

# A Call to Action to End Gun Violence

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Blood is saturating our streets and bullet-ridden bodies are filling our cemeteries. And before we can mourn one life –another is quickly taken. The recent murder in broad daylight of two young men hard-at work in their family business removing waste in the Tutu community is tragic. These two cousins 29-year-old Rique Ashby and 14-year-old Aaron Ashby will never reach their full potential and their family will never be the same.

This horrific incident brought back painful memories. The murder of my friend Kadeem Leonard when he was barely out of high school.....the traumatic phone call that jolted me out of my sleep alerting me that my brother had been shot multiple times.....the recent murder of my cousin Elon Frett, his son now fatherless.....and the murder of his father policeman Ariel Frett years earlier. The list goes on and many Virgin Islanders can evoke similar, if not darker, memories.

The average homicide victim in the U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI) is a young man in his 20s who is killed by a firearm. A recent study looking at data between 1999-2014 showed an average of 37.4 homicides per 100,000 residents per year in the USVI. This is an alarmingly high rate when compared to other Caribbean Islands or cities in the U.S. And the bloodshed is clearly not slowing down with 27 homicides since the start of 2020. This is the violent reality of life in America's Paradise.

What are we going to do about gun violence? What are you going to do about gun violence?

As a Virgin Islander and primary care doctor, I see this as a public health crisis. There is an African proverb that says, "When the roots of a tree begin to decay, it spreads to the branches." The problem of gun violence in our community has to be addressed starting with the socio-economic root issues, while also focusing on low hanging fruit.

The Center for Disease Control suggests a socio-ecological approach to violence prevention that aims at addressing issues on the individual, interpersonal, community, and societal levels. In other words, individuals, families, neighborhoods, schools, businesses, community organizations, churches, government agencies and lawmakers will ALL need to play a collaborative role if we are to make headway on gun violence prevention.

To be clear, this work will take the entire village. It not only requires real change within ourselves, homes, and neighborhoods, but also requires effective leadership both from the government and grassroots organizations. This may sound overwhelming or lofty, but it can be done. It may look different for you or your organization, but consider any of the following actionable steps:

### **Individual and Interpersonal Actions**

- Talk about how gun violence and trauma has affected you with friends, family or a medical professional.
- Have open conversations with your children and students about how violence and trauma is affecting them. If needed have your child see a therapist or counselor. [Adverse childhood events \(ACEs\) can have a lifelong impact](#), including increased risk for future violence victimization, perpetration and poor health outcomes.
- Learn about healthy parenting strategies from [experts](#) and other parents, through [local](#) and national parenting groups and organizations.
- [Speak up](#) and encourage friends and family members to speak up when they have knowledge of crimes that have been committed.
- Commit to [mentor](#) and/or tutor an at-risk youth. Regular and frequent contact with a role model can have a positive impact. For those abroad, this can also be done virtually.
- Have a skill? Share it with the youth either via partnering with schools, organizations or inviting young people to shadow you as you work.
- Volunteer or donate to local organizations investing in the community. Examples: [Community Action Now](#), [Project Promise](#), [Family Resource Center](#), [Community Foundation of the Virgin Islands](#) and [Lutheran Social Services of the VI](#).
- Create and share an online database of helpful resources that can be easily accessed by the community. Examples: food pantries, safe spaces, mental health professionals, support groups, parenting classes, domestic violence groups, mentorship organizations or after-school programs.

## Community Action & Governmental Action

- Create focus groups inclusive of government agencies (ex. Office of the Governor, Law Enforcement Planning Commission, VIPD, and Departments of Education, Justice, Health, Human Services, Housing Parks & Recreation, and Labor) community organizations, churches, youth, and other stakeholders aimed at addressing gun violence in the community.
- Lead interested community members in organizing a [neighborhood watch program](#). There is strength in numbers.
- Hire, train, and mentor an at-risk youth in your business.
- Clean up neighborhoods. Abandoned cars, buildings, and trash creates the perfect environment for crime.
- Demand that law enforcement take action to curb gun violence with targeted interventions.

## Societal Action

- [Challenge negative social norms](#) via conversations with friends, educational campaigns or social media efforts. For example, the norm that violence is an acceptable way to resolve conflict in our community.

This list is by no means exhaustive or prescriptive, it's meant to start a conversation and spur action. Start sharing stories, resources, ideas, and personal steps you will take to end violence in the USVI using the hashtags #DoingOurPartUSVI and #EndGunViolenceUSVI.

Tell us— what are you going to do?

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