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## Everyday Exposure: A Qualitative Study of the Impact of Gun Violence on the Lives of DePaul Students

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## Everyday Exposure: A Qualitative Study of the Impact of Gun Violence on the Lives of DePaul Students

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## Everyday Exposure: A Qualitative Study of the Impact of Gun Violence on the Lives of DePaul Students

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**ABSTRACT** This study examined a novel data source: the contents of letters that students wrote to local, state, or national politicians about gun control for a class assignment in order to collect evidence of the impact of direct and indirect gun violence on the lives of DePaul students. For the study, we coded and analyzed 83 de-identified student letters for themes pertaining to the experience of exposure to gun violence and mass shootings. Our findings include a high prevalence of student exposure to direct incidences of gun violence; strong negative emotions surrounding the fear of gun violence intruding into students' daily lives; and an emergent theme of a 'right to safety' from gun violence expressed by some of the students in the study.

### INTRODUCTION

Exposure to gun violence has well- documented effects on students' physical and mental health (Abrams, 2022). Studies that have examined direct exposure to gun violence found that it was associated with lower high school graduation rates, lower college graduation rates, increased antidepressant use, and a decrease in overall well-being (Abrams, 2022; Cabral et al., 2020; Rossin-Slater et al., 2020). Other studies focused on indirect exposure to gun violence found associations with increased anxiety and panic symptoms, increased levels of stress, and a decrease in overall well-being (Abrams, 2022,

O'Brien & Taku, 2022; Riehm et al., 2021). Lowe & Galea's (2017) systematic review found increased feelings of fear and decreased feelings of safety among indirectly exposed individuals who had received information about mass shootings from family and friends or had heard about the events in the media.

Less often studied is the extent to which thoughts about gun violence permeate even day-to-day activities and routines. Letters to elected officials about gun violence offer one possible means of assessing the impact of such thoughts. Letters to elected officials have become an

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**Assignment: Letter to an Elected Official – 15 points**

**DUE DATE SUNDAY XXX , 20XX**

The Letter to Elected Official is designed for students to directly engage with one of their elected officials on the topic of gun control. Citizens shape health policy by more than just casting a ballot; elected officials depend on continued dialogue with constituents to understand concerns, consider options, and make decisions. Part of the aim of this course is to become an informed and active member of the health policy discussions currently taking place in our country.

**Choose an Elected Official**

In place of Quiz #3 you will be writing a letter to an elected official that **represents you**. This could include the mayor of Chicago, Lori Lightfoot, an Illinois senator or representative (for the appropriate district), Governor Pritzker, or President Biden. **Remember that only senators and representatives vote on federal bills, while the President holds veto power.** If you want to address something at the local level – that is great, but the piece of legislation you are advocating for must match the representative you are writing to (e.g. don't write to the mayor about gun control legislation at the federal level).

**Topic**

Because violence in the city of Chicago has been a topic of local and national concern, I have chosen **gun control** as the topic for this assignment. You should choose ONE of the pieces of legislation to advocate FOR or AGAINST and urge your elected official to vote FOR or AGAINST it.

**Figure 1.**

important venue for discussion (Lyons 2021, Tierney et al. 2015) and offer a way to investigate beliefs about contentious topics such as gun control without explicitly asking participants about it.

Our study utilizes student letters to elected officials, a far less common source of data, to discover the pervasiveness of thoughts about gun violence among DePaul students. Finding new sources of data is particularly important for a topic such as gun violence which has proved challenging to study and has been under-resourced for decades compared with other public health and biomedical issues (Branas et al., 2005). We analyzed student letters written to political representatives on the topic of gun violence during three separate quarters of a Health Policy course offered in the Health Science Department. We were curious to what extent students would express personal emotions and experiences about gun violence even in an academic context in which they were not explicitly required to do so. In our analysis we found that an overwhelming majority of students shared their fears, experiences, and emotions regarding gun violence and mass shootings.

Additionally, many students used a rights-based

language to express their desire to feel safe in their everyday lives. By analyzing students' recall of specific incidents of gun violence when not explicitly asked to do so, our study highlights the extent to which gun violence is a present issue in students' minds. Through an analysis of these letters, our study provides insight into how gun violence has impacted the lives of DePaul University students and continues to affect their day-to-day psychological state.

