

GUN ACQUISITION AND USE BY JUVENILES:

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

by

DIANE MARANO

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written under the direction of

Daniel Thomas Cook

and approved by

Daniel T. Cook

Michelle L. Meloy

Jane A. Siegel

Lauren J. Silver

Camden, New Jersey

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Dissertation Director:

Daniel Thomas Cook

This dissertation examines why and how juvenile males acquire illegal guns, as well as how they use guns, and their feelings about gun violence. Gun violence by juveniles inflicts serious harm on victims, and often destroys the lives of the offenders themselves. Yet little is known about the social and personal circumstances surrounding a youth's first encounters with firearms, or how these events affect subsequent criminal activity. This project explored how these young men viewed themselves, their worlds, and the role of guns in their lives, through interviews with offenders in the custody of the New Jersey Juvenile Justice Commission. I used a phenomenological approach intended to elicit detailed descriptions that would make possible the construction of theory grounded in the realities and perceptions of the youth themselves. I found that the participants in this study viewed guns as serving multiple purposes in their lives. The young men faced many social and economic challenges, and often considered gun possession and use to be adaptive responses to their circumstances. The primary pathway to gun acquisition

described by participants was through entry into illegal street activities that exposed the young men to a perceived increased risk of violent victimization, beyond that which pervaded their neighborhoods as a whole. While participants generally reported their initial gun acquisition to be for purposes of protection or defense, many eventually exploited the gun's potential as a weapon of aggression, particularly for armed robbery, enforcing control over drug-selling territory, or street fighting. Money was among the stated motivations for at least some of the illegal activities of virtually all participants. Many expressed a desire to provide for their own needs and wants in order to decrease the financial burden on their struggling mothers. Participants viewed guns as useful for protection, for economic gain, for acquiring or maintaining respect, for feeling powerful, and for enjoyment as consumer objects. My hope is that insights gained through this research might advance prevention, intervention, and rehabilitation efforts.

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Introduction: Making meaning from guns

Boys in the urban streets have long been conceptualized as both “dangerous” and “in danger” (Oswell 2013:143). As early as 1855, David Oswell (2013:147) has found, an observer in the United Kingdom summarized the agency of the city delinquent as follows: “[H]e can take care of his own immediate interests. He is self-reliant, he has so long directed or mis-directed his own actions . . . that he submits to no control and asks no protection.” At the same time, his self-reliance was seen as the product of his vulnerability, in that he took care of his own needs because adults failed to do so.

This Dickensian image represents the reverse of the vaunted “protected childhood” of Victorian England. Even at that time, as Oswell suggests, “Certain parts of the city were seen to be outside of society and civilisation” (2013:141). A century and a half later in the United States, certain parts of many cities are still viewed as “other worlds”, and now such places are additionally marked off as sectors where poor persons of color live apart from more privileged sectors of society. This combination of race, place, and absence of privilege (Squires & Kubrin 2005) exacerbates the “otherness” of the boys and young men who, now as then, largely continue to take care of their own immediate interests in inner-city neighborhoods. When they are armed with guns, these young men come to represent an alien and fearsome group. The fact that they are in danger, as well as dangerous, often serves only to incline many to give both them and their surroundings a wide berth.

Much has been written about juvenile male gun offenders, but few researchers have talked with them to learn about how they view themselves and their worlds. This study explores how young Black men make, narrate and conceive of their identities and life trajectories after they have been incarcerated for gun-related offences. Through the

use of qualitative research interviews with these young men, and drawing upon symbolic interactionism, phenomenology and insights from criminal justice studies, I investigate various ways in which guns, including the process of gun acquisition, have come to serve as an “actor” and symbol in their life worlds. The term life world, sometimes written “life-world”, especially in translation, is a term often used in discussions of phenomenology to describe the realm of subjective phenomena that make up a person’s lived experience (Husserl 1970:111). As the study is built around incarcerated young men and guns, it is both physically and theoretically situated in a juvenile delinquency context, necessarily thereby drawing upon the scholarship in this area, as well as research in victimology. In recent years, criminology has begun to make use of symbolic interactionism to theorize violent events (Wilkinson & Fagan 2001; Wilkinson 2003). Yet David Farrington and Brandon Welsh noted in 2007 that the point at which the risk or potentiality for crime becomes an actuality in a given situation remains understudied (Farrington & Welsh, 2007:19). What is missing from most accounts of gun acquisition and use is the perspective of the “offenders” themselves; that is, how and why they acquired guns, what they did with them and how “the gun,” as a cultural-phenomenological object, resides in the relationships and social spaces of their lives. Making use of interpretive approaches and ethnographic material remains a central feature of childhood studies, as Myra Bluebond-Langner and Jill Korbin (2007) point out, as does anthropology’s long-standing orientation toward both emic views and multivocality (Bluebond-Langner & Korbin 2007:241). While not strictly an ethnographic study, I have incorporated the many voices and affective dimensions of the

participants in the hope that conveying multiple perspectives will enrich the portrayal of their worlds.

Talking about guns

As I prepared to begin this project, several people outside the academy offered their predictions concerning what I would find about juvenile gun acquisition and use. A man who worked in the juvenile court said, “I think you’ll find it’s the parents”. A woman who had been a juvenile detective in Atlanta suggested that young men use guns “to feel powerful”. After twenty-five years as a criminal prosecutor in Camden, New Jersey, I too had some thoughts about what Peter Woods called the “inputs and outputs” associated with the area I intended to study (Woods 1992:340). What I was interested in, however, were the processes; that is, opening up what Woods called the “black box” of how and why young men acquired and used guns.

One reason for my interest was that there seemed to be consensus among not only academics and stakeholders in the juvenile justice system, but also among young offenders themselves and even the public at large, that the most likely outcomes of juvenile gun possession and use were incarceration, injury, or death. Moreover, many young men who had been released after a period of incarceration, intending never to return, did in fact return to juvenile or adult facilities to serve another term for a similar offense. In view of such a widely shared discourse concerning the negative outcomes often attending juvenile gun acquisition and use, I wanted to understand what had drawn these incarcerated young men to this type of activity.

This project aims to explore how participants experienced and viewed their worlds. While the study is focused on their nexus with guns, participants shared,

sometimes obliquely, the shame of being poor, the discomfort of being a young man dependent on a struggling woman, and how they suppressed feelings of empathy in order to commit armed robberies. Thus, feelings about money, family relationships, and interpersonal violence are also an important part of this study. In attending to the voices of the young men as they described their worlds, I attempted to understand how guns acquired meaning in their lives, and what implications those meanings had for their developing identities and life trajectories.

In pursuing this problem of youth gun acquisition, I ask: What were the circumstances surrounding the offender's first encounters with a gun? In what ways did guns figure into the everyday lives of the youths, both in family relations as well as peer relations? How did the young men explain or narrate their experiences and feelings of using a gun or being confronted by somebody wielding one?

I discovered that there were many facets to participants' gun use. Indeed, for many of the problems that these young men faced, guns seemed to be the solution. Guns seem to carry a broad range of meanings and uses that spoke to challenges the young men faced in their life worlds. Participants in search of a wide variety of different things--money, protection, respect, fun, and excitement--all looked to guns and found what they were looking for. Many of these realms were linked together and nested within each other, as I learned, connecting in ways that reinforced the utility and symbolism of the gun in their lives.

In the economic realm, the support of fathers was generally absent, and children were raised in female-headed households that struggled to get by. This circumstance often pushed participants into the role of the man of the house, with the perceived

obligation to provide financially which that role traditionally entails. When combined with the paucity of legal jobs nearby and the modest returns from the jobs that were available, the wish to make money often drew young men into the illicit economy of the streets, especially selling drugs and committing robberies. A gun became a useful tool in these income-producing enterprises.

In the social realm participants, like other young people, sought an acceptable social identity. Such an identity required that they have not simply clothes to cover their bodies, but the right clothes and other accoutrements that would demonstrate that they were persons with dignity, despite, or even more because of, their impoverished setting. Participants were both income-producers and consumers who needed and wanted various things, including guns. They viewed guns not only as useful tools, but also as sources of enjoyment in their own right and as powerful symbols in their presentations of self. Respect, as Elijah Anderson (1999) and others have shown, is a valuable asset in the streets, and guns often meant respect. Guns thus functioned both as a means to something else and as an end in themselves, as consumer objects.

I argue that participants illustrated Herbert Blumer's (1969) thesis that people can occupy the same physical spaces, and yet be living in totally different worlds. These young men described a sort of parallel universe where young men not involved in street activities would have no need for a gun, while their neighbors who were involved in such activities would "need" one. Outside observers insensitive to the contexts and circumstances of these young men might view these neighborhoods as uniformly dangerous territories in a somewhat monolithic or undifferentiated way. Participants, on

the other hand, tended to perceive and describe nuanced, varying levels of risk of violent victimization depending upon their degree of involvement in delinquent activities.

It is not surprising that different research methods should support different kinds of inquiry, and that the in-depth qualitative research interview is one of the ways to learn how people account for how and why they did certain things, and what world views support these accounts. A phenomenological approach and a symbolic interactionist stance make it possible to see how dissimilar interactions, associates, and activities constructed different life worlds for different young men, or even for the same young men at different times in their lives. The adolescent schoolboy who solely went about his daily home and school routine may have had little relevance to the boy in the streets, as they did not interact in any meaningful way. The meaningful actors for the boy in the streets were the others who were in the streets and hence, due to his particular interactions, associations, and activities, the gun arose as a “need”. Conversely, it was because of the absence of meaningful interactions with these street actors that the schoolboy did not feel the need for a gun, despite their sharing the same geographical space. Participants accordingly described how their perception of risk changed over time, resulting in a feeling that they needed a gun as they moved into the street lifestyle not merely because of “random” street violence, often touted in media accounts and everyday discourse, but rather to protect themselves from specific and often known and knowable others. Through detailed and sensitive attention to their views, their life world, these young men arise not as undifferentiated, young, Black and male “others”, but as active and actively engaged and knowing social actors who assessed the increased risks that accompanied their street activities and adjusted themselves accordingly. It is this shift in

perspective, from observer to actor, that I have strived to accomplish in this study so as to provide novel and important angles on and voices to the street violence and gun use.

Moreover, as the gun use of some participants evolved from defensive to aggressive uses, several felt themselves more and more likely to become victims of violence. These young men came to perceive that they were now targeted for violence in a more personal way, as they believed others might wish to retaliate against them. In this sense, a gun initially acquired for protection could contribute to making a participant even more vulnerable, depending upon how the participant used it—a cycle which provides its own momentum.

Because a phenomenological approach seeks an understanding of experience from the first-person perspective, it was also well suited to exploring the embodied experience and sense of self entailed by having or not having a gun. Participants described a range of views regarding how guns made them feel about themselves and their relationship to the world. Some embraced guns as central to their identities, while others problematized the nexus between their guns and their identities, explicitly rejecting any connection and emphasizing that a gun was nothing more to them than a tool. The pathway to gun acquisition and use was often understood by participants as a pathway out of various negative aspects of their environments, including material deprivation, feelings of powerlessness and dependence, and the tedium that accompanied inner-city poverty. At the same time, this pathway could also lead participants into a realm of even greater risks and grave consequences. But beyond gun use in particular, participants also described how violence in general had many meanings and functions in their lives.

Contributions of this study

The primary contribution of this study is to show how young gun offenders viewed their worlds and the place of guns in their worlds, as explained by the young men themselves. This study provides a detailed description of the process of juvenile gun acquisition, illuminating not only how, but why, these young men obtained guns. It shows that guns are multivalent objects for participants, and that the experience of gun possession includes an element of embodiment, which may give rise to the incorporation of the gun into the young person's view of himself. The study also demonstrates that participants experienced their environments not as places where everyone is equally at risk of violent victimization, but rather as places where the level of risk is largely dependent upon whether one participates in what these young men call "the street lifestyle". This research contributes to our understanding of violent offending by juveniles, as participants who perpetrated crimes such as armed robbery described how they suppressed any feelings of empathy for their victims in order to accomplish their objectives. This study sheds light on family and community dynamics of vulnerability, interdependence, and responsibility, to show how age, gender, and economic stress coalesce to push and pull participants into a place where gun possession seems sensible. At the same time, it reveals participants as young people who are interested in consumption, in having fun and excitement, and in presenting themselves to their peers in an acceptable way.

Chapters, pathways, and directionality

Several concepts recur throughout the chapters, including the familiar developmental oppositions of vulnerability and agency, dependence and independence,

and irresponsibility and responsibility. In the life worlds of the participants, these domains, typically conceptualized as continua on the road to adulthood, become somewhat skewed. These adolescents responded to their perceived vulnerability by acquiring guns, a strategy that often succeeded, at least in the short term, in converting their feelings of vulnerability into feelings of agency. With one exception, however, the vulnerability that prompted their gun acquisition was born out of their illegal activities in the street, a form of delinquent agency that was itself, I argue, a response to various types of vulnerability that participants experienced in their environments. Participants often dealt with the discomfort of being dependent on financially-stressed parents by seeking a measure of financial independence in the illegal economy of drugs, theft, or robbery. Sometimes they viewed this course of action as acting responsibly, albeit illegally, whether they were providing for many of their own needs and wants or contributing to the support of the household at large. The fact that their parents might accept these financial contributions could only reinforce such a view. In these ways, participants' life worlds constrained and enabled their courses of action, permitting the creation of social and economic spaces in which they could feel competent, somewhat independent, and relatively responsible. These young men were growing and learning in ways that they viewed, at the time, as adaptive, but they were hardly doing so along the conventional path to adult agency, independence, and responsibility. Rather, their pathways typically led first to the streets, then to gun possession, and then, for some, to aggressive gun use. Finally, each one's path brought him to a term of incarceration, where they paused long enough for us to meet.

Chapter One situates this study in the context of its theoretical foundations, primarily in the areas of identity theory and juvenile delinquency. It reviews some of the relevant research in these fields, and touches on the history of guns in American popular culture in order to provide some background for both etic and emic views of guns and gun use. Chapter Two outlines how I went about this research project, as well as the theoretical foundations of the methods used. The structure of the next four chapters can be viewed in terms of Margaret Beale Spencer's Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST) (1993:133). Chapter Three describes the risks and challenges of participants' environments, their encounters with various stressors, and some of the ways that they adapted to these challenges. In particular, it outlines how participants were drawn to the street life. Chapter Four focuses on gun acquisition as a particular reactive coping strategy employed by participants, generally in response to the challenges of the street lifestyle. It discusses how participants came to decide that they needed or wanted guns, and how they acquired them. It also describes their embodied experience of having a gun, and how participants viewed that experience either as influencing or not influencing their views of themselves. Chapter Five describes how some participants moved from using a gun for protection to using a gun more aggressively. In terms of Spencer's PVEST, it describes the stable coping responses of a particular subset of those participants who acquired guns, and discusses how these participants narrated their emergent identities as gun offenders. The chapter discusses the unfolding of several violent events, and explores participants' feelings about their violent offending. Chapter Six considers several outcomes of the street lifestyle, including being shot. It thus conceptualizes embracing the street lifestyle as a reactive coping strategy that may lead to

specific negative outcomes. It also looks more broadly at how participants and some researchers have viewed the implications of gun involvement in particular and street activities in general, and examines what these incarcerated participants believed might have prevented them from taking this path. Chapter Seven concludes the discussion by summarizing the relevance of Spencer's PVEST to the data, discussing some of the main findings, and exploring several policy and intervention implications of these findings. Finally, I detail some limitations of the research and suggest some directions for future projects.

Such outcomes, of course, are by no means inevitable or universal for young men from similar environments. This group of incarcerated participants, however, described their pathways as having a certain directionality that, while not chronological, included a series of contextually-structured decisions that channeled their actions to a place where, as several put it, "we are having this conversation." Those contexts, decisions, actions, and conversations are the subject of the chapters that follow.

Chapter One

Literature Review: Concepts and Contexts for Juvenile Gun Offending

In spite of decreases in the levels of gun violence in recent decades, gun violence by juvenile males continues to inflict serious harm on individual victims, society at large, and the lives of the young offenders themselves. While there is a considerable body of knowledge documenting predisposing risk factors, the moment when a youth first decides to pick up or use a gun has not been as well researched. In order to improve interventions at all levels, we need a better understanding of the processes by which young people come to acquire and use guns, and of what guns mean to them.

We know that young people who acquire and use guns illegally often live in different environments from those who do not. Existing research tells us that contexts of poverty, race, gender, and living in a dangerous environment inform how youth understand and attach meaning to guns and gun possession. Little is known, however, about the social and personal circumstances surrounding a youth's first encounter with firearms and how these may affect subsequent criminal activity. To shed more light on these experiences, I conducted a qualitative study based on semi-structured interviews with incarcerated juvenile gun offenders regarding the conditions under which they first acquired and used a firearm. The object of the study was to gain the offenders' perspectives concerning what aspects of their worlds prompted them to acquire a firearm. I also explored the effects of gun possession and use upon participants' views of themselves and of their surroundings. This chapter discusses some of the literature in the areas of juvenile delinquency, identity theory, and what might be called gun culture that helps to frame this study. It also touches upon the possible effects of various types of victimization on children's and adolescents' pathways into offending.

Theoretical Foundations and Existing Research

Much research on delinquency provides an aggregate picture of the potentiality for offending. Conversely, resilience studies have examined at-risk adolescents who avoid delinquent behavior. David Farrington and Brandon Welsh (2007:19) note, however, that the point at which the risk or potentiality for crime becomes an actuality in a given situation remains understudied and hence opaque. Deanna Wilkinson and Jeffrey Fagan (2001) have introduced a theory of violent events that takes an interactionist approach, examining the development of the violent event from the perspective of the adolescent actor, where the decision to engage in violent behavior is actually made. Their analysis of adolescent violence as a dynamic event, with multiple choices and decisions leading to the final outcome, invited close examination of the situated experiences of individual gun offenders.

Wilkinson described the study upon which her theory of violent events was based in her 2003 book, *Guns, Violence, and Identity among African American and Latino Youth*. That study provides a point of departure for the current study, as Wilkinson used symbolic interactionism to focus primarily upon decisions young men made when they were “armed and angry” (Wilkinson 2003:251). She comprehensively catalogued the different types of violence in which a group of young men from New York engaged. The youth interviewed by Wilkinson’s helpers were not then incarcerated but were demographically similar to the participants in the current study, with the exception that a larger proportion was Latino. Among many other important findings, Wilkinson learned, through what she called “event-level analysis”, that impression management designed to achieve “a highly valued social identity” was behind much of the violent activity of these

young men (Wilkinson 2003:25, 225-226, 249). With regard to gun acquisition, however, Wilkinson stated the following: “Respondents provided limited detail on the exact methods of acquiring guns. The interviewers failed to effectively probe the topic to get beyond vague generalities about the topic” (Wilkinson 2003:56).

The current study explores gun acquisition in detail and extends Wilkinson’s use of symbolic interactionism in criminological research to domains frequently analyzed by scholars in the field of childhood studies, such as vulnerability and agency, dependence and independence, and responsibility and irresponsibility. I also explore guns as consumer objects and symbols, and exploit the advantages of a phenomenological approach to unpack participants’ descriptions of their feelings and other experiential matters.

Identities and Contexts

George Herbert Mead’s ideas, central to identity theory, encompass both individualistic and social theories of the self (Mead, 1934:222-226). He emphasized that, in order to become aware of himself as such, a person must become an object to himself, and “only by social means—only by taking the attitudes of others toward himself—is he able to become an object to himself” (1934:226). In this way, interactions with others become the basis of identity. The ideas of Charles Horton Cooley (1902) and Harry Stack Sullivan (1953) are often considered together with those of Mead, as Cooley spoke of the social self as “the reflected or looking-glass self” (Cooley, 1902/1964, 184), and Sullivan divided the self-system into “good-me” and “bad-me” (1953:161-162). The nature of the social interactions which play such a great role in identity development, however, are to a large extent not within the control of the individual, particularly in the

case of the young child and even the adolescent. For this reason, Sullivan points out that the outcome of adolescence “is so much a matter of accident”, often dependent on matters outside of the individual’s control, such as one’s socioeconomic status (1953:297-298). Sullivan stressed what he called the importance of opportunity, clearly a function of social structure, to an adolescent’s identity development.

Yet, Mead also emphasized the extent to which an individual controls his own environment, and thereby introduced a major role for the self-as-agent in identity development as well. Beginning with a discussion of other organisms, Mead pointed out that a being “selects and picks out what constitutes its environment” and only responds to that part of its environment to which it is sensitive (1934:244). He argued that “environment is in a very real sense determined by” the being that perceives it, and that environments therefore “exist in this selected character and as constructed in terms of possible responses” (1934:247). The individual’s identity is therefore, according to Mead, socially constructed in a very real sense, and the self-as-agent moves about in his socio-cultural context in such a way that only parts of the environment become parts of “his world”. Mead’s explanation shows why overly deterministic views of identity development are deficient, and why the mutual influence of the person and the environment on each other must be taken into account. As the participants in the current study describe the surroundings and persons that comprise their environments, the dynamic interplay among those elements which they did not select and those which they did select, within those constraints, becomes apparent. The selves that emerge from these thousands of interactions reflect how participants believe the world views them, how they view themselves, and how they view their worlds.

Ecological Systems Theory and Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory

Two related models are helpful in considering the influence of the environment on youth identity development. Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979) described nested spheres of influence extending out from the individual child, from the microsystems of his daily interactions in the family, neighborhood and peer group to the outermost reaches of the macrosystem, whence broad cultural and media forces exert their influence upon individual identity development. While some of the diagrams used to illustrate this theory may appear static, Rolf Muuss emphasized the phenomenological basis of Bronfenbrenner's theory, noting that it is both dynamic and mediated by the perceptions and perspectives of the individual at its center. Muuss pointed out that Bronfenbrenner viewed as an almost "immutable law" that "if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Muuss, 1999:321). As Muuss put it, "What matters psychologically speaking are not the objective properties as defined by physical reality, but the significance attached to these properties by the individual in that environment." Therefore, when considering Bronfenbrenner's nested systems, ranging from proximal systems such as the microsystem and mesosystem to the more distal processes of the exosystem and macrosystem, it is important to consider not only the influences of these systems on each other and on the adolescent, but also both the differential impact of the environment on different individuals, and the influence that the adolescent can have on these systems and on their relationships. (Except as the basis for Margaret Beale Spencer's Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory is not explicitly referenced again until the

concluding section, although the image of his nested spheres serves as a foundation for the entire discussion.)

Spencer (2003) made explicit both the phenomenological and the dynamic nature of the adolescent's interaction with the environment in her Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST). Building upon Bronfenbrenner's model, Spencer described the processes involved in human development as including five components (Spencer et al., 2003:132). These are the risk and protective factors in the environment, the net stress or engagement level, which may present challenges or supports to the adolescent, the reactive coping strategies used in the face of these stressors, which strategies may be either adaptive or maladaptive, the emergent identities, or stable coping responses, that begin to solidify as the person finds which strategies have the desired effect, and these can also be positive or negative, and, finally, coping outcomes, which may be either productive or unproductive (2003:133). She thus incorporates Mead's idea that in selecting among the possible responses to his environment, the individual constructs both his environment and, ultimately, his identity.

