

Issue

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More than mass shootings:

Gun violence narratives in California news

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We can't solve a problem that we don't fully comprehend.

That's why a key component of stopping the gun violence epidemic in America is understanding the complete picture of what this public health crisis looks like.

Most people have seen at least glimpses of the picture: Gun violence is a leading cause of premature death in the United States, killing more than 38,000 people and causing nearly 85,000 injuries each year.^{1, 2} The good news, in the face of these staggering statistics, is that gun violence is completely preventable, and communities and leaders around the country are making powerful strides toward ending the epidemic — wherever and however it happens.

The bad news is that not enough people recognize that violence is preventable, in large part because of the public discourse around gun violence, which portrays it as extreme and inevitable.

Daily news is a key piece of that discourse: Many people learn about gun violence primarily through the filter of what appears in the media. That means that the public's understanding is significantly influenced by print, broadcast, and social media. Journalists set the agenda for the public debate about any issue by deciding which incidents they report (or don't report) and how they choose to frame these.³⁻⁶ "Framing" refers to how an issue is portrayed and understood and involves emphasizing certain aspects of a story to the exclusion of others.⁷ Frames shape the parameters of public debates by promoting particular definitions of a problem, its causes, its moral aspects, and its possible solutions.⁷ Many factors influence what frames get evoked in news stories: the language that's used, whose perspectives are included or left out, what types of information are highlighted, and the potential solutions that are discussed.

We know from decades of research that, in general, news coverage of different kinds of violence can stoke fear by focusing narrowly on the details of the most extreme cases, obscuring solutions,^{8,9} and reinforcing the sense that crime and violence are inescapable and unchangeable problems. When it comes to gun violence in particular, news narratives are dominated by stories about mass shootings. These tragedies, while horrific, aren't the major cause of gun deaths in this country. In fact, most incidents of gun violence are much less visible: More than 60 percent of people in the U.S. who die from guns die by suicide.¹ Many of the remaining deaths occur in the context of a domestic violence incident¹⁰ (that is, violent or aggressive behavior within the home, typically involving the abuse of a spouse or intimate partner). When gun violence does happen in public, it's more often in the context of community-level or street violence. Urban gun homicide rates often reach 10 times the national average for homicides.¹¹

The public, and the policymakers whose actions and decisions shape our communities, need to understand what everyday, all-too-common gun violence looks like, where it happens, and how it harms people. More than that, they need to know what could be done to end it — and what *is* being done, in hospitals and homes, in communities and courtrooms, in schools and on streets around the country.

In addition to mass shootings, the news media tend to highlight federal gun law policy efforts. The gun lobby is a high-profile figure in many of these debates.¹² National gun law reform is important, as are ongoing efforts to hold the gun industry and its representatives accountable for the gun violence epidemic. However, community-level solutions are also a key part of addressing that epidemic, and to lift up these strategies, we need to elevate the solutions that are working and the voices of the people who are involved. When the full, complex landscape of gun violence is in view, then the changes that must happen at every level (individual, family, community, institutional, and societal) to end the epidemic will make sense to people.

Because news provides such an important window into the discourse and has a strong influence on what people and policymakers understand, we wanted to know: How do the three most common types of gun violence — suicide, domestic violence, and community violence — appear in news coverage? How, if at all, do solutions appear? Whose voices are part of the stories, and whose are absent? How does coverage of these distinct aspects of gun violence differ, and how is it similar?

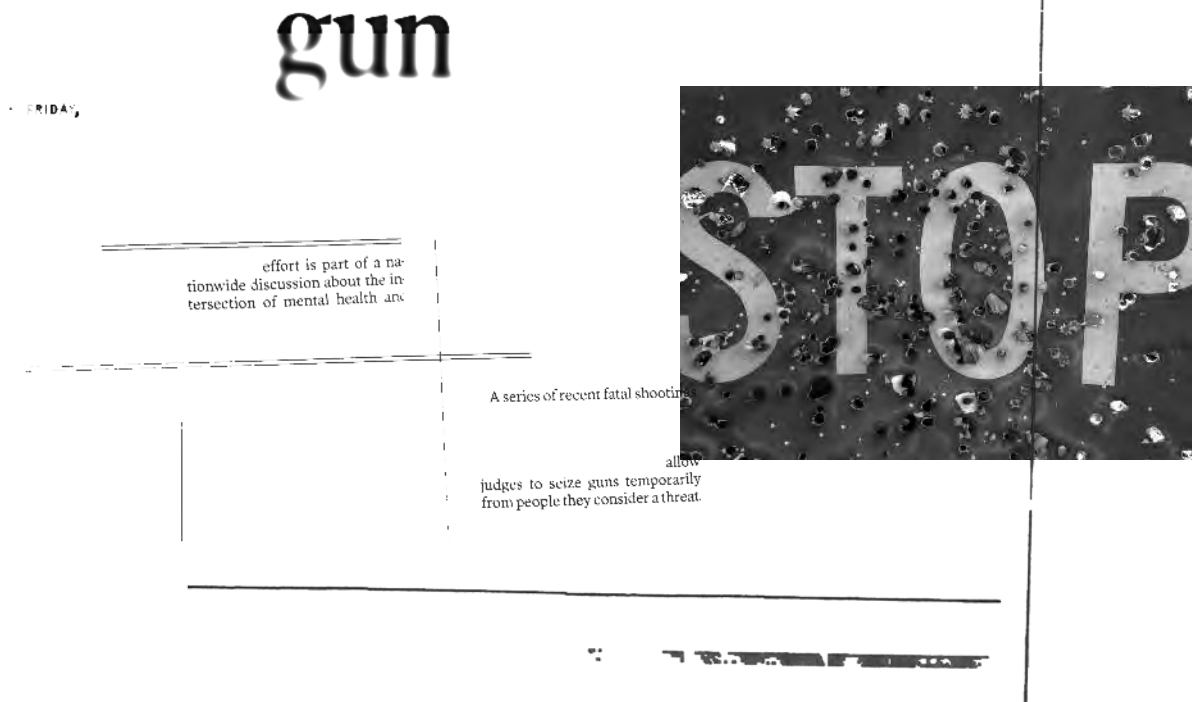
For the purposes of this analysis, we focus on news from California, the country's most populous state. California, while unique in many regards, is also in some ways a political microcosm of the United States. For example, despite its reputation as a "progressive bastion" with some of the country's strongest gun laws, the state has a large conservative presence, particularly in rural and inland areas.¹³ Since the articles we analyzed come from outlets around the state, the frames and themes that appeared in the news reflect a diverse mix of political and social perspectives. Therefore, patterns we observe could hold true for gun violence coverage from other regions of the country. Additionally, although we analyzed news published in California outlets, the scope of what the news outlets covered crossed state lines, including stories about gun violence and gun policy in other parts of the country.

What we did

We searched the Lexis-Nexis database for news and opinion articles published between October 15, 2016, and October 14, 2017, in 41 English- and Spanish-language California newspapers. We selected these dates, in part, to capture the impact on the news cycle of the October 1, 2017, mass shooting in Las Vegas, Nevada. Our searches were designed to capture articles about guns and domestic violence, guns and community- or street-level violence, and guns and suicide.

We selected a random sample of stories about each type of gun violence from the year of coverage. We used an iterative process to develop and refine a coding instrument that allowed for comparison across the different types of violence, based on our review of the existing peer-reviewed literature; our previous analyses of gun violence, domestic violence, and community violence in the news; and conversations with experts from around the state and the country. Among other variables, we explored how each article characterized the connections between guns and the specific type of violence under study; who spoke in the articles; and how, if at all, solutions to gun violence appeared. To better understand how the news frames issues of race and gender in the context of gun violence, we also coded the people who appeared in images associated with each article. We identified who was pictured in the photos, as well as the race and gender of the photo subjects.

Before coding the full sample, we used an iterative process and statistical test (Krippendorff's alpha¹⁴) to ensure that coders' agreement was not occurring by chance. We achieved an acceptable reliability measure of $>.8$ for each variable, including the race and gender of the photo subjects.



What we found

We found 3,815 articles about gun violence relating to community violence, domestic violence, or suicide in California newspapers between October 15, 2016, and October 14, 2017. The amount of news about community violence and guns dwarfed that about domestic violence or suicide and guns (Figure 1): There were 2,228 articles about community violence and guns, 744 articles about domestic violence and guns, and 843 articles about suicide and guns. To account for this disparity, we drew proportionately larger samples of articles about the latter two topics to ensure that we had a robust set of substantive articles to examine. Our final sample included a randomly selected 5% of stories about community violence and guns, and a randomly selected 40% of stories about domestic violence and guns and suicide and guns. We did not see notable changes in the volume of articles about the three issue areas over the course of a year.

After sampling each category of articles (see above) and removing irrelevant pieces (e.g., stories that mentioned community violence, domestic violence, or suicide in passing but were primarily focused on other topics), our final samples of gun violence articles included 111 about guns and community violence, 64 about guns and domestic violence, and 53 about guns and suicide.

The majority of stories about gun violence in our sample were straight news articles. Opinion coverage (i.e., columns, editorials, opinions, and letters to the editor) appeared more often in stories related to suicide than in stories about community or domestic violence (25% of suicide stories, compared to just 4% of community violence and 14% of domestic violence articles).

