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Article

Change Through Play, Rethinking Masculinity: An Intervention to Gun Violence in the United States

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Abstract: This scholarly article introduces the "Change Through Play: Rethinking Masculinity" program, a potential intervention designed to address gun violence in the United States by targeting its societal roots, particularly through the lens of gender socialization. The program focuses on transforming children's, particularly young boys', perceptions of masculinity away from gun violence by influencing the types of toys they play with. By promoting non-violent play, the initiative aims to foster a future generation less inclined to engage in gun violence. This community-interactive and educational approach emphasizes the importance of evidence-based interventions that respect community values and cultural dynamics. The program employs a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative research to evaluate its effectiveness. The program highlights the necessity of sustained, collective action to transform the entrenched practices and beliefs that perpetuate violence, ultimately striving for a society that prioritizes peace, justice, and safety.

Keywords: gun violence; intervention; Change Through Play; perception; safety; United State

Part I. Introduction

Despite various policies and interventions implemented in the US to combat and reduce gun violence, the persistent and alarming statistics often raise the question: Can gun violence in the US truly be remedied? The Axios American Health Index reveals a startling figure: 26% of Americans identify gun violence as the primary threat to public health, a concern paralleling the opioid and fentanyl crises. The United States grapples with over 43,000 firearm-related fatalities annually, 40% of which are homicides, particularly vulnerable are children and teenagers, with approximately 4,000 fatalities and 15,000 injuries recorded each year among those aged 0-19 (Database of Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and National Center for Health Statistics). According to Everytown Research & Policy, the US gun homicide rate is 26 times higher than that of other high-income countries, and the gun suicide rate is nearly 12 times higher. Every day, more than 120 people in the United States are killed with guns, twice as many are shot and wounded, and countless others are impacted by acts of gun violence. This makes the US gun violence threat an outlier relative to the rest of the world. This evidence highlights the severity of gun violence as a pervasive crisis deeply ingrained in American society. It disproportionately affects marginalized groups and demands immediate, coordinated public action through an intervention. As a major social problem, gun violence induces widespread trauma, diminishes community security, and necessitates a comprehensive and systemic public health response to mitigate its detrimental effects on the nation.

This article aims to propose an innovative intervention, the "Change Through Play: Rethinking Masculinity" program, which seeks to address gun violence by tackling its societal roots. By transforming children's perceptions of masculinity away from gun violence and by influencing the types of toys they play with, this program promotes non-violent play and aims to cultivate a future generation less inclined to engage in gun violence. The intervention emphasizes on the necessity of sustained, collective action to transform the entrenched practices and beliefs that perpetuate violence. Ultimately, this intervention strives for a society that prioritizes peace, justice, and safety. By

embracing a holistic and culturally sensitive method, the program aspires to create a significant impact on reducing gun violence in the United States.

Part II. Review of Literature

Gun violence is a multifaceted issue influenced by numerous societal factors, including gender socialization. Studies have shown that traditional notions of masculinity, which often valorize aggression and dominance, contribute significantly to violent behavior (Connell, 2005). Boys are socialized from a young age to associate masculinity with toughness and the use of force, which can manifest in later violent behavior, including gun violence (Kimmel, 2018). Interventions that aim to redefine masculinity and promote non-violent behaviors are essential in addressing the root causes of gun violence.

