

# Gun Violence, Racial Justice And You

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In addition to the recent travesties in Buffalo and Uvalde, and others even newer, there have been 234 mass shootings in the US to date, where ‘mass shooting’ is defined as 4 or more people shot and wounded or killed, not including the shooter. A horrible, horrible statistic! And the reasons abound, as offered by devotees of the AR-15, politicians and their lobbyists, and of course the NRA. They assign the blame to mental illness, drugs, unlocked doors, unarmed teachers and grocery store clerks, police inexperience and over-caution, lack of hardened schools, churches and places of business...but never the weapons of war and flesh-rending ammunition they proudly own or defend. Besides the overworked “thoughts and prayers are with the families...” we are now hearing that mass murder is “unfortunately just a fact of life in the United States” so obviously nothing can be done. It is so incongruous and heart-breaking that the same politicians, who rabidly decry abortion and campaign on saving the pre-born, are only too willing to roll the dice on those babies later being sacrificed on the altar of the NRA. While many weep and wonder why.

But let’s look at the broader picture of gun deaths in our country. In 2020, 43% of the deaths - amounting to 19,384 people - were homicides, according to data from the Communicable Disease Center. The figure represents a 34% increase from 2019, and a 75% increase over the course of the previous decade. Suicides represented 57% of the gun deaths. The rate of U.S. gun deaths reached especially deadly levels for young Black men, according to the report.<sup>1</sup> African Americans were at least four times more likely to be killed by a gun than the overall population, and twelve times more likely than a white person, the data showed.

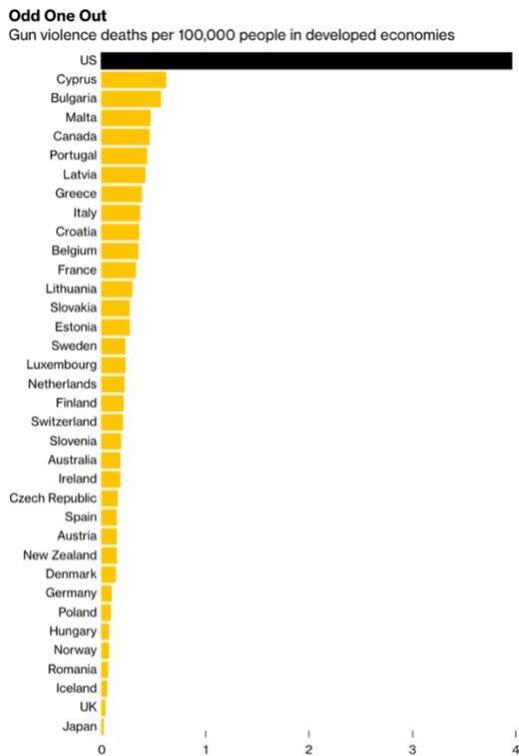
The CDC report goes further in placing the rate of homicides caused by firearms at the highest level in 26 years, while also noting disparities based on race, ethnicity and poverty. The firearm homicide rate, measured per 100,000 people, rose from 4.6 in 2019 to 6.1 in 2020, with a strong correlation to poverty. Among African Americans, the rate was 26.6 deaths per 100,000, a 39.5% increase over 2019. For white Americans, the rate was 2.2 per 100,000. By raw numbers, of the 19,384 homicides by firearms in 2020, African Americans accounted for 62% of the total and white people 21%. Moreover, according to data collected by The Washington Post, police shot and killed at least 1,055 people nationwide last year, the most since the newspaper began tracking fatal shootings by officers in 2015. That is more than the 1,021 shootings in 2020 and the 999 in 2019<sup>2</sup>.

Black people, who account for 13 percent of the U.S. population, accounted for 27 percent of those fatally shot and killed by police in 2021, according to Mapping Police Violence, a nonprofit group that tracks police shootings. That means Black people are twice as likely as white people to be shot and killed by police officers.

An interesting contrast is that the suicide rate for African Americans is 70% lower than that of the non-Hispanic white population.

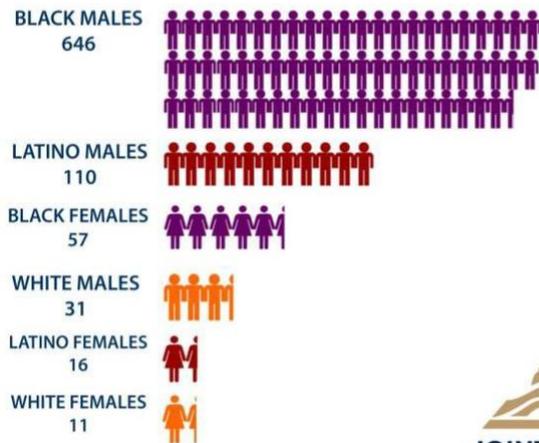


## By The Numbers: U.S. Gun Deaths



Sources: Institute for Health Metrics Evaluation, United Nations

## RACE AND STATE OF THE UNION U.S. HOMICIDE GUN DEATHS PER 1 MILLION PEOPLE AGES 15-34 in 2014



Data Source: CDC Injury & Prevention Control Database



It is evident that race has played a distinct role in this gun violence, as other minorities were also found to have higher rates of gun deaths. According to the CDC report<sup>1</sup>: "Longstanding systemic inequities and structural racism have resulted in limited economic, housing, and educational opportunities associated with inequities in risk for violence and other health conditions among various racial and ethnic groups,".

