

Victims of gun violence tell their stories: Everyday violence, 'feelings of hopelessness'

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Invited to share their personal stories, victims of urban gun violence describe living with violence as a "common everyday experience" and feeling abandoned by police and other societal institutions, reports a study in the November/December *Journal of Trauma Nursing*, official publication of the Society of Trauma Nurses.

"Victims of [gun violence](#) experience challenges related to poverty, deficient educational preparation, and community neglect," according to the narrative inquiry study by Mary Francis, RN, Ph.D., ANCP-BC, of Widener University, Chester, Pa. "The presence of gun violence in their neighborhoods has had an everlasting impact on their well-being."

From the Voices of Gun Violence Victims, Four Themes Emerge

Dr. Francis conducted face-to-face, confidential interviews with 16 victims of gun violence. Participants were recruited during follow-up clinic visits to a level I trauma center clinic in a US Mid-Atlantic city. They ranged in age from 18 to 71 years; most were African American men.

Participants were asked to share their personal accounts of being a victim of gun violence. Interview transcripts were analyzed to identify underlying patterns or themes that cut across the stories. The analysis identified four main themes:

- *Prevailing Nature of Everyday Violence.* Participants described gun violence as an "ordinary occurrence—part of their everyday lives. As witnesses of gun violence from a young age, "They described feelings of hopelessness and felt as if they had no options to escape the violence in their neighborhoods," Dr. Francis writes.
- *Feeling Abandoned by the Institutions of Society.* The respondents described "an absence of police force or a lack of faith in the effectiveness of police to help them." They also reported a lack of support by school systems and community organizations, leading to a more violent community.
- *Living in a Context of Reactive Violence.* Participants believed that living in poverty and lack of education contributed to limiting their options for the future. They described a "cascade of circumstances...eventually increas[ing] their potential to become victims of gun violence."
- *Evolving Psychological Effects.* Participants said that their emotions and behavior had changed since they became victims of gun violence. Some reported symptoms similar to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) such as increased vigilance and being afraid to leave home.

"The participants voiced feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness regarding their situations," Dr. Francis writes. "They described a life embedded in poverty and violence in which they could identify no strategies to improve their lives."

Gun violence is a public health crisis in the United States, leading to thousands of injuries and deaths each day. The risk of violence involving a firearm is substantially increased for low-income individuals, and especially for African American young adults. "Gun violence is part of a vicious cycle of race and poverty in the US, reflecting a social inequality," according to Dr. Francis.

The study lends new insights into the challenges faced by survivors of gun violence. While limited to an urban, mainly African American population, the findings may help in understand the factors contributing to the ongoing cycle of race, poverty, and violence—and in developing strategies to reduce the prevalence of deaths and injuries due to firearms.

"Community leaders and community members need to work together to improve the living conditions of people in poverty and improve education for further prevention," Dr. Francis concludes. "Health care policy changes and community programs that assist in decreasing [violence](#) and availability of guns need to be developed and implemented."

More information: Mary Francis, A Narrative Inquiry Into the Experience of Being a Victim of Gun Violence, *Journal of Trauma Nursing* (2018). [DOI: 10.1097/JTN.0000000000000406](https://doi.org/10.1097/JTN.0000000000000406)

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