

# Black boys, grief, and guns in urban schools

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In 2008, a group of Chicago Public Schools students were on a leadership retreat for Black male students roughly 40 miles outside the city. Ignoring the cold of the fall night, 16 of those students left their bunks to take paddle boats onto the river nearby, not knowing that the floor plugs had been removed for the season.

That decision would have a lasting effect on Nora Gross, joint doctoral candidate in sociology and education, who was running a [student](#) writing center within a Chicago [high school](#) at the time.

"That drowning accident was not just the death of three beautiful children and an unimaginable loss to their families, but a profound loss to the [school](#) and their friends, some of whom did not easily recover," she says, reflecting on the one-on-one time she spent with students because of her position. The experience of processing grief with her students made a lasting impact and changed her academic trajectory.

Over time, Gross' interest in the student grieving process in high-poverty, [urban areas](#) increased, particularly in relation to gun violence.

Gun violence is a significant problem in cities across the U.S., like Chicago and Philadelphia. For example, shortly after the August 2019 [mass shootings](#) in El Paso, Texas, and Dayton, Ohio, Chicago saw 59 people shot, seven of them killed, in a single weekend. A recent report from the *Journal of the American College of Surgeons* states that Philadelphia experiences cluster shootings that can be classified as "mass shootings" at a rate that measures out to one every three months.

"The 'mass shootings' that happen on street corners in Black and Brown urban neighborhoods don't get the same level of attention as a mass shooting at, for example, at a big concert or a movie theater," notes Gross. "I wanted to understand how the particular kind of emotional experience or trauma of losing multiple friends to gun violence affects urban students' experience with school and their ideas about their own futures."

In 2013, Gross brought her questions to Penn through a unique dual-degree program that allows her to earn a Ph.D. in both sociology and education. Her co-chair advisors are Camille Charles, Walter H. and

Leonore C. Annenberg Professor in the Social Sciences in Penn Arts & Sciences, and Kathleen Hall, associate professor of education and anthropology in the Graduate School of Education.

For her dissertation, Gross went inside a Philadelphia school, doing ethnographic research for two years in an all-boys public charter high school in a high-poverty area of the city. The summer prior to her arrival, the school lost a student to gun violence. In her second year on site, the school community lost two more young men in separate incidents. One of those boys, Gross knew well. He had done interviews with her about the death of his friend, which had occurred only a year and a half earlier.

In her Ph.D. dissertation, Gross tells the story of how the school's surviving students dealt with the deaths of their peers and how the adults in the building supported (or sometimes failed to support) them, while giving voice to the grief and trauma of Black [male students](#). The chapters will touch on a number of related topics, including the policing of grief and the ways in which the pain of Black boys is often misunderstood, stereotyped, or stigmatized. The dissertation also interrogates how students both hid and announced their grief on their bodies with memorial tattoos, jewelry and clothing underneath their uniforms, as well as through social media. The working title is "Bullets, Books, and Brotherhood: Grief and Recovery in an Urban All-Boys High School After Three Fatal Shootings of Friends."

During the writing of her dissertation, Gross noticed that school administrators, staff, and teachers were trying to manage an institution that, she says, isn't really designed to deal with emotion.

"The space is designed to create order and structure to support learning," she explains. "On the one hand, adults in the building really genuinely care and want to be compassionate and supportive, yet they feel they

have a job to do, which requires them to sort of put that stuff aside. My dissertation looks at how the policing of grief affects students who are dealing with loss and ongoing trauma."

Gross offers an example of the ways in which the misunderstanding of Black boys' pain can play out, oftentimes leading to interventions that may not be helpful.

"In my two years at the school, it seemed like our students didn't really have the tools to express their grief in ways that the adults recognized. What are the repercussions of that?" She answers, "I mean, I heard a lot more stories of "I was sent to anger management," than "I was sent to therapy.'"

When asked what she hopes readers will take away from her work, Gross says, "We all need to better understand and appreciate the full complexity of Black boys' emotional lives because it's necessary to understand how they grieve in order to support them."

She adds, "I also want people concerned about gun violence to know that beyond the victims and the victims' families, gun violence has ripple effects that change the dynamics of school and classroom life, and the lives of other youth. We can't let this be normal."

Provided by University of Pennsylvania

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