

Gun violence is a public health epidemic, experts say. It needs to be treated like one.

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Dr. Michael Rodriguez is tired of "thoughts and prayers."

He is overwhelmed. Weary. Frustrated with inaction. Yet another

staggering string of gunfire massacres across the nation has left dozens dead and more reeling.

Ten killed at a Buffalo, New York grocery store. Two teachers and 19 [elementary school children](#) dead in Uvalde, Texas. Four dead at a medical center in Tulsa, Oklahoma. In Ames, Iowa, two women killed outside a church.

A father, physician and professor at University of California, Los Angeles, Rodriguez is co-director of the university's Firearm Violence Prevention Center, and has studied [gun violence](#) as a public health issue for almost three decades.

The danger hit home when a student at his daughter's school was arrested Wednesday, accused of recruiting others in a mass shooting and bombing plot. Assault rifles were found at the student's house.

"The danger of guns on the lives and welfare of children, adults, families, communities, is escalating with time," Rodriguez said. "Thoughts and prayers have not done one single thing to prevent it."

It's long past time policymakers stop "refusing" to accept the nation's worsening gun violence as a public health crisis, say experts like Rodriguez—and finally treat it as one.

"The public health approach allows us to take a look at things and use the science we have that inform our actions," he said. "We have mechanisms to look at the products the consumers' purchase, and look at them in ways to reduce the danger that they present to the public."

On Thursday night, President Joe Biden implored Congress to ban assault weapons and "finally do something."

"How much more carnage are we willing to accept?" he said.

A 'right' to a life of good health

People of color suffer a disproportionate burden of gun violence. Black people are at the highest risk of dying by gunfire, nearly half of all homicides of Indigenous people are by gunfire, and gun homicides have been found to be highly concentrated in Black and Hispanic or Latino neighborhoods.

After last month's racially motivated shooting in Buffalo, the National Medical Association, the largest group of Black physicians in the nation, released a statement calling for "comprehensive common sense gun reform." It declared the violence "a public health crisis that deserves a treatment plan."

Dr. Preston Phillips, the orthopedic surgeon killed in the Tulsa shooting, was a member of the group. "The grief we feel over his loss is overwhelming," President Dr. Rachel Villanueva wrote in a statement.

Experts have long pointed to successful public health approaches that made cars safer and reduced car crash deaths, as well as measures that reduced smoking-related deaths. Similar, evidence-based regulations have been shown to reduce shootings, including rigorous firearm purchaser licensing laws, gun removal laws, bans on high-capacity magazines for semiautomatic weapons and possession penalties.

Even community-level approaches like "cleaning and greening" vacant lots, which are associated with increased violence, have shown effective in reducing neighborhood violence.

"Reducing access to guns will not take away the violence, but it will dramatically reduce the killings, the critical injuries," Rodriguez said.

Dr. Georges Benjamin, executive director of the American Public Health Association, is dismayed by lax gun purchasing and licensing laws in states that he said venerate gun ownership over people's lives.

"They just keep complaining about these individual rights things. People also have the right to live to good health. And I would argue that life is far superior than any other right you can think of," said Benjamin, an emergency room physician. "The Constitution is there to enable us to have a safe, prosperous society."

So far in 2022, there have been more than 200 mass shootings, defined as at least four people killed, excluding the shooter. Compounding high-profile mass shootings are daily gunfire deaths that plague the nation, including suicides, domestic violence homicides and unintentional injuries and deaths.

Overall this year, there have been more than 18,300 firearm deaths; more than half were suicides, according to the Gun Violence Archive.

In the pandemic's first year, gun deaths reached a historic high in the U.S., with more than 100 deaths a day in 2020, according to a recent Johns Hopkins University Center for Gun Violence Solutions analysis of CDC data. Overall, more than 45,000 people died by gun violence, and gun homicides rose by 35%.

The researchers called gun violence a "concurrent public health crisis" with COVID-19 that only intensified. Firearms were the leading cause of death among children and teens in 2020.

Disparities are stark

Sakita Aikens, a Tallahassee, Florida mom, feared her 12-year-old son Demarcus would be among those homicides that year. In June 2020, the

boy was struck in the jaw by a stray bullet outside the family's home in a housing project while taking the trash out.

The family was celebrating his mom and cousin's birthdays, and Demarcus had gone outside at dusk to throw away empty cake boxes. He ran back into the house covered in blood and collapsed.

Hospitalized for a month, he now has screws and plates in his jaw, has trouble speaking and is deaf in his left ear from the bullet, his mom said. Ever since the shooting, he doesn't like to play outside and has trouble sleeping.

"They took that away from my child being a kid," said Aikens. "It hurts. And there's nothing I can do about it. I cry."

Experts say social inequities like poverty are a huge contributing factor. Counties with the highest poverty levels had firearm homicides almost five times the rate of wealthier counties, according to the CDC.

Comprehensive community-based strategies must address structural inequities, said Daniel Webster at the Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Solutions, part of the university's Bloomberg School of Public Health.

"There's a reason certain neighborhoods have much higher rates of gun violence. It has to do with disinvestment, the conditions within those neighborhoods, the lack of opportunities in those neighborhoods," he said. "How do you create conditions that create more opportunities and less stressors?"

Disparities also widened in 2020. The largest increase in firearm homicides—39%—was among Black people. One in every 1,000 Black males age 15 to 34 were shot and killed, according to the report. Black

women suffered a 47% increase in firearm homicides, and were shown to be five times more likely to die by firearm than [white women](#).

Gun suicides also rose to the second highest peak in three decades. While overrepresented among white men, firearm suicides saw an alarming 42% increase among American Indian and Alaska Native people, who had the highest rate of any racial group. They also died of gunfire more than three times the rate of white people; Hispanic and Latino people were twice as likely.

Socioeconomic distress, historic lack of investment and disenfranchisement fuel such disparities, say experts like Dr. Marie Crandall, division chief of acute care surgery at the University of Florida and author of the book, "Why We are Losing the War on Gun Violence in the United States," an extensive collection of data and perspectives exploring the [public health crisis](#).

"We ... need to address the things in society that increase social distress: social inequities, higher gap between the rich and the poor, racial and ethnic discrimination, the erosion of voter rights, the over-policing of Black communities," she said. "Things that contribute to dissent and strife in society."

Hindering a comprehensive public health strategy is a multi-billion-dollar gun lobby and industry, Crandall said. But lucrative, too, were the cigarette and automobile industries ahead of multi-disciplinary public health approaches that proved successful in mitigating their dangers, she added.

Now is the time for action, Crandall said.

"How can we not have the impetus to create change when children are dying?"

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