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# The Flaws of Our City

How Gun Violence and Mental Health Affect Chicago's Youth.

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## **Behind the Injustice of Chicago**

Teenagers' mental health remains an underdiscussed and often “taboo” topic in our society, although 95% of Chicago’s youth agree that anxiety, depression, and stress are major community issues.<sup>1</sup> The overall awareness around these issues remains low, with limited resources to combat these dilemmas, which causes individuals to resort to negative ways to cope with their unstable environments. Although media exposure continues to increase on this topic, the overall effects of improving the social standards regarding various mental illnesses present have yet to manifest into a significant positive impact. As society slowly implements the idea of spreading resources to assist those who are affected, it is clear that support services within schools are essential to combating the negative impacts that arise in the community.<sup>2</sup> Within Cook County, issues of mental health continue to remain a large factor that hinders the success of our youth.

Additionally, the issue of gun violence among teenagers is also an underaddressed part of Cook County as well. Families suffer the consequences of losing their child on the regular. Gun violence has repeatedly been the leading cause of death for youth in Illinois throughout recent years,<sup>3</sup> leaving scarring effects on both the victim and the community that surrounds these tragedies. One contributing factor to gun violence is that individuals do not feel safe in their environment. Without a gun in their possession, youth may find themselves vulnerable within their own communities, leading them to believe they also need one to stay protected.<sup>4</sup> Overall, this may increase the risk of violence instead of reducing it. As fewer and fewer people

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<sup>1</sup> A Better Chicago, *A Better Chicago Announces 2025 Youth Survey Results Revealing Mental Health Concerns, Deportation Fears, and more*, A Better Chi. Sept. 23. 2025.  
<https://www.abetterchicago.org/blog/a-better-chicago-announces-2025-youth-survey-results-revealing-mental-health-concerns-deportation-fears-and-more>

<sup>2</sup> Andrea L DaViera, Amanda L Roy, *Chicago Youths’ Exposure to Community Violence: Contextualizing Spatial Dynamics of Violence and the Relationship With Psychological Functioning*, NIH. Dec. 2. 2019.  
<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8006467/>

<sup>3</sup> Everytown For Gun Safety, *‘Dangerous and Deadly Year for Children’ in Chicago A Tragic Reminder of Gun Violence’s Toll on Children*, Everytown. Nov. 24, 2020.  
<https://www.everytown.org/press/dangerous-and-deadly-year-for-children-in-chicago-a-tragic-reminder-of-gun-violence-toll-on-children/>

<sup>4</sup> Naomi Johnson, Austin Segal, Maya Simkin, Stephanie Agnew, Kareem Butler, Briana Payton, *Punishing Fear: The Devastating Impacts of The War on Gun possession in Chicago*, Chi. Appleseed. Oct. 30. 2024.  
[https://www.chicagoappleseed.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/202\\_modern-day41030\\_Gun-Possession-Facts.pdf](https://www.chicagoappleseed.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/202_modern-day41030_Gun-Possession-Facts.pdf)

acknowledge the reality of what is going on within our streets, more and more lives are being lost: whether it's the victims of violence or juveniles being punished due to not being able to express their thoughts and feelings in a socially acceptable way.

Overall, the exposure of an ongoing mental health crisis and gun violence in the youth's environment leads others to question if these major dilemmas are correlated with one another, and whether or not actions can be taken to both prevent and improve the status of youth's lives as a whole. After a thorough, deep analysis of these two systems of societal behavior, supported by both evidence of real situations and data, it is important to note the possible relationships that may arise between these two ideas. Initiatives such as increasing the number of recreational places and starting non-profits to help individuals who are affected can benefit both of these dilemmas, pushing society as a community to fight against these societal pressures being forced against innocent hearts.

To better understand the condition imposed upon the growing youth majority of Cook County, this paper will explore the ideals within the two subjects of mental health and gun violence. On behalf of adolescents in Chicago, data regarding an individual's environment, the effects of drug use, and traumatic experiences will be thoroughly analyzed in order to illustrate how mental health and gun violence are intertwined in modern-day society. Additionally, to combat these conflicts, resolutions to these complex problems will also be addressed in order to promote a higher standard of living for all.

