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# **“Gotta Make Your Own Heaven”**

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## **Guns, Safety, and the Edge of Adulthood in New York City**

By Rachel Swaner, Elise White, Andrew Martinez, Anjelica Camacho, Basaime Spate, Javonte Alexander, Lysondra Webb, and Kevin Evans



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# Executive Summary

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Despite a significant decline in violent crime nationally over the last 15 years, high rates of gun violence persist among youth in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods (Children’s Defense Fund 2019). In New York City, gun violence has been increasing in specific communities, with many attributing the increase to youth gang conflicts (Sandoval 2019; Watkins 2019). Efforts to prevent young people from acquiring guns must address the reasons *why* they are getting guns, not just the logistics of *how* they are doing so. This is especially true given that young people acquire them *almost exclusively* through the informal economy (Webster, Meyers & Buggs 2014), likely eluding traditional policy interventions.

This project investigated the experiences of New York City youth ages 16-24 who were at high risk for gun violence (e.g., carried a gun, been shot or shot at). Youth participants were recruited from three neighborhoods with historically high rates of gun violence when compared to the city as a whole—Brownsville (Brooklyn), Morrisania (Bronx), and East Harlem (Manhattan). We explored the complex confluence of individual, situational, and environmental factors that influence youth gun acquisition and use. This study is part of a broader effort to build an evidence-based foundation for individual and community interventions, and policies that will more effectively support these young people and prevent youth gun violence. Through interviews with 330 youth, we sought to answer these questions:

1. What are the reasons young people carry guns?
2. How do young people talk about having and using guns?
3. What are young people’s social networks like, and what roles do guns play in these networks?

Youth were recruited through respondent-driven sampling, with initial interviews accessed through outreach at Cure Violence programs (gun violence prevention programs with credible messengers on staff), observation at outdoor public housing project “hot spots,” and ethnography at indoor gang spaces. These initial interview participants then helped recruit other eligible youth from their social networks.

## Participatory Methods

Participatory methods and trust-building were vital to accessing these youth. Early in the study, we faced challenges in gaining trust and candid responses from these heavily street-involved youth—unsurprising given the sensitive nature of our questions regarding guns, gangs, and violence. Accordingly, it was critical to employ field researchers—the people conducting the interviews and the public face of the project—with significant personal experience in the social networks of the target population. Some of our team members reflected the demographic composition of the neighborhoods and had connections to the street in such a way that research participants could, as these field researchers explain, “feel your gangsta.” Beyond merely ensuring access, this approach also led to more honest engagement from the interviewees. It further yielded more accurate analysis and interpretation, as field researchers not only conducted many of the interviews, but also helped to code and analyze the data, draw study conclusions, and develop recommendations.

The importance of building trust with 16- to 24-year-olds at risk for gun violence cannot be overstated. The processes for gaining trust in each neighborhood differed significantly; this geographic specificity further played out on the micro level within specific housing developments and indoor gang spaces. New approaches had to be identified in each location. Researchers collected data in the areas gangs or housing developments “controlled,” since that was where the participants felt the most comfortable. To undertake this networking, researchers had to be consistently present and visible in spaces important to participants, showing respect for local gang politics, and acknowledging interpersonal and social trauma. The necessity of a street ethnography/participatory approach and ongoing trust-building meant the team consistently put in long hours on activities not immediately connected to the project deliverables, such as helping neighborhood youth create resumes and apply to jobs, navigate housing issues, and connect to services; providing food; and attending holiday parties and community events. Further, our research team had countless spontaneous interactions with community members such as basketball games and informal conversations about hip-hop or politics.

We also found it essential to engage gang leadership in each new neighborhood we worked in. This involved our field researchers identifying and meeting with the heads of local gangs to discuss the research and answering any questions they had. During these meetings, field researchers disclosed their own past street involvement and familiarity with gang culture. Once these relationships were solidified, gang leaders gave our team permission to conduct interviews with members of their gang in the physical spaces they controlled. We would not have gotten access to the high number of young gun carriers without this engagement and relationship building with gang leaders.



As we release this report, sweeping national protests against murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Rayshard Brooks by police officers, specifically, and continued police violence against people of color more broadly are pushing many jurisdictions to reexamine traditional approaches to public safety. This research—arguably the most ambitious of its kind—into why some young New Yorkers carry guns can be used to inform new strategies for keeping communities safe. This summary outlines our study findings, and the implications for policymakers.

## Major Findings

Analysis of interview data revealed findings across five areas: participants’ neighborhoods, guns and violence, gangs, alternative-economy survival strategies, and the police. Key findings from each of these areas are below.

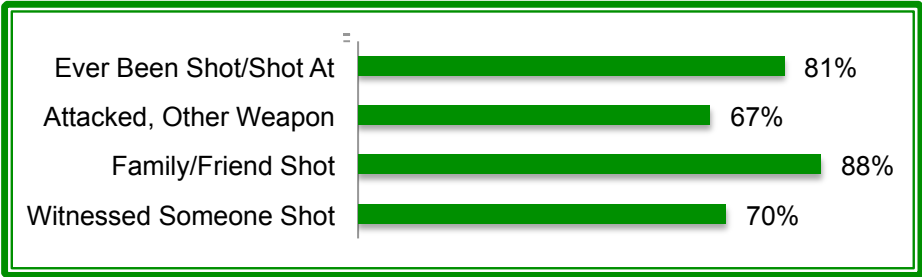
### Participants and Their Neighborhoods

- **Demographics** The 330 youth in the study overwhelmingly were men (79%), living in public housing (78%), and Black or Latinx (94%). On average, participants were 21 years old. A higher percentage of the women interviewed had children (58%, v. 31% for men).
- **Neighborhood Perceptions** Most reported it was easy to get drugs (83%), there was a lot of crime (78%), and there were regular gunshots (70% said at least monthly) in their neighborhood. Over a third (36%) reported hearing weekly about someone threatened with a gun.
- **Lack of Neighborhood Safety** Lack of safety was reported as a major driver of gun carrying. Participants reported feeling unsafe because of beefs between rival gangs or housing projects affecting how they could “move”—i.e., where they could safely walk or go; police harassment for small infractions but lack of responsiveness for serious crime; and fear of being shot by a police officer.

“I know it’s against the law to have any type of weapon without a license, but at the same time, I just feel like I need to carry it to make sure generally I’m safe.” (Black man, 16)

### Guns and Violence

- Violent Victimization** Violence was a near universal experience among the young people we interviewed. Eighty-one percent had ever been shot or shot at. Experiences with violent victimization often related to being in the wrong place at the wrong time, having fights related to romantic relationships, and getting caught up in gang-related altercations. Some participants made explicit connections between their victimization, attendant decrease in trust of others, and feeling that carrying a weapon was the only choice left to them.



- Gun Carrying Practices** Most participants (87%) had owned or carried a gun at some time. Participants reported being more likely to carry at nighttime. Those who carried all the time—i.e., night and day—identified the gun as central to their strategies for self-preservation.
- Carrying for Protection** These communities’ lengthy histories of violent victimization at the hands of other residents and the police—whether or not participants had themselves been injured—were repeatedly cited as the backdrop against which decisions around weapons-carrying were made. Some youth reported carrying guns because of their pervasive sense of neighborhood mistrust and a feeling that they could be victimized at any time—a kind of generalized fear. Other participants felt a more localized fear—needing protection from people seeking retaliation. Finally, many participants felt a sense of overarching fear of the state, primarily in the form of law enforcement.

“You gotta protect your life because the cops might shoot you.” (Black man, 24)

- Gender Nuances** Self-protection took on further nuances for female participants who were involved in traditionally male street activities. The women in our study indicated that their gender did not exempt them from retaliation and in some cases even *increased*

their risk of violence from men who felt their masculinity was undermined; in these cases, women described men working to restore their street reputations through gun use.

- **Self-Defense** Self-protection, self-defense, and retaliation were categories that overlapped significantly in the way participants described their gun use. Sixty percent of study participants framed their gun use as self-defense. Sometimes they reported just having to flash their gun to stop an immediate threat; other times they fired a gun in response to an attack, but after some time had passed.
- **Caution Around Gun Use** Many of the gun carriers in the study talked about exercising restraint with guns—only using guns in circumstances deemed extreme. Some participants expressed this restraint as a moral quagmire: while gun-carrying might have kept them alive, they knew it was not consequence-free and could lead to personal trauma, entanglement in the criminal justice system, or another person’s death. Some participants reported using marijuana as a way to calm their anger and increase their ability to manage challenging emotions and situations without resorting to gun use.
- **Access to Guns** Participants reported three common methods of obtaining guns: being given one from fellow gang members, borrowing from a friend or family member, and stealing. Among those who had owned a gun (58%), the majority (63%) had gotten their first gun between the ages of 14 and 17; an additional 20% had gotten it when they were younger than 14. Gun access was facilitated by knowing the right people and being trusted to not reveal sources or turn the gun on the seller.

“If you don’t know nobody, you ain’t getting none. [...] Ain’t nobody gonna sell to you if they don’t know you. They gonna think you’re a cop.” (Black man, 24)

## Gangs

- **Gang Involvement** Eighty-eight percent of participants reported having been in a gang at some point in their lives. The proportion of participants reporting gang involvement suggests that much—though not all—of NYC’s gun use overlaps in important ways with gang involvement and activity. The majority of those reporting gang involvement joined between 14 and 17 years of age (61%); another third (33%) joined before age 14.

- **Reasons for Joining** Participants identified the need for protection as a motivating factor for joining a gang. They felt that a gang could provide the “strength in numbers” and protection necessary to keep them safe from people who come to their neighborhood with the intent to harm, as well as from the police. Participants identified three additional reasons for joining: family history of gang involvement; gangs serving as a family of sorts, providing love and emotional support; and gangs providing material support (e.g., money, connections to opportunities to earn money, food, or shelter).

“These people love me. They may be harsh. It may come with this, it may come with that. I’d rather harsh love than no love.” (Latino, 23)

- **Neighborhood Conflicts** Participants described conflict as constant and pervasive throughout their lives. While these conflicts were sometimes related to gang involvement, often they were not. “Beefs” might occur over stolen drugs or money, instigation on social media, romantic relationships, verbal displays of disrespect, and “color banging” (i.e., wearing one gang color in a neighborhood controlled by a different gang). Guns would frequently come out as part of these conflicts.
- **Gangs and the Community** Some participants felt that gangs played a vital role in members’ broader growth and development. For them, the original mission of the gang—codified in paperwork for incoming members in national gangs—speaks to prosocial and civic intents and positive connections in the community. A majority of gang-involved participants described their gang attempting to help the neighborhood by providing assistance to neighborhood kids (81%), support for community activities (73%), and help to community residents (70%). Most frequently, gangs were cited as providing material support for children and adult community members (e.g., clothing, backpacks, school supplies, food); and organizing community events (e.g., basketball tournaments, cookouts, food drives, block cleanups).
- **Gang “Family”** Gang-involved participants almost universally viewed their gang as a net positive in their lives. Participants’ descriptions of gangs as a “brotherhood” or “family” suggest an important and complex relationship. When asked to further illustrate the types of support they personally received from their gang, participants pointed to the same reasons they joined the gang in the first place: emotional support, material support, and protection.

“[Y]ou have a lot of people who don’t have families like that. You have a form of family. You have a form of people that really care for you. You have a form of ‘I’m not going to get beat up because I have all these people that have my back.’”  
(Black woman, 24)

## Alternative-Economy Survival Strategies

- **Primary Drivers** Throughout the interviews, participants often described lack of ready access to money as a source of stress for themselves and their families, leading to engagement in alternative-economy survival strategies—most often drug dealing and robbery. They identified poverty and criminal records as push factors for engaging in these illegal ways to get money. Rather than valorizing or romanticizing these strategies, participants identified them as the least bad choices available to them.

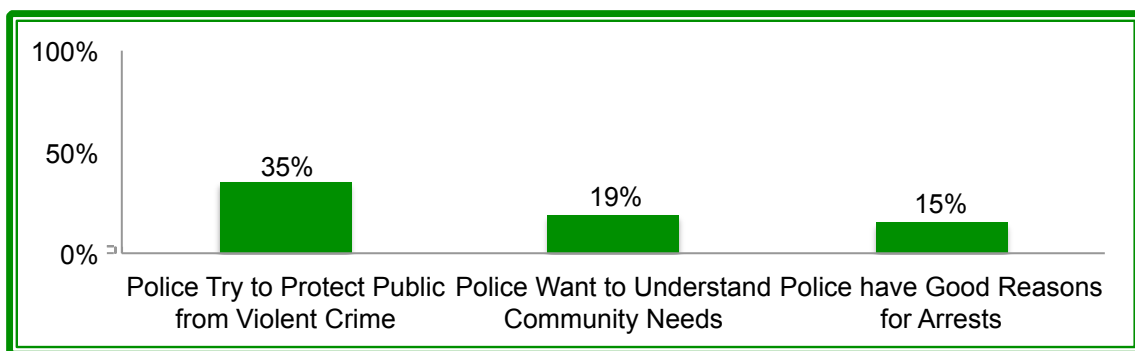
“Cause when you broke, you get angry about everything and then you grab your gun and just do robberies and do stuff you not supposed to be doing to get your money.” (Latino, 21)

- **Guns and the Alternative Economy** A fifth of participants (20%) reported that the ways they make money requires them to have a gun. But while they said it was not *required*, some of those who sold drugs felt safer having one anyway.

## The Police

- **Widespread Police Contact** Study participants reported significant criminal justice system involvement:
  - Nearly nine out of every ten participants had been arrested, with the most common arrest charges being marijuana possession, robbery, assault, and subway fare evasion. Thirty-eight percent had been arrested on a gun charge.
  - Over half (57%) had been arrested before their 16<sup>th</sup> birthday, and 63% had been incarcerated.