## METHODS

This study used letters that were submitted as part of a required writing assignment in the course: Introduction to Health Policy (HLTH 250). HLTH 250 is a required course offered by the Department of Health Sciences in the College of Science and Health at DePaul University. For the assignment students were told to choose a government representative to write to *in support or opposition* to a legislative measure pertaining to gun control. See Figure 1 for a detailed description of the assignment prompt. Letters were downloaded from three-quarters of HLTH 250 (Spring 2022, Winter 2023, and Spring 2023) by the faculty member who taught the course.

<b>Table 1. Codes</b>			
<b>Code Name</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Inclusion</b>	<b>Exclusion</b>
1 - Emotion	Personal feelings of emotion related to gun violence (fear, security, disappointment, sadness, grief)	Any individual student's feelings about gun violence, related events, political situations	Abstract emotions (indirect, nonpersonal)
2 - Family/friend relationships are impacted	How students think their family and friends' relationships are impacted by gun violence	Any worries, concerns, or thoughts about how gun violence affects family or friends' ease of living ( <u>abstract</u> thoughts)	Personal and direct stories about how gun violence has impacted students, family, or friends
3 - Intimate personal experience	Students who have been personally affected by or had family members involved in gun violence	Any personal stories about how gun violence has <u>directly</u> impacted students' own lives or had family/friends affected by gun violence	Abstract views about how gun violence has impacted themselves or others
4 - Community safety	Thoughts about the safety and security in communities	Comments or concerns regarding feelings of wanting safety and security in neighborhoods, high-risk communities, ethnic communities, Chicago, and Illinois & how gun control and restrictions can provide security within these communities	Any comments or thoughts about how the overall safety of the United States is affected by gun violence
5 - Future	Thoughts about the future concerning the issue of gun violence	Any comments or thoughts about how gun violence can change in the future	Any comments or thoughts about gun violence in present time
6 - Religion	Thoughts about religious discrimination/motives pertaining to gun violence	Any comments or thoughts about how religion can motivate/correspond with gun violence	Any comments or thoughts about how other profiles (gender, age, race, social/economic status) correspond with gun violence when not paired with thoughts of religion
7 - Race	Thoughts about racial discrimination/motives pertaining to gun violence	Any comments or thoughts about how race can motivate/correspond with gun violence	Any comments or thoughts about how other profiles (gender, age, religion, social/economic status) correspond with gun violence, when not paired with thoughts of race
8 - Expectation of/right to safety	Comments regarding an expectation or right to feel safe in one's community or school	Any comments beginning with "You should feel safe..." or "I have the right to feel..." This is an abstract thought.	Concrete expressions of safety such as "I didn't feel safe..."

Table 1.

The names of the letter writers and all identifying information were redacted before analysis began. Our study protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Board at DePaul University, protocol number IRB-2023-1034. In June of 2023 the authors met regularly to read all 83 letters that were included in the study. First, we made note of all the themes and salient points that were communicated in the letters, as described by Zhang and Wild (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). Then we used an inductive approach to develop a coding scheme to document the themes and content that we would code for in the letters. This was accomplished by reading each letter to identify the expression of each of these notions or ideas (Minichiello et al., 1990). Following conventional practice, portions of sentences or terms could be multiply coded as expressing more than one theme. We concluded that thematic saturation had been reached when no new themes emerged in the different domains of inquiry. As described by Saunders et al. (2018), thematic saturation is a methodological principle indicating when there are no new themes that arise in the data source.

As part of this process, we developed a coding manual, consisting of theme names, rules for assigning codes, and examples that evolved during the process (see Table 1 for a full list of codes and examples of each). Two authors separately coded each letter according to whether any of the themes were expressed (yes/no). The coding was rechecked for consistency, and the results were discussed as a group to identify and discuss instances of disagreement to make final determinations about what the appropriate code was.