### **The Lasting Weight of Trauma**

The first step in initiating change is addressing the core principles of an injustice. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a fundamental component in rising rates of both crime and mental illness. About 40% of girls who attend a Chicago Public School have experienced PTSD and stress regarding violence,<sup>5</sup> trauma, and related mental health issues that are present in many families. For the youth, trauma may manifest itself through self-destructive tendencies and aggressive behaviors.<sup>6</sup> Negative behaviors that the youth may have could also be associated with

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<sup>5</sup> Marianna McMurdock, *For Chicago Girls Confronting Violence, A School Solution for Reducing PTSD*, The 74 Mil. Jun. 7. 2023.

<https://www.the74million.org/article/for-chicago-girls-confronting-violence-a-school-solution-for-reducing-ptsd/>

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, PTSD in Children and Teens, VA.

[https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand/what/teens\\_ptsd.asp](https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand/what/teens_ptsd.asp)

rising rates of gun violence due to individuals expressing their trauma in unhealthy ways, pushing individuals to possibly harm others. Additionally, individuals may experience emotional numbness, leading to emotional suppression and eventually turning into a bigger problem, such as depression or anxiety.

Since a significant number of the youth in Cook County possess PTSD, coping mechanisms are used to adjust to the change following a traumatic event. There has been a push within our state legislature to encourage better resources for children in schools. For example, the state of Illinois passed a law allowing students to take up to five excused mental health days from school, encouraging individuals to have a mental break during moments of hardship. Another solution to PTSD is through the use of group counseling. When implemented in schools, there is a decrease in mental disorders in participants such as PTSD, depression, and anxiety.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, individuals who have experienced PTSD have a higher chance of turning to alcohol and other substances in order to cope with their feelings and emotions.<sup>8</sup> This is evident in those who may suppress their emotions and think there is no hope for them, which is never the case.

Emotional effects of PTSD can be long-lasting on one's mental state throughout adolescence and may persist beyond, carrying trauma into adulthood. After a traumatic event, the amygdala of the brain, or the part that controls fear and aggression, may become overreactive, causing an individual's body to enter a never-ending state of "survival".<sup>9</sup> This can detrimentally impact a youth's mental processes and lead one to fear situations and environments that resemble a previous state of trauma, or be overwhelmed with emotions that can cause them to act differently than they used to. Not only the youth, but parents may also be impacted emotionally due to children being admitted to hospitals due to a mental health crisis.<sup>10</sup> This may cause a ripple effect within neighborhoods as traumatic events affect more than just one individual at a time. This also connects with the idea of students experiencing trauma and displaying it in their daily lives, such as when attending school. Teachers in Cook County frequently share the burden

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<sup>7</sup> Id.

<sup>8</sup> Cook County Trauma & Burn. *Trauma Recovery*. Cook Cnty. Trauma & Burn. <https://www.cookcountytrauma.org/patient-family-resources/trauma-recovery>

<sup>9</sup> Id.

<sup>10</sup> Id.

of how students “bring their trauma to school”, ultimately manifesting in ways such as watching a student go emotionally offline to protect themselves from exposure to trauma.<sup>11</sup>

## **The Cycle of Addiction**

Substance abuse is also a huge factor in both mental health and gun violence, affecting individuals differently in both aspects. The youth in Cook County are exposed to substances in unhealthy ways, leading to a higher risk of addiction and a lower standard of living. In 2023, 29.3% of high school students had used marijuana, and 30.2% had used an electronic vapor device.<sup>12</sup> The high number of individuals using “gateway” drugs can influence their involvement in substances later on in life, possibly leading to abuse. Additionally, the environment and peer pressure that a youth faces can further encourage them to use drugs.<sup>13</sup> It is also important to note that an increase in drug usage may increase the possibility of accidents and violence against others.<sup>14</sup> In addition to peer pressure, individuals who repeatedly have higher risks of developing a substance abuse disorder may experience a mixture of these factors: low supervision, academic failure, poor communication skills, etc.<sup>15</sup> These factors may lead individuals to feel as though they need to lean on a substance in order to feel comfortable in their own skin.

