

The Gendered Dynamics of Gun Violence in Chicago

By Katelyn Jones and Julia Whiting

In October 2020, Chicago was headed toward an increase of at least 51 percent in the murder rate and a 52 percent increase in shootings by the end of the year, compared to 2019.¹ The city's advocates and social service providers projected that COVID-19 will also increase domestic violence, which is often referred to as the shadow pandemic.² Researchers and policymakers are at a loss to explain the spike in homicides and gun violence in Chicago and other cities around the country, and thus cannot come up with clear suggestions on how to reduce these trends.³

Many Chicago nonprofit organizations are actively working to mitigate violence. A cursory review of prominent programs addressing gun violence in Chicago reveals that most focus their efforts on one type of actor: men, specifically cis men of color. The vast majority of these programs ignore how women are affected by and participate in violence.⁴

We argue that understanding the gendered dynamics of conflict helps us better understand increasing rates of violence and ways to mitigate it. A review of the data reveals that gun violence in the city is highly correlated to domestic violence, including sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). Areas with increased rates of domestic violence also experience higher rates of gun violence.⁵ These trends indicate the need for more careful attention to the role of gender in the rising violence in Chicago: how and why women and men participate in violence, how and why women and men are victims of violence, and how gun violence intersects with other forms of violence—especially intimate-partner violence.

There is a distinct lack of research examining the links between SGBV and urban gun violence in the United States generally. This absence of a gender lens for examining violence stands in stark contrast to what we have learned in conflict-affected countries around the world. Applying a women, peace and security lens to US urban violence can produce a better understanding of what factors contribute to spikes in violence in US cities and what could be done to mitigate them. As with any armed conflict, one cannot fully understand it without recognizing women's and men's experiences of it.⁶

In this brief, we first justify our interpretation of Chicago's gun violence as a form of armed conflict and explain how the women, peace, and security (WPS) lens can aid in its analysis. Second, we share results of a data analysis in which we map the prevalence and interconnectedness of domestic violence and gun violence across the city. We use domestic violence as a proxy to assess SGBV, as domestic violence measurements are the only available data that capture SGBV in Chicago. Third, we recommend shifts in data collection, research, and policies to take gendered dynamics into account and motivate more effective programming in Chicago and elsewhere.

Gun Violence as Armed Conflict

We maintain that gun violence in Chicago constitutes an armed conflict for two reasons. First, it meets the baseline intensity and organization requirements for armed conflict classification in Common Article 3 and Additional Protocol II (APII) of the Geneva Conventions.⁷ Responses to gun violence have met the APII intensity requirement because military forces—not just police—have been deployed to mitigate and prosecute the violence.⁸ It has also met the organization requirement, as 61 percent of Chicago’s homicides are connected to gangs.⁹ Moreover, long-standing control over distinct territories, specifically neighborhoods on the south and west sides of the city, is maintained by prevalent gun violence.¹⁰

Second, Chicago is described as a war zone in popular narratives. In 2009, local rapper King Louie coined the term *Chiraq*, equating Chicago with armed conflict in Iraq.¹¹ The nickname gained popularity as a commentary on pervasive gun violence experienced by many communities. *Chi-raaq* was also the title of a 2015 film adaptation of Aristophanes’s *Lysistrata* set on Chicago’s South Side.¹² Although the archetype of women withholding sex from men to achieve peace does not accurately represent women’s experience of gun violence in Chicago, the continued comparison of Chicago to widely acknowledged sites of armed conflict is noteworthy. These narratives elucidate how popular descriptions of Chicago as a war zone produce meaning and justify actions, including the involvement of federal forces to combat Chicago’s gun violence.¹³

Recognizing gun violence in Chicago as armed conflict enables us to examine its gendered dynamics through the lens of the women, peace, and security (WPS) agenda. Applying a WPS framework in our analysis means that we evaluate gun violence with special attention to the different ways men and women experience armed conflict in the city. Moreover, we examine how different experiences of gun violence are connected to other types of violence, especially SGBV.

