



# Voices of Child Health in Chicago REPORT

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## REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

More than one in four parents said their children have heard gunshots when at home. This proportion varied significantly by city region.

One in five parents said their children's mental health has been impacted by exposure to gun violence, the most common symptoms were feeling more scared and worried.

Parents supported a number of solutions to reduce gun violence exposure for youth, such as increasing community-based violence intervention programs and job opportunities for youth.

## Gun Violence Exposure and Mental Health Impact Among Chicago Youth

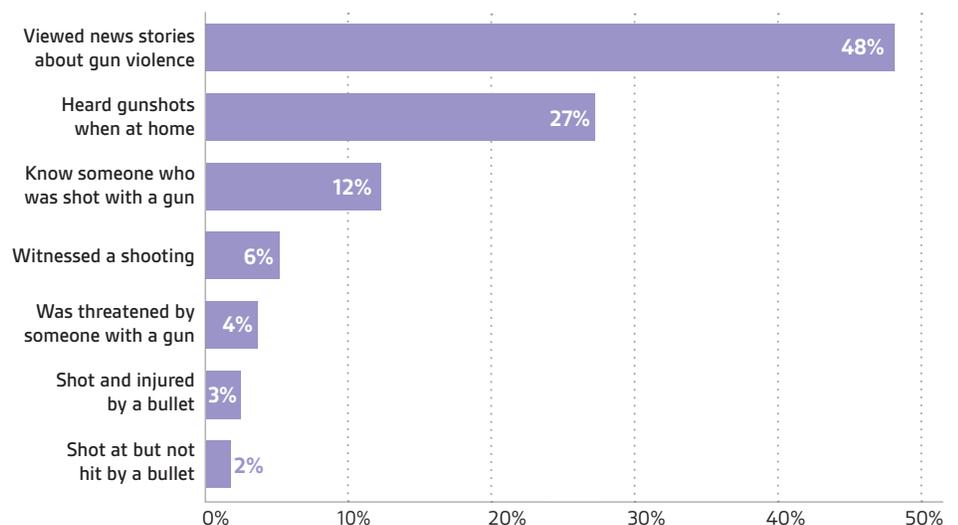
Exposure to gun violence has many negative effects on the health of youth. A policy brief from the Regional Gun Violence Research Consortium reported that youth exposure to gun violence is consistently associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other internalizing symptoms, such as anxiety and depression.<sup>1</sup> The National Alliance on Mental Illness also reported that increased risk of gun violence corresponds with a history of exposure to violence.<sup>2</sup> Youth mental health is directly connected to gun violence exposure, and as gun violence rates increase, mental health concerns may as well. Additionally, firearms are the leading cause of death for children in Illinois, with an average of 183 children and teens dying each year and around 60% of Chicago's youngest children living in community areas where 91% of homicides took place.<sup>3,4</sup>

In this month's *Voices of Child Health in Chicago Report*, we provide insight into gun violence exposure and connections to mental health among Chicago's youth. We asked over 1,000 Chicago parents from all 77 community areas in the city about their children's exposure to gun violence, the impact on their children's mental health and other questions relating to improving gun violence and its negative impact on youth.

### Chicago children's exposure to gun violence

Parents reported a vast variety of their children's gun violence exposure. Nearly half of parents said their children have seen or heard news stories about gun violence (48%). More than one in four parents said their children have heard gunshots when at home (27%). Additionally, 12% of parents said their children know someone who was shot with a gun and 6% said their children have witnessed a shooting.