Times

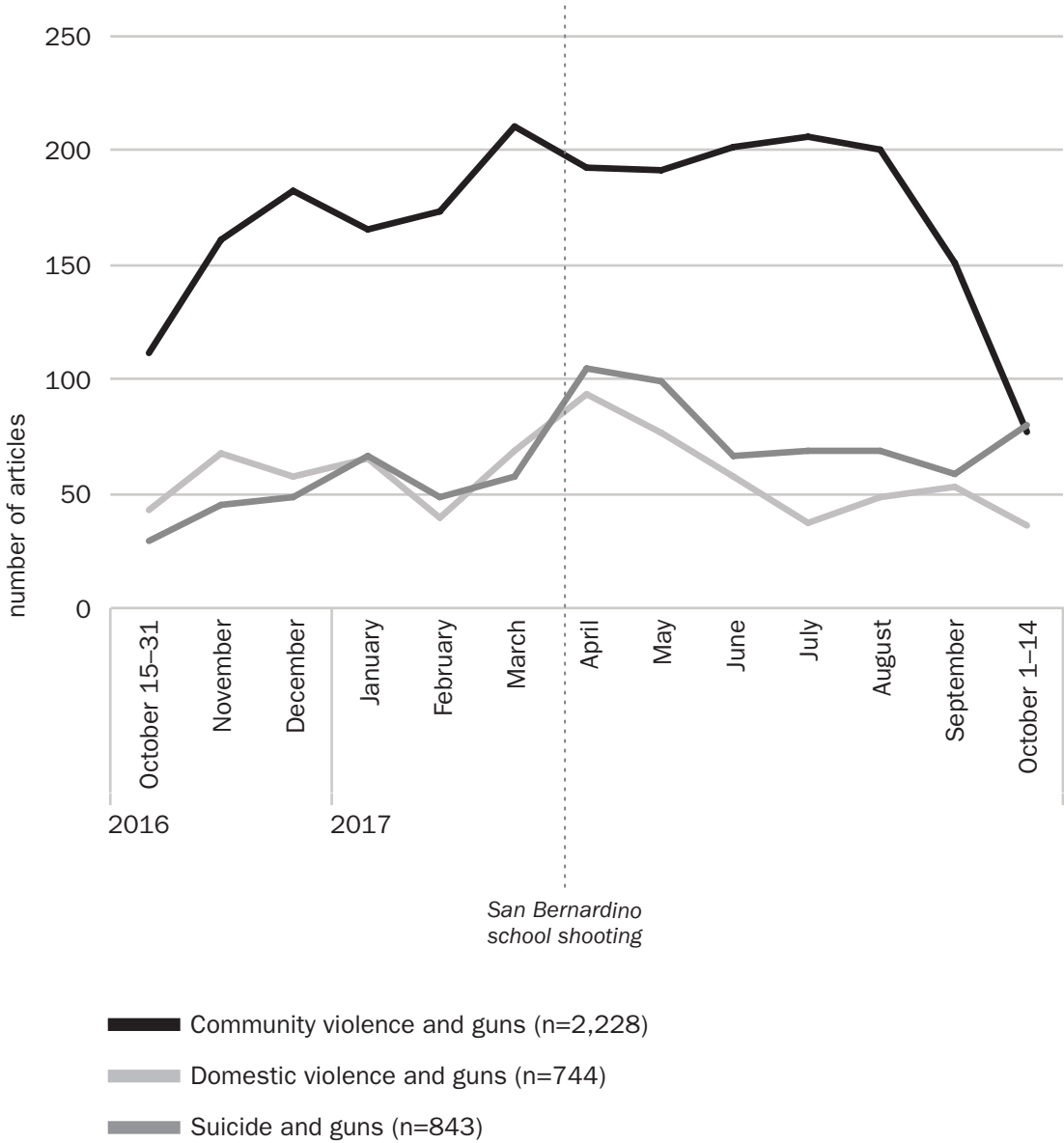
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suicide



Figure 1 Total articles about guns and community violence, domestic violence, and suicide in California newspapers, October 15, 2016 – October 14, 2017 (n=3,815)



What about mass shootings?

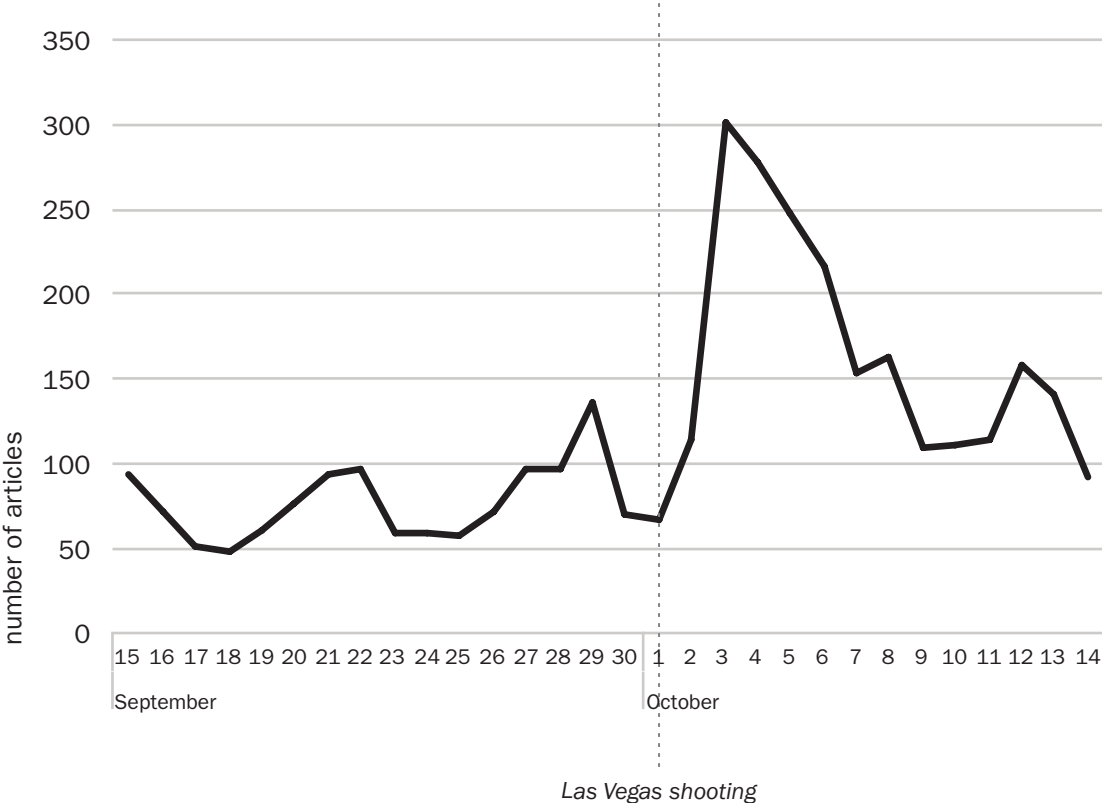
During the period of our analysis, one of the deadliest mass shootings in modern American history happened in Las Vegas, Nevada. On October 1, 2017, a man opened fire on a crowd of more than 22,000 concertgoers from the 32nd floor of the Mandalay Bay hotel, killing 58 people and injuring 851 before killing himself.

As is typically the case with news coverage of gun violence in the days or weeks following these horrifying events, there was an immediate spike in articles about mass shootings after the Las Vegas incident, with coverage peaking on October 4, 2017 (see Figure 2). However, we did not see an increase in coverage about guns and domestic violence, suicide, or community violence in the days after the shooting.

Put another way, mass shootings drive coverage of mass shootings but don't seem to increase media attention to other kinds of gun violence.

After just one week, the volume of coverage dropped back down to pre-shooting levels. This finding is in keeping with other research showing that immediately after a mass shooting there is a jump in coverage of the incident, but the news coverage that follows does not lead to a longer-term shift in the number of stories about gun violence.¹⁵ This pattern may be changing, however, as a result of the advocacy efforts of teenagers in the aftermath of the Parkland, Florida, school shooting on February 14, 2018.¹⁶

Figure 2 News stories about gun violence in California newspapers by day of publication, September 15 – October 14, 2017 (n=3,500)



Why are stories about gun violence in the news?

We wanted to know: When gun violence appears in the news, why? Why that story, and why that day? Reporters commonly refer to the catalyst for a story as a “news hook.” Many factors can influence why reporters and editors select some stories and not others, from the details of a specific incident to what else competes for attention during the news cycle. We identified the news hook for each article by answering the question, “Why was this article published today?”

Gun violence most often appeared in the news because of an event in the criminal justice system, such as an arrest, a trial, or the discovery of a body by police. This pattern was especially pronounced in news about guns and community violence: 80% of those articles were driven by a criminal justice event. The majority of articles about guns and domestic violence and guns and suicide were also in the news because of events in the criminal justice process, though the proportion was lower (69% and 51%, respectively). An example of a different reason that a story might be in the news was the release of a report, which was the case in 8% of articles about suicide and gun violence.

