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The Issue Paper: Violence in Urban Communities

***Introduction***

In this paper, I will be discussing the lucrative gun industry, the billions of dollars it accumulates annually, the millions of guns it manufactures and distributes, its supporters, and the people who are exploited and harmed in the process. On a broader scale, I wanted to focus on the growing concerns of violence (specifically gun violence) in urban communities with a special focus on Chicago, Illinois. I became interested in this city when I would constantly read about numerous shooting incidents and the thousands of Black people, including young children, being slaughtered yearly. I wanted to delve into the reasons why this was happening, and why it has been happening as long as it has. While doing research, I discovered many causes for the bountiful gun violence in the “windy city.” Firstly, large gun corporations were being supported and promoted heavily by lobbyist groups, and on the other hand, millions of guns were being made by these companies, distributed throughout the United States, and trafficked into Chicago and other cities through bordering states. The states that provided and trafficked these guns were extremely lenient when it came to their gun laws. If that wasn’t bad enough, officials in Chicago also decided to cut a lot of funding for recreational and constructive programs. This eventually led to an increase in shootings and homicides. After rustling through mounds of information about Chicago’s gun violence crisis, and the imperial status of gun corporations, I attempted to conceive a world where these problems didn’t occur; a world where these problems can be fixed, and where people from all aspects of life can have their voices heard.

***Follow the Money***

***Pick your poison.*** Though I may have previously discussed the causes behind why violence (gun violence, especially) is so prevalent in urban communities, we must acknowledge the driving forces behind the provision of these weapons and the people profiting and benefitting from their mass dissemination. Again, let us take look at Chicago, Illinois for instance. According to the *Chicago Tribune* in a data compilation reported by the Chicago Tribune Breaking News staff, since January 1, 2016, there have been well over 700 shooting incidents with 133 homicides in the city. With this information in mind, it is more than evident that guns are the preferred weapons for most of the crimes committed in Chicago. It may also be safe to assume that markets geared towards manufacturing and distributing firearms are saturated with money. What else can be expected when guns are now easily accessible, cost-effective, efficient, and plentiful in Chicago, Illinois and in surrounding cities and states? There are an estimated 270-310 million guns floating around the United States, with major concentration in Chicago, according to the article “Gun Industry Executives: Mass Shootings Good for Business and Stock Prices” in *NewsMax* journal.

***Who are the beneficiaries?*** Now that we’ve discussed the weapon of choice used in many of the assaults and homicides committed in Chicago, Illinois, we must then ask ourselves, “Who wins here? What are they gaining?” Aside from the pretentious victories that gangbangers *think* they may be acquiring by assaulting and taking the lives of rivals—and even innocent lives caught in the crossfires, oftentimes thought of as “casualties of war”—there are corporations who actually get paid on the strength of people’s desire to harm and kill one other. In the *Washington Post,* an article entitled “How the U.S. gun industry became so lucrative” by Brad Plumer, discusses just how much money is being poured into gun industries. In 2012, gun industries pulled in a whopping $11.7 billion dollars in gun and ammunition sales. There was also an impressive $993 million made in profits. Alongside large sales and profits, gun makers pumped out six million guns in 2011 which doubled the amount of guns made in 2001. According to the article, “back in the late 1990s, the gun industry was actually facing decline, as the economy was humming along and crime fears were subsiding. Then Sept. 11 hit. Thanks to new counter-terrorism measures, law enforcement agencies and the U.S. military started buying up weapons at a faster pace, reviving the industry” (Plumer). It appears that fear mongering has played a major part in the restoration of the gun industry, as well as the recurring mass shootings which have also contributed to an increase in the supply and demand for guns. Citizens of America felt compelled to “protect” themselves.

Many corporations within the industry have benefited heavily from these sales. In the *Business Insider,* an article written by Betsy Kim called “Massive Gun Profits Make Firearms Nearly Impossible To Control” gives some insight about the top gun sellers in the United States of America.Some of the top gun sellers in America are Freedom Group, Inc., Smith & Wesson Holding Corp., and Sturm, Ruger & Co., who all pulled in annual sales of $775 million, $439.3 million, and $328.8 million in 2012, respectively. *CNN Money*’s article “Gun stocks surge 70% in 2015 alone” by Heather Long explains the gun stock surges for the popular gun corporations Sturm, Ruger & Co., and Smith &Wesson. These companies were considered to have had the best stocks in America in 2015. Smith & Wesson’s stock increased by 80 percent, with Sturm, Ruger & Co. following closely behind with a surge of 70 percent in the same year. According to the same article, “Sturm Ruger does over half a billion in gun sales a year now. That's almost double what it did in 2010. Smith & Wesson is on track for over $600 million in sales this year, according to FactSet. That's a 50% spike from its 2010 sales” (Long). Even with Smith &Wesson and Sturm, Ruger & Co. are competing for financial dominance in the gun industry, Wal-Mart has been coined the largest seller of guns and ammunitions in the United States. It sells 400 types of guns and 300 types of ammunition in over 1,800 of its more than 3,800 stores throughout the nation.

