

Brady music: [00:08](#) ***music plays***

JJ: [00:08](#) Hey everybody. This is the legal disclaimer where we tell you that the views, thoughts, and opinion shared on this podcast belong solely to us. The people talking and not necessarily Brady or Brady's affiliates. Please know this podcast does contain discussions of violence that some people may find disturbing. That's okay. We find it pretty disturbing too.

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JJ: [00:51](#) You're back with red, blue, and Brady, the podcast devoted to letting you know what's happened and what's happening and what can happen. And then gun violence prevention world. Today we're here with a mini-sode with Thomas apt app, writes about teaches and researches urban violence. He's here today to tell us about his book, bleeding out what has inspired his research and how we can reduce gun homicide rates by 50% in just eight years. Thomas was kind enough to come into Brady today for a book talk and then for an interview, but it is sort of a shame because yet again, we are JP lists here. We miss his raspy voice and we do miss him, but he's in Denver fighting the good fight in the mile high city, trying to help. All of our great grassroots workers and partners to help prevent gun violence. So Thomas, thank you again so much for being here. Would you mind introducing yourself really quickly to our audience?

Thomas Abt: [01:54](#) Hi, my name is Thomas apt. I'm a senior research fellow at the Harvard Kennedy school of government

JJ: [01:59](#) And we're so happy that you came here today and you brought your book bleeding out, the devastating consequences of urban violence and a bold new plan for peace in the streets. I'm going to refer to, it just says bleeding out from here on out. I hope that's okay. Of course. And one of my first questions for you is what brought you, you yourself into researching urban violence specifically this intersection of urban violence and what is normally just called gun violence?

Thomas Abt: [02:25](#) Sure. So you know, I'm in my uh, mid forties and I really sort of came of age in the late eighties and early nineties when urban violence was peaking. And at the time I think many people may meet who are a little bit younger, don't really appreciate the sort of salience and ubiquity of crime as an issue during that time. Thankfully and around 1991 it started to, to decline. And so I think that was sort of a, a big part of driving interest, but I didn't grow up in a crime ridden neighborhood. But I think that that sort of context of growing up during that time period, um,

had something to do with it. I would also just point out that over the years I've sort of touched this issue from a variety of perspectives. Unfortunately when I was younger I, uh, I taught at a public high school actually here in D C and one of my students was murdered and yeah, no, it was, it was difficult. I've seen this issue as a prosecutor, as a, you know, teacher as a community member. And so over time I just seem to see it and you know, at the both the local, state and federal level. So at some point I just felt like I had a compelling story to tell.

JJ: [03:45](#) And this story predominantly focuses on urban gun violence. And your definition of urban violence is, I think, very interesting and important to be really clear on what you mean it is. And what you mean, isn't it? So could you tell us what you mean by that?

Thomas Abt: [03:59](#) Sure. So urban violence is, you know, violence that is happening in urban areas. It's really sort of happening at the intersection of what's commonly known as youth violence and gang violence and gun violence and street violence and community violence. It's essentially the violence that is between and among often poor young men of color without a lot of hope, without a lot of advantages who are engaging in this violence often for reasons that are not really well understood, not even to them. And so that's really the, there's not really a precise clinical definition, but that's about as close as I can get.

JJ: [04:39](#) So one of the things in in use it a beautiful book talk with all of us and one of the things that came up then, and it comes up quite often in the book, is how the American public pays attention to mass shootings and not everyday gun violence that tends to be centered around urban areas.

Thomas Abt: [04:52](#) Sure. I think that, you know, it's, it's very disappointing, but it's perhaps not surprising that violence that is disproportionately concentrating among the most persecuted and least powerful among us doesn't get a lot of attention and the solutions that have been proven to solve it don't get a lot of support. And so I think the sad reality is that if urban violence was claiming the lives of white children, these solutions would be getting plenty of attention and plenty of funding. And so we just have to acknowledge that, you know, race and privilege still remain relevant and American life and American politics. Interesting thing is other forms of violence, the violence that is in terms of mass shootings has sort of elevated this issue in a way that at times has been, I think, difficult for people who have been struggling in relative obscurity with urban violence. But I think now I'm hopeful that as a, a 10 as people are successfully raising

attention to this issue, generally they're also paying attention to urban gun violence

JJ: [06:08](#) as the whole epidemic gets noticed of gun violence. The idea is that everyone's getting treatment,

Thomas Abt: [06:13](#) right. And I, but I do think the, the researcher in me thinks feels like it's important to remind people to, to dis-aggregate and that, you know, we're not suffering from one gun violence problem in this country. We're suffering from at least for the first being urban gun violence, which accounts for most of the homicides in the United States. The second is domestic violence, which counts for a significant but smaller share mass shootings, which claim about 2% of all gun deaths victims and then uh, suicides, which while they're not violent deaths account for about two thirds of all gun deaths.

