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Illinois Blueprint for Peace provides framework for revitalizing communities and reducing gun violence

CHICAGO –The Illinois Blueprint for Peace – a framework of recommendations to build peace and prevent gun violence in Illinois – was released Tuesday by a statewide coalition of organizations and individuals committed to supporting and advocating for proven approaches to bring peace and healing to Illinois communities.

By addressing the underlying trauma that shapes decisions to carry guns and the harm caused by gun violence, the Illinois Blueprint for Peace contains a series of more than three dozen recommendations to improve the lives of Illinoisans impacted by gun violence and to reduce future gun violence.

“Beginning in the spring of 2020, Illinois experienced the largest pandemic in at least a century, the largest civil rights protests in a generation, the largest economic disruption in a decade, the highest rate of handgun sales in history, and a sharp increase in shootings and homicides that coincided with a sharp overall decrease in other violent crimes,” the report states.

“It is too soon to quantify how each of these events may have impacted the others; so much change occurred at once, some answers may remain elusive. Regardless of cause, effect, or catalyst, the fact remains that in recent years, Illinoisans experienced stress, grief, economic pressure, and strained social ties on a scale larger than most have ever known. However, the individual and collective traumas of these experiences did not fall equally upon people of all races, ethnicities, and income levels.

“Our current conditions are the manifestation of decades of structural racism, as any measure of health, policing, criminalization, or gun violence makes clear.”
The Illinois Blueprint for Peace advocates “rethinking the outsized investments our state has made in traditional police- and prison-based responses to gun issues – particularly during a period of concentrated health, social, and economic needs.”

“Far too many Illinoisans continue to be harmed by gun violence, policing, and the criminal legal system,” states the Illinois Blueprint for Peace. “At the same time, research has continued to expand our understanding of what does and does not work to prevent gun violence and what forms of accountability can be most effective in reducing risky behaviors.”

A 2021 symposium examining gun violence led to the creation of the Illinois Blueprint for Peace, which developed the recommendations. Sponsored by the Children and Family Justice Center at Northwestern Pritzker School of Law, the day-long symposium brought together attorneys and academics alongside community organizers, advocates, and service providers to discuss why people carry guns, how the criminal system responds to gun-carrying, and more sustainable approaches to reduce violence. Selective enforcement within each jurisdiction, layered on top of regionally-different approaches to gun law enforcement, drives racial disparities among gun penalties that are even more extreme than the rest of Illinois’ criminal system.

The report notes that lessons learned from the failed war on drugs can be applied to reduce gun violence and bring peace to our communities:

- The law enforcement “war” on contraband model shifts focus away from manufacturer liability and other industry accountability measures, instead placing blame and punishment primarily on individuals who have often been harmed by the contraband themselves.
- Demand and harmful use decrease when people are healthy and feel safe. They increase when people cannot heal from trauma and feel afraid.
- Healing resources must be immediately accessible to all.
- Positive outlets and support do more to reduce harm than legal responses ever will.
- Intensive policing and harsh criminalization aimed at individual-level contraband possession will never sufficiently prevent death, but these do create new harms that destabilize families and communities - and ultimately drive more demand.

Recommendations in the Illinois Blueprint for Peace follow three primary areas.

(1) Illinois should invest in the health and healing of residents impacted by gun violence. The recommendations include increased mental health support for those directly and indirectly impacted by gun violence and participation from – and compensation for – youth involved in gun violence prevention.

(2) Illinois should redesign the criminal processes by bringing transparency, fairness and community voice to gun charging decisions in the courts. This includes ending the frequent presumption that cases involving mere gun possession - not use - should be charged as harshly as possible and instead should be charged as misdemeanors.

(3) Illinois should improve sentencing and policy integrity by promoting compliance with gun laws, not simply punishing violations. This will require educating, training, and licensing many thousands of Illinoisans who already have access to weapons but have had insufficient exposure to safe gun practices and to the legal framework around guns in Illinois. Recommendations include ending the characterization of possession-oriented and licensing violations as “gun crimes,” a category indistinguishable on paper from gun violence and resulting in misinterpretation that creates a barrier to securing housing and employment.

“Like Illinois, our coalition includes participants who own firearms and those who vehemently oppose gun ownership; those who view Illinois’ approach to gun regulations as important and protective and those who view its licensure system as unnecessary and out-of-step,” the Illinois Blueprint for Peace concludes. “What unites us is the conviction that Illinoisans do not have to continue to be hurt by high rates of gun violence and by traditional gun politics that prioritize harsh, isolating, inequitable individual punishments–perpetuating violence–over developing and investing in shared community values.

“We ask you to imagine a different way forward, to choose justice over harm, and to build a state that is healthier and more peaceful for all.”

The Illinois Blueprint for Peace website includes the full report, a list of more than 60 organizations supporting its policy recommendations, brief video presentations explaining the project, and a summary of the recommendations.

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