

Episode 179-- Will Climate Change Increase Gun Violence

📅 Wed, 4/13 1:31PM ⌚ 30:52

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

gun violence, people, communities, shootings, climate change, violence, homicide, thinking, cities, places, talking, media, temperatures, country, brady, neighborhoods, criminologist, occurs, phd, hard

SPEAKERS

Daniel Semenza, JJ Janflone, Kelly Sampson



JJ Janflone 00:08

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JJ Janflone 00:37

Hey everybody, welcome back to another episode of Red, Blue, and Brady. I'm one of your hosts JJ,



Kelly Sampson 00:42

and I'm your other host, Kelly.



JJ Janflone 00:44

And today, Kelly, and I have a question for all of our listeners. Did you know that gun violence and climate change are linked?



Kelly Sampson 00:50

Yeah, cuz one of the things we've really learned here at RBB, and we hope that we share with all of you is that gun violence is truly intersectional. And it touches every single part of American life, and in turn every single part of American life touches on gun violence.



JJ Janflone 01:05

So how does climate change and global warming, how do they impact rates of gun violence? To unpack all the ways that climate change could worsen gun violence, and how we can all help to combat that rise we're joined by Dr. Daniel Semenza, an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Criminal Justice at Rutgers University.



Daniel Semenza 01:28

My name is Dan Semenza, and I'm an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Criminal justice. And I'm at Rutgers University at the Camden campus, which is kind of the smaller campus down in South Jersey, I'm also affiliated with the New Jersey Gun Violence Research Center, which is housed at Rutgers more broadly.



JJ Janflone 01:49

And sort of along those lines, I'd love if you could tell us a little bit about what brought your research interests into gun violence, you know, of all the things.



Daniel Semenza 01:59

Yeah, it's there is actually a story behind it. I mean, so when you do a PhD, you go into your first year, and you're entirely overwhelmed. I did my PhD at Emory University in sociology, get there and take a bunch of classes and kind of try and figure out what you're what you're really interested in. I actually went to do my PhD to study musicians originally. I'm I'm a guitar player and a piano player. And so I was studying when I did my Masters, like in New York City, how people carve out different territories where they play and do like street musicianship where they busk in like Union Square, stations, and where they play in the subways. And that's what I studied for my master's. And I thought that's what I was going to do for my PhD. And right before I went down to Atlanta to start my PhD, the Sandy Hook shooting happened in 2012. And I'm from a small town in Connecticut called Monroe, which actually is right next to Sandy Hook. And so when that happened, I kind of saw how I mean, the entire Newtown and Sandy Hook community was affected by this. But then all of the students that were at Sandy Hook actually came to my former middle middle school. And so my mom was teaching in the school system. And so it had this real effect on my own community and kind of the region where that awful awful mass shooting took place. And so while I was thinking, and moving into my PhD, I started to switch gears.



Daniel Semenza 03:36

And it just so happened that a, a really awesome criminologist named Bob Agnew worked at Emory University as well. And so I was like, hey, could I work with you, I want to study gun violence in a much deeper way. And he was like, I'm retiring. And I said, I promise I'll finish in five years, and then you can retire and I'll leave at the same time, and it'll be all good. And he luckily agreed to it. And we kind of had a pact. And that's what got me studying violence more

broadly, I studied teen dating violence and online aggression, and that as I started moving into my job at Rutgers, I focused a lot more intensely on gun violence where I originally wanted to be, but even during my PhD, not that long ago, it was very hard to get funding and support that's only you know, as we know, just starting to change. But if you get a CDC grant or the NIH grant or something like that, to do some research on gun violence, so it was hard to do that during graduate school, but that has started to open up a little bit more. And that's my very long way of saying, you know, it was a bit of a roundabout way of getting to here, but it's always where I wanted to be. It was just it took a little time to really get my focus down.

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Kelly Sampson 04:49

Thanks for explaining that. It's really interesting to peel back the layers and just see how even getting the right sponsor can be quite the ordeal. But we're talking today you know about the intersection of guns violence and climate change. And that is such an interesting intersection, because it's not one that immediately comes to mind for a lot of people. So can you just sort of help us understand how climate can impact gun violence in general?

