

Peers and Gun Use Among Urban Adolescent Males

An Examination of Social Embeddedness

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Youth gun violence is most often a group phenomenon yet most empirical examinations ignore this fact. Using interview data with 416 violent male offenders from two disadvantaged New York City neighborhoods, this paper examines the roles that the peer contexts play in explaining the nuanced patterns of respondent gun-related behaviors. We hypothesize that respondents who are comparatively more embedded in networks of peers who carry and use guns will also report greater involvement in serious gun violence. We found that guns were equated with self-protection and the most prevalent reason given for possession and carrying behaviors of peers. Belonging to a group of associates was also perceived to have protective value. Guns and armed peers played a role in heightened risk for lethal conflict. Peers are involved as co-offenders in the majority of gun events reported. We discuss the implications of our findings for violence intervention policy and future research.

Keywords: *guns; cooffending; group processes; gun crime; third party roles; self-protection; violence*

Gun violence has been part of the collective psyche of Americans for the past several decades with the impact being felt most severely among African American, urban youth. Homicide has been the leading cause of death for African Americans aged 15 to 24 since 1981 and either the leading or second leading cause of death for African Americans aged 25 to 34 from 1981 to 2005 (CDC Wonder, 2006). Whether in urban centers or more recently in the nation's rural heartlands, guns have been central to the character of youth violence for nearly 30 years (Wilkinson & Fagan,

2001; Zimring, 1999). Guns have played a significant role in shaping the developmental trajectories and behaviors of many inner-city youths, and through the extended reach of media reports, youth in suburban and rural areas have also grown up affected by the images of gun violence. Although violence has been a recurrent theme for decades in contributing to urban delinquency, youth gun violence has become more prevalent and more concentrated spatially and socially during the eighties and nineties (Cook & Laub, 1998; Fagan & Wilkinson, 1998a).

In this essay, we summarize recent studies on the trends in youth violence specifically related to firearms violence. Next, we present empirical findings on the gun-related behaviors among the peers of violent male youthful offenders. Third, we explore the qualitative ways in which the peer context shapes gun-related behaviors. Fourth, we examine patterns of cooffending versus solo offending in gun events. Finally, we discuss the policy implications from our findings.

Theoretical Framework

Dating back to early studies by Sutherland (1927), Shaw and McKay (1931), Short and Nye (1958), and Wolfgang (1958), scholars have consistently found that delinquency often occurs in the context of groups. Despite this empirical fact, most studies of youth delinquency, particularly violent delinquency, have not focused on its group nature (see Conway & McCord, 2002; McCord & Conway, 2005; McGloin, Sullivan, Piquero, & Bacon, 2008; Warr, 1996, 2002 for exceptions). Gang studies would be another exception but even gang studies have generally failed to examine the relational contexts of peer influence with regard to particular cooffending in violent events. The issue over whether violence perpetrated by a group of youth constitutes gang violence is, in part, a definitional one (Klein & Maxson, 2006). Youth may engage in collective violence, but they may not actually be gang members. Most criminological theories overlook the group character of delinquent and criminal behavior (see Reiss, 1986; Warr, 2002 for exceptions). Urban male gun violence in particular is likely to be characterized as a group-on-group phenomenon, which may have features of group threat as well as individual conflict at its core.

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Weerman (2003) argued that cooffending is not the same as having delinquent or criminal associates; instead there is an element of social exchange that leads to a delinquent or criminal act. He found that offenders vary in their preference for cooffending or solo-offending. Cooffending varies by offense type and by age (younger offenders cooffend more than older offenders); cooffending is usually instigated by one of the cooffenders; cooffending usually takes place in small and relatively homogeneous offending groups; and cooffending takes place within changing constellations. Weerman (2003) examined the utility of four theoretical perspectives for explaining patterns in cooffending: (1) Group Influence Perspective—the necessary result of the group influence leading to criminal behavior; (2) Social Selection Perspective—a by-product of the tendency of offenders to select each other as friends or companions; (3) Instrumental Perspective—the result of the decision that cooffending leads to an easier, more profitable, or less risky execution of a crime; and (4) Social Exchange Theory—cooffending is a way of obtaining rewards through the exchange of goods that cannot be obtained by solo-offending.

Literature Review: Guns and Gun Use Among Youth

We have argued elsewhere that the most recent epidemic of juvenile gun violence led to adaptations in the everyday lives of inner-city adolescents, particularly African American and Latino male youth (Fagan & Wilkinson, 1997, 1998a, 1998b; Wilkinson, 2003; Wilkinson & Carr, in press; Wilkinson & Fagan, 1996, 2001). The most directly measured impact of the heightened firearm homicide rate was increased exposure to serious violence particularly in urban areas (Fagan, Wilkinson, & Davies, 2007). Increased exposure has resulted in increased fear of victimization, greater desire for self-protection, increased youth acquisition of firearms, and an increased perceived need to carry guns for personal safety. Relatively inexpensive handgun availability and diffusion to urban adolescents has also been linked to the increased rates of gun homicide and other gun violence. The diffusion process or social contagion “flowed” through peers (Fagan, Wilkinson, & Davies, 2007). Estimates of gun carrying in school ranged from 0.1% (Kann et al. 1996) to 15% (Harris, 1993) during the highest gun homicide peak years of 1988 to 1997. Since 2000, the national surveillance surveys have either found school gun-carrying rates below 0.1% or asked students about knowing someone who carried guns to schools in an effort to improve measurement accuracy. These rates of gun carrying are much higher among (a) youth residing in inner-city neighborhoods, ranging from 6% of 11th graders in a Seattle study done by Callahan and Rivara (1992) to 25% in a Baltimore study completed by Webster, Gainer, and Champion (1993), and (b) youth already involved in the criminal justice system, ranging from 22% in a study of 856 juvenile arrestees from 11 U.S. cities published by Decker, Pennell, and Caldwell

(1995) to 80.4% in a study of active youth violent offenders in New York City completed by Wilkinson and Fagan (2001).

