

Surviving the Loss

—Gun Violence Survivors struggle to cope and take action

By Shihao Feng

On a sunny winter Saturday in Jamaica, Queens, about 20 people cram into Carolyn Dixon's office: neighbors from Jamaica, visitors from all boroughs, nearly all survivors of gun violence. Dixon's non-profit organization, Where Do We Go From Here, has invited them for lunch. Since August 2021, Dixon, who lost her 24-year-old son over a parking dispute in 2014, has been organizing various community events for others who lost loved ones to gun violence.



Figure 1 Pictures of gun violence victims in Jamaica, Queens on the wall of Dixon's office.

People occupy chairs and a sofa around Dixon's desk and chat. Volunteers bring in fragrant fried chicken and mashed potatoes from local eateries. The sunlight through the glass doors illuminates photos of Jamaica gun violence victims, labeled with their birth and death dates. Cody Cash Khan, born in 1991 and shot in 2012. Jan Michael Harris, born in 1986 and shot in 2020. NeShawn Plummer, shot in 2015 when he was only 16.

Though it's freezing outside, Dixon, 63, wears only a black short-sleeve T-shirt in the warm room, and a black head wrap. She doesn't stop working, pushing a box of masks by foot to the middle of the office and distributing the mask boxes to everyone.

“Everyone here is a survivor,” she says, some she connected with through her non-profit work, others are friends and neighbors of many years.

Family members and friends of those injured or killed, also known as gun violence survivors, find their needs easily overlooked. However, the bullet that killed or injured people is also the weapon that harms people related to victims, as they suffer profound grief for years.

Pamela Gentry, 67, wears a red hat and a black shirt with her son’s picture and name; he was shot dead in Schenectady in May, 2020. She asks other survivors about the monument to gun violence victims in Washington D.C. “Gun Violence Project Memorial,” someone tells her.

Gentry writes it down. “We should find a driver to take us all there,” she says.

She walks into the healing room, a separate small space Dixon often uses for private therapy sessions. Two other survivors, also mothers who lost children, are there talking, apart from the crowd. Once Gentry introduces herself, the three women start to exchange dates and details of the incidents that changed their lives.

“That was my daughter, the one that got shot at six o'clock in the morning.” Janifer Taylor says.

“Couple weeks ago?” asks Robin Williams, sitting beside her.

“Oh no, not a couple of weeks. She was shot on December 17.”

“This is my son,” says Williams, showing her son’s picture on her red shirt. “He was the first murder of New York City in 2021.” She adds, “The next day would have been my son's 21st birthday.”

Gentry shares what she just told everybody else at the lunch about her son Fred Gentry. “Fred was born on Nelson Mandela's birthday, and he died on Malcolm X's Day.”

Gentry, Williams and Taylor lost their children in 2020, early in 2021, and at the end of 2022. The pain resists, though it’s different depending on how fresh the memory is.

“I have a life-size poster of him in his room that somebody blew up for me. And I touched that poster from head to toe,” Williams says. “Every day, after he died, I would go in his room.”

For Taylor, it’s been less than two months since her daughter was shot on the way to work on an ordinary morning, and the flashbacks stay with her. “I see her lying in the street,” Taylor says, “every time I walk out that door.”

Williams tries to comfort Taylor by describing the recovery process as a “coping mechanism,” as she has learned through the past year. “We will never forget. We will never forget,” Williams says. “But we have to learn how to cope.”

In 2021, New York City suffered the highest incidence of gun violence in the past 10 years, as well as the highest death toll, according to the NYPD Shooting Dataset.

In 2021, shooting incidents totaled 2011, more than double the number in 2019. In addition, 428 people died from shootings in the past year, which is 2.3 times the 2019 death toll in 2019. The latest spike of gun violence started with the pandemic, and has continued for two years. From the start of 2022 to mid-February alone, over 37 deaths were caused by gun violence, an increase of 15% over the same period in 2021.

