



Loaded questions

By Jamie Dean February 8, 2013

Gun Rights | The mass shootings that have prompted a national debate over gun control are tragic—but rare. What about the gun violence that takes the most American lives? Are we ready to pursue solutions that are hard-fought and long-term?

ALL TOO COMMON: Pallbearers carry the body of Joseph Briggs following a funeral in Chicago. Briggs, 16, was shot during a drive-by shooting while he was sitting on his front porch with his sister—one of nine people killed and 46 wounded by gunfire in Chicago during the June 9 weekend. [Enlarge Image](#)

photo by Scott Olson/Getty Images

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ATLANTA—When Justina Dix huddles with her family in a central room in their southeast Atlanta home, she isn't worried about springtime tornadoes. She's worried about year-round gunfire.

For 27 years, Dix has lived in Atlanta's Summerhill neighborhood—a community plagued with gangs, drugs, and violence since the 1970s. These days, crime has dipped, but fear remains. When Dix hears gunshots ring, she summons her family to take cover: “It seems like every other week somebody gets shot nearby.”

Shootings in Summerhill and other Atlanta neighborhoods often don't make national news. Indeed, the revived debate in Congress over gun control stems from the horrific mass shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn., but it barely touches the most common kind of gun violence in the United States: Urban shootings that afflict hundreds of communities across the country every year.

The FBI reports about 13,000 homicides annually in the United States. About two-thirds involve firearms. In 2012 mass shootings took less than 100 lives—less than 1 percent of all homicide victims. Nearly eight times as many Americans died from physical beatings.

Though the overall murder rate in the United States has dropped in recent years, homicides by gunfire have remained steady in many inner-city areas. By the end of January, Chicago officials reported at least 42 murders for the month—many by gun violence.

Much of the violence in inner-city areas flows from drug deals and gang wars, and involves a vexing, generational problem: young black men killing young black men.

An analysis by The Wall Street Journal found more than half the nation's homicide victims are black, though African-Americans make up only 13 percent of the population. Of those victims, 85 percent were mostly young men killed by other black men.

Though gangs and drugs fuel gun violence, they also ensnare bystanders. Less than six weeks before gunman Adam Lanza massacred 20 students, six school employees, and his mother in a terrifying rampage in Newtown, another gunman terrorized a red brick house in the Polar Rock community of Atlanta.

The assailant fired through the home's door, striking two children sleeping with their grandmother on a sofa bed. The gunfire hit 1-year-old Isaiah Motley near his spine. The infant survived, but his 2-year-old sister, Ty-Teyanna Motley, died at the hospital.

It's the kind of violence that grieves Justina Dix, but it doesn't paralyze her. Instead, the director of Summerhill Community Ministries works with inner-city children and teens to address the root problems of gun violence.

Like workers in other urban-based, Christian ministries, Dix says it's far too easy for young people to get guns. But she also says focusing on guns alone won't solve spiritual and familial problems that perpetuate criminal actions: "Even if it died down a little, it would build right back up because you're not dealing with the root of the problem."

Dealing with the root problem isn't easy. Dix has been working on it for nearly two decades, and says true change means more than passing new laws: It means forging relationships rooted in Christ and staying committed to an often-discouraging process that could take a lifetime.

That's a discussion missing from the current debate over gun violence, but it's one that Dix and others in urban areas hope Christians will remember. For all the fatigue and cynicism surrounding urban violence, surrender isn't an option for Christians committed to the gospel.

Dix's husband, Emanuel, who grew up surrounded by Summerhill's violence, says: "It basically boils down to human nature, and laws can't change that."

The most controversial gun laws President Barack Obama has proposed since the mass shootings in Sandy Hook likely wouldn't stop much of the urban violence in places like Chicago and Atlanta: Many shooters use handguns—not the kind of assault weapons the president has proposed banning. (And though some proposals for expanded background checks make sense, most urban shooters don't buy guns legally.)

Indeed, some wonder whether the measures would stop massacres like Sandy Hook and others: In Newtown, Lanza used weapons his mother bought legally in a state with strict gun control laws. The Virginia Tech shooter, who killed 32 victims in 2007, passed a background check despite serious mental health issues. And the Columbine High School massacre happened during the federal assault weapons ban spanning 1994 to 2004.

