

EARLY EDUCATION AND YOUTH GUN VIOLENCE IN NEW JERSEY
KATELIN WALSCH

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INTRODUCTION

Gun violence is a pervasive crisis in the United States, and though its effects are widespread, it disproportionately affects children and youth. Each year, 21,000 children and teens are shot, wounded, or killed,¹ making gun violence the number one leading cause of death in children ages 1-19.² And the rate of gun deaths continue to increase. Between 2019-2021 alone, gun deaths among U.S. children and teens rose 50%.³ Homicides account for 60% of these youth deaths, followed by suicide, at 32%, and accidents at 5%.⁴

¹ (n.d.). *Child & Teen Gun Safety*. EveryTown. <https://www.everytown.org/issues/child-teen-safety/>

² (n.d.). *Gun Violence*. Children's Defense Fund. <https://www.childrensdefense.org/tools-and-resources/the-state-of-america-children/soac-gun-violence/>

³ (2023, April 6). *Gun deaths among U.S. children and teens rose 50% in two years*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/04/06/gun-deaths-among-us-kids-rose-50-percent-in-two-years/>

⁴ See footnote 3

Though the statistics are grim, there is hope for prevention of youth gun violence through education. Studies have shown that education can mitigate the prevalence of violence amongst children and teens.⁵ Higher educational attainment in elementary and middle school is associated with lower rates of teen crime and violence.⁶ Conversely, lower school performance in teens is known to increase the risk of teen violence, including homicide,⁷ whereas students with higher grades are less likely to part in violence on and off school grounds.⁸

The foundation for higher academic achievement is largely determined by children's early education,⁹ which is widely inaccessible in the United States. Education is not guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution, and many state constitutions don't mention the right to education at all.¹⁰ Currently, there are only four states in the U.S. that automatically enroll 4-year-olds in state funded preschool,¹¹ and only 40.2% of children nationwide are enrolled in preschool or an early childhood education program.¹² This percentage continues to drop each year, and exponentially decreased after the pandemic, when many early childhood education centers closed, never to reopen again.¹³ Even the United States Department of Health and Human Services' Head Start program, which federally funds early childhood development programs throughout the U.S., saw a 30% decline in enrollment numbers over the last 3 years.¹⁴

However, there are international measures set in place to ensure all children receive adequate education. In 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) adopted Article 26, which cemented education as a fundamental human right. The article declares that, "Education shall be free, at

⁵ Bray, M. J. C., Boulos, M. E., Shi, G., MacKrell, K., & Nestadt, P. S. (2020). Educational achievement and youth homicide mortality: a City-wide, neighborhood-based analysis. *Injury epidemiology*, 7(1), 20. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40621-020-00246-1>

⁶ See footnote 5

⁷ Loeber, R., Pardini, D., Homish, D. L., Wei, E. H., Crawford, A. M., Farrington, D. P., Stouthamer-Loeber, M., Creemers, J., Koehler, S. A., & Rosenfeld, R. (2005). The prediction of violence and homicide in young men. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical psychology*, 73(6), 1074–1088. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-006X.73.6.1074>

⁸ (n.d.). Making the Connection: Youth Violence and Academic Grades. Center for Disease Control. https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/health_and_academics/pdf/DASHfactsheetViolence.pdf

⁹ Kern, M. L., & Friedman, H. S. (2008). Early educational milestones as predictors of lifelong academic achievement, midlife adjustment, and longevity. *Journal of applied developmental psychology*, 30(4), 419–430. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2008.12.025>

¹⁰ Dallman, S., & Nath, A. (2020). Education Clauses in State Constitutions Across the United States.

¹¹ Hazen, T. (2024, February 1). *Is Preschool & Pre-K Free?*. Trusted Care. <https://trustedcare.com/costs/how-to-find-a-free-preschool>

¹² (2023, August 30). Public and Private Preschool Enrollment From 2019 to 2021 at Its Lowest Since 2005. United States Census Bureau. <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2023/08/preschool-enrollment.html>

¹³ See footnote 11

¹⁴ (2023, October 24). *Low Preschool Enrollment Rates Threaten to Worsen Student Achievement*. HE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION. <https://www.aecf.org/blog/low-preschool-enrollment-rates-threaten-to-worsen-student-achievement>

least in the elementary and fundamental stages,”¹⁵ and that, “elementary education shall be compulsory.”¹⁶ Though this right, which is afforded to all people, has been reaffirmed through numerous international and regional treaties, conventions, and laws over the last 76 years, there are still countless nations, including the United States, that deprive children of the right to early childhood education.

As a state party, the United States has an obligation to fulfill this right to education. However, it neglects to do so by denying early education as an inalienable right and rendering early education largely inaccessible. Because a lack of quality education has been proven to be a predictor of violence in adolescence,¹⁷ the United States leaves children vulnerable to violence later in life by depriving children of their rights under international law.

