

Insights

Racially Motivated Violence is a Children's Health Issue

A Conversation with Dr. Stacy Scott and Becky Russell

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In the wake of recent mass shootings in Buffalo, Uvalde, and Highland Park, and too many others, we discuss the mental health implications of racially motivated and gun violence on children and their families with Stacy Scott, PhD, MPA, Executive Project Director and Equity Lead at NICHQ, and Becky Russell, MSPH, Senior Director of Applied Research and Evaluation at NICHQ.



Stacy Scott, PhD, MPA, Executive Project Director and Equity Lead

Why are racially motivated violence and hate crimes an important topic for children's health?

Stacy Scott: For me, the work that I do with grief is a major piece. When you look at grief, and the impact of grief on people, then when we look at our children, we sometimes underestimate the impact of this level of violence that we're seeing. I look at it from a Black child's perspective – in many cases, these crimes are against people of color. And that has its own set of issues. But then also I look at the young, usually young white men and boys, and you want to put it in context who are committing the crimes as well. That is a big concern for me, too. I'm not looking at them as victims, but I'm acknowledging that there's something we're not doing in society that these young men are able to hold this level of hate at such an early age to commit such acts of violence. I say we are dropping the ball on both sides. We must do a better job at addressing the

anger built up in these young people which compels them to so violently strike out at other people and cause that level of grief and sorrow. We must end this terrible cycle.

Federal Freeze on Gun Violence Research Ends After Decades

Federal money for gun research all but disappeared after Congress in 1996 enacted the so-called Dickey Amendment, which barred the C.D.C. from spending money to “advocate or promote gun control.” In 2019, lawmakers appropriated \$25 million, split between the C.D.C. and the National Institutes of Health, for firearm injury prevention research. The agencies are now financing nearly two dozen studies

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Becky Russell, MSPH Senior Director of Applied Research and Evaluation

Becky Russell: I agree with Stacy. We are failing all of the children in this country in one way or another by not acknowledging what's happening and calling it what it is. Part of that is because there's been a barrier to the investment in dollars around gun violence research in this country. There were laws written that prevented the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) from focusing any federal dollars on gun control research. I believe we just recently saw the first round where the National Institute of Health (NIH) and the CDC gave grants to study gun violence again.

What are some of the effects of violence, and particularly racially motivated violence, on the mental health of children?

Stacy Scott: It's important that we take a step back and look at the victim as well as the perpetrators in these scenarios. They are often both young. In the work that we do at NICHQ, focusing on children and families, we must examine what can we do to help prevent these acts from a mental health perspective and how we provide comfort and support to people who fall prey to these act – particularly children. Access to proper grief and trauma care is crucial.

Becky Russell: In terms of the impact on children, one thing that really opened my eyes was reading about what happened in Buffalo and the fact it wasn't just this racially motivated violence, but it also took place in one of the limited numbers of grocery stores in the city. That felt particularly violent. It was a part of the community that was perceived to be safe where people came together. I think that's a piece we don't hear enough about – the impact that it has on the communities and their fear and their reactions.

Stacy Scott: That act of violence took away that safe place. When we compare the shooting in Buffalo with the Robb Elementary School shooting in Uvalde, TX – the difference in public response is evident. We learned that many of the victims in Buffalo were elderly Black people, while the victims in the school shooting were primarily Latinx children. Both were horrific, but one had much more public outcry. I think about all the grandparents that were killed in this grocery store and what kind of impact that has on their grandchildren, children, nieces, and nephews. How can we as Black people explain to our children that we're just trying to grocery shop after they have seen what happened in the news? How does the knowledge that their parent may not come home from the store impact their psyche? That is a reality that many people are not considering. With the constant threat of violence, people aren't sure if they're safe or if they have the ability to keep their loved ones safe. That impacts mental health.

Becky Russell: You mentioned the grandparents that were killed in Buffalo and the impact that has on the parents and on their children, and we didn't hear about that then, but in the Highland Park shooting on the Fourth of July, we saw a much different media and public response recognizing the impact the loss of a caregiver has on children. There was news everywhere about an infant who lost both parents in the shooting. I can only assume they were white and that might be my own bias, but the reaction was both public outrage and immediate fundraising efforts for families impacted. That is absolutely a warranted response, but it's a different public reaction when you're talking about one group of people versus another. That's where we as a society are failing. It's clear in the reporting of these incidents that we moved on from Buffalo quickly because of the Texas shooting, and while that was just as horrific, it doesn't mean that the shooting in Buffalo didn't happen. You see how the media's reaction is different, and that's hard to ignore.

Stacy Scott: As Black people, saying that I woke up this morning and that I'm able to conduct my day despite all the things that can happen is a feat. It's hard to believe we have not seen some movement on this gun issue, and I think it's worth examining – who are the perpetrators and who are the victims, and how does race and privilege factor into the response.

What is Racial Trauma?

Racial trauma, or race-based traumatic stress (RBTS), refers to the mental and emotional injury caused by encounters with racial bias and ethnic discrimination, racism, and hate crimes. Any individual that has experienced an emotionally painful, sudden, and uncontrollable racist encounter is at risk of suffering from a race-based traumatic stress injury. In the U.S., Black, Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) are most vulnerable due to living under a system of white supremacy.

[Read more from Mental Health America](#)

As a Black parent or caregiver, how do these events impact your family/loved ones/friends?

