



Statement of

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On

Addressing Violence around DC Schools

Public Roundtable on
*The Value of Investing in Trauma-Informed Public Schools and Support
Services*
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Samuel Bieler is a Research Associate at the Urban Institute at the Urban Institute. Portions of this testimony are based on other work by the author, particularly *Close Range Gunfire around DC Schools*, as well as work by other Urban researchers from the local Education Policy and the Housing Opportunity and Services Together (HOST) Demonstration initiatives. Samuel is indebted particularly to Megan Gallagher, Susan J. Popkin, Elsa Falkenburger, sade adeeyo, and Brittany Murray, for their work on the HOST demonstration and guidance on educational policy in DC. All opinions expressed herein are solely the author's and should not be attributed to any of these individuals or organizations with which he is associated.

Councilmember, I would like to thank you for this opportunity to testify on identifying and supporting students affected by trauma.

Gun violence has a uniquely devastating effect on youth. A long research record shows that youth exposed to violence are at higher risk for developing PTSD, have more difficulty concentrating in the classroom, have lower academic performance and educational aspirations, and report a wide range of psychological challenges, including disassociation, anxiety, and depression.

This exposure can fuel a devastating cycle of violence. Youth who witness violence or hear about it from their peers often acquire firearms for defense, which then encourages other youth to obtain firearms for the same reasons, leading to further violence. Youth exposed to violence are also more likely to use violence themselves, and when firearms are added to this mix, the results can be tragic for them, their families, and their communities.

Children are safer in schools than in almost any other location, and the Metropolitan Police, DC Public School system, and all of DC's charter schools should be commended for their constant diligence in protecting DC's students. However, our research indicates that a surprising and worrying amount of gunfire occurs around DC schools even when children are in the classroom.

We based our results on activations of DC's ShotSpotter gunfire detection system and focused on the 116 schools covered by this technology. We counted only gunshots that occurred on school days during the 2011-2012 year between 7 am and 7 pm to account for the times youth spend going to, coming from, and in school. Our study counted shots that were within 1000 and 500 feet of these schools – at this range gunfire is loud and distinctive. During these hours, there were a total of 336 gunfire incidents and 54 percent of these occurred within 1000 feet of a school.

Gunfire was not distributed evenly: while 54 percent of schools experienced at least one incident within 1000 feet, nine percent of DC schools experienced about 48 percent of the total gunfire at this range. These schools experienced eight to sixteen gunfire incidents. At 500 feet, where the sound of gunfire is even more distinctive, the bulk of violence was concentrated among an even smaller number of schools. Thirty percent of schools experienced at least one gunshot at 500 feet and 11 percent of schools experienced two or more incidents at this close range. There were also two middle schools and two high schools that experienced a disproportionately high volume of close-range gunfire: nine to eleven incidents in a single year.

Finally, we looked at incidents between 8 am and 9 am and 3 pm and 4 pm, the times when children are entering or exiting school and are likely to be concentrated in a few areas like entrances. A quarter of schools had these highly concerning incidents and one elementary school had multiple access hour incidents in the course of a single year.

Together, this research suggests to us that, particularly in a small number of schools, students are being exposed to a substantial amount of gunfire. We also see this in locations around DC that families rely on for important social services: in 2012 each of the four Department of Human Services service centers covered by gunfire detection technology experienced at least one incident of gunfire within 1000 feet, including five instances during business hours.

The good news is that with the insights this new technology is providing us, we have an opportunity to target our social supports to these schools and the children they serve with unprecedented accuracy. Knowing where violence is will help us respond in a more effective, targeted way, maximizing every available resource.

Schools are not currently providing the kind of resources and responses needed to address these and other traumas in a systemic manner. Safe spaces are an essential component of the response to this

issue that programs like Urban Institute's HOST (Housing Opportunity and Service Together) seek to provide. HOST works with youth and community members to collaboratively devise programming on sexual health and safety, emphasizing access to safe spaces for youth development as a key component.

Community members have emphasized the importance of areas where youth can process the events in their lives and receive the support they need to continue healthy development. While this program development is occurring outside of schools, such work could also inform the development of school programs, delivering social supports to the youth who need them most, when they need them most.

The development of HOST also highlights the importance of getting community feedback to identify the issues to address: in Benning Terrace, where one HOST group is working, the project identified sexual trauma as a core issue but each community or school has its own issues to address. One size does not fit all and community engagement is an essential counterpart to data systems like ShotSpotter.

Finally, this research highlights how important it is to make sure youth have the ability to access the services they need. Research from the HOST project and shots fired during access hours shows that youth may be vulnerable not only at school but on the journey to and from school, which may affect their willingness to attend. No child should be afraid to access their right to education and if fear of violence on the way to school is discouraging youth from attending we need to figure out how to prevent that victimization.

Identifying students affected by trauma is the first step in delivering the services they need to maintain their psychological health and academic achievement. By leveraging the unprecedented information supplied by gunfire detection technology, we have an opportunity to better identify students affected by violence and make sure they have the support they need to succeed.