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Memphis' gun violence epidemic needs an urgent, detailed approach | Opinion

With a healthy sense of urgency, we must act to reduce gun violence in our community.

Bill Gibbons

Guest Columnist – June 3, 2021

Bill Gibbons is president of the Memphis Shelby Crime Commission and executive director of the University of Memphis Public Safety Institute.

Too many Memphians face the threat of gun violence every day in their neighborhoods and on their streets.

After two years of reductions, the spike in gun crime that began with the COVID-19 pandemic last spring continues. Through May 31 of this year, Memphis had 98 reported murders, up 10% from the same time period last year. The Memphis Police Department indicates that 91% of those murders were committed with guns.

Nine of the murder victims so far this year were children. Of the 98 victims, approximately 90% were Black, 5% white, and 5% other.

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There are too many guns in the wrong hands

In 2014, the Tennessee General Assembly enacted legislation allowing handguns in vehicles without a permit. The result was predictable. More guns in cars resulted in more guns stolen from cars. Through the end of May, 669 guns have been reported stolen from vehicles in Memphis, an alarming 69% increase over the same time period¹ last year.

This year, the General Assembly enacted legislation allowing the public carrying of handguns – openly or concealed – without a permit. Once again, the result is very predictable. There will be more guns in the hands of persons with no background check and without any firearm training. It will be a challenge for law enforcement.

Cure Violence is an organization that has worked with many communities to reduce gun violence. The Shelby County Health Department is partnering with Cure Violence to assess the challenge in our community. The key approaches advocated by Cure Violence are already moving forward in Memphis.

An engaged approach

Cure Violence advocates focusing on those with the highest risk of engaging in gun violence. District Attorney Amy Weirich is taking the lead in implementing a focused deterrence approach, which is also a key part of the local Safe Community Plan. It involves focusing on the right people – those we have reason to fear and who are responsible directly or indirectly for a large portion of our gun violence.

It also involves talking to them candidly about the cost of continuing to engage in violence and, at the same time, offering them the services they need such as job training, drug treatment, and cognitive behavioral therapy. The effort expanded significantly earlier this year, with plans to expand it more in the coming months.

Cure Violence also advocates an approach that detects and interrupts ongoing conflicts and retaliatory actions. By retaining trained, credible violence

interrupters to help identify and mediate potential violent conflicts, we can reduce the level of gun violence.



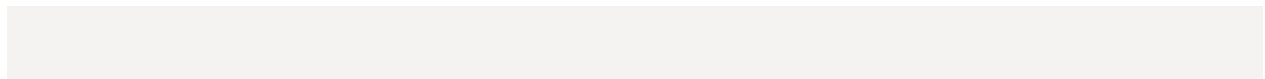
We already have some interrupters working in Memphis everyday making a difference, but we need more with a presence in neighborhoods, schools, and hospitals. Mayor Strickland is taking the lead in efforts to ramp up this vital approach.

We also need to be looking several years ahead and reducing the number of individuals who would be inclined to use gun violence as a way of resolving conflict. After some false starts, efforts are moving forward to more effectively assess young people upon their first encounter with law enforcement and develop individualized plans to move them in the right direction so there is never a temptation to go down the road of gun violence.

Youth Villages is undertaking a promising pilot effort in the Raleigh and Frayser areas of the city, and Shelby County is taking the lead in developing an assessment center to look at what is going on in a young person's life or family life and address needs early on.

The Cure Violence model also notes the importance of mobilizing the community to change norms and send a clear message that gun violence is not acceptable behavior.

It is a message that needs to be heard consistently in our homes, from our pulpits, in our schools, and through events such as the Community Walks Against Gun Violence in which the Crime Commission and over 20 other entities are involved.



The next Walk is scheduled for Saturday, June 12 at 10 a.m., beginning and ending at Hamilton High School, 1362 East Person Avenue.

It is an opportunity for Memphians to come together with a clear message that gun violence is not acceptable.

With a healthy sense of urgency, we must act to reduce gun violence in our community.

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