



No Shots Fired

Examining the Impact and Trauma Linked to the Threat of Gunfire Within the U.S.

By Eugenio Weigend Vargas and Rukmani Bhatia | October 20, 2020

Acts of gun violence that cause death and injuries rightfully dominate the narrative about gun violence in the United States, where more than 300 people are shot each day.¹ But not all acts of gun violence involve pulling a trigger. Often, perpetrators of crimes brandish firearms to intimidate and subdue victims, forcing them to comply out of fear of bodily harm. In 2014, police investigated a series of armed robberies in Milwaukee, where armed men drove up to victims on the street and demanded they hand over anything valuable.² In 2015, a man was arrested on charges of attempting to rob a convenience store in Jacksonville Beach, Florida, pointing a firearm at the teller while demanding money from the register.³ That same year in Scotts Valley, California, a man was arrested after brandishing a pistol and pointing it directly at his neighbors.⁴

In many such incidents, the firearm is drawn during a conflict, which escalates the conflict and substantially increases the dangerous nature of the interaction. As of July 2020, a woman in Orion Township, Michigan, is facing felony assault charges after allegedly pointing her firearm at a woman and her daughter in a Chipotle parking lot, escalating an argument that began after one party bumped into the other.⁵ That same month in St. Louis, a couple was charged with standing outside their home and pointing a handgun and an assault rifle at Black Lives Matter demonstrators who were walking down the street.⁶ On October 6, 2020, a grand jury issued indictments against the couple.⁷

All these acts are forms of gun violence. While survivors of these crimes are left with no visible wounds, they often suffer from emotional distress and psychological trauma.⁸ It is vital that incidents such as these be considered in efforts to address the epidemic of gun violence that plagues the United States.

According to data from the FBI, from 2009 through 2018, close to 160,000 assaults and 127,000 robberies were perpetrated with a gun annually.⁹ While these figures are an undercount,¹⁰ they indicate that these types of crimes occur with staggering frequency. However, these numbers do not tell the full story of the impacts that gun crime victimization has on individuals and communities. This issue brief explores data from the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) to gain a more complete understanding of the scope and impact of the use of guns to threaten victims without shots being fired, focusing on two specific violent crimes: robbery and aggravated assaults.¹¹

The National Crime Victimization Survey

The NCVS is a project of the U.S. Department of Justice that collects annual data on nonfatal crime victimization related to violent crimes against individuals and property crimes. These data come from a representative sample of around 240,000 interviews.¹² Information compiled in these interviews includes demographic characteristics of victims as well as crime characteristics such as types of weapons used. They also capture data on the impacts victims faced and assemble information on crimes regardless of whether they were reported to the police.¹³

Looking closely at these data, the Center for American Progress identified two notable aspects of nonfatal crimes in the United States from 2009 through 2018:

- Threats of gun violence during robberies or aggravated assaults occur with alarming frequency and disproportionately affect men, communities of color, and young people.
- The use of a gun during a crime exacerbates victims' emotional trauma.

Threats of gun violence occur with alarming frequency during robberies and aggravated assaults—and have disproportionate effects

According to CAP's analysis, from 2009 through 2018, more than 3.6 million nonfatal violent crimes were perpetrated with a gun in the United States, affecting more than 4 million people.¹⁴ Sixty-five percent of these people were victims of an aggravated assault, and close to 35 percent were victims of a robbery. This means that in addition to the 103 victims killed and the 210 victims injured with a gun every day, at least another 1,100 victims are threatened with a gun during a violent crime. (see Figure 1)