- Men in the study had more criminal justice involvement than women, being more likely to be stopped by the police in the past two years (94% v. 76%) and to have been arrested (91% v. 78%).
- **Lack of Trust in Police Effectiveness** The majority of youth expressed extreme dislike and distrust of law enforcement, with an overall sense that the police were a negative force in their communities. This lack of trust stemmed from three primary concerns: being stopped for low-level offenses, feeling the police were not addressing serious crime and violence, and sensing a lack of care for people in the community.



- **Police Responses to Youth and Gangs** Participants felt that police treated gang members and youth from the projects as less than human, “criminals,” “demons,” and “animals.” They also made specific connections between their poor treatment by the police and their race.

They're picking off people for no reason. [...] So Imma carry mine because I have to protect myself from you now. It's not a regular person I gotta worry about. I gotta protect myself from the people who are made to protect and serve us. And that is the most scariest thing in the world. (Multiracial man, 24)

## Conclusion and Implications

This study is the first to access such a high number of New York City youth who carry or are at high risk for carrying guns, collecting the greatest volume of in-depth information about their experiences with guns. Our data reveal that the youth in our study were mostly carrying to increase their feelings of safety. Many had been shot or shot at, attacked physically with a

non-firearm weapon, or had someone close to them shot. They held a widespread belief that they could be victimized at any time, and guns served to protect them from real or perceived threats from other gun carriers—rival gang members, residents of different housing projects, and the police.

Additionally, their wholesale distrust of the police stemmed partly from historical over-policing of minor crimes in their communities—resulting in significant loss of family members and peers to incarceration—as well as their own restricted access to mainstream jobs and public programs due to criminal records and discrimination. In their experience, police officers did not show care or concern for them, were not protecting them from more serious crimes, dehumanized them, antagonized them, and threatened them with violence. Their fear of police not protecting them (at best) or killing them (at worst) was grounded in their lived experience and what they saw happening regularly in their larger racial and ethnic community (e.g., black men killed by the police when stopped for minor infractions or for nothing at all). Taken together, this resulted in extensive community trauma.<sup>1</sup>

Given these realities, the hypervigilance that seems apparent in many participants’ excerpts may constructively be understood as a trauma reaction, in a causal relationship to the death and threat-of-death they live with daily. Gun carrying served as one mechanism of self-preservation. Gangs and other social groups also served as a mechanism of self-preservation and as outlets for coping with this trauma, but equally provided the love and emotional, material, and physical support that many of these young people found lacking elsewhere.

Ultimately what all these data indicate is that street-involved youth of color are caught in double-binds: they are potential targets both of other youth and of agents of the state who are theoretically in place to protect them. Further, efforts they take to provide for their own safety merely serve to increase their vulnerability from both these sources. This community trauma is shared by those who carry guns and those who do not. It factors into nearly every gun-related decision these young people make. Policies and programs must contend with this context and the sobering conditions these young people live in. Not doing so will further an already deep mistrust and compound these youths’ vulnerability.

The findings of this study speak to the need for very specific approaches to addressing youth gun violence. Gun violence prevention efforts should directly address the realities of why

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<sup>1</sup> Community trauma “affects social groups or neighborhoods long subjected to interpersonal violence, structural violence, and historical harms” (Falkenburger, Arena, & Wolin 2018).

youth are carrying guns and develop relationships built on trust. Specifically, programs and funders should consider:

- **Bringing Services to the Spaces Important to Youth** The model for many community-based organizations is to offer services and programming at specific locations in a neighborhood. Many of our participants talked about the restrictions on where they could safely walk or go because of beefs between rival gangs or housing projects. Additionally, our team had to spend a significant amount of time in the spaces that were important to the youth to build trust and gain access to the population. Community organizations should therefore bring their services and programs into community spaces where youth congregate (e.g., outdoor courtyards in housing projects). This may require a reimagining of how services are typically offered and who is offering them.
- **Hiring More Credible Messengers** Community-based organizations seeking to engage high-risk youth must hire frontline staff who have the “street” experience and cultural knowledge to connect with these young people. They will be more likely to be trusted and have access to the desired population, and will make it more likely that the youth will accept services or engage in programming.
- **Investing in Community Safety Strategies that Do Not Involve Law Enforcement** Given the current realities of these young people—including the deep distrust of law enforcement and the psychological and physical harms law enforcement inflicts upon youth of color—we must develop community strategies that ensure neighborhood safety while also building trust and encouraging healing. This cannot be done by police.
- **Creating Job Programs Specifically for Youth** Many study youth were involved in the alternative economy as a means of survival, given limited access to mainstream employment. Employment programs must take into account the education and social realities these young people face, meeting them where they are to teach hands-on skills in different sectors to build qualifications and experience, and helping to imagine long-term career paths. Rather than simply providing “resume-writing assistance,” such programs must include concrete pathways to jobs that pay a living wage, and could help youth gain necessary experience while building social capital.
- **Engaging Gang Leadership** One methodological finding from this study is that given the significant roles of gangs in the lives of these youth, respecting and engaging with



gangs is extremely important. Gang leaders must be partners at the table for any discussion of community services and safety in order to facilitate access to young gun carriers in urban areas. The social inclusion of gangs—seeing them in part as social movements and cultural groups vital to resilience—is essential to this process. Such partnership and trust is necessary to decrease gun violence and create programs and policies that engage and meet the needs of the youth most at risk for gun carrying.

- **Conducting More Participatory Research** Our experience conducting this research shows us that a participatory approach has recruitment and analytic benefits. It is also an extremely important strategy at this historical moment, when traditional systems of knowing are being challenged, and there is widespread mistrust in government and services. Participatory research provides a mechanism to meaningfully tap expertise of marginalized or hard-to-reach community members, while also providing them with meaningful jobs.

## Chapter 1

# Introduction

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Despite a significant decline in violent crime nationally over the last 15 years, high rates of gun violence persist among youth in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods. In 2017, over 21,000 children and teenagers were killed or injured with a gun, and gun violence was the leading cause of death among Blacks ages 1-19 (Children’s Defense Fund 2019). Data show that young people are both the primary victims (e.g., Xu et al. 2018) and perpetrators of gun violence (e.g., Braga, Hureau & Winship 2008; New York Police Department 2015). In New York City in particular, gun violence has been increasing in specific communities, with many attributing the increase to youth gang conflicts (Sandoval 2019; Watkins 2019).

A distinctive aspect of gun involvement among youth is that young people acquire guns almost exclusively through the informal economy (Webster, Meyers & Buggs 2014). This suggests that the possession, carrying, and sharing of guns among youth is largely unregulated and untraceable, and likely eludes traditional policy interventions. Indeed, recent research has shown that federal and state age restriction laws on gun purchases by 18- to 20-year-olds have had no impact on violent crime rates (Kleck 2019). Comprehensive efforts to prevent young people from acquiring guns should start earlier, addressing the reasons *why* they are getting guns, not just the logistics of *how* they are doing so.

So, what are the reasons that urban youth acquire or use guns? Webster and colleagues’ 2014 systematic literature review reveals two enduring gaps in the research addressing this question: 1) a lack of generalizable studies of high-risk youth, and 2) little or no qualitative research designed to understand the complex situational factors related to gun use (Webster, Meyers & Buggs 2014). Prior research on gun involvement among youth has frequently suffered from sampling biases, introduced either by specifically surveying adolescent populations in schools (e.g., Sheley & Wright 1998; the CDC’s Youth Risk Behavioral Surveillance System)—which tends toward the systematic underrepresentation of high-risk youth who are often disconnected from school—or by focusing on youth in confinement for violent offenses (e.g., Birkbeck et al. 1999; Sheley & Wright 1995)—which may overestimate the proportion of gun-related behaviors that are motivated by criminal intent or aggression. Finally, the closed-ended surveys that currently dominate research on guns cannot fully capture the complex decision-making processes that underlie gun use. Indeed, little to no qualitative research in this area has been conducted in over twenty years

(Wilkinson & Fagan 1996; Fagan & Wilkinson 1998), suggesting the need for new research that is capable of reaching—and creating a safe space to elicit reflections on gun carrying from—deeply distrustful and “street”-involved young people who carry guns.

Taken together, then, the existing research and *gaps* in that research clearly indicate a need for generalizable, mixed-method studies capable of recruiting and exploring the lives of urban youth who use guns within complex and often misunderstood social and cultural contexts (Payne 2011). Given the Center for Court Innovation’s history of community-based, ethnographic research with hard-to-reach populations, we felt uniquely poised to address this need.

## About the Current Study

In 2017, the National Institute of Justice funded our organization to conduct a mixed-method, exploratory study with high-risk youth. This project investigated the lives and experiences of youth ages 16-24 who were at high risk for gun violence in select neighborhoods across three boroughs of New York City. To be considered “high risk,” participants had to have owned or carried a gun, or been shot or shot at.<sup>2</sup> We explored the complex confluence of individual, situational, and environmental factors that influence youth gun acquisition and use.

Importantly, the research was explicitly designed to construct a generalizable sample of this traditionally hidden group, and to gain both qualitative and quantitative information that fills critical knowledge gaps in existing research. This study is part of a broader effort to build an evidence-based foundation for both policies and individual and community interventions to more effectively support these young people and prevent youth gun violence.

Through semi-structured interviews with 330 youth who met the eligibility criteria, we sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the reasons young people carry guns?
2. How do young people talk about having and using guns?
3. What are young people’s social networks like, and what roles do guns play in these networks?

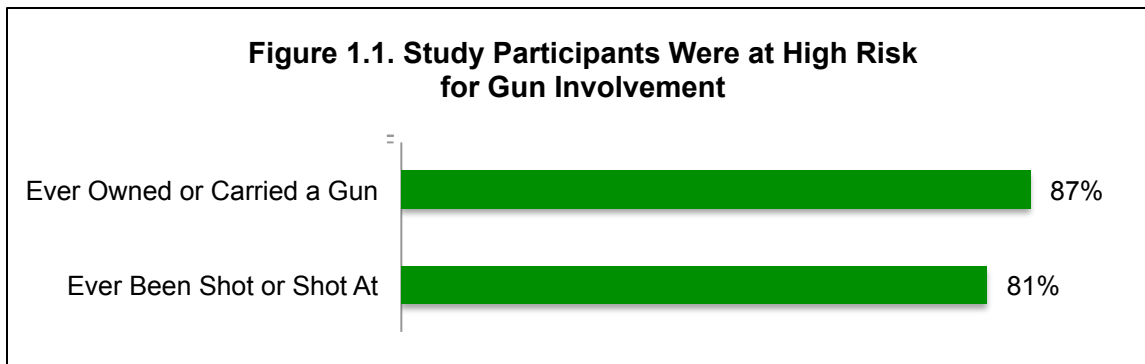
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<sup>2</sup> A small percentage of the sample (7%) did not meet those criteria, but reported carrying a different weapon (e.g., knife), having been attacked by a non-firearms weapon, or having had a family member or close friend who had been shot—usually a combination of more than one; and reported that they were networked with those who carried guns, making them important for the growth of respondent-driven sampling network trees.

# Methodology

## Interviews with Youth at High Risk for Gun Violence

To overcome the sampling challenges that limit the generalizability of previous research, we employed respondent-driven sampling (RDS) to access, identify, and recruit a representative “underground” sample of 330 16- to 24-year-old youth who were at high risk for gun violence. These youth were recruited from three New York City neighborhoods: Morrisania, Bronx (39%); Brownsville, Brooklyn (35%); and East Harlem, Manhattan (26%)—areas chosen because of their persistently high rates of gun violence compared with the city as a whole. Seventy-one percent of participants had carried a gun *and* been shot at.



RDS is a method for sampling hard-to-reach populations, whose underlying behavior or participation in research might be stigmatized and for which a sampling frame does not exist. Research has shown that after only a few recruitment waves, RDS reaches a representative sample that eliminates any bias that results from initial participant selection (Heckathorn 1997, 2002, 2007; Salganik & Heckathorn 2004). In this study, RDS started with initial “seed” interviews—youth who were recruited through one of the following methods:

- 1. Outreach at Cure Violence Programs** Each of the three study neighborhoods had community-based organizations running a Cure Violence program—a public health approach to addressing gun violence that relies on hiring staff with past street involvement who serve as credible messengers to stop retaliation shootings in a specified geographic area (“violence interrupters”). After meeting with the program coordinators to discuss the study, violence interrupter staff members identified and helped us recruit their program participants to be seed interviews.
- 2. Observation at Outdoor Public Housing Project “Hot-Spots”** Most New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) public housing projects have outdoor areas and

pedestrian walkways where residents gather. In two of our study sites, researchers spent time in common areas of housing projects with high rates of shootings. We observed the movements of the neighborhood, identified centers of the underground economy, and formed relationships with residents and “gatekeepers” to gangs in order to gain trust and permission to conduct interviews with youth from that housing development. Once permission was granted, the “gatekeepers” helped identify seeds who met the study eligibility criteria and were well-networked.

**3. Ethnography in Indoor Gang Spaces** In one neighborhood in particular, local gang “beefs” meant that residents were not comfortable going to outdoor locations in any identifiable pattern (which increased their perceived likelihood of victimization). In order to access eligible young people in this community, researchers had to signal insider status through displaying knowledge of key cultural norms (e.g., playing specific rap artists loudly while driving around in their cars, signaling gang codes) and leveraging existing street connections in order to gain trust and access to the indoor spaces where gang members gather—particularly the trap houses: apartments where drugs are processed and sold; gambling units are established; and gang members can go for shelter, money, and companionship. Once access was granted, seeds were identified and recruited.

Interviews were confidential (no names, addresses, or other identifying information were collected), and participants were given \$30 cash for their time. In addition, all participants were given three numbered coupons, asked to give the coupons to other eligible youth in their social network, and paid \$10 cash for each coupon that was redeemed for a subsequent interview. Ninety-four percent of the 330 interviews were from coupon referrals, and 6% were seeds—meaning that RDS was successful in achieving sufficient recruitment waves to generate a representative sample of 16- to 24-year-old urban youth at risk for gun violence.<sup>3</sup> Appendix A shows the recruitment chains of the seeds and their network trees.

