An examination of the situated transactions of firearm homicides

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Abstract This study employs a mixed methods approach, using quantitative analysis to discuss significant patterns, and qualitative analysis to provide descriptive accounts of homicide incidents. Seven hundred and five homicides that occurred in a northeastern city between January 1999 and December 2007 are examined to answer the following research question: Do the situated transactions of firearm homicides differ from those involving other weapons? The quantitative analyses found distinct patterns in offender intent, criminogenic tendencies, and situational attributes between firearm and other weapon homicides. The qualitative analysis revealed that firearms are most often utilized in homicides that can be understood as "doing crime," where offenders and victims are engaged in a criminal lifestyle and firearms are an extension of this activity. Other weapons are associated with homicides concerned with "establishing moral order," or defending values and ideals, between individuals who are intimate. The methodological and policy implication of these findings are discussed.

Introduction

Approximately 74.5% of homicide incidents committed in the United States are carried out with a firearm (CDC, 2019). Although there is a plethora of research documenting the relationship between firearms and lethal violence, few studies have examined the transactions that escalate into acts of lethal violence using qualitative analytic techniques. As a result, while it is known which variables are related to the use of a firearm in the commission of homicide, there is still a deficit in knowledge on the situational dynamics that give rise to this crime. Questions such as what are the immediate events that give rise to a homicide, how do the dynamics vary by weapon used in the commission of this crime, and how the availability of a weapon escalates the event into an act of lethal violence are still unclear. As a result, this study focuses on elucidating the situated transaction of homicide. Situated transactions refer to the exchange and interactions between the offender, victim, and third parties that culminate in a homicide (Luckenbill, 1977). A mixed methods approach is utilized, which employs quantitative analyses to identify significant relationships, and qualitative analyses to provide rich descriptive accounts. These methods are employed to systematically identify the patterns, themes, and processes that give rise to the homicide event and the choice of weapon. One research question is explored: *Do the situated transactions of firearm homicides differ from those involving other weapons?*

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Research suggests that firearm use in a homicide is related to offender intent and motive (Corsaro et al., 2017; Decker, 1996). Decker (1996) found that "motive has clear implications for the choice of means by which death is inflicted" (1996, p. 437). More recently, Corsaro, Pizarro, and Schafer (2017) found that firearms were more prevalent in events where the offender and/or victim traveled to the incident location with the intent of engaging in a criminal act or to confront the other party. Studies examining disaggregated motive types have shed further light into the aforementioned relationships. Domestic-motivated homicides are the least likely to involve firearms relative to the more instrumental drug, gang, and robbery homicides (Pizarro, 2008).

Firearm carrying also increases the likelihood of homicide occurring, even when there is a lack of intent and motivation, due to their capacity to cause serious injuries (Libby & Corzine, 2007). Branas et al. (2009) found that individuals who carry a firearm are more likely to sustain a firearm injury than those that do not. Others have found that firearms embolden individuals and increase the odds that a person who feels slighted will confront the aggrieving party (Phillips & Maume, 2007; Watkins, Huebner, & Decker, 2008; Wells 2002). According to Wilkinson (2003), firearms serve as a form of protection, and those who carry one may do so to deter potential offenders from targeting them or fight off criminal attempts against their person. This serves to increase the victimization of potential offenders and also those who are carrying a firearm for protection.

Although firearms are often included in statistical models as independent variables in the examination of homicide, very few studies have examined firearms as a dependent variable. Decker (1996) and Pelletier and Pizarro (2019) are among the few scholars to examine the variables that influence the choice of weapon in homicide events. Decker's (1996) study of St. Louis, Missouri homicides found variations among homicide motive types, with firearms used in instrumental cases involving family members, close friends, intimates, and strangers; while expressive acquaintance-involved homicides being more likely to involve physical force. More recently, Pelletier and Pizarro (2019) found that offender and victim demographics and lifestyle characteristics are important covariates of firearm use in a homicide, with younger African American males who were either drug dealers and/or gang members being more likely to be victimized or offend with this weapon type. Moreover, they found that unlike other weapons types, firearms were often on the offender's person at the time of the homicide.

Qualitative homicide research is lacking in comparison to quantitative homicide research. Perhaps the most noted qualitative analysis of homicide is that of Luckenbill (1977). Luckenbill (1977) described the homicide as a collective transaction between the victim, offender, and, sometimes, an audience. Each of these parties shape how the other actors behave and interact (Goffman, 1967; Luckenbill, 1977). He concluded that the event is a character contest that escalates due to the victim and offender attempts to save face. Luckenbill illustrated this premise by disaggregating the homicide event into 6 stages. During these stages the lethal act escalates from a perceived (or real) gesture of disrespect towards the offender on the part of the victim, to the murder of the victim.

A decade later, Katz (1988) provided an insightful qualitative analysis which sought to understand what the offender was trying to accomplish during the homicide with specific focus on how the offender understands the self, the victim, and the situation. He described different types of homicide and the varying motivations accompanying the acts, which include the righteous slaughter and the cold-blooded murder. For Katz (1988), what is most important in studying homicide transactions is the meaning and emotionality of the homicide, which can be deduced by examining offender narratives, situational aspects, witness accounts, extent and type of wounds, victim preferences, and weapon type. This is illustrated in his homicide typology. For example, righteous slaughter is an attempt by the offender to defend "the good," or a sense of morality. When offenders feel that "the good," or a sense of what is right is at stake, they react in a way to set straight the moral order, using homicide to resolve the situation. Conversely, a "cold-blooded murder," is more practical or methodical in nature. These homicides may seem senseless to many, but they are consistent with the nature of the offender or their lifestyle, and are typically associated with other crimes, such as robbery or gang violence.

