

'All we want is revenge': How social media fuels gun violence among teens

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Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Juan Campos has been working to save at-risk teens from gun violence for 16 years.

As a street outreach worker in Oakland, California, he has seen the pull and power of gangs. And he offers teens support when they've emerged from the juvenile justice system, advocates for them in school, and, if needed, helps them find housing, [mental health services](#), and treatment for substance abuse.

But, he said, he's never confronted a force as formidable as social media, where small boasts and disputes online can escalate into deadly violence in schoolyards and on street corners.

Teens post photos or videos of themselves with guns and stacks of cash, sometimes calling out rivals, on Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, or TikTok. When messages go viral, fueled by "likes" and comments, the danger is hard to contain, Campos said.

"It's hundreds of people on social media, versus just one or two people trying to guide youth in a positive way," he said. Sometimes his warnings are stark, telling kids, "I want to keep you alive." But, he said, "it doesn't work all the time."

Shamari Martin Jr. was an outgoing 14-year-old and respectful to his teachers in Oakland. Mixed in with videos of smiling friends on his Instagram feed were images of Shamari casually waving a gun or with cash fanned across his face. In March 2022, he was shot when the car he was in took a hail of bullets. His body was left on the street, and emergency medical workers pronounced him dead at the scene.

In Shamari's neighborhood, kids join gangs when they're as young as 9 or 10, sometimes carrying guns to elementary school, said Tonyia "Nina" Carter, a violence interrupter who knew Shamari and works with Youth Alive, which tries to prevent violence. Shamari "was somewhat affiliated with that culture" of gangs and guns, Carter said.

Shamari's friends poured out their grief on Instagram with broken-heart emojis and comments such as "love you brother I'm heart hurt."

One post was more ominous: "it's blood inna water all we want is revenge." Rivals posted videos of themselves kicking over flowers and candles at Shamari's memorial.

Such online outpourings of grief often presage additional violence, said Desmond Patton, a University of Pennsylvania professor who studies social media and firearm violence.

More than a year later, Shamari's death remains unsolved. But it's still a volatile subject in Oakland, said Bernice Grisby, a counselor at the East Bay Asian Youth Center, who works with gang-involved youth.

"There's still a lot of gang violence going on around his name," she said. "It could be as simple as someone saying, 'Forget him or F him'—that can be a death sentence. Just being affiliated with his name in any sort can get you killed."

The U.S. surgeon general last month issued a call to action about social media's corrosive effects on child and adolescent mental health, warning of the "profound risk of harm" to [young people](#), who can spend hours a day on their phones. The 25-page report highlighted the risks of cyberbullying and sexual exploitation. It failed to mention social media's role in escalating [gun violence](#).

Acutely aware of that role are researchers, [community leaders](#), and police across the country—including in Baltimore, Chicago, Los Angeles, Oakland, Pittsburgh, St. Louis, and Washington, D.C. They describe social media as a relentless driver of gun violence.

Michel Moore, the Los Angeles police chief, called its impact

"dramatic."

"What used to be communicated on the street or in graffiti or tagging or rumors from one person to another, it's now being distributed and amplified on social media," he said. "It's meant to embarrass and humiliate others."

Many disputes stem from perceived disrespect among insecure young adults who may lack impulse control and conflict-management skills, said LJ Punch, a trauma surgeon and director of the Bullet-Related Injury Clinic in St. Louis.

"Social media is an extremely powerful tool for metastasizing disrespect," Punch said. And of all the causes of gun violence, social media-fueled grudges are "the most impenetrable."

Calls for regulation

Social media companies are protected by a 1996 law that shields them from liability for content posted on their platforms. Yet the deaths of young people have led to calls to change that.

"When you allow a video that leads to a shooting, you bear responsibility for what you put out there," said Fred Fogg, national director of violence prevention for Youth Advocate Programs, a group that provides alternatives to youth incarceration. "Social media is addictive, and intentionally so."

People note that social media can have a particularly pernicious effect in communities with high rates of gun violence.