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<sup>3</sup> In RDS studies, seeds complete the interview and receive a predetermined number of coupons that they can use to recruit other people like them (Wave 1). The recruits of Wave 1 then complete the interview process and recruit Wave 2, with the referral chain continuing until the desired sample size is reached. Research has shown that sample and social network characteristics reach equilibrium (i.e., become representative of the population of interest) after several “waves.” The precise number of waves can range from three to six, depending on the number of subjects recruited by each initial subject, although a series of publications suggest that six waves is the *maximum* necessary (Heckathorn 1997, 2002; Salganik & Heckathorn 2004; Wang et al. 2005).

Ranging from 45 to 90 minutes, interviews were semi-structured with closed- and open-ended questions on the following topics: demographics; neighborhood perceptions; perceptions of and experiences with the police, gangs, guns, and violence; substance use; criminal history; and future expectations.<sup>4</sup> Interviews were digitally recorded upon consent of participants. Those with more than 15 minutes of rich data were transcribed verbatim. All interviews were conducted between July 2018 and August 2019.

## **Participatory Methods**

Early in the study, we faced challenges in gaining trust and candid responses from these heavily street-involved youth—unsurprising given the sensitive nature of our questions regarding guns, gangs, and violence. Accordingly, it was vital to employ field researchers—the people conducting the interviews and the public face of the project—with significant personal experience in the social networks of the target population. Some of our team members reflected the demographic composition of the neighborhoods and had connections to the street in such a way that research participants could, as these field researchers explain, “feel your gangsta.” Prior to this deliberate staffing decision, we struggled to access the study population. Beyond merely ensuring access, this approach also led to more honest engagement from the interviewees. It further yielded more accurate analysis and interpretation of interview data, with field researchers not only conducting many of the interviews, but also helping to code and analyze the data, draw study conclusions, and develop recommendations.

The importance of building trust with 16- to 24-year-olds at risk for gun violence cannot be overstated. Many of these youth had to be found via gang networks, and control of physical space is a well-documented aspect of many gangs (e.g., Adamson 1998; Suttles 1972; Thrasher 1927); our experience bears this out. The processes for gaining trust in each neighborhood differed significantly. This geographic specificity further played out on the micro levels within specific housing developments and indoor gang spaces. New approaches had to be identified in each location. Researchers collected data in the areas gangs or housing developments “controlled,” since that was where the participants felt the most comfortable. To undertake this networking, and to recruit the participants who were most able to speak from current, first-hand experience about the realities of gun acquisition and use, we needed to engage in methods drawn from street ethnography—primarily observation of spaces and participants, as well as ongoing embedding in neighborhoods beyond data collection activities.

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<sup>4</sup> The full interview instrument is available upon request.

This embedded approach meant being consistently present and visible in spaces important to participants, showing respect for local gang politics, and acknowledging interpersonal and social trauma. The necessity of a street ethnography/participatory approach and ongoing trust-building meant the team consistently put in long hours on activities not immediately connected to the project deliverables, such as helping neighborhood youth create resumes and apply to jobs, navigate housing issues, and connect to services; providing food; and attending holiday parties and community events. Further, our research team had countless spontaneous interactions with community members, such as basketball games and informal conversations about hip-hop and politics.

## **Engaging Gang Leadership**

In addition to employing participatory methods, we found it essential to engage gang leadership in each new neighborhood or housing project we worked in. This involved our field researchers identifying and meeting with the heads of local gangs, telling them about the study and the topics we would be asking about, discussing confidentiality, acknowledging historical distrust of researchers and service providers, and answering any questions they had. During these meetings, field researchers disclosed their own past street involvement and familiarity with gang culture. Once these relationships were solidified—which sometimes took multiple days—gang leaders gave our team permission to conduct interviews with members of their gang in the physical spaces they controlled. We continued to communicate with them regularly to let them know the days we would be collecting data so that we did not show up unannounced, and they helped ensure the safety of our researchers on those days. We would not have gotten access to the high number of young gun carriers without this engagement and relationship building with gang leaders.

## **Analysis**

Descriptive statistics provide a comprehensive portrait of youth involved with guns based on quantitative interview data. The team applied grounded theory to iteratively code and analyze the qualitative data from transcribed interviews. Members of the research team open-coded approximately 30% of the transcribed interviews by hand, with emergent codes developed, combined, and collapsed. The group collectively reviewed primary and sub-codes, resulting in a final codebook. The collaboratively-developed codes were then applied to 88 interviews.

## **Limitations**

A probability sample requires that everyone who is eligible have an equal opportunity of being recruited into the study sample. Therefore, in RDS studies, it is important to ask questions about network size. We asked participants how many other 16- to 24-year-olds

they knew from their neighborhood who met the eligibility criteria—since those with larger networks have a greater likelihood of hearing about the study. The network size question allows for data weighting to compensate for the fact that some participants may have larger networks than others. However, responses to this particular question were unreliable and we were not able to weight the final data to adjust for differential network sizes. For example, young people had a hard time describing their network size, often saying they did not know and then giving answers like “50 to 100” or “a lot.” However, we do not believe this to have any significant impact on quantitative findings.<sup>5</sup>

Additionally, when interviews were conducted in trap houses or in outdoor spaces, there was often loud music playing in the background, making audio recordings difficult to transcribe. Therefore, some interviews with rich qualitative data—as many as 25 interviews—were not included in the qualitative analysis, though they are represented in the quantitative data.

Given that the study was among urban youth gun carriers and those at risk for gun violence, we are limited in our ability to generalize to suburban and rural youth. However, we believe that our results may, to a meaningful extent, be generalizable to other urban settings with high rates of gun use among youth, particularly in light of research suggesting considerable similarities in these epidemics across different cities (see Braga et al. 2001; Blumstein 2002).

Despite these limitations, this research is arguably the most ambitious of its kind into why some young New Yorkers carry guns.

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<sup>5</sup> We also grouped responses into “small,” “medium,” and “large” network sizes to help address limitations in the data. When we ran descriptive statistics on those groupings, we did not find any major differences by network size group.



## Chapter 2

# Participants and their Neighborhoods

This overview report presents major findings from our interviews. Where appropriate, we illuminate key findings with selected quotes from the qualitative portions of the interviews. The current chapter focuses on participant demographics and neighborhood perceptions.

## Demographics

Table 2.1 shows the demographic characteristics of the 330 interview participants<sup>6</sup> who were at risk for gun violence because they have owned or carried a gun, have been shot or shot at, or carry or have been attacked with a non-firearms weapon. The sample was overwhelmingly comprised of straight Black men living in public housing. A higher percentage of the women interviewed had children.

**Table 2.1. Participants Were Largely Black Men Living in Public Housing**

|                                       | <b>N</b> | <b>Men<br/>261</b> | <b>Women<br/>69</b> | <b>Total<br/>330</b> |
|---------------------------------------|----------|--------------------|---------------------|----------------------|
| <b>Gender</b>                         |          | 79%                | 21%                 | 100%                 |
| <b>Mean Age</b>                       |          | 21.0               | 21.8                | 21.2                 |
| Ages 16-17                            |          | 13%                | 9%                  | 12%                  |
| Ages 18-24                            |          | 87%                | 91%                 | 88%                  |
| <b>Race/Ethnicity</b>                 |          |                    |                     |                      |
| Black                                 |          | 74%                | 61%                 | 71%                  |
| Latinx                                |          | 13%                | 16%                 | 14%                  |
| Multi-racial (e.g., Black and Latinx) |          | 8%                 | 14%                 | 9%                   |
| White                                 |          | 0%                 | 3%                  | 1%                   |
| Other or Not Specified                |          | 5%                 | 6%                  | 5%                   |
| <b>Sexual Orientation</b>             |          |                    |                     |                      |
| Straight                              |          | 99%                | 70%                 | 93%                  |
| Bisexual                              |          | 0%                 | 17%                 | 4%                   |
| Gay/Lesbian                           |          | 1%                 | 13%                 | 3%                   |
| <b>Public Housing Resident</b>        |          | 79%                | 77%                 | 78%                  |
| <b>Raised by Single Parent</b>        |          | 61%                | 70%                 | 63%                  |
| <b>Has Children</b>                   |          | 31%                | 58%                 | 37%                  |

<sup>6</sup> The total sample size for the study is 330, but for some questions throughout the report that were asked of all study participants, the sample size may be as low as 288 due to missing data.

| <b>Relationship Status</b>           |     |     |     |
|--------------------------------------|-----|-----|-----|
| Single                               | 85% | 71% | 82% |
| In a Relationship, Living Separately | 10% | 20% | 12% |
| Domestic Partnership                 | 4%  | 6%  | 4%  |
| Married                              | 1%  | 3%  | 2%  |
| Divorced                             | 0%  | 0%  | 0%  |
| <b>Currently in School</b>           | 41% | 35% | 40% |

## Neighborhood Perceptions

We asked participants a series of questions to gauge their impressions of their neighborhoods, particularly around activities that might affect safety and/or decision-making around gun carrying. As shown in Table 2.2, more participants reported feeling safe during the day than at night. Eighty-three percent said it was easy to get drugs, 78% felt there was a lot of crime, and 70% heard gunshots at least every month. Over a third (36%) reported hearing weekly about someone threatened with a gun.

Most (95%) were aware of gangs in their neighborhood, and a quarter said that people feel pressured to join them. However, for many, this was not overt pressure from any individual gang member or peer, but rather circumstances that “pushed” them into needing something from the gang: being broke or homeless and in need of monetary support; needing protection from others in the neighborhood; or looking for sources of emotional attachment. As a 24-year-old Black woman explained,

I think more or less the pressure lies in [the people who join gangs]. [...] [Y]ou have a lot of people who don’t have families like that. You have a form of family. You have a form of people that really care for you. You have a form of “I’m not going to get beat up because I have all these people that have my back.” [...] They put the pressure on themselves, feeling like they need someone.

**Table 2.2. Neighborhood Safety Was Complicated**

|                           | N | Total<br>330 |
|---------------------------|---|--------------|
| <b>In My Neighborhood</b> |   |              |
| I feel safe:              |   |              |
| During the day            |   | 71%          |
| At night                  |   | 51%          |
| Where I live/hangout      |   | 62%          |
| There is a lot of crime   |   | 78%          |

| N   | Total<br>330 |
|---|--------------|
| It's easy to get drugs                            | 83%          |
| <b>Hear Gunshots in my Neighborhood</b>           |              |
| Weekly  | 44%          |
| Monthly   | 26%          |
| Every few months                                  | 18%          |
| Every 6 months to a year                          | 7%           |
| Never or rarely                                   | 5%           |
| <b>Hear of Someone Threatened with a Gun</b>      |              |
| Weekly  | 36%          |
| Monthly   | 17%          |
| Every few months                                  | 17%          |
| Every 6 months to a year                          | 12%          |
| Never or rarely                                   | 18%          |
| <b>Possibility of Violence Limits My Activity</b> | 50%          |
| <b>Gangs</b>                                      |              |
| Aware of gangs in the neighborhood                | 95%          |
| Gang presence influences where I go               | 63%          |
| People feel pressure to join gangs                | 25%          |

## Neighborhood Social Cohesion

Most participants (89%) said their neighbors know each other well. Over half reported that people in their neighborhood are willing to help each other out (52%), that there are adults they could talk to about important things (58%), and that there are good adult role models in the neighborhood (69%). Despite this, perceived trust between residents was low, with only one quarter (26%) reporting that neighbors trust each other. Neighborhood trust in the police was even lower. Though police were a regular presence across neighborhoods—88% reported seeing the police patrolling the streets in their neighborhood on a daily basis, and 68% reported seeing “stop and frisk” activity at least weekly—the behavior of police had the net effect of only 9% of participants reporting that people in their neighborhood trust them.

### “Between the police and the people, it’s hard to determine who you can really go to”

We asked participants what types of things made them feel safe in their neighborhood. Many participants identified as a core component of their sense of their safety in their neighborhood “being known”—e.g., **being familiar with and to the people, places, and implicit rules specific to one geographic area**. As a 22-year-old Black woman from the Bronx stated, “I feel safe because I know everybody. But like if I just came to those projects not knowing anybody, I would not feel safe.” Being known to community members, particularly other young people and neighborhood gang members, directly contributed to

participants' feelings of being able to avoid physical harm from within the neighborhood. It did not, however, mean participants were at ease. Despite knowing people and being known in their neighborhoods, most also reported a simultaneous need to maintain vigilance.

My area and my comfort zone, I feel safe, but I'm always on point because you just gotta be, but I guess you can't live every moment scared. So, at times I guess if I'm having good times and I'm just not thinking about the surrounding bad stuff happening in my neighborhood, I guess I feel safe because I'm not thinking on it. (Latino, 23)

Lack of safety was reported as a major driver of gun carrying. Those who reported feeling unsafe provided reasons that primarily centered around two main themes consistent with the literature on youth and gangs. First, participants discussed **beefs between rival gangs or housing projects** affecting how they could “move”—i.e., where they could safely walk or go—including for even mundane activities like going to the corner store. As one 18-year-old Bronx Latino said: “If I go somewhere and somebody press me about what [gang or housing project] I rep [...] I get chased off the other blocks and, like, I just want to go to that store, I can't. I don't feel protected in other neighborhoods unless I have a gun on me.”

The neighborhoods where we conducted interviews had high concentrations of public housing, with multiple NYCHA complexes located in close proximity. Being associated with or known as a resident of one development pitted participants against residents of other developments. As one participant stated: “I mean, you gotta understand [...] I'm from Howard. [...] Howard projects, we got beef with the whole Brownsville, bro. Like every projects in Brownsville don't like us.” A young man from East Harlem explained, “This project and Wagner [Houses] don't get along. They're only ten blocks away. But Wagner comes over here shooting.” In some instances, merely associating with groups identified with a housing development was sufficient to put participants at risk.

