"Two Battlefields"
Opps, Cops, and NYC Youth Gun Culture

by Elise White, Basaime Spate, Javonte Alexander, and Rachel Swaner

Center for Justice Innovation

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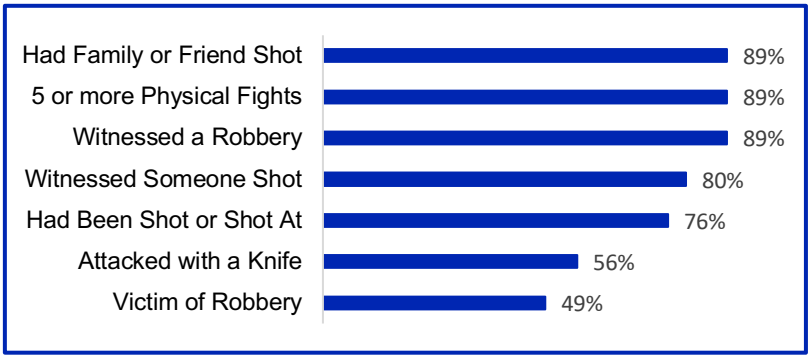
Executive Summary

In 2020, while the world was wrestling with how to keep safe from a new contagious respiratory virus, many young, urban Americans were navigating how best to protect themselves from another public health crisis: a steep increase in gun violence. Long before these dual pandemics came to dominate media coverage, researchers at the Center for Justice Innovation [the Center] had been grappling with understanding gun violence in cities around the country: Why are young people carrying and using guns? What factors—social and structural—are creating and impacting gun culture? What cultural strategies do youth develop in response to gun culture, and how can those strategies be leveraged to stem the violence?

To answer these questions and build on the Center's previous study of New York City youth gun carrying (Swaner et al. 2020), the Center received funding from the National Collaborative on Gun Violence Research to conduct an exploratory, participatory action research study of the socio-cultural roots of gun violence in four cities (Brooklyn, NY; Wilmington, DE; Philadelphia, PA; Detroit, MI) that will each produce site-specific findings. This report focuses on the findings from the Brooklyn, NY site, where we conducted interviews with 103 youth ages 15-24 who had carried a gun in the previous year. Data were collected between February 27, 2020, and March 30, 2021.

Major Findings

Interpersonal Violence and Guns Participants—primarily Black men—described experiencing and witnessing many different kinds of interpersonal violence and threats of harm at alarming rates. The vast majority had friends or family members who had been shot, and most had come under fire themselves at some point.



They identified an ever-present web of danger and threat, where anything could happen at any time. Being unprepared for this unpredictable violence—to be "caught lacking"—was a major reason they carried guns. The majority identified fear as the driver of that gun-carrying—primarily fear of their own deaths (75%) and fear someone might harm their families (72%). Often, gun violence occurred at the hands of "opps," or opposition—terminology akin to that of a war zone that refers interchangeably to one's rival gang members, unaffiliated people involved in the street economy, or other adversaries. The cultural importance of this term cannot be overstated as it relates to conceptualizations of threat and gun-carrying.

> *My biggest fear is somebody coming for me and they can't get to me. They try to get to my family.*

Structural Violence and Guns Participants also identified the lack of economic opportunity and the absence of police protection as drivers of their gun carrying. Only a small fraction had access to stable work in the mainstream economy, with most relying on informal "hustles"—like drug dealing and scams—to make ends meet. The inherent dangers of the underground economy drove many participants to carry a gun for protection. Police were widely seen as threatening figures, and as putting young people's lives at risk by reacting slowly or not at all to threats to their safety. In fact, 35% of participants cited fear of police as a reason they carried guns. Crucially, neither aggressive policing nor incarceration were seen as real deterrents. They characterized power dynamics between themselves and police in the same language as those between themselves and their opps, attributing the same volatile unpredictability to interactions with law enforcement.

> *I feel like if the police ain't going to protect us, who else is going to protect us besides ourself?*

> *I'd rather go back to jail than somebody taking my life.*

Social Support and Guns Participants described how family members—fearing for the safety of the young men who were beginning to be "outside" engaging in street culture—gave them weapons to protect themselves. The 61% of participants who reported gang, crew, or street-network involvement generally described network leadership as caring about the success and wellbeing of those "under" them. While street network membership came with risks—like conflicts with rival groups—it also served for many participants as an indispensable source of belonging, material support, and guidance. Decision-makers within street networks emerged as uniquely positioned to influence young peoples' decision-making with regard to many aspects of their behavior, including gun use. However, participants reported that leadership that was indecisive or disorganized increased safety concerns, contributing to the uncertainty and unpredictability that often led participants to carry guns.

By contrast, some participants supported and wanted increased connection and "togetherness" within and between their street networks and their community as a whole.

Social Media and Guns Social media played a large role in youth culture and had profound implications on how the young people moved through and understood their physical environments. Many participants (85%) reported seeing social media videos of people being harmed weekly or more frequently, with nearly two-thirds viewing such videos daily. They felt that watching these videos had a strong effect on young people, underlining their vulnerability to harm and expanding the level of potential public embarrassment around claims against their image. Participants described the importance of protecting their images and reputations, and felt the risk of embarrassment and increased visibility associated with having a social media presence led to more gun involvement—to prevent being recorded in vulnerable situations and to defend against online beefs that spilled out to the street.

> *It's just basically regular people dissing my side, and we're dissing their side. But they do it more on the internet, and that gets us mad … They're portraying somebody they're not on Facebook, on the internet. We just got to do what we've got to do.*

A Typology of Brooklyn Gun Carriers

Participants in this study were very clear that they picked up guns because they feared for their lives. For them, gun-carrying was an act of agency and resilience in the face of systems that, through action and inaction, demonstrated contempt for participants' lives. The qualitative data suggests four distinct kinds of gun-carrying youth in Brooklyn:

1. **Carrying for Protection** Those who carry for protection expressed ambivalence about carrying and, even more, firing guns. "I'm not trying to kill nobody. I'm not a killer." But this ambivalence was trumped by the safety imperative: "It's not about being cool or being tough or nothing. It's just more about being safe."

2. **Carrying for Image** Those who carry for image might brandish the gun in a group, flash it to intimidate opps, or shoot and intentionally miss. They were also perceived as likely to get into beefs related to false claims or representation.

3. **Carrying for Street Hustles** Those engaged in street hustles (e.g., drug dealers, scammers) were known to hold large amounts of cash or goods. They carried for protection against being robbed. Others engaged in robbing or breaking-and-entering

used guns to acquire the cash or goods sought through intimidation and threat, seldom intending to kill.

4. **Shooters** Rarer than the other three categories, "shooters" were carriers who regularly went on the offensive, if need be killing those perceived as threats.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

The findings from this study support many of the recommendations made in our prior report (Swaner et al. 2020), including **bringing services to the spaces important to youth; expanding job programs specifically for youth and people with criminal records; and continuing to fund participatory research to provide critical insights into what would work best to provide safety and support.**

The increase in gun violence experienced in many U.S. cities in 2020 and into 2021 saw an attendant increase in funding for anti-gun violence programming. Much of this funding is being funneled into crisis management strategies that include models that rely mostly on using credible messengers to diffuse immediate violent conflicts between individuals (e.g., Cure Violence) and Focused Deterrence programs. The latter relies heavily on law enforcement messaging that responses to gun carrying will be swift and severe and local community organizations encouraging engagement in services. Findings of this study indicate that additional gun violence prevention approaches—that derive from and speak to the lived experiences and cultural frameworks of participants—are sorely needed. We offer here a further set of recommendations for those delivering programming, funders, and policymakers that build on those from our prior study, and which emerge from the cultural logic of the young participants themselves.

- **Tailor the Messenger to the Message** Programs must identify and build trust with key community members around gun-carrying and -use, which frequently means respected, trusted decision-makers within local gangs, crews, and street networks. Engaging with these community members in long-term, meaningful ways in the design and execution of programming and, when appropriate, hiring them as staff—with competitive salaries and ongoing support and development—is vital to making lasting movement toward gun desistance. This recommendation may present legal and logistical challenges that will vary across locations. However, it is an essential next step for the field given the centrality of gang culture to these young people's daily lives, gang leadership's unique ability to intervene in young people's use of guns, and

young people's desire for increased positive direction from their own gang leadership toward network and community cohesion.

- **Engage Youth Within, Rather Than Isolate Them from, Existing Street Networks** Guns exist in urban settings in relationship to gangs and street networks. These networks are also often the primary source of trust and allegiance for members. Attempting to "treat" young people as individuals outside of these networks ignores these networks' social and cultural centrality to Black youth experience in urban settings. Expecting youth to leave street networks, or to engage in behavior that is not normed within them, makes long-term behavior change extremely challenging to sustain. By partnering with the gangs, programming will be sanctioned, or authorized, making it safe for gun carriers to be honest about what they experience and are facing within the context of the street networks and wider communities they are part of.

- **Build on Existing Informal Community Aid Systems** Identify the existing informal and geographically-specific ways neighborhood residents are already supporting one another. Street networks and community residents, particularly in low-income communities, frequently have existing methods of pooling and redistributing financial resources, food, access to money-making enterprises, etc. Many programs move into such neighborhoods and recreate methods of distributing resources and connecting participants to needed services. Harnessing and strengthening existing relationships and pathways instead can take less effort and bring effective and long-lasting community development.

- **Recognize that Law Enforcement Pressure is Out of Alignment with Healing** Image, power, and authority are key cultural features of gun carriers in our study, *and* of those who police them. The logic of mutual escalation means that gun violence prevention and intervention programs that include a direct law enforcement component are likely to tap into existing patterns of distrust and fear these young men have of law enforcement, and experienced as acts of aggression to young men who carry weapons. While intended to communicate clear messages of what is and is not acceptable behavior, pressure tactics in the cultural logic of the street must be met with equal or greater force. True healing requires vulnerability, which is next to impossible in such situations of fear or intimidation, and when participants' fight-flight-freeze mechanisms are activated. Services offered by those perceived as aggressors, or in partnership with aggressors, are unlikely to be engaged voluntarily and/or long-term.

- **Focus on Self Knowledge and Healing** Young gun carriers are survivors of extensive—and ongoing—interpersonal, structural, and social trauma. They live in a state of constant hypervigilance. When in such heightened states of fear, people have trouble self-regulating and accessing the brain's decision-making center. Programs need to offer young gun carriers tools for understanding trauma and healing; safely navigating their interior emotional landscape; and exploring the links between their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors and the context of structural violence in which they occur. This is a crucial first step to set them up to be successful in educational and employment spaces.

- **Co-create Space with Youth** This study would not have been successful if we had not had physical space in a location that met the specific cultural needs of this population. At the height of the dual pandemics, this meant space away from potential threats and the eyes of the street, allowing the youth to relax and move out of a state of hyperarousal. Future programs should co-create space with the participants they intend to serve so that it can convey physical safety and facilitate the emotional safety and vulnerability needed to them to begin to heal.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should focus on 1) conducting formative evaluations of pilot programs specifically for young gun carriers and incorporate the above recommendations, 2) understanding the social service needs of and barriers to access for young gun carriers, 3) systematically investigating the effects of drill music[1] and social media on youth gun carrying, and 4) quantifying the percentages of young gun carriers in each of the typology classifications.

[1] Drill music is a subgenre of hip hop that emerged in Chicago in the early 2010s. It is intimately connected with gang culture and has become a way for young men to publicly embarrass or threaten rivals and to track rival gangs and beefs. A hallmark of drill culture is music videos—typically posted to YouTube and other streaming platforms—that include violent acts, geographically-specific gang imagery and symbolism, stacks of cash, and guns. There is debate among rappers, music critics, law enforcement, policymakers, and scholars as to how closely the lyrics of drill are connected to any actual criminal behavior.

Chapter 1

Study Overview

In 2020, while the world was wrestling with how to keep safe from a contagious respiratory virus, many young, urban Americans were also navigating how best to protect themselves from another public health crisis: a steep increase in gun violence. In 2020, murders—the vast majority of which are committed with guns—were up nearly 30% from 2019 nationwide (Cook and Ludwig 2022). Gun homicides accounted for 19,384 deaths in the U.S., and 79% of all murders that year (CDC, via Gramlich 2022). This is the highest raw number since 1968, outpacing the previous peak of 18,253 in 1993.

A 2022 report by the Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Solutions outlines the striking racial disparities nested inside these numbers: young Black men represented two percent of the total U.S. population but accounted for approximately 38% of all gun homicide deaths in 2020. Moreover, *more than half of all Black teens (15-19) who died in 2020 (52%) were killed by gun violence.*

As some research has shown, traditional means of controlling gun violence such as background checks and age restrictions on gun purchases have virtually no effect on violent crime rates among youth (Kleck 2019). So how do we protect these young people from urban gun violence?

About the Current Study

Before these dual public health crises—one novel, one long-standing—dominated media stories, researchers at the Center for Justice Innovation (the Center) were already grappling with this question, stemming from previous research they had conducted on why young people carry guns (Swaner et al. 2020). Gun violence research has been underfunded for decades, though recently some funding has been dedicated to discrete subcategories such as mass shootings and suicides. The funded research on urban gun violence that does exist has primarily focused on evaluating the effectiveness of community-based intervention strategies. But a crucial step is missing; before developing and evaluating these community violence programs, practitioners, policymakers, and community activists need to have a comprehensive understanding of the root causes and drivers of urban gun violence *and* the cultural strategies that can be leveraged to address them. Filling this knowledge gap is

critical to creating programs that will most likely bring long-term safety to communities disproportionately impacted by gun violence.

Building on the Center's previous study of youth gun carrying, the National Collaborative for Gun Violence Research funded the Center and Dr. Yasser Arafat Payne at the University of Delaware to conduct an exploratory study of the socio-cultural roots of gun violence in four U.S. cities: Brooklyn, NY; Wilmington, DE; Detroit, MI; and Philadelphia, PA. Through interviews with youth ages 14-24 who had carried a gun in the last year, the study investigated three primary questions:

1. What motivates young people's acquisition and use of guns?
2. What are the social and structural factors that create or impact gun culture?
3. What are the individual and community characteristics that could build resilience and facilitate desistance from gun use?

