

“You have to address the issues of mental health at all levels”

Richard Juarez
Little Village Community Member

Perspectives on Chicago Gun Violence
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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.

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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, Shure Charitable Trust, the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago, and United Way of Metropolitan Chicago.

Biography: This interview is with Richard Juarez; he is a commissioner on the Little Village Chamber of Commerce. He is a long-standing community member of Little Village and works with other organizations in Little Village. 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: Our first question is if you can tell us a little bit about who you are? How long you've lived in Chicago, and what connection you have to this particular community in the city.

Richard Juarez: I have lived in Chicago since 1980, over the years I've attended high school in the community at Curie High School. I went away to college, and I've come back and lived in this community of what is known as Little Village, also known as South Lawndale. My wife and I, we have been married for twenty-nine years. We have raised three children of which all three are married, and our first two children with their spouses have children. So that makes my wife and I grandparents. We are heavily invested in our community through our employment, also through our community engagement and involvement in our church and various other community organizations. I am a commissioner of the Little Village Chamber of Commerce, special service area 25. I am also a member of the Elder Board of La Villita Community Church and the president of the Administrative Board of the church. I have served on various boards in the surrounding community, one of them happens to be vice chair of Lawndale Christian Health Center for about three years. I work in what is called public health, primarily working with older adults at Lawndale Christian Health Center.

CGVRC Fellow: Now I'm going to ask a few questions about gun violence in your neighborhood. Can you describe your personal perception to the gun violence in the neighborhood?

Richard Juarez: My personal perception of gun violence in the neighborhood...I feel that the root, the cause is not necessarily the weapon of a gun but more as individuals. I strongly believe in addressing issues of mental health, of disparities in opportunities to education, to employment, to a higher quality of life in the North and South Lawndale communities. These communities have been affected very strongly by the environment. Our environment is detrimental to the health of our people. We live in homes that are very old, that have lead in the paint, which, in the Little Village community, we have the highest concentrations of lead in the blood of children. That affects how an individual acts out as they get older. The research is clear. So, it's like looking at a knife. You can look at a knife to cut a piece of steak or a piece of bread and then that same knife can be used to hurt somebody. The same thing as a gun – the gun I guess it's used for the protection of you and your family if something is happening, but that same gun is used to perpetrate a crime, to take advantage of another human being there's something there that has driven that individual. So, I believe that a gun is a tool like any other tool, like a rock, a knife, a dynamite, it's just what the person does with it. It's like having authority or influence: you can have one person who is cruel and mean and wants to take advantage with that authority and influence, and then you have another individual who is very caring and understanding and opens up opportunities for people, with that same authority and influence.

CGVRC Fellow: Thank you. So, you already kind of answered this but if you have anything else to add: What do you think generates gun violence in your neighborhood?

Richard Juarez: In my humble opinion, what generates gun violence is that individuals who put their hands on weapons, on guns in particular. I feel that these individuals feel powerless in their life, and this is the first power that they hold in their hand. And so, all of a sudden, perhaps they have been

mistreated throughout their life, perhaps they've been neglected, perhaps they've been overlooked, have never been appreciated, either at school or in the home because that's another issue that we face in our communities, is broken homes. And so, when you grow up being talked down to, being perhaps beaten up physically, emotionally, spiritually, psychologically – all of a sudden you come across a gun and you feel empowered. And at that point you're not going to let anyone talk to you, you're going to respond with the weapon, with that gun, by firing it at someone. You're going to discharge it on someone. Whereas if you grew up as an individual who was confident, who has been able to overcome obstacles and challenges and you are encouraged and you receive opportunities, you'll find other ways of expressing that frustration or that anger through conversation, through sharing your thoughts and your ideas. And those thoughts and ideas if they are understood and comprehended, they just might be put into practice by the overall group, by the overarching group. But if you've grown up never being paid attention to, this is one way you can definitely make a mark, make yourself known. And, I don't know if its urban legend or not, I don't know, but I've heard that individuals who are being initiated into gangs are told to go and shoot somebody for the heck of it or for the initiation of it. And so, of course it's very easy to shoot a gun and it's very indirect, especially if its impersonal, if you do it from a distance. If you're in a car and you're driving by, whoever walks, you don't know that person; you have no emotional attachments, so you will fire that weapon. So, there's a lot, and that's where I think that when a person is using a gun, that is like the visible symptom, right? It's like when we get a cold and are sneezing and have a watery nose, those'll be the symptoms that we see but the reality is that we have a bacteria internally. So, I see it that way.

