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Unlocking Gun-Violence Solutions: The Necessity and Power of Lived Experience

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ABSTRACT
This article contributes to our national understanding of gun violence by incorporating in our analyses the perspectives of the young men most likely to be victims and/or perpetrators of gun violence in urban areas. It also describes a more complex gun violence crisis by taking into account the environment in which many young Black men live and learn and how those settings contribute to their gun possession decisions. This focus on environment underscores the contextual differences between mass and school shootings compared to urban gun violence. The cities where our respondents live are marked by violence and few positive opportunities. By the time they were 15 years old, the majority of our study participants knew someone who had been shot, many knew someone who had been killed by a gun, and the majority had been arrested. On the contrary, few had significant adjucation or incarceration records and most were either in school or had graduated from high school. The findings represent the lived experience of 364 young Black males living in high crime cities. The interviews were conducted in collaboration with community partners in Baltimore, MD, Jackson, MS, Houston, TX, and Wilmington, DE.
KEYWORDS: gun possession, lived experience, urban gun violence, black male perspective.

The United States is home to more guns than any country in the world (Karp, 2018). It is no surprise that gun violence has become one of our country's most intractable problems. More Americans died of gun-related causes in 2020 than ever before (Gramlich, 2022), and guns became the leading killer of children for the first time in history (Gebeloff et al., 2022). On average, more than 300 people in the United States are shot every day (Brady Report, 2022). On all measures, rates of gun violence in America are as much as 25 times higher than rates in other developed nations (Grinshteyn & Hemenway, 2016).

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While policymakers, activists, and voters devote increasing attention to gun violence, attempts to reverse worrisome trends have been unsuccessful. The inability to slow gun violence is due in part to the myopic focus on only one aspect of gun violence: mass shootings. Meanwhile, another gun violence epidemic rages in cities across America, disproportionately impacting Black Americans. The problem of interpersonal gun violence does not affect Americans evenly. Black Americans represent the most vulnerable segment of the population. Firearm homicides among Blacks increased by 61% between 2018 and 2021, and for over five decades, has been the leading cause of death among Black men (Nguyen & Drane, 2023). To effectively reduce gun violence, social science needs to understand better why those who are most likely to be victims and perpetrators of gun violence possess guns. Yet, the perspectives of young Black men remain sparse in the academic literature and basically absent from public discourse on gun-violence policy. Without an understanding of the lived experience, our responses to interpersonal gun violence will remain limited and ineffective.

In response to this gap, we set out to understand *why* young Black men choose to possess guns and how the environments they live in influences that decision. Employing a grounded-theory approach, we conducted a phenomenological study with a single research question: Why do young African American men living in high-crime urban environments possess firearms? We selected this population because if we are to achieve meaningful policies, we need to understand from their lived experience both the environment that fosters gun violence and the reasons young African American men possess guns.

Life in environments marked by high crime and pervasive violence present significantly different challenges from those that groups victimized by mass shootings face. Understanding and documenting these specific lived experiences provide scholarly advantages and benefits. Accounting for realities these youths perceive adds important context and details, thus providing a greater understanding of statistics reported by scholars and government agencies. Permitting victims of gun violence to tell their stories allows scholars to demystify statistical analyses. There is a very strong likelihood that lived experiences can reveal factors or relationships not yet thought through or considered to be highly influential. For instance, respondents can point out certain public policies or systems that are the culprits for their problems, which have been omitted from the literature to date. We can learn whether they believe their living conditions shape their attitudes and behaviors toward guns. This suggests that there must be a stronger effort to connect lived experiences with policy as a solution to gun violence.

While statistical analyses can suggest factors that influence opinions, those do not account for all of the variance. Focusing on lived experiences can offer added insight as to when hypotheses do matter, even when those do not appear to be statistically significant. Lived experiences allow more information to be gathered because respondents are able to untangle these factors and assign value to them. Respondents elaborate on precise elements, features, and people who have an impact. They will allude to specific peers and social networks and how both of these factors play roles in their decision-making, opinions, and behaviors. Lived experiences can serve to reinforce or debunk long-held propositions that are too readily assumed. That is, we can find out if Black youths living in these settings have a heightened sense of awareness and are hyper-vigilant within their surroundings in order to protect themselves from potential gun violence—which may foster aggression and overreaction to verbal comments or seemingly benign behavior. Drawing on accounts of lived experiences, we are better able to determine if Black youths rationalize gun possession or violence, blaming others or society for their gun use and justifying harm or dehumanizing victims of gun violence.

This article contributes to our national understanding of gun violence by incorporating the perspectives of the young men most likely to be victims and/or perpetrators of gun violence in urban areas. It also describes a more complex gun violence crisis by taking into account the environment in which many young Black men live and learn and how those settings contribute

to their gun-possession decisions. A focus on the environment allows generalization to similar settings, thus, paving the way for a broader menu of effective policies to stem gun violence.

Literature Review

Almost a decade ago, Ruggles and Rajan (2014) analyzed gun possession among a national sample of youth using the data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS). YRBSS was initiated in 1991 and is administered to all students in grades 9 through 12 in private and public schools. The dataset consists of questions addressing demographics, health behaviors, and risk behaviors across several domains, including violence, sexual experiences, drug and alcohol use, and eating and exercise habits. It also includes questions about students' school and living situations. Ruggles and Rajan (2014) examined YRBSS data over a ten-year period (2001 through 2011) to determine if youth possessing guns participated in other high-risk behaviors with more frequency than youth who did not possess guns. Using a discovery-analysis process, they analyzed risk-behavior combinations in an effort to identify behavior clusters that might differentiate youth who possessed guns from those who did not. Their findings indicated that youth who possess guns are more likely to participate in high-risk behaviors than those who do not. The strongest high-risk behaviors associated with gun possession were drug and alcohol use and feeling unsafe. Youths who had possessed guns reported proved more likely to report a history of sexual assault than those who had not possessed guns. Finally, mental health was also associated with gun possession. However, as Ruggles and Rajan (2014) underscore, this association was much lower than other associations.