“People thought once society reopens, people get vaccinated and start going back to work, kids go back to school... everything will go back to normal,” says Christopher Herrmann, who teaches law and police science at CUNY John Jay College of Criminal Justice. “But the reality is, we're still at that really, really high level.”

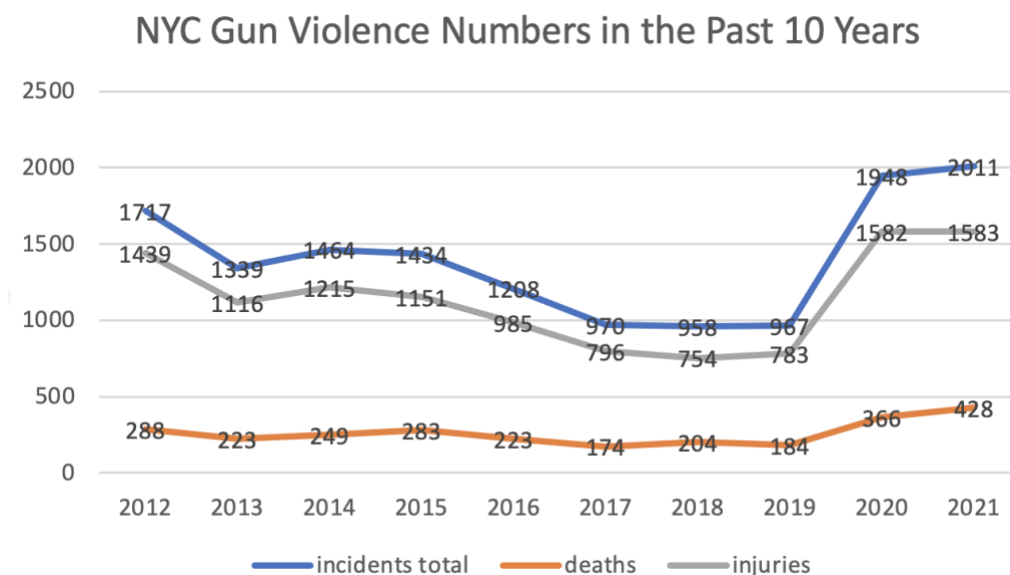


Figure 2 Source: NYPD Shooting Incident Dataset (Historic).

“Our brains are not able to work in the same way and there are symptoms on top of grieving,” explains Steven Marans, a psychoanalyst and professor of psychiatry at Yale University School of Medicine who specializes in the treatment of post-traumatic disorders in children. The immediate aftermath of losing a beloved one can cause “emotional dysregulation.” In a sudden, unanticipated death from shooting, “the connection to the immediate routines of daily life is significantly disrupted,” says Marans.

He describes the traumatic experience as a “double whammy.” Gun violence survivors often face two psychological challenges at once, grief itself and traumatic dysregulation. The latter could leave survivors feeling “easily startled, anxious, jumpy, constantly hypervigilant, withdrawn and unable to connect to the world,” along with physiological impacts.

The way to “heal” from the traumatic experience is to negotiate the loss and the grief associated with it until survivors can better achieve mastery over the symptoms, Marans says. People can recover from their post-traumatic symptoms with the appropriate help, but “healing” is an unspecific term to describe this process.

Lashon Stockton, lost her 23-year-old son Jahade Chancey, a promising rap producer on Staten Island, in January 2021. She met Dixon a few weeks ago at a mayor’s roundtable with the Gun Violence Survivors Advisory Council, established to advise government agencies on services for survivors. Stockton, 52, didn’t participate in advocacy work until lately, but she has come to Dixon’s lunch today.

She wears a black down jacket and carries a black handbag. Her eyes look a bit tired after traveling from Staten Island to Jamaica. Reclining on a chair near the door to the healing room, Stockton speaks quickly, in a low voice, seeming to withhold strong emotions. She pauses between responses, falling into brief reflection.

