

# **Community and academic partner perspectives on collaborating towards a reduction in community gun violence**

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## **ABSTRACT**

South Carolina ranks 10<sup>th</sup> in the nation for firearm death rates. The homicide rate increased by 22.1% in 2020, the highest rate since 1993, identifying an urgent need for intervention. The Medical University of South Carolina Community Engaged Scholars Program provides Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) training and seed funding for projects to improve health in South Carolina. This article describes a collaboration between a grass-roots community organization and academic partner. The Tri-County Gun Violence Coordinating Council was created to address gun violence in Charleston, Berkeley, and Dorchester counties by facilitating coordination among stakeholders and developing a comprehensive gun violence reduction strategy. We explore perspectives of both the community and academic partner on collaborating towards a reduction in community gun violence.

## **KEYWORDS**

Community-Based Participatory Research, Community health, Community health research, Health promotion, Health disparities, Gun violence, Firearm deaths

## **Introduction**

South Carolina ranks 10<sup>th</sup> in the nation for its firearm death rates and the homicide rate increased by 22.1% in 2020, the highest rate since 1993, identifying an urgent need for intervention.<sup>1</sup> The South Carolina Clinical & Translational Research Institute's Community Engaged Scholars Program provides Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) training for academic partners and community-based organizations and seed funding for projects to improve health. In 2022, recipients of this program included the College of Charleston and Tri-County Gun Violence Coordinating Council with the goal to reduce community gun violence

in Charleston. We examine the perspectives of both the Academic Principal Investigator and Community Principal Investigator in their participation in the Community Engaged Scholars Program.

Gun violence and firearm deaths are health disparities which disproportionately impact some communities. Reflecting national patterns, in South Carolina, Black non-Hispanic residents have the highest firearm death rates (35.09 per 1,000).<sup>1</sup> When combined with sex, Black non-Hispanic men have a firearm death rate (68.02 per 1,000) that is more than ten times the rate of White non-Hispanic women. In 2022 the White House introduced a presidential strategy for reducing gun violence that includes investing in evidence-based community violence interventions.<sup>2</sup> This project intended to further that goal through the collaboration of a local community organization and the College of Charleston.

### **Community Partner**

The Tri-County Gun Violence Coordinating Council (GVCC) was created to address gun violence in Charleston, Berkeley, and Dorchester counties, (which make up the Charleston, South Carolina metro area, by facilitating coordination among stakeholders and developing a comprehensive gun violence strategy.<sup>3</sup> The GVCC is a grass roots organization consisting primarily of family members who have lost loved ones to gun violence, law enforcement, local non-profit workers, community advocates, academics and physicians. The GVCC meets monthly and coordinates community events to discuss gun violence, advocate for policy change, and provide resources for those impacted by community gun violence.

### **Academic Partner**

In 2021, the College of Charleston Faculty Senate created an ad-hoc Committee to Curb Gun Violence.<sup>4</sup> One of the reasons cited for creating this committee included the series of recent

incidents in which gun violence impacted the local campus community. Cynthia Hurd, a college librarian, was one of the nine victims of the 2015 Mother Emanuel AME church shooting and in 2020, Tom DiLorenzo, husband of the College of Charleston Provost, was shot and killed near campus. Ten members were elected to the initial committee, which adopted the mission statement to “Conduct research and connect with local community partners (academic and non-profit) to understand, spread information, and implement change to reduce gun violence in the Charleston area”. The committee first undertook an informal needs assessment of local gun violence. Based upon those findings, they focused on working to reduce community gun violence among populations most impacted in the Charleston area, primarily young Black, Non-Hispanic men.

### **Initial Collaboration Between Community and Academic Partner**

In the Fall of 2021, the College of Charleston ad hoc Committee to Curb Gun Violence was asked to review a document created by the GVCC outlining formal requests (Figure 1) to the City of Charleston to reduce gun violence. Based on this initial contact, the chair of the committee began attending monthly meetings of the GVCC as a way to strengthen ties with grassroots organizations working on gun violence within communities. Soon after, the GVCC leader and College of Charleston committee chair applied jointly for the Community Engaged Scholars program<sup>5</sup> as Academic and Community Principal Investigators to conduct a study to assess the feasibility and community consensus of implementing the GVCC’s requests to reduce gun violence.

### **Community Based Participatory Research Grant**

The Community Engaged Scholars Program is designed to increase the capacity of community and academic partners to conduct research jointly to improve health of communities

in South Carolina. The program is implemented by the South Carolina Clinical and Translational Research Institute at the Medical University of South Carolina and funded by the National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences of the National Institutes of Health. Objectives of the program are to foster community and academic partnerships, encourage collaborative identification of community health priorities and provide an interactive group learning curriculum for CBPR. Academic and Community partners engage in online training sessions and meetings with grant staff over a 12 week period, during which they design a CBPR research project.<sup>5</sup> Upon the completion of training, partners are awarded up to \$10,000 in pilot funds to collect data intended to support future funding and research efforts.