Participatory Approach Because situated knowledge about urban youth gun carrying and use is absent from the literature, this project sought to understand the issue from the perspectives of the young gun carriers themselves. But could we access this population, gain their trust, and elicit honest responses that would provide us with valid and reliable data? The answer is yes, by employing a street participatory action research (Street PAR) approach (Payne, Hitchens, & Chambers 2023). Street PAR involves former or current members of street culture or persons involved with gun carrying directly participating in all phases of the research-activism process. Street PAR also operates as an intervention by way of equipping Street PAR Associates with a scholarly reading, writing, data analysis, professional speaking and activist-based skill set. Further, a Street PAR epistemology assumes research teams in each city had cultural knowledge needed to succeed in their respective street environments. Street PAR Associates had to skillfully navigate their street communities while maintaining the rigor of the research process. Some members of the teams had prior experience conducting research, while others were brand new to the work. All team members were trained over nine sessions on research methods, interviewing skills, recruitment methods, and the fundamentals of Street PAR. Their expertise and local knowledge were included from the project's outset, from creating the interview questions, conducting interviews, analyzing data, writing up findings and recommendations, and creating related actions to address findings.

Each city is publishing its findings in city-specific reports. Quantitative data and qualitative themes that hold across all four cities will be merged into a larger, multi-city report. This particular report focuses on analysis of data collected in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, NY.

Brooklyn, NY Brooklyn was the first study site to collect data and did so at a historically unique time. Fieldwork began in February 2020, and was then paused for a time when most of New York City—the epicenter of the pandemic at that time—was locked down due to the first wave of COVID-19. Interviewing resumed in September 2020 in a completely changed landscape. Breonna Taylor and George Floyd had been murdered by the police with attendant uprisings across the country; young people were out of school (many left with the option of attending "virtual school" via their phones); shootings in cities had risen; tensions between and within street networks were increasing as national gangs began reorganizing into different crews and gangs that left questions in participants' minds about allegiance, loyalty, and trust.

We had to find outdoor spaces to safely conduct interviews during the height of the first wave of COVID, but those places also had to be secluded, given the increasing tensions on the street. Eventually, we found an unused garden in the back of a store-front non-profit that had temporarily shifted to providing its services remotely. With a shoestring budget, our team renovated the backyard, turning it into an oasis of protection for participants, where they could come to escape the pressures of the block and eat, listen to music, and relax. Interviews were completed in March 2021.

Methodology

Sample Given that random sampling is difficult without a sampling frame (understandably, one does not exist for this hard-to-identify and -reach population), researchers leveraged the street networks of the Street PAR associates to recruit participants, and participants also helped "sanction" the study and refer up to three others in their network for interviews. Eligibility requirements included being between 14 and 24 years of age, having carried a gun within the last year (determined by the date of their interview), and living in Crown Heights, Brooklyn—an area that saw the sixth-highest number of shootings in the city during the time of data collection (NYPD Compstat, via Vital City). Researchers conducted 103 interviews

in Brooklyn.[2] We made efforts to ensure the sample included youth from the dominant gangs in the neighborhood (including Bloods, Crips, and Gangster Disciples).

Interviews Researchers conducted interviews in one-on-one settings. Interviews were confidential, with no names or other identifying information gathered, and, on average, lasted 45 minutes. Participants were given $30 cash for their time and an additional $10 for successful referrals. The interview instrument included a mix of closed- and open-ended questions capturing attitudes towards and experiences with guns, perceptions of and experiences with the criminal legal system, neighborhood characteristics, safety, interpersonal and social trauma, street networks, social media, and resilience and protective factors.

Table 1.1. Participants Were Nearly All Black Men

N*	103
% Male	96%
Mean Age	19.9
Ages 15-17+	18%
Ages 18-24	82%
Race/Ethnicity	
Black	94%
Latino	5%
Black and Latino	1%
Public Housing Resident	23%

*N may be as low as 99 because of missing data.
+ Though age eligibility was as low as 14, our youngest participant was 15.

Analysis Throughout this report, descriptive statistics provide information on key domains for the 103 gun-carrying youth. The full quantitative results for the Brooklyn participants will be combined with the data from other study sites in a future cross-site report; this report predominantly focuses on ethnographic data. The team applied grounded theory and iteratively coded and analyzed qualitative data from transcribed interviews. We open-coded 30% of transcribed interviews by hand, developing emergent codes, which were then

[2] Because the information being shared was so sensitive, participants needed ongoing assurances about the confidential and protected nature of the data. Given the dynamics at play in neighborhoods (shifting alliances and network reorganization, policing, and shootings) as well as concerns around snitching, participants were particularly on edge. Having teams with street experience was essential to gathering valid and reliable data; without their involvement, we would not have been able to complete the study.

combined and collapsed into a final codebook. The collaboratively-developed codes were then applied to 37 interviews.

Limitations Our team was doing difficult, dangerous work at a time when few services in New York City were even in person. We initially set out to conduct 150 interviews; however, the strain of collecting interviews during the massive unpredictability of both the initial wave of COVID-19 and the increasing street tensions and related gun violence safety concerns resulted in the decision to stop fieldwork early, for a final sample size of 103. Additionally, only 4% of the sample were women. The analysis that follows is specific to men's—and primarily Black men's—experiences in the streets.

Chapter 2

"I'm Not About to Keep Running": Gun Carrying and Interpersonal Violence

The lives of the young gun carriers who participated in this study were characterized by extensive exposure to violence at rates nearly identical to those found in prior research (Swaner et al. 2022). Almost all had experienced physical harm, frequently describing multiple and compounding traumas. When they detailed harming others, they almost always couched their actions in the language of self-defense or pre-emptive strike. Moreover, the majority identified fear as the driver of that gun-carrying—primarily fear of their own deaths (75%) and fear someone might harm their families (72%).

We asked participants questions relating to experiencing and witnessing several forms of interpersonal violence. They described being harmed, observing others harmed, being threatened with harm, and watching both threats and acts of harm on social media as an ever-present web of danger and threat. **Participants identified this web as the primary contributor to their decisions to carry and use guns.** Given their high rates of victimization, potential versus actual threat was a nuance most did not want to risk determining.

High Rates of Interpersonal Victimization

Threats Participants detailed a local youth culture where threats of harm were ubiquitous. Ninety-one percent of participants had been threatened with serious harm at least once, with slightly less than half having been threatened five or more times (Table 2.1).

Fights Nearly all participants reported having been in at least one physical fight, and almost four-fifths had been in physical fights five or more times. Often, these fights escalated to the point where weapons became involved. "There was this one time we was having a brawl. Somebody from the other side had a gun but we was fighting him. He dropped it. Someone from our side picked it up … They wasn't fighting no more about it. They was running."[3]

[3] In the interest of preserving the integrity and intent of those who spoke with us as part of this study, we report excerpts from interviews as spoken. With the exception of truncating quotations for the sake of length, we have not censored or edited the content of participant narratives.

For some participants, the initial point when a weapon was involved in one of these fights was a watershed moment, with the realization that there was no predicting whether anyone on the opposing side might have a gun or not. “I was like 16, 17, and I was walking outside with my friends. ... And I guess we was about to get into a confrontation and a nigga backed out his gun. So from there it kind of just changed my perspective. Everybody doesn’t want to fight, so it’s just like you got to protect yourself at all times.”

Table 2.1. Exposure to Physical Harm and Robbery was Universal

	N*	103
Physical fight		
Experienced		94%
Experienced 5+ times		79%
Witnessed		96%
Threatened with serious physical harm		
Experienced		91%
Experienced 5+ times		46%
Witnessed		96%
Robbery		
Experienced		49%
Experienced 5+ times		10%
Witnessed		89%

*N may be as low as 98 because of missing data.

Robbery About half of the participants had been robbed at least once. Robberies took place in numerous locations: on basketball courts, at delis and corner stores, on the block; and in any constellation of group size: solo, small groups, and large groups. “I can’t forget this robbery,” one participant explained. “This one was so sneaky. [While we] was playing ball … my [phone got] tooked. [My friend’s wallet was stolen]. He had just got off of work and his fucking $60 was going on his bank card. So he had to call in, put his shit on hold.” This robbery is an example of “sneak-thieving,” or a more passive form of robbery that does not involve confrontation.

Participants frequently identified these experiences of being robbed as clarifying, revealing previously invisible levels of vulnerability. One participant explained that people “robbed me for some bread ... Little shit like that will make you want to carry a gun. ... You feel like you ain’t safe.”

The above is an example of a defining—and undesirable—characteristic of how participants describe victimization: being **“caught lacking.”** To be caught lacking, “caught,” or “lacking” is essentially a situation where one should/could have been prepared and was not

and, being caught off-guard, was taken advantage of or worse. “I just see so much people get killed around here, because they denied their gun. They get caught. They get gunned down, or whatever.”

Experiences of Harm Involving Weapons

Almost three-quarters of the sample had been shot at but not hit. One-fifth had been shot at five or more times. Over half had been attacked or stabbed with a knife, and 68% had used a knife in self-defense. Often, this weapons-related violence occurred at the hands of “opps,” or opposition, terminology that refers interchangeably to one’s rival gang members, unaffiliated people involved in the street economy who are adversaries of some kind; namely, anyone with whom a participant might have “beef” (i.e., a serious or ongoing issue). The cultural importance of this term cannot be overstated as it relates to conceptualizations of threat and gun-carrying.

Table 2.2. About 3 in 4 Participants Had Been Shot or Shot At

N*	103
Shot at with a gun but not hit	74%
Shot at 5+ times	20%
Shot with a gun	
Experienced	12%
Witnessed	80%
Witnessed 5+ times	26%
Had ever been shot or shot at	76%
Attacked/Stabbed with a knife	
Experienced	56%
Experienced 5+ times	8%
Used a knife in self-defense	68%
Ever been to emergency room due to act of violence	40%

*N may be as low as 98 because of missing data.

Participants identified long-term consequences from these experiences, including having **“PTSD,” “blacking out,” and becoming more “militant.”** “[I]t made me move smarter,” reported one participant. He continued:

> I ain’t want that shit to happen again or whatever. Even like a little fight that’s violent or whatever, or somebody threaten me with a knife or whatever, after me being through that

> experience? I just had to move different. That's really what it do. Going through those experiences is going to make you … a militant person.

Here, "militant" refers to a defensive posture of becoming more aware of one's environment, assessing spaces and people for potential threats. The proximity of exposure to violence and intense feelings was a frequent occurrence in narratives. Explained another: being shot at "brought the demon out of me. It just made me very angry. I couldn't control my anger."

For others, this victimization made them more open to exploring ways of resolving conflict that were less, rather than more, reactive.

> [Since getting shot at, I've changed] for the better. You feel me? You can't go backwards, I learned in life. Like now, even when the random instance, like random situations, I do this certain face like... It's my questioning face … It look like I'm about to just be start barking and blacking. But this is me trying to really figure out. Before anything go wrong, I'm trying to figure out what's happening, what's going on. And basically this is my understanding point. Like, what is going on at this very moment for him to be like that, for me to get this mad, or for us to have this conflict. Or to even get to that next level, I must know what's going on. Before, I don't really care. Like, I'm here, ready. Now it's like I have a process. I do a process of elimination like, "All right. This is good, this is good. All right, so we about to fight because of this?" And that's when I retake like, "Yo, bro. I ain't fighting you for this shit." But I can't lie, some days where that shit, that process do fail, though.

In this passage, the participant identifies strategies like pausing and trying to get perspective on or "understanding" of the situation before "barking and blacking," i.e., turning immediately to a violent reaction. The "barking and blacking" this participant described, the "PTSD" and the not being able to "control my anger" the other participants talked about, all suggest these may be understood as trauma reactions directly related to the incredibly high rates of violence to which these young men are exposed. In other words, the ability to self-regulate and access the brain's decision-making centers may not be available to some of these young men in moments of heightened fear for survival.[4]

[4] For more on symptoms and relationship to gang and street involvement, see C. Gillikin et. al., 2016. "Trauma Exposure and PTSD Symptoms Associate with Violence in Inner City Civilians," *Journal of Psychiatric Research,* 83: 1–7; J.R. Smith & D.U. Patton, 2016. "Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms in Context: Examining Trauma Responses to Violent Exposures and Homicide Death

As a result of interpersonal harm, 40% had been to the emergency room at least once because of an act of violence against them.

Observing Harm to Friends and Family

In addition to direct victimization experiences, participants described **witnessing violence at very high rates**. Eighty-nine percent had witnessed a robbery. Almost all the participants (96%) had witnessed one physical fight. Most had seen violence involving weapons: 68% had seen someone attacked or stabbed with a knife, 80% had seen someone shot, and a quarter (26%) had five or more times seen someone shot. Not all these incidents led to serious harm or death—out of sheer luck, sometimes, rather than intent. "I seen people get shot at but I never seen nobody in my face get hit and fall bleeding or shit like that. Because people don't really have aim, they just have guns. Somebody will shoot 12 shots in your direction and none of them shits will hit you." For a few participants, their exposure to violence was far-ranging. "I seen at least 12 of my good friends get shot … And my father. I seen my father die in front of me. I never deal with it good, but I just got to accept it because it's the life … What's done is done."

Secondary Exposure to Harm

In addition to participants' first-hand experiences being threatened with, experiencing, and witnessing interpersonal violence, participants also detailed hearing about violence experienced by friends and family.

Table 2.3. Nearly 9 in 10 Participants Had Someone Close to Them Shot

N*	103
Had someone close to them shot	89%
Close friend	50%
Cousin	29%
Aunt/Uncle	17%
Parent	10%
Sibling	5%
Other (grandparent, big homie, parent's partner)	6%
Possibility of being hurt by violence prevents you from going places or doing things you would like to	47%

*N may be as low as 101 because of missing data.