Stockton wasn’t able to be this composed last year when her loss was fresher. “I couldn’t say, ‘My son was murdered’ without crying,” Stockton says. “That first sentence would break me down.”

The incident was a “robbery gone wrong.” Three suspects plotted to rob Chancey’s recording studio, but they didn’t get in. Prosecutors said that as they fled, Darren Boyd, 30, shot Chancey in the back through a window, a fatal wound.

At the time, Stockton was at her daughter’s house, several blocks from the studio. When police called that her son was shot, she went straight to the hospital where Chancey was pronounced dead.

“The past year has been a pure hell,” Stockton says, adding that she’s not the person she used to be. She has isolated herself from most family members, she says, because they say she’s grieving the wrong way.

For 15 years, Stockton has worked as a case planner with Safe Horizon, a counseling center in Brooklyn that works to reduce trauma symptoms among survivors of crime and abuse — exactly what she needs right now. Stockton has dealt with many domestic violence victims and gun violence survivors, but never thought that she would be the one in need of such counseling. “I would tell my clients the same thing I’m telling myself,” she says.

She understands that “survivors don’t need opinions from others, sometimes they just need their support system, friends and family, to listen to them.”

“You can’t tell a mother how to grieve for their child,” says Stockton. “You can get all the sessions in therapy, lay down on the couch, but that’s not going to help you deal with what you’re dealing with.”

Unlike many other gun violence cases that have gone cold, meaning that the police haven’t made a breakthrough in the investigation for months or even years, Stockton felt “blessed” that her son’s case was solved a week after the incident. The three suspects, arrested within six months, all have been charged with murder, along with other charges.

As though most courts in New York have held online hearings since the Covid-19 pandemic, Stockton was able to attend every in-person hearing on Staten Island. There she would greet the judge by name, address other support staff, and see the suspects in person. “I want her to see that my son had a family that loved him,” says Stockton of the judge. “That he wasn’t just somebody who people will say, ‘Oh, he deserved it.’” Fighting for justice for her son has become Stockton’s main goal right now. She wants the maximum jail time for the three suspects, a minimum of 25 years.

Chancey, a known rap producer on Staten Island, had been into music since he was a child, and was finally getting the chance to do what he loved. “He just wanted to start his own business,” says Stockton, referring to her son’s studio. “He started it, but he just didn’t finish it.”

A year after the shooting, Stockton held a memorial for her son at the south beach on Staten Island. Friends and family, and the detective responsible for Chancey’s case, came to honor his life. “It was peaceful,” Stockton says. She played a song called “If I Would Have Known.” The lyrics say, “If I would have known/ That you wouldn’t be here anymore/ I would have made the moments last a little longer/ Cuz now I’m alone /And you’re just a memory in my mind...”

“Deal with it in one day at a time.” What Stockton used to tell her clients is also what she tells herself now.

Not until recent years did the public health community start to call for more research on gun violence. “We are in a moment of educating the U.S. public and policymakers that this is a much bigger issue than just the law enforcement community,” says Charles Branas, chair of epidemiology at the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University. Scholars in the field of public health have responded to gun violence as an “analogy to a communicable disease that passes from person to person,” as the Cure Violence program, a successful gun violence prevention program using public health methods, described in its [annual review](#).

Branas says the same epidemiologic methods used to prevent COVID can prevent gun violence. It was epidemiologists, he says, who first established the link between possession of a firearm and the risk of being shot. “The same epidemiologic modeling that we used to determine the spread of COVID can be also used to interrupt the contagions,” he says.

However, gun violence research remains poorly funded in the United States. Although the Dickey Amendment has prevented the C.D.C. from spending federal funds to research gun violence for nearly 25 years, Congress restored funding to gun violence studies in 2019, splitting \$25 million every year between C.D.C. and the National Institutes of Health (NIH). Baras says that \$25 million is, nonetheless, a minor number compared to investment in other public health issues like HIV and drunk driving.