Overall Patterns in Gun Availability and Carrying

We located over 100 studies since 1990 on patterns of gun availability, carrying, or use among youth. These studies varied widely in terms of their samples, measurement, time-frame for reporting, methodology, and study purpose. We summarize some of the findings here. Although researchers have documented the difficulty of accurately measuring youth access to guns, Braga and Kennedy (2001) used Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) gun trace data to provide one estimate. They found that juveniles and youth obtained the majority of their guns through retail outlets and thefts despite the fact that it is illegal for minors to purchase handguns via retail outlets. The gun trace data on more than 1,500 guns revealed that straw purchases accounted for 571 of the transactions (Braga & Kennedy, 2001). Other data sources offer estimates of how easily youth believe they could access a gun. For example, using a mail survey of 731 tenth and eleventh grade boys, Sheley and Wright (1998) found that 50% felt that they could easily obtain a gun and 29% had carried a gun in the past year. Similarly, Lizotte and colleagues used interview data from 615 Rochester boys and found that 22% of students acknowledged ever carrying a gun (Lizotte, Howard, Krohn, & Thornberry, 1996; Lizotte, Tesoriero, Thornberry, & Krohn, 1994). Callahan and Rivara (1992) surveyed 970 eleventh graders in Seattle and found that 34% had easy access to handguns and 6% admitted to carrying a gun to school, while Slovak's (2002) study of 171 rural students found that 57% had access to a gun in the past year, and 48% said they knew of someone else who had accessed a gun. Miller and Hemenway (2004) used phone calls to interview 5,801 California adolescents and found that 33% had ever handled a gun. Using the same data, Sorenson and Vittes (2004) reported that less than 1% of respondents carried a handgun, 17.3% felt they could get one immediately, and 5.8% felt they could get one within 2 days. Using the 1995 National Survey of Adolescent Males, Cook and Ludwig (2004) found that 1 in 10 adolescents reported carrying a gun at least once a month; rural boys reported the highest gun-carrying prevalence at 14.7%. Cook and Ludwig (2004) attempted to disentangle the effects of gun availability at the county level with gun-carrying patterns among adolescent boys. They found that gun carrying was significantly higher among males residing in gun ownership prevalent counties. They concluded,

The nature of that causal influence is not identified by the statistical results, but it seems plausible that the mechanism is gun availability. Where guns are prevalent, adolescents will find it easier to borrow or steal or buy them from family members or other people. An alternative interpretation is that in counties where guns are more common, teens tend to be more experienced, knowledgeable or comfortable with guns. Both explanations grant a direct causal role to gun prevalence, whether it operates through availability (as

in the first explanation) or learning (the second). In either case, adolescent behavior is closely linked to gun prevalence among adults, and would be modified in response to a change in that context. (Cook & Ludwig, 2004, p. 49)

Gun Availability and Carrying in Disadvantaged Urban Neighborhoods

Focusing on availability of guns in highly disadvantaged neighborhoods, youths' reported access to available guns has increased. Schubiner, Scott, and Tzelepis (1993) conducted a study of 246 African American youths in an inner-city neighborhood and reported that 30% of the respondents could get a gun within an hour and another 30% reported easy access to a gun within a week. Inciardi, Horowitz, and Pottieger (1993) surveyed 611 youths in Miami's inner-city neighborhoods and found that 48% of the respondents carried a gun in the previous year. In addition, Schubiner et al. (1993) found that 42% of their inner-city sample had seen someone shot or knifed, and 22% had actually seen someone killed through gun violence. Kahn, Kazimi, and Mulvihill (2001) interviewed students in both inner-city and non-inner-city high schools in New York, and 57% of those surveyed reported that they, or someone close to them, had been injured by a gun. Sheley, Wright, and Smith's (1993) survey of 1,591 inner-city high school adolescents found that 23% believed that it would be easy to get a gun, 80% thought that other students carried weapons to school, 20% had been threatened with a gun, and 12% had actually been shot at. Furthermore, 80% of this sample reported that other students carried weapons to school. Using the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods (PHDCN) data which was not school-based, Molnar, Miller, Azrael, and Buka (2004) found that lifetime estimations for concealed firearm carrying were at 4.9% for boys and 1.1% for girls. Approximately 3% of participants indicated they had carried a concealed firearm at one time or another. They found that youth were less likely to carry concealed weapons in neighborhoods with lower violence rates and higher perceived safety.

Other studies of inner-city adolescents found similarly high gun and other weapon prevalence rates. Sheley and Wright (1995) surveyed 758 male, high school students and found that 45% of respondents reported being threatened with a gun or shot at en route to or from school. More recently, Ding, Nelsen, and Lassonde (2002) sampled junior high school students in New York where they found that males who had more experience with guns reported reacting more violently to frustration and participating in a greater number of violent acts than those with less gun experience.

Reasons for Weapon Carrying

Rountree (2000) summarized the literature on the etiological factors of weapon carrying. She categorized six main explanatory factors including sociodemographic patterns, fear and loathing, criminal lifestyle, proweapon socialization, social (dis)attachment,

and contextual effects. In terms of sociodemographic patterns of weapon carrying, male gender, age during Grades 9 and 10, and low socioeconomic status were consistently found to be significantly associated with the behavior. In terms of fear as a motivator for weapon carrying, numerous studies found that students carry a weapon for protection because of exposure to violence at school or in the neighborhood (Carlson, 2006; Kahn et al., 2001; Lizotte & Sheppard, 2001; Mateu-Gelabert, 2002; Webster et al., 1993). Webster et al.'s (1993) convenience sample of inner-city junior high school students reported that 25% of boys carried a gun for protection and 16% of these individuals carried a gun for protection on an everyday basis. Using the Rochester Youth Survey data, Lizotte and Sheppard (2001) found that 6% of the boys in their study owned a gun for protection during gang involvement and drug activity, as well as from general gun crime in their everyday lives. The LH Research survey found that 42% of the study feared that guns would shorten their lives (Harris, 1993). Involvement in criminal, delinquent, and other problem behaviors was also considered an important factor in weapon carrying especially gun carrying (Huff, 1998; Rountree, 2000; Sheley & Wright, 1995; Wilkinson & Fagan, 2001). Gang presence in schools or community settings increased the likelihood of gun carrying among youth (Forrest, Zychowski, Stuhldreher, & Ryan, 2000).

