Background. In the early 1990s, the United States was in the midst of an “epidemic of gun violence.” Although hospitals had become much better at treating gunshot victims, deaths caused by firearms increased from 28,000 in the early 1980s to nearly 40,000 in the early 1990s. Public sentiment demanded action to curb fatalities resulting from gun violence, but bitter division arose over proposed policy solutions. Tighter restrictions on gun ownership and regulations on gun manufacture garnered some support, but gun manufacturers and the National Rifle Association protested ardently that such restrictions would endanger the public rather than curb gun violence. Some municipalities and families of victims filed civil suits against gun manufacturers directly for complicity in the rise in gun violence, asking courts to take actions where legislators would not do so.

A lack of comprehensive information about the circumstances surrounding incidents of gun violence facilitated this disagreement over the underlying causes and appropriate policy responses to gun violence. In fact, when studies in 1996 suggested a decline in gun violence had occurred, experts could not agree on the causes of the decline, with some pointing to gun control measures and others to attitudinal changes among young people.

In stark contrast to the lack of information on the circumstances surrounding violent deaths and gun-related crimes, a comprehensive database of traffic fatalities, maintained by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, has long provided policy makers as well as the public with extensive data about each traffic fatality. Public health researchers have pointed to the importance of the database in helping to develop policies on safety belts and air bags that have indisputably resulted in the saving of lives. No such database had ever been available for gun violence, even at a local or regional level, prior to the Joyce Foundation’s involvement.

Strategy. The Joyce Foundation’s program on gun violence began with the arrival of Deborah Leff as president of the Foundation in 1992. Leff came to the Joyce Foundation after having served as producer to the news shows “ABC World News Tonight with Peter Jennings” and “20/20.” She personally undertook a research initiative on gun violence and convinced her board to begin making grants in the area in early 1993; results of an initial poll commissioned by the Foundation received widespread media coverage. In the foundation world, Joyce was the first to address gun violence as a matter of grave public health.

The Foundation’s early funding efforts in gun violence included a great deal of fact-finding through the commissioning of reports and public opinion polls. Through its study, the Foundation came to believe that policy makers needed accurate information to craft appropriate solutions to solve the problems of gun violence. A survey commissioned by the Foundation reported that, even at the state level, little was done to maintain data on gun related injuries. Without the answers to important questions about gun violence, such as what proportion of homicides are related to drug trafficking, or whether homicides at school are increasing or decreasing, public officials had little basis for instituting new policies to reduce the number of gun-related fatalities. With no records keeping track of such data, policy makers have instead had to rely on fragmented information, anecdotal evidence, and speculation. A study by the National Academy of Sciences years after the Foundation began its work in the field of gun violence confirmed that the utter lack of information about gun-related crime left policy scholars unable to judge the effectiveness of a wide variety of policies.
Among its other gun violence initiatives, the Foundation adopted a strategy of promoting a database for violent and gun-related deaths the better to inform policy decisions and to correct misperceptions among the public about the nature and extent of gun violence. In 1994, the Foundation made an initial grant to Dr. Stephen Hargarten at the Medical College of Wisconsin to begin a pilot database of violent and gun-related deaths in an eight-county region in Wisconsin. Hargarten collected data from numerous sources, including medical examiners, state crime laboratories, and police reports. The database was designed to record about 200 details surrounding each gun-related fatality. Another Joyce Foundation grant partially funded a pilot program at the Harvard School of Public Health that worked to improve the design and streamline the data collection process for a national gun violence database.

**Impact.** The Joyce Foundation’s efforts to promote a nationwide database on gun violence are near full realization. A number of health organizations, such as the American Public Health Association, the American College of Physicians, and the American Psychiatric Association have called for a nation-wide system of violent death reporting modeled after the system developed by Joyce grantees. With the support of such groups and a broader public sentiment favoring better data collection, President Bush in 2002 instructed the CDC to direct $1.5 million to begin building a National Violent Death Reporting System (NVDRS). The database methods developed by Joyce Foundation grantees in Wisconsin and at Harvard have served as models for the new NVDRS.

The head of the NVDRS anticipated that nationwide deployment of the program would take up to ten years. The CDC announced in September 2002 that six states would receive grants totaling $7.5 million over five years to begin developing the system at the state level. By early 2005, Congress had expanded the NVDRS to include seventeen states. At its current rate of expansion, the NVDRS is on pace to provide policy makers and the public with detailed information on every violent fatality in the United States within ten years of its creation and less than twenty years after the Joyce Foundation first instituted its program on gun violence.

**Notes**

1212. Ibid.
1219. Ibid.
1220. Ibid.
1225. Ibid.