

Humanistic Gun Violence Reporting:

A Toolkit for Minimizing Harm in
Episodic Stories



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Media coverage of gun violence often inadvertently perpetuates stereotypical narratives about the people and communities most impacted. Typical coverage focuses on individual episodes of gun violence and often lacks explanation of what causes it and what could be done to prevent it. These practices can ultimately further stigmatize marginalized communities and promote fatalism around gun violence prevention. By changing the way gun violence is covered, reporters can make an active step towards minimizing harm—and even make an important contribution towards preventing gun violence.

Quick-Start Guide

The following checklists are designed to serve as a quick-start guide to ethical and empathetic gun violence reporting.

When approaching someone who has experienced gun violence or who is closely connected to a victim, it's important to take a trauma-informed approach. This involves asking for consent at every step of the process (e.g. talking, documenting, recording, publishing, etc.), offering to have them review the piece prior to publishing, asking if they would like to be left anonymous, and more. See [this article](#) to learn more.

Reporting from the scene of a shooting is not always recommended, as it can often intentionally or inadvertently sensationalize the event and further stigmatize those impacted. If reporting from the scene is necessary, consider the following recommendations:

- Look for community context first. Is there a store, church, or park? Try to find a community representative willing to speak and provide context about structural factors or what community members/organizations are doing to address the problem.
- Look for someone who knows the victim and is willing to speak to you about the victim so that you can present them empathetically.
- Utilize trauma-informed practices when approaching survivors and families. Understand that they may not be ready to talk immediately following a traumatic event like a shooting.
- Let community members and the family know how their participation will result in better reporting.
- Involve the community in the fact-checking process when possible.
- Seek out the expertise of people beyond the police, such as impacted family members, activists, public health experts, and longtime community members.
- Whenever possible, consult and update your source list for a quotation from a community leader and/or scholar about proven solutions.

When covering episodic gun violence, don't:

- Don't contextualize a mass shooting by referring to a “gun violence epidemic.”
- Don't focus on the scope of the problem without emphasizing that prevention is possible.
- Don't use racist codewords like “gritty” or “urban.”
- Don't discuss the disparate effects of gun violence without explaining the drivers of those disparities (e.g. structural racism).
- Don't use sensationalizing language or that which dramatizes a traumatic situation for a more visceral reaction from an audience.
- Don't blame victims. Never report in a way that suggests a victim “deserved” to be shot because of what they were engaged in prior to the shooting.
- Don't reduce victims to a number or a datapoint or use data to sensationalize the issue of gun violence.
- Don't rely on police imagery.
- Don't include the clinical condition of the victim(s), number of gunshot wounds, or the treating hospital, without first obtaining the consent of the victim(s).
- Don't use design choices that sensationalize the issue, such as bright colors or flashing images.

When covering episodic gun violence, do:

- In the case of a mass shooting, emphasize that these events are rare.
- Use data in context to talk about trends or the effects of policy choices.
- Use humanizing language to describe victims, such as “son” or father.”
- If the victim is a woman or a child, emphasize that this is rare.
- Explain what drives gun violence and frame it as a structural issue (see “Drivers of Community Firearm Violence” for ideas).
- Offer solutions relevant to the specific shooting (see “Drivers of Community Firearm Violence” for examples).
- Humanize victims and tell their stories via their own accounts or those of their close family/community members.
- Direct your audience to community resources.

Changing the Narrative

The narrative elements that we include in our media coverage can make a big difference when it comes to helping our audiences understand the event, the context, and the possibility for substantive change. By constructing evidence-based, humanizing narratives, we can avoid further perpetuating harmful stereotypes about the people and communities most impacted by gun violence. The choices we make about whose perspective to highlight, how to describe the event and community efforts to address it, and how to contextualize the event all play a role in breaking away from stigmatizing narratives.

Below, we identify stigmatizing narrative elements to help journalists avoid crafting harmful stories. We then identify elements and examples of new, prevention-focused narratives that can help audiences better understand the root causes and structural factors that contribute to gun violence, making paths toward prevention possible.