Herrmann, the criminologist from John Jay College, shares similar insights of the “chain effect” in gun violence by referring to a shooting in Chicago in July, when [15 people, ages 21 to 65, were shot outside a funeral home](#). He and a fellow scholar traced the 15 shootings over four weeks and found that eventually, nearly 120 people were shot as a result of the initial crime.

The cause for optimism, therefore, is the significance of preventing the first shot. “If we can prevent the one shooting, then you can prevent the additional eight or nine shootings that would happen as a result,” says Herrmann.

Gun violence interruption groups, who have unique access to communities, have become a major effort to stop the spread of violence on a local level. Baras says gun violence interrupters, often survivors themselves, “have experienced the violence firsthand and are able to ask people to put the gun down.” Other survivors’ organizations like Moms Demand Action, a national volunteer movement aiming at reducing gun violence, were able to help promote gun control on policy level. “We wouldn’t have the \$25 million if groups like Moms Demand hadn’t been active,” says Baras. “Parents and mothers vote, they have a strong voice.”

At Dixon's luncheon, Beyonce's song "Give Me Some" is playing on Tik Tok as people in the video do hip-hop dance moves —squats — in all kinds of ordinary places: on the road, on the stairs, even while taking a Covid-19 PCR test. Dixon and Natasha Christopher, a board member of the Gun Violence Survivors Advisory Council, take the initiative, dancing in the office, crouching along with the music, and rising back up.

As more survivors join the improvised dance, the luncheon feels like a party. Volunteer dancers immerse themselves in the moves, while the others laugh and cheer and some shoot videos with their phones.



Figure 3 Carolyn Dixon and other gun violence survivors dancing in her office. Feb 5, 2022. Photo/Shihao Feng

"Ladies... get some cakes in there," Dixon says when she rests on a sofa, breathless after the dance. "I'm done, I'm damn near 63 years old, I can't..."

"We have a lot of reasons to cry, right?" says Natash Christopher. "So we do find reasons to laugh."

Immediately after Dixon's son Darrell Lynch was murdered, Dixon grabbed the shooter's gun and shot back at him. She recalls being sedated at the hospital overnight, feeling traumatized and hysterical. She remembers asking her mother afterwards, "Where do we go from here," which became the name of her organization.

Dixon took the position of hospital responder at Life Camp, a Jamaica-based organization supporting youth and families impacted by gun violence. "I understood that the survivors needed more focus on getting what they need," says Dixon, adding that at Life Camp, she first imagined establishing her own non-profit for gun violence survivors.

Dixon says it's not difficult for survivors to open up to her. "Once that trust is there, I have no problem with a mother or father opening up, because we're experiencing the same pain."

"My biggest challenge is trying not to relax to my own feelings," says Dixon. "Not being triggered — to go back to the feelings I had when my son was murdered."

She knows that survivors are progressing in their recovery if there's a change in life for positive. "You may have a survivor who says, I'm not gonna do anything in memory of my child," says Dixon. "But then the next year, they call in and say, you know what, I'm going to have a memorial."

Dixon's office doesn't usually draw such a big crowd. As a small community-based organization, Where Do We Go From Here doesn't have staff other than Dixon. She pulls manpower and resources from the neighborhood, for the neighborhood.

On Christmas Eve, 2021, her desk was stacked with toys — from Spiderman action figures to a princess kit -- for families of gun violence victims and other community members, most of the toys donated by Moms Demand Action.

About an hour before the toy distribution began, Dixon and two friends were unpacking the toys and labeling each by gender and age. "I will put this as boys, one plus," said Marie Delus, referring to a box of wooden blocks. Delus is also a gun violence survivor, and she leads the New York group of Moms Demand Action.

Parents and children lined up outside and came in one by one to choose their toys. A little boy checked the gift table and selected a racecar, turning to Delus' camera spontaneously for a photo session. "You guys know what to do," Delus laughed.

Delus told her Facebook Live streaming audience that they were not only receiving people in the office, but also taking calls from survivors who couldn't show up in person. They'd keep the toys they want for their children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews, she explained.

