

A Nonfatal Shooting Primer

Beth M. Huebner | Natalie K. Hipple | July 2018

Introduction

Gun crime is a major concern for communities and police agencies. Gun crime affects not only the immediate victims and their families, but the community as a whole. Timely first responders, advanced medical care — and perhaps the poor aim of the shooter — mean saved lives, making shootings that were once fatal events now nonfatal events. Although there is no central repository or data collection system that measures nonfatal shootings, it is nevertheless important that law enforcement expand its focus to include them. This report is a short primer on gun crime and on the pivotal role that the collection of data on nonfatal shootings can play as part of a comprehensive response to gun crime.

Moving Beyond Homicide

Gun crime is a costly, widespread, and persistent public health issue.¹ Research and police practice have traditionally focused on homicides, even though homicides are rare events and may not be reflective of the broad scope of gun crime.² Data from Indianapolis indicate that nonfatal shootings occur almost four times more often than gun homicides.³ Specifically, over the past four years, for every fatal shooting victim, there are 3.5 nonfatal shooting victims. Additionally, for every fatal shooting incident, there are 3.4 nonfatal shooting incidents (see [figure 1](#)). By focusing only on homicide, potentially one-half to two-thirds of gun crime is omitted from inquiry.

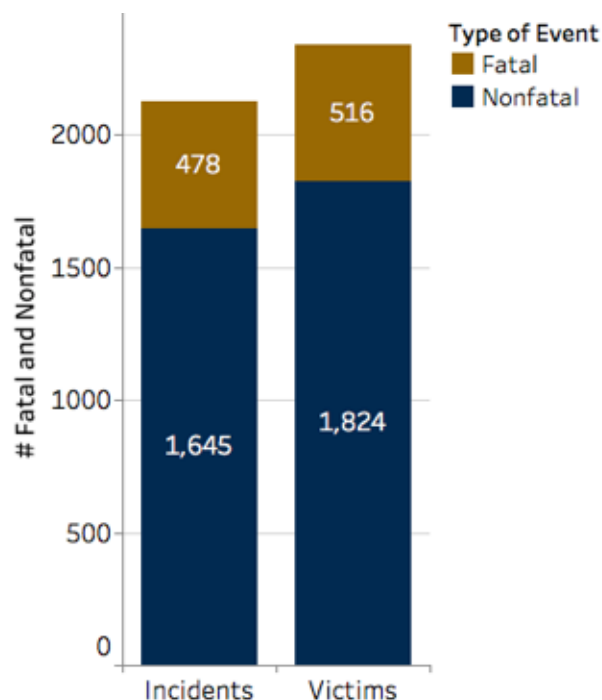
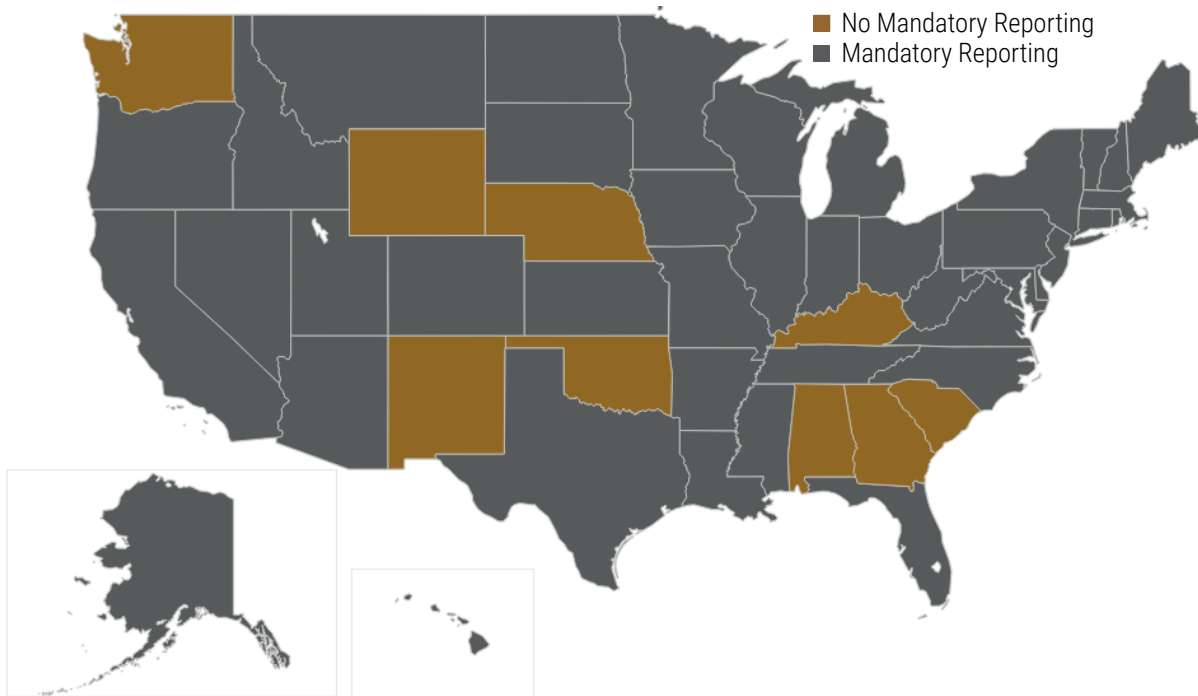


