

The Role of the Media in the Disparate Response to Gun Violence in America

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Abstract

In December 2012, 20 elementary school children fell victim to gun violence. Shortly after the killings occurred, national media outlets instantaneously and simultaneously began covering the tragedy with “calls to action” explicitly voiced by public officials and members of the general citizenry. Gun violence in African American communities has also left an indelible mark on the quality and quantity of life among the youngest members as well. Statistics released by federal law enforcement officials reveal that, collectively, more children of color die each year to gun violence. However, gun-related crimes involving low-income persons and racial and ethnic minorities are framed by the media as a convergence of cultural, environmental, and individual shortcomings and immorality. Consequently, structural and/or policy resolutions to address such crimes involving low-income persons and racial and ethnic minorities are overlooked or even omitted from the national and, more importantly, political discourse.

Keywords

gun violence, stereotyping, media, public health disparities, minorities, racism

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Introduction

In December 2012, 20 elementary school children were the victims of a school-based shooting in Newtown, Connecticut. Not very long after the shootings, political and community leaders began speaking out support of policies to increase gun control within the United States. Some pointedly referred to the shootings in Newton, Connecticut as a “call to action” (Cohen, 2013; Cable-Satellite Public Affairs Network (C-SPAN), 2013). Yet, prior to the killings in Newton, numerous children of color nationally, many of them residing in low-income neighborhoods were, and continue to be, victims of or witnesses to gun violence in school, at home, or within their respective communities or neighborhoods (Center for Disease Control [CDC], 2008).

While the extent to which violence occurs in inner-city neighborhoods predominantly inhabited by Blacks is widely known and even briefly mentioned in newscasts, it rarely sparks a call to action tantamount to that witnessed in the aftermath of the Newton shootings. It may be contended that the lack of attention paid to the number of children residing outside of suburban and affluent areas may be, in large part, due to the manner in which crime-related issues are framed in the media. More importantly, the lack of enthusiasm for addressing gun violence involving children and minors of color residing in the inner cities may be due to the manner in which the media, utilizing social rhetoric, has historically depicted Blacks versus Whites (Carpenter, 2012; Hill-Collins, 2000; Oliver, 2003). The traditional stereotypes often associated with Blacks may serve as an impediment to concern and empathy by members of the media, and therefore, the general citizenry. In addition to examining the persisting race-related gun violence disparities, the following discussion utilizes empirical analyses, various news media outlets, popular culture, and federal data to examine the integral role of the media in the incongruent response to those disparities.

Disparities in Gun-Related Deaths

Gun violence accounts for the vast majority of homicide-related deaths each year (Levine, Goldzweig, Kilbourne, & Juarez, 2012). Recent public health studies have revealed that Blacks are more likely to fall victim to gun violence at a highly disproportionate rate relative to other races and ethnicities (Karch, Logan, McDaniel, Parks, & Patel, 2012; Logan, Hall, McDaniel, & Stevens, 2013). Gun violence in Black communities has left an indelible mark on the quality and quantity of life among the youngest members as well. National FBI statistics illustrate that, in 2012, more Blacks were the victims of homicide in comparison with their White counterparts (see Figure 1 below).

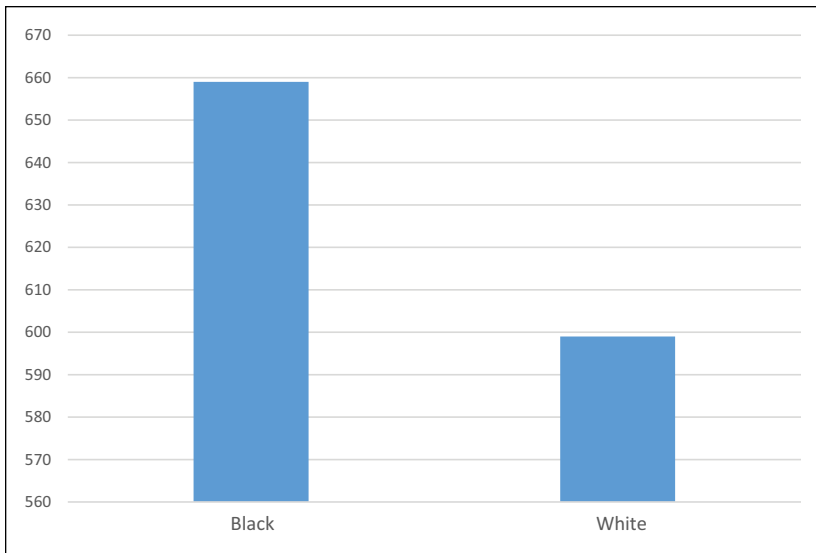


Figure 1. Number of reported homicides among Blacks and Whites in 2012.

