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Short Communication

Why urban teens turn to guns: urban teens' own words on gun violence

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: Missing from the discussion of youth and gun violence are qualitative data from diverse youth regarding their perspectives on gun violence in their communities and what will help prevent or reduce such violence. The purpose of this exploratory study was therefore to gain a deeper understanding of urban teens' perceptions of gun violence in the context of their daily lives and gather their ideas for reducing or preventing gun violence through meaningful discussions with urban teens.

Study design: Focus group discussions.

Methods: A total of 29 urban teens aged between 14 and 18 years participated in two separate focus group discussions between August 2016 and July 2017. Participants engaged in an open-ended discussion guided by 12 semistructured questions that addressed their perceptions of community safety, the need to carry a gun, police relations, the need for community change, and their ideas to reduce gun violence and help make their communities safer. Data were analyzed using a thematic approach.

Results: Teens' perceptions of racism and poor relations with the police are tied to gun violence, while they identified the need for better relations with the police and meaningful, long-term relationships with adults as factors to help prevent or reduce gun violence.

Conclusions: Long-term reductions in community violence will not occur until larger social issues are addressed. While waiting for these concerns to be addressed, secondary prevention, including mentoring programs and other efforts to build meaningful relationships between adults and teens can foster teen resilience and activism in the face of gun violence.

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Introduction

Gun violence is a major public health problem and a leading cause of injury, disability, trauma, and premature death in the United States. Thirty-eight thousand people die annually in the US due to gun violence of various forms, and another 85,000 suffer non-fatal gun injuries. Guns are the leading means of suicide in the US and account for half of all suicide deaths. While most gun deaths are not linked to mass shootings, 437 people were killed and 1802 were injured as a result of 346 mass shootings in 2017. Notably, gun violence impacts youth, particularly those who self-identify as Hispanic or black, at disparate rates.¹ Even youth who are not injured or killed by gun violence but witness gun violence experience adverse outcomes later in life.²

A rich body of quantitative research exists on youth attitudes toward gun violence including changes in youth views after involvement in gun violence intervention programs and risk and protective factors for youth involvement in gun violence.^{3–6} Missing from this discussion are qualitative data from diverse youth regarding their perspectives on gun violence in their communities and what will help prevent or reduce such violence. The purpose of this exploratory study was therefore to gain a deeper understanding of urban teens' perceptions of gun violence in the context of their daily lives and gather their ideas for reducing or preventing gun violence through meaningful discussions with urban teens.

Study population and design

A total of 29 teens who participated in a leadership program through an urban community-based non-profit organization were recruited to participate in two separate focus group discussions between August 2016 and July 2017. Fifteen youth participated in the first focus group discussion, and 14 other youth participated in the second focus group discussion. Seventy-two percent of all participants were female; 28% were male. Roughly half of teens aged between 14 and 15 years (55%); 34% aged between 16 and 17 years; and 10% aged

between 18 and 19 years. Ninety percent of teens self-identified as African-American, and 10% identified as other.

Focus group discussions were held during the day at the organization and lasted approximately 1 hour each. After completing a brief demographic survey, teen participants engaged in an open-ended discussion guided by 12 semi-structured questions that addressed their perceptions of community safety, the need to carry a gun, police relations, the need for community change, and their ideas to reduce gun violence and help make their communities safer. Focus group discussions were audio-recorded. Written assent and parent or guardian consent was obtained for all participants younger than 18 years. Teens aged ≥ 18 years provided written informed consent (See Table 1 for a copy of the interview guide).

Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim; researchers reviewed the transcripts to verify their accuracy. Staff at the non-profit organization reviewed copies of the transcripts and provided comment and clarification as needed. Data were analyzed using a thematic approach.⁷ Two themes emerged through the deductive analysis: racism and the importance of personal relationships. Within each of these broad themes, subthemes were identified as described in the following sections.

Participants' perceptions of racism

Youth participants were acutely aware of the negative views that some white individuals had of black individuals and communities. They attributed some of these perceptions to the media which they said often portrayed blacks as 'thugs,' 'gangbangers,' or 'dangerous.' They also stated that being black negatively affected how they were treated in school and by the criminal justice system, as well as limited the economic and leisure-time opportunities available to them. Participants shared stories when their teachers were unsympathetic to their requests to learn more about historical black figures such as Dr. Martin Luther King. Teens also felt disrespected and poorly treated by the criminal justice system. They further reflected on this topic by stating that a black person would be

Table 1 – Interview guide.