The main activity that Where Do We Go From Here offers gun violence survivors is the healing circle. Survivors sit in a circle, meditate, and talk about where they are in the healing process. They are also planning a retreat in the Pocono Mountains in Pennsylvania next month, where they can "be loose, and cry, and talk about what they're going through," Dixon says.

The organization supports about 30 survivors. “Every day. They walk in, they call me,” says Dixon, pointing out that the spike of shootings in the neighborhood has increased her workload. Still, she answers her phone 24/7. “It’s very crucial,” Dixon says. “You never know if they’re suicidal, or what’s going through their mind.”

In 2021, 15 people died from shooting in Precincts 103 and 113, covering most of Jamaica. The number for all of 2020 was 12, according to NYPD Shooting Data.

“When you see people getting shot in broad daylight, and you hear shootings at 6 in the morning,” says Dixon. “When every time you look at the news or get a new alert from Citizen, shootings all day, every day in different areas of South Jamaica -- that’s when we have a problem.”

Linda Brown, her longtime neighbor and friend, was also helping with the toy giveaway. A fourth-grade teacher at a local charter school, she has a look that many people say belies her age: 50. With her long dreadlocks and reddish-brown jacket, she talked in a gentle tone.



Figure 4 From left to the right, Marie Delus and Linda Brown and are preparing for the toy distribution. Dec 24, 2021.
Photo/Shihao Feng

On August 21, 2019, Brown's son Gregory Haskins, a close friend of Dixon's third son, was shot dead outside his apartment building at Sutphin Boulevard and Shore Avenue, barely a minute's walk from Dixon's office. "He walked out the house, turned the corner, said a few words to a neighbor." Then Brown heard the gunshot, but didn't think it was nearby until her two nieces shouted from another room, "Greg got shot!"

"All within four minutes of leaving the house," Brown said. "From my room door, I sort of ran out, I ran out to..." With uncontrollable sadness, Brown had to pause and rush to the restroom to compose herself.

She jokingly called Haskins entitled, a "spoiled brat" who would make and play music at home, and dance into the wall while teaching a cousin "getting lite," a dance move that originated in Harlem in the early 2000s. "Happy, serious. Don't play with me, playful." Haskins could get mad when he encountered obstacles, but "once he gets his way, you don't even remember being upset because now he's happy he got his way."

He was just 25. "Everybody liked him. That's why when he got killed, nobody can believe it," Brown said.

The deadly shooting left a lot of unanswered questions. Calling the detectives on Haskins' case every two weeks since, Brown hasn't waited for significant updates about the investigation. Piecing together what she has heard, Brown believes that Haskins knew the gunman. "What did he SAY to make somebody want to kill him?" Brown still wondered. "Even the detective was like, we can't even tell you."

Haskins was a good brother, close to the children in the family, she recalled. "Greg was the one that played with them, tossed them around to do stuff, cooked with them and worked on the schoolwork," said Brown. After his death, one of Brown's nephew's Christmas requests was a photo portrait of Haskins like the one he'd seen at Brown's apartment. "He's 10. He wants a picture of his cousin (who) passed away." Besides grappling with her own sorrows as the mother, Brown says that dealing with kids' and friends' emotions is also hard.

To help raise her youngest sister's four kids after she passed away, Brown moved from Long Island to Jamaica with her own three children in 1998. Despite her concerns about an increasingly unsafe neighborhood, Brown stayed in Jamaica to keep the seven children together and raise them.

"I never wanted to have kids here. I never wanted to raise kids for the same reason," she confessed. Brown said, "I chose my sister's kid, in a situation of trying to keep them together."

Though shootings plague many neighborhoods in New York City, the state's strict gun laws mean that most guns don't originate here. By 2018, New York City had the lowest gun-ownership rate of any large city in the nation, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported.