With limited efforts to combat substance abuse, the youth in Cook County can cope by involving themselves in Medication-Assisted Treatment.<sup>16</sup> This uses other prescribed medications as well as behavior therapies in order to treat the addiction properly and regenerate the brain chemistry that was previously destroyed due to improper usage.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, recovery support programs such as The Loft at Eight Corners strive to give the youth a safe

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<sup>11</sup> Mike Shaver, *Chicago students are in crisis. Here's how we can help them heal*. Brightpoint. Nov. 1. 2023. <https://www.brightpoint.org/chicago-students-are-in-crisis-heres-how-we-can-help-them-heal/>

<sup>12</sup> Chicago Public Schools, *Substance Use among Chicago High School Students*. CPS. 2024. [https://www.cps.edu/globalassets/cps-pages/about-cps/district-data/2023-substance-use\\_high-school.pdf](https://www.cps.edu/globalassets/cps-pages/about-cps/district-data/2023-substance-use_high-school.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Jessica Reichert, Caitlyn Delong, Kaitlyn Konefal, *National and Illinois Youth Substance Use: Risk Factors, Prevalence, and Treatment*, ICJIA. Jan. 9. 2017. <https://icjia.illinois.gov/researchhub/articles/national-and-illinois-youth-substance-use-risk-factors-prevalence-and-treatment>

<sup>14</sup> Id.

<sup>15</sup> Id.

<sup>16</sup> Cook County Health. *Mental Health & Substance Abuse*. CCH. <https://cookcountyhealth.org/services/mental-health-substance-abuse/>

<sup>17</sup> Illinois Department of Public Health. Medication-Assisted Treatment FAQ. IDPH. <https://dph.illinois.gov/topics-services/opioids/treatment/mat-faq.html>

space in order to properly cope throughout substance addiction and mental health issues while setting them up for success through the use of skill-building exercises and wellness education.<sup>18</sup>

Substance abuse may also cause individuals to endure extreme emotional effects as they attempt to cope with their environments. It is evident that individuals who have indulged in substance abuse for a prolonged amount of time may have an increase in episodes of violence against others.<sup>19</sup> Ultimately, this may tie in to the idea that minor acts of violence, such as bullying or acts of intimidation, can easily escalate to be deadly, all with the presence of a gun nearby. Additionally, these individuals may become hostile when another is trying to get them help and acknowledges the presence of substance abuse in their life.<sup>20</sup> With these factors influencing a youth's emotional state and, at times, aggressive social interactions, isolating themselves from society is also present, affirming that declining mental health is present with substance abuse.

Lastly, the social influence of substance abuse is a long-lasting impact within the youths of Cook County. From 2019 to 2023, there have been records of over 140 youth drug overdose deaths in Cook County, rising consistently as the years pass.<sup>21</sup> These numbers have caused individuals in these communities to increasingly worry about how drugs are being distributed to young children and brainstorm ways to prevent teenagers from experimenting with drugs.<sup>22</sup> To add, according to the CDC, there has been an immense trend of drug usage among youth. As rates of drug usage rise, younger children have been victims of drug overdoses and death in communities.<sup>23</sup> Ultimately, many parents have had to witness their children dying around them and hold the burden of burying their babies.

### **The Environments That Shape Us**

Lastly, a youth's overall environment can also shape experiences later in life. Although the city of Chicago offers many opportunities, poverty and other environmental factors

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<sup>18</sup> Cook County Department of Public Health. *Mental Health Resources Easily Accessible Support in Suburban Cook County*. CCDPH.

