

# After the Uneasy Peace: Why the United States is Vulnerable to Surges of Violence

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## ABSTRACT

*After a long period of decline, violence in America rose sharply from 2014 to 2021 before falling again in 2023 and 2024. These nationwide fluctuations lead us to move beyond the commonly studied question of what factors are driving changes in violence in a given place at a given time and to instead consider what makes the United States vulnerable to persistently high levels of and abrupt shifts in violence. In this essay, we review causal and descriptive evidence on two main factors that contribute to America's violent crime landscape: the unique nature of concentrated disadvantage in the U.S. and the prevalence of guns circulating through American neighborhoods. We argue that the emphasis on vulnerability to violence has implications for approaches to confronting it, and we point to evidence supporting a turn toward community-oriented institutions and basic regulations on access to and use of guns as central in the effort to confront violence.*

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## INTRODUCTION

In 2014, I (Sharkey) began writing my book *Uneasy Peace*, an empirical account of how the decline of violence in the United States had transformed urban America.<sup>1</sup> The timing here is meaningful: the national murder rate in 2014 was 4.4 murders for every 100,000 U.S. residents, the lowest rate since the beginning of the 1960s.<sup>2</sup> Given what is known about the long-term trajectory of U.S. violence over the past few centuries, the year I started writing the book was likely one of the safest years in the history of this nation.<sup>3</sup>

My purpose in writing the book was to generate evidence on the impact of declining violence on different types of communities, different segments of the population, and outcomes like life expectancy, academic achievement, and economic mobility. This evidence, which we will review in the next section of the article, suggests that the drop in violence should be seen as a breakthrough that had its greatest impact on the most disadvantaged communities and groups in the United States. But as I warned in the book's Preface, "[t]he decline in violence that changed urban America is fragile."<sup>4</sup>

The Preface continued:

It [the decline in violence] is threatened by the resentment of police officers who have been asked, for the past twenty years, to take over dangerous city streets by any means necessary—and who are now being vilified in some quarters and told to change the way they do their jobs. It is threatened by the outrage of the many Americans who are now aware of the scale of mass incarceration, and the protesters who have now seen how police officers have long treated residents in the nation's poorest, most segregated neighborhoods. It is threatened by the election of Donald Trump, whose law and order rhetoric is a reminder of the language Richard Nixon used back in 1968, just before the last century's sharpest rise in violence occurred.

And lastly, it is threatened by a broader, more troubling trend that has been developing for the past forty years: the rise of urban inequality. As

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<sup>1</sup> PATRICK SHARKEY, *UNEASY PEACE: THE GREAT CRIME DECLINE, THE RENEWAL OF CITY LIFE, AND THE NEXT WAR ON VIOLENCE* xvi–xviii (2018).

<sup>2</sup> *See id.* at 6.

<sup>3</sup> *See id.*; Claude S. Fischer, *A Crime Puzzle*, MADE IN AM. (June 3, 2010), <https://madeinamericathebook.wordpress.com/2010/06/03/a-crime-puzzle/> [<https://perma.cc/9XDZ-M5AS>] (showing that violent crime and murder continued to decrease through 2010). *See generally* Douglas Lee Eckberg, *Estimates of Early Twentieth-Century U.S. Homicide Rates: An Econometric Forecasting Approach*, 32 *DEMOGRAPHY* 1 (1995) (correcting early twentieth century homicide statistics); ROGER LANE, *MURDER IN AMERICA: A HISTORY* (David R. Johnson & Jeffrey S. Adler eds., 1997) (The Ohio State Univ. Press, The History of Crime and Criminal Justice Series) (tracing the history of homicide in the United States from the Colonial Era to the late 20th century).

<sup>4</sup> SHARKEY, *supra* note 1, at xxi–xxii.

economic inequality has grown steadily since the 1970s, our cities have become increasingly segregated by income. Poverty has become more concentrated in neighborhoods that are detached from the rest of the city, the wealthy have moved into distinct areas of their own, and gated communities have proliferated. The new American city is historically safe but shockingly unequal.<sup>5</sup>

The intervening years have, unfortunately, validated many of these initial concerns. After reaching historic lows in 2014, violence began to rise in the latter half of the 2010s and rose sharply in 2020 and 2021 before falling again more recently.<sup>6</sup> Although these fluctuations raise questions about the forces that led to each of these specific shifts in violence, this article, co-authored with Varsha Menon and Chloe Shawah, does not intend to put forth a theory or causal evidence to explain each of these changes. Instead, it is an effort to take stock and learn from the trends in violence since the publication of the book and to think about what makes the U.S. vulnerable to these fluctuations.

The article proceeds with a review of evidence on the impact of the crime decline from 1991 to 2014 before describing the rise and fall of gun violence that has occurred since the book was written. We argue that concentrated disadvantage and the prevalence of guns are two main factors underlying U.S. vulnerability to violence, and propose two questions that violence researchers must grapple with to better understand the unique nature of violence in America: what can be done to 1) weaken the link between concentrated disadvantage and violence; and 2) limit the effect of gun prevalence on gun violence? We conclude with ideas about the implications of our argument for social policy.

## I. THE FALL OF VIOLENCE

The decline of violence in the 1990s was most visible in America's cities. While the national murder rate fell by roughly half over this period, a number of major urban centers experienced a more substantial change. In New York City, for instance, there were over 2,000 murders per year in the early 1990s.<sup>7</sup> By 2014, this number had decreased to 328 murders, completing a nearly 85% decline.<sup>8</sup> This scale of change was not unique to New York City, as a range of cities completely transformed over this period. The murder rate fell by 70% or more in Los Angeles,

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<sup>5</sup> SHARKEY, *supra* note 1, at xxii.