Figure 1 Recorded Criminal Shootings in Indianapolis, IN 2014-2017⁴

Homicide and nonfatal gun crime share many of the same characteristics and are often separated by good medicine, poor aim, and quick first responders. Survival rates for gun injuries have increased over the past decade, and scholars argue that advancements in medicine in the 21st century can account for some of the recent decline in homicides.⁵ Researchers estimate that six out of seven shooting victims survive, resulting in over one million shooting survivors living in the United States today.⁶ Our current measurement and intervention schemes, which focus primarily on homicide incidents, have not caught up with medical science.

Figure 2 Mandatory State Reporting Laws



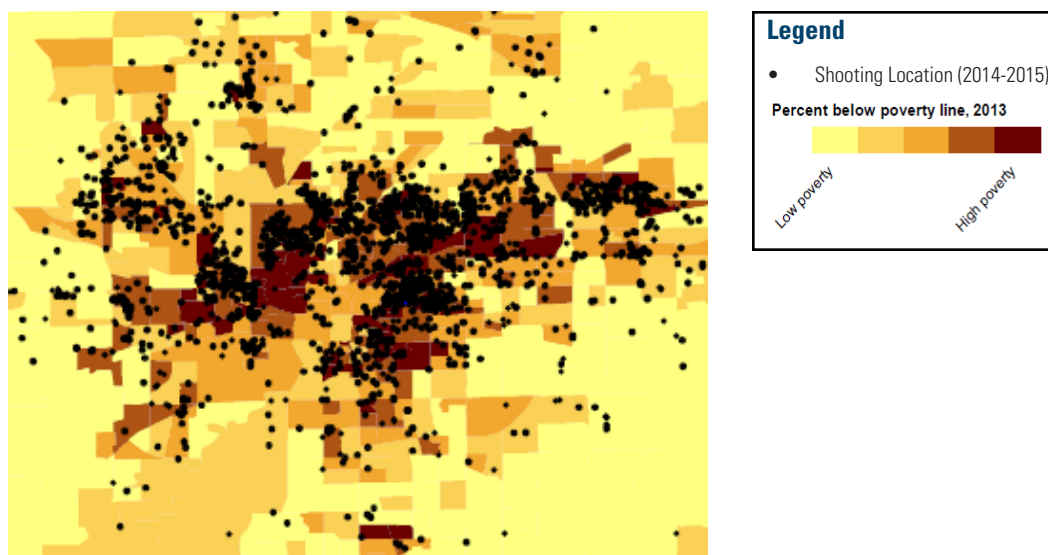
A number of structural factors separate nonfatal shootings from homicides. Mandatory reporting laws in 41 states require health care facilities or physicians to report gunshot wound injuries to local law enforcement (see [figure 2](#) above).⁷ However, little is known about the estimated 40% of nonfatal shooting victims who do not seek medical attention or report crime to police or other authorities.⁸ Gun crime also increases fear of retaliation, further highlighting that nonfatal shootings should be considered alongside homicides.⁹

Research on Gun Crime

Gun crime is not random and can be linked to people, groups, and places. Research suggests that gun crime can be transmitted like an epidemic through peers, social networks, and communities.¹⁰ There is evidence from Chicago that gun crime clusters within a small population of peers, and that even minimal contact with individuals who are involved with guns increases the risk of victimization.¹¹ The constant presence of crime guns in a community, particularly among small peer groups and gangs, further increases gun carrying and use. Research suggests that youth are afraid of victimization and carry guns at high rates, even when the penalties for gun carrying are known.¹²

Gun crime clusters geographically in communities. Violence often spills across neighborhood boundaries because of the mobility of gun-involved persons and the role of contagion in violence.¹³ Gun crime also concentrates in poor communities where citizens, particularly men of color, can be reluctant to call on police because they do not trust the response (see [figure 3](#)).¹⁴

Figure 3 Marion County (Indianapolis), IN Shooting Location and Percent in Poverty¹⁵



Overall, collecting data on the people and locations involved in nonfatal shootings — and on the linkages between the two — can provide substantial information on potential retaliatory violence and allow for the introduction of real-time interventions.