While major gun corporations are receiving exponential amounts of revenue from their sales of firearms, this constant revenue, alongside the demand for guns, provide many people with jobs all while stimulating the economy. In *NewsMax* journal, the article “Gun Industry Executives: Mass Shootings Good for Business and Stock Prices” written by F. McGuire states that “The number of full-time jobs related to the firearm industry is 263,223, up from 209,750 in 2012,” while “The estimated overall economic impact of the firearms and ammo industry in the U.S. is $42.9 billion” (McGuire). This shows that not only is the gun business lucrative, but it also provides a means for the citizens of America to become self-sufficient.

***Who supports this?*** Although corporations in the gun industry seem to be flourishing with no sign of slowing down, a major part of their success and longevity are their supporters and organizations who push for their presence. Let’s take the National Rifle Association (NRA) for instance. The NRA is a non-profit organization that aims to protect and apply the second amendment right (the right to bear arms) by rallying and lobbying around the nation. The *Business Insider* featured an article titled “How The Gun Industry Funnels Tens Of Millions Of Dollars To The NRA” by Walter Hickey which digs into the correlation between the NRA and large gun companies. There seems to be a symbiotic relationship formed between both parties. The article talks about the NRA advertising for companies, while earning copious amounts of funding for its defense of these corporations in return. It’s an interesting point since the NRA was once a social club that proudly displayed its independence from corporate influence. As of late, the NRA receives less than half of its revenue from membership and program fees.

The article goes on to explain the ways in which the NRA and gun corporations rely on each other. It states, “The bulk of the group's money now comes in the form of contributions, grants, royalty income, and advertising, much of it originating from gun industry sources. Since 2005, the gun industry and its corporate allies have given between $20 million and $52.6 million to it through the NRA Ring of Freedom sponsor program. Donors include firearm companies like Midway USA, Springfield Armory Inc, Pierce Bullet Seal Target Systems, and Beretta USA Corporation. Other supporters from the gun industry include Cabala's, Sturm, Rugar & Co, and Smith & Wesson. The NRA also made [$20.9 million — about 10 percent of its revenue — from selling advertising](http://990s.foundationcenter.org/990_pdf_archive/530/530116130/530116130_201012_990O.pdf) to industry companies marketing products in its many publications in 2010” (Hickey). Major corporations in the gun industry fund the NRA and on the other hand, the NRA defends and supports the goals of each company. It is an interrelationship bent on the uplifting and uprising of each other. Relationships such as these will keep large gun companies in business as their supporters continue to push their agendas. Furthermore, people will constantly be at risk of losing their lives to gun violence. It is a trend that more than likely will continue under the guise “protecting” the citizens of the United States from an unapparent predator.

***Follow the Exploitation***

***Victims of circumstance.*** While the gun industry is booming, you can be sure that there are victims when all is said and done. Exploited people are usually at the mercy of centralized corporations. In this paper I’ve decided to make Chicago, Illinois the focal point of an area severely affected by gun violence. Though gun violence is pervasive in many communities across the country (mainly in urban communities), I personally feel as though Chicago is in the midst of a detrimental crisis. As I stated previously, since the beginning of this year there has already been over 700 shootings with 100 or more homicides in Chicago. Seriously think about that. It’s only April, and close to 1,000 people have been assaulted or killed by guns. This shocking revelation leads to my next point. I think it’s important that we understand *how* the guns are getting into the city of Chicago and into the hands of individuals who are oppressed by their minds and circumstances. I also believe it’s important to discuss who is being affected by these acts of violence.

***Where are the guns coming from?*** An article writtenby Mike Spies and Emily Fuhrman entitled “Watch How Chicago Gets Flooded with Thousands of Crime Guns” featured in *The Trace* attempts to uncover information behind the question presented at the beginning of this paragraph. In 2014, 88 percent of the guns found in Illinois came from the city of Chicago. More than 50 percent of them came from out of the state. Some of these states included Indiana, Mississippi, Wisconsin, Missouri, and Kentucky. Indiana was the largest gun supplier for Chicago, providing the city with 3,269 guns from 2010-2014. Another article, “Lax gun laws in Indiana fuel gun violence in Chicago”, written by [Ryan Schuessler](http://america.aljazeera.com/profiles/s/ryan-schuessler.html) tries to explain the reason why so many guns are finding their way into Chicago by means of Indiana. In the article, [Schuessler](http://america.aljazeera.com/profiles/s/ryan-schuessler.html) says that, “Indiana’s gun laws are relatively simple. Federally licensed “brick and mortar” gun dealers are required to perform standard background checks, while vendors selling their “private collections” at gun shows are not. An Indiana resident could walk out of the Crown Point gun show with a legally purchased assault rifle that same day — without a background check — less than an hour from Chicago, where assault rifles are banned. Handguns are subject to different regulations in Indiana.” As this article states, there are very lenient laws in the state of Indiana. Because of this, guns can find their way into other cities in state without a trace of where they came from, or whose hands they may end up in. It’s also clear that Chicago’s strict gun laws are doing absolutely nothing to battle or prevent the increasing violence.