Guns and the Peer Context

Whereas the above studies have considered youths' access and attitudes toward guns, some researchers have also begun to investigate peer influence and gun use. As described above, Rountree (2000) summarized the prior literature on proweapon socialization. She found that particularly for adolescents, the proweapon socialization happens in the youth peer group with family socialization influencing sporting behaviors rather than weapon carrying in other contexts. Rountree noted that "perceptions of others' carrying guns to school significantly affect the likelihood of students' carrying weapons to school themselves" (2000, p. 297). Sheley and Wright (1998) reported that 14% of participants' peers carried a gun. Bjerregaard and Lizotte (1995) found that 33% of peers carried a gun, and Sheley, Wright, and Smith (1993) found that 35% of respondents reported that their peers carried a gun outside home. Finally, Williams, Mulhall, Reis, and DeVille (2002) reported that 57% of participants stated that at least one of their friends carried a gun during the past year. For delinquent samples, researchers would expect higher reports of peer involvement in gun possession and carrying. The fact that nearly two thirds of youth violence can be classified as cooffending situations increases the relevance of understanding the diffusion of guns within peer networks (Wilkinson, 2003).

Conway and McCord (2002) examined the patterns of juvenile cooffending with a violent accomplice. They found that juveniles who committed any crime with an accomplice who had a prior violent delinquency on his or her record were significantly

more likely to be involved in a serious violent crime in the future. Using the McCord data set, McGloin et al. (2008) examined the stability of cooffending and cooffending partners among Philadelphia juveniles over time. They found that cooffending patterns were varied rather than stable in terms of cooffending over time and offending with the same cooffenders. The study was limited by the original methodological design which only included juveniles up to age 17. McGloin et al. (2008) called for new lines of research on cooffending that would “take into consideration the role of friendship and peer networks” (p. 180) and “attempt to collect a wide range of data to examine what constellation of individual, environmental, and situational variables are related to co-offending and co-offender patterns” (pp. 179-180). Conway and McCord did not specify whether the violent incidents involved guns or other weapons.

Peer influences on gun possession, carrying, and use are often overlooked despite evidence suggesting that during adolescence, youths increasingly turn to their peers for social approval, companionship, and socialization (Mateu-Gelabert, 2002). Furthermore, previous research has also found that youths’ having peers who carried a gun increased the chances that focal respondents carried a gun or were involved in violence (Lizotte et al., 1994, 1996; Luster & Oh, 2001; Zimmerman et al., 2004). Thus, peers are a major contributing factor in gun possession and carrying. Yet, although studies question respondents’ about their peers’ access to guns, very few studies focus on respondents’ perceptions of peers’ actual use of guns or how the peer context influences respondents’ use of guns. This article will examine how peers play a role in the construction of violent events involving gun use as well. The purpose of this study is to provide a descriptive examination of peer influences on gun- and non-gun-related criminal behaviors on a sample of violence-involved male youth. Using qualitative analysis, we explore the hypothesis that respondents who are comparatively more embedded in networks of peers that carry and use guns will report greater involvement in serious gun violence events.

Method

The data for this research came from a qualitative study of 416 active violent offenders from two New York City neighborhoods. The interview data were gathered over a 3-year period from September 1995 through July 1998 (as described previously by Wilkinson, 2003). The study neighborhoods had among the highest levels of poverty and violent crime in New York City. Current or previous residency in one of the study neighborhoods was an eligibility criterion. The sampling design targeted offenders between the ages of 16 and 24 from three pools of subjects: individuals convicted of illegal handgun possession or a violent offense (the criminal justice sample, $n = 150$ or 36%); individuals injured in a violent transaction (the hospital sample, $n = 62$ or 15%); and individuals identified by screening as having been

actively involved in violence in the previous 6 months (the neighborhood samples, $n = 204$ or 49%).

The young men in the jail sample were interviewed at Rikers Island in a private office ordinarily used for psychological counseling. Young men from the study neighborhoods who had been arrested for violent or gun-related offenses were recruited to participate in the study. Participants in the hospital sample were recruited at Lincoln and Kings County Hospitals by researchers working with hospital staff to identify violently injured youth. Most hospitalized youth were interviewed in their hospital rooms or in private offices in the hospital. Two of the interviewers also worked for the New York City Health Department which facilitated our access to patient information and recruitment. The neighborhood samples were generated using chain referral or snowball sampling techniques (Watters & Biernacki, 1989). The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Columbia University, Rutgers University, and The Ohio State University.

Peer interviewers conducted the in-depth, open-ended interviews, which took 1 to 2 hr to complete. Peer interviewers were initially recruited through the first author's involvement with a local nonprofit organization that provided reentry services to young offenders leaving Rikers Island. Interviewer training was an ongoing and elaborate process that focused on teaching peer interviewers about the purposes of the research, the procedures for protecting confidentiality, ways of being sensitive to respondents, interviewing techniques, the importance of developing a rapport, and how to communicate effectively with potential respondents. Training also included role playing; mock interviewing; peer and researcher critiques of each interviewer's style; explanations of how to use probes, reference points, sequencing, memory aids, and cross-checks to assist in the recall of information; identifying and screening potential subjects; a full review of the informed consent procedures; and transcription of taped interviews. The first author conducted a reflective debriefing session with each interviewer for all early interviews and on an ad hoc basis throughout the data-collection period. Interviewers and participants were matched on participant's proximate age, race/ethnicity, gender, and life experiences. Participants were paid \$20 for their time. The confidential interviews were tape recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods.

