at least 100,000 or more, the city of Jackson’s per capita murder rate is the highest in the United States (Gates, 2022). Using 2020-2021 crime statistics, Jackson’s homicide rate is 97.6 murders per 100,000 residents, which is 15 times higher than the U.S. rate of 6.5 with most resulting from

gunfire (Salo, 2021). The city of Jackson recorded a record 156 homicides in 2021 (Corpuz, 2022). This number exceeded a previous record of 130 homicides set in 2020 (Corpuz, 2022).

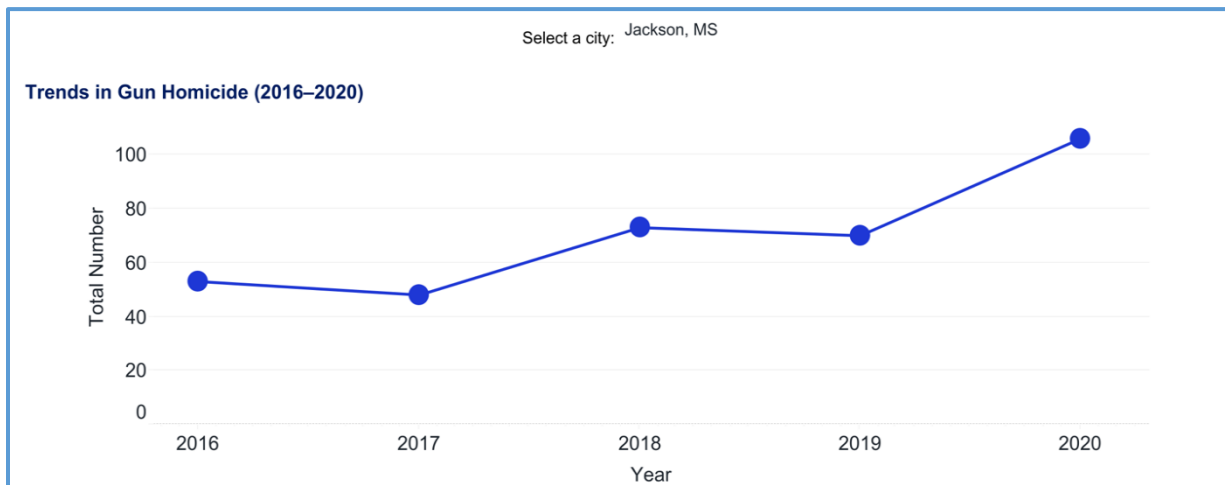
According Salo (2021), the year 2021 had the distinction of being the deadliest year on record for the city of Jackson. An analysis of homicide rates conducted in the fall of 2021 compared rates in the various wards of Jackson (see Table 1). According to LeMaster (2021),

Table 1 Percent (%) of Homicides in City of Jackson (2021)

Ward 1	Ward 2	Ward 3	Ward 4	Ward 5	Ward 6	Ward 7
5%	4%	26%	5%	20%	7%	25%

26 percent of all homicides within the city occurred in Ward 3. Ward 7 had 25 percent of the killings, while 20 percent of the homicides took place in Ward 5. These three city Wards appear to have been the most dangerous areas of the city to live in (LeMaster, 2021). Less than one-fourth of the 2021 homicides occurred in Ward 6 (7 percent), Ward 1 (5 percent), Ward 4 (5 percent), and Ward 2 (4 percent) (LeMaster, 2021). By the end of 2021, a total of 156 individuals lost their lives as a result of gun violence homicide in Jackson, MS (Corpuz, 2021).

Figure 8 Jackson, Mississippi



Factors Contributing to Gun Violence

Under-Resourced Communities

Results from one study of firearm homicide data from 2015 found that 26% of all firearm homicides in the United States occurred in census tracts that contained only 1.5% of

