This month, the “Take Charge of Your Health” column focuses on gun violence prevention. The column is written by Betty Cruz, Associate Professor of Behavioral Medicine at the University of Pittsburgh Graduate School of Public Health and Director of the Public Health Advancement Research and Education Center (PHARE) at the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh. Professor Cruz’s perspective on this topic is that we’re finally addressing the issue of gun violence prevention. The column’s topic is not new to the Urban League of Great- er Pittsburgh. Earlier this month, Governor Wolf and CEO of the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh, Dr. Ericka Hager, spoke on this topic. I have written about this subject in previous columns, and others in the community have been working to address gun violence for decades. In this new column, I’m committed to having a mental health education component as an action in the prevention of gun violence.

**Betty Cruz**

**Founder, Change League of Greater Pittsburgh**

As a country and a community, we have lived through the affects of gun violence without fully understanding what we are facing or those who are affected by it. We have struggled to understand the impacts of gun violence, it is an emotional, politically charged issue, the information circulating about gun violence is based on myths. Myths about how people feel about gun ownership, the community trauma that results from gun violence is deep and long-lasting.

The United States is the only one of several countries, including Guatemala and Mexico, that doesn’t have a gun control law. The United States has the one of these countries that has no restrictions on who can own guns. (The Economist, “Guns everywhere—the world’s second-most gun-crazed nation.”) In the United States, the high rate of gun ownership is coupled with a high homicide-by-firearm rate—which is 25.2 times higher than that of other high-income countries (Simmons et al., “Health Behaviors and Outcomes,” 2018). Every single day takes a toll. People suffer from the affects of stress.

**Richard Garland, MD**

“Research has found that the overwhelming majority of people who are violent, have not had an identifiable mental illness.” He adds, “Some of the violence relates to substance abuse or addiction. In fact, people with mental illness are three times more likely to be targets rather than perpetrators. This myth does still inspire more to promote the stigma of mental illness and distract people from addressing the root causes of the often separate issues of violence, mental illness and gun violence.”

Despite the myths surrounding gun violence, its devastating effects on people are unquestionable. The grid of data is immense. Research has shown that people who live in high-stress situations or neighborhoods experience physiological activation of the body’s stress response systems (increases in heart rate, breathing rate and adrenaline production) by firearm-related crime and exposure to violence. People with a history of trauma and stress can have a negative effect on people’s health—even the presented in both neighborhoods and public safety.

I believe that we can say, quite clearly, is that any exposure to firearm violence—from being a target, victim or witness—is a tremendous health risk. Where you stand in this situation is that if you are not living in a healthy environment, it’s likely that the health risk will be more than doubled. But that doesn’t mean that we can’t do anything about it.

People start a protest march in front of the Allegheny County Courthouse in Pittsburgh on Monday, June 25, 2018. Protests were being held in response to the killing of Antwon Rose Jr. by a police officer on June 19, 2018. (AP Photo/Gene J. Puskar)
Can investing in neighborhoods help to reduce gun violence?

In 2016, 5,175 youths between the ages of 15 and 24 were killed by firearm homicide in the United States. More than 43,000 youths were treated for firearm-related assault injuries, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In the 2017 Youth Risk Behavior Survey of high school students, 5 percent of teens reported carrying a gun in the past year. 5 percent of teens reported carrying a gun in the past year.

As a doctor and violence prevention researcher, I study how neighborhood factors affect youth violence. Research shows that investing in neighborhoods can affect gun violence, crime, and mental health. These simple, low-cost investments include improving vacant and run-down spaces. In a study done in Philadelphia, my colleagues and I found that green space, street lighting, walking and having easy access to public transportation were linked with a lower risk of youth homicide. This is a major finding in the past year.

Community Resources

Resolve Crisis Services: resolve is a 24-hour, 365-day crisis service. It is free to all residents of Allegheny County, regardless of your ability to pay. 54-hour hotline to speak to a trained clinician at 1-866-7 YOU CAN (796-2289)

-mobility crisis team can travel anywhere within Allegheny County to respond to a crisis. They provide face-to-face support and will work to arrange further care and stabilization if needed.

Center for Victims is a community-based, nonprofit organization. It is the largest, most comprehensive and coordinated response to gun violence and to share our CAV youth summits to bring anti-violence and to share our CAV.

In partnership with community members, we hope to use our research to guide future interventions. By rethinking and redesigning neighborhood space, we hope to reduce youth violence. Alison Clyba, MD, PHD, MPH, is assistant professor of pediatrics, School of Medicine, and of behavioral and community health sciences, Graduate School of Public Health, University of Pittsburgh

RICH FITZGERALD

RICH FITZGERALD, Allegheny County Executive, "I commit to having county departments—including Health, Human Services, Police and others—work collaboratively with the community in a comprehensive outreach to combatting this public health issue.

RICH FITZGERALD

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PARISHA “SHAE” TAYLOR, youth activist “I commit to being a voice in the crowd of quiet souls. Who should all have the chance to reach our full potential. We were born into this generation and should have the opportunity to shape it for the next. Our plea will be heard.”

AJAYLA JOHNSON

AJAYLA, JOHNSON, youth activist “I am committed to working with others as an advocate and partner, an independent voice, an activist, good listener and not just someone who says, ‘Isn’t this terri-

AJAYLA JOHNSON

ROBERT MARIN

ROBERT MARIN, MD, Board of Directors, Community Empowerment Association, Homewood, PA, associate director, Center for Public Health Psychology, University of Pittsburgh, "I commit to working with others as an advocate and partner, an independent voice, an activist, good listener and not just someone who says, ‘Isn’t this terri-

ROBERT MARIN

TIM STEVENS

TIM STEVENS, Chairman and CEO, Black Political Empowerment Project (B-PED), Co-convenor of the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Violence (CAV), “I am committed to expand our work to bring anti-violence youth summits to as many locations as possible in order to share strategies on gun violence and to share the personal pain and destruction gun deaths cause to family members, friends and the community at large. We will continue to partner with CeaseFirePA in advocating for rational and reasonable statewide gun legislation and background checks.”

TIM STEVENS

The basic loss of life from gun violence at the Tree of Life in Squirrel Hill reemerges the Take Charge of Your Health page in its goal to support and dissemi-