CGVRC Fellow: So, this is kind of a four-part question. I'm just gonna read all of them and you can answer which one. So, what is being done in the neighborhood to address gun violence? Do you know of any specific programs or policies that are in place in your neighborhood? What suggestions do you have in your neighborhood that can support youth and reduce gun violence? Can you describe anything that you have found frustrating in current efforts to reduce gun violence?

Richard Juarez: Other than the laws that exist pertaining to murder and unauthorized use of a weapon, I don't know if there are any policies or procedures in our community. I am aware of organizations, such as Urban Life Skills. I am aware of these individuals, and I am aware of the efforts they do in providing reconciliation in terms of engagement among the youth from various gangs. And I completely respect and uphold and support any of their efforts one hundred percent. There are already some wonderful organizations in our community that are hoping to prevent this kind of violence.

CGVRC Fellow: Any suggestions you might have about what we can do to support youth?

Richard Juarez: Absolutely. Today, at La Villita Community Church is a job fair for young people the ages of sixteen to twenty-four, if I remember correctly, in particular working with other workforce development organizations, but this is being sponsored by McDonalds. Now, I appreciate the fact that McDonalds is doing this, and I'd like to see much more of this. Our church La Villita Community Church will be more open to hosting such events to help the community. One thing that I would like to see starts more outreach efforts and funding from the city of Chicago, the state, and even the federal government too. Other local organizations that will help older individuals that are adults that are between, I want to say twenty-one through forty, in how to become a better parent, you know parenting skills, professional development, learning new skills and new trades because then that will ripple down to their children. And I really believe that if we continue, if we start to provide more support to this group, their children will be better off than they were. If we allow these individuals to have a livable wage, hopefully both parents will not have to work so much because then, if these

parents don't have a network – who are their babies staying with, their children – and so, that's what I would like to see.

Not just money for the sake of throwing money, but it has to be very deliberate and see what evidence-based solutions or recommendations are out there and invest in them. They're out there! I'm not too familiar with many of them, I'm just familiar with a handful of them. And the work that Urban Life Skills does, violence prevention, what they do – I've seen their work. What we do through what is called the Chicago Youth Boxing Club, I've seen that have a very positive impact. Let's provide more funding to these organizations in the community because they are making an impact. It might seem small, but can you imagine if they didn't exist? How things would be? I think a lot worse. But unfortunately, we cannot measure prevention – how do you measure prevention? So, we know that what is being done in these organizations I've mentioned, they have been successful and have positive outcomes, measurable outcomes in the fact that the young people that are involve in these are being productive.

CGVRC Fellow: So, anything that you have found frustrating about current efforts to reduce gun violence?

Richard Juarez: I hope...bring together the various organizations that exist because so many of them are doing very good work but none of them are talking to each other. Everyone works in silence. And that's good because they have a niche, however, if you can somehow bring these organizations together to see commonalities to support each other, not to be in competition for funds for money, but how can we, as a group get money together for the overall, all of us who are under the umbrella for this kind of work. Then I believe that our efforts would be even stronger, and we are approaching it not, as they say in football terms, not just man-to-man but more zoned. You're playing zone if you get someone to bring us all together to talk about these things. That is the frustration that I see. I don't see organizations supporting each other and encouraging each other. Because if the goal is to reduce gun violence, it's going to take, like Clinton said, it'll take a village, it'll take all of us – those of us who are in church, those of us who are in civic, those of us who are in medicine, et cetera. Parents, our parents are critical. The churches are critical. The church is not the final answer to this, and neither are the parents. They're all very important parts, we all have our responsibility. The medical centers, the research, they all have a part of it, but we need to bring that collaboration of all of us talking together.

CGVRC Fellow: So, I agree that all of these people need to be involved, all these different organizations. Besides the alderman, how do you think we do that?

Richard Juarez: The alderman has many responsibilities under his belt, that's alderman-elect right now and he's gonna be sworn in about a week and a half from now. But the alderman has what is called influence. If he starts to bring the organizations together and they see that he's really trying to – there's a common good – I think that through those efforts, people will come on board. And I think Mike is the right person to do that. He has expressed his desire to better our community. I am in full support of Michael in these efforts, as part of his transition team. And actually, just for the record I ran for alderman against Mike, and I lost. However, because of love for the community I gave him my word when we were both candidates that if I were to lose I would support him and that's what I am doing. But I think that Mike is the right person for this job. He is young, he's energetic, he's focused, and so I'm very much looking forward for him to do it. So, his influence, through the people that he knows in the political realm, by pulling strings if you will, and I'm not saying anything bad about that. What I'm saying is that by talking to the other influencers, people who have authority in different levels of government,

that they can open up doors because sometimes it just takes saying “hey you’ve gotta bring this over here.” And people come. And so that’s how I believe he will be successful in doing that.

