

# Episode 178-- What You Need to Know about Gun Violence Again...

📅 Mon, 5/2 1:15AM ⌚ 32:48

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

homelessness, people, gun violence, violence, homeless, firearm, experiencing, housing, homeless population, brady, youth, individuals, important, community, victims, perpetrate, housing first model, vulnerable population, population, mental health

## SPEAKERS

Dr. Hsun-Ta Hsu, Hsun-Ta Hsu, Donald Whitehead, Isabella Dâ€™Alacio, JJ Janflone, Kelly Sampson

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JJ Janflone 00:08

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JJ Janflone 00:37

Hey everybody, welcome back to another episode of Red, Blue and Brady I'm one of your hosts JJ,



Kelly Sampson 00:42

and I'm your host Kelly.



JJ Janflone 00:44

This month, one man was accused of shooting five unhoused men in Washington DC and New York City over the course of just one month. And while a suspect in that case is now in custody, the national attention from that case led many, us included to ask a question; how does gun violence specifically impact unhoused people?



Kelly Sampson 01:02

And as we discovered gun violence and populations experiencing homelessness are indeed

tragically linked in a number of ways. And that intersection is an important conversation that we need to be having.



JJ Janflone 01:14

And to best have this we're joined this week by three experts because you know, we couldn't do it alone. Mr. Donald Whitehead, Executive Director of the National Coalition for the Homeless, Dr. Hsun-Ta Hsu, Associate Professor of Social Work at the University of Missouri, and advocate Isabella Dâ€™Alacio, who was a member of both Brady's Team Enough Executive Council and serves as the federal policy associate at March for our lives.



Donald Whitehead 01:40

I am Donald Whitehead, the Executive Director for the National Coalition for the Homeless.



Hsun-Ta Hsu 01:46

Hi, my name is Hsun-Ta Hsu and currently an associate professor at University of Missouri Columbia School of Social Work.



Isabella Dâ€™Alacio 01:55

Yeah, hi, I'm Bella. I'm on the Team Enough Executive Council, which is the youth organization affiliate of Brady, and I'm a Policy Associate at March for Our Lives, and also student at George Mason University.



JJ Janflone 02:06

Well, I really want to thank all three of you for joining us today. And to kick things off, we're going to start with I think, a very broad question. We know that gun violence disproportionately impacts marginalized and vulnerable groups, right. But how does it impact those experiencing homelessness specifically?



Donald Whitehead 02:22

So we we've, we've certainly heard in recent weeks about the serial killer who was targeting individuals in both New York and the Washington DC metro area. But there, this is not a one off event. We've seen over the last 20 years, 20 plus years, actually, at this point of numerous attacks on people experiencing homelessness, and many of them involved guns, there was just one last year in the Miami-Dade area, another serial killer attacking homeless people. Guns aren't always the weapon of choice, but many times they are and we documented more attacks against homeless people that resulted in fatalities than all the other protected classes combined over that 20 year period

D

Dr. Hsun-Ta Hsu 03:13

Yeah. Additionally to what you both had said, I think also a huge component of gun violence with homelessness is suicide ideation and completion, which is often with a firearm. One thing that isn't really talked about a lot it with homelessness and this crisis is that there is a mental health aspect to it of not having a home and a place to turn. And so that, you know, causes people to either turn to crime or turn to harm themselves. And that is something that is a terrible tragedy within homelessness and gun violence as well.

H

Hsun-Ta Hsu 03:13

We're delighted to see that they're currently more funding targeting understanding, you know, gun violence among not just general population but more vulnerable population but that you know, that the funding just got kicked in. So we don't have much information regarding firearm violence like statistics, you know, faced by individuals experiencing homelessness, but we do have some information about youth and young adults experiencing homelessness, what may be their firearm violence exposure, and I will say compared to general population it is alarmingly high. In one study that we conducted with youth experiencing homelessness across seven cities, we do see that over 40% of our participants had been shot by another person or had witnessed another person got shot on purpose. We also see you know, about 18% of them expressed they had perpetrated firearm violence, and so their their exposure to firearm violence is alarmingly high. And a lot of times it's really because they don't have a physical space to to protect them, you know, living on the street without a roof on top, some high threshold shelter services may prevent them from accessing those services. So they are not really physically quite, unquote "protected", which increased really increase the victimization and violence exposure, not just firearm violence, but in general violence exposure among individuals experiencing homelessness.