A Journal of Urban Health study analyzing the flow of illegal guns to New York City found that 48.6% of traced guns originated from "first retail sales at I-95 (Interstate 95 highway) in southern states with comparatively permissive gun laws," including Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia. 10.4% of traced guns came from Pennsylvania, and 13.3% from elsewhere in New York State.

That's why gun trafficking has become one of the greatest concerns for advocates and activists. "I'm wishing that they pass some strict laws on trafficking, because that's how we're getting our guns," Dixon said.

Last year, the federal Department of Justice announced [a new gun-trafficking crackdown](#) to combat growing crimes in five major cities including New York City, but [this effort didn't curb the increasing gun violence in 2022](#).

At the same time, the consequence of even one shooting feels overwhelming. When shooters grab guns, "they don't think about everything else that goes with it, just their satisfaction of killing somebody for bragging rights or whatever," said Brown. "Whatever they got taken away, we can never get back."

Gun violence prevention and gun safety programs across New York City reflect an imbalance, in which not all neighborhoods in need of interventions receive funds and attention. Community partners of large-scale violence prevention efforts like Cure Violence and Project Safe Neighborhood are usually non-profit organizations that have to raise funds and reach beneficiaries on their own. Survivors are easily overlooked.

"A lot of the work that's being done is concentrated on violence organizations, which are violence interrupters," said Delus. "They're not really concentrating on survivors."

Since Dixon's organization can't afford to hire staff, she runs the office mainly on her own with friends and volunteers like Delus and Brown. She got the initial funding from a program of Mayor's office. Now, she has been running late for the \$3000 monthly rent since November. Expecting more funding to come from various grants she applied for non-profit organizations, she wishes she could bring on a "data person" who could quantify the office's work with the survivors. "How many families we assist, whether it's getting contact with the police department, whether it's going to court."

Short of manpower and money, survivor groups with similar goals often support each other. "Our new family," said Dixon.

That's how Delus got to know Dixon. They met at an across-borough event of the 2018 National Day of Remembrance for Murder Victims. Dixon was in charge of a memorial session for victims in Queens.

After her nephew was shot dead in Queens in 2008, Delus started to volunteer at a gun violence prevention organization. Raised in Brownsville, Brooklyn, Delus knew lots of people who'd been shot or killed; her two sons had been shot at, but escaped injury. "It's not normal, but it's like a weird normal," said Delus.

What eventually made Delus devoted to gun violence survivors wasn't local assaults, but the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in Newtown, Connecticut, where 20 children and six school staff members died in December 2012.

"That's when I had enough," said Delus. "That's what galvanized me to do the work."

Delus and two other survivors formed the Gun Violence Survivors Advisory Council in 2018 to work with the New York Mayor's Office. Serving as a bridge between survivors and city agencies, the council set up meetings with Crime Victims Services, district attorneys, NYPD officials and the Department of Homeless Services.

"We found that in each call there is a misunderstanding as far as what survivors need," Delus said, "because the policy says one thing, survivors need another, and sometimes the two don't mix." An example: updates from the NYPD detectives after a shooting incident. Survivors want to know "that the case is still open and they still investigate it," Delus said, even when there hasn't been a critical new development.

Healing gun violence trauma is costly, both psychologically and economically. Christopher Herrmann estimates the monetary cost of New York City gun violence at \$2 billion annually, including the loss of the victim's income, the potential decline in the family's income, and health care costs. What survivors will need in the longer term, including funeral support and services, court support, housing and mental health services, adds another layer to the cost.

"We should try something because otherwise hundreds of millions of dollars every year are going down the drain because of guns," says Herrmann.

It was about 7 pm in Jamaica. The street outside the Where Do We Go From Here office was dark, without many Christmas lights. As neighbors drifted away after picking up toys, Brown took a break. Tonight, her two daughters would join her for a family gathering, but Greg Haskins wouldn't be there to joke around and fuss over the Christmas tree ornaments like he used to.

"Can I be healed? Do I want to be healed?" Brown wondered. "I don't know."