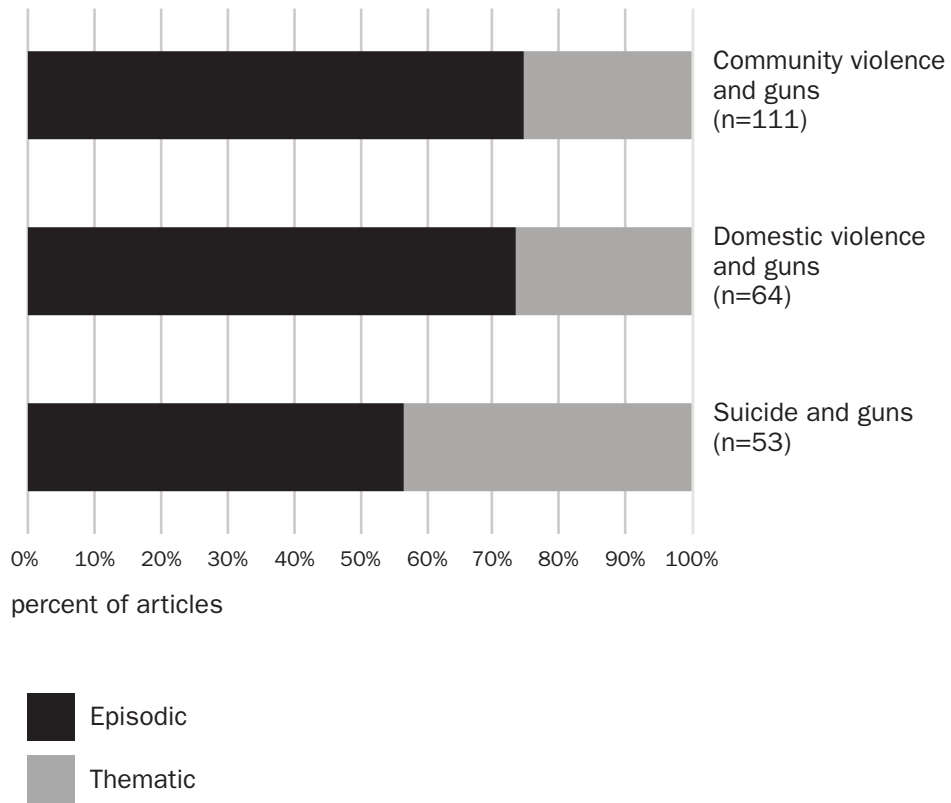
How are articles about gun violence framed?

To understand how journalists frame, or portray, stories, it can be helpful to imagine the difference between a portrait and a landscape.¹⁷ Many articles are framed episodically, like portraits — they emphasize a person or specific incident. Stories that are framed this way leave little room to talk about the context of the problem and how to solve it.^{18, 19}

Less often, news outlets frame stories thematically, like landscapes, pulling back the lens to take a broader view. Thematically framed stories may include details about individuals or specific incidents, but they also draw connections to institutions, environments, or larger social issues.¹⁹⁻²¹ Thematic stories are important because they help audiences think about solutions that involve changing institutions, communities, or social norms.¹⁹

Perhaps not surprisingly, given that most stories were in the news because of a specific criminal justice event, we found that the overwhelming majority of all stories about gun violence used an episodic frame (70% of all articles, see Figure 3). However, between categories, the news about suicide and guns was more likely to use a thematic frame (43% of these articles were framed thematically).

Figure 3 Episodic and thematic frames in news coverage of gun violence in California newspapers, October 15, 2016 – October 14, 2017 (n=228)



We also examined the key topics of each article (see Figure 4). The overwhelming majority of community violence and gun stories (85%) focused on a specific incident of violence, and the majority of these (60%) were described as gang or prison violence.

Domestic violence and gun news also focused on specific incidents (84%), including a high-profile mass shooting in San Bernardino, California, where a local man shot his wife at the school where she worked, killing her and one of her students, and injuring another. Several stories about this case widened the frame and made the connection between domestic violence and gun violence, as when an editorial published in *The Sacramento Bee* about the shooting noted, “Domestic violence happens in every community, and studies show that the presence of a gun dramatically increases the risk that the relationship will end in death.”²²

Articles about suicide and guns were more likely than other gun violence stories to discuss mental health (28%), research (25%), and policies to prevent suicide (15%). For example, in an article about California state legislation that would require suicide prevention efforts in public schools, the California State Superintendent voiced his support for the policy, saying, “One of my top priorities is serving the needs of the whole child, including their mental health needs.”²³

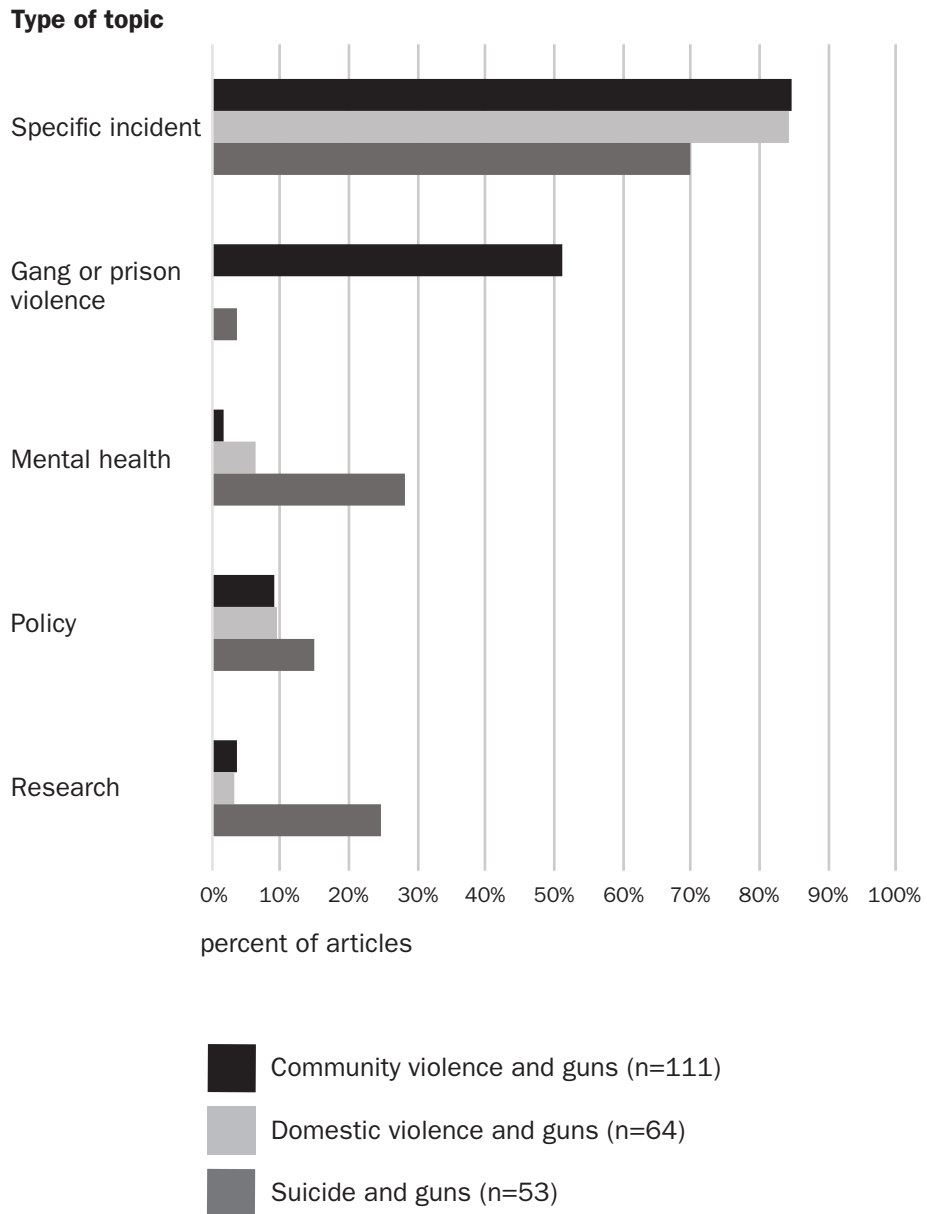
Spanish language news about gun violence is sparse and incident-focused.

There is a dearth of California news outlets that publish in Spanish, which limited our analysis of Spanish-language print news to 43 articles from three sources: *La Opinión*, *Chico Enterprise-Record*, and *The Californian* (the latter two publish in English and Spanish).

Based on such a small sample, it is difficult to generalize, but what we found in Spanish-language coverage mirrored what we saw in the English-language news. Spanish-language news stories were almost entirely focused on specific incidents and lacked discussion of causal factors or solutions: 88% of Spanish-language articles were episodic, and the articles were overwhelmingly in the news because of criminal justice actions (81%).

Figure 4 **Topics in news coverage of gun violence in California newspapers,**
October 15, 2016 – October 14, 2017
(n=228)*

* One article could have multiple topics.



The news rarely included the context around acts of gun violence.