If you or your family, God willing, have not been directly affected by gun violence, you may breathe a sigh of relief, thank your God, and rest easy knowing you are not part of the problem. Think not? Well, look in a mirror. If you are white, that face staring back at you is the face of white privilege...the privilege you automatically earned by being born white. It may be the privilege of growing up in a two-parent family, living

in a nice house in a good neighborhood, of going to a school in an area with a substantial tax base. It may be that your expertise as a doctor, a lawyer, an airplane pilot, a teacher, or a repairman is not automatically questioned because of your skin color. Or it might be the privilege of being treated respectfully by the police...of being greeted with a smile in a department store instead of reflexively being suspected as a shoplifter...of jogging with a hoodie outside of your neighborhood and not having someone call the cops...of having a supermarket with fresh produce and meats close to your home...of not needing to have “the talk” with your kids, in case they are stopped by the cops...these are “privileges” many Blacks or other People of Color do not enjoy.

Even deeper than that, the white privilege you enjoy is the result of centuries of laws and regulations, passed by politicians elected by you and others before you, that have institutionalized whiteness as “good” and non-whiteness as “other”. And the “other” have been systematically denied the economic, political, social, and, yes, even religious opportunities that would have been afforded to them under a system of equal rights and dignity. Not only that, but they also must face the indignities, both subtle and overt, the unwritten rules, the need to be self-abasingly respectful of authority, and the microaggressions, all of which add up to the exact antithesis of white privilege.<sup>3</sup>

If you want concrete examples, they are right here in St. Louis, Missouri.

St. Louis and Missouri have been a hotbed of “racial capitalism” against both Blacks and Native Americans well before Daniel Boone left his debts in Kentucky to begin life anew here. After World War II, Blacks were shut out of the housing opportunities offered under the VA and FHA programs, prevented from going to school under the GI Bill, and refused employment at many large corporations.

Through redlining, other shoddy real estate practices, and the restrictive covenants of the 90 or so municipalities that declared themselves independent of the City of St. Louis, Blacks were largely relegated to the North City area above the Delmar Divide, an area that was generally ignored by the City Fathers, unless they needed to declare eminent domain over some Black-owned neighborhood to support a developer’s “urban renewal” project or a new interstate highway. In fact, some relatively stable Black neighborhoods were “taken” after the government conveniently expanded the term “blighted”. Even when the US government allocated funds through legislation to help improve struggling Black neighborhoods, most of the funding, administered through the City or County, miraculously stayed downtown or south of the Divide.

This area has experienced thousands of abandoned buildings, decaying homes and lots, struggling businesses that cater mainly to the poor, inadequate schools, few good jobs, substandard medical care, shabby infrastructure AND, of course, white flight. So, what do Black residents, and particularly young adult and teenage Blacks, look forward to? Crime, drugs, oppressive policing, low-paying or no jobs, environmental degradation, minimal education, poor health outcomes, AND white privilege in plain view.

No wonder they are angry; no wonder they just don’t care; no wonder murder is an effective way to settle an argument; no wonder that there are more Blacks in prison, or on parole, or awaiting trial in the US than there were Black enslaved persons in this country before the Civil War. Many do refuse to be beaten by the system; they work hard, support their families, take pride in their neighborhoods, try to build a better life. Unfortunately, too many still lose their lives, or grieve the loss of someone dear to them.

What we need to keep in mind is that this gun violence, this continuous senseless killing, DOES affect us all, and we, as whites, ARE part of the problem if we benefit from our white privilege and the systemic, institutionalized inequities and inequalities that keep many Blacks and People of Color as second-class, impoverished citizens. It’s a fact that the average Black and Hispanic or Latino households earn about half as

much as the average White household and own only about 15 to 20 percent as much net wealth. Many do not have the savings wherewithal to manage an unexpected \$500 car repair or visit to the ER.

*In Mercy in Action: The Social Teachings of Pope Francis*, Thomas Massaro S.J. examines Francis' teaching in this area. Pope Francis and Catholic Social Teaching enjoin on us a responsibility to actively reverse systemic injustices that we have sadly inherited as effects of past racist practices and policies, rather than simply performing individual works of charity or generosity.

In fact, Francis expresses impatience with “weak responses”, a phrase he uses throughout his encyclical “Laudato Si” in reference to measures to reduce climate change. In effect, Francis and C.S.T. are saying: White people don't get a moral pass by simply refraining from overtly racist acts. Rather, they must examine racial biases within systems; reflect on how they participate in and benefit from these biases; and then take deliberate action to change them.

It's not just the gun violence of senseless mass shootings that should trouble us and demand a solution...it's the everyday violence experienced by our Black sisters and brothers and other People of Color...it's our involvement in its perpetuation...actively or not! It should force us to ask ourselves the question...” What am I, what are WE going to do about it?

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-gun-deaths-surged-35-2020-higher-black-people-cdc-2022-05-10>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/2022/02/09/fatal-police-shootings-record-2021/>

<sup>3</sup> *White Privilege: Unpacking the invisible Knapsack* <https://psychology.umbc.edu › files › 2016/10>