<sup>6</sup> Patrick Sharkey & Alisabeth Marsteller, *Neighborhood Inequality and Violence in Chicago, 1965–2020*, 89 U. CHI. L. REV. 349, 361, 370 (2022); Ernesto Lopez & Bobby Boxerman, *Crime Trends in U.S. Cities: Mid-Year 2025 Update*, COUNCIL ON CRIM. JUST. (July 2025), <https://counciloncj.org/crime-trends-in-u-s-cities-mid-year-2025-update/?pdf=11983> [<https://perma.cc/3MUW-HSAU>].

<sup>7</sup> SHARKEY, *supra* note 1, at xv.

<sup>8</sup> *Id.* at xvii.

Washington, D.C., San Diego, Fort Worth, and Charlotte.<sup>9</sup> Even cities that did not experience such a dramatic transformation saw significant violence reduction during this period. In Cleveland, Ohio, for instance, the murder rate fell by roughly half.<sup>10</sup> Many places known for high rates of violence—Chicago, Detroit, Oakland—all saw violence decline by at least a quarter.<sup>11</sup>

One might assume that declining violence in cities like New York primarily benefited upscale areas, like Times Square in Manhattan, without reaching neighborhoods in the poorest sections of boroughs like Brooklyn or the Bronx. The data available suggests that the opposite is true. To determine the neighborhoods where violence fell most sharply, Michael Friedson and I (Sharkey) were able to gather neighborhood-level crime data for six cities throughout the decades of the crime decline.<sup>12</sup> Across these cities, we found that the greatest changes in violence took place in neighborhoods with high rates of poverty, reducing disparities in community violence between poor and nonpoor residents.<sup>13</sup> Neighborhood-level data and rates of victimization across income groups led to the conclusion that the experience of urban poverty changed in a fundamental way over this era. Before the Great Crime Decline, urban poverty meant living in intensely violent communities; this was much less true as violence fell in cities nationwide.<sup>14</sup>

Just as the greatest changes occurred in the most disadvantaged neighborhoods, the benefits of the decline in violence were concentrated among the most disadvantaged segments of the population. This point is most clearly illustrated by examining lives saved. Friedson and I (Sharkey) also analyzed life expectancy from 1991 through 2014 for four demographic groups: Black and White men and women.<sup>15</sup> To estimate the impact of the crime decline for each group, we performed a thought experiment: what would life expectancy look like if the crime decline did not happen? After calculating life expectancy over time for each group, we

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<sup>9</sup> *Id.* at 26; *American Violence Interactive Crime Map*, AMERICANVIOLENCE.ORG, <https://www.americanviolence.org> [<https://perma.cc/U6M2-XYHP>] (select “Murder” in “Crime Type” dropdown; select “Rate per 100k” in “Measure” dropdown; select “Custom” in “Time Period” dropdown; then select “Yearly” in “Data precision dropdown” and set “From” and “To” years as “1990”; click “Save”; then hover over the city of interest; follow the same process but set “From” and “To” years as 2014 to view data for 2014) (last visited May 20, 2025). Data for Washington, D.C., San Diego, and Fort Worth are drawn from *Uneasy Peace*, while figures for Los Angeles and Charlotte are taken from AmericanViolence.org. In Los Angeles, the murder rate declined from 28.2 in 1990 to 6.73 in 2014; in Charlotte it fell from 23.49 to 6.07 over the same period.

<sup>10</sup> *American Violence Interactive Crime Map*, *supra* note 9. Cleveland’s murder rate was 33.23 in 1990 and 16.07 in 2014.

<sup>11</sup> *Id.* Chicago’s murder rate was 30.57 in 1990 and 15.3 in 2014; Detroit’s was 56.62 in 1990 and 42.85 in 2014; Oakland’s was 39.22 in 1990 and 19.88 in 2014.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Friedson & Patrick Sharkey, *Violence and Neighborhood Disadvantage After the Crime Decline*, 660 ANNALS AM. ACAD. POL. & SOC. SCI. 341, 345 (2015).

<sup>13</sup> *Id.* at 355.

<sup>14</sup> *Id.* at 354–55.

<sup>15</sup> Patrick Sharkey & Michael Friedson, *The Impact of the Homicide Decline on Life Expectancy of African American Males*, 56 DEMOGRAPHY 645, 646 (2019).

calculated what the 2014 life expectancies would be if murder rates were fixed at the 1991 level, before violence started to fall.<sup>16</sup> For White women, Black women, and White men, the difference was not substantial. For Black men, the group most affected by urban violence, the difference was enormous.<sup>17</sup> The decline in murder rates from 1991 to 2014 contributed to an improvement in life expectancy for Black men of just over 0.8 years.<sup>18</sup>

While this might not seem like a significant change, few public health advancements have produced anywhere near this improvement in life expectancy over the past few decades.<sup>19</sup> For comparison, research on the obesity epidemic in the United States suggests that eliminating obesity entirely would yield an improvement in life expectancy of between one-third of a year and one year.<sup>20</sup> Put differently, the *actual* improvement in life expectancy among Black men attributable to declining murder rates is roughly equivalent to or greater than the *hypothetical* improvement in life expectancy that would be expected if the United States were able to eliminate obesity altogether.

Violence did not just decrease in the streets; it also declined in schools. Self-reported victimization data from the National Crime Victimization Survey show that reports of serious victimization in schools fell by 80% from the early 1990s to 2015.<sup>21</sup> Young people reported substantial declines in the prevalence of school assaults that were equivalent to the drops in violent assaults in their neighborhoods at large.<sup>22</sup> And as schools became safer, academic achievement improved. States that experienced the largest declines in violence saw the greatest improvements in academic performance and the most significant narrowing of racial gaps in academic performance.<sup>23</sup>

The drop in violence not only translated into improved outcomes for young people in school but also led to long-term improvements in their chances of moving upward in the income distribution. To study the effect of the crime decline on economic mobility, Gerard Torrats-Espinoso and I (Sharkey) exploited exogenous variation in the timing of the decline across U.S. counties and found that a one-standard-deviation decrease in violence for teens in the twenty-fifth percentile of

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<sup>16</sup> *Id.* at 645.

