Better Gun Violence Reporting: A Toolkit for Minimizing Harm

MAY 2024

Contents

Better Gun Violence Reporting: A Toolkit for Minimizing Harm

News 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 an explanation of what causes it and what could be done to prevent it. These reporting practices can further stigmatize marginalized communities and promote fatalism around gun violence prevention. By changing the way gun violence is covered, reporters can take an active role in minimizing harm to injured people, communities, and society—and even make an important contribution toward 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 obtaining informed consent at every step of the process (e.g., talking, documenting, recording, publishing, etc.), offering to have sources review their contributions to 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 should be carried out with caution and sensitivity, 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.

— Seek out the expertise of people beyond the police, such as impacted family members, activists, public health experts, and longtime community members. Making connections with community members at the scene can be a first step to building trusting relationships to inform accurate follow-up stories.

— Utilize trauma-informed practices when approaching and interacting with survivors and families. Understand that they may not be ready to talk immediately following a traumatic event like a shooting.

— Let community members, survivors and co-victims know how their participation will result in better reporting.

— Involve the community, survivors, and co-victims in the fact-checking process when possible.

— Whenever possible, consult and update your source list for a quotation from a community leader and/or scholar about proven solutions.

— Acknowledge and address your own emotional responses to reporting from the scene and seek opportunities for self-care.

✕ When Covering Episodic Gun Violence, *Don't*:

— *Don't* focus on the scope of the problem without emphasizing that prevention is possible.

— *Don't* discuss the disparate effects of gun violence without explaining the drivers of those disparities (e.g., structural racism).

— *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* use sensationalizing language or dramatize a traumatic situation for a more visceral reaction from an audience.

— *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* reduce victims to a number or a datapoint or use data to sensationalize the issue of gun violence.

— *Don't* contextualize a mass shooting by referring to a "gun violence epidemic."

— *Don't* use racist codewords like "gritty" or "urban."

— *Don't* include graphic images of the shooting or crime scene.

— *Don't* rely exclusively on police imagery.

✓ When Covering Episodic Gun Violence, *Do*:

— *Do* humanize victims and tell their stories via their own accounts or those of their close family/community members.

— *Do* use humanizing language to describe victims, such as "son" or father."

— *Do* offer solutions relevant to the specific shooting (see "Drivers of Gun Violence" for examples).

— *Do* explain what drives gun violence and frame it as a structural issue (see "Drivers of Gun Violence" for ideas).

— *Do* use data in context to talk about trends or the effects of policy choices.

— In the case of a mass shooting, *do* emphasize that these events are rare.

— If the victim is a woman or a child, *do* emphasize that this is rare.

— *Do* direct your audience to community resources.

Changing the Narrative

The narrative elements we include in our news coverage can make a big difference when it comes to helping audiences understand an event, its context, and the possibilities for substantive change. By constructing evidence-based, humanizing, and more complete narratives, we can avoid further perpetuating harmful stereotypes about the people and communities most impacted by gun violence. The choices we make about whose perspectives to include, how to describe and contextualize an event, and whether to highlight community efforts to address it all play a role in breaking away from harmful 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	— "Good guy" cops (who are treated as experts on gun violence) — "Bad guy" criminals — "Helpless," stigmatized, and/or dehumanized victims
Story Structure/Angle	— Gun violence epidemic — Fatalistic (e.g., "Another inevitable shooting") — Police are the primary solution to gun violence — Sensationalized portrayals of traumatic events
Setting	— 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	— Usually police at the scene
Tone	— Sensationalizing, often conveyed by multimedia design choices like bright colors and flashing visuals along with graphic images and explicit language

Example of a Harmful/Stigmatizing Narrative

ANOTHER VICTIM SHOT AMID GUN VIOLENCE CRISIS
Nov. 30, 2023

At 2:19 AM on Monday, 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 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	— Community members recognized as experts — Health and/or public health experts (experts other than law enforcement) — Victims who have given informed consent and are sharing their stories of their own volition
Story Structure/Angle	— Starts with individual situation but also provides context — 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, 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. "While permit-to-purchase laws are one of the most effective ways to reduce gun violence, 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. Michael Brown, one of the students leading this effort, said: "Preventing gun violence starts with supporting each other. We want young people to know they can get involved and make a difference."

