



SUMMARY

'Gotta Make Your Own Heaven'

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

Sweeping national protests against police brutality and racism are pushing many jurisdictions to reexamine approaches to public safety, and police budgets. Our research—arguably the most ambitious of its kind—into why some young New Yorkers carry guns uncovered widespread experiences of violence along with a near wholesale distrust of police. This summary outlines our findings and the implications for policymakers.

« *My area and my comfort zone, I feel safe, but I'm always on point because you just gotta be.*

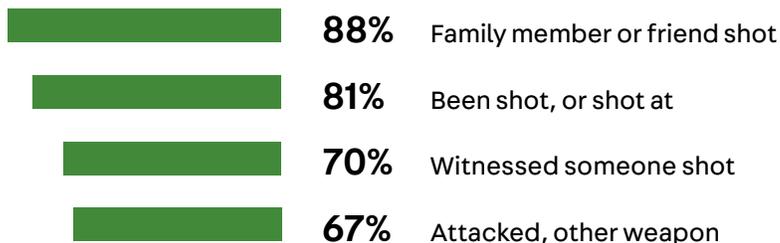
What We Studied

We interviewed 330 young people from ages 16-24 from neighborhoods particularly impacted by gun violence. They were overwhelmingly male (79%), Black and Latinx (94%), and living in public housing (78%); 87% have owned or carried a gun. We wanted to know **why they resorted to guns**, and the role guns played in their social networks, with the goal of informing broader community-based and policy interventions. The study employed **field researchers** with significant personal experience in the networks of our participants and relied on an intensive process of trust- and credibility-building.

Violence and Trauma

Violence was a near universal experience among the young people we interviewed.

Taken together, these experiences amount to extensive community trauma. We found this trauma factors into nearly every gun-related decision these young people make. Policies and programs must contend with this sobering context.



Lack of Safety

The **pervasiveness and unpredictability of violence** was the major driver of gun-carrying. Participants reported disputes with rival gangs or housing projects could make even mundane activities like going to the corner store feel unsafe. The lack of protection from police, and the fear of being shot by them, were also cited as motivations for carrying.

The sense of a **double-bind**—unprotected by police from other gun users but punished for carrying to protect themselves—was a central feature of young peoples' narratives.

Justice-Involvement, Stifled Opportunity

88% of participants had been arrested, more than half before age 16—mostly for charges like marijuana possession, robbery, and fare beating; almost two-thirds had been incarcerated.

Criminal records and poverty pushed some participants to alternative survival strategies like drug dealing or robbery, which sometimes involved carrying a gun.

Gangs and Guns

Almost nine of 10 participants reported gang involvement and much of the city's gun use clearly overlaps with gang activity. Rival gangs are a constant source of **threat** (and an impetus for carrying), but one's own gang provides **protection** and material and emotional support, with some participants comparing it to a form of family.

« *They may be harsh. It may come with this, it may come with that. I'd rather harsh love than no love.*

Police

Along with widespread contact, participants expressed **vanishingly little trust** for police with only 15% agreeing police had good reasons for making arrests; many participants explicitly connected their race to the treatment they received from police. As a corollary to the long-standing over-policing of low-level offenses, participants also criticized police for **not doing more to address violent crime**. Finally, some participants cited the **fear of being killed by police** as a reason for carrying.

« *It's not a regular person I gotta worry about. I gotta protect myself from the people who are made to protect and serve us.*

Recommendations

1. **Invest in Safety Strategies Outside of Law Enforcement.** Given the deep distrust of law enforcement, community strategies to ensure safety must be developed that both foster trust and encourage healing. This cannot be done by police.
2. **Create Job Programs Specifically for Youth.** Employment programs designed around the social realities faced by these young people must work to build qualifications and experience and provide concrete pathways to living-wage jobs and long-term career paths.
3. **Bring Services Directly to Young People.** Participants often pointed to the restrictions on their movement given concerns over violence. Community organizations must bring their needed services directly to the localized spaces where young people congregate.
4. **Hire More Credible Messengers.** Community organizations seeking to engage high-risk youth must hire frontline staff who have the "street" experience and cultural knowledge to connect with these young people.
5. **Engage Gang Leadership.** Given their role in the lives of these young people, gangs must be partners at the table for any discussion of community services and safety.

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For More Information

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Full report: courtinnovation.org/publications/gun-violence-NYC.