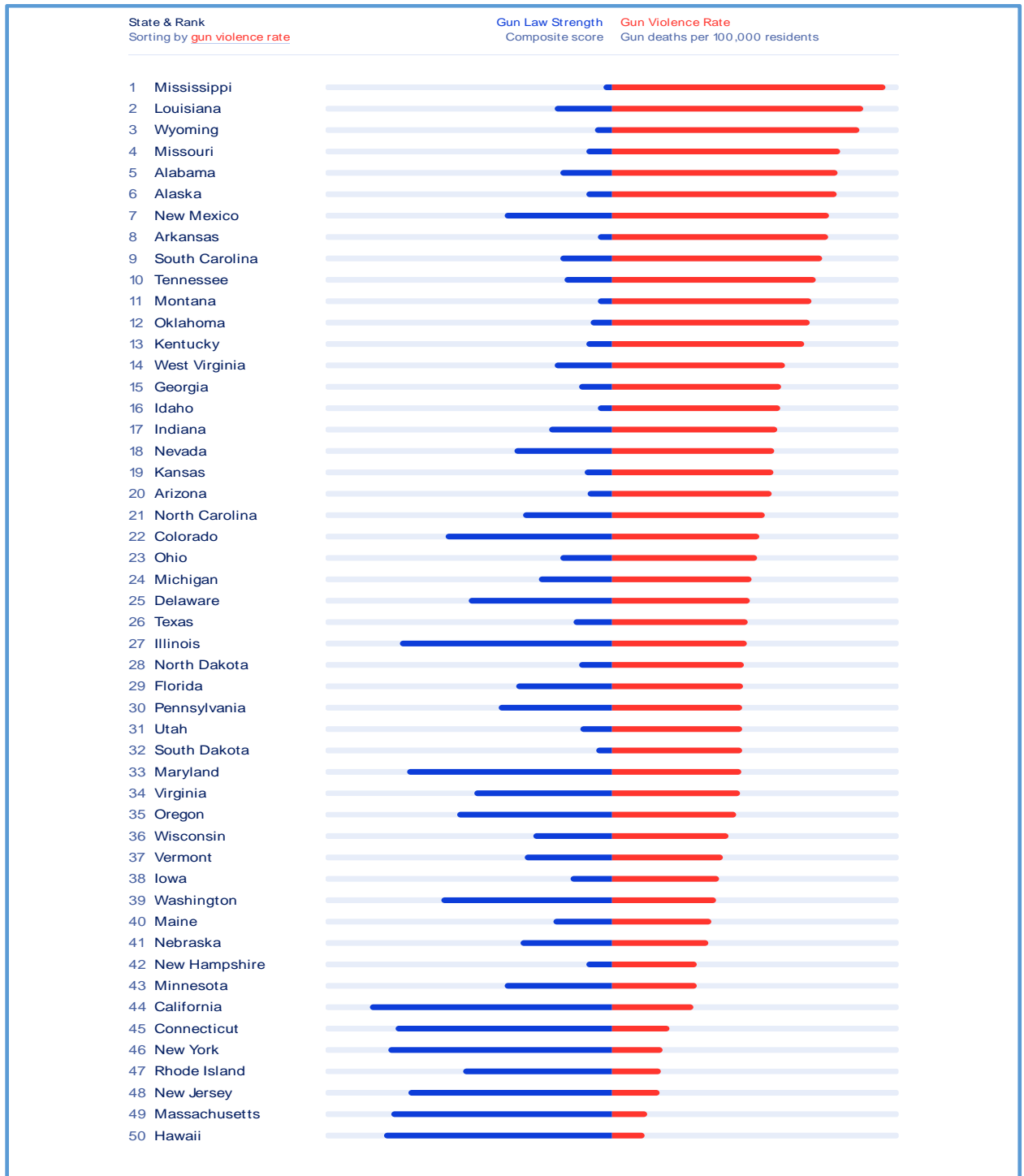
the American population (Community Gun Violence, 2021). Gun violence is frequently confined to a small number of neighborhoods that are under resourced where predominantly African-American and Latino/Hispanics live (Community Gun Violence, 2021). Thus, it appears gun violence disproportionately impacts Black and Hispanic/Latino communities (especially young Black and Hispanic/Latino men). The 2021 gun violence study referenced earlier also identified the following factors associated with gun violence in those communities: (a) usually occurs outside of the home in a public setting; (b) usually occurs between individuals who are not intimately related; and (c) is often sparked by a dispute between individuals or groups and may be retaliatory as a result of long-standing conflict (Community Gun Violence, 2021).