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Daniel Semenza 05:15

Yeah. So when I'm trying to think about a research problem or a research question that I have, and I learned this when I was in graduate school, and I honestly, I learned a kind of as a musician, as well as I think that the most interesting questions are where there are intersections of different things. So you could take, you know, country and hip hop, and you can have these two very different genres, and you can cross them over and you can get a Lil Nas X song, and it becomes this huge, really fascinating thing. And that's because you're kind of finding that intersection of two very different things that that creates something new. And I try and do that often when I think about crime and health and the overlap between how criminal victimization corresponds to different health outcomes, and how health risks increase risk for victimization and, and things like that. With climate change, this is just kind of an example of extending that and thinking about some of these very large, big problems, like climate change and gun violence, and where there is some overlap here. So I mentioned my advisor, Bob Agnew at Emory. And at the time, little before I got there, he had written this this theoretical argument about why we should think about climate change in crime more broadly, right, just general crime and all the different ways and theoretical reasons why the two might be linked.

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Daniel Semenza 06:44

And in the interim, there's been a lot of research and a lot of different fields, that has thought about the implications of kind of state violence, or broader, you know, war and conflict between countries as a result of climate change. And that's as a result of scarce resource competition, less crops or poor crop yields, and less access to food, food insecurity, poor water access, right. So there are all these different reasons why climate change could influence violence at a very macro level scale around the world, as well as things like migration, right? If you're have certain countries that are being disproportionately affected, and people have to move because of sea level rise, or because of temperatures changing what that refugee impact could look like on on state on state conflict. But outside of that there hasn't been a ton of work or thinking around what this might mean, kind of at a more micro level. And that's why I think it's important to

really consider this big, big thing, climate change that we all conceptualize as this huge issue as to how it might filter down into interpersonal gun violence in cities in the United States. And that's, that's really my focus and thinking. And when I talk to people about this, it's kind of my area that I feel most comfortable speaking about. So, you know, the disadvantaged communities that are most prone to gun violence in the United States are also going to be highly prone to the impacts of climate change. And so thinking about the intersection of that, and how those two things are related, that's really what brought me to the discussion that we're having right now.

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Kelly Sampson 08:26

And, you know, you just mentioned that they're the same communities that are most impacted by climate change are also the same communities that may be most impacted by gun homicide. And just to kind of put it out there on the table. Which communities are you talking about?

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Daniel Semenza 08:40

Yeah, it's such an important thing to distinguish. First off, and maybe other people on the podcast have said this, you know, I think it's important to think about gun violence, again, a big, big giant issue as multiple different issues within within that umbrella, right. You have issue of mass shootings, issue of domestic violence, issue of suicide, where the most fatalities are in terms related to guns in the United States. And then you have interpersonal violence and street violence, urban gun violence, it goes under a lot of different monikers. But this is the violence that occurs predominantly in disadvantaged communities of color within cities committed by young men between the ages of 15 to 30, roughly, that are predominantly Black or Hispanic, right? So it's as that is where the majority of homicides are occurring in this scope within these cities. And they're typically occurring because people are, it's a small number of people who are part of gangs or drug sets or crews, it's not super organized, and it's often not even over things like turf or drug wars or anything like that, but it's smaller beefs, shows of disrespect and smaller interpersonal conflicts like that. And so when I'm talking about these communities, it's really important to remember that no, gun violence is not equally distributed in the United States. It does not have the same burden on the population in general. And again, that depends on the type of gun violence we're talking about. But it's disadvantaged minority communities and cities that are being most heavily affected by the interpersonal shootings that I'm talking about here. And again, remember, you know, just for anybody who's listening, and it's always just really key, that it's just a very small number of individuals within these communities that are responsible for an outsized portion of the shootings, or the homicides in that community. It's not like everybody or every young Black male in these areas are responsible for all the different shooting, it concentrates in a very hot kind of small, high activity group of people. So that's really, who and who I'm talking about the types of communities I'm talking about, especially related to climate change.

K

Kelly Sampson 11:05

And thanks for kind of unpacking that, because I think it kind of builds on some of the work that you're doing, because part of the reason why we see gun homicide concentrate in communities that have often been oppressed and experienced its investment is because there's so much

material need, and there's so many disparities in those communities. You know, there's health disparities and socioeconomic disparities that can lead to violence. And so can climate change. So can you talk about how these disparities can interconnect and then result in homicide?