Though there had been extensive studies of elementary schooling as a deterrent of general violence and crime,¹⁸ there has been little study on the impacts of adverse early childhood education and experiences on gun violence in particular. The aim of this paper is to explore the relationship between early childhood education (which for the purposes of this paper will be used interchangeably with preschool education) and youth gun violence. The paper will examine the rate of gun violence amongst youth ages 15-19 in six New Jersey counties, relative to the counties’ capacity for and accessibility to early childhood education. It will then assess whether the United States is respecting its duty to comply with international rights laws that require state parties to provide education to all children, and subsequently protect them from the risks and perils of gun violence.

THE ROLE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN PREVENTING VIOLENCE

Brain development in the first five years of a child’s life is critical for a child to reach academic success, and early childhood education fosters this growth.¹⁹ The development of these initial cognitive abilities in early childhood leads to greater academic readiness for kindergarten, and subsequently greater

¹⁵ (n.d.). *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. The United Nations. <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

¹⁶ See footnote 1

¹⁷ Bast, S., & DeSimone, V. (2019). Prevention Suggestions. In *Youth Violence Prevention in the United States: Examining International Terrorists, Domestic Terrorists, School Shooters, and Gang Members* (pp. 30–35). Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep22584.11>

¹⁸ Beardslee, J., Docherty, M., Mulvey, E., Schubert, C., & Pardini, D. (2018). Childhood risk factors associated with adolescent gun carrying among Black and White males: An examination of self-protection, social influence, and antisocial propensity explanations. *Law and human behavior*, 42(2), 110–118. <https://doi.org/10.1037/lhb0000270>

¹⁹ Thematic Group on Early Childhood Development, Education, and Transition to Work. (2014). *Young Children as a Basis for Sustainable Development*. Sustainable Development Solutions Network. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep16105>

academic achievement, general IQ, and verbal abilities throughout middle and high school.²⁰ Children who receive a quality early childhood education are more likely to complete primary and secondary education, and to obtain higher financial status in adulthood.²¹ All of these factors are crucial in preventing adolescent violence and crime.²²

Honing these cognitive skills through early childhood education is also imperative to developing social and emotional behaviors that deter violence. Previous research suggests that the absence of early development of social cognitive skills may be related to aggressive and antisocial behaviors in youth.²³ These behaviors include physical aggression, hyperactivity, immature and irrelevant private speech, impulsivity, and failure to use verbal mediation in situations in which it would be appropriate.²⁴ Grade school children that exhibit such behaviors are those who did not learn to regulate emotional reactions, which most children learn in the first or second year of life.²⁵ Early conduct issues can be spotted in children even before they begin schooling, are a significant predictor of engagement in violence in adolescence.²⁶ As aggressive and antisocial behaviors continue throughout childhood, children develop cognitions that reaffirm and normalize their conduct, and subsequently support decisions to engage in violence in adolescence.²⁷ Research shows that children with these early conduct issues before the age of ten are more likely to partake in gun violence,²⁸ including homicide, as teens.²⁹

It is clear that early childhood education is imperative to deterring children from violence, however, access to early childhood education is not ubiquitous. Children from low-income communities have less

²⁰ Yoshikawa, H. (1995). *Long-Term Effects of Early Childhood Programs on Social Outcomes and Delinquency*. *The Future of Children*, 5(3), 51–75. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1602367>

²¹ See Footnote 8

²² See footnote 8

²³ Chandler, M. J. *Egocentrism and antisocial behavior: the assessment and training of social spective-taking skills*. *Developmental Psychology*, 1973, 9, 326-33

²⁴ Camp B. W. (1977). *Verbal mediation in young aggressive boys*. *Journal of abnormal psychology*, 86(2), 145–153. <https://doi.org/10.1037//0021-843x.86.2.145>

²⁵ Nagin, D., & Tremblay, R. E. (1999). *Trajectories of Boys' Physical Aggression, Opposition, and Hyperactivity on the Path to Physically Violent and Nonviolent Juvenile Delinquency*. *Child Development*, 70(5), 1181–1196. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1132057>

²⁶ Garcia, E. (2015). *Inequalities at the starting gate: Cognitive and noncognitive skills gaps between 2010-2011 kindergarten classmates*. Economic Policy Institute. <https://files.epi.org/pdf/85032c.pdf>

²⁷ Guerra, N.G., Rowell Huesmann, L. and Spindler, A. (2003), *Community Violence Exposure, Social Cognition, and Aggression Among Urban Elementary School Children*. *Child Development*, 74: 1561-1576. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8624.00623>

²⁸ Beardslee, J., Docherty, M., Mulvey, E., Schubert, C., & Pardini, D. (2018). *Childhood risk factors associated with adolescent gun carrying among Black and White males: An examination of self-protection, social influence, and antisocial propensity explanations*. *Law and human behavior*, 42(2), 110–118. <https://doi.org/10.1037/lhb0000270>