Among Black Males in Urban Neighborhoods," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry,* 86: 212–223; S. Kelly et.al., 2012. "The Effects of Exposure to Gang Violence on Adolescent Boys' Mental Health." *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, 33:80-88.

Friends Half of the young gun carriers in our study had a close friend shot, sometimes resulting in death. They reported facing **loss from outside (at the hands of "opps")** ***and*** **within their social networks**. Sometimes the within-network violence resulted from disputes over what participants describe as "petty beef." For example, explained one participant: "people be playing dice. Somebody could think it's on a crack, it's not all the way upright. Then they could be like, 'Yo, what's good? I want my money.' They start shooting." Another frequent contributor was fall outs over access to money.

> My mans killed my mans because they did a robbery together. One didn't give him the other half of the cut, so he felt a way. He killed him. Not only did he kill him, he killed him with his moms, his dad, and his sister in the same crib.

Family Many participants had family members who had been shot and/or killed. The most frequently cited relative was a cousin. "[S]omebody came on the block, the corner of their block," reported one young man, describing his cousin's death. "They had like a MAC-11, and they just started shooting at the whole crowd. The whole block was filled." Another participant described the lingering effects of a shooting on his cousin and himself. "He hasn't been the same since that. He's been in a wheelchair ever since … It's still kind of recent, so it's like, man, I don't even get my regular cousin back, the one I was playing basketball with and shit because he can't walk." Participants also described injuries or casualties of multiple family members. Reported one young man:

> [I lost] a few people, my brother, some friends, godbrother ... It's hard because usually it's a person that I'm with all the time or a person that I used to be with all the time and we kind of fell off, and instead of being able to make up and be cool again like we was before, the person is gone. So it be difficult to deal with it … I get angry.

Sometimes the altercations described occurred within families. "My father one time—he was in a gang—and he was just walking up the street one time. And then his own brother shot at him just because his own brother was a different gang. His brother was Crip."

Fear of Families Being Hurt Many participants (72%) cited fear of having their families hurt as a driver of their gun carrying. Explained one participant: "My biggest fear is somebody coming for me and they can't get to me. They try to get to my family." Another voiced the same concern, explaining, "because that's like me walking with my mom, and

then I don't have [a gun], and then I pull up and that nigga got it. That nigga could kill me and my mom, but if I've got it, I can protect her. All I've got to do is tell her to watch out."

Effects of Violence on Weapons Use

Participants cited these experiences of witnessing, experiencing, and hearing about physical violence as contributing to a general atmosphere of fear. Carrying weapons was viewed as a protective strategy to avoid being caught lacking. Seventy-two percent reported owning a gun of their own, and most (91%) reported carrying guns they did not own. These typically were guns shared by friends, family members, or other gang members. Additionally, 80% reported also having used a weapon other than a gun, frequently a knife.

Once young people realized that others did not want to settle disputes through physical fights, they turned to gun-carrying to enhance their self-protection strategies. One participant described a memorable fight: "I ran up the block, [but] I'm not about to keep running from them. [Using the gun] stopped me from running, got me out of danger. I'm safe for that moment but I don't know what they're thinking about retaliation-wise."

The connection between gun-carrying and potential harm was clear. "If I'm going to get killed, I might as well have something on me to defend myself," explained one participant. Said another: "I need a gun basically. I just have to protect myself. I had a lot of beef with certain people. I be getting death threats, trying to kill me … That's why I need a gun and always keep it on me." **The shooting of close friends also drove gun carrying and use.** Here, a participant describes becoming more "militant" and carrying a gun as a safety and survival strategy.

> When my friend … got shot, I just thought different. Because he's always the one to tell me, "Yo bro, you can't play out here. Life's not a game, bro. Shit real out here, shit will happen, bro." Word, acting like you ain't one of the toughest niggas I know. So when it happened to him, I really found out everybody can get touched … You've got to be safe. You've got to watch yourself, watch your surroundings, and be prepared for everything … If I'm walking at night and I see niggas with hoodies, my heart will stop and I'll think, damn, what if these niggas really about to kill my ass right now.

Central to all these narratives was the sense that **anything can happen at any time, and as a result, participants feeling forced into carrying a gun by the web of danger and threat around them**. Explained one participant: "We just going to another man's crib to go smoke

and shit. And some niggas ran down on us … Trying to rob niggas and shit … And I'm like, 'Damn, yo, I should have had it on me.' You feel me? Because I would back niggas down. I wouldn't have blew my shit but I would have backed niggas down. 'Yo. Respect my shit.'"

Chapter 3

"We Are the Weapons to Them": Gun Carrying and Structural Violence

Participants' sense of their vulnerability was not limited to fear of death from peers. Data in this chapter support a significant body of research that details the hyper-presence of the state in some areas (e.g., policing) and the hyper-absence of the state in others (e.g., social services) as contributing to significant down-stream effects for young Black men and Latinos in cities.[5] In addition to fearing harm from opps, participants feared harm from the state. This harm extended beyond direct forms of physical violence (e.g., from police) to clearly articulated beliefs that their lived realities were frequently invisible or irrelevant to those in power and that, as a result, public policy seldom reflected their needs. Our data further indicate that the sense of structural vulnerability and violence our participants encountered was a primary driver of their gun-carrying behavior.

Poverty, the Underground Economy, and Guns

Only 8% of participants reported being employed full-time, with another 14% reporting part-time employment (Table 3.1). These numbers indicate **minimal overlap between young gun carriers and the mainstream economy**. In an effort to survive with no form of stable employment, participants reported cobbling together funds from several sources, including support from family and friends. However, it was through participation in the underground economy that a majority of participants generated income; almost two-thirds of participants identified illegal activities (that is, "hustles" like drug dealing or credit card scams) and one in five reported "off the books" employment as being a way they got money to buy things

[5] See, for example, M. S. Phelps et. al., 2021. "'We're Still Dying Quicker Than We Can Effect Change': #BlackLivesMatter and the Limits of 21st-Century Policing Reform," *American Journal of Sociology*, 127:3; S. Balto, 2019. *Occupied Territory: Policing Black Chicago from Red Summer to Black Powe*r, Charlotte: University of North Carolina Press; K. Crenshaw, 2012. "Overpoliced and Underprotected: Women, Race, and Criminalization," *UCLA Law Review*. V.M. Rios, 2012. *Punished: Policing the Lives of Black and Latino Boys.* New York: NYU Press; R.K. Brunson, 2007. "'Police Don't Like Black People': African-American Young Men's Accumulated Police Experiences." *Criminology and Public Policy,* 6(1):71–101.

they needed or wanted. **Many participants used multiple approaches and understood the social context that created the necessity for them to do so**:

> I really feel like it all boils down to poverty. … I feel like if there was more opportunities to make money than the streets, other than selling drugs and stuff like that, then … people wouldn't resort to beefing with each other, having bad attitudes, having crimes going on and resorting to gun violence.

In fact, most participants, when asked about their future hopes or goals for themselves in the next six months, expressed a desire to access the "American Dream," including such things as becoming "a better person," "going down a better path," or "moving up." Often, wishes involved integrating into the mainstream economy. "After I get a solid job, in a couple of months after I stack up a little money, I'm just planning to go back to school. Just try to get everything back in order while I still got a little bit of youth left in me before I get too old," shared one participant. "Right now, I'm studying for engineering. I be getting good grades … It's just that I'm just trying to build my life the better instead of the worse," said another. Many participants wanted to start businesses. Barriers cited for these goals were frequently, in the words of one participant, "a support system and money."

Absent reliable access to one or both of these, however, participants' methods of supporting themselves and their families involved participation in the alternative economy, primarily including drug dealing, financial scams, and robbery. **Carrying a gun was understood by many participants (44%) to be a requirement of these hustles.** Importantly, this gun-carrying fell into two camps: defensive and offensive gun-carrying.

Table 3.1 Illegal Activities Were the Most Common Sources of Income

	N*	103
Ways I make money to buy things need/want		
Income through illegal activities (e.g., drug dealing, swiping)		64%
Support from family/parents		46%
Support from friends		27%
Employed under the table/"off the books"		21%
Employed part-time		14%
Employed full-time		8%
A government program, such as social security or disability		8%
Ways I make money require having a gun		44%

*N may be as low as 100 because of missing data.

Defensive Gun Carrying Because of Hustles Participants involved in activities like scamming or drug dealing were in a challenging position. Many felt these activities exposed

them to significant risk of being robbed and required them to carry a gun. As one participant explained, "I'm in the streets. I'm traveling, selling all different kinds of drugs. They're going to try to rob me or kill me for whatever I got. I feel I need mines." Shared a second participant, "[T]o be honest, if you're going to do trapping[6] or anything like that, you just got to keep it on you so you can prevent getting robbed." A third participant detailed how **economic violence and absence of police protection intersect as drivers of gun carrying**. "[S]elling drugs, people just looking at you as a victim, as a stain. As some way to get more money on they plate. And they're more likely to rob you because they know what you're doing is illegal. You can't go to the police about it or nothing like that." Here, the illegality of the ways participants are driven to make money *and* cultural understandings of police behavior toward them negate the possibility of seeking recourse in more traditional law enforcement mechanisms and compel gun-carrying for self-protection and -preservation.

Offensive Gun Carrying Because of Hustles The aggressors (i.e., the people doing the robbing) were the other side of this dynamic. Here, guns were perceived as a tool of the trade. One participant explained, "You're robbing people or just doing certain shit. Let's say you … running in cribs and shit like that … You never know. Some[body] could be waiting for you behind the door with a gun, and in the crib there's no cameras, so whatever happens, happens."

Even in this context of offensive carrying (i.e., carrying the gun to initiate an aggressive interaction), the participant understood his gun-carrying as protective, given the lack of predictability in the encounter. Participants, then, described defensive and offensive gun-carrying as being structured similarly to the other forms of interpersonal disputes they encountered in the streets (detailed in Chapter 2). That is, **given the potential for the opposing side to be carrying guns, participants understand their own decisions to carry guns as the best available means for securing their survival in potentially deadly encounters.**

Experiences with Police

Police emerged as another primary source of danger and threat to the young gun carriers we interviewed. Participants in this study generally held negative opinions of police, a term they

[6] Trapping, for our participants, refers to activities associated with drug processing and dealing. A trap house is a place where large quantities of drugs are broken down into smaller quantities, housed, and prepared for sale.

applied both to beat cops and detectives in specialized units of the New York Police Department, including the gang squad, the narcotics squad, and the now-disbanded anti-crime unit.[7] They described law enforcement as being unresponsive to their safety needs, enacting culturally insensitive and harmful policies, and employing dangerous practices that endangered their lives.

Table 3.2. Participants Had Little Trust in the Police

N*	103
% Agree/Strongly Agree that "in my neighborhood…":	
Most police harass youth	91%
Most police are trying to protect the public from violent crime	43%
Most police are interested in understanding the needs of the community	25%
Most police have a good reason when they arrest people	13%
Witnessed police abuse their authority in neighborhood	90%
Police respond quickly to emergency calls for shooting in the area	50%

*N may be as low as 101 because of missing data.

Absence of Police Protection Half of participants felt that police responded quickly when called about a shooting, and less than that (43%) felt that police were trying to protect people from violent crime (Table 3.2). Participants felt that the police did not value their safety at all, thereby **putting their lives at risk through slow, untimely, or complete lack of action**.

> It's like they just don't care. Anybody that I know that got hit [by a bullet] or whatever, they come mad late and then want to ask questions and shit. Like, "Oh, what happened?" Like, come on. Put him in the [ambulance], you feel me? … Niggas is leaking out, bleeding out right now, you want to ask questions about what happened and shit. Put him in the stretcher, take him. Do something.

Some participants added further nuance to the numbers above, explaining that this lack of response was often evident when police were being called for gang-related incidents. "If they know it's something involved with gangs or something, they don't come quick … But if it's

[7] For a more detailed description of the official roles of these detective units, see https://www.nyc.gov/site/nypd/bureaus/investigative/detectives.page. For more on the disbanded Anti-Crime unit, see https://www.thecity.nyc/2021/4/27/22404899/eric-adams-bring-back-anti-crime-unit.

something else, like something else going on, they'll come quick … It's something about this gang-related stuff; they just don't give a fuck."

Fear of Being Targeted by Police All this contributed to what participants described as a deeply adversarial relationship with police that, for many, translated into a sense of opposition and lack of safety: "I don't feel safe being protected by cops, to be honest." Even when police did respond to calls for assistance, only a small percentage of participants felt that police in their neighborhood had a good reason when they arrested people. Rather than try to solve crimes, **police appeared to participants to be in a power struggle with them.** One participant explained, "they just want to get people with guns and get collars and just find all the guns and just make everybody look like a bad person. And that's not really the case. But it will never stop. That's the way of the life."

Threats Participants detailed a variety of menacing and threatening police behavior they experienced and observed. As shown in Table 3.2, nine in ten participants said that most police in their neighborhoods harass youth and that they had personally witnessed police abusing their authority in their neighborhood.

> You could be sitting in your car minding your damn business, they're going to … WOOP WOOP. A lot of this is just fuckery. It's a lot of times they just speed up at you and just act like they're going to hop out on you, just open the door right quick. Try to make it seem like you're going to run, so that means if you run, they're going to chase you down. If you don't, they're going to leave you alone. It's crazy how I got used to that shit.

Often, these interactions involved potential long-term consequences for participants in the criminal legal system and beyond. In the passage above, the participant described a practice where law enforcement creates conditions to scare young men in their neighborhood so they will run, giving police cause to chase and search them, or arrest them for "resisting arrest." Another participant identified the Gang Database[8] as the mechanism for this menacing.

> They got you listed as an active gang member, not even knowing that you grew up with these people. You're probably just a basketball player or you probably just smoke weed. So now, because you smoke weed, you're automatically a gang banger. They got you listed. They documented you. Now they're giving you fake collars, arresting you. They

[8] For more information on the New York City Gang Database, see https://theintercept.com/2018/06/11/new-york-gang-database-expanded-by-70-percent-under-mayor-bill-de-blasio/.

