



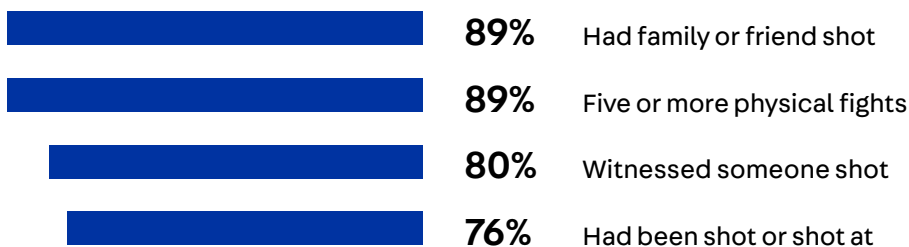
“Two Battlefields” Opps, Cops, and NYC Gun Culture

Our study of young gun-carriers in Brooklyn, New York, identifies fear—fear of one’s own death or the death of one’s family members—as the overwhelming factor behind the decision to carry. In-depth interviews with 103 gun-carriers, ages 15 to 24, found shocking levels of exposure to violence among participants and near-universal experiences of physical harm and trauma. Under constant threat—from other gun-carriers as well as from police—and with virtually no ties to the mainstream economy, participants describe gun-carrying as a form of resilience in a world with vanishingly few options. Researchers with personal connections to participants’ social networks conducted the interviews, opening up levels of trust and honesty found in very little prior research.

Experiences of Violence

Participants—primarily Black men—described witnessing and experiencing violence at alarming rates. The vast majority had friends or family members who had been shot, and most had come under fire themselves.

These experiences fostered an atmosphere of unpredictable violence, forcing many participants to become hypervigilant. For the majority, **fear for their own lives (75%) or for their families (72%) was the primary reason for carrying a gun.** Both police and “opps”—rival gang members, adversaries, and other potential threats—were the main sources of this fear.



« *My biggest fear is somebody coming for me and they can’t get to me. They try to get to my family.*

Structural Violence

On top of immediate physical danger, participants identified a lack of economic opportunity and absence of police protection as major reasons for carrying. Only a small fraction had access to stable work in the mainstream economy, with most relying on informal “hustles”—like drug dealing and scams—to make ends meet. The inherent dangers of the underground economy drove many participants to carry a gun for protection.

Police were widely seen as threatening figures, and as slow to respond when their help was needed. In fact, 35% cited fear of police as a reason they carried guns. Crucially, neither aggressive policing nor incarceration were seen as real deterrents.

« *I feel like if the police ain't going to protect us, who else is going to protect us besides ourself?*

Guns and Street Networks

More than half (61%) of participants had been part of a gang, crew, or street network of some kind. While involvement in a street network comes with risks—like conflicts with rival groups—it also served for many participants as an indispensable source of belonging, material support, and guidance. Decision-makers within street networks were found to have a large influence on many of these young people’s choices, including their gun use.

Guns and Social Media

Many participants (85%) described seeing videos of people being harmed on social media on a weekly basis, with nearly two-thirds seeing them daily. The pervasiveness of violence on social media added to participants’ sense of their own vulnerability, and many felt that social media played a role in heightening the tensions that lead to gun use.

Four Types of Gun-Carriers

Participants in our study talked about four distinct kinds of gun-carriers in Brooklyn. Some carry strictly **for protection**, and are usually ambivalent about using guns. Others **carry for image**, in an attempt to intimidate or impress others. A third type carries protectively as part

of **street hustles** that can involve them in risky situations. Finally, **shooters**—described by participants as being the least common—are offensive gun-carriers, willing to shoot others whom they perceive as threats.

Recommendations for Policy and Programs

- **Engage decision-makers within street networks:** Street networks are the primary source of community and loyalty for many young gun-carriers, with a unique ability to influence culture around gun use. Engaging decision-makers within local gangs, crews, and street networks in designing and implementing programs—and hiring them as salaried program staff when appropriate—is a vital next step for the gun violence prevention field.
- **Build on existing community support systems:** Young people, their social networks, and their communities already have ways of pooling resources, sharing them out, and lending each other forms of support. Rather than starting from scratch, programs can tap into these existing support networks to distribute resources and support longer-lasting community development.
- **Provide opportunities for healing:** Young gun-carriers are survivors of extensive trauma, with roots in both interpersonal and structural violence. Programs and policies need to offer them tools for healing in spaces where they feel comfortable, safe, and supported.
- **Reduce reliance on law enforcement:** Given widespread fear of police, programs with a police component make it almost impossible for young people to begin healing from the extensive trauma they encounter. Minimizing law enforcement’s role can help programs provide the kinds of emotional and physical safety young gun-carriers need to heal in the long term.

« *I’m not trying to kill nobody. I’m not a killer.*

For More Information

Contact Elise White: ewhite@innovatingjustice.org

Full report: innovatingjustice.org/twobattlefields