

NON-FATAL SHOOTINGS IN NEW JERSEY



Issue Statement:

“Gun violence in New Jersey must be viewed as a public health crisis, thereby, compelling forward and innovative thought leaders to apply medical research strategies to resolving the gun violence crisis.”

The recent rash of shootings in Jersey City in particular and in New Jersey’s urban centers in general compels one to examine, explore and contemplate new ideas and perspectives as it relates to Assemblyman Mainor’s Peace on Gun Violence Initiative.

One only needs to examine the number of homicides in the State as compared to the number of nonfatal shootings in the State to realize that a far more ominous problem may be lurking behind the numbers of under-reported, untracked and unclosed cases of non-fatal shootings. These data points will lead to the identification of other variables which may assist with resolving the gun violence crisis in New Jersey.

Michigan State University criminal justice professors Jesenia Pizarro and April Zeolis cite in their report Homicide As Infectious Disease that homicide should be viewed through the lens of violence as a public health issue. This perspective would commit medical researchers to using approaches and strategies to reduce gun violence that are used to combat other medical issues.

(http://www.nj.com/news/index.ssf/2012/12/newark_homicide_trend_is_treat.html).

A Newark Star Ledger Report on New Jersey’s “Staggering Amount of nonfatal Shootings Go Unsolved Statistics Show, puts into measurable data points, the impact of nonfatal shootings. The report examined police department records of nonfatal shootings from 2008-2011 in several New Jersey urban cities (Newark, Camden, Jersey City, Elizabeth, Atlantic City, Irvington, Plainfield and Orange. Note: Trenton did not respond). There were 2,593 nonfatal shootings during this time period. Arrests were

made in only 25% of these shootings, which leads one to conclude that 75% of these shooters (1,945) are still on the streets free to wreak havoc on the communities that they are in.

The reports continues by comparing 2010 shooting statistics. 65% of homicides in these cities were solved (375) while only 21% of the nonfatal shootings were solved (652). These numbers point to the larger issues surrounding shootings in New Jersey, which include how the data is tracked,

(http://www.nj.com/news/index.ssf/2012/12/staggering_amount_of_nonfatal.html).

Tracking the Data to Drive the Solutions

The Uniformed Crime Report, which is used to track specific crimes across the State annually, does not have a category to track nonfatal shootings. Consequently, police strategies, legislation and policy decisions are made based on homicides which may be a very low data point for determining the severity of gun violence in New Jersey.

The report cites the followings reasons why municipalities do not track nonfatal shootings (1) municipal resources, (2) uncooperative victims, (3) priority that is given to homicides. I believe that these are plausible rationales but tracking the data is as simple as adding a check box to a police incident report and a category to the Uniformed Crime Report (UCR) document that all police department use.

Conclusion

Gun violence is a statewide issue. There is a need to reevaluate the approach to resolving the crisis. This is not just an urban problem. This is not just a problem of poor people. This is a New Jersey problem that is a public health crisis. This crisis is impacted by poor education, broken homes, illegal firearms, gangs, drugs and other social conditions including poverty.

The argument to address gun violence as a public health issue is a theme that is gaining in support statewide. Ras Baraka, Newark, New Jersey City Council Member, founded an organization, The Newark Anti-Violence Coalition (NAVC), has made this argument since July 20, 2009, after a innocent mother of two children, Nakeisha Allen was shot and killed in Newark, New Jersey in a drive by shooting.

Homicide through the lens of a public health crisis as a cluster has a source. It has a mode of transmission and there is a susceptible population. This lens implores health care professional to develop strategies to contain, combat and prevent the spread of violence.

Recommendations:

1. Declare violence a public health issue.
2. Organize a public safety committee that include social service and health care providers to create a pathway toward sustainable violence reduction through, prevention, intervention and suppression strategies.
3. Develop legislation to require that New Jersey police departments track nonfatal shootings.
4. Work collaboratively to encourage New Jersey prosecutors to track nonfatal shootings; track open/closed nonfatal shooting cases;
5. Establish channels of communication New Jersey trauma centers effectively gather and track violence data (like they do with gun violence victims).