U.S. Constitution 2nd amendment

Guns are profoundly embedded in American society, and are frequently at the center of political debate (Schaeffer, 2021). Americans have the right to bear arms. This authority is provided by the Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, and about a third of U.S. adults say they personally own a gun (Schaeffer, 2021). According to the U.S. Constitution, the original purpose of the clause is to “protect the States in their authority to maintain formal, organized militia units, and thereby avoid the need for the development of a standing army” (U.S. Constitution). This was modified somewhat by the U.S. Supreme Court in 2008 when justices ruled that the Second Amendment protects an individual’s right to possess a gun unconnected to service in the militia, for the purpose of self-defense in the home (Legal Information Institute, 2022).

In 2016, Mississippi became the ninth State to approve legislation granting law-abiding adults the ability to carry a concealed pistol or revolver for personal protection without government-mandated permitting or fees (Nra-Ila & Association, 2016). This law ranked Mississippi among the leaders of states having some of the least restrictive gun laws in the nation. A recent report from the Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Solutions analyzed Centers for Disease Control and Prevention firearm fatality data for 2020. The report concludes that states with the most robust gun laws have lower gun-related death rates (Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, 2022). Below is a chart comparing state gun laws and state gun violence rates:

Figure 1 Comparison of State Gun Laws and State Gun Violence Rates



Source: Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, 2022

COVID-19

The results of a cross-sectional time series study suggested the recent increase in firearm purchases significantly increased firearm violence in the United States (Schleimer et. al. 2020). This association was observed during a coronavirus pandemic-related surge in firearm purchases with an estimated 2.1 million additional purchases nationally between March and May 2020 (Schleimer et. al. 2020). Additionally, data from the Centers for Disease Control indicate homicides from gun violence climbed during the COVID-19 pandemic among people of every age, most racial groups, for men and women, in cities and rural areas, and in every region of the nation (Kimball, 2022). According to Ross Johnson (2022), another recent report from the Centers for Disease Control reveals the rate of homicides tied to firearms reached its highest mark in nearly three decades as the COVID-19 pandemic took hold in the U.S. Results from the agency's analysis indicate the overall age-adjusted rate of firearm-related homicides climbed by more than 30% in 2020, from 4.6 deaths per 100,000 people in 2019 to 6.1 per 100,000 (Ross Johnson, 2022). Furthermore, the report revealed that firearm homicide was lowest, and experienced a lower increase, across communities where poverty was the lowest (Ross Johnson, 2022). Additionally, the report noted increased racial disparity with the largest increase in firearm homicide occurring among Black individuals, for whom the rate jumped from 19 deaths per 100,000 people in 2019 to 26.6 per 100,000 in 2020 (Ross Johnson, 2022). That compared to a rate of 2.2 deaths per 100,000 among whites in 2020, further widening an already stark racial disparity (Ross Johnson, 2022). Counties where less than 9% of residents were in poverty had a firearm homicide rate of 2.4 per 100,000 in 2020, compared with the highest rate of 10.8 per 100,000 among individuals living in areas where the percentage of those in poverty was greater than 14.6% (Ross Johnson, 2022). Researchers in the CDC's Division of Violence Prevention indicated socioeconomic stressors related to the COVID-19 pandemic likely played a large part in increasing the risk of homicide. Conditions such as job loss, housing instability and food insecurity – coupled with social isolation – likely led to increased levels of anxiety and depression (Ross Johnson, 2022).

Unemployment

One study published by the Journal of Urban Health identified evidence of a possible association between excess unemployment and firearm violence and homicide. According to Schleimer et.al. (2022), an ecological study of 16 large U.S. cities was conducted which included Baltimore, MD; Boston, MA; Chicago, IL; Cincinnati, OH; Dallas, TX; Denver, CO; District of

Columbia; Kansas City, MO; Los Angeles, CA; Milwaukee, WI; Philadelphia, PA; Phoenix, AZ; Riverside, CA; Sacramento, CA; San Francisco, CA; and Seattle, WA, during the time period of March–July 2020. That study’s researchers found evidence of a possible association between excess unemployment and firearm violence and homicide (Schliemer et. al., 2022). That same study estimated an average increase of 3.3 firearm violence incidents and 2.0 homicides per city, per month. Study findings indicated increases in unemployment may have contributed to a rise in firearm violence and homicide during the pandemic (Schliemer et. al. 2022).