A handful of more recent studies have also undertaken a qualitative approach to examine homicide. Polk (1994) examined male perpetrated homicide in Australia via coroner, police, and prosecution reports. His analyses found that men often kill people who they know. Instances of murder varied by the gender of the victim, however. He found that when men killed other men, the murders were a direct result of their lack of legitimate social resources, and that these males were essentially killing their competition. The killing of women, on the other hand, often stemmed from the motivation for sexual possession. Using a similar methodology, Brookman (2003) examined male perpetrated homicides in England and Wales. Her qualitative analyses of male homicides found two themes—confrontational and revenge homicides. Confrontational homicides were not planned and were more likely to be committed with non-firearms. Conversely, revenge male homicides were planned and committed with firearms.

Studies that have examined youth violence found similar results. Wilkinson (2003) found that possessing and carrying a firearm plays a significant role in urban youth violence. Her later work (Wilkinson, 2011) found that violent interactions can result from "sparks" that create the need to demonstrate masculine identity, dominance and status, and self-protection. She developed an interactionist approach that is similar to Luckenbill (1977), and uses it in explaining how these "sparks" can escalate into violence. Similar to Luckenbill (1977) she disaggregated violent incidents into 6 transactions: (1) opening moves, (2) counter moves, (3) escalation/intensification, (4) closing moves, (5) assessment of performance and demands, and (6) aftermath. She posits that the presence of a firearm, alcohol, and drugs increases the likelihood of violence and the severity of such violence during these "sparks."

Previous qualitative research has mostly focused on the patterns of homicides events as a whole, or gender subsets, but not on the patterns as they relate to weapon choice. Research suggests that during the homicide event, weapons are often used to maintain and gain power, facilitate compliance, inflict pain, or mete out punishment (Decker, 1996; Tedeschi & Felson, 1994; Wilkinson, 2003). These dynamics, however, are not adequately captured by variable research. The present study sought to address this gap in the literature by integrating qualitative with quantitative analysis of homicide events in the analyses of weapon choice in a homicide. This approach "creates a synergy and leads to a deeper understanding" of violence than the use of either method independently (Testa et al., 2011).

Methodology

The objective of this study is to examine the transactions of homicides, and how those transactions differ based on incident weapon and the use of a firearm. One research question is examined: *Do the situated transactions of firearm homicides differ from those involving other weapons?* Data from the Newark Homicide Project is employed to answer this research question. Newark Homicide Project data were primarily collected from the investigation files of homicide detectives investigating the incidents. The investigation files contained detailed victim and offender demographic and lifestyle information as well as detailed notes on the investigation details. The files also contained witness statements, the statements of other parties who assisted in the investigation, and sometimes victim and offender statements. This allowed for the creation of a timeline of the homicide event, and a detailed description of the transactions that culminated in the lethal act.

A data collection protocol and instrument helped ensure that researchers captured information in the homicide investigation files in a consistent manner. Most of the information extracted from the homicide files was objective in nature (e.g., gender, ethnicity, incident location, and weapon), so the researchers copied that data directly from the homicide files. A second portion of the data collection involved the creation of narratives describing the incident based on the investigator reports and witnesses statements. The narratives include accounts for each incident describing the circumstances that led to the homicide, detailing how it occurred, and providing information on the victim(s) and suspect(s). These narratives were then used to code variables such as victim offender relationship, offender intent, and how the murder was carried out. The researchers used a codebook, compiled by the lead researcher, which provide definitions and examples of what each variable and category within the variable entailed, during the coding.[1]

This study centers on homicides that occurred from January 1, 1999 to December 31, 2007. Given the mixed methodology nature of the study, two sets of analyses are conducted to answer the research question—quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative analyses provide information on the trends of homicides as they relate to firearms, and the significant covariates of firearm homicides. The qualitative analyses, supplement the quantitative findings by elucidating the circumstances and processes that contribute to the significance of the variables in the quantitative analyses.

Quantitative methods

The quantitative analysis includes all of the 705 homicides that occurred in the site during the study period. These analyses focus on the situational covariates of homicides by firearm versus other types of weapons, and in doing so, relies on descriptive frequencies, bivariate Chi square tests of independence, comparison of means, and a multivariate logistic regression to estimate the probability of a firearm used to commit a homicide relative to other weapon types. Six situational variables that have been found significant in previous homicide research are included in the quantitative analyses (i.e., see Corsaro et al., 2017; Pelletier & Pizarro, 2019; Pizarro, 2008; Pizarro & McGloin, 2006): planned aggression, drug related, gang related, victim offender

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[1] Various steps were taken by the lead investigator to ensure that the protocol was used correctly by researchers. First, researchers were trained by the lead investigators of the study prior to data collection. The training involved introducing and familiarizing the coders to the codebook and the protocol. The lead investigator then had the coders observe the data collection process before collecting data themselves. Once the training was completed the lead investigator continuously oversaw the data collection, and conducted checks of the data, to ensure that the researchers were following proper protocol.

relationship, setting, mode, number of victims, and number of offenders. Table 1 presents the coding and operationalization for each variable. Planned aggression, victim precipitation, drug related, gang related, and victim offender relationship tap into the incident motive and criminogenic nature of the offender and victim; while setting, mode, number of victims, and number of offenders on the situational characteristics of the homicide.