The YRBSS data findings provide a framework in which to organize our current understanding of gun possession among youth and young adults. The primary findings from that study highlight topics where research on gun possession has focused: mental health, high-risk behaviors, and victimization. It is a common belief that people who perpetrate gun violence suffer from a mental health issues. Robertson and colleagues (2020), in their study of 1,215 male juvenile offenders, examined the relationship between callous-unemotional traits and gun ownership and gun use. Callous-unemotional traits, such as lack of empathy and lack of guilt, are associated with behavioral issues in children and are the strongest precursor of adult psychopathy (Saunders et al., 2019). Robertson's (2020) team, using an index of

callous-unemotional traits allowing for differentiation in the extent of these traits, documented gun possession and use based on self-reported data collected at seven points over 48 months. They found that as the number of callous-emotional traits increased, so did the likelihood of carrying a gun and to a lesser extent the use of a gun in a violent crime. This finding suggests that at least among male-juvenile offenders, gun possession and use is associated with hardened, uncaring personality traits.

The idea that people who use guns to inflict harm are mentally unstable, lack empathy, or are otherwise sociopathic is commonly held and is perpetuated by media presentation, particularly mass shootings (Gonzales & McNeil, 2020; Simonsson & Solomon, 2021). In fact, further investigation shows minimal links between mental health and gun violence. Fewer than 1% of mass shootings are committed by people with serious mental illness (Applebaum et al., 2000). Mental health symptomatology may not be associated with gun violence; conversely, however, exposure to gun violence results in depression, anxiety, and aggression (Shulman et al., 2021).

As indicated in the YRBSS analysis (Ruggles & Rajan, 2014), other risk behaviors have been examined as correlates of gun possession, such as drug and alcohol use, delinquency peers, and criminal involvement. Much of what we know about gun possession among adolescents who are involved in the juvenile justice system is derived from the Pathways to Desistance Study (Mulvey et al., 2004). Over the course of seven years, 1,354 serious juvenile offenders

adjudicated between November 2000 and January 2003 in Phoenix, Arizona, and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, were surveyed a total of nine times. The prospective study aimed to identify pathways after release from the juvenile justice system, differentiating between pathways out of that system from those into the adult criminal justice system. The study produced a comprehensive dataset, including data points related to gun possession and gun use. Analysis of this dataset indicates that risk factors, including gun possession and peers' gun possession, lead to gun violence. However, the study also showed that only about half (49%) of study participants who carried a gun participated in gun violence (Pardini et al., 2021), underscoring the importance of understanding gun possession beyond its association with gun violence.

Further analyses show that one risk factor in particular, drug dealing, was associated with gun possession (Docherty et al., 2020). More specifically, carrying a gun increased slightly prior to a drug-dealing period, increased significantly during drug-dealing periods, and then decreased somewhat after a drug-dealing period. This study underscores that carrying a gun is not a constant. Here, gun possession is a decision determined by involvement in the specific activity of drug dealing. Using this same dataset, Gonzales and McNeil (2020) assessed factors associated with moving from gun possession to gun use. As part of the Pathways to Desistance study, the Threat Control Override Psychotic Symptoms Scale was administered. This scale identifies both the presence of and the seriousness of the belief that someone is intent on harming you (threat) and/or that an external force is in control of you or your thoughts (control). They found that among juvenile offenders who possessed a gun, the likelihood of participating in gun violence was related to the presence of threat-control overrides symptoms.

Gonzales and McNeil (2020) also found that neighborhoods where guns were easily accessible increased by 2.5 times the risk of gun violence for study participants. Other studies examining the difference in gun violence by environmental factors show an increased risk of firearm mortality for areas with higher concentrations of poverty (Hester, 2020). This analysis of firearm mortality using data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Compressed Mortality File (CMF) and US Census Bureau population data also showed that more than half of all firearm-related deaths among 5- to 24-year-olds and more than two-thirds of homicides for this age group occurred in counties with high concentrations of poverty.

Research on the impact of gun violence exposure has been limited to gun violence victimization and/or perpetration. Recently, however, studies using a broader perspective on gun violence exposure highlight the environmental impact. A review of location-specific studies describes how daily schedules and routines are altered as a direct result of violence, particularly gun violence (Kravitz-Wirtz et al., 2022). Kravitz-Wirtz and colleagues (2022) extended this line of inquiry from location-specific studies to a population-based analysis of neighborhood characteristics correlated with community violence. They used two datasets, one of individual-level data (Fragile Families Child Wellbeing Study) and the other of incident-level data (Gun Violence Archive). The FFCWS includes data from almost 5,000 families identified through a multistage, stratified-probability sampling technique. The Gun Violence Archive is an open-source dataset of gun incidents compiled from over 7,500 sources. The two datasets were harmonized by matching the incident location in the GVA data to the FFCWS study participants' home addresses. The findings corroborate the location-specific data from ethnographic studies, indicating that poverty across the nation, at both the individual level (measured by household income) and the community level, increased the probability of exposure to gun violence (when measured by neighborhood assets). Youth living in high-poverty households were 5 to 10% more likely to be exposed to gun violence.

However, youth living in highly disadvantaged neighborhoods were 50% more likely to be exposed to gun violence (Kravitz-Wirtz et al., 2022). Exposure to gun violence has been associated with an array of negative effects on mental health immediately following the incident, specifically depression and anxiety (Gonzales & McNeil, 2020), and with trauma symptoms for as long as two years following the incident (Turner et al., 2018). Exposure to gun

violence increases anxiety and aggression among at-risk males and may also affect self-control and information processing (Shulman et al., 2021).