When it comes to the proposal to ban high-capacity ammunition magazines, Robert Levy of the libertarian Cato Institute believes a ban on magazines with 20 rounds or more makes sense, and possibly could stop a mass shooter from inflicting mass casualties. (The president and some legislators advocate a ban on magazines with 10 rounds or more.) Either way, Levy notes a significant problem: Homemade magazines are easy to build.

Levy successfully argued the Supreme Court case in 2008 that overturned a ban on most handguns in Washington, D.C. During the 32-year ban, gun violence and homicides in the district soared, as criminals maintained their arsenals, and many law-abiding citizens went unarmed. The court's 2008 decision underscored citizens' Second Amendment rights to keep and bear arms.

Jeffrey Shapiro, a former prosecutor in D.C., notes since the court struck down the gun ban, murders in D.C. dropped from 186 in 2008 to 88 in 2012—the lowest number of homicides since the district enacted the gun ban in 1976.

Gun advocates fear their Second Amendment rights are in danger, but despite intense national debate, the most controversial legislation—like banning assault weapons and limiting high capacity magazines—faces an uphill battle in Congress. For all the talk, little may happen.

Meanwhile, in urban areas across the country, chaos and carnage continue with fleeting national attention.

Take Chicago. Though crime in the city has declined overall, homicides are up. The city's murder count reached 500 last year—the highest since 2008. (That's still far lower than a peak of 900 murders a year during the early 1990s.)

Last month was brutal: 42 murders in 31 days—the deadliest January in more than a decade. On Jan. 12, gunmen killed two boys, ages 14 and 15, in separate shootings.

Officials say much of Chicago's violence is gang-related, but it sometimes claims innocent victims: Seven-year-old Heaven Sutton died last June after suffering a gunshot wound in her front yard. Hadiya Pendleton, 15, died from a gunshot wound in a Chicago park on Jan. 29—a week after performing as a majorette at President Obama's inauguration.

The violence continues despite the city's stringent gun laws: Though there are no gun shops in the city limits, police seized more than 7,400 guns employed in crimes or unauthorized use last year.

Phil Jackson sees those crimes regularly. The associate pastor at Lawndale Community Church has lived in Chicago's poverty-stricken Lawndale community for nearly 20 years.

Jackson offers a running list of neighborhood violence: A man shot two blocks from the church while helping a woman being robbed; a 20-year-old man from the church gunned down at a grocery store; a member of the youth group who survived being shot in the back seven times.

The pastor says the violence permeates life in the neighborhood: The church shuts down the gym at 8:30 p.m. so children can get home safely. The community has few sit-down restaurants because law-abiding patrons worry about coming out late at night.

Jackson says lots of problems fuel gangs and guns: Poverty, fatherlessness, failing schools, and a lack of opportunities. A whole housing project is dedicated to grandparents raising grandkids.

When he talks about solutions, Jackson mentions the church's expansive programs like affordable housing, a healthcare clinic, job training, and Saturday night youth outreach.

But he mostly emphasizes relationships rooted in demonstrating the gospel. When we talked by phone, Jackson was preparing to pick up a gang member who told the pastor he wants to find a job and a new way of life: "That didn't happen because I met him the other day," says Jackson. "That happened over years—taking him to breakfast, seeing him in the neighborhood, talking to him on the street."

Jackson says the process is slow and methodical, and it often takes years: "These relationships come with longevity and consistency. ... They need to see the light of Christ in the darkest areas of their lives."

In the 8th Ward of New Orleans, J.B. Watkins faces plenty of darkness. The pastor of St. Roch Community Church came to the inner-city neighborhood in 2007.

He's seen deep sorrow in a short time. The 33-year-old graduate of Reformed Theological Seminary has buried three young people killed by gun violence in the last five years: Two teenage boys and a young woman who was a victim of domestic violence. The parents of one of the boys had already lost another son to gun violence.