In order to analyze the letters we used content analysis. According to Erlingsson (2017) content analysis is used to evaluate patterns within a piece of content (for example, words, phrases, or images) or across multiple pieces of content or sources of communication (for example, a collection of newspaper articles or political speeches). We used content analysis to identify the frequency with which the ideas that we had coded for were shared or spoken about. For example, the number of times a particular emotion was identified by a letter writer. We

also identified patterns of deeper underlying themes that ran throughout the letters, such as the idea that students expressed about desiring a safe space within which to conduct their daily lives. The important findings from these patterns are described below.

## RESULTS

Demographic information for each of the 83 letter writers were collected and are reported in Table 2. Of the 83 participants, 70 were female, 12 were male and one did not specify gender. All of the participants were current students at DePaul University. Two-thirds of the letter writers (60) named Chicago as their place of residence, 30 letter writers identified their residence as being in the suburbs surrounding Chicago, and two were out-of-state residents. The choice of government officials the participants addressed varied widely; eight addressed them to the President, 14 to the governor, 29 to the senator, 13 to the mayor, and 19 addressed them to a state representative or congressman. Table 3 describes some of the key contents and overall takeaways found within the letters. These were used to create overall conclusions about how the student responded to gun control and what reasoning they used to explain their stance. For example, 82 students expressed support for gun control, while one opposed gun control. Thematic topics relating to gun violence are reported below.

### Theme 1: Gun violence is something that DePaul students experience

Most of the letter writers reported some level of experience with gun violence. Several themes emerged to characterize this experience including: **direct** personal experience with gun violence and **indirect experience** of family and friends who had experienced gun violence. Just over one-third - 31 (37.3%) - of the participants in this study reported having a direct personal experience with gun violence. For example, one of the letters included the following anecdote, “In November of 2021, I had firsthand experience with gun violence. While driving home at night a friend and I were carjacked at gunpoint each of us with automatic guns pressed against our bodies. We were left stranded and scared in the middle of the night with no one around to help us” (Spring 2022 Letter 25).

Another student’s letter noted, “Gun violence has personally impacted me as my \_\_\_\_\_ recently passed away protecting our city of Chicago. On \_\_\_ of this year, they were responding to a domestic violence call in their own neighborhood of \_\_\_ where a man was chasing a woman down the street with a gun. My \_\_\_ was shot in the arms, legs, and head. This especially hit home for my family and I as gun violence in Chicago took one of our loved ones away” (Spring 2023 Letter 29).

An additional six students reported having direct, personal experience with school lockdowns in their letters. For example, one student noted, “This is concerning to me as a student; while I was in high school, we had to lock down because there was a person in the area carrying a rifle near school premises” (Winter 2023 Letter 16). Another student recalled, “There are many times where I’m receiving notifications from the Citizen’s app that there was a shooting near me. Sometimes, I can even hear it if it’s nearby. I live near campus for school and often go out at night with my friends since I’m in class all day and it’s very frustrating to know that within my own college town, there’s many gun violence activities occurring near me which makes me scared that I chose to live where I live, let alone, step foot outside” (Spring 2022 Letter 13).

While only one-third - 31 (37.3%) - of the letter writers reported a direct experience with gun violence, about one-fourth - 19 (22.9%) - of the letter writers reported having an indirect experience of gun violence through their family and friends, or the overall presence of gun violence in their neighborhoods and communities. For example, one student noted, “One of the various reasons I am concerned about gun violence is because of the shootings that are ongoing throughout Chicago that have affected not only myself but my friends and family as well. I have young family members who attend elementary school and middle school who must worry about school shooting drills and must learn different strategies and ways to act if they were to be in a shooting situation. It breaks my heart just thinking about them having to worry if they are going to be able to see their families after school” (Spring 2023 Letter 12). As one student’s letter explained, “I am

concerned about the issue of gun violence because I am a student and I notice that a lot of people, especially some of my younger cousins in high school, struggle feeling completely secure when attending school. With more and more cases of school shootings piling up on the news, it can cause despair for many parents which can make them reluctant to send their children to a public school” (Spring 2023 Letter 4). Another student explained, “I’m lucky to live here but I know people and have friends who have family who live in areas where gun violence is a pressing issue. There are people who witness gun violence daily and can give accurate accounts of what it’s like to live in terror”(Spring 2022 Letter 3).