In terms of demographic characteristics, the sample was 48.5% African American, 39.3% Puerto Rican, and 12.2% Caribbean, Latin American, or mixed ethnicity. The average age of respondents was 19.5, with 18.2% of respondents at the modal age of 18; the range was 14 to 27 years and the standard deviation was 2.69. Thirty-six percent of respondents were enrolled in school at the time of the interview, 20.7% had completed high school or a general equivalency degree, and 43.1% had dropped out of school. Only 18.7% were raised in two-parent families, and 37.8% were fathers. Of the sample, 19.8% were legally employed (full- or part-time). As shown in Table 1, the sample participants reported numerous risk factors and violent experiences: 92.1% owned or had owned a gun, 85% had been or were

Table 1
New York City Youth Violence Study Sample Characteristics

Variable	<i>n</i>	Valid <i>n</i>	%
Neighborhood			
East New York	205	(416)	49.2
South Bronx	182	(416)	43.9
Other	29	(416)	7.0
Sample source			
Neighborhood chain referral	204	(416)	49.0
Recently released from jail	127	(416)	30.5
Jail interview	23	(416)	5.5
Hospital interview	62	(416)	14.9
Age, range 14-27, <i>SD</i> = 2.68			
Mean 19.5 years		(416)	
Median 19 years		(416)	
Mode 18 years		(416)	18.3
Race/ethnicity			
African American	192	(398)	48.2
Puerto Rican	158	(398)	39.7
Other Caribbean or mixed ethnicity	48	(398)	12.1
Structural position			
Education: Currently in school	138	(380)	36.3
Education: Dropped out	182	(366)	49.7
Education: High school graduate or higher	67	(333)	20.1
Education: Completed general equivalency degree	22	(333)	6.6
Currently employed (legitimate work)	99	(401)	24.7
Raised in 2 parent family	43	(247)	17.5
Respondent is a father or expectant	124	(330)	37.6
Risk factors/violent behaviors			
Ever owned a gun ownership (14.4)	357	(388)	92.0
Mean age of first gun	74	(303)	24.0
Reported a gun-related event	259	(344)	75.0
Ever involved in drug economy	318	(374)	85.0
Ever involved in robbery	241	(339)	71.1
Ever involved in assault	164	(295)	55.6
Ever involved in attempted murder	116	(301)	38.5
Ever incarcerated	290	(341)	85.0

involved in the drug business, 77% had committed a robbery, 62% reported about their involvement in a gun event within the past 2 years, and 85% had been or were incarcerated.

Measures

Three primary sections of the interview protocol were analyzed for this article including measures of peer network composition, peer behavior (alcohol/drug use, peer gun carrying/use, and criminal behavior), and peer involvement in violent events. Specifically, the interview protocol included the following:

- Peer network composition
 - Best friend, number of close friends, group size
 - Longevity of friendships, geographic proximity, age structure, closeness of ties
 - Amount of time spent together, types of activities together, perception of influence on youth
- Peer alcohol/drug use, gun carrying/use, and criminal behavior
 - Gun possession, gun carrying, gun use in crime, reasons for carrying
 - Involvement in the drug business, drug/alcohol use patterns
 - Friends who are non-gun involved
 - Consequences of gun use (arrest, being shot, and death)
 - Violent events

As in other studies that have employed event analysis (for example, Felson, 1982), respondents provided detailed description of only certain types of events. Interviewers used a scripted introduction to elicit detailed event descriptions:

Okay, NOW let's go a little deeper into like three or four of those situations. Tell me about the gun event . . . Next, tell me about the knife event . . . Tell me about a fair one. Tell me about a beef that heated up but got squashed before violence started.

Note to Interviewer: Ask the respondent to pick which events he can remember most clearly. Try to get: a gun event (GET AT LEAST 1), a knife event, a fair one (defined as no weapons), and argument with no violence).

The event measurement protocol (the set of questions used to elicit the event narrative from respondents) included fourteen components or *multidimensional* blocks identified as important features of violent events based, in part, on previous research of situated transactions (Felson & Steadman, 1983; Luckenbill, 1977; Luckenbill & Doyle, 1989; Oliver, 1998; Tedeschi & Felson, 1994). The event question sequence included 95 primary questions with numerous probing or follow-up questions embedded in the event protocol. The event protocol included open-ended questions about emotional/behavioral context, the steps of the event, characteristics of opponents, information on third parties, the context of the event, the weapons used, the presence of alcohol and drugs, injuries, police activity, outcomes, and the rationale given by respondents for their behavior (see Wilkinson, 2003).

Data Analysis

The interview content was deconstructed into themes and emergent patterns for questions relevant to the study. The stages of data analysis included open coding (Strauss, 1987), sifting and sorting (Wolcott, 1994), categorizing, checking for consistency, and examining interactions between and across categories and cases. The typescript files were created, merged into a qualitative data analysis software package (QSR NVIVO 8.0),¹ and coded. Coders read the interviews and highlighted the text units to be assigned to a particular category folder. The coding occurred in stages or layers. One coder read through all of the relevant data to create the initial categories or themes that represented interpretations of the data chunks. Each code was explicitly defined and multiple codes were applied as appropriate. Conceptual labels were refined in an emergent fashion as new insights were gleaned, which clarified distinctions between categories. The early categorizations of interpretation were purposefully unstructured. As the analysis progressed many of the categories were grouped together or organized hierarchically into *tree nodes* or families of ideas. A second coder (the first author) examined all of the same data independently looking for inconsistency, alternative interpretations, and missed data. Inconsistencies were discussed until both coders agreed on the best fit for the data. We developed a heuristic for analyzing the influences of peer behavior on the reported behavior of our study participants.

