YOUNG GUNS:

HOW GUN VIOLENCE IS DEVASTATING THE MILLENNIAL GENERATION

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American children and teenagers are 4 times more likely to die by gunfire than their counterparts in Canada, 7 times more likely than young people in Israel, and 65 times more likely to be killed with a gun than children and teenagers in the United Kingdom.[1]

There is a crisis of youth gun violence in this country.

Even though violent crime has steadily declined in recent years—overall violent crime declined 19 percent between 2003 and 2012, and the murder rate declined 17 percent during that period[2]—rates of gun violence remain unacceptably high. On average, 33,000 Americans are killed with guns each year, and the burden of this violence falls disproportionately on young people: 54 percent of people murdered with guns in 2010 were under the age of 30.[3] Young people are also disproportionately the perpetrators of gun violence, as weak gun laws offer easy access to guns in many parts of the country. Far too often, a gun not only takes the life of one young American but also contributes to ruining the life of another young person who pulls the trigger.

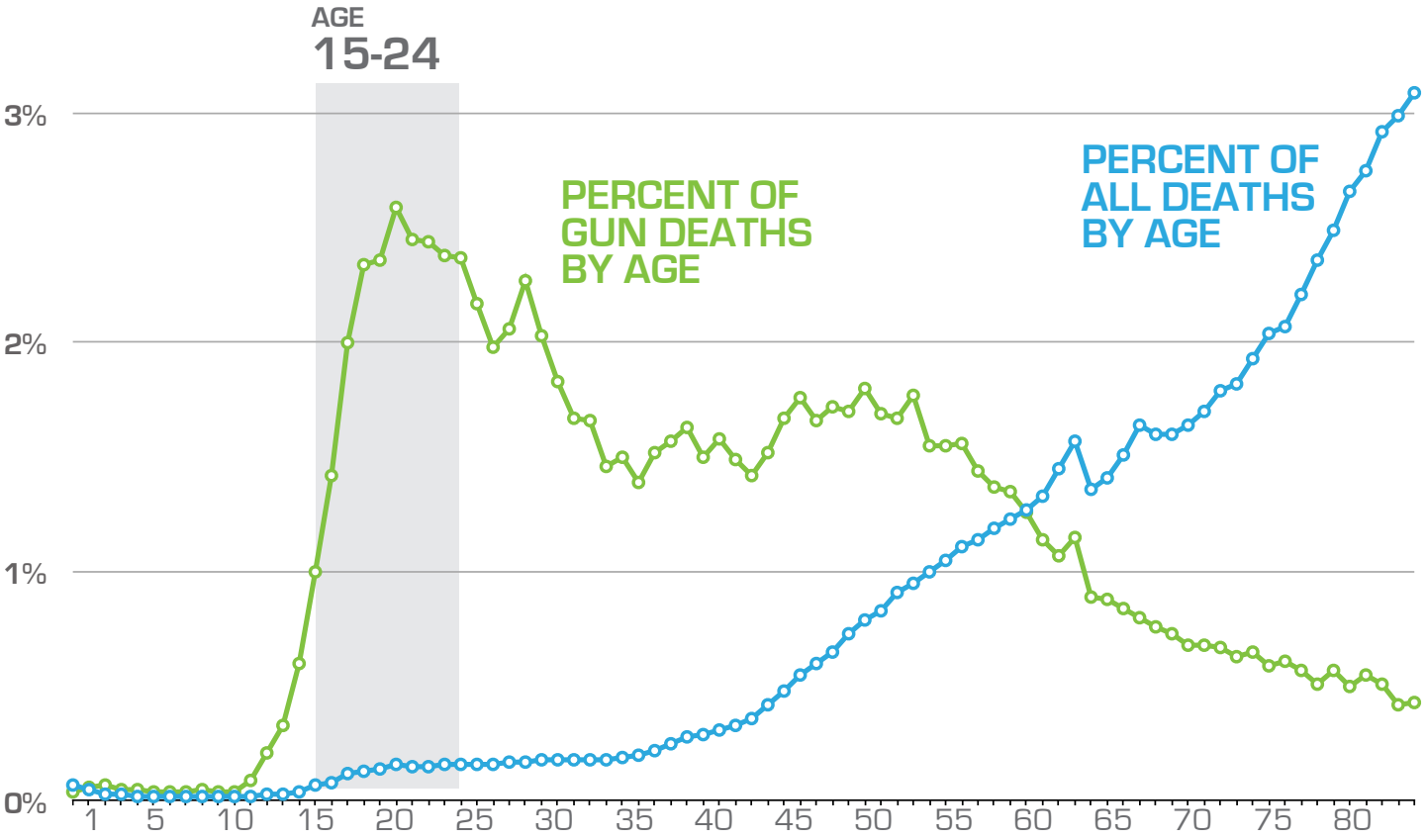
And while guns play a role in so many deaths of America's youth, very few public health research dollars are spent to understand the causes of this epidemic and develop policy solutions to address it.[4] In the wake of the tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School in December 2012, the issue of gun violence has received renewed attention in this country, and many voices are now calling for solutions to this public health crisis.

In this environment of increased focus on gun violence, Millennials' voices are crucial. As discussed in detail below, young Americans suffer disproportionately from gun violence. Beyond the numbers, which are startling, the voices of young people must be heard and the stories told about the effect of this violence on their lives and communities.

