

Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

Unforgiving Places: The Unexpected Origins of American Gun Violence

By Jens Ludwig

Unforgiving Places: The Unexpected Origins of American Gun Violence is 244 pages in nine chapters, not including a preface, acknowledgments, notes, bibliography and index. It was published in 2025.

Jens Ludwig is an economist, director of the University of Chicago's Crime Lab and a longtime researcher into the causes of violence.

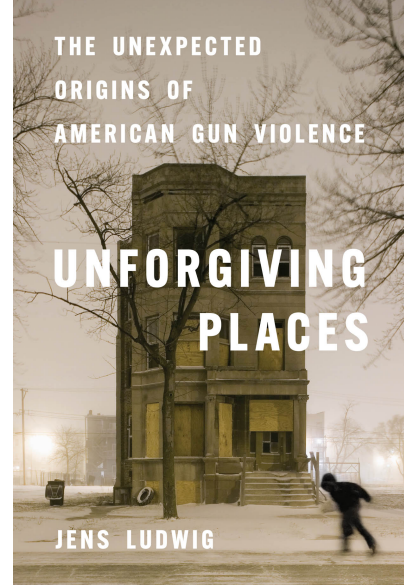
This is a book about gun violence, what causes most homicides, where they happen, and how acts of violence could be reduced in American cities.

It comes to some startling conclusions. America's two prevailing theories about gun violence are both wrong, Ludwig says. Violence is neither an outgrowth of poverty nor always the actions of intrinsically bad people. As a result, he says, the two prevailing public policy remedies—increase support for the poor or lock up more criminals—will not reduce gun violence.

There's a third remedy, of course, which is to reduce the number of guns in America. And, yes, Ludwig says, that would help greatly, but it is not politically feasible.

What is feasible? Target the cause of most shootings in cities, which are arguments among young men that suddenly escalate. These impulse homicides do not happen everywhere, Ludwig says, and are rare outside of specific groups of young men, he goes on. Target these young men with training and improve neighborhoods so others can watch over public spaces and acts of gun violence will plummet.

This may sound a little like Jane Jacob's theories about neighborhood safety—that what made places safe weren't cops on every corner but mixed-use streets where many people kept informal watch. Jacobs called this the "eyes on the street" in her classic 1961 book [The Death and Life of Great American Cities](#).



Ludwig says that Jacobs was right. People keeping watch and intervening when arguments get heated will reduce gun violence. And he agrees with Jacobs that you can facilitate these interventions through neighborhood design. If we did so, it would take care of much of our gun violence problem. His other suggestion: Starting when they are middle-schoolers, teach young people—and especially boys from troubled families—how to manage their emotions.

These are, as the book's subtitle suggests, unexpected explanations of gun violence. And Ludwig's solutions will almost certainly face a wall of skepticism. For that reason, most of the book explains how this longtime academic researcher came to these surprising answers.

What isn't surprising is why this is an important problem. "In terms of its impact on American life," Ludwig writes, "gun violence *is* America's crime problem." It's not just that shootings traumatize families and terrorize neighborhoods, but they are unusually common in the United States.

The United Kingdom, for instance, has roughly similar crime statistics to the U.S. There are property crimes and assaults in British cities in about the same number per 100,000 people as in America. There's one glaring exception: The homicide rate in the U.S. is five times that of the U.K.'s.

The reason is simple: Handguns, which are easy to obtain and conceal, are often involved in violent encounters here and have lethal results. Guns are rare in the U.K., so violent encounters there may end with broken bones, black eyes and even stab wounds, but not death.

For the past 55 years, policymakers have tried to reduce the number and types of guns available to Americans with little success. If courts did not strike down restrictions, the gun lobby and their congressional allies undid them. There is, Ludwig says, no reason to believe this will change. "Federal gun politics will continue to feel a lot like World War I trench warfare," he writes. "Lots of effort expended but little movement."

But, Ludwig says, gun violence is made up of two parts, guns *plus* violence. So there is a second way forward, which is to attack the violence part. The aim of this approach isn't to take guns out of people's hands, he says, but "to reduce the tendency of people to use those widely available guns to harm one another."

Why should we think this approach would work? Two reasons, Ludwig says. First, there are neighborhoods that are similar in most ways except for their rate of gun violence, so clearly neighborhoods can influence violence. Second, social scientists like Ludwig have done controlled experiments—or taken advantage of naturally occurring situations—to study the effects of environment and training on violence. They are convinced these approaches will work, and they have statistical evidence.

To show how neighborhoods affect gun violence, Ludwig takes us to two South Chicago neighborhoods, South Shore and Greater Grand Crossing. They are adjacent, separated by Dorchester Avenue, and demographically and economically alike. But one big thing separates them: Shootings are nearly twice as likely in Greater Grand Crossing as in South Shore. Why?

A big reason Ludwig points to is the physical design of the neighborhoods. South Shore is denser (18,000 residents per square mile versus 8,800 in Greater Grand Crossing), and more mixed in its uses (nearly half of its land is commercial). This means, as Jane Jacobs would say, are more "eyes on the street."

But there is something else: It's also more mixed in ages. There are 2.5 adults per young person in South Shore, and only 1.8 per young person in Greater Grand Crossing. So there are fewer adults around in

Greater Grand Crossing to step in if young people start arguing on a street corner or to call the police. (People in South Shore are 50 percent more likely to call 911 than on the other side of Dorchester Avenue.)