The current research on gun possession has established that the likelihood of possessing a gun is related to individual risky behaviors, such as drug and alcohol use, criminal activity (particularly drug dealing), and associating with delinquent peers. We also know that mental health and personality traits explain neither gun violence nor gun possession to the degree the public believes they do. Conversely, however, research shows that exposure to gun violence directly affects mental health, cognitive processing, and development. Furthermore, we know that exposure to gun violence is unequal, with a much greater likelihood of exposure for those living in poverty and in disadvantaged neighborhoods. What we do not have is a clear picture of the impact of neighborhoods with high rates of crime and poverty on the decision to possess a gun. To better understand gun violence in urban areas, we must examine why young men living in impoverished, high-crime cities choose to carry a gun.

For Black youths, the issue of violence, gun or otherwise, is particularly acute. Many studies also show that adverse factors disproportionately afflict Black youths in urban areas. Conditions are worse for urban Black youths because they are more likely to reside in areas of such community disorder (Price & Khubchandani, 2017; Thompson & Massat, 2005). Black urban youth residents are more likely to be victims of violence more often and across more years than other Black youths and much more so than white youths (Dijkstra et al., 2012; Price & Khubchandani, 2017; Thompson & Massat, 2005). A couple of the works conclude that inadequate economic resources yield racial and social disparities, low educational achievement, high crime, and other aspects of community disorder (Albdour & Krouse, 2014; Murray & Farrington, 2010).

Several studies suggest that the above conditions may give rise to gun availability, possession, and use (Khubchandani & Price, 2018). One study suggests gun possession among Black youths is tied to its pervasiveness in Black households (Leventhal et al., 2014). Another study finds that nearly a third of Black households in the US have a gun in their home (Parker et al., 2017). A third study finds that Black middle schoolers from low-income families engage in sophisticated, risky behavior in that they are more likely to carry a gun to school because they believe others do (Simckes et al., 2017). Gun possession and gun use are also indicated as variables for why Blacks suffer the highest levels of gun-related hospitalizations than other races and why gun-related death is the leading cause of death for Black male youths (Leventhal et al., 2014). However, these studies do not consider the lived experiences of adolescent and young African American males, as we do here.

It is not enough to address the issue of gun violence and the problem of gun-related homicides in generalized terms. Data must be disaggregated to accurately depict the issue because, in this case, one demographic group, African American men, experience a unique reality. Race is intrinsic to the intractable gun violence crisis. A multitude of studies indicate that the overwhelming majority of gun death victims are Black men (Sakran & Lunardi, 2022). Furthermore, Black youths are disproportionately affected by gun violence and are over eight times more likely to die from firearm homicide than white youths (Oliphant et al., 2019). Blacks fare worse than any other racial group by far, especially whites. If the Black community is suffering more than others, then greater attention must be given to the lived experiences of Blacks in order to alter the effects of America's race-based policies and systems.

Research indicates that unequal distributions of economic and social development and the lack of resources and economic opportunities place Blacks at a huge disadvantage and are related to high levels of violence and crime. Policies and practices, such as Jim Crow laws, enforced segregation between Blacks and whites, while subsequent policies supporting desegregation facilitated neighborhood segregation, yielding differences in housing availability, values, and lending (Sakran & Lunardi, 2022). Additionally, politically driven policies undergirding the "War on Drugs" and the "Tough on Crime" strategy led to different

circumstances for Blacks and whites. Altogether, the centuries of effects these policies and systems have had have been far more detrimental to Blacks than to any other racial group, and to Black male youths bearing the brunt of it.

Study Purpose

As the literature review established, gun violence threatens safety and vitality in many urban areas. The ages of gun violence perpetrators and victims are decreasing, while the risk to citizens, the economy, and revitalization efforts are increasing. Interventions do not have a significant impact on gun violence. One critical missing piece in reducing gun violence is understanding why young Black men possess guns, both the typical urban gun-violence victims and the perpetrators. The proposed research aims to address this gap by interviewing young Black men in four cities with high rates of gun violence who have experience possessing a gun to understand why they choose to possess guns. Given the lack of information from the lived experience of this study population, our study is exploratory and, as such, we did not develop hypotheses. We were intent on allowing our study participants to share their experiences in their own words. Therefore, we did not create a survey with predetermined response options necessary for hypothesis testing. Rather, we created an interview guide with open-ended questions designed to create a conversation, addressing topics previously identified as relevant to understanding gun possession.

Methodology

From decades of cumulative experience in this space, our approach to creating gun-violence solutions is data-driven, holistic, and creative, incorporating community engagement, based on people's lived experiences to truly benefit the communities most impacted by gun violence. The study was conducted in four sites: Baltimore, Maryland; Houston, Texas; Jackson, Mississippi; and Wilmington, Delaware. The work in each site was led by a seasoned researcher based at an HBCU (Historically Black College and University). Conducting the research with a team of HBCU researchers ensured that the historical and structural factors contributing to and, in many cases, creating the environments of interest was considered in developing the study protocol and analysis approach. HBCU-based research teams have the understanding and expertise to conduct research of this nature that the participants often considered intrusive and risky.

Because there is little information about gun possession among young Black men living in high crime and violent areas, our study is phenomenological. The study employs a phenomenological approach using a purposive sampling technique. Phenomenology is a qualitative research methodology designed to examine a specific and frequently atypical or uncommon event or situation. Phenomenological research is an essential social science methodology for understanding events and situations among groups that are hard to reach or marginalized (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1974). Because the study addresses an uncommon activity, purposive sampling is necessary to ensure that study participants have the experience necessary to credibly inform the research. The intentional recruitment of minority males in urban areas with gun-possession experience aligns with the primary ethical principle of justice, ensuring the inclusion of study participants because they have a direct relationship to the study topic established in the Belmont Report. For this approach, taped interviews are the standard data-collection mechanism (Cychosz et al., 2020). A lengthy review of the literature and other human-subjects protection sources, such as the National Institutes of Health, the American Sociological Association, and the American Association of Public Opinion Research, revealed no documentation of anonymous taped interviews posing any greater risk of deductive identification than are posed by survey procedures. The study protocols comply with best

practices and with NIH Informed Consent guidelines.