In this report, we present data on the disproportionate impact of gun violence on young people; discuss the prevalence of young people as perpetrators of such violence and the ramifications of involvement in the criminal justice system; and highlight poll numbers indicating that Millennials are increasingly concerned about the presence of guns in their communities. With an American under the age of 25 dying by gunfire every 70 minutes,[5] we must all recognize that gun violence among youth is an urgent problem that must be addressed.

Young people are the victims of gun violence at higher rates than older Americans.

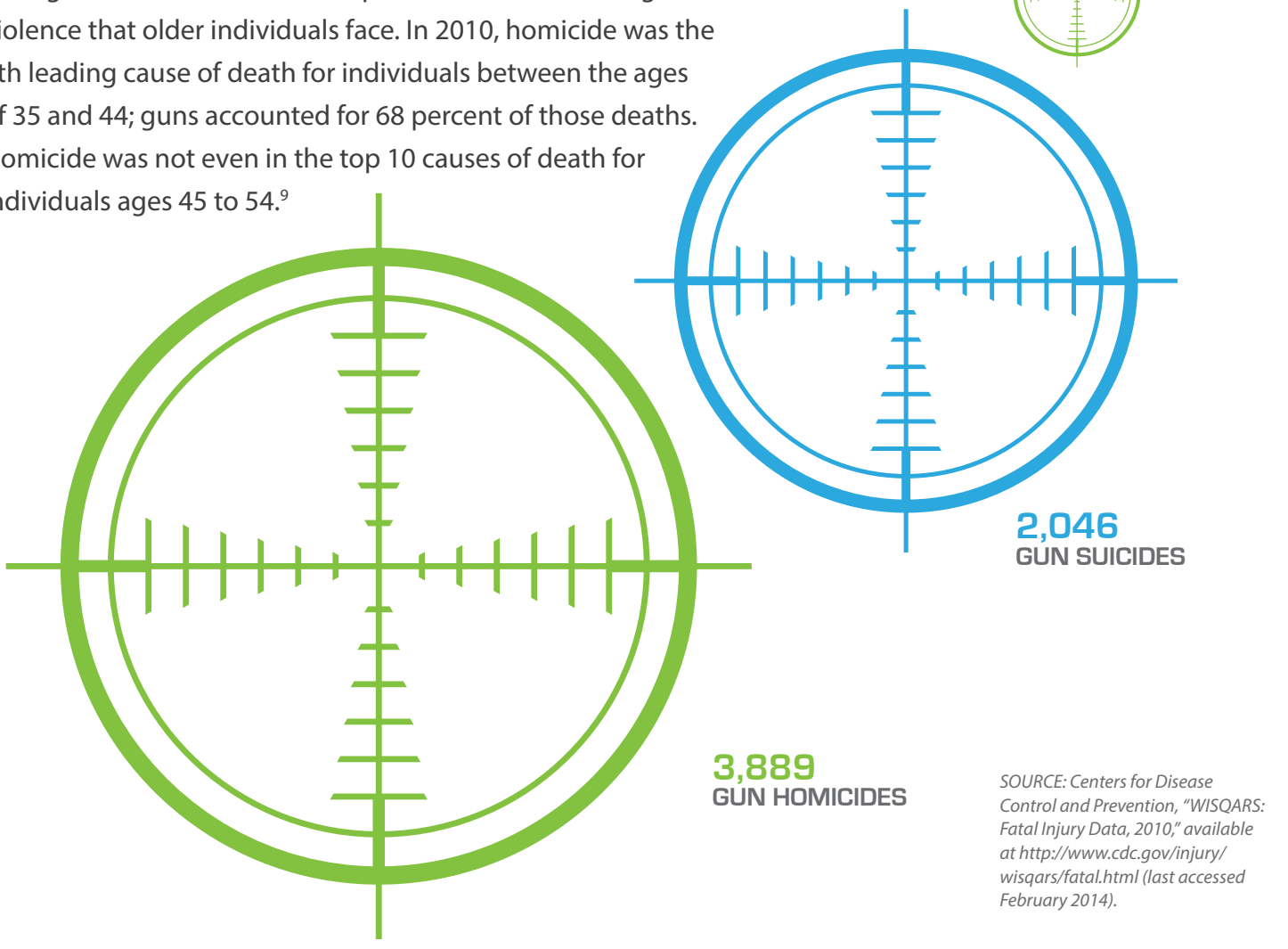
Every year, about 2.5 million Americans die from all causes, and not surprisingly, very few of them—less than 3 percent—are under the age of 25.[6] But when you consider gun deaths, a different pattern emerges: 21 percent of individuals killed by guns in 2010 were under the age of 25—totaling more than 6,500 deaths.[7]



SOURCE: Center for American Progress analysis based on data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2010).