D Daniel Semenza 11:41

Yeah, so you made this great point that when we're talking about the communities that are most prone to are at risk for high homicide rates, or non fatal shooting rates, they're, they're the communities that have experienced most disinvestment, right. They're the communities when a lot of times the research that I do looks at differences between census tracts, right, and census tracts are a really good way of thinking about neighborhoods or communities, it's hard to think about a city as a community, right? Like, we all know that cities are so multifaceted. And, you know, one part of a city can be, you know, very high in rates of poverty, and another part can be extremely wealthy. So it's really hard to compare city to city, but census tracts help you think about, you know, one neighborhood versus the next how people actually live their lives. And the neighborhoods that are most impacted by gun violence are the neighborhoods that have the highest rates of poverty that have the highest rates of unemployment, they are often segregated, right. So there are a lot higher percentages of Hispanic and Black residents in these communities that are being affected, lower levels of education, all these things. And we could have a whole week of podcast episodes about how, you know, different neighborhoods in communities end up becoming disinvested and disadvantaged in the way I'm talking about. But because of these factors, it creates a lot of the conditions where violence kind of thrives or violence, you know, can endure for a long period of time. And even though up until recently, gun violence and homicides has really come down in the United States right now.

D Daniel Semenza 13:24

Now, we're going back up in the last year and a half or so. But there was a long trend of decreasing shootings and homicides throughout the country. You don't see those kinds of declines and trends, specifically among poor Black and Brown communities that are disadvantaged in cities, right, that was a much flatter curve from the mid 1990s until relatively recently. So even though everybody's wanted to celebrate, you know, improvements in crime and improvements in in shooting, that has not improved nearly to the extent that might be thought otherwise, in the hardest hit communities where violence occurs. And so because there's a lot of disinvestment, and because there's a lot of poverty and unemployment and things like that, these are also communities that are going to be affected by higher temperatures, they might be places that are more vulnerable to sea level rise that are more vulnerable to extreme weather events, I think of, you know, in particular, something like Hurricane Katrina, or Hurricane Sandy. That happened when I was living in New York City. And the places that were hit the hardest, the places that took the longest to really be able to bounce back and to kind of rebuild, and to the extent that they could, were often the most disadvantaged communities and neighborhoods that had a hard time building back from you know, even before these kinds of weather events have occurred. And so that's what I'm kind of talking about when I'm talking about dual strain or dual impact of violence and climate change that can occur at the same time and we can get into why maybe one comes before the other. But that's why I think these two things are sitting next to one another, at the very least,



JJ Janflone 15:06

Well, within this vein, what are some ways that climate change, or perhaps even within that global warming, what are the ways that it directly impacts rates of gun violence? Is it something like it causes scarcity, and so that leads to rates to increase? Or, you know, I'm just curious if we can tease this out a little bit more.



Daniel Semenza 15:23

There can be a lot of different things. But I think it's important to focus on a couple of key reasons why, again, disadvantaged communities in cities in the United States, where violence is high, might have this exacerbated violence response as a result of climate change. And to your point, more specifically, to global warming, temperature change. Now, one could be what's called Heat aggression, right? We've all been in a situation where we're really hot. And it's frustrating, and we're kind of on the edge. And you know, we snap at our spouse or we tell our dog, no, no, I can't right now, like, you know, we're just a little bit overwhelmed by how hot we are. Maybe that's because you're outside or maybe that's because your air conditioning broke, or whatever it might be, right. So I think we're all very familiar with this idea of, of heat aggression, and just kind of feeling more frustrated, and our levels of self control and individual level might go down a little bit. So it's reasonable to think that if if temperatures are increasingly getting hot, especially in places that might not have been as hot before, that when you have a violent altercation, or where you have some kind of aggressive moment between people that the heat could further exacerbate that. There's been lots of kind of experimental research to show that this could bear out, right. It's harder to parse out when you're looking at the population. But you could put individuals in a lab and, you know, put one in a temperature room and another in a higher temperature room, and you see that there's more of an aggressive response when when that heat goes up.



Daniel Semenza 17:01

So I think over time, that is a possibility that things uncomfortably warm temperatures can make things worse, when you have conflict between individuals living in communities that are particularly disadvantaged, because oftentimes, people do not have access to air conditioning, right, they may have to be outside more often, and therefore experiencing those higher temperatures more. And so that's just going to have this aggregate effect of making conflict more violent. I think that's an okay link to talk about. And I think it's harder, but I think it's more of a stretch than the other way that these things can be linked is what criminologist call kind of routine activities, or routine activities theory, RAT. And it's really just this idea that when more people kind of brush up against each other, and are, you know, associating more with one another, that there's just a greater number of instances where people can become in conflict with one another. So if you're thinking about poorer communities that have poorer housing access, less access to places where there might be air conditioning, for pools, or kind of outside places where there's, there's wind and the ability to cool down, more people are outside for longer, they might be them brushing up. And I mean, physically and metaphorically, but coming up against other people where there is just greater opportunity for for violent conflicts to arise. And like I said, a lot of times the shootings that occurred in cities like where I live near Philadelphia, or places like Washington, DC, or New York City, these are not well thought out, well planned shootings that arise because of gang territory disputes, or major drug thieves. They are arguments over boyfriends or girlfriends, you know, shows of disrespect, things like