Current interventions to reduce or prevent gun violence often focus on federal laws and law enforcement, such as assault weapons bans, safe storage laws, universal background checks, red flag laws, mental health provisions, licensing requirements, and others. Most of these laws are founded on established literature on gun violence intervention. One notable example is the Boston Ceasefire Pulling-Levers model, as outlined by Kennedy et al. (2001). This pioneering intervention aimed at curbing youth gun violence in Boston during the 1990s. Part of Operation Ceasefire, it adopted a problem-oriented policing approach, targeting youth violence, gangs, and guns. The Pulling-Levers strategy is often hailed as an innovative and replicable model for addressing urban violence, but its effectiveness depends on the precise execution of its key components: collaboration, communication, and deterrence. The strategy centered on identifying the small core population driving the majority of the city's violence. It required extensive data gathering and analysis from various sources, including police records, hospital data, and street intelligence, to map out gang affiliations and the dynamics fueling the violence. Once identified, a crucial aspect of the model was interagency collaboration, bringing together law enforcement, social services, and community members to craft a comprehensive response. This included a unified message communicated directly to gang members through face-to-face "call-ins," emphasizing the community's zero-tolerance policy for violence and the specific legal consequences of continued violent behavior. The focused deterrence strategy employed by the model pulled on every lever of influence, including legal, social, and moral, to deter violence. These levers ranged from the promise of swift legal repercussions for violent acts to the offering of social services for those seeking a way out of gang life. The response to violence was immediate and commensurate with the severity of the offense, aiming to establish a strong and clear deterrent effect. Community engagement was also pivotal, bolstering the model's legitimacy and helping maintain the moral pressure against violence. The community's involvement was instrumental in mobilizing resources and providing support for youths who wanted to leave behind a life of crime, thereby addressing some of the root causes of gang membership and violence.

Another notable intervention is Project Exile, designed to reduce gun violence by applying stringent federal gun laws to local gun crimes, effectively "exiling" offenders from the community to federal prison. Initiated in Richmond, Virginia, in 1997, in response to high rates of gun violence, the core philosophy of Project Exile was that the fear of federal penalties, including longer prison sentences served far from home, would deter individuals from carrying and using guns in crimes. According to Rosenfeld, Fornango, & Baumer (2005), the intervention involved a collaborative effort among local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies to prosecute individuals who violated specific gun laws, circumventing the perceived leniency of local court systems. An extensive public awareness campaign accompanied the project, informing the community about the severe consequences of gun law violations, thus intending to create a deterrent effect.

The Chronic Violent Crime Hotspots Intervention (Braga & Weisburd, 2010) is another example of targeted enforcement on specific individuals and places, showing significant impact on overall crime rates while minimizing the impact on community residents. Research consistently shows that a small number of individuals and locations account for a disproportionate amount of crime (Sherman, 2007). For instance, Sherman et al. (1995) found that police raids on crack houses resulted in decreased crime at the block level. Similarly, McGarrell et al. (2001) found that directed police

patrols focusing on gun carrying in specific regions of the city led to a decrease in violent firearm crime. Place-based strategies, such as hotspot policing, have proven effective in reducing gun violence in high-crime areas (Rosenfeld et al., 2012). Recent research suggests that combining people- and place-based strategies, such as focusing on prolific offenders in hotspot locations, holds promise for violence reduction (Groff et al., 2015; Uchida & Swatt, 2013). Additionally, targeting specific problems at places, in line with problem-oriented policing, has been found to be more effective in reducing crime than simply increasing traditional patrol (Braga et al., 2012). Braga and Weisburd's (2010) study on problem-solving at chronic violent crime hotspots employed a methodological approach to crime reduction, focusing law enforcement and community efforts on small geographic areas where crime is concentrated. This strategy is based on the theory that a large proportion of a city's crime occurs in a relatively small number of places, and managing these hotspots can significantly reduce the overall crime rate.

The Cure Violence strategy, explored by Skogan et al. (2009), adopts a public health approach to mitigating violence, treating it as a disease that can be prevented, interrupted, and cured. This intervention focuses on altering individual behaviors within communities to halt the transmission of violent behavior. The Cure Violence model includes identifying and detecting potential instances of violence, interrupting and intervening in potentially volatile situations, and changing social norms to prevent violence from occurring. The Cure Violence program in Chicago builds upon one component of the original Boston Ceasefire model by employing street-level "violence interrupters" to mediate disputes between feuding parties and assist law enforcement in reducing gun-related violence. These interrupters, often individuals with histories in gangs or violence who have reformed, leverage their credibility and relationships within the community to de-escalate conflicts.