<sup>17</sup> *See id.* at 655.

<sup>18</sup> *Id.* at 645.

<sup>19</sup> *See id.* at 658–59; *see also* SUSAN T. STEWART & DAVID M. CUTLER, THE CONTRIBUTION OF BEHAVIOR CHANGE AND PUBLIC HEALTH TO IMPROVED U.S. POPULATION HEALTH 14 (Nat'l Bureau of Econ. Rsch., Working Paper No. 20631, 2014), [https://www.nber.org/system/files/working\\_papers/w20631/w20631.pdf](https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w20631/w20631.pdf) [<https://perma.cc/A9N4-YEHH>] (showing that the decline in smoking increased life expectancy by 1.26 years over a fifty-year period).

<sup>20</sup> *See* S. Jay Olshansky et al., *A Potential Decline in Life Expectancy in the United States in the 21st Century*, 352 *NEJM* 1138, 1140–41 (2005).

<sup>21</sup> SHARKEY, *supra* note 1, at 91–92.

<sup>22</sup> *Id.* at 91.

<sup>23</sup> *See id.* at 93.

parents' income distribution led to approximately a two-point increase in their expected income rank at age twenty-six.<sup>24</sup> This improvement is equivalent to growing up in a metro area like Denver, Colorado instead of Chicago, Illinois, where rates of upward mobility are substantially lower.<sup>25</sup> These results suggest that children who lived in an area where violence had declined by roughly half—which, as noted above, was not uncommon during this period—could expect to earn roughly \$2,000 more in income every year during the early part of adulthood.<sup>26</sup> This is enough of a boost to give young adults a long-term chance at upward mobility and, for some, to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty.

The evidence on the decline of violence leads us to three core conclusions. First, from the 1990s to the mid-2010s, violence in the U.S. was cut roughly in half, completely transforming some cities where the murder rate fell by 70% or more.<sup>27</sup> Second, the greatest benefits of the crime decline were experienced in the most disadvantaged communities and among the most disadvantaged segments of the population.<sup>28</sup> Finally, the decline in violence should be recognized as a public health breakthrough. It saved thousands of lives, improved academic achievement, and had lasting effects on upward economic mobility.<sup>29</sup>

## II. UNEASY PEACE

By 2014, the national murder rate was 4.4 murders per 100,000 people, representing one of the safest years in United States history.<sup>30</sup> Then, from 2014 to 2020, the national homicide rate increased by approximately 50% and violence rose in almost every major city.<sup>31</sup> Consider Cleveland, Ohio, where violence had been

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<sup>24</sup> Patrick Sharkey & Gerard Torrats-Espinosa, *The Effect of Violent Crime on Economic Mobility*, 102 J. URB. ECON. 22, 22–23, 31 (2017).

<sup>25</sup> *Id.* at 32.

<sup>26</sup> SHARKEY, *supra* note 1, at 108.

<sup>27</sup> *See* SHARKEY, *supra* note 1, at xvii–xviii, 24–27.

<sup>28</sup> Friedson & Sharkey, *supra* note 12, at 341; *see also* Sharkey & Friedson, *supra* note 15, at 647 (showing that the decline in homicide increased life expectancy for African American males by 0.8 years, reducing the racial life expectancy gap).

<sup>29</sup> *See* Sharkey & Friedson, *supra* note 15, at 658; SHARKEY, *supra* note 1, at 91–95; Sharkey & Torrats-Espinosa, *supra* note 24, at 22–23, 28, 31.

<sup>30</sup> SHARKEY, *supra* note 1, at 6.

<sup>31</sup> *See Data Explorer: Crime*, FBI CRIME DATA EXPLORER, <https://cde.ucr.cjis.gov/LAT/EST/webapp/#/pages/explorer/crime/crime-trend> [<https://perma.cc/B7RR-PQFY>] (select “Homicide” in “Crime Select” dropdown; select “Custom” in “Time Frame” dropdown; set start date as January 2020 and end date as December 2020; click “Submit”; then click “View by Rates” in blue hamburger menu at top left of chart; the data may then be downloaded by clicking “Download as CSV” in blue hamburger menu; follow the same process but set start date as January 2014 and end date as December 2014 to view data for 2014; the monthly homicide rates for 2020 and 2014 sum to a yearly rate of 6.77 per 100,000 and 4.5 per 100,000, respectively) (last visited Nov. 9, 2025).

reduced by approximately half during the crime drop. In the six years following 2014, violence more than doubled, surpassing the 1990 rate.<sup>32</sup>

While the rate of fatal neighborhood shootings increased by about 76% nationally, the distribution of this increase was not uniform. In neighborhoods with relatively low poverty rates, there was approximately a 58% increase in fatal shootings. In contrast, neighborhoods with high poverty rates experienced over a 91% increase.<sup>33</sup> This pattern is consistent with historical trends: just as the greatest benefits during the crime reduction were experienced in the most disadvantaged communities, the greatest damage occurs in these same communities when violence increases.<sup>34</sup>

Reflecting on these fluctuations in violence levels in the United States over time leads us to consider two distinct questions. The first question represents the dominant focus of most criminological research: why does violence rise or fall in particular places at particular times? This constitutes the majority of the work in the field, with researchers attempting to understand the specific forces that cause violence to rise or fall in certain settings. But after seeing violence fall by half over the 1990s, before rising sharply again, we propose a second, equally important question: why has the United States remained vulnerable to abrupt rises—and persistently high levels—of violence? This second question leads to a different set of answers than the first and, consequently, to a different set of policy responses.

### III. VULNERABILITY TO VIOLENCE

What makes American neighborhoods vulnerable to violence? One part of the answer is the unique nature of concentrated disadvantage in the United States. In the middle of the twentieth century, U.S. cities were faced with a set of interrelated challenges stemming from shifts to central city economies, the suburbanization of middle-class families, and the declining political influence of and resources available to city governments.<sup>35</sup> As joblessness rose, challenges like addiction and homelessness became more prevalent. Poverty became more concentrated, and violence began to rise.