> don't even have a warrant. Now you get to the precinct. You don't even have a warrant. They try to lock you up for gambling, or they're trying to lock you up saying you have marijuana on you.[9] So now you just got collars. So now when you go in front of the judge, they got nothing but ammunition for you. It's a routine. It's a daily routine.

The law enforcement practice of **targeting individuals believed to be committing crimes was another common practice participants pinpointed as central to their feelings of opposition to the police**. "The ones that did get locked up already, I don't know, the police be all funny. They move funny, because they treat them like they're friends. They see them, call out their first and last name, 'Hey, how you doing?' Like harassment."

Similar Power Dynamics Between Cops and Opps Participants described power dynamics between themselves and police in almost the exact same language as those between themselves and other young people with whom they have beef. As one participant explained,

> [I]n the neighborhood, you might be one of the people that the police already know. Like for example, if your name is Josh, they already know how you look or whatever so they'll be like, "Oh, when you see Josh punch him or something," some shit like that. They just have more hate for a specific person because the person that gave them problems in the past. Actually might have disrespected them or just cursed at them or whatever—basically don't-respect-them type shit. *So nobody wants to be disrespected, so when you get disrespected and shit, people tend to have less mercy for you type shit*. Like with the police, what they do to one person who's just a regular criminal, they don't really know him, they're just getting him just because he did a crime, whereas a person who they already know do crimes and shit and already is hated by that precinct and shit, when they see him they're going to do worse shit to him. They're going to beat him or pop the tires, cuffs extra hard or some shit. [emphasis added]

[9] The Brooklyn District Attorney set a policy of declining to prosecute, in most cases, small amounts of marijuana possession cases in 2014, and marijuana smoking cases in 2017. In early 2021, possession of up to three ounces marijuana for adults over 21 was legalized in NYC. Most of our data was collected prior to this legislation being passed, though from these young men's narratives, it appears that even if these cases were not being prosecuted, police were still using marijuana possession as pretext for stops and arrests.

Here the participant talked about the need for police to respond offensively to situations where they feel disrespected, where their images are affected by an exchange, and where they feel they need to keep the upper hand or maintain the image of authority. This offensive response mirrors the dynamic around respect, fear, and image that will be discussed in Chapter 5.

Physical Harm from Police In addition to these examples of psychological and legal harassment, participants detailed situations that involved physical assaults by police. More than eight in ten participants reported having been stopped and frisked by the police[10] (Table 3.3). Aggressive physical encounters were described as occurring during these interactions, as well as part of other routine policing practices.

> I went to this party. A fight had broke out or whatever, so the police came and shut down the party. The police started chasing the big crowd, but their big crowd ran past me. So I was in there with them because they ran past me. Cops tried to come grab me. I shook them off like, "What you doing?" Tried coming and arresting me, so I started running. They started chasing me ... I get on Atlantic [Avenue], and they hit me with a car. Boom, hit me with a car. I get back up … Put my hands up, they slammed me on the ground. They're kicking me in my face, their knee. I had a black eye, broken leg, my face was fucked up, all type of shit.

Participants saw a **similarly cavalier approach to their lives in the ways law enforcement officers carry and brandish guns**.

> One time I was smoking in a staircase with my son. It's like three of us, you feel me? Ds—the detectives—pulled up out of nowhere, like, "Oh, you got a I-Card[11]" to my son or whatever. I never knew what an I-Card was at the time, you feel me? But, he didn't

[10] Notably, these data predate the election of Mayor Eric Adams and the reinstatement of stop-and-frisk as a policing strategy. See: https://gothamist.com/news/new-york-city-police-have-stopped-and-questioned-more-people-this-year-than-last-as-mayor-adams-cracks-down-on-crime, and https://datacollaborativeforjustice.org/work/low-level-enforcement/10-highlights-from-the-2022-new-york-city-stop-question-and-frisk-data/.

11 I-Card is short for "investigation card." This is an online document created by an NYPD detective to indicate a person is wanted, either because of a crime they wish to arrest someone on or because they want to question someone as a suspect or witness to a crime. See https://medium.com/spodeklawgroup/the-definitive-guide-to-nypd-i-cards-ae9fbacc4bd7. A class action suit settled in December 2022 makes stops for minor violations that involve running a civilian's name through warrant and I-Card databases illegal.

> even have that shit. They put one cuff on him or whatever, but he got away though. They put one cuff on him. He just dipped down the stairs, or whatever. When he had dipped down the stairs, the detective was following him, but there was another detective on the top step. So, when me and my son tried to run, he said, "Don't move" and he aimed his gun at us. So, we was just like, "what the fuck? He just aimed a gun at us." So, that was some shit they wasn't supposed to do. And we was both teens. They're not even supposed to be aiming a gun in a building at us. We ain't even do nothing. Just smoking and shit, just chilling … ain't commit no crimes, nothing.

Police officers flashing or pulling out guns in interactions with these young people was not isolated to one or two anecdotes. And **where young people understood their own use of guns as ensuring their safety and preventing aggression, they understood the police as using guns to threaten and intimidate**. As another participant detailed, "We were chilling. The cops roll up. This is NYPD, not even the detectives, come up. They start bothering me. I start talking back. And he just up a gun on me. He upped it through the window, like this, to show me. And my heart just started racing." Another shared, "[My man's friend] got shot down by the police in the middle of the street for nothing. They didn't find a gun on him or nothing, so I just... I mean, police treat, I feel like any person of color really, they don't even have to be in a gang, different."

Deep Cultural Distrust of Police The extent of the reported psychological and physical acts of harm perpetrated against participants and the absence of help in potentially life-saving moments created what participants experienced as a pattern of threat to their existence based on race, class, and age. This is where participants most clearly articulated deep frustration and pain with the structural racism and violence they saw permeating policing policy and practice.

> We're viewed as Black kids, hoodlums that ain't got no home training, and they want to put us away. They treat us bad. Even if we aren't doing anything, they're going to bother us. Even if we're just sitting down chilling, they're still going to bother us. To them, we are the guns. We are the weapons.

Many articulated feeling that young men of color, and nuances within their family and peer structures, were illegible to many police officers. "Police stereotype us, so they think everybody in my neighborhood is up to no good. So what they'll do is, they'll run down on

everybody.[12] It recently just happened to me yesterday, for no reason. They just think everybody look alike for some reason."

It is difficult to overstate how strongly participants in this study perceived the police as out to get them, even and up to killing them.

> [Police] do the most illegal shit than all criminals that's just outside right now because... And they work for the government, they're working for the government and everything like that, so they could do whatever they want without getting caught because they're the police. I feel like that and I also see it with my own eyes. So basically I just see... It be happening on the news and everything like that, innocent Black bystanders getting arrested for no reason. You already heard about Kalief Browder.[13] He just committed suicide because he was accused of stealing a backpack. So I would figure that, shit, that could be anybody.

Participants commonly referred to police as the "biggest gang" and felt that the common occurrence of law enforcement harming Black men without consequence was deeply hypocritical. As this passage illustrates, at times, **participants' sense of being targeted by police extended to the government as a whole.**

> That's why I feel like this shit is a setup right now. The world is a setup, bro, because you got to just be... It's in front of you … We be killing off each other. They want that, bro. They want us to be killing off each other. That's why they don't care about that shit. That why they just wait 'til they playing big-ass indictments.

Experiences with Incarceration

Participants, though young, had extensive contact with the criminal legal system. Eighty-four percent reported being arrested, almost a quarter on a gun charge. Over half had been

[12] "Run down" here refers to police taking someone by surprise and aggressively interacting with them. Stop, question, and frisk falls into this category, as do some of the other anecdotes in this section describing police chases on foot and by car.

[13] For more on Kalief Browder's life and death, and the effects of three years of incarceration without any finding of guilt see: https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/kalief-browder-1993-2015.

incarcerated, with the majority of these being held in juvenile detention and/or jail. The average age of first arrest was 15 (Table 3.3).

Table 3.3. Participants Had Significant Involvement with the Criminal Legal System

N*	103
Ever arrested	84%
Gun charge	24%
Mean age of first arrest	15.1
In past 12 months	
Stopped by police	88%
Frisked by police	82%
Arrested	52%
Given a summons	50%
Detained without arrest	43%
Convicted	23%
Picked up in a sweep	20%
Ever in Detention[14]	55%
Juvenile detention	27%
Jail	23%
Prison	3%
Jail and juvenile detention	2%
People regularly associate with have been to jail/prison	53%
Person raised by spent time in jail or prison	58%
Carrying makes me fear jail time	47%

*N may be as low as 100 because of missing data.

The shadow of the carceral state loomed over their lives in other ways, with more than half of participants reporting that the person who raised them spent time in jail or prison and that people they regularly associate with have been to jail or prison. For most participants, those incarcerated family members were their fathers, brothers, uncles, and male cousins. "My uncle, he did like six years, money laundering," explained one participant. "Shit, I used to look up to him when I was growing up so shit kind of fucked me up." These experiences led participants to reflect on their own decisions. Another said, "My father [was incarcerated for] a gun charge. It was more towards when I was younger, when I was first born. By the time I

[14] The data on where participants were incarcerated should be approached with caution. Participants were not always clear on whether they were held in prison or jail, the nuances sometimes being lost on those these systems often act upon.

got old enough to remember, he started coming around more … The stories, it just makes you think about what you're doing every day, like, do I really want to live this life?"

Effects of Structural Violence on Gun Carrying

Fear of the police was a *reason* for carrying guns for 35% of participants. "[I carry because of] NYPD, if I'm going to be honest with you. Dumb niggas get wilding. Killing niggas left and right for bullshit," one young man reported. Shared another:

> I feel like the only reason that people walk around with guns is because the police got them and that's what they doing: they shooting and killing. So I just feel like they going by what they see, you know what I'm saying? They say "Lead by Example" for a reason, because if we're watching y'all just kill us for no reason, they feel like they can do the same thing. They just can't get away with it … [Police say they're] scared. What are you scared for? What are you talking about? Can I pull my candy out my pocket? Can't even pull no candy out your pocket nowadays and they think you're doing something, pulling some shit on them. They using [their guns] recklessly.

Another participant shared, "You got a gun, they shoot on you automatically. You don't even get the chance to... You can't even do nothing, bro. Once they know you got a gun, that's it. You basically dead already. [N]iggas could kill me. Niggas could rob me and kill me. Yeah, I got to have my protection on me. Anything could happen." In this excerpt, the participant **explicitly links the unpredictability of interactions in the streets to the unpredictability of interactions with police, both of which generate fear, and both of which, in his mind, require gun-carrying to ensure survival.**

Deterrence theory and some of its programmatic offshoots (e.g., Focused Deterrence) argue that jail and aggressive policing punish those who break the law *and* motivate changes in future behavior. However, our study suggests more nuance. Incarceration was so much the norm for these young men that some felt their own images suffered because they had not been to jail. "I'm one of them lucky niggas. I be chilling, but I'm just lucky," one participant said of his ability to avoid detention. Then he corrected himself: "No cap.[15] I be like, 'Yo, I ain't got arrested.' I be thinking I should. That's that hood shit." Like this young man, some **participants felt torn between the notoriety that can come from a public arrest or large-scale indictment and the realities of jail, and identified that as a feature of local youth**

[15] "Cap" is a synonym for "lie."

culture. To be clear, data in this study show that young men do not *want* to interact with law enforcement or go to jail. The latter was especially true for those who had been incarcerated. "It wasn't a cool experience, and I wouldn't want to go back, ever at all, ever in life," said one participant after being incarcerated for two years.

For participants who were encountering their potential deaths, neither incarceration nor aggressive policing was a motivator for desistance for gun-carrying behavior. That said, many participants were deeply conflicted about carrying their guns in places they suspected they might encounter police. Nearly half reported that carrying made them fearful of going to jail. As one participant shared, "With me just coming home, I be not wanting to go back." But, he said, in a line we heard many times: "I'd rather go back to jail than somebody taking my life. So it's an effect but it's not at the same time." Echoed another: "I think about it like a scale in a way, because it's jail time on this side and running into the opps, them just hurting your family, and all that other shit on the other side. And all that other shit on the other side? It kind of outweighs getting caught by the cops." Here, **gun-carrying stands as a statement of resilience and assertion of agency in the face of people and systems that threaten their existence.**

Chapter 4

“They Don’t Want You to Slack”: Gun Carriers and Their Social Networks

We have illustrated how young gun carriers in our study experience extreme exposure to interpersonal and state violence and how this exposure informs their decisions to carry guns. This chapter looks at how guns function within participants’ families and street networks, and the extent to which guns function as a survival strategy for Black men on a broader cultural level.

Families

Participants described family units of varying make-up, as shown in Table 4.1. About a fifth of participants also had children of their own. For some, home life was separate from involvement in street networks. In these cases, participants often framed their gun carrying and/or street involvement as a departure from the more mainstream cultural and economic paths their families offered.

> My home life growing up... It was pretty good. My family was there for me every way they really could. There was just me … trying to find other outlets. So that’s what really messed me up in life. Just going other routes instead of sticking with just family. You feel me? My moms had a lot of friends coming in and out. I had a lot of cousins living with us. Always lived with my cousins and my aunties and uncles and grandmother. Always had relatives in the house. It was never just us.

These family structures were frequently larger, with extended kinship networks. Sometimes, as above, this contributed to participants’ feelings of support and wider community. Participants felt less at ease in other cases, particularly where their home lives overlapped with street culture. As one participant said, “My pop’s crib, yeah I felt safe there. My mom’s crib? Not really. Too much people in and out. I mean, it was an active home, too much going on. [I saw] my first gun at the age of six, seven and I just liked it ever since. I’d go to school, search that shit up, like: ‘guns.’” As this excerpt illustrates, street culture among families often resulted in early exposure to weapons, including guns.