### **Study Activities**

The collaborative project proposed by the Academic and Community Principal Investigators, titled “Charleston Community Gun Violence Interruption and Intervention” was selected for the 2022 Community Based Partners cohort. Over the course of Spring 2022, as a part of the online training sessions, the proposal was revised until the following final aims were selected: 1) Conduct an online survey of community members, law enforcement, and local government in the Tri-County Charleston area regarding steps to reduce local gun violence and 2) Conduct interviews with key stakeholders in the local community, law enforcement, and local government regarding the feasibility and necessary steps to achieve a reduction in gun violence based on the Tri-County Gun Violence Coordinating Council’s identification of needs.

The quantitative portion of the study was conducted in Fall 2022. Recruitment methods included advertising at local gun violence forums, contacting community partners, paid Facebook advertisements, and a segment on a local news channel. Criteria for participation included being 18 years of age or older and living in Berkeley, Charleston, or Dorchester

County. Participants completed an online Qualtrics-based survey which included virtual informed consent. Survey questions included ranking the feasibility and importance of potential gun violence reduction measures. Following the quantitative portion of the study, qualitative data were collected in Spring 2023. To recruit for the qualitative study, interested participants who participated in the quantitative portion of the study were contacted. Additional recruitment included advertisement at local gun violence forums, contacting community partners and social media. A team of community and student researchers qualitatively interviewed participants over Zoom. Participants were shown a list of initiatives requested by the GVCC and asked to discuss each item in terms of feasibility, barriers and facilitators for implementation. As of the writing of this manuscript, data analyses are in process using a mixed methods approach. It is noted that recruitment was most successful for community members for both the survey and qualitative components. There was representation from law enforcement, however low, and no representation from elected officials. The College of Charleston IRB approved all study procedures.

### **Perspectives from Community and Academic Principal Investigators**

The Academic and Community Principal Investigators have worked together closely for over two years and jointly provide their perspectives on the strengths and challenges of the collaboration. As co-authors, through conversations and emails, we collaboratively identified multiple areas of the project that were beneficial as well as areas that were more difficult for one or both of us as partners.

### **Challenges**

*Gun Violence costs our community billions of dollars every year, yet we fail to see the importance of funding those that work to reduce it. – Community PI*

From the Community PI perspective, there is an overall feeling of frustration as a result of years working on an issue that remains pervasive in the community. He acknowledged that this issue is so divisive that often the community believes nothing will change, so why take action. It is difficult to work in an area where beliefs are so deeply held regarding gun rights. Specific to the partnership, it was difficult to hold community gun violence forums with law enforcement, legislators and solicitors' offices without them feeling attacked by the community for a perceived lack of action. While study recruitment was held at these events, it proved difficult recruiting law enforcement and policy leaders to participate in the study, despite some long standing relationships with the community partner. As a result, there was less representation from these roles than from concerned community members. The fact that law enforcement officers and elected officials have close relationships with the community partner and participate in advocacy and community action events yet did not participate in the research indicates a need to further understand barriers and hesitation towards participation in the research process. Due to working in a limited geographic area, law enforcement and elected officials are in public positions and could have concerns of being identified as participating, despite confidentiality. In future research, we could expand the reach of law enforcement departments and elected officials beyond a 3 county area to enhance the confidentiality of results.

*When studying an issue where lives are on the line, it is important to balance the often lengthy timeline of the research process with vital community action and advocacy. – Academic PI*

A main concern from the Academic PI was how to navigate the research process and efforts to ensure it is not delaying or hindering ongoing community efforts. The research process is lengthier than other forms of community action. For example, the monthly meetings and plans of the GVCC often outpaced the research process where any changes involved approval from funders, routing of funds through university processes, and Institutional Review Board approval. The community organization is typically able to move faster in community action without these levels of bureaucracy. Historically, when the GVCC has planned mentoring events, community forums, and recorded public campaigns without a research component, it is possible to put together plans in weeks rather than months. The Academic and Community PI have open communication about this dilemma and the challenges on both sides. The Community PI has communicated that he values research and is willing to wait through delays to include the processes needed to incorporate research. The Academic PI continues to gain training in Community Based Participatory Research and remains continuously aware of how efficiency can improve the timeline for community action. Communication is key when working together and the Community and Academic PI speak often via email and phone, regardless of the current status of research funding.

Another challenge was that the pilot study funding did not provide compensation for the community partner's participation. In this situation where the community partner was a grass-roots organization without funding, the Community PI was not compensated for their time in the program. The Academic PI was not compensated through the grant, but since her academic appointment included protected research time, this was not a barrier in the way that it may have been for the Community PI. The issue of compensation reflects a larger area of concern with



power imbalance. The Community Engaged Scholars Program pilot funding was routed through the academic institution rather than the community organization. This created a power imbalance where only one partner's organization had direct access to funds. The process to pay the community partner for grant activities was through a lengthy reimbursement process that took several months to complete. In future funding opportunities, it would create equity to directly fund both organizations in line with individual roles in the project.