H

Hsun-Ta Hsu 05:18

I think that's a really good point, when people are talking about firearm violence, a lot of times people think about perpetration or being, you know, victimized by firearm violence, but we found that there's high suicide risk among individuals experiencing homelessness, understand what we, you know, all the trauma, all the victimizations, all the past history they went through, I think the alarming finding in our study is that we found that about 30% of youth said that they had ready, easy access to a firearm whenever they need it. Moreover, among youth who have expressed that they had suicidal thoughts, or you know, they had attempted suicide in the past 12 months, 40% of them, the proportion actually jumped to 40% of them to have ready access to firearms. So I think that's really worrisome in terms of the to lethal intersection about people who are high risk of suicide risk, but also have access to firearm and a lot of the current evidence based interventions like safety, storage, those types of interventions may not reach out or may not apply to this vulnerable population, simply they don't have a secure place to store their belongings. So I think that's also something we should look at,

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Isabella Dâ€™Alacio 06:38

You know, we have a strong veteran population that is homeless, and a lot of them are

You know, we have a strong veteran population that is homeless, and a lot of them are struggling with these mental health crises and often have thoughts of suicide, ideation and completion. And so that is another segment all within itself when it comes to homelessness,

**D** Donald Whitehead 06:51

Just wanted to push back on one thing, though, when we're talking about homelessness, it's a really broad range of people. So when we talk about crime, and homelessness, it's important that we point out that homeless individuals are far more likely to be victims of crime than to actually perpetrate crimes, and that when it comes to substance abuse and mental health issues, that is a higher there's a higher rate for street homeless people. So people living outside, there's far more people that are episodic in their homelessness. And it may not be living outside, it may be doubled up on somebody's couch, or in a car or something to that effect. It isn't actually living on the street. So the high rates of mental health and substance abuse are more likely to happen in that street homeless population. When the professor talks about that youth population. They're couchsurfing. They're living with a friend, they're living in abandoned buildings. They're not as much on the street. But I do certainly agree that the lack of a door that you can lock behind you really creates the opportunity for, for convenience, for someone who wants to commit harm to them. So many times the victims are victims of opportunity versus intent, although intent is pretty high in in the prevalence of crimes as well. So I just wanted to make those two points.

**H** Hsun-Ta Hsu 08:19

I agree that totally and totally agreement that there's usually some misperceptions in terms of, you know, minority youth or young adults or individuals or people with mental illness or suffering from mental health related issues, they're more likely to perpetrate firearm violence. But in our studies, we actually found that racial minorities, people with mental health related issues, they are not more likely, statistically, they are not more likely to be perpetrators of firearm violence, however, they're significantly more likely to be victims of firearm violence. I think that's a really prominent point that we are trying to convey is that a trauma informed care, a more a more support that devoted to this vulnerable population is should should be focused rather than when we're thinking about like perpetration, we automatically, a lot of people may automatically think about people with minority status. So that's just some echoing the point.

**K** Kelly Sampson 09:26

We've been talking a fair bit about some of the, you know, increased risk for people who are already unhoused but I'm wondering, can gun violence itself or experiencing gun violence be a factor that may cause someone to become unhoused?

**D** Donald Whitehead 09:40

I would say absolutely. It could cause people to become so one of the highest indicators of people that become homeless is their high levels of health related issues, and the health disparities that are there so many times people who are victims who survive are have really

heavy medical issues and medical issues really push people into the homeless population and or mental health or behavioral health issues as well. So many of those are a result of traumatic events often involving guns. So yes, that is a another factor. On the other side, those that do perpetrate those crimes are introduced to law enforcement. And law enforcement is also, people's criminal history is a huge factor in both their inability to access housing, but also access employment, which results in their inability to lack housing. I want to make one other point because I think it was very important to Professor brought this up that one of the biggest barriers to be able to really calculate the level of violence that's perpetrated against people that are homeless with guns, or in other ways is that most police departments or and most medical examiner's do not track housing status. So the information that we get about how many people are victims of gun violence is really mostly anecdotal information. Now we do our due diligence to make sure that we follow up on that anecdotal information and make sure we document it. But the Los Angeles Police Department is one of the few departments in the entire country that actually track violence against people based on their housing status. They found it as 14 times more likely that people will become victims of homicidal violence among the homeless population than the general population



JJ Janflone 11:43

On sort of that issue, though, to have even getting access to housing in the first place as being something that can cause folks to being unhoused. I know, Bella, you've done a fair bit of work in this area based on even your own experience. And I wonder if you can talk about that a little bit for folks.