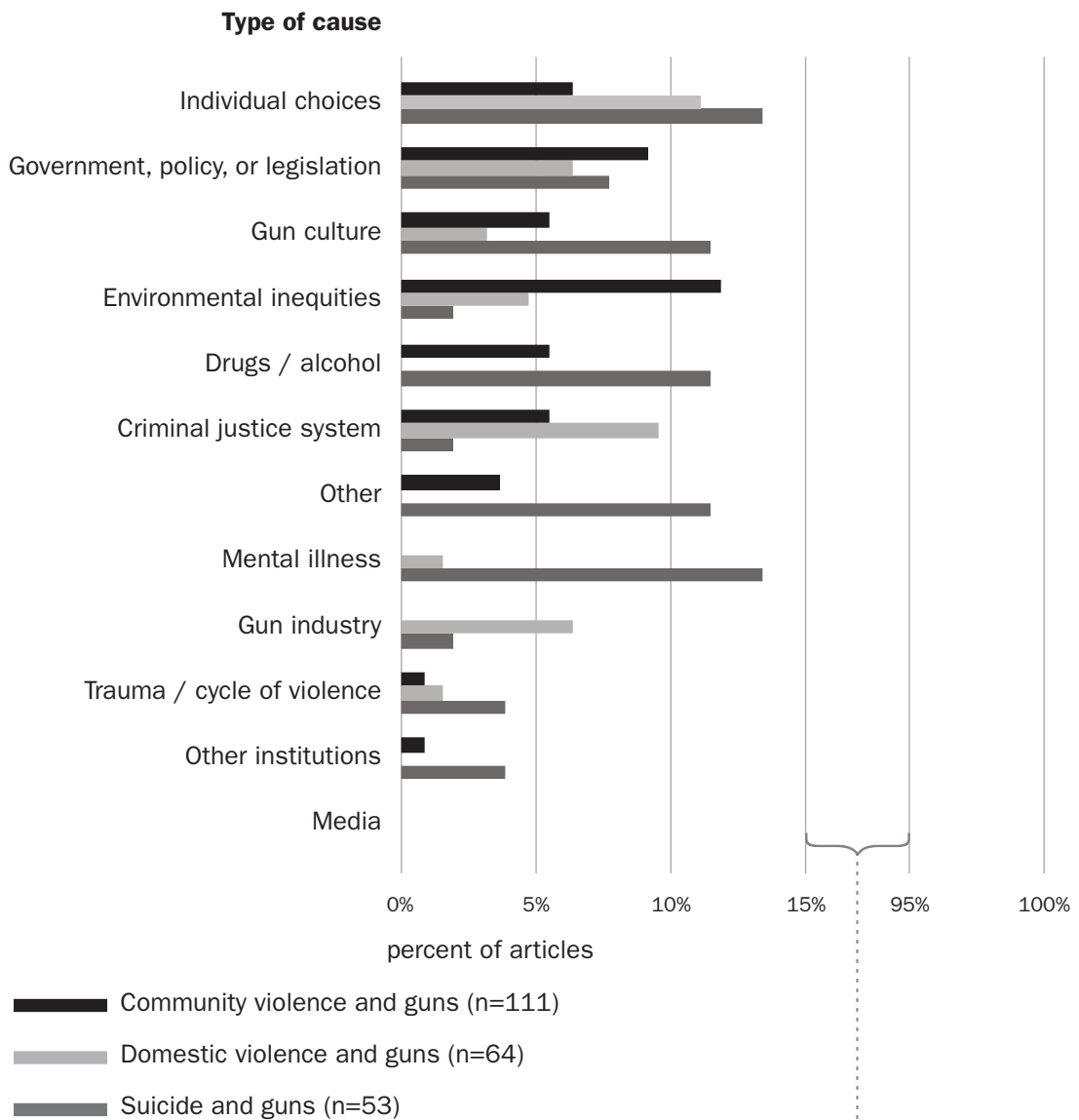
Since most gun violence stories were episodic, we were not surprised that the news rarely included reporting on the root causes of gun violence (Figure 5). What discussion of causal factors there was emphasized individual choices, particularly in the news about suicide and guns (13% of articles) and domestic violence and guns (11% of articles). In stories about suicide, many articles failed to consider the contextual factors surrounding suicide, such as access to lethal means or barriers to accessing health care — especially mental health and substance abuse treatment — and instead focused on the individual’s choice in the moments leading up to the act. For example, one *Los Angeles Times* article noted, “No one will ever know what drove Florida newscaster Christine Chubbuck to shoot herself in the head on live television in July 1974.”²⁴

We know that racism, poverty, education, and other structural inequities are inextricably linked with gun violence. Although certain communities are more affected than others by its shattering impact, mentions of social inequities and other systemic issues were rarely present in the news about gun violence. We saw references to social inequities more often in stories about community violence and guns (12% of articles) than in news about suicide and guns or domestic violence and guns (2% and 5% of articles, respectively). A particularly incisive example came from an after-school program manager in Oakland, who observed, “This gun violence is a result of systemic oppression and poverty and the violence that our community experiences. It exists because of that.”²⁵

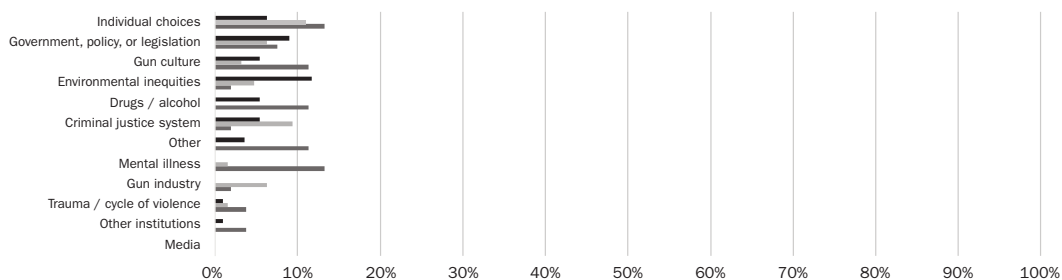
Mental health issues emerged as a root cause of suicide in 13% of articles, as seen in a story about schools working to spot warning signs of suicide. The interim director of the San Diego County Office of Education commented on the need for schools to have teams in place to address students’ “psychological issues before they spin out of control and result in students harming themselves.”²⁶ By contrast, mental health was mentioned as a cause of gun violence in only 2% of articles about domestic violence and guns and was not discussed at all in stories about community violence and guns. We also looked for references to trauma and the cycle of violence, and we seldom saw these mentioned as root causes of gun violence (1% of community violence and gun stories, 2% of domestic violence and gun stories, and 4% of suicide and gun stories).

“This gun violence is a result of systemic oppression and poverty and the violence that our community experiences. It exists because of that.”

Figure 5 Causes of gun violence in news coverage of community violence and guns, domestic violence and guns, and suicide and guns in California newspapers, October 15, 2016 – October 14, 2017 (n=228)



15% – 95% is compressed to show detail.
Complete data are shown to scale below.



The news frames the repercussions of gun violence as they relate to individual victims, not communities.

The news about each type of gun violence regularly referenced the emotional and physical impact of shootings — such as bereavement or injury — on individual victims and their families. A typical heart-rending example came from the grandfather of a victim of community violence who mourned, “It’s hard to adjust to life without her. My heart aches every day.”²⁷

We saw fewer articles that mentioned the broader consequences of gun violence for communities or society as a whole (14% of community violence and gun articles, 14% of domestic violence and gun articles, and 9% of suicide and gun articles). A rare example came from an advocate for victims of domestic violence, who wrote about the San Bernardino school shooting: “Everyone was impacted. The children who witnessed the horrific event, the school personnel who knew the teacher and the students closely, the first responders who came upon the tragic scene, the family members of the victims whose lives have been forever changed, the parents of the children in the school, who are now incredibly worried about the long-lasting impacts of what their children have experienced.”²⁸ While this quote notes the impact on different groups of individuals within the school community, it does not describe the shooting’s immediate or lasting consequences for society at large. We rarely observed reporting on the long-term impact of gun violence for whole communities in our sample.



Who's in the frame?

To understand whose perspectives are elevated in the news (and whose are obscured), we looked at which speakers were quoted in the news about gun violence. We also wanted to know how the news portrayed the race and gender of people involved in different forms of gun violence. Because reporters avoid making direct references to race, we analyzed the images accompanying articles to see the characterizations of people that go unwritten.

Criminal justice speakers dominate the news about gun violence.