HARMFUL/STIGMATIZING NARRATIVES

Narrative Element	Elements of Stigmatizing Narratives
Characters	<ul style="list-style-type: none">— “Good guy” cops (who are treated as experts on gun violence)— “Bad guy” criminals— “Helpless,” stigmatized, and/or dehumanized victims
Story Structure/Plot	<ul style="list-style-type: none">— Gun violence epidemic— Fatalistic (e.g. “Another inevitable shooting”)— Police are trying and necessary to help— Sensationalized portrayals of traumatic events
Setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none">— Drawing on racist and classist biases, the narrative connects the event to a “bad” neighborhood where a reader might expect violence— Alternatively, the narrative describes “good” neighborhoods where readers would not expect violence— The event is contextualized via an “ongoing crime wave” or “gun violence epidemic”— Factors that contribute to the likelihood of experiencing gun violence are attributed to individual behaviors (e.g. the “missing father”)
Point of View	<ul style="list-style-type: none">— Usually law enforcement via police at the scene and other messengers

Tone

- Sensationalizing, often conveyed by multimedia design choices like bright colors and flashing graphics in multimedia

EXAMPLE OF A HARMFUL/STIGMATIZING NARRATIVE:

ANOTHER VICTIM SHOT AMIDST GUN VIOLENCE CRISIS

Nov. 30, 2023

At 2:19 AM on Monday morning, the North County Police Department responded to reports of gunshots on the 3400 block of Wornall Avenue. Police have arrested a suspect and taken him into police custody. The victim, a 23-year-old male, was rushed to North County Hospital, where he remains in critical condition. The suspect, 26-year-old John Smith, is believed to have acted alone.

Monday's shooting was the fourth that our county saw this week. "We're experiencing a huge rise in violent crime," says Maya Barnes, police spokesperson. "We understand that many people do not feel safe in our community." Barnes added that the department is increasing law enforcement presence in the neighborhoods adjacent to Wornall Avenue in anticipation of escalating violence in the coming months.

PREVENTION/HUMANIZING NARRATIVES

Narrative Element	Elements of Prevention/Humanizing Narratives
Characters	<ul style="list-style-type: none">— Community members portrayed as experts— Health/public health experts (experts other than law enforcement)— Victims who have given consent and are sharing their stories of their own volition
Story Structure/Plot	<ul style="list-style-type: none">— Starts with individual situation and moves toward more thematic content— Includes information /resources that are part of the solution— Illustrates how systemic factors play a role (e.g. inequitable allocation of resources, disinvestment in communities of color, etc.)— Points to the work being done to stop gun violence (the people and the organizations involved)

Setting

- A specific community where residents are calling for more resources/doing something to address the problem while noting that resources aren't fairly allocated
- A country with failing firearm policies
- A society in which outcomes are shaped by structural racism, concentrated poverty, lack of access to social supports, and other environmental factors
- Refers to systemic problems that contribute to the likelihood of experiencing gun violence (e.g. families separated as a result of mass incarceration)

Point of View

- People affected by gun violence
- People bringing many kinds of expertise (public health, community organizing, etc.) to the issue of gun violence

Tone

- Level and pragmatic, often conveyed by multimedia design choices like a simple or cool color palette and minimal animations

EXAMPLE OF A PREVENTION NARRATIVE:**RISE IN GUN VIOLENCE “PREVENTABLE,” SAYS PUBLIC HEALTH EXPERT**

Nov. 30, 2023

Just after 2:19 AM on Monday morning, a 23-year-old victim was rushed to the hospital after reports of gunshots on Wornall Avenue. This incident marks the 16th countywide shooting this month, following changes to the state's permit-to-purchase law in October.

“Occurrences like this aren't new for our community, but they are preventable,” says Sarah Blythe, President of the North County Gun Violence Prevention Center. Blythe's organization is just one public health organization working to enact structural change when it comes to gun violence.

According to Blythe, gun policies are only one part of the equation. “It comes down to an array of factors—how resources are distributed, whether or not social supports are available and accessible, and even how we build our communities,” she says.

Some community members are taking this advice to heart. A local group of students has been meeting weekly after school to discuss ways that young people can be part of the solution, organizing rallies, and volunteering for local food banks and park clean-ups.