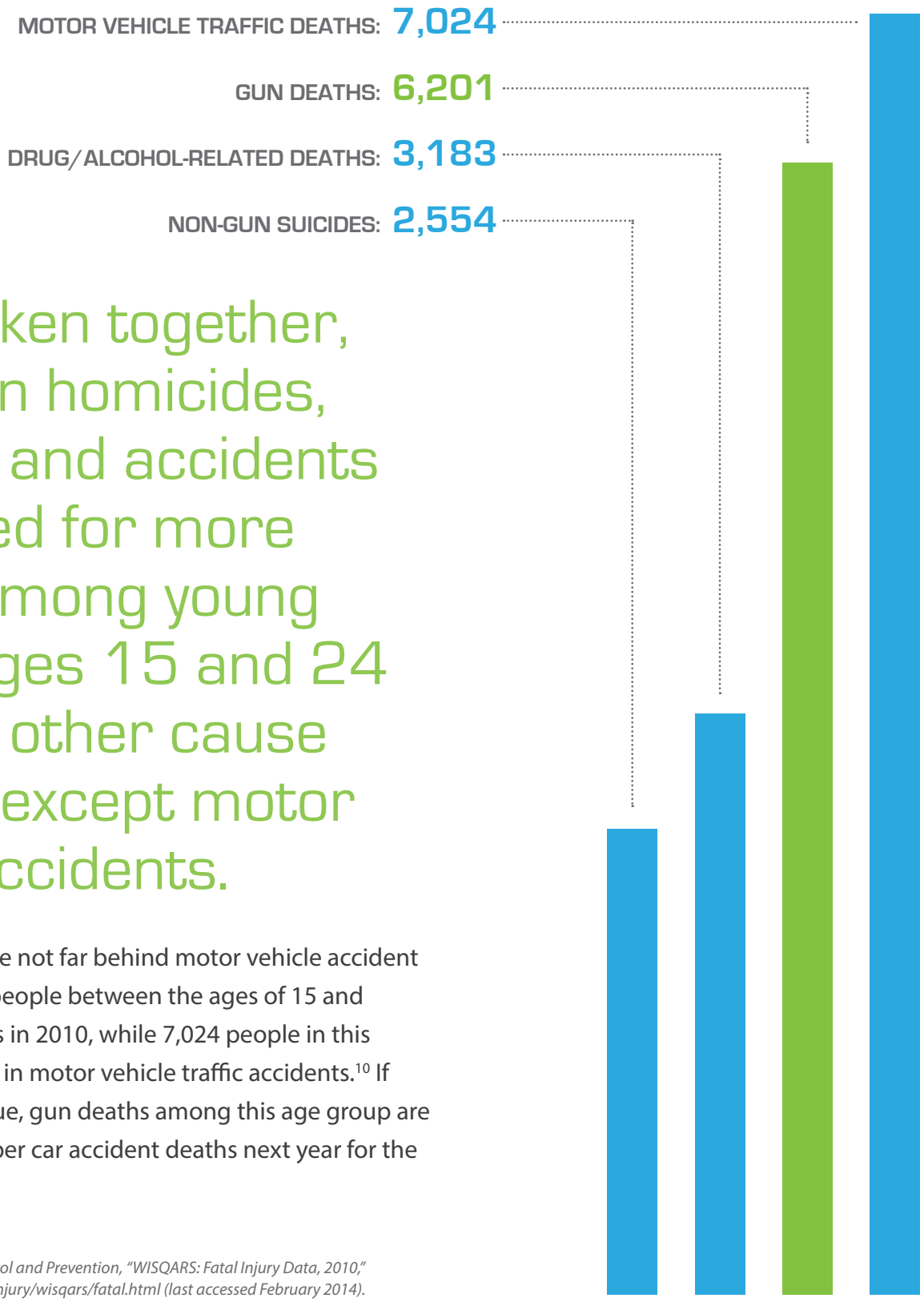
In 2010, the second most frequent cause of death for people between the ages of 15 and 24 was homicide, and 83 percent of those homicides were committed with a gun.

The third highest cause of death for this age group in 2010 was suicide, and again, guns played a large role, accounting for a plurality—45 percent—of those deaths. In total, guns were the cause of death for 6,201 young people ages 15 to 24 during 2010.[8] This stands in sharp contrast to the risk of gun violence that older individuals face. In 2010, homicide was the 5th leading cause of death for individuals between the ages of 35 and 44; guns accounted for 68 percent of those deaths. Homicide was not even in the top 10 causes of death for individuals ages 45 to 54.[9]



SOURCE: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "WISQARS: Fatal Injury Data, 2010," available at http://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/fatal.html (last accessed February 2014).