Mapping Gun Violence and SGBV

Scholars and policymakers have yet to adequately evaluate connections between SGBV and gun violence in Chicago, despite evidence that they are related. Between 2016 and 2019, shootings in which a woman was the victim increased 13.5 percent each year.¹⁴ Police typically described these victims as connected to a “gang lifestyle,” but some were also described as victims of crimes of opportunity, armed robberies, arguments that became violent, or domestic violence. There is also evidence that SGBV is more prevalent in Chicago neighborhoods with significant rates of both crime and poverty. Between 2002 and 2016, four neighborhoods in

Chicago with the highest homicide rate also had the highest sexual assault rate. For example, West Englewood reported 50 homicides and 42 sexual assaults in 2016.¹⁵

While there is a paucity of research on these dynamics in Chicago, an ever-growing body of literature examines these dynamics internationally in conflict-affected settings. For instance, societies in other parts of the world that have higher levels of gender-based violence within households have been found to be more likely to engage in violent group interactions.¹⁶ Thus SGBV can be a useful predictor of violence outside of homes, and it suggests that these dynamics likely exist outside of conventional conflict areas. The 2020 US WPS index examines women’s status along the interconnected dimensions of inclusion, justice, and security at the state level. The report found that states that do well in one of these dimensions also do well in the others and vice versa, suggesting that systems of (dis)empowerment often reinforce each other.¹⁷

To analyze the relationship between Chicago’s gun violence and SGBV systematically, we mapped and compared the prevalence of both throughout the city. In particular, we asked: Do the same areas of the city have high levels of gun violence and SGBV? Or would the two variables appear geographically unrelated?

We used citywide data on gun violence and SGBV over the same period. For data on gun violence, we used the city of Chicago’s Data Portal, which provides data on calls to the police (excluding homicides that include identifiable data for either victim or perpetrator) from 2001 to the present. The best publicly available data source for SGBV (and the only citywide source for domestic violence data) is the Chicago Police Department’s (CPD) Domestic Violence Quarterly Statistical Report, which maps average daily calls to the police by police district for domestic disturbance, domestic battery, or violation of orders of protection during January 2014–September 2014.¹⁸ This report, therefore, includes domestic violence that might not necessarily be considered SGBV—such as elder abuse—and it is limited to crimes reported to the police. Because SGBV in particular is typically underreported, the report likely undercounts incidents of SGBV.¹⁹ While using domestic violence data as a proxy for SGBV’s prevalence in Chicago is not ideal, it is the best option at present.

Using R, we entered these daily averages as a new dataset in order to compare it with CPD crime data from the Data Portal.²⁰ We filtered the raw CPD data by month to include only 1 January–30 September 2014. Within this time frame, we tallied all gun-related calls to the police, excluding possession, sale, or registration offenses, by police district. The remaining crimes are categorized in the database as assault, battery, robbery, sexual assault, and reckless or unlawful use of a

firearm. This approach was meant to isolate incidents of gun violence, which has some drawbacks. First, some crimes in the CPD database, such as aggravated vehicular hijacking, may have but did not necessarily include a gun. Second, while illegal weapons sales are not directly harming someone, they contribute to an environment of armed conflict. Third, because homicides are not included in the data, a fatal dimension of gun violence is not included. Fourth, some crimes included in our measure of gun violence could also be considered SGBV. In particular, criminal sexual assault with a gun (total count: 50) and aggravated domestic battery using a handgun (total count: 3) are both included. While it is likely that many of these crimes also count as SGBV, we cannot be sure, as we do not have detailed information about these crimes.

We sorted each district's total gun-related calls by the hundreds to create a categorical scale similar to the average daily domestic violence calls. Initially, we calculated each district's daily average calls to the police regarding gun violence to compare with the daily average calls to the police regarding domestic violence. Those averages were too small for meaningful analysis—no district averaged more than 3 calls per day. Because of this, we opted to calculate total gun violence calls per police district instead. This suggests that, while gun violence in Chicago gets more publicity, domestic violence occurs much more frequently. Total gun calls to the police and daily average domestic violence calls per district are sorted by number of gun calls in descending order (table 1).