Our study was rooted in grounded theory, a research method that gathers and analyzes data to develop a theory from the ground up (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Using grounded theory paired with our multilayered approach to understanding gun possession, we compiled a one-of-a-kind dataset rooted in young Black men's lived experiences. In addition to questions on gun possession, we asked questions across a range of topics, including educational experiences and attitudes, financial stresses, general preferences, life goals, and challenges. These questions were identified through an extensive review of the literature on gun possession, on risk factors, and correlates of violence and have been associated with previous research. The primary interview themes and questions are presented in Table 1. The full interview guide is available on Open Science Framework.

Table 1

Interview Themes and Question Categories

Themes	Question Categories
Background	Age; Race/Ethnicity; Living Situation; Mental Health; Foster Care
Personality, Influences & Life Goals	Self-description; Heroes; Influences; Friends; Enemies; Pressures; Challenges; Life Goals; Legacy
School	Attendance; Experience; Learning Style; School Usefulness
Employment & Income	Work experience; hours per week; income; sources of income
Police	Interactions; First experience; Most Recent Experience; Impact; Views
Arrests & Justice Experience	First arrest (reason, experience, impact); Most recent arrest (reason, experience, impact); Detention; Out-of-Home Placement; Incarceration
Gun Exposure & Possession	Exposure to Guns: Age; By whom; Response Exposure to gun violence: Age; situation; relationship to victim; response Gun Possession: Age, how, why, reaction, learned to use, situations carry a gun
Views on Guns, Violence and the City	Reasons for violence; Reason for guns; Suggestions for reducing guns and violence; description of the city; opportunities in the city
Other	Additional comments

The use of similar questions in other studies gives them face validity. Although validity is increasingly considered a quantitative construct, it should be established for qualitative questions as well. We employed a 6-step process commonly used in market research on consumer feedback and adapted from medical research (Collingridge & Gantt, 2019). The steps include: (1) establish face validity; (2) run a pilot test; (3) clean collected data; (4) conduct Primary Component Analyses (PCA) or factor loading; (5) check internal consistency; and (6) revise the survey. Because the topic of interest is rare and, in this case, potentially involves illegal activity, the interview questions would be considered intrusive for a general population sample. However, they are appropriate for the study topic and comply with the American Sociological Association (ASA) guidelines for studying illegal behavior and NIH Informed Consent guidelines, including the options, without repercussions, to stop the interview at any point and to refrain from answering any question. The interview questions must also be highly specific to garner the information of interest and to accurately reflect the lived experience and inform our understanding. Questions of this nature are necessary to contribute to the desired benefits of the study, specifically informing meaningful and effective interventions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This level of questioning is also necessary to provide the lived experience of the study participants in order to establish their credibility, a central aspect of building confidence in the study findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Throughout the research process, we collaborated with community organizations which became key partners. Representatives from our community organizations vetted the interview guide, recruited study participants, assisted in developing the coding scheme, and contributed to the interpretation of the findings. Our community partners are located in the environments where our study population lives, undertaking the hard and frequently dangerous work of assisting youths and young men vulnerable to or involved with crime and gun violence. Each of these community partners is particular to the situation in their city. It is important to recognize these community partners and to understand their role in our research. We partnered with the Center for Structural Equity (CFSE) in Wilmington, Delaware. Founded in 2020, CFSE's mission is to empower and equip communities to respond to structural violence and promote structural equity by providing programs to reduce community violence, facilitate positive youth development, and engage the community. CFSE has a team of researchers trained in participatory action research (PAR) with lived experience and a keen understanding of the community and of the study population. The CFSE team bridged the academic real-world gap and gave the academic research team legitimacy with the study population. They extended their rapport with the study population to the academic research team.

In Baltimore, Maryland, it was vital to establish trust-based relationships with community-based organizations that actively engaged our study population through their provision of services. The fostering of partnerships with the following organizations was vital to acquiring access to Black men who were eligible for the study: ROCA Baltimore, the Druid Heights Development Corporation (DHDC), the National Center on Institutions and Alternatives (NCIA), Safe Streets (McElderry Park and Park Heights Belvedere), the Mayor's Office of African American Male Engagement (MOAAME), The J.O.Y. Baltimore, Thread TouchPoint, and Keys Development-Keys Empowers. The utilization of a community consultant with over 30 years working with organizations was also value-added in establishing rapport with these organizations. Thus, the research team benefitted from these trust relationships established with members of the organizations who provided access to study participants at their respective service sites. Most importantly, in a city with a "no snitching culture," the partners validated the study protocol based on anonymity.

In Jackson, Mississippi, participants displayed a strong degree of cynicism. Many believed discussing gun possession and use with interviewers would lead to criminal charges. Several participants were skeptical about giving interviews out of an abundance of caution. The use of community partners would probably have reduced their fears. Community partners would be able to reassure prospective participants that the study is serious and well-meaning. Nonetheless, community partners were not utilized. Rather, using seemingly non-threatening, approachable, and relatable interviewers made data collection very effective.

In Houston, Texas, interviews were conducted in partnership with several community organizations, including the Houston Health Department, the Harris County Juvenile Detention Facility, and Change Happens, a citywide nonprofit organization. The Houston Independent School District also allowed us to interview several of their young men. These partnerships were instrumental in establishing trust-based relationships with our study population and provided access to eligible participants. Community partners were also critical in validating the study protocol and reassuring participants about the seriousness and good intentions of the research. These partnerships allowed us to effectively engage with young Black men in urban environments and gain valuable insights into their experiences and perspectives on gun violence. Our study highlights the importance of community-based organizations in conducting research and identifying community-developed policies that address the root causes of gun violence.