Results and Discussion

We have described elsewhere some of the qualitative characteristics of peer social relationships among the study youth including friendships, associates, affiliates, coworkers, and fictive kinship (Wilkinson, 2003). Of the 230 youth who were asked the question “do you have someone that you would consider your best friend?”, 53.5% indicated that they had a best friend. A large percentage reported having more than one close friend (170/252 or 67.5%). Of the total respondents, 84.4% reported that they belonged to a group that all hung out together ($n = 256$). Nearly 82% reported that they were “pretty tight” with their friends (out of 343 responding). Close to 76% of youth reported that their friends lived in the same neighborhood (out of 332). Of the 145 who were asked about the age of the friends, 65% reported that friends were about the same age or close to their age. Of the 158 who reported about the duration of their friendships, 77 or 49% reported being friends since childhood, 33 or 21% reported the duration to be more than 5 years but not since childhood, 46 or 29% reported friendship duration to be 1 to 5 years, and 2 or less than 1% reported being friends for less than 1 year. Of the 131 respondents who were asked about the frequency of getting together with these friends, 71% reported everyday, 8% reported 3 to 4 times a week, 11% reported 1 to 2 times a week, and 11% reported less than once a week. When asked if they thought their close friends were a good influence,

Table 2
Respondent's Perceptions of Peer Gun Possession and Carrying Behaviors^a

Question	<i>n</i>	%
Do your friends have guns? (Valid <i>n</i> = 318)		
Peers have guns	303	95.3
What is the main reason for them to have guns? ^a (Valid <i>n</i> = 251)		
Carry for protection	162	64.5
Carry in drug trade	75	29.9
Carry to avoid beefs	53	21.1
Carry because it's cool	16	6.4
Carry because they have to	5	2.0
Carry gun just to have	3	1.2
Carry to kill	2	0.8
Carry to claim turf	2	0.8
Don't know why peers carry	6	2.4
If peers have guns, do they usually carry guns when they are on the street? (Valid <i>n</i> = 182)		
Peers usually carry some	144	79.1
Frequency of peer gun carrying (Valid <i>n</i> = 149)		
Carry everyday	30	21.0
Sometimes carry gun	86	60.1
Carry only at night	6	4.2
Carry but frequency not given	27	18.9
Do you have any friends or associates that don't carry guns? (Valid <i>n</i> = 226)		
All friends carry guns	31	13.7
Some friends don't carry guns	195	86.3
What do you think of them for not messing with guns? (Valid <i>n</i> = 247)		
Good (if peers) do not carry guns	103	47.9
Need to carry guns	80	37.2
Ambivalent about carry guns	61	28.4
Think lesser of peer if not carry gun	3	1.4

a. Accounts for multiple coding; percentages do not add to 100%

nearly 59% of the 307 answered affirmatively. Of the 252 who answered, 97% of youth reported that their close friends drink and/or smoke weed or use other drugs, and 94% reported their friends were involved in the drug business (of 170 asked).

According to respondents, their close friends and associates were more active in gun-related behaviors for the most part than respondents reported for themselves. As shown in Table 2, gun possession was almost universal among friends with 95.3% of respondents reporting that their friends had guns. Of those who reported, 79.1% believed that peers carried guns at least some of the time when they were on the street. Protection was the prevalent reason for carrying, followed by involvement in the drug trade, and to avoid beefs. Of the 227 youth who were asked, 86.3% reported that they had at least some friends who did not carry guns. Very few (1.4%) reported

Table 3
Respondents' Perceptions of Peer Gun Use Behaviors^a

Question/Response	<i>n</i>	%
Do any of your friends use guns to commit crimes in the neighborhood? (Valid <i>n</i> = 247)		
Peers use guns in crime	195	78.9
What types of crimes do they commit with guns? (Valid <i>n</i> = 194)		
Gun used in robbery	158	82.3
Gun used in car jacking	3	1.6
Gun used in defending territory	1	0.5
Gun used in rape	1	0.5
Crime type not specified	31	16.2
Have any of your friends ever shot someone over a dispute that you can remember? (Valid <i>n</i> = 268)		
Peer gun shooting	214	79.9
What happened [in the disputes that your friends used guns]? ^a (Valid <i>n</i> = 214)		
Shooting for retaliation	37	16.8
Shooting murder	29	13.2
Shooting over girl	24	10.9
Shooting over drugs	21	9.6
Shooting over argument	19	8.6
Shooting over robbery	14	6.4
Shooting over money	13	5.9
Shooting b/c of a disrespect	11	5.0
Shooting b/c looked at wrong	10	4.6
Shooting for no reason	9	4.1
Shooting over game	7	3.2
Shooting to test gun	4	1.8
Shooting accidental	1	0.5
Shooting over arrest	1	0.5
Shooting over selling	1	0.5
Shooting to show off	1	0.5
Shooting reason not given	49	22.3
Consequence of peer gun use (Valid <i>n</i> = 249)		
Arrest for a gun related offense	215	86.3

a. Accounts for multiple coding; percentages do not add to 100%

thinking less of their peers for not carrying guns. Nearly half of the respondents thought it was good for peers to not carry guns, whereas 37% thought gun carrying was necessary. In terms of perceived peer gun use, respondents reported greater percentages of gun use in crime and using a gun to shoot someone in a dispute for peers.

As shown in Table 3, nearly 79% of youth had friends who used guns in crime. Robbery was the most often mentioned type of gun crime (82.3%). Respondents provided examples of the types of disputes that their friends had used guns over;

Table 4
Comparisons of Respondent Self-Report Versus Perception of Peer Behavior

Behavior	Respondent		Friends/Associates	
	%	Valid <i>n</i>	%	Valid <i>n</i>
Had a gun	92	388	95	318
Carry at least some of the time	80	202	79	182
Felt protection was reason to have gun	50	327	66	236
Used guns in crime	74	313	79	246
Arrested for gun-related offense	42	282	86	248
Reported involvement in a gun event	62	416	80	267
Percentage of gun events that were cooffending	67	236		
Ever involved in the drug business	85	374	94	226
Correlations		X^2	<i>p</i>	<i>n</i>
Respondent gun possession and peer gun possession		4.900	.027	312
Respondent gun possession and reported on 1 or more gun events		7.540	.006	388
Respondent gun possession and cooffending in gun events		7.716	.005	385

retaliation topped the list at nearly 17% of 214 events. The other reasons are listed in Table 3. Respondents reported that many of their friends had been arrested for a gun-related offense. Of those who provided data on this question, 86.3% of 249 reported a peer gun-related offense arrest. In Table 4, the data for respondents' self-reported gun-related behaviors are compared to their reports on friends. We found that the numbers were very similar on gun possession, gun carrying, and gun use in a crime. Respondents reported greater peer involvement in being arrested for a gun-related offense, involvement in a gun event, and involvement in the drug business.

