

Summary of Trauma and Domestic Violence with a Firearm

Every month in the United States, an average of 70 women are shot and killed by an intimate partner,¹ and many more are shot and wounded. Access to a gun in a domestic violence situation makes it five times more likely that the woman will be killed.² Additionally, American Indian / Alaska Native, Black, and Latina women are victims of intimate partner firearm homicide at the highest rates.³ Less is known about the impact of trauma from domestic violence with a firearm. To better understand the breadth and depth of trauma experienced by survivors of gun violence, Everytown for Gun Safety conducted 16 focus groups with 103 survivors of gun violence with diverse identities that have not been researched extensively, such as domestic violence survivors. A total of 18 people who participated identified as a survivor themselves or cared about someone who experienced domestic violence with a firearm, or both. These participants shared their experiences with gun violence that resulted in the death of a loved one, firearm suicide, complex trauma, and concerns for safety.

I lost my sister, my only sister. It'll be three years in July, and this thing never goes away. We just learn how to cope. People don't understand that trauma never goes anywhere, and healing is an ongoing process. It's just a lifelong process. I, too, will never ever be the same."

—Survivor whose sister was shot and killed by her intimate partner

Key Findings

• **Impact of Trauma**

All survivors or someone they cared about who experienced intimate partner violence experience trauma. Survivors shared that during the initial aftermath of gun violence, they felt numb, in shock, in disbelief, and did not have strong memories of the moments after the incident. They continue to live daily with the lasting impacts of trauma, such as longing to feel safe, challenges with navigating support services, anticipating trauma, and everyday emotional and physical responses.

• **Safety and Fear**

Survivors felt unsafe and fearful after the incident. Their immediate steps to gain a sense of safety included uprooting their lives, relocating their homes, and leaving their careers behind. Domestic violence survivors were in constant “fight or flight.”

• **Murder-Suicide with a Firearm**

When a gun is used in a domestic violence incident, the risk of suicide also increases. This was a common experience among survivors in the focus group. Family members and friends recalled incidents of murder-suicide, and survivors recalled abusive partners dying by suicide with a firearm after attempting to harm them.

• **Familial Impact from Domestic Violence**

The impact of domestic violence extends beyond intimate-partner relationships, impacting other family members, including children. Domestic violence survivors in the focus group prioritized keeping their children safe—and accessing support services for their children's trauma—even in the midst of violence in the home.

- **Generational Trauma**

Participants spoke of generations of people in their families who experience intimate partner violence and abuse. The multigenerational trauma experienced by grandparents, parents, siblings, and the next generation of children shaped survivors' behaviors and understanding of healthy relationships.

- **Mental Health and Support Services**

Access to mental health services, peer support, and support services is instrumental to recovery and healing. However, survivors who identified as Black or Latinx were less likely to have access to short- and long-term support from mental health services. Even with access to services, they experienced stigma and discrimination, in addition to providers who were not culturally attuned to their communities.

- **Post-Traumatic Growth and Gun Violence Prevention**

Survivors experienced an additional component during their healing and recovery that illustrates posttraumatic growth—positive changes following their struggles with trauma. Some survivors experienced new possibilities in their lives, such as greater senses of personal strength, spiritual development, and appreciation for life. These feelings were gained by participating in gun violence and domestic violence prevention advocacy, peer support networks, and accessing support services.

Solutions and Recommendations

Included in the full report *Beyond Measure: Gun Violence Trauma* are eight solutions and recommendations for action based on the broader study. The results of this study add to the urgency of preventing intimate partner violence and gun violence and the importance of interrupting cycles of violence. Survivors need more availability of trauma-informed care, access to peer support networks, police accountability, and legislation that addresses the trauma survivors' experiences with gun violence and intimate partner violence. Members of Congress and state lawmakers can enact clear policies now to save lives such as strengthening state laws prohibiting domestic abusers from possessing guns and requiring abusers to relinquish guns they already have. Implementation and enforcement of existing state firearms relinquishment laws by state and local courts and law enforcement agencies must be prioritized. Further research on the needs and experiences of survivors of gun violence is critical to inform advocacy and services.

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1. Everytown analysis of CDC, National Violent Death Reporting System (NVDRS), 2019. Analysis includes firearm homicides involving an intimate partner and women 18 years and older.
 2. Jacquelyn C. Campbell et al., "Risk Factors for Femicide in Abusive Relationships: Results from a Multisite Case Control Study," *American Journal of Public Health* 93, no. 7 (July 2003): 1089–97, <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.93.7.1089>.
 3. Everytown analysis of Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Violent Death Reporting System (NVDRS), 2019. Ages 18–85+. AI/AN and Black defined as non-Latinx origin.