Table 4.1. About Half of Participants Were Raised Primarily by Their Mothers Only

	N*	103
Main person raised by		
Mother only		49%
Both parents		25%
Father only		7%
Grandparents		7%
Other (e.g., sister, aunt, foster parent, godparents)		12%
Has Children		21%

*N may be as low as 102 because of missing data.

Weapons Possession Among Family Members In the data, **guns and other weapons emerge as sources of safety and protection not just for participants, relative to themselves and their families, but for their families** as well. Seventy-seven percent of participants reported that the family members they lived with growing up had weapons. For participants growing up in New York City, this meant growing up around illegal guns.[16] Of the 72% of participants who reported owning a gun, only 13% reported having a permit. However, **some participants were introduced to guns by family members who owned them legally**, usually through extended kinship networks outside New York state (frequently the southeastern U.S.). "My pops, he owned guns. It ain't just on some one gun. He owned guns. Legally. He got a license and all that. That's because he lived down South. But I grew up around him and he basically was telling me. That's why I want to get my license and get my joints legally."

In other cases, those **family members who owned guns were similarly involved in the alternative economy**. Most frequently, these were other male relatives: fathers, grandfathers, brothers, uncles, or older cousins. "[Pops] was a drug dealer so he always had it," said one

[16] In June 2022, the Supreme Court overturned New York State's concealed carry law. Prior to this (and during the period this data was collected), New York City had some of the strictest and most complicated gun laws in the country. Rifles, shotguns, and handguns require a permit issued by the NYPD as well as a certificate of registration to purchase. Owners also must be licensed and have a permit to carry. Some exceptions apply (including if the owner is in the military or is a peace officer). Open carry is not allowed anywhere in the state. Possession of an illegal handgun is considered a felony with a mandatory three-and-a-half to 15 years in prison, with five years being the "going rate." Those with felony convictions are federally barred from obtaining a license, making legal possession challenging for many of the men in our study. The impact of the Supreme Court decision on local laws is still being litigated at the time of this report's publication. More information can be found at https://gothamist.com/news/where-are-guns-allowed-in-new-york-now-an-updated-look-following-supreme-court-ruling.

participant. “We had guns in every room,” another participant reported. “[B]asically everyone over 18 had one.” A third explained,

> We had duffel bags of hammers[17]. All kind of hammers. We slept with hammers under the chair. If there wasn’t a chair, they stick it under the pillow. You know what I mean? … My mom’s side of the family, her brothers actually used to sell weed, so everybody [had guns]. It was like a family business.

Table 4.2. Participants Encountered Guns at an Early Age Through Family Members

N	101
Family members lived with growing up had a weapon	77%
Ever owned a gun	72%
Mean age when first got that gun	15.8
Had gun permit (n=73)	13%

Families and Gun Carrying In the last chapter, we saw that participants perceived gun carrying as an act of individual agency. Participants’ narratives of their families and social networks suggest that within communities experiencing such high rates of exposure to interpersonal and systemic violence, this understanding of gun carrying extends beyond individual decision-making to be an act of cultural resilience more broadly.

When participants’ first guns came from family members, there was often a coming-of-age quality to the exchange. **Family members, fearing for the safety of the young men who were beginning to be “outside” (that is, increasingly engaging in street culture), were described as giving participants weapons out of concern for their survival.**

> Basically, my cousin came to me … He was like, “Yo, what y’all niggas be doing?” and shit. “Y’all getting in any beef?” We was like, “What you mean?” That’s a time when I ain’t have no problems or whatever. He was like, “Nigga, if a nigga pull up on you and, you feel me? What you going to do?” I was like, “Fight him.” He was like, “If he backed out a knife?” I was like, “I don’t know. Run?” He was like, “Nah, you can’t do that, bro.” I was like, “So, what I’m going to do?” He was like, “Look.” Then he showed me some shit. Looked at it, I’m not going to say the details of the guns, but just know that the shit don’t drop no shells or whatever. He said, “Yo, come outside” … He told me put my hand around the shit, shot that shit. I ain’t going to front, that shit was mad weird. I was like, “What the fuck?” After that, he said, “Yo, put that shit in the crib.” I put that shit in

[17] “Hammer” is another word for firearm.

> the crib and he just left that shit. Just had that shit for me, but I never used it or nothing … After that, I bought my other shit from one of my mans off the block or whatever. But, I ain't never do no other shit though. Just had my shit just in case niggas try to play.

Here, the participant's cousin introduces him to gun-carrying as a method of self-preservation in what he believed were the inevitable future altercations the participant would encounter. Another participant similarly had a cousin teach him to use weapons:

> My cousins taught me how to [use a gun], so … My mother was involved in the streets when I was younger. She just got out the streets, so that's why she be scared for us and shit. Especially back in the day, you know people was getting killed left and right, so she grew up in that era where shit was really, really, real out here.

This participant came from a family that has some connection to the street. His mother, in this excerpt, is "scared" for him based on her knowledge of street culture and the potential dangers he will face; the gun stands as the family's best effort to insulate this young man from danger.

Other participants received their guns as gifts or inherited them. "[I got my first gun at] 14, turning 15 the next day … It was something I had been talking about with my uncle. He put something together for me … He was probably like late 40s." Another participant said, "My pops, he had three of them. He had a sawed-off shotgun and he had two pistols. [I got my first gun at 18]. It was my family's, my father's. My father passed away and it was basically mine after that."

Finally, in some cases when participants reached 14 or 15, older relatives gave them guns to "hold down," meaning to keep safe until needed. "[When I was] 14 … my bro had brought that shit to the crib. He had copped it off somebody else. And I just ended up holding that shit down."

Gangs and Street Culture

Gangs were essential social organizing entities for young people who carried guns, whether the young people were involved in street networks or not. Sixty-one percent of participants reported being or having been part of a gang or street network. This number likely underestimates the actual percentage, given reticence some participants expressed about discussing gang processes and experiences on record (despite the confidentiality and

safety protections the research team put in place). Participants reported affiliation with local sets of national gangs, like the Bloods, Crips, and Gangster Disciples; "block gangs," some of which were more loosely affiliated with these national gangs; and crews, which were generally groups of friends that coalesced into identifiable groups. In what follows, taking a cue from participants, we use the term "gang" and "street network" interchangeably.

Our 2020 study (Swaner et al.) found that gangs play vital social roles within low-income urban communities in New York City, providing members with a sense of brotherhood; emotional, material, and physical support; and protection. Data from this study produced similar findings. In many participants' narratives, **gang membership was described as a fluid and often inevitable progression from youthful friendships or familial relationships to eventual codification within formal and informal street network structures**.

Crews Many participants chose to call the street networks they were part of "gangs" and related derivatives (e.g., "gang-gang"). However, crews were characterized by smaller and more ad hoc organizational structures. Frequently, **crews took shape out of existing friend groups**. "[I]t didn't start off as a gang. It started off as something like you and your mans share together. But as you get older, beef start to get heavier. This all stems off of people I grew up with since I was younger." As social pressure increased, particularly the need for protection, these friend groups took on some of the features of national gangs. As another participant shared, "It was like a gang we created … So it started off with the handshake. Then we got off into wearing certain colors. Then after we start fighting niggas. We started bringing it up to like adding more niggas, like more recruits."

In the following passage, one participant details his efforts to make a name for himself at his school, how this led him to form a music group—which functions like a smaller crew—and then transitioned to a block-based crew.

> [When I was 14] I was rapping and whatnot … All the older gradesmen was basically the best rappers and shit like that, getting all the clout, throwing all the parties, moving all the packs[18] and shit like that. I wanted to aspire to be like that … I recorded a song on GarageBand and shit like that, put it out. [I met someone who] ended up starting a group and he wanted me to be like the third member … So from then, we just... Regardless if people was making music or not, we was just jacking the group and supporting each other. Putting money on whoever went to jail's books, stuff like that … And then from

[18] "Packs" refers to a unit of drugs. The term can be applied to any drug in any size.

there, I joined another. It's kind of like a gang, this one, because it ain't really music orientated but it kind of is. [I]t's more like just a family block. We just started repping our block and partaking in each other's beefs and shit like that.

His use of the phrase "it's kind of like a gang" indicates how, in the minds of some participants, **"gang" is a fluid term applied to a group of friends who support one another, share money, and "partake in each other's beefs."**

General Gang Support Again, findings here mirror those of our 2020 study, with participants citing emotional support, family bonds and brotherhood, and financial and material support as benefits to gang involvement. In many participants' narratives, all these were combined. "Basically, when I'm down, they down. When I'm up, they up[19]. If I need somebody to talk to, I go to one of my brothers, sit down, smoke a spliff with them, chat about life. And if they give me something I could learn from or they give me something I could walk on for the day, I'll be Gucci[20]." **Participants described a dynamic of sharing resources and life wisdom as a key, valued feature of these relationships.**

The emotional support participants discussed did not always come in a form recognizable as such to cultural outsiders, but nonetheless played a crucial role for participants.

[I]f you in a gang and you mad, niggas going to wonder what's wrong. But what niggas going to tell you is go spin[21]. Now, if you in a gang and you happy, niggas going to be like, "Nah, he too happy. Y'all got to do something to him to get him back in shape." Then niggas going to try to jump you or some weirdo shit. Then you going to be tight like, "What y'all niggas fucking with me for?" … They constantly play, to make you stronger.

Here, the participant details a process where **fellow gang members try to keep each other sharp and strong and prevent them from being "caught lacking."** While the behavior involved—antagonizing, physical aggression toward someone who is "happy"—might appear anti-social, narratives indicate this behavior has an intention of supporting and helping protect them from more severe forms of victimization.

[19] "Down" and "up" in this quote refer to finances.
[20] "Gucci" is a synonym for "good."
[21] "Spin" here refers to the phrase "spin the block," which means to going to an opponent's block or area with the intention of shooting them.

Participants frequently stressed the pro-social qualities of gang membership while also internalizing social judgements about gangs, as this passage illustrates:

> They used to give me advice. We used to just talk, bond. We was like family. It was never no game, nothing like that. They used to help me just by giving me advice and stuff … Leading me to the right path, even though we was in gangs and stuff but they was still trying to help me. They never told me to quit school, just stay here by us the whole day. They used to still tell me to go to school, get my money but I had to still chill with them and stuff.

Here, as in excerpts about family membership and joining gangs, there is a sense of dichotomy in the moral valances of gang involvement (good vs. bad, right vs. wrong).

Gang Leadership as Mentors Eighty-six percent of gang-involved participants reported that there was a leader in their gang. Again, terminology differed here. Participants most often used the phrase "Big Homie" to describe the person guiding their local sets or block gangs. Participants in crews—those smaller, local street networks that often emerged organically from long-time peer groups—often had no leaders. We note that several participants elected to skip these questions, being reluctant to speak in detail about the things their gang leadership did or did not do. Therefore, the numbers are lower than the number of respondents who reported having had a leader.

What emerges from these data is how varied gang leadership is, as are the things each leader values. On balance, data suggest that most gang leaders care about the long-term success and well-being of those "under" them. Personal development was the highest-reported area where gang leadership provided support. This often translated to participants as emotional support, guidance, and direction: "They help me have a better understanding on life, because I get to see things through their eyes and learn from a lot of they mistakes, because they made a lot of them," a participant said. "So, it's real helpful. You become real advanced, learning and just watching how other people did they thing."

Table 4.3. Gang Leadership Encouraged Well-Being of Members

	N*	53
The leader/big homie of my gang has mentored me in:		
Personal development		85%
Physical/mental well-being		79%
Educational development (e.g., school support, GED program connections)		77%
Emotional well-being		75%
Professional development (e.g., connections to jobs, resume help)		68%

N*	53
The leader:	
Requires going to school	76%
Teaches how to deal with/resolve gun situations	67%
Teaches how to safely handle guns	62%
Has confidence in gang leadership	76%

*N may be as low as 49 because of missing data.

Over 75% of participants who answered this question reported that their gang leadership helped them pursue their education, and about the same number (76%) reported that gang leadership required them to go to school (Table 4.3). In many cases, this was because **the same ethic of avoiding being caught lacking was applied more broadly.** "They don't want you to slack. They want you on top of your shit," one participant reported. "They don't got no time for games, so basically, he just want you on top of your deeds." In this case, the benefit is both to the participant and the gang's image. In other cases, gang leadership was more concerned about the leader's image or the well-being of the gang as a whole.

Gesturing toward the differences in personality and priorities of different leaders, one participant explained how **the approach varied depending on who was in charge and what they valued**: "at times you had certain ones that didn't give a fuck how you prosper in your life. Then you had the ones that actually had that best fit for you. Some of them had the best fit for their self and their guidance, but however they looked at it, they still forced certain individuals to get their diploma or GED in the long run." Another described his **gang leader's interest in making the gang more self-sufficient and less dependent on systems that exploit or harm them**:

> We got to start becoming doctors, lawyers, nurses and stuff. So if in the future when our mans get shot or get into a shootout, we don't go to the hospital, because you could get arrested. We got somebody who a nurse who in our set who could just fix him right there. Or if you a lawyer, your man's going to want somebody in your group a lawyer. You don't got to pay that much money for a lawyer now. All that. Or somebody who making good money who could bring to the pot, if somebody get arrested, bring them. That's what he said. That's why he tell us he really want us to go to school and stuff like that.

Other participants described **gang leadership wanting to ensure the long-term options of the members individually**: "[Staying in school is] something that they recommend, yeah. I guess because they feel we're younger so they're like, 'Y'all got to get out of this.' Like it's not too late for us, I guess."

