

Testimony on House Bill 33  
Senate Health Committee

May 9, 2023

Submitted by:  
Michelle Bell

Chair Huffman, Vice Chair Johnson, Ranking Member Antonio and members of the health committee, thank you for allowing me to provide testimony in support of funding organizations in Ohio that work to prevent gun violence. My name is Michelle Bell, and I am testifying as a citizen, a volunteer with the Together We Rise Coalition in Cleveland, Ohio along with being a survivor of gun violence.

I became a gun violence survivor on February 10, 2019 when my son Andre Brown was shot and killed while sitting in a car with a friend. Andre was very compassionate, and he had a big heart often putting others first. He laughed often and was generally the person bringing laughter. The near split-second event on February 10, 2019, a senseless act of gun violence that ended my son's life and changed my life forever.

As I navigate life challenged with grief and coupled with pain of uncertainty because Andre's case remains unsolved. The pain of murder loss makes my heart heavy, and my son's absence makes my heart empty. The healing process is never-ending, and I pray daily for justice, and I pray relentlessly that no other mother/parent will have to know this pain. Unfortunately, each year more than 200 families throughout greater Cleveland are added to this painful group of losing a loved one to gun violence. I never expected my fate to be a gun violence Survivor Mom.

Deaths by guns continue at alarming rates during the first 36 days of this year, 2023, there were 21 homicides which is nearly double of the number (13) at the same time last year (source – Fox 8 News and Cleveland.com). If homicides continues at the rate of 21 every 36 days, we will lose more than 210 lives by the end of the year. If it is true that each person's circle of influence is 500 people, the impact of gun violence on our communities is devastating – 500 X 218 (Cleveland's yearly average from 2020 - 2022) is 109,000 people impacted by gun violence each year. At the nationwide rate of increase, 39% (everytown.org), that figure grows to over 151,000.

Gun violence is a time of intense difficulty, trouble, or danger which is the definition of crisis. More importantly, gun violence is an urgent situation in which the health status of an area (Cleveland, Cuyahoga County) within the territory (Ohio) is adversely affected which is the definition of public health crisis. The physical, social, emotional, and psychological health status our neighborhoods across the state of Ohio are adversely affected as a result of the trauma that comes with gun violence. Daily we navigate the public health crisis of gun violence on our communities because the impact is many times larger than a bullet.

When I hear sirens, I pause and relive February 10, 2019 because I heard sirens the night my son was murdered but did not know that they were responding to a double homicide that included my son on the next street. When I hear sirens, I wonder if another mother will become a gun violence survivor.

Local communities across Ohio are currently suffering from the tragic effects of increased gun violence. Guns are the leading cause of death among children and teens in Ohio. In an average year, 65% of gun deaths in this age group are homicides (everytown.org). Community violence intervention and prevention programs can help reduce gun violence (everytown.org). Moreover, research shows that intervention programs work, and we should pay attention to the data (everytown.org). These organizations should unequivocally be supported by the Ohio legislature by including such funding in our budget.

Prioritizing community violence intervention programs in the state budget would provide an essential source of funding and support for this life-saving work.

I ask that you please do your part to diminish gun violence by supporting funding for prevention efforts.

Sincerely,  
Michelle Bell, Survivor Mom  
Together We Rise Coalition, Co-founder,