"Social media companies need to be better regulated in order to make sure they aren't encouraging violence in Black communities," said Jabari

Evans, an assistant professor of race and media at the University of South Carolina. But he said social media companies also should help "dismantle the structural racism" that places many Black youth "in circumstances that resign them to want to join gangs, carry guns to school, or take on violent personas for attention."

L.A.'s Moore described [social media companies](#) as serving "in a reactionary role. They are profit-driven. They don't want to have any type of control or restrictions that would suppress advertising."

Social media companies say they remove content that violates their policies against threatening others or encouraging violence as quickly as possible. In a statement, YouTube spokesperson Jack Malon said the company "prohibits content reveling in or mocking the death or serious injury of an identifiable individual."

Social media companies said they act to protect the safety of their users, especially children.

Rachel Hamrick, a spokesperson for Meta, which owns Facebook and Instagram, said the company has spent about \$16 billion in the past seven years to protect the safety of people who post on its apps, employing 40,000 people at Facebook who work on safety and security.

"We remove content, disable accounts and work with law enforcement when we believe there is a genuine risk of physical harm or direct threats to public safety," Hamrick said. "As a company, we have every commercial and moral incentive to try to give the maximum number of people as much of a positive experience as possible on Facebook. That's why we take steps to keep people safe even if it impacts our bottom line."

Meta platforms generated revenue of over \$116 billion in 2022, most of

which came from advertising.

A spokesperson for Snapchat, Pete Boogaard, said the company deletes violent content within minutes of being notified of it. But, Fogg noted, by the time a video is removed, hundreds of people may have seen it.

Even critics acknowledge that the sheer volume of content on social media is difficult to control. Facebook has nearly 3 billion monthly users worldwide; YouTube has nearly 2.7 billion users; Instagram has 2 billion. If a company shuts down one account, a person can simply open a new one, said Tara Dabney, a director at the Institute for Nonviolence Chicago.

"Things could be going great in a community," Fogg said, "and then the next thing you know, something happens on social media and folks are shooting at each other."

Playing with fire

At a time when virtually every teen has a cellphone, many have access to guns, and many are coping with mental and emotional health crises, some say it's not surprising that violence features so heavily in children's social media feeds.

High school "fight pages" are now common on social media, and teens are quick to record and share fights as soon as they break out.

"Social media puts everything on steroids," said the Rev. Cornell Jones, the group violence intervention coordinator for Pittsburgh.

Like adults, many young people feel validated when their posts are liked and shared, Jones said.

"We are dealing with young people who don't have great self-esteem, and this 'love' they are getting on social media can fill some of that void," Jones said. "But it can end with them getting shot or going to the penitentiary."

While many of today's teens are technologically sophisticated—skilled at filming and editing professional-looking videos—they remain naive about the consequences of posting violent content, said Evans, of the University of South Carolina.

Police in Los Angeles now monitor social media for early signs of trouble, Moore said. Police also search social media after the fact to gather evidence against those involved in violence.

"People want to gain notoriety," Moore said, "but they're clearly implicating themselves and giving us an easy path to bring them to justice."

In February, New Jersey police used a video of a 14-year-old girl's vicious school beating to file criminal charges against four teens. The victim of the assault, Adriana Kuch, died by suicide two days after the video went viral.

Preventing the next tragedy

Glen Upshaw, who manages outreach workers at Youth Alive in Oakland, said he encourages teens to express their anger with him rather than on social media. He absorbs it, he said, to help prevent kids from doing something foolish.

"I've always offered youth the chance to call me and curse me out," Upshaw said. "They can come and scream and I won't fuss at them."

Workers at Youth Advocate Programs monitor influential social media accounts in their communities to de-escalate conflicts. "The idea is to get on it as soon as possible," Fogg said. "We don't want people to die over a social media post."

It's sometimes impossible, Campos said. "You can't tell them to delete their [social media](#) accounts," he said. "Even a judge won't tell them that. But I can tell them, 'If I were you, since you're on probation, I wouldn't be posting those kinds of things.'"

When he first worked with teens at high risk of violence, "I said if I can save 10 lives out of 100, I'd be happy," Campos said. "Now, if I can save one life out of 100, I'm happy."

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