***Collateral Damage.*** Chicago is one of the largest cities in America, and though gun violence is common there, the entire city isn’t crawling with people who commit acts of violence. In fact, a lot of the crime is concentrated in smaller areas of the city. One of the popular areas where crime occurs is South Side, Chicago which sits in the Cook County of Illinois. Its citizens are predominantly African-American/Black and the families range from middle class to the impoverished. Most of the crimes committed are by gang members against other gang members. There are constant “wars” over turf, drugs, and respect. Many of the crimes committed are also retaliatory, meaning that when a person is harmed or killed in a shooting, their family or friends may seek revenge against the person (s) they assume is/are responsible. Oftentimes, innocent people are caught in the crossfire; sometimes people are hurt or murdered simply because they are related to/associated with a person who’s done wrong to someone else. Unfortunately, due to social isolation and poverty, a lot of people are forced to live in the midst of all of this violence and chaos. Low levels of education, the lack of rehabilitation and recreational programs, and unemployment also contribute to residents feeling trapped in their own neighborhoods.

The majority of the victims of gun violence are young black men. This brings me to one of the things that attracted me to this city. A nine year-old boy by the name of Tyshawn Lee was executed in an alley because his father, Pierre Stokes, was a ranking member of the Gangster Disciples gang who were at war with the Black Pstones. I have read several articles on this story, but Lois Beckett wrote an article entitled “Chicago gun epidemic, out of control: the execution of nine-year-old Tyshawn Lee” featured in *The Guardian* thatgoes into more details about the circumstances surround little Tyshawn’s murder. Tyshawn was shot approximately seven times because his father was previously involved in a shooting where Corey Morgan’s (Corey Morgan is one of the suspects) mother was wounded and his brother, Tracy Morgan, was killed in yet another shooting in the city. The wounding of his mother and the murder of his brother vexed the suspect to no end, and he made it evident that when he avenged his brother’s death that he would spare no lives. He even claimed that children and elderly people were not safe from his wrath. He then connected with two other men Dwright Boone-Doty (the actual gunman), and another suspect, Kevin Edwards, who remains on the lam.

The murder of Tyshawn Lee is just one aspect of how people are being exploited and how they are suffering. The government also plays a part in another aspect and contributes to the demise of its citizens. Beckett’s article also states that, “Chicago was the victim of the same kind of government neglect that had poisoned the children of Flint, Father Mike said, “only there they can pinpoint it – it’s the water. Here it’s neglect, abandonment, cuts of programs.”” The article also goes on to state that, “Pfleger, who was the model for a character in Spike Lee’s recent movie Chi-Raq, said, the church had lost $1m of state funding “in an email”. Its summer jobs program, which offered 1,150 summer jobs in 2014, could only offer 350 last year, he said. A recent study from the University of Chicago Crime Lab found summer jobs programs can dramatically reduce youth violence” (Becket). Although everyone is responsible for their own actions, if it’s been proven that summer jobs and better opportunities can drastically reduce the amount of crime in Chicago, then why are these programs not being provided? The lack of concern on the government’s behalf is why a nine year-old can be executed in broad daylight on his way home for school and no one bats an eye. This why in 2014 during the fourth of July weekend, 82 people were shot and 14 of them were killed, and this is also why on March 23rd, 2016, four people were shot and wounded outside of a daycare center on Chicago’s South Side. In the case of the daycare shooting, bullets penetrated the walls and entered a room where children were napping. Fortunately, the children were not injured.

This type of hell that innocent residents of Chicago are subjected to should never be tolerated. If anything, this should perpetually pique government officials who should demand a change in the city. I struggle to understand why programs and funds were stripped from the citizens of Chicago, even though they were proven to have a positive impact. What was the motivation? Was there a hidden agenda? What did officials believe would happen? Unfortunately, these are questions I cannot answer, but I am interested in possible answers. Although the gun market does not affect the citizens of Chicago directly, there are residual consequences of such a lucrative business. The abundance of criminal acts committed in Chicago is only going to fuel the cycle of fear, which ultimately leads to more violence. Demands for “protection” will increase and so will the supply of guns to meet those demands.

