Mothers' Plights to Protect their Children and the Impact on

Workplace Performance

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This afternoon another child told your son, "I'm going to kill you dead. Actually, just go home and kill yourself."
~~Message to a Preschooler's Mother

Introduction

With the focus on mental health awareness in May, this topic arose from a need to investigate potential connections between the worries mothers experience and how workplaces respond to and support worried mothers. Falling second only to stresses over personal finances, lower-income and mid/high-income working mothers alike are equally worried about their children—worried about exposure to unhealthy or criminal behavior and worried about school safety (University of Phoenix, 2023). Research shows mothers' worries are valid. Exposure to violence is nearly unavoidable as unhealthy and criminal behavior intrudes on television and movies, social media, and in daily life resulting in increased risks for similar behavior and mental health concerns. Gun violence in the United States (U.S.), specifically, results in an alarming number of lives lost and continues to trend upwards. Compounding the issue, active shooter incidents in U.S. schools continues to increase demonstrating schools are no longer considered safe spaces to learn. Working mothers carry these worries with them, which may impact their mental health. Considering the increasing importance, reasons why working mothers worry along with the impact and options for support in the workplace are explored.

Exposure to Violence

Glorified through entertainment or witnessed in households, children and teens witness unhealthy behaviors in a variety of ways. Violent behavior, specifically, is found in video games, books, movies, television shows, toys, and social media to name a few. Exposure to violence facilitates hostile thoughts and aggression, which may lead to increased exposure to violence (Zhu et al., 2022). Research further confirmed children exposed to unhealthy or violent behavior

outside of the home are at increased risk for violence, delinquency, or other health-risk behaviors later in adolescence (Warner et al., 2023). Similarly, Kowalski et al. (2024) found abuse experienced as a child resulted in a strong association to internal and external behavioral health disorders, with physical abuse relating to substance use disorders. Gun victimization and physical assault, specifically, were associated with clinically significant posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms (Allwood et al., 2023). Exposure to unhealthy and violent behavior is inevitable, and children and teens are no exception. The consequences of such exposure can be severe and permanently damaging. Protecting the hearts, minds, and bodies of children is becoming an increasingly difficult task for working mothers, and there are little to no options when gun violence infiltrates otherwise safe spaces.

Protection from Harm

Gun violence can occur anywhere and at any time—to name a few places, gun violence occurs on the streets, in the open, in the workplace, in the home, in malls, nightclubs, places of worship, grocery stores, and schools—and can impact anyone. Widely considered a U.S. phenomenon, the frequency of gun violence may leave many Americans feeling both overwhelmed with the complexity and magnitude of the issue or desensitized unless and until the violence invades on a personal level (Wagner, 2022). Further, extensive legislative challenges prevent implementation of any effective gun control (Zundel-Davis, 2023). Firearm-related injuries have been the leading cause of death for children and teens in the U.S. since 2020 (Banks, 2022; CDC, 2023; Goldstick et al., 2022; Marsh, 2024; Roberts et al., 2023). Not even five months into 2024, the Gun Violence Archive (2024a) reported there have already been 80 children killed, 181 children injured, 405 teens killed, and 1,080 teens injured by gun violence. Figure 1 and Figure 2 demonstrate a 10-year trend of lives lost. In 2023, there were 1,121

incidents involving guns in U.S. schools (Gun Violence Archive, 2024b). Guns are apparently

here to stay, and accessibility is becoming increasingly easier as more children and teens

continue to lose their lives over gun violence. Aside from worrying, there is mostly a pivot to

defensive postures in the form of raising awareness and conducting active shooter drills. With

the threat of gun violence looming daily, working mothers are finding ways to navigate their

professional lives while maintaining composure. Inside, working mothers are worried.