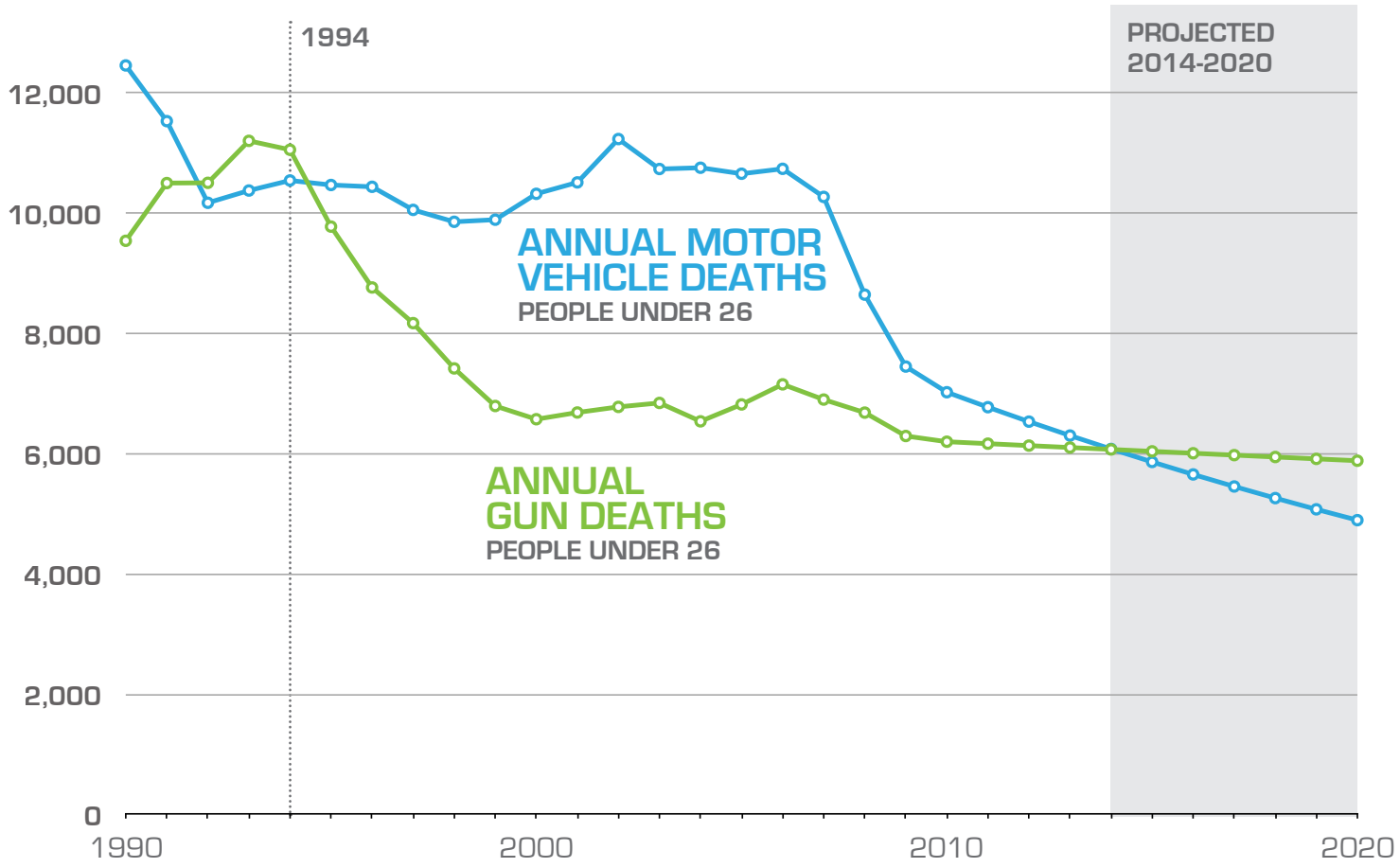
DEATHS AMONG AMERICANS AGES 15-24 (2010)

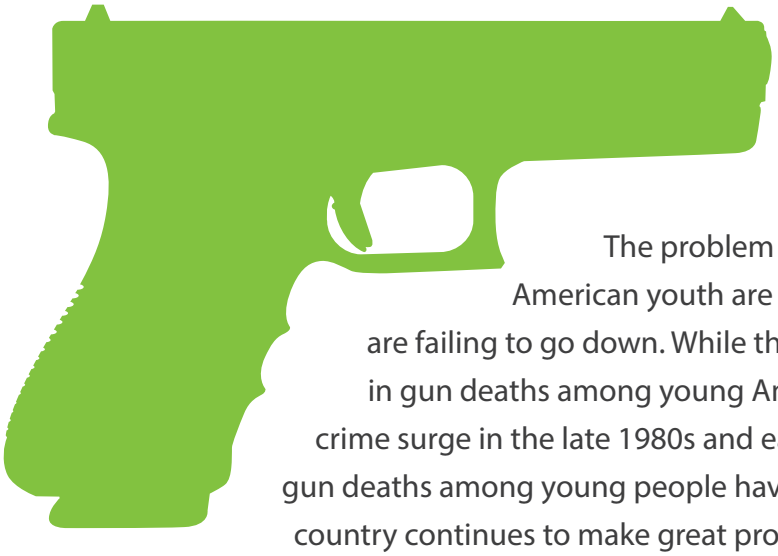


When taken together, these gun homicides, suicides, and accidents accounted for more deaths among young people ages 15 and 24 than any other cause of death except motor vehicle accidents.

Indeed, gun deaths are not far behind motor vehicle accident deaths: 6,201 young people between the ages of 15 and 24 were killed by guns in 2010, while 7,024 people in this age group were killed in motor vehicle traffic accidents.[10] If current trends continue, gun deaths among this age group are projected to outnumber car accident deaths next year for the first time since 1994.[11]

SOURCE: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "WISQARS: Fatal Injury Data, 2010," available at http://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/fatal.html (last accessed February 2014).





SOURCE: Center for American Progress analysis based on data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2010).