Planned aggression captures whether the primary reason for the victim and/or offender to be in the incident location at the time of homicide was to: confront the other party; seek retaliation over a prior dispute; commit a robbery specifically against the other party; stall the other party; burglarize the other party's home; or, confront, rob and/or kill the other party (Corsaro, et al., 2017). Incidents that did not involve planned aggression occurred spontaneously without any planning in a sudden manner. *Victim precipitation* captures whether the victim provoked the offender by insulting or physically attacking them, and cases where the victim refused to comply with an offender's request. For example, a victim did not comply with an offender's request to stop selling drugs in their territory. Two variables capture the criminogenic nature of the incident. *Drug related* captures incidents related to drug transactions, disputes over turf, drug thefts, and those where either the victim or offender where under the influence or were involved in the sales of drugs at the time of the homicide. *Gang-related* captures whether the victim

and/or offender where members of a gang at the time of the homicide. *Victim offender relationship* (VOR) captures whether the relationship between the victim and offender was intimate/familial/friends if the victim and offender had an intimate relationship or were family members; acquaintance if the victim and offender knew each other at the time of the incident; stranger if the victim and offender did not know each other at the time of the incident; or unknown if an offender has not been identified thus the relationship is not known. Intimate/familial serves as the reference category.

Setting refers to the place where the incident occurred. Three categories are examined: residence, public street, and other location. Residence captures incidents that occurred in the victim's and/or offender's place of residence, while public street refers to incidents that occurred outside in public streets. The other category consists of incidents that occurred in alcohol establishments and other places of business, parking lots, open fields, cemeteries, industrial places, and abandoned structures. The reference category for this variable is residence. Finally, incident *mode* refers to how the incident was carried out by the offender and captures whether the homicide was committed in a face-to-face manner where the victim was aware of the offender's presence and were communicating at the time of homicide, or other method such as a drive-by or shoot out, or the mode is unknown. Unknown cases are primarily comprised of incidents where a body was found,

Table 1 Variable coding schema

Dependent variables	
Weapon	What type of weapon was used to commit the homicide?
	1 = Firearm; 0 = Other
Independent variables	
Setting	Where did the homicide occur?
	1 = Residence; 2 = Public Street; 3 = Other
Mode	How was the homicide carried out?
	1 = Face-to-face; 2 = Drive by, Walk by, Shoot out; 3 = Unknown
Planned aggression	Was the aggression planned or impulsive?
	0 = No; 1 = Yes; 2 = Unknown
Victim precipitation	Did the victim precipitate their murder?
	0 = No; 1 = Yes; 2 = Unknown
Drug-related	Was the homicide drug-related?
	0 = No; 1 = Yes; 2 = Unknown
Gang-related	Was the homicide related to gang activity or gang members?
	0 = No; 1 = Yes; 2 = Unknown
VOR	What was the victim-offender relationship at the time of the homicide?
	1 = Intimate/family/friend; 2 = Acquaintances; 3 = Stranger; 4 = Unknown
# of Offenders	How many offenders carry out the homicide?
	Continuous
# of Victims	How many murder victims in incident?
	Continuous

there were no witnesses, and an offender has not been identified. Face-to-face serves are the reference category for this variable. Finally, the number of individuals killed and number of offenders who carried out the incident.

Qualitative methods

The qualitative analyses was facilitated through the use of the software program NVivo. NVivo allows to manage, extract, compare, explore, and reassemble meaningful pieces of information from large amounts of rich and descriptive text in a rigorous and systematic way (Friese, 2013). Because qualitative analyses require rich text data in order to allow for adequate qualitative coding, only homicide incidents with narratives that contained at least 200 words were included. Of the 705 homicide incidents, 297 met the inclusion criteria.[2]

The narratives of the 297 included incidents were initially recorded in Microsoft Word documents which were transferred into NVivo. This facilitated the qualitative coding which is the fundamental qualitative analytic process (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). The coding process included reading through the narrative, offender and victim histories while identifying relevant first level codes. Codes are defined as ''tags or labels for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study'' (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 56). Focused coding decisions were made using the central research question and goals of the study (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003), which is to differentiate between the dynamic situations that result in a homicide, and whether these situations vary by weapon.

Codes were developed in several ways. First, codes are theory driven, meaning derived from the extant theoretical research on homicide transactions (i.e., Decker, 1996; Katz, 1988; Luckenbill, 1977; Pelletier & Pizarro, 2019), and revised as the researcher analyzed the raw data. Additionally, codes are data-driven, meaning they are derived from the raw data where it is organized into small units and used to draw meaningful inferences. This results in the development of a coding scheme, or codebook. The first step in the coding process is initial or open coding. During this step, important words or groups of words are identified and labeled. In the present study, this was conducted through line by line coding, or coding on the level of sentence, and what is termed "level of meaning," which included paragraphs or the entire narrative (DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall, and McCullough, 2010). Additionally, important

words or groups of words are themselves used as a code (Holloway, 2008). For example, a narrative typically included information regarding victim and offender criminal history. This information was coded line by line as "victim criminal history" and "offender criminal history," a relatively straightforward code that was theory-driven. Level of meaning codes were higher level codes such as, "challenge to parental authority," or "demeaning the offender" and were derived from the data.

After first level codes had been developed, research memos were constructed in order to examine relationships and explore the data. Memo writing is the pivotal intermediate step between coding and the first draft of the analysis. Memo writing allows researchers to organize and create concepts, make comparisons, demonstrate connections, and find novel relationships (Charmaz, 1995; 1999). In the present study, memos included references to theoretical perspectives on homicide, specifically Luckenbill and Katz's work, insights regarding transactions between individuals such as verbal exchanges or important details regarding the homicide motive, and details regarding victim and offender dynamics such as relationship and nature of the lethal and final interaction, and weapon type. These memos were used to develop second level axial codes, which establish relationships between first level codes that are informed by symbolic interactionist and homicide theory and the data being analyzed. These codes were then used to develop categories which are groups of related codes. In the present study, examples included, "crime as lifestyle," "respectability challenge." To be clear, these codes are essentially ideas that group first level codes together to become more descriptive regarding meaning.