Isabella D'Alacio 11:57

Yeah. So I kind of am the story that the professor and Mr. Whitehead have, you know, outlined a little bit. My homeless experience, I was in high school, there was a rent increase in our apartment complex, and so my mom could no longer afford the rent. So we had like a 60 day window to leave. But that wasn't enough time to find a new apartment. And so we ended up being homeless for around like three months, just kind of like couchsurfing. At first, we stayed at my mom's friend's like timeshares in like a random hotel, like really close to the house. And then we ended up at my mom's friend's house and sharing a bedroom in there, until eventually were able to find our own place. And to speak to that it was incredibly emotionally taxing to be a junior in high school and having to wonder where I was going to sleep at night, wonder where my mom was going to sleep at night, because obviously, she's going to prioritize my safety and well being. And I'll never forget, I was standing in a Publix, Florida grocery store, and I just didn't know where my mom was gonna stay that night, and I broke down. And that's when I really realized like, wow, like, this is being homeless, like, I have no idea where I'm going to live, where I'm going to make food, like a place, I don't have a place to call home. And having to do that coupled with being a regular high school student and do homework. Where am I going to do homework, with what Wi Fi? It was like, all of these, like, huge battles of like, how am I going to even get to a library, if I don't have a car, my mom's working, trying to make money so she can get a house, you know, like you're constantly running into these walls. It's this cycle of poverty that you just cannot escape. And so luckily, we were eventually able to find a place. But that was something that ultimately did set me back during my high school experience. And I think that with that, you know, we really have to address poverty as a whole

in the United States and how it manifests in healthcare disparity it manifests in homelessness, and it manifests in all these different ways that people can even have access to start their life back on track.

D

Donald Whitehead 13:59

I think the other expense and Bella, thank you so much for sharing your story. It's really how we can change minds and hearts about you know, who is really homeless, and what the underlying issues are by really telling stories. So important. I think the other cost is not necessarily a financial cost. But what happens to especially young people in homelessness, the residual trauma that happens to young people as they go through the homeless population, they're far more likely to see violence than the general population. So that lasting impact whether it's PTSD, that results from that experience. What what has been found in studies is that if, if children and youth are homeless as children, they're far more likely to become homeless as adults. And it's very important that we stop that cycle. Now our organization was really responsible for putting liaisons in every school district in the country to help students as they cycled through that situation. But we certainly have not done enough. And again, the violence that we talk about with individuals has even a greater impact on a young people. And it really can shape their lives at some.

K

Kelly Sampson 15:22

And as we talk about sort of the intersections between being unhoused and being young, there's, you know, research has also shown that there's an intersection between race, gender, sexuality, and the ways that those particular identities can interact with not only homelessness, but also gun violence. And so this is a question for anyone in the panel, can you talk a little bit about some of these other intersections and being on house and experiencing violence.

D

Donald Whitehead 15:52

So I can just talk generally about the disproportionality of People of Color within the homeless population. So the different populations, African-Americans are 40% more likely, they make up about 40% of the homeless population, while making up 13% of the general population. If you look at Native Americans, it's about a six to one ratio, general population versus homeless population. And then if you look at Hawaiian Islanders, it's nine to one, the ratio, so People of Color do fall into homeless populations more likely. And they're also more likely to come from unhealthy neighborhoods, where gun violence is common. And it actually circles all the way back to the 1930s, when public housing was created as a segregated housing opportunity for people, even in communities that were integrated at the time. So we actually created these really, highly overpopulated sections of our country that were not able to get the resources that they need, whether it's health resources, healthy grocery stores, schools, all of those things. And all of those things lead to that movement into homelessness. We've all heard about the prison, the school to prison pipeline, if you look at the discipline, that happens in schools, it's far more likely that a Black female will be disciplined at a level that's higher than any other part of the population. So we know that violence sometimes, actually, people who are treated with violence actually become violent themselves. So all of those things really have a really major impact on homelessness. And it also if you talk about African-American youth, one of the

highest, one of the biggest reasons African-American youth become homeless, is they they, they have gender issues that they come out to their parents with, and they're forced out of the home. People in the LGBTQ population, that's one of the largest populations of People of Color that experience homelessness, as you...