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<sup>32</sup> The Cleveland, OH murder rate was 33.23 in 1990, 16.07 in 2014, and 42.0 in 2020. *American Violence Interactive Crime Map*, *supra* note 9 (set both “From” and “To” years as 2020 to view data for that year).

<sup>33</sup> Sharkey & Marsteller, *supra* note 6, at 375, 380.

<sup>34</sup> *See id.* at 375.

<sup>35</sup> *See also* BARRY BLUESTONE & BENNETT HARRISON, *THE DEINDUSTRIALIZATION OF AMERICA: PLANT CLOSINGS, COMMUNITY ABANDONMENT, AND THE DISMANTLING OF BASIC INDUSTRY* (1982) (describing social and economic changes in U.S. cities during the mid-20th century). *See generally* WILLIAM JULIUS WILSON, *THE TRULY DISADVANTAGED: THE INNER CITY, THE UNDERCLASS, AND PUBLIC POLICY* (1987) (discusses how changes in U.S. cities led to a concentration of poverty / disadvantage within urban areas).

An extensive body of literature has shown that concentrated poverty is associated with high levels of violence in the United States.<sup>36</sup> A smaller number of studies have demonstrated that this relationship is causal: when poverty becomes less concentrated due to policy shocks, such as the demolition of public housing developments or the end of rent controls, violence tends to fall.<sup>37</sup> Other research at the individual level reinforces the findings linking concentrated poverty with violence. Mark Votruba and Jeffrey Kling analyzed mortality outcomes for Black male youth whose families moved as part of the Gautreaux Assisted Housing Program, a court-ordered desegregation program begun in Chicago in the late 1970s. The program required Chicago's public housing authority to offer several thousand families living in public housing in the city the chance to move to units throughout the metropolitan area, including integrated or predominantly White neighborhoods with substantially lower rates of poverty. The authors found that children from families assigned to neighborhoods with lower poverty rates had substantially lower rates of overall mortality as well as mortality by homicide.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, Eric Chyn analyzed the outcomes of children in families that were compelled to move out of high-poverty public housing developments in Chicago that were demolished. He found that they had lower rates of arrest than children living in nearby developments that were left intact.<sup>39</sup>

These findings lead to a natural question: what is it about concentrated poverty that makes U.S. neighborhoods particularly vulnerable to outbreaks of violence? One key pathway is the role of concentrated disadvantage in the decline of local institutions that provide the foundation for collective life. As communities lose middle-class residents, political influence, and public resources, core community institutions like schools, housing complexes, churches, parks, and playgrounds deteriorate. Fluctuations in funding for public and affordable housing, for instance, made it difficult for local housing agencies to create sustained financial support for

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<sup>36</sup> See, e.g., Alyssa W. Chamberlain & John R. Hipp, *It's All Relative: Concentrated Disadvantage Within and Across Neighborhoods and Communities, and the Consequences for Neighborhood Crime*, 43 J. CRIM. JUST. 431, 431–32, 439 (2015); Ruth D. Peterson & Lauren J. Krivo, *Racial Segregation, the Concentration of Disadvantage, and Black and White Homicide Victimization*, 14 SOCIO. F. 465, 467, 469 (1999).

<sup>37</sup> See David H. Autor, Christopher J. Palmer & Parag A. Pathak, *Ending Rent Control Reduced Crime in Cambridge*, 109 AEA PAPERS & PROC. 381, 381, 383 (2019); Dionissi Aliprantis & Daniel Hartley, *Blowing It Up and Knocking It Down: The Local and City-Wide Effects of Demolishing High Concentration Public Housing on Crime*, 88 J. URB. ECON. 67, 80 (2015); Danielle H. Sandler, *Externalities of Public Housing: The Effect of Public Housing Demolitions on Local Crime*, 62 REG'L SCI. & URB. ECON. 24, 24–25 (2017).

<sup>38</sup> See Mark Edward Votruba & Jeffrey R. Kling, *Effects of Neighborhood Characteristics on the Mortality of Black Male Youth: Evidence from Gautreaux, Chicago*, 68 SOC. SCI. & MED. 814, 814 (2009).

<sup>39</sup> Eric Chyn, *Moved to Opportunity: The Long-Run Effects of Public Housing Demolition on Children*, 108 AM. ECON. REV. 3028, 3028, 3045 (2018).

public housing projects and have thereby contributed to the rapid decline of public housing developments in many central cities.<sup>40</sup>

The concentration of poverty can also change the social dynamics within communities by limiting collective efficacy, making it less likely that residents will come together to watch over public spaces and provide the kinds of informal social controls that are effective in reducing violence. Using data from clusters of neighborhoods in Chicago, Robert Sampson and his collaborators showed that collective efficacy mediates the relationship between neighborhood disadvantage and violence, a finding that has been replicated in a wide array of settings and time periods.<sup>41</sup>

Finally, concentrated disadvantage leads to the degradation of a neighborhood's-built environment, which in turn impacts the quality of neighborhood institutions and the level of collective efficacy present in the community. Flagging investment in local infrastructure leads to poorly lit spaces, abandoned lots, and empty buildings that are vulnerable to becoming areas of violence.<sup>42</sup> For instance, Charles Branas and co-authors found a significant positive association between the number of vacant properties in Philadelphia neighborhoods and the number of gun assaults.<sup>43</sup> The degradation of the built environment can lead to a self-perpetuating cycle: as public spaces begin to decline, and thus become more prone to serving as sites for violence, residents start to disengage from public spaces, which leads to further deterioration and divestment in public amenities.