Stacy Scott: Often, we try to pretend like everything's okay, but our children know. They see the struggling, and the fact that we don't make time to deal with it because we must move to that next step and go to work and handle responsibilities. I think about these families in Buffalo

whose relatives died or were injured, and I wonder how many people had the luxury of saying I'm taking time off work so I can pull myself together? If you as a parent don't have time to deal with the grief and loss, you don't have the ability or the skillset to be able to deal with your child's grief and loss, and that's a big concern for me. We see that perpetuate itself generation after generation. We are taught, especially young Black women, to be strong. We don't have that luxury to fall apart, and if we do, folks often look at us like something's wrong because the expectation is that you keep going, and again your kids don't have the ability to maneuver that.

As a white parent, how do these events impact your family/loved ones/friends?

Becky Russell: I am the parent of now young men, they're 17 years old. Their whole lives, they've witnessed mass shootings and events like Parkland High School and Sandy Hook Elementary School, and with them, it's becoming, "Oh, here's another one." It's important to talk to them about the differences between some of these shootings, especially the racially motivated ones, because they are a privileged class. They are young white males who are growing up in this country, and they have to recognize that privilege, but that's a hard balance when you're talking about 17-year-olds. They don't need to feel guilty, but they do need to be aware of their privilege and use it in a positive way. I'm very fortunate that I have two children who are socially aware, empathetic, and care a lot about the world, but it's difficult to talk to them about these things, time after time, week after week. However, I think it's necessary for them to understand racially motivated violence as much as we can, and to recognize it for what it is. The other piece that I'll bring into this is from the mental health perspective. Having family members who have Autism Spectrum Disorder, as well as anxiety and depression, I get very worried when we, as a country, try to blame mental health for these violent events that are happening. In so much of the rhetoric, people are quick to point to mental health, and I'm not belittling the importance of mental health and building up the mental health infrastructure in this country, but to lay the blame solely on that, creates an environment where folks can begin targeting and profiling people. That's dangerous because we know that's going to disproportionately impact our young men of color, people with mental health issues, developmental delays, and other historically marginalized communities. It's very dangerous for us to lay the blame solely on the mental health issues with these individuals, and to Stacy's point, without looking at what we as a society are doing to combat white supremacy and this rhetoric that is creating a culture of hatred and anger.

How can health professionals support people most impacted by racially motivated violence?

Becky Russell: I think that'd be a lot of my same recommendations for what do we do as an organization – it's that we recognize that this is the reality for so many people. When they walk out of their homes, or when their mothers or fathers leave the house, they don't know if they're going to be returning.

Stacy Scott: I worked as a social worker with adolescent youth that were incarcerated and being certified as adults, and I would work with them prior to them transferring to prison. These were both young Black and white men, and it was amazing that none of them felt that they would live beyond 22 or 23 years old. We would talk about that, and I would do an activity with them where they'd read the obituary section of the newspaper and find obituaries of men who lived to

be in their 70s and then write their own obituaries based on living to be 70 years old. The stories they would tell were amazing. Some of them were married, they had five grandchildren, and it was like you could see the light bulbs go off. It's as if they never even imagined having that future. What I took from that is we are producing a generation of children who feel they have no future, or if they have a future, the future is grim.

Youth on Youth Violence

Teenagers and young adults account for a significant proportion of the country's hate crimes—both as perpetrators and as victims, and research indicates that a substantial number of these crimes were committed by males under age 20.

[Read more from the Department of Justice](#)

Becky Russell: That's so powerful – the fact that they needed permission to imagine what their futures could be. The question is how do we do that for a whole generation of kids? That comes back to the fact that gun violence is a public health threat, and although people who are passionate about public health recognize it as a public health issue, we have to do a better job of helping the public understand it as such. Society needs to change, which is no easy thing, but every child should feel like they have the permission to dream about what's next, and the support to get there. A few areas where health care professionals can have a major impact is helping to build a better infrastructure to support mental health and having providers integrating mental health checks in their annual visits. There's a lot we can do within the healthcare system to prioritize mental health. But that's also not going to solve the problem. Recognizing gun violence as a public health topic and emphasizing gun control is important. Addressing mental health is necessary, but it's not going to solve the whole problem. It is a societal issue.

Stacy Scott: Many people in BIPOC communities have expressed that there are certain stigmas when discussing mental health. Sometimes, we apply a negative connotation to the term. It's all about mental wellness. Just as we encourage children and families to exercise to stay physically healthy, we need to understand and talk about what keeps us well mentally.

How can healthcare organizations and institutions transform their systems to provide better mental health care and resources to children and families from historically marginalized communities?

Stacy Scott: One thing we can all do is bring awareness to the issue and remove some of the stigma surrounding conversations about mental health challenges and accessing care. We're doing that through this conversation we're having. I see myself working at NICHQ, and as comfortable as I am with the relationships I've established, I still could never imagine saying, "I'm too stressed and I need to take a break," because the first thing that would come to my mind is that people would think, "Stacy doesn't have what it takes to do the job."

Becky Russell: Seeking mental health treatment is a very acceptable thing in some communities, and there isn't necessarily that stigma attached, and I think to your point, that I would not be hesitant to share if I was taking medication or seeing a therapist to ensure I'm mentally healthy. With my position of privilege, I'd probably get a pat on the back for taking care

of myself from many people. There are so many inequities to address. These conversations are one thing that is missing. I'm very fortunate to be able to have a friend and colleague who can help shine a light on these inequities for me.

Stacy Scott: Continuing to facilitate open and honest conversations about mental health is important and acknowledging the racial disparities that exist is essential to developing effective and anti-racist policies. Here at NICHQ, we can help educate people about the mental and emotional health impacts of racially motivated violence and gun violence on children and families.