

“One of the drawbacks with federally funded housing is that your criminal background can sometimes eliminate you from housing opportunities.”

Dominique Davis
Resident Services Manager
Mercy Housing Lakefront

Perspectives on Chicago Gun Violence
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Chicago Gun Violence Research Collaborative

The Chicago Gun Violence Research Collaborative (CGVRC) Graduate Student Fellowship brings together student fellows (graduate students from Chicago-based universities) and faculty fellows (professors and public health professionals) to address gun violence by conducting change-oriented research in partnership with Chicago communities.

To learn more about the CGVRC, please visit us at: <https://www.cgvrc.org>

Perspectives on Chicago Gun Violence

Our *Perspectives on Chicago Gun Violence* project allowed CGVRC Graduate Student Fellows to conduct stakeholder interviews, gaining a diverse perspective on local gun violence and organizational efforts to prevent it. This work was funded through support from Sinai Urban Health Institute, the Shure Charitable Trust, the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago, and United Way of Metropolitan Chicago.

Biography: This interview is with Dominique Davis; she is a Resident Services Manager at Mercy Housing Lakefront. This interview was done as part of the Chicago Gun Violence Research Collaborative Graduate Student Fellowship series, *Perspectives on Chicago Gun Violence*. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

CGVRC Fellow: My first question is, can you tell us who you are, how long you've lived in Chicago, and what your particular connection is with the community?

Dominique Davis: My name is Dominique Davis. I am an employee of Mercy Housing Lakefront. So, this was actually my first location as a Resident Services Manager. I have only lived in Chicago for a year and a half, but I grew up, my family grew up in the Austin community. Then, I attended high school in East Garfield Park.

CGVRC Fellow: : Thank you. Can you provide your organization's name and describe your role, which you have a bit, if you could expand a little bit on what your position entails?

Dominique Davis: Mercy Housing Lakefront Resident Services Manager, coordinates service activities for the residents and also works in partnership with the property managers to address resident issues, community issues.

CGVRC Fellow: : Can you speak a little bit about what your organization does to help residents in Austin?

Dominique Davis: So, in our communities we have affordable family housing, which includes project based housing. So, some of our residents have vouchers, subsidies attached to their units.

CGVRC Fellow: Oh, that's great. Thank you. Now I'd like to ask you a few questions about gun violence in the neighborhood specifically. Can you describe your personal perception of gun violence in Austin?

Dominique Davis: My personal perception is that it happens. Since I've worked in Austin, I've only actually experienced three instances where gun activity was happening during the day or when students were around, but then the news portrays a lot more activity than I've actually witnessed. So I know it's here, but I haven't seen it except for those three times.

CGVRC Fellow: What do you think generates gun violence in the neighborhood?

Dominique Davis:: Poverty. I think a lack of resources and economic development spurs criminal activity and you don't have a lot of resources to get basic necessities like food. It leads you to do other things. And, it also causes disruption in relationships and communication, so it's difficult for you to have healthy and positive relationships sometimes, in addition to other trauma related stressors that may have occurred in life.

CGVRC Fellow: Do you know of any specific things that are being done in the community to prevent gun violence or just to address it as an issue?

CGVRC Fellow: I know that the police department has started a young men's club. I'm not entirely sure if it was like Boy Scouts or just some type of like scout activity for young men. I'm not aware of any of our residents that have actually participated in it. But I know that that was one thing. There is the Nonviolence Institute. And then there are other organizations within – Austin Coming Together Collaborative that have a couple of different programs that are trying to address some of the issues within the community, specifically related to gun violence.

CGVRC Fellow: Have you heard anything about participation in those programs in general? Just not just Mercy and success, anything like that?

Dominique Davis: No.

CGVRC Fellow: Do you have any suggestions for how the neighborhood could support youth and reduce gun violence?

Dominique Davis: I think development of businesses. I don't know, you said you interviewed Christ the King or CBI, Chicago Jesuit. So, they're usually police that sit on this corner. I'm right here. Like when the kids get out to kind of help with making sure the kids get home safely. But in addition to that, I think I think it's going to actually take a lot of redevelopment within the community, which is something that I know that Austin Coming Together is actually working on, in collaboration with LISC...for the quality of life plan. In addition to funding resources downstate, there hasn't been a state budget for services, which is part of the problem. Even though the police are here, there's a drug corner (What is this? Adams and Cicero?) where they constantly pass out and are just loitering.

So, the community is aware of what's going on, but it's gonna take a lot of redevelopment – I personally believe a lot of the vacant units within Austin real estate development. It's just a lot.

CGVRC Fellow: So it sounds like the change has to come from a policy standpoint first or it has to be focused on more?

Dominique Davis: I do, but here's my hesitancy with that – is once policy is in place, you usually see a shift within the community. More like the residents who need affordable housing get pushed out of those communities. So, I'm not entirely sure I have the answer. I think I do. I just don't want to see like the community shift drastically in order for the redevelopment to happen.