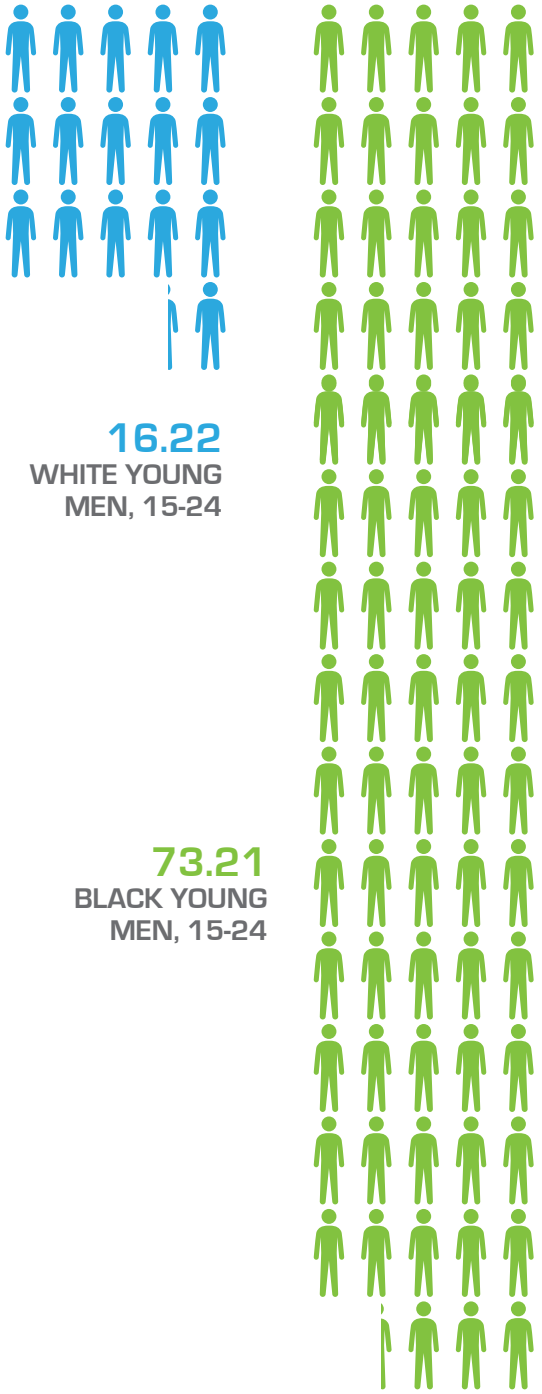
The problem is not that gun deaths among American youth are going up, but rather that they are failing to go down. While there was a significant decrease in gun deaths among young Americans following the violent crime surge in the late 1980s and early 1990s, in the past decade, gun deaths among young people have barely declined, even as our country continues to make great progress in reducing car accident deaths. In fact, the car accident death rate among people under age 25 is dropping 7 times faster than the gun death rate.[12] Given this trend, gun deaths are on track to surpass motor vehicle traffic deaths for this age group in 2015.

Among young people, the risk of gun violence falls disproportionately on African Americans, particularly black males.

While 13 percent of Americans are black,[13] in 2010, 65 percent of gun murder victims between the ages of 15 and 24 were black. Forty-two percent of the total gun deaths of individuals in this age group were of black males.[14] Young black men in this age group are killed by a gun at a rate that is 4.5 times higher than their white counterparts.[15]

YOUNG MEN KILLED BY GUNS

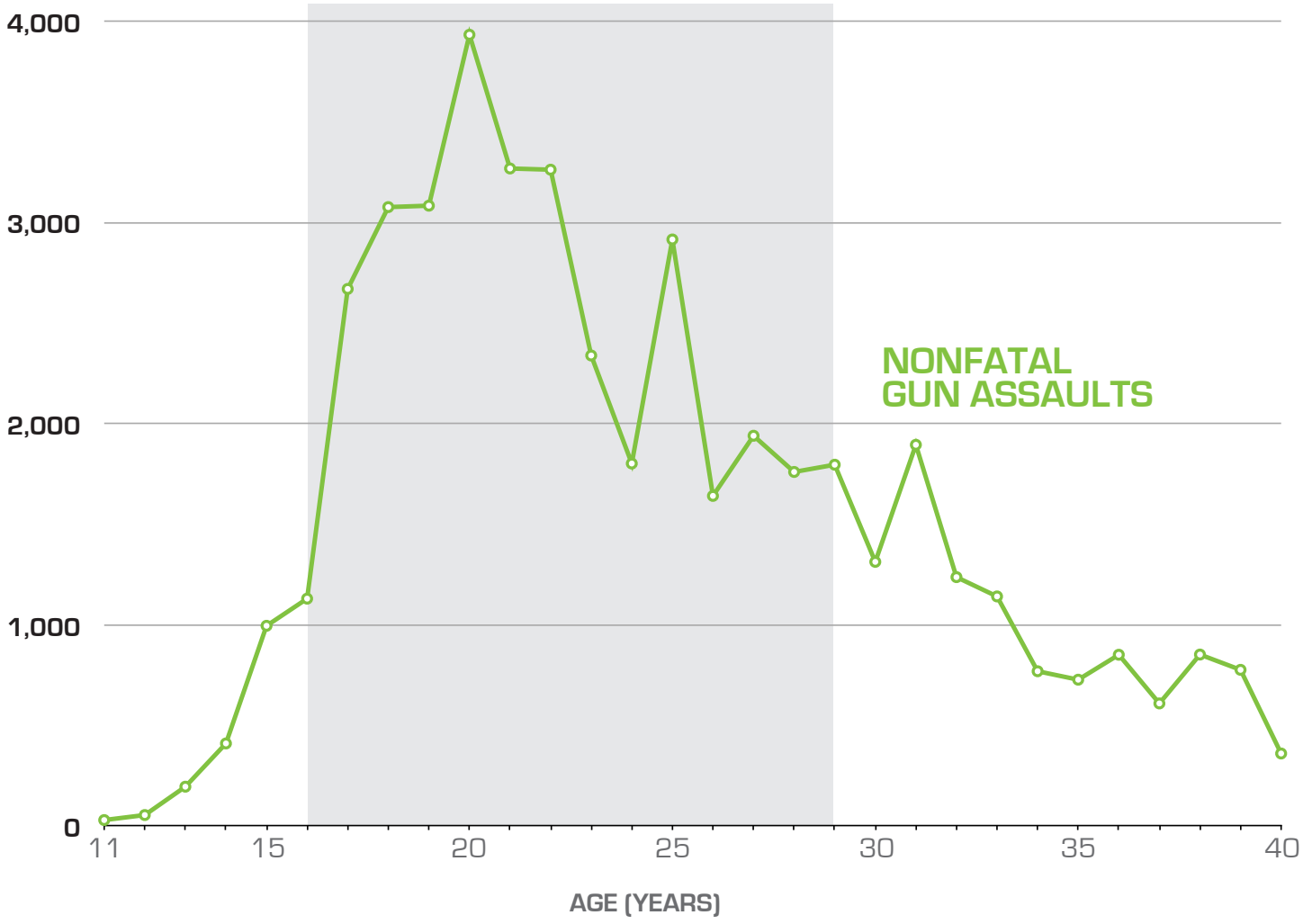
(RATE PER 100,000 INHABITANTS)