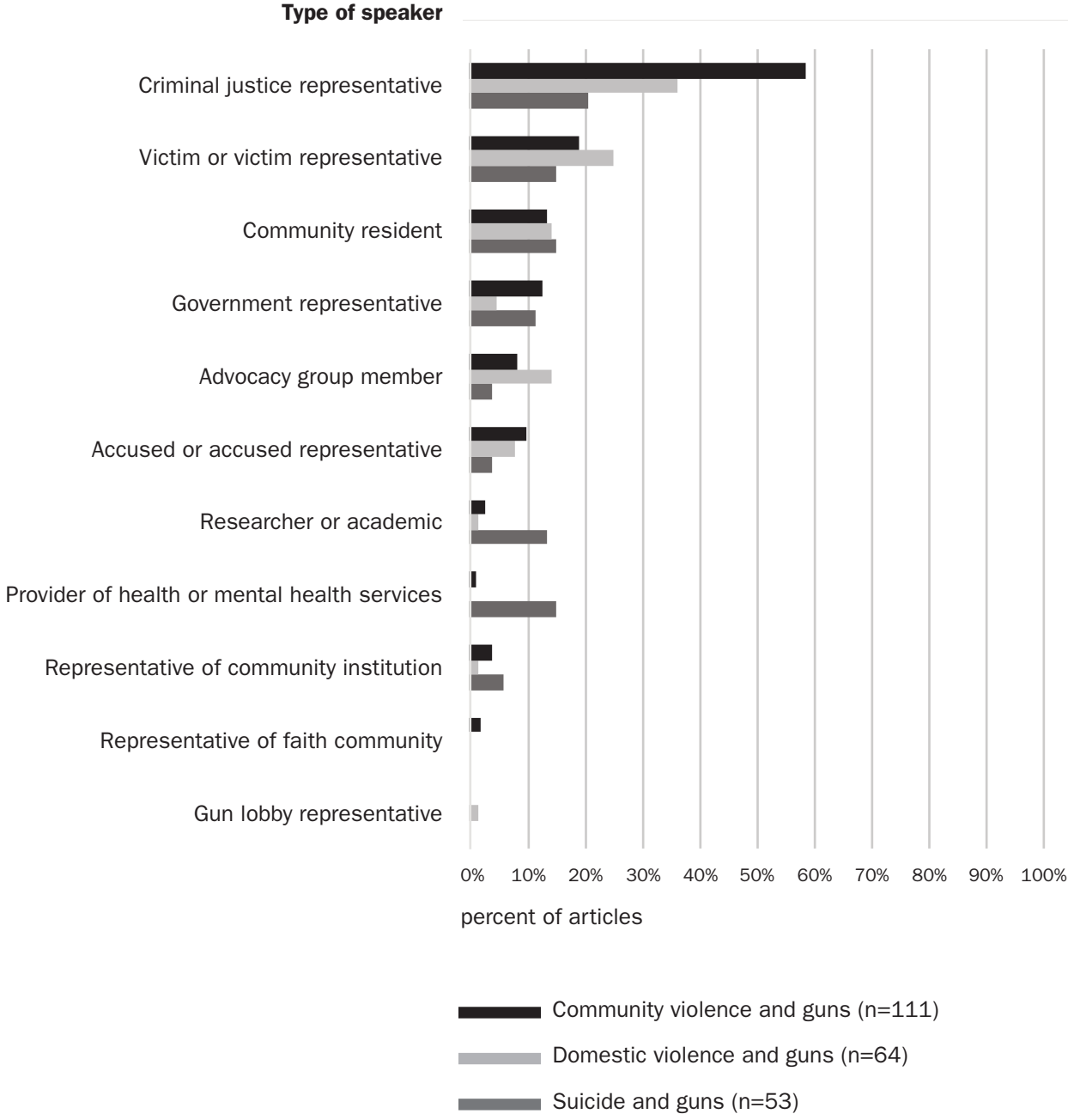
The speakers quoted most often in all news about gun violence were criminal justice representatives, including police officers, detectives, and others associated with law enforcement. These speakers were quoted much more frequently in community violence and gun stories (59% of speakers) than they were in domestic violence and gun stories (36% of speakers) or suicide and gun stories (21% of speakers). The Spanish-language news followed a similar pattern to the English-language news in terms of who spoke: Criminal justice representatives were the most frequently quoted speakers (63%) in that sample.

In articles about community violence and guns, victims of violence (19%) and community residents (14%) were the second and third most commonly quoted speakers. News about domestic violence and guns followed a similar pattern, although advocacy group members, ranging from representatives of local domestic violence shelters to speakers for national organizations like Futures Without Violence, were more frequently quoted (14%) than they were in stories about other types of gun violence. Their quotes often provided broader context about the realities of domestic violence, as when one advocate highlighted the connection between domestic violence deaths and firearms, noting that “one-third of American women experience domestic violence, and the presence of a gun increases the risk of homicide by 500 percent.”²⁹

Here again, the news about suicide followed a slightly different pattern. For example, speakers representing mental health (15%) and the research community (13%) appeared in the news about suicide and guns more often than they did in stories about community or domestic violence and guns.



Figure 6 Speakers in news coverage of gun violence in California newspapers, October 15, 2016 – October 14, 2017 (n=228)



The news about police-involved shootings

In the aftermath of several well-publicized shootings of people of color by the police, it is impossible to talk about community violence in the United States without talking about officer-involved shootings. We rarely saw mentions of these shootings in the news about guns and community violence (9% of articles), domestic violence (6% of articles), or suicide (4% of articles).

To learn more about where these shootings are appearing in the news, we did an additional search for information on fatal California officer-involved shootings kept by *The Washington Post*ⁱ and Killed by Police.ⁱⁱ These sites collect data from “news reports, public records, social media and other sources,” so they may not represent the total number of killings. We found no other databases that track officer-involved shootings nationally.

We found 159 officer-involved fatal shootings in California between October 15, 2016, and October 14, 2017. When we searched the Lexis-Nexis database for articles about the victims of these shootings by name, we found 329 articles about the incidents published in California papers during the period of our sample. Very few of these articles showed up in the sample that formed the basis of our community violence and gun news analysis.

We wanted to better understand how many of these incidents receive media attention (and consequently public attention). To this end, we conducted a separate, more in-depth evaluation of officer-involved shootings and found no news coverage for almost one-third of all police-involved shootings in California in 2017.ⁱⁱⁱ More than half of the victims of the shootings without news coverage were African American and Latino men.ⁱⁱⁱ When stories about officer-involved shootings did appear, they were usually brief and provided little background information. The coverage included only a few articles about each killing: Nearly half of the fatal police-involved shootings in 2017 produced only one or two brief stories (48% of incidents).ⁱⁱⁱ The few cases (10%) that generated five or more articles drew attention because the victim’s family continued to call for justice.ⁱⁱⁱ

Police violence is an important part of the story about gun violence that needs to be further researched so that it may be fully addressed and effectively prevented.

ⁱ Police shootings database. (2017). *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/national/police-shootings-2017/>.

ⁱⁱ Killed by police. (2018). Retrieved from: <http://www.killedbypolice.net/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mejia P. (2018). *The forgotten victims of officer-involved shootings*. Retrieved from Berkeley Media Studies Group website: <http://www.bmsg.org/blog/media-forgotten-victims-officer-involved-shootings>.

People of color, especially men of color, dominated photos in the news about community and domestic violence.

Though the news coverage about guns and violence seldom included overt references to race (13% of community violence and gun articles and 8% of both domestic violence and gun and suicide and gun articles), the photos associated with articles about gun violence (N=119) could reinforce problematic ideas about race, gender, and gun violence. Indeed, the majority (65%) of the images in our sample were of people of color.

In community violence and gun articles, images of people accused of gun violence were overwhelmingly people of color (90%), specifically men of color (85%). When victims of gun violence appeared, they were usually also people of color (93%).

In stark contrast, white people — the majority of them male — appeared in photos associated with articles about community violence and guns, primarily as representatives of the criminal justice system (73%) rather than as victims or perpetrators of violence.

In news about domestic violence and guns, all photos of alleged perpetrators were men, and the majority (67%) were men of color. Most victims of domestic abuse whose photos appeared in the news were female (71%), and half of the victims pictured were women of color (50%).

The photos associated with articles about gun violence could reinforce problematic ideas about race, gender, and gun violence. Indeed, the majority of the images in our sample were of people of color.

Table 1 People pictured in photographs accompanying stories about community violence and guns in California newspapers, October 15, 2016 – October 14, 2017 (n=68)




Photo subject	Percent	Typical photo	Headline
Accused of gun violence (community violence)	36%	<i>The typical photo was a mug shot of a man of color. We have chosen not to reprint photos of this type because doing so can reinforce negative stereotypes that we do not wish to perpetuate.</i>	Gang members convicted of killing five, Long Beach Press-Telegram ³⁰
Criminal justice representative	22%		One person killed, two injured in San Fernando shooting; gunman remains at large, Los Angeles Times ³¹ Photo: Mel Melcon
Victim or representative of victim	21%		No charges filed in Ezell Ford case, Torrance Daily Breeze ³²
Community representative	5%		Man who sought peace falls victim in Oakland, San Francisco Chronicle ²⁵ Photo: Santiago Mejia

Table 2 People pictured in photographs accompanying stories about domestic violence and guns in California newspapers, October 15, 2016 – October 14, 2017 (n=36)





Photo subject	Percent	Typical photo	Headline
Accused of gun violence (domestic violence)	36%	<i>The typical photo was a mug shot of a man of color. We have chosen not to reprint photos of this type because doing so can reinforce negative stereotypes that we do not wish to perpetuate.</i>	Man arrested for allegedly shooting girlfriend in Belmont, <i>San Mateo Daily Journal</i> ³³
Victim or representative of victim	22%		Deadly ends to 2 cases of domestic violence, <i>San Francisco Chronicle</i> ³⁴ Photo: Scott Strazzante
Criminal justice representative	11%		Authorities arrest domestic violence suspect after search in Keyes near highway, <i>Modesto Bee</i> ³⁵ Photo: Stanislaus County Sheriff's Department

Table 3 People pictured in photographs accompanying stories about suicide and guns in California newspapers, October 15, 2016 – October 14, 2017 (n=15)

Photo subject	Percent	Typical photo	Headline
Criminal justice representative	40%		Sospechoso se suicida después de atrincherarse durante horas al sur de LA, según la policía <i>(Suspect commits suicide after barricading himself for hours south of LA, according to the police), La Opinión³⁸</i> Photo: Captura vídeo ABC7
Victim or representative of victim	33%		Southern California actor streams his suicide live on Facebook, Los Angeles Daily News ³⁶

Suicide: A story not pictured

Stories about suicide and guns were much less likely to have an accompanying photo than were stories about domestic or community violence and guns. For example, though older white men have the highest rates of suicide by firearm,¹ they were seldom pictured in the coverage. In the few articles about suicide that did have accompanying images, these were of criminal justice representatives or famous people who had died of suicide, such as an actor³⁶ or the father of a professional golfer.³⁷

Problematic frames and themes in the news about gun violence

Evaluations of news narratives about gun violence — or any social problem — must assess not only where the coverage succeeds, but also where it reinforces harmful stereotypes, perpetuates myths, or violates reporting guidelines. Potentially problematic frames and themes appeared in news about community violence and guns, domestic violence and guns, and suicide and guns, though these frames looked different for each type of gun violence.