***The Solution***

What can be done about gun violence in urban communities? Unfortunately and currently, I believe this problem is too far-gone. There have been multiple lives lost, many marches, numerous speeches, and various images of heart-broken families plastered all over the media. The violence has continued and the people committing the crimes seem more apathetic than anything. Though I do believe that the gun violence plaguing urban communities is irreparable, I do imagine a world where it decreases or even ceases completely. I will describe two scenarios for the ideal living conditions in what are now considered “urban areas.”

***Land of the gun-free?*** The first ideal living condition would be a society where there are no guns. I am sure that this ideology may seem ridiculous, but let me explain. In a world without guns, I am not dubious about the fact that people will feel defenseless without them, however, in nature, we are more capable of defending ourselves against our fellow human beings with the absence of weaponry, than in the presence of weaponry. The reason I would choose a living condition such as this one, is that I believe weapons, guns specifically, have a way of creating dissociative behaviors and personality disorders. *The Journal of Trauma & Dissociation* defines dissociative behaviors as, “a normal process that is initially used defensively by an individual to handle traumatic experiences [that] evolves over time into a maladaptive or pathological process” (p. 119). In my personal opinion, these type behaviors can be harmful and dangerous.

No doubt, killing a person can cause emotional and mental trauma, but I strongly believe that the manner in which people kill others can have different levels of impact. Shooting a person, for instance, may not appear to be as callous or as personal as, let’s say, stabbing a person. For some, using a gun is quick, efficient, and doesn’t always require a level of closeness between two or more people. This is one reason why law enforcement may refer to a crime as a “crime of passion”, due to its nature and manner. Dissociative behaviors can lead to sociopathic behaviors where a person may begin to lack moral responsibilities and a social conscience. There is no way to rehabilitate a person who has begun to develop severe symptoms of this personality disorder. How do you correct a person who believes they have not done anything wrong? I would imagine that it would be a difficult process. This theory may seem far-fetched, but in present times, it appears that there are many people walking around without consciences and a lack of empathy. They make no qualms about taking another person’s life, because more than likely they are not beating themselves over the head with the idea of taking responsibility. They don’t feel they have to, because in their mind they haven’t done anything.

***The powers that should NOT be.*** The second ideal living situation would be one where the system of white supremacy is completely and utterly demolished. I have to make it clear that I am not exempting anyone from personal responsibility; however, the system of white supremacy has definitely played a key role in destroying the lives of many people of color. By white supremacy, I’m talking about the discrimination, mass incarceration, institutionalized racism, locational isolation, lack of resources, and many other hurdles that people of color, especially Black people, face in this country. I’m going discuss slavery briefly, simply because the problems that are listed above are all residual components of slavery. It’s the reason why Black people are discriminated against in the first place. The perpetual brainwashing and hopelessness that slaves felt back then are the same feelings we have today. It’s also why we don’t value each other. We don’t value each other because we, ourselves, do not feel valued by society. We see each other and ourselves as expendable pawns in the ghettos we are forced to live in. If we don’t have hope for ourselves, we definitely don’t see it or don’t want to see it for someone that looks just like us. Perhaps in a world where there wasn’t a system of white supremacy, human beings would be able to live amongst each other without ugly stigmas being attached to a person because of the melanin in their skin, or the neighborhood they grew up in. Black people should be given opportunities to be in positions of power and be able to speak freely about oppression and injustice without someone trying to silence them or “get rid” of them. They should also be allowed to speak from personal experiences without white people calling them “reverse racists,” claiming that they’re “pulling the race card,” and “race-baiting”.

The “powers that be”, which are our political leaders and government officials, should be diversified. It should consist of people from all backgrounds and lifestyles. The problem is that the concentration of power in America focuses on the heterosexual white male, and eventually that figure becomes symbol of strength. The system of white supremacy has ruined any chance of people of other races truly understanding the plight of Black people in America because we do not have many powerful representatives, and when we do, they are silenced or even killed. It seems to me that the United States of America has developed dissociative characteristics to cope with the wrongdoing it has inflicted upon people of color. If it does not allow others to hear the voices of the oppressed, then the oppressed become lost in the shadows, and eventually everyone else will accept normalize the atrocities being committed against minorities while believing that this is how things are supposed to be.

***Conclusion***

While researching this paper, I discovered things I wasn’t previously aware of. For example, the government in Chicago cutting the funding for local programs and recreational activities, though it decreased violence. I do wonder what their motive was. I also concluded that America has a serious problem. The obsession with guns, violence, and constant fear mongering are all issues that need to be addressed from the ground up. There is an underlying reason why corporations like Smith & Wesson are bringing in billions of dollars annually. Obviously, there is a supply and demand for it. There are also underlying reasons for the unspeakable amounts of shooting incidents in the Windy City. I may not have all these answers, but I have definitely uncovered information that can put me on the track to finding them.

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