A little over two-thirds of participants who answered this question indicated that their gang leadership also worked to help participants secure jobs by connecting them to local organizations and helping them with resumes. “Like somebody had came home [after being incarcerated]. They got him housing and a job so he could pay for his little apartment. And got him a little job to help him up because that’s his situation,” one participant explained. “But I’m still living with my family. I don’t really need help. I do need a job, when I’m 17, you feel me? I never really ran into a situation like that. But they do help each other out, though, professionally.” **The numbers here indicate a correlation between gang leadership offering mentorship and guidance and participants having confidence in them (and therefore being more likely to follow their direction).**

Gangs and Gun Carrying

Fifty-two percent of gang-involved participants reported that guns were a primary way their gangs ensured safety. As detailed in Chapters 2 and 5, gang- and crew-involved participants were frequently involved in each other’s “beefs,” including carrying, brandishing, and using guns to protect themselves, their “mans,” and their blocks.

Less than two-thirds of gang-involved participants reported that their gang leadership taught them how to safely handle guns. “A lot of these little niggas out here, feel me, they had a silver spoon. They’re just hopping off the porch … They do need that expertise to sit down to teach them, ‘Yo, this is how you do it,’ you feel me?”

For some participants, this **guidance came in the form of basic instructions on how to handle guns**. Advice included things like “don’t clean a gun with the clip in it” and a breakdown of how the guns work. One participant drew a distinction between his gang leadership’s instruction on gun-handling basics and practices around gun use to secure greater safety from law enforcement.

> They taught us how to put it apart, put it on safety, take it off safety … They didn’t teach us everything … They didn’t teach us if we kill somebody and then we start running, where to throw it, they didn’t teach us none of that. Some stuff you got to learn on your own. You got to think about on your own.

Still, **other gang leadership reportedly paired some of the mechanics of safe gun handling with moral advice on when and how guns should be used.** One participant gave more details on the guidance he received on gun safety and use.

> [F]irst he'll give you an unloaded gun. Sometimes it's not even put together. He'll ask you to put it together, or try and put it together. He'll show you which one's the safety. He'll tell you to not point it at anything you're not ready to use it at, stuff like that. Never keep one in the house, stuff like that. And when you get in the house, he'd tell you, "Clip and guns stay away from each other." He try to make you resolve the situation at first. If it's unresolved and it can only go one way, then yeah.

Another shared his gang leadership's guidance, which resonates with the excerpt above: "When you're in the house, never having the gun in the same place. Don't ever point a gun at somebody you're not willing to use it on, shit like that. Realize they're dangerous, that you really could take somebody's life."

Guns and Conflict Resolution Guidance on how and when to use the gun differed depending on the stance of gang leadership. **Some took a more cautious, conservative approach, looking at the gun as an option of last resort (i.e., defensive use).** "He was just teaching me, like, you can't react to every situation. Sometimes you got to be more observant than talkative." **Others advised a more preemptive-strike approach (i.e., offensive use)**, teaching their "little homies": "If a fight's about to go on, and you pull out your gun, I guarantee that fight not going on anymore." And while many participants reported that gang leadership gave them some degree of instruction on *how* to use a gun, some still stressed their own autonomy in the decision of *when* to do so. "Certain shit he might give me a little lecture like, 'Yo, all right, yo this is how you do that.' And I might take that conversation. But at the end of the day, I'm my own man. I'm going to do what I got to do, feel me? Ain't nobody going to stop me from doing what I got to do." Here, the participant indicates that **even if his gang leadership cautions against settling a dispute with weapons, that authority only goes so far.**

Gang Politics and Gun Carrying Participants described gang politics as related to gun carrying in an important way. **The more uncertainty participants were exposed to, the more they were likely to carry their guns.** Gang leadership that was either indecisive or disorganized was reported as increasing participants' concerns around their safety, primarily because of the lack of information-sharing around what issues the gang was facing. "With the situation being unorganized and not always in tune and up-to-date with a lot of things going on, you could be blind to a situation that your mans is into." Here, a participant suggests that lack of clarity around who is beefing with whom could result in people unwittingly exposing themselves to threat.

Unaffiliated Youth and Guns Participants described a **fair amount of social overlap between those who were part of street networks and those who were not, and gang affiliation did not always track involvement in the underground economy.** Speaking of his social network, one gang-involved participant explained, "you got some people that got respect and are cool with niggas, then you got some people who are scared of niggas and shit like that that, feel threatened. So people that feel threatened, they would want to carry guns, you feel me?" Here, the participant explains that some **unaffiliated young people are intimidated, or afraid, of the gangs and carry out of a sense of protection**. Another participant described this dynamic from the inside of the experience, as an unaffiliated person who had beef with a gang member. "I just knowed that the gang, they was heavily protected," he said. "They got heavy armor or anything like that, feel me? They got all sorts of weapons. So I'd rather take someone's life than anybody take mines, feel me?" Here again is the direct link between fear, feeling threatened, and gun carrying. In this passage, we also see that **"protection" is used synonymously with gun carrying/access, indicating the extent to which these concepts are fused in participants' minds**. Another non-affiliated participant shared:

> I only got one life and I know certain people can't get access to [methods of making quick money] I could. So, I know that they would try to do anything to stop that. Especially if they know that it's easy for me to get caught up or whatever, because I don't got security of my own. I'm just a regular, just me. So, if niggas want to pull up, they know where to find me. That's why I got to keep that.

Potential for Gang Networks

We asked participants what, if anything, they would change about how their gangs or street networks operate. **Their responses all centered around increased unity and positivity and possibility that these qualities within gangs could increase safety.** For some participants, this applied primarily within their gang itself. "[There's] a lot of shit wacky these days. A lot of shit off course, everything ain't put together no more. There's a lot of lacking going on out here," said one participant. "I would recommend support for everybody," another participant suggested. "If somebody's down, give them cash, let them come up, have everybody come up together." "Honestly," shared another, "I feel that everybody should stop gang banging. I don't mean just Crips. Like, we should just all … gather around and just help the community and stop fighting with each other."

Chapter 5

“Fear is Order”: Cultural Landscapes and Gun Carrying

Prior chapters have laid out participants’ exposure to interpersonal and structural violence and their social networks’ cultural strategies for ensuring safety and survival through gun-carrying. This chapter explores how these myriad incidents come to rest in the physical spaces (e.g., their neighborhoods and “the block”) and virtual spaces (e.g., social media) participants inhabit. Experiences of interpersonal and structural threat and violence are inscribed on their physical landscapes. Their neighborhoods emerge from the data as holders of memory—of kindness and caretaking, as well as of loss—and of invisible geographic lines that profoundly affect their daily movements. Social media environments increasingly have real-life consequences for how they experience their neighborhoods. These cultural landscapes are key to understanding young people’s use of guns.

Neighborhood Experiences and Perceptions

Study participants talked about their neighborhood in two primary ways: as a place of mutual aid and caretaking and as a site of generalized unpredictability and threat.

Mutual Aid and Caretaking Those who were long-term residents of neighborhoods, had family ties there, or had formed relationships with other residents and local businesses reported feeling taken care of due to those ties. **People looked out for one another physically by providing protection and support in altercations, and financially and emotionally by ensuring basic needs.** Sixty-eight percent of participants reported that people in the neighborhood were willing to help each other. Participants’ descriptions included care from other people in the neighborhood, most commonly neighborhood “hustlers.” Sometimes this support was purely in the form of money or ways to quickly make money in the underground economy. “When I’m broke,” one participant shared, neighborhood hustlers “give me weed and shit to flip because they know I don’t play about my bread. I like to get money, so they’ll give it to me. They already know their bread’s coming back to them next day, two days at the most.” Here the participant is clear that although there is generosity in the drug dealer giving the participant a pack to break up and sell, there is an expectation that the investment will be returned promptly. In other examples,

the support also involved provision of basic needs. “When I first got into foster care,” another participant explained, “[local hustlers] just held me down, clothes, money, food, shit like that.”

A few participants also identified local independent businesses as periodically helping them out when funds were tight. “If you don’t got it at that moment, then some businesses, like stores and stuff, will make you pay them back another day … So they really get where we come from in the street, in the hood.” Another specified that this care and support often came from and to people with deep or long-term connections to the community. “If they know your family, or they watched you grow up, or they actually care about your well-being, yeah, they’re going to look out for you, they’re going to make sure you’re good.”

Spatial Exposure to Violence

This care and support had clear physical boundaries. “Everybody think of us like family. My neighborhood is a big community, so family,” said one participant. Within the family, people generally took care of each other. Sixty percent of participants felt that the people in the neighborhood mostly got along. This participant continued:

> But the people that’s outside the neighborhood? They view it as everybody in the neighborhood that they don’t associate with, they beef with. They think we’re the enemy, so now they got to carry a gun because you never know who will come to the neighborhood. And the neighborhood’s big and it’s open to everybody, it’s public, so you need to carry guns.

Another participant had similar sentiments, suggesting that though the neighborhood might take care of its own, that did not necessarily equate with friendliness. A little over half of participants felt that people were friendly in the neighborhood. “[N]obody’s friendly,” this participant said.

> You already know how every projects is set up. It’s not a place you just come and chill and nobody knows you. People have to know who you are for them to not press you or bother you … It’s more of maintaining their status or whatever. They already portrayed in their music and to the streets as being gangster and stuff. So what do gangsters do? Gangsters make sure only their gang is on their block. No civilians, no opps basically. Because they mostly do it for the opps though, because you can’t really tell who’s who these days. Anybody could walk through. And it’s already getting cold outside, so you

> could just walk around with a hoodie and masks. This corona[virus], you could just have a mask hoodie on and nobody really know who you are. So, if it's somebody that's not from there and has problems with people there, they could just get in there easily because: hoodie, mask.

This passage details how local gang members' concern over image means they need to protect the physical boundaries of their space.

This passage also reveals **a vital shift in New York City street culture under COVID, namely the introduction of the balaclava ski mask**.[22] Many people wear these masks in cold weather, but during the time this research was conducted, the masks gained popularity among young people who carry guns to literally mask their identities. This masking was effective, as the participant indicates, when they wanted to go into opps territory to shoot or when they had beef and wanted to keep their identities hidden. Suddenly, people could not see each other's faces, which, as this participant indicates**, led to a rapid increase in fear and uncertainty among our sample. As young people moved unidentifiably between neighborhoods, physical space—"the block," "the neighborhood"—became further aligned with the sense of latent threat of potential opps**.

As a result, while many beefs were between people who had existing relationships, some participants felt that heightened tensions meant that "[m]ost altercations now is random. It's like, 'Yo, bro. What the fuck you looking at? Yo, bro, what?' That's it. Sometimes at that moment I don't be having a gun, but that's why I carry it. That shit be mad quick." **This increased sense of uncertainty—of not knowing who or when someone might try to shoot them in their own neighborhoods—permeated participants' relationships with the physical spaces they inhabited.** One explained that he carried "because I'm living in a dangerous neighborhood, because anything can happen at any point in time." Said another, "[i]t's always happening around the neighborhood: so many shots coming, you be hearing, so you just don't feel safe at all." This sense of uncertainty extended to how participants experienced other physical spaces beyond their own neighborhoods. Almost half of participants **(47%) reported changing where they went outside the neighborhood, including neighboring blocks, based on the fear of being harmed.**

A Neighborhood Under Siege This sense of uncertainty of potential harm often played out linguistically and further illustrated how interwoven physical space, fear of harm, and culture are for these young people. In the passages that have preceded and will follow,

[22] This ski mask is referred to as "Pooh Shiesty," after the rapper of the same name.

participants frequently used war metaphors and analogies to make sense of their experiences and form protective strategies to help ensure their survival. The relationship to the military extends beyond mere terminology to ways of understanding and encountering opps and police. “It’s like we got a gun to protect us from the opps. Now we got to protect us from the cops too, so it’s two battlefields,” one young man reported. “It’s us versus the cops, and then it’s us versus each other. So it’s just too much going on.” These groups assumed the guise of enemy combatants. “When I hear there are opps in the hood,” shared a participant, “I know they aren’t in the hood just to walk around. They’re in the hood to do something to one of us. So, I’ve got to be on top of the game, I’ve got to be one step ahead of them.” Another shared, “I mean, it’s a small neighborhood, everybody has opps so if the opps are shooting then I guess we got to shoot right back. That’s how the mentality is.” Yet another stated, “I never really liked the term gang. I call them my brothers in arms.” As previously noted, participants frequently referred to those with whom they were beefing as “opps,” and becoming more “mili” (i.e., militant) when they or someone close to them died or nearly died (as discussed in Chapter 2). A step beyond being “mili” was being “on timing,” or **shifting from a posture of defense against potential risk to offense and moving preemptively to neutralize a threat.**

In New York City, street networks are frequently—though not always—organized spatially. The national gangs discussed in the last chapter (i.e., the Bloods, Crips, Gangster Disciples) contain smaller sub-groups called “sets.” In the neighborhood we interviewed within, sets, “block gangs,” and crews all had stake in the organization and spatial apportionment of neighborhoods. Many participants described inheriting beef through geography, either via existing long-term beefs between housing developments or blocks, or because of gang beef they were associated with due to the block they lived on, regardless of affiliation.

The mean age of joining gangs, first arrests, and gun-carrying among participants were tightly stacked at 14.8, 15.1, and 15.8 respectively. These ages coincide neatly with the developmental stage at which adolescents begin moving away from their families of origin as the primary unit of importance and finding identity and personal meaning from social ties. In their neighborhoods, participants described two choices: to stay “inside” and essentially be removed from the social and cultural life of youth in their neighborhood, or to “jump off the porch” and be “outside,” involved in youth street culture. In doing the latter, they were exposed to threats, which led to fights, involvement in street networks, arrests, and for some, gun-carrying. The sense of neighborhood-under-siege is central to this decision-making process. As this participant explained of his entry into gun-carrying:

> I be starting to have guns when I'm around 15 or 16. It was just so protective, but the thing is that I live around a neighborhood that is always crimes happen. You feel me? There always shots be letting off, there be so many people dying in my neighborhood. The sides, right now, every side protect their own territory or they just get back for their mans or anything … I live in a neighborhood that's involved with mad shit. You feel me? Any territory they see me, any sides who got a beef with my sides and shit, and they see that I'm from that side, it's not going to be a good feeling for me. That's the reason why that I started picking my gun up at that age, because that's the situation I was going through. I had to protect myself. Like, I always had to be there. I always had to keep that shit on me.