In exploring identity, the basic theoretical framework utilized in this study is Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979, 1993), as expanded upon by Margaret Beale Spencer's PVEST (2003). This framework provides a way to consider the effects of participants' ecologies at all levels, from the most localized to the broadest cultural influences, upon their identities and their actions. At the same time it is a dynamic model that takes into account the influence of identities and actions upon each other and upon ecologies. As will be seen, the directionality implicit in the primary pathway to gun acquisition and use described in this study in many ways maps onto the

components of Spencer's model. The directionality of this pathway is also congruent with a life course perspective, as gun acquisition and some types of gun use can be viewed as significant life events that may mark transitions affecting participants' trajectories (Sampson and Laub 1993:8).

Participants in the current study described the risks presented by their environments, the extent to which they were stressed by these various risks, and what coping strategies they used to deal with them. In their retrospective views, some participants continued to view their coping strategies as adaptive, while others believed another strategy might have been better. At the time, however, most participants found that their street activities provided more positive than negative outcomes, and therefore these ways of coping became characteristic for them. Of course, because of the research design, the eventual and then-prevailing outcome for all participants in the study was incarceration, but it is important to emphasize, as Spencer's model suggests, that neither this outcome nor the main pathway described in this study is inevitable or universal for young men from similar environments. Rather, the most that can be said is that, for this group of participants, a particular pathway to this outcome emerged from the interview data. Spencer's PVEST is well suited to framing a study that seeks to understand, from the perspectives of the participants, how and why they made certain decisions within the constraints of their environments. The multiple factors that influenced these young men, many of which were structural in nature, such as poverty, racism, consumerism, and meta-narratives about masculinity, violence, and guns, played out in innumerable interactions as participants navigated through family, neighborhood, school, and peer contexts. As they constructed their identities, these various "sphere influences" mediated

their decisions and choices about family roles, neighborhood comportment, peer selection, and whether they saw school as a place for them.

Elements of Youth Gun Involvement

Both adolescents and their gun involvement are multi-dimensional, but it is helpful to review existing research on gun involvement as it intersects with various identity categories individually before addressing participants in the round. Among the many factors that may influence the nature of a young person's interaction with others are gender, race or ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and popular culture.

Male gender and gun violence

According to the 2008 Uniform Crime Reports published by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, juvenile males continue to be arrested approximately ten times more frequently for weapons offenses than do juvenile girls, roughly the same proportion as in 1998 (Federal Bureau of Investigation, Table 33). A recent study of self-reported weapon carrying by 12 year-olds found a proportion of eight to one, with boys again predominating (Lewis, Leeb, et al., 2007, 263). Male gender is clearly among the strong predictors for juvenile weapons offending. Because this project focuses on the experience of males, the masculine pronoun will be used throughout.

Although males have long predominated both as victims and perpetrators of adolescent gun violence, it could be argued that only in recent years have criminologists and sociologists begun to theorize the gender gap in criminal offending in a persuasive way. Viewing masculine gender as a socially constructed identity, rather than as simply given by biology, has proved to be a fruitful avenue for the analysis of differing gender patterns in delinquent and criminal behavior. Raewyn Connell (2005) argues that various

“masculinities” are performed by men and boys, depending upon their differing social backgrounds. Some boys in socially powerless situations respond to their circumstances with “a claim to the gendered position of power, a pressured exaggeration . . . of masculine conventions” (2005:111). Connell singles out ethnic minority street gangs in the United States as a specific example of a collective form of this practice, where boys enter the gang milieu through the tensions “created by poverty and an ambience of violence.” By means of this collective performance, an adolescent boy makes “a claim to power where there are no real resources for power” (2005:111). An adolescent’s social context therefore will help to determine which of numerous “masculinities” he will enact. C. J. Pascoe (2007) argues that much adolescent male posturing entails the repeated repudiation of the specter of failed masculinity. Thus, a young man may achieve his masculine identity by showing what he is not—by engaging in aggressive performances designed to distance him from anything remotely understood as “feminine,” including being homosexual. In that way, he attempts to dispel any doubts, on the part of himself or others, that he is a manly male (Pascoe, 2007:65). In her discussion, Pascoe is careful to note that identifying typologies of male behavior, such as those she observed in the high school where she conducted her research, is not a substitute for analyzing power structures and relations. She emphasizes the need to avoid reified typologies that can distract researchers from developing a more nuanced view of masculinity (2007:8). Certainly, when studying young men of color who grew up in poverty, it is important to keep power structures and relations squarely in view. Moreover, in studying a group of incarcerated juvenile gun offenders who are all young men of color, it seems less important to identify typologies than to unpack those that are all too familiar.

Since a boy or young man must construct his masculine gender out of the social setting in which he lives, and with the resources available in that social setting, masculine gender identities will differ across class and race, or, as James Messerschmidt (1993) puts it, “boys will be boys, but differently” (1993:27-28, 87). Citing Erving Goffman to argue that gender is “done” and interactionally accomplished in situated ways (1993:79), Messerschmidt maintains that crime may provide a way of “doing masculinity” for boys to whom other resources or avenues of success, such as school or careers, appear closed (1993:85). Education theorists have argued that urban school contexts may leave young men of color alienated, adultified, and positioned as “bad” (Fine 1991; Ferguson 2000). Engaging in delinquent activity may be one of the most readily available ways in which to construct maleness.

Implicit in any analysis of how the child perceives his world is his perception of how the world views him (Cooley 1964:184). Among other things, this reflected self-image affects the adolescent’s public performance of his masculinity. Adrian Nicole LeBlanc’s *Random Family* (2003) shows how boys and young men perform the role of “man of the house”, placed upon them by their mothers and sisters. Boys may be expected to resolve any conflicts involving their female family members that arise within the community (LeBlanc 2003:343). Likewise, they may feel pressure to remedy such problems as food shortages in the household, which they can accomplish by committing crimes, and receive praise from their families when they do so (LeBlanc 2003:377). Messerschmidt, too, notes that the assumption of protective and breadwinning roles may prompt some young men toward delinquent conduct (Messerschmidt, 1993:85).

Race and gun violence

Gun violence disproportionately affects young men of color, both as victims of gunshot injuries and as offenders (Giroux 2009:93). Elaine Cassidy and Howard Stevenson, citing statistics from the year 2000, point out that while African American male adolescents comprised only 1 percent of the U.S. population, those between the ages of 14 and 17 constituted almost 26 percent of all homicide victims that year. They also reported that an overwhelming percentage of African American males who die at young ages are killed by those who are also young, Black, and male (Cassidy & Stevenson 2005:55).

Juvenile facilities and adult prisons alike are notorious as sites where young men of color are disproportionately contained, and the public health community has recognized that gun violence constitutes a serious mortality threat to young Black men. Latino youth, too, are frequent victims. Physician John May (1995) discovered that 26 percent of men admitted to the Cook County Correctional Facility in Chicago had experienced prior gunshot wounds (May et al. 1995:164), making it clear that the offending population is highly at risk for victimization by gun violence. Of the sample studied by May, 70.8 percent were African American and another 10 percent were either Mexican American or Puerto Rican (1995:163). May also noted that in addition to those offenders who survived to be arrested again, in large urban areas anywhere from 44 to 67 percent of homicide victims have prior criminal records. May adds that most of those victims were young men, and most were killed with guns.

While race may be socially constructed, it has very real social meaning in America, and influences, among other things, how children are viewed by the world, how

they view themselves and the world, and, of course, how children believe the world views them. Jonathan Kozol (2005) spoke with children in urban schools where virtually all the children belonged to a racial minority and learned that some believed the dominant society would be relieved if people like them did not exist (2005:28-29). As Kozol made clear, children learn many things in segregated urban schools, including that dominant social views do not consider children like them worth any sort of social investment. Some learn that those who allocate resources view them as being outside the “success narrative,” that expectations for success and subsequent social valuations are reserved for students in other, well-to-do schools and neighborhoods and that they are “not good enough” to do better, or to have more resources than they do (Wells & Crain 1997:157).

Pierre Bourdieu spoke of “sites of social relegation”, and the “destiny effect from belonging to a stigmatized group” (Bourdieu et al., 1999:64). The effects of racial discrimination in the United States are pervasive and systemic, often sending a variety of negative messages to children of color. The destiny effect that many youth of color may absorb from growing up together in urban sites of social relegation can lead them to believe that legal routes to success are not for them.

As Howard Stevenson pointed out, “[t]he idea that urban African American youth may be angry (e.g., pissed) should not be a surprise given their social experiences” (Stevenson 1997:42). He argues that their anger, however, can manifest itself in either productive or maladaptive ways and should not be interpreted as pathological in itself (1997:50). Stevenson recommends that research with minority urban youth be approached with “a curious appreciation of their world”, as they “often feel

misinterpreted, disrespected, and angry about their life possibilities”, or “Missed, Dissed, and Pissed”, as he called his 1997 article.

Elaine Cassidy and Stevenson studied a sample of African American boys ranging in age from 10 to 18 who had been expelled from their urban schools for aggressive acts (2005:62). The researchers’ testing showed that while these boys were aggressive, they were also depressed, sensitive to social rejection, and fearful. The authors suggested that these boys hid their “hypervulnerability” beneath a mask of “hypermasculinity”, causing many observers not to recognize their situation (2005:70). The combination of racial discrimination, anger, and guns constitutes a serious threat to young men of color, both offenders and non-offenders.

Poverty and gun violence

The criminal law, even when applied evenly to all offenders, has a very different impact upon children who live in poverty and those who do not. For young people who do not grow up in conditions of material deprivation, the motivation to engage in many types of delinquent activity is considerably diminished. Henry Giroux argues that it is important to “unravel how cultural differences have been constructed within the unequal distribution of resources” (Giroux 1996:201), and there is little mystery in the higher rate of delinquency among poor children, many of whom also happen, not coincidentally, to be youth of color.

In addition to the vulnerability and anger that may arise from living in dangerous neighborhoods and experiencing the effects of racial discrimination, material deprivation itself can motivate adolescents toward offending behavior. Not only the need for basic necessities such as food and rent, but also the desire to participate in our consumer

society prompts youth to escape (or disguise) their visible material deprivation by acquiring what Steve Hall, Simon Winlow, and Craig Ancrum call “consumer baubles”, or “the outward trappings of success”, through criminal activity (Hall, Winlow & Ancrum 2008:203-204). While these authors, who conducted their research in the United Kingdom, seem somewhat disdainful of the superficial nature of their subjects’ desires, one can easily empathize with American teenagers, particularly those whom Margaret Beale Spencer (1993) calls “physically visible minorities” (Spencer et al., 1993:720), whose parents cannot afford to buy things for them. These adolescents may still wish to present a prosperous, or at least fashionable, façade. As Daniel Cook (2001) argues, “[t]he cultural marketplace is now a key arena for the formation of the sense of self and of peer relationships . . .” A young man who seeks to project an acceptable identity as a consumer may resort to criminal activity in order to do so. He may obtain for himself, through illegal means, what wealthier adolescents may have provided for them by their parents. Along the dimension of childhood dependence to adult-like independence, the adolescent not provided with the means to consume may take on the adult-like role of providing consumer items for himself, whether lawfully or illegally. Whether to acquire the basic necessities of life or simply those items that make his life worth living, the youth who turns to delinquent activity for economic reasons may choose a gun as an instrumentality of his crimes (Hecht, 1998:214).

Moreover, by internalizing the “street” presentation described by Anderson (1999), a young man may inadvertently close the doors to those opportunities that might otherwise have been available to him. Anderson described one effect of the “street” persona, and the unfortunate limitations that the internalization of such an identity can

place on a person's prospects for mobility. He argued that "by enforcing conformity to such external displays of manhood, the oppositional culture ravages the individuality of those who fall victim to it" (1999:288). Anderson demonstrated, through the example of one of the men he interviewed, that "his very identity was derived from the oppositional culture, and ultimately it immobilized him in the face of conventional opportunity". This young man's adaptations to the street, or neighborhood, unfit him for success in other contexts, pushing him further into a context of poverty and violence.

Multiple Roles of the Gun

People carry guns for both instrumental and expressive reasons (Stretesky et al. 2007:486). The instrumental roles include protection as well as use as a tool for committing crimes, while the expressive roles encompass elements relating to the identity of the possessor, such as the demonstration of power or anger. There may be status considerations attached to a gun, where the weapon itself may have value as an object of consumer desire. The gun may also be an important constituent in the adolescent's self-presentation (Anderson 1999).

Such disparate factors as the fear of violent victimization and the desire to participate in "youthful consumerism" (Hall, Winlow, and Ancrum 2008:80) may motivate youth to possess and use guns. Guns may serve youth as a consumer object in themselves (Cook, Molliconi, & Cole, 1995) or the means to acquiring consumer goods, or both. Moreover, in everyday practice, instrumental and expressive uses of firearms maybe difficult to disentangle, as adolescent offenders may feel that they need guns for protection during the commission of economically-motivated crimes (Sheley & Wright

1993:382) and may also describe the function of the gun as providing a sense of power on these occasions (Hecht 1998:214; Anderson 1999:125).

Because so many functional and emotional factors may be active simultaneously, research methods that constrain the participant's response, such as forced-choice surveys, may fail to capture the richness of even those motivations of which the participant is aware. This study, therefore, utilized a more open-ended conversational format in order to enable the participant to provide sufficient context to illuminate the various elements that contributed to his actions. Because a gun can serve as a symbol, a marker, or a badge of belonging, in addition to its instrumental functions, it is important to use research methods that can elicit this complexity. The process of meaning-making for such an object, as Blumer explains, grows out of social interaction, specifically, "the ways in which other persons act toward the person with regard to the thing" (Blumer, 1969:4). The multiple meanings of the gun and of gun use for a young person may thus be best understood as Goffman describes it, by putting "yourself in the position of those engaging in this conduct so you can understand what meanings they attribute to it" (Goffman 1973:15).

Popular Culture and Guns

In a study about young men and guns, it is essential to consider the extent to which guns, and the idea of guns, are embedded in both U.S. history and American cultural history. Popular culture testifies to the degree that America is, as Richard Slotkin (1992) wrote, a *Gunfighter Nation*. From the time of the early settlers, to the nineteenth century and "the gun that won the West", to the newer immigrant gangsters of the early

twentieth century and the “gangstas” of today, the man with a gun has been both a central part of American history and the basis of a national myth.

Actual guns and the symbolism of guns have long permeated U.S. culture at many levels, often with special meaning among the dispossessed. Slotkin points out that the meaning of the gun as a tool for the “social bandit” who is discontented “with the division of wealth and power in modern society” has been a trope of popular literature for at least a hundred and fifty years (Slotkin 1992:126). The outlaw hero or anti-hero of this genre “uncovers and attacks the dark side of modern capitalism.” Over the course of this long tradition, the myths of Jesse James and the James brothers gave way to the urban gunmen of the 1930s gangster films. These films suggested to Depression-era audiences that their criminal “quasi-heroes” were a “predictable, even a probable, product of modern American life.” (Slotkin 1992:260) Slotkin references the same opportunity gap that Robert Merton (1957/1964) does as providing the basis for the gangsterism in these Prohibition-era films (Slotkin 1992:264). Several outlaw Western films presented the same social critique, suggesting that the powerful elite placed the (often immigrant) poor in the position of committing economically-based crime, often with guns. Slotkin cites the original 1932 *Scarface* as an example of the urban gangster film genre, and its 1983 remake, with Al Pacino portraying the lead character as a Cuban refugee, illustrates the tendency of modern examples to focus on the experiences of young Latino or African American men. Indeed, participants in the current study referenced both the *Scarface* of 1983 and 1991’s *New Jack City*, featuring an African American protagonist, as significant to their gun-carrying lifestyles, despite the fact that both films debuted long before participants could have viewed them in their original releases. Nonetheless, such

films continued to provide both an interpretive frame and a mythic gloss to adolescents' gun-based activities. Citing rap music, as well, as evocative of their lifestyles, some participants seemed to position themselves within an outlaw or underdog discourse, though most hesitated to put it in explicitly race or class terms in their conversations with me. Rather, they tended to displace race or class references with references to place, speaking of their neighborhoods as the source of their lifestyles. In this discourse, guns often became not only symbols, but, as Slotkin suggested, "fetishized" as material objects in much the same way as they were in Western films of the 1950s such as *Colt .45* (1950), *Springfield Rifle* (1952), *Winchester '73* (1953), and *The Gun That Won the West* (1955) (Slotkin 1992:380). Participants thus drew, perhaps unintentionally, upon well-established gun narratives of American popular culture, as disseminated in their contemporary iterations. The examples which resonated particularly with participants were those where powerless young men of color were able to prevail with the use of a gun.

Theories of Delinquency

Contemporary explanations of delinquency range in focus from the neurological to the global, and many of them may contribute to our understanding of juvenile offending. While early theories that criminal tendencies were inborn (Lombroso, 1876) have largely given way to sociological explanations, both psychological and biological theories are still influential, particularly in treatment contexts. Lawrence Kohlberg's (1981) theory of moral development, for example, locates behavioral problems in the adolescent's failure to successfully complete one or more specified levels of development, and recent genetic research has suggested that young people with a

particular genetic feature can exhibit higher levels of aggression than those without it in the presence of environmental stressors, such as abuse (Nilsson et al. 2006).

Both early and contemporary theories can also be arranged along a continuum of individual agency from those that stress free will to those that emphasize determinism (Whitehead & Lab, 2006: 50), whether the deterministic forces come from within or outside the individual. For example, Michael Gottfredson and Travis Hirschi's self-control theory (1990) views delinquent activity as the manifestation of the young person's failure to learn self-control early in his life. Adrian Raine, on the other hand, argues that problems with brain functioning lead to offending behavior (Raine et al., 1995). The most prominent contemporary theories take a sociological approach and find a place for the agency of the child or adolescent within a framework of structural constraints.

Theorists such as Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay (1942) viewed cities themselves, where many people live together in conditions of poverty, subject to many environmental stressors including discrimination, as criminogenic. Longitudinal surveys have examined numerous variables, such as association with delinquent peers, to study their relationship to delinquent behavior (Thornberry et al., 1994). Risk factors have been located in family, neighborhood, school, and broader domains of the young person's world (Bronfenbrenner, 1993; Hawkins & Catalano, 1992).

Bridging free will and determinism, as well as individual and global influences, strain theory emphasized an adolescent's perception of his world as a precipitating factor in delinquency. Robert Merton (1938) theorized that certain types of delinquency resulted from "the acute pressures created by the discrepancy between culturally

induced goals and socially structured opportunities” (Merton, 1938/1964:178). He was very clear, however, that he did not expect one theory to account for all crime or delinquency (1938/1964:177). He believed that “wholesale negativism” could be construed as “a sustained repudiation of the authorities which exemplify the contradiction between legitimized cultural aspirations and socially restricted opportunities” (1938/1964: 178). While Merton concentrated on strain caused by the youth’s belief that he could not succeed in the world through legitimate avenues of endeavor, Robert Agnew (1992) broadened the focus to include other stressors, such as the intrusion of a negative stimulus in the form of harm to the youth, or the loss of a desired positive objective (Agnew, 1992:50). According to Agnew’s general strain theory, as the individual young person came to believe that he could not be successful, safe, or happy through conventional pursuits, he was at risk of turning to delinquency. Strain theory helped to explain why some youth living in what seem to be similar circumstances may become delinquent, whereas others do not, since the individual young person’s repudiation of the “legitimate” social structure precipitated his turn toward delinquency.

Pathways

Robert J. Sampson and John H. Laub’s 1993 book, *Crime in the Making: Pathways and Turning Points through Life*, presented what the authors termed a sociogenic model of delinquency and crime. Part of their thesis was that “structural context mediated by informal family and school social controls explains delinquency in childhood and adolescence” (Sampson & Laub, 1993:7). Their model was thus a comprehensive one, incorporating individual characteristics of the child as well as family, peer, community, and school influences on development. Because my research discusses

pathways to gun possession and use in the lives of the adolescent participants, I shall discuss Sampson and Laub's study in some detail.

The archival data on which their study was based was compiled by Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck over forty years ago, and the Gluecks' sample consisted entirely of white boys from Massachusetts born in the 1920s and 1930s (1993:61). 500 delinquent boys and 500 non-delinquent boys, who made up the comparison group, comprised the sample. During that era, drug involvement did not play a role in the problems of these boys, although alcohol did. As Sampson and Laub pointed out, the absence of racial diversity or drug activity in this sample, while in some ways a deficit, can also be viewed as a benefit. The historical perspective provided by this data demonstrates that the assumption often made today that delinquency and crime are inextricably linked to race and drugs must be examined (1993:3). The Gluecks' sample was also matched by neighborhoods, with all of the boys coming from similarly disadvantaged backgrounds, and by intelligence as measured by IQ tests, the delinquents having an average IQ of 92, and the non-delinquents an average of 94 (1993:28). In other words, these boys were matched against the controls racially/ethnically (by the birthplace of both parents), by neighborhood disadvantage, and by intelligence. Sampson and Laub conducted a fresh analysis of the Glueck data, and found that the social processes of family, school, and peers had the strongest and most consistent effects on delinquency, with peers taking a secondary role to family and school processes. Specifically, poor parental supervision, inconsistent and harsh discipline, and weak parental attachment predicted delinquency most strongly. School attachment was found to be highly protective against delinquency. Structural factors such as poverty were seen to exert their influence indirectly, by

affecting the family and school processes, and individual factors such as being a “difficult child”, having tantrums, and having an early onset of unofficial misbehavior, while relevant to delinquency, were less predictive than family, school, and even peer influences (1993:247). Sampson and Laub found that these early individual characteristics of the child became less significant as the child aged, with family process effects becoming much more prominent. They stressed that, “independent of all other factors including childhood social behavior, a one-unit increase in mother’s supervision (on a three-point scale) is associated with a 54 percent decrease in official delinquency” (1993:93-94). Effects of parental monitoring on unofficial delinquency were similar. The authors traced the trajectory, which they defined as a pathway or line of development over the life span, of some subjects well into adulthood, as the Gluecks had also conducted interviews with a subset of the men. They, Sampson and Laub, looked for transitions, which are marked by life events embedded in the trajectories. They posited that the interlocking nature of trajectories and transitions might “generate turning points or a change in the life course” (1993:8).

In studying turning points, Sampson and Laub’s model focused primarily on adults. Their thesis was that, while there was continuity in antisocial behavior from childhood to adulthood, both in criminal and non-criminal forms of deviance, favorable influences such as stable employment and strong family bonds could constitute turning points whereby the offender could overcome, and turn away from, former bad behaviors (1993:7). However, their thesis also encompassed the idea of a negative turning point or, as they put it, “turning points (or lack of turning points) that facilitated continued involvement in crime” (1993:240).

The current study focuses on a much narrower segment of participants' lives, both in time and in subject matter, and, while its research design does not lend itself to the identification of turning points in the life course of these juveniles, it does trace participants' pathways into gun acquisition and use.

In a similar way, life course theory embraces the concept that specific events in a young person's life can be precursors to delinquent behavior. Cathy Spatz Widom (1989) found that, while there may be multiple pathways to violent behavior, abused and neglected children have significantly greater risk of becoming delinquents, criminals, and violent criminals (Widom, 1989:164-165). Testing specifically for a cycle of violence, Widom discovered that subjects in the physical abuse and neglect groups of her study had a significantly higher likelihood of having an arrest for a violent offense than the controls (1989:163). Her sample included approximately equal numbers of males and females (49 percent versus 51 percent) (Widom, 1989:162).