Pointedly, the number of Black minors killed is disproportionate to the number of Blacks residing within the United States. Figure 2, also containing FBI statistics, illustrates that, in 2012, a greater number of Black minors between the age of 13 and 16 were victims of homicide nationally. These numbers reflect findings released by the CDC that illustrate that gun violence is of particular concern to this age group of Blacks, and Black males in particular. According to the CDC, gun violence often claims the lives of males between the ages of 10 and 24 more so than females or persons belonging to any other age group. Moreover, Black males between the ages of 10 and 24 are more likely to fall victim to gun violence than any other demographic (Logan et al., 2013).

Shootings on school grounds are especially shocking. Statistics reveal that the collective number of Blacks who have been exposed to gun violence is also disproportionate to the number of White children who have been exposed to gun violence on school grounds. During the years 1994 to 1999, Black minors were killed in school-associated events at a rate 3 times higher than their White counterparts (Anderson et al., 2001). Although recent CDC statistics show that during the years 1992 to 2006, there was an overall decline in the number of school-associated homicides, the rate at which inner-city public school children, often predominantly racial minorities, were killed in

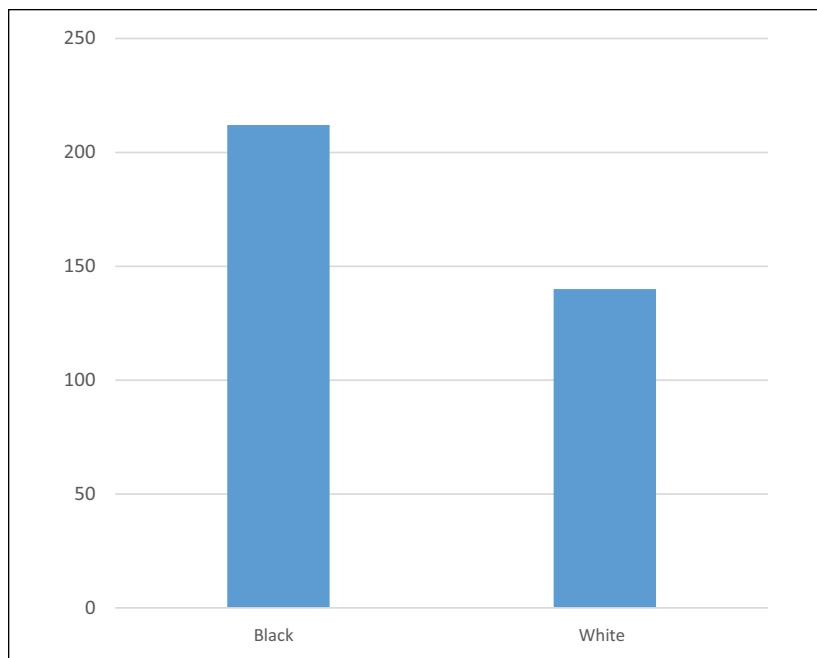


Figure 2. Number of reported homicides among Black and White minors (13-16) in 2012.

school-associated homicides remained disproportionately higher than their counterparts attending schools in other geographic settings (e.g., suburban, rural, private schools, etc.; CDC, 2008).

In addition to those students who are killed in relation to a school-associated event, those who survive are often left to contend with symptoms associated with psychological distress and disorders including social phobia, conduct disorder, agoraphobia, and so on (Fein et al., 2002; Hamrin, Jonker, & Scahill, 2004). Among those who witness such events, including witnessing an attempted individual or multiple homicide, poor academic performance and depression are the likely long-term emotional and mental consequences (Schwartz & Gorman, 2003; Wilson & Rosenthal, 2003). Low-income Black males have been found to be especially vulnerable to experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder on witnessing a violent act, thereby generating a potentially hostile environment that may produce a cyclical pattern ensuing acts of violence (Martin, Revington, & Seedat, 2013).