CGVRC Fellow: Just enough money, not too much, but a little more just for programming...

Dominique Davis: And see, that's the thing within Austin, they're like over, I think there are close to 500 agencies that offer programs. You have the Chicago Park District, you

have the programs. It's a matter of vision. I think sometimes you need to see things like economics, you know, like things to like start to spur in order for things to be different.

CGVRC Fellow: So money going into the residence pockets rather than...

Dominique Davis: Yeah, yeah. Which takes a lot. Have you all done the research in Austin? So I think I forget the statistics, but there is concentrated poverty, so you have a lot of residents who don't necessarily have the educational attainment, they have a high school diploma, some college, which isn't necessarily a bad thing, but then when you look at employment opportunities that's linked to educational attainment and if you want a livable wage, you almost have to go back to school or get some type of apprenticeship, and if you're working taking care of your family, when do you have time to do that?

CGVRC Fellow: Not to mention, the money to do that?

Dominique Davis: Exactly. If you don't have childcare... So, it takes a whole community and support system. Which I'm not always sure that people are aware of.

CGVRC Fellow: I want to hear a little bit more about what Mercy Housing Lakefront does with residents. Is it strictly housing services, or do you have some of that connection to other agencies? Do you have strong partners in different agencies in the community?

Dominique Davis: So actually, we partner with agencies within the community. And then within Mercy Housing, we provide housing, but then there is senior housing, there's affordable housing, and then there is permanent supportive housing, which is targeted for individuals experiencing or formally experiencing homelessness. So, the services included health and nutrition, economic development, financial capability, afterschool programming...But basically anytime a resident comes in and says that they need assistance with anything, we'll look for referrals to different agencies, mental health services, health, diabetes, whatever the issue may be. Um, so there are case managers at just about every one of our properties to help facilitate that process.

CGVRC Fellow: So what do you do on a day-to-day basis? How do you work with the case managers? What does that look like? Structurally?

Dominique Davis: I do a little bit of administration. I work with case managers to make sure that their documentation gets reported accurately for our grant funding. I used to run the afterschool program. I used to oversee the adult education program. Now, I'm working at The Loss on Arlington in North Lawndale and that's more of a resident services case management type role. But the major initiative there, it's really helping people become more financially stable. So, it's providing a lot of economic resources for banking, insurance, and benefits – things like that to make sure that they stay housed.

CGVRC Fellow: That's great. Do you see a correlation between access to housing or any other realm of what you do within the housing structure and gun violence?

Dominique Davis: I do. So, this is how I see it. You're aware of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, right?

CGVRC Fellow: I'm in psychology, so I try not to say it...

Dominique Davis: Once your basic needs are met, you can think about higher order things that you need as far as like comfort or survival.

CGVRC Fellow: Self-actualization being at the top.

Dominique Davis: Exactly. One of the drawbacks though with housing or federally funded housing is that depending upon your criminal background, it can sometimes eliminate you from housing opportunities, which I think is problematic and needs to be part of the policy discussion. Especially when you talk about communities like Austin that has a high recidivism rate. It's one of the highest in Illinois. I think the other one is downstate somewhere.

CGVRC Fellow: It's a cycle, right? So, if you can't get housing you're more likely to have to do things to survive and then back in prison...

Dominique Davis: Not to mention that they, you know, your mom and I have a criminal background, but I have no place to go. And so now I'm staying in your unit, but she's the property manager and she found out that you have an unauthorized tenant, and now your housing is in jeopardy but you don't want to kick me out. So, there's so much discussion that actually needs to happen so that everybody can live and survive. I get stuck sometimes in philosophy and theory, but the actual work of what Mercy Housing does is to address some of those problems. It's just there's a lot that happens within housing, that you don't necessarily see if you just work in the schools or if you just work in a social service agency like you see so much because it's somebody house.

CGVRC Fellow: Yes. Where people are.

Dominique Davis: Exactly.

CGVRC Fellow: When you're thinking about the city as a whole, how can we prevent gun violence? I know you've already answered that a little bit...

Dominique Davis: Decriminalize drug activity. That's a little far reaching, right? But if I don't have to fight you, then we're not fighting over territory, right? So then I don't have to shoot you. What else would I do? I might have stricter policies on how people are able to get licensed. My drawback with that is that a lot of the activity that is the problem with gun violence in Chicago usually aren't people who have licenses, right? So, I want to say like stricter borders, but that doesn't even work

because the people who are patrolling the borders are the ones who are living in it. It's just a lot. I don't know.

But I know that one thing I would probably do is what the City of Chicago has taken one step towards, of, I'm just fining people for – what is it – less than 16 ounces or something of marijuana. So, doing the little things like that.

This is a good question. Give me a second...I think I might also develop some type of mandatory program for youth – maybe 13 to 25 – who get caught with a weapon their first time. And not necessarily that they get charged, but they would have to go through some type of mandatory program that helps them get connected to services. And that's not to say that it'll work all the time, but that would be one of my initiatives.

