



Commentary

Gun violence in the U.S.: It is past time we listen to the voices of women and black communities

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The United States (U.S.) presidential election is upon us at a time when the nation faces increasing polarization on many issues, including guns and violence, and our presidential candidates reflect this polarization. The incumbent Republican Nominee, Donald Trump, warns voters that his opponent will “take away your guns (and) destroy your Second Amendment,” which secures the right of the people to keep and bear firearms [1]. Democratic nominee and former Vice President under Barack Obama, Joe Biden, in fact includes in his platform a commitment to effective gun control policies, including banning assault weapons and requiring background checks for the purchase of a firearm [2].

There is no question that we in the U.S. have a gun violence problem. Our age-adjusted firearm mortality rate is 10.6 per 100,000 residents, the highest among comparable nations [3]. U.S. states with the highest firearm related mortality rates, Alabama and Mississippi, have almost twice this rate- 22 and 23 firearm deaths per 100,000 residents, respectively. These rates are comparable to that of Honduras [3,4], which the U.S. State Department has deemed unsafe for U.S. travelers due to its high levels of violence [5]. We know that gun laws matter: state enactment of gun laws significantly reduces the rate of firearm related mortality [6]. At the same time, policies alone may not be sufficient to reduce this violence, as we are seeing an increase in firearm purchase as a consequence of pandemic fears. This is true even in states with more restrictive policies such as California [7], where more than one in five households in the state (22%) have a firearm [8].

Gun ownership is normative in the U.S., in practice and beliefs. Data from 2017 indicate that 30% of U.S. adults own guns and an additional 36% report interest in obtaining a gun in the future [9]. Protection is the primary reason for gun ownership [9]. These normative beliefs and practices, however, vary substantially by gender and

race/ethnicity. Males are more likely than females, and whites more likely than Blacks and Hispanics, to own a firearm and have a firearm in their household [8,9]. Females are more likely than males, and Blacks more likely than whites, to believe that gun violence is a problem in their community and that gun ownership would lead to more crime [9]. Data from California indicate that the majority of white males views guns in the home as important to keep a family safe; this was not seen for females or males of any other racial/ethnic groups [8]. Black females in this study were least likely to view guns as valuable to keep families safe, as well as least likely across groups to want a firearm in or around their home [9]. These findings may be related to Black men being most likely to be victims of gun violence, and females being more likely than males to have had a partner use a firearm against them [9]. Notable from this research is that among Black males who have experienced gun violence, one in three experienced that violence at the hand of a police officer [8].

These research findings from across studies highlight why our nation sees critical gender and racial/ethnic divides in our politics. Normative beliefs and experiences of one's subculture guide voters' political ideologies in ways that can negate the realities of others, including those who may be more affected by a given issue. This dynamic has contributed to the recent growth of movements to address inequalities in violence, including Black Lives Matter (BLM), founded by three Black women, Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi, to address violent policing against Black communities. Simultaneously, we are seeing a rise in vigilante militias, largely or exclusively comprised of white males, which assume responsibility for policing events organized by movements such as BLM, though these individuals are atypically from the areas in which such protests are occurring [10]. Worryingly, some members of these militia groups have viewed President Trump's remarks regarding their actions and organizations as commending them, or even calling them to action, as seen by recent violence at BLM protests and violent threats against female politicians.

As we move toward our presidential election, we should not allow political rhetoric to compromise data-driven decision-making on effective means to reduce violence from firearms, nor to silence the voices of those most affected by gun violence. The data are clear: the U.S. maintains unacceptably high rates of gun violence, disproportionately burdening Black communities as well as women affected by domestic violence. Policies and normative change efforts are needed to contend with these issues, with a focus on our most affected populations. The voices and movements led by Black communities and

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women should guide our voting decisions and firearm platforms, and racially divisive vigilante justice should in no way be viewed an acceptable means of addressing the escalating violence in our country.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The author, Anita Raj, has no conflicts of interest to disclose related to this work.

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