I don't go to certain blocks [...] because they hate on a block that I'm from and they'll stereotype you and think that you're from the gang just because you're from that block. You're in that gang, or you know this person, you know that person, you hang with them so you're one of them. You're still going to get that ass whoopin' at the end of the day when they see you. (Black man, 20)

For some participants, these beefs were an accepted part of their daily lives. However, others—like this young Brownsville woman—questioned the logic of these conflicts: “I don't understand why you have beefing if we all live in the same neighborhood, you all got to go to the same store. Same train station.”

The second common reason participants reported feeling unsafe in their neighborhood was **police harassment for small infractions but lack of responsiveness for serious crime**. As one Bronx resident put it:

I really don't even like my neighborhood anymore. I feel like the police be worried about the wrong things. Like, there'll be [people] out here getting killed and raped. They don't be worried about none of that, but they be worried about somebody smoking a little bit of weed outside or something. [...] We can't even be outside comfortable to do nothing. [...] We feel like we can't really ask them for help for anything. [...] When there's people out there actually getting hurt, they're nowhere to be found. (Black man, 21)

Participants almost universally conveyed a sense that police would not be there to protect them if something bad happened. One participant stated that in his neighborhood, “cops aren't there late at night [...] you've got to protect yourself.” This was cited as a reason that he would sometimes carry a gun. Another young man shared his reasoning behind not carrying a gun when he goes to a “safer” neighborhood, but doing so in his own community:

If I'm chilling in the area, it's mandatory. Don't play with your life. But if I'm going to 125th or Union Square, it's no need for that. It's knife time. 'Cause you ain't gonna shoot me in Union Square. Well, you probably will, but I will get to the ambulance better than over here I guess. I will get to the emergency room faster than over here. I feel like if the police see me laying on the floor in my area, it's a “pull out their phones, see what time it is” moment. (Black man, 22)

Additionally, for some participants, the sense of a lack of safety in their neighborhood stemmed from perceptions that the police harass them just because they live in the projects. This made it unsafe for them to be outside for fear of getting entangled in the criminal justice system. As a Bronx participant explained:

[Police] don't care. [...] They just be harassing us. They be chasing us sometimes for nothing in projects. [...] Jaywalking is illegal but we in New York. They be locking us up for jaywalking in the projects and all that. For the littlest thing, they lock us up. So sometime we don't even be coming outside. (Latino, 21)

Finally, some felt scared of the police having guns. “Police with these fucking guns and they scared. They be scared with guns so that make 'em shoot first.”

## Chapter 3

# Guns and Violence

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This chapter discusses participant attitudes towards and experiences with guns, as well as their own violent victimization.

## Violent Victimization

Violent victimization—both directly experiencing and witnessing—was widespread in participants’ lives. Eighty-one percent had ever been shot or shot at, with stark differences between men (87%) and women (56%). Over two-thirds (67%) had been attacked with a weapon other than a gun. Eighty-eight percent had had someone close to them shot, most commonly a close friend, cousin, or sibling.

**Table 3.1. Gun Victimization Was Prevalent in Participants’ Lives**

|   | N | Total<br>330 |
|---|---|--------------|
| <b>Direct Victim</b>                              |   |              |
| Shot or shot at                                   |   | 81%          |
| Attacked with weapon other than a gun             |   | 67%          |
| <b>Witness</b>                                    |   |              |
| Saw someone shot                                  |   | 70%          |
| Saw someone attacked with weapon other than a gun |   | 88%          |
| <b>Had Someone Close to them Get Shot</b>         |   | 88%          |
| Close Friend                                      |   | 57%          |
| Cousin  |   | 24%          |
| Sibling   |   | 20%          |
| Uncle or Aunt                                     |   | 16%          |
| Parent  |   | 9%           |
| Other (e.g., mother’s boyfriend, grandparent)     |   | 10%          |

Those who had been shot, shot at, or attacked with a non-firearm weapon—usually a knife—shared three common underlying themes related to their victimization: being unintended targets, being involved in romantic disputes, or being involved in gang-related beef.

For some participants, their stories related to **being in the wrong place at the wrong time**—most typically, being in physical proximity to the intended victim. A 22-year-old Bronx man described an experience he had the previous year: “I never really thought I was gonna get shot. [...] They was looking for some dude that was in the park I was playing in [...], hopped

out [of] the car and started shooting.” Other participants found themselves in similar situations as a result of trying to intervene in friends’ disputes in order to keep the peace:

I got stabbed because it was a party, and the dude [...] was arguing with another dude. He pulled the knife out and tried to swing it, but while he’s trying to swing it, I’m trying to get in between them like, “Yo, you all need to stop fighting. It’s not our house,” and I got stabbed right there trying to stop it. (Black man, 24)

Participants also described violent victimization stemming from **romantic relationships**. A woman from the Bronx explains:

I was in a fight with some girl at the time because the girl that I was interested in and was talking to was talking to her too. So neither one of us knew that we were being played by this girl. But I wind up fighting the girl in defense because I found out I was being played. And she stabbed me. I’ve got the scar. (Black woman, 24)

Finally, being attacked also often related to being **caught up in gang-related altercations**. Commonly, as one Bronx youth described, this involved being shot at when “ops”—in this case rival gang members—came and “shot up the party” he was at, forcing him to “get low and start ducking and stuff.” Such incidents included both group-related attacks and one-on-one engagements, as this 23-year-old Latina describes:

I was with my son’s father [...] and we were at the front of some place and there was another gang member that came up, and he wanted to know where one [...] of their homies was at, and my baby father wasn’t going to tell him and nobody was going to tell him. And so he took out the gun, and my son’s father told him to shoot it and he really didn’t believe he was going to shoot, and he shot it. And mind you, he was in front of me, and he didn’t get shot, I got shot.

Some participants made explicit connections between their experiences with violent victimization, their attendant decrease in trust of others, and their feeling that carrying a weapon was the only choice left to them. “I carry sometimes knives,” explained a 20-year-old Black man from the Bronx.

I don’t trust people because I got stabbed before. [...] I ran to the park trying to ask people for tissues, expected them to call the cops, try to call the ambulance. They didn’t call the ambulance; they stopped the basketball game to look at me, everybody looking at

me. I'm like, "What the fuck y'all looking at? You see me bleeding [...] the fuck about to stand there and watch me bleed, you not going to try to help or nothing."

## Attitudes Towards Guns

Participants' attitudes towards guns were complicated, as Table 3.2 highlights. Over half (55%) stated that they wished there were *not* guns in their neighborhood. That percentage may have been higher if the question had been phrased differently, as participants often followed up by stating they wished there were no guns anywhere, but given that they exist, they did not want their neighborhood to be vulnerable. While over three-quarters of participants felt that carrying a gun makes a person feel powerful (82%) and safe (77%), only a quarter (26%) felt gun carrying would bring respect. As one Bronx Latino told about his gun, he did not "carry it just to say, 'I'm cool, I've got this on me.' It's not about that."

**Table 3.2. Guns Made Participants Feel Powerful and Safe**

| N   | Total<br>330 |
|---|--------------|
| <b>Carrying a Gun Makes a Person Feel:</b>          |              |
| Powerful  | 82%          |
| Safe  | 77%          |
| Respected   | 26%          |
| <b>Why Carry</b>                                    |              |
| Family would want me to defend myself if attacked   | 71%          |
| Feel safer with a knife (in a physical fight)       | 43%          |
| Feel safer with a gun (physical fight)              | 40%          |
| Less likely to be a victim with a gun               | 52%          |
| <b>I Wish There Weren't Guns in my Neighborhood</b> | 55%          |

## Gun Carrying Practices

Most participants (87%) had owned or carried a gun at some time. (The men in our sample were more likely than the women: 90% v. 76%.) Participants reported being more likely to carry at nighttime because, in the words of one youth, "nighttime is when people tend to act up. Everybody just start actin' different, crazy." Just under half (45%) carried all the time, identifying the gun as central to their strategies for self-preservation and self-conception.

I think [the gun is] just an extra body part for me. [...] The shit don't go nowhere. It can't leave me. I could wake up seven o'clock in the morning to get a bacon, egg, and cheese



on a bagel and my shit is tucked right. I'd rather get caught with it and not need it than need it and not have it. (Black Latino, 24)

**Table 3.3. Most Participants Had Owned or Carried a Gun**

| N  | Total<br>330 |
|--|--------------|
| <b>Ever Owned or Carried a Gun</b>               | 87%          |
| <b>How Often Do You Carry a Gun? (N=256)</b>     |              |
| Daily  | 23%          |
| A few times a week                               | 23%          |
| A few times a month                              | 8%           |
| Once a month or less                             | 24%          |
| Other (e.g., "during beef time," "if I need to") | 23%          |
| <b>When Do You Carry? (N=246)</b>                |              |
| Both Day and Night                               | 45%          |
| Nighttime  | 45%          |
| Daytime  | 10%          |
| <b>Where Do You Carry? (N=274)</b>               |              |
| On the street                                    | 68%          |
| Parties or other social events                   | 51%          |
| Other people's houses                            | 40%          |
| While in transit                                 | 24%          |
| School or work                                   | 10%          |
| <b>Police Practices Affect Gun Carrying</b>      | 61%          |
| <b>Ever Used a Gun in Self-Defense</b>           | 60%          |
| <b>Easy to Get a Gun if Needed*</b>              | 58%          |

\* Includes those responding that getting a gun is "very easy" or "pretty easy."

As shown in Table 3.3, the most common places participants reported carrying were on the street and at parties, largely out of a sense that anything could happen at any time. As this 20-year-old Bronx man explained, "Even though I go to the parties and I feel like I'm valid everywhere [...] I just know a lot of shootouts happen at parties, and I ain't trying to be that nigga that gets shot for no reason or have one of our mans get shot."

Because many participants felt unsafe going to other housing projects, many described carrying a gun when they moved between neighborhoods or between NYCHA developments with known beefs: "I'm going to a neighborhood I don't particularly know too well, or I may have static in? I'm carrying," said one 24-year-old man.

While 61% said that police practices affected whether people in their neighborhood carry guns, qualitative responses revealed that this was a complex question that required further

clarification. For some, it meant they were *less likely* to carry to avoid arrest: “if I keep seeing cops, I’m not bringing it.” For others, the deteriorated relationship with law enforcement meant they were *more likely* to carry to **protect themselves from the police**: “most of the time they be carrying the gun to protect themselves from the cops.”

## Carrying to Increase Feelings of Safety

Over three quarters (78%) of the participants said they felt “very safe” or “pretty safe” when carrying a gun; and a lower percentage (63%) said they felt as safe when not carrying a gun. About a third of the youth in our study also reported feeling confident, anxious, and powerful when carrying.

**Table 3.4. More Participants Felt Safe Carrying a Gun Than Not**

| N   | Total<br>277 |
|---|--------------|
| <b>Feel Safe When:</b>                          |              |
| Carrying a gun                                  | 78%          |
| Not carrying a gun                              | 63%          |
| <b>Other Feelings when Carrying<sup>+</sup></b> |              |
| Confident                                       | 37%          |
| Anxious   | 34%          |
| Powerful  | 31%          |
| Scared  | 21%          |
| Angry/Aggressive                                | 20%          |
| High  | 9%           |

\* Includes those responding feeling “very safe” or “pretty safe.”

+ Participants could choose more than one response.

Participants who felt anxious when carrying most often reported that was because they thought they might get caught by the police, as one 16-year-old explained: “I worry about getting in trouble with the police or the law because I know it’s against the law to have any type of weapon without a license, but at the same time, I just feel like I need to carry it to make sure generally I’m safe.” This sense of a double-bind—i.e., unprotected from other gun users by police while simultaneously punished for self-protecting through gun carrying—was a central feature of young peoples’ narratives.

## Carrying for Protection

These communities’ lengthy histories of violent victimization at the hands of other residents and the police—whether or not participants had themselves been injured—were repeatedly cited as the backdrop against which decisions around weapons-carrying were made. The majority of participants (75%) did not feel like carrying a gun was about respect. Rather, the

most frequent reason cited was protection and safety in some form: from random acts of violence, from acts of retaliation, and from the police.

Some youth reported carrying guns because of their **pervasive sense of neighborhood mistrust and a feeling that they could be victimized at any time—a kind of generalized fear**. “I didn’t know how to fight,” reported one Brownsville participant, who said he carried because, “I really felt like I was protected by the weapons just from other people who wanted to bully me.” This young man saw carrying a gun as the most reliable way to prevent victimization in the first place. Other participants had previously experienced victimization, and were concerned about it reoccurring.

I’m a paranoid person ever since I got stabbed. I come out of work and nobody’s after me [...] I still be lookin’ behind me. I don’t trust nobody. You never know when a random person just say [...], “I’m gonna get this nigga. I’m not feelin’ good today. I’m gonna shoot this nigga, just because he’s here. [...] He got a job. He’s makin’ money. I’m not makin’ money. I’m fuckin’ miserable. I’m gonna shoot this nigga.” (Black man, 24)

For other participants, they felt a more **localized sense of fear—needing protection from people seeking retaliation**.

Motherfucker owed me some bread and he kept going around—kept talking bad on my name, talking crazy about me, talking about I ain’t gonna do shit, just taunting my name just because he owe me bread. And when I seen him, he try to front on me. He really tried to back out on me. He thought I ain’t bring it outside that day. [...] Motherfucker already tried to back out on it, shoot at me before I even got down to tell my story so I have to shoot back and I have to defend myself. That was the first time I ever pulled my shit out. First time. (Black man, 24)

This self-protection took on further nuances for female participants who were involved in traditionally male street activities. The women in our study indicated that their gender did not exempt them from retaliation and in some cases even increased their risk of violence from men who felt their masculinity was undermined. In these cases, women described men working to restore their street reputations through gun use. As one young woman in Brownsville explained: “I got beef. I got shot and I been shot at. Niggas I done robbed, niggas I done took niggas’ chain. I done embarrassed grown-ass men. So I need one. I’m a female. Niggas want to shoot at you.”

