

Testimony on Resolution Declaring Gun Violence as a Public Health Crisis
Submitted to the Cook County Board of Commissioners
by Joel K. Johnson, President and CEO, TASC (Treatment Alternatives for Safe Communities)
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I am Joel Johnson, President and CEO of TASC. I would like to thank Commissioner Deer and the full Cook County Board for the opportunity to testify on this critical resolution declaring gun violence as a public health crisis.

The immense toll of gun violence goes far beyond those who die from it—which is already a toll that has been unacceptably high for too long. The impact is seen in the collective grief and trauma of school children, parents, relatives, educators, social workers, and entire communities. The familiar [statistics](#) on gun violence are overwhelming, but the impact is even more widespread than the numbers show.

At TASC, we work with thousands of adults and youth in Cook County each year, and we see the toll of gun violence every day. Many of our clients have been shot in the past, or fear being shot, or have known family members and friends who've been shot, or have witnessed shootings themselves. Very often, the pain of those experiences gets manifested in chronic stress, mental health problems, or in people self-medicating with alcohol or other drugs. And then those conditions become magnified when people become involved in juvenile justice, criminal justice, or child welfare systems.

The toll of gun violence is also manifested in the fear and hopelessness of young people who feel the need to carry a gun themselves for their own protection. And so, as we look at the public health crisis of gun violence, it's too simplistic to make it just about people who use guns and those who get shot. The effects of this epidemic go far wider. Gun violence affects all of us, including those who carry guns, family members, friends, neighbors, schools, social services, our local community businesses, and taxpayers. It affects our very identity as a community.

In 2020, there were 875 gun-related homicides in Cook County. When you count extended family members, friends, classmates, and neighbors, let's say each of those individuals knew 100 people. We know that's probably a significant underestimate. But if each of those victims knew 100 people, that's some 87,500 people who were affected by gun violence last year alone—and that only counts those who knew the victim. Now imagine the person who fired the gun, and all the people in their circle. Depending on how much these circles overlap, we're easily talking about 160,000 to 175,000 people personally affected in just one year. And that doesn't include the entire neighborhoods, the whole communities that are affected, let alone the compounded and [lasting impacts](#) of each of these tragedies.

Now, think about the fact that 78 percent of homicide victims in Cook County were Black, and 16 percent were Latino. Think about the collective family and community trauma. What does it

say about our society overall that we don't have the resources, support, and a plan at the highest levels to sufficiently address this epidemic? I think we all know the answer to that.

Gun violence strains our emergency rooms, kills our neighbors, and makes parents fear for their children's lives—not to mention the lingering trauma that repetitive violence injects in our communities. If that doesn't signal a public health crisis, I don't know what does.

So, the question isn't really whether gun violence is a public health crisis. It is. The question is: when will there be resources to meet this epidemic at a level even close to the scope that it's affecting our communities?

The County Board's Resolution Declaring Gun Violence as a Public Health Crisis is an important step forward. TASC fully supports the resolution and we are fully committed to being part of the solutions that the resolution puts forward.

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