[https://cookcountypublichealth.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/EASILY-ACCESSIBLE-MENTAL-HEALTH-RESOURCES\\_060326\\_ENGLISH.pdf](https://cookcountypublichealth.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/EASILY-ACCESSIBLE-MENTAL-HEALTH-RESOURCES_060326_ENGLISH.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> Medline Plus. *Substance Use Disorder*. NIH. <https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/001522.htm>

<sup>20</sup> Id.

<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth Matthews. *Chicago area sees disturbing surge in youth drug overdoses*. FOX. Sep. 13. 2023. <https://www.fox32chicago.com/news/chicago-area-disturbing-surge-youth-drug-overdoses>

<sup>22</sup> Id.

<sup>23</sup> Id.,

significantly shape the life of a youth, putting them at risk of negative outcomes. One out of four adolescents lives in poverty, with some communities in Cook County experiencing about 90% poverty.<sup>24</sup> The intermediate effects of poverty can cause individuals to struggle to afford basic necessities, leading to stress in families and a lower standard of living for these households. Additionally, another issue that is present within Cook County is exposure to violence. Two-thirds of adolescents in the county experience violence firsthand, and 25% of youth see violence weekly.<sup>25</sup> These high percentages are known to bring safety concerns to individuals who are living in these communities and have to face these hardships of impending danger head-on. Overall, the negative elements in Chicago communities are certain to have a lasting effect on a youth's mental health and leave them at higher risk of mental disorders such as PTSD that may manifest into violence later on in life.

How individuals cope with negative factors in their environment can shape their interactions later in life. One way the youth may cope with violence in their communities is to associate themselves with other people who are also struggling to cope with the violence present in their lives.<sup>26</sup> The youth may surround themselves with individuals who inspire them to do better and try new experiences, which leads to a better influence. This idea of avoiding violence by not acknowledging it is extremely present within the youth of Cook County, leaving individuals to seem detached and ultimately isolating themselves from certain parts of society. Additionally, individuals may "combat" their environment by engaging with firearms in order to stay protected in case something happens around them.<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, this may escalate into youth being pushed to defend themselves with a gun and contributing to the gun violence in their communities. Overall, the idea of violence is unbeatable in communities, as long as individuals have to pick between two choices: mentally detaching themselves from the reality of what's present in their environments, or contributing to the current negative environment.

As teens try to adjust positively while in a dangerous environment, the emotional effects still remain in these communities. 41% of children who have direct exposure to gun violence

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<sup>24</sup> A Better Chicago. A Better Chicago Releases State of Our Youth 2025 Report. Apr. 3. 2025. <https://www.abetterchicago.org/blog/a-better-chicago-releases-state-of-our-youth-2025-report>

<sup>25</sup> Id.

<sup>26</sup> William Harms. Urban youth cope with neighborhood violence in diverse ways. UChi. News. Dec. 2. 2010. <https://news.uchicago.edu/story/urban-youth-cope-neighborhood-violence-diverse-ways>

<sup>27</sup> Id.

show symptoms of deteriorating mental health;<sup>28</sup> secondhand factors show concern that these children cannot control their environment and are forced to endure the consequences of living in it day to day. Additionally, experiencing the negative reality of one's environment at an early age can lead to stress in families.<sup>29</sup> This is a risk factor for involvement in violence, as higher amounts of stress early in life are associated with more exposure to violence later in life.<sup>30</sup>

The social effects of the youth's environment can also show a lower standard of living among teenagers in Chicago. With the crucial importance of showing up to school, the percentage of absenteeism among youth reached nearly 41% in 2024.<sup>31</sup> Schooling is being affected by other factors in one's environment, hindering students from being able to attend. Additionally, the rates of proficiency (more specifically 3rd grade reading and 8th grade math) of students have remained below pre-pandemic levels,<sup>32</sup> showing a correlation between the outcomes of education and the environments that the students live in. On the other hand, Chicago has been taking this information into account and has been implementing community programs directed towards youth. These programs have made individuals feel more optimistic about their futures and look more into pursuing higher education.<sup>33</sup>