- 1 When you hear the words 'gun violence' what do you think of?
- 2 Do you see a difference between how you view gun violence and how others view gun violence? If differences exist, please describe them. Who, if anyone, do you think has views on gun violence that are similar to yours?
- 3 Do you think most people think about gun related suicide when they talk about gun violence? Why?
- 4 Do you think race plays a role in gun violence? Why or how?
- 5 Do you think geography, or location, plays a role in gun violence? How?
- 6 How do you feel about police relationship in your community? How do you feel about the police's ability to respond to violence in your community?
- 7 What is one thing that could change in your community to reduce gun violence?
- 8 If you wanted to talk to your friends/community about gun violence, what would help you get them engaged and talking about the topic?
- 9 Do you think an online resource such as a website, blog or some other form of social media would be a good way to reach out to your peers and others in your community on the topic of gun violence? Please explain.
- 10 As you know, there are many different types of resources that can be made available through a website or other forms of social media. Which, if any, of the following do think would help engage teens on the topic of gun violence: films and video clips; personal stories; music videos; plays and other forms of performance art; and other literary materials? Please explain.
- 11 Are there other resources that we haven't discussed that you think would help others engage on the topic of gun violence?
- 12 We have spent a lot of time today talking about gun violence. Is there anything we haven't touched on about this topic that you'd like to add?

Table 2 – Response themes and select teen comments.

Sub-Theme	Supporting Quotes
Theme 1: Teen comments on racism	
Negative Perceptions	<p>Yeah, it's like what they [whites] see on TV. It's not their [whites] fault really, but at the same time before you judge, you know, get to know your surroundings first. But, that's all they put us out there to be. Like ghetto, loud, dangerous.</p> <p>We're always depicted as like thugs, animals, gangbangers. We have no sense.</p>
Unfair Treatment by Criminal Justice and Education Systems	<p>... in 8th grade, my teacher, on Martin Luther King day, me and my best friend were talking about it and we were saying we could at least learn about him. And the teacher went and said "Do you learn about dinosaurs every year? No you don't. You learned about that in first grade, so you good." I was like, really? And I was like, but it's Martin Luther King and she was like "Well, we have school on my birthday." She said that. She said that we have school on my birthday. And I'm like you cannot compare yourself to him. That is disrespectful. But like we talk about LGBT so much. Like that's a really big topic, but then, like black history month, we never talk about it. Like if a Caucasian person were to do it, like commit an armed robbery, they wouldn't get as much time as if a black person would and I feel as if guns can't really stop that from happening. That Caucasian boy that did that school shooting ... they tried really hard to say that he had something wrong in the head. I feel as if it was an African American, they would have had no second thoughts, they would have put him in prison for life. Go to jail.</p>
Unequal Access to Economic and Leisure-time Activities	<p>Most of the good jobs are in the suburbs and but then that's when it's like not really diverse out there. You know, they don't want us to go over there and take their job opportunities and stuff. They [teens who live in the suburbs] got stuff to do. We still have nothing to do. We'd have to pay for the bus. I don't got no money. What else am I going to do?</p>
Connection Between Unequal Access to Power and Privilege and Community Unrest	<p>Where like institutional racism and different things like that, and our educational system come into play. If you have a whole group of people that are uneducated and they are not prepared for life, then that will make them more susceptible to commit a crime or be criminalized by an unjust police force. If you actually educated a people like you are supposed to, when you have all these other people that have different privileges than them, then I feel like it is not just about removing the police officers, it's also in the systems.</p> <p>I feel like to be safe or to protect yourself you need some sort of power. And I feel like us, being black, we're already set up at less of an advantage to have that sort of power and that's why people turn to guns, especially the males.</p>
Theme 2: Importance of Relationships	
Lack of Good Relationships with Community Police	<p>We don't have a relationship with them [police]. They want to build this fake relationship for the media, but it's not really a relationship.</p> <p>Like I've never had a conversation with a police officer if it wasn't facilitated by working with them for something at [community organization]. Besides that, I've never had a conversation with a police officer, just casually about how I was doing, or like about anything that was relevant to young people.</p> <p>They [police] have no type of personal relationships with the people here, and that's how riots would happen because you come in and you don't have any type of relationships or any community relationship or talking to the people or anything. And you just come in very harshly and stuff and that's why bad things happen. I feel like that is one of the reasons the protests get so bad, because you can't just come in and really not know and start doing stuff like that.</p> <p>... like the patrols in our areas, they don't live here. They live all the way out and then they come in and they don't understand, and I don't want to say they don't understand, but they're not used to that and it turns into a kind of overreaction.</p>
Connection Between Meaningful Relationships and Gun Violence Prevention	<p>I was talking to my mom about that, and she used to have to go to school where we lived at, and they all walked together, and everybody knew everybody. You had the relationship with the police cause you would see them every day. And everything would be smoother.</p> <p>I'm pretty sure there are multiple videos on the internet about anti-gun violence and stuff, but obviously it is not helping anything. So I feel like a new approach like stepping out into the communities and gaining a personal relationship with them and when I say that I don't just come talk and then I never see you again in my life. That is pointless and that is going to make me dislike you. Make it a schedule. Make it something that is actually beneficial and not something that is just going to happen one time.</p> <p>Like we need mentors that will actually, that are willing to come to the inner city and will like stick with kids throughout their teenage years and show them like the right way to do things. They don't have to be like, it's good to have that diversity, like the white mentors, but ... I want them to be like good strong black men, personally. Cause that's what we need to see. You know, the powerful, the good role models, the blacks.</p>

