

# Research is growing into how best to stop gun violence. One city looks to science for help

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"That's where I got shot," said Rashaad Woods, nodding toward a convenience store in Knoxville's "gun zone." There were bullet holes in a church's walls. Nearby was a shuttered nightclub where some people were killed.

"There was a point in time I wasn't comfortable standing here," said

Kodi Mills, 45. "But that time is passing."

The men work for Turn Up Knox, a year-old program that mentors kids and defuses situations that could escalate into [violence](#). It's a centerpiece of the Tennessee city's attempt to follow a science-based playbook in fighting a surge in shootings.

Research reviews have begun to conclude there's enough evidence to say which public health interventions prevent shootings, which don't, and which need more study. Knoxville is one of a growing number of cities teaming with researchers to develop an evidence-based plan to stop the bleeding.

Knoxville's program includes policing changes and other efforts. However, it does not count on new gun restrictions. That was important, since Tennessee has repeatedly moved to loosen [gun laws](#).

"I wanted to have answers," Knoxville Mayor Indya Kincannon said.

Nearly non-existent until recently, gun violence prevention research has experienced a small boom in the wake of mounting shooting deaths, expanded funding and burgeoning advocacy.

Two decades ago, only about 20 U.S. researchers were focused on gun violence prevention. Last fall, more than 600 gathered in Washington, D.C., for a national conference on the issue.

Funding continues to be just a fraction of money spent on other leading causes of death. Still, research has "just exploded" in the last few years, said Rebecca Cunningham, a researcher at the University of Michigan.

The work addresses the worst firearm violence in decades. Researchers [estimate](#) there were more than 48,000 firearm deaths last year, with gun-

related homicide and suicide rates not seen since the early 1990s. Gunshots are [the leading cause](#) of death of U.S. children and teenagers.

Though some big questions remain, there's a growing consensus about what policies make a difference—and which don't.

According to an [assessment](#) by the Rand Corp., measures that work include laws that permit charging adults who let children have unsupervised access to guns, well-enforced background checks and policies that ban guns from people subject to domestic violence restraining orders.

Measures that don't: stand-your-ground and concealed carry laws, which studies show increase gun homicides; and gun buyback programs, which have been shown to have little, if any, effect on crime.

About 16% of Knoxville's population is Black, and about 40% live in poverty, many in East Knoxville, where firearm violence has surged.

As in other U.S. cities, violence escalated during the COVID-19 pandemic, when adults were out of work, kids weren't in school and people were anxious.

Before that homicides hovered around 20 per year. That shot up to 38 in 2020 and rose again to 41 in 2021, giving Knoxville a gun homicide rate rivaling Chicago's.

As shootings accelerated, Kincannon turned to Thomas Abt, whose book, "Bleeding Out," offers a plan for cities that includes having police and [community organizations](#) work together.

Crucially, Abt's program doesn't count on policymakers to take action to restrict gun access. That was key, because Tennessee's state government

has been moving in the opposite direction.

In 2021, the state started letting people carry handguns—visibly, or concealed—without a permit. This year, the minimum age for carrying handguns dropped to 18.

Even after a mass shooting that killed three children and three staff at an elementary school in Nashville this year, the state Legislature's Republican majority fought calls for tougher gun laws. Two Black representatives who protested the inaction were expelled.

Kincannon supports expanded background checks and other gun-control measures, but said Knoxville's efforts are designed to make a difference "no matter what happens legislatively."

Knoxville became the first city to sign up with Abt's program at the Center for the Study and Practice of Violence Reduction at the University of Maryland, which teamed with an outside researcher to analyze the city's violent crime.

There were a few surprises, said Knoxville Deputy Police Chief Tony Willis.

The average age of shooting suspects was 28 and for victims, 29,—an unexpectedly large proportion "much older than I expected," he said.

Only 12% of homicides were solely gang-related, much lower than anticipated, Willis said, That suggests gun violence was often a personal dispute that could be mediated or averted before shots are fired.

The research also supported police data showing most gun violence happened in a few "hot spots," mostly in East Knoxville, leading to a plan focusing police and community outreach to a nine-block area.

A goal is to increase public trust in law enforcement, which was sometimes abysmal. A low point occurred in 2021, when a police officer killed a student in a high school bathroom in East Knoxville.

"We would have someone get killed in broad daylight, with a lot of witnesses, but no one wanted to talk," Kincannon said, adding "we need to build trust."

The city funded Turn Up Knox, which uses ex-offenders, violence survivors and other [community members](#) to identify those most likely to be shot, or to become shooters in the future.

They mentor teenagers and are teaching families how to mediate conflicts and deal with the trauma that follows shootings. When someone is in danger of a revenge shooting, they give them a bus ticket to get out of town for a few days.

It's too early to say if the steps are making a difference.

There were 36 homicides last year, down from 41 the year before. But firearm homicides fell nationally last year, and experts aren't sure why. In the first six months of this year, Knoxville had 15 homicides, down from 18 in the same period last year.

Some experts have mixed feelings about the Knoxville approach.

Abt is "very respected" and focuses on immediate steps to reduce gun violence, but he doesn't emphasize programs to alleviate poverty and racial disparities, said Jim Mercy of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The program also doesn't directly address gun suicides, which outnumber gun homicides.

Some East Knoxville residents note the area has few stores and safe places for kids to have fun, and limited opportunities for summer jobs.

"Kids should have something to do," said Chloe Isom, 41, who lost two sons to gun violence last year.

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