Moreover, Jane Siegel and Linda Williams (2003) explored the relationship between child sexual abuse and female delinquency and crime, and found that child sexual abuse was a statistically significant predictor of certain types of offenses. The authors discovered that sexual abuse victims were significantly more likely to have been arrested as adults than the controls (2003:84). Moreover, the number of victims in their sample arrested as juveniles for violent crimes was nearly one and a half times greater than the number arrested for property crimes. This constituted an unusually high proportion of violent crimes for a female population (2003:84-85).

The interview protocol for the current study did not include questions about abuse or neglect. However, participants' accounts sometimes suggested that they had been

victims of neglect, and several young men offered recollections of having been physically abused by their stepfathers or their mother's boyfriends.

Therefore, while abuse and neglect were not the focus of this study, it seems important to keep in mind the association between victimization and offending even as participants are discussing the more structural influences that affected their daily lives and decision-making. We can consider juvenile offending, including gun offending, against a background of ever-widening spheres of victimization, from neglect and abuse in the home, to violence and violence exposure in the community, to the structural victimization of poverty, and the symbolic violence of racial discrimination, both institutional and interpersonal.

From victim to offender

Widom pointed out, over twenty years ago, that the linkages between child abuse and violent criminal behavior and aggression later in life were not well understood (1989:165). In the years since then, researchers in various fields have sought to help explain this well-documented connection. Among them are Terri Lewis and colleagues (2007), whose study of maltreatment history and weapon carrying among early adolescents seeks to shed some light on this association. Their data, self-reported by twelve year-olds, permitted them to analyze the relationship among reported physical and sexual abuse, the perceived need for a weapon, and weapon carrying (Lewis et al., 2007:261-262). While boys overall reported eight times more weapon carrying than girls, boys and girls who were physically abused were 2.7 times more likely than those without such a history to report the perceived need for a weapon, and 2.8 times more likely to report weapon carrying. Those with a history of sexual abuse were 4.2 times

more likely than those without such a history to report the perceived need for a weapon, and 4.4 times more likely to report weapon carrying (2007:263). The authors theorized that maltreated youth were likely to feel especially vulnerable, and to view the world as a hostile and aggressive place. Citing research on self-protection theory, Lewis and colleagues argued that these feelings of vulnerability were likely to underlie the subjects' perceived need for a weapon (2007:261). Unfortunately for these already victimized children, however, weapon carrying is associated with an increased risk of both violent offending and future victimization (2007:265-266). The scope of this problem is significant, for, as Michelle Meloy (2006) points out, citing Snyder and Finkelhor, more than two-thirds of all reported sexual assault victims have been juveniles under the age of eighteen, and at least one in five girls and one in seven boys has been the victim of sexual abuse before reaching their eighteenth birthday (Meloy, 2006:3). Lewis's study describes a different pathway to juvenile weapon carrying, and in a generally younger population, than that explored in the current project; nonetheless, she suggests that those children attempted to mitigate their feelings of vulnerability by arming themselves.

Even today, while it is fair to say that the association between at least some types of victimization and offending has been well established (Sandberg 1989; Geller & Ford-Somma 1984), the nature of that association and the processes through which it functions are still being investigated (Greenwald 2002). Several participants in the current study recounted episodes of physical abuse in the home and victimization by street crime, but they did not tie these experiences to their processes of gun acquisition. Yet several researchers (see Greenwald, ed., 2002) have outlined a more indirect pathway from victimization to offending, where childhood trauma may lead to conduct disorder that

results in aggression and violent delinquency. The violent delinquent in turn is more likely to acquire a weapon (Webster, Gainer, & Champion 1993; Vaughn, Howard, & Harper-Chang 2006).

Peer selection toward, and away from, weapon carriers

Just as the influence of individual characteristics of the very young child may decline in importance as the process of family, and then school, socialization becomes more influential, peer influences are likely to become stronger as children move into adolescence and their friendship networks change (Sampson & Laub, 1993:250). Nonetheless, Sampson and Laub argue, following Lee Robins (1966), that the insignificant influence of delinquent siblings suggests that adolescents tend to select friends who are similar to themselves in behavior and attitudes (1993:116-117). They also cite the difficulty of interpreting temporal ordering in searching for the effect of peers on delinquency, since, as Farrington noted, most delinquent acts are committed in groups, and “those who commit such acts will almost inevitably have delinquent friends” (1993:104). Likewise, self-report measurements of offending and delinquent peers, as Gottfredson and Hirschi point out, “may, almost by definition, be measuring the same underlying theoretical construct of delinquent peers” (1993:104).

The situation appears to be more complex, however, as Jan Kornelis Dijkstra and colleagues (2010) recently reported after attempting to determine influence and selection processes in weapon carrying among adolescents. The authors’ quantitative study showed that these adolescents did tailor their weapon carrying behavior to resemble more closely that of their friends between Time 1 and Time 2, one year later (Dijkstra et al., 2010:205). In addition, personal characteristics such as aggression contributed to weapon

carrying. The authors concluded that prior aggression and peer influences, as well as the perceived attractiveness of weapon-carriers as friends, all played a role (2010:210).

Yet Sally Black and Alice Hausman's qualitative study (2008) showed a different selection effect: youth who did not carry guns selected themselves away from peers who carried (Black & Hausman, 2008:605). An interesting aspect of this finding was that the peers who did carry seemed to hold a misconception that their non-carrying friends looked up to them and felt protected by them, when in fact these non-carriers were deliberately decreasing the amount of time they spent in the carriers' company. If their findings have broader application, this reverse selection effect would seem likely to result in the gun-carrying youth becoming more embedded in a gun-carrying peer group as that group draws him in and the non-carrying friends pull away from him. The bi-directional self-selection processes described in these two studies provide additional support for the "birds of a feather" view, with the qualification that those who aspire to carry weapons may attach themselves to weapon-carriers and then emulate them.

Social learning and strain approaches

Alan Lizotte and colleagues (2000) found that, over time, different risk factors influenced gun carrying among the young urban males in their sample, which was drawn from the Rochester Youth Development Study (Lizotte et al., 2000:817). The authors noted that females were excluded from the analysis because they rarely carry guns (2000:818). The mean age of the boys that they studied was 14 at wave 2, and 20 at wave 10. Gun-carrying was related, at the younger ages, to gang membership, and at the older ages, to drug dealing. As the boys aged, their gang membership declined, and serious drug dealing increased (2000:828-829). The pattern of criminal activity fits with

strain theory, because as the boys reach ages where they would expect to be working in the paid labor market, they are instead selling drugs for a living. Agnew, in outlining his general strain theory, also attempted to divide the classic first category, blocked goal, into more specific types of disjunctures between aspirations, expectations, just or fair outcomes, or even tolerable outcomes, and the reality experienced by the adolescent (1992:51-56). He expressed the hope that such an analysis might facilitate empirical research, and ended by suggesting that researchers ask adolescents about a variety of goals, predicting that strain would be greatest when several goal-oriented standards were not being met, especially expectations and just or fair outcomes. Many drug-dealing youth appear to experience frustration with legitimate avenues of employment as measured by a number of these standards, believing not only that their aspirations and expectations cannot be met in the legal sector, but also that their prospects there are neither fair, just, nor tolerable (Venkatesh, 2000:167-168). They accordingly repudiate the legal work sector, to use Merton's term. Lizotte and colleagues found that, because drug-selling for profit is dangerous, a gun was viewed as a necessary tool of the trade (2000:815). Both for the younger, gang-involved youth and the older, drug-dealing young men of their study, the contagion theory pushes more and more people to have guns, because the other people have guns. The authors conclude that "the many vicious cycles of contagion come and go over the adolescent life course to produce the milieu of gun carrying that produces homicide among young males" (2000:831).

As Agnew suggested (1992), control theory, social learning theory, and strain theory complement each other, as they all deal with different dynamics of relationships; that is, the extent to which an adolescent feels positive attachment to positive others and

institutions, the extent to which he is positively attached to negative persons, or is negatively disposed toward “legitimate” others or institutions, respectively (Agnew 1992:50). As positive attachments weaken, whether as a result of the introduction of strain or for some other reason, space is opened up for negative social learning, assuming the child has not already been introduced to it in the home.

Wilkinson and Fagan have focused attention on the ways in which urban youth are likely to learn, on the streets, “scripts” for handling potentially violent interactions (Wilkinson & Fagan, 2001:185). Decisions about whether to carry a gun, “to bring oneself to a setting where guns are likely to be present, to pursue a dispute that may turn deadly, to show a gun or make a threat with it, and ultimately to use the gun or to avoid its use” (2001:181-182) all involve social interactions that can be learned by watching both strangers and peers. Wilkinson and Fagan note that the processes for learning this type of gun knowledge, practice, and “scripts” have not been well studied (2001:185).

Guns and gun crimes are different

Philip Cook and Jens Ludwig (2000) point out that guns differ from other kinds of weapons and gun crimes are qualitatively different from other types of crimes. Firearms intensify violence and make certain types of crimes possible as well as increasing the likelihood that the victim, intended or unintended, will die or be seriously injured. As they state, “[w]e don’t see drive-by knifings or innocent bystanders killed by stray fists.” (Cook & Ludwig, 2000:33) Hence, gun violence potentially takes many unintended and unseen victims in ways not encountered with other forms of weaponry or fighting. Consequently, those who live in places and contexts where gun violence is a distinct likelihood are themselves likely to be wary of their own unintended ballistic

victimization. As well, juveniles who commit gun crimes find themselves treated more harshly by the juvenile justice system, receiving longer sentences than non-gun offenders, and facing an increased likelihood of transfer to adult court. Cook and Ludwig cite the passage of sentence add-ons for gun crimes as one of the more widespread responses of state legislatures to gun violence (2000:126-127).

Gun acquisition and use research with incarcerated populations

While large-scale studies of at-risk populations have contributed much to the state of knowledge on young men's gun acquisition and use, the direct approach of asking gun-offending youth how they first came to possess and use guns is essential. Because this study targets only offending youth, it is also economical. Moreover, since "human behavior is primarily driven by perception and not by facts or by what is understood as facts by risk analysts and scientists" (Melde et al., 2009:570, citing Renn, 2005:31; see also Wilkinson & Fagan, 2001), it is crucial to gain the youth's own perspective of his world. Learning how he views himself, his environment and his actions—even retrospectively--offers insights about the meaning of guns and gun usage heretofore unconsidered. In *The Science of Self-Report*, Wendy Baldwin (2000) points out that motivations for certain criminal behaviors, environmental characteristics (such as exposure to physical and psychological threats), violence in the community, and risks from violence that may have some behavioral components are among the areas of inquiry where self-report is often the only or best source of information (Baldwin, 2000:6-7).

Several researchers have attempted to explore different aspects of gun acquisition and use by interviewing incarcerated populations. Caroline Wolf Harlow (2001) of the Bureau of Justice Statistics analyzed survey data acquired in interviews with adult state

and federal prisoners in 1991 and 1997 (Harlow, 2001:1). She reported information concerning the source of the offenders' weapons, what kinds of weapons they used during their crimes, and how they used them (whether shooting, brandishing, threatening, and so on). Her findings, however, shed limited light on the experience of juvenile gun offenders, or on what aspects of the juveniles' worlds made them desire a gun.

Philip Cook, Stephanie Molliconi and T. B. Cole (1995:64) interviewed juvenile offenders in a North Carolina residential school, but their focus was on the nature of gun markets, particularly on how guns were transferred to and from juveniles. These researchers did not seek to study the use of guns in criminal activity or their meanings in the lives of offenders. Peter Ash and colleagues (1996) conducted a study of juvenile offenders in Atlanta juvenile detention centers. They interviewed youth who were detained for a broad range of offenses from status offenses to murder, asking about their gun acquisition and use. These adolescents, some female and some male, reported both feeling safer when they carried guns and feeling more anxious, with one young man reporting that trouble was likely to find him when he had a gun (Ash et al., 1996:1756-1757). The research questions of Ash and colleagues overlap with those of the current project in many ways, although the 1996 study was approached from a public health perspective. They felt that the self-report method of gathering data was "hampered by the lack of clear criteria for validity", and expressed uncertainty whether overreporting or underreporting of gun behavior should be expected (1996:1757). The current study attempts to control for this threat to some extent by selecting as participants primarily those with adjudications for gun-related offenses. Among Ash's findings was that youth who carried guns, at least by their own report, tended to use them. Of the 53 detained

juvenile respondents who had ever owned a gun, 41 said they had pointed it at someone at least once, and 29 males and 4 females claimed they had shot at someone (Ash et al., 1996:1757). This finding is consistent with those of other researchers who found gun-carrying to be more closely associated with aggressiveness than victimization. As discussed above, Joseph Sheley and James Wright (1993:382) found that the serious juvenile offenders they surveyed considered the category of carrying a gun for “protection” to be quite broad, including carrying a gun when committing a robbery in order to forestall or meet any resistance on the part of the victim. The current study attempts, among other things, to unpack the idea of protection by exploring how the perceived need for the protection of a gun changes over time, and depends upon the type of activities in which the participant is engaged.

This project builds upon existing research in identity theory, juvenile delinquency, and victimology to extend and deepen understanding of the meaning of guns in the lives of this group of incarcerated young men.

Chapter Two

Method: Hearing young voices, seeing young lives

“It’s hard to figure somethin’ out that you’re not doin’ . . . Positively, a hundred percent, you’ll never know.”
Tim Myers (June 2, 2011)

Tim, a thoughtful participant in this study, was reflecting upon the difficulty faced by a researcher trying to understand a world quite distant from her own lived experience. He was not the only participant to point out that my grasp of his world could only be partial. In this sense, Tim seemed to have identified the ontological, epistemological, and phenomenological dilemmas inherent in this project. In fact, while it would be an understatement to say that phenomenology is difficult to explain and that such an explanation would be beyond the scope of this dissertation, saying that I am seeking to understand participants’ understandings of their first person experiences might be a good place to begin. Describing this study as a phenomenological approach entails both some methodological avenues and some substantive underpinnings for those avenues.

In its substantive sense phenomenology helps us to grasp such concepts as embodied experience, and as the source of a method it directs us to attend, in an interview study, to our conversational partners without reference to prior discourses, knowledge, or experience. It explicitly calls for us to “bracket”, for a time, such knowledge and to place it apart from what we hear during the data collection phase of research (Kockelmans 1994:113). As Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945) put it, “in order to see the world and grasp it as paradoxical, we must break with our familiar acceptance of it”, even while understanding that doing so completely is impossible (Merleau-Ponty 1945/1962: xiv). By using this approach, we can avoid simply slotting what participants share with us into our existing analytical frameworks, and can be open to hearing something that is new.

By eliciting the narratives of the incarcerated young men who agreed to talk with me, I hoped to learn how, where, when, and why they first acquired and used guns. The objective of this inquiry was to better understand the place of the gun in relation to participants' views of themselves at the time of first possession and use as well as their retrospective assessments of the activities and social worlds or contexts that prompted and enabled their actions.

If one wants to know how gun offenders understand their worlds and their lives, it seems logical to talk with them and ask them (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009: xvii), although the simple act of "asking" will not, in itself, produce completely transparent data. Rather, this approach was used in an attempt to learn what the juvenile's world and relationships felt like to him, and what it was about his conceptualization of his environment or situation that prompted his gun offending, at least as he reports it today (Spencer et al., 2003:133).

Research paradigm, approach, and theory

I conducted my dissertation research essentially within a constructivist paradigm, using a phenomenological approach to method, from a theoretical position of symbolic interactionism. I believe there is a natural fit among these qualitative-interpretive approaches, as well as with the research questions that I investigated.

Herbert Rubin and Irene Rubin (2005) define a paradigm as "a way of looking at the world; interpreting what is seen; and deciding which of the things seen by researchers are real, valid, and important to document" (Rubin & Rubin, (2005:20-21). As Mary Anne Pitman and Joseph Maxwell (1992) have pointed out in discussing the relationship of paradigms to methods, some theorists, such as Michael Quinn Patton, are quite

ecumenical in their approach to methods, believing that a researcher should consider what he or she wants to do, and utilize the paradigm and methods that work best for that purpose (Pitman & Maxwell, 1992:734). Others, such as Egon Guba and Yvonna Lincoln (1994), feel strongly that a constructivist stance is entailed in an interpretivist approach. They distinguish their research philosophy most strongly from that of positivism and postpositivism in terms of ontology, epistemology and methodology (Guba & Lincoln, 1994:111-112). Positivism, often viewed as the constituting the “classic” or traditional scientific research philosophy, is based on the observation of data, which are to be separated from the interpretation of their meanings. The researcher and the researched are viewed ideally as separate and not influencing each other. Reality can be apprehended and known by following scientific methods, largely independent of the content and context of the investigation (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009:326; Guba & Lincoln, 1994:110). Postpositivism modifies positivism’s view of reality by maintaining that reality exists, but can only be imperfectly apprehended (Guba & Lincoln, 1994:110). As Pitman and Maxwell describe Guba and Lincoln’s constructivism, these “realities are constructed rather than ‘out there’ and depend on an observer for their existence” (1992:738). Guba and Lincoln themselves describe their ontology as relativist, arguing that “realities are dependent for their form and content on the individual persons or groups holding the constructions” (1994:110-111). They thus consider the realities of the social world to be subjective, rather than objective.

Guba and Lincoln argue that, in their conception of constructivism, there is no real distinction between ontology and epistemology, because, as there is no “truth out there” to be known, the knowledge or “findings” are literally created during the course of

the investigation. They view the researcher and the subject as being linked as co-constructors of knowledge. It follows logically from this conception of epistemology that Guba and Lincoln's recommended methods to gain the personal and intramental constructions of those researched include interaction between the investigator and the respondents. The aim of the constructivist inquiry is increased understanding, and reconstruction of the constructions that people initially hold (1994:113). In that sense, the aims of this study are congruent with those of constructivist inquiry, the study's goal being to increase my understanding of what others do by gaining a better understanding of how they view and experience their worlds, or their own realities.

What Steinar Kvale and Svend Brinkmann (2009) call the qualitative research interview, or, more specifically, the semi-structured life world interview (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009:3), seems ideally suited to a constructivist paradigm. They describe such an interview as one with the purpose of obtaining descriptions of the life world of the interviewee in order to interpret the meaning of the described phenomena. In fact, they note that this type of interview was in part inspired by phenomenology, which seeks to describe how people experience the phenomena of their life worlds (2009:14). Because I sought to obtain detailed life world descriptions that would help me interpret the meaning of guns in participants' lives, I decided to base this study on semi-structured life world interviews.

Because interpretivism looks to the meanings people make from their interactions with the world and others in it, symbolic interactionism constitutes its philosophical basis. Herbert Blumer takes the credit for coining the term symbolic interactionism in 1937 (Blumer, 1969:1). He used it to encompass the approaches of George Herbert

Mead, Charles Horton Cooley, and others to understanding the social actor and social interaction in terms of the meanings that things have for human beings. Blumer emphasized the formative process of interaction, by pointing out that social interaction is a dynamic and dialectical process, rather than simply “an arena for the expression of pre-existing factors” (1969:10). Because the person must forge or construct a line of action as he interacts with others, it is necessary to take a first person perspective, because an object may have a different meaning for different individuals (1969:11). As Blumer says, “people may be living side by side yet be living in different worlds”. This idea comes directly from Mead, as does the concept that a person notes something in his environment, engages “in a process of self-indication in which [he] makes an object of what [he] notes, gives it a meaning, and uses the meaning as the basis for directing [his] action.” (1969:14). Thus, the person’s behavior arises out of the process of interpretation that takes place, and is not simply a “response” to the environment. For this reason, depending on the research question, qualitative-interpretive approaches to social research may be more appropriate than other, more positivist approaches that may be suitable to the natural sciences. As Blumer puts it, “one has to get inside of the defining process of the actor in order to understand his actions” (1969:16). Moreover, people do not act in isolation, but within a context of human group life, which “consists of, and exists in, the fitting of lines of action to each other by the members of the group” (1969:16-17). Blumer’s idea of people living side by side but in different worlds became particularly relevant during the course of this project, as participants described not only how others in the same environment might have different experiences of it, but also how

they themselves experienced the same physical environment differently over time, depending upon what was going on in the context of their own “human group life”.

As Mead (1934) maintained, people have different selves, and it is the social context that determines which self we are going to be (Mead, 1934:143). Mead states even more strongly that an individual possesses a self only in relation to the selves of the other members of his social group, and that the structure of his self expresses or reflects the general behavior pattern of this social group to which he belongs” (1934: 164). Yet Erving Goffman (1959) concludes the first chapter of *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* by pointing out that a person’s status, position, or social place is “something that must be enacted and portrayed, something that must be realized” (Goffman, 1959:75). He ends with a vignette from Sartre, describing a waiter in a café, who is probably unaware that he is enacting a performance of a waiter in a café. As Sartre interprets the meaning of this performance, “There are indeed many precautions to imprison a man in what he is, as if we lived in perpetual fear that he might escape from it, that he might break away and suddenly elude his condition” (Goffman, 1959:76). While Mead and Blumer show us the social actor as choosing his world to a large extent through his interpretation of his environment, Goffman and Sartre suggest the extent to which our social place may force upon us the performance of a particular role, even if we are not aware of it. They thus set up the tension between structure and agency that is so apparent in the identity development of participants in this study.

These tensions highlight the importance of “getting inside the defining process of the actor”, as Blumer put it, and suggest the suitability of a phenomenological approach, which is based upon careful description and analyses of consciousness (Kvale &

Brinkmann, 2009:326). Yet, in an interview study, the other person's communication of his meaning is the basis of our data, and, as Alfred Schutz argues, even under the best circumstances, our grasp of what the other person says is an approximation of his meaning, and never the meaning itself (Schutz, 2002:37). In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) argues that that which is perceived, by its very nature "admits of the ambiguous, the shifting, and is shaped by its context" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962:11). He uses the famous example of two horizontal lines that appear to be unequal in length because they are embedded in a figure. In fact, they are not "unequal", but are "different", and it is our analytic perception, which is not natural, that makes them appear to be unequal. For this reason, Merleau-Ponty argues that we must confine our observations to the pre-objective realm, before analysis, in order to understand what we are seeing, because "[N]othing is more difficult than to know precisely *what we see*" (1962:58, emphasis in original). The phenomenology of perception is to grasp the unity of the thing observed, not to compare it, or take it apart. In an interview study, this means the researcher must strive to apprehend the participant's "intramental constructions", as Guba and Lincoln put it, from what she is hearing. For this reason, description must precede analysis; otherwise we will only be re-analyzing our pre-existing conceptions.

A constructivist paradigm and a phenomenological approach to qualitative-interpretive methods, underpinned by symbolic interactionism, seemed to be a natural way to study the meaning and place of guns in the lives of incarcerated youth.