“These are the sorts of solutions that prevent gun violence before it happens,” says Blythe. Vacant lots or crumbling buildings, a lack of green spaces and well-maintained parks, and lack of access to goods required for basic subsistence are all drivers of gun violence. “Importantly, ending gun violence means addressing systemic racism and income inequality by investing in impacted communities,” she adds.

EXAMPLE OF A HUMANIZING NARRATIVE:

SURVIVOR OF MONDAY’S SHOOTING TELLS HIS STORY

Nov. 30, 2023

Just after 2:19 AM on Monday morning, 23-year-old Charlie Hughes, who works as a youth counsellor, was rushed to North County Hospital after suffering two gunshot wounds to his abdomen. Hughes, who was visiting a friend in North County, says he was walking through the parking lot behind the old grocery store when he was attacked.

“You know that this kind of thing happens, but you don’t think about it happening to you,” says Hughes, describing his first thoughts during the attack. “It feels like something’s changed—for me, my family, all of us,” he added. Hughes is recovering from surgery to stop the bleeding from his spleen and intestines and has given us permission to include details about his condition so that people can better understand the impact of gun violence.

This incident marks the 16th countywide shooting this month, following changes to the state’s permit-to-purchase law in October.

Public health experts say that these incidents may be prevented through comprehensive gun violence prevention policies and by addressing factors like concentrated poverty and structural racism, which are often tied to disinvestment in community spaces. According to the North County Gun Violence Prevention Center, vacant lots, like where Hughes was walking on Monday, are a driver of gun violence. So are crumbling buildings and a lack of well-maintained green spaces and parks.

Hughes, videocalling us from the hospital, ended our interview with a single sentence: “We have to do better.”

Drivers of Gun Violence

For people to see gun violence as a preventable issue, they need to know what causes it in the first place. The following brief explanations model what it might look like to succinctly introduce structural causes of gun violence. They are designed to be paired with solutions or data when appropriate, but can also stand on their own to provide needed context around the drivers of gun violence.

Gun Violence Driver #1: Lack of access to social supports.

Gun violence is driven in part by a lack of social supports such as health insurance, mental health care, and violence recovery services. Without a reliable safety net for people to depend on in times of crisis, gun violence can spread.

Solution: *Improving access to social supports, especially among systemically marginalized communities, can address some of the root problems that create and perpetuate firearm violence.*

Solution: *Increasing and improving health care-based solutions like hospital-based violence intervention programs (HVIPs) can help reduce gun violence. By scaling these programs toward the most-affected communities, we can better address the mental health needs of individuals who could benefit from trauma-informed care.*

Gun Violence Driver #2: Concentrated poverty and structural racism.

One of the primary risk factors for gun violence is concentrated poverty, driven in large part by our country's legacy of racist policies and practices.

Solution: *Preventing gun violence will require combatting systemic racism, reducing income inequality, and investing in impacted communities.*

Solution: *Preventing gun violence will require ensuring every child has access to high-quality, safe, nurturing, and trauma-informed educational opportunities.*

Gun Violence Driver #3: Ineffective firearm policies.

High rates of gun violence are in part a failure of our country's firearm policies.

Solution: *Focusing on evidence-based policies like permit to purchase, universal background checks, and waiting periods can effectively reduce firearm violence in our communities.*

Gun Violence Driver #4: Inequities in the built environment.

Disparities in the built environment help to explain why gun violence is more likely to occur in certain neighborhoods. The presence of structural decay within a community is often indicative of other forms of disinvestment. Research consistently demonstrates a connection between the availability of green spaces and lower rates of firearm violence.

Solution: Addressing structural vulnerabilities within a community by improving building edifices, demolishing vacant buildings, and greening empty lots strengthens community infrastructure and helps people feel safer—and it can help to reduce firearm violence.

Solution: Investing in well-maintained parks and green spaces reduces rates of firearm violence while also fostering a sense of community cohesion and wellbeing.

Gun Violence Driver #5: Disinvestment in Public Health Systems.

Inadequately resourced public health departments without access to good data make it difficult to know what interventions are necessary to prevent gun violence—or to implement a comprehensive plan to address it.

Solution: Strengthening local, county, and state public health departments and ensuring access to high-quality data can help us chart a course from where we are now to where we want to be when it comes to addressing gun violence.