Stereotypes in the Media

Historically, racial and ethnic minorities have been negatively portrayed in television and film (Carpenter, 2012; Hill-Collins, 2000). Stereotypical television and movie roles often portrayed by racial minorities include that of criminal, mammy, prostitute, drug dealer, and drug abuser (Sewell, 2013; Smith-Shomade, 2003). In this tradition, Black women are often portrayed as the representative of immorality and, therefore, widely perceived as being the erotic, innately sexual “other” (Harris-Perry, 2011; hooks, 2000; Muliawan & Kleiner, 2001). In a similar manner, Black males are widely perceived as animal-like and criminally inclined (Oliver, 2003; West, 1994). Accordingly, the longstanding portrayal of minorities in television and film, Blacks in particular, has efficiently reified commonly held stereotypes existing among the general U.S. citizenry (Harris-Perry, 2011; Hill-Collins, 2000; West, 1994).

News and the Perpetuation of Stereotypes

Local news stations have dedicated, and continue to dedicate, a tremendous amount of their resources to covering crime within their respective viewing areas or markets (Chiricos & Eschholz, 2002; Eschholz, Chiricos, & Gertz, 2003; Oliver, 2003). As part of their coverage, local news stations have actively engaged in the incorporation and propagation of portraying Blacks as criminals and Whites as the victims. An examination of local news stories determined that crimes including a White and/or female victim were more likely to be highlighted than those crimes involving a Black person (Lundman, 2003; Weiss & Chermak, 1998). Moreover, local news outlets rarely show Blacks in the victim role. Conversely, studies have revealed that local news stations opt to focus on Blacks in the role of assailant or perpetrator, as crime stories on local stations disproportionately feature a person of color as the assailant (Bjornstrom, Kaufman, Peterson, & Slater, 2010; Chiricos & Eschholz, 2002; de Coteau, Jamieson, & Romer, 1998; Dixon & Linz, 2000; Poindexter, Smith, & Heider, 2003).

For additional effect, as part of their coverage, local news stations typically show assailants walking in the custody of law enforcement officials (Entman, 1992). To further create a homogenized illustration of the violent assailant, unlike White suspects, Black suspects are less likely to have their names shown or shared along with their facial images. As a result, the concept that Blacks are individuals comprising a larger group is dispelled (Entman, 1992; Oliver, 2003). Ultimately, those physical characteristics stereotypically viewed as “Black” are considered synonymous with criminality

and, hence, a lack of innocence or morality (i.e., wide noses, dark skin, etc.; Banks, Eberhardt, & Ross, 2006; Eberhardt, Goff, Purdie, & Davies, 2004; Peruche & Plant, 2006).

Equally important, the ability to associate Blacks with the role of victim becomes increasingly difficult. As briefly noted above, news stories involving a Black victim are rarely given much coverage, as journalists have traditionally deemed such stories as not newsworthy. Unlike shootings involving Whites as the assailant(s) and victim(s), it has been suggested that criminal events involving Blacks, and Black males specifically, as both the assailant and victim are so unexceptional that they are not considered newsworthy (Lundman, 2003; Mingus & Zopf, 2010). Most notably, on the conclusion of their study on the news value of Black victims, Weiss and Chermak (1998) noted,

News media treat murders of African-Americans as being less important than murders of white victims. News selection decisions, and how events are presented to the public, are driven by what is considered extraordinary. The results indicate that race plays an important role in the decision making processes of news personnel. Murders involving African-Americans, in general, are considered ordinary. (p. 82)

That local news stations rarely feature stories involving Blacks as the victim indicates a perceived lack of empathy among the mainstream viewing audience (Pritchard & Hughes, 1997). Thus, the mainstream viewing audience is unable to connect with Blacks as being in the role of victim versus the role of assailant (Bjornstrom et al., 2010; Eschholz et al., 2003).

Furthermore, by focusing heavily on crime stories, local news media outlets effectively construct a subjective reality that makes the viewing audience believe that crime is more prevalent than it actually is (Callahan, 2012; Eschholz et al., 2003; Gerbner, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1982). More importantly, it perpetuates the perception that crime is simply the cultural norm in urban areas facilitating a notion that the shooting deaths of children or minors in urban areas are an unfortunate manifestation of that norm (Levine et al., 2012; Miller, 2010; Weiss & Chermak, 1998). As a result, the deaths of children or minors in urban areas are ultimately viewed as routine. Thus, for those who reside outside of such areas, the issue is perceived as something from which they are separated, and therefore, not something for which they should be concerned (Gilliam, Valentino, & Beckman, 2002; Levine et al., 2012; Miller, 2010; Robinson, 2009).