SOURCE: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "WISQARS: Fatal Injury Data, 2010," available at http://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/fatal.html (last accessed February 2014).

A person's risk of being shot in the United States is greatest between the ages of 17 and 29.

In addition to gun homicides, a large number of young people are victims of nonfatal gun assaults. In 2010, 5,494 individuals in this age range were murdered with a gun,[16] and another 33,519 young people in this category were intentionally shot but survived their injuries.[17]

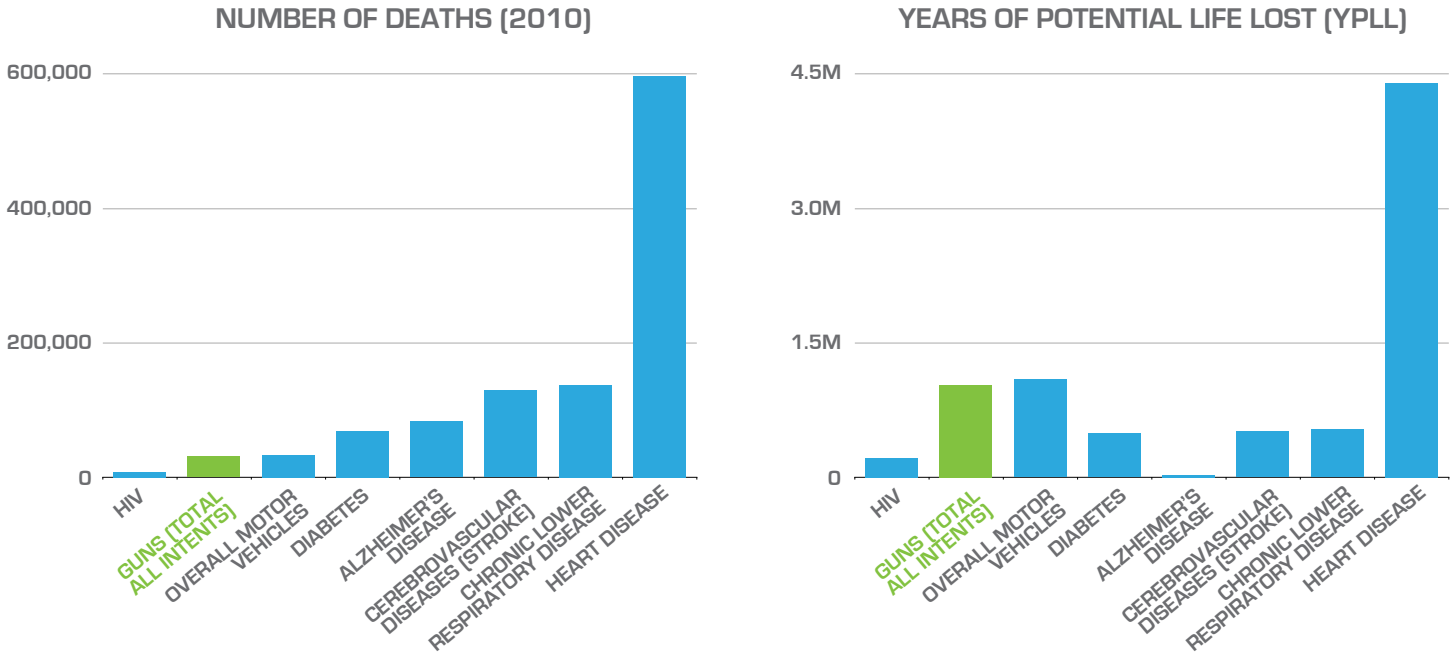


SOURCE: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "WISQARS: Nonfatal Injury Data (2010)," available at http://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/nonfatal.html (last accessed February 2014).