Evaluative measures for qualitative research

Traditional methodological issues such as reliability, sampling, and validity have been handled in different ways by different qualitative researchers. As Guba and Lincoln acknowledge, one proposed set of trustworthiness criteria for constructivist research is suspect because its components essentially reproduce positivist criteria (1994:114). Thus, in this set of proposed criteria, credibility parallels internal validity, transferability parallels external validity, dependability parallels reliability, and confirmability parallels objectivity. They point out that these criteria have been well received, presumably because they are so familiar. They propose another set of criteria, more closely associated with the intended “products” of constructivist research, which include increased understanding as well as advocacy and activism. These “authenticity” criteria include fairness, ontological authenticity, educative authenticity, catalytic authenticity, and tactical authenticity. They noted that, at least as of 1994, these issues of evaluative criteria remained unresolved. Subsequent scholars, however, have not hesitated to address these concerns.

Joseph Maxwell (2005) sees validity as the “correctness or credibility of a description, conclusion, explanation, interpretation, or other sort of account” (Maxwell, 2005:106). Rather than “objective truth”, he submits that most researchers simply want validity to give them some grounds for distinguishing accounts that are credible from those that are not. He argues that dealing with validity threats, ways in which the researcher might be wrong, is a practical way to ensure validity, and recommends considering alternative explanations, or rival hypotheses, as well as member checks and triangulation (2009:107). As discussed later in this chapter, member checks consist of

systematically soliciting feedback about the data and conclusions from the people being studied. In this sense, Maxwell is addressing the traditional concern for internal validity; that is, the soundness of statements or conclusions drawn from the data (Rosnow & Rosenthal 2005:141). He also explains that it is important to address in qualitative research issues often presumed not to be present in quantitative research; namely, researcher “bias” and reactivity. Maxwell suggests that qualitative researchers foreground their possible biases so that readers can also perform validation, and that they gather rich data, through verbatim transcripts, for example, so that the researcher does not only gather the data that she feels is significant. I have attempted to foreground my possible biases later in this chapter, and have produced verbatim transcripts of the interviews. Reactivity, the influence of the researcher on the subject or the setting, cannot be minimized or eliminated in interview research, and must instead be recognized and understood so that the researcher knows how it may affect inferences drawn from the data (Maxwell, 2005:109). Both later in this chapter and throughout the data chapters I discuss various ways in which I believe I may have influenced the participants and what they said (and didn’t say) to me, but of course this knowledge too must remain partial. Maxwell suggests that additional strategies for dealing with validity threats include intensive, long-term involvement, intervention, a quasi-experimental approach, searching for discrepant evidence and negative cases, quasi-statistics, and comparison, including comparing one’s research findings with those in the existing literature, or with one’s own, or participants’ own, previous experience. Many of these strategies are unavailable in an interview-based study, but certainly constant comparison and searching for discrepant evidence and negative cases are essential. Maxwell also points out that qualitative

researchers rarely make claims of generalizability about their findings, often using theoretical or purposeful sampling rather than probability sampling. For this reason, what is known as external validity in quantitative research has limited relevance in this context (Rosnow & Rosenthal 2005:141). Yet, while no claims of external generalizability may be made, the researcher must attend to what Maxwell calls descriptive, interpretive, and theoretical validity to be certain that the setting has been studied in a way that would at least generalize to that setting or group; that is, without having selectively focused on particular individuals and ignoring others (Maxwell, 2005:115). Cathy Charmaz (2006) makes the same point, noting that quality research should have both suitable and sufficient data, not “skimpy” data (Charmaz, 2006:18). By interviewing as many gun offenders as I could in six facilities and exploring a variety of their gun-related interactions, I aimed to document a broad range of participants’ experiences that would at least be representative of that group.

Kvale and Brinkmann take a somewhat more holistic view of validity, viewing it not only as embedded in each phase of the research project by means of careful craftsmanship, but also as socially constructed through communicative and pragmatic forms of validation. They reinterpret the concepts of reliability and validity in ways suitable for interview research, pointing out that reliability, for example, usually refers to whether a finding is reproducible at other times and by other researchers, and may encompass whether interview subjects will change their answers during an interview or with different interviewers (2009:245). With regard to generalizability, Kvale and Brinkmann ask, “Why generalize?” They point out that many qualitative approaches view social knowledge as socially and historically contextualized, in contrast to traditional

assumptions that scientific knowledge must be universal and valid for all places and times (2009:261). I would argue that a well-designed and well-executed qualitative study, to the extent that it illuminates the dynamics of interactions and the intramental processes that support them, can have relevance across more than one area of human experience. I would propose as examples studies by Lara Riley (2006) and Howard Becker (1953) of infanticide and becoming a marijuana user, respectively. This is different, of course, from arguing that all juvenile gun offenders acquire and use guns in the same ways and for the same reasons as did the participants in this study, but I would hope that the findings of this study would be relevant to discussions of the topic.

Interviewing incarcerated youth

One of the challenges inherent in studying delinquent youth populations qualitatively is that, unless one is prepared to (and able to) engage in long-term participant observation as Sudhir Venkatesh (2000,2008) did, one is largely confined to self-report data (Baldwin 2000). Whether a researcher relies upon autobiographies (see Douglas 2010) or interviews, problems of communication and memory are among the impediments to clear understanding of past events and their meanings for participants (Biklen 2007, Kihlstrom et al. 2000, Merleau-Ponty 1970). Even with regard to reporting of current views and attitudes, much can get in the way of good communication. As Goffman (1968) points out in *Asylums*, institutionalized persons are stripped of their usual “identity kit”, including street clothing, jewelry, preferred hairstyle, and so on. (Goffman 1968:20). Yet they must still perform an identity during the interview, and it may at times be difficult to tell to what extent an incarcerated person’s performance of a prison persona, a street persona, or some other persona (Goffman 1959) is affecting the nature and quality of the interview data.

Moreover, in interviews with incarcerated juveniles, the usual power imbalance between researcher and researched, as well as between adult and child or youth, is exacerbated. As I was unable to empower participants by giving them control over the place, time or manner of the interview, I attempted at least to be flexible in the structure of the interview itself, leaving room for participants to express their individuality and interests (Knapp 1997; Paredes 1977).

Reflections on my personal interest and perspective

As Maxwell (2005) and others suggest, reflexivity has a critical role in qualitative research, as the researcher herself is the research instrument. Robert Emerson, Rachel Fretz, and Linda Shaw (1995) point out that what the researcher writes is her version of participants' version of their social worlds (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw 1995:215-216). This explains why foregrounding the basis for my interest and my possible biases is crucial for both the reader and me in considering the validity of my interpretations of the interview data. My interest in this subject arose out of my work for twenty-five years as an assistant prosecutor in Camden County, New Jersey. For the last twenty-one of those years I supervised the unit that prosecuted juveniles, who are defined in New Jersey as persons who have not attained the age of eighteen at the time of the charged offense. The county seat, the city of Camden, has been notorious as among the poorest and most dangerous cities in the United States in recent years, and much of the violent crime in the city has consisted of gun offenses by juvenile boys. The combination of poverty and violence that characterized the life worlds of the city's children often made me think of the famous admonition inscribed over the entrance to the Old Bailey, the Central Criminal Courts building in London. That inscription reads: "Defend the children of the poor and punish the wrongdoer." During the decades when I prosecuted juvenile

offenders, this statement seemed to me to summarize the challenge of my work, because the children of the poor usually *were* the wrongdoers. How was I to defend or protect these young people while at the same time protecting their victims, generally their own neighbors, *from* them?

Whether or not one chose to characterize the court's various forms of intervention as punishment, it was clear that the disparate constituencies, among them the juvenile, the parents, and the victim, would welcome the court's intervention to varying degrees. In order to emphasize the family court's rehabilitative ethos, one judge routinely began his in-court colloquy with each juvenile's parent by asking, "What would you like me to do FOR your son?" It was not at all unusual for a parent, usually the mother, to ask the judge to keep the child in custody, either for his own safety, for that of the parent, or both.

As others have observed (Barrett 2013), family court was a place where the judge, prosecutor, and defense attorney often felt more like social workers than attorneys, all struggling to find and craft a disposition (the juvenile court word for "sentence") that would help to keep the juvenile from returning to court, either as a juvenile or an adult. In the case of serious violent offenses, the focus would often shift, certainly for me as prosecutor and often for the court as well, to the safety of the community or the welfare of a surviving victim.

The duality, or plurality, of often conflicting interests was always present, however. As the vast majority of the children who appeared before the court were poor (approximately eighty percent of the juveniles were public defender clients, indigent by definition), each day presented the challenge of balancing care and protection of the

juvenile with accountability for the juvenile and protection of the community.

Depending upon the extent of harm to the public, or to an individual victim, presented by the child's offense, my own efforts would be directed toward seeking either a disposition where the child remained in the community or one where he was separated from the community. In the most serious cases, such as homicides, I would often seek, after conferring with my colleagues in the appropriate investigating unit of the prosecutor's office, to transfer jurisdiction of the case to the adult court. This process is often known as "waiver", because the juvenile court waives, or gives up, its original jurisdiction over the case to the adult court. The state's objective in waiving a case is generally to obtain a longer sentence and a criminal record for the person charged.

In addition to issues of age and gender (virtually all gun offenders were male), issues of race and class were always salient. However, as victims tended to be from the same neighborhoods as the juvenile offenders, the salient feature was not simply that the offenders were poor young men of color, but that most of the victims as well as the offenders were poor persons of color. In this sense, the Old Bailey's admonition resonated at two levels, as both the juvenile charged with an offense and his victim were likely to be "the children of the poor".

Outside of the courtroom I was engaged, to a more limited extent, with the broader concerns that went beyond the circumstances of individual cases, to the resources available in the children's lives and the juvenile justice system at large. There were and are many people working in all areas of the juvenile justice system to improve the life chances of young people either involved with or viewed as "at risk" of involvement with the juvenile court. Many of them have chosen their careers because they want to work on

behalf of young people. I cannot count myself among them, as I was simply a prosecutor who was assigned to supervise the juvenile unit without having any particular previous interest in juvenile law. As a prosecutor, I enjoyed working in the public sector and believed I was performing a job that was of service to my community, as were the public defenders who worked hard to ensure that indigent defendants received legal representation of high quality. I considered my county fortunate to have both prosecutors and public defenders who were professional and dedicated, and, most of the time, our adversarial relationship was respectful on both sides.

Shortly after beginning to supervise the juvenile unit at the Camden County Prosecutor's Office, I was designated to serve as chairperson of the planning subcommittee of the Camden County Youth Services Commission. This legislatively-created group is charged with assessing the needs of court-involved youth or those who may become involved with the court, and planning to address those needs by, among other things, recommending how certain public dollars allocated for serving those youth should be spent. This work permitted me to take a longer-term view of the problems faced by local children and adolescents, as the commission worked to improve services in areas of delinquency prevention, detention, diversion, disposition, and re-entry into the community for offenders who had been incarcerated. I also participated for several years in a group called May Day, which attempted to reduce violence against children in Camden through various community initiatives, and served on a local United Way council that helped to make spending recommendations for United Way funds earmarked for children and youth.

In short, during the course of both my work as a prosecutor and my related committee service I encountered many young men, often urban youth of color, who were victims of gun violence, gun offenders, or both. I became interested in learning what perceptions on the parts of juvenile gun offenders led them to acquire and use guns, what life experiences generated these perceptions, and whether there were ways to interrupt the pathway from minor offending to serious gun offending.

Crossing boundaries

My past and present involvement in the juvenile justice system may provide a basis for my interest in the subject of the current study, but professional experience as a prosecutor and service on committees are a far cry from sharing the childhood experiences of the participants. Although I was working as a prosecutor in the same county in which I had grown up, I had been raised not in the city of Camden, but in a comfortable if not affluent suburb where concerns about personal safety were nonexistent. It was not until I began to work in Camden that I encountered neighborhoods where mothers would feel the need to position their babies' cribs so that they would be less vulnerable to gunfire from the street.

Moreover, I was aware that I would be approaching the subject of violent offending not only from the legal perspective of a former prosecutor, but also from the ordered and relatively privileged perspective of a person who had never experienced want, abuse, discrimination, or fear of violence. Based on my own life experience, I had a limited foundation from which to comprehend youth violence.

When planning for the fieldwork phase of this project, I anticipated that problems creating a relationship with interviewees very different from myself, what Rubin and Rubin call "crossing boundaries" were likely to arise (Rubin & Rubin, 2005:86). I was

acutely aware of the demographic differences between my anticipated participants and me. In speculating about how the young men would respond to me, I knew that we would differ in age, race, gender, and socioeconomic status. In these ways, we could hardly have been more different. As for the one area that we had in common, exposure to the juvenile justice system, I was reluctant to disclose my former role as a prosecutor for fear that it would interfere with my effort to establish rapport. Although I had some reason to believe, from previous experience, that such a disclosure could actually help in making a connection, I opted in favor of caution and simply presented myself as the overage student that I was. But in the same way that incarcerated participants may have felt uncomfortable because of the clothing they were required to wear for the interview (Goffman 1968), I too was concerned about choosing some attire that, if not placing the participants more at ease, at least would not make them even less so. Joan Gurney (1985) had written, in “Not One of the Boys”, that she had eventually exchanged her graduate student outfit of a faded denim skirt for a more professional look when she wished to be treated more like a professional while conducting research in a male-dominated prosecutor’s office (Gurney, 1985:55). I did not want to present myself as yet another “professional” woman, like the many social workers and psychologists with whom participants were no doubt required to interact during the term of their incarceration. Nonetheless, as a middle-aged white woman visiting a prison, I realized this was the default category into which I was likely to be placed. In an effort to escape that classification and accentuate my student identity, I dressed as casually as possible, but in a manner that I hoped would be suitable to both the occasion and the research site.

Not surprisingly, participants made assumptions about me, some of which they shared, based upon my gender, age, race, presumed class, and the apparently lawful nature of my work. Tim prefaced one statement with, “If you have kids—I’m pretty sure you do”. He also ventured the opinion that “[w]e all like money, I’m pretty sure you do, too--just probably ‘good money’”, in contrast to the “bad money” he said he made on the streets. On the few occasions when the fact that I was a lawyer came out during the course of the interview, participants seemed surprised, and, while none of the participants ever used my name when addressing me, they *Ma’am*’d me twice and *Miss*’d me once. In short, participants seemed to view me as a nice older woman, probably a mother, who was able to restrict myself to legitimate sources of income. I also noted that none of the participants directly or indirectly asked about my own background, and perhaps this was one more indication of the asymmetrical nature of our conversational relationship.

I was also uncertain whether our differences would make participants more or less likely to discuss certain aspects of their experiences. Researchers have found that subjects may be either less willing, or in some cases more willing, to discuss topics with someone who is different from them than they would be to discuss them with an interviewer more similar in terms of race, gender, age, or class (Tixier y Vigil & Elsasser 1978; Zinn 2001). Yvonne Tixier y Vigil and Nan Elsasser (1978) learned that Chicana women, for example, were more willing to discuss sexual topics with an Anglo interviewer, evidently believing that this type of discussion was more acceptable in Anglo culture. They were much more reticent with the Chicana interviewer. In addition, participants may have welcomed the opportunity to be the expert, and to educate an “outsider”. Similarly, they might not have felt the same obligation to act tough that they

might have felt with another man, as Jody Miller pointed out in “The impact of gender when interviewing ‘offenders on offending’” (Miller 2010). This could have resulted in an increased willingness on the part of participants in this study to discuss their feelings. Unlike Miller’s project, however, mine had only one researcher, so I cannot compare the data gathered by male and female interviewers. As for topics that we mutually avoided, I noticed later that there was no discussion of sexual matters, and relatively little about dating relationships.

Finally, in terms of crossing boundaries, the primary functional boundary of which I was cognizant was that between a prosecuting attorney and a juvenile defendant. Although I had not worked as a prosecutor for several years, I was very aware that the only setting in which I had previously had the opportunity to question a juvenile offender was when cross-examining him during a trial. In our interview setting, however, the boundary between prosecutor and defendant was a unilateral one, as only I was aware of it. In a sense, this was one more instance of the power asymmetry between us, as the knowledge of this aspect of our connection was kept from the participant. With my conversational partner in custody, though, and the issue of what he had done already resolved, the only questions that were salient for me at the time were why and how he had come to be in that place. Away from the courtroom context, there was no adversarial element present. At the same time, when participants would speak of doing numerous armed robberies in one night, I was glad not to be meeting them on the street. Although I genuinely felt that many of these young men, based on what they themselves had told me, had presented too great a threat to their neighbors to have the liberty of the streets, it was saddening to see them confined and immobilized. I continued to have in my mind both

the risks that they presented to the public and the past and future challenges, and present hardships, faced by the young people with whom I was conversing.

“Talking the talk” of the juvenile justice system

As I began each interview, I asked a few preliminary questions about the participant’s background, such as where he was from, and I also wanted to grasp the details of his current legal situation from the outset. This was partly for my own purposes and partly because I imagined participants would consider a variation on the familiar “What are you in for?” to be an innocuous conversational ice-breaker in that setting. As a result of my experience in the courts, I had little difficulty in understanding either the procedural or substantive developments of the participants’ cases as they related them to me. If anything in their descriptions was initially unclear, I was able to clarify it readily with a few pertinent questions. Although we generally did not discuss my own background, it was my impression that my familiarity with the intricacies of the juvenile and criminal justice systems served to put the participants at ease and thereby facilitated our moving on to discuss issues relevant to the research project. In this area at least, we had a shared vocabulary and knowledge base, and what might be called “shop talk” served at some level as a bridge between us.

Asking the participant, early in the interview, to tell me about the offense for which he was currently incarcerated had other advantages as well. This approach ensured that we started with an event for which it was clear the participant was no longer in legal jeopardy because he had already been adjudicated for it, as well as its being most likely to be a gun-related offense, since these were the criteria for which the institution had searched in finding potential participants. In addition, of course, events closest in time were likely to be easiest for the participant to recall in detail (Brookman 2010:91). After

a discussion of that offense and any other topics that came up in the course of the discussion, it seemed natural to then go back and ask about the participant's initial gun exposure and gun acquisition. Prior to our scheduled interviews, I had already introduced the residents at the largest facility to my study and its overarching concerns during our group recruitment sessions, which are described later in this chapter. In the case of residents at the other facilities, I explained the objectives of the project as I met each participant individually.

Research questions

- 1) What factors prompted these incarcerated juvenile males in New Jersey to acquire or use a gun?
 - a) What elements, if any, of their environments were relevant?
 - b) How, if at all, does the idea or experience of “power” factor into these decisions or events?
 - c) How does a gun affect these young men's views of themselves, or others' view of them?
 - d) How do motivations such as protection, self-image, and instrumentality of crime overlap and intersect?
- 2) What is the process by which these juvenile males acquire a gun?
 - a) How do recollections of guns in their families or neighborhoods affect their own views of gun acquisition and use?
- 3) What effect do these participants feel their incarceration will have on their future gun possession? Do they believe it will be likely to increase? Decrease? Have no effect? Why?

4) What do the participants believe might have been done to prevent their gun possession, or to intervene before they used the gun?

5) What supportive institutions or community groups exist? Is the subject population able to access such supports, or are such supports able to access them? What about their parents? At what points in time might community supports be able to make a difference? Can juvenile justice system institutions function as community supports; that is, can probation or parole function in a supportive role?

The fifth proposed research question is only tangentially addressed in this dissertation. With regard to community and institutional supports and their accessibility to this population, I had hoped to draw upon my ongoing committee work from September of 2010 through April of 2013, considering the various gaps in services and structural barriers as disclosed by our planning and reviews of youth services in Camden County. These were the issues that the Youth Services Commission (YSC) in general and the planning subcommittee in particular dealt with on a regular basis, and they are in fact the *raison d'être* for these groups. I tried, throughout this period, to mentally move back and forth between what participants said about the supports and the lack thereof in their lives, and what the YSC and the various community and institutional service providers were doing or trying to do. I conceptualized these supports as attempting to mediate some of the risks and challenges that the young people faced in various spheres of their environments, from individual and family issues to the structural factors that affected them either directly or indirectly. However, my study did not shed much light on these issues, as I did not attempt a wide-ranging resource inventory or survey of key

stakeholders and system actors, choosing instead to focus on interviews with the incarcerated young men.

I did ask participants about their involvement in community organizations, but most said they were not involved in any way. Those few who answered in the affirmative said they had participated in community athletic organizations until their street pursuits took priority over attending practices and games, just as school had taken a back seat for the same reason. The participants in this study were, by and large, disconnected from such community supports, and what little contact they had ever had was undermined or overwhelmed by their other interests. The attachment between them and community, or even institutional, supports such as probation or parole was insufficient to withstand the countervailing rewards of the street. Participants, on the whole, showed little interest in discussing community or institutional resources, which seemed to hold minimal relevance for them. Accordingly, I chose to focus on the first four research questions. However, during the period of my fieldwork, I chanced to observe a focus group of youth in detention discussing service needs, and the main support these young men said they needed was jobs. This focus group is discussed in more detail in a Chapter Four. I now believe that a separate research project (or projects) with a different focus and methods would be required in order to do justice to the role and efficacy of community and institutional supports for at-risk adolescents and their parents. These are certainly questions that interest me, but I feel that it was unrealistic to propose to answer them in the context of this dissertation project. Based on the interview data alone, my findings in this area are negative findings; that is, I found that community and institutional supports did not seem to have relevance for this population of youth.

Choice of research site and access

The most likely places to find juvenile gun offenders seemed to me to be in the streets, at detention centers, or in places to which juveniles were committed upon disposition. I did not consider a street-based study to be practical for me, and young men in detention were usually awaiting either adjudication or disposition, which raised Fifth Amendment issues. I therefore settled on the New Jersey Juvenile Justice Commission (JJC), whose several facilities were places that were familiar to me. I gained access to the site by first approaching a retired acquaintance who had been a juvenile parole officer, and who in turn directed me to the person in charge of research at the JJC, Michael Aloisi. Dr. Aloisi responded to my letter and assisted me in navigating the process of gaining approval for the project from the JJC's Research Review Board. This process proceeded in tandem with that of the Rutgers University Institutional Review Board, which also approved the project, under IRB#10-241. Dr. Aloisi continued to serve as a liaison during the process of identifying prospective study participants and meeting each of the superintendents or assistant superintendents of the facilities I visited. The field research was conducted at six facilities operated by the JJC. I visited the New Jersey Training School for Boys, Essex Residential, Camden Residential, Southern Residential, Albert Elias, and Costello Prep. In terms of security levels, the facilities ranged from locked facilities with uniformed guards at the door and metal detectors through which visitors were required to pass, to the former country estate of famed aviator Charles A. Lindbergh, which presented a more home-like atmosphere.

Selection and recruitment of participants

I initially sought to interview twenty juvenile male gun offenders. The JJC, in lieu of granting me access to its database, asked me for selection criteria for prospective

participants. As New Jersey's criminal code is not organized in such a way that gun offenses can be directly accessed in databases, I requested the JJC staff to look for residents adjudicated for unlawful possession of a weapon, possession of a weapon for an unlawful purpose, aggravated assault with a deadly weapon, attempted murder, armed robbery, or homicide. There were no participants with homicide adjudications among the prospective participants.