Males, Masculinity, and GVH Theory

Using a new extension of the *Gender Role Strain Paradigm* (GRSP), Levant theorizes that “discrepancy strain” increases the tendency to gun violence (Levant, 2022). “Discrepancy strain theory” relates to the strain of failure that one experiences when they do not live up to an internalized ideal of masculine behavior (Levant, 2022). In the literature examining precarious manhood studies, Levant (2022), noted a 1990 anthropological study which states that manhood must be earned by action and that the actions must be repeated to maintain status. The *Precarious Manhood* studies indicate that a compromise in a man's sense of masculinity results in ‘aggressive demonstrations’ (Levant, 2022). Levant also cited an article published by Bosson et al. (2009) that stated the public demonstration of aggression was found to reduce the negative effect of ‘men’s anxiety regulated cognitions. Stanaland and Gaither (2021), noted that social pressure to be a man may even precede masculinity in the precarious sense. Bridges and Tober (2019), found that the over-demonstration of masculinity, as ‘proof of masculinity’, was demonstrated by males that were unable to obtain social status by other means, and ended up turning to guns and violence (Levant, 2022). Wilkinson (2001), observed that males in urban settings must be tough and remain that way in order to gain respect from others. This exhibition of toughness is often expressed in gun violence as guns are readily available, and because there are no other ways of expressing their manhood in communities (Wilkinson 2001, Levant 2022).

Jackson (MS) specific Contributing Factors

In a study that gathered feedback from local community residents and leaders, community members stated a lack of social services, jobs, and resources can make violence seem like a viable option for teens (LeMaster, 2020). Community members also referenced the strain

caused by the pandemic, as well as the stress caused by lockdowns among the reasons for the rise in killings (LeMaster, 2020).

Jackson's Mayor Lumumba stated . . . "We know the pandemic has increased the level of desperation that leads to violent crime across the nation, and Jackson has not been immune to that trend" (Corpuz, 2021). However, Mayor Lumumba cautioned against summarizing the rise in crime in Jackson to the pandemic alone. According to Corpuz (2021), the Mayor attributes the city's increasing crime rate to COVID-19, systemic poverty, lack of employment, and poor education. The mayor also listed several other factors contributing to the city's rising homicide rate that included:

1. Inability to detain offenders in the Hinds County detention system because a federal consent decree limits the jail to holding individuals to forty-eight hours (Warren, 2021).
2. A backlog of criminal cases in the circuit court system along with significant delays at the state Crime Lab (Emery, 2022).
3. An influx of illegal guns on the street, many of them high-powered, semi-automatic assault rifles (Ikhayyam, 2022).
4. Lumumba said Mississippi's open carry law makes it difficult for officers to determine if weapons displayed in plain view are illegal, and provides protection to the individuals who possess them (Dixon, 2020).

Other Factors

According to LeMaster (2021), the rise in Jackson homicides comes as the Jackson police force has dwindled from a peak of more than 520 officers to about 290. Though the Jackson Police Department is budgeted for 400 officers, current police chief James Davis said the department has a vacancy of about 100 officers (Gates, 2022). The police force has struggled to retain officers and attract new ones, as the city faces a dire economic downturn, and people are packing up and leaving in droves (Salo, 2021).

According to Salo (2021), it is estimated that a fourth of the population of city of Jackson live below the poverty line. The city of Jackson is plagued by inadequate services, poor education, lack of jobs and resources (Corpuz, 2021). The largest age demographic in the city of Jackson are teens and young adults, age 16 to 24 (U.S. Census Bureau 2020). These significant

factors potentially increase the level of desperation in young people, who are immersed in an environment of available high-powered semi-automatic weapons, to see violence as a viable option; and thereby contribute to the rising tide of gun violence homicide in Jackson or any other U.S. city (Corpuz, 2021).

Potential Solutions to Reducing Gun Violence Homicides

There are many factors and circumstances contributing to recent increases in rates of gun violence homicides across the country. For this reason, law enforcement agencies use a range of reactive and proactive strategies to address gun crime issues (Peterson & Bushway, 2020). The following is a partial listing of gun violence reduction strategies currently being implemented in 3 U.S. cities (Indianapolis, Indiana; Oakland, California; and St. Louis, Missouri). These cities have achieved various levels of effective reductions in gun violence by utilizing different forms of proactive law enforcement.