Finally, many participants felt a sense of **overarching fear of the state, primarily in the form of law enforcement**. “You gotta protect your life,” reported a young Black man from Brownsville, “because the cops might shoot you. That’s why I think to myself, ‘Why is it they don’t want us to bear arms but they bear arms and pull out on us?’”

Self-protection, self-defense, and retaliation were categories that overlapped significantly in the way participants described their gun use. Sixty percent of study participants said they had used a gun in self-defense<sup>7</sup>, and indeed, they framed experiences as such. Sometimes they just had to flash their gun to stop an immediate threat, as was the case for this teen:

I was getting jumped by these kids [...] And just more of them kept coming so I’m like “What the ...?” So then one time they stopped and then I just, my head just blanked and I just pulled the gun out. It helped ‘cause they stopped beating me up. They just stopped. (Latino, 18)

In these instances, the gun was used to send a deterrence message to prevent another person from doing something harmful, as this 16-year old explained: “most of the time, if I have to pull out a gun, it’s to scare somebody. Basically that means back up and chill.”

Other times, they fired a gun in response to being attacked, but after some time had passed. Their use, however, was still framed as self-defense.

I got jumped. I was with my best friend. She the only reason why I really ain’t get “beat up” beat up. She was on top of me while I was getting jumped. They didn’t want to hit her. After a while they just stopped. After that I went back over there. You could say it’s self-defense but not at the moment. I defended myself because I went back and I retaliated. I shot somebody. (Black man, 19)

## **Caution Around Gun Use**

Finally, many of the gun carriers in the study talked about exercising restraint with guns, and only using it in what they felt were extreme circumstances. “Our number one rule was just: ‘Don’t bust unless you need to bust’” one participant explained. Said another: “I’m not gonna just pull it out, tryna shoot you for no reason,” and, “If I don’t get jumped but maybe you’re just fighting over some petty shit [...] I’m not gonna go get it.” Some participants expressed restraint in gun use as a moral quagmire in which they regularly found themselves. While gun-carrying might have kept them alive, they knew it was not consequence-free and

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<sup>7</sup> More men in the study reported using a gun in self-defense than women (63% v. 39%).

could lead to another person's death, personal trauma, or entanglement in the criminal justice system. As one young man explained, there are "[n]o advantages. You're taking somebody's life. It wasn't helpful for me. It triggered and traumatized me mentally."

## **Smoking & Drinking: Opposite Effects on Gun Use**

Many of the youth we interviewed discussed the connection between gun violence and drug use, particularly the use of alcohol and marijuana. As we have seen, participants *explicitly* identified living with a near-constant sense of impending violent engagement; similarly nearly all talked about their own and their peers' marijuana use as a way to numb related emotions they did not want to or did not have the space to feel.<sup>8</sup> For some, the challenging emotion was anger—"I usually just smoke and smoke just keep me calm or regular." For others, it was a way of dealing with fear and sadness. As one woman shared, "People go and get high because they want to be in another place. I don't see drugs as a bad thing [...] That's them numbing their pain."

Some participants reported using marijuana as a way to avoid "stupid shit" related to guns, calming their anger and increasing their ability to manage challenging emotions and situations without resorting to gun use. One 22-year-old participant recounted his own experience: "I've been in positions where I'm hot and wanna go pick up my gun [...] and then I smoke and I'm thinking completely different. Like, 'Yo, I'm wilding.' Like, 'That shit wasn't even worth it.'"

Whereas marijuana had a calming effect, participants talked about alcohol doing the opposite: amplifying anger that makes gun use more likely.

If I am using marijuana, it's a less chance I'm going to use a gun [...] the marijuana is calming me down so I'm just nice and mellow. But if I'm using alcohol, now I'm ready to use it because all my emotions is coming all at once, everything is clashing together.  
(Black man, 21)

One Bronx participant summed up the dangers of mixing alcohol and gun use: "You might wanna shoot the person you wasn't gonna shoot when you wasn't drunk."

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<sup>8</sup> The participants were by and large not drug users, aside from marijuana, which two-thirds (67%) reported using daily and an additional 12% reported using at least monthly. Almost none of the participants had ever used heroin (1%) or cocaine/crack (2%); less than a quarter (23%) had ever used pills such as painkillers, "benzos," or opiates. Ten percent of participants reported using alcohol every day, and an additional 20% reported using one to five times weekly.

# Access to Guns

Among those who had *owned* a gun (58%), the majority (63%) had gotten their first gun between the ages of 14 and 17; an additional 20% had gotten it when they were younger than 14. For those who had never owned but had carried a gun, over half (55%) had borrowed it from a friend, and an additional 17% had borrowed from a family member.

Gun access was facilitated by **knowing the right people**—“If you don’t know nobody, you ain’t getting none. [...] Ain’t nobody gonna sell to you if they don’t know you. They gonna think you’re a cop.” **Being trusted** was also an important factor. Sometimes trust was related to not revealing your source—“If no one trusts you to know that you’ll keep your mouth shut from who you got it from, that’s what makes it hard.” Other times trust was related to people knowing you would not turn the gun on the person who sold it to you—“If I’m a gun dealer and you have \$500 to buy an AR and you buy an AR, are you gonna take your \$500 back from me, with a gun?” Some of the women in the study felt it was harder for them to get guns than men. When asked how people obtain guns, responses revealed three primary methods: being given one from fellow gang members, borrowing from a friend or family member, and stealing.

Many of the gang members had gotten their guns **from fellow gang members**. One participant stated, “[I] went to my big homie’s house. Spoke to him about a situation and he just gave me one and he said use it if I need it.” Being given a gun whenever you asked for one was not a given, however. According to participants, gang leaders do not usually give guns out if they “know you a hot head,” and they will assess members’ reasons for needing one before distributing a gun, as this East Harlem participant recounted:

How’d I get it? Honestly, when you in gangs you get the connects. So first I went to my [gang name] homie, I’m like, “Yo bro, it’s not funny, I get bullied a lot. A lot of people just want to fight me for no reason. I just want it for protection. I’m not going to go around like shooting everybody.” Like you got let him know a reason. [...] They got [to] at least hear a valid reason somewhere. You can’t just have it like, “Yo, I just want it just to have it.” (Black man, 20)

Other participants **borrowed from a friend**—“I [...] go to my friend house and get it. Tell him why I need it [...] Because some people just ain’t gonna give you they stuff if it’s to go start problems”—**or family member**—“All I gotta do is call up my brother and he’s gonna

let me hold it, or I call up my cousin, he’s gonna let me hold it.” Finally, a limited number of participants reported **stealing** their gun, as this Brownsville resident recalled:

It’s crazy how I got my gun, ‘cause actually a motherfucker came to shoot me. He came to shoot me, his shit jammed, and when his shit jammed, I took it from him, I beat the shit out of him, and I beat him up with his gun. [...] I never let off a shot [...] even though he came to shoot me [...] But I took that gun ‘cause I ain’t know what he was gonna do with it, so I took it and I ran with it. Took it back to the crib like, “nah, this is mine now.” (Black man, 24)

## Gun Use and Conflict Resolution

During interviews, we presented participants with hypothetical scenarios that youth might face where altercations might ensue, and, in theory, a gun might be used—e.g., having conflicts in other neighborhoods, being owed money. We asked them to tell us whether, in these scenarios, they would pull out or use a weapon, react physically, react emotionally, or ignore the situation altogether. Their responses are presented in Appendix B, but major findings are summarized here.

While many participants carry weapons for personal safety, overall, participants were **not likely to report that they would pull out or use a weapon in most of the scenarios we presented**. Indeed, fewer than 20% of our high-risk participants reported they would pull or use a weapon in *any* of the sixteen conflict scenarios we presented. More than half of participants reported that they *would* respond physically—but without resorting to a weapon—in eight of the scenarios, however. The most common scenarios that would result in a physical reaction or weapon use involved someone instigating a fight in another neighborhood, or feeling that someone is cheating them out of money—either through stealing or refusing to pay money owed. A majority of participants also reported that they would react physically if someone shows disrespect to or physically harms them or someone close to them.

### Gender Differences

For most of the presented scenarios, responses from men and women were relatively similar. A few notable exceptions were:

- More men than women reported that they would pull a weapon if the loser of a bet refused to pay them (17% v. 2%) or if someone took a swing at them at a party in another neighborhood (22% v. 8%).
- More men than women reported that they would react physically or pull a weapon if people they did not know tried to take over the basketball court (54% v. 37%) or if someone showed up at a party wearing a jacket that was stolen from them (81% v. 63%).
- More men than women (54% v. 42%) said they would ignore someone disparaging them on Facebook.
- More women than men (51% v. 32%) reported they would react physically or pull a weapon if they saw their ex on the street with a new person after a breakup.

## Reasons for Carrying Other Weapons

Seventy-two percent of participants said that they sometimes carry a different type of weapon, like a knife or blade. This was often a purposeful choice. Some did not feel comfortable with what a gun could do—“Pull out a gun and your intention is to take life”—or what it would require of them—“I don’t have the heart to use a gun.” For many, however, it was about the consequences if caught, as this Bronx youth explained: “If I get caught with a knife or a blade, I won’t get in trouble as much as if I get caught with a gun.” Indeed, some talked about trading their gun for another weapon if cops were around: “If I know that the law enforcement is down the block, I’m not going to take my gun with me. I’ll just take something smaller.”



## Chapter 4

# Gangs

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We were interested in learning about participants’ social networks, and how guns and violence were or were not a part of the culture of these networks. Questions focused on peer behaviors and gang involvement. As part of the interview protocol we asked participants what word they used to describe any group affiliation they might have. Participants used different words, including: gang, clique, set, crew, team, and squad. Sometimes they just referred to their group by their official names. For each individual, we used their preferred term throughout the remainder of the interview. For the purpose of this report, however, we will just use the word “gang” while highlighting that our use of this term includes both well-known national gangs and lesser-known local crews.

## Peer Characteristics

Participants described their peers as regularly engaged in activities that are traditionally framed by criminological literature as “prosocial” and “antisocial” behaviors. While over half had peers who went to school or jobs, fewer associated with peers involved in youth programs or religious groups, and many also reported having peers involved in drug use and illegal activities. Less than half (44%) felt that they could talk to those they spend time with about something important. Slightly more than half (53%) reported that most or all of their peers had been incarcerated, and 19% reported that many of their peers regularly carry a gun.

**Table 4.1. Many Peers Were Disconnected from Traditional Social Institutions for Youth**

| N   | Total<br>330 |
|---|--------------|
| <b>Positive Behaviors</b>   |              |
| Attend school/work regularly  | 55%          |
| Could serve as a confidante   | 44%          |
| Extracurricular involvement (e.g., youth organizations, sports, arts) | 29%          |
| <b>Criminal/system Involvement</b>                                    |              |
| Have been to jail or prison   | 53%          |
| Regularly involved with illegal drugs                                 | 53%          |
| Regularly break the law   | 42%          |
| Regularly carry a weapon other than a gun                             | 38%          |
| Regularly carry a gun   | 19%          |
| <b>Are in a Gang</b>  | 56%          |

\* Includes participants responding “most” or “all” of the people they spend time with fit the criteria.

## Gang Involvement

The vast majority (88%) of participants reported having been in a gang at some point in their lives, though a smaller percentage (60%) were still active members. The proportion of participants reporting gang involvement suggests that much—though not all—of NYC’s gun use overlaps in important ways with gang involvement and activity. The majority (61%) joined their gang between the ages of 14 and 17, and a third (33%) joined before age 14. Participants discussed some of the things their gang provided them with, the most common being support, fun, and protection.

**Table 4.2. Gangs Provided Participants with Support, Protection, and Fun**

| N   | Total<br>290 <sup>+</sup> |
|---|---------------------------|
| <b>My Gang...<sup>+</sup></b>                     |                           |
| Provides me with support                          | 93%                       |
| Does things together that are fun but not illegal | 93%                       |
| Provides protection for its members               | 91%                       |
| Gets in fights with other gangs                   | 89%                       |
| Has or uses guns                                  | 83%                       |
| Helps neighborhood kids                           | 81%                       |
| Does things that are illegal                      | 74%                       |
| Is involved in community activities               | 73%                       |
| Provides help to residents                        | 70%                       |
| Requires me to have a gun                         | 20%                       |
| <b>Being a Gang Member...<sup>+</sup></b>         |                           |
| Makes me feel respected                           | 65%                       |
| Makes me feel like I belong                       | 59%                       |
| Makes me feel safer in my neighborhood            | 57%                       |
| Makes me feel important                           | 46%                       |

\* Questions were only asked of those who had ever been in a gang. For any given question, N may be as low as 281 because of missing data.

+ Past tense was used if the participant was no longer active in their gang.

## Reasons for Joining Gangs

Similar to one of the reasons they gave for carrying a gun (as outlined in Chapter 3), participants identified the need for protection as a motivating factor for joining a gang. They felt that a gang could provide the “strength in numbers” and protection necessary to keep safe from people who come to their neighborhood with the intent to harm, as well as from the police. Participants identified three additional reasons for joining: preexisting family involvement, emotional support, and material support.

## **“I was basically born into it”**

For some participants, joining a gang was a normal thing to do given their **family history of gang involvement**. When asked why they got involved, they stated things such as, “‘cause my brother was in it,” “it’s always in my family,” and “I had family members that was [...] members.” Some participants did not even consider themselves having actually joined, rather seeing themselves as “born into it.” As one participant explained: “That is something a lot of people just, I think, forget. [...] Some of us have no choice. We born into this. [...] I can’t even deny it if I want to. My pops has been doing this for how many years? [...] It’s a lineage.”

## **“You wanna fill that void”**

Some participants stated that they joined the gang because they were **searching for a family**. Their desire to join stemmed from what they consistently described as not getting the **love** they felt they needed from their families of origin. One young man in East Harlem stated, “Imma be where the love is it, and if I can’t get the love from home, I’m definitely going to join a gang.” A Brownsville participant described a similar dynamic with his fellow gang members: “These people love me. They may be harsh. It may come with this, it may come with that. I’d rather harsh love than no love.”