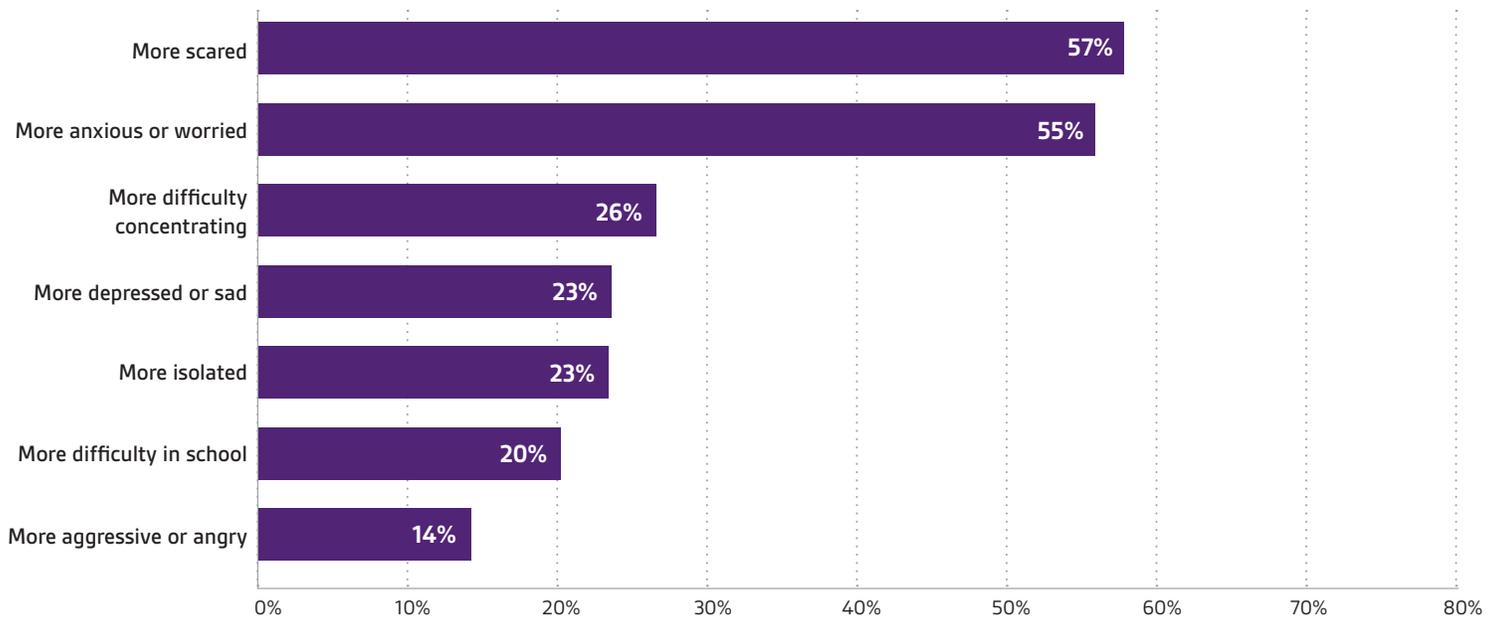
**Figure 1.** Proportions of parents who said their children have been exposed to gun violence through each method



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**Figure 2.** Among parents who reported gun violence had an impact on their child's mental health, the proportion of parents who reported each specific mental health impact of gun violence



Among children who have heard gun violence when at home, 5% hear gunshots daily, 14% hear them multiple times per week, 18% once a week, 39% once a month and 24% hear them once a year. For children who know someone who was shot by a gun, the victims included the child's classmate (32%), a friend (29%), another family member (29%), a parent (19%) or a sibling (15%).

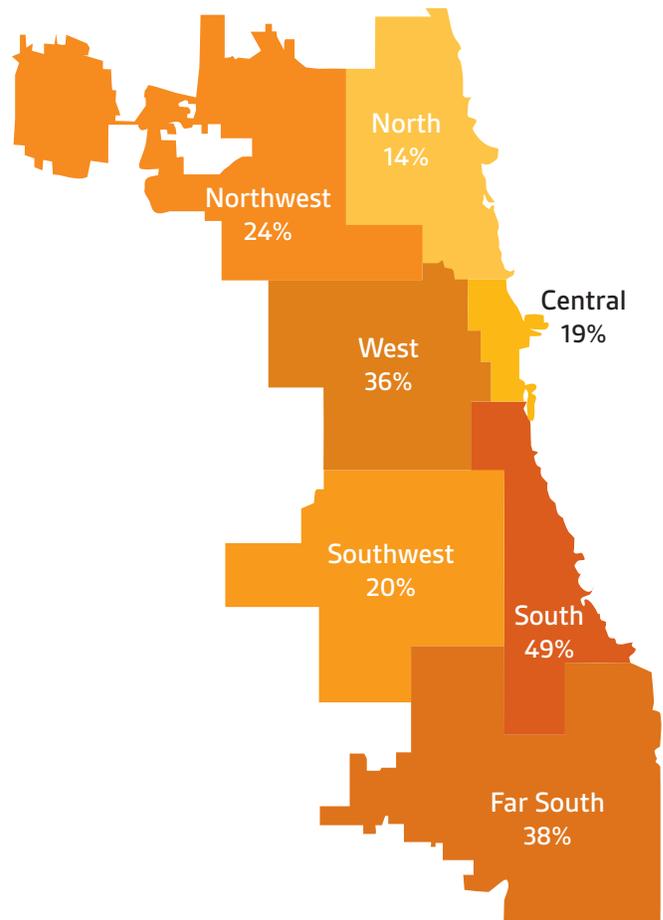
**Gun violence and the impact on children's mental health**