These codes were then grouped into categories using NVivo. Categories are considered theoretically saturated when new data analysis returns only codes that fit into the existing categories (Birk & Mills, 2011). Saturation of the data was obtained when no new codes emerged and cases were explained using these categories. These categories were selectively coded, which includes identifying the core qualitative variables and developing them into meaningful themes that describe the data in terms of the focused research questions.

Once the categories were created, the study relied on the method known as grounded theory in the analysis process to develop themes. This is a method of qualitative inquiry which involves inductive theoretical analysis from collected data as an iterative method process (Charmaz & Bryant, 2011). Grounded theory derives its theoretical underpinnings from the schools of pragmatism and symbolic interactionism, and is based on the notion that phenomena are not static but are dynamic and subject to change, and that an analytical approach should grant individuals agency in a changing environment (Strauss &

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[2] There are no significant differences related to weapon between the included and excluded incidents (Chi square = 2.227, $p < .136$). Of the excluded incidents, 24% were committed with another type of weapon, and 76% with a firearm. Of the included cases 22% were committed with another weapon type, and 78% with a firearm.

Corbin, 1990). This method allows for the richness and depth of qualitative interpretations while maintaining the logic, rigor, and systematic analysis argued to be inherent in quantitative research (Charmaz, 2000; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). To be clear, grounded theory is concerned with theory generation from the collected data. It is an inductive process, where the researcher determines areas of interest and uses these to guide the analysis.

Findings

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics and bivariate analyses. The majority of the 705 examined were committed with a firearm (77.7%), followed by knife and blunt objects (13.6%), hands and feet (7.4%), and other weapons (i.e., motor vehicles, fire, poison, ropes, and neglect) in 1.3% of the incidents. Given the small percentages knife/blunt objects, hands/feet, and other weapons, they were all grouped into an "other" category. Hence, weapon is

Table 2 Descriptive statistics by weapon type

	Total N = 705 N (%)	Firearm N = 548 N (%)	Other N = 157 N (%)	Chi square
Planned aggression				60.059***
Yes	196 (27.8)	163 (29.7)	33 (21.0)	
No	223 (31.6)	134 (24.5)	89 (56.7)	
Unknown	286 (40.6)	251 (45.8)	35 (22.3)	
Drug-related				116.175***
Yes	371 (52.6)	328 (59.9)	43 (27.4)	
No	183 (26.0)	90 (16.4)	93 (59.2)	
Unknown	151 (21.4)	130 (23.7)	21 (13.4)	
Victim precipitation				74.453***
Yes	108 (23.8)	141 (27.7)	27 (17.2)	
No	276 (39.1)	169 (30.8)	102 (68.2)	
Unknown	261 (37.1)	238 (43.4)	23 (14.6)	
Gang-related				139.226***
Yes	271 (38.4)	254 (46.4)	17 (10.8)	
No	255 (36.2)	136 (24.8)	119 (75.8)	
Unknown	179 (25.4)	158 (28.8)	21 (13.4)	
VOR				168.972***
Intimate/family/friends	101 (14.3)	30 (5.5)	71 (45.2)	
Acquaintance	271 (38.4)	215 (39.2)	56 (35.7)	
Stranger	139 (19.7)	125 (22.8)	14 (8.9)	
Unknown	194 (27.5)	178 (32.5)	16 (10.2)	
Location				152.503***
Residence	123 (17.4)	44 (8.0)	79 (50.3)	
Public street	435 (61.7)	328 (69.5)	54 (34.4)	
Other	147 (20.9)	123 (22.4)	24 (15.3)	
Mode				88.825***
Face-to-face	406 (57.6)	266 (48.5)	140 (89.2)	
Drive by, walk by, shoot out	214 (30.4)	210 (38.3)	4 (2.5)	
Unknown	85 (12.1)	72 (13.1)	13 (8.3)	
Continuous variables	Frequency	Mean	Mean	F statistic
# Offenders	602	1.63	1.34	7.285**
# Victims	705	1.05	1.03	4.075*

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$

dichotomized in these analyses (other = 0; firearm = 1). In terms of incident modus, the majority of incidents during the study period were committed in a public street (61.7%), and in a face-to-face manner (57.6%). Approximately 28% of the homicide incidents were planned, while 32% were spontaneous, and in 41% it is unknown whether the incident was planned or not. Moreover, the victim precipitated the incident in approximately 24% of the homicides. A little over half (52%) of all the incidents examined are drug related, and 38% are gang related. The majority of victims and offenders had an acquaintance type relationship at the time of the murder (38.4%) followed by unknown (27.5%), intimate/family/friend (14.3%), and stranger (19.7%). The bulk of incidents had one victim (95.7%) and one perpetrator (54.3%). The range of victims is 1–4; while the range of offenders is 1–8.[3, 4] As expected the situational attributes examined significantly vary by weapon type (see Table 2).

Multivariate logistic regression

Logistic regression was employed to identify the situational covariates that differentiate firearms versus other weapon homicides. The advantage of using this analytic technique is that it tests the goodness-of-fit of the entire model and provides odds ratio calculations in order to determine the relative importance of each independent variable (Pampel, 2000). Table 3 presents the logistic regression findings. Several variables emerged as significant in the logistic regression model: planned aggression, drug related, gang related, victim offender relationship, setting, and mode. The model explains substantial variation in the dependent variable (Nagelkerke R^2 = .547).