Like local news programs, the national news media is also complicit in the propagation of stereotypes. Notably, analyses of media reports involving Blacks and Whites displaced by Hurricane Katrina revealed clear disparities

in terms of the portrayal of the two racial groups (Garfield, 2007). Specifically, Black residents of New Orleans were frequently referred to by members of the national media as refugees implying a lack of country of origin or homeland on the part of the displaced residents (Associated Press, 2005). Unlike White persons displaced by Hurricane Katrina, Blacks who were displaced by the massive storm were portrayed and described by members of the national media as looting while trying to obtain food and other resources after the storm (Kinney, 2005). As revealed by studies conducted post-Katrina, members of the general citizenry who did not self-identify as Black displayed less empathy and were therefore less supportive of policies to aid those Blacks displaced by the hurricane (Huddy & Feldman, 2006; Johnson, Olivo, Gibson, Reed, & Ashburn-Nardo, 2009).

Similarly, in the instances when national news focused on the gun-related fatality of an infant, child, or minor within the inner city, they are rarely referred to explicitly as innocent. Typically, the names and the ages of the victims are provided in an attempt to imply or infer innocence. Yet, the actual term *innocent* is rarely used to describe the victims. Moreover, potential nefarious affiliations or actions of the parents, or those nearby, are noted—indicating personal responsibility on the victim or the victim's community (Associated Press, 2012; Boroff, 2013; Connor, 2013; McVeigh, 2012; Sege, Gorner, & Rhodes, 2013).

The Media and Newtown

When shootings involving White assailants do occur, the incident is considered bewildering and outside of the norm (Curry, 2013; Elam, 2012; Mingus & Zopf, 2010). Soon after learning of the Newtown shootings, members of the national media instantly began to question the shooter's mental health implying that his behavior was deviant and outside of the norm for the area in which the shootings occurred (Llanos, 2012; Mingus & Zopf, 2010; Neuman, 2012; Rochman, 2012; Stoller, Strauss, & Stanglin, 2012). Converse to inner-city children fatally injured by gun violence, members of the national media also consistently and explicitly referred to those killed during the Newtown shooting as "innocent" victims (Dothan, 2012; Waxman, 2012). Consequently, in addition to restrictions concerning the mentally ill, policy experts, public officials, and members of the general citizenry exhibited a significant shift in gun control policy including stricter controls on gun sales and access to guns overall (Saad, 2013). Congressional members and other federal lawmakers also began to shift their focus on the role of gun policies in an attempt to ameliorate the public's growing demand of gun reform in the aftermath of the shootings (Cohen, 2013; Wilgoren, Wilson, & Farenthold, 2012).

A series of congressional hearings were held to debate the issue of gun control policy in the United States (Arioso, 2013). In addition to the parents of the Newton shooting victims, the parents of a sole Black, middle-class child who was fatally wounded near the home of President Obama were present (Karl, 2013). Parents of those low-income, children of color fatally injured by gun violence were altogether or disproportionately absent from the testimonials permitted. Simply stated, primarily the parents of those children representative of those who fit the commonly accepted victim archetype were allowed to give testimony. It should be noted that such an omission reflects previous events in which those persons who must contend with ongoing crime in their respective neighborhoods are excluded from giving voice to their experience (Miller, 2010).

Maintenance of the Status Quo

Because erroneous racial stereotypes and ideals are deeply embedded within and interwoven into the dominant ideology, critical theorists argue that the media support the dominant ideology by perpetuating those ideals and beliefs that maintain the current social hierarchy—an intricate system of varying power and privilege that frequently relegates racial and ethnic minorities to the lower rungs of society (Harris-Perry, 2011; Hill-Collins, 2000; Oliver, 2003). As previously detailed, Black men are often portrayed as criminal, thereby causing members of the general citizenry to view them as the opposite of moral, law-abiding citizens. In consequence, one may contend that the media are simply a tool that facilitates the perception of racial and ethnic minorities as criminal, immoral, untrustworthy, uneducated, and/or civically irresponsible in order to sustain or reinforce the infrastructure of the socially constructed hierarchy (Hughey, 2010). Hence, the media substantiates the maintenance of a status quo that allows for, and even enables, the existence of a social order that is rife with inequality.