Community violence:

In articles about community violence, we saw coverage that framed people who commit violence as terrifying monsters, or “criminals and crazies”³⁹ (14% of articles). A typical article from the *Los Angeles Times* quoted the sentencing memo for a gang member that characterized the defendant as “the prototype of why and how gangs destroy communities (most often their own) through violence, intimidation, fueling crack cocaine addiction and by contriving a self-serving and morally corrupt ‘code.’”⁴⁰

This type of language could reinforce the idea that people who are involved in community violence are all depraved, distant, or somehow “other”; such depictions, in part a consequence of episodic reporting that minimizes context, may ignore the fact that many are victims of violence themselves. If we can’t talk about gun violence as a problem that goes beyond a few “bad apples,” it will be harder to see and talk about solutions that go beyond punishment and incarceration.

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Domestic violence:

Many previous analyses have explored problematic reporting on domestic violence that overemphasizes extreme cases,³⁸ and these studies have found that harmful news frames can perpetuate stereotypes about domestic violence and blame the victim.⁴¹⁻⁴³ We found that almost 1 in 10 stories about domestic violence and guns (9% of articles) contained language or framing could reinforce harmful stereotypes about the people involved, cast doubt on the stories of victims, or obscure the true frequency of such violence.

For example, an article about the domestic violence shooting at a school in San Bernardino, California, quoted a faith community leader who said of the perpetrator, “He was a deeply religious man. There was never any signs of this kind of violence ... on his Facebook he even criticized a man for attacking a woman.”⁴⁴ Such quotes could lead readers to empathize with the perpetrator or see their actions as shocking or “out of character” rather than the deadly conclusion to a pattern of behavior.⁴² That, in turn, could make it harder to show that domestic violence homicides are usually the fatal final action in a long series of violent, coercive, or controlling actions⁴⁵ — and that there are multiple places along the way where it may be possible to intervene and remove guns from the situation.⁴⁶

Suicide:

In news about suicide, a primary concern is how well the coverage conforms with best practices for reporting on suicide.⁴⁷ For example, journalists are cautioned to avoid describing the mechanism of the suicide or where it occurs because the risk of copycat suicides increases when stories includes these details.⁴⁷

We expected a certain amount of information about the method of suicide, since we specifically searched for articles about the intersection of guns and suicide. Even taking that into account, though, fully one-fifth of articles about suicide included extremely graphic or explicit details about the incident. For example, an article about a public suicide in a San Diego mall noted, “The woman reached The Gap, sat down, aimed a gun toward her own head, and pulled the trigger. ... ‘All that blood ... it was really intense,’ said the clerk. ... [A shopper] heard a loud ‘pop’ and a woman fell to the pavement.”⁴⁸

How did the news characterize stopping the gun violence epidemic?

In line with our previous research that shows that the news about violence tends to focus on problems rather than how to solve them,^{8, 49} we found that solutions rarely appeared in gun violence coverage (29% of all articles). When solutions did appear, the focus was often on changes to the policies and practices of specific institutions, such as a police department's plan to implement a new technology to detect shots in an area⁵⁰ or a school system's efforts to spot warning signs of suicide (Figure 7).²⁶

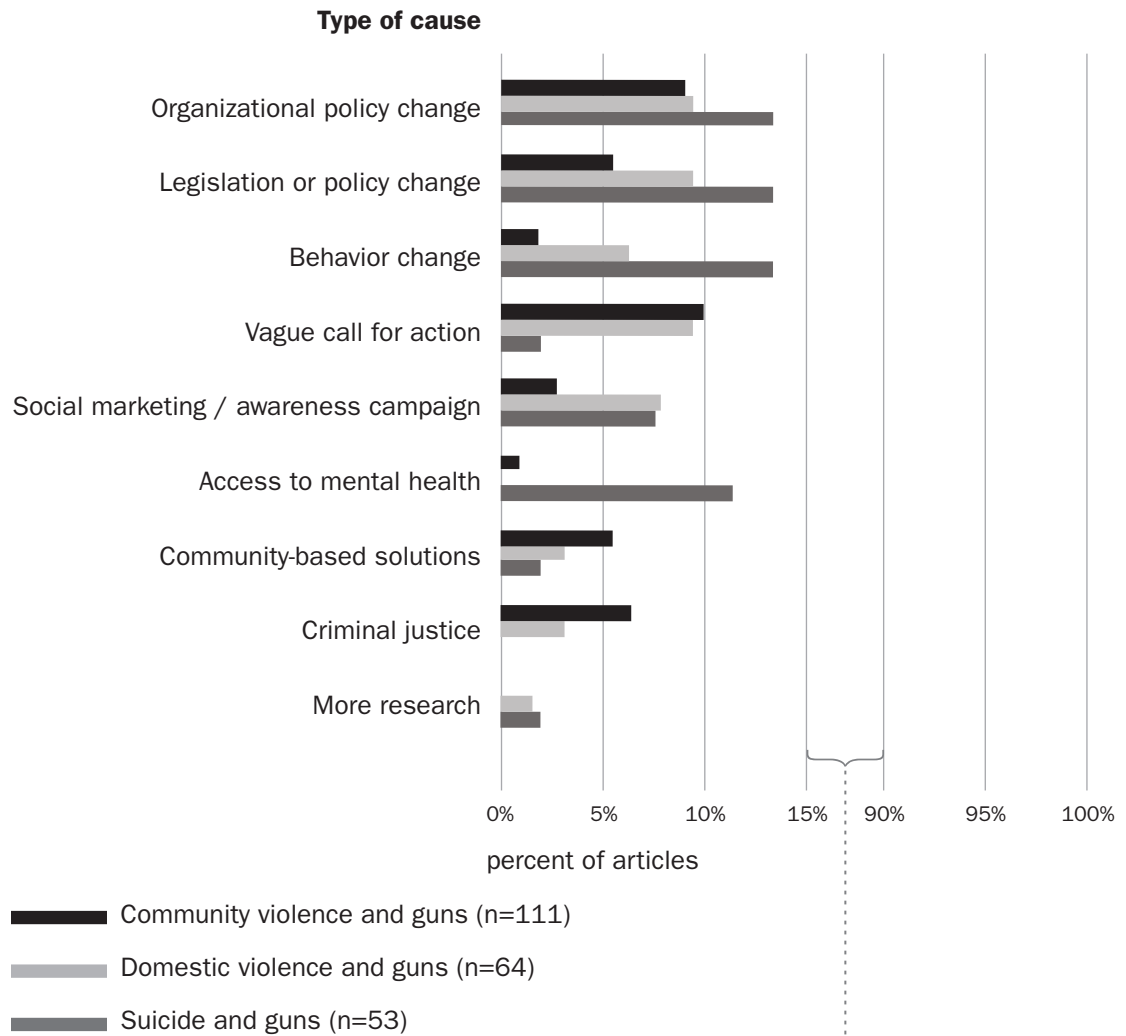
Overall, stories about suicide and guns were more likely to discuss solutions than were articles about community or domestic violence and guns. In suicide and gun news, mental health was highlighted as an underlying issue: 11% of articles mentioned access to mental health services as a solution.

Specific policy approaches for reducing gun violence were seldom named in the news about gun violence. A rare example came from *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof, whose op-ed on domestic violence was reprinted in *The Fresno Bee*: "If we really want to make Americans safer, then we should require universal background checks before gun purchases We should work hard to get guns out of the hands of people subject to domestic violence restraining orders."⁵¹

Community-based solutions were also infrequently mentioned in the news about gun violence: These appeared in only 5% of articles about community violence and guns, 3% of articles about domestic violence and guns, and 2% of articles about suicide and guns.