Some participants described not having family members *physically* present in their lives to provide the **emotional support** they needed—because they did not exist, had passed away, or were incarcerated. “They don’t have brothers or sisters so they’ve got to go come to somebody when they need help or they scared,” observed one participant about fellow gang members. Others felt their family members were not *emotionally* present because of the chronic stress of poverty, interpersonal conflicts, or the lack of bonding that many children experience while in the foster care system. One young woman drew an explicit connection between being rejected by her family because of her sexual orientation and her choice to join a gang:

It was mostly ‘cause I didn’t feel the love from my family. I felt like they never really liked me, soon as my mom and everybody found out that I was gonna be gay [...] But my friends [...] we would cling to each other. They knew me better than my own family.  
(Black Latina, 23)

## **“I was struggling”**

Finally, some of those affiliated pointed to a need for **material support** as the reason they joined their gang. Sometimes this took the form of money or connection to a job to earn money to survive or buy things that they wanted, as was the case for this teenager:

I needed clothes. My mom wasn't getting it for me. Nobody was getting it for me. My foster parents wasn't getting it for me. I wasn't even getting no check for nothing because I was in the system. [...] I needed to support me. [...] I wanted to get some money, that's why I joined. (Black man, 17)

Food and housing insecurity served as additional reasons some participants cited for becoming gang members, as the young people felt that the gang would ensure they had meals and shelter.

## Neighborhood Conflicts

Participants described conflict as constant and pervasive throughout their lives. Sometimes conflict involved physical space and territory (e.g., housing project v. housing project) and large groups (gang v. gang), and sometimes they were interpersonal conflicts (e.g., money or romantic disputes, antagonizing social media posts). While these conflicts were sometimes related to gang involvement, often they were not.

As Table 4.2 shows, 89% of past or present gang members reported that their gangs clash with other gangs. Many participants (gang affiliated or not) described frequent disagreements, verbal and physical conflicts, or war—all known as “beef” or “static”—between gangs, and between different NYCHA developments or city blocks.

Participants also pointed to territory as a major source of rivalry. A Bronx participant explained: “It’s different areas, different sections. If we have one section, stay in your section. Don’t come to our section and take over ’cause we’re not gonna take it and then we’re going to have to fight for territory.”

Beefs were often over stolen drugs or money, people “talking shit” on social media, women (e.g., having a sexual relationship with someone else’s current or former girlfriend), verbal displays of disrespect, and “color banging” in a different territory (i.e., wearing one gang color in a neighborhood controlled by a different gang). Participants described many of the beefs they were involved in as “petty,” “stupid,” and “bullshit.” As one Brownville participant put it: “A lot of people don’t know why they got beef.”

## **“I carry a gun for the opposition”: Conflicts and Guns**

People from rival gangs or different locations that participants are “beefing” with are considered “ops.” One participant defined an op as: “my enemy basically. Op means opposition.” Sometimes, even petty beefs would escalate to violence, and some participants believed they needed guns to protect themselves from ops in these situations.

Guns would frequently come out as part of more serious conflicts with ops. One 20-year-old explained: “If I seen somebody from the other side that I got beef with [...] I have to, it’s automatic, they killed my brother so. When I see one of the niggas from the other side, yeah I gotta shoot. Anybody disrespectin’ my dead mans, I gotta shoot.” Participants recounted stories of being at parties where ops showed up and started shooting, resulting in them or their peers getting shot. They also told of times they themselves fired a gun during an encounter with an op.

According to some participants, harming an op is often rewarded by the gang leaders. One woman who belonged to a national gang said, “If I slice [someone from another gang], I get a star because I’m hurting somebody from a different set.” Similarly, a Bronx participant explained:

If you go shoot a op, that’s called “putting in work.” If you go rob a trap, that’s called putting in work. [...] Your OG, he’ll be happy for you for that. He might give you something. He might throw you some bread, might throw you some money. (Black man, 17)

## **Gangs and the Community**

### **“Not all gangs are for violence”**

Though violence was clearly a part of gang life, some participants felt that gangs played a vital role in members’ broader “growth and development,” stressing “it was never about violence [...] it was about family structure and then positive-ness, [...] self-production, and elevating and evolving.” For them, the original mission of the gang—codified in the paperwork that members of national gangs receive when they become members—speaks to prosocial and civic intents and positive connections in the community.

When I read my paperwork [...] the codes and conducts is what got me. Brotherhood, uplifting, empowering one another. Let’s do something positive. Let’s put this money together to create a business so that our family can eat. [...] So I seen that and I was like

[...] Let's get an event together, let's put the neighborhood together. Let's have a block party for the kids on the block. [...] Me, I wanted the brotherhood out of it. [...] It's not about killing one another, money, sex, drugs. It's about, "Let's bring the community together." Brotherly love. [...] If you do your research back to back then, that's how it was. (Multiracial man, 24)

Some participants did note that while street gangs had these intentions, they had shifted away from that in the face of real and perceived threats to their safety from individual and structural violence, and now focused too much on drugs and fighting. Others, however, saw protecting the community as also steeped in history and part of their mandate:

You're supposed to police our own community. [...] That's why a lot a stuff got started in the first place. The police was comin' around killing young Black men [...] and wasn't nothing happening. That's when gangs started to get creative. Black Panthers and all that extra stuff was to fight an oppression. So yeah, that's some of the stuff you supposed to do. Mandatory. (Black Latino, 24)

### **“They’re really good with the kids”**

Despite the violence, gangs were seen as a source of support and love not just for their members, but also for their surrounding community. Table 4.2 indicates that a majority of participants felt their gang helps neighborhood kids (81%), is involved in community activities (73%), and provides help to residents (70%).

Participants said that the gang members were “really good with the kids” and would try “to keep them on the right path.” Sometimes, this took the form of serving as “a role model when the kids of the community don’t have a big brother or a father figure to look up to,” setting behavioral expectations by urging young people to respect their mothers; avoid cursing; stay in school; and “follow their dreams.” Other times it meant the gang members were giving children in their neighborhood or housing project money to buy things like snacks at the store or deli, or buying them essential items (e.g., clothing, backpacks and school supplies, food).

Beyond helping members and children, participants reported that gangs support the community at large by organizing basketball tournaments, cookouts, food drives, and block cleanups. One gang member reported that his gang sponsored a GED awareness day, helping connect people to programs so they could obtain their high school equivalency diplomas. The youth in our study also stated that making sure everyone in their project eats was a priority

for their gang, and that they were “constantly giving out food”—“milk, eggs, and cheese” on a daily basis for people to meet basic needs, as well as turkeys for Thanksgiving.

Despite the positive interactions, a small number of participants pointed to ways that gangs also hurt the community. One was bringing negative attention from law enforcement and increased criminal liability. Another was when stray bullets stemming from gang-related conflicts hit community members. One participant identified this as “unnecessary gun violence. Sometimes they let they egos get to them and just start blazin’. Not caring who’s around, or what’s happening, or who gets shot in the crossfire.”

## Gang “Family”

Nearly three-quarters (71%) of those with past or present gang affiliation stated that they enjoyed being a gang member. While gangs are frequently vilified in the national media and criminological literature, Table 4.2 highlights that participants felt their gang was a positive force in their life. Beyond just serving as a group to associate with, participants’ use of words like “brotherhood” and “family” to describe their gang suggests a much more important and complex relationship. When asked to further illustrate the types of support they personally received from their gang, participants pointed to the same reasons they joined the gang in the first place: emotional support, material support, and protection.

### “We uplift each other”

The **emotional support** gang members felt their gangs provided for them took different forms. Sometimes it meant there was always someone who would listen to them: “When you don’t got nobody [...] that you can talk to, you can come to them.” Sometimes it meant other members were sources of “positive talk” and encouragement: “They’ll push me on to go chase my dreams. [...] Push me to my highest, to my fullest.” Other times it meant that they were shown love in various ways such as being “shouted out” on social media. In general, there was a sense of comfort among participants in knowing they could turn to their fellow gang members. As one Bronx teenager put it, “Just to let you know you’re not in the problem alone. We will take on the problem with you.”

### “If I need something, they got me”

Participants pointed to their gang providing them with **material support** in the form of money, food, and shelter. The sentiments of many are summed up by this young man in Brownsville: “There’s times I don’t got nowhere to stay. I’m going to my brother’s house. Got nothing to eat, go to my sister’s house. She gonna make me something to eat. Give me

some money. [...] Vice versa.” Some of those who had been incarcerated specifically mentioned the support they got while in jail or prison. One Bronx participant was given necessary items from fellow members of his gang who were incarcerated in the same facility, once coded language revealed he was also a member.

I don’t have a lot of family, so I couldn’t get a lot of commissary. So it was like when I first went there and the fact that it was like popping and I’m like “we popping,” it kind of turned us into a family in jail where they gave me a whole bucket of commissary, flip-flops to get in the shower, radio. Like they were giving me stuff I didn’t have to pay for or nothing [...] So it was basically like, dang, they really go for each other, really go out for each other. (Black man, 20)

### **“Do something to my brother, we coming strong”**

Many participants said that gang membership gave them **protection** from “any opposition” or threats from rival gangs, people from other neighborhoods, random people on the street, or the police. This protection took several different forms. One was a precautionary approach of moving around in groups—safety in numbers: “We always travel together. Somebody going to the store, somebody got to go with them. Nobody get left alone.” Other forms of protection were reactive. As one participant stated, the strategy was determined by the threat: “Depending on how serious and different things. They maybe just come to try to mediate [...] Some situations require more than just communications or talking. I guess that’s when it could get violent.” If there were physical fights, the sentiment was, “If one fight, we all fight.” If fights got escalated, participants knew that their gang “got straps,” and they could “call each other for the gun.” Many felt that the gang was necessary for this protection because they could not count on the police to do so, and “if we don’t do it, ain’t nobody else goin’ do it.”



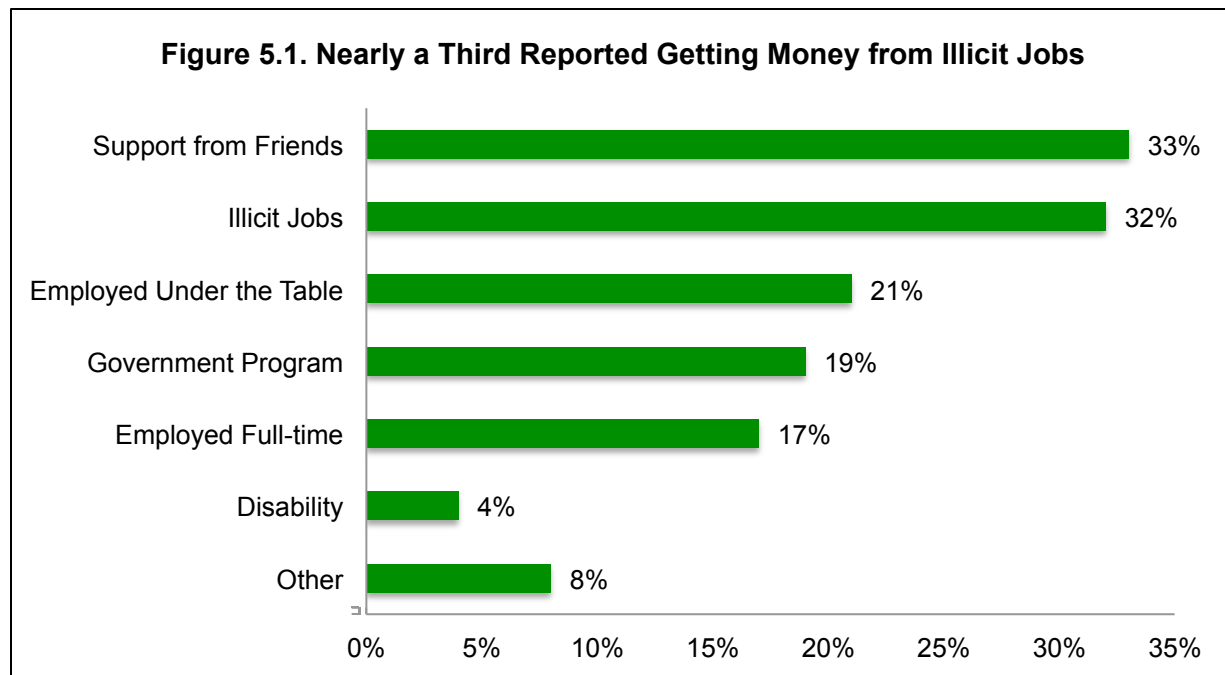
## Chapter 5

# Alternative-Economy Survival Strategies

Throughout the interviews, participants often described lack of ready access to money as a stressor for themselves and their families. Shut out of the mainstream economy, youth described turning to other economies—e.g., drug dealing—to provide for themselves.

One Bronx resident described what he felt was a common scenario for him and his peers: even when they were qualified for jobs, they were not being offered them. “At least ten people probably got their OSHA card, right. I bet if we went across the street, at this new site, probably couldn’t get us a job. [...] Why can’t we do it? Why can’t we work?”

Unable to obtain a job in the legal economy, many youth in the study turned to alternative ways to support themselves. As Figure 5.1 shows, “illicit jobs” and “employed under the table” were common responses to the questions of how participants obtained money.



## Primary Drivers: Poverty and Criminal Records

Study participants identified **poverty** as a push factor for engaging in illegal ways to get money they needed to survive. “When you’re broke, you start leaving to do negative things. Like stealing or finding ways to [...] make money.” Rather than valorizing or romanticizing robbery, participants identified this as the least bad choice available to them. “It’s not the right path, but we wasn’t born with a silver spoon in our mouth like a lot of other people,” a 24-year-old Bronx Latino explained. “You gotta do what you gotta do.” Many participants drew explicit connections between structural issues, like poverty and racism, and their gangs’ involvement in the informal economy: “We gotta make our money happen. And one thing I can say, they don’t make it nice for a Black man to live out here. You gotta make your own heaven out here.”

