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Communities Offer Kids First-Aid Training for Gun Violence

In cities where shootings are on the rise, children practice applying gauze to wounds to stop bleeding

By [Dan Frosch](#) | Photographs by Amber N. Ford for The Wall Street Journal
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CANTON, Ohio—Don Ackerman was checking on some vacant homes that his church is refurbishing when a 6-year-old boy in the neighborhood began talking about how gunfire doesn't frighten him.

"My mom tells me to stay back, because gunshots can go through the wall," the boy said, standing in his yard strewn with bikes and toys on a recent October afternoon. "I don't get scared at all. They're not very loud."

Mr. Ackerman, a United Methodist pastor, said it is common to hear such stories from children in this city of 70,000.

Feeling overwhelmed by the problem, he began organizing first-aid trainings this past summer for children as young as 3, aiming to teach them how to care for people who have been shot with dressings and pressure to stanch bleeding.



Pastor Don Ackerman organized three first-aid sessions for children at parks in neighborhoods in Canton, Ohio, where the group is restoring run-down houses.

Similar efforts are popping up across the country in [communities grappling with gun violence](#), all intended to give young residents the means to help their neighbors, friends and loved ones survive a shooting.

“It gives kids and parents here the agency to do something about these challenges as opposed to sitting around and feeling hopeless,” said Mr. Ackerman, who served 10 years in the Army before joining the ministry. “Sometimes it is the small things that give us hope.”

The lessons are often more resonant than safety techniques children have learned for decades like the Heimlich maneuver and “stop, drop and roll” fire prevention.

[The gun homicide rate in the U.S.](#) rose to the highest levels in 26 years in 2020, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The rise continued in 2021, preliminary government data show.

In Canton, there were 49 shootings last year, nearly double the number in 2018, and 21 homicides, the highest tally in at least a decade, according to police data.



Latoya Dickens-Jones is a nurse who ran the recent training sessions for children in Canton, Ohio.

A booming manufacturing hub decades ago, some 30% of Canton residents and about half the city’s children now live in poverty, according to census data.

The first-aid program took shape last spring when Mr. Ackerman was speaking to a group of children in the Shorb Avenue neighborhood, where boarded-up buildings sit not far from the sprawling Pro Football Hall of Fame complex, where [a new football-themed resort is being built](#).

A girl about 12 years old casually described listening to gunshots ring out by her home, the 36-year-old pastor recalled. When she wandered outside, she said she saw a dead body in the street.

Mr. Ackerman flashed to Afghanistan, where he served two combat tours in the Army, and thought of the detached tone his fellow soldiers used recounting firefights and explosions.

“I wondered, ‘Am I really having a conversation with a child right now?’” he said.

Haunted by the girl’s story, Mr. Ackerman and the nonprofit he runs, Canton for All People, organized three first-aid sessions at parks in neighborhoods where the group is restoring run-down houses.

Groups of children between ages 3 and 12 learned how to use gauze to apply pressure to a gunshot wound until an adult arrives, said Latoya Dickens-Jones, a nurse who ran the trainings. After Ms. Dickens-Jones demonstrated on a child’s arm, the kids practiced on each other while she chimed in with pointers.



first-aid kit was given to each child who participated in the training sessions.

Many of the children were too young to learn how to fashion a tourniquet, she said, but all of them had heard gunshots before.

Ms. Dickens-Jones then gave the children a scenario where they are playing with a friend at home when a bullet whizzes through the window and hits the friend in the arm. The group eagerly repeated what they had learned, she said: “Go get my mom. Get our kit. Hold pressure.”

The approximately 60 kids total who attended the training went home with first aid kits filled with bandages, gauze and an eye-patch.

“These are kids who should be able to run outside and play and not have to worry about if they hear a gunshot or if one of their friends is going to get shot,” Ms. Dickens-Jones said. “But they have to be wiser.”

Mr. Ackerman said when he started the trainings in Canton, he wasn’t aware some other cities were offering their own versions.

In Durham, N.C., the fire department has helped run “Stop the Bleed” courses developed by the American College of Surgeons, teaching dozens of young teenagers how to treat gunshot wounds and other injuries, said Fire Captain Elaine Towner.

In Chicago, the violence prevention group GoodKids MadCity trains young people how to stanch bleeding from gunshot wounds with whatever they have on them—a credit card, driver’s license, socks—until help arrives.



workshop at the Chicago Torture Justice Center teaches attendees how to treat gunshot wounds with whatever is available.

PHOTO: ARMANDO L. SANCHEZ/CHICAGO TRIBUNE/GETTY IMAGES

Carlil Pittman, the organization's co-founder, said the sessions double as therapy for traumatized young people who take on different roles as part of the training: shooter, victim, witness.

"It's mind-blowing that they even have the capacity to sit and laugh and talk about stuff like this," Mr. Pittman said. "But it just shows how it's become the norm."

Mr. Ackerman grew up in the Canton area. He decided to leave the military and become a pastor, he said, after witnessing a village elder in Afghanistan kill a 14-year-old boy with a machine gun. The boy reminded Mr. Ackerman of his cousin.

After planning the trainings, Mr. Ackerman said he heard from some people who opposed the idea, believing it cast the city in a negative light. But many local parents were supportive.

José Salinas sent his three children—ages 5, 7 and 9—to a session. Mr. Salinas, 28, said he wanted his kids prepared for anything in their neighborhood, where they sometimes heard gunshots. He said they now show him proper techniques when he patches up their paper cuts.

Groups in other cities said several children who took their trainings had used what they learned to save gunshot victims. That hasn't happened yet in Canton, said Mr. Ackerman, who plans to hold more sessions this summer.

"I can't take guns away from people," he said. "I'd rather train the next generation to be healers."

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