It's a sadly common tale in New Orleans—a city with the highest per capita murder rate in the country. Violence, poverty, and fatherlessness have longed plagued the parts of the city, even before Hurricane Katrina destroyed whole swaths of poor neighborhoods in 2005.

These days, pre-Katrina problems continue, says Watkins: "You hear gunshots daily. ... It's wild in many ways." Patterns of systemic corruption among some police officers and city officials deepen the woes.

Effective policing has proven hugely successful in other urban areas. New York City enjoyed an 80 percent drop in homicides over the last two decades. Criminologists largely attribute the dip to efforts led by William Bratton, the city's police chief from 1994 to 1996.

The chief insisted on the now-famous “broken windows” theory—cracking down on smaller crimes that lead to larger crimes (and snagging serious offenders). He encouraged officers to stop and search people they reasonably suspected of a crime. He pursued vigorous crime tracking, and deployed officers to the city’s hot spots.

Crime fell dramatically across the board, and though Bratton favors some gun control legislation, he insists smart policing is a bedrock for reducing crime. Cities that have followed New York’s lead have seen similar drops.

That’s not the case in New Orleans, and for many residents—young and old—the cycles of poverty and violence make it difficult to imagine another way of life. That’s especially hard for working class, law-abiding residents trying to lead peaceful lives.

Watkins says his church seeks to extend the hope of life in Christ. Mostly, that means preaching the gospel and being a good neighbor. It also means throwing block parties, hosting an afterschool program, and playing basketball with youth in a dangerous park.

The pastor looks for opportunities to tell troubled young men how Jesus identifies with them: “How He was born in low esteem and not in a significant place. How He didn’t have much. How people hated Him. And how He was even killed. . . . Nevertheless He was loved of the Father and came to do all this for us.”

Over time, Watkins hopes that message will penetrate dark corners, and he’s encouraged to see youth and families pursuing new patterns in the context of a Christian life and the church.

He knows it’s hard work that will take a long time. “I’ve told my church that we may have to see ourselves as Moses instead of Joshua,” he says. “I wanted to walk into the Promised Land yesterday, but there’s a real sense in which we may be just tilling the soil and setting the groundwork for the next generation. . . . We may be the early settlers.”

Back in Atlanta, Justina Dix has been tilling the ground a long time at Summerhill Community Ministries. The ministry started 14 years ago as an outgrowth of her personal ministry to those struggling in her neighborhood.

These days, the ministry serves a few dozen children from kindergarten to 12th grade with sports, activities, and an afterschool program focused on homework, mentoring, and a peaceful environment.

On a recent afternoon in the ministry's small house near the end of a dead-end street, a dozen children from some of the roughest sections of town sat quietly for an afternoon Bible lesson. Valentine's Day is approaching, so the children learned about 1 Corinthians 13: "Love is patient, love is kind."

It's a hard lesson for some of these children to understand, says Dix. Some endure child abuse. Others watch drug deals in their living rooms. Some know their mothers are prostitutes. Few have strong fathers in their lives. Many witness gun violence.

Dix, her small staff, and a couple dozen volunteers work to help the children face immense challenges. Dix pleads with mothers to help their children lead better lives. She goes to court when a child is abused. She cooks dinner for hungry neighborhood kids. "I go to bat for them," she says.

It's the long, hard, work of a lifetime, and it does bear fruit: Some of youth in the program have become the first in their families to go to college. Others are the first to graduate from high school.

Still, the obstacles remain. During our interview on Jan. 31, a news report flashed on Dix's phone: A middle school student at nearby Price Middle School had shot another student in the neck. Dix shook her head: "You see."

Later at the scene of the crime, authorities announced the student's injuries weren't life threatening, but worried parents paced an intersection behind police tape near the school. They craned their necks to look for the last students to emerge while helicopters buzzed overhead.

Police announced the students would ride the bus to their normal stops, as three buses raced through the intersection. Some mothers strained to see if their children were on board. Faye Roberts, the mother of an eighth-grader, panicked: "My son doesn't ride the bus!"

Before her son eventually walked safely out of the school, Roberts explained her fear. "They're dropping him off in a neighborhood he doesn't live in, and it's getting dark," she said. "What if he gets shot?"