Having access to and the trust of young Black men exposed to gun violence and possessing guns, we relied on our community partners to recruit participants. Each HBCU student was trained in ethical research and completed the CITI training. They were also trained in interviewing techniques, the purpose and methodology of the study, the community partners, and qualitative coding. Several staff members at Wilmington's CFSE are trained PAR researchers and received additional training specific to this study. The interviews were taped. For minors, guardian consent to participate was obtained. Prior to starting the taping, interviewers read and explained the informed consent form. Participants signed the consent form. Confirmation that the participant understood the study and agreed to participate was obtained verbally when the recorded interview started. No identifying information was recorded during the interview, ensuring that the recorded responses were anonymous and participants' identities were protected. The recordings were transcribed through an automated transcription service and edited by a research team member for accuracy. Students abstracted information from the transcriptions, entered responses in a database, and coded the data. As such, the dataset includes both the authentic individual responses as well as the coded responses that allow for the grouping of similar responses. Safety and security protocols were discussed between research sites and partner organizations to minimize risk and consider the safety of all parties involved in the research study.

Study Sites

The target cities of this study are Baltimore, Maryland; Jackson, Mississippi; Houston, Texas; and Wilmington, Delaware. These cities are characterized by a younger population, a higher proportion of Black residents, more females, and greater levels of segregation than other parts of the United States, as reported by Smith et al. (2022). In addition, conditions in these cities point to concerns with their underlying social determinants of health, including poverty, limited healthcare access, and systemic racial inequalities. These factors contribute to the perceived need to resort to gun possession as a response to life's challenges (Whaley, 2022).

Previous research on these cities has also identified several other potential risk factors, including single-parent households, limited education, and the absence of a father, which can contribute to higher rates of gun violence and other forms of criminal behavior. These factors are often associated with social and economic disadvantages, such as economic instability, limited social support networks, and exposure to violence and trauma. However, it is important to acknowledge that these factors serve as proxy measures of historical trauma and systemic racism experienced by Black communities, which can contribute to high levels of violence and trauma among Black individuals, including young Black males. Gaylord-Harden and colleagues (2022) suggest that a trauma-informed approach is necessary to understand the decision-making processes related to risky firearm behavior among Black adolescents, as this population experiences disproportionate levels of exposure to trauma and associated symptoms. Understanding these risk factors, including the impact of historical trauma and systemic racism, is crucial for developing effective strategies in addressing the root causes of gun violence in urban areas, particularly among vulnerable populations, such as young Black males aged 15 to 24.

The four target cities share several common characteristics beyond their elevated rates of gun violence and other social challenges. Two of the cities are located in the eastern half of the United States, one in the Southeast region and the other in the lower Southwest. They are all major urban centers with large populations, ranging from approximately 600,000 to over 2.7 million residents. The cities are also home to a significant number of historically marginalized communities, particularly Black residents, who have faced persistent economic, social, and political disparities. In addition, all of the cities have experienced high levels of racial segregation, which can contribute to the concentration of poverty and limited access to

resources and opportunities. Despite these shared characteristics, each city also has a unique historical, social, and cultural context that shapes the experiences of its residents and the nature of its gun violence and related challenges.

Study Sample

We aimed to interview 400 Black men between the ages of 15 and 24, 100 from each study site. Our community partners assisted in recruiting study participants. They informed their clients eligible for the study about it and arranged a time for interviewing at their sites. Participation was voluntary and parental/guardian consent was obtained for minors. Both our community partners and study participants informed others of the study-participation opportunity. Through this recruitment process, we used a combination of convenience and snowball sampling strategies.

We completed interviews with a total of 374 respondents (94% of our target sample size). The study sample includes 95 respondents from Baltimore, 86 from Jackson, 100 from Houston, and 93 from Wilmington. Ten of the interviews could not be used due to audio issues with the taping. All except seven were African American/Black respondents, the exceptions comprising six Latinx respondents and one white respondent. Respondents who did not identify as Black or African American were not included in the analysis presented here. Of the 357 Black respondents, ten also identified as mixed race/ethnicity, including Black and Latinx, Black and white, and Black, white and Asian. The respondents were between 15 and 24 years of age, with an average age of 20. Table 2 provides an overview of the study sample by study site.

Table 2
Study Population Demographics by Study Site

Characteristics	Baltimore	Jackson	Houston	Wilmington	Sample
Interviews Conducted	95	86	100	93	374
Included in analysis	95	81	100	81	357
Age					
Range	15 to 24	15 to 24	15 to 24	15 to 24	15 to 24
Average	20.6	20.2	20.3	18.4	20.0
Race/Ethnicity					
Black/African American (% of sample)	100%	99%	99%	94%	98%
Mixed (# respondents)	0	2	2	6	10
School Status					
In HS School	14%	28%	18%	65%	27%
HS Diploma	62%	56%	59%	15%	51%
Quit School	24%	13%	16%	18%	18%
No Response	0%	3%	2%	2%	4%

Our study respondents described themselves in positive terms, similar to how other young men in this age group see themselves. The most common self-descriptions included fun and funny; caring, kind, or nice; smart or intelligent; and outgoing or friendly. None of them described themselves as gang members or gangsters. Only one respondent used “violent” as a

self-descriptor, and only three included anger in their descriptions.

The young men in the study, in general, lived with their families, most frequently composed of their mothers and siblings. They reported strong relationships with their family members, particularly their mothers. Immediate family members influenced the young men on a daily basis and, for most of the respondents, were also their heroes. A quote from one respondent demonstrates the strong family bonds:

> *My father tells me the right things, always motivating me. My mother is the same. She loves and takes care of me. No matter what it is, she going to always look out for me. And, my grandmother, she always been there. If I don't have anywhere to stay, I can always live with her. She still living so she is a strong lady and I look up to her.*

The young men recognize that their family, particularly their parents, were "the only two people who have my back, for real." Another respondent commented about his heroes: "My grandmother and aunt. They did everything they could to get me back on track." They recognize the struggles of meeting everyday needs, "My mother, she's a low-income parent. She cares for her family. Always there for us mentally and financially." Contrary to popular belief, many of the young men had fathers in their lives, providing an "example of how to be successful/be a man."