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<sup>40</sup> See CHARLES M. HAAR & DEMETRIUS S. IATRIDIS, HOUSING THE POOR IN SUBURBIA: PUBLIC POLICY AT THE GRASS ROOTS 319–22 (1974) (discussing public policy options to provide equal housing opportunities to all income levels); Demetrios Caraley, *Washington Abandons the Cities*, 107 POL. SCI. Q. 1, 12 (1992); Jason Deparle, *Slamming the Door*, THE N.Y. TIMES MAG. (Oct. 20, 1996), <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/10/20/magazine/slamming-the-door.html> [<https://perma.cc/58NQ-UNWC>]; PETER DREIER, JOHN MOLLENKOPF & TODD SWANSTROM, PLACE MATTERS: METROPOLITICS FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY 107–13 (2001); Charles J. Orlebeke, *The Evolution of Low-Income Housing Policy, 1949 to 1999*, 11 HOUS. POL'Y DEBATE 489, 497 (2000). See generally ALEX F. SCHWARTZ, HOUSING POLICY IN THE UNITED STATES 129–47 (2006) (discussing the challenges of maintaining low- and moderate-income rental housing for continued low-income occupancy); ALEXANDER VON HOFFMAN, HOUSE BY HOUSE, BLOCK BY BLOCK: THE REBIRTH OF AMERICA'S URBAN NEIGHBORHOODS 7–14 (2003) (discussing how grassroots organizations built housing in disinvested urban neighborhoods as a result of federal funding cuts); WILSON, *supra* note 35 (discussing how the decline in federal investment contributed to decline in urban neighborhoods and housing available in urban areas).

<sup>41</sup> Robert J. Sampson, Stephen W. Raudenbush & Felton Earls, *Neighborhoods and Violent Crime: A Multilevel Study of Collective Efficacy*, 277 SCI. 918, 918, 923 (1997).

<sup>42</sup> Michelle C. Kondo et al., *Neighborhood Interventions to Reduce Violence*, 39 ANN. REV. PUB. HEALTH 253, 253, 256, 263 (2018); see also Aaron Chalfin et al., *Reducing Crime Through Environmental Design: Evidence from a Randomized Experiment of Street Lighting in New York City*, 38 J. QUANTITATIVE CRIMINOLOGY 127, 127, 129, 151 (2022) (discussing the effect of street lighting on neighborhood crime rates). See generally ERIC KLINENBERG, PALACES FOR THE PEOPLE: HOW SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE CAN HELP FIGHT INEQUALITY, POLARIZATION, AND THE DECLINE OF CIVIC LIFE (2018) (reiterating how conditions such as empty buildings can lead to high-crime areas in cities like Chicago).

<sup>43</sup> Charles C. Branas, David Rubin & Wensheng Guo, *Vacant Properties and Violence in Neighborhoods*, 2012 INT'L SCHOLARLY RSCH. NOTICES, no. 1, 2012, at 1, 5.

Ethnographic research in Chicago and Philadelphia documents how the threat of violence leads residents to retreat from public spaces, creating “no-go” zones that deteriorate over time and schools that resemble prisons.<sup>44</sup> Ultimately, residential retreat disrupts processes of informal social control, resulting in neighborhoods lacking individuals present to keep “eyes on the street” and thereby allowing violence to go unchecked.<sup>45</sup> In sum, the evidence tells us that concentrated disadvantage causes increased violence through several different mechanisms stemming from eroding community resources and ties, leaving underserved neighborhoods vulnerable to high rates of violence.

The second part of the answer as to why U.S. neighborhoods are uniquely vulnerable to surges in violence is the prevalence of unregulated guns. The Small Arms Survey estimates that U.S. civilians held over 393 million firearms in 2017, or about 120 firearms for every hundred citizens.<sup>46</sup> This estimate does not account for the firearms Americans bought during the pandemic: NORC found that one in twenty adults purchased a gun for the first time from March 2020 to March 2022.<sup>47</sup> Even when duly acknowledging the challenges of estimating cross-national civilian firearm ownership, it is hard to overstate how much of an outlier the U.S. gun ownership rate is compared to rates in the rest of the world.<sup>48</sup> For a sense of scale, England is estimated to have fewer than five guns per hundred residents.<sup>49</sup>

Several theories link the prevalence of guns to the persistently high levels of lethal violence in the United States. The most straightforward was put forth decades ago in 1967 when criminologist Franklin Zimring made an instrumentality argument: firearm attacks are more dangerous than attacks with the closest

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<sup>44</sup> See generally ELIJAH ANDERSON, *STREETWISE: RACE, CLASS, AND CHANGE IN AN URBAN COMMUNITY* (1990) (discussing how neighborhood characteristics can create disparate outcomes between neighborhoods); DAVID J. HARDING, *LIVING THE DRAMA: COMMUNITY, CONFLICT, AND CULTURE AMONG INNER-CITY BOYS* (2010) (examining the role of structural disadvantage in promoting violence in low-income communities in Boston); ERIC KLINENBERG, *HEAT WAVE: A SOCIAL AUTOPSY OF DISASTER IN CHICAGO* (2002) (demonstrating the impact of urban decay and community neglect on Chicago neighborhoods in the context of the 1995 heat wave); LOÏC WACQUANT, *URBAN OUTCASTS: A COMPARATIVE SOCIOLOGY OF ADVANCED MARGINALITY* (2008) (explaining how systemic design lends itself to violence in neighborhoods with higher violence).

<sup>45</sup> See Wesley Skogan, *Fear of Crime and Neighborhood Change*, 8 *CRIME & JUST.* 203, 203 (1986).

<sup>46</sup> AARON KARP, *SMALL ARMS SURV., ESTIMATING GLOBAL CIVILIAN-HELD FIREARMS NUMBERS* 4 tbls.1 & 2 (Tania Inowlocki & Alex Potter eds., June 2018 ed. 2018) <https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/SAS-BP-Civilian-Firearms-Numbers.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/7F9F-NLD2>].

<sup>47</sup> *One in Five American Households Purchased a Gun During the Pandemic*, NORC AT THE UNIV. OF CHI. (Mar. 24, 2022), <https://www.norc.org/research/library/one-in-five-american-households-purchased-a-gun-during-the-pande.html> [<https://perma.cc/K84U-YY42>].