### **Healing the Damages**

In a community filled with a few flaws, there will always be hope for a better future. In terms of preventing gun violence and mental disorders in adolescents, local businesses can assist in creating more recreational places in order for teenagers to spend their free time instead of engaging in negative behaviors. In Cook County, there are plenty of recreational places present that are catered to youth that promote physical activities, opportunities to be creative, and prioritize the ability to build friendships with their peers. This reduces stress and anxiety for the youth, as well as limiting isolation and other mental illnesses that can arise without the use of these places. Additionally, recreational places will ensure that the youth are being supervised, which will limit gun usage, as well as limiting behaviors of potential violence with involvement

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<sup>28</sup> Full Circle Team, *Anxiety in Teens: Understanding and Supporting Chicago-area Youth*, Full Circle C&W. Jul. 2. 2025. <https://www.fullcirclecandw.com/post/anxiety-in-teens-understanding-and-supporting-chicago-area-youth>

<sup>29</sup> Id.

<sup>30</sup> Id.

<sup>31</sup> A Better Chicago. A Better Chicago Releases State of Our Youth 2025 Report. Apr. 3. 2025. <https://www.abetterchicago.org/blog/a-better-chicago-releases-state-of-our-youth-2025-report>

<sup>32</sup> Id.

<sup>33</sup> Id.

of gangs and drug addiction. For example, programs provided by the Noah's Ark Foundation and teen centers provided by the Chicago Park District encourage individuals to engage in artistic expression and community involvement, limiting the risk factors for unfortunate events in our city. In addition to support from local businesses, state and local governments can also be involved by passing legislation to increase funding for recreational programs in underrepresented communities. By providing grants for these centers, this can increase the quality of activities while providing more opportunities for teenagers to participate in positive behaviors rather than contributing their time to riskier behaviors. The addition of these recreational places can also strengthen the relationships that are in communities, leading the youth to look after each other and build more positive relationships with others, reducing the idea of displacing anger within teenagers' relationships.

Although we cannot take the trauma away from families who have experienced these unfortunate circumstances of deaths within our communities, nonprofit organizations can be started in order to aid families that have been unexpectedly impacted by a death. Led by community leaders, mental health professionals, volunteers, and affected families, organizations can provide grief counseling and advocate for mental health resources. By providing support needed by families in our communities, the nonprofit will positively assist with both emotional and financial burdens that families have to endure. By reducing additional stressors on top of the death of a loved one, this can prevent trauma that may contribute to future mental health struggles and potentially more cycles of violence. Additionally, with rising funeral and mental health therapy costs, prioritizing the financial needs of a non-profit organization will help families reduce stress while covering these expenses in our economy. This can be through the effort of creating fundraisers scattered throughout the city of Chicago and various pop-up events educating others about mental health and gun violence in youth. Additionally, local governments can utilize grant programs that can expand services for families impacted by gun violence. With the addition of these grants, the funds can be used for counseling and financial assistance for funeral expenses, helping families that are in need. Currently in Chicago, there is a list of local nonprofits that have taken similar steps, such as the Chicago CRED (Create Real Economic Destiny) organization, which is focused on reducing gun violence through building connections and helping individuals turn their lives around by increasing employment and education. These

solutions will positively affect individuals within the Cook County area, helping parents and guardians who have lost children due to these problems, as well as siblings and friends who are affected by grief and seeking support from these programs. This ultimately creates a better place for entire neighborhoods and communities altogether.