CGVRC Fellow: That's a great idea, I wonder why it hasn't happened.

Dominique Davis: I don't know. Policy?

CGVRC Fellow: Policy and funding

Dominique Davis: I'm going to look this up after I leave here and see how I can get connected to this, because I like that.

CGVRC Fellow: If you had a crystal ball and could ask it anything about gun violence or neighborhood safety, what would you ask it?

Dominique Davis: I might ask it two questions. I would want to know, if the people who are caught committing violent crimes if it's their first offense and I would want to see the correlation with any previous trauma that may have occurred in their life and then it might work backwards to work for it. So, we'll see if there's any connection to the types of trauma that people have experienced that commit the type of violent crimes within the communities.

CGVRC Fellow: So, you're saying – a strong possibility of a connection between mental illness and gun violence or just trauma and health issues due to trauma?

Dominique Davis: Not mental health issues as a result of trauma, trauma related stressors.

CGVRC Fellow: Well, especially because in this community, I mean trauma can look so different and there's so many avenues anywhere for trauma to happen, especially in low income, low resource communities.

Dominique Davis: And see what's my issue and not issue. But I say the same things but a lot of time, even thinking about like my family and some of the things that we've discussed in our family. People don't see trauma as trauma even though it is trauma, right? Within the health community, we know trauma, but people are like, "Oh, it just happens," and it like was a pretty dramatic experience.

But it's difficult to talk about if you're fearful that you're going to be labeled because of the experiences that you've had in your life. And so like nobody talks about it, but then it's all of this stuff that's impacting you, that's affecting your brain development. Especially when I've talked to some of the youth who have witnessed somebody being murdered, or shot in front of them and it's like, "oh yeah", you know, it's a normal part of life.

CGVRC Fellow: Right. And it's not.

Dominique Davis: And it's not.

I remember in college, one of my good friends is actually from, Police City. Are you guys familiar with that? It's like 13th and like Kildare or something like that. I think it's not too familiar with the City of Chicago, but it's over near the area by like Lawndale.

Have you ever played the game, "When the Wind Blows?" You take a step forward or back depending on if the question relates to you. And then you see where people are. And so, one of the questions was "Take a step up if you've ever been a part or if you've ever experienced war". And when he took a step up, we were like, "You're f from Chicago", he's like, "Have you ever been over there?"

And so, like just thinking about that, right? And this is where people don't talk about like when you have to make sure that you are strategic and navigating your way through the city just to get to school. And so these are all the things.

CGVRC Fellow: Similarly, when you were talking Dominique I was thinking, I wonder how it is that a person first gets a gun in their hands? I wonder what happens immediately preceding that. So, as you were talking, I was thinking about the trauma, but then that transition from trauma or life experience that leads to a gun in your hand or you in a circle with people who have guns. There's a lot between those two things. Yeah. I just don't know. I'm sure it's a whole host of factors or trends, but it just leaves me wondering.

CGVRC Fellow: Do you have any suggestions for research questions that you would like the collaborative to work on? Our collaborative. What do you think we should ask or what would you want to know? Or what questions may be asking and hoping the data answers?

Dominique Davis: Has the gun activity or gun violence within the areas that you're researching affected the faculty in any way and if so, how? As far as like how they work with students or community residents. Have they personally ever been affected by gun violence throughout their life, whether in the City of Chicago or elsewhere? And are they aware of the gun laws and policies or ways to advocate for safer neighborhoods within the city of Chicago?

CGVRC Fellow: Thank you.

CGVRC Fellow: So, are we on the right track as a city? Are you optimistic? Pessimistic?

Dominique Davis: I'm always hopeful. What I don't like is how things just get moved around and nothing really gets solved. As the City of Chicago is expanding and you're talking about Amazon coming, that Austin is going to change, Austin is going to change for the better, but that doesn't always mean that the people who need the services get the attention that they need. And so, it gets pushed back out to the suburbs until they start building factories back up in the suburbs and then it gets pushed back into Chicago. And so that's a lot of moving things around without actually solving the problem. So, what I would like to see is a lot more collaboration at the political level. So, Alderman need to speak and work with other Alderman, there needs to be a much more collaborative process within policy for things to actually happen. And once you get to the level of being a key participant in policy, still making sure that you stay grounded to the community, to work with the community. And it's easier said than done because once you get elected, you have so many different constituents. But just making sure that you stay true to the cause that you built your platform on. I think that's an issue.

CGVRC Fellow: How do you think we can generate a sense of optimism across the city in regard to gun violence?

Dominique Davis: To become more optimistic, you will actually have to see a reduction in gun violence. This could get really deep. So, you know, Chicago is one of the most segregated cities in the country. I think we go back and forth with Milwaukee each year. Exposure to life outside of your community and not feeling marginalized or like you don't belong in other parts of the City of Chicago and really getting the community connected to those opportunities where development is happening, I think that's a first step.