²⁹ Loeber, R., Pardini, D., Homish, D. L., Wei, E. H., Crawford, A. M., Farrington, D. P., Stouthamer-Loeber, M., Creemers, J., Koehler, S. A., & Rosenfeld, R. (2005). *The prediction of violence and homicide in young men*. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical psychology*, 73(6), 1074–1088. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-006X.73.6.1074>

access to quality early childhood education, and are therefore less likely to enter kindergarten with the properly developed cognitive and noncognitive skills necessary for academic success.³⁰ Since kindergarten readiness is a key predictor of violence later in life, low-income children are more susceptible to delinquency and violence than their affluent peers.³¹

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION & GUN VIOLENCE IN NEW JERSEY

New Jersey has been recognized for having one of the most robust early education programs in the nation. In 2021, the American Health Records ranked New Jersey number 3 in the nation in early education enrollment, with 53.9% of 3–4-year-olds being enrolled in nursery school, preschool, or kindergarten.³² This is a 13.7-point difference from the national average of 40.2%.³³ This expansive program is largely in response to the 1981 New Jersey Supreme Court ruling in *Abbot v. Burke*, which mandated that the state provide “thorough and efficient”³⁴ education to low-income districts, consistent with New Jersey’s state constitution. This landmark case prompted the founding of numerous state-funded initiatives to increase the funding and quality of schools in lower-income districts.

Abbot v. Burke was preceded by numerous court orders and legislative initiatives that continued to develop New Jersey’s early childhood education programming.³⁵ In 2011, New Jersey founded its Early Learning Commission (ELC), an initiative chaired by representatives from the education, children and families, and health and human services state departments. The ELC’s mission is to study state data on early education programs in order to recommend improvements for quality and accessibility of early childhood programming in throughout the state. New Jersey’s Early Childhood Integrated Data System (ECIDS) utilizes the NJ Enterprise Analysis System for Early Learning (NJ-EASEL) to collect data on early education to discover and employ initiative that enhance early childhood education for children 0 to 8 years old.

Since the implementation of these ambitious initiatives, New Jersey has further expanded its early education funding, as well as its social and emotional learning programs to fund over 260 school districts.³⁶

³⁰ See footnote 43

³¹ (Global Study on Homicide, 2019)

³² (n.d.). *Early Childhood Education in New Jersey*. America Health Rankings. https://www.americahealthrankings.org/explore/measures/Early_Education/NJ

³³ See footnote 58

³⁴ (n.d.). *The History of Abbott v. Burke*. Education Law Center. <https://edlawcenter.org/litigation/abbott-history/>

³⁵ (2021, January 1). *Early Childhood Education in New Jersey*. National Institute for Early Education Research. <https://nieer.org/research-library/early-childhood-education-new-jersey>

³⁶ (n.d.). *New Jersey*. National Institute for Early Education Research. <https://nieer.org/yearbook/2023/state-profiles/new-jersey>

In the 2022-2023 school year, New Jersey enrolled 58,387 children in preschool, an increase of 5,094 from the prior year.³⁷ Furthermore, numerous independent ranking organizations report New Jersey amongst the top in the nation when it comes to quality of education, and it is praised for its thorough employment of social and emotional learning programs.

In addition to the its exceptional early education offerings, New Jersey also ranks as one of the lowest states in the nation in regards to gun death rates.³⁸ There are approximately 5.2 gun-related deaths per 100,000 residents in New Jersey each year, compared to the National Average of 35.³⁹ This rate continues to decrease each year. In 2023 alone, gun death rates went down by 13%, a historically low rate.⁴⁰ This is likely due, at least in part, to the state's comprehensive gun laws and numerous gun violence protection programs that have been come into effect over the last 20 years. Despite such progressive stance, firearm related deaths are the 4th leading cause of death among children and teens in New Jersey. Though firearms are the first leading cause of youth deaths nationwide,⁴¹ still approximately 36 children and teens in New Jersey die by guns each year.⁴² 15% of these gun deaths in New Jersey are deaths by suicide.⁴³

METHOD

A. Overview and Data Collection

This paper utilizes the data put forth in *Understanding the Early Child Care Landscape* by Rutgers University Edward J. Bloustien School of Public Policy and the New Jersey Community Capital. The report calculated the capacity of early childhood education centers and the potential need of families with children under the age of 6 to determine maximum potential service rates (MPS) of each county in New Jersey. This paper uses the report to identify the six New Jersey counties whose early childhood education programs were functioning at the lowest and highest MPS rates (Salem, Camden, Sussex, Morris, Somerset, and Hudson), in order to assess whether early childhood education impacts the prevalence of youth gun violence.

³⁷ (n.d.). *Early Childhood Education in United States*. America's Health Rankings.

<https://www.americashealthrankings.org/explore/measures/EarlyEducation>

³⁸ (n.d.). *Gun Laws in New Jersey*. Everytown. <https://everytownresearch.org/rankings/state/new-jersey/>

³⁹ (2023, March 9). *NJ Ranks Fourth Nationally for Strength in Gun Laws*. NJ Spotlight News.