"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, 23-year-old Charlie Hughes, who works as a youth counselor, 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 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, video calling 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 combating 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 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.*

Appendix A: About This Toolkit

This toolkit is the product of collaborative efforts between the Philadelphia Center for Gun Violence Reporting (PCGVR) and the FrameWorks Institute, with support from the Stoneleigh Foundation.

This project was led at PCGVR by Dr. Jessica Beard, PCGVR Director of Research and Stoneleigh Foundation Fellow, along with PCGVR Founder and Director Jim MacMillan. At FrameWorks, the project was led by Clara Blustein Lindholm, Director of Research Interpretation for the FrameWorks Institute Culture Change Project, along with Khaliah Pitts, Director of Engagement Initiatives, and Erin Lowe, Strategic Communications Associate.

This guide was reviewed and approved by lived experience experts including PCGVR Community Manager Maxayn Gooden and PCGVR Newsroom Liaison Oronde McClain. Professor Jennifer Midberry of Lehigh University, who also serves as PCGVR Journalism Research Advisor, provided additional feedback.

The need for this toolkit was identified by participants during PCGVR's 2022 Better Gun Violence Reporting Workshop, which was produced in partnership with The Better Lab, a human-centered design venture working to study and fix health care challenges.

Twenty-six journalists representing every major Philadelphia news organization, 10 gun violence prevention advocates from impacted communities, nine staffers from PCGVR, and 25 participants from partnering organizations attended.

The FrameWorks Institute also conducted two listening sessions with 20 Philadelphia journalists representing most local news organizations before producing this guide.

Appendix B: Acknowledgements

Twenty journalists representing nearly every Philadelphia newsroom participated in listening sessions that informed this guide, including:

Loraine Ballard Morrill, iHeartMedia Philadelphia

Bobbi Booker, WHYY News

Sammy Caiola, independent journalist

Denise Clay-Murray, The Philadelphia Hall Monitor

Mensah Dean, The Trace

Kianni Figuereo, freelance journalist

Joe Holden, CBS News Philadelphia

Manuel McDonnell Smith, Philadelphia Association of Black Journalists

Roxanne Patel Shepelavy, The Philadelphia Citizen

Maia Rosenfeld, data journalist

Samantha Searles, freelance journalist

Afea Tucker, The Trace

About the Stoneleigh Foundation

The Stoneleigh Foundation was founded in 2006 by John and Chara Haas to improve the life outcomes of our community's youth by advancing change in the systems that serve them, including youth justice, child welfare, education, and health. The Foundation awards two types of Fellowships—the Stoneleigh Fellowship and Emerging Leader Fellowship—to exceptional leaders who work within, alongside, and outside of these systems to catalyze change.

Learn more at www.stoneleighfoundation.org

About the Philadelphia Center for Gun Violence Reporting

The Philadelphia Center for Gun Violence Reporting creates direct and genuine connections among gun violence prevention scholars, journalists, and impacted communities to mitigate harmful media narratives and advance empathetic, ethical, and impactful gun violence reporting.

Learn more at www.pcgvr.org

About FrameWorks

The FrameWorks Institute is a nonprofit think tank that advances the mission-driven sector's capacity to frame the public discourse about social and scientific issues. The organization's signature approach, Strategic Frame Analysis®, offers empirical guidance on what to say, how to say it, and what to leave unsaid. FrameWorks designs, conducts, and publishes multi-method, multidisciplinary framing research to prepare experts and advocates to expand their constituencies, to build public will, and to further public understanding. To make sure this research drives social change, FrameWorks supports partners in reframing, through strategic consultation, campaign design, FrameChecks®, toolkits, online courses, and in-depth learning engagements known as FrameLabs. In 2015, FrameWorks was named one of nine organizations worldwide to receive the MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions.

Learn more at www.frameworksinstitute.org

Better Gun Violence Reporting: A Toolkit for Minimizing Harm