We found that 20% of parents said their children's mental health had been impacted by gun violence. The most common ways children's mental health was impacted by gun violence were feeling more scared (57%) and more anxious or worried (55%). Other symptoms included having more difficulty concentrating (26%), feeling more depressed or sad (23%), or isolated (23%).

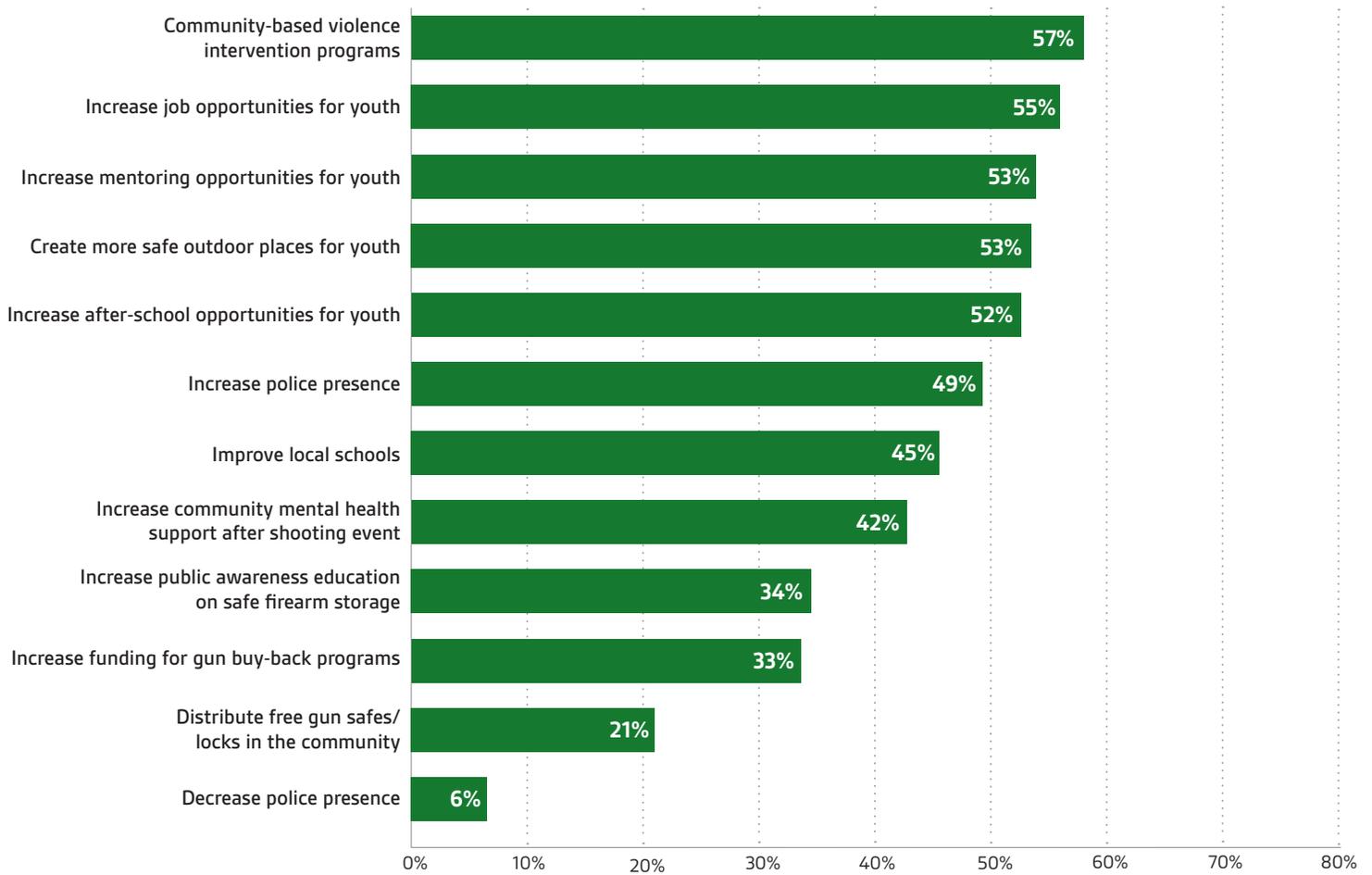
The impact of gun violence on children's mental health was connected to the level of their exposure. Children who had a direct exposure to gun violence, such as hearing gun shots, witnessing a shooting or being the victim of a shooting, were most likely to have negative mental health impacts from gun violence (41%). Even children with only indirect exposure to gun violence (e.g., viewed news stories) were more likely to have a negative mental health impact (13%) compared with children who had no exposure to gun violence (4%).