<https://www.njspotlightnews.org/2023/03/new-jersey-ranks-fourth-nationally-for-gun-laws/>

⁴⁰ (2024, January 4). *New Jersey records fewest shootings in 2023 since tracking began nearly 15 years ago*.

Associated Press. <https://apnews.com/article/shootings-new-jersey-record-low-36ca0533d32d4867f8ba898365ccb21a> .

⁴¹ Ibrahim, N. (2023, April 3). *Are Guns the Leading Cause of Death for Children in the US?*. Snopes.

<https://www.congress.gov/118/meeting/house/115787/documents/HMKP-118-JU00-20230419-SD018.pdf>

⁴² See Footnote 40

⁴³ h (n.d.). *The Analytics Behind Gun Violence: New Jersey*. Anti-Violence Coalition.

<https://antiviolencecoalition.org/statistics/>

B. Analysis

The paper then analyzes the results from New Jersey Student Learning Assessments to assess the effectiveness of early childhood education in preparing students for kindergarten through 4th grade schooling. It also considers factors such as independent rankings, student teacher ratio, and enrollment numbers to assess the capacity, accessibility, and quality of early childhood education programs. The paper then compares the capacity, accessibility, and quality of early childhood education in each county relative to its gun violence and death rates, which were collected from government funded New Jersey state databases.

C. Limitations

There were several limitations of this paper that may impact the ultimate conclusion. Firstly, though there is plentiful data on enrollment and capacity of pre-school and early childhood education programming in New Jersey, there is little data on preschool curriculum, the kindergarten readiness, and the quality of the early education programs offered. New Jersey does provide guidance and standards for early childhood centers to follow, however, how individual schools and counties perform on these standards and guidelines is not made public. This is in part due to the New Jersey standardized testing system, which evaluates student performance for K-4th grade education through standardized tests beginning at the end of the 4th grade. The 4th grade standardized tests are meant to be all encompassing for those years, and was therefore used in this paper to determine kindergarten readiness and the quality of available early childhood education programs.

Secondly, there are very little statistics on youth gun violence in high MPS counties. This could be due to the lack of gun violence in general in these counties. Without this data, the paper lacks the ability to differentiate between gun violence in the general population versus gun violence amongst youth ages 15-19 in high MPS counties.

Furthermore, time limitations prevented the study of all counties in New Jersey, and therefore the sample size is limited to only some of the lowest and highest capacity school districts. These counties studied include Salem, Camden, Sussex, Morris, Somerset, and Hudson counties. Further studies should aim to assess the remaining low and high-capacity school districts, as well as the median school districts.

Time limitations also prevented the study of laws and county programming that targets gun violence. Though New Jersey has uniform gun laws throughout the state, many counties have rolled out their own anti-gun violence initiatives, that differ by county lines. Further studies should factor in these

anti-gun violence programs into their studies to evaluate whether these programs are a prominent contributor to gun violence (or lack thereof).

FINDINGS: COUNTY CAPACITY & GUN VIOLENCE RATES

A. Low MPS Counties

In a study aimed at evaluating the early childhood education system in New Jersey, Rutgers University Edward J. Bloustien School of Public Policy and the New Jersey Community Capital calculated the potential need of families with children under the age of 6 versus the capacity of early childhood education centers to determine maximum potential service rates (MPS) of each county in New Jersey. Of the 20 counties studied, Ocean, Salem, Atlantic, Cape May, Camden, and Sussex were operating at the lowest capacity. In other words, the need for early childhood education outweighed the supply of programs offered.

1. Salem County

Of the low MPS counties, Salem County scored the lowest and ranked number 19 out of 20 in the Advocates of New Jersey Children's independent ranking of preschool districts.⁴⁴ The county has 2,588 children under the age of 6 with all family in the workforce, and the capacity to serve 1,255 children in early childhood education and preschool programs, giving it an MPS score of 0.4849.⁴⁵ Salem County has only 17 early care centers, and a poverty rate of 20% amongst children under the age of 5.⁴⁶ In the 2022-2023 school year, 153 students were enrolled in full or half day. In regards to later academic success in childhood, only 21% of elementary school students in Salem tested at or above the proficient level for reading, and 2% tested at or above that level for math.⁴⁷

Salem County also had the second highest rate of gun violence in the state of New Jersey, with a death rate of 8.7 per 100,000 people per year.⁴⁸ New Jersey State Health Assessment reports that Salem County has more firearm related deaths than the state average, with an average of 12.9 deaths per year,

⁴⁴ (n.d.). New Jersey Needs Assessment Preschool Development Grant Birth through 5. New Jersey Department of Children and Families in Collaboration with Johns Hopkins University.

⁴⁵ (2021). *Understanding Early Childhood Landscape in New Jersey*. New Jersey Community Capital; Rutgers University.