JJ: [06:51](#) Expanding on, on that and sort of the desegregation, you also talk about how shooters can't just be counted as perpetrators that in many cases they're also overwhelmingly the victims of violence as well. And I wondered if you could for our listeners to expand on that a little bit, although I have to say that sort of my favorite part of the deep dive you do within the book, the sections pertaining to that. So I really would recommend that our listeners check it out. We'll link to this obviously across all of our social and on our website, Brady, united.org/podcast but I was just wondering how, you know, if this ties in with your other comments in the book that residents of rough neighborhoods do not celebrate violence, but some do you see themselves as having little choice but to embrace it for the purposes of self preservation.

Thomas Abt: [07:35](#) Right. So you know, you know, getting back to your original question, you know, one of the, one of the things you might ask is why would someone like me be interested in this? And I think the reason that I'm interested in, in these issues is because I can recognize the common humanity in the people who are disproportionately impacted and I feel a kinship with them. And part of that is really understanding based upon, uh, you know, the rigorous research that's covered in the book, but also just, you know, over a period of 20 years having worked with street cops and you know, a street outreach workers and clergy members and victims who have lost loved ones that, you know, people are really impacted by their circumstances. And you know, I've worked with a lot of young men. I've prosecuted a fair amount of young men and I've also worked at help help them.

- Thomas Abt: [08:34](#) And one of the things that I really recognized quite early is that if I had been placed in some of those circumstances, if I had been exposed to violence in the home, in the community, if I had been raised without access to quality, you know, education, um, you know, I wasn't given any sort of treatment for the traumatizing experiences that that happened to me. If I had no economic prospects, all of all of these different things, it was pretty clear to me that I might not make better choices. And while we have to hold people accountable for their choices, I think we should really have more empathy and understanding. And so that's part of the, that's sort of a through line through both my research and the book
- JJ: [09:24](#) for our listeners who live in impacted communities, are survivors themselves or know survivors. That idea of hyper vigilance not being something that you can just automatically turn off, right? And that, that then having an impact on your decision making processes, that if we don't address that hyper vigilance along with addressing other issues, we're not really solving the root of the problem.
- Thomas Abt: [09:47](#) Yeah, I think that one of the things that I find very frustrating sometimes is how people misunderstand the victims who sometimes become PR and then sometimes become perpetrators of urban violence and how sometimes they are misdiagnosed in terms of a mental health diagnoses. You know, while people present with various symptoms, overwhelmingly, you know, people who have suffered through this are victims of posttraumatic stress disorder. They, uh, have higher rates of that disorder than most returning veterans. And so, you know, you know, the people who are suffering under this enormous, immense, you know, emotional and mental health burden. It's not because there was something, you know, in their biology, it's because of something terrible that happened to them and often happens. Repeat it repeatedly. One of the hardest things when you're working with a young man who's trying to change his life is to talk about treatment and talk about trauma. Recognizing that after he leaves your offices or leaves this center, he's going right back into the same circumstances. And that's a real sobering thing. And I think sometimes we are just not, uh, we really just don't recognize the reality that people are living with
- JJ: [11:09](#) yet within that. Uh, at the same time, I mean, do you feel that this talks about that what you draw up, which is the difference between would be shooters and someday shooters? Is it sort of just this acknowledgement that we can't end gun violence prevention? We can't stop every violent harm. We can't stop

everyone from going out to commit violence so we can treat those who might become