When compared to spontaneous incidents, planned aggression increased the odds of firearm by 2.309 (β = .837, $p < .05$). Victim precipitation also increased the odds of a firearm being used by 2.409 (β = .879, $p < .01$). Drug and gang related incidents also increased the odds of the offender using a firearm to commit the murder by 3.54 and 5.32 respectively (drug: β = 1.267, $p < .001$; gang: β = 1.672, $p < .01$). Some victim-offender relationship types also increased the odds of firearm use in homicide. When compared to having an intimate/family/friend relationship, a stranger relationship increased the odds of a

firearm homicide by 5.929 (β = 1.780, $p < .001$); and unknown relationship increased the odds of a firearm by 7.423 (β = 2.005, $p < .01$).

Significant situational differences between firearm and other weapon homicides also emerged in these analyses. Offenders are more likely to use a firearm in homicides that occurred in public streets (β = 1.231, $p < .001$) and other settings (β = 1.024, $p < .01$). As expected, only a drive by/ walk by/shootout was significant in predicting the likelihood of using a firearm as opposed to another weapon (β = 2.369, $p < .001$). Finally, number of victims and offenders does not significantly differentiate firearm from other weapon type homicides.

The quantitative analyses found important situational differences between firearm and other weapon homicides. As indicated in the discussion above, firearm homicides are differentiated from other weapon type homicides due to the intent of the offender, victim precipitation, drugs, gangs, victim offender relationships, setting in which the incidents occur, and the manner in which they are carried out. While important, these robust results do little to shed light into the dynamics that evolve into the actual homicide incident. The following section employs qualitative data to elucidate the dynamic surrounding the significance of the aforementioned variables, and the events that evolved into the lethal act. The aim of the qualitative analysis is to move beyond variables in order to better understand the emotionality of homicide and how this varies by weapon type.

Qualitative findings

Several significant themes emerged throughout the qualitative analysis. These themes were developed through systematic analyses of the narratives regarding the nature of the homicide of interaction with a specific focus on weapons used by the offender. These themes included "doing crime," "establishing the moral order," and "demanding esteem" and were able to account for all of the 297 incidents examined. Noteworthy patterns related to weapon emerged among these themes (see Table 4).

Homicides with firearms

Among incidents involving a firearm, the most prevalent and explanatory theme was that of "*doing crime*," which emerged in 73% of the firearm homicide incidents. Codes that were identified among this type related to weapon type, drug and gang related, victim offender relationship, and location of crime. Examples of frequently occurring categories for these homicides included "crime as business," "crime as lifestyle," and "weapon on persons." These categories led to the dominant theme of "doing

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[3] The high percentage of unknowns is attributable to open investigation cases where an offender was not identified during the study period. Specifically, of the 705 incidents, 444 (63%) have been cleared with the arrest of a perpetrator, while 261 (37%) remain open.

[4] The data collection period spanned from March 2000 through October 2008, 10 months after the end of the study period. Since not all cases were resolved at the time of initial data collection, researchers reexamined open cases every 6 months to assess if an offender was identified and the investigation closed.

Table 3 Logistic regression: weapon type, n = 705

	Exp. (β)	β Coefficient	S.E.
Planned aggression (No)			
Yes	2.309*	0.837	0.329
Unknown	0.917	− 0.086	0.400
Victim precipitation (No)			
Yes	2.409**	.879	0.319
Unknown	2.301	.833	0.516
Drug-related (No)			
Yes	3.254***	1.180	0.295
Unknown	1.178	0.164	0.515
Gang-related (No)			
Yes	4.914***	1.592	0.335
Unknown	2.297	.831	0.603
VOR (Intimate/family/friends)			
Acquaintance	1.401	0.337	0.399
Stranger	5.485***	1.702	0.464
Unknown	5.708*	1.742	0.777
Location (residence)			
Public street	3.375***	1.216	0.344
Other	2.720*	1.001	0.403
Mode (face-to-face)			
Drive by, walk by, shoot out	10.903***	2.389	0.560
Unknown	1.605	0.473	0.551
Number of offenders	.987	− 0.013	0.008
Number of victims	2.132	0.757	0.692
Constant	0.040***	− 3.218	0.775

$*p < .05$; $**p < .01$; $***p < .001$

Table 4 Weapon types by qualitative theme, (n = 297)

	Doing crime (%)	Moral order (%)	Demanding esteem (%)	Total (%)
Weapon type				
Firearms	73	17	10	100
Non-firearm	20	69	11	100

crime," which was where offenders, and in most cases victims, had histories of persistent criminal behavior, and the homicides were part of a larger pattern of doing crime in their daily life; whether through theft, robbery, drugs, or gang activities. Firearms were part of the lifestyle of offenders and victims, and were most likely to be on the offender's and victim's person at the time of the murder. The bulk of these incidents involved planned aggression and many of these crimes involved victim precipitation, and the weapon was used to solve a crime related problem in a quick and simple manner. The following case illustrates a doing crime homicide:

The offender and a few of his friends went to buy heroin from the victim. When they knocked on his door, the victim wouldn't sell to them. The offenders left, but then decided to come back and rob him of the heroin. They retrieved a handgun from the offender's apartment and returned to the victim's drug selling apartment. When they knocked on the door again, the victim opened, and then tried to close the door because he saw one of the guys reach for a gun. As the offender's friends struggled to open the door, the offender started shooting at the victim. The offenders fled the scene, and the victim's friend who was in the apartment with him rushed him to the hospital in his

vehicle. The victim expired hours later due the injuries sustained.