St. Louis --- Gun Violence Homicide Reduction

In the city of St. Louis Missouri, a city of 300,000, homicides fell, dropping an estimated 25 percent, according to police crime data (Salter, 2022). Mayor Tishaura Jones told the Washington Post that the drop was an indication her strategy of addressing violent crime at its source — by reducing poverty, engaging young people and allowing police to focus their energies on the worst violent offenders — can achieve results (Gates, 2022). According to Salter (2022), city of St. Louis officials also used “Cure Violence.” This innovative approach made use of an estimated \$5 million in stimulus money to address the issue of community gun violence. The approach involved hiring individuals who lived in high crime areas to serve as interrupters (Salter, 2022). Interrupters work to identify individuals who are at high risk for violence, and approach these individuals with a blunt message to listen to the advice offered by interrupters on ways to avoid violence and/or potential incarceration (Salter, 2022).

Indianapolis

According to Andrea (2021), Indianapolis, Indiana experienced its most violent year in 2021 with 271 homicides, setting a record for the second consecutive year. A “Gun Violence Problem Analysis” conducted by the National Institute for Criminal Justice Reform commissioned by the city found that Indianapolis’s prevention effort to reduce crime was underfunded, poorly coordinated, and understaffed (DePompei, 2021). According to DePompei

(2021), the analysis also revealed that approximately 39% of homicides reviewed were confirmed to have involved some “street group members” as victims, suspects or both. These findings prompted the Indiana police department to place more officers on foot patrols logging an estimated 31,000-foot patrols from April to December (Andrea, 2021). The chief of police reported the department received tremendous support solving crimes from the community during that time period due to increased community engagement (Andrea, 2021).

Police department officials plan to continue holding townhalls in each district to allow an open exchange between the community residents and the police department (Andrea, 2021). Furthermore, officials’ plan to place greater focus on the small group of people and places responsible for violent crime across the city. According to Andrea (2021), the department also place “proactive teams” of police officers in the northwest, north, and east districts of the city to concentrate patrols where gun violence is known to frequently occur. The city’s Office of Public Health utilized American Rescue Plan funds to place 35 “Peacemakers” into neighborhoods of Indianapolis. These individuals were responsible for identifying individuals determined to be at-risk of community violence (Andrea, 2021). Officials also used American Rescue funds to hire “Interrupters” who were tasked with intervening in community conflicts before they turn deadly, and others who connect individuals with wraparound services. The Indianapolis police department also instituted a plan to hire 100 police offers while offering a \$5,000 signing bonus, and referral bonuses, to attract new recruits (Andrea, 2021).

Oakland

In 2017, officials in the City of Oakland California created the *Office of Violence Prevention* to address resurgent homicide rates as well as other crimes (Ravani, 2021). According to Ravani (2021), the department suffered from inadequate funding and a lack of leadership. However, this changed in 2019 when the city hired a respected anti-violence expert to head the newly formed agency, which was followed by a significant increase in resources (Ravani, 2021). Swan (2022), wrote that the department was given a goal of reducing killings in the city by 80% within a span of three years; however, the agency received great scrutiny and stress when crime actually increased almost 80% between 2020 and 2021, prompting the leadership to enlist the help of all city departments in the fight against violence (Ravani, 2021). The department head laid out a plan for his small department to be fully embedded in communities disproportionately impacted by gun violence (Ravani, 2021). Key elements of the

director's plan included doubling the number of violence interrupters to 20, adding more staff for crime scene response, and increasing support for the families of homicide victims (Ravani, 2021). In 2021, the Oakland police department launched an initiative called "Ceasefire." The program involves communicating with individuals most prone to commit gun violence, and offer alternatives such as education and job training programs (Ravani, 2021).