A second driver of alternative-economy survival strategies was having a **criminal record**. Indeed, our participants reported significant prior involvement with the criminal justice system (88% had previously been arrested, 63% had been incarcerated; further discussion in Chapter 6). They connected their criminal histories with their inability to obtain legal employment. As one young man stated, “We got to sell drugs [...] We can’t get no nine-to-five—we done been in jail, got felonies, man. We can’t operate the same way other people operate. But, we still got to get money. Everybody got a kid.” In recent years, efforts have been made nationally to limit employment discrimination based on criminal records, such as through “ban the box” campaigns. However, participants felt that securing a job remained a challenge despite these policies.

There are a lot of people in the ‘hood with felonies and it’s a lot harder for us [...] even though the background section is kind of like scarce now, they said that they took it off applications, but in all reality, I think they still do the background check because they want to know who’s going to work. And they see it, “oh he’s got a robbery” [...] they think twice [and go with] the motherfucker that doesn’t have a record. You might have all the work experience but you’ve got two felonies. He might have no work experience but he doesn’t have any felonies and they’re going to choose him and train him. (Latino, 24)

## Drug Dealing and Robbery

Participants described two primary ways they and their peers were able to make money to provide for themselves and their families: drug dealing and robbery. “My mom ain’t have a job so I had to go out into the streets and do what I gotta do to survive and keep my mom happy, like sell drugs.” Some felt that though it was necessary to **sell drugs** to survive, it was not what they or their peers wanted to be doing. “I feel they doing this to take care of their families and to get by,” explained one East Harlem woman. “Nobody wants to be on the fucking streets selling drugs.”

Some participants also said that **robbery** was a way they and their gangs supported themselves. “People gonna rob to eat. Rob to get money. Steal to eat, steal to get money.” While this was relatively common, most participants described a set of rules, or ethics, governing this behavior, often stealing from their “ops”: “We don’t really just rob random, innocent people. We rob the rival members, people on [the] other side.” Other times it meant “boosting” from stores—“I was stealing out of stores and go sell it to somebody that owned another store.”

## Guns and the Alternative Economy

A fifth of participants (20%) reported that the ways they make money requires them to have a gun. Indeed, not all of those who sold drugs reported carrying guns when dealing. One young woman in the Bronx felt it was not necessary for minor drug dealing: “I mean, it would be advised that you have one had you decided to up your game and move into big quantities. [...] But otherwise, no, what do you need a gun for?”

But while they said it was not *required*, some of those who sold drugs felt safer having one anyway. “At that point when I first got a gun, I was selling a lot of weed so I felt keeping a pistol would [...] prevent me from getting robbed or somebody tryna hurt me for selling on their turf or something.” One participant described how he flashed his gun while selling when he felt he was in danger:

It was a set up. I was selling weed [...] I was walking in the building and there was some dude standing at the door that was just standing there and I walked in the building and he closed the door. I was supposed to go in the steps. I felt the whole vibe when I walked in, so I backed it out, put it in his face. “Open the door, my nigga. Get out my way.” (Black man, 22)

Some of those who reported robbing people or stores said they also used guns when doing so. One 17-year-old in the Bronx stated, “There’s so much things you can do with a gun [...] one is just robbing the plug,” which he went on to explain was the person who supplies the smaller drug dealers. Another participant made connections between poverty, emotions, and gun use: “Cause when you broke, you get angry about everything and then you grab your gun and just do robberies and do stuff you not supposed to be doing to get your money.”

## Chapter 6

# The Police

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The vast majority of interview participants had a history of interaction with the police and experience in the criminal justice system. As detailed below, participants did not see the police as trustworthy or effective, felt police held characterizations of them as inhuman, and feared being shot by an officer.

## Widespread Police Contact

The youth in our study reported significant, ongoing criminal justice system involvement: nearly nine out of every ten participants had ever been arrested, with the most common arrest charges being marijuana possession, robbery, assault, and subway fare evasion. Thirty-eight percent had been arrested on a gun charge. In the last two years alone, the youth were stopped an average of 9.9 times. Over half (57%) had been arrested before their 16<sup>th</sup> birthday, and 63% had ever been incarcerated. More than one-third (37%) reported that the person who raised them had ever been incarcerated.

**Table 6.1. Most Participants Had Been in the Criminal Justice System**

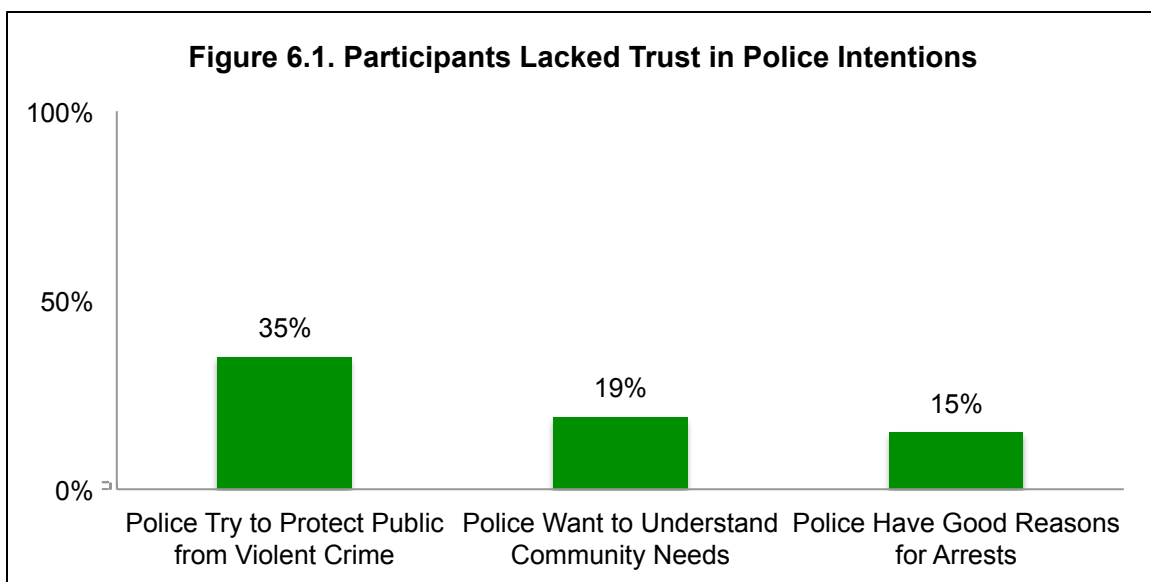
| N   | Total<br>330 |
|---|--------------|
| <b>Stopped by the Police (Last 2 Years)</b> | 91%          |
| Average number of times stopped*            | 9.9          |
| <b>Ever Arrested (Any Charge)</b>           | 88%          |
| Average number of times arrested*           | 7.1          |
| <b>Ever Arrested (Gun Charge)</b>           | 38%          |
| <b>Age of First Arrest</b>                  |              |
| 12-15 years old                             | 57%          |
| 16-17 years old                             | 31%          |
| 18-24 years old                             | 13%          |
| <b>Ever Incarcerated</b>                    | 63%          |
| Juvenile Detention Center Only              | 14%          |
| Jail Only                                   | 24%          |
| Prison Only                                 | 4%           |
| More than one type of facility              | 21%          |

\* Extreme values were censored at 25. This includes 47 participants who reported being stopped by the police *more than* 25 times in the last two years, and 18 participants who reported being arrested more than 25 times.

The men in the study had more criminal justice involvement than the women, with a higher percentage having been stopped by the police in the last two years (94% v. 76%) and stopped more often on average (11.4 times v. 3.8 times), and having a higher percentage having ever been arrested (91% v. 78%). However, almost the same percentage of men and women reported having been arrested on a gun charge (38% v. 37%, respectively).

## Lack of Trust in Police Effectiveness

As shown in Figure 6.1, participants did not trust the intentions of police officers.



Most youth in the study expressed extreme dislike and distrust of law enforcement, with an overall sense that the police were a negative force in their communities. As one Bronx woman put it: “They don’t really do things to help us so it’s like, what do you need to trust them for?” This lack of trust in police effectiveness stemmed from three primary concerns: being harassed or arrested for low-level offenses, feeling that the police were not addressing serious crime, and sensing a lack of care for the people in the community.

### “They worry about the wrong things”

Many youth reported having been **arrested for minor things** such as not having an ID, riding their bike on the sidewalk, jumping the turnstile to avoid paying subway fare, smoking marijuana outside, littering, and jaywalking. This gave the young people the sense that police were present to harass them for inconsequential behavior, but were not around when more serious crime was happening. As one young man explained, when young people are

engaging in these minor offenses (many of them not even criminal per se), “we’re not killing people. We’re [...] not hurting nobody. But when there’s people out there actually getting hurt, they’re nowhere to be found.”

### **“They’re just sitting there [...] not doing nothing”**

As highlighted earlier in this report, participants felt unsafe in their neighborhoods, often due to local “beef” between rival groups or housing projects. Some of their cynicism regarding police legitimacy was rooted in the belief that the **police did not protect them from that violence**—“They’re never on time when crime do happen or when somebody is shot and bleeding to death”—or that **police were ineffective at solving violent cases**—“Police ain’t doing nothing. We got like ten unsolved murders in my hood.” Some reported seeing officers deliberately avoid situations they could have intervened in.

About three months ago some man had gotten jumped right there [...] And the cops just rolled past. They didn’t stop or nothing. I saw everything for myself. [...] They fucked that guy up. He couldn’t walk. He was getting up and falling back down and stumbling, and two cops cars just drove right past. And I’m just like, “They’re not even going to help the man.” (Black woman, 22)

Some felt that when officers were present, their intervention made it worse:

A lot of times it looks like they’re engaging in the crime themselves. I’ve actually sat and watched a police officer come up to a situation that was happening how ever, but it didn’t seem as though he was trying to fix the situation or [...] defuse it. It just looked like he was antagonizing it and putting fuel to the fire. [...] You see someone up riled already, your job is to serve and protect us. So shouldn’t you try to calm that person down versus you engaging in argument with them? [...] It’s like, “who’s the officer?” Because if you didn’t have the uniform on, I wouldn’t be able to tell. (Black woman, 24)

### **“Just act like you care sometimes”**

**Focusing on minor offenses and failing to intervene when needed had the net effect of leaving participants feeling that the police do not care about people in their community.**

This lack of regard showed up in the language some officers use—“the way they talk to us is just disrespectful”—and the behavior of some officers when there was no threat—“last year it was a cookout and the police came in and got a jug of water and poured the water on the grill.” Some youth felt that the police made no efforts to get to know them as individuals, and that doing so would help them be more effective and humane.

They don't try and really get to know what's up with people. [...] It's easier to assume, as opposed to get to know somebody or say, "Hey." [...] They will do the PAL basketball tournaments, but that's nothing. You gotta get in the community. If you patrolling in your community, you should be able to come here and know some of the youth. (Black Latina, 18)

Some also felt that cops did not take the time to get to know community norms that would help them understand why young people might be acting a certain way. They stated things like, "They don't understand our hurt," "They don't know what we go through," and "They don't go based on [...] what you've been through, how hard your life was, what made you do it. They don't ask none of that." One Brownsville resident connected this lack of understanding to which cops were sent to work in his community: "Most cops don't come from neighborhoods or they're not from your neighborhood. [...] They don't come from like our struggles or what we go through."

## Police Responses to Youth and Gangs

We asked participants how they thought police viewed gang members and people from their neighborhood, and how they themselves viewed the police. The following themes emerged from their responses: police treated gang members and youth from the projects as less than human, the police force itself was similar in structure and goals to their gangs, and gun carrying was sometimes necessary to protect themselves because of police inaction or action.

### **"They think we out here shooting people for fun"**

On average, the young men in our sample had been stopped 11.4 times in the last two years (higher than the 3.8 average for women). The men in particular felt that they were often stopped—"In this hood, cops stop anybody for putting their hands on their head. Putting their hands in their pocket, they will stop you"—or harassed—"You're not even doing nothing and they find a way to harass you"—simply for being affiliated with a gang. When asked how the police see gang members, participants responded with characterizations such as: "we are stupid," "we demons," "scum," "animals and terrorists," "criminals," "a terror to society," and "monsters." One 20-year-old Bronx resident stated, "They think we carry guns on us all day, run around shooting people all day for no reason."

They also made specific connections between their poor treatment by the police and their race. As one participant stated, "At this point, being Black, it's like you expect to be arrested or for them to bother you." These often false and negative characterizations based on



participants' identities made them less likely to trust the police. **On the rare occasion a participant said something positive about a police interaction, it was because an officer took the time to get to know them, which felt meaningful and conveyed a sense of care.** More often, however, the sentiment was negative and stemmed from being stereotyped and treated like they were not individuals worth knowing. As one participant noted, "They don't know nobody's story. I'm a gang member. I got two kids. I take care of my kids. They don't know that. I go to work. All they see is a nigga standing outside."

### **"The cops is the biggest gang out here"**

While most felt that police officers treat them poorly solely because they are gang members, numerous participants also saw it as ironic given that they believed police themselves to be a "legal gang."

They're a gang too. [...] They're basically shooting people and being justified for it. What makes you different from someone in the street? [...] Any gang member out here that shoots, all of them think it's justified. Just because you scared? Because we walk around scared every day. We can't just go shooting people because we're scared. (Black woman, 24)

They made numerous assessments of how the police and their own gangs were similar in terms of structure, leadership, identity, and brotherhood.

The fact that they'll lie for each other, just like we will. Something happen, I can get beat up by the police officer right here, we get to the precinct and the other police officer that was with him would say, "That didn't happen." They lie for each other, just like everybody else. They got their colors. They just like a gang. And they stand in the street all day too. They just like a gang. (Black man, 22)

As a result of some officers' antagonistic behavior or violent behavior, in their interviews, many participants identified police as "ops" alongside other gangs.