<sup>48</sup> See generally KARP, *supra* note 46, at 3–4 (showing the United States’ high estimated gun ownership rate compared to other countries).

<sup>49</sup> *Civilian Firearms Holdings, 2017*, *SMALL ARMS SURV.*, <https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/SAS-BP-Civilian-held-firearms-annexe.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/BN4M-WRZS>].

substitute, knives, by the nature of the tool. It follows that if all violent perpetrators were suddenly armed with a knife instead of a gun, fewer victims would die per incident, and the homicide rate would be lower, even if the rate of violent attacks was unchanged.<sup>50</sup> Building on this idea, Philip Cook argues that some of the characteristics that make firearms more objectively dangerous—that they can be used from a distance and do not require physical strength to overcome a victim—change vulnerability patterns by broadening the population of people who can successfully commit violence and be victimized by violence.<sup>51</sup> Zimring found in his initial analyses that the rate of knife deaths per hundred reported knife attacks was less than one-fifth the rate of gun deaths per hundred reported gun attacks in Chicago, while other characteristics of the incidents were similar.<sup>52</sup> Cook observed a similar pattern for armed robberies—the victim fatality rate for gun robberies was over five times higher than that of non-gun armed robberies.<sup>53</sup>

More recent evidence provides support for the connection between gun ownership and violence. Michael Siegel and colleagues estimate that a 1% increase in state-level firearm ownership from 1981 to 2010 is associated with a 0.9% increase in the state's expected firearm homicide rate.<sup>54</sup> Micro-level data from California indicate that adults who did not own a gun but began living with a handgun owner from 2004 to 2016 faced a substantially elevated risk of dying by homicide—a risk more than double that of those who did not live in a home with a gun.<sup>55</sup>

Do these findings suggest that gun ownership *causes* higher levels of violence? Turning these clear connections into convincing causal evidence is challenging, but a set of studies have developed research designs that allow for stronger causal claims. Mark Duggan used subscriptions to *Gun & Ammo* magazine as a proxy for gun ownership from 1980 to 1998 and found that higher gun ownership leads to substantial increases in the overall homicide rate in the following year, driven by gun homicides.<sup>56</sup> In another study, Stephen Billings used concealed handgun permit (CHP) data in North Carolina to compare outcomes of new permittees with similar

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<sup>50</sup> See Frank Zimring, *Is Gun Control Likely to Reduce Violent Killings?*, 35 U. CHI. L. REV. 721, 725–28, 735 (1968); see also Philip J. Cook, *Thinking About Gun Violence*, 19 CRIMINOLOGY & PUB. POL'Y 1371, 1374–75 (2020) (discussing the effect of gun availability on homicide rate using Zimring's instrumentality argument).

<sup>51</sup> See Philip J. Cook, *The Influence of Gun Availability on Violent Crime Patterns*, 4 CRIME & JUST. 49, 55–59 (1983).

<sup>52</sup> Zimring, *supra* note 50, at 728.

<sup>53</sup> Philip J. Cook, *Reducing Injury and Death Rates in Robbery*, 6 POL'Y ANALYSIS 21, 39 (1980).

<sup>54</sup> Michael Siegel, Craig S. Ross & Charles King III, *The Relationship Between Gun Ownership and Firearm Homicide Rates in the United States, 1981–2010*, 103 AM. J. PUB. HEALTH 2098, 2098, 2101–03 (2013).

<sup>55</sup> David M. Studdert et al., *Homicide Deaths Among Adult Cohabitants of Handgun Owners in California, 2004 to 2016*, 175 ANNALS INTERNAL MED. 804, 804, 807–08 (2022).

<sup>56</sup> See Mark Duggan, *More Guns, More Crime*, 109 J. POL. ECON. 1086, 1086–1100 (2001).

non-permittees. The study finds that while individuals with a CHP are on average more law-abiding, as in less likely to be arrested for a crime, the neighborhood spillovers from CHPs increase total crimes by about 2% and violent crimes using a gun by almost 8%. Billings suggests that this increase in neighborhood violent crime is operating through stolen guns, as CHP holders are more likely to be victims of a property crime involving a stolen firearm.<sup>57</sup> For rural counties, Juan Camilo Cristancho, Daniel Semenza, and I (Sharkey) exploited variation in the start of deer hunting season across U.S. counties and found a large increase in shootings in the first two weeks of the season relative to the week prior.<sup>58</sup> The increase in shootings is not attributable to hunting-related accidents, suggesting that the presence of guns in public spaces is the most plausible explanation for the sharp rise in shootings that coincides with the start of deer season.

Policy changes also provide opportunities to study the causal effect of gun access on mortality. In other countries, there are particularly clean examples linking firearm access policies to suicide deaths. For example, in Switzerland, military-issued weapons were often kept in households by soldiers during and after their service, but a 2003 restructuring of the army had a byproduct effect of reducing military gun availability to Swiss citizens.<sup>59</sup> This legislation led to a significant and sustained reduction in the firearm suicide rate and overall suicide rate through “restriction of means,” a public health principle akin to Zimring’s instrumentality thesis.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, in 2006, the Israeli Defense Forces implemented a suicide prevention policy that included soldiers leaving their weapons on base over the weekend instead of bringing them home. This policy resulted in a 40% decline in the number of suicides annually, with most of the decline coming from weekend firearm suicides.<sup>61</sup> The outcome of interest in these two studies is suicide, not homicide, yet the results are relevant for providing strong causal evidence that access to firearms increases preventable gun deaths on a national scale.

There have also been domestic policy changes that allow us to study the effect of gun access in the United States. In a rebuke of John Lott and David Mustard’s “More Guns, Less Crime” hypothesis, a study exploiting the timing of right-to-carry laws shows that these laws increase aggregate violent crime rates ten years later.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> See Stephen B. Billings, *Smoking Gun? Linking Gun Ownership to Crime Victimization*, J. PUB. ECON., June 2023, at 1.