that, that can go very quickly, from a heated argument where somebody is, you know, yelling at one another to somebody pulling out a gun, and somebody ends up getting shot. And so the more opportunities there are for that to happen, partially created, because of the heat of that might have risen in these spaces. I think that's a good control way of thinking about how these two things might be related. And that's more of what I've been focusing on in thinking about this problem.

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Kelly Sampson 19:26

And you know, you're doing so much great work on this intersection between gun violence and climate change. But there's still a lot that we don't know about both of these problems, which are put it plainly huge problems. And so I'm wondering, you know, what, what are some of the reasons for those information gap? And also, what are some of the things that we might need to know to understand the problem better?

D

Daniel Semenza 19:49

Yeah, that's a good question. So I think one of the answers is getting out what you said and just like climate change and gun violence, I mean, if I had to think about two of the largest problems that we really have to grapple with immediately, even though it's very hard to do so, you know, you'd be hard pressed to find two that are better candidates, but they're also some of the most complex things, especially climate change. I mean, I am not a climate scientist. And so when I'm trying to think about these things, or write about these things, it's really pushing the limits of my knowledge to go through, you know, a Climate Change report or something like that. And I imagine a climate scientist, probably, to a lesser extent, might say, oh, you know, I don't know as much about gun violence. So when you're trying to intersect two things, you're trying to bring together different bodies of knowledge. And that can be hard to do. And not everybody is going to be willing to try and think these things through or just have the tools and the capacity to try and get at that. The other thing, though, is that, especially with climate change, even though there's great documentation and empirical evidence that this is a thing that is happening, that is going to continue happening, it's happening on a much longer, broader scale. So it's harder to kind of track out meaningful changes in temperature fluctuations, and how that corresponds to maybe decades of of homicide, or non fatal shooting data, it's just hard to put these datasets together. I haven't myself done that too much. At this point, there have been people who have looked at kind of temperature fluctuations and individual shootings, individual cities, excuse me. Um, so that's been done. And when temperatures fluctuate, that can map on to, to shootings, for some ways.

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Daniel Semenza 21:42

So I think it's the problems are complex. But and the data is complex. But also, scientists and criminologist like myself, want to be really careful about making predictions, right? So it's not my job to predict the future, I can take data that's already been created. And I could say, hey, we know what's already happened. And we have an idea that this might influence things moving forward, right, but you don't want to fall into the space, of well, violence is definitely going to rise because of climate change. Some of you might be familiar with the term super predator, if you've ever heard that term before. This was a bad moment for criminologists.

Because back in the 1990s, there were all of these criminologists saying, "You know, because of demographic shifts, there's going to be this wave of young juveniles, particularly young Black men, who are going to be super predators, they're not going to care about morals or ethics, and they're just going to go on a, you know, violent rampage, and they're not going to be controllable." Hillary Clinton, and all these different people kind of latched on to this concept. And that was a huge problem, because it's predicting the future, and they were dead, wrong. Right, we saw a major decrease in a lot of forms of violence throughout the country. Right. So what the opposite of what a lot of people were predicting. And so I think that kind of predictive speculative trap is why it's, it's harder to really get good research on this is because to some extent, there is some theorizing here that is happening. And, and a lot of research was not want to fall into that. So those are just a couple of thoughts as to why I think that there hasn't been a ton of research on this yet. But I do think that the data is getting better. And there are more people interested at working intersectionally. And so this will continue to build out hopefully, because we have conversations like this.



JJ Janflone 23:34

Do you think that that's sort of part and parcel to why there's not a ton of media attention, focusing on just this intersection, although I guess the same thing could be said of the intersections of like gun violence and race or gun violence and gender? You know, one of the things that strikes me so that's so interesting about gun violence and climate change coming together is that these are both two things that should be bipartisan. But oftentimes, they're also politicized. And so I'm wondering if if you're seeing an uptrend in media attention or even just, you know, do you get retweeted a lot? Like, what, are you seeing people paying attention to this a little bit more now or...