- Thomas Abt: [11:31](#) sure. You know, I'm a, you know, I'm a deeply pragmatic person and the, and the book is very pragmatic. You know, in law enforcement circles. I'm formerly in law enforcement. Uh, we don't talk about eliminating crime. We talk about controlling crime or reducing crime. And ultimately my sort of vision of, you know, peace in these communities is not communities that are devoid of totally devoid of violence, but that they have the same levels of violence that we have. And our more affluent communities so that when violence happens, it's shocking. It should be shocking. It's terrible. And it should be so abnormal that people are, are devastated by it. But unfortunately, in many, in far too many communities, it's kind of normal.
- JJ: [12:22](#) Yeah. We lose a hundred people a day to gun violence. Now granted, suicide is a part of that. But then based on actually what your book shows very well, the numbers, urban gun violence is that the predominant portion of those that are not suicidal deaths, right? So that means that it's quite normalized and a lot of what will you define as hot communities is that, that's, that's a place where a lot of people are losing people repeatedly in the same network,
- Thomas Abt: [12:49](#) right. Not hot communities, but hot spots. Because in fact, as I say in the book, uh, I get what you're saying. I just, just to clarify, um, we often stigmatize, um, entire communities or entire classes of people with this broad brush of violence. But even in the most so-called violent communities, the vast majority of people are not violent. And the vast majority of the geography is not violent. Uh, and that's something I try to get across in the book, how hyper concentrated violence is. And you know, this is this in some ways, uh, makes it difficult to untangle. But in other ways it makes it enormously efficient. You don't have to work with everyone everywhere all the time, you know, because it's so concentrated. You can target these concentrations and you can create efficiencies.
- JJ: [13:44](#) And it also seems because of that targeted, I mean, what would you suggest? And we'll talk about that a little bit later in terms of solutions or programmatic things that can be done. So it's not very expensive to reduce this problem, to solve it as much as, as much as we can.
- Thomas Abt: [13:58](#) Right.

JJ: [13:58](#) And I think that that sort of ties in to what you called the problem is gun carrying not guns.

Thomas Abt: [14:04](#) Right. So, you know, one of, in terms of gun violence, we often sort of overgeneralize and we say the poverty, the problem is poverty, or the problem is racism. Or the problem is inequality. And all of those things bear a relationship we have. But we also say it, the problem is guns meaning all guns, but in terms of the most rigorously proven solutions, the solutions that are really saving lives, what we see is that the most those solutions are the most targeted. They don't focus on general factors and specifically with guns, they don't focus on all guns. They focus on the particular guns that are most likely to be used by the shooters in these locations that we call hotspots. And so it's not about sort of effective violence reject. Our urban violence reduction generally is focused on proximate causes, not root causes. And so you're not asking these big questions about how does injustice everywhere in America contribute to gun violence and how? Can we remedy that?

JJ: [15:10](#) Some levels of vulnerability, stability---

Thomas Abt: [15:12](#) Right. It's not about boiling the ocean, it's about getting very specific and very concrete. In this city there are 374 high risk proven risk individuals who we'll call hot people. And there's, you know, 57 um, hot spots or hot locations is micro locations and those hotspots and those hot people generate 50 60, 70% of the city shootings. What are we doing it with those hot people and with those hotspots and do we have a set of programs that are both designed to deter them from violent behavior but to also help them and support them in changing their lives?

JJ: [15:57](#) Do we as people who work in gun violence prevention and then just listeners of the podcast in general, how can they do this while also sort of rejecting the race Vegas rhetoric that sometimes I think overwhelms the conversation of urban crime. I think that that's,

Thomas Abt: [16:11](#) I think that's challenging and I do think that that's an obstacle in my work. I find that there are some people who, so just to, just to set this out in the book, I point out that many of the strategies that are most effective have this element of balance. They have some enforcement components and some prevention components. They involve police, but not only please. And so you know, these strategies somewhat challenged the, the priors of many people on the hard left or the hard right. So on the hard left, many people are so mistrustful of law

enforcement that they don't want any involvement with law enforcement whatsoever on the hard right. People believe that only law enforcement is the solution, a sort of lock them up and throw away the key approach and they don't believe in services or support and the evidence really is somewhere in the middle and that you need a little bit of both. And so that is a real challenge

JJ: [17:08](#) Then in terms of the solutions, what do you think specifically of current gun violence prevention proposals, like the legislation that's currently being pushed in front of Congress, do you think that that helps urban gun violence and, and do you think that it helps sort of gun violence overall? What, what are we doing wrong?

Thomas Abt: [17:27](#) So I think that the, the broader gun violence conversation is still too focused around the issue of mass shootings, which are the, we know the least about and are the rarest form of gun violence as opposed to urban violence, which we know the most about and where the most homicides are occurring. I believe that urban violence is simultaneously the most serious in terms of the number of lethalties and the most solvable form of gun violence. That's not to say that we shouldn't be doing everything we can to stop mass shootings or domestic shootings or suicides, but I'd like to see there be more balance in the discussion. And so in terms of the policies that we see in the national gun violence conversation, a lot of them are sort of supply side ideas in terms of background checks or like, you know, limiting the size of magazine clips or you know, licensing firearms or safe storage. All of these things. I think that these are all extremely important and we should be moving forward to do them, but I think we should acknowledge that they're unlikely to have an impact on urban violence. In the short and middle term and so what I like to say is that they're important but they're not a substitute for these policies that I'm talking about in the book there are complement to it. It's a both and not either or. Discussion.