But looking at the number of gun deaths in the United States only tells part of the story. While the raw number of young people killed by guns is staggering, the impact of gun violence on society is drawn into even sharper relief when considered in terms of years of life lost by gun deaths. This measure considers not just the overall number of deaths attributed to various causes—such as disease, car accidents, and gun violence—but also takes into account the relative age of individuals who died as a result of these causes to provide another measure of the impact on society of each cause of death.[18]

Many diseases cause more deaths each year than gun violence, which could lead one to conclude that the more urgent public health need is to address those causes. But when these causes of death, such as heart disease, cancer, and Alzheimer's disease, are measured in terms of years of potential life lost, their impact on society is reduced compared to gun deaths. The reason for this is simple: Gun violence disproportionately affects young people, who are stricken down decades before individuals who die from other causes. In contrast, life-threatening diseases tend to cause death in individuals who are much older and therefore result in fewer years of potential life lost. Public health researchers have a measure of calculating this pernicious impact of diseases and other causes of death that disproportionately affect the young: years of potential life lost, or YPLL.

More than 1 million years of potential life are lost due to gun deaths each year. These are years of life that young people killed by guns would have achieved educational milestones, entered the workforce, had families, and contributed to the social, economic, and cultural advancement of society in untold ways—all erased by gunfire.



SOURCE: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics, Vital Statistics System (2010).

Young people are not only affected by gun violence as victims, young people commit violent gun crimes in high numbers. The easy access youths have to guns across the country creates the opportunity for otherwise nonfatal confrontations between young people to become fatal. This means that incidents that would have ended as simple fistfights or a trip to the hospital end instead with a trip to the morgue. When a young person pulls the trigger, two lives are often changed forever: the victim and the perpetrator. While we rarely devote sustained thought or attention to the impact of gun violence on the individuals who perpetrate these crimes, it is worth considering the effect that involvement in such crimes has on the young people who perpetrate them and on society as a whole.

SOURCE: Federal Bureau of Investigation, "2010 Uniform Crime Reports: Arrests," available at http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/crime-in-the-u.s/2012/crime-in-the-u.s.-2012/tables/38tabledatadecoverviewpdf (last accessed February 2014).

Ashley Nellis, "The Lives of Juvenile Lifers: Findings from a National Survey" (Washington: The Sentencing Project, 2012), p. 33, available at http://sentencingproject.org/doc/publications/jj_The_Lives_of_Juvenile_Lifers.pdf.

Young people commit gun offenses in high numbers. In 2012, 75,049 young people between the ages of 10 and 29 were arrested for weapons offenses, such as illegally carrying or possessing a firearm. This group made up 65 percent of all arrests for weapons offenses that year.[19] In 2011, 4,998 individuals between the ages of 12 and 24 were arrested for homicides, and 3,490 of those murders, or 70 percent, involved guns.[20]

Little can compare to the suffering of the family of a gun homicide victim. But it is worth considering the effect of this crime on the perpetrator, as well as the victim, as we all bear the costs of both ends of the equation when it comes to fatal gunfire. A 20 year-old convicted of a gun murder is likely to be sentenced to a long term of incarceration, often life in prison in most federal and state courts[21]—and perhaps appropriately so. But the cost of this imprisonment is staggering: incarcerating a 20 year old for life will cost taxpayers roughly $2 million.[22] And this accounts only for the actual costs of incarceration and does not include other costs to society, such as lost productivity and tax revenue, had the 20 year old avoided a life in prison.

Even nonfatal gun crimes devastatingly affect victims and perpetrators alike. As an initial matter, many juveniles who commit such crimes are treated as adults and prosecuted in the adult criminal justice system. In every state, a person over the age of 17 will be prosecuted as an adult, and in 10 states that age is lowered to 15 or 16.[23] In many states, individuals charged with the most serious offenses, such as murder and attempted murder, will be prosecuted as adults regardless of their age.[24] Once a person is convicted of a serious crime, their life is affected in numerous and often permanent ways.

For those convicted of the most serious crimes, young people face long periods of incarceration in adult correctional facilities.[25] Serving such sentences has a lasting negative impact, even if the offender is eventually released. Young offenders will often be housed in adult prisons, where they are commingled with adult offenders and face a heightened risk of assault and suicide.[26] Many facilities do not offer adequate educational and rehabilitation programs for young offenders, and the facilities are often located far from the offenders' families, making it difficult to maintain a connection to family and friends.[27]

The effects of felony conviction on young people that fall short of long-term incarceration are no less devastating. In many states, individuals convicted of felonies are denied the opportunity to participate in some of the basic functions of citizenship, such as the right to vote and jury service. A felony conviction is also a frequent barrier to employment, housing, public assistance, and student loans.[28]

This generation of young Americans is losing far too many of its members to gun violence, both as victims and as perpetrators. The young people who are convicted of serious felony offenses and receive long terms of incarceration as the result of bad decisions that are exacerbated by easy access to guns represent a significant loss to society. Just as the years of potential life lost because of gun death is a drain on society, so is the potential extinguished or dimmed by involvement in the criminal justice system.