In this case, both the victim and the offender were involved in a lifestyle of criminality prior to the homicide. Moreover, the offenders planned the attack and brought the firearm with them to the scene with the intent to use it. It is unclear, however, whether their intent was to engage in murder, or simply use the firearm to facilitate a robbery. When situational elements converged, the transaction resulted in lethal violence.

Although the majority of "doing crime" homicides involved some type of planned aggression, some occurred quickly, suddenly, and were a means to an end, and the offender has the weapon at the scene. The following case illustrate a spontaneous "doing crime" homicide.

> The victim and offender were having an argument in the hallway of the building where the offender resided over a drug deal gone bad. The victim and offender were business partners and casual acquaintances. The argument escalated into a physical scuffle. The offender then pulled out a gun from his pocket and shot the victim twice. The victim expired in the scene as a result of the injuries sustained. The offender fled the scene and the police arrested him a couple of days later after an investigation.

Similar to the first incident illustrated, both the victim and the offender were involved in a lifestyle of criminality prior to the homicide. Moreover, the offender had a firearm on his person.

Another theme within firearm homicides was that of *"establishing the moral order."* This represents an attempt on the offender's part to restore moral order, or universal laws of right and wrong, when it becomes threatened or unbalanced. Moral order is concerned with social institutions such as marriage, fidelity, parenthood, and family. In these transactions, the only way to make things right and establish the moral order is to kill the offending party. Codes for this theme included items such as "sexual jealousy," "suspected infidelity," "threats to parental authority," and "the sanctity of relationships." These codes were grouped into categories such as, "defending ideals," "restoring safety," and "sanctity of relationships," which were used to develop the dominant theme. Approximately 17% of firearm homicide fit this theme.

In these cases, most often the victim and offender knew each other, and in many cases had some sort of familial or intimate relationship. Unlike the saving face element that Luckenbill detailed, establishing the moral order was not so much about saving individual face or identity work per se, but more about macro ideals such as appealing to higher loyalties. These cases were more likely to occur in victim's residences where the victim was unarmed and when the offender had the weapon on their person and evidenced less planning than those firearm incidents that were classified as doing crime. Additionally, these instances were face to face and included close physical contact between the victim and offender. For example, one offender shot and killed a family member after they refused to bail him out of jail, an angry retaliation for lack of care and support from family members. Another case involved an altercation over cutting in line for a pool table—a clear violation of proper pool hall etiquette and fairness in general. The offender shot and killed the victim, restoring the moral balance by setting boundaries regarding acceptable and decent behavior. The following case illustrates an example of an "establishing a moral order" firearm homicide.

> Hours prior to the homicide the victim's nephew had a physical altercation with the offender. According to the nephew, the offender and two other males physically assaulted him. After the altercation the nephew returned to his residence and told his family of what occurred. His uncle, the homicide victim, then went out in the neighborhood to find the men who assaulted his nephew in order to talk to them because he wanted to make sure that his nephew would not be attacked again. When the victim spotted the males, the victim began to talk to them. The talk escalated into an argument. During the argument the victim approached the offender. When this occurred the offender took a gun out of his pocket and shot the victim once on the chest. The group of males, which include the offender, fled the scene. All three males were arrested and charged with the homicide days after the murder.

Lastly, 10% of firearm homicide incidents are classified using the theme *"demanding esteem."* Codes for this theme included "humiliation," "disrespect," and "direct challenge." These were developed into categories such as "protecting status," "restoring code of the street," and "saving face" which led to the selective theme. In these transactions, there is a demonstration on the part of the offender, whether it be regarding masculinity, respect, or status. These homicides, unlike moral order cases, occurred when an offender perceived a slight or disrespect that was related to their own status. Rather than some universal construct, demanding esteem was about the offender's own subjective experience of their self being attacked. Cases met the criteria for this theme when there was a distinct and direct challenge to the offender or victim, and many of these cases exhibited victim precipitation and face to face contact. Violence was employed to demonstrate to the victim and potential audiences some sort of moral worth or status that the offender perceived as threatened. An

example of demanding esteem can be found in cases where status is threatened or questioned, or there was an act where the offender was made to feel individual humiliation:

> The offender was angered by the victim, who was a bouncer in the lounge. Earlier in the evening, the victim is said to have escorted the suspect out of the tavern and this initiated the violent act. Offender says that victim pushed him out of the bar because he was drunk. The force used to escort him out of the tavern caused suspect's eye to be cut and he interpreted offender's action as purposefully done to humiliate him, saying, "he just tried to humiliate me." The suspect's state of intoxication exacerbated the situation to the point where he accessed a gun, and killed the victim. Witnesses corroborate the story, saying that the suspect kept trying to come into the tavern and that victim had to escort him out each time.

In these cases, the offender was defending not a higher moral order but their own individual persona. The homicide was an attempt to reassert status or identity. Although most offenders had weapons at the time of the perceived slight, there were several cases where the offender left the scene and came back with the firearm to confront the victim (i.e., planned aggression), or encountered the victim after the humiliation or disrespect and was armed at that point. Like the doing crime homicides, it was more often that victims also had firearms in these incidents.