Measuring Nonfatal Shootings

Criminal nonfatal shootings are difficult to count.¹⁶ There is no agreed-upon national definition of a nonfatal shooting, nor is there a single data source that provides reliable and accurate data on nonfatal shootings. The two most commonly used official crime data sources, the Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) and National Incident-Based Reporting Systems (NIBRS), do not define a nonfatal shooting as a crime in and of itself. In both systems, they are considered aggravated assaults.¹⁷ Further, most police records management systems don't allow for an easy extraction of nonfatal shooting incidents. All of these factors make it difficult for police departments and researchers to accurately capture nonfatal gun crime. Comparisons between cities or agencies simply are not done because of these measurement challenges. Therefore, agencies should be deliberate when defining a criminal nonfatal shooting and make every attempt to be consistent when counting and collecting information about the people, places, and circumstances surrounding nonfatal shootings.

Defining what constitutes a nonfatal shooting incident is, consequently, a critical exercise for agencies to undertake.

The following suggested definition has three primary components:

- **Criminal intent**
- **A weapon with a powder discharge**
- **A penetrating wound**

At a minimum, the incident should meet the FBI’s UCR/NIBRS definition of an aggravated assault. The FBI defines an aggravated assault “as an unlawful attack by one person upon another for the purpose of inflicting severe or aggravated bodily injury.”¹⁸

Criminal intent is an essential characteristic because these are the incidents that police agencies are most concerned about and where they dedicate resources. Nonfatal shooting incidents that are not “unlawful,” like self-inflicted and accidental shootings, should not be included.

The type of weapon causing the bodily injury is also significant. A good starting point is to use federal criminal code definition as a guide for the definition of a firearm.¹⁹

Finally, the type of wound inflicted is a critical criterion. The wound should be a penetrating wound caused by the intentional firing of a weapon with a powder discharge. Shrapnel wounds such as those due to broken glass or wood splinters would be excluded.

Currently there is no best way to define a nonfatal shooting event. While the decision to include some incidents may be clear, other types of cases should be discussed when crafting a definition and data collection strategy. For example, officer-involved shootings are of great concern to local police agencies. Departments are encouraged to review the criteria for a nonfatal shooting (criminal intent, weapon type, and injury) when categorizing events, separate from the situational characteristics of the incident. Another type of case to think through is graze wounds. These are lesser wounds but still caused by the firearm projectile (i.e., not shrapnel). Consistency is of utmost importance. Consider collaborating with a research partner or crime analyst early on to help with measurement, data collection, and analysis. [Table 1](#) suggests scenarios that agencies should exclude when creating their definition.

Table 1: Excluded Nonfatal Shooting Scenarios

Scenario	Reason not included
Self-defense	It is not unlawful to shoot someone in self-defense (missing unlawfulness)
Self-inflicted	Incident is not an “attack by one person upon another” (missing two-person requirement)
Accidental	Incident lacks “the purpose of inflicting severe or aggravated bodily injury” (missing intent)
Shrapnel	Does not meet the definition of a wound inflicted by a firearm
Not a firearm	Weapon does not have a powder discharge

Next Steps

Data on nonfatal shootings can be translated into effective public policy. Building data capacity is an essential first step. Agencies such as the [Philadelphia](#) and [Rochester Police Departments](#) collect data on shooting victims and share them in an open format through the Police Foundation’s [Police Data Initiative](#). Recent emerging work suggests that [Crime Gun Intelligence Centers \(CGICs\)](#) can be an effective model for comprehensive data collection and coordinated action on gun crimes.²⁰ Finally, evidence-based practices such as the Milwaukee Homicide Review²¹ can help multiple agencies review gun crime and take actionable steps to reduce gun crime. The ability to respond operationally in real time to information collected from nonfatal shootings will better serve both the community and the agency.