Prior themes of fear of death, exposure to violence, and lack of safety find physical expression in the landscape. **The danger and death they hear about, see, and fear fuse with the block.** "I never really needed a gun but... I guess you could say [I chose to carry one] because watching my neighborhood and the shit I was around going down, niggas dying left and right." Another said, "I really try to progress in life," describing his desire to move away from gun-carrying. "But where you live at, it be hard. It be hard. You walk outside, you can get got as soon as you close your door." This is reflected in some participants' descriptions of balancing their desire for positive change against the realities of their social contexts. "I tried [to change],"one participant explained, "but it's like just getting pulled back into the same shit. I guess I got to change my surroundings." As another participant stated, "I live here. ... So it's like, you really still in it. You really still in it. You can't really leave the streets alone."

Social Media

The other primary "space" with which our participants engaged beyond "the neighborhood" or "block" was social media. Though not a physical space, **social media was the dominant cultural landscape they inhabited and had profound implications on how participants moved through and understood their physical environments**. Our participants detailed regular social media engagement, and at the time of the research, the primary platforms referenced were Facebook Live, Instagram, and Twitter. **Eighty-five percent reported seeing social media videos of people being harmed weekly or more frequently, with nearly two-thirds viewing such videos daily.** Participants laid out in detail how closely networked to the kinds of violence outlined above social media is and the ways in which it constitutes another aspect of the web of danger and threat that surrounds them. It affected their lives in two primary ways: first, it expanded the boundaries of potential harm from

neighboring blocks or neighborhoods to essentially the entire world. Second, it allowed for additional vectors of potential threat and exposure to violence that increased their sense of generalized uncertainty, strengthening the need for them to become more "mili" to avoid "being caught lacking" as they moved through the physical spaces in their lives.

Table 5.1. Social Media Played a Major Role in Participants' Lives

	N*	103
See social media videos of people physically harmed		
Daily		64%
Weekly		21%
Monthly		12%
A few times a year		3%
Social media has changed the way people you know handle beef		91%
Ever involved in social media beef that got out of hand		52%
If yes, guns were involved (n=50)		60%

*N may be as low as 100 because of missing data.

Virtual disputes were continuous with the street in the sense that they often originated from similar kinds of issues (e.g., fights over romantic partners, threats of potential harm, and claims against a person's reputation or network). Participants described claims as typically involved intimidation, challenges to masculinity or strength, or intimations that someone was "lacking" or "moving scary." As one participant described, "I felt social media was everything, how people view you and stuff. This person tried to spread a rumor about me. He tried to talk this snitching shit because I had got arrested … He took it upon himself to start a rumor, which ultimately got him hurt." Here, the claim made against this participant's reputation on social media was that the participant had "snitched" to police and shared incriminating details about friends during his arrest process. Concerned about how this rumor would affect his image, the participant retaliated.

As above, participants outlined the fluidity of online and real-life beef. In the following passage, this young gun carrier spells out how beef in virtual and actual landscapes interact: "Couple people was going Live on social media. Some of the opps spinned [t]o where we was at. They had guns and we had guns. It went to a shoot-out."

Participants repeatedly described the importance of protecting image and name, and the serious cultural affront it is to make false claims on social media, either about yourself or someone else:

> [N]iggas talking on Facebook, it just makes me go outside. It makes me go to them … It's just basically regular people dissing my side, and we're dissing their side. But they do it more on the internet, and that gets us mad … They're portraying somebody they're not on Facebook, on the internet. We just got to do what we got to do[23].

Effects of Social Media on Viewers Participants felt that watching such videos had a strong effect on young people, similar to the effects of secondary exposure to violence. Namely, these were **1) making them consider their own vulnerability to potential harm and 2) increasing the visibility of the situation, and therefore expanding the level of potential public embarrassment around claims against one's image.** Participants described a culture where they were compelled to respond—through language on social media, by fighting or "spinning," or through more long-term, subtle efforts to make their opps nervous or uncertain about the nature and timing of their potential retaliation. If no action was taken, the person abstaining was frequently perceived as taking a further hit to their image, with the assumption that the claims against them must be true. If the person remained on the defensive, and never went on the offensive, the perception was that they would keep getting "violated." One participant explained:

> Because everybody don't want to be disrespected. Everybody want to be seen in a certain way. So, I feel like when others degrade their character [on social media], it definitely have a bad effect on the people that use guns because now they want to make an example out of you and let other people know that they're not the ones to be played with. [N]ow they're not doing it out of respect no more. They're doing it more out of... Just to show others... This basically for others. They not even doing it for they self. They're just doing it for others.

The potential embarrassment was not only from unanswered threats from opps. **It could also come in the form of being filmed within-network "lacking."**

> They're seeing people get caught lacking or whatever, how bad they get beat up. Or sometimes they make you just do an act or whatever that makes you basically disowned by the gang. Sometimes they'll catch you if you're just scared or whatever, or you don't have heart or whatever, they could just scare you enough to drop your own gang or

[23] Participants typically used "do what we've got to do" as a euphemism for either physical violence or gun use.

> whatever. And videos are going to go viral, so anybody that you know will see that, they're just going to be like, "Oh, let's clip them."

The increased visibility meant that for those referenced in social media live streams or who had videos posted of them, their images were increasingly at stake depending on how they responded. Described one participant: "[t]here's more anger, because social media is a part of the beef, to embarrass people. That's how you would embarrass someone you have beef with." **Many participants felt the possibility of embarrassment and increased visibility led to more extreme behavior.** "Now on social media, you record this and that to get, I guess, clout or whatever. That kind of makes the violence or the beef, the situation more aggressive because now, more other people can see it on social media so yeah. It's got a big impact."

Participants frequently described the acts of physical violence they viewed on social media as contributing to their personal sense of danger, mirroring reactions they had to violence experienced by people they knew in person. "They'll see somebody get assaulted, and they'll say to theirself … 'I can't let it happen [to me].' So they'll be more on the defense." Another participant shared:

> It be having an impact on me because I'll be thinking like, 'Yo, if that was me, I would have been...' But sometimes you got to think, everybody don't got the same mindset as you. Everybody got their own vote. So at the same time, if you ain't going to help them, then just you got to watch. That what a lot of people do. They watch because they don't want to help. They be scared.

This participant names fear as a driver both of viewing these videos and of the viewer's identification with the person committing harm or being harmed. **Here, participants' concerns of protecting their images, protecting themselves and their friends, and protecting their physical space merge.**

Spatial Violence Exposure, Image, and Gun Carrying

At the base of participants' decisions to pick up guns was an effort to exercise agency over lives where they otherwise have little control. Participants in this study were clear that among all the things they sought to protect by carrying guns—their own lives (75%), their families (72%)—and the things they sought safety from—opps (65%), police (35%), and

gangs more broadly (32%)—**securing and maintaining respect for respect's sake was low on the list (11%).** The differences between these numbers suggests that the concept of respect, which has received considerable academic attention, has nuances that bear deeper investigation, particularly since half of participants believed that carrying a gun makes people respect a person (Table 5.2).[24]

Table 5.2. Participants Carry Guns More Out of Fear of Dying or Harm Than Respect

	N	103
I carry guns for…		
Fear of dying		75%
Fear of someone hurting my family		72%
Fear of running into opposition		65%
Fear of police		35%
Fear of gangs		32%
Fear of losing respect on the streets		11%
Carrying a gun makes people respect a person		50%
Carrying a gun makes a person feel powerful		81%
In my neighborhood, it is good to be known as a shooter		51%

Participant narratives reveal that respect, power, and fear are tightly intertwined in their minds. Rather than the end goal in itself, respect, like image, is something participants believe must be carefully guarded and maintained. To be respected is to be left alone. Put another way, **people who were not respected were more likely to be perceived as potential victims.** And this is a direct outgrowth of the extreme exposure to interpersonal and structural violence that young people experience:

> People don't respect nice people in the hood. Maybe in White neighborhoods they respect them because everybody's nice. But in the hood, though, it's different because people are just violent. If you're not violent, people are just going to take advantage of you. They're going to think you're a pussy or you're just not about it, or you're just not down to ride or whatever. If you're just mad nice, like for example, let's say you're just rolling people up or buying people stuff, just talking mad nice, letting people just walk over you physically and verbally and shit, you're just going to be seen as a hood nigga, and nobody want to be a hood nigga.

[24] See E. Anderson, 1999. *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co.

Here, **the participant identifies the way race and space ("White neighborhoods" versus "the hood") and violence combine to compel people to respond with violence rather than kindness and support to avoid people taking "advantage of you."** Respect, then, is something to be pursued so as to "not get involved in no issues, stuff like that, avoid all problems, no arguments."

Respect and Gun Carrying There were differing opinions on the relationship between gun carrying and respect. In the estimation of many, the gun was perceived as the final arbiter of living or dying (for oneself or another) and, therefore, capable of inspiring fear *and* respect.

Sometimes respect alone was stated as the effect of gun-carrying, for the purpose stated above (i.e., ensuring one is not messed with). "I feel like [being known as a shooter] gives you status. Niggas love that, if you shoot, I guess. They're going to respect you a lot more. People be a little bit more iffy about like … even fucking with the person." Explained another, "if a nigga got a gun and another nigga don't? What he gonna to do? He know what's up." That is, he knows to leave the person alone or let the issue drop.

Other participants pushed back against the idea that gun carrying automatically conferred respect.

> You have a gun you just feel like … anybody, no matter how strong they look or who they think they are, is just nothing. Because you could just end their life by just pulling the trigger. After that you're going through life as Bruce Lee, Floyd Mayweather. Respect? Nah. You don't get respect for having a gun.

Another participant echoed this response, pointing out that "with or without a gun, you can't force respect. If somebody respects you, they respect you. If they don't, they don't." Another put it more directly: "[some people] that I see with guns, sometimes I laugh at them like, 'You're still a clown.'"

Fear and respect were terms sometimes conflated in participants' minds. Said one: "the shooters [are the most respected], because they give off the most fear. Fear is order. They don't even have to have money, but the people with money would just gravitate towards them because they have the fear and they have the respect. People feel safe being around them." Here, the participant suggests that because shooters are the most feared, they can create order and safety. And from that flows respect. Explained another: "people respect fear.

When you scare, you don't got nothing to worry about." A third drew a clear differentiation between the two. "Carrying a gun makes you feared, makes people scared. It's fear, not respect. Everybody want to be feared, not even respected nowadays in this age, you feel me? So it's like they rather do something to gain the fear, instead of gaining respect and gaining trust."

For other participants, gun carrying was entirely unrelated to securing respect. "I don't care about no street cred. It's more of a personal thing. It's not about being cool or being tough or nothing, it's just more about being safe." Another put it this way: "I don't really care about losing respect. That shit don't get you nowhere really, but just respect."

Respect and Money Being known as someone who had or could easily make money was the other primary way participants earned respect, notably one *not* directly tied to the exercise of violence, and suggesting that instilling fear and gun-carrying were not intrinsically tied to the concept of respect. Instead, **the respect was rooted in the money maker's independence, means to quickly obtain luxury goods, and ability to extend financial support to the rest of the community**. "[W]hen you've got bread, ain't nobody can tell you nothing. Everybody respects you," said one participant. Another participant echoed the importance of independent financial success on respect: "hustlers and scammers [are the most respected people in the hood] because they have their own way to make money." Another identified some of the scams associated with COVID as shifting perceptions of respect in the community, due to the increase in money they brought. "I'd say scammers [got the most respect right now]," said another participant. "The pandemic that's going on right now, everybody trying to make a way to get some free money, anywhere the money can come." Some participants felt that, while in some ways this access to "fast money" might be "doing wrong … in the eyes of certain people, it's really not. And they get … the flashy stuff quicker and easier in a sense."

Although there was **not an explicit relationship between gun-carrying and securing respect through easy access to income, participants indicated it was still a dangerous pursuit that often made carrying a gun a smart move.**

> You got some people that feels like [you] owe [them] just because they had been around you, but never was really trying to look out for you. They just been around you. Now, they see that you're getting something that could be considered easy money. But, it's really not easy money, just using your brain and they feel like you got to give them this or give them that. So, I got to just keep that weapon because niggas will make threats

> like, “Oh, if you don’t do that, oh, you’re moving funny. You’re not my man.” So after that, niggas start moving different like, “Oh, if I see you, it’s on sight.” So, I keep weapons and shit.

Here, the participant explains that once people have an image of having money, other people in their networks start expecting access to some of that money. If that money is not shared as expected, the person making the money becomes a potential target for theft. “There’s certain people,” shared a participant, “they just hate seeing other people better than them, so they’d rather try to take it from you. If somebody’s trying to take something from you, you got to defend yourself, regardless.”

Recent Cultural Shifts in Resolving Conflict

Many participants felt that there was a significant shift in how they and their peers were handling problems compared to older people in the neighborhood, largely due to the cultural changes arising from social media’s ubiquity in their cultural landscapes. The passages below exemplify common perceptions of youth of the **centrality of social media to beefs, image, and social capital as foundational shifts in youth street culture**. “[W]hen I was growing up,” one participant shared,

> if you had beef, you approached a person personally. But now social media got everybody putting their say-so in it. So you got people on Facebook, if you’re arguing with somebody, they go on Facebook, post about it, go on Live, say something about it, and the next thing you know you got they mans or the next person’s mans, or their significant other commenting on it. And then the next thing you know, everybody under the sun’s in your beef when it’s just you and another person.

Another participant echoed this sentiment, sharing, “Basically, few years ago people never used to really do a lot of that internet talking. You had beef, you go where the person be or where the person at and then you go settle it like that. You won’t go to social media and talk on social media first.” Shared another: “There’s no more ‘see you when I see you.’”