H

Hsun-Ta Hsu 18:15

We do see, like LGBTQ sexual and gender minority youth are over represented in youth and young adults experiencing homelessness. And in our study, we have about 40%, 30 to 40% of youth self identified as sexual and gender minority. And they are major. They're the major reason why we ask about why they first why they experiencing homelessness, and the major reason why is they been then being kicked out from home or they are running away from home. And we a lot of literature has already suggest that social support is critical. When we're thinking about connected with services, were thinking about mental health related addressing mental health related needs, and also substance use related behaviors. For them, they, because of the their their gender identity, their their sexual orientation, being rejected from their family, they lost that specific what we call, quote unquote, pro social, pro social ties, they are able to maintain them facilitate so how to connect them with a supportive types may be very important when we're thinking about addressing homelessness in this population, and also whatever needs or difficulties they are facing.



JJ Janflone 19:38

Well, and as we've discussed, you know, we're framing this conversation sort of around the recent attacks on unhoused populations in New York City and DC that made the national news, you know, these were assaults and murders committed with firearms. But we know attacks like this aren't new. Right? We know attacks like this happen frighteningly often. And so I'm wonder During if this maybe we could talk about why they'll all of those attacks don't get national attention.

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Donald Whitehead 20:06

So I'll jump in on this one because I think I have a theory as to why that happens. We can't be sure, of course, one we know the media is far more likely to tag a homeless person than a housed person. So you've never seen a story that says "Housed person shoot somebody," although the overwhelming majority are people that are housed. But I think there has been a concerted effort over the last 40 years or so. So we are in the longest period historically, of continued homelessness that we've ever had in this country. So we've had homelessness all the way back to, to the days of when when people first came to this country from Europe, we've always had homelessness, they were called poor houses. They had all kinds of different names down the line. But the longest period is this period. And what I think is symbolic of this period one, I think there's a couple of things. The first is that there was a concerted effort to villainize poor people in the late 70s, early 80s, you heard things like the welfare queen, I know all of us are familiar with the welfare queen.

D

Donald Whitehead 21:12

And what that does, what that did is is kind of painted this picture, that people who are homeless were somehow and people that were poor were taking from society, that they were a burden on society. And so compassion, slowly moved to contempt. And in addition to that, what we see is that, in all these communities, the elected officials, their way to solve homelessness, they become frustrated, because we haven't solved it yet. So their way to solve it is to raid encampments. And they call them sweeps. I don't call them sweeps. Because we don't sweep people, we sweep trash and leaves. So I call them raids. So they raid the encampments, they make homeless people out to be less desirable in society, throw away people. And I think that leads to a mentality that these people are others. They other, they've been othered, and therefore they are less valuable. And so it's okay to perpetrate violence against these people. I think the other thing that I think is a factor, a lot, there's not been a lot of studies on this, is the fact that we have this growth of People of Color in the homeless population. People of Color have always been victims of violence. And so the more this population turns into one of People of Color, the more we see violence perpetrated, I think those two things are, are the underlying reason. And I do think it's also a frustration, because a lot of money has been poured into the issue the wrong way, I think, and we haven't solved it.

I Isabella Dâ€™Alacio 22:50

You know, there's really just a stigma against homeless people in general. And even in Florida, I've seen it in my own state, there have been countless times where people have been arrested for feeding homeless people. And that's just unacceptable. That doesn't make any sense to me that says lack of compassion, and seeing someone as human, they're seen as other. And that is an issue within itself that we need to address not only in Congress, but as a society as seeing another human as other, but also to just really, you know, put the resources that are needed, especially after COVID. We're seeing increases in houselessness. And we need to be able to put these resources where they deserve. I think it's insane that Representative Cori Bush had to beg for the moratorium to be extended for so long. Why did it take so much effort, these are human people, these are human lives that just simply do not have a home. And I think once we remove that stigma, we can have, you know, this conversation, but it definitely needs to be talked about more. The more that we talk about it, the more that we you know, I tell my story that so you can see that someone who looks like me could be homeless, the more other people can tell their story and the more change that we can create around this issue.

H Hsun-Ta Hsu 23:59

I think another thing that people don't talk about homelessness, sometimes is stemming from the misconception that, you know, they choose this type of lifestyle. So, you know, if you choose this type of lifestyle, that comes the consequences, so they don't talk about it. I you know, in during our interviews, we also see the misconceptions that you know, they actually earn more money standing on the street than, you know, general folks like working, working, you know, 15 hours or whatever hours per week. So, I think that's the thing that people have the perception that they choose this type of lifestyle. So they the these are the consequences that they they will need to face so people don't talk about it like that, but we also know that you know, one study the housing pathway to housing first model, they look at, you know, the first identify the top up ranking identified needs among individuals experiencing homelessness is housing. They're not choosing to live on the street or experiencing unstable housing they actually looking for to exit homelessness to have a stable housing. And the second point I want



to make is that we all agree that, I assume we all agree that housing is the most prominent strategy to end homelessness. But I also want to caution in a way that housing should not be served as a social control. So especially when it comes with NIMBYism, right. So we don't want to just simply house the individuals comparing homes homelessness for the sake of housing them, but rather, where do we choose the housing places how the housing neighborhood should look like? What may be individuals experiencing homelessness, their say, in terms of determining housing is critical, because that's going to help them to move on in terms of exiting homelessness.