CGVRC Fellow: And I don’t know about the rest of Chicago, but I know at least, being a resident of Little Village and how I feel. I feel like the people that are doing the work in Little Village are not doing it just because it’s a job, but because.. you and Mike and people at New Life really care about the neighborhood. So, I think that’s what’s going to sustain the work, long-term. But I feel like that’s very specific to Little Village. Again, I don’t know what it’s like in other neighborhoods, but what do you feel overall will help prevent gun violence in Chicago, as a whole?

Richard Juarez: Oh, my goodness. With all the different neighborhoods? We have to keep in mind that the city is extremely diverse, and many people have said that it’s segregated. So, you’re looking at different points of views on how to achieve this, right? The number one thing is, in my opinion, is addressing the issues of mental health. You have to address that at all levels. Many people think that young people don’t have stress or depression – they do. That has to be addressed. Education, that has to be addressed. Perhaps encouraging young people, teaching them about the realities of life even though they don’t want to hear it, but just letting them know “hey listen.” I support giving young people Planned Parenthood. I support that, though, because I really believe that if young people are going to be involved, going to be sexually active before the commitment of marriage, they should have condoms, young women should be protected. They should be empowered to say “no,” to stand on that ground if they want anything for their bodies – fine I respect that. Unless they want to and that is their choice and I strongly believe in that. So, these are the issues that I believe, because again gun violence, it’s not that it’s the gun. I mean you could use a vehicle to kill people. Remember, airplanes were used as a weapon of mass destruction on 9/11, we’re not gonna outlaw airplanes right? Guns happen to be a very easy, powerful weapon that anyone can put their hands on.

So, mental health, education, opportunities of employment, workforce development, all of these things are very important in order for us to start addressing these issues. Funding for the arts, money for the arts. Have people involved in music and painting and dance, expressive poetry, because there’s talent. These kids have a lot of energy and a lot of knowledge and creativity. Let’s use that instead of them using that creativity for violence. I think that is, these are keys; it’s not the gun, the gun is the end result, that’s what does the harm, but it’s what’s behind it. There are laws, like for example, I think that automatic weapons should be completely banned. Because if someone gets their hand on that they’re going to cause a lot more harm. It’s our constitutional right for us to bear arms, unless you want to change the constitution. But even if that happens, guess what’s going to happen? There’ll be more illegal guns. It’ll be an underground just like there is now, but larger. So, it’s addressing the issues of the spirit and of the soul, internally. I think that is key and we’re looking at the outward symptoms and treating the cause. It’s like if you have a cold, and I see you have a cold and I give you a tissue “here wipe your nose you have a runny nose,” “thank you for that,” “oh runny noses they’re horrible here have some more tissues,” I’m giving you tea, an antibiotic, you know something to treat the actual symptom which I think is internal. This might be a simplistic answer.

CGVRC Fellow: No, I think it’s great...

Richard Juarez: But these are my simple, humble opinions.

CGVRC Fellow: I think it's great. I mean, that's a hard question to ask anybody to answer. So, what do you think we need to know as researchers, to better understand gun violence? So, what research questions should we be asking?

Richard Juarez: This is what I recommend: have the researchers talk to perpetrators, people who have actually shot people, people who have killed people with guns, and ask them their motives. That is key. You're asking me, and I've never shot anyone. I never wanted to shoot anybody. I have been to a firing range and shot a gun, I don't even know what kind of gun it was, I'm not familiar with it. But so, for that question, if I were to say whatever I think, it's not going to carry weight. Ask those who have been perpetrators, because I'm certain that there will be people who have fired a gun in self-defense. I am certain that some of them might feel guilty for perhaps taking the life of someone, in self-defense. You know, ask a soldier, you know people who have been in combat who have been on tours, military tours. Ask them, what did they think, how do they feel. You know, and I think that will open up a door to what drives [them] – especially people who are not in the military. Ask a kid who's in jail, a man or a woman who is in jail for killing someone with a gun. Whether it was done in a drive-by, ask them, get their perspective. I think you will have your answer to this question.

CGVRC Fellow: How do you think we get access to those people? Because as researchers, I feel like a lot of them don't know them, or don't live in the neighborhood in which they're doing the research.