**Table 2.** Description of Student Letter Writers

	Count (N=83)	Percentage
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	70	84.34
Male	12	14.46
No gender	1	1.20
<b>Residence</b>		
Chicago	60	72.29
Suburbs	21	25.30
Out of state	2	2.41
<b>Letter Addressed to</b>		
President	8	9.64
Governor	14	16.87
Senator	29	34.94
Mayor	13	15.66
State Representative/ Congressman	19	22.89

**Table 2.**

Theme 2: Emotions attached to gun violence

Just over one-half - 46 (55.4%) - of the participants in this study reported their opinion on gun violence using descriptive language associated with emotions. Students often connected their experiences while expressing fear and the feeling of being numb as a result of

frequent exposure to gun violence. For example, one student commented, “I was fearful the whole night constantly following the news as it came. I am tired. I am tired of being afraid to go to school, fearful of whether or not I’ll return home, from a place that should be my safe space. Fearful for my friends praying over them every morning. I am tired of being scared...something has to be done” (Spring 2023 Letter 8). Another student’s letter explained, “Going to school in the U.S. there has always been a slight fear in the back of my head, a school shooting. I can recall exactly where I was on the day of the Sandy Hook Elementary school shooting, sitting on my living room floor in front of the news on TV, worried about my next day of 5th grade. That worry never really left me, especially since shootings are only rising” (Spring 2022 Letter 5).

The repetition of specific emotions such as disappointment and frustration highlighted the student's concern towards a lack of action taken by the government. One student noted, “I have been getting so frustrated at this country’s government because of how they are doing absolutely nothing to protect the children and teachers” (Spring 2023 Letter 23). Another student’s letter said, “Being born and raised in Chicago, I’ve become prone to the constant violence that has been going on in our city for years. I am concerned about this issue because I am worried about our future and the upcoming generations. The violence in Chicago has worsened over time and I feel as if there is no action being taken about it” (Spring 22 Letter 9).

### Theme 3: Race/Religion

Two sub-themes were repeated among the students that mentioned race in their letters. References to racial discrimination were discussed in terms of African Americans being targeted and negatively impacted by gun violence across the United States. For example, one student noted, “From hearing about gun violence in predominantly Black communities in Chicago, to grieving from individuals that have died from gun violence, this bill will heavily bring change to racial communities whose stories are hidden, and voices are silenced” (Spring 2023 Letter 5). Another student’s letter

explained, “I believe that in supporting this bill you will impact the lives of all of us kids growing up in this country. Better giving us the chance in low-income communities to not carry this fear of being shot. Or fearing racially motivated homicide due to being a Latina in this country that sometimes doesn’t support people of my background being here. Saving the black and brown community from generational trauma of family members being shot or this stigma where we as brown kids are the reasons that gun violence is hot when it, in fact, is not the case” (Spring 2023 Letter 17).

The other sub-theme that emerged from the letters was a very general reference to racism, marginalized groups, and communities of color. As one student mentioned, “A bill like H.R.6575 is a step towards improving the lives and safety of those most affected by gun violence such as communities of color, women, and other marginalized groups in our society” (Spring 2022 Letter 2). Another student’s letter reported, “As a country, we need to stop making everything political and think about the well-being of everyone regardless of race, gender, or sexuality when it comes to gun safety in the United States” (Spring 2023 Letter 5).

	<b>Count (N=83)</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<b>Support Gun Control</b>		
Yes	82	98.80
No	1	1.20
<b>Mention Foreign Country's Gun Law</b>		
Yes	30	36.14
No	53	63.86
<b>Mention Experience with School Lockdowns</b>		
Yes	6	7.23
No	77	92.77
<b>Mention Knowledge of Mass Shooting Event</b>		
Yes	19	22.89
No	64	77.11
<b>Personal Experience with Gun Violence</b>		
Yes	31	37.35
No	52	62.65