References

1. Wintemute, G. J. (2015). The epidemiology of firearm violence in the twenty-first century United States. *Annual Review of Public Health*, 36, 5-19. doi:10.1146/annurev-publhealth-031914-122535
2. Piquero, A. R., MacDonald, J., Dobrin, A., Daigle, L. E., & Cullen, F. T. (2005). Self-control, violent offending, and homicide victimization: Assessing the general theory of crime. *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, 21(1), 55-71. doi:10.1007/s10940-004-1787-2. Also Pridemore, W. A. (2005). A cautionary note on using county-level crime and homicide data. *Homicide Studies*, 9(3), 256-268. doi:10.1177/1088767905277202
3. Hipple, N. K., & Magee, L. A. (2017). The difference between living and dying: Victim characteristics and motive among nonfatal shooting and gun homicides. *Violence and Victims*, 32(6). doi:10.1891/0886-6708
4. Marion County Nonfatal Shooting Database.
5. Kalesan, B., Adhikarla, C., Pressley, J. C., Fagan, J. A., Xuan, Z., Siegel, M. B., & Galea, S. (2017). The hidden epidemic of firearm injury: Increasing firearm injury rates during 2001-2013. *American Journal of Epidemiology*, 185(7), 546-553. doi:10.1093/aje/kww147
6. Fowler, K. A., Dahlberg, L. L., Haileyesus, T., & Annet, J. L. (2015). Firearm injuries in the United States. *Preventive Medicine*. doi:10.1016/j.ypmed.2015.06.002
7. Gupta, M. (2007). Mandatory reporting laws and the emergency physician. *Annals of Emergency Medicine*, 49(3), 369-376. doi:10.1016/j.annemergmed.2006.05.017
8. Planty, M. G., & Truman, J. (2013). *Firearm Violence, 1993-2011*. Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice.
9. Papachristos, A. V. (2009). Murder by structure: Dominance relations and the social structure of gang homicide. *American Journal of Sociology*, 115(1), 74-128. doi:10.1086/597791
10. Zeoli, A. M., Pizarro, J. M., Grady, S. C., & Melde, C. (2014). Homicide as infectious disease: Using public health methods to investigate the diffusion of homicide. *Justice Quarterly*, 31(3), 609-632. doi:10.1080/07418825.2012.732100
11. Papachristos, A. V., Wildeman, C., & Roberto, E. (2015). Tragic, but not random: The social contagion of nonfatal gunshot injuries. *Social Science & Medicine*, 125(1), 139-150. doi:10.1016/j.socscimed.2014.01.056
12. Watkins, A. M., Huebner, B. M., & Decker, S. H. (2008). Patterns of gun acquisition, carrying, and use among juvenile and adult arrestees: Evidence from a high crime city. *Justice Quarterly*, 25(4), 674-700. doi:10.1080/07418820801930118
13. Huebner, B. M., Martin, K., Moule Jr, R. K., Pyrooz, D., & Decker, S. H. (2016). Dangerous places: Gang members and neighborhood levels of gun assault. *Justice Quarterly*, 33(5), 836-862. doi:10.1080/07418825.2014.984751
14. Clampet-Lundquist, S., Carr, P. J., & Kefalas, M. J. (2015). The sliding scale of snitching: A qualitative examination of snitching in three Philadelphia communities. *Sociological Forum*, 30(2), 265-285. doi:10.1111/sof.12162. Also Gau, J. M., & Brunson, R. K. (2010). Procedural justice and order maintenance policing: A study of inner-city young men's perceptions of police legitimacy. *Justice Quarterly*, 27(2), 255-279. doi:10.1080/07418820902763889
15. 2009-2013 ACS Estimate and Marion County Nonfatal Shooting Database
16. Hipple, N. K., & Huebner, B. M. (2018). 5 things you need to know about nonfatal shootings. Retrieved from Washington, DC: https://centerforimprovinginvestigations.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/5-Things-Nonfatal-Shootings_NRTAC_Police-Foundation-March-2018.pdf. Also Hipple, N. K., & Magee, L. A. (2017). The difference between living and dying: Victim characteristics and motive among nonfatal shooting and gun homicides. *Violence and Victims*, 32(6). doi:10.1891/0886-6708
17. Federal Bureau of Investigation. (2004). *Uniform Crime Reporting Handbook*. Retrieved from <https://www2.fbi.gov/ucr/handbook/ucrhandbook04.pdf>. Also Federal Bureau of Investigation. (2013). *Criminal Justice Information Services (CJIS) Division Uniform Crime Reporting Program (UCR)*. Retrieved from <https://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/nibrs/summary-reporting-system-srs-user-manual>
18. Federal Bureau of Investigation. (2013). *Crime in the United States, 2012: Aggravated assault*. Retrieved from <https://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/crime-in-the-u.s/2012/crime-in-the-u.s.-2012/violent-crime/aggravated-assault>
19. 18 U.S. Code § 921(a)(3)
20. <https://www.policefoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/5-THINGS-to-Know-About-Crime-Gun-Intelligence-Centers.pdf>. Also <https://crimegunintelcenters.org/>
21. <http://city.milwaukee.gov/hrc#.WsFbcYj4-Ul>. Also <https://crimesolutions.gov/ProgramDetails.aspx?ID=354>



Police Foundation

1201 Connecticut Avenue N.W.

Suite #200 Washington, DC 20036

(202) 833 -1460

www.policefoundation.org



NATIONAL RESOURCE & TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE CENTER
FOR IMPROVING LAW ENFORCEMENT INVESTIGATIONS