K

Kelly Sampson 26:07

And just to follow up on one thing, because you mentioned Housing First. And for listeners who might not be familiar with that, could you just explain what that strategy is?

H

Hsun-Ta Hsu 26:18

Okay, so sorry. Housing First is basically, there's not really consensus in terms of or manualized, like consensus of housing first model, but in general, the overarching goal is that individuals should be should receive housing with a low threshold, meaning that they are not required to stay abstinence, substance abstinence to get housing, they are also not required to receive treatment in order to get housing. So instead of graduating from emergency shelter, and shelter program, and then into permanent supportive housing, housing first model is actually okay, this person is in need of housing, and using housing to stabilize the situation so that all that resource supportive services can kick in to address so the basically is to address the subsistence needs, and then to address behavioral related issues held out to promote their health outcomes or mental health outcomes.



JJ Janflone 27:24

You've given us so much, I think, to think about and to act on today. And on that note, you know, what are some actions our listeners can take if they want to push back against this violence,

I

Isabella Dâ€™Alacio 27:35

Okay, for young people join Team Enough! Team Enough is a youth-led gun violence prevention movement, we focus on intersectional issues and how to end gun violence, we we look at not only why gun violence is an issue, but also the root causes and homelessness is one of them. I think, broadly, you know, in this country, when we do look at homelessness, and we look at gun violence, we cannot ignore this root cause and you know, investing in community violence intervention programs is an amazing way to do so. And this really does help keep keep people out of violent situations and conflicts. So call your legislators tell them, ask them if their community violence intervention programs in your state or hospital based violence intervention programs, ask about these resources and advocate for them. But Team Enough is definitely a great place to start on your journey or any local organization that you know is doing the work, the best place that you can create changes in your own community because you know, your

community you grew up there, you understand the risks and what the culture is like. So no better than you to help. So definitely just, you know, look around you and get involved in, reach out to others check in on people make sure they're doing okay. And all that.

H

Hsun-Ta Hsu 28:46

I'm in total agreement with Bella's approach, I think, you know, it takes I mean, firearm violence is really a complicated issue and it takes a village especially when we're thinking about addressing firearm violence among individuals experiencing homelessness, it you know, schools need to be involved. Child Welfare Agencies should be involved because a lot of youth experiencing homelessness they actually graduated from foster care system. Subsistence services should be provided like, drop-in centers so that they can be connected with other services. Trauma informed care especially should be included. There are community based models such as what Bella just mentioned your also like Cure Violence Program that really engage the whole different systems together to with a goal to address community violence, individuals experiencing homelessness, this is a little bit different in a way that they are probably a little bit transient and so not really a geographical area. So I think it's important that so one size does not fit all. So I think it's really important to engage to involve youth who are currently experiencing homelessness and youth who are who had lived experiencing experiences of homelessness to understand, you know, what's the best or draft strategies to reach out to them, whether a program or a community effort is feasible and sustainable so that it tailored to their needs. And if I can add one thing that is to encourage your listeners to really have an open mind to understand the issue of homelessness in the United States, like break the go out of the comfort zone, like look into, not not that the misperception that perpetuated, but like really look into the experiences of people experiencing homelessness.



JJ Janflone 30:49

Thank you, Dr. Hsun-Ta. I think that's actually a fantastic note to end on. And of course, everything we've talked about today, resources will be linked in the description of this episode. But Mr. Whitehead, Bella, as well, thank you both.

K

Kelly Sampson 31:02

We have amazing discussions on Red, Blue, and Brady, but this one was a perfect example of you know how you can begin a conversation on something that you may not know that much about if you have people who do know a lot about it.



JJ Janflone 31:17

No, I mean, I think that's how every good conversation supposed to be. Right? And what I kept coming back to is that this just goes to show how gun violence is such an intersectional issue, and how it impacts communities and really different and yet really similar ways.



JJ Janflone 31:37



jj jammone 02:10

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Kelly Sampson 31:51

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