**Table 3.**



#### Theme 4: Right to Safety

An unexpected theme that emerged from our study was the expectation that letter writers expressed a ‘right to safety’ in relation to gun violence. 13 of 83 students - 13 (15.7%) - expressed feelings that safety is something entitled to them as US citizens within the letters written to government officials. Of these letters that mention the use of rights-based language, one major sub-theme emerged. 10 of the 13 students mentioned the entitlement to feelings of safety especially regarding everyday activities such as going to school, the mall, movies, etc. For example, one student noted, “The citizens of this country shouldn’t fear for their lives every time they step outside. Children shouldn’t have to wear clear and bulletproof backpacks to school daily, parents shouldn’t have to pray their children make it home safe every day from a place they should have no fear walking into, and teachers shouldn’t have to take on a job they have no experience in while also putting their lives in jeopardy to protect their students” (Spring 2023 Letter 11). Another student explained, “People want freedom, liberty, and to feel safe going outside for a walk, going to school, or getting their nails done. But in today’s days, we can no longer live in peace” (Spring 2023 Letter 20).

Three of the 83 letter writers - 3 (0.04%) - discussed the expectation of safety concerning the next generation. For example, one student commented on this feeling regarding her own child, “I shouldn’t have to have a constant fear of being in the middle of a shootout at a red light with my child in the car. I shouldn’t have to worry about a shooting happening at the mall or zoo when I am just trying to allow my son to have a good time” (Spring 2022 Letter 9). Another student mentioned the expectation and right to safety regarding future generations, and wrote, “I don’t want to have to raise children in this country knowing that I won’t want them to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, I don’t want to have this underlying fear confused whether what I heard in my neighborhood was a gunshot or a firework anymore, and the children don’t deserve to grow up in those conditions either” (Spring 2023 Letter 17).

## DISCUSSION

The letter writers in this study voluntarily divulged personal experiences and emotions about gun violence in the context of a school assignment **that did not require them to do so**. Although the assignment only required students to express their support or opposition to gun control to a government representative, many of the letter writers included personal stories about experiences with gun violence and expressed strong emotions about how it had affected them. This finding demonstrates that gun violence is a present and emotional topic for students, even to the extent of influencing their school work.

Our study also indicates that many DePaul students are routinely exposed to some level of gun violence in their lives. Of the letter writers, approximately one-third - 31 (37.3%) - reported a direct experience with gun violence, while approximately one-fourth - 19 (22.9%) - reported having an indirect experience of gun violence through their family, friends, neighborhoods, and communities. Previous studies indicate that stress related to gun violence affects the performance of students in schools. For example, in Chicago specifically, studies show that black children who reside in violent neighborhoods spend at least one week a month functioning at lower concentration levels and report feeling less safe as a direct effect of gun violence (“The impact of gun violence on children and teens,” 2022).

Our study also confirms what other studies have shown regarding strong emotions attached to being exposed to gun violence (Abrams, 2022, O’Brien & Taku, 2022; Riehm et al., 2021). For example, the study conducted by O’Brien & Taku (2022) found that just reading a news article about mass shootings increased anxiety levels among university students. As these events such as school shootings and mass shootings are spread across media and social media, it is difficult for students to not have some type of exposure to gun violence even if the event has occurred hundreds of miles away. The “U.S. Youth Attitudes on Guns Report” (2024) explored the opinions of young adults concerning gun violence. The report

found that “Regardless of whether they experienced gun violence directly or indirectly, participants reported feelings of anxiety, grief, loss, and fear. This was the case even for people who had not witnessed a shooting take place but had a shooting occur in/close to their communities (both social and geographic)” (“U.S. Youth Attitudes on Guns Report,” 2024). Because the assignment specifically asked about gun control, the fact that there was an outpouring of emotion about the topic may not be as surprising as we have suggested. Abrams (2022) discusses a common theme we found among students who expressed and wrote about their emotions: feelings of numbness to the events happening. He writes, “While some people worry regularly about mass shootings, many are fatigued by the seemingly endless cycle of violence that moves rapidly through the media and public discourse” (Abrams, 2022). Students who had grown up in the city of Chicago specifically expressed feelings of numbness towards the constant news and media surrounding gun violence that has been ongoing for years without extreme action or measures to combat this epidemic.