Another area of concern for the Academic PI included academic transitions and continuity of partnerships. Near the end of the funding period, the Academic PI accepted a new faculty position out of state. To continue the study, a new PI was indicated at the College of Charleston, yet the original Academic PI committed to continuing work with the GVCC. Acknowledging that are difficulties in navigating the sustainability of this partnership when living in a new state, the Academic PI has taken steps to expand the existing research. She joined a local academic gun violence alliance, the East Carolina University Department of Surgery Firearm Research Alliance<sup>6</sup>, and recently submitted a grant proposal involving new and existing partners for a regional gun violence initiative. The Community PI is an active partner in the new grant submission.

## **Strengths**

*[It] allows the opportunity to engage our law enforcement, legislatures and media on the topic of gun violence and demonstrate how the community has been impacted by it. –*

Community PI

The community PI identified two main strengths of collaboration, noting that gun violence is a local public health crisis. The collaboration allowed for engagement of a wide range of stakeholders. In addition, the partnership provides an opportunity for the community's voice to be heard through our forums and surveys, and for the community to offer solutions.

*The funding allowed for community members to be involved as research assistants, travel to academic conferences, as well as support research efforts through recruitment and incentives. –*

Academic PI

From the Academic PI perspective, the grant provides funding to support and build upon existing partnerships and to create more formalized and sustainable relationships between community partners and academic institutions. Prior to funding, the partnership did not have the resources to complete many desired goals. Funding also allows for opportunities that help build capacity and professional skills of community organization leaders.

Both partners noticed that the collaboration increased media attention to bring awareness to the issue of community gun violence and the efforts of the partnership. The collaboration attracted local interest and was twice featured on local evening news stations during the year of funding. From a research perspective, this facilitates the opportunity to develop research materials and initiatives driven by the priorities of the community. The Community and Academic PIs are optimistic that this initial research will lay groundwork and provide evidence-based support for future interventions, including support for applying for larger grants for gun violence intervention programs. As of this writing, they have collaboratively submitted one additional research grant and two grants focused on practice to fund the work of the Tri-County Gun Violence Coordinating Council.

## **Conclusions**

In conclusion, it is important when planning and implementing CBPR based programs, to take into accounts the needs and priorities of both community and academic partners at all stages of the process. When funding opportunities are offered through an academic institution, it is important to continually assess how the norms and processes of academia play a role in how programs are incentivized and structured and to ensure that community partners equally benefit from the partnerships. However, despite challenges, the benefits of community and academic partnerships can provide long lasting bonds that lead to future opportunities to grow community work, apply for increased research and implementation funding, and expand efforts beyond the initial partners.

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<sup>1</sup>Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Web-Based Injury Statistics Query System (WISQARS), “Fatal Injury Reports.” Data for 2020; 2023 [cited 2023 Sept 8]. Available from: <https://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/fatal/index.html>

<sup>2</sup>The White House. Fact Sheet: President Biden’s Historic Actions to Make Our Communities Safer by Reducing Gun Crime; 2023 [cited 2023 Sept 6]. Available from:

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/03/01/fact-sheet-president-bidens-historic-actions-to-make-our-communities-safer-by-reducing-gun-crime/>

<sup>3</sup> Tri-County Gun Violence Coordinating Council; 2020. [cited 2023 Sept 6]. Available from: <https://www.palmettohopenetwork.org/gun-violence>

<sup>4</sup> Report of the Ad hoc Committee on Curbing Gun Violence, 2021-2022; 2022. College of Charleston.

<sup>5</sup> Community Engaged Scholars Program. Medical University of South Carolina; 2023 [cited 2023 Sept 6]. Available from: <https://research.musc.edu/resources/sctr/programs/community-engagement/engaged-scholars>

<sup>6</sup> East Carolina Firearm Injury Research FAIR Alliance. Surgery Research Insight, Summer 2023. East Carolina University Department of Surgery; 2023 [cited 2023 Sept 11] Available from: <https://surgery.ecu.edu/2023/07/26/surgery-research-insight-jul2023/>

Figure 1: Tri-County Gun Violence Coordinating Council Requests to the City of Charleston

Request 1: Implement a local public campaign to lock cars to reduce gun theft.

Request 2: Create public, readable, accessible databases on local gun crime.

Request 3: Fund local community gun violence interruption and intervention with wrap around services

Request 4: Offer local youth at risk for gun violence (identified by community, schools and police) social resources and mentor services.

Request 5: Conduct an in depth review into how local law enforcement addresses cold case gun related homicides and non-fatal assaults and how families are being kept up to date on their cases.

Request 6: Build local social capital, improving access to programs for high-risk youth, community greening/improvement of neighborhood physical space to reduce gun violence.