

Community Responses To Violence In Our Cities Maj Toure

Black Guns Matter

Good afternoon. My name is Maj Toure and I am the co-founder of Black Guns Matter. Our organization travels around the country to address firearms related rights and responsibilities. Each one of our classes, which happen in libraries, churches, recreation centers, and even on street corners where we discuss firearm safety, conflict resolution, and the law. My travels have afforded me a unique opportunity to see first hand the issue of violence in our urban centers, as well as the failures and successes of various approaches. Black Guns Matters started four years ago and the data we have collected has been, and will continue to be, a very valuable tool in saving lives and protecting freedoms as stated in the Constitution and Bill Of Rights.

Firstly, I know that today's hearings are centered on quelling the violence in Urban communities, but the phrasing is a bit off. We do not have a “gun violence” issue in our urban centers, but we do have a host of other issues that coupled with the lack of de-escalation tools, leads to violence. What we are experiencing is not an issue with guns per se, but more of a lack of ability to navigate trauma. If we are going to address violence in Urban America, we need to address violence of all kinds. Singling out firearms is a tremendous misstep in SOLVING this issue and I hope my testimony today will assist in redirecting our focus.

One of the first ways that we have tackled this issue is by identifying and labeling answers as “Solutionary.” Giving Urban Americans tangible skills has been very impactful, because we define not only what our approach is, but also a parameter for staying the course of solution-based thinking. By naming what we are DOING, we have given Americans all around the country an ideology to galvanize around solutions more so than further focusing on the problem. Our focus is solutions to violence, our approach is conflict resolution, our goal is saving lives and mitigating trauma, our results are healing while defending freedoms. This is the Solutionary way that has been effective.

In 2016, when we started Black Guns Matter, it was a result of a steady barrage of media images that depicted our communities as violent and savage. That year one of my best friends was shot in the head because of negligence. As news of his death circulated, I couldn't help but think how easy it would have been to ensure he knew the basics of conflict resolution and safety. I recognized that in addition to doing a voter registration drive that year, we needed to do a license to carry drive by inviting people in my community to be safe and responsible owners. That year we hosted our first class in North Philadelphia, expecting 35 people, instead 350 showed up to learn. Guns are a taboo topic in Urban American therefore safety training has purposefully been withheld in our communities and the homicide rates are a direct reflection of that ignorance. The year we started Black Guns Matter, Philadelphia saw the lowest firearm related deaths in Philadelphia since 1976.

After weekly ongoing classes which continued to overflow from the space, we began getting calls from my homies in other cities. They said, “We need you to come here to Baltimore, to Chicago, to Brooklyn, to Compton and host some classes.” With the support of crowdfunding, we started a 13 cities tour and began visiting cities with the highest homicide rates to inform members of our community on the conflict resolution, de-escalation, and training. This is a place where people from both sides of the aisle can agree that this simple act of free education is saving people in my community from prison, negligence, and death.

I want to take this moment to provide a bit more in depth information about what our classes include. Also I want to let you know that we have now trained over hundreds of thousands of people across the country and have been to almost all 50 states taking an approach that not only preserves freedoms but also empowers the people.

The first component to every class is firearm safety.

a. Firearm safety —With the power that comes with firearms ownership, there is also a tremendous responsibility. Safety training and education to prevent negligent death is something we can control with proper knowledge around firearm safety. One of my neighbors, who I will call Jamal, was lost to homicide a few years ago. However this loss actually sparked his mother and younger brother in wanting to know how to properly & legally utilize, store, and transport firearms to not be a victim at all. Showing young people what to do if they come across a firearm in a park or at a friends home can be crucial to saving that child’s life. The impact of preventing ONE death is unimaginably powerful to a family that would have lost a loved one to that ignorance.

b. The law—lawyers, prison, families, freedom. We have had tremendous success in sharing local laws by inviting lawyers to teach beginners who may not know local carry, proper storage and handling laws. One of our students, Brandon, who had never faced criminal charges of any kind before, was charged with possession of a firearm simply because he did not know that he had to spend twenty dollars in Philadelphia to apply for his license to carry. This was a young man who lived in North Philadelphia, purchased a firearm lawfully from a licensed dealer, was pulled over and let the officer know he had a firearm in his glove compartment. Not being aware of proper transportation or concealed carry laws, he was charged and subsequently lost his bank teller position as well as his ability to apply for student loans or public housing. Not because he was the “bad guy” but simply because he didn’t know. Our events and classes around the nation have shed light on this information, removing hundreds of Americans from potential charges and jail time that unnecessarily would tax our already overburdened courts. This is progress.

c. Conflict resolution— Also according to the CDC, of the 12,979 firearm homicides in the United States in 2015, 81% occurred in urban areas (CDC, 2017). For example, in 2014, in Philadelphia’s safest police district, which is approximately 85% White, no one was reported killed by gun violence. The homicide rate for Black Americans in all 50 states is, on average, eight times higher. Importantly, most urban areas, especially those that experience the most gun violence, are characterized by poverty, inequality, and racial segregation. This speaks to a very

important piece of our curriculum, conflict resolution. These are a bit more tricky to gauge, but the impact of the lack of this skill set is clearly shown. In spaces where young people are shown what conflict actually is and isn't, and being presented with tools to handle each situation accordingly, this is a powerful tool. Where else are they teaching conflict resolution in our hoods? Addressing cultural differences and similarities as well as how to understand moments of tension have significantly helped. Case in point, in 2018, when we taught these fundamental principles at YesPhilly, an alternative high school in North Philadelphia, there was a potential for a shooting between two students who had pre-existing issues between each other. Both students had access to firearms and volatile tempers. One of the school students was going to shoot another student after class. I went out to these students, walked them through our conflict resolution tactic of saying 'You Right' and we were able to save two lives. One person who may have been shot and killed and another who would have went to prison for murder. This is yet another intangible that has serious impact on our community while respecting the human right to self defense.

4. Closing.

In the last four years, we have developed a curriculum based on lived experience and case studies all around this nation in some of the areas that suffer the most poverty, human rights restrictions and negligence in the country. Our experiences with applying these solutions has been that most people, regardless of political affiliation, respect our people-powered initiative. Communities can solve these problems on our own. Primarily because we have taken this holistic solution-based approach more than the "guns are bad" and the problems will just go away if you restrict them attempt. To add more restrictions to good Americans solves NOTHING. Education and solidarity around intelligence has been the most productive means of striking balance between solutions and respect for rights and I don't think in any way punishment solves problems more than proper education from a holistic and freedom based perspective.

Thank you for your time, I know that we as Americans can solve this issue with logic and respect for our Bill Of Rights.