About one-third of the respondents were in high school, and almost two-thirds graduated from high school. Of the high school graduates, almost half were taking college courses. Only one-tenth were not in school at the time of the interview or had not graduated from high school. Most of the group who dropped out of school quit going because they found school too difficult and did not get the support they needed. Only one reported getting expelled, and five quit attending school because they were incarcerated. When asked how they felt about school, almost half responded positively. Many recognized the importance of an education. As one respondent shared, the school was "wonderful. Posed challenges that were complementary to my future success. School served as a situation to overcome in order to be successful." Others truly enjoyed learning and were grateful for their high school experience. For example, one respondent was introduced to computer science in high school and was working on a computer science college degree at the time of the interview.

Only about one-fifth of participants reported negative feelings about school. As one respondent shared: "Me and school, we didn't get along together." For some, school was stressful due to other demands, such as responsibilities at home and work. Others noted that they attended school only because they were required to attend: "For real for real. I went for my mom. I didn't enjoy school." Others managed the unpleasant school environment by staying to themselves: "I try to stay out of problems. People get rowdy real quick." For others, their dislike of school was directly related to their negative experience with teachers. "I just needed people that going to teach." Another respondent noted that he "never liked the people there. Teachers are just teaching to get along with their day." One respondent went as far as to say that "white teachers were racist." Others recognized the demanding environment for teachers. "Teachers going through too much, spread thin with dealing with other students' behaviors and needs." On the other hand, several respondents noted that their unpleasant experience with school was the result of their behavior and choices:

> *Yeah, I was too busy getting twisted, by the time I was ready to go to school the next day I was still trying to sober up from having a hangover. Couldn't get to the, you know, the right classes on time and ended up getting in trouble. And when it comes to, you know, staying after school to make up for the missed time and going to truancy court,*

being in juvenile lockup which just opened the door to me to meet more bad-ass friends that were my age, you know. And that just opened the world up to more chaos.

Findings

The reasons why the young men we interviewed possessed guns overwhelmingly related to the environment in which they lived. Two key themes emerged as critical to understanding gun possession among the participants in our study. First, the cities where they live are marked by violence and lack of opportunities. Second, their exposure to violence at an early age and continuously, in their view, necessitates the need for gun possession for protection and a sense of safety to survive. Their responses to the causes of and solutions to the violence are instructive. In this section, we present our study participants' description of their cities, experiences with violence, and suggestions for addressing violence.

City Description

The young men in our study described where they lived in bleak terms, providing a contextualized understanding of their environment. Two-thirds of the respondents described their city in negative terms, including harsh, violent, and a negative social environment with few opportunities. In Wilmington, "murdertown" was used repeatedly and, in Baltimore, "a bushel of crabs" was a common response. Single-word responses, such as "violent," "dangerous," "chaotic," and "crazy," were typical. The people in the city were described in terms such as "angry and miserable." Respondents noted the heightened sense of danger with comments like: "if you say the wrong thing, you're dead and that's the end of that." Respondents struggled to identify positive opportunities in their cities. In fact, less than one-fifth reported that their city had opportunities. The most commonly mentioned opportunities were school and work. They also noted that the opportunities were hard to find, and individuals must work hard to access them. Of the remaining one-third, half described their city in mixed terms, recognizing both the good and bad aspects. Many in this group pointed out that the city would not be bad except for the violence. Few described their city in positive terms, with only 10 out of 364 respondents describing the city as great.

Exposure to Violence

Our respondents reported exposure to violence at alarmingly young ages. They knew people who had been shot when they were 15 years old, including family members and close friends. One-third reported that they were younger than 10 when they experienced a family member or friend who had been shot. These were not isolated cases. The young men we interviewed knew multiple people who had been shot. About one-quarter reported knowing more than 10 people who had been shot. In fact, one-tenth of our respondents had been victims of gun violence. Their experiences with gun violence include losing family and close friends. The majority had lost a family member or close friend to gun violence by the time they were 15. Some recalled being younger than six years old when they first lost a family member to gun violence, including fathers, uncles, and older brothers. Although the number of family and friends they knew who died from gun violence was notably fewer than the number they knew who had been shot, it is alarming that most knew more than five people who had been killed by a gun.

Exposure to gun violence early in life and the extent to which our respondents had experienced it engendered fear and anxiety. The younger they were, the more confusing that incident was. "I didn't fully understand. I just knew they weren't coming back." "No one said

anything. Everyone was just crying." For most, it was a reality shock. "This is real. You really lose your life." And for some it created paranoia, as voiced by responses, such as: "Was I next?"

The environment in which they live, in their assessment, necessitates a need to possess a gun. All our respondents had been exposed to guns and knew where they could obtain one. Only one-third noted that none of their friends possessed guns. For most, their first gun exposure occurred before they were 15, with half reporting exposure to a gun before they were 10. Typically, they were introduced to guns by family members and close friends.

Two-thirds acknowledged possessing a gun. Generally, they possessed guns for safety. Some noted that they needed a gun to protect themselves from enemies and few reported that they needed a gun because they were involved in criminal activity. Only two mentioned that they had a license to carry a gun. Most indicated that they obtained guns illegally. About half said they carried a gun all the time. The most common situations in which our respondents were certain to carry a gun was when they felt they were going to be in a dangerous situation, a dangerous area, or an unfamiliar area. Many could not perceive a scenario in which they would stop carrying a gun. Some noted that they needed to know their safety was guaranteed before they would consider not carrying a gun. A few reported scenarios in which they envisioned not carrying a gun, including having a family, moving out of the city, or incarceration.