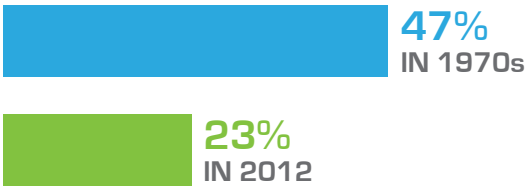
Young people are not ignorant about the toll of gun violence on their generation. Indeed, young people today choose to own guns in much lower numbers than their counterparts in previous generations. Data from the General Social Survey, a public-opinion survey conducted every two years, found that household gun-ownership rates among people under age 30 fell to 23 percent in 2012. This is down from a high of 47 percent in the 1970s and well below the overall household gun-ownership rate of 34 percent.[29]

Additionally, Millennials are now increasingly expressing concern about gun violence. A 2013 poll commissioned by the Center for American Progress, Generation Progress, and Mayors Against Illegal Guns found that 70 percent of respondents under the age of 30 agreed that "the gun culture in our society has gotten out of control," and 52 percent said that they feel safer in communities with fewer guns.[30]

Part of this concern about guns may come from personal experience with gun violence. Remarkably, 30 percent of people under the age of 30 reported having been personally affected or knowing someone who has been affected by gun violence, and 60 percent expressed concern that gun violence may personally affect them or their communities in the future.[31] These numbers were even higher among young African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans: Collectively, 73 percent of respondents from those racial and ethnic groups reported being worried about being personally affected by gun violence in the future.[32]

These views about and experiences with the gun culture in the United States by younger Americans have translated to high levels of support for specific policies intended to reduce gun violence and keep guns out of the hands of dangerous people. The 2013 poll found that while the proposal to require background checks for all gun sales is supported by the vast majority of Americans over the age of 30 – 86 percent said they supported such a law – this policy is even more popular among Americans aged 18 to 29, with 92 percent saying they supported this measure.[33]

PERCENT OF PEOPLE UNDER 30 WHO RESPONDED "YES" TO OWNING A GUN



60%
OF PEOPLE UNDER 30 EXPRESSED CONCERN THAT GUN VIOLENCE MAY PERSONALLY AFFECT THEM

73%
OF AFRICAN AMERICANS, LATINOS, AND ASIAN AMERICANS EXPRESSED CONCERN THAT GUN VIOLENCE MAY PERSONALLY AFFECT THEM

SOURCE: Sabrina Tavernise and Robert Gebeloff, "Share of Homes with Guns Shows 4-Decade Decline," The New York Times, March 9, 2013, available at http://nyti.ms/1nQGgrQ

GBA Strategies and Chesapeake Beach Consulting,"Millennials Say Gun Culture Has Gotten Out of Control" (2013), available at http://www.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Natlguns13m1-041613.pdf.

The United States pays a high price for its incredibly high rates of gun violence—by one measure, roughly $174 billion in 2010 alone.[34] But even more important is the cost of this violence in terms of lives lost and communities devastated. Right now there are roughly 21 million high-school-aged teenagers in the United States between the ages of 14 and 18.[35] If current trends continue, in the next year, nearly 1,700 of them will be killed by guns, and more than 17,000 people in this age group will die because of gunfire in the next 10 years.[36]

American youth deserve more than this. Young people must make their voices heard in demanding that their leaders take action to ensure that all young people, in every community, are able to live and thrive without fear of preventable gun violence.

AUTHORS

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11. Ibid. The comparison of gun deaths versus car accident deaths differs when you consider all age groups, rather than just young people. While gun deaths among people under age 25 briefly exceeded motor vehicle traffic deaths for three years during the high-crime era of the early 1990s, when considering the entire U.S. population, car accident deaths have exceeded gun deaths since at least 1950. Garen J. Wintemute, "Responding to the Crisis of Firearm Violence in the United States," JAMA Internal Medicine 173 (9) (2013), available at http://archinte.jamanetwork.com/article.aspx?articleid=1661391. Gun deaths are projected to exceed car deaths among the general population in 2015 as well. Chris Christoff and Ilan Kolet, "American Gun Deaths to Exceed Traffic Fatalities by 2015," Bloomberg News, December 19, 2012, available at http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-12-19/american-gun-deaths-to-exceed-traffic-fatalities-by-2015.html.

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24. Ibid.

25. Nellis, "The Lives of Juvenile Lifers," p. 19. In *Graham v. Florida*, 560 U.S. 48 (2010), the Supreme Court held that individuals cannot be sentenced to life without parole for non-homicide offenses committed when they were juveniles. While this ruling helps ensure that many juvenile offenders are not subject to lifetime incarceration, many young people who commit serious crimes, including gun crimes, continue to face long terms of imprisonment.

26. Nellis, "The Lives of Juvenile Lifers," p. 19.

27. Ibid., pp. 23–25.

28. For information about the collateral consequences of criminal convictions, see The Sentencing Project, "Collateral Consequences Publications," available at http://www.sentencingproject.org/template/page.cfm?id=141 (last accessed February 2014).

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