

# The Children's Agenda

Smart Choices. Bold Voices.

We at The Children's Agenda are filled again with both sorrow and outrage at yet another massacre of children. The 19 children and two teachers murdered yesterday in Uvalde are victims of what is now the leading cause of death of American children and teenagers in the United States: gun violence.<sup>1</sup>

For our part, we are fed up with empty rhetoric. We will save our "thoughts and prayers" for tragedies that aren't preventable, foreseeable or predictable. But these murders of children are preventable. What is required of us now is **to act** for policy changes that will make a difference.

Violence toward youth and by youth is a public health crisis, no different than the COVID pandemic. But unlike that pandemic, we as a society are dramatically under-responding. We treat youth violence as a law enforcement issue rather than the public health crisis it is – which is the moral equivalent of punishing people sick with COVID rather than distributing masks and vaccines.

Why is that?

Rochester Institute of Technology's Center for Public Safety Initiatives has shown that Rochester's per-capita homicide rate ranked highest in New York and near the top among the two dozen U.S. cities studied. With 38.4 homicides per 100,000 people, Rochester is the fifth highest of the 24 cities tracked by CPSI's annual report.<sup>2</sup> An average of 9 million U.S. children ages 5 to 17 lived in a census tract where there had been at least one annual gun homicide from 2015 - 2020. But that exposure is not evenly distributed by race: the risk was 4.4 times higher for Black kids, and 2.1 times higher for Hispanic kids than it was for white children, the lowest-risk group.<sup>3</sup> Young Black males ages 15-34 make up 2% of the population but account for 37% of all firearm homicide victims.<sup>4</sup>

Structural racism is at the core of why we treat this public health crisis as a law enforcement issue, perpetuating and even accelerating its spread, rather than addressing it effectively through prevention and treatment. Employing effective public policies that stop the easy transmission of this epidemic – in this case, by preventing easy access to guns for just anyone and by providing meaningful social supports for nearly everyone – is the way to stop the drumbeat of these heart-stopping headlines: Sandy Hook, Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, Columbine . . . now Uvalde. And preventing easy access to guns for just anyone and providing meaningful social supports for nearly everyone is also the way to halt the daily catastrophes that are **not** making our headlines: the little kids shot by stray bullets strafing a neighborhood or a family home, and the endless cycle of teen suicides or retaliatory shootings in response to earlier retaliatory shootings.

Effective public health policies that respond to this uniquely American epidemic of youth violence include:

1. **Immediately stopping easy access to guns for just anyone:** requiring licensing and background checks for all purchases; banning sale of guns to people convicted of violent crimes, hate crimes and domestic violence;

<sup>1</sup> ["Guns Became the Leading Cause of Death for American Children and Teens in 2020," Time Magazine, 4/27/2022](https://www.time.com/2022/04/27/guns-became-the-leading-cause-of-death-for-american-children-and-teens-in-2020/)

<sup>2</sup> <https://rochesterbeacon.com/2022/02/03/rochesters-homicide-surge/>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.ajpmonline.org/article/S0749-3797\(22\)00129-5/fulltext?utm\\_source=The+Trace+mailing+list&utm\\_campaign=4448699720-EMAIL\\_CAMPAIGN\\_2019\\_08\\_29\\_06\\_04\\_COPY\\_01&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_f76c3ff31c-4448699720-112595721](https://www.ajpmonline.org/article/S0749-3797(22)00129-5/fulltext?utm_source=The+Trace+mailing+list&utm_campaign=4448699720-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2019_08_29_06_04_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_f76c3ff31c-4448699720-112595721)

<sup>4</sup> <https://efsgv.org/learn/type-of-gun-violence/community-gun-violence/>

banning gun sales to people under age 21 years; banning high-capacity magazines and weapons; enforcing safe storage laws. For every 100 people in the United States there are 120 guns – over 300 million.<sup>5</sup> A public health approach would make violence less transmissible to people at high risk of succumbing.

**2. Addressing root causes to prevent youth violence:** by supporting healthy community and family environments; strengthen youth skills and connections; provide quality education; and intervene to lessen harms and prevent future risk. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have listed<sup>6</sup> all the alternatives to law enforcement approaches to prevent the epidemic of youth violence, by prescribing social supports for nearly everyone, including universal access to home visiting and child care, mentoring and afterschool programs, strengthening social-emotional supports and integrating mental and physical health care.

Please, we are far past the point of “thoughts and prayers”. If we do not **act** to address this public health crisis, swapping out law enforcement responses with real prevention, the death of the next child killed by a gun will be on all of us.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/11/06/opinion/how-to-reduce-shootings.html>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/youthviolence/fastfact.html>