

St. Louis Episcopalians act against gun violence as homicide rate spikes

by [David Paulsen](#) in the [April 26, 2017](#) issue

St. Louis is being called America's murder capital after a recent spike in gun violence, making the city the site of more killings per capita than any other major U.S. city.

The 188 killings last year prompted a renewed focus, including by the Episcopal Diocese of Missouri, on the causes and possible solutions of such violence.

"One death is too many," said Marc Smith, who last year became the bishop's deputy for gun violence prevention. But developing a plan of response defies easy answers.

"Looking for the elegant, simple solution is wrong," he said. "It is an incredibly complex problem."

One of Smith's tasks is to help 36 community organizations coordinate more effectively on the issue of gun violence. He's also trying to mobilize Episcopalians at the parish level to work toward a tangible first goal: giving away gun locks to gun owners.

Accidental shootings and suicides often are overlooked in the debate over gun violence, Smith said, but this danger is "probably the easiest to solve." The diocese recently began a partnership with Washington University's School of Medicine and a group called Women's Voices Raised for Social Justice to support the group's Lock It for Love initiative.

Lock It for Love aims to reduce the frequency of suicides and accidental shootings by children by distributing gun locks for free. Since April 2015, Women's Voices Raised has given out about 1,500 gun locks to families, mostly at health fairs and similar events, President Lise Bernstein said.

“Sometimes the issue of gun violence can just seem overwhelming and frustrating and depressing,” Bernstein said. The focus on gun locks was a way to rally the community around a hands-on solution to one slice of the larger problem.

Bernstein and Smith also share the belief that gun violence should be tackled as a public health issue, an approach that draws on Smith’s experience as a health-care administrator.

Smith, who grew up in the St. Louis area, began serving as a priest in 2011 at the Church of the Ascension on St. Louis’s North Side. About six months into the job, he attended the wake and funeral of a woman who was killed in a drive-by shooting. It was a scene he would witness again and again.

“The sense of desperation and hopelessness and powerlessness is crippling,” he said.

Much national attention has been focused on Chicago, which recorded the most total homicides in 2016 with more than 760. [Cardinal Blase Cupich of Chicago launched an antiviolence initiative in early April, including a [Good Friday stations of the cross procession remembering murder victims.](#)]

Smaller cities like St. Louis, Detroit, and New Orleans have suffered from even higher rates of homicide per capita. St. Louis recorded nearly 60 homicides per 100,000 people last year.

The national murder rate has risen over the past two years, and the possible causes, from gang activity to policing policies, are hotly debated.

At the local level, gun violence prevention often emphasizes the practical. In St. Louis, for example, there is a group of black clergy known as “homicide ministers” who reach out to victims’ families, attend funerals, and provide assistance as needed. The Episcopal diocese is developing a plan to partner with the ministers.

Smith also is looking for additional, simple ways for Episcopalians to get involved.

“So many people have expressed a desire to help, and yet most people are not inclined or well equipped to be homicide ministers,” he said.

He has asked each congregation to identify one parishioner to serve as a liaison to the diocese as it coordinates efforts. Congregations can support Lock It for Love in

multiple ways, such as by holding fund-raisers for the money to buy the gun locks or by sending volunteers to promote the campaign at health fairs.

Smith hopes this initial project will inspire Episcopalians in the St. Louis area to get active on the issue of gun violence and eventually help expand the diocese's outreach to address some of the underlying causes.

“Regardless of the debate over gun safety and constraints on guns, young people are still going to kill young people,” he said. “And toward that end, I want our limited resources to try to minimize that from happening, to help families pick up the pieces and not get caught in a cycle of retaliation.” —Episcopal News Service