We were surprised that race didn’t figure prominently given studies indicating that gun violence and rights are color-coded and evocative of racial resentment (Filindra et al., 2016). Exposure to gun violence was lowest among white children and highest among black children, experiencing 4.44 times more gun violence in their neighborhoods (Martin et al., 2022). Additionally, a study concluded from 2000-2017 demonstrated that the average homicide rate for a black individual was 10.3 per 100,000, while only 2.1 per 100,000 for a white individual (Wong et al., 2020). One of the conclusions we drew as to why race was not as prevalent in our study was the fact that it was catered towards students, who had their own separate association with gun violence. In comparison to polling a population of participants that are not only students, there might be more variety in the reasons why they are concerned about gun violence. This study solely looked at the impact of gun violence on students, where gun violence has played a large impact on the student population alone. The fact that there have been many mass shootings

related to students alone, we determined, was a bias that may have steered away from the discussion of race as a motivating factor for gun violence.

An unexpected and novel theme that emerged in our research was the letter writers’ expressions of a right to safety or their stated expectation of safety as an American citizen.

13 out of 83 letters expressed this theme. We were unable to corroborate this finding within the existing literature on students’ experience of gun violence, but submit that the articulation of a ‘right to safety’ could be seen as analogous to other student expressions of rights such as the right to freedom of expression or dress (Ahrens & Siegal, 2019). As such, our study represents a potentially new arena within which to examine students’ expectations and desire for a safe environment, particularly within day-to-day activities such as attending school, shopping at the mall, or just walking around the city. A 2021 legal essay goes so far as to contend that there is already a legal basis for the right of Americans to be protected from gun violence (Gabor, 2021).

The final contribution of this paper is the introduction of a novel method of measuring the impact of gun violence on students. A variety of innovative methods have been used to try to capture the multi-dimensional effects of gun violence on students. For example, studies conducted by Rossin-Slater et al. (2020) and Cabral et al. (2020) provide different methods of assessing the impact of direct exposure to gun violence among students who have experienced school shootings. Rossin-Slater et al. (2020) focus on the impact of school shootings on the mental health of students by measuring the distribution of prescription antidepressants by providers within a certain mile radius of the school that had experienced a shooting. In another study, Cabral et al. (2020) discuss the impact of school shootings on education by measuring the number of absent days, chronically absentees, and grade repetition among students at a school who had experienced a shooting. This study, by analyzing a school assignment that did not require students to include personal experiences and emotions surrounding gun violence offers an additional method to evaluate the impact that the dramatic increase of gun

violence in our country is having on students' daily lives.

### Limitations

This study has several limitations. One limitation of our study is the lack of demographic information regarding the participants due to the nature of the assignment. We do not have information regarding race, income, religious affiliation, etc. making it difficult to contextualize the context of our findings, especially in terms of Theme 3: Race. Because the study's main use of data is from letters written by students, there are limitations in our analysis as we are not able to ask more individualized follow-up questions with participants based on what was written, and their experiences with gun violence. Lastly, there is a limitation due to the gender imbalance of our participant sample: about 84 % of our sample was female, while only 14% of our sample was male. There is a much higher percentage of female-to-male letter writers.

### Conclusion

Our study used a novel source of data, a school assignment about gun control policy, in order to assess the impact of direct and indirect forms of gun violence on student lives. The majority of student letter writers provided

unsolicited descriptions of direct and indirect exposure to gun violence, suggesting a pervasive impact of gun violence on students' mental health. Further, students reported that they were often scared and fearful for themselves and their friends and family members in common places such as schools and public events. Student pleas for a 'right to safety' from gun violence in their daily lives, as well as their expression of entitlement to be safe in public places, suggest a possible direction for gun control activism centered around the *right to feel safe* rather than the right to bear arms. College-aged individuals play an important role in advocating for changing policies and systems related to gun control. Many forms of activism already exist such as creating student groups on campuses advocating for gun control, holding rallies and protests to support safe school environments, and providing literature to educate their peers about gun violence (Columbia Scientific Union, n.d.; Action Against Gun Violence, 2018). This research could support a different, more indirect but just as important form of activism. In conclusion, we recommend that future research explore more indirect data sources that offer a window into the potent impact that gun violence has on students' day-to-day lives.

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