More often, the news — especially the news about domestic and community violence and guns — included only vague calls for unspecified solutions. For example, commenting on the need for action following a fatal shooting in the city of Oakland, an after-school program manager said that one of the first steps to prevent future incidents from occurring would be to get "guns off the streets."²⁵

Figure 7 Few solutions appeared in news coverage of gun violence in California newspapers, October 15, 2016 – October 14, 2017 (n=228)



*15% - 90% is compressed to show detail.
Complete data are shown to scale below.*

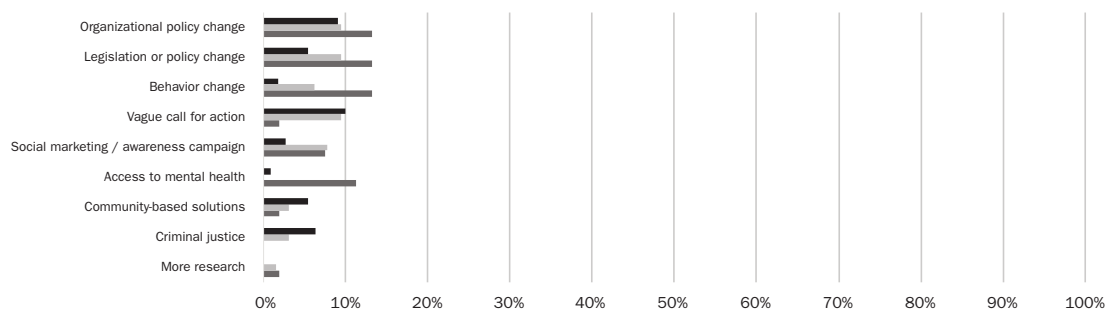
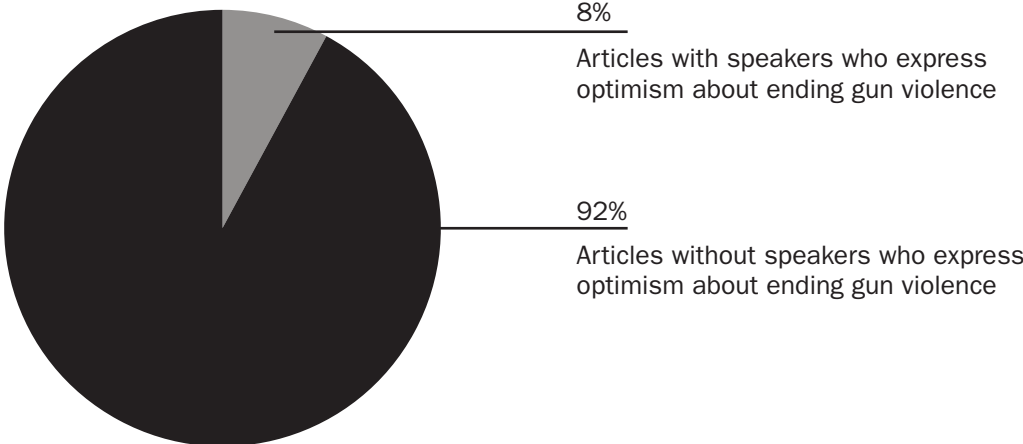


Figure 8 Few articles include expressions of optimism about stopping the gun violence epidemic in news coverage of gun violence in California newspapers, October 15, 2016 – October 14, 2017 (n=228)



Since so few stories report on solutions, the news conversation about gun violence is problem-focused — and, ultimately, pessimistic. In fact, only 8% of all gun violence articles included any kind of language that evoked optimism about the possibility of ending, or even reducing, gun violence in California (Figure 8). A rare, but powerful, example of a more optimistic perspective came from California State Assemblymember Mike Gipson, who was quoted in the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, saying, “I believe we have what it takes to rise above political division and enact laws that will strengthen public safety and reduce the plague of gun violence. I will never stop fighting for the right for residents to live in a safe and prosperous community.”⁵²

“I believe we have what it takes to rise above political division and enact laws that will strengthen public safety and reduce the plague of gun violence. I will never stop fighting for the right for residents to live in a safe and prosperous community.”

Conclusion

Our analysis of the California news about the three most common types of gun violence showed that:

Stories about suicide and domestic violence involving guns rarely appear in the news.

California news outlets regularly cover community violence and guns, but they rarely report on suicide or domestic violence involving guns. With so few articles about suicide and domestic violence and guns, it may be more difficult for audiences to understand how common these types of gun violence are and why preventing them is so important.

Most articles frame gun violence through a criminal justice lens that obscures context, consequences, and communities.

When articles about suicide and guns do appear, they are unusual in that they are often thematic. Thematic frames place specific incidents of suicide within a broader context, one that includes perspectives from researchers, medical professionals, and others. On the other hand, news about community and domestic violence and guns tends to focus narrowly on isolated incidents of crime and violence and to rely almost exclusively on quotes from police and other representatives of the criminal justice system.

Criminal justice is crucial when it comes to gun violence, but when news coverage relies almost entirely on a criminal justice lens, it means the coverage focuses on incidents that have already happened and are being dealt with by the police and the courts. In addition, the episodic frame that emphasizes incidents makes it more difficult to show what schools, faith communities, businesses, advocates, and community residents could do or are doing to prevent gun violence. The criminal justice lens could also reinforce the belief that gun violence is an inevitable problem, one that must be simply endured, never ended.

The pictures accompanying stories about community and domestic gun violence tell a story that visualizes communities of color.

Black and brown men, in particular, appear mostly as perpetrators or victims of violence. While data on the demographics of gun violence offenders is difficult to find, the overwhelming visual representation of people of color in the news about gun violence could parallel the overrepresentation of people of color in the American criminal justice system.⁵³

If the only way audiences learn about gun violence is from the news, these images could reinforce harmful stereotypes that maintain support for unjust policing and incarceration policies. That's a particular concern amid ongoing and highly charged national discussions about violence, racism, and criminal justice. A narrative that depicts violence as only a problem for certain communities could make it harder for policymakers and other audiences to understand that gun violence has broad repercussions throughout our society — and that systemic solutions are needed to make everyone safer and to support the health and well-being of all residents.

With so much of the coverage of gun violence focused either on mass shootings or on isolated acts of community violence making their way through the criminal justice system, California news coverage is not making it easier to see, understand, or talk about day-to-day acts of gun violence or what to do about them. A more complete news narrative would help policymakers and the public understand the value of ending all three types of gun violence. Although our study focused on the news in California, since in certain ways California is a microcosm of the United States, a number of the trends that we observed could mirror patterns in news from other parts of the country.

Still, advocates and journalists can — and should — tell a more complete story about gun violence, in California and beyond. On the following pages are some recommendations to help expand and deepen coverage.



Recommendations for advocates

Broadening the narrative about gun violence means helping reporters — and, by extension, news audiences — put every incident of gun violence into context. That will make it easier to show why violence happens and how it can be prevented. But illustrating context is easier said than done: Many advocates working on gun violence find that they are most often part of the news when a journalist asks them to respond to a terrible or tragic incident. In that situation, the advocate is already in the after-the-fact “criminal justice response” frame. From there, it’s a lot harder to move toward talking about how to correct misconceptions or solve the problem. What’s the solution? Advocates can:

Create news about prevention.

To ensure that gun violence isn’t only in the news after a tragedy, advocates should create news that makes room to talk about ending the different types of gun violence and the role we all play in making our communities safe. In practice, that means pitching stories to reporters that focus on actions, initiatives, and policies that are designed to prevent gun violence or are already doing so successfully. For example, Advance Peace, a violence interruption program started in Richmond, California, reaches out to young men involved in firearm offenses and places them in personalized fellowships — and, in doing so, breaks the cycle of violence. The program was featured on an episode of HBO’s newsmagazine series “Vice” about youth incarceration, which presented Advance Peace as an effective strategy to decrease violence and keep young men of color out of the criminal justice system.⁵⁴ Advocates can also release studies, celebrate community milestones, give awards, or find other newsworthy ways to bring attention to each type of gun violence and what needs to happen to prevent it.

Even when the news is focused on the criminal justice aspects of a high-profile case or the specifics of a mass shooting, there may be opportunities to sensitively but strategically ensure that the impact of other types of gun violence isn’t ignored. We call that “piggybacking.” Piggybacking can be proactive or reactive. For example, in response to a story about an incident of domestic violence involving celebrities, an advocate could help a reporter understand the prevalence of this type of violence in their locale and underscore the increased risk of death for women when guns are present.¹⁰ An example of proactive piggybacking might be the release of a report about local suicide gun death rates, using local or regional data, in advance of a town hall or local government meeting. Successfully pitching that story to reporters would help get the issue on policymakers’ agendas and enable the community to start making the connection between suicides and gun violence.

Contribute opinion pieces.

We found very little opinion coverage in our sample, which means advocates could be missing opportunities to shape the public discussion around all types of gun violence. Advocates can regularly contribute opinion pieces to newspapers, blogs, or online news outlets. Opinion pieces can be proactive or reactive. One proactive strategy is to meet with editorial boards and request editorials supporting prevention; a well-timed editorial can be very persuasive during policy or funding debates. A reactive strategy is to write a letter to the editor to tactfully address problematic or inaccurate news coverage on gun violence — or to compliment a reporter for compelling reporting. Both proactive and reactive strategies can bring solutions to the fore.

One rare example of an opinion piece from our sample demonstrated a reactive approach, when an op-ed writer took the opportunity in the aftermath of the Las Vegas shooting to highlight the gun deaths that do not make headlines: “As horrific as it was — the crackling gunfire and the mayhem — many Americans will soon forget about the Las Vegas massacre. But the families of the 59 people who died in the concert chaos last Sunday night will remember. The loved ones of the estimated 95 others who died in gunfire the same day — unmentioned victims in the quotidian toll of ‘ordinary’ U.S. firearm deaths — will remember, too.”⁵⁵

An example of a proactive strategy comes from an opinion article from our sample about teenage suicide prevention, in which a pediatric psychologist noted, “Studies show that 90% of suicidal persons suffer from depression, anxiety or other mental illness. None of these is a weakness.”⁵⁶



Prepare for the long term by building relationships with journalists.