Homicides with knives, objects, and hands

Unlike firearm incidents, other weapon types were most often used in order to *establish the moral order*. This theme accounted for approximately 69% of cases where weapon types included knives, blunt objects, bricks, motor vehicles, and the offender using their own hands to beat or strangle the victim. In non-firearm incidents, the offender and victim were more likely to be closer in relation, either family, step-family, spouses, partners, or at least acquaintances and these incidents were more likely to occur in the home. These incidents were also more emotional and less likely to involve planned aggression than other cases. For example:

> Offender told police that he got mad at his wife during church services when he saw her looking at another man. The next day, offender told police that he left for work around 6:00 am but decided to go back home. From the street he could see that his wife was on the telephone so he went into the house and picked up another phone extension. He says he heard a man tell his wife to meet him at 2:00 pm. Offender

immediately hung up the phone, rushed to the room his wife was in and begin to choke her until she died. He told police that he took her to the basement and buried her in a sewer pit and sealed it.

In the case above, the sanctity of marriage was threatened. The offender had a long history of abusive behavior toward his wife and when his suspicions of infidelity were confirmed and he learned that she had broken marital vows, the only way to set things right was to kill her right then, in the moment, to restore balance and order to the chaos of broken marriage and infidelity.

Another example of this theme is an offender who was extremely agitated by what he perceived as defiant behavior and a lack of discipline when it came to his fiancé's young daughter. The evening had been spent with the offender sporadically berating and physically assaulting the young girl. Over several hours, the event escalated:

> The offender's fiance's daughter responded in what he perceived as a negative response. He went to get his belt and started beating the victim again. He then began punching her in the chest, which lead to him kicking her, all the time he was cursing at her. Around approximately 2:00 a.m. in the morning the victim was allowed to lie down. At some point, her sister noticed that she was not breathing properly so she informed their mother. The victim died from her injuries.

In this case, the offender killed the victim using an extension of common means of enforcing parental discipline and enacted his violence as a means to send the message that parental authority should be honored (Katz, 1988). Ideals of how children should behave and the moral authority of parents fueled the offender's rage, which resulted in the victim's death.

Other cases that were classified as establishing the moral order involved conflicts regarding moral values surrounding behaviors such as stealing, safety, and infidelity. In one case, three suspects beat a man to death over an alleged stolen bike (that they had sold him earlier and subsequently attempted to retrieve from him). One offender retaliated against someone who had broken into his home while his partner was home, threatening his and his partner's sense of security and safety. He reportedly told the victim, "You'll never break in my house and bother my girl again," while beating him to death with a brick. In committing this homicide, the offender was restoring a sense of safety and security that the victim had threatened.

Approximately 20% of the "other weapon" homicides are classified under the *doing crime* theme. These homicides involved offenders who were already engaged in criminal activity at the time of the homicide or for whom

criminality was a lifestyle or the goal of the transaction. For example:

> Victim was discovered beaten to death at his place of business. The officers reported to the incident location (a mechanic shop) and found that victim lying face down in the corner office covered in blood. The place was in total disarray. The safe of the shop was open and all of the money was gone. The suspects took the victim's credit card and used it in various locations. Through tracing the locations of where the card was used police were able to find the suspects. They also took the victim's cell phone and used it.

Lastly, among those incidents that involved knives, objects, or manual violence, the theme of *demanding esteem* occurred in the minority of cases, approximately 11%. One case involved two men where one made a sexual advance toward the other. The recipient of the advance was not gay and rather than simply refuse the advance, became enraged and stabbed the victim. This act of violence was a way to reinforce his notion of masculinity and his identity as a straight male.

Taken as whole, these qualitative findings support and elucidate the quantitative findings. The majority of homicide incidents are committed using firearms and there are distinct differences between those transactions in which firearms are utilized versus other weapons. These differences vary based on the intent of the offender and whether the homicide is related to other criminality. In most cases of doing crime, firearms are the weapon of choice and offenders and victims are involved in criminal activity such as drugs and gangs. Relative to expressive and spontaneous incidents, firearms are associated with crimes that evidence planned aggression. Homicides where other weapons are utilized are more likely to involve establishing the moral order and these incidents were less likely to involve planned aggression, occur more in private settings, and weapons are retrieved from the scene.

Discussion

The present study sought to examine whether *the situated transactions of firearm homicides differ from those involving other weapons*. Both the quantitative and qualitative findings suggest that there are indeed differences. Quantitatively, when compared to other weapons (i.e., knives, blunt objects, hand, feet etc.), firearm homicides are more likely to occur when the offender plans the crime, the victim precipitates the offense, there are drug and gang issues at stake, and the victim and/or offender are taking part in drug and/or gang lifestyles. Firearm homicides are also more likely to occur in public streets and to be carried

out not in a face to face manner. These findings are not a surprise given that prior variable research have documented these relationships (Pelletier & Pizarro, 2019).

The qualitative analyses and findings, provided rich details that elucidate why and how these variables are significant. Three main themes emerged, doing crime, establishing the moral order, and demanding esteem. These themes were differentiated by weapon types, with most firearm homicides involving doing crime. For example, the quantitative analyses showed that planned aggression, and drug and gang related incidents were more likely to be carried out with a firearm. The qualitative findings provided more context to these findings by demonstrating the relationship between "doing crime," firearm carrying and use, and these types of homicides. As indicated in the qualitative findings, in these incidents, firearm carrying and use were part of the lifestyle of offenders and/or victims (i.e., drug use, distribution, selling, gang membership). These findings are not surprising given that prior research has demonstrated that gang members and drug dealers, are more likely to engage in gun carrying behavior and gun homicides (Pelletier & Pizarro, 2019; Watkins et al., 2008; Wilkinson & Fagan, 1996). Moreover, homicides that were classified as doing crime or demanding esteem were more likely to involve both the victim and offender having a firearm on their persons. Prior research demonstrates that drug dealers and gang members are more likely to carry a firearm in order to protect themselves and to facilitate their crimes (Blumstein, 1995; Watkins et al., 2008). As a result, it appears that firearm carrying is an extension of gang and drug lifestyles, which may have an effect on offender decision making. Future research should further explore this relationship with qualitative offender interviews in order to shed more clarity on whether firearm carrying precipitates lethal violence.