Causes of and Solutions to City Violence

Respondents offered a variety of reasons why violence was high in their city. By far, the most common responses were related to negative individual interactions. Frequently used terms included "hatred," "beef," "disputes," "revenge," and "retaliation." Respondents recognized the pettiness of most of the personal disputes. "There's so much violence in the city because people be hating. They be beefing over dumb stuff. Over money. They shoot you over females. All sorts of dumb stuff."

According to the young men in our study, personal disputes were fueled by negative influences, such as gangs, social media, and rap music. As one respondent states: "The youths wanna be hype." Many noted that young people affiliate with gangs or get into trouble because they have too much free time. We did not ask directly about the influence of social media or rap music, but both were mentioned. Rap music was not mentioned as frequently as social media. Social media was a commonly mentioned reason for personal disputes getting inflamed to the point of gun violence. "Instagram has influence on people. People post pictures with guns. Kids these days think it's life." "People try to be tough and think they need a gun to be respected."

Lack of resources, such as education, community programs, and opportunities, and living in poverty were also frequently mentioned as contributing to violence. As one young man summed it up: "There's nothing for people to do. They're idle so they commit crimes." Another young man explained that the violence was a result of "jealousy and hatred towards the people you grew up with. There is a lot of poor people that just want to have a comfortable living and they don't see another route to take, so they go the violence route." Others explained the violence as a result of "disparities in African American communities," with one respondent adding that "racism is the soul of America." The young men recognized the generational impact on social institutions, such as education, and socialization, such as parenting and role models. They described the results as young people "having no common sense" and being "ignorant." In the words of one young man: "We have no community leaders. We have no backbone for the city. We have no one standing up for what's right and coming here and letting everyone know it is enough. It's okay to be a little square, you know, to be a little punkish or however people say."

The level of violence they experience in their lives made the young men in our study feel unsafe, sad, depressed, and hopeless. They see it as a "life problem" that impacts everyone in their communities. "I don't even like coming outside." Another respondent added: "Every time I leave out the house, my mom worried that something might happen to me. She always going to check up on me." One young man responded, "Sometimes I be nervous. I ain't gonna lie. I could die walking around out there." This concern was noted for others as well: "what if somebody picks a gun up and is like Get away from me, and start shooting. They may accidentally miss you and hit somebody else. They get their life taken away who was not in the picture for no reason." A young father added: "it interrupts living a normal life and my ability to raise my sons."

Constant vigilance because of the violence was a common response, as is evident with comments such as "makes me have my senses up all the time," "makes me very conscious of my environment," and "have to watch how you move and watch what you do." When incidents of violence occur, some of the respondents became more careful, avoided certain people or groups, and stayed away from certain areas. Several pointed out that the constant violence was why they carried guns: "You're not safe. So I have a gun." For several other respondents, carrying a gun allowed them not to worry about the violence, with one young man commenting: "I don't care. I got my pull [gun]. I'm gonna stay protected. I ain't ever gonna be without my edge [gun]. Because they be going at each other every day." About one-fifth reported that they had become numb to the violence and that it no longer affected them. Their typical response was, "it is what it is."

There was a strong consensus that guns contributed to the level of violence in the city but very few respondents thought that as individuals, they personally contributed to the violence. Rather, a large majority of those interviewed, including respondents who possessed guns, said they personally did not contribute to the violence. When asked how to reduce the number of guns in their city, about half said it was not possible. A few noted that the police and the government wanted guns to be available to young men like themselves, but most said it would not be possible because gun sales, both legal and illegal, were a lucrative business. The other half of the respondents suggested making it more difficult to obtain a gun, and a few suggested stronger penalties for possessing a gun illegally.

Study participants' suggestions for reducing violence in their city were split between stronger gun laws and more community programs and resources. Among those advocating for stronger gun policies, the most common suggestions for reducing violence in general were decreasing access to guns and stronger penalties for possessing a gun illegally. Those advocating for more community programs focused on better schools, more youth work programs, and more social and physical activities for youth. Many study participants noted that elected officials and other government employees need to communicate better with city residents and include them in creating a safer environment. A few noted the need for more and better policing.

Summary

Our study findings contribute to the limited understanding of the young men living in high-crime urban areas who are most vulnerable to becoming victims of and/or perpetrators of gun violence. Contrary to popular belief and media presentation, they are not gangsters devoid of morals or prosocial attitudes. They are like other young men their age. Most liked school, and many were high school graduates pursuing education beyond high school. They respect and admire their parents. They see themselves as intelligent, loyal, fun, and kind.

What is different is the environment where they live. They live in poverty, with few opportunities, and are exposed to gun violence at an early age. The violent environment, coupled with their exposure to violence as a witness and frequently as a victim, makes the young

men in our study feel that access to or possession of a gun is necessary for protection and survival. Despite the environmental difference, the young men in our study carry guns for the same reason others carry guns: protection. Like many urban residents (Schaeffer, 2021), they support stricter gun laws.

We also found evidence countering existing research findings. Much of what we know about gun possession among young Black men is from studies of adjudicated adolescents. In those studies, the correlates of gun possession were associated with high-risk behaviors, such as criminal activity, drug and alcohol use, and poor school attendance (Docherty et al., 2020; Mulvey et al., 2014; Pardini et al., 2021). Few of our respondents were heavily involved in criminal activity; the majority were either in school or had graduated from high school. Although we did not ask directly about drug and alcohol use, few of the respondents indicated involvement in drug dealing, and none mentioned drug-treatment experiences or drug use more serious than casual marijuana use. Similarly, evidence of extensive or serious mental health issues was minimal.

Our findings emphasize the impact of the environment on gun possession. Respondents' descriptions of the cities where they live and official statistics from those cities both depict a dismal and often dangerous living situation. These environments are why young Black men living in urban areas possess guns. The answer is straightforward and simple: protection and safety.