Naturally, imagery is vital to the media's substantiation and promulgation of the existing social hierarchy. The use of visual symbols and subtle verbal cues signals to the watching or listening audience a message intended to frame how individuals perceive various issues and phenomena (Abraham & Appiah, 2006; Bonilla-Silva, 2002; Hughey, 2010). The use of visual symbols and subtle verbal cues also provides skewed anecdotal evidence to ensure that the dominant ideology continues to uphold the status quo. In their contribution to the proliferation of racially hegemonic ideals, the media have great influence on how subpopulations are viewed, and ultimately typified, by the larger society. As a result, in the context of gun violence, the media frequently frames inner-city gun violence as an immoral shortcoming of Blacks.

The Media and Public Policy

Depending on one's proximity to or direct experience with an issue or phenomenon, he or she is likely to depend on the media to provide the information necessary to facilitate his or her analysis and subsequent understanding of it. As a result, members of the viewing or listening audience are likely to interpret emerging issues in the context of the prevailing norms or beliefs as they have been introduced, or rather, reiterated by the media (Adoni & Mane, 1984; Berger, 2000; Gerbner, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1982; Klein, 2003). Thus, the manner in which issues or topics are framed by the media often times has an impact on public opinion, and ultimately, on public policy (Iyengar, 1989). Most notably, the media's use of social rhetoric has had particular influence on the manner in which public health issues such as gun violence are perceived. Accordingly, the media's application of social rhetoric to frame public health issues often determines the extent and manner to which the citizenry, and consequently, public officials will respond to those issues affecting the public's health and well-being (Rousseau, 2009).

For instance, studies focusing on other issues related to the public health have determined that the manner in which issues affecting the public health are presented by the media often times affects how members of the general society will perceive the underlying cause, and thus appropriate resolution, of the problem. Obesity, a widely discussed topic in the media, consistently garners a range of opinions on its root causes, and in turn, a range of policy recommendations to address the underlying origins. Public health researchers have concluded that visual imagery via the entertainment and news industry shapes the way in which people view the causes of obesity (Brochu & Esses, 2009; Brochu, Pearl, Puhl, & Brownwell, 2014; Heuer, McClure, & Puhl, 2011; Kim & Willis, 2007). Explicitly, if obese individuals are depicted in a stigmatizing manner, then members of the general society are less likely to support policy recommendations aimed at ameliorating the high prevalence of obesity. However, if they are not depicted as engaging in unhealthy eating habits or sedentary stances, then members of the general public are more likely to support policy recommendations to aid obese individuals to overcome their respective conditions (Brochu, Pearl, Puhl, & Brownwell, 2014).

Likewise, when the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) first emerged, it was thought to be a disease only found among homosexuals indicating the disease was strictly the consequence of lifestyle choices (Washington, 2007). Shortly thereafter, large numbers of Blacks, including children, were being diagnosed at disproportionate numbers. Yet, they remained largely overlooked. Conversely, when Ryan White, a 10-year-old White boy, was diagnosed with HIV, the national media diverted much attention to the expanding epidemic

(Health Resources and Services Administration, n.d.). Similarly, when Kimberly Bergalis, a White woman who had never engaged in sexual activity, was diagnosed, she too received large amounts of attention by the national media, which was diligent in emphasizing her virginal, and thus, innocent status. Members of the national news media began distinguishing between “innocent victims of AIDS” and others implicitly labeled as “guilty” (i.e., historically marginalized groups; Washington, 2007). Since such “innocent” victims of HIV/AIDS emerged, many resources have been allocated to reduce the spread of the disease. Indeed, the Ryan White Act, a federal program charged with funding and providing resources to combat the spread of HIV/AIDS was established (Health Resources and Services Administration, n.d.).

Unlike obesity, gun violence is a problem that straddles both the public health and crime arenas. Therefore, similar to the issue of obesity, the manner in which it is framed, and thus, depicted to the general public often determines public opinion, and ultimately, public policy. Hence, the media’s framing of crime-related issues often dictates whether public opinion will perceive crime as a concern of individual or social responsibility (Iyengar, 1989). Typically, crimes involving low-income persons and racial and ethnic minorities are framed, and consequently, attributed to a convergence of cultural, environmental, and individual shortcomings and immorality (Iyengar, 1989; Levine et al., 2012; Miller, 2010; Mingus & Zopf, 2010). For this reason, structural and/or policy resolutions to crimes largely involving marginalized communities significantly composed of low-income persons and racial and ethnic minorities are overlooked, or even, omitted from the national, and more importantly, political discourse (e.g., increased scrutiny of gun purchasers at gun shows, background checks, greater policing of illegal gun sales, etc.; Miller, 2010). Instead, local police districts and community leaders often attempt to address the issue of gun control within urban communities with the implementation of local, smaller programs that emphasize stronger families and individual responsibility (Levine et al., 2012).