While existing interventions focus on estimating the outcomes of state and federal laws, example is Gun buyback programs, enhancing penalties for gun crimes, mandatory reporting of lost or stolen firearms, and others, there is an opportunity for research that can lead to gun violence interventions independent of state and federal legislators. This article aims to propose a novel and testable gun violence intervention that targets the root causes of gun violence. Although legislative avenues remain a primary strategy to prevent gun violence, the proposed interventions do not rely on state or federal legislation or law enforcement. Instead, they call for stakeholders to come together and enforce measures to address the rampant nature of gun violence in the United States.

Part III. The Proposed Intervention for Gun Violence

"Change Through Play: Rethinking Masculinity"

Overview of the Intervention

According to Miller and Azrael (2022), 4.6 million children in the United States live in homes with at least one loaded and unlocked gun. Approximately three million American children witness gun violence every year, and nearly 140 children and teens die from unintentional shootings annually. Black children and teens are more than 17 times more likely than white children and teens of the same age to die by gun homicide (Everytown Research & Policy). One contributing factor to this problem of children gun fatality is the fact that they are exposed to guns, which could be real guns or toy guns. This intervention assumes toy guns because these toys, or other violence-related toys, are often normalized in households, particularly for male children, to instill a sense of masculinity as promoted by parents or the community. This normalization includes allowing male children to watch movies involving gun use, which influences and motivates children to desire to play with toy guns or real guns, leading to unintentional shootings and deaths. If society, parents, and the community paid critical attention to the ease of access to gun toys by children and their usage, this could significantly reduce and solve the gun violence problem in the future generation. Correcting children by disallowing them from playing with any violence-related toys will ensure a safe society in the future. I believe this approach would be more effective than waiting for children

to grow up and become gun users before enacting gun laws to tackle the problem. Thus, solving the problem from its root cause at an early age is the focus of this intervention.

"Change Through Play: Rethinking Masculinity" is a dynamic community-oriented intervention designed to address gun violence by tackling its roots in early childhood gender socialization. This intervention centers on the influence of societal norms surrounding masculinity, which often glorify gun-related behaviors. Through engagement with how young boys interact with toys that promote violence, such as toy guns, the intervention aims to fundamentally alter their perceptions of masculinity, thereby reducing their inclination towards gun violence as they mature. Orchestrated by non-profit organizations, this intervention is a preventive strategy designed to transform childhood socialization practices.

Objectives

Parents, caregivers, and the broader community will be educated about the profound impacts of gender-specific toys on a child's perception of masculinity and violence. The primary goal of this intervention is to systematically replace toys that glorify violence with those that encourage empathy, teamwork, and creative expression. Additionally, the intervention aims to foster a societal shift to reduce the endorsement of guns as symbols of masculine power among boys in the targeted communities.

Strategic Goals

The strategic goals of "Change Through Play" include achieving a 40% reduction in the prevalence of toy guns and similar violence-associated toys in family homes within the first two years of the intervention implementation. Additionally, the intervention seeks to secure a 60% increase in the adoption of non-violent play preferences among participating families within the same timeframe. Over five years, the intervention will track and document a long-term decline in the acceptance of gun violence as a facet of masculine identity among boys engaged in the intervention. The intervention also aims to advocate for a ban on the sale of children's gun toys and educate the community about the detrimental effects of such toys in homes.

Methodology

The "Change Through Play" program adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative research to evaluate its effectiveness comprehensively. The program will be implemented in several pilot communities across the United States, targeting boys aged 4-10. Data collection will involve pre - and post - intervention surveys, focus group discussions, and observational studies to assess changes in attitudes toward masculinity and violent behavior. Pre-intervention surveys will establish baseline attitudes and behaviors, while post-intervention surveys will measure the changes resulting from the program. Focus group discussions will provide deeper insights into the participants' experiences and perceptions, while observational studies will offer real-time data on behavior during interactions. This comprehensive approach allows for a robust analysis of the program's impact, capturing both statistical trends and personal experiences. By integrating various data collection methods, the program ensures a thorough understanding of how interventions influence perceptions and behaviors related to masculinity and violence. Additionally, the mixed-methods approach allows for triangulation, enhancing the reliability and validity of the findings.