Since most violence is unplanned and the result of escalating insults, Ludwig says, intervention is critical —by police, security guards, teachers, shopkeepers or just about any older adults. Doing so in the 10-minute window from “WHAT did you say?” until a gun comes out of a pocket will deter most shootings. This is why “eyes on the street” are important IF they belong to adults willing to step into stressful situations.

There’s another role that neighborhoods play, Ludwig writes, and it has to do with the signals these places send to young people. Something about Greater Grand Crossing makes young men there feel unsafe and believe that, if trouble comes, no one will step in to help. It makes Greater Grand Crossing, he adds, a “wicked learning environment.”

This uncertainty “depletes people’s mental bandwidth due to higher levels of stress and trauma,” Ludwig writes. And this makes it harder to think clearly in that 10-minute window leading to violence.

To explain it, Ludwig introduces us to a field of psychology called behavioral economics. It seeks to understand decision making and, in particular, why people make mistakes over and over. A central concept is that we think in two primary ways, routinely and reflexively (which behavioral economists call System 1) and carefully and slowly (System 2). The trick is to know when you can trust System 1 and when you need to turn to System 2.

If you spend most of your time in safe neighborhoods, System 1 operates just fine, which is good because it is far less emotionally and mentally taxing than System 2. Unfortunately, some places like Greater Grand Crossing serve up enough daily uncertainty for young men—*should I take this street to the corner store and, if so, what dangers might I face?*—that System 1 is exhausted.

When they hear insults and challenges, they depend on a depleted System 1 to tell them what to do rather than pause and think things through. And guns come out of pockets.

The challenge in these neighborhoods, then, is to lower the stress level and invite older people to keep watch. Density, well-designed and maintained public places such as parks, mixed uses and mixed ages can help. Add to that programs that teach young men about their emotions and show them ways of dealing with stress, and we can solve most of our gun violence problems, Ludwig says. And we can do it without locking up more people, getting rid of guns or changing economic inequality.

A considerable amount of the book is about how Ludwig came to these unexpected answers. Much of it is based on social science experiments, some of which weren’t intended as experiments. They just happened in ways that mimicked randomized controlled trials. They ranged from programs that moved families from stressful public housing projects to mixed-income neighborhoods to efforts at building small parks so their effects on public safety could be studied. There were also experiments in training teenagers to handle stressful situations.

What they add up to, Ludwig says, is an opportunity for solving America’s distinctive crime problem by trying something entirely different. These approaches “don’t magically make immoral people moral, or end poverty, or merely reduce crime by locking lots more people up. At least part of what they seem to be doing is interrupting System 1 when it’s about to make a mistake—about to do something System 2 would regret. And the result seems to be, fairly consistently: less violence.”

Footnote 1: Ludwig has spent decades studying violence. Along the way he has assembled a set of facts about murder in America:

- Less than 10 percent of murders involve robberies. So there has to be a reason other than profit for most homicides.
- Most murderers are not psychopaths. Studies of inmates indicate psychopaths make up between 15 and 25 percent of those serving time for murder.
- Only 10 percent of homicides involve multiple victims, so murder is almost always directed at an individual, not a group.
- Chicago police cannot always determine a motive for a homicide, but when they can, they attribute 70 to 80 percent of them as stemming from arguments.

Footnote 2: Why is it important to public safety have older people in a neighborhood? Because gun violence peaks among males in their late teens and twenties, then declines steadily. “As people get older,” Ludwig writes, “they get wiser.”

Footnote 3: Why doesn’t mass incarceration work? *Incarceration* can work, Ludwig says, just not the *mass* part. Locking up psychopaths and career criminals has the greatest impact on making places safer but incarcerating for life every young hothead who killed someone in an argument—not to mention every low-level drug dealer—is horribly expensive and not effective.

And there’s a little-recognized consequence of mass incarceration: It keeps older men out of neighborhoods like Greater Grand Crossing. That neighborhood’s imprisonment rate is a third higher than in South Shore. This means the men who might break up an argument by two 19-year-olds can’t do so because they aren’t there. They are in prison.

When the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group meets, we will discuss Jens Ludwig’s book about how to reduce homicides in cities. We and look for lessons for Urban Atlanta.

Our meeting will be **Nov 4, 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. at 1788 Ponce de Leon Ave. NE, Atlanta GA 30307.**

There’s more information about this discussion at the [Atlanta Urbanist Book Group website](#).

Preparing for the discussion

Here are some questions we’ll consider in our discussion:

1. What are “big ideas” in this book that you think could work in Urban Atlanta (that is, Atlanta and its suburban cities)?
2. If these big ideas were adopted, how could they make Urban Atlanta better?
3. What are some obstacles that might prevent these big ideas being adopted in Urban Atlanta? Are there assets that would help with their adoption?
4. Are there things government officials, civic leaders, neighborhood leaders or citizens could do—collectively or individually—to overcome these obstacles, using our assets?

How to get your copy of *Unforgiving Places*:

- You can purchase a hardcover copy from a local bookstore, such as [Virginia-Highland Books](#).
- You can download an e-book edition from the Barnes & Noble, Apple or Amazon websites.
- You can borrow a copy from the [DeKalb County Public Library](#).