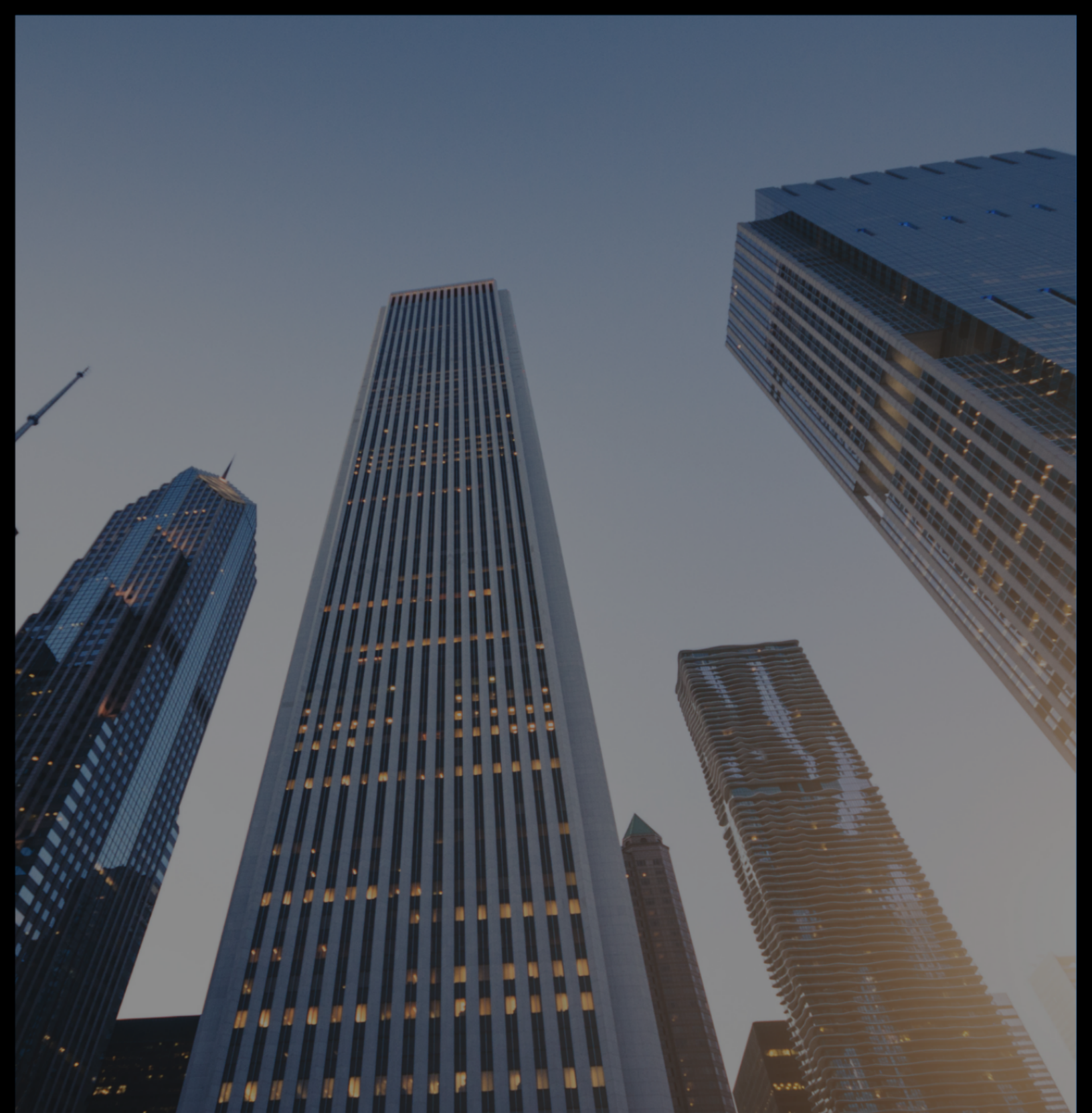
Ultimately, the establishment of these two solutions in our communities will aid in stopping the cycle of gun violence and mental disorders in the future. As discussed throughout this paper, plenty of factors such as trauma, substance abuse, and one's environment may contribute to problems faced by individuals in Chicago. As we invest in the betterment of our communities, the idea of preventing all of these issues and instead promoting various ways to support our communities, both leaders and residents can create safer spaces which can provide future generations with safety and resources needed to thrive. As teens grow and the awareness of these dilemmas becomes more and more present, communities as a whole will have a way to step in and intervene in the negative aspects of youth within our precious city. Although these issues cannot be resolved overnight, everyone involved in the community can step forward with hope to ensure a stronger standard of living for all.



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