JJ: [18:57](#) And then for some of the solutions that you propose, since we only have a short time together, I'm not going to ask you to go through necessarily all of them, but how you end the book is this idea that we could within eight years in the U S reduce the homicide rate by 50% that's incredibly substantial in a short amount of time for a really almost insignificant as far as government budgets go amount of money.

Thomas Abt: [19:21](#) Right. So let's just talk about one particular strategy covered in the book, something called the group violence reduction

strategy, otherwise known as focused deterrence. This is a strategy where a partnership of police community members and service providers come together and they do an analysis and they identify the groups and individuals who are driving violence in a particular city. And often that's a surprisingly small number of people in Oakland for instance, when they did this analysis, it came up with about 400 people, a number that was much smaller than people expected and then through a series of sort of small meetings, a not all at once. This partnership will reach out and engage and even confront these individuals face to face and they'll give them a strong message and the message is this, we know that it's you who's doing the shooting and it has to stop. If you put the guns down, we will help you.

Thomas Abt:

[20:22](#)

If you refuse to put the guns down, we will stop you. And so it's a, it's a very balanced message. It's a message that's offering support but also consequences and then partnership then as to follow up on those promises in terms of helping those who want to get out of the life and giving them services, support and treatment, Dobbs and education, all of those types of things, but also then meaningfully following up and investigating and ultimately charging and prosecuting those individuals who just simply refuse and continue to keep shooting. You know, the strategy has been done in locations all over the country. There are a number of evaluations of it. It is, it's generally producing reductions in shootings and killings of 30 40 50% and most recently in Oakland the program was launched in 2012 and despite a history, a very difficult police community relationships and despite of some massive changes in some police scandals and changes in police leadership, despite all of that, the program is delivered hoarding to a rigorous evaluation of 50% reduction in homicide.

Thomas Abt:

[21:33](#)

And so you know, if Oakland can do it, I believe other cities can. And in fact other cities have. What my strategy says is you can use strategies like the G VRS, the group violence reduction strategy, and others like cognitive behavioral therapy, like family functional therapy, like urban greening and other issues. A small number of strategies, join them together and focus them on the hot people and hotspots in your city. And if you do that for a surprisingly small amount of money, you can get a 10% reduction in homicide every year for eight years, which ultimately results in a more than 50% reduction. Now, you know, in a city like Chicago that could save as many as 700 lives across the 40 most violent cities in the United States. If we did it in a national program, it would save 12,000 lives. And so that's the, uh, that's really the impetus for the book is to sort of explain in very simple terms that it doesn't have to be this way,

that really progress is possible and it doesn't require a sort of a revolution in terms of legislation or budgets or anything else. This is doable right now. So while the book, you know, delves into some very dark subjects, it's ultimately an optimistic book.

JJ: [22:56](#) What can, in addition, obviously to going out buying the book, reading the book, what can people who do want to have a positive impact on reducing urban gun violence? What can they do specifically?

Thomas Abt: [23:09](#) Sure. What do such a great question. I think the best thing that they can do is get involved locally. You know, if you live in, if you live in a nice neighborhood in a city in the, in the nine States, it's likely that only a few miles away from you. There's a community that is really suffering from serious rates of gun violence. And what I would say is get involved in the issue low locally start learning what's being done, start going to community, you know, organizations that are working on this and really educate yourself. And one of the that I think we often see is people are willing to sort of invite people from these impacted communities into their spaces, but they won't go into the spaces themselves. So in Boston I'm saying go to Matt pan, go to Roxbury, build relationships there. And if you're not from those communities and you have access to money and influence and capital that they don't normally have, start using that to ask the tough questions and say, Hey, there's a lot of evidence out there that shows you could do a, B and C to significantly impact this problem.

Thomas Abt: [24:23](#) Why aren't we doing that? And you know, talk to your council members, talk to your mayor and uh, talk to people like that. We need to constituency to support these programs. But it doesn't need to be a big constituency. It just needs to be allowed constituency. And in fact, if I'm speaking to a group of maybe 50 to 75 people in a, in a city, I often say if this group all 50 to 75 of you got together and were very committed, you could change violence in this city. It's, it's if you're organized and if you're committed, it doesn't take, you know, a massive number of people. It's more about quality and less about quantity.

Brady music: [25:06](#) **music plays**

JJ: [25:06](#) Thanks for listening. As always, Brady's lifesaving work in Congress. The courts and communities across the country is made possible. Thanks to you. For more information on Brady or how to get involved in the fight against gun violence, please like and subscribe to the podcast. New full length episodes.

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remember, take action. Not sides.

Brady music:

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