

OPINION



Voting rights activists gather outside the U.S. Supreme Court for oral arguments in the Alexander v. South Carolina Conference of the NAACP gerrymandering case in Washington in October. **BILL CLARK/CQ-ROLL CALL INC.**

What the US can learn from Canada about ending gerrymandering

By Robert Weiner and Olivia Ardito

Over the past few years, the legitimacy of American elections has been called into question by Democrats and Republicans alike. Both sides can point fingers and claim the opposing party may try to cheat, scheme or tamper with the election results in some way. At all levels, American elections have been subject to criticism, and it seems to be a general consensus that everyone wants American elections to be more fair.

What is one easy way the U.S. could ensure our future elections are more fair? Getting rid of gerrymandering is a strong start.

To do that, we should look to our northern neighbor since Canada has set a great example.

There is no doubt that the U.S. suffers from extremely high levels of gerrymandering. Look at the Illinois congressional districts in Chicago. Some call Chicago the most gerrymandered city in the country. Nicknamed “the earmuffs” because of its bizarre shape, Illinois’ 4th District, consist-

ing of various bits of western Chicago, is a prime example. The district was handcrafted to include even specific blocks and houses. The bias is evident, and it’s everywhere across the nation — cities and rural areas alike.

Gerrymandering has a long history. It was named after former Massachusetts Gov. Elbridge Gerry who, in 1811, specifically remapped a district to help his party win electoral seats. Since then, it has become common practice in the U.S. for states to redistrict to ensure their party has the best shot at winning.

While Democrats first realized how to gerrymander, in recent years, Republicans have used it the most to their benefit.

Canada, like the U.S., suffered from gerrymandering. However, today the country is entirely free of gerrymandering. Here’s how Canada did it and what we can learn from our neighbor.

In Canada, districts known as “ridings” are drawn at the provincial level by a commission consisting of a superior court judge chosen by the chief justice and two others chosen by the speaker of the House. Nota-

bly, members of the Senate, House or provincial legislature cannot be on these commissions. This helps avoid the potential of political officials manipulating ridings for their personal gain. Typically, the additional two members are professors, urban geographers, mapmakers or professionals in related jobs. Their expertise in mapmaking, sociology and more help ensure ridings are as fair and practical as possible.

With this simple change, Canada got rid of gerrymandering. If we followed our neighbor’s lead, we could too.

There have also been many attempts across the U.S. to end gerrymandering. For example, then-Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger tackled gerrymandering in California by creating a commission of impartial Californians to draw districts. Members of this commission apply of their own will, are split equally along party lines and vow to be impartial.

While Schwarzenegger’s plan is strong and has helped California, it’s not perfect, considering how deeply polarized the public is right now and how intensely party divisions affect

everyday Americans.

Canada’s combination of a local-level judge, someone who has already sworn impartiality to the country, removes this issue. Additionally, the knowledge experts help fine-tune the boundaries. As Canada does this process at the provincial level, the U.S. could implement this at a state level and potentially adjust the number of commission members to fit state size. The system works for our northern neighbor and, with a few contextual tweaks, could work for us too.

If we learn something from Canada about ending gerrymandering, we could make elections in America more free and fair and, in turn, strengthen American democracy. And a stronger democracy is something everyone can get behind, eh?

Robert Weiner was a spokesman in the Bill Clinton and George W. Bush White Houses. He was communications director for several congressional committees. Olivia Ardito is a policy analyst, research coordinator and writer working at Robert Weiner Associates News and Solutions for Change.

Black men’s suicides by gun need to be part of violence prevention

By Janelle Goodwill

People who do not live in Chicago have a lot to say about gun violence in Chicago. Some comments ring hollow, feel deeply disingenuous and are devoid of true care and concern for the holistic well-being of Black residents in this city.

Take, for example, Republican U.S. Sen. John Kennedy of Louisiana, who during a November Senate Judiciary Committee hearing on gun violence asked Dr. Megan Ranney of the Yale School of Public Health: Why has Chicago “become America’s largest outdoor shooting range?” Several other political leaders, cable news hosts and U.S. presidential hopefuls have made similar statements when describing violence in Chicago in public forums or settings.