Other areas of the United States have also utilized reactive and proactive approaches in seeking to obtain lower levels of crime and gun violence rates. Please see the report "*7 community-led initiatives to address gun violence in cities*" (Crowe, 2022) for a listing of interventions, programs, and services implemented in other large cities to reduce gun violence injury and homicide rates. Below is a listing of additional potential solutions that Jackson (MS), and other cities experiencing high rates of gun violence homicides, could possibly implement:

- More collaboration with federal, state and other law enforcement agencies, including working with political leaders in the tri-county area on crime enforcement and prevention.
- Asking postal employees, utility companies' employees, and others who may be out in the community to report any suspicious activity they may see.
- Placing a priority on mentoring young students in the local school systems.
- Recruiting more local churches in the community to do more in the fight against crime.
- Working with local colleges and universities to map and analyze crime data to help develop and implement potential policies, programs, and services.
- Get city law enforcement leaders to commit to implementing proactive law enforcement approaches in addition to traditional "reactive" approaches to law enforcement.
- Implement programs similar to the "Cure Violence" project that emphasize hiring Peace Keepers and Interrupters who seek to prevent violence in city areas where violent crime frequently occurs.
- Commit to community engagement with residents to facilitate better communications and increase trust levels between residents and police department.

Conclusions

Over the past two years, large American cities have experienced an upward trend in incidents of gun violence in all categories including homicide, attempted homicide, suicide and attempted suicide. The findings of this study reveal a newly identified phenomena known as community gun violence which is described as intentional acts of interpersonal gun violence committed in public places by individuals who are not intimately related to each other. This phenomenon has been found to disproportionately impact communities of color leaving residents who reside in them traumatized, and at-risk of committing violence as a result. This trend is pervasive and appears to place the lives of African American and Latino/Hispanic males at greater risk for gun violence as many individuals from these minority groups are frequently the victim or perpetrator of the crime.

The findings of this study also revealed significant factors which appear to influence the occurrence of gun violence at the community level. Under resourced communities characterized by high poverty, high unemployment, inadequate services, poor housing, and poor educational opportunities have more frequent instances of gun violence. National and state/local changes have resulted in some states relaxing gun laws which have corresponded with increases in the purchasing of weapons. Open carry laws in Mississippi and some other states have made it more difficult for law enforcement officers to determine if weapons are being legally carried by individuals. A comparison of gun laws among U.S. states revealed that Mississippi has the weakest gun law strength in the nation coupled with the highest rate of crime. The above factors have contributed to record breaking homicide rates across the United States including the city of Jackson.

The COVID-19 pandemic contributed to elevated rates of violence with individuals making record purchases in weapons since the start of the pandemic. The pandemic also placed a greater strain on services and institutions which formally provided resources and services needed by individuals and families that were already struggling to survive. The *Gender Role Strain Paradigm* and the “*Discrepancy strain theory*” offer plausible theories for high rates of gun violence among young males of color, who have been locked out of educational and employment opportunities needed to support themselves, and their families. These individuals have been further impacted by the lingering economic and social effects of the pandemic. With no system to serve as a safety net, and few options to address their needs, individuals within this group are at high risk for violence.

Addressing the issue of community gun violence in Jackson (MS) could possibly involve adapting interventions used successfully in other cities like Indianapolis which launched a community engagement campaign by the police department. That effort involved an increase in officer foot patrols and ongoing townhall meetings with community residents. Some results of implementing that intervention included an improvement in communications and trust between community residents and the police force, and an increase in the number of solved crimes. The city of Indianapolis also implemented a strategy called “Cure Violence” which calls for the dedication of funding for implementing non-law enforcement interventions such as “Peace Keepers” and “Interrupters,” who go into communities to identify and communicate directly with individuals in communities known for violence. These interventions have been found to be effective in the cities of Indianapolis and Oakland when the initiative is properly funded, furnished with good leadership, and provided appropriate coordination guided by analysis of the issues of the target community. An increase in the number of law enforcement officers was part of the strategy to combat crime in Indianapolis with officials calling for 100 additional officers, and an offer of a \$5,000 signing bonus.

The task of addressing rising gun violence homicide rates will require multifaceted sustainable interventions. It will also require the vigilance and support of individuals at all levels of our society and government, as well as the various neighborhoods and communities where violent crimes are often committed. Finally, the effort will also involve the engagement of city, state, and federal officials using their influence to bring funding and the coordination of services and resource needed to begin effectively reducing gun violence.

The purpose of this special report was to examine trends, factors, and potential solutions related to gun violence homicide rates. Community members and organizations, Federal, State, and local officials are encouraged to use this report to help reduce the epidemic of gun violence homicide rates across the United States.

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