Design

Scientific Experimental Design

A study will be conducted with 4–10-year-old children, dividing them into two groups: one exposed to non-toy guns or empathy toys (Control group) and the other to gun toys (Treatment group). The purpose of this experiment is to demonstrate that early exposure to non-violent toys can

reduce preferences for violence-associated toys and increase non-violent play preferences in family homes. These effects will be tracked and documented over a two-year period, aiming for a long-term decline in the acceptance of gun violence as a part of masculine identity among boys engaged in the intervention over five years. This evidence-based approach highlights the intervention's potential to significantly reduce gun violence among male children as they grow.

Program General Design

The intervention is designed with several key components, each aimed at fostering non-violent behavior and challenging traditional gender norms. One of the primary components is toy selection and distribution. Partnering with local schools and community centers, the program will distribute non-violent toys such as building blocks, art supplies, and cooperative games to boys aged 4-10. These toys are chosen to promote creativity, empathy, and cooperative play, steering children away from toys that glorify violence. The selection process will involve consulting with child development experts to ensure the toys are developmentally appropriate and effective in promoting desired behaviors.

Educational workshops form another critical component of the program. Conducted by trained facilitators, these workshops will engage children, parents, and educators in discussions about gender norms and the impact of traditional masculinity on behavior. The workshops will use interactive activities, such as role-playing and group discussions, to encourage participants to reflect on their own experiences and beliefs, fostering a deeper understanding of how societal norms shape actions and attitudes. The workshops will also provide practical strategies for parents and educators to reinforce non-violent behavior and inclusive masculinity at home and in school.

Community engagement is also integral to the program's success.

The program will involve community leaders and organizations to foster a supportive environment for change. Community events, such as toy fairs and educational seminars, will be organized to raise awareness and promote the program's goals. These events will provide a platform for the community to collectively embrace and support the initiative. Engaging the broader community ensures that the values promoted by the program are reinforced across various social contexts, creating a more consistent and pervasive influence on the children.

Additionally, mentorship programs will be established, where older youth and adults from the community will be trained to serve as mentors, providing positive role models for younger boys. Mentorship activities will include group outings, sports, and collaborative projects that emphasize teamwork and non-violent conflict resolution. This component is essential for reinforcing the lessons learned in workshops and through play. The mentors will receive training in child development, conflict resolution, and non-violent communication to effectively support and guide the younger boys.

Key Stakeholder Engagement

The success and sustainability of the "Change Through Play" program depend on collaboration from various stakeholders, each contributing unique expertise and support.

Religious bodies are integral stakeholders in the "Change Through Play" program. Religious leaders, such as those from Christian churches, Muslim mosques, Hindu temples, and other faith communities, possess significant influence over their members. They can advocate the importance of the intervention to their congregations, emphasizing the values of empathy, safety, and peace that the program promotes. By educating parents and caregivers within their communities, religious bodies can encourage them to choose non-violent toys and activities that foster positive social behaviors in children. This advocacy is crucial in ensuring a better and safer future generation, free from the normalization of gun violence. Incorporating religious bodies into the stakeholder engagement strategy strengthens community support and reinforces the program's message across diverse cultural and social contexts. Their involvement underscores the universal values of compassion and non-violence, promoting a cohesive approach to building a safer society for all.

Non-profit organizations will spearhead both the implementation and oversight, ensuring alignment with broader violence prevention and community health goals. These organizations are essential not only for securing funding and resources but also for advocating policy changes that bolster the program's objectives.

Educational institutions play a pivotal role by embedding the principles of "Change Through Play" into their curricula and after-school activities, making the intervention a consistent part of children's lives. Schools provide the infrastructure for workshops and toy distribution, with educators trained to incorporate program values into their teaching practices.

Local businesses and community leaders contribute through funding, resources, and active participation in community events like toy swaps, which sustain the program and bolster its legitimacy within the community. Their involvement broadens participation and support, ensuring a comprehensive approach to building a safer society.