### **"They'll gun you down for anything"**

As mentioned in Chapters 2 and 3, lack of neighborhood safety was attributed in part to feeling like the police were not responsive to serious crime and did not protect participants or their communities. Sometimes participants made explicit connections between gun carrying and what they felt like was ineffective policing. One Bronx participant said a gun allowed

him to protect himself and his family “until the police arrive to do nothing for you.” Other times participants specifically identified police shootings as the reason they needed to carry:

They’re picking off people for no reason. [...] So Imma carry mine because I have to protect myself from you now. It’s not a regular person I gotta worry about. I gotta protect myself from the people who are made to protect and serve us. And that is the most scariest thing in the world. (Multiracial man, 24)

Indeed, this fear of being hurt by the police is based in the reality of life for young black men in the U.S. A recent study showed that over the life course, about one in every 1,000 black men can expect to be killed by police use of force, with the risk peaking between the ages of 20 and 35 (Edwards, Lee, & Esposito 2019).

## Chapter 7

# Conclusion and Implications

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This study is the first to access such a high number of New York City youth who carry or are at high risk for carrying guns, collecting the greatest volume of in-depth information from them about their experience with guns. We sought to answer the following questions: 1) What are the reasons young people carry guns?; 2) How do young people talk about having and using guns?; and 3) What are young people’s social networks like, and what roles do guns play in these networks?

Our data reveal that the youth in our study were mostly carrying to increase their feelings of safety. Many had been shot or shot at, attacked physically with a non-firearm weapon, or had someone close to them be shot. They held a widespread belief that they could be victimized at any time, and guns served to protect them from real or perceived threats from other gun carriers—often rival gang members, residents of different housing projects, and the police.

Additionally, their wholesale distrust of the police stemmed partly from historical over-policing of minor crimes in their communities—resulting in significant loss of family members and peers to incarceration—as well as their own restricted access to mainstream jobs and public programs due to criminal records and discrimination. In their experience, police officers did not show care or concern for them, were not protecting them from more serious crimes, dehumanized them, antagonized them, and threatened them with violence. Participants’ fear of police not protecting them (at best) or killing them (at worst) was grounded in their lived experience and what they saw happening regularly in their larger racial and ethnic community (e.g., black men killed by the police when stopped for minor infractions or for nothing at all). Taken together, this resulted in extensive community trauma.<sup>9</sup>

Given these realities, the hypervigilance that seems apparent in many participants’ excerpts may constructively be understood as a trauma reaction, in a causal relationship to the death and threat-of-death they live with daily. Gun carrying served as one mechanism of self-preservation. Gangs and other social groups also served as a mechanism of self-preservation

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<sup>9</sup> Community trauma “affects social groups or neighborhoods long subjected to interpersonal violence, structural violence, and historical harms” (Falkenburger, Arena, & Wolin 2018).

and as outlets for coping with this trauma, but equally provided the love and emotional, material, and physical support that many of these young found lacking elsewhere.

Ultimately, what all these data indicate is that street-involved youth of color are caught in double-binds: they are potential targets both of other youth and of agents of the state theoretically in place to protect them. Further, efforts they take to provide for their own safety merely serve to increase their vulnerability from both these sources. Those who are most at risk live daily with the reality of their own mortality, and are faced with a decision-making calculus not unlike soldiers at war. This is reflected in the language the youth use—“ops”; “protection”; “brotherhood”; “enemy”; “territory”; and even the “with us or against us” descriptions of how people from other gangs or housing projects are seen, whether or not they have any gang affiliation. This community trauma is shared by those who carry guns and those who do not. It factors into nearly every gun-related decision these young people make. Policies and programs must contend with this context and the sobering conditions these young people live in. Not doing so will further an already deep mistrust and compound these youths’ vulnerability.

## Recommendations

The findings of this study speak to the need for very specific approaches to addressing youth gun violence, with a particular focus on *why* rather than *how* youth acquire and use guns. As we complete this report, our country is reeling from the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Rayshard Brooks by police officers, specifically, and continued police violence against people of color more broadly. Sweeping national protests are pushing many jurisdictions to reexamine approaches to public safety, and to reallocate police budgets. Much of what we learned in this study documents young people of color’s anger at and fear of the police, and makes explicit connections between police behavior and their decision to carry a gun. Our recommendations on how to reduce youth gun violence stem from these realities.

Funders should direct their anti-gun violence funding streams to programs and policies that directly address the reasons why youth are carrying guns and develop relationships with young people built on trust. Any one program may show small individual-level changes, but it is the network of strategies offered together in a community that could lead to community-level reductions in gun violence. These should include:

- **Bringing Services to the Spaces Important to Youth** The model for many community-based organizations is to offer services and programming at specific

locations (e.g., schools, storefronts) in a neighborhood. Many of our study participants talked about the restrictions on where they could safely walk or go because of beefs between rival gangs or housing projects. Given this reality, it may feel like too big a risk to go to any particular location—especially not knowing who might be there. Additionally, our team learned that we had to spend a significant amount of time being consistently present and visible in the spaces that were important to the youth to build trust and gain access to the population of youth who carry guns. Community organizations should therefore bring their services and programs into community spaces where urban youth congregate (e.g., outdoor courtyards in public housing projects). This may require a reimagining of how services are typically offered and who is providing them. It may also involve engaging gang leadership who can provide access for the organizations while also vouching for them with the youth.

- **Hiring More Credible Messengers** Community-based organizations seeking to engage high-risk youth must hire frontline staff who have the “street” experience and cultural knowledge to connect with these young people. They will be more likely to be trusted and have access to the desired population, and will make it more likely that the youth will accept services or engage in programming.
- **Investing in Community Safety Strategies that Do Not Involve Law Enforcement** Given the current realities of these young people—including the deep distrust of law enforcement and the psychological and physical harms law enforcement inflicts upon youth of color—we must develop community strategies that ensure neighborhood safety while also building trust and encouraging healing. This cannot be done by police. These strategies will be most successful where they can be combined with significantly reduced low-level enforcement by traditional law enforcement groups and a re-focusing of police efforts on responding to violent crimes.
- **Creating Job Programs Specifically for Youth and People with Criminal Records** Many youth in our study were involved in the alternative economy as a means of survival, given limited access to mainstream jobs employment. Guns were sometimes part of these survival strategies. Employment programs must take into account the education and social realities these young people face, meeting them where they are to teach hands-on skills in different sectors to build qualifications and experience, and helping youth imagine long-term career paths. Rather than simply

providing “resume-writing assistance,” such programs *must* include concrete pathways to jobs that pay a living wage, and could help youth gain necessary experience and build social capital. Additionally, employers (private sector, nonprofits, and government) should develop job opportunities specifically for workers with criminal histories.

- **Engaging Gang Leadership** One methodological finding from this study is that given the significant roles of gangs in the lives of these youth, respecting and engaging with gangs is extremely important. Gang leaders must be partners at the table for any discussion of community services and safety in order to facilitate access to young gun carriers in urban areas. This includes discussions led by policymakers and those led by community organizations. Our study shows that many gangs are committed to making the community better for their members and neighbors because they feel that no other community group or government is providing them with what they need in terms of safety, economic opportunity, emotional support, and healing. The social inclusion of gangs—seeing them in part as social movements and cultural groups vital to resilience—is essential to this process. Such partnership and trust is necessary for decreasing gun violence and for creating programs and policies that engage and meet the needs of the youth most at risk for gun carrying.
- **Conduct More Participatory Research** Our experience conducting this research shows us that a participatory approach has recruitment and analytic benefits. It is also an extremely important strategy at this historical moment, when traditional systems of knowing are being challenged, and there is widespread mistrust in government and services. Participatory research provides a mechanism to meaningfully tap expertise of marginalized or hard-to-reach community members, while also providing them with meaningful jobs.

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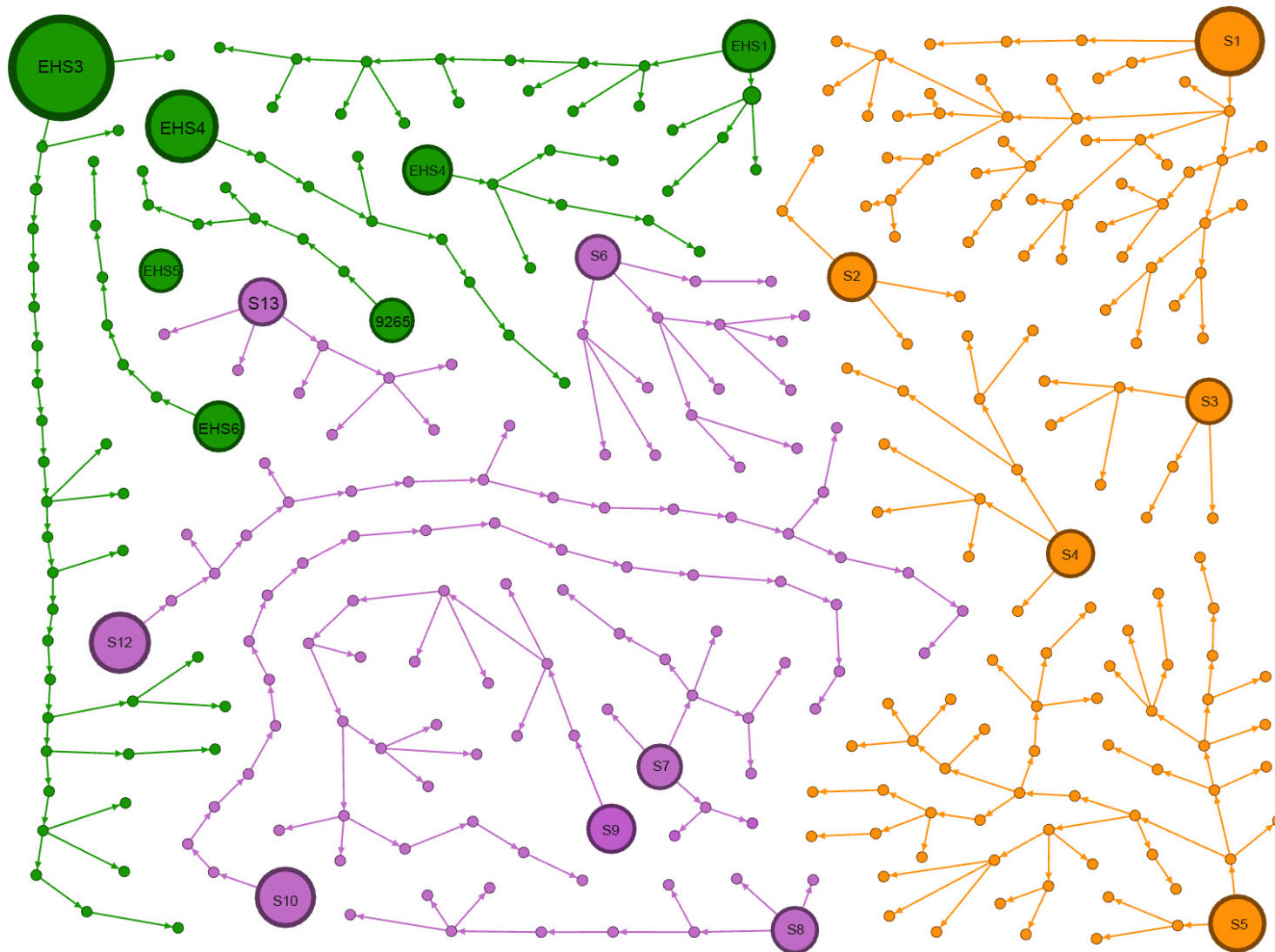
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# Appendix A. Respondent-Driven Sampling Network Trees



Green = East Harlem Purple = Brownsville Orange = Morrisania

# Appendix B. Reactions to Common Conflict Scenarios

| N=330  | Pull Out/Use Weapon | React Physically | React Emotionally | Ignore | Not Sure |
|--|---------------------|------------------|-------------------|--------|----------|
| Someone takes a swing at you at a party in another neighborhood.                                     | 19%                 | 74%              | 3%                | 2%     | 3%       |
| Somebody shows up at a party wearing the jacket everyone knows was stolen from you.                  | 16%                 | 62%              | 9%                | 7%     | 6%       |
| You won a bet and the loser refused to pay you.  | 14%                 | 54%              | 16%               | 8%     | 9%       |
| You see someone who owes you \$200 and you think he is trying to play you.                           | 14%                 | 66%              | 13%               | 3%     | 5%       |
| You see someone on the street who beat up your brother last week.                                    | 13%                 | 70%              | 7%                | 5%     | 6%       |
| You are on your way to a party outside of your hood. You bump into someone and he swings at you.     | 10%                 | 83%              | 3%                | 2%     | 3%       |
| You are hanging out with a friend and someone tries to smack your friend around.                     | 8%                  | 72%              | 11%               | 4%     | 5%       |
| You see someone who has not paid you the \$100 he owes you.  | 7%                  | 48%              | 26%               | 10%    | 9%       |
| Somebody disrespects you in front of your friends.   | 5%                  | 56%              | 22%               | 12%    | 6%       |
| Your girl/man and you broke up one week ago. You see her/him with a new girl/guy on the street.      | 4%                  | 32%              | 20%               | 39%    | 5%       |
| A group of people you and your friends don't know try to take over the basketball court.             | 4%                  | 47%              | 25%               | 16%    | 8%       |
| Somebody talked shit about you on Facebook.  | 2%                  | 21%              | 20%               | 52%    | 6%       |
| The cashier at the bodega cheated you at the register.   | 2%                  | 20%              | 58%               | 16%    | 5%       |
| You are at a club talking to a girl/guy when a girl/guy comes and tells you she's/he's his girl/man. | 2%                  | 7%               | 20%               | 59%    | 13%      |
| You are with your friends and someone steps on your new Jordan's.                                    | 1%                  | 16%              | 33%               | 43%    | 7%       |
| You are at a club talking to a girl/guy and another girl/guy tries to get her number.                | 1%                  | 10%              | 22%               | 62%    | 6%       |