FIGURE 1

Types and scope of daily gun violence in the United States

Threats of gun violence during robberies or aggravated assaults

Gun injuries

Gun deaths

103

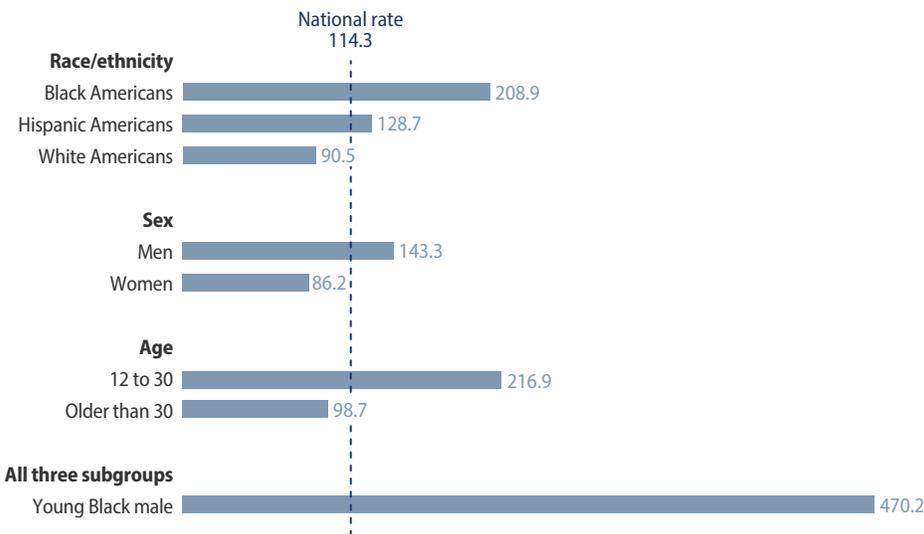
210

1,100

Sources: Brady; United Against Gun Violence, "The Facts That Make Us Act," available at <https://www.bradyunited.org/key-statistics> (last accessed October 2020); Center for American Progress analysis of the National Crime Victimization Survey, 2009-2018, on file with author. The numbers for gun deaths are based on data from 2013 through 2018. Gun injuries are based on data from 2014 through 2016. Gun-related robberies and aggravated assaults are based on data from 2009 through 2018.

FIGURE 2**The burden of gun-related threats during robberies and aggravated assaults falls disproportionately on communities of color, men, and young people**

Rate of gun-involved crimes per 100,000 people by subgroup, 2009–2018



Sources: Center for American Progress analysis of the National Crime Victimization Survey, 2009–2018, on file with author. Rates of gun-involved crimes were obtained using population data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Fatal Injury Reports, National, Regional, and State, 1981–2018," available at <https://webappa.cdc.gov/sasweb/ncipc/mortrate.html> (last accessed October 2020).

The impact of these crimes is not felt equally in all communities. Like gun deaths, the burden of gun-related robberies and aggravated assaults falls disproportionately on communities of color, men, and young people. (see Figure 2) Observing victims across race and ethnicity, Black Americans faced the highest rate, with 209 crime victimizations per every 100,000 people from 2009 through 2018. Hispanics followed with a rate of 129 crime victimizations per every 100,000 people, while white Americans had a rate of only 91 crime victimizations per every 100,000 people.¹⁵ Within the United States, then, Black and Hispanic communities are disproportionately affected by this form of gun violence.¹⁶ Often these events are affected not just by the prevalence of firearm violence but also by social and economic issues—such as generational poverty, lack of gainful employment, reduced educational opportunities, and a breakdown of police-community relationships—that threaten the safety of residents.¹⁷

When compared with women, men are more likely to be victims of gun-related threats during robberies and assaults. From 2010 to 2018, women had a rate of 86 crime victimizations per every 100,000 people, while men had a rate of 143 per every 100,000 people—66 percent higher.¹⁸ However, women are more likely to be victims of gun-related threats from individuals they know well. An analysis of gun-related robberies and assaults involving a single perpetrator indicated that women were victims of intimate partners in 41 percent of the cases considered. In contrast, this was the case for roughly 9 percent for men.¹⁹

Finally, gun-related threats during robberies and assaults primarily affect young people under the age of 30. The 2010–2018 rate of crime victimizations for individuals ages 12 to 30 was 217 per every 100,000 people. In contrast, the rate for individuals over the age of 30 was 99 per every 100,000 people. In other words, young people are more than twice as likely to face a threat of gun-related violence during robberies or aggravated assaults. When considering all these subgroups together, young Black men have a rate of 470 crime victimizations per every 100,000 people, a rate more than four times higher than the overall national rate.²⁰

Guns exacerbate the emotional trauma of crime victims

Policymakers and leaders need to recognize the psychological and emotional toll of violent encounters in which the perpetrator threatens lethal force with a gun.

In 2002, Robin Arzon was with friends at a local bar when a gunman entered and threatened to kill everyone present.²¹ He then seized Robin and used her as a shield to protect himself from the police outside the bar. The gunman was disarmed by a bar patron who jumped on him while he was distracted. The trauma of this event took a toll on Robin; she began running and training for marathons to cope with the experience, noting “I ran through pain and, honestly, I ran through fear. It was in the run that I found my strength again.”