Reporters and photographers are always looking for “real people” who can “put a face on” the story. Journalists can tell complete stories about gun violence only if they are familiar with advocates, their resources, and their networks. If advocates become trusted sources, reporters have somewhere to go for data and information when they have a story to tell. Otherwise, many journalists may rely on their traditional contacts in criminal justice.

If journalists are to add new sources to their mix, those sources have to be ready and willing to talk and share resources — and to do it on a tight deadline when journalists are covering breaking news. Advocates can work with their organizations and networks to develop their media skills, including their readiness to talk about what causes gun violence, how it affects communities, and what is being done to end it. Advocates need to be ready to drop everything to help a reporter on a tight deadline.

It can be especially helpful to train people who have experienced or committed violence so they are comfortable talking with reporters. Media training can help people with lived experience be powerful “authentic voices” who can talk not only about their own stories, but about what should be done to ensure that no one else has to suffer. By putting authentic voices forward for media opportunities, advocates are helping to keep storytelling power within the community. For community violence and guns, this could be a youth-serving organization leader; for domestic violence and guns, it might be a survivor of domestic violence; and for suicide and guns, this could be a veteran whose community has been affected by gun suicide.



Talk concretely about context and solutions.

Whether advocates are creating news or reacting to a reporter's questions after a tragedy, they can help reporters see the landscape beyond the gruesome details of an incident of gun violence. What advocates highlight in that bigger picture will depend on their overarching goals: Perhaps they want to illustrate that mass shootings aren't the only threat to take into account when talking about gun violence prevention, show that something happening locally contributes to the problem or solution, or make the case for a new approach that could make a big difference in their community.

Whatever advocates' goals and however they want to help reporters see the broader context, they should be clear and precise: Using abstract or general terms can leave readers with more questions than answers. If they are illustrating the root causes of violence, phrases like "gun culture" may be too vague. Are there statistics or examples from the local community that reporters can cite to make the case tangible? When advocates are talking about solutions, they should use concrete and context-specific examples of community initiatives, programs, policies, and other preventive measures that need to be established, supported, and maintained to stop the gun violence epidemic for good.

By talking about race and equity issues that contribute to gun violence, advocates can help elevate the connections between violence prevention and other social and political movements to advance progress on multiple fronts.

Prepare and share compelling story elements that illustrate the context.

Though time constraints and editing may limit any given story, advocates can make it easier for reporters to include context if they have statistics, media bites, visuals and other story elements at the ready. Visuals are particularly important: We know that images associated with victims and perpetrators in stories about gun violence tend to focus primarily on people of color and that images of white people are mostly criminal justice representatives. Together, these images paint a stereotypical and inaccurate picture of gun violence.

Advocates should consider: What visuals can be provided to reporters that would help them tell a complete, fair story about prevention, the community, and the violence that advocates are trying to address? For example, an advocate might share an image of members of a violence prevention group at an event in the community that they are part of and serve. Are there photo opportunities to set up or images to provide that could help reporters paint an accurate picture or challenge harmful stereotypes? What in the landscape of the local community needs to be visible in photos if the public is to “see” prevention?

Talk about race and equity issues as they relate to gun violence.

Gun violence is the confluence of many complex environmental factors like poverty, racism, and other structural inequities. However, the connections between gun violence and these structural inequities were rarely highlighted in the news. A rare example from our analysis came from an after-school program manager in Oakland, who made the connection between gun violence and systemic oppression and poverty.²⁵ By talking about race and equity issues that contribute to gun violence, advocates can help elevate the connections between violence prevention and other social and political movements to advance progress on multiple fronts. These conversations can also help shift the focus from specific incidents to the broader social change needed to prevent future gun violence in all forms.

Recommendations for journalists

Improving coverage of gun violence can be challenging, particularly in an era of shrinking newsrooms. A number of organizations have outlined general recommendations that focus on interviewing techniques, confidentiality concerns, language considerations, and other technical specifics of reporting on violence.^{47, 57-60} Our focus is on how journalists can bring attention to gun violence issues that are often ignored. Journalists can:

Cultivate and interview sources beyond the criminal justice system.

The news about gun violence is dominated by sources representing the criminal justice system. These sources and their perspectives are undoubtedly valuable. But gun violence isn't just a criminal justice issue. To illustrate the broader context, journalists can seek out other voices (like community members, faith leaders, and medical professionals) who could provide important and often overlooked perspectives on gun violence. These sources can help to shed light on the untold stories about gun violence. For example, we found that the cycle of violence and trauma were rarely mentioned as causes for gun violence, but community violence prevention advocates or medical professionals could help illustrate the connection between gun violence and the lasting trauma it causes in individuals and communities. Sources from different fields may also be able to suggest ideas for stories that focus on underexamined questions, such as the connections between domestic violence and more visible mass shootings; suicide and gun availability; and the impact on local gun violence rates when communities invest in youth violence prevention programs. They can also help reporters give more depth and meaning to specific incidents of gun violence.



Ask questions about the context for gun violence.

Since news coverage of gun violence is usually spurred by a specific incident, it may seem difficult to include context. Yet, for each type of gun violence, with breaking news or in follow-up stories, there are ways for reporters to include more context — but they have to ask about it.

For stories about community violence and guns, reporters could ask about access to guns and how guns come into neighborhoods. Journalists could also ask about the connections between systemic inequalities and gun violence. One way to do this would be to ask sources about how factors that drive violence in a community, e.g. poverty, have evolved over time. Another way would be to ask sources to describe what has been done in other communities to prevent gun violence and whether those programs or policies could work in the community in question.

When interviewing advocates for articles about domestic violence, reporters could ask their sources questions about the relationship between domestic violence and guns; researchers and advocates are keenly aware that guns heighten risk that can lead to domestic violence-related fatalities, coercion, and intimidation.^{10, 61} Reporters can ask how the story about guns and domestic violence connects to other sectors or disciplines, including what the implications are for policy, education, health care, and business. In a state like California that has implemented a gun violence restraining order (GVRO) policy (“red flag” laws) — a tool for temporarily removing guns and ammunition from individuals who are at risk of harming themselves or others⁶² — journalists might ask about how local law enforcement use GVROs in the community and to what effect. In a constituency without a GVRO law in place, journalists could ask their sources about the impact that implementing this policy would have on community safety.

Articles about suicide and guns made the connection to mental health and health care in many cases, but the challenge for journalists here is to broaden these stories beyond individual cases. Reporters might ask their sources questions about the impact that suicide with guns has had on the wider community. Stories that go beyond specific cases will help audiences view suicide with guns as a broader issue that communities can act on. Reporters might also make the connection between guns and suicide by asking questions about what steps individuals can take to prevent suicides, as when family or friends intervene with loved ones who might be at risk for suicide by exploring strategies to restrict access to the lethal means.

Expand coverage of gun violence to include other sectors.

Comprehensive violence prevention is a multisector effort that involves health care, schools, businesses, public health, youth-serving organizations, concerned citizens, and many others.⁶³ To help people understand community violence as a preventable problem, the larger social and economic context in which gun violence occurs needs to be visible in news stories. Connections to the context in which violence occurs can be made in stories about any sector that could play a role in preventing violence. Journalists can expand coverage of gun violence to include other sections of their news outlet, e.g. the business, health care, or education beats, to demonstrate how sectors can partner in preventing gun violence and building safer, stronger communities.

In a previous analysis that Berkeley Media Studies Group conducted on the news about community violence, we found multiple themes in stories from the business, education, and health care sectors that could easily connect to how that sector might prevent future violence and build or sustain safe communities.⁶⁴ For example, we found that health care stories often focused on costs and access, which have important implications for how well people are able to obtain mental health and other services that could help prevent gun violence before it occurs. There are many opportunities for reporters to connect stories from a range of sectors with gun violence prevention, and they can do so by drawing members of other sectors into the conversation and asking them about how their work can contribute to a shared goal of stopping the gun violence epidemic.

Explore issues of structural racism and other systemic factors.

Gun violence, particularly at the community-level, takes place when complex environmental factors like poverty and structural racism coincide with the presence of firearms. As a society, we need to have a better understanding of the relationship between inequality, racism, and which communities are most affected by gun violence. Journalists can help illuminate the connections. In one case from our previous analysis of the news discourse about community violence, an article about community-led efforts to deter crime provides an example of how to address race and racism with more complexity. The story quoted a resident who specifically addressed the multiple intersections of racism and community safety, noting, “There’s another kind of safety, particularly if you’re a person of color. People need to feel safe from racial profiling.”^{64, 65} To get to this type of nuanced answer, reporters might ask their sources about the historical context that has led to certain communities being more plagued by the epidemic of gun violence than others, as well as what steps can be taken to remedy this burden.

As a result of our country’s complicated history with guns and the gun industry,^{66, 67} there is a dearth of research on gun violence, including data on the rates at which the different forms of gun violence affect racial and ethnic groups. For this reason, we recommend that journalists work with the National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting (NICAR), a program of Investigative Reporters and Editors, Inc. (IRE), or similar groups to help them acquire and assess the local crime data to make sure that their reporting reflects local crime trends.

To help people understand community violence as a preventable problem, the larger social and economic context in which gun violence occurs needs to be visible in news stories.

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The public and policymakers need to understand what everyday, all-too-common gun violence looks like, where it happens, and how it harms people. More than that, they need to know what could be done to end it — and what is being done, in hospitals and homes, in communities and courtrooms, in schools and on streets around the country.



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