

## Engaging Impacted Communities In Reducing Gun Violence

*The Educational Fund to Stop Gun Violence recognizes that we must engage impacted communities – specifically communities of color – in our work to reduce gun deaths. We do this by developing community-driven Advocacy Networks which tackle the structural barriers at the root of violence and the unregulated access to firearms that facilitates lethal violence.*

### This Work is Important

**Homicide is the leading cause of death for African-American boys and men ages 15 to 34 and the second most common cause of death for Hispanic men ages 15 to 34.<sup>i</sup>** Nearly one out of every 1,000 Black males aged 20-24 were murdered by firearm in 2017. Young Black men and boys are over 21 times more likely to be murdered by firearm than their non-Hispanic White counterparts. Young black women and girls are 7 times more likely than their non-Hispanic White counterparts to be murdered by firearm.<sup>ii</sup>

**In communities of color, nearly everyone is impacted by the traumatic effects of gun violence.** In fact, one study found that among Blacks, the likelihood of having someone within their social network die by firearm at some point during their lifetime was 95.5%.<sup>iii</sup> Within disadvantaged communities of color in cities, exposure to gun violence is routine even for children.<sup>iv</sup> A survey of Baltimore City youth ages 12-24 found that 42% had witnessed a shooting compared to 4% of suburban youth.<sup>v</sup> Likewise, a survey of middle school children enrolled in the Richmond, Virginia public school system found that 94% report hearing gunshot; 44% of boys and 30% of girls reported witnessing a shooting.<sup>vi, vii</sup>



**Witnessing gun violence or knowing someone who is a victim has lasting impacts on individual health, wellbeing, and development. These impacts are especially harmful for children.<sup>viii</sup>** Gun violence exposure changes the chemistry in the brain and is associated with antisocial behavior, depression, substance abuse, posttraumatic stress disorders, and an increased likelihood that youth will engage in criminal activity.<sup>ix, x</sup> A study that examined 500 African American youth in Hampton Roads, Virginia found that direct exposure to violence was the best predictor of whether an individual would later engage in gun related crimes.<sup>xi</sup>

**Gun violence affects community health; its impacts are compounded by poverty, discrimination, and systemic inequities.** Research consistently points to the relationship between gun violence, poverty, and inequality.<sup>xii</sup> These social factors are both the root causes of gun violence and are exacerbated by gun violence.<sup>xiii</sup> Addressing these inequities is essential to reducing gun violence.

## Our History

Over the past five years, the Educational Fund to Stop Gun Violence has worked to promote community engagement and political involvement within communities disproportionately impacted

by gun violence – communities of color. In 2015 we partnered with the Urban Institute, the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, and the Joyce Foundation to convene nearly 50 community members in Richmond, Virginia to provide insights into how to curb gun violence within communities of color. Combined with parallel convenings in Stockton, California and Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the result was a report entitled *Engaging Communities in Reducing Gun Violence*. It called for a holistic and multifaceted public health approach that tackles the structural barriers at the root of gun violence. We applied these recommendations to further develop our Engaging Communities program.



## Our Approach

To stop gun violence, we must both address firearm availability and promote community-based interventions which engage community members, interrupt cycles of violence, change norms, and build political activism. We do this by first building genuine relationships with community members. We then use a research grounded toolkit called Education to Action to turn these relationships into self-sustaining community action networks that advocate for policies to reduce gun violence.

**Education to Action:** The Education to Action program mobilizes and trains community members to advocate for policies that reduce gun violence. This toolkit and workshop highlight how advocacy for evidence-based gun violence prevention policies is linked with a broader set of community concerns. It acts as a community organizing tool to facilitate increased outreach, involvement, and empowerment within the community.



**Community Action Networks:** The Community Actions Networks are self-sustaining advocacy groups from communities statewide, currently in place across Virginia and Washington. They advance an evidence-based, holistic approach to tackle gun violence in communities of color by hosting workshops and

events which bring together law enforcement, community members, faith leaders, and politicians. They create a space for individuals who were disengaged from the political process to become active leaders within their communities, fighting for policies that will build healthy communities free of violence and inequity. They also act as a forum for skill-building, for instance in public relations and communications, and provide an opportunity for members to collaborate on the development of violence prevention programming. As an example, the Community Action Network in Hampton, Virginia is in the midst of developing a shooting review board that will examine the root causes of fatal and non-fatal shootings in the area.

### Our Impact

***Kaaleah's Story:*** Kaaleah Jones was a toddler when her father was shot and killed in Newport News, Virginia, the community she's grown up in and still sees plagued by senseless violence. An activist since early childhood, she got involved in the Engaging Communities program in middle school to learn more about how to stop the violence within her community. The Education to Action program gave Kaaleah tools to further develop her skills as a community organizer who advocates to stop gun violence, as well as on public safety, economic opportunity, and ending the school to prison pipeline. She has met with her legislators and followed up with phone calls and letters, produced a testimonial video, and spoken at events and before city council – even encouraging her mother to *run* for city council. Now 16, Kaaleah is the chairwoman of the Generation Z Steering Committee for the Community Action Network in Virginia and is an emerging community leader.

*“Through my activist work in the community [...] I ensure that my father's legacy will live on, not only through me, but through the children we have saved in our community. Maybe my dad couldn't influence the youth like he wanted to, but I have picked up in his footsteps.”*  
- Kaaleah Jones



***Our Reach:*** Within five years our program has grown from one site in Hampton, Virginia to include work in six states and the District of Columbia and partnerships with influential African-American organizations nationwide. We have led over 60 Education to Action workshops in Virginia and Washington and provided hundreds of one-on-one coaching to rising and established community leaders, trained over two dozen new workshop facilitators, and given people of all ages the necessary tools to advocate for their communities. Our pioneering Community Action Network in Virginia hosts quarterly meetings, often standing room only, that bring together diverse stakeholders to address community needs. This work has empowered over two thousand individuals in communities across America to organize and to pressure local policymakers for comprehensive policies to stop gun violence and reduce educational and economic inequalities in impacted communities of color – and we're just getting started.

## References

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