⁴⁶ (2020). Salem County Needs Assessment. New Jersey Department of Children and Families. <http://chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.nj.gov/dcf/about/divisions/opma/docs/Salem%20County%20Needs%20Assessment%20Report%202020.pdf>

⁴⁷ (n.d.). Salem City School District. US.. News and World Report. <https://www.usnews.com/education/k12/new-jersey/districts/salem-city-school-district-106039>

⁴⁸ See footnote 19

compared to the state average of 5.⁴⁹ Between 2019-2024, the number of shootings in Salem has doubled, and violent crime has risen by 42%.⁵⁰ Most of the victims are young men between the ages of 18 and 34, and though Latinos make up only 30% of the Salem population, they make up about half of all gun violence victims.⁵¹

2. Camden County

Similarly, Camden County also scores low on the MPS scale, and was ranked 17 out of 20 in the Advocates of New Jersey Children's independent ranking of preschool districts.⁵² The county has 26,436 children under the age of 6 with all family in the workforce, and the capacity to serve 15,841, granting it an MPS rate of 0.5992.⁵³ In 2024, Camden County had 163 preschools, with a total of 1,831 students enrolled in full-day programs.⁵⁴ In a survey conducted by Camden County, 53% of respondents reported that the "Strongly Disagree" or "Disagree" with that child care facilities in Camden County are of good quality and staff provide good customer service.⁵⁵

Camden County's students struggle to meet state set academic standards; by the 5th grade, only 2% of students were scoring above state average on standardized tests.⁵⁶ This is particularly pronounced amongst low-income students. 15.7% of children under the age of five in Camden live below the poverty line, and 52% of these low-income students score below the state average on New Jersey state reading and math assessments.⁵⁷

Notably, Camden also has one of the highest rates of gun violence in New Jersey. Sometimes referred to as the "Murder Capital,"⁵⁸ Camden has an average of 8.2 deaths per year, in comparison to the state average of 5.⁵⁹ The County has the third highest violent crime rate in the state, the second highest

⁴⁹ See footnote 51

⁵⁰ Adams, J., & Cook, K. (2024, March 6). *'Troubling trends': City of Salem sees uptick in violent crime, including youth gun violence*. KGW8. <https://www.kgw.com/article/news/crime/gun-violence/salem-violent-crime-youth-gun-violence/283-8559e5f8-228c-49b2-9115-4ee19d89fc8e>

⁵¹ See footnote 57

⁵² See footnote 49

⁵³ See footnote 50

⁵⁴ See footnote 50

⁵⁵ See footnote 62

⁵⁶ (2022). *Camden County Quick Facts: Children, Families, & Child Care*. Camden County. <http://chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.ccanj.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Children-in-Camden-County-Fact-Sheet-December-6-2022.pdf>

⁵⁷ See footnote 64

⁵⁸ Malinconico, J. (2021, March 2). *Shootings fell in Camden in 2020, but they rose in Paterson and Trenton. Here's why..* NorthJersey.com. <https://www.northjersey.com/story/news/paterson-press/2021/03/02/nj-shootings-2020-camden-decrease-paterson-trenton-increase-why/6873120002/>

⁵⁹ See footnote 19

domestic violence rate, and a murder rate of 24.6.⁶⁰ According to the Camden County Needs Assessment report, aggravated assault is the most common crime, and gun violence is particularly prevalent.⁶¹ The Camden County Needs Assessment report also notes that Camden County has the second highest murder rate in the state.⁶²

Gun violence is particularly prevalent amongst Camden's youth. The county's juvenile arrest rate is the second-highest in the state at 23 per 1,000 people.⁶³ In 2022, the Camden County Police recovered 314 illegal guns, most of which were seized from teenagers.⁶⁴ Interestingly, these seizures coincided with a period of truancy, when approximately 700 students stopped attending school.⁶⁵ Furthermore, since 2020 the gun suicides among children ages 17 and under reached the highest rate in 20 years,⁶⁶ and about half of all guns possessed in New Jersey belong to youth from below age 17 to age 30.⁶⁷

3. Sussex

Sussex county has a low MPS rate of 0.5419, however, in contrast to Salem and Camden, a lower poverty rate relative to the rest of the state, at just 7.90%.⁶⁸ The county has a capacity to provide early childhood education to 2,736, yet has 5,049 children with all parents in the workforce, meaning it can only serve about half of the children in need.⁶⁹ There are 64 licensed child care providers in Sussex County, and only two Head Start programs.⁷⁰ The median monthly cost of child care for an infant is \$956, the median monthly cost of child care for a toddler is \$910 and the median monthly cost for pre-k is \$800.⁷¹

⁶⁰ See footnote 62

⁶¹ Semenza, D.C., Stansfield, R., Silver, I.A. *et al.* Reciprocal Neighborhood Dynamics in Gun Violence Exposure, Community Health, and Concentrated Disadvantage in One Hundred US Cities. *J Urban Health* **100**, 1128–1139 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11524-023-00796-x>