These findings must be viewed within the context of the study's limitations. Given that the data were collected from police investigation files, officer's perceptions of the event may have clouded some of the information in the investigation reports. Additionally, the study site may not be generalizable to the average American city. Newark's population is primarily comprised of ethnic minorities, the city suffers from acute economic deprivation and isolation, and it is one of the most violent cities in the country (Zeoli et al., 2014). There are also a substantial number of incidents with unknown information on key variables such as planned aggression, victim precipitation, drug and gang related, and victim offender relationship, which is mostly due to the fact that 37% of the incidents (i.e., 261) examined in this study remain open and an offender has not been apprehended. As a result, this study might have undercounted these important variables. The finding might be also inflated since there is a possibility that the unknowns

might not be planned, and/or gang/drug related. Similarly, given that qualitative analyses require rich and detailed information on the phenomena being analyzed, 58% (i.e., 408) of the homicide incidents were excluded from this analysis so important situational themes might have been missed due to their exclusion. Finally, given the degree of specificity needed to create the qualitative themes, the findings might not be generalizable to other settings.[5]

Despite these limitations, this study is one of the first to elucidate qualitatively the dynamics surrounding firearm use in homicides. Taken as a whole, the findings presented here suggest that dynamics of homicides vary by weapon used to commit this crime, and that a substantial number of homicide incidents are an extension, and in many respects a culmination, of a life involvement in drug and gang activity, and firearm carrying. The findings also demonstrate that homicides are not events that occur by chance, but instead that there is a structure to these incidents, even when they are not premeditated. The behaviors of the victim and offender, which may be attributed to their lifestyles (i.e., gang membership and drug dealing), contribute to whether a homicide will occur. This provides multiple avenues for prevention interventions.

While it would be impossible to prevent the occurrence of all homicide, interventions that target drug and gang involvement might prove to be successful in the prevention of some firearm homicides; particularly those related to drug and gang activities. Interventions that target inner city youth who are engaged in these behaviors, such as Operation Ceasefire in Boston and the Cure Violence Program in Chicago, might be beneficial (see Braga, Hureau, & Papachristos, 2014; Butts et al., 2015). Given the relationship between victim precipitation and planned aggression, intervention such as Cure Violence, which focus on interrupting the cycle of violence by intervening in conflicts that may escalate into acts of lethal violence might also prevent this crime.

Due to the relationship between gang membership and drug dealing, programs that prevent youth from adopting these lifestyles may also serve to save lives. Initiatives that employ primary prevention strategies, such as those that focus on reducing gang membership by educating at-risk youth, would be effective in homicide reduction. Strategies that focus on empowering youth via job training and education would also be useful in decreasing youth involvement in the drug trade and gangs. Programs that focus on conflict resolution might also be beneficial in inner cities currently suffering from high homicide and firearm related violence rates. More specifically, programs that focus on children and

youth in inner city schools and offer curriculums related to conflict resolution, social competence, problem solving, self-esteem, and how to adequately navigate the high prevalence of firearms in their neighborhoods may also serve to disrupt the cycle of violence and the allure to carry and use firearms (Wilkinson & Fagan, 1996). Finally, it would be remiss to ignore the source of the firearms being used in inner city acts of violence. Research suggests that they are often obtained via illegal markets, which are facilitated by straw purchases in states with lax gun purchasing regulations (Hemenway, 2017). As a result, laws that tighten these loopholes can also help reduce homicides.

Conclusion

Firearm homicides are quantitatively and qualitatively different than incidents carried out with other weapons. The findings presented here elucidate these differences. To our knowledge this is the first study to examine the specific transactions that culminate in a homicide by weapon type. Future research should continue on this endeavor and replicate the methods presented here in order to access the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, qualitative analyses should attempt to triangulate police narratives using case files that include witness statements, medical examiner reports, and other information that can yield descriptive accounts of these transactions. Future research should explore how gun carrying behavior affects the likelihood for lethal violence via interviews with offenders. This line of research would help elucidate whether firearm carrying in it of itself increases the odds of a homicide incident occurring. Relatedly, an examination of premeditation and the time that elapses between the precipitating event and the actual homicide event are important to explore, since they can help inform prevention efforts. Group dynamics and co-offending should also be explored in the context of weapon choice and retrieval. The source of weapons carried by homicide offenders, as well as whether they were purchased via legal or illegal venues should also be explored. The examination of how situational event variables interact with temporal and social structural variables to give rise to homicide events would also better elucidate dynamics that result in a homicide and would provide a more holistic understanding of this crime. Finally, future studies should replicate these methods in the examination of non-fatal incidents. These new areas for research would further elucidate the root causes of homicide, and firearm incidents in particular. The crime of homicide results in multiple individual and societal detrimental effects; thus, scholars and practitioners who are concerned with its prevention need to fully understand the various dynamics that facilitate its occurrence, so more research is necessary.

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[5] The majority of the cases excluded from the qualitative analyses remain uncleared and the offender has not been identified (i.e., 64%, 261 incidents of the excluded narratives).

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest Jesenia M. Pizarro, Karen Holt, and Karissa R. Pelletier declares that they have no conflict of interest.

Human and animal rights and Informed consent All procedures followed were in accordance with ethical standards of the responsible committee on human experimentation (institutional and national) and with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2000. Informed consent was obtained from all patients for being included in the study.

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