

“Folks from Europe come to our hospital to learn how to treat people who have been shot. We have more experience with bullet wounds than even many battlefield surgeons.”

Jessica Beard Trauma surgeon at Temple University Hospital and director of research at the Philadelphia Center for Gun Violence Reporting



Oronde McClain says he has never fully recovered from being struck in the head by a stray bullet at age 10. He was in a coma for seven weeks and a wheelchair for nearly two years. JIM MACMILLAN VIA KFF HEALTH NEWS

Needs vast for child shooting survivors

Huge health obstacles and costs await the youngest victims of gun violence

Liz Szabo KFF Health News

Oronde McClain was struck by a stray bullet on a street corner in Philadelphia when he was 10. ● The bullet shattered the back of his skull, splintering it into 36 pieces. McClain’s heart stopped, and he was technically dead for 2 minutes and 17 seconds. ● Although a hospital team shocked him back to life, McClain never fully recovered. Doctors removed half his skull and replaced it with a gel plate, but shrapnel remains. **See SURVIVORS, Page 5A**

The numbers

- Shooting survivors ages 19 and younger were **68%** more likely than other young people to have a psychiatric diagnosis and **144%** as likely to develop substance abuse.
- Firearm injuries were the leading cause of death in the U.S. for ages 1 to 19 in 2020 and 2021.
- While more than **48,000** Americans of all ages were killed by firearms in 2022, an average of about **85,000** Americans survive firearm injuries every year.
- Being shot added an average of **\$35,000** to the health care costs of each young person.

Survivors

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The shooting left him in a coma for seven weeks and in a wheelchair for nearly two years. School bullies magnified his pain, laughing at his speech and the helmet he wore to protect his brain.

McClain said he repeatedly attempted suicide as a teenager. He remains partly paralyzed on his right side and endures seizures and post-traumatic stress.

"People who die, they get funerals and balloon releases," said McClain, now 33. "Survivors don't get anything."

Yet the ongoing medical needs of gun violence survivors and their families are vast.

In the year after they were shot, child and adolescent survivors were more than twice as likely as other young people to experience a pain disorder, according to a new study co-authored by Zirui Song, an associate professor of health care policy and medicine at Harvard Medical School.

The shooting survivors in the study, ages 19 and younger, were 68% more likely than other young people to have a psychiatric diagnosis and 144% as likely to develop a substance use disorder.

Firearm injuries were the leading cause of death in the U.S. for ages 1 to 19 in 2020 and 2021, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. While more than 48,000 Americans of all ages were killed by firearms in 2022, an average of about 85,000 Americans survive firearm injuries every year.

"The public hears about mass shootings and the number of people who died," Song said. "The population of people affected by firearm violence is



In this childhood photo, Oronde McClain wears a helmet as he heals from a gunshot injury. At age 10, he was struck by a stray bullet. Today, he is partly paralyzed and has seizures and PTSD. PROVIDED BY ORONDE MCCLAIN

much larger than deaths alone."

'We are now a nation of survivors'

Doctors can now save most gunshot victims, said Jessica Beard, a trauma surgeon at Temple University Hospital who was not involved in the study.

"Folks from Europe come to our hospital to learn how to treat people who have been shot," said Beard, who is also director of research for the Philadelphia Center for Gun Violence Reporting. "We have more experience with bullet wounds than even many battlefield surgeons."

Most Americans say they or a family member has experienced gun violence, including witnessing a shooting, being threatened by a person with a gun or being shot, according to a survey by the

health policy nonprofit organization KFF.

"We are now a nation of survivors, and we have an unmet obligation to help families and communities heal, both physically and emotionally," said Megan Ranney, dean of the Yale School of Public Health.

Being shot added an average of \$35,000 to the health care costs of each young person studied compared with the expenses of those who weren't shot, according to the study, based on data from employer-sponsored health insurance plans.

Survivors often need continuing care from physical therapists, occupational therapists, makers of prosthetics and others. Traveling long distances multiple times a week for specialized services can pose additional hardships for rural residents or those in cities who rely on public transportation.

Although McClain's mother had health insurance through her employer, the plan did not cover the cost of his wheelchair. Insurance didn't pay for dance or theater classes, which his therapists recommended to improve his speech and movement. Although his grandparents helped pay the medical bills, his family still held fundraisers to cover out-of-pocket costs.

The study is one of the first to assess the effects of a child's shooting on the entire family, said Ranney, who was not involved in the research.

Psychiatric disorders were 30% more common among the parents of the gun-injured children compared with parents of uninjured children. Their mothers made 75% more mental health visits than other mothers.

Ranney noted that caregivers of shooting survivors often neglect their own needs. In the study, parents and

siblings of the injured children made fewer visits for their own routine medical care, lab tests and procedures.

A club 'you don't want to be in'

When McClain was in a wheelchair, his grandfather drove him to the hospital for the first few years after his shooting. Later, when McClain could walk, he took two buses and a subway to the hospital.

"I would scream at the doctors," McClain said. "I said, 'Don't tell me you know how I feel, because you don't understand.'"

Yet McClain has found purpose in his experience.

Last year, he co-produced a documentary called "They Don't Care About Us, or Do They?" with the Philadelphia Center for Gun Violence Reporting, where he works. In the film, young survivors talk about wearing hoodies to hide their scars, navigating the world in a wheelchair, and coping with infertility caused by their injuries.

McClain is now working to improve news coverage of gun violence by creating a directory of shooting survivors who are willing to share their stories.

Survivors are the forgotten victims of the nation's gun violence epidemic, he said. Many feel abandoned.

"They push you out of the hospital like you have a normal life," McClain said. "But you will never have a normal life. You are in this club that you don't want to be in."

KFF Health News, formerly known as Kaiser Health News (KHN), is a national newsroom that produces in-depth journalism about health issues and is one of the core operating programs at KFF, an independent source for health policy research, polling and journalism.