Richard Juarez: That's exactly right, and these are academic people. This professor whose name is here, the lead investigator, right, that's exactly what I'm talking about. You need to go to the source, right? And how do you make that happen? This is exactly where perhaps they could reach out to the mayor. You know, "we're trying to find out, what do you think of this perspective." I would think that for the sake of research to find the answer, the root cause, people in leadership – the mayor, the governor, the alderman, the state representatives – this would make sense to them. You're not going to force any individual who has used a weapon, you're not going to force them, you're going to ask them if they are willing. And I sense that right now these people who are in jail – you think they're happy that they're there? They're probably regretting it. Yet they still need to tap into why there was a time when they had hatred, anger, or just frustration. I don't care if they're gonna use their weapon, they're gonna fire it. Now that they are locked away they have time to reflect and they say "I am never gonna put myself in this again" unless they're going through the same things where in jail they're being abused, neglected, and taken advantage of – they're gonna come out angrier. And guess what, that's where there are repeat offenders, because they have not dealt with the issues of their soul and of their spirit.

So, having the politicians support these studies, that will allow the researchers to talk to people that are incarcerated. Think about this, talking to the family members of the perpetrator, what would they say? Because I was informed that, children under the age of twelve were considered really bad news. They would use sentences such as "I'm gonna shoot him," "I'm gonna kill him," they were just ready. It was just a matter of time. And unfortunately, these children died in the last year and a half through a horrific tragedy that took place. And so, these children were very well known. So, what kind of environment were they being raised, for them to think this was okay? It was okay on the street and there's a lot of talk and all of a sudden they get power, and then they use this weapon. But how many other children have been raised that way? That have done this, committed crimes? And now that they're locked away, I wonder if they realize "man that was all a lie that I was fed. Look at me now, my life now is put away." They're paying their dues, if you will, for what they've done. But I think talking to their loved ones because I'm certain that if their dad or their mother encouraged that kind of conversation and talk, I'm

sure that their hearts are hurting for their child that is locked away. So, I think asking them. I think that would give a lot of information, a lot of data, for this research.

CGVRC Fellow: Thank you. So overall, are you optimistic or pessimistic that things will get better?

Richard Juarez: I'm always optimistic. We have to live in hope. You mentioned earlier that it's the people in the community that are making this happen, it's this way. Think of it this way: we're here, we have to make the very best of it. We have to, as a parent, have to do my best to keep my front yard clean, to always pick up the empty beer bottles that are thrown, the diapers. Can you imagine if I were just to leave it, like "I don't care"? What's gonna happen? Its gonna get worse. So at least I'm working within my parameter, and because I'm invested and I want to see the safety for my children, for my grandchildren, for my wife, for my loved ones, for my extended family, for my community. Because the people I know in this church and the people I know in the community, it would break my heart to know that something terrible, that a tragedy like this would happen. And I would say to myself, "well what have I done? And so, it's better to always be proactive and always be hopeful. It's better to live in hope than to live with a pessimistic perspective in life because then you're just hurting yourself and the people around you when you're pessimistic.

CGVRC Fellow: Do you think that Little Village as a whole is pessimistic or optimistic?

Richard Juarez: I think I think it's a combination of both, but the overarching approach is that people don't care. Its...

CGVRC Fellow: apathetic?

Richard Juarez: Yes, thank you. They're "this is the way things are, what can I do?" They're not, gosh I couldn't think of the word. Anyway, I'm sorry I couldn't think of the word, they're just not, they just don't care. Somehow they haven't related to what's going on.

CGVRC Fellow: That's alright. How does your organization help the neighborhood in general, not just with respect to gun violence?

Richard Juarez: I'll speak on my involvement, two of them, the church that I attend that I am a very, very honored individual to be a part of the La Villita Community Church, because I have seen this church and its members, and its leadership and pastors always reach out to the community. And to be a part of this, it's an honor, it's a great honor. The organization that I work for, it's called Lawndale Christian Health Center. I have utmost respect for all the work that the clinic does through, in the field of health. Their standard of excellence is a very high standard, the provide quality health care services on every level and every discipline of health. Organizations like these that provides employment to tons of people in our communities, North and South Lawndale, that provide – believe it or not – out of the sixty-five thousand, over sixty-five thousand patients that the clinic has, a huge portion live in the 60623 zip code. So that people are aware of these resources they can go get for their wellbeing, I think its admirable, that the clinic is there.

CGVRC Fellow: Is there anything else that you would like us to know as researchers, or anything else you want to add?

Richard Juarez: Well, I am always glad to see that research is taking place. I would love to see the end result of what this research is going to demonstrate – it's going to either prove a hypothesis or not. And then what are you guys going to do with it, what is the lead researcher going to do with this? How will they implement in practical terms in the community? Will the lead investigator, will this just be for a research paper to make money for grants? Or will it be so they can take this research, the data, and take it to an elected official and say "look, here's what I have found, and I believe that these are the solutions to solve this." That's what I want to see.

CGVRC Fellow: Well thank you so much for your time. I appreciate it.