

On-screen: A Story Data Can't Tell: The Impact of Violence in Black Communities Keisha Lindsay Nurse, PhD, MA EIS 2022. April 26, 2024 Sarah Luna Memorial Ted-Style Talk Session 2024 Epidemic Intelligence Service Conference. CDC logo on bottom right.

(Applause)

KEISHA NURSE: I love stories. Stories, for me as a researcher, is what I see when I see data. And today I want to tell you a story about a young man who should be sitting with us today, Malik Barry Buchanan. Malik's parents, Aaliyah, a registered nurse, and Sidney, an IT professional, moved from New York City to Atlanta in 1980, and to Atlanta's historic West Side in 1982. They welcomed Malik and Josey Barry Buchanan on December 27, 1983.

Malik grew up in that historic West Side neighborhood where the beltline now runs through. He went to many of Atlanta's best schools before enrolling at Howard University. He was a dreamer who loved to have fun. And he was an entrepreneur, founding his very first business, Malik's Mats and Things, selling doormats to his neighbors. He was a budding journalist, writing for The Atlanta Journal Constitution's News For Kids column as a teenager.

And when he was eight years old, the family welcomed Ayanna, his little sister. And he was a doting big brother. When other teenagers would probably balk at having to pose with their little sister, Malik posed. When other teenagers would probably deny having to attend a preschooler's party, Malik not only attended the party, he was the DJ.

On March 16, 2007, Malik went to visit his mom to bring her a meal. His dad, Sidney, and his sister Ayanna were at college tours in Alabama. Ayanna was a high school junior at the time.

Malik then returned home. And in a series of events that occurred, we know that someone broke into Malik's apartment and eventually got out through the front door. Malik was behind the perpetrator, not giving chase, but wanting to ensure that his roommate and his girlfriend, Kristen, who had arrived during this event, were safe. The perpetrator turned around with everyone outside of the apartment and shot Malik, in front of his girlfriend, in front of his roommate, and in front of his home.

Kristen would tell The AJC "If Malik did not come outside to ensure that we were OK, he would have been OK." Kristen then called Malik's mom, who then called Malik's dad. Malik's dad remembers feeling so helpless. He and Ayana were on a bus back home from Alabama after visiting those colleges.

Malik's mom then went to Grady Hospital, the very hospital she worked in as a registered nurse. And she remembers that although Kristen, his girlfriend, did not say that Malik had died, and the hospital didn't pronounce him until more family members came to be with her, she knew. A mother always knows. Homicide impacts us all. And it disproportionately impacts the Black community. Here in Atlanta, of the 139 murders recorded in 2021, 134 of them, or 96%, were of Black people. Nationally, homicide is the

leading cause of death of Black men ages 15 to 24 and the second leading cause of death of Black women, ages 15 to 24. Malik was 23 when he died.

Data is important. I know my crowd. However, data does not give us all of the information we need. It can't tell us about the aftermath of homicide. The lived experiences of the individuals, families, and communities left behind.

The data tells us that per homicide, 3 to 10 loved ones are impacted. 17 years after his death, a huge community of people are still impacted by Malik's death. His parents shared that Malik's death has changed their view of the world and even their relationship with each other. His mom says, "I miss my sidekick, who I took everywhere as a child." And his dad recalls the loss as "Edges that are jagged and will remain jagged, for there is no cure for this type of pain."

In addition to being a son and a brother, Malik was Kristen's sweetheart. I asked Kristen how they met. And she said they were at a work training and she looked across the room and saw this young man. And although he was half asleep in the work training, she knew that he would be special to her and to her heart.

They began dating. And she joyfully her daughter Trinity loved Malik. Trinity, Malik, and Kristen, a family, would move, or would be getting ready to move to another state if Malik were alive. And that family would get ready to welcome a new family member at the time of Malik's death, a baby boy who would be named Zahir, a baby boy who would never meet his father. "We were going to have a nice life with our family," Kristen shares with me, with tears streaming down her face.

The data tells us that the cost of fatal firearm deaths in the United States from 2019 to 2020 was \$227 billion. This cost to Black communities is \$140.8 billion in the same time frame. That is 60, 6-0, percent of the cost where Black people make up 15, 1-5, percent of our population.

Malik's death meant that Kristen became an unintentional single mother. She said that despite or perhaps because of this sudden loss, she knew she had to persevere. And she then became a medical doctor, the profession she practices today. But in the midst she's needed help and has leaned on Malik's parents and her family for financial assistance after Malik's death so that Trinity and Zahir can have all that they need. I paused when I saw \$140.8 billion in one year. And I thought what would Black communities, what would our lived experiences be like, if we had \$140.8 billion to spend in one year, the costs that we pay to bury our loved ones?

The data tells us that most victims of homicide have not acted violently in the past. However, our image of who dies by homicide is shaped by how these incidents are reported. In the midst of planning funeral services for Malik and mourning their child, Malik's parents had to track down journalists and journalism houses to retract stories purporting Malik to be a gang member. The lived experience of Malik's family is that amidst all of their sudden loss, they had to deal with law enforcement, often the sources of these headlines. And these headlines appear in the very newspaper he wrote for as a child.

Law enforcement, the experience with law enforcement meant that Malik's death and Malik's case would not be met with priority. His parents described that they had to, with renewed passion, encourage the police department to review Malik's case, finally leading to a conviction in 2022. Malik died in 2007, 15 years.

And I paused again. Is everyone who died by homicide purported to be a gang member? Does every case take 15 years to solve? Or is it just for some communities?

Data cannot even begin to describe what it means to lose a parent to homicide, a parent you would never meet. Malik's son, now 16, describes the loss of his father as "a void that can never be filled." And in the words he so eloquently spoke at the sentencing of the man convicted of killing Malik, "Someone unnecessarily took away my father"-- the lifelong trauma of it all.

Zahir's words echo what we know about homicide, that it is 100% preventable. But data alone cannot help us develop holistic prevention and intervention activities to prevent homicide and many of the things we study here at the CDC. Whether we work in chronic disease, in global health, in surveillance research programs, we must link arms with communities and organizations to learn beyond the data, to learn the stories that data just cannot tell. It can be uncomfortable and uneasy to learn about lived experiences. And I thank Malik's parents for sharing their lived experiences with me.

When we both understand data and have the courage to learn about the lived experiences of the communities and people we work with, we can have renewed hope to prevent unnecessary deaths, deaths like Malik's. Malik Barry Buchanan, Aaliyah and Sidney's son, Ayana's brother, Kristen's sweetheart, Zahir's dad, and my dear cousin. Thank you.

(Applause)

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