Mental health professionals will develop age-appropriate educational materials and evaluate the psychological impacts of the intervention, ensuring the well-being of the children involved. Their expertise is crucial in creating content that is both effective and sensitive to the needs of the participants. They will also offer support services for children and families who may need additional help in adapting to the program's changes.

Expected Outcomes

The "Change Through Play" program aims to achieve several significant outcomes. One of the primary goals is a reduction in violent behavior among participating boys. By promoting non-violent play and challenging traditional gender norms, the program seeks to reduce aggressive behavior. The anticipated outcome is to see a measurable decrease in incidents of physical aggression, bullying, and other forms of violence among participants.

Another anticipated outcome is the development of more positive attitudes toward masculinity. Participants will gain a more inclusive understanding of masculinity, recognizing that strength and leadership can coexist with empathy and cooperation. This shift in perception is expected to manifest in increased emotional intelligence, improved peer relationships, and greater acceptance of diverse expressions of masculinity.

Additionally, the program aims to enhance community cohesion. By involving diverse stakeholders in its implementation and fostering a collective commitment to non-violence, the program will strengthen community bonds. These outcomes are expected to contribute to a cultural shift that diminishes the normalization of violence as part of masculine identity. A cohesive community environment that supports non-violent behavior will help sustain the program's impact over the long term.

The practical application of this intervention is intricate and interactive, encompassing various segments of the community. Parents and caregivers are pivotal participants, attending workshops designed to broaden their understanding of the impacts of violent toys. They will not only receive this knowledge but will also be provided with alternative toys that embody constructive and cooperative play values. Community leaders and educators will take on the mantle of discussion facilitators and organizers of community play events. These events will stand as beacons of the values that "Change Through Play" seeks to instill empathy and teamwork. It is through these community gatherings that new societal norms will begin to crystalize. Children, the heart of the intervention, will be immersed in structured play sessions that eschew the common threads of competition and aggression, instead championing inclusivity and creativity. By reshaping the play environment, the intervention reshapes the future behaviors and attitudes of these young individuals.

Evaluation

The effectiveness of the "Change Through Play" program will be evaluated through a combination of surveys, focus groups, and observational studies. Surveys and questionnaires will be administered to participants, parents, and educators to measure changes in attitudes and behaviors.

These instruments will be designed to capture a wide range of data, including self-reported changes in behavior, perceptions of masculinity, and feedback on the program's components.

Focus groups will be conducted with various stakeholders to gather in-depth feedback on the program's impact and identify areas for improvement. These discussions will provide qualitative data that can offer context and deeper understanding of the quantitative findings. Stakeholders will include children, parents, educators, and community leaders.

Observational studies will document interactions during play and workshop sessions to assess behavioral changes. Trained observers will use structured observation tools to systematically record instances of cooperative play, aggressive behavior, and other relevant interactions. This real-time data will complement the survey and focus group findings, providing a comprehensive view of the program's impact.

This multi-faceted evaluation strategy ensures a comprehensive understanding of the program's impact, allowing for adjustments and enhancements to maximize effectiveness. The data collected will provide valuable insights into the program's strengths and areas needing refinement, guiding future iterations of the intervention. Continuous evaluation will also help in demonstrating the program's value to funders and stakeholders, securing ongoing support.

Conclusion

The "Change Through Play: Rethinking Masculinity" program offers a promising strategy for mitigating gun violence in the United States. By addressing the societal and cultural factors that contribute to violent behavior, this intervention has the potential to foster a generation that values peace, justice, and safety. Through collective action and evidence-based practices, we can work towards a future free from the scourge of gun violence.

The program's innovative approach, combining play-based interventions with educational and community engagement, represents a significant advancement in violence prevention. If successfully implemented and scaled, the "Change Through Play" program could serve as a model for other communities and countries seeking to address similar issues. By investing in our children and reshaping societal norms, we can create a safer, more inclusive world for future generations.

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