⁶² See footnote 69

⁶³ See footnote 62

⁶⁴ Long, C., & Chang, D. (2023, July 25). *Majority of illegal guns in Camden, NJ, come from out of state, police say*. 10 Philadelphia. <https://www.nbcphiladelphia.com/news/local/majority-of-illegal-guns-in-camden-nj-come-from-out-of-state-police-say/3611692/>

⁶⁵ See footnote 72

⁶⁶ (n.d.). *Camden County & Be SMART For Secure Gun Storage*. Camden County. https://www.camdencounty.com/service/awareness-causes/gun_safety/

⁶⁷ (n.d.). *Firearms Trace Data: New Jersey*. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives. https://www.camdencounty.com/service/awareness-causes/gun_safety/

⁶⁸ See footnote 50

⁶⁹ See footnote 50

⁷⁰ (2020). *Sussex County Needs Assessment*. Sussex County. <http://extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.nj.gov/dcf/about/divisions/asi/docs/Sussex%20County%20Needs%20Assessment%20Report%202020.pdf>

⁷¹ See footnote 78

The Sussex County Needs Assessment reports that 53% of survey participants agreed that there are not enough early childhood education services available to those who need them.⁷² The same survey also reports that, “Seventy-six percent of respondents cited transportation as being the most significant barrier in obtaining child care services,” and, “66% noted the high cost of care, 44% noted long wait lists and 46% noted a lack of awareness of service providers as barriers to receiving services.”⁷³ However, despite the low accessibility to early childhood education in Sussex County, approximately 82% of students pass New Jersey standardized tests in the fourth grade.⁷⁴

Sussex Counties average gun deaths per year is consistent with the state average, with about 5.1 each year.⁷⁵ Its violent crime rate is about .6 per year, lower than the state average, and 65% lower than the national average.⁷⁶ It has an average of about 1 murder per year.⁷⁷ It also has a lower juvenile crime rate than the rest of the state, with an average of 2 juvenile arrests per year.⁷⁸ Unfortunately, this is the extent of the data found on violence and crime in Sussex County.

B. High MPS Counties

The three New Jersey counties with the highest MPS rates are Hudson, Somerset, and Morris.

1. Somerset County

Somerset County has the highest MPS, and one of the lowest rates of poverty in the state, and ranks number 4 in the Advocates of New Jersey Children’s independent ranking of preschool districts.⁷⁹ The County has 13,495 children under the age of six with all family in the workforce, and the capacity to serve 14,636.⁸⁰ This gives the county an MPS rate of 1.0845. In other words, Somerset County has more than enough preschools to provide education to the number of children in need. Only 2.7% of children in

⁷² See footnote 100

⁷³ See footnote 78

⁷⁴ (2015). *New Jersey Kids Count 2015 Sussex County Profile*. Advocates for Children of New Jersey. http://chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://acnj.org/downloads/2015_04_20_KidsCount_SussexCountyProfile.pdf

⁷⁵ See footnote 19

⁷⁶ See footnote 78

⁷⁷ Sullivan, S. (n.d.). *Where does crime happen in N.J.? A county-by-county look*. True New Jersey. https://www.nj.com/news/2017/05/heres_where_crime_happens_in_new_jersey.html

⁷⁸ (2015). *Juvenile Demographics and Statistics*. NJ Office of the Attorney General Juvenile Justice Commission. <http://chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.nj.gov/oag/jjc/stats/12-04-15-Juvenile-Demographics-and-Stats.pdf>

⁷⁹ See footnote 49

⁸⁰ See footnote 50

Somerset live in poverty.⁸¹ In 2022, 1,000 children enrolled in public full-day preschool, and nearly 13,000 children enrolled in a Head Start program.⁸² 83% of children in Somerset County passed New Jersey standardized testing, above state average, and the county has the highest proportion of residents with a bachelor's degree in the state.⁸³ However, Somerset ranks as one of the most expensive early childhood education counties, whereas Salem County, for example, ranks last⁸⁴. Parents in Somerset County pay on average 11.6% of their income on early childhood education and care.⁸⁵

Somerset also has an extremely low rate of gun violence, with about 2 firearm related deaths per 100,000 citizens per year.⁸⁶ According to the Somerset Needs Assessment Report, approximately 75% of Somerset County survey respondents agreed or completely agreed that violence is not prevalent in their community.⁸⁷ In 2016, the number of violent crimes in Somerset County was recorded at 226 which was less than New Jersey's statewide average of 21,914 for that year.⁸⁸ In that same year, there were only 6 juvenile arrests, which is lower than the state average of 10.⁸⁹ It scores better than the statewide average on firearm deaths, with only 2.7 each year, per 100,000 residents, as compared to the state average of 5 per year.⁹⁰

2. Morris County

Morris County also has a high MPS and lower rates of poverty. There are 20,880 children under the age of six with all family in the work force, and the capacity to serve 17,285.⁹¹ This gives Morris County a MPS rate of 0.8278, meaning they can serve most of the students in need of preschool education.⁹² Morris County has 193 preschool or early childhood education systems, and only 5.1% of children under the age

⁸¹ See footnote 50

⁸² (2022). *Somerset County Quick Facts: Children, Families, & Child Care*. Community Childcare Solutions. <http://chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.ccanj.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Children-in-Somerset-County-Fact-Sheet-December-6-2022.pdf>

⁸³ (2020). *Highlights from the Census 2000 Demographic Profiles for New Jersey by County DP2 – Profile of Selected Social Characteristics*. Official Site of the State of New Jersey.