The use of firearms by perpetrators significantly affects the outcomes of violent crimes. Previous research has shown that victims are more likely to comply with the perpetrator’s demands during a robbery if offenders are armed with guns, as the lethal threat is greater.²² The likelihood of robbery victims dying is three times higher when perpetrators use a gun than when they use sharp objects as weapons.²³

In 2006, Samantha Messersmith was walking with her roommate to a friend’s apartment to celebrate the new year.²⁴ They were approached by three men; one pulled out a firearm and demanded Samantha’s roommate give them her purse. They then demanded Samantha turn over her purse; when she replied that she did not have one, the armed man grabbed her and inserted the firearm into her mouth, before stepping away and leaving with the other men. Samantha drove to her parents’ house that night; her life changed following the incident. Her roommate and she ended their friendship after that night. She wrote about the experience, noting, “I was at a place in my life where I had to separate myself from the reality of that night. I only went back to that apartment complex one time: to gather my stuff.”

Many police agencies and national organizations recognize that victims of violent crimes experience vulnerability, anger, anxiety, low self-esteem, and preoccupation.²⁵ However, there is a dearth of research on the distinctions between victims of gun-related crimes and victims of nongun-related crimes. An important reason for this lack of research is that data are limited; another is that researchers as well as advocates often rely on anecdotes and testimonies to explain the effects of a gun being used in a crime.

In 2008, however, questions around distress levels were added to the NCVS. As a result, researchers found that victims of gun-related crimes were more likely to report higher distress levels than victims of nongun-related crimes and that victims of crimes involving firearms were more likely to report having problems at work or school and with friends or family members.²⁶

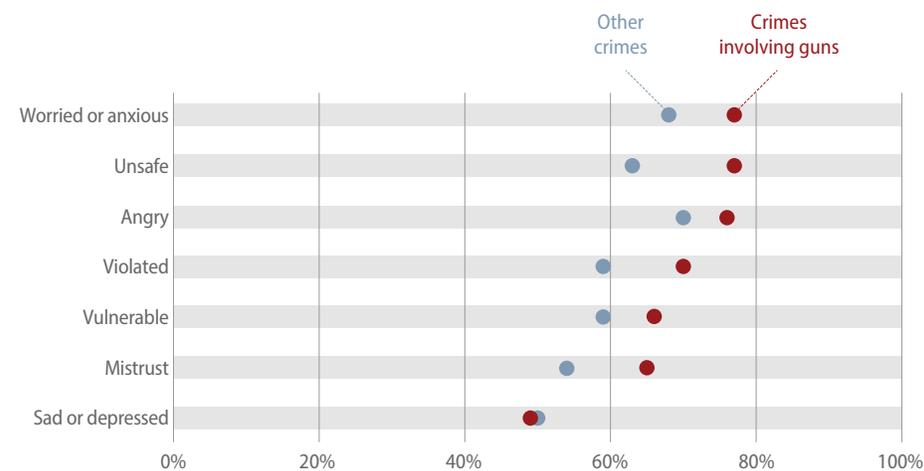
In April 2020, a 55-year-old Uber driver was held at gunpoint by his passenger.²⁷ The passenger ordered the driver to go to a nearby ATM. The armed man then demanded the driver withdraw money from his account, a demand to which the driver complied. The driver was then told to return to the vehicle and continue driving with the armed man inside. The incident ended after the driver saw a police vehicle near an intersection and drove near it, stopping his car behind the vehicle. The armed man fled the vehicle on foot, evading arrest.

As part of the additional questions on the NCVS, some crime victims are now asked about emotions they experienced after a violent crime, including feelings of insecurity, anxiety, anger, violation, mistrust, vulnerability, and sadness or depression.²⁸ Overall, a large percent of crime victims asked about these feelings report experiencing them, regardless of whether a weapon was used in the crime. However, nearly all these feelings were reported more frequently when perpetrators used a gun to threaten the victim.²⁹ (see Figure 3)

FIGURE 3

Victims of gun-involved crimes are more likely to experience negative emotional impacts after victimization

Percentage of victims who reported suffering an emotional problem one month or more after the crime occurred, 2009–2018



Source: Center for American Progress analysis of the National Crime Victimization Survey, 2009–2018, on file with author.

For example, 77 percent of victims of robberies or aggravated assaults in which a gun was used but not fired against any victim reported feeling unsafe, a percentage that is 14 points higher than that of victims threatened with other weapons or by unarmed offenders during robberies or aggravated assaults. Similarly, 77 percent of victims of such robberies and aggravated assaults reported feeling anxious or worried, 9 percentage points higher than victims of nongun-related crimes. While further academic studies that control for factors such as the place of crime or number of offenders are necessary, the NCVS data suggest that the presence of a gun can exacerbate traumatic feelings related to crime victimization.

Conclusion

Gun violence within the United States alters thousands of lives. Every day, more than 300 people are shot, 103 of them fatally.³⁰ Another 1,100 people, however, survive a confrontation involving a gun without the firearm being shot. These are all forms of violence that need to be addressed in order to ensure communities are safe and able to thrive.