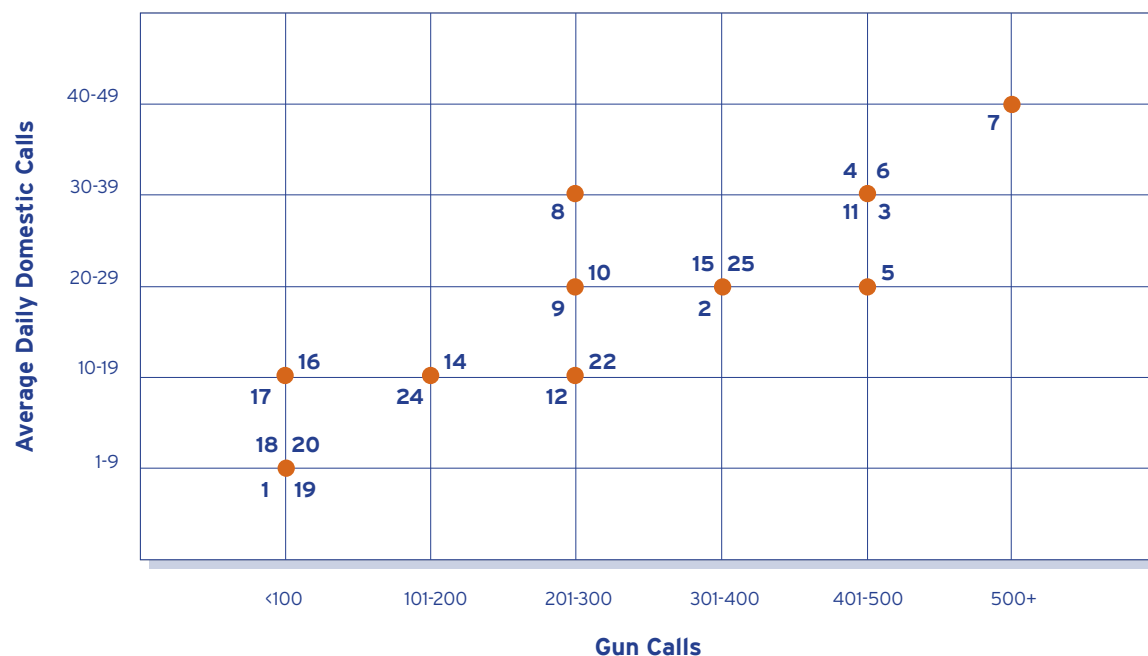
Table 1 and Figure 1 show that the districts with more gun-related calls generally have more domestic violence calls. A few stand out: District 8 has the 10th highest number of

Table 1: Average Daily Domestic Calls and Total Gun-Related Calls to Police per Chicago Police District, January 2014-September 2014

Police District	Total Gun Calls	Average Daily Domestic Calls
7	500+	40-49
3	401-500	30-39
4	401-500	30-39
5	401-500	20-29
6	401-500	30-39
11	401-500	30-39
2	301-400	20-29
15	301-400	20-29
25	301-400	20-29
8	201-300	30-39
9	201-300	20-29
10	201-300	20-29
12	201-300	10-19
22	201-300	10-19
14	101-200	10-19
24	101-200	10-19
1	<100	1-9
16	<100	10-19
17	<100	10-19
18	<100	1-9
19	<100	1-9
20	<100	1-9

Source: Domestic Violence Quarterly Statistical Report, Chicago Police Crime Data

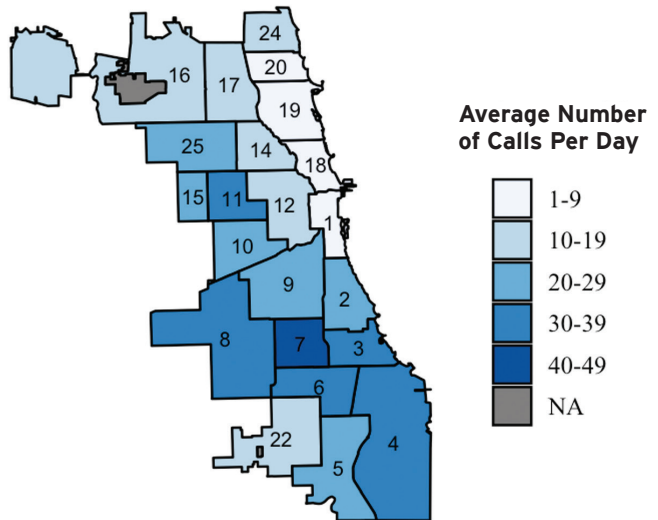
Figure 1: Police Districts with Higher Numbers of Gun Calls Tend to Have Higher Daily Rates of Domestic Violence Calls



gun-related calls out of 22 districts but a relatively high average number of domestic violence-related calls. Districts 2, 5, 15, and 25 have lower daily domestic violence call averages but higher numbers of gun-related calls. Police District 7 has the highest number of gun-related calls and the highest daily average domestic violence calls to the police. This district includes West Englewood, one of four neighborhoods with the highest homicide and sexual assault rates from 2002 to 2016.²¹