I preferred to interview residents with histories of gun offenses for several reasons. First, this protected residents without adjudications for gun offenses from being asked about events which might expose them to new criminal liability, and ensured that there would be at least one relevant offense that we could discuss safely. Second, it focused the field research on participants whose lives contained those elements which the study intended to examine. In other words, it was a theoretical sampling. Finally, a gun offense history served to corroborate at least those parts of participants' accounts of gun involvement that were the subject of adjudication, enhancing the validity of the interview data. This addressed the concern expressed by Peter Ash and colleagues (1996:1757) in their study of detained juveniles.

Due to the imperfect fit between the statutes and my research questions, the selection criteria proved somewhat slippery and over-inclusive, with the result that not all of the offenses for which the JJC selected involved guns. Some of the smaller facilities solved this problem by simply calling the young men in and asking them whether a gun was the weapon they used in the offenses for which they had been admitted, sometimes doing this while I was still on the phone with the staff member.

Other facilities, such as the Training School, put any residents with the designated adjudications into the pool of prospective participants. The recruiting process likewise varied depending upon the size of the facility, with staff at the smaller facilities often doing the preliminary recruitment themselves among the one, two, or three residents who fit the criteria, while at the Training School two formal recruiting sessions were set up for the dozen or so residents who fit the criteria at different times. At the smaller facilities, I would meet the residents one at a time, introduce myself, and explain the project. I met only one resident under the age of eighteen at the smaller programs, and his superintendent had already obtained a signed parental consent before my arrival. At the Training School, the assistant superintendent and I conducted the group recruiting sessions with a social worker present, and if a resident was willing to participate but was under the age of eighteen, the Training School attempted to obtain parental consent. While many Training School residents under age eighteen expressed interest in participating in the project, parental consent was obtained for two of them. As a result of our inability to obtain more parental consents, all participants except for three were eighteen or older, though all had been adjudicated as juveniles. I explained assent or consent forms, as appropriate, with all participants during our individual meetings. Many of the residents who attended the large recruiting sessions declined to participate in the project, and it is tantalizing to speculate upon the ways in which these residents might have differed from those who agreed to participate. Were they more alienated? Less verbal? More restrained by gang norms? Unfortunately, I'll never know. The study participants were thus partially self-selected, partially selected by the Juvenile Justice Commission, which determined which facilities I could visit and screened for the relevant

offense criteria, sometimes conducting the recruiting process as well, and partially selected by me, as I determined the selection criteria. Willing residents under the age of eighteen were also excluded from participating because their parents or guardians did not return parental consent forms.

Data collection

I conducted fieldwork from November 2010 through June 2011, and recorded the interviews both on a digital recorder and on cassette tape. Two participants declined to be recorded, so I took notes during those two interviews. The semi-structured single interviews ranged in duration from just over half an hour to an hour and a half. Because the participants were selected for a particular set of relevant experiences in their pasts, I believe the interviews could be characterized as what Charmaz refers to as intensive interviews; that is, in-depth explorations of a particular topic with a person who has had the relevant experience (Charmaz, 2006: 25).

I met with twenty-six residents, but, due to a language barrier, my interview with a Spanish-speaking resident lasted only long enough to determine that his attempted murder charge had involved a knife rather than a gun, that he had never used a gun, and that he had never been a victim of gun violence. We gave up the interview after about two minutes. For this reason, I included the limited information I obtained from him in the aggregate descriptive data, but had full interviews with only twenty five participants. The interview protocol is attached as Appendix A.

Because the selection criteria could not filter out residents who had committed the targeted offenses with weapons other than guns, I did not learn whether many participants' current adjudications in fact involved a gun until after I had begun to talk

with them. Once I had begun an interview, I did not terminate it if the resident said he had used a weapon other than a gun in the offense for which he was currently in custody. Almost all participants in this group also described gun possession and use. In fact, as the fieldwork progressed, I found that not only were the New Jersey statutes an over-inclusive means of selecting for gun offenders, but that having a gun adjudication did not necessarily mean that the participant would admit to gun involvement. On the contrary, several adjudicated gun offenders denied having guns, and many participants not adjudicated for gun offenses described gun possession and use. With regard to the latter group, I was initially somewhat concerned both that these young men might over-report their gun involvement since I did not have an adjudication to corroborate it, and that our discussions might range into areas that could expose them to criminal liability. However, in examining the interview data, I found that these young men seemed equally credible as those with gun adjudications, and that their accounts did not seem to differ in quality from those of the former group. I considered them to be comparable in every respect, and this impression aligned with a remark by a JJC staff member that most of the residents had some gun involvement, whether or not they had an adjudication for it. As for my concerns about possible self-incrimination, these young men were sufficiently circumspect that they did not provide enough specific details concerning particular events that they could be charged with them. I discuss this topic in more detail in the ethics section of this chapter.

By the conclusion of the fieldwork, there were nineteen participants who admitted having firearms, and a twentieth who said he had committed an armed robbery with a BB gun that was later recovered from his home by the police. Fourteen members of this

group who acknowledged gun involvement were among the eighteen participants with gun adjudications, and the remainder had adjudications for the weapons and violent offenses I had specified. One young man was currently incarcerated on a drug distribution charge, but had a previous adjudication for robbery. Thus, all participants had been adjudicated for weapons or serious violent offenses. There were no participants with adjudications for shooting anyone, though several described such events. The three participants with attempted murder adjudications all used knives rather than guns, and the one participant adjudicated for an aggravated assault while using a gun beat his victim with the gun rather than shooting him. I could only speculate, based on my experience, that the juveniles charged with shooting or killing people had either been waived up to adult court or were housed at the Juvenile Medium Security Facility, to which I was not offered access.

In short, the juveniles adjudicated for gun offenses were not precisely the same group who described gun offenses. Of the four participants who had gun-related adjudications but did not acknowledge gun involvement, one was adjudicated for armed robbery, but said he was a lookout and that one of his co-defendants who entered the victim's house had a gun. Two of the three participants among this subgroup who were adjudicated for possession of a firearm said it was the person they were with who had the gun. In one case, the boy was selling drugs and he and his co-defendant were both adjudicated for possession of the gun held by the co-defendant, evidently on a joint or constructive possession theory. Although this participant said he did not handle guns, he was probably viewed as having benefited from his co-defendant's possession of the gun that protected them during their drug transactions. Another boy said his friend had a gun,

but discarded it and ran when he saw the police. This participant was thus the only person arrested, and was charged with and adjudicated for possession of the gun, although he says he never had it. The fourth participant in this adjudicated-but-not-admitting group maintained that the gun, allegedly in the car in which he was riding, had either been planted by the police or abandoned by an unknown third party in the yard where he was ultimately arrested. He said that if the gun had been in the car he would have known about it, and since he didn't know about it, he does not believe the gun was in the car. Nonetheless, he was adjudicated for possession of it. This same participant displayed his numerous gunshot wounds to me, saying he had sustained them because of the activities in which he was involved, such as selling cocaine, and that "what goes around comes around". I took this to mean that while he denied having the gun for which he had been adjudicated, he had been involved with guns on other occasions, although he did not say so directly.

In order to attain my desired complement of twenty participants discussing their gun involvement, I found that I needed to interview twenty-six young men, and to request approval from the IRB to interview more than the twenty subjects originally approved. By the conclusion of the fieldwork, I realized that even had the selection criteria been sufficiently precise or congruent to yield only participants with adjudications for gun offenses, I would still have needed to interview more than twenty participants in order to find twenty who acknowledged their gun involvement. The combination of over-inclusiveness due to the statutory definitions of offenses and denials of gun involvement by adjudicated gun offenders required a larger number of participants and also led me to use what I considered to be important and reliable data from participants not adjudicated

for gun offenses, but adjudicated for other weapon or serious violent offenses. In the interest of transparency, I note in Appendix C, describing each named and quoted participant, which ones were currently incarcerated for gun-related offenses and which were not, in the event that the reader wishes to consider this information when evaluating the speaker's credibility with regard to his gun-related activity.

The participants constitute in some sense an intermediate group of juvenile offenders, in that their offenses, sometimes in combination with their histories, were deemed sufficiently serious to require incarceration, but not so serious as to require waiver to adult court or, perhaps, placement at the Juvenile Medium Security Facility. Nevertheless, several participants discussed engaging in violent offending for which they would likely have been waived had they been arrested, and several had adjudications for armed robbery with a gun or attempted murder with a knife. Thus, while the participants had been adjudicated delinquent for serious offenses, these serious adjudications did not include homicides or shootings.

Because interpretive interviewing methods essentially require an iterative design, the interview protocol evolved throughout the duration of the fieldwork as topics not explicitly addressed in the initial protocol emerged (Rubin and Rubin 2005; Williams, Siegel, & Pomeroy 2000:212). As Rubin and Rubin explain, this continuous redesign is necessary in order for the researcher to build on new findings, continue to gather data informed by these new findings, and modify both questions and emerging theories in response to what has been learned from participants (Rubin & Rubin 2005:62-63). For example, as successive participants made reference either to giving money to their mothers or relieving their mothers of much of the financial burden of supporting them, I

began to pursue the topic of what participants did with their money. This subject also resonated with me because I recalled a day in court many years ago when I had noticed a young man about to be taken to detention turn and, as discreetly as possible, peel several bills from a wad of cash and hand them to his mother before he was led away. Other topics, such as participants' own victimization and their changing subjective experiences of their environments at different points in their lives, also presented themselves and invited further exploration with subsequent participants. This iterative approach, which can be cumbersome to execute when multiple interviewers are involved in a project (see Wilkinson 2003), can unfold organically when there is but one interviewer incorporating new ideas as she goes along in her fieldwork.

Data analysis

In the same way, data analysis was ongoing throughout the project, as categories and themes emerged over time and invited consideration, and the writing of memos, about the import of both anticipated and unanticipated topics. My approach to data analysis was primarily issue-focused rather than case-focused. As Robert Weiss suggests with regard to issue-focused analysis, coding is likely to be the process that dominates during the early phases, and "[t]he idea in coding is to link what the respondent says in his or her interview to the concepts and categories that will appear in the report" (Weiss 1994:154). Of course, as Weiss points out, some of these categories are brought to the interviewing project by the researcher, while others emerge from the interviews themselves. Coding and identification of themes thus began early in the process, and as the fieldwork generated additional areas of exploration, more and more categories were identified, fleshed out, and often subdivided (Maxwell 2005:95-96; Charmaz 2006). For example, early categories that emerged from the data included emotions, money,

violence, liking guns, getting guns, first guns, and so on. These broad areas soon came to include multiple issues such as, under the rubric of money, feelings about being supported financially by a struggling mother, things participants spent their money on, lawful employment as a source of money, “the streets” as a source of money, and so on.

Writers on the subject of qualitative data analysis described numerous the process of coding, dating from both the pre- and post-computer eras. I found that as my list of categories grew, the categories would sometimes subdivide themselves and at other times would begin to group themselves together. As I worked variously on transcripts, memos, or field notes, each of these types of documents continually informed the coding, and the existing codes in turn informed the memos. In this way I was able to keep adding new categories as they were identified, recording where the relevant examples were located, and revising or subdividing categories as I went along. While I did not use a qualitative analysis software program, I found that the Microsoft feature permitting word searches within individual documents was helpful when continuously going over the transcripts.

I also prepared short interview summaries, sometimes called vignettes, which I sought to keep at around two or three pages each. These vignettes helped me to grasp how individual narratives contributed to the overarching narrative of the study. While I do not include full case studies as such in this dissertation, I found it useful to be able to see participants’ accounts in a more vertical or holistic way, in addition to horizontally across issues.

In order to gain an overview of some of the variables that emerged from the interviews, I compiled information such as the offense for which each participant was

currently incarcerated, his age, family structure, which participants had suffered particular types of victimization, such as robbery, and so on, in an excel spreadsheet. This data was originally limited to what might be considered independent variables and demographics, but I eventually incorporated some findings into this format as well. I prepared field notes both after each interview and about the various institutional settings as I visited them, in order to capture impressions and other information that would not appear in the transcribed interviews themselves. I documented conversations with staff at several research sites, as well as occasional exchanges that I had observed between staff and participants. These too were analyzed for themes, especially with regard to staff discourses about residents and their families, and the nature of relationships between staff and residents.

The major part of the data analysis, however, took place during and after transcription of the interviews. Doing my own transcription facilitated contemplation and documentation of concepts and themes emerging over the course of the project. I was able to seek out and test emerging themes as I continued with fieldwork, to note discrepant evidence and negative cases, and to consider what they suggested for emerging theories. For example, it was during this phase that I noted that the sole participant who felt he needed a gun for protection even though he did not engage in street crime was a young man who had not moved to the city until he was ten years old. Those who had been born there considered their neighborhoods “normal” despite the violence and crime surrounding them, and did not feel particularly threatened by their environment until they got “into the streets”. This other young man’s apparent “outlier” status could possibly be explained by his having spent his early years in the suburbs.

Through continued analysis of the ways in which participants' environments and experiences were similar and how they were different, patterns and pathways emerged from the data. Moreover, by transcribing the interviews and writing memos throughout the course of the fieldwork, I was able to be sensitive to redundancy in the data and note saturation of different categories and themes. This ongoing review and analysis of the transcribed interviews also helped me to see areas of discussion where I could have probed further or followed up more, while I was still in a position to do so in the remaining interviews (Rubin & Rubin 2005).

As the processes of data collection and coding continued, I began what Weiss called the process of sorting (Weiss 1994:156) when the data started to form into "topical units" that became the basis of chapters and chapter sections. As these topical units formed I attempted to interpret the data by writing memos, constructing what Weiss called "minitheories" to explain what I was hearing, during the phase of the analysis that he termed local integration. At this point I was both constructing and deconstructing themes and concepts, trying to see how the data did and did not fit together, and what the implications were for my arguments. My efforts to understand processes and meanings of gun acquisition and use began to coalesce into several constellations around the foci of environmental influences and pressures to get into the street life, acquiring guns once participants were in the street life, using guns in various ways, and finally outcomes, both in terms of identity and other kinds of consequences. Each of these constellations contained several subsidiary areas with their own dynamics. Through continuing analysis of the data once the fieldwork had been concluded, I engaged in the process that Weiss called inclusive integration, in which I aimed to "develop a framework that will include

all the analyses the investigator wants to report, moves logically from one area to the next, and leads to some general conclusion” (Weiss 1994:160). My eventual framework consisted of what might be considered an etic component, or my view of participants’ social worlds, as well as an emic component, for, although my understanding of participants’ life worlds and viewpoints increased substantially over the course of the study, our viewpoints did not converge “a hundred percent”, as Tim had astutely predicted during our interview. In this dissertation, I attempt to present as many different perspectives held by participants as is feasible, while indicating which perspectives predominated. My hope is that the inclusion of these multiple perspectives will contribute to a comprehensive and multi-faceted picture of how participants experienced and responded to their worlds.

Validity

Validity in qualitative research, as Joseph Maxwell (2005) explains, refers to “the correctness or credibility of a description, conclusion, explanation, interpretation, or other sort of account” (2005:106). Maxwell points out that quantitative and qualitative researchers approach validity differently, in that quantitative research seeks to rule out any and all unspecified threats through the research design, whereas qualitative researchers seek to identify specific threats, and deal with them throughout the data gathering process (2005:107).

Validity threats come in many forms, but two of the main types are researcher bias, or subjectivity of the researcher, and reactivity, the influence of the researcher on the individuals studied (Maxwell, 2005:108). While, as researchers, we cannot eliminate our own subjectivity, we must recognize and communicate our own backgrounds and positioning, in the hope that we ourselves, or, failing that, our readers, can determine the

extent to which our conclusions are reflective of the perspective we bring to our work. Earlier in this chapter, I have attempted to unpack some of my own background and positioning in order to enable as transparent an evaluation of my interpretations as possible.

As a white, middle-aged, female former prosecutor, I clearly brought experiences (and the absence of experiences) and perspectives to this study that influenced my views of the research participants and their activities. As discussed previously, I have never had the experience of living in a dangerous neighborhood or being a victim of physical violence, and my efforts to understand those experiences, and many others foreign to me, were necessarily imperfect. Merleau-Ponty (1945) points out that “that consciousness which is hidden in so much flesh and blood is the least intelligible of occult qualities” because “the true subject knows its own world through all its experiences, and cannot know another’s world in the same way” (1945/1962:349). This imperfect understanding is bound to have manifested itself in my descriptions, explanations, interpretations, and conclusions.

Maxwell cautions against two important threats to validity resulting from researcher bias. These are the selection of data that fit the researcher’s existing theory or preconceptions and the selection of data that “stand out” to the researcher (2005:108). An important way to counter these threats is to acquire “rich data”, what Howard Becker described as data that are detailed and varied enough that they provide a full and revealing picture of what is going on (Maxwell, 2005:110). For interview studies, verbatim transcripts, in addition to notes on what the researcher felt was significant, are recommended in order to provide rich data, and I recorded all the interviews and

produced verbatim transcripts, except for the two participants who declined to be recorded. Close analysis of the recordings and transcripts, as Maxwell suggested, revealed ideas, patterns, and themes that were contrary to my existing theories and preconceptions. In fact, many patterns and themes that I had not anticipated emerged from the interview data.

The influence of the researcher on the individuals studied is inescapable, as Maxwell points out, and, instead of eliminating or minimizing it, researchers must strive to understand how they are influencing what the informant says, and what effect this influence has on the validity of our interpretations (Maxwell 2005:109). Americo Paredes (1977), moreover, emphasizes that in conducting research with minority populations, researchers often draw mistaken conclusions for any of a variety of reasons. These reasons include the researcher's failure to understand an idiomatic expression or failure to recognize that their informants are drawing upon cultural caricatures, types, stories, myths, and jokes of which the researcher is completely unaware, and taking literally what is for the informant largely an artistic performance. As Paredes explains, the informant may test the researcher, pull her leg, or simply present his account within a cultural frame unknown to the researcher. Paredes, a folklorist, emphasizes the importance of viewing the informant "not only as a more-or-less representative member of a group, but as a potential artist, and an individual person as well with interests and goals of his own" (Paredes, 1977:9). This advice was helpful as a reminder of the reciprocal, bilateral nature of the interview relationship, where both parties are giving and taking, and each is observing and evaluating the other. As the fieldwork unfolded, the interactional dynamics of the interview relationship were quite varied among the different

participants, with some revealing themselves as enthusiastic raconteurs glad of an appreciative audience, others wishing to discuss policy issues in a rather academic way, and some clearly measuring their responses in a guarded manner. Participants' self-presentation, as well as what they chose to discuss, likely reflected their conceptions both of the world at large and of me, as well as their different temperaments and interactional styles.

Respondent validation, or member checks, are an important way of confirming that the researcher is correctly interpreting what the participant is saying. Maxwell defines respondent validation as "systematically soliciting feedback about your data and conclusions from the people you are studying" (2005:111). I therefore freely employed respondent validation to maximize the validity of data gathered during interviews. Opportunities for such checks arose naturally enough from my conversations with participants as I tried to clarify their statements and ensure that I understood what they meant. Participants sometimes said, "Yes!" or even "Exactly!" when I attempted to reflect back what I thought I was hearing, but occasionally an emphatic "No!" informed me that I was on the wrong track.

Even if the communication between the interviewer and the participant is not impeded by misunderstanding, the interview researcher still faces the hazards of self-report data, particularly when the data concern the recollection of past events. At best, the interviewer will learn the participant's current construction of past events and motivations.

Merleau-Ponty stresses that the retrospective view is not the same as the view that the participant had at the time of the event. He points out that his own interpretations of

his past, that which he had in the past, the interpretation he has of it today, and that which he will have tomorrow, may all be different: “Tomorrow, with more experience and insight, I shall probably understand it differently, and consequently reconstruct my past in a different way” (Merleau-Ponty, 1970:346). Furthermore, it is important to realize, as Merleau-Ponty put it, that we are “necessarily destined never to experience the presence of another person to himself” (1970:364). As a researcher, I was twice removed, both in person and in time, from the phenomena I was seeking to understand.

Memory itself functions in many ways to affect the nature of the interview knowledge that can be constructed. As Biklen points out, memories are not just stacked on a shelf in the brain awaiting retrieval (Biklen, 2007:254), but are constructed when retrieved, through devices such as narrative, imagery, and emotion (2007:255). Kate Douglas (2010) argues that, in telling of their traumatic childhoods, adults make use of “scripts for remembering”. Narrators use various templates for telling their stories, including endurance sagas (Douglas, 2010:110), wherein they position themselves as survivors, and counter-discourses to nostalgic memories (2010:111), wherein they frame their childhood experiences as unusual or unacceptable in terms of the prevailing images of childhood. Participants in this study, rather than positioning themselves explicitly as survivors, emphasized their competence and resourcefulness in meeting the challenges of their environments. Similarly, they did not frame their childhoods as unacceptable, but simply explained how they navigated their life worlds and adapted to their circumstances.

Researchers have also found that memory is highly selective, and that our emotional states may affect what we perceive and remember. John Kihlstrom and colleagues (2000) report that in constructing and reconstructing our memories, some

research shows that information associated with positive affects is more readily remembered than that associated with negative affect (Kihlstrom et al., 2000:83). This is sometimes called The Pollyanna Principle. Other findings suggest that material associated with intense emotions, whether positive or negative, will be remembered over neutral material. Many other mechanisms also appear to be at work, including possible mood dependent effects, where both the context of “encoding” and “retrieving” memories may affect how much is remembered, including autobiographical memories (2000:88). Having all this in mind helped me to be aware that the mosaic of memory was undoubtedly incomplete, and that the incidents which participants chose to share with me, aside from the offenses for which they were currently incarcerated, might be somewhat fortuitous and arbitrary. I used prompts to aid recollections concerning persons, times, places, and other matters, but since it was the participants who had to rummage through their memories for relevant episodes that they felt comfortable recounting, the burden of production, as it were, fell upon them. All I could do was direct participants’ attention to the areas in which I was interested and hope that they would recall and choose to relate something that would prove helpful to my research. Fortunately, they were very generous and forthcoming with illuminating accounts.

Thus many factors, among which were the distortions of the retrospective view, gaps in memory, and participants’ own filtering of what was conveyed to me, combined with the inherent impossibility of knowing another’s consciousness to challenge me in co-constructing a full and representative picture of participants’ life worlds.

For these reasons, I attempted wherever possible to use additional validity tests recommended by Maxwell, such as searching for discrepant evidence and negative cases,

triangulation, and comparison (Maxwell, 2005:112-114). The selection, as much as possible, of participants with official histories of gun-offending served as one form of triangulation, providing a source other than self-report for important aspects of these participants' accounts.

Existing literature on this population of youth, including other studies of incarcerated juveniles, served as an informal means of comparison, which helped me to interpret results and to notice and understand the meaning of exceptional cases (Maxwell, 2005:113). Sheley and Wright (1993), Ash and colleagues (1996), and Wilkinson (2003) were especially helpful in this regard. My background knowledge, acquired through observing juveniles and adults give their accounts in court, reading transcripts of both witnesses' and defendants' statements, and reading police and investigative reports, also helped me to recognize distinctive features of participants' accounts, bearing in mind that my experience came from a particular organizational perspective (Maxwell, 2005:114).

Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) point out that validity in interview research comes from craftsmanship, by constantly checking data, questioning interpretations, and theorizing about the nature of the phenomena investigated (2009:248-252). From the thematization and design phases through to the reporting of the research, validity concerns have been addressed by continuously considering all the ways in which my ideas might be wrong. For example, presenting portions of this project at workshops and conferences offered an opportunity for classmates, researchers, and others to offer suggestions and ideas that I might not have considered, and to test my interpretations against these fresh perspectives.

Maxwell (2005) points out that comparison of the accounts of various participants can help to ensure validity. The lack of dissonance in participants' accounts, compared with each other, with existing literature on similar populations, and with my own experience in practice, gave me a sense that the data hung together in a convincing way. This is not to say that participants all said the same thing, but rather that their sometimes differing perspectives could be seen to represent genuine and comprehensible interpretations of their life experiences. These various forms of triangulation served to reinforce each other and, hence, my confidence in the data.

Ethics

The two primary ethical issues that concerned me during this research project arose respectively from participants' status as prisoners and as children (even though only three were still under age eighteen at the time of the interviews), and these two issues were somewhat intertwined. As prisoners discussing their offending, participants as well as I had a concern, once our discussions ranged beyond the offenses for which they had been adjudicated, that they might incriminate themselves in some dangerous way (Thomas & Marquart 1988). This did not become a problem partly because the largely street-wise participants were accustomed to being cautious about discussing their offending, and partly because we found ways to negotiate "safe spaces" for talking about offenses that were not the subject of previous adjudications by keeping details vague. I quickly learned that I needed a way to distinguish between a negative response to a question about a violent activity, such as shooting somebody, that actually meant "no" and one that meant, "I don't feel comfortable discussing that". Once I learned how to do so, by explicitly asking participants which of the two they meant, I felt that both participants and I became more assured that our communication was as clear and in-depth

as was practicable. The other issue, that my efforts to be as “deep and probing as possible”, as Kvale and Brinkmann (2009:174) say, might intrude upon emotionally sensitive areas that might prove troubling for young people did not materialize either, at least to my knowledge. Perhaps because participants were adolescents rather than younger children, street-savvy, and veterans of the cognitive-behavioral therapeutic approaches prevalent in juvenile treatment contexts, they knew how to shield and avoid those areas of their personhood that would have been troubling to discuss in anything beyond a superficial way. Of course, I did try to strike a balance between being probing and being sensitive, as Ann Lewis cautions (Lewis 2010:19). However, while I maintained a non-confrontational stance, I did question participants closely concerning their feelings about and during the commission of violent crimes such as armed robberies. I believe several participants engaged in frank discussions of this topic that were helpful to me and did not cause them to feel encroached upon.

The fieldwork and subsequent analysis revealed a group of participants that was hardly uniform in terms of gun acquisition and use. There were young men who said they didn’t like or use guns, even though some of them had gun adjudications, others who used guns only for protection, some who used them aggressively, whether brandishing, threatening, clubbing or shooting, and some who said they “loved” or were “infatuated with” guns. This broad range of experiences and feelings formed a rich source for the discovery of themes and concepts.

Notes on participants’ names and quotations

I assigned pseudonyms to each participant, rather than asking them to choose their own, in the hope of maximizing the confidentiality of what they shared with me, even if they might have chosen to do otherwise by sharing their pseudonyms or stories with

others. When participants' words are rendered in capital letters in quotations from interviews, this indicates that the participant placed special emphasis on those words. I did not "clean up" the texts of the interviews, but I sometimes omitted the names of particular towns, also in order to preserve confidentiality as much as possible. I indicated in the transcripts where some brief portions of recordings were inaudible.

Although all participants were informed that they could review the transcripts of their interviews, only one participant expressed a wish to do so and, unfortunately, by the time his interview was transcribed I was unable to locate him. I eventually learned that he had been arrested by the United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency shortly after his release from the custody of the Juvenile Justice Commission. I was told that he had been charged with a serious violent offense as an adult and had presumably been deported to Mexico. I was sorry not to have had the opportunity to meet with any of the participants a second time, to hear their reflections upon what they had previously shared with me.

Voices

The participants in this study were often eloquent, open, and insightful. I felt no need to tinker with their words in order to make their ideas more clear, as I believe their voices stand very well on their own. I am mindful of the frequency with which researchers are said to become overly sympathetic to their participants out of gratitude for making their research possible, and I hope that the methods employed in this project are sufficiently transparent that the reader can see past the grateful researcher and the judgmental prosecutor alike.

Chapter Three

Consuming Violence, Constructing Masculinity

“... I’m standin’ in front of my house. It was a time back before I started doin’ this. I was standin’ outside in my helmet and shoulder pads, and I just hear gunshots . . . they just come down the street in a car and they shootin’, and I, I just RUN. . . . You know how people say, ‘Here today, gone tomorrow’; you could be here today, gone today. . . . Tomorrow is not promised”.

Tim Myers (June 2, 2011)

Tim was describing a day back before he started selling drugs or carrying a gun, when he was dressed and ready to go to football practice. At that time, he was still a committed student-athlete, around twelve years old. Many of the participants described similar encounters with violence in their everyday lives. Three of them, more than ten percent of the group, had been shot, twelve more reported having been shot at but not hit, at least six had been victims of robberies, some on more than one occasion, and at least fourteen had friends or family members who had been shot. Direct and indirect victimization, poverty, and violence exposure of various kinds typically characterized their life worlds. In this sense, I view the participants in this study as consuming various forms of violence on a regular basis; sometimes involuntarily through victimization, violence exposure, or the symbolic violence of poverty or racism, and sometimes more willingly, regarding violence in their neighborhoods or through media representations as entertainment. As they did so, they grew from boyhood to adolescence, constructing their identities as young men from all that they had consumed.

In this chapter I explore many of the challenges and threats faced by participants in their family and neighborhood spheres. As well, some of the ways in which they coped with these risk factors also form part of the context of their lives and experiences.

The dynamic relationship among environmental risks, the individual adolescent's perceptions, and his coping responses is well illustrated by Margaret Beale Spencer's Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (1995). Her framework, which gives due prominence to the subjective and interactive processes of identity development, helps to explain why some young men respond to their environments by becoming involved in illegal activities while others do not. Many children grow up in similar surroundings and do not become gun offenders. Therefore, in tracing participants' pathways to gun acquisition and use, it is important to consider how they described their experience of these environmental factors, and how they related them to their identity development. In addition, because the pathway to gun involvement described in this study tends to lead through a period of pre-gun offending, analyzing how participants began engaging in delinquent behavior arises as a critical dimension of the research. This chapter, then, focuses on the pathway into the illegal activities of the street lifestyle, which typically preceded gun acquisition and use among these participants. It highlights the environmental features described by participants as salient to their decision-making processes and their emerging identities as juvenile offenders, rather than as students on the path to conventional achievement.

Violence Exposure and Victimization

The most intimate sphere of a child's environment is his home, and while I did not ask participants directly about child abuse or domestic violence, several young men volunteered accounts of violence in their homes, and described what they believed to be its lasting effects upon them. Both Kevin, an eighteen year-old Latino boy with a gun assault charge, and Thomas, a young African American who was over eighteen and incarcerated for armed robbery, recalled being beaten by their mothers' boyfriends when

they were little boys. As Kevin and I discussed the subject of angry feelings, he said his mother's former boyfriend used to beat both his mother and him. Now incarcerated for using a gun to beat another young man, Kevin listed the kinds of occasions when he would consider it appropriate to use a gun, including "if somebody, like, hurt my family, hit my mother or something like that." Similarly, Thomas said he had had a stepfather who would hit him frequently, and, as he put it, "I grew up in an abusive home, and I just kept tellin' myself, one day when I get a gun, all this will stop." I asked whether he meant that he had wished he'd had a gun to defend himself on those occasions, and Thomas replied fervently, "I always did." For both Kevin and Thomas, a gun had meaning as an equalizer that could change them from helpless children in a dangerous, frightening situation to powerful actors who could stop the abuse. However, as will be discussed in the next chapter, neither of them acquired a gun until after he had begun selling drugs.

Several young men described being introduced to guns in their homes, the guns' presence often attributed to older family members' involvement in the drug trade. Quinto told me he came from a drug-dealing family, and that guns were always hidden around the house, though not well enough to keep a curious youngster from finding them:

I was about four or five when I picked one up . . . a .357. That was my first exposure to a gun. And when I was about seven, I had picked up a rifle; it was wrapped around in a towel, a purple towel. I unwrapped it, and started playin' with it . . . When I heard my uncles comin' in, I just wrapped it up, and put it back . . . behind the couch; that's where they had it.

Eventually his uncles showed him how to hold a gun, but on the day that rival drug dealers arrived and shot at his home, young Quinto was banished to the basement while his older family members returned fire. By the time he was eight or nine, Quinto was practicing his aim by using a bb rifle to shoot rats in the kitchen of his home:

QUINTO: Yeah, we had rats inside the kitchen area, yeah. Rats, they would run through like on the stove, and then they would run across both sides. . . . I'd be chillin' with the gun, waiting to shoot one of the rats. I'd see one come. I'd breathe. . . .[demonstrates how he would inhale and then hold his breath] I'd go like that. And my hand would be shakin'. So, I'd shoot.

DM: For real?

QUINTO: Yeah. I hit one of 'em in the head.

Any concerns that his account might have been embroidered or exaggerated were dispelled by my recollections of the rat traps I had seen in the parking lot surrounding the office building where I had worked, only a few blocks from where Quinto grew up.

The remarkable detail with which Quinto recalled both his early discovery of a rifle in his home and his shooting of a rat in his kitchen suggests that he may have viewed both incidents as significant life events. Other participants, too, often had vivid memories of their first encounters with guns, as will be described in the next chapter. Memory researchers have found that material associated with intense emotions, whether positive or negative, will be remembered over neutral material (Kihlstrom et al., 2000:83), and participants seemed often to have intense emotions associated with these early gun encounters.

Participants' Victimization and Violence Exposure in Public Spaces

Thomas's childhood wish for a gun did not arise in a vacuum or simply from viewing glorified violence on television, but from lived experience. "You could walk through my door, there'd be bullet holes in there," he told me, describing his apartment building. What's more, when he was around nine years old, someone pointed a gun at him while he was in the building's elevator on his way to school. The elevator incident turned out to be a prank that had gone awry, but Thomas remembered being "in shock"

when it happened. His shock quickly turned to fascination once the young man with the gun realized he had frightened the boy:

[H]e seen the way I was lookin', and he said, "Naw, little man, you're good;" so I'm lookin' at him like I'm upset, and he said, "You can worry about it when you become a man." And I said, "Can I hold it?" He put it in my hand; it was a revolver. . . . And then later, that whole day after I went to school, I was just thinkin' about it. Couldn't wait to get my own gun.

The complexity of Thomas's early feelings, combining gun fear and gun attraction in rapid succession, is apparent in this account. Incarcerated at the time of our interview for robbing drug dealers, Thomas recognized early that a gun could give him a measure of power and an accompanying feeling of safety. It is important to bear in mind that while I employ the linear image of a pathway to gun acquisition and use, guns and violence often pervaded participants' lives whether they sought guns out or not. This means that these young men's contact with guns must be viewed in a more holistic way, and that when I speak of consuming violence, this can encompass either involuntary consumption, such as violence exposure of various kinds, or more participatory types of consumption. What seems significant with regard to the process of gun acquisition is what else was going on in a participant's life at the time of his various encounters with guns.

For example, Tim described finding two guns on the streets in his city. When he found the first one at around age twelve, he was still committed to school and sports, and immediately turned the gun over to a local adult. By the time he came across the second one while in his teens, he had joined a gang and kept the gun for himself. The meaning of a gun for the same person changed from something that inspired fear or merely curiosity, to a valued possession, depending upon the broader context of the young man's

life at the time. As Howard Becker formulated the process, drawing upon G. H. Mead, a person who makes meaning of an object or experience is interacting not only with others or the object, but also with himself, and must indicate to himself what the meaning of the object or experience is (Becker, 1953:238). What a gun means to a young man therefore depends upon how he is viewing himself and his life world at that particular time. For Tim, the committed student-athlete, a gun had no relevance; for Tim, the self-described gangbanger, it had obvious utility.

Another participant, Leon, talked about finding a job at around age fourteen, where he and his friend handed out fliers for an insurance company. As he put it, “I had a job, legal; I was tryin’ to do the right thing.” While working one day, he and his friend were robbed at gunpoint. When I asked him what that felt like, Leon answered,

Well it feel like, if you don’t do what they want you to do, they just shoot you. And I wasn’t gonna test they patience, because one thing you don’t wanna do is test somebody with a gun’s patience, ‘cause, you never know, you never know if they’re really gonna shoot you, or not gonna shoot you. . . I didn’t have pockets in my shorts. That’s the good thing. They put the gun up to me, and they took it away. I told them, “I ain’t got no pockets!”

Leon admitted that he had already begun committing robberies by the time he and his friend were robbed but, while the chronology is somewhat unclear, it appears that he had not yet begun doing armed robberies. Since Leon was wearing basketball shorts with no pockets, the robbers quickly turned their attention to his friend and co-worker: “So they just went to him, and . . . I seen how it really is to have a gun; he did what he said, and . . . he started shakin’ and stuff.”

Speaking of his own offending, Leon offered,

Yeah, I been doin’ robberies since I was like eleven years old. It started off with just strong-arm robbery. But then, I started seeing guns and stuff, that’s when I realized that you could get it, without having to fight. It would be easier, by stickin’ ‘em up. So, that’s the next part. That was the next thing.

As Leon said, in time he became an armed robber himself, ultimately wearing a bullet-proof vest for protection against retaliation by his victims. At the time of our interview, he was incarcerated for an armed robbery of a liquor store. In listening to participants' accounts, I sometimes had the impression of a sort of feedback loop, wherein they both consumed violence and became consumed by the violence that surrounded them, taking it in until it overtook them and became a part of them. In this sense, their external surroundings became internalized.

Participants typically learned, over time, how to be at home in violent surroundings. Sam described an incident that occurred when he was fourteen, walking from school with his cousin. A car came around the corner, followed by a man on foot chasing the car while firing two handguns. At first Sam couldn't believe this was really happening, especially in view of the reactions of the other bystanders:

And it's like, ain't nobody was runnin'! And it's like, it was NATURAL! Like it was a GAME or somethin'! . . . When it first started happening, I was like, "Think! Run!" I was like, "Wow!" Then I saw my cousin's like, "What you runnin' for? It ain't got nothin' to do with us." "What? You buggin'!" I mean, they're shootin', and ain't nobody runnin', ain't no babies cryin'. It just NATURAL! When the car got away, he just put 'em back in his pocket, and walked away around the corner! Like ain't nuttin' happened!

Asked about being in a violent neighborhood, Sam responded, "You know, you become used to it". Sam seemed eventually to take his cue from the nonchalant attitude modeled by his cousin and the other bystanders, as neighborhood violence became normalized for him. If the violence had nothing to do with him, he learned to ignore it. Sam was incarcerated for an armed robbery of a man at a light rail station.

Murder, too, touched the lives of many participants, taking their family members or their friends. Naheem told of a friend being killed while he was nearby. The soon-to-

be victim's mother was visiting from down south, and Naheem, a guest at the gathering, had momentarily gone down the block with some other friends. They heard what sounded like a firecracker, but, suspecting that it was not, ran back up to the house, and found that their friend had been shot in the head three times. They waited for the police and provided some information, but, according to Naheem, the homicide remained unsolved.

Significantly, Naheem appears to have withheld considerably more information about the possible killer than he provided to the police, believing the killer to have been someone the victim had recently robbed. While Naheem's summary of what he told the police about the deadly shooting was confined to what he observed that day, he told me, in addition, that "I think he might have robbed somebody like that—that's probably the kid that came back to shoot him. But nobody found out yet though." As will be discussed in Chapter 6, much neighborhood street violence is viewed, by victims and witnesses as well as perpetrators, as retribution for previous offenses, and therefore not appropriate for police or court intervention. This is but one of several reasons participants gave for the practice of withholding information from the police.

Naheem said he himself had committed only one robbery, and that was without a gun. He was currently in custody only for selling drugs, although he acknowledged keeping guns on his drug set for protection, and once shooting a gun to chase away noisy children on the block, who were interfering with business.

Kyle, a young man who had moved from a high-crime neighborhood to a quiet area that bordered on the rural, was not incarcerated for a gun offense, but for aggravated assault with a car. He related that an illegal gun belonging to his older brother, a gang

member, had been seized by the police when his brother was arrested for threatening their mother, during the period when Kyle lived with them in the city. Kyle said he had lost many family members, friends, and even enemies to gun violence while he lived there. Hearing gunshots at night, he would think, “Somebody’s gettin’ shot, who is it now? Which friend am I gonna lose, which relative am I gonna lose? Which enemy am I losing?” He learned to cope with his dangerous surroundings by being careful not to walk beyond the corner store if he was out alone at night. Walking from his mother’s house to his grandparents’ house was thus something he felt unable to do. Kyle clearly perceived his movements to be circumscribed by the limits of a relatively small zone where he felt he could tolerate the level of risk, and this zone was even smaller at night.

Finally, one participant drew on an account of his own street victimization to position himself as a knowledgeable actor sacrificing his safety to protect a friend, thus portraying himself as a sort of guardian even while acknowledging that he became a victim. Quinto provided a detailed description of an armed robbery that occurred while he and a younger boy were out walking one night. Quinto’s twelve year-old friend had been smoking, and wanted to buy some chewing gum before returning home so that his mother would not smell smoke on his breath. Quinto told me he had a bad feeling about two people who seemed to be following them, and, as he recalled, “I told him; I knew it; I felt it. . . . Like you can feel when there’s about to be somethin’ happening. You know something’s wrong.” Although he persuaded his friend to take the evasive action of crossing the street, the duo continued to follow them. At that point Quinto recommended heading directly to his friend’s nearby home, and reported that he argued with his companion when the boy still held to his plan to stop at the store first, telling the boy how

foolish it was to risk being robbed rather than face his mother with smoke on his breath. When his friend insisted on continuing to the store, Quinto acquiesced, only “because I didn’t want him to go by himself”. Sure enough, the robbers approached, and Quinto was about to turn and run, but saw that his friend still did not apprehend the situation, and once again Quinto was loathe to abandon him. They were, as Quinto anticipated, robbed at gunpoint; both forced to lie face-down on the ground. Even then, Quinto attempted to school his companion, who seemed to be trying to peer up at the robbers: “I told him . . . ‘Don’t look up’. He looks up, and got pistol-whipped in the face.” Quinto himself was kicked in the back of the head twice before the robbers left. Throughout this account, Quinto positioned himself as the older, wiser actor who tried unsuccessfully to protect his less street-savvy friend, putting himself at risk to do so. Although he described himself as angry following the robbery, Quinto clearly relished telling the tale, dramatizing it with sound effects of footfalls by drumming on the table. Quinto was in custody for gun possession in connection with his drug-selling business, but described several instances of firing guns in a variety of circumstances ranging from anger to celebration, as will be discussed later.

Participants thus explained how violence came to be incorporated into their everyday lives. Through exposure, violence came to be somewhat routinized, becoming a part of their identities and expectations.

“What you call violence, I call excitement”

Street violence was often consumed (and produced) by adolescents as entertainment. While Thomas and Sam expressed some apprehension about their early exposure to guns and gun violence, Quinto expressed outright enthusiasm for watching a

street fight unfold. He quickly reframed my question about witnessing violence in his neighborhood:

DM (following up on a statement of his): You felt, like, violence on your own block?

QUINTO: No, to me, I didn't see, I didn't look at it as violence. Like I don't look at that stuff as violence. I just look at it as excitement. I guess it excites me just to see two people arguing and not knowing whether they're going to start beating each other up. And then the other dude get beat all up, and he go grab his gun, go back around the block, just start shootin', it's like something, I don't know, it's excitement.

Another participant, Kenneth, who had been incarcerated since he was thirteen for an armed robbery with a knife, talked about being shot at by a rival gang member while he and his friend were sitting on a porch. They were about to beat the other boy up, when their intended victim suddenly pulled out a gun and started shooting at them. I tried to get a sense of how Kenneth felt at the time:

DM: Um, so was that scary?

Kenneth: Yeah. It's scary but it's, still, it's fun in a way.

DM: That's, yeah, so for you, it's sort of like excitement?

Kenneth: Yeah. Yeah. It's (very slight pause) exhilarating.

Although I was wary of leading Kenneth, I wanted to follow up on his suggestion that being shot at had been fun on that occasion, so I used Quinto's word. Kenneth's choice of the vivid adjective "exhilarating" satisfied me that he was not simply following my lead, but rather expanding upon his own description of the experience as "fun".

Robert Garot (2010) has suggested that many young men who live in poverty are bored, and that "the occasional excitement of gang violence and crime" can relieve some of this boredom (Garot, 2010:112). This seems to be true both for those who are participants and those who are spectators. What I, as a middle-class researcher, call

violence evinces a different sort of meaning for many of these participants, framed as something that is fun and exciting--sometimes for watching, sometimes for participating in, and sometimes for just ignoring, as part of the everyday background of their worlds.

Quinto also described an incident that had created problems for him in the neighborhood (scorching some siding on a local house with a cigarette lighter) as arising out of poverty-induced boredom:

I don't know, I was bored . . . There was really nothin' you could do. It just be boring . . . Most of the parents around here . . . they don't got enough money to go on trips, to take they kids somewhere . . . Niggers ain't got no money for no Wildwood, and all that other shit.

Quinto, a very fair-skinned Latino boy, conflated race and class when arguing that the inability to take even a day trip to the Jersey shore resulted in his looking for excitement in the wrong places. Moreover, he is acutely aware that the poverty of his city contrasts markedly with conditions in the neighboring suburbs: "I don't come from a rich family . . . We do not live in no Pennsauken or Cherry Hill."

The structural violence of poverty: The Case of Quinto

Boredom, however, may be one of the less immediate threats to the welfare of these children in poverty. Some participants had little parental supervision, lived in rat-infested homes, and had to worry about what they were going to eat. Quinto's account of his home life provided glimpses of what some less forthcoming participants may also have experienced. He said his mother lived in another part of town, and his father was usually at his girlfriend's house, leaving Quinto with plenty of opportunity to entertain friends at home. Home, however, was a place where Quinto could practice his aim with a bb gun by shooting a rat in the kitchen, as he told me with some pride.

Consistent with Ervin Goffman's impression management theory (1959), however, Quinto and other participants at times seemed uncomfortable or evasive when our discussion threatened to uncover grave material deprivation or parental neglect.

Quinto was hesitant about naming the only food that might be on hand:

Quinto: Sometimes we might run out of food, or whatever, I'm hungry, like, since I don't eat certain stuff, and I WON'T eat it. 'Cause I just don't like it.

DM: Like what?

Quinto: I would only eat it if I'm starvin'. Like some of the stuff that's there. Let's just say, if you don't got no chicken, no nothin', no none of that meat, we might not even have food or nothin'. We just got RICE. Just rice, that's it, just rice, so. . . I don't wanna eat rice.

Quinto spoke obliquely for a considerable time before finally naming rice as the hated food that he would eat only if he were starving. He was much more reticent about naming this food, which he evidently considered to be the emblem of his family's poverty, than he was about discussing his drug selling or violent offending. He seemed to feel keenly the stigma of being a poor teenager in a poor neighborhood of a poor city.