As shown in Table 5, 72% or 199 of the 276 gun events with complete data in the New York City Youth Violence Study event sample were classified as cooffending situations. In 161 of those gun events, the respondent engaged in violence in concert with his associates as cooffenders. Eighty-seven gun events included group-on-group violence with cooffenders on both sides of the conflict. Eighty gun events occurred while the respondent was alone, and in 16 of those gun events, the unarmed respondent faced a group of armed opponents. There were 43 incidents in which the opponent was confronted by the armed respondent while he was unarmed. The involvement of cooffenders played a significant role in the more serious outcomes including 24 reported deaths and 77 reported injuries serious enough to require medical care. Obscured in

Table 5
Gun Events: Severity by Cooffending Status (*n* = 276)

Event	Cooffending Events		Solo Events	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Gun present, near violent	2	1.1	3	3.9
Gun used to threaten, not fired	31	15.5	18	23.7
Gun used to threaten, other violence, minor injuries	2	1.1	1	1.3
Gun used to threaten, other violence, seriousness unknown	1	0.5	0	
Gun used as blunt object, no injury	2	1.1	1	1.3
Gun used as blunt object, minor injury	2	1.1	1	1.3
Gun used as blunt object, serious injury	2	1.1	0	
Gun used as blunt object, seriousness unknown	1	0.5	1	1.3
Gun fired, no one injured	41	21.6	16	21.1
Gun fired, minor injuries	3	1.1	3	3.9
Gun fired, serious injuries	77	40.5	24	31.6
Gun fired, death	24	12.6	5	6.6
Gun fired, injury but seriousness unknown	3	1.6	2	2.6
Gun fired, injury status unknown	8	4.3	1	1.3
Total	200		76	

Table 5 are the vulnerabilities that respondents (and/or their opponents for that matter) faced when confronted, unarmed, by an armed attacker. Group gun violence was very dangerous because of the increased number of potential people shooting and potential targets that could be injured. We calculated correlations between respondent gun possession, peer gun possession, and cooffending in gun events. The correlations were moderately statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level.

Next, we examined the experiences of the 16 respondents who reported that none of their friends had guns to see if their involvement in serious gun violence differed in meaningful ways than the enmeshed counterparts. These cases are interesting, in that, only two reported a gun event in which their peers were involved as cooffenders. The 15 respondents reported a total of 21 violent and 5 near-violent events: 7 involved no weapon, 8 involved a knife or blade, and 11 involved a gun. Peers were present in 75% of these events. Besides getting involved in the violence, peers watched the respondents' back, broke up the dispute, verbally escalated the conflict, or ran away for self-protection. Of the 15, most respondents, despite not being part of a network of gun-involved peers, had guns themselves, reported using guns in crime, and had been arrested for a gun-related offense.

Beyond the numbers, we analyzed the narrative for insights into the nuances of how the peer context shapes violence. In the first example, both the respondent's friends and

the opponent's friends played roles in the violence process. Individuals on both sides of the conflict promoted the use of violence. According to the respondent, the crowd was "rowdy" and gave specific instructions to inflict harm on its opponent; these comments registered with the respondent. JP described how others were involved:

Interviewer: So umm, did any of your . . . did any of his people get involved with it as soon as he and you walked outside?

JP: Yeah. All his . . . he was with all his boys. I was with a couple a niggas. That's why he was acting rowdy. 'Cause he was with his peoples.

Interviewer: So your peoples from your crew?

JP: Yeah, my boys was telling me "shoot the nigga. Slice him, stab him." Shit was running through my mind.

Interviewer: So how 'bout his peoples?

JP: Yeah, you know, they were shouting shit out. "Just shoot that cat."

Interviewer: How you was feeling when your peoples was instigating?

JP: I was gonna do it. Cops pulled up too quick.

Housing authority police officers disrupted the initial event; the combatants fled the scene to avoid arrest. The conflict later continued and intensified into a shootout between the opposing sides. In the subsequent incident, previously uninvolved third parties become actively engaged as cooffenders in the "retaliatory" gun event.

Interviewer: So what happened when they left? They broke out?

JP: Yeah, they broke out. We just . . . we broke out too. But we caught the niggas the next day.

Interviewer: Hmm. Y'all caught them the next day. What you mean?

JP: Yeah, we caught 'em like I said. We went back over there the next day. With a bigger crew. We just—we did what we had to do.

Interviewer: So when y'all went back, what y'all—what y'all . . . you say? You went back with a stronger crew?

JP: Yeah, we saw them out there. We rolled up on them. We just flipped on them. So everybody bugged the fuck out.

Interviewer: So everybody got violent?

JP: Yeah. We pulled out on them. They pulled out too.

Interviewer: Oh, so y'all had a shootout? The next day?

JP: Yeah.

Interviewer: So umm, this shootout—anybody got hurt?

JP: Yeah. Yeah, the kid that I was fighting with; I'm saying he got shot in the chest.

Robberies, for example, often involved groups of young men as cooffenders. One respondent described a robbery of a drug spot that did not unfold the way the group had planned—it became a robbery-turned-shootout. First, Travis described "the robbery plan," then he described the actual encounter. Note the very detailed account of his thought processes during the event:

Interviewer: What happened?

Travis: Well, somebody got shot and shit, the man and shit. We went up in there and shit and . . . do you want to hear exactly what happened?

Interviewer: Yeah. Yeah.