The Child Welfare League of America reported that with more than 25% of U.S. children witnessing an act of violence in their homes, schools or communities over the past year, and more than 5% witnessing a shooting, gun violence is an issue of both regulation and addressing its traumatizing impact. The process of doing so is complex, and requires our society to find ways to reduce the number of children and youth who are initially

**Figure 3.** Proportion of parents who said their children heard gunshots at home, by city region



**Figure 4.** Proportion of parents who selected each solution to reduce gun violence exposure and its negative impact on youth



exposed to gun violence, because children who are exposed to chronic trauma can experience inhibited brain development, producing a lasting impact on their life outcomes.<sup>5</sup>

### Differential impact of gun violence

Exposure to gunshots differed significantly by city region. Children who lived on the South side were more than three times more likely to hear gunshots when at home (49%) when compared with children who lived on the North side (14%). This is consistent with rates of gun violence in different regions across the city and with prior research that reported communities are affected by gun violence disproportionately, with Black and Latinx youth impacted at higher rates than their White peers.<sup>6-8</sup>

### What do Chicago parents think should be done to decrease gun violence and the negative impact it has on youth?

Parents suggested a variety of solutions to decrease gun violence and its negative impact on youth. More than half of parents supported solutions such as community-based violence intervention programs (57%), increasing job opportunities for youth (55%), increasing mentoring opportunities for youth (53%), creating more safe outdoor places for youth (53%) and increasing after-school opportunities for youth (52%).

### RESOURCES FOR PARENTS

There are many small-scale steps that families can take to minimize the effects of gun violence exposure and its impact on their child's mental health.

- If exposed to violence, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration recommends that parents/guardians listen, answer questions and create space for their child to express and feel a range of emotions, as people react to trauma differently.<sup>9</sup>
- It is also recommended to allow those who are interested to find ways to connect with the community by doing activities such as mailing sympathy cards or letters.
- The National Association of School Psychologists suggests reassuring children that they are safe, making time to talk to youth at a developmentally appropriate level, reviewing safety procedures, being cognizant of a youth's emotional state, limiting televised coverage of the violence and continuing to maintain a normal routine.<sup>10</sup>
- Adults also can be a stable support for children by modeling self-care, eating healthy meals, exercising and getting enough sleep.

By recognizing the needs of youth, parents can help youth process the trauma and grief that comes with gun violence exposure.

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### HOW THE SURVEY WAS CONDUCTED

This report is based on data from the Voices of Child Health in Chicago Parent Panel Survey. The survey is administered to a sample of Chicago parents by Lurie Children's and NORC at the University of Chicago via internet and telephone. The survey is administered to our panel of parents three times each year. The data in this report was collected from May through July 2022. The sample consisted of 1,068 Chicago parents, step-parents, or guardians who had at least one child under 18 years of age in the household (referred to as "parents" in this report). Parents were from all 77 community areas in Chicago. The survey completion rate was 43% and the cumulative survey response rate was 2.2%. All analyses were conducted with statistical weighting so that the results are representative of the parent population in the City of Chicago during the time period of data collection. For more information about the VOCHIC Parent Panel Survey, visit [luriechildrens.org/ParentPanel](http://luriechildrens.org/ParentPanel) and our page on Open Science Framework at <https://osf.io/cjz82/>.

### SUGGESTED CITATION

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