Pierre Bourdieu has spoken of "sites of social relegation",

where the personal suffering of each is augmented by all the suffering that comes from coexisting and living with so many suffering people together—and, perhaps more importantly, of the destiny effect from belonging to a stigmatized group. (Bourdieu & Passeron., 1999: 64)

Participants did not explicitly discuss the stigma of their positioning. Yet, Quinto's evident embarrassment at revealing the scarcity of food in his home, and his generalization that the parents in his area could not take their children on trips, suggests that his "niggers ain't got no money" comment was not a casual one. Rather, his remark suggests that he believed himself to belong to a group and carry a social identity that was relegated to an undesirable state. Unlike the Oakland, California, grade school children

described by Barrie Thorne in “‘The Chinese Girls’ and ‘The Pokemon Kids’”(2008), Quinto was acutely aware of both his absolute and his relative poverty. In addition, he seemed dubious about his ability to present himself credibly for the world of legal employment:

I didn't have the proper attire. . . Like, you got to have the proper attire to go to interviews. I didn't have that proper attire to go to the interviews, so why waste my time, goin' in regular clothes when somebody else could go up in there with a dressy shirt and some slacks, and some cone shoes, at least that's what I call 'em.

Without a nice shirt, slacks, and fashionable, pointed-toe dress shoes, Quinto could not even envision himself stepping out beyond his neighborhood and being taken seriously in the “legitimate” world. Something about the tenor of his speech, moreover, hinted that his lack of confidence, despite his usual bravado, extended beyond simply not having the right clothes. The “destiny effect” Bourdieu described seemed to function like an invisible fence, keeping Quinto confined within his site of social relegation. As uncomfortable as his surroundings were in many respects, they seemed to constitute a comfort zone within which he felt capable of making a successful presentation. He had followed in the familiar path of his uncles and become a drug dealer.

Welcome to My World: Narrating Capability

As I listened to Quinto relate his experiences of being robbed at gunpoint, shooting a rat in his kitchen, and sometimes having nothing in the house to eat except rice, his accounts struck me as harrowing instances of victimization, neglect, and vulnerability. Nonetheless, his demeanor was quite cheerful as he recounted these things; perhaps he even enjoyed the opportunity to shock a presumably naïve listener with his tales (see Paredes, 1977). I realized he had constructed and narrated himself as a capable, resourceful person who knew how to negotiate his life world.

He framed his account not in terms of an “endurance saga” as discussed by Kate Douglas in *Contesting Childhood* (2010), but more as an adventure story, wherein he heroically battled each foe. He ruefully granted, however, that his agency was sometimes limited to knowing the procedure for surviving armed robbery, as when recounting how he guided his younger companion through the victimization experience with as little harm to them both as possible. His poverty featured in his narrative as an explanation for why he sold drugs and why, out of boredom, he found excitement in risky ways.

He also explicitly, if haltingly, defended his parents, who seemed to have left him largely on his own as a young teenager. At the same time, he seemed defensive about having to do so:

So I needed some money, so whatever . . . they, it's not, if they had money, they'd give it to me, it's not like they stingy with it. And then they just, I mean, sometimes, they don't have the money. They don't got money, whatever.

I inferred from his account that on those occasions when there was little food to be had at his father's house, his efforts to find some food at his mother's apartment were not very productive either: “She had some food at her crib, but, it wasn't like, I mean, the stuff she had there, it wasn't, she had food, whatever, she, she had it, but it would go, it would be gone.”

A voluble young man who happily talked with me for an hour and a half, Quinto only stumbled when discussing his severe material deprivation. His evasion and hesitation when speaking of his difficulty in obtaining food suggested that he was engaging in what Barrie Thorne and others have called “shamework”, an effort to save face when exposing an area that would position him as “lesser” in some way (Thorne, 2008; 2010). As Thorne noted, crediting Arlie Hochschild for the term, “shame work”

includes identity work performed by poor children (or youth, as here) in order “to sustain a sense of dignity” (Thorne, 2008:90). Thorne recently documented children’s experiences and management of family shame, particularly in the context of straitened economic circumstances such as food insecurity (Thorne, 2010). What Quinto sought to highlight for me was his resourcefulness in meeting his many challenges, not the fact that his parents had failed to provide for him. In short, he attempted to manage my impression of him by accentuating the positive, his agency, while downplaying what he plainly considered to be the negative, his vulnerability (Goffman 1959). In Chapter 5, Quinto will provide an example of how shamework is performed with a gun.

With his mother and father living separately and his older brother “locked up for a long, long time”, Quinto said he began selling drugs because he needed some money, and I believed him. His living situation recalled Laurie Schaffner’s discussion of “empty families” in *Girls in Trouble with the Law* (2006). Although Quinto had a roof over his head, he seemed to be missing many of the other material and emotional supports that non-offending children may take for granted. He was the only participant to explicitly cite food insecurity as a reason for selling drugs, though many participants said they would use the proceeds from their drug sales to buy food. I wondered how many other participants, less forthright than Quinto, likewise worried about what they were going to eat. When telling me how they spent their money from selling drugs, almost all participants listed food or clothing first.

Man of the House: At the intersection of masculinity, poverty, and race

The accounts of these young African American and Latino men demonstrate that it was not only when performing violence, but also when dealing with shortages of money and creating their place in a female-headed household, that they sought to

construct their identities in terms of masculine competence and capability. They tended to view themselves as providers, protectors, and in control of their situations to the extent possible, even while they labored under severe constraints upon their agency.

The degree of financial hardship among the different participants' families no doubt varied. However, secondary only to all the participants being young men of color, the outstanding common demographic feature among them was that the vast majority, over twenty, lived in female-headed households. Seventeen lived with their mothers, three with aunts, and one with his grandmother. Only three lived with a mother and father, and one lived with his father although, according to the participant, his father spent little time at home.

Much has been written about the multiple ways in which growing up without a father in the house affects boys. Often the focus is on the absence of male guidance or discipline in the household as the boy becomes a young man (Simons et al., 1999:1030). The most salient feature of the female-headed household as discussed by the participants in this study, however, was the shortage of money. Many described the experience of living with their struggling mothers as impelling them to seek income. Over and over, participants reported that they believed they should, at the very least, provide for their own needs rather than drain their mothers' limited resources. They seemed intensely aware that their mothers were under a financial strain, and felt that it was incumbent upon them, as young men, to do something about it, seemingly experiencing the dependent status of being supported by a struggling woman as incompatible with their emerging masculine identities.

Unlike middle-class adolescents who often are purely reacting against the dependency relation of age when they seek employment, these young men seemingly felt called upon to relieve their mothers of part of the burden of supporting them, in view of the family's straitened circumstances. Their accounts suggest that one criminogenic aspect of fatherless homes may be that a young man, whether or not his mother is genuinely poverty-stricken, may feel the need to be financially self-sufficient. Some participants reported contributing to the support of their households through their criminal activity, whereas others simply provided for their own needs, stating that as a consequence of having an "independent" source of income, they didn't have to take money from their mothers. Ernie said he used the money he obtained from drug dealing and robberies for "anything I wanted. Like clothes, food, whatever. I ain't gotta ask my mother for nothin'." Several participants did have legal employment at various times, but either lost or left those jobs, eventually falling back upon the drug trade, the default employer in the inner-city, or other types of delinquent activity, such as robbery or automobile theft. In addition to the participant who had distributed fliers for an insurance company, one boy had worked at a university food court, one at a chicken restaurant, and one at a women's clothing store. Several others reported applying for jobs without success, and still others, like Quinto, seemed to consider such efforts futile.

As Prudence Carter (2005) and James Messerschmidt (1993) have discussed, young people who reside in the inner-city often have very limited networks for connecting with legal employment, and the connections they have may be fragile, leaving these young men with less-than-robust identities as legal workers. Thus, after Ernie lost his job at a women's clothing store, he became demoralized and decided that he would

return to selling drugs: “I was just, like, just screw it; I just did not care about a job no more . . . I can’t get a job . . . I’m, like, I couldn’t do nothin’. I just felt like the best thing I was good at was sellin’ drugs.”

Xavier, an eighteen year old African American, described a similar experience, except that he never succeeded in finding a job. Both a drug dealer and a robber of drug dealers, Xavier moved back and forth between his mother’s and his aunt’s homes, and said, “I had tried fillin’ out job applications; I didn’t get no response. So I guess I just, gave up on that.” In addition to buying clothes and other things for himself, he said he would buy things for his aunt. He acknowledged that both his mother and his aunt could use help with the bills, “’cause I understand that they were strugglin’.”

Likewise Kevin, an eighteen year old Latino, recalled that as soon as he made his first drug sale, and saw how fast the money came, he “stopped askin’ my mom for dollars here and there; I had a bunch of dollars in my pocket”. With five more siblings at home and his father incarcerated, Kevin felt pressure to bring in some money. He said of his siblings, “But they were younger than me. I’m the oldest. So it was like, old take care of the young.” Although still too young to get a legitimate job, he said he helped his mother by buying her a car and fixing things around the house. Many young men described similar scenarios, wherein they would use the proceeds from their dealing or robberies to provide for themselves or to help support their mothers, to a greater or lesser degree. At the very least, as David, also an eighteen year old African American, said of his mother in a comment that typified those of other participants, “She has priorities, too”, and he felt that whatever money he did not have to obtain from his mother would leave more for her own needs and priorities.

Thomas, who was temporarily living with his girlfriend, explicitly declared that after he began to make money through his illegal activities, he felt that his masculine identity had been forged: “When I started doin’ stuff, like, when I started bringin’ food home and I started bringin’ money home, that’s when I felt as if, like, I’m a man.”

Kjerstin Andersson (2008) discovered while researching young Swedish men’s talk of violence that young men can “be seen to position themselves in relation to particular discourses of masculinity, based on certain understandings of what it entails to be a man. These discourses call for the man to be in control of the situation, to be able to protect himself and others . . .” (Andersson, 2008:159)

Raewyn Connell (2005) conceptualizes gender, like race, as socially constructed. Young men construct their masculinity from the resources available to them in their environments, and those in poverty do not have the same avenues for the construction of masculine identities as do those who grow up in more affluent surroundings (Connell 2005:111). Messerschmidt (1993) likewise argues that middle-class young men, who have their youth culture and other material needs met by their parents, usually construct their masculinity from resources such as the school context and, sometimes, minor misbehavior, generally of a non-violent nature. He points out that white working-class boys, if not focused on school, often have access to part-time employment or summer jobs, and, when they engage in criminal activity, tend to engage in sporadic property crime and hate crime in order to, respectively, obtain extra money and forge bonds with their peers. He argues that, for some lower working-class and poor racial minority boys, neither school nor legal work presents a sufficiently absorbing site for the construction of their masculine identities. Legal work may be unavailable, or if available, menial.

Naheem worked for a time in a chicken restaurant:

I served chicken and stuff like that. Workin' there, you get good money, too. You're always gettin' paid; they didn't know that I was still sellin' drugs. [smiles] Yeah, and I would open the store in the morning. But . . . I had quit that job; I was wastin' time in the morning. That's what I thought.

Naheem seemed to like several aspects of this legal job—getting paid “good money” regularly, the responsibility of opening the store in the morning, and, as he put it, “I didn't have to worry about bein' locked up or nuttin'.” Yet the money he could have been making by selling drugs, and, perhaps, the increased freedom of the street, convinced him that he was wasting his time at this job.

Keith, similarly, found work at a university's food court while he was being supervised on an electronic bracelet, but he later decided to leave that job: “When I got off the bracelet, I stopped workin' there.” Keith lived with his mother and two little brothers, and had been selling drugs in order not to be financially dependent on his mother. He was incarcerated for gun possession when I met him, but told me that when he is released he hoped to just work and help his mother.

In *American Project* (2000), Sudhir Venkatesh argued that “doing the right thing” may force these young men to confront their social position of weakness and impotence (Venkatesh 2000:189). Instead, they find the resources to construct their identities in the street (Messerschmidt 1993:102), where they can feel some power and relative autonomy (Venkatesh 2000:189). The ubiquitous opportunities in the illegal drug economy can make the menial legal jobs that are available to these participants seem less appealing.

The environmental dangers and material deprivations participants faced were in many ways no different from those of earlier decades described by Alex Kotlowitz (1991), Venkatesh (2000, 2008), and others. As participants described their own experiences of these structural constraints, they emphasized their own agency in either

ignoring or responding to various aspects of their circumstances. Regarding matters over which they viewed themselves as having no control, such as where they lived, participants generally adopted a stoic attitude. Where they perceived a space in which to maneuver, which often consisted of a way to increase their material resources, these young men seized their opportunities, legal or illegal. What they emphasized in their accounts were often relational aspects of their experiences: how they interacted with others, took care of others, presented themselves to others, and imagined they were perceived by others. As will be seen, it was practicable in their world for a young man in his teens to display his ability to take care of himself and others by getting a car, clothes, jewelry, and some consumer goods for the family home, but not for him to provide the family or himself with a better home in a more tranquil neighborhood. Neither the helpless child victims described by Kotlowitz nor the successful older gangsters who could move to the suburbs, these young men were capable of marginally improving their lives, *in situ*, in material ways. Before being incarcerated, they had found that they could act to impact some things in their worlds, if not to change the worlds they lived in.

Fathers

Participants' relationships with their fathers were generally nonexistent, intermittent, or strained. Xavier, however, was the only participant explicitly to tie his economically-motivated offending to his having been repeatedly disappointed by his father. He said, "My father, he wasn't really there. I mean, he'd pop up every once, he wasn't regular." Xavier had been a boxer, and said his father would sometimes come to watch him box, "would watch, and leave. And then I wouldn't see him for a couple months. From there, it just taught me the main thing, like, he ain't coming. I wouldn't know the next time he was gonna come." Xavier explained that his father could not be

relied upon to support him emotionally or financially, even for “something simple, like shoes”. He never knew whether or not his father was going to “pop up” to cheer him on in the ring, or come through with a little money when it was needed: “So if I don’t know, then, that’s alright, I’m gonna get it myself, and went to get a job, that’s when I filled out job applications, didn’t get hired”, and then eventually began making money in the street. Xavier’s description suggests that he would have been happy to be a dependent, supported child for a while longer, but that he began to become financially independent when he felt his needs, even for “something simple, like shoes”, were not being met. He offered the above account in response to my question about what might have kept him from going down the path of delinquency, saying that “things would have been better” with a father who provided both material and non-material support.

Thomas, who said he had been hit a lot by an abusive stepfather, acknowledged that his own theory about a real father making a difference might not be valid, since he couldn’t really imagine what it would have been like to have such a father:

Mmm, I always say this, but I don’t know if it’s true, if I could ever put myself in the situation. But I say that if my real dad was there for me, then I don’t think we would be sitting here having this conversation. So I think if my dad would have been there, or somebody, if any male would have been there for me positively, I wouldn’t have been here. I wouldn’t have felt the need to look up to somebody who I thought was doing right, if I could have looked up to somebody who I know was doing somethin’ right.

The imagined “good father”, and good father-son relationship, remained powerful ideas that continued to inspire some participants. Naheem was hoping to repair his relationship with his father. Naheem had been on juvenile probation for a robbery adjudication when he turned eighteen and incurred a new drug arrest. He spent some

time in the county jail on the adult charge, and then was released to a juvenile facility to serve additional time for violating his probation on the juvenile charge. Naheem said,

I had a father figure in my life, but we had an argument, when I was in the program. After that I didn't really talk to him. But I was getting ready to go home [abscond] from the program, and, like, yeah! He came, to get me, to tell me to go back, but, I ain't listen to him. I felt as though, like, he locked up for five years of my life, so I was like, you wasn't there, so, why should I listen to you now. . . I been thinkin' about it, lately, when I was in the county doin' my time or whatever. He always told me, "You ain't gonna like it when you get to the county," . . . and I went, and I didn't like it. . . I'm gonna go home and tell him, like, "You was right." Leave all that stuff we got, in the past. Try to get a little connection, like, back again. [smiles] That's how I was gonna start off, 'cause I, like, there was a C.O. [corrections officer] in the county jail who I used to talk to sometimes; he, uh, helped me out, like, I used to talk to him, whatever. I had to figure out how to start a conversation with my father, that's how I find it. That's how I'm gonna start over

As Naheem's account illustrates, the authority of some fathers is undermined not only by the fact that they have been absent from their sons' lives, but also by the fact that they have been incarcerated. In Naheem's case, conversations with a supportive corrections officer in the county jail helped Naheem to see both that his father's perspective could be useful, and that candidly acknowledging this to his father could provide an opening for a conciliatory conversation with him. I did not ask participants whether their fathers or father figures were criminals, but more than half a dozen of them volunteered that the significant male adults in their lives either had been incarcerated or were drug dealers.

Kenneth, too, hoped his father might re-enter his life in a supportive way. He first mentioned his father when describing his initial gun exposure. Kenneth said he was about seven or eight years old when he was cleaning his father's kitchen, and came across a gun behind the breadbox. Kenneth recalled that his father walked in while Kenneth was handling it, took the gun from him and told him not to touch it again. In the years

between that event and the period of Kenneth's incarceration, their relationship had suffered a break, and Kenneth said he hadn't seen his father in four or five years. Further complicating the family picture, Kenneth said he had numerous siblings, most of whom lived with his father, and Kenneth would visit them, but only when his father was not there, because, as he said, "I don't talk to him . . . I just don't like him." Kenneth's story of his troubled and intermittent bond with his father ended with a surprise twist. Kenneth was scheduled to be released in twenty days, just after his sixteenth birthday. Despite their long estrangement, Kenneth had just heard from his father:

So, I'm gonna get a job, 'cause my dad, my dad just recently wrote me a nice letter. He just recently wrote me, and he said that, he doin' good now, and he own his own construction business. He said that if I'm gonna try to stay out of trouble, I could come work for him, and so I could probably do that.

As with so many participants in this study, Kenneth's father seemed a tantalizing phantom who was sometimes in and sometimes out of Kenneth's life. Participants believed they had been adversely affected as a result of being let down by absent, undependable fathers or fathers who were poor role models. Leon, whose father was a drug dealer, replied when I asked what could have made a difference in his life, "maybe if I was brought up around better people. If I didn't see any of this stuff happening . . . it's like, all I know was to do it." Leon's father, after being asked to leave the house by Leon's mother, had given Leon a gun and a box of bullets so that Leon could protect the rest of the family. Leon was about fourteen years old at the time.

Some participants were already fathers themselves. I did not routinely ask whether participants had children, but the topic occasionally arose in the course of our interviews, usually in the context of hopes and plans for the future. At least five participants were fathers, and two more were expectant fathers. Kevin, who had both a

daughter and a son, expressed a typical sentiment: “I don’t want them to do what I did, to follow in my footsteps; I don’t want them to grow up like me. I hope they be nerdy or something.” Since Kevin himself had begun selling drugs to contribute to the support of his household during his father’s period of incarceration, he was no doubt aware that his hope to raise nerdy children might depend on his staying out of trouble in the future. Nevertheless, he was currently incarcerated for beating another man over the head with a gun because the man was selling fake drugs in front of Kevin’s house, which was Kevin’s own drug-selling territory. Kevin had also been shot some time earlier in retaliation for another assault he had committed. He clearly hoped that his children would escape the delinquency, criminality, and violence that had already ensnared both him and his father. In Kevin’s mind, the best way for his children to do so was to embrace the opposite of the street lifestyle, which Kevin dubbed the “nerdy” lifestyle.

Dangerous Adaptations

Researchers have consistently found that exposure to violence has negative consequences for youth (Ceballo et al. 2003, Hammack et al. 2004). Learning to ignore “extraneous” violence around them, or even to enjoy it, appeared to be one way in which these young men internalized a sense of control over their environments. Early researchers of children’s violence exposure expressed concerns that such accommodations to their dangerous life worlds might lead to problem behaviors as boys entered adolescence. For example, John Richters and Pedro Martinez (1993) found that, as boys grew older, they tended to downplay their fears and engage in boastful behavior despite living in dangerous surroundings. This finding gave rise to a concern on the part of the researchers that the boys might develop maladaptive behaviors as a way of coping

with their fears. Yet the failure to develop such coping mechanisms hardly suggests a better prognosis.

For the boy who cannot get away from his violent, materially deprived neighborhood as he transitions from boyhood to adolescence, adopting an identity as a capable young man who has found a way to come to terms with his environment, downplaying his fears if need be, does not seem maladaptive in itself. As Richters and Martinez intimated, however, the accommodations that accompany this adaptive masculine identity may be problematic.

Moreover, as Adrian Nicole LeBlanc demonstrated in *Random Family* (2003), young men who felt themselves thrust into the role of man of the house (LeBlanc 2003:343) could engage in economically-motivated street crime with ultimately disastrous results for themselves.

Negotiating the lure of the good life: popular culture and consumption

Robert Merton's strain theory (1938) provides the basic theoretical grounding for the discussion of participants' economically-motivated offending. The tension between their wants or needs and the dearth of legitimate means for accessing those goals provides the impetus for getting money any way that they can.

In Quinto's case, the combination of money, excitement, and family tradition drew him both to the drug trade and to the gun violence of the street. Additionally, popular culture offered reflected images of the same type of excitement, arising from similar activities, and provided a mythic gloss to the street life. During our interviews, Quinto and other participants tried to bridge the cultural divide between our worlds by referencing films or music that were meaningful for them. As Quinto explained,

‘Cause there’s always a beef, like, if you watch ‘hood movies, you would understand, like, *New Jack City*. If you watch certain movies like them, you would understand how it is in the ‘hood, more. Like, I can tell you, but you’re not gettin’ a visual picture of the story.

Another participant asked whether I listened to rap music, saying that was what his world was like. Although many participants earnestly endeavored to translate their perceptions and experiences into terms that I would understand, one observed, consistent with Merleau-Ponty’s admonition, that “somebody who not actually doin’ it, I don’t think they can ever figure it out. . . . It’s hard to figure out somethin’ that you’re not doin’ . . . You’re not actually doin’ it, so you would never know—positively, a hundred percent, you’ll never know.” These and other participants held the view, shared by many educational theorists, that concrete experience was essential to gaining an understanding of any subject. They believed that simply telling me about their lives would not suffice to provide me with a full “picture of the story”.

While correctly pointing out that I could never have a “hundred percent” understanding of his life world, Tim provided a nuanced description of his drift from good student and enthusiastic football team member to full-time gangbanger and drug dealer, noting that for a time he tried to straddle both worlds:

. . . [I]t’s hard to do both things. To try and stay positive and do negative things. See, you can’t play both sides of the fence. See, I was tryin’ to play football, but then I decided to get some money. So I started doin’ what I wanna do, sell some drugs, you know what I’m sayin’? And I still had my mother to provide for me, but at that stage, there were just things that I saw that I wanted that my mother couldn’t provide for me. . . . So that was the reason behind me sellin’ drugs.

He expanded on the reasons why he provided for his own needs and wants, rather than relying on his mother:

I think I just felt a little proud issue in myself; I always was like this; I don’t like for a person to feel like I NEED them. Do you know what I’m saying? Even

though that's my mother, she have her own needs, too. I don't ever want her to feel that I NEED her. Plus, she worked but, she couldn't give me what I wanted.