What these commenters fail to realize is that gun violence in Chicago is not just an issue of homicide but also an urgent concern for matters of suicide prevention.

I say this in response to a new study that my colleague and I recently published in the American Journal of Public Health in which we found that Black Americans were the only group to experience a significant increase in suicides among both males and females in Chicago from 2015 to 2021.

Further, suicide rates for Black

men in Chicago increased from 7.7 per 100,000 in 2015 to 14.1 in 2021.

Results from our study also indicate that 55% of Black men who died by suicide in Chicago did so using a firearm. This percentage was higher than that of every other race and sex group affected by suicide in the city, as other populations more commonly turned to hanging or overdose instead.

It is imperative for researchers and clinicians to understand not just the rate at which individuals are dying by suicide, but also the method people are using to end their lives.

Learning more about the mechanisms different groups use when planning a suicide offers mental health professionals much needed insight when working to develop prevention programs and interventions.

Still, it seems that national news outlets continue to amplify homicide rates in Chicago without carefully considering the ways that gun violence also negatively affects experiences of mental health felt within Black communities across the city.

In 2022, ABC News reported on gun violence in Chicago. Information describing the increase in suicides among Black Chicagoans, however, was not mentioned.

Rather, local journalists have led the charge in raising aware-

ness about the rise of suicides in Cook County. The diligent reporting on the alarming rise in Black suicides by Lakeidra Chavis for Injustice Watch has been instrumental in my own understanding of this topic. In my view, support is needed at both the local and national levels in order to prevent more Black suicides from occurring.

Moreover, instead of taking to heart the words of those who have no vested commitment to the flourishing and well-being of Black Chicagoans, I turn to insights offered by Richard Wright, who penned these powerful words in the 1940 classic “Native Son.”

Set in the Bronzeville neighborhood on Chicago’s South Side, Wright opens the novel by describing the plight of protagonist Bigger Thomas following an argument between Bigger and his mother as she decries his shortcomings surrounding issues of financial stress, family responsibility and masculinity.

Wright, in reference to Thomas, goes on to say: “He knew that the moment he allowed what his life meant to enter fully into his consciousness, he would either kill himself or someone else. So he denied himself and acted tough.”

In Chicago in particular, we are witnessing a new generation of Black men who are grappling with some of the same issues

faced by Bigger Thomas, but who now have easier access to firearms.

This is just one of many places in which I believe that policymakers are uniquely positioned to intervene in restricting access to firearms in Chicago and across the nation.

Instead of using gun violence among Black men in Chicago in an attempt to score political wins during Senate hearings and presidential debates, I ask that policymakers and elected officials commit to creating pathways to accessible mental health treatment for those in need.

In our peer-reviewed study, we discuss updating eligibility for the Illinois firearm owner’s identification card, along with the Protect Illinois Communities Act that went into effect in 2023.

A consistent approach to restricting firearms, however, is yet to be implemented at the federal level.

Additionally, I ask that policymakers invest in establishing public mental health centers that offer treatment to all residents, irrespective of their insurance coverage or ability to pay.

Six mental health centers were closed in Chicago after a 2012 decision to redress the city’s deficit included the closure of these city-run facilities. Several closures occurred in Black and Latino neighborhoods on the West and South sides.

The reopening of public mental health clinics, coupled with the development of new mental health centers, could help mitigate risk for suicide among Chicago’s most understudied and vulnerable populations.

Let this be a lesson for what other states and cities should consider before choosing to eliminate potentially lifesaving mental health resources within marginalized communities.

Overall, the findings presented in our study complicate our understanding and perceptions of gun violence in Chicago — particularly among Black men — by demonstrating that Black men in this city are using guns to end their lives by suicide too. Suicide, therefore, persists as an understudied and overlooked form of gun violence in Chicago and does not get the local and national attention that it deserves.

Existing violence prevention programs should be expanded to prioritize suicide prevention alongside homicide reduction, as both forms of violence are disproportionately contributing to the loss of Black lives in Chicago today.

Janelle Goodwill is an assistant professor at the University of Chicago who leads research projects that focus on issues of mental health promotion, suicide prevention and racial disparities in Chicago.