



## How Gun Violence Survivors Navigate the Aftermath through Online Communities

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Gun violence can leave deep, lasting effects that go far beyond the immediate injury or loss. Survivors often struggle with emotional pain, social isolation, and practical challenges, but support isn't always easy to find. Understanding how people cope and rebuild their lives after such experiences is essential for helping communities heal.

A [new qualitative study](#) explores how survivors of gun violence use online communities to process trauma, rebuild identity, and connect with others who share similar experiences. Through in-depth interviews with 12 survivors affiliated with online support networks, the study reveals that these digital spaces play a powerful, but complex, role in the aftermath.

Rather than simply offering emotional support, online survivor networks help people make sense of their experiences, find language to describe what they have lived through, and connect their personal stories to broader community and advocacy efforts. The study suggests that hospitals, community programs, and violence intervention programs should help connect survivors to these networks of peers with shared experiences for informal support.

### Why Online Survivor Networks Matter

For many survivors, the aftermath of gun violence can feel isolating. Participants in this study described online communities as the first places where they felt understood without needing to explain their experiences. Within these spaces, survivors encountered others who shared similar trauma, helping them feel less alone. Many participants said these communities gave them a sense of belonging and validation that they struggled to find elsewhere.

Just as importantly, the networks often provided practical help. Survivors shared information about therapy, financial assistance, victims' compensation programs, and memorial events. In this way, online communities often filled gaps left by formal healthcare or social service systems.

### Finding Language and Identity After Trauma

Online networks help survivors develop a shared language for their experiences. Many participants said they did not initially think of themselves as "survivors" in the aftermath of their experience with gun violence. Instead, that identity emerged through conversations within these communities. Hearing others use this language allowed participants to reinterpret their experiences and see themselves as part of a broader collective. These networks, therefore, function not just as support groups but as interpretive communities:

spaces where survivors collectively shape how gun violence is understood and how survivorship is defined.

Some survivors used these networks to channel their experiences into civic engagement. Participants described speaking at events, mentoring others, organizing community programs, or sharing their stories publicly to raise awareness. For these individuals, advocacy offered a way to transform personal tragedy into a sense of purpose. However, not all survivors felt comfortable with these expectations. Some participants described feeling pressure to turn their trauma into activism or to publicly share their stories. Others wanted to focus on healing privately rather than participating in advocacy. This highlights a key tension within survivor networks: while they can empower collective action, they can also create subtle expectations about how survivors should respond to trauma.

There's also the complicated role of visibility. Sharing stories publicly (whether online, in the media, or at events) can help survivors feel heard and can bring attention to the realities of gun violence, but it can also be emotionally exhausting. Participants described carefully managing how much of their story they shared and when. Some worried about retraumatization from repeatedly recounting their experiences, while others felt pressure to present their stories in ways that aligned with organizational or political goals. This work of balancing highlights the emotional labor involved in publicly "performing" survivorship.

## Recovery as an Ongoing Process

Importantly, survivors' relationships with these networks often changed over time. Immediately after violence, participants often relied heavily on online communities for connection and guidance. Later, some transitioned into mentoring roles, supporting newer survivors who were just beginning to process their experiences. Others stepped back from the networks to protect their own well-being. These shifting patterns show that recovery is not a linear journey, but an evolving process shaped by changing needs and capacities.

## How to Improve Access to Peer-Support Communities

Surviving gun violence can often be an isolating experience, even when statistically we are aware that many in the United States have this shared experience. Supporting community-building among survivors can help them heal and organize. Research findings suggest several opportunities for community support programs and healthcare organizations to strengthen support for survivors of gun violence:

- **Recognize survivor networks as part of the recovery infrastructure.** Public health agencies and philanthropic funders should support survivor-led peer networks as complements to formal healthcare and victim services.
- **Integrate survivor networks into healthcare and victim service referrals.** Hospitals, trauma centers, and violence intervention programs should provide survivors with information about trusted peer-support communities alongside mental health and legal resources.
- **Expand equitable digital access.** Programs that support internet access, digital literacy, and hybrid online/offline support models can help ensure more survivors benefit from peer networks.
- **Protect survivors from advocacy burnout.** Survivor organizations should ensure storytelling and public engagement remain voluntary and provide guidance and mental health support for those who choose to participate.

- **Include survivors in policy and program design.** Public health practitioners, community violence interrupters, and researchers should amplify survivors' voices in the development of violence recovery programs, research initiatives, and response policies.

The evidence is clear: peer networks are not a peripheral resource but a critical component of gun violence recovery infrastructure. Adopting the recommendations in this brief – from integrating survivor networks into clinical referral pathways to protecting participants from advocacy burnout – will help close the gaps that leave too many survivors without meaningful support. Policymakers and practitioners who act on these findings have an opportunity to meaningfully transform how communities live in the aftermath of gun violence.

**Read more in Deanna M. Girdi, “We can endure suffering but not meaninglessness”: Identity, Meaning-Making, and Community in Online Firearm Violence Survivor Networks.” *SSM-Qualitative Research in Health* (2026): 100742.**