Discussion

Many efforts to strengthen gun laws are being considered and enacted. To what degree these efforts will help is unknown. However, based on past efforts to reduce gun violence, the potential effect is questionable if new laws mirror current or past legislation, particularly for gun violence in high-crime urban areas. For young Black men living in high-crime urban areas, the decision to possess a gun is defined by the environment. A lack of resources and opportunities coupled with high crime and easy access to illegal guns create a perceived necessity to carry a gun for personal safety and survival. Laws seeking to reduce gun violence must first address the environmental factors that shape the perception that gun possession is the only survival tool available.

To address the urban gun violence crisis effectively also requires equitable and informed attention to the issue. The lack of public attention to and understanding of urban gun violence raises questions. Why is the evening news not running as the lead story? Why aren't we as a nation lowering our flags in grief when Black men living in poor neighborhoods are killed? As Leonard (2017) puts it:

> *All gun violence is not created equally. All victims of gun violence are not created, seen, or treated equally – no 'all lives' don't matter. Those assailants, those mostly men who hold, pull the trigger, and use their guns to inflict pain and death on others, are most certainly not created or treated equally. Race, gender, zip code, and class all matter* (p. 101).

Gallagher and Hodge (2018) put it more simply: "It is an issue whereby some groups are less visible and less valued than others" (p. 3). In addition, when the public discourse is diluted to catchy refrains, our responses continue to be uninformed by the realities and variation in gun violence. For instance, when the argument against stricter gun laws is based on the refrain that "Guns don't kill people. People kill people," it gives politicians permission not to take action and, in turn, perpetuates both the gun culture and racism. This call to inaction protects guns to the detriment of people, raising the question of why we love our guns more than we value the lives of some, whether they suffer from mental health symptoms and/or the effects of

poverty.

Both the refrain and the sentiments behind it are part of American gun culture. It is well documented that guns have been a constant in US history as a necessity for survival, protection, and sport. Early in our history, gun ownership became a right as well as a symbol of independence, strength, and freedom, key characteristics of being American (Yamane, 2017). As Abdalla and colleagues (2021) argue, the issue of gun violence must be reframed in a way that does not threaten the entrenched gun culture. They go on to suggest approaches used to reframe tobacco use and driving while intoxicated provide a path forward in reframing the gun violence crisis in ways that are acceptable within gun culture.

Our examination of gun possession among young Black males most at risk of being victims and/or perpetrators of gun violence in urban cities supports the need to change the narrative. Little progress will be made with no shift away from choosing guns over human lives. The reframed narrative needs to unpack the gun violence crisis and recognize the equally important but contextually different epidemics comprising it. Most importantly, those most impacted by gun violence need to be at the center of reframing the factors fueling the epidemics.

Action needs to be coupled with this narrative change. We need community-based, data-driven policies. This street-level understanding has been lacking; thus, interventions have been ineffective—they have focused on the end result of gun violence, not the underlying factors fueling it. Preventing gun violence takes more than adding police officers, or buy-back programs, or promoting safe gun storage (Henderson & Brown, 2022). Escalation will continue without sincere consideration of those most vulnerable to becoming both victims and perpetrators of gun violence.

Implications

Our study sheds light on the experiences and perspectives of 357 young Black males living in urban environments. Their decision to possess guns was based primarily on the need to protect themselves in a violent environment. As our findings highlight, the environment exposes young Black men to guns and gun violence at an early age. The exposure to violence frequently puts them in a position in which gun possession is necessary. The impact of the environment on the decision to possess a gun has significant implications for intervention and policy development.

Our participants emphasized the need for off-ramps, pathways out of the violent environment where they live, and interventions to address the trauma they have experienced. We have a menu of interventions that inform us on how we should approach the environmental gun violence issue. Trauma-informed care is now the standard for working with people experiencing immediate and long-term effects of trauma (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, 2014). Community-level interventions, such as Skills for Psychological Recovery (Berkowitz et al., 2010), teach coping and problem-solving skills necessary for recovery from trauma and survival within threatening environments. We have models for including those with lived experience in efforts to improve communities, a prime example being Community Action Agencies (LaRochelle, 2019). Our community partners represent grassroots organizations frequently staffed by community residents with personal experience with gun violence. They are the key ingredient to addressing gun violence because they can build rapport and trust, the precursor to guiding young men involved in gun violence to the off-ramps that exist. They also provide de-escalation training, as well as opportunities for jobs, job training, life coaching, and other supportive services that can decrease gun violence. These are proven interventions, and community partners should be at the center of the gun-violence discussion.

The young men in our study also made it clear that without community-level changes, individual interventions will be ineffective. Research indicates that a number of gun-control policies are effective in reducing gun violence, including mandatory licensing, hot-spot policing

with well-trained police and strong systems of accountability, programs such as CeaseFire and GVI, and violence interrupters and outreach workers (Webster, 2022). Effective solutions to reduce gun possession and gun violence in marginalized communities also include policies that prioritize comprehensive background checks, licensing requirements, oversight of gun sellers, closing the Charleston loophole, and disarming hate (Moran, 2020).

Research also suggests that policies must be more comprehensive than simply gun violence reduction. For instance, the success of the GVI program is, in part, the ability to swiftly address environmental and social issues that frequently prove the precursors to gun violence (Abt, 2019). Our study participants were clear that we must address systemic inequalities, such as poverty, housing insecurity, and educational disparities, which contribute to the prevalence of gun violence (Smith et al., 2022). By implementing policies that address these root causes and by providing resources for community development that provide pathways out of violence, we can create more equitable and safer environments for everyone.

Limitations

Our study has several limitations. First, it was conducted in only four cities. Despite the variation in these cities, without additional research, neither the cities nor the study participants can be considered representative. As such, the findings cannot be generalized to the general public. Second, we focused on a specific demographic group: young Black men living in high-crime urban areas. Our findings are specific to that group and cannot be extrapolated to other demographic groups. Finally, it is exploratory, with a focus on reflecting lived experience, prohibiting more sophisticated inferential statistical analyses. These limitations, coupled with our findings, make the case for additional research, including exploring the lived experiences of other groups and in other locations.

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