⁸⁴ Tarrazi, A. (2023, January 26). *Child Care Costs Eat Up More Of Somerset County Parents' Income*. Patch. <https://patch.com/new-jersey/bridgewater/child-care-costs-eat-more-somerset-county-parents-income>

⁸⁵ See footnote 91

⁸⁶ See footnote 19

⁸⁷ (2020). *Somerset County Needs Assessment*. New Jersey Department of Children and Families. <http://chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.nj.gov/dcf/about/divisions/asi/docs/SomersetCountyHSACNeedsAssessmentReport2020.pdf>

⁸⁸ See footnote 117

⁸⁹ See footnote 94

⁹⁰ (n.d.). *Somerset County Community Health Profile*. Official Site of the State of New Jersey. <https://www-doh.state.nj.us/doh-shad/community/indicators/STIPDA/GeoCnty/18.html>

⁹¹ See footnote 50

⁹² See footnote 50

of six live below the poverty line.⁹³ In 2024, 73% of students met or exceeded the state average for New Jersey standardized testing scores.⁹⁴

Morris County also has low rates of youth violence, and gun violence in general. It has the lowest rate of gun deaths per year, at a rate of 2.01.⁹⁵ In 2024, there were zero incidences of weapons or violence in the Morris School District.⁹⁶ The overall violent crime rate in Morris County is approximately 7.2, compared to the national average of 22.7.⁹⁷ The county also has a low murder of just 0.8.⁹⁸ Unfortunately, this is the extent of gun violence statistics available on Morris County.

3. Hudson County

By looking at the capacity and poverty levels, Hudson County was found to be an outlier. Though it has one of the highest MPS in the state, it also has a higher poverty rate and lower median family income, relative to the state levels.⁹⁹ Hudson County offers the most early childhood education programs in the state of New Jersey, with 374 early care centers.¹⁰⁰ In 2022, there were 8,305 students were enrolled in preschool, and 12,429 students were enrolled in a Head Start program. Approximately 42% of children live below the poverty line.¹⁰¹ Despite high poverty levels, the county scores better than average on state standardized test. 67% of children performed above average on standardized testing in 2022.¹⁰² According to the Hudson County Needs Assessment report, The majority of survey Hudson County survey participants responded that childcare facilities in the County provide trained staff that are knowledgeable and provide good customer service, and most reported that the quality of schools was above average.¹⁰³

⁹³ See footnote 50

⁹⁴ (n.d.). *New Jersey Performance Report*. Official Site of the State of New Jersey. <https://rc.doe.state.nj.us/2022-2023/district/detail/27/3240/climate?lang=EN>

⁹⁵ See footnote 19

⁹⁶ (n.d.). *New Jersey Performance Report*. Official Site of the State of New Jersey. <https://rc.doe.state.nj.us/2022-2023/district/detail/27/3240/climate?lang=EN>

⁹⁷ (n.d.). *Morris County, NJ Crime*. Best Places. https://www.bestplaces.net/crime/county/new_jersey/morris

⁹⁸ (n.d.). *Uniform Crime Reports*. New Jersey State Police. <https://www.nj.gov/lps/njsp/ucr/uniform-crime-reports.shtml>

⁹⁹ See footnote 50

¹⁰⁰ See footnote 50

¹⁰¹ (2022). *Hudson County Quick Facts: Children, Families, & Child Care*. Urban League of Hudson County. <http://chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.ccanj.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Children-in-Hudson-County-Fact-Sheet-December-6-2022.pdf>

¹⁰² (n.d.). *New Jersey Performance Report*. Official Site of the State of New Jersey. <https://rc.doe.state.nj.us/2022-2023/district/detail/27/3240/climate?lang=EN>

¹⁰³ (2020). *Hudson County Needs Assessment*. New Jersey Department of Children and Families. <http://chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.nj.gov/dcf/about/divisions/asi/docs/Hudson%20County%20Needs%20Assessment%20Report%202020.pdf>