Travis: Alright. I had the ‘Bama. The shit was in Queens. We went over there, we parked there. This kid was setting up the plan and shit, me and my man. My man had .45 and I had a .32 and shit. So the kid, he just told us the plan. “You go in there, tell ‘em Dan sent you, and tell ‘em this and that” and shit. So me, as being Spanish, should have an advantage, for I could talk my Spanish and shit, boom boom bam. And since them being Spanish too and shit, know I could blend in and they give me a little more.

According to Travis, this was the first time he took a leading role in setting up an exchange with a victim. He described being nervous and worrying about how his performance, if inadequate, would affect his standing back in the neighborhood. Travis was reluctant to carry out his mission and described his behavior as procrastination. His actions were determined in part by cues he received during the event from his partner:

Travis: So I went up. We went up in there and shit. It was a record shop, a regular shop. Fat Colombia man in the front and shit, bitch in the back. So when we went up in there we like, “yo what’s up?” and shit, and I’m waiting for the people to leave and shit. So he like, “what’s up?” and shit, you know. That’s when I stepped in and started kicking my Spanish, *yo quiero un viento cinco*, it’s a one twenty–five, a hundred and twenty–five. So he was like, “umm, alright, who sent you?” and shit, so I said “Dan” and shit. So he started getting suspicious. So he was like “all right put it right here.” So he went to the back, I guess he made a phone call. So he came back. And [my partner] was like, “umm, man, damn, set it off. Set it off.” My man wanted me to set it off and shit [perform the criminal act] but I was procrastinating, so he waited.

Interviewer: You was nervous?

Travis: . . . yeah I ain’t gonna front. I was kinda nervous and shit. So we waited for a little second ‘cause I wanted him to set if off, if he wouldn’t have set it off no matter what, which I had to. That was the . . . it was the destiny I had to do it. I wasn’t going back to the projects, “ahh, he fronted!” so I had to do it. So I was just waiting for them and shit.

The respondent described waiting for the right moment, but then being forced into action when someone else entered the room, and his partner ordered him to act. At that point, Travis took a more aggressive position:

Travis: So we waited . . . waited. All a sudden another man came. When the other man came my man was like, “fuck, you gotta do it now and shit!” So another man came, my man pulled out click. When he pulls out I pulls out. Put the shit to the fat Colombian nigga head, so I searched him. Boom pulled out, he had a nine . . . nine-shot Taurus. [I] pulled it out put it in my, umm, pouch. I had a, umm, Columbia windbreaker type shit. So we backed him down and shit run him to the back. So when we brought him to the back my man was deep inside shit. So you know I’m like—look I could see the front door and shit from the back of the, umm, store. So my man backing him down. My man just start, “fuck that, where the fucking money at?” shit like that. So, all of a sudden I just heard some motion-type shit. “Oh shut up, ‘this and that and shit.” So I hear shot,

Bow, so I said “ahh fuck it. I got to shoot somebody or shit.” So I shot the nigga. I had him down on the wall so I shot him, but I shot him in the leg though, bow, bow, twice and shit, and I ran. When I ran and shit I left, you know, I—mistakenly I left my man and shit. I should not did that, so I—when I was leaving the door and shit, I turn around, you know. My man call me, he’s like “yo son.” I turn around see my man get on the floor. This fat motherfucker shot him in the leg and shit. So I run back and shit. When I run back I shoot the nigga two times in the back ba bow. My man get up and shit, you know. A clip fell out the gun and shit, like, damn, so we running out the store and shit. We get in the car and jet. After that we was doing more shit though, man.

The respondent described this event as the beginning of a series of stick-ups of corner stores. This situation clearly was a learning experience for him. One of his primary concerns was how others, both at the scene and back in the neighborhood, would view him after this incident.

Retaliation by Cooffending

One common practice was *retaliation by cooffending*. Often fights that were initially one-on-one resulted in the loser of that fight retaliating with one or more cooffenders (also often with guns). Nick had a one-on-one fight over a girl that he lost that resulted in him retaliating with his brother by jumping the opponent. The opponent then returned to their block with two cars of his people, causing Nick’s side to open fire on the opponents. The *instrumental perspective* states that cooffending is chosen when it is expected to be easier and more rewarding (Weerman, 2003). This was seen in the previous example. The respondent likely found it easier to retaliate with a cooffender than solo (even though the original fight was one-on-one). In other instances, like later on in Nick’s story, the need for cooffenders seemed more justifiable. When the opponents came looking for them with a large group, the respondent admitted being scared. Nick said, “I was scared to death; I was scared out of my socks.” Cooffending seemed to make sense in the later case in that it was easier and safer.

Also along the lines of retaliation as well as *social rewards* (Weerman, 2003) as mentioned previously, retaliation was often done with a group and with a weapon. Perhaps sometimes respondents were attempting to save or gain a certain reputation and thus saw cooffending with weapons as the best way to ensure their success and the subsequent social rewards of reputation and respect.

Other “Hoods” and Cooffending

Other examples where respondents felt cooffending was necessary, if not mandatory, occurred when respondents traveled to other neighborhoods. Often times respondents mentioned that they were carrying weapons and/or traveling in groups because they were in a neighborhood that was not their own. In one example, Norman was confronted by his opponent and verbally assaulted. Instead of reacting,

he deflected the opponent's comments, left the scene, and arranged for the opponent to come to his neighborhood later. The fight which escalated to a shoot-out then took place between cooffenders on both sides.

Initially cooffending might not have seemed to be mandatory in this situation as the opponent approached the respondent alone. However, simply being in the opponent's neighborhood apparently gave the respondent reason to feel that if he was facing danger, he would be better off not facing alone.

Social Exchange

Aspects of cooffending as social exchange were also evident in the New York City Youth Violence Study data. In one case, Ben came across a man who had stolen his hat as a child and decided to rob him in retaliation. Although a portion of the gains were material, the majority were not. The respondent and his boys "roughed up" the opponent; they pistol-whipped him and took his pants making him run home in his underwear. This was clearly more about revenge and humiliation than it was about material rewards. Ben said, "I had nothing to lose and I gained everything." His friends' coinvolvement in the brutality of this event heightened Ben's assessment that justice was restored.