Overall, in addressing the challenges of gun violence, it is particularly important to incorporate the issue of nonfatal gun crimes that leave no physical scars. The trauma that survivors of this kind of gun violence feel also requires support and intervention. While efforts to support families of those killed by a gun as well as those injured by a gun are fundamental, it is also important to provide support for those victims who, while not shot, were still put at a serious risk when confronted with a gun. Given the success of community-based programs in addressing the disproportionate impact of gun homicides within specific communities, federal, state, and local governments should further source and resource these programs so that the programs can expand their efforts to contribute to an overall reduction in nonfatal gun-related crimes. The frequency and impact of nonlethal gun-related crimes in this country are further reminders of the need for stronger federal and state gun laws.

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Endnotes

- 1 Brady, "The Facts that Make Us Act," available at <https://www.bradyunited.org/key-statistics> (last accessed October 2020).
- 2 WISN ABC, "Milwaukee police arrest several robbery suspects," December 31, 2014, available at <https://www.wisn.com/article/milwaukee-police-arrest-several-robbery-suspects/6324775>.
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- 9 CAP analysis of Uniform Crime Reporting program. FBI, "Crime in the U.S.," available at <https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s> (last accessed October 2020).
- 10 Many crimes are not reported to the authorities, and police agencies don't always submit data to the FBI.
- 11 To encompass these groups, we follow the categories used by the Bureau of Justice Statistics. While sexual assault and rape make up a significant portion of overall violent crime, they make up less than 4 percent of gun-related violent crimes. See authors' analysis of U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, "National Crime Victimization Survey, Concatenated File, [United States], 1992-2018. ICPSR 37322" (Washington: U.S. Department of Justice, 2020), available at <https://doi.org/10.3886/ICPSR37322.v1>. We are not including these crimes in this analysis. Nonetheless, we encourage continued exploration on the link between guns and sexual assaults, building on the existing research on this form of violence. See Sarah Michal Greathouse and others, "A Review of the Literature on Sexual Assault Perpetrator Characteristics and Behaviors" (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2015), available at https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1000/RR1082/RAND_RR1082.pdf; D. B. Kates and N. J. Engberg, "Deadly Force Self-Defense Against Rape," *University of California Davis Law Review* 15 (1982): 873–906, available at <https://www.ncjrs.gov/App/Publications/abstract.aspx?ID=108610>; RAINN, "Perpetrators of Sexual Violence: Statistics," available at <https://www.rainn.org/statistics/perpetrators-sexual-violence> (last accessed October 2020). Similarly, because the objective of this analysis is to explore incidents where shots were not fired, we are removing those few cases where victims reported being shot. There are only a few cases of gunshot injuries reported to the NCVS because many gun injuries are categorized as attempted murder or unintentional shootings, crimes not included in the NCVS.
- 12 Bureau of Justice Statistics, "Data Collection: National Crime Victimization Survey," available at <https://www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=dcdetail&iid=245> (last accessed October 2020).
- 13 A limitation of these surveys is that they do not capture data on crimes committed against businesses or on homicides and attempted homicides.
- 14 Likely, this figure is slightly higher than that presented by the FBI because it captures those incidents that were not reported to police agencies.
- 15 To estimate rates, we used the population over 12 years of age from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. While other races are included, cases reported to the NCVS were not enough to estimate weighted data.
- 16 Eugenio Weigend Vargas, "Gun Violence in America: A State-by-State Analysis," Center for American Progress, November 20, 2019, available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/guns-crime/news/2019/11/20/477218/gun-violence-america-state-state-analysis>.
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- 18 When data are broken down by race, men still present higher rates of violent crimes involving firearms.
- 19 Center for American Progress analysis of NCVS. For this analysis, we are only including those cases with one single perpetrator and their relationship with the victim. For the category of intimate partners, the authors are including the following relationships: spouse, ex-spouse, and dating partners.
- 20 Authors' analysis of the NCVS from 2009 through 2018. Data are on file with the authors.
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- 22 See, for example, Philip J. Cook, "Thinking about gun violence," *Journal of Criminology & Public Policy* (2020), available at <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/1745-9133.12519?af=R>.
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- 28 Only victims who reported mild to severe distress levels and problems at school or work as well as with family members or friends are asked about emotional symptoms.

29 Center for American Progress analysis of the NCVS. These figures are based on victims who were asked about their feelings a month or more after the crime. It is important to note that not all victims were asked these questions. For this specific analysis, we are using unweighted data.

30 Brady, "The Facts that Make Us Act."