given more prison time than a white person for committing the same crime.

In terms of employment and leisure-time opportunities, teens indicated that their urban neighborhoods were devoid of good-paying jobs and affordable recreational activities. In comparison, youth shared that the suburbs, which are less racially diverse, had more and better job and leisure activities but were off limits to the urban teens because of their limited finances and transportation options.

According to the teens, lack of access to the aforementioned resources and lack of power to have one's voice be heard and to affect change in one's community contributed to community unrest and violence. They described a sequence of events where some blacks are poorly educated, have few economic opportunities available to them, and thus turn to criminal and/or violent behavior (See Table 2 for select teen comments on racism).

Participants' perceptions of the importance of relationships

Important characteristics of relationships as identified by the participants included the ability to have a meaningful conversation with someone, understand another's personal experiences, and make a long-term commitment to another. Teens stated that they did not have such positive relationships with police in their neighborhoods, which contributed to tension between law enforcement and the community and in turn could escalate to gun violence. Building meaningful, long-term relationships with the police and others was named by the youth as important in helping to prevent gun violence. Teens suggested that having police live in the neighborhoods they served would help strengthen relationships with community members. Participants also expressed a desire for more adult mentors they could talk with and who would be role models for them. Importantly, they explicitly stated that they wanted the mentors to look like them (See Table 2 for select teen comments on the importance of relationships).

Conclusion

This exploratory study provides insights into urban teens' understanding of gun violence and its prevention in the context of their daily lives. Our findings suggest that teens' perceptions of racism and poor relationships with the police are tied to gun violence, while they identified the need for better relations with the police and meaningful, long-term relationships with adults as factors to help prevent or reduce gun violence.

Our study also highlights the role of racism in gun violence as it plays out in urban youth's lives. Jones delineates the following three types of racism: (1) institutional racism, defined as 'differential access to the goods, services, and opportunities of society by race'; (2) personally mediated racism, defined as prejudice and discrimination; and (3) internalized racism when stigmatized groups internalize negative messages about their worth and abilities.⁸ Teens in

this study described their experiences with institutional and personally mediated racism and suggested they contributed to violence in their communities. These results support growing evidence that neighborhood-level factors in urban areas, including segregation, availability of jobs, and lack of social trust play a role in youth violence, violent crime, and homicide.⁹ Results also support previous research that shows youth attitudes toward police are shaped in part by neighborhood context: Minority youth have consistently less favorable opinions of the police than their white counterparts.¹⁰

Study participants expressed their desire for high-quality, sustained relationships with adults, including police in their neighborhoods, as a potential strategy for reducing or preventing gun violence. Recent research indicates that youth who have at least one stable, committed, and supportive relationship with a parent, caregiver, or other adult are more likely to withstand hardships because of poverty, parental abuse, neglect, or recurrent violence. However, black youth report difficulty forming positive relationships with adults because of discrimination, or personally mediated racism as defined previously.¹¹

This study also suggests the role of social determinants of health in gun violence. Lack of access to quality education, meaningful employment, and safe neighborhoods are some of the underlying factors that contribute to gun violence. We believe that long-term reductions in community violence will not occur until these larger social issues are addressed. However, we recognize the time, resources, and commitment from multiple social institutions required to implement these changes. While waiting for these larger social concerns to be addressed, secondary prevention, including mentoring programs and other efforts to build long-term, meaningful relationships between adults and teens, can foster teen resilience and activism in the face of gun violence. Programs to break down barriers between law enforcement and communities are also important secondary prevention strategies.

This exploratory study is limited by the small number and lack of racial diversity of participants. Further research that includes other racial and ethnic groups is needed to determine if similar themes emerge and to gain additional insight into teens' suggestions for helping to reduce community gun violence.

Author Statements

Ethical approval

This study was approved by the Carroll University Institutional Review Board (no. 18-001).

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Competing interests

None.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.puhe.2019.06.020>.