Influence(s) on Gun Carrying

Most respondents did not appear to be influenced by peers to carry guns to gain social recognition or reputation. On the contrary, the majority of respondents seemed to carry weapons for protection. Often respondents would not carry guns but would go get them when conflicts arose. For example, Caleb reported about an event that happened that interpreted his basketball game. Someone informed him that his cousin was about to be jumped. He then went home, got his gun, and went to confront the opponents. Similarly, Keith was hanging out with his friends when they noticed a car continually riding by with the people inside glaring at them. Seeing this as suspicious, the group went and got their guns. Keith reported, "We found it suspicious . . . and our suspicions were just right We shot at them and they shot back." When asked what they were trying to accomplish, the respondent said, "Our safety, in our own neighborhood . . . just trying to make sure that he don't come back around our neighborhood."

The peer pressure that influences gun violence is not one about fitting in but rather one very much related to safety. While peers may influence each other to carry weapons, it often seemed to be more in the form of a *kill or be killed* manner than a sign of status, reputation, or being "down." Keith argued that he got a gun and preemptively attacked "cause if we wouldn't have had shot first, we would have got shot at."

Also along the same lines, many respondents decided to carry a gun, or carry one more often, after being involved in a violent event. They voiced concerns about

anticipated retaliation and apprehension for encountering similar conflicts again. After being involved in a random shoot-out, Michael reported that he has his girlfriend carry his gun in her purse. He was certain that the shooting was a case of mistaken identity but reported heightened concerns for his safety after the incident. After Deshawn was in a fair fight (with no weapons involved), he still felt the need to carry his gun. Similarly, Theo was robbed and subsequently retaliated with his friends (cooffenders) by shooting the opponent several times. Theo stated that he carried his gun more often after the event.

Often times cooffending happened based on the presence or availability of cooffenders as Weerman (2003) stated. It seemed that more spontaneous unplanned offenses were more likely to be committed solo, whereas the more calculated retaliation were committed with cooffenders. This pattern was likely not only because cooffenders were available but also because their presence ensured easier or more likely success.

Conclusions

This study adds to the growing literature on patterns of gun possession, carrying, and use among urban youth by focusing on the role of the peer context in shaping gun-related behaviors. Despite much evidence on the group nature of violent delinquency, there is still a paucity of research on the group processes in violent offending. We originally hypothesized that embeddedness in friendship clusters of youth who were comparatively more involved in gun-related behaviors would distinguish degrees of involvement in gun violence for respondents. Most of the sample reported multiple types of involvement in gun-related behaviors, *and* they were deeply enmeshed in networks of peers, who from their perspective were also deeply involved in gun-related behaviors and other crimes. Cooffending in violent events appears to be situational as particular features of the situation are more likely to result in the coparticipation of peers in violent events.

This study adds to the existent knowledge on the peer contexts of violent delinquency and offers insights to the study of cooffending, particularly with regard to gun violence. The peer context, like the neighborhood environment, shapes the cognitive landscape of urban adolescents in particular ways. With cross-sectional data, we are unable to distinguish the direction of influence of peers on gun-related behaviors. We are clearly able to document the processes by which peers became engaged in violence as cooffenders in particular events. The original study was not on cooffending, although it was concerned with understanding the roles of third parties in the situational dynamics of youth violence and how the peer context influenced youth studied. There are several limitations to the present study, which future research should seek to improve on. Respondents' accounts of

their neighborhood and violent experiences are taken at face value. Although the validity of such interview data will always be open to criticism, we carefully scrutinized the data for internal consistency. For example, in the event narratives, the presence and involvement of third parties is discovered in multiple ways making cross-checking possible. The interviewers also challenged respondents during the interview when obvious inconsistencies emerged. The interviews included here are the cases in which the narratives were deemed to be internally consistent, and those judged to be problematic were excluded (33 in all). Certain facts were checked during the flow of the interview. The precision of these narratives probably matter less than demonstrating a general consistency across multiple sections of the interview. The present study focused only on African American, Puerto Rican, and multiracial inner-city males who were, or had been, violent offenders. The study results are neither generalizable to other racial/ethnic groups nor necessarily representative of all youth in the study neighborhoods. The study was cross-sectional and did not follow-up with youth over a period of time. Future work should also examine the experiences of young women and youth generally who have not engaged in violent behavior, and attention should be focused on those younger than 16.

Finally, there are some policy implications of the present study. First, though it is hardly groundbreaking, some neighborhoods have extremely high rates of exposure to violence, and the mere concentration effects suggest that approaches to reduce exposure should be based at the neighborhood level. Peer influence must be understood as a developmental context much in the same way as family or neighborhoods. Despite documented high rates of community violence in many American cities, very few services are available to assess or treat associated mental health and social/emotional development problems among youth navigating those dangerous spaces. Without such resources, youth may rely more heavily on their peer network for material, emotional, and protective support. Second, even given neighborhood conditions that foster violence, events often only occur or are prevented because of a confluence of circumstances, such as the role of peers and bystanders. Increasing the opportunities for prosocial interactions or somehow underscoring the positive interventions of peers can also go some way toward reducing violent events. More specifically, since many conflicts resemble contests of character among primary actors, attention should be paid to identify ways to deescalate conflict in ways that allow both sides to save face. Finally, the presence of guns cannot be overlooked, and although efforts at gun control have largely failed to reduce the amount and use of firearms in many neighborhoods, more resources should be devoted to gun suppression specifically targeted toward youth. Breaking the youth gun culture will not result from programs that target individual youth while ignoring the powerful influences of peers (and other contextual factors such as neighborhood dynamics).

Note

1. QSR NUD*IST (Version 6.0, Melbourne) and QSR NVIVO 8.0 are commercially available relational database programs for qualitative data analysis.

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