<sup>58</sup> See Patrick Sharkey, Juan Camilo Cristancho & Daniel Semenza, *Deer Hunting Season and Firearm Violence in US Rural Counties*, JAMA NETWORK OPEN, August 2024, at 1, 1–3, 5.

<sup>59</sup> Thomas Reisch et al., *Change in Suicide Rates in Switzerland Before and After Firearm Restriction Resulting from the 2003 “Army XXI” Reform*, 170 AM. J. PSYCHIATRY 977, 977 (2013).

<sup>60</sup> *Id.* at 978.

<sup>61</sup> Gad Lubin et al., *Decrease in Suicide Rates After a Change of Policy Reducing Access to Firearms in Adolescents: A Naturalistic Epidemiological Study*, 40 SUICIDE & LIFE-THREATENING BEHAV. 421, 421–22 (2010).

<sup>62</sup> John J. Donohue, Abhay Aneja & Kyle D. Weber, *Right-to-Carry Laws and Violent Crime: A Comprehensive Assessment Using Panel Data and a State-Level Synthetic Control Analysis*, 16 J. EMPIRICAL LEGAL STUD. 198, 198–99 (2019).

Recent research examining the mechanisms of this effect found a 50% increase in stolen firearms and a reduction in violent crime clearance rates.<sup>63</sup> Missouri repealed a law requiring permits for handgun purchasers in 2007, which led to an increase in firearm homicide overall and, notably, a 19% increase in Black firearm homicide in St. Louis and Kansas City.<sup>64</sup> Conversely, researchers found that Connecticut's implementation of a permit-to-purchase law that included an increase in the minimum age to buy a gun led to a 40% reduction in firearm homicide over the next ten years.<sup>65</sup> Research has also shown that firearm restrictions for those subject to domestic violence restraining orders reduce intimate partner homicide;<sup>66</sup> that waiting periods for handgun purchases reduce gun homicide;<sup>67</sup> and that stand-your-ground laws increase homicide.<sup>68</sup>

Collectively, these studies paint a picture in which increased firearm access—as measured by permits, firearm magazines, hunting season, or policy—increases violent crime. While all the aforementioned research links firearm access to increased violence, the studies explicitly or implicitly suggest different direct mechanisms: evidence on the mechanism of stolen guns<sup>69</sup> demonstrates that each gun purchased can contribute to increased violence, even if not by the hands of its purchaser. Sharkey and colleagues conclude that increased shootings at the start of deer hunting season are most likely due to the “heightened presence of firearms in public and private spaces.”<sup>70</sup> Finally, the effect of permitting laws on decreasing

<sup>63</sup> John J. Donohue et al., *Why Do Right to Carry Laws Increase Violence? Effects on Gun Theft and Clearance Rates*, J. URB. ECON., May 2025, at 1, 1–2, 5.

<sup>64</sup> MORGAN C. WILLIAMS, JR., GUN VIOLENCE IN BLACK AND WHITE: EVIDENCE FROM POLICY REFORM IN MISSOURI 23 (2020), [https://morganwilliamsjr.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Missouri\\_Gun\\_Violence\\_WP\\_December\\_2020-2.pdf](https://morganwilliamsjr.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Missouri_Gun_Violence_WP_December_2020-2.pdf) [<https://perma.cc/TXS2-U3DS>]. See generally Daniel Webster, Cassandra Kercher Crifasi & Jon S. Vernick, *Effects of the Repeal of Missouri's Handgun Purchaser Licensing Law on Homicides*, 91 J. URB. HEALTH 293, 296–98 (2014) (analyzing the effect of Missouri's permit-to-purchase law being repealed on homicide rates).

<sup>65</sup> Kara E. Rudolph et al., *Association Between Connecticut's Permit-to-Purchase Handgun Law and Homicides*, AM. J. PUB. HEALTH, August 2015, at e49, e49, e51.

<sup>66</sup> Mikaela A. Wallin, Charvonne N. Holliday & April M. Zeoli, *The Association of Federal and State-Level Firearm Restriction Policies with Intimate Partner Homicide: A Re-Analysis by Race of the Victim*, 37 J. INTERPERSONAL VIOLENCE NP16509, NP16509 (2022); ROSANNA SMART ET AL., RAND CORP., THE SCIENCE OF GUN POLICY: A CRITICAL SYNTHESIS OF RESEARCH EVIDENCE ON THE EFFECTS OF GUN POLICIES IN THE UNITED STATES 96–97 (Allison Kerns ed., 2d ed. 2020).

<sup>67</sup> Michael Luca, Deepak Malhotra & Christopher Poliquin, *Handgun Waiting Periods Reduce Gun Deaths*, 114 PROC. NAT'L ACAD. SCI. U.S. AM. 12162, 12162 (2017); SMART ET AL., *supra* note 66, at 176–77.

<sup>68</sup> See Michelle Degli Esposti et al., *Analysis of “Stand Your Ground” Self-Defense Laws and Statewide Rates of Homicides and Firearm Homicides*, JAMA NETWORK OPEN, February 2022, at 1, 1; SMART ET AL., *supra* note 66, at 245.

<sup>69</sup> See Billings, *supra* note 57, at 13; see also Donohue et al., *supra* note 63, at 1–2 (finding gun theft as a possible mechanism linking right-to-carry laws and increased violent crime).

<sup>70</sup> Sharkey, Cristancho & Semenza, *supra* note 58, at 7.

violent crime<sup>71</sup> suggests that the basic regulations on the sale of guns can play a role in influencing levels of violence.

#### IV. IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL POLICY

We have argued that our nation's response to the urban crisis of the 1960s led to disinvestment and declining institutions, leading to a unique form of concentrated disadvantage. These shifts, combined with the prevalence of circulating guns, make U.S. neighborhoods particularly vulnerable to surges of violence. Our focus on vulnerability not only changes the way we seek to understand fluctuations in violence but also offers novel ways to think about how this nation can respond to violence.