Daniel Semenza 24:05

No, I don't think so. And, you know, it's funny when I was originally, like, tweeting about this, like, nobody paid attention, nobody liked it, nobody cared. But The Trace did pick it up, and we did an interview, and we had a more in depth discussion. And that was helpful, I think, in moving this discussion along. But you know, if you're an academic and you're, you're just publishing papers, that's gonna get academic attention, you might have those siloed conversations, but frankly, a lot of that does not move into broader media, unless there's an intentional push to do so. Or people at the university are helping get that done, or people are tweeting about it, and it ends up getting picked up. So it's, it's often hard and I found this too, that moving from academia into the media sphere is there's this tension and you want to be careful with it, but my thought has always been like; Gotta get out of our desks, in our chairs on our academic publications and find ways to translate this kind of work and these these ideas about gun violence and stuff into a more popular conversation because this affects people, but then the problem becomes, especially with something like gun violence, and I think this happens with with climate change, too. They're super complicated, but the media has 15 seconds to do a story on it. So get like the hottest take possible, even if it's not the most accurate take possible. And, you know, heaven forbid, you want to try and intersect with an issue of race, or gender, or, you know, climate change, or something like that.



Daniel Semenza 25:43

You know, and I think this is why a lot of times media reporting just defaults to the case, right? Person A shot Person B, this person is in custody, will report on this update 11 o'clock night news, right. And that's really, you know, unless outlets and Fox 29 here in Philadelphia has done this, unless outlets are willing to do a larger segment or a longer kind of in depth thing, you're not going to get a lot of like very mainstream kind of larger facing media, on these more in depth, complex issues. Mass shootings tend to garner a lot of that more public attention, which, you know, you've heard me talk about how I saw that affect my own community. So it is absolutely critical to talk about this. But when you think about the burden that gun violence is having more broadly around the country, the issues of interpersonal violence, that I'm talking about domestic violence, or even suicide, on get less of that media share, I think in a lot of ways than the mass shooting attention for, for better or worse, I think that's just how it is. And so you have these multiple forms of tension that make it harder to take these ideas, put them into a broader media, and have those conversations in front of more people,

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Kelly Sampson 26:58

I really appreciate you drawing out that point. Because even when we do see homicide, especially if it's a Black person or a Brown person, oftentimes it's for whatever reason, we can imagine that there might be context around the mass shooting, like, well, what what happened, what caused this, but then if it's, you know, a homicide, and it's like, well, that's just, that's just how it is. There's no nuance, there's no context there. So I really appreciate you drawing that out. And as the recording time comes to a close one question for listeners who were like, I want to know more about this, what are some resources that you would recommend to help people kind of understand this more and really root themselves in the facts?

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Daniel Semenza 27:37

Yeah, so if you don't want to spend a bunch of time combing through academic literature on Google Scholar and other fun library sites, which I understand, I did an interview with TheTrace that's a little bit more in depth that can talk about why some of these things might be a little more connected in particular communities and neighborhoods that we're discussing, that might be helpful to read. But often, like we just talked about, two things are talked about separately, or they focus on violence. It's about state violence, or collective violence. It's not about interpersonal kind of gun violence, like I'm talking about here. So I don't have a ton of other recommendations beyond kind of this interview and the Agnew article. But those are good places to get started. And hopefully, there are going to be more people that are doing this research. And we can continue to have these broader media conversations that people can draw off of and learn more from



JJ Janflone 28:34

well, and also, where can people find your Twitter so that they can retweet you?

D

Daniel Semenza 28:40

So my Twitter is @dsemenzcrim, or you can just search me Dan Semenza can find me on my
But on my website, you just Google that it'll get you to my Twitter

Rutger website, you just Google that it'll get you to my Twitter.



JJ Janflone 28:52

Well, and thank you so so much, Dan, this has been phenomenal. And as always, we'll link to many, many other resources in the description of this episode, so folks can continue to educate themselves.



JJ Janflone 29:05

So Daniel gave us so much to discuss of what I keep coming back to personally is that the places and communities that are already hit the hardest by gun violence are also going to be the places and communities that are hardest hit by climate change related gun violence. There's no breaks here.



Kelly Sampson 29:24

Yeah, unfortunately. And, you know, we also were hit by the fact that there's this difference in how that gun violence is going to look or at least play out. And it really just underscores how important it is for us to be fighting for gun violence prevention at both local and federal levels that we can really protect everyone.



JJ Janflone 29:46

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Kelly Sampson 30:01

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