Figure 1
Children (Age 0-11) and Gun Violence
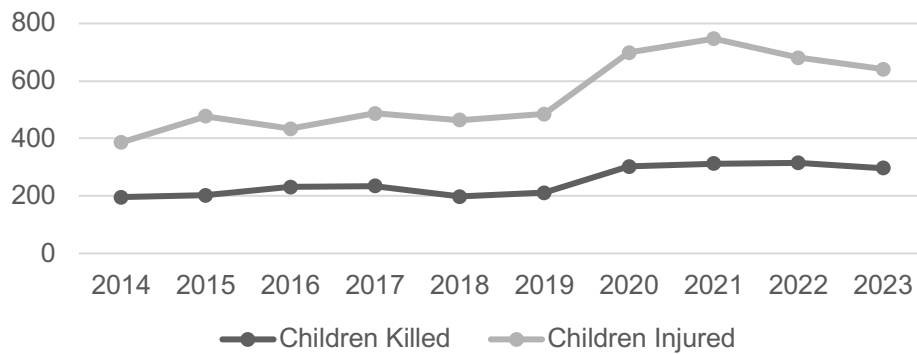
Note. Data gathered from the Gun Violence Archive (2024a).

Figure 2
Teens (Age 12-17) and Gun Violence
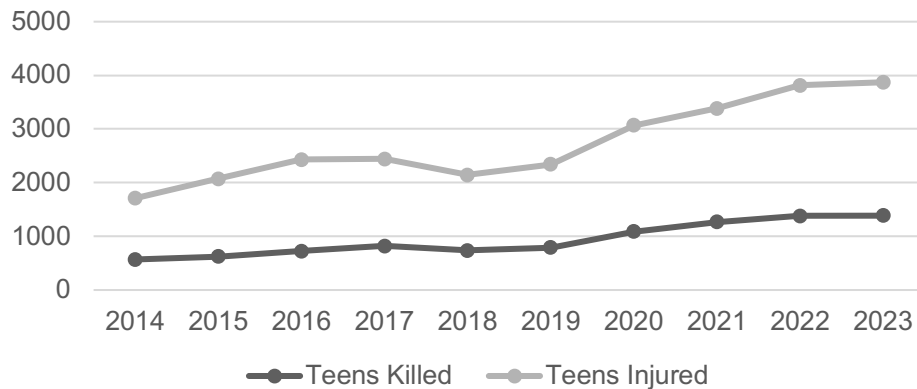
Note. Data gathered from the Gun Violence Archive (2024a).

Worry in the Workplace

The intensity of worries experienced vary, but dismissing significant worries altogether

could be detrimental. The American Psychological Association (2018) defines worry as "a state

of mental distress or agitation due to concern about an impending or anticipated event, threat, or danger" (para. 1). While the constructs of worry in relation to implications concerning mental health fluctuate (Boehnke et al., 1998; Gana et al., 2001; Levy & Guttman, 1975), the uncontrollable nature of worry persists. Being female, or more notably being a mother, is predictive of worry (Gana et al., 2001). Worry is inevitable, but debilitation from worry is not.

Worry carried by mothers can produce motivational benefits such as keeping an issue at the top of mind resulting in increased action or by triggering mitigation efforts when confronted with bad news leading to more productive responses (Sweeny & Dooley, 2017). Recognizing the upside to worry may empower mothers to embrace and appreciate the ability to worry. Mothers worrying about their children may also start analyzing options that are within their control, which may lead to potential actions to reach goals limiting worry. Working mothers need space to acknowledge the worry and consider options that will keep their children safe.

Negative impacts to mental health may develop without proper support and recognition from employers of the worries mothers experience. Connecting worry to mental health, 60% of workers, regardless of gender, say their mental health directly impacts their performance at work (University of Phoenix, 2024). Employers acknowledging the severity of worries experienced by working mothers might demonstrate understanding and respect, and when employers treat employees with respect, 85% of workers agree they would feel more optimistic about the future of their careers (University of Phoenix, 2024). This further aligns with the motivating function worry produces, which supports goal-directed action, productivity, and optimism.

Conclusion

Although National Mental Health Awareness Month is coming to a close, employers are encouraged to ensure working mothers are sufficiently supported in an effort to acknowledge the

impact of the exposure and daily worries over their children in the workplace. Employers may consider sharing regular resources focusing on all areas of well-being to help with the inevitable worries working mothers experience. In addition to creating a positive workplace environment from a place of caring and empathy, specific support may consist of providing the number for a warmline where working mothers can find immediate support (Mental Health America, 2024). Establishing employee resource groups or other safe spaces where working mothers can connect to discuss current concerns is another consideration to prioritize productive conversations. Employers embracing working mothers and their worries demonstrates respect for their wellbeing and awareness of the unthinkable and unimaginable threats their children are facing.

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