On the contrary, when the media frame an issue so that the attention of the general public is captured, lawmakers are also likely to focus their efforts on the issue. Although federal lawmakers rarely focus their attention to local crime incidents or criminal events perceived as having social origins, they are more inclined to dedicate substantial focus to such incidents should they capture the attention of the media. As such, they are then more inclined to focus their individual and collective efforts to exploring and potentially developing policy solutions to ameliorate the issue (Miller, 2010). For instance, once the issue of illicit drug use among minors garnered the attention of the media, many federal agencies began to dedicate resources to addressing the issue. (Miller, 2010).

Discussion and Conclusion

In closing, the ubiquitously historical and ongoing portrayal of Blacks in the media has perpetuated and effectively maintained the negative stereotypes of Blacks as members of a culture that is innately contentious and aggressive. The convergence of local news broadcasts and national news media has set forth an indelible depiction of Blacks as criminally inclined and the collective antithesis of vulnerability or innocence. Consequently, the disproportionate rate at which children and minors within the inner city lose their lives to gun violence is insouciantly generalized as manifestations of a cultural norm among low-income Blacks. Efforts to curb gun violence have traditionally been the sole responsibility of members and agencies within those communities suffering from gun violence; utilizing initiatives typically limited in scope such as gun buyback programs, family counseling, and information sharing sessions. As a result, the large numbers of Black children and minors who lose their lives, and often on school grounds or during school-related events, go largely unnoticed or addressed by members of the media and political arena.

On the contrary, the tragic events at Sandy Hook Elementary brought widespread, national attention to the issue of gun violence within the United States. The media's focus on recent gun violence has had a marked impact on the perceptions of Americans regarding gun control. One could argue that the mass media's focus on the Newton shootings resulted in conspicuous changes among the overall American population's support for gun control. Until the shooting in Newton, the majority of Americans displayed limited amounts of enthusiasm or support for federal control policies including background checks. However, statistics released by Gallup shortly after the Newton shooting revealed that Americans showed demonstrable changes in their perceptions of gun control policies with close to 60% exhibiting support for stricter gun control policies (Saad, 2013). Although a year after the Newtown shootings, Gallup polls showed lower amounts of support for restrictive gun laws, the amount of support remains higher than it was the year previous to Newtown (Saad, 2013).

Despite intense lobbying by and on behalf of the parents who lost children during the Newtown shooting, federal lawmakers failed to enact national legislation increasing gun restrictions. Although federal lawmakers did not enact broad sweeping legislation to minimize the access to guns by those who may be mentally ill and/or have malicious intent, a sizable number of state-level legislators enacted a broad range of laws in an attempt to curtail gun violence within their respective states ("Focus of U.S. Gun Control Shifts to States," 2013). Though several states actually passed laws to increase access to guns,

approximately 40%, or 20 out of 50 states, introduced and passed new gun-related laws in an attempt to strengthen gun control efforts. Of those states that introduced and ultimately ratified gun restricting laws, several states enacted between 4 and 10 gun-related laws (The Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, 2013).

The laws passed by state legislatures in 2013 include but are not limited to (a) bans on large capacity magazines, (b) finger printing of gun registrants, (c) regulation of ammunition possession, (d) surrender of firearms by restraining order subjects, (e) creation of gun offender registries, (f) prohibition of mentally ill persons from accessing firearms, (g) mandatory reporting of lost or stolen firearms, and (h) expansion of child access prevention regulations (The Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, 2013). According to the report outlining the above, the efforts taken by state legislatures were in direct response to the Newtown shootings, unequivocally stating, "After Newton, the nation demanded stronger gun laws. State legislators and governors have responded to the call" (The Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, 2013). Thus, the shootings at Newton served as an impetus for drafting stronger gun laws. Yet, one must consider that, prior to Newtown, the deaths of children of color residing in inner-city communities were long overlooked as simply unfortunate realities of a cultural aberration.

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