Participants also frequently detailed what they felt was **an overlap of beefs, social media, and gun use (as opposed to fighting or even knife-use) to settle disputes.** Some felt it would be better if “it would be like how it was back in the day. Fair ones, you feel me? Fighting. Getting over it. So it’s like now, everybody got guns, it’s like everybody gun talk now. Instead of going and handling it like men, it’s gun talk now.” Another participant

explained this relationship: “They don’t want to be embarrassed on social media, so I feel like that embarrassment hurts their pride, and that pride makes them pick up a gun.”

As with previous forms of exposure to violence, **social media and the sense of the neighborhood itself—memories of deaths of loved ones, threats from opps often delivered via social media—led many young participants to carry guns**.

Chapter 6

Conclusion and Recommendations

This report details the findings of data collected from 103 young gun carriers in Brooklyn, NY as part of a four-city exploration of the socio-cultural roots of gun use in U.S. cities. Research questions included: 1) What motivates young people's acquisition and use of guns?; 2) Which social and structural factors create or influence gun culture?; and 3) What individual and community characteristics could build resilience against and help stop gun use?

Our data reveal that these young people live with extremely high rates of exposure to interpersonal and structural violence. Witnessing, experiencing, hearing about, and committing acts of harm all leave participants with a pervasive sense of their own vulnerability, which makes the threats of harm they receive all the more threatening. Street and neighborhood networks provide much-needed sites of support and mutual aid, though are perceived by participants as tenuous and sometimes with strings attached. Protecting their images—on social media and within their street networks and communities—was paramount. Many participants describe an important cultural shift, where the desire to be respected has been supplanted by a desire to create and nurture fear in others. Both of these have been cultural strategies to avoid being harmed.

With no structural options to provide for their safety, participants framed their gun carrying as an intentional decision in the face of death. Rather than an effort to be "cool" or to succumb to peer pressure—a popular U.S. cultural narrative around most risky teenage behavior—**participants were very clear that they picked up guns as an act of agency, because they feared for their lives and did not want to die.**

Three-quarters of participants said they carried guns out of fear of dying. "This summer 2020, a lot of people died. Now speaking for myself, speaking for other people, nobody want to die. So they went and got what they had to get to make sure they ain't got to die." This is not just an agentic act relative to other young people; it's also **an act of resilience in the face of systems that repeatedly, through what they do and what they do not do, demonstrate disregard for participants' lives.** One participant bluntly stated: "I feel like if the police ain't going to protect us, who else is going to protect us, besides ourself?" Another, weighing what he saw as his options, explained, "I'd rather go to jail by 12 than die and get carried by

six people. That's my decision for life now." Here, he makes the resilient act of choosing "life now," preferring potential incarceration to dying because of lack of self-defense.

Participants carry guns because the only other options they see are neither feasible nor long-term solutions.

> [Y]ou could also stay inside or also move. But most people don't want to leave where they live at because it's the only primary thing they have. Like say you got beef, the people you got beef with come in and trying to hurt you. You want protection from that. Somebody trying to rob you or something. You got to protect yourself from that.

Recalling participants' exposure to violence, these are not theoretical scenarios. They make calculated decisions based on experienced phenomena that consistently put them face-to-face with their own mortality and the mortality of those around them. In the words of one participant: **"Safety. That's it, just safety."**

Towards a Typology of Brooklyn Gun-Carriers

In his 2019 book *Bleeding Out*, Thomas Abt identified different types of gun carriers: "Wannabees" (those who are desperate for status and belonging); "Legacies" (those who are born into families who norm "criminal violence"); the "Wounded" (those who suffer early childhood trauma); and "Hunters" (those who willingly kill, and even enjoy it).

However, our data indicate that most of our participants experience early and ongoing trauma, challenging the idea of the "wounded" as a separate category to which only some belong. Many gun carriers grow up in families where family members own and carry weapons, sometimes legally and sometimes not. Having families deeply embedded in street networks can normalize those networks for young people, but not all young people who grow up in such households carry guns, or carry them for the same reasons.

Our data reveal a different structure, with significant implications for program and policy. Participants in this study talk **about four kinds of gun carriers in Brooklyn: 1) those who carry for basic protection; 2) those who carry for image; 3) those who carry as part of their street hustles; and 4) "shooters."**

Type 1: Carrying for Protection

People who carry for basic protection are defensive gun carriers primarily concerned with their survival due to general exposure to danger via their neighborhoods or families, gang-related beefs, or their own issues with opps or the police: "To be honest, I never liked guns but I always have it on me … I had to protect myself like I always had to be there. I always had to keep that shit on me." Often, as with this participant, **those who carry for protection expressed ambivalence about carrying, and certainly using, guns. This ambivalence was trumped by the safety imperative.**

> I'm the type of person, if you don't pull out nothing and we just going to fight, we just going to fight. I could have knife, a gun, I could have anything on me, I don't have no reason to kill you. I look at taking a life. It's like there's no reason someone should have to take someone else's life. You're taking this nigga off the planet. He got a family. He might have a daughter, a mom, a son. You feel me? That's going to cause a lot of hurt, more than need be.

A final participant summed it up this way: "I'm not trying to kill nobody. I'm not a killer."

Type 2: Carrying for Image

People who carry for image are defensive carriers who might pull out the gun in a group, flash it to intimidate opps, or shoot and routinely and often intentionally miss ("cloud shooters"). These people do not necessarily earn respect by carrying, especially if they carry for clearly defensive reasons or "just to be having guns, just to show it off." As another participant explained, "[Carrying a gun] make you respect the person if you doing something with your gun. Not if you just carrying it." **This category of carrier is likely to get into beefs related to false claims or representation, both in person and via social media.**

Type 3: Carrying as Part of Street Hustles

People who carry as part of street hustles are defensive carriers, as in the case of drug dealers and scammers, and offensive carriers, as in the case of those committing "gangsta" robberies and breaking and entering. Typically, the defensive carriers are known to hold either large amounts of cash or goods that can easily translate into cash. They are still carrying for protection: "He only have a gun just because he's a drug dealer and shit, so he just has a gun for his protection just in case some situation go down." Explained another participant:

> A nigga know you making 3K, 5K a day, and they know you walk around with a lot of money … They know you're not like that, they know you're not really into that other stuff, but you got a lot of money. People will try to rob you, so now you got to go get what you got to get to protect your money and yourself.

The offensive gun carriers carry as part of their robbery and breaking-and-entering practices. In these cases, the gun is a tool of the trade, used to obtain the cash or goods sought through intimidation and threat. It is seldom intended to kill, and is still in those cases used in a defensive fashion. "Let's say you … running in cribs and shit like that. Shit like that, you just got to … you never know. Some nigga could be waiting for you behind the door with a gun, and in the crib there's no cameras, so whatever happens, happens."

Type 4: Known as a "Shooter"

People in this category seem from participants' descriptions to be rarer (a feature that overlaps with Abt's observations about "the Hunters"). However, rather than necessarily *enjoying* killing, our data suggest that "shooters" or "real shooters" are offensive carriers, people who are "on timing" and regularly go on the offensive if need be by "bodying" those who are or might become a perceived threat. Here, a participant breaks down some of the differences between himself and his friend, a "real shooter":

> My homie like a real shooter, so he wasn't really feeling the vibes and whatnot. So he came back to the block going crazy and whatnot saying, "Niggas about to get it on with these niggas right now. He already owe you bread. These niggas ducking and diving, doing all this weird dumb shit. We're about to just handle the situation right now." So I'm walking with this nigga, thinking to myself like, "All right, this is about to be handled type shit. We're about to just get this shit done. We're both on our time."

This gun carrier regularly goes on the offensive and is known to settle disputes by shooting and killing, and so has power that derives from fear. "[If[you're a shooter … a lot of niggas not going to play with you because they're going to be scared, and you just got the name."

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

The findings from this study support many of the recommendations made in our prior report (Swaner et al. 2020), including bringing services to the spaces important to youth; expanding job programs specifically for youth and people with criminal records (and providing living

wages and mentorship); and continuing to fund participatory research to provide critical insights into what would work best to provide safety and support.

The increase in gun violence experienced in many U.S. cities in 2020 and into 2021 saw an attendant increase in funding for anti-gun violence programming. Much of this funding is being funneled into crisis management strategies that include models that rely mostly on using credible messengers to diffuse immediate violent conflicts between individuals (e.g., Cure Violence) and Focused Deterrence programs. The latter relies heavily on law enforcement messaging that responses to gun carrying will be swift and severe and local community organizations encouraging engagement in services. Findings of this study indicate that additional gun violence prevention approaches—that derive from and speak to the lived experiences and cultural frameworks of participants—are sorely needed. We offer here a further set of recommendations for those delivering programming, funders, and policymakers that build on those from our prior study, and which emerge from the cultural logic of the young participants themselves.

- **Tailor the Messenger to the Message** Programs must identify and build trust with key community members around gun-carrying and -use, which frequently means respected, trusted decision-makers within local gangs, crews, and street networks. Engaging with these community members in long-term, meaningful ways in the design and execution of programming and, when appropriate, hiring them as staff—with competitive salaries and ongoing support and development—is vital to making lasting movement toward gun desistance. This recommendation may present legal and logistical challenges that will vary across locations. However, it is an essential next step for the field given the centrality of gang culture to these young people's daily lives, gang leadership's unique ability to intervene in young people's use of guns, and young people's desire for increased positive direction from their own gang leadership toward network and community cohesion.

- **Engage Youth Within, Rather Than Isolate Them from, Existing Street Networks** Guns exist in urban settings in relationship to gangs and street networks. These networks are also often the primary source of trust and allegiance for members. Attempting to "treat" young people as individuals outside of these networks ignores these networks' social and cultural centrality to Black youth experience in urban settings. Expecting youth to leave street networks, or to engage in behavior that is not normed within them, makes long-term behavior change extremely challenging to sustain. By partnering with the gangs, programming will be sanctioned, or authorized,

making it safe for gun carriers to be honest about what they experience and are facing within the context of the street networks and wider communities they are part of.

- **Build on Existing Informal Community Aid Systems** Identify the existing informal and geographically-specific ways neighborhood residents are already supporting one another. Street networks and community residents, particularly in low-income communities, frequently have existing methods of pooling and redistributing financial resources, food, access to money-making enterprises, etc. Many programs move into such neighborhoods and recreate methods of distributing resources and connecting participants to needed services. Harnessing and strengthening existing relationships and pathways instead can take less effort and bring effective and long-lasting community development.

- **Recognize that Law Enforcement Pressure is Out of Alignment with Healing** Image, power, and authority are key cultural features of gun carriers in our study, *and* of those who police them. The logic of mutual escalation means that gun violence prevention and intervention programs that include a direct law enforcement component are likely to tap into existing patterns of distrust and fear these young men have of law enforcement, and experienced as acts of aggression to young men who carry weapons. While intended to communicate clear messages of what is and is not acceptable behavior, pressure tactics in the cultural logic of the street must be met with equal or greater force. True healing requires vulnerability, which is next to impossible in such situations of fear or intimidation, and when participants' fight-flight-freeze mechanisms are activated. Services offered by those perceived as aggressors, or in partnership with aggressors, are unlikely to be engaged voluntarily and/or long-term.

- **Focus on Self Knowledge and Healing** Young gun carriers are survivors of extensive—and ongoing—interpersonal, structural, and social trauma. They live in a state of constant hypervigilance. When in such heightened states of fear, people have trouble self-regulating and accessing the brain's decision-making center. Programs need to offer young gun carriers tools for understanding trauma and healing; safely navigating their interior emotional landscape; and exploring the links between their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors and the context of structural violence in which they occur. This is a crucial first step to set them up to be successful in educational and employment spaces.

- **Co-create Space with Youth** This study would not have been successful if we had not had physical space in a location that met the specific cultural needs of this population. At the height of the dual pandemics, this meant space away from potential threats and the eyes of the street, allowing the youth to relax and move out of a state of hyperarousal. Future programs should co-create space with the participants they intend to serve so that it can convey physical safety and facilitate the emotional safety and vulnerability needed to them to begin to heal.

Recommendations for Future Research

The data from this study has unearthed a number of themes and findings that bear future investigation.

- **Formative Evaluation** It is important to pilot programs that incorporate the recommendations above. Formative evaluation of such programs can uncover the implementation challenges for the community-based organizations running them, reveal the barriers participants face, provide real-time feedback for fine-tuning the program, and identify promising practices for success. Documenting these pilot initiatives in a systematic way can help inform the development and expansion of future programming.

- **Social Service Needs and Barriers to Access** Our study participants have had significant interpersonal violence exposure and have experienced structural violence such as poverty and mass incarceration. They need healing services and basic needs met. Additionally, fewer than 10% of participants reported have a full-time, legal job, and about half said they were in school. To better understand how to best reach and serve this population—for services, and to adequately support them as they transition into employment and educational programs—future research should focus on gaining a better understanding of their primary needs and identifying the social and structural barriers to engaging in these services and programs.

- **Drill Music and Social Media** Participant interviews and informal interactions the research team had with participants as they waited to be interviewed revealed the importance of drill music[25] to youth gun culture. Our interview protocol did not

[25] Drill music is a subgenre of hip hop that emerged in Chicago in the early 2010s. It is intimately connected with gang culture and has become a way for young men to publicly embarrass or

directly address this, so we do not include this in the report. While some academic literature has begun to tease out these relationships, given the debates surrounding use of drill lyrics in criminal proceedings and a number of high-profile recent indictments of well-known rappers, future research should investigate the relationship between drill music, social media, economic mobility, violence, and self-conceptualization.

- **Gun Carriers Typology** The qualitative data from this study revealed a typology of gun carriers. Future quantitative research with larger samples should seek to determine the size within each category—i.e., of the population of youth gun carriers, what percent carry for protection, for image, for street hustles, or are "shooters."

threaten rivals and to track rival gangs and beefs. A hallmark of drill culture is music videos—typically posted to YouTube and other streaming platforms—that include violent acts, geographically-specific gang imagery and symbolism, stacks of cash, and guns. There is debate among rappers, music critics, law enforcement, policymakers, and scholars as to how closely the lyrics of drill are connected to any actual criminal behavior.

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