



King County

King County Board of Health

Staff Report

Agenda item No: 10
BOH Briefing No. 20-B01

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Subject

A briefing on the Youth and Young Adult Gun Violence Report requested by King County Council Motion 15234.

Purpose

This report provides a comprehensive and updated snapshot of what gun violence looks like from the perspectives of youth, young adults, families, and key informants including providers and experts in King County. The perspectives address themes and factors including what promotes, prevents, and protects people from gun violence; as well as what is being and what more can be done to address gun violence in King County, Washington. This is a response to King County Council Motion 15234 (October 3, 2018), which requests that the Executive engage and collaborate with King County youth and young adults and their family members to develop a report on gun violence among youth (ages 13-17) and young adults (ages 18-24).

Background

Firearm deaths - whether self-inflicted or interpersonal - affect youth, families and communities adversely. Firearms are the leading cause of suicide and homicide deaths among youth and young adults.¹ Roughly three-fourths of the suicide deaths among youth ages 10–14 result from firearms. Firearm homicide rates are highest among young adults ages 18–24 compared to other age groups.²

All firearm deaths and injuries among children, youth, and young adults are preventable. In the majority of King County's youth suicide deaths from firearms, youth obtained the weapon from a family member, and in roughly a third of cases, the weapon was stored unlocked or was loaded.³ Removing access to a firearm decreases the likelihood of firearm-related suicide⁴

¹ Washington State Department of Health. Community Health Assessment Tool (CHAT) Data, self-inflicted death youth 0–24 years, 2015–2017.

² Washington State Department of Health. Community Health Assessment Tool (CHAT) Data, self-inflicted death youth 0–24 years, 2015–2017.

³ Public Health – Seattle and King County. The impact of firearms on King County children and youth. Retrieved from <https://www.kingcounty.gov/depts/health/data/youth-firearms.aspx>

⁴ Giffords Law Center. Retrieved from <https://lawcenter.giffords.org/gun-laws/policy-areas/child-consumer-safety/safe-storage/>

whereas firearm availability in the home significantly increases the risk of suicide.⁵ Effective community and clinical education programs, including those that are applied universally or are selective across different settings, are effective at reducing suicide ideation, re-attempts,⁶ and violence prevention.⁷

To understand how King County youth and young adults experience gun violence including what factors contribute to and prevent exposure to gun violence, the Public Health – Seattle & King County (PHSKC) research team conducted focus groups with youth, young adults, and their family members and interviewed King County subject matter experts as key informants. Participants in this data collection effort were recruited from all King County regions (East region, North region, Seattle, and South region), as well as all racial/ethnic groups and ages. Though participants were recruited from all regions in King County, the participants represented in the report are from three (East region, Seattle, and South region) of the four regions. Thirteen focus groups were conducted in English, and one in Spanish. Many of the youth violence prevention and behavioral health programs and services are in Seattle and South King County, thus the perspectives in this report largely represent those of youth and young adults in the Seattle and South King County.

Participants identified numerous factors influencing youth's decisions to engage in gun violence. These include:

- Cultural factors such as popular culture (entertainment, music, and video games), social media, and mass media, can associate guns with looking “cool” or attracting fame and attention. These depictions of guns tend to exaggerate the actual prevalence of guns and gun violence.
- Community conditions including both affluence and poverty can place stress on youth. Furthermore, racism and discrimination may lead to a sense of powerlessness and some youth may turn to gun violence as a result of this anxiety.
- Adolescent brain development is associated with poor decision-making, and adolescent males may react strongly to expectations about masculinity. These factors increase youth susceptibility to gun violence.
- Guns are easily accessible, and youth can often access guns either through their peer networks or household members who keep guns at home. Young adults expressed that existing laws do not present a significant barrier to obtaining guns legally, noting that it is easier to get a gun than to get a job.

⁵ Mann, J. J., & Michel, C. A. (2016, October 1). Prevention of firearm suicide in the United States: What works and what is possible. *American Journal of Psychiatry*. American Psychiatric Association. <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ajp.2016.16010069>

⁶ Robinson, J. et al. (2018). What Works in Youth Suicide Prevention? A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis. *EClinical Medicine by the Lancet*, 4, 52-91.

⁷ Fagan, A. & Catalano, F. (2012). What Works in Youth Violence Prevention: A Review of the Literature. *Research on Social Work Practice*, 23(2), p. 141-156. DOI: 10.1177/1049731512465899.

Services and programs already in place in King County can decrease the impact of these influences and help youth avoid gun violence. These include:

- Community centers that offer after-school activities and the opportunity for youth to develop supportive relationships with each other and with trusted adults.
- Youth development programs offering skill building and intervention resources such as conflict resolution and restorative justice.
- Mental health supports available in schools and clinics.

Some youth encounter barriers to accessing such services, however, particularly if they belong to underserved communities or live outside Seattle.

Analysis

Participating youth, young adults, families, and key informants were asked what should be done to address youth and young adult gun violence. Their recommendations include:

- More education about gun violence for youth, families and community members.
- Increase the range and scope of community centers.
- Increase youth access to mental health services.
- Provide social and emotional skills training to youth at risk of gun violence.
- Increase youth employment and educational opportunities.
- Examine and address youth's ability to easily access guns.
- Develop and increase systems alignment between government and community supports.

Eight report back sessions were conducted with relevant stakeholders and available community members who participated in focus groups or interviews. During these report back sessions, participants had the opportunity to review the methods, findings, and recommendations included in the report. Across sessions, attendees raised common themes, including: prevention and intervention efforts should focus on the community rather than focus solely on individuals and connecting gun violence to mental health issues often shifts the focus on individuals rather than on communities, also, communities want to hear about what actions will be taken to reduce and prevent gun violence.