The Rise in Gun Sales Amid Covid-19 Should Propel Philanthropy to Act

By Judy Belk and Brian Malte

These are uncertain and scary times. With Covid-19 spreading across America, people are doing their best to adapt to home isolation, stocking up on supplies like toilet paper and canned goods.

And guns.

If history is our guide, the surge in gun purchases in response to the Covid-19 pandemic will most likely be followed by an increase in intimate-partner violence, suicides, and hate crimes. This deadly combination of guns and violence threatens the safety of Americans already traumatized by fear of illness and death, economic stress, and necessary but sometimes difficult physical isolation. We are witnessing the convergence of two public health crises — and the results may be catastrophic, especially to the most vulnerable people in society. Foundations make a mistake not to make this an important piece of their response to the Covid-19 crisis.

Everyday gun violence was a public-health crisis long before Americans knew the term Covid-19. Bringing even more guns into our homes only increases our risk of injury and death. A recent study by researchers at the University of California at Davis showed that California cities with greater increases in the rate of handgun purchasing were more likely to see a significant and prolonged increase in the rate of firearm injury.

The risks of guns in the home are well documented. Before the virus outbreak, 300 million guns were circulating in the United States. Yet many states have allowed gun stores to stay open as essential businesses. This gun-buying spree means, of course, that we can expect to see even more guns in
homes and likely more first-time gun buyers — many with no knowledge of gun safety or proper storage practices.

Before Covid-19, more than one in three homes had a gun, and that percentage is almost certain to rise. What are the implications of this? Women and families are told to isolate in their homes with their abusers — many of whom are now armed with a gun. When families are isolated in close quarters, intimate-partner violence increases due to limited safe housing and the loss of community networks. Suicide increases during economic downturns, and access to a gun triples the risk of death by suicide, leaving behind families and communities that will never completely heal.

The impact of increased gun sales will have a ripple effect far beyond the home. The FBI anticipates a spike in hate crimes against Asian Americans amid the Covid-19 pandemic, and such incidents have been widely reported.

We don’t have to go back very far to see the deadly consequences of armed hate. Last year in just eight days, mass shootings at a Walmart in El Paso and at the Gilroy Garlic Festival in California targeted Latinos. The El Paso shooter talked about “the Hispanic invasion of Texas,” and the Gilroy shooter had a target list that included religious groups. The combination of increased gun sales, anti-Asian sentiment, and the dangerous rhetoric from public officials is a disaster in waiting.

While gun deaths and injuries affect all Americans, we know that our society’s most vulnerable, especially people of color, suffer the most from it. Historically, income inequality has been a driving force and cause of gun violence. As the economy is ravaged by the Covid-19 outbreak, families already living paycheck to paycheck are facing even greater financial stress. When jobs disappear and school and afterschool programs are not in session, we see spikes in gun violence.

Buying more guns will not save us from Covid-19; rather, it puts families and communities more squarely in harm’s way. Now is the time to recognize the collision of these two public-health crises and challenges. We must do all we can to mitigate gun deaths, injuries, and trauma by supporting organizations working on the front lines of gun violence and our local and statewide domestic-violence and suicide-prevention organizations. Communities will be needing them now more than ever.

As philanthropy responds and aims to mitigate the pandemic’s impact, remember that the safety, wellness, and health of communities are critical to our long-term recovery and prosperity. We must invest our resources to equitably address the longstanding public-health crisis of gun violence, which has plagued our homes and communities for far too long, and ensure that our vital community-based organizations that work on the front lines of gun violence are in a position to continue to do their important work.

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