We conclude the article by posing two social policy questions. First, what can be done to weaken the link between concentrated disadvantage and violence? Based on a large body of evidence, we argue that a turn toward community-oriented organizations can be effective in reducing violence without the costs of intensive policing and mass incarceration.

In the early 1990s, when violence in U.S. cities was at its most recent peak, there was a large-scale proliferation of community nonprofits that were formed to confront violence and build stronger neighborhoods.<sup>72</sup> Torratts-Espinosa, Delaram Takyar, and I (Sharkey) developed a method to exploit variation in the timing of the formation of these organizations in the U.S. to estimate whether the growth of community-oriented organizations had a causal impact on violence. We found that in a typical city of 100,000 residents, every ten additional nonprofits—including organizations focused on crime, general community development, or both—led to an approximately 9% reduction in murder and a 6% reduction in overall violent crime.<sup>73</sup>

This finding is further reinforced by a range of experimental evaluations of existing programs. For example, using random assignment for program eligibility, the Becoming a Man program implemented by the Heartland Alliance in Chicago combined high-quality after-school programs with cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and led to a 45–50% reduction in arrests for violent crimes among participants.<sup>74</sup> The One Summer Chicago Plus program randomly assigned youth attending Chicago public schools to participate in a two-month summer job program

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<sup>71</sup> See generally Donohue, Aneja & Weber, *supra* note 62, at 200, 208, 210 (evaluating the effect of right-to-carry laws on violent crime).

<sup>72</sup> Patrick Sharkey, Gerard Torratts-Espinosa & Delaram Takyar, *Community and the Crime Decline: The Causal Effect of Local Nonprofits on Violent Crime*, 82 AM. SOCIO. REV. 1214, 1219–20 (2017).

<sup>73</sup> *Id.* at 1230.

<sup>74</sup> UNIV. OF CHI. CRIME LAB EVALUATION TEAM, PREVENTING YOUTH VIOLENCE: AN EVALUATION OF YOUTH GUIDANCE'S *BECOMING A MAN* PROGRAM 23 (2018), [https://americorps.gov/sites/default/files/evidenceexchange/BAM\\_SIF\\_Final\\_Report\\_Revision\\_20181005\\_508\\_1.pdf](https://americorps.gov/sites/default/files/evidenceexchange/BAM_SIF_Final_Report_Revision_20181005_508_1.pdf) [https://perma.cc/J6TT-3GGP].

and receive sustained mentorship by an assigned job mentor. A second version of this program also included daily participation in a curriculum informed by CBT.<sup>75</sup> An evaluation of this program found a 45% drop in violent-crime arrests.<sup>76</sup> Interestingly, this drop primarily took place after the program ended, suggesting that any skills and lessons acquired during the program were applied beyond the program timeline itself.

Research from other cities suggests a range of interventions to the built environment can also help to reduce violence. A randomized controlled trial of improved street lighting around public housing developments in New York City led to a sharp drop in nighttime violence.<sup>77</sup> In Philadelphia, an experimental evaluation of efforts led by the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society, a local nonprofit, to beautify abandoned lots throughout the city found that the program reduced violence in areas that were beautified, with the largest impacts in high-poverty neighborhoods.<sup>78</sup>

The conclusion from this research is that community organizations have tremendous capacity to play central roles in reducing violence—yet they have never been given the resources or commitment that the police and the prison system have received.

Secondly, we ask what can be done to limit the effect of gun prevalence on gun violence. While there is skepticism about any efforts to regulate the circulation and use of guns in the United States, evidence suggests that this nation has very recently gone through a period of substantial progress. From 1991 to 2016, the best measures of household firearm ownership suggest that the prevalence of guns fell, and, while there was little progress on gun regulation at the federal level, this was also a period where most states grew more restrictive in their gun regulations.<sup>79</sup> In the study I (Sharkey) undertook in collaboration with Megan Kang, we used two sources of exogenous change in state gun laws to estimate the long-term causal effect of state policy on gun deaths. We found that as states became more restrictive in their gun regulations, there was a substantial effect on the overall gun death rate and the gun homicide rate, with no effects on non-gun deaths and non-gun homicides.<sup>80</sup> Based on our analysis, we estimated that state regulations enacted during this period saved approximately 4,000 lives in 2016 alone, representing about 11% of total gun deaths that year.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> SARA HELLER & HAROLD POLLACK WITH JONATHAN M.V. DAVIS, THE EFFECTS OF SUMMER JOBS ON YOUTH VIOLENCE 1, 4 (2017), <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/ojdp/grants/251101.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/9MT6-JJ46>].

<sup>76</sup> *Id.* at 1, 11.

<sup>77</sup> Chalfin et al., *supra* note 42, at 127, 151–52.

<sup>78</sup> See Charles C. Branas et al., *A Difference-in-Differences Analysis of Health, Safety, and Greening Vacant Urban Space*, 174 AM. J. EPIDEMIOLOGY 1296, 1297 (2011).

<sup>79</sup> Patrick Sharkey & Megan Kang, *The Era of Progress on Gun Mortality: State Gun Regulations and Gun Deaths from 1991 to 2016*, 34 EPIDEMIOLOGY 786, 786 (2023).

<sup>80</sup> *Id.* at 790.

<sup>81</sup> *Id.* at 792.

This evidence provides hope that the United States can make progress toward sustained periods with low levels of gun violence. The drop in violence that occurred in the 1990s transformed urban life and had its greatest impact in the most disadvantaged communities, but the subsequent period of fluctuating violence serves as a reminder that the United States remains uniquely vulnerable to surges of violence. We argue that efforts to respond to rising violence in particular places at particular times must be complemented by efforts to address the link between concentrated disadvantage and violence and to implement the most basic regulations on the sale and misuse of firearms.