

DAILY REPORT

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An ALM Publication

Youth Conflict Resolution Programs: A Call to Action

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Two 6 and 8-year-old boys are shot and killed by a young gang member in an act of gun violence. This is an everyday reality due to the prevalence of gun violence in America's cities. Unfortunately, incidents similar to what is described above were occurring when I was a police officer almost 50 years ago in Detroit.

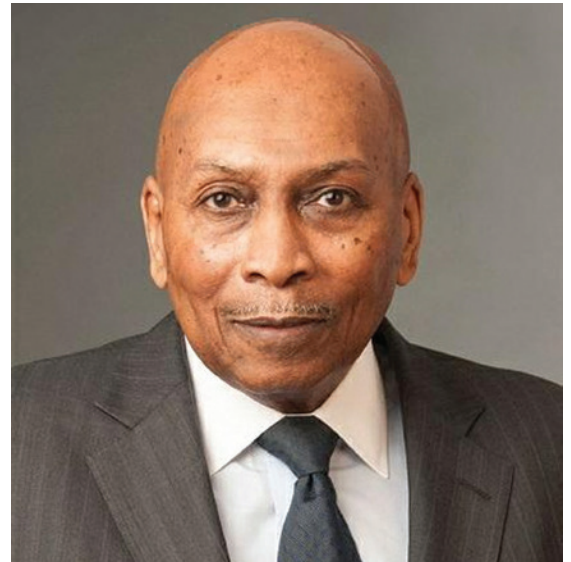
It is unacceptable that over at least the last 50 years, generation after generation of our children continues to live in fear of gun violence in their communities. Sadly, Atlanta is no exception.

- On June 27, 2020, Jalanni Pless, 18 years old, was shot and killed allegedly by another teen over a dispute concerning the selling of bottled water in Midtown Atlanta.
- On July 4, 2020, 8-year-old Secoria Turner was shot and killed, allegedly by a teen,

while riding in her mother's car.

- Just before Christmas 2020, shots were fired after a shopping center parking lot argument. One of those shots hit and killed 7-year-old Kennedy Maxie as she rode in her aunt's car in Buckhead.
- On December 26, 2020, Kalecia Williams, 16 years old, was shot and killed in a hotel allegedly by another teen.

In 2020, homicides in Atlanta increased to 157 from 99 in 2019; similar increases occurred in Chicago and New York City. Many of these homicides resulted from gun violence. Atlanta Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms has stated that the Atlanta police will focus additional resources on targeting gangs and gun violence. Shaddi Abusaid, Christian Boone, *AJC Special Report: Crime*, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution



(Jan 15, 2021) <https://www.ajc.com/news/atlantas-deadliest-year-in-decades-has-city-on-edge-and-demanding-change/WAF3MV7AVBD2BO2RZ-VANXDI6E4/>.

Gun violence in our cities will not subside until we address the root causes of that violence. Of course, issues such as poverty, systemic racism, and underperforming educational institutions, among others, all contribute to the foundation supporting the cycle of gun violence in our cities.

Further, we cannot expect that cycle to abate without sustainable solutions to those root causes. However, as we perform the hard and necessary work of developing solutions to those root causes, we also need to teach our children conflict resolution techniques to deescalate disputes and occurrences that could lead to gun violence tragedies.

Reporting on a recent incident of gun violence in Atlanta, a local television news station broadcast the following elegant quote from an Atlanta police officer:

“The number of people who lack conflict management skills, and who opt to take a life, risk going to prison and abandoning their family and freedom too often over trivial things, is shocking. ...We need people to understand how important it is to settle arguments by walking away or seeking outside help. No argument is worth destroying lives.” Cheune Her, *Atlanta city leaders frustrated over weekend shootings, rising gun violence*, 11 Alive (March 1, 2021), <https://www.11alive.com/article/news/local/atlanta-violent-weekend-leaders-frustrated/85-4819b556-c957-42c1-9582-ce559e449f55>.

There can be no dispute that we owe our children and our communities a safe environment devoid of gun violence. Clearly, our country’s history of deaths

from mass shootings like those recently experienced in Atlanta and Boulder, Colorado cry out for comprehensive and thoughtful solutions. There is an urgent need, however, for coordinated and comprehensive training to assist our youth in developing methods for deescalating conflicts before they lead to gun violence in our schools and communities.

Achieving that goal requires the coordination of initiatives by a cross-section of legal organizations and community groups. Quite frankly, the infrastructure for this already exists. Multiple organizations—like the Anti-Defamation League with its No Place for Hate® school program; the 100 Black Men and 100 Black Women of America with its youth programs; the YMCA; the Urban League; and many other youth programs—are focused on mentoring children and providing methods for addressing bullying and other divisive behaviors.

As neutrals who are members of local, state, and national bar association dispute resolution sections, we have the ability to coordinate with the various youth programs in our communities to use our skills and training to expand upon existing and develop new youth conflict resolution programs. This effort would be a natural use of our resources and experience, as it has the potential to positively

impact local communities and reduce youth gun violence. For example, as lawyers and neutrals, we can assist youth and our society, in general, to resolve disputes through the use of the following conflict resolution techniques:

- Set the stage
- Gather perspectives
- Find a common interest
- Create options
- Evaluate options
- Create / Reach an agreement

The ultimate result, of course, would be the development of a generation of youth skilled in conflict resolution that can be relied upon throughout their lives.

Bernard Taylor, Sr. is a former police investigator in Detroit, Michigan, a lawyer with almost 40 years of trial experience, and a JAMS mediator and arbitrator in Atlanta. Through its non-profit JAMS Foundation/Association for Conflict Resolution (ACR) Initiative, JAMS provides grant funding for youth conflict prevention and dispute resolution programs.

