UC SANTA BARBARA
THE Current

January 6, 2026
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New data shows gun violence drives major declines in neighborhood foot traffic and economic growth

Gun violence incidents profoundly impact American neighborhoods in ways that extend beyond the immediate harm. Drawing on millions of mobile-device location records paired with 30,000 gun violence incidents, UC Santa Barbara sociologist Masoud Movahed has quantified how shootings reduce the number of people who visit affected neighborhoods, identifying a causal relationship between gun violence incidents, local economic activity and racialized patterns of segregation.

Movahed's new paper in Spatial Demography, co-authored with Karl Vachuska (University of Wisconsin-Madison), underscores neighborhood "visibility" as an important and often overlooked dimension of urban inequality.

The study offers one of the first comprehensive looks at how gun violence influences neighborhood mobility patterns across U.S. neighborhoods, adding a distinct angle to extensive neighborhood stratification and gun violence research. By introducing "neighborhood popularity" — a measure of how often people from *outside* a neighborhood visit it — Vachuska and Movahed highlight an underexplored mechanism through which inequality and segregation persist.

"Neighborhood disadvantage is usually measured with things like income levels, wealth, poverty rate or racial composition," Movahed said. "We wanted to add

another layer: How visible are neighborhoods to the rest of the city? How many new people come in, how many stay away, and how does gun violence change that?”

To address those questions, the authors constructed a unique dataset by merging data from the Gun Violence Archive with anonymized geolocated mobile-device data representing roughly 40 million unique visitors nationwide. They analyzed visitor patterns in a 28-day window before and after gun incidents, comparing affected neighborhoods with similar ones that did not experience shootings. This quasi-experimental framework enabled the authors to isolate the *causal* effect of a shooting on visitor behavior.

The results show a sharp and measurable decline in neighborhood visits following gun violence. Indeed, the authors find that non-fatal and single-fatality gun violence incidents cost U.S. neighborhoods approximately 5.626 million visitors and 3.328 million visitors, respectively, over just the subsequent 27-day period alone. “If even a fraction of those new visitors would have bought just one cup of coffee, you can start to see the local economic loss add up,” Movahed said.

This economic impact of gun violence is not evenly felt. The study finds that the decline in visitors is especially severe in majority Black and majority Hispanic neighborhoods, and even more pronounced in communities where at least 80% of residents are Black or Hispanic. White visitors in particular show the largest decline in visits to predominantly Black neighborhoods after a shooting.

“Neighborhood visibility as a dimension of neighborhood stratification is a highly racialized process, just like many other spheres of public life in the United States,” Movahed said. “Gun violence doesn’t just harm individuals and families. It also deepens segregation by making already isolated neighborhoods even less connected to the rest of the city.”

Businesses such as restaurants, retail shops and essential services take an economic hit, but Movahed also emphasized the social implications of reduced neighborhood activity. Visibility, he explained, is closely tied to social capital — the networks and connections that help people access opportunities. When fewer visitors come in, residents have fewer points of contact with people outside their immediate community, which can further entrench patterns of segregation and limit access to broader resources.

“Visibility is a form of nonmaterial inequality,” he said. “When fewer people visit your neighborhood, your access to social capital is impeded. You’re being deprived of chances to be integrated into the broader society in the way others are.”

The findings contribute to greater policy conversations by quantifying the community-level costs of gun violence. “Gun violence is a byproduct of weak gun control,” Movahed said. “Our work shows that beyond the tragic loss of life, there is substantial economic harm and a deepening of segregation. More rigorous laws and regulations around gun possession are critical not only for public safety, but also for local economic dynamism and for giving all neighborhoods a real chance to flourish.”

Movahed, who joined UCSB’s Department of Sociology in 2025 and is a research affiliate with the campus’s Broom Center for Demography, places this work squarely within his broader research agenda on income inequality, wealth inequality and intergenerational economic mobility. As a quantitative and computational sociologist, he studies both material disparities and the less visible social processes that shape life outcomes across communities at home and around the world.

“I study economic inequalities, but also the less tangible ones — who is seen, who is visited, who is connected,” he said. “This project extends that agenda into the spatial and social fabric of cities, showing how violence interacts with those inequalities and how it can reinforce them.”

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Data Science

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