Hudson County has the fourth lowest gun death rate, at 3.4 gun related deaths per 100,000 people per year.¹⁰⁴ According to the New Jersey State Health Assessment, Hudson County scores better on yearly firearm deaths than the state average, with around 3.4 deaths per year, consistent with other studies.¹⁰⁵ And in recent years, shootings have decreased from 52 per year, to 47 per year, and homicides are down from 12 to 10 per year.¹⁰⁶ In addition, juvenile arrests for violent crimes has decreased by 18.3% in recent years, and weapon incidents have decreased by 7.5%.¹⁰⁷ However, there are significant racial disparities amongst juvenile arrest; Black and Latinx/Hispanic youth are arrested at a rate of 10% of youth arrested, whereas the white youth arrest rate is only 1.3%.¹⁰⁸

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

The findings of this study suggest that the accessibility and capacity levels of preschools and early childhood education programming may correlate with rates of gun violence. Counties with the lowest capacity early childhood education programs tended to experience higher levels of youth gun violence, and gun violence in general. Counties with higher MPS rates also perform better on standardized testing than counties with lower MPS rates, suggesting that students who attended preschool or an early childhood education program were more prepared for kindergarten and elementary school than their peers who did not. With this said, it is likely that early childhood education does indeed impact the prevalence of gun violence.

Although there does appear to be a correlation between the accessibility, capacity, and quality of childhood education and gun violence, the prevalence of gun violence could also be attributed to other socioeconomic factors. Counties with low MPS rates tended to have higher poverty rates, and higher than average gun violence rates. Counties with high MPS rates saw the opposite, with lower poverty rates and lower than average gun violence rates. Two caveats of this finding were Sussex County and Hudson County. Although Sussex County had lower poverty rates, it also had a lower MPS rate, and an average amount of gun violence relative to the rest of the state of New Jersey. On the other hand, Hudson County has higher poverty levels, but a higher MPS rate and lower rates of gun violence. These findings suggest that there may be a link between early childhood education offerings and gun violence, separate from levels of poverty.

¹⁰⁴ See footnote 19

¹⁰⁵ (n.d.). *Hudson County Community Health Profile*. New Jersey State Health Assessment Data. <https://www-doh.state.nj.us/doh-shad/community/indicators/STIPDA/GeoCnty/9.html>

¹⁰⁶ See footnote 93

¹⁰⁷ See footnote 133

¹⁰⁸ See footnote 112

Given these research findings, this paper argues that expanding access to early childhood education can be a mechanism for preventing children from gun violence, and ultimately respecting the rights of the child. The lack of accessible early childhood education denies children their human right to education, and prevents them from the foundational brain development needed to develop to their full potential, live a healthy life, and protect them from the health risks of gun violence, all of which are guaranteed under international law. By increasing access to early childhood education, the United States can ensure all children equal enjoyment of their paramount human rights and prevent them from experiencing the reprehensible effects of gun violence.

In analyzing New Jersey's early childhood education system, it has been made clear the inconsistencies in early childhood education offerings. These disparities in New Jersey, and perhaps the United States writ large, directly contradicts the United States' commitment to Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which declares that "Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory."¹⁰⁹ By not providing free education in the "fundamental stages,"¹¹⁰ the United States deprives its children of the rights granted under Article 26.

As previously stated, early childhood education is fundamental to the development of the cognitive and noncognitive skills needed to obtain greater academic achievement, general IQ, and verbal abilities.¹¹¹ These factors have been proven to prevent children from violence in their adolescence, and lead them to more success in their adult lives.¹¹² The aforementioned disparities in early childhood education therefore deprives children from low capacity areas of the opportunity to "development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential,"¹¹³ which is guaranteed under Article 29 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Moreover, in failing to provide all children the adequate early childhood education needed for healthy brain development, the United States further violates Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of

¹⁰⁹ (n.d.). *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. United Nations. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>

¹¹⁰ (n.d.). *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. United Nations. <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

¹¹¹ Yoshikawa, H. (1995). Long-Term Effects of Early Childhood Programs on Social Outcomes and Delinquency. *The Future of Children*, 5(3), 51–75. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1602367>

¹¹² See footnote 44

¹¹³ (n.d.). *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. United Nations. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>

the Child, which guarantees, “The enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health,”¹¹⁴ and ensures, “that all segments of society, in particular parents and children, are informed, have access to education and are supported in the use of basic knowledge of child health and nutrition.”¹¹⁵ Increasing capacity levels of early childhood education programs would afford all children the opportunity to develop appropriately.

Lastly, the and most importantly, the findings of this paper echoes past research that established the lack of education as a predictor of violence, in this case, gun violence. The children in low capacity counties have a higher risk of gun violence later in life. In neglecting these children of their right to early childhood education, the United States further departs from its responsibilities to protect children from violence granted under Article 19 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which reads: “States Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence.”¹¹⁶ With this, the United States is required to take the appropriate measures to address gun violence. By expanding access to early childhood education, the United States can respect their duties under international law to protect the nation’s children from all forms of gun violence.

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¹¹⁴ (n.d.). *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. United Nations. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>

¹¹⁵ See footnote 145

¹¹⁶ (n.d.). *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. The United Nations. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>

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