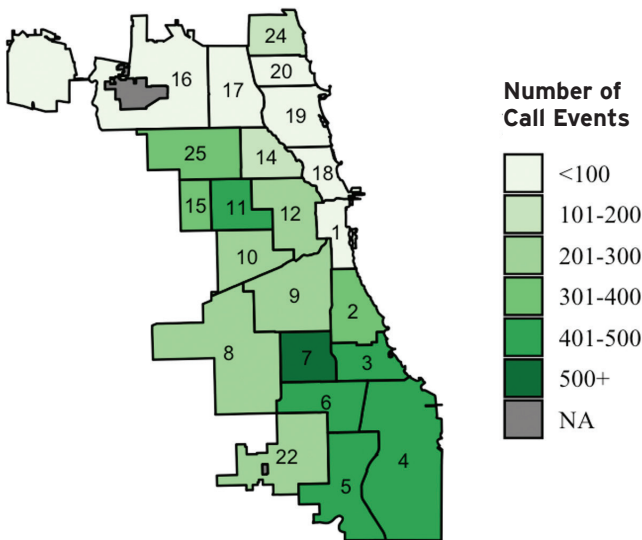
We then created maps demarking CPD district boundaries that show ranges of gun-related calls to the police (figure 2) and daily average domestic calls (figure 3). To visualize the relationship between gun violence and SGBV,²² we overlaid the hexcodes for the corresponding green and blue for each district to get a combined map (figure 4). The darker shaded districts have higher instances of both gun violence and SGBV. These districts are concentrated on the South and West sides of the city, areas shaped by decades of racist housing and economic development policy.²³ This analysis illuminates not only the interconnectedness of gun violence and SGBV but also the critical need to address them concurrently in policies that take the city's history into account.

Figure 3: Domestic Violence Calls in Chicago by Police District Year to Date September 2014



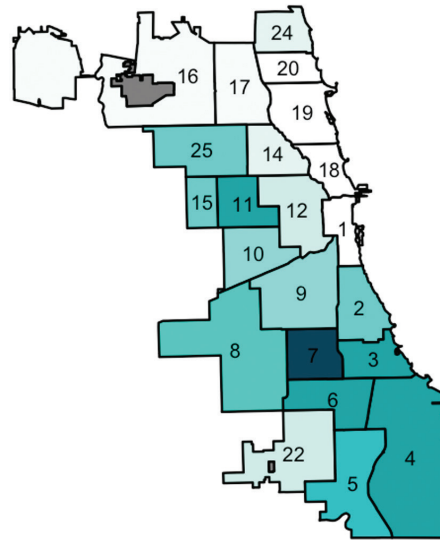
Source: Chicago Police Department Quarterly Domestic Violence Statistical Summary

Figure 2: Gun-Related Call Events to Chicago Police by District Year to Date September 2014



Source: Chicago City Data Portal

Figure 4: Overlaying the Maps for Gun-Related Calls and Average Daily Domestic Violence Calls Shows that Districts with High Rates of One Type of Violence Tend to Have High Rates of Both



Source: Chicago City Data Portal and Chicago Police Department Quarterly Domestic Violence Statistical Summary

Recommendations

In this brief, we have pointed to gun violence's connections to domestic violence and SGBV. Our analysis underscores gun violence's existence amid and in relationship to broader systems of violence. It also highlights the need for data disaggregation about violence to better understand the prevalence of SGBV. Much more needs to be done to address violence's gendered dynamics and the ways that systems of violence intersect in Chicago. As such, we have several recommendations for policymakers, program directors, and researchers:

First, we recommend that policymakers and programs increase funding and support for women-focused efforts in existing gun violence programs. Programs must recognize men and women as differently involved in systems of violence and work to address the interconnectedness of these systems, especially SGBV.

Second, Chicago's domestic violence data need to be disaggregated by type of violence—for example, separating elder abuse from spousal abuse—as well as by gender. This disaggregation is necessary to accurately assess the prevalence of SGBV in the city.

Third, data should track citywide experiences of violence per community area rather than police district.²⁴ The city's 77 community areas are generally comparable to Chicago neighborhoods and have remained mostly unchanged since the 1920s, whereas police districts may touch multiple neighborhoods and may change in response to funding or other concerns. Tracking SGBV by community area over time would build a more nuanced understanding of violence in the city than is currently possible.

Fourth, we encourage WPS practitioners to consider more carefully how a WPS framework can be applied to more local contexts, rural and urban. Some work has already been done on this regarding local action plans, especially in post-conflict settings, but we recommend this work be broadened to consider the gendered dynamics of violence in settings like Chicago that do not necessarily fall within WPS practitioners' conventional understanding of armed conflict.²⁵

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