

Good afternoon and thank you again for including us in today's listening session. It was both heartbreaking and inspiring to hear from so many organizations that are doing great work, and yet still struggling to address the prevalence of violence in our communities.

I wanted to offer my additional thoughts on the question of what is contributing to gun violence in our communities. I am in no way an expert, but I see a problem of basic respect and value of (certain) human lives and communities. Through my position at CCFSA, I have been fortunate enough to accompany our Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) Case Managers into underserved communities to provide Chromebook devices to our clients to use for additional schooling, job searching, job training, or working remotely. During these home visits, I have become acutely aware of some of the challenges these communities are going through. Often times they live in unsafe conditions due to dilapidated buildings, infested with rodents or other pests. They see and hear violence every day and experience trauma because of it. They live in a food desert, with not enough healthy food available and affordable to them. They go to schools filled with lead paint, asbestos, and an underpaid work force and get the feeling that, instead of being prepared for a happy, healthy, productive life, they are being warehoused for a certain number of hours in the day until they can be let loose into the community. They hear about police violence against members of the BIPOC population on a daily basis. They feel the effects of institutional racism. They do not feel valued, respected, or hopeful for their future.

But how to turn all of that around? A whole-system change needs to happen with investment in providing healthy, nutritious foods for underserved population, before-school and after-school programs that feed the child intellectually, spiritually, physically, and creatively, investment in low-income neighborhoods including green space and safe, secure housing, education that focuses on college preparedness or job training, and inter-community collaboration where every child is told they are valued, respected, and worthy of a bright future. It seems like a lot to ask, and also, extremely simplistic, but we need to invest in these upstream approaches to supporting all of our children and communities so that when they encounter a gun, or are given a choice between violence and peace, they know they have another choice and they are worthy of living a better life.

The violence in our communities right now is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Children in underserved communities are being told, in a myriad of ways, that they are unworthy, and they begin to believe it long enough to act out in a way that derails what could be a very bright future. It is heartbreaking.

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