Tim cited what he called pride and the desire to be independent, as well as consideration for his mother's needs and her modest income, as reasons why he began selling drugs. His developing view of himself as a person who should be self-sufficient, and his material wants that exceeded his mother's limited means, seemed to mutually reinforce each other in drawing him into the street. Tim wanted money not only to go shopping for the sweatshirts, pants, and sneakers he spoke of, but also to take his girlfriend out to dinner and clubs, and to buy cars. For example, he said he wanted a Mercedes automobile, and did not want to wait for it, saying, "[S]ee, I was in the fast lane, and I, it was, 'Listen, I want this and I wanna get it now.'" Tim said his mother's slower-paced approach to expensive purchases, where she might say, "Oh, baby, we can wait, and like I can put a down payment", was not for him.

As Allison Pugh (2009) argued in *Longing and Belonging*, young people's wants may be constructed as needs when they seem necessary to keep up one's dignity with peers, or even to "reshape the powerful social asymmetries that order our experience" (Pugh, 2009:23). Although these young gun offenders are older than the children Pugh studied, their desire for expensive consumer goods, especially cars, as well as for more everyday needs, was important to their presentation of self and their enjoyment of life. As a young African American male living with his mother in a dangerous area of his city, Tim's making a show of affluence could have profound meaning for his identity processes, serving to offset, to some extent, the obvious structural disadvantages of his position. One participant, who lived with both his mother and father, said he would "help out as needed" with the bills at home, as well as buying himself clothes, cars, and jewelry

with the proceeds from his drug sales. He would pay an adult to go to a legitimate car rental company and obtain a car for him to use. For Vernon, the “fast money” on the street was the attraction. Another young man, who preferred not to specify how he obtained money but said he didn’t use a gun to do so, clearly distinguished between “wants” and “needs” when I asked whether he had felt a pressing need for money. “Um, [pause] not a pressing need, you know, but everybody has wants, so, that’s about it.” He said the things he wanted, but did not feel comfortable asking his mother and grandfather for, included clothes, shoes, and, if he had the money, a car. As David put it,

It got to the point where I’m sayin’, like, well, I’m getting this old, and I shouldn’t be askin’ my mother for money to live my life with. I mean, she has priorities to take care of, too. I know she can’t always give me what I want. If she can, she will. So it got to the point where I said I gotta, get myself some income.

Xavier listed some of the things that made his street lifestyle fun: “It brought a lot of females, a lot of attention, a lot of, like, cars. It brought me a lot: clothes, keep my fashion in step, cell phone . . . Yes, I liked it. I had a car; I stayed up to date with fashion . . . and I had money and everything.” Xavier said he also was helping his aunt, with whom he lived, to “pay some of the bills”.

In addition to helping with household bills and buying themselves things they needed, such as food and clothing, participants reported buying things that they seemed to consider luxuries, such as jewelry and cars. The line between wants and needs, however, was not at all clear, and several young men seemed to acknowledge this by characterizing themselves as “greedy”, as Luke did:

DM: Okay. Um, and what was your mom’s financial situation?

Luke: (quietly) It, there was no problem.

DM: (quietly) Okay.

Luke: Um, she works at a hospital, so,

DM: Okay. So, would you say, would she be in a position to buy you your clothes?

Luke: (quietly) Yeah.

DM: Okay.

Luke: I just was plain greedy.

Once again, the subject of family finances seemed to be very sensitive for the participant, who redirected the discussion toward what he claimed to be his own shortcomings and away from his mother's level of ability to provide for him.

Xavier, too, claimed "greed" as the reason for both selling drugs and robbing drug dealers, despite the fact that he was also helping to pay the household bills. As he put it, "I mean, like robbery both and sellin' drugs, it just meant, more money. Basically I was greedy. Money. Just bring in more money." Xavier was enjoying a free-spending lifestyle and having fun, as well as buying what he needed and helping to support the family.

Finally, Naheem said he saw his friends who were selling drugs with, for example, two new pairs of sneakers each week, and wanted what they had. He said he himself had new sneakers, but started selling drugs because he wanted the fast money to buy more "of the stuff that I want. I didn't really need it, 'cause I had it, I just wanted more." Yet he also said he would give money to his mother, because she was struggling. In these participants' accounts, it is sometimes difficult to tell where provisioning leaves off, and consumption begins.

Pugh (2009), in discussing the dilemmas of low-income parenting, spoke of the "alchemy of desire into need", citing Annette Lareau's *Unequal Childhoods* (2003) for

low-income parents' practice of constructing "good -enough" childhoods for their children (Pugh, 2009:123). One way in which parents did this was by "instilling in children a sense of 'emerging constraint'" (Pugh, 2009:126). The young offenders who called themselves "greedy" seemed to be saying, at least in retrospect, that they had failed to internalize a sense of emerging constraint, instead insisting upon obtaining for themselves those things that their mothers could not provide. In addition to feeling ashamed of what they could not afford, these participants seemed to feel ashamed of wanting more than their families could give them. The exact location of the line between wants and needs may have been viewed differently by the youth and the parent, with the parent defining "needs" in terms of what she could afford. Pugh argued that affluent parents sought to check their children's consumer desires for reasons of character-building and seemliness, not wanting their children to be, or seem, overly materialistic. The poor parents, on the other hand, tried to check their children's consumer desires because they could not afford everything the child wanted.

Supporting Pugh's interpretation of parent-child dynamics, a social worker at one of the facilities I visited shared her view of the source of participants' use of "greedy". She opined that some of their mothers may have called their sons greedy in an effort to confine their desires to what the mothers could afford. (In the same conversation, she also alluded to the opposite dynamic, mothers who, she believed, had given birth when they were fifteen or sixteen, viewed their teenage sons as the man of the house, and virtually thrust their sons into the streets to make money.) The boys who used the word "greedy" when speaking with me may have been engaging in another sort of shamework, preferring to call themselves greedy rather than acknowledge that their mothers were

unable to provide for them. Several participants described their mothers' objections when they saw their son wearing clothes that she had not bought. They recalled their mothers saying "Take that off!" or "Don't be coming into this house with two-hundred dollar pants!" The numerous meanings of money and consumer goods created a complex dynamic in terms of material possessions and identity. Among the young offenders' reasons for wanting jewelry, cars, or two new pairs of sneakers per week may well have been to "reshape powerful social asymmetries" as Pugh argued. They may also have wanted money to buy their own things because they were impelled by a desire to help out at home. The extent to which they were caught up in a consumerist ethos that had replaced traditional cultural values (Hall, Winlow, & Ancrum, 2008) was difficult to tell. In the worlds experienced by these young men, where money meant autonomy, autonomy meant masculinity, and money, therefore, defined masculinity, the ability to spend or provide was much of what being a man was about. Participants' mothers no doubt exhibited a range of parenting styles, and, while the study design did not permit me to determine whether some mothers in fact encouraged their sons' illegal income-generating activities, participants did discuss different ways in which this income was or was not addressed.

Talking, or not, about a juvenile son's illegal economic contributions

The ways in which parents, usually mothers, and sons negotiated the issue of the son's illegal income was complex, and varied both among the participants and also over time for individual participants. Some maintained that their mothers did not know that they had illegal sources of income, others described a *sub rosa* or unspoken understanding about these monies, and one participant said he and his mother talked

about it openly. The latter participant said he and his mother had more or less come to an understanding to disagree, since she could not stop him from making money in the streets. Several participants said, “Mom’s from the ‘hood, so she understands”. Those who said their families did not know about their offending were careful not to be conspicuous about their spending, as in Leon’s case. Leon, who both sold drugs and committed armed robberies, said that after his father left the family, he decided to obtain money illegally, primarily for his own upkeep:

Leon: . . . I didn’t wanna put too much strain on my mom, so I had to do what I had to do.

DM: You felt that you were kind of costing her money, in a way?

Leon: Yeah, also I feel as, if I go get it by myself, that’s less I need to get from her.

DM: Right.

Leon: I gave her more money back. I always see how she be like talkin’ about not havin’ that much money for herself, so I just let her have her money, and I did what I did for my money.

DM: Did you bring money to her also?

Leon: Well, I, she wouldn’t like me makin’ money like that, so if I tell her, she would wonder why, how I got money like that, so,

DM: Right.

Leon: So I would, sometime here and there, I would buy somethin’ from the store, for the house,

DM: Like food and stuff?

Leon: Yeah, I’d buy food,

DM: So basically, so she would not have approved of what you were doing?

Leon: Oh, no!

While Leon says his mother would talk about not having much money for herself, he maintains that she would not have approved of his illegal activities, and so he mainly used his money for his own needs, only infrequently buying food for the house in order to keep his delinquent activity somewhat “under the radar”. This “don’t ask, don’t tell” method of dealing with the subject was alluded to by other participants. In Leon’s case, he said that his father had been a “big-time drug dealer”, who moved out because Leon’s mother didn’t like what he was doing. It is difficult to imagine that Leon’s mother could have been unaware of his delinquency, but by tacitly agreeing not to discuss it, they could maintain the fiction that she did not know. Vernon, who was one of only three participants who lived with both his mother and father, said that, in addition to spending money on himself, he would “help out as needed” with the household bills. Vernon was incarcerated for conspiracy to distribute crack cocaine, and also gun possession, although he said it was his co-defendant who had the gun. When I asked Vernon whether he thought his parents knew the source of the money he was contributing, he answered in the affirmative:

DM: And, um, do you think your parents had an idea where the money might be comin’ from?

Vernon: Yeah.

DM: They knew you were sellin’ drugs, I guess?

Vernon: Not for a fact, they just assumed it.

DM: Right. So it was not spoken of, really, but they appreciated the help, I guess.

Vernon: Yeah.

Lara Riley (2005), as well as Cheryl Meyer and Michelle Oberman (2001), have discussed the family dynamic of group denial in the context of “concealed” pregnancies

that ended in infanticide. They pointed out that the expedient of parents “seeing but not seeing”, and “knowing but not knowing” might be used to avoid the topic of a child’s unwanted pregnancy, which was too disruptive to acknowledge or discuss. What the authors referred to as family collusion, in not acknowledging what everyone knew, led to tragic consequences for the pregnant mothers and their unborn children. In the case of the young male offenders in the current study, the issue of needed but illicit income seems likewise to have been a source of discomfort, sometimes for both mother and son. In the following excerpt from Naheem’s interview, both his uneasiness in discussing the matter with me and the sensitivity of the issue in his relationship with his mother can be inferred:

DM: Okay. So once you got this money, what did you spend it on?

Naheem: Clothes, gave some, some to my mother, some weed [smiles], . . .

DM: You think your mother knew where it was comin’ from?

Naheem: Yeah. See, my mother, she grew up, she grew up in the hood, so,

DM: Right.

Naheem: She know how, she knew what I was doin’ and, she couldn’t really say nuttin’ to us ‘cause, I always listen to my mother, but at the same time, like, she [inaudible], like, she can’t do nothin’. We, she got three boys.

DM: Right.

Naheem: There’s three of us. So she really can’t do nothin’ about a problem that we be doin’, and sometimes she strugglin’ on her own, so,

DM: So she had money problems.

Naheem: Yeah.

DM: So, she wouldn’t mind taking some from you.

Naheem: At the same time she was, she was [inaudible] take it from me. I know she feel like she wouldn’t want it.

DM: She wouldn't be wanting it.

Naheem: Yeah. She might not like what I'm doin', but she can't, she can't stop me.

DM: Right, she can't stop you, and also, you think she needed money so she would also take it.

Naheem: [pause, and seems a little reluctant to concede this] Yeah.

Although it was Naheem who first introduced the point that he would give some of his drug money to his mother, when I followed up on it he suggested that he and his brothers were doing something against his mother's will. Yet he acknowledged that because she was "strugglin' on her own", she would accept money from him, even though "she feel like she wouldn't want it", and didn't like what he was doing. He described himself as both the good son and as doing something his mother didn't like, and described his mother as both disapproving his activities and accepting the proceeds. There seems to be a certain ambiguity, or even queasiness, in Naheem's discourse about the provider role that he and his brothers patently played in the family. He, and other participants, seemed at the same time to be proud of providing, and ashamed that there was a need for them to do so. In Naheem's account, perhaps one can discern as well his mother's shame that her boys were placed in this position. Once again I sensed that it was much more difficult for participants to discuss their family finances than their violent offending. It was difficult for me to tell whether they were trying to save the family honor by minimizing the extent to which the adult family members were aware of the son's illegal income. Certainly Naheem's sense of shame in disclosing his mother's needs and her understanding of where the money came from is evident.

Another participant, Tim, outlined a gradual evolution in his relationship with his working mother, from his unsuccessful concealment of his income to her acceptance of the fact that she could not do anything about his activities:

Tim: . . . I shouldn't have to keep askin' my mother for money. Even though she would ask me, "Oh, you want some?", "Nah, I'm good".

DM: Now, I take it at some point, she became aware that you had more than what she was providing for you.

Tim: Mmm.

DM: Did she know specifically what was going on, or what?

Tim: Well, it started, like I used to bring like sweatshirts home, like I'd go out shopping and I'd say to my mother, like, she like used to question, like, "Where you get that from?"

DM: Yeah.

Tim: "Oh, I bought it". "Oh, you bought it." Or I used to lie, "Oh, my friend bought this." Or, "My girlfriend bought this."

DM: Right.

Tim: [inaudible] Know what I'm saying? So I lied. But basically, she catch on, said, "Don't come in the house with two hundred dollar pants and sneakers".

DM: Right.

Tim: Know what I mean? Twenty five, twenty five hundred dollar watch,

DM: Right.

Tim: You know, ain't no average friend just buy you all this stuff,

DM: Right.

Tim: Plus, she's from the 'hood, too. She knows what goes on.

DM: So you think that, eventually, she figured it out, but it was just something that wasn't discussed?

Tim: No! We discussed it [inaudible]. She talked to me about it. But, it's really nothin' nobody can do.

DM: Right.

Tim: All they can do is talk to you, and try to persuade you into doin' what they want you to do.

DM: Right.

Tim: Takin' a positive outlook. She can't just shackle me down and keep me in the house for the rest of my life.

DM: So she would give you advice, but you would disregard her advice.

Tim: Basically.

As in Leon's case, Tim's mother's distress was likely exacerbated by the fact that his stepfather, according to Tim, had been a high-level drug dealer who had been shot and killed when Tim was thirteen. One can only imagine his mother's feelings as she helplessly watched her son take a similar path, powerless to do anything beyond insisting upon a limit to his displays of ostentation.

Not surprisingly, participants and their families negotiated this delicate morally- and financially-mediated territory, which implicated dimensions of dependence and independence, responsibility and irresponsibility, and vulnerability and agency, in a variety of ways. Since almost all the participants still lived with their families, they remained dependent on adults for their housing needs, but there were diverse degrees of interdependence with regard to other requirements, going in both directions. In this sense, concepts of adultification, the parentified child, and mutuality are all involved. Both Tobias Hecht (1998) and Mary Lorena Kenny (2007) explored similar themes in the context of poor Brazilian children who brought income into their households. Kenny discussed a young girl who began to have "more of a say in things" and to undermine her mother's authority as a consequence of bringing money into the household (Kenny, 2007:72). Hecht discussed children who nurtured their families, gaining favor with their mothers through the income they contributed (Hecht, 1998:88). For the young men in the

current study, some erosion, inversion, or subversion of parental authority may have accompanied their increased financial power. As they became the “man of the house”, the balance of power may have been shifting, often with their mother’s consent or acquiescence, as in Hecht’s and Kenny’s studies.

The relationships of these provider-children with their parents, usually their mothers, were characterized by a form of economic interdependence in some ways similar to that found among families in the global South (Hansen 2008). Unlike middle-class American adolescents who work part time in legal jobs, participants’ income was more than symbolic of their evolving independence. Whereas middle-class teenagers are traditionally viewed as working while in high school in order to build their character, constructively fill their free time, learn the value of a hard-earned dollar, and have some pocket money, participants were often an integral part of the family economy, whether contributing to the support of the household at large or simply relieving their parents of much of the burden of supporting them. Like Kenny’s income-producing children, participants at times seemed to approach being “hidden heads of households”, as she dubbed them. What participants called the “fast money” of the streets, however, often convinced them that the low-paying legal jobs available to them were a waste of their time, as Naheem said when explaining why he quit his job at the chicken restaurant. In this sense, participants, at least prior to their arrests, were learning a very different lesson from that which middle-class American working teenagers are assumed to learn.

Emotional and social attractions of gangs and the street

Clearly, what these young men described as wants, needs, and helping out with household expenses all factored into the financial lure of the streets. Beyond the money, however, was a social draw that blended fun and excitement with companionship or, as

one participant said, “the love”. When I asked Luke what had attracted him to his gang, the Bloods, he answered, “The love, the money, the drugs, the love.” He felt that this group, the Bloods, was the best place for him to find the atmosphere of loyalty that he was looking for.

Keith, another former student-athlete who had been proud to play varsity football as a high school freshman, described the process of drifting from being a full-time student to cutting half of the school day to not going to school at all during his sophomore year:

Once I start hanging back with the old friends, and seein’ how much fun I could have, and like, I felt welcome, like, I felt that was where I should have been, instead of doing everything else, and I told you like. . . I was just having a lot of fun, so that’s what I stuck with.

The fun that Keith described included going to parties, spending time with girls, and smoking marijuana. He also sold drugs and belonged to a gang, and the companionship of this group that made him feel welcome and feel that this was where he belonged seemed to provide a strong non-material inducement for him to stay with the gang and in the street.

Tim, also a member of the Bloods, stressed the importance of having loyal friends when explaining the difference between a friend and an associate: “A friend is somebody who’s loyal to you, somebody who cares about you; somebody who’s by you, whether you are right or wrong.” Tim made the same distinction between friends and associates that Nikki Jones discovered while studying African American inner-city girls in *Between Good and Ghetto* (2010): a friend was expected to stand by you in a crisis (Jones, 2010:55).

Participants found loyalty, friendship, fun, and feelings of welcome and love, as well as money and drugs, in their street associations or gangs, as Luke explained. It has also been pointed out that unpleasant conditions in their homes, whether material, emotional, or physical, could make hanging out in the streets seem a more attractive alternative. While we did not discuss bad home lives except when participants offered accounts as historical background, the desire to escape painful experiences of home may also be significant here.

In the introduction to *Fugitive Cultures: Race, Violence, and Youth*, Henry Giroux (1996) described a pertinent experience in his own youth, after the departure of his mother and his sister left him feeling “homeless in [his] own home”. Giroux felt that his experience was similar to that of many working-class youth in that “home was neither a source of comfort nor a respite from the outside world.” As a result, the neighborhood became his home, and his friends his sanctuary (Giroux, 1996:5-6).

The Lure of the Streets

A combination of forces seemed to both push and pull these young men to the streets. Elijah Anderson (1999) wrote of children being “sucked up by the streets” (Anderson 1999:98), and these incarcerated participants likewise seemed to view the streets as having a Venus flytrap quality that drew them in, held onto them, and could devour them. One young man, Nate, had moved to a nice neighborhood when he was ten, but continued to return to the projects in the worst part of his city to get in trouble. Nate said his deceased father had been a drug dealer, and his mother had had an alcohol problem and a nervous breakdown, resulting in her abandoning Nate and his younger brother when Nate was ten years old. He went to live with his aunt in a nice, quiet area

of the same city. His aunt had two older sons, both “good boys”, as Nate said, and a good job which enabled her to give Nate plenty of money. As Nate put it, “It was perfect!” Yet he persistently went back to the projects, where he began to smoke and sell marijuana, rob, sell heroin and crack, steal cars, and join the Bloods. The only explanation Nate could offer was that he had grown up in that section of town, had always seen drugs and guns, and was accustomed to it. Later he added, “Trouble was fun to me! It still is fun to me!” Moreover, Nate was not the only participant who sought out the “trouble” of the streets even though he was not living nearby. David said he appreciated the quiet atmosphere of his home town, but went into the city where his relatives lived to hang out and make money illegally.

This “stickiness” of the streets continued to be a concern for participants as they contemplated their release back to their home communities. More than one participant expressed the worry that it would be difficult to stay away from the same friends and activities he had known. Mark said he believed he would need to live in a different area, because he doubted his ability to find a different circle of friends in his home town with whom he would feel the same bond. “You gotta feel trust,” he said, and he believed his old group, those with whom he got in trouble, was the only group with whom he could experience this type of mutual loyalty. As Mark put it, “If I called them, they’d be right there”, and likewise, “they could count on me”.

A place to construct an acceptable social identity

In describing the attraction of what Jack Katz (1988) called “street elites”, or groups of adolescents who engaged in fighting or other forms of illegal behavior, Katz argued that these young men were trying to construct an elevated platform for themselves, an identity in which they could take pride by placing others who were in

social proximity to themselves “beneath them in social disrepute”. (Katz, 1988:117)

While many other explanations for the attraction of gangs and similar groups have been put forward, it is easy to understand why the participants in this study might want to construct a social hierarchy in which they are not on the bottom. By virtue of their race and class, they had reason to feel socially marginalized. Yet, in addition to joining with peers to construct an “elite” social identity, some of the young offenders explicitly designated others as more marginalized than themselves, or beneath them, as Katz wrote. Participants who sold drugs, for example, often made a point of distancing themselves from their customers, calling them “crackheads”, “dope-fiends”, “crack-fiends”, or just plain “fiends”, and emphasizing that they themselves never used the crack or heroin that they sold. One participant described “fiends” as “dirty”, “low”, and wearing “old clothes”. Another, clearly proud of his fit appearance, laughed when I asked whether he had used crack, retorting, “Do you know anybody who uses crack and looks like me?” In contrast to those they disparaged as “fiends”, participants, by presenting a clean and fashionable appearance, could show that they had sufficient money to be viewed as credible consumers, or, as Pugh says, persons with dignity. The street was where the money to keep up appearances could be obtained readily. The salient fact that all the participants in this study are young men of color in the United States no doubt influences the way in which we, and possibly they, frame their identity work.

To bring this point into strong relief, it seems pertinent to consider a study of White, primarily male, criminals in the northeast of England whose authors took a somewhat less sympathetic view of their subjects’ economically-motivated crime. Steve Hall, Simon Winlow and Craig Ancrum (2008) conducted an ethnographic study of

White criminals for their book, *Criminal Identities and Consumer Culture* (Hall, Winlow, & Ancrum, 2008:18-20). They discovered that their subjects embodied what the authors called the new consumer narcissism, committing crimes in order to acquire ornamental consumer goods (2008:191). The authors believed that consumption had filled the void left by the demise of “traditional culture, collective identity, and politics” (2008:192), with the result that “social crime” had been replaced by “asocial crime” (2008:198). Hall, Winlow, and Ancrum noted that their subjects experienced no sense of “social exclusion” or social injustice, however, simply wanting to pull away from the despised herd of “losers” that surrounded them by achieving some form of material success (2008:191, 193). Like Katz’s “street elites” and Pugh’s children attaining dignity through the possession of peer-approved consumer goods, however, the young UK men were presumably seeking to attain some type of identity in which they could take pride. Like the young offenders I interviewed, they did not wish to be part of the despised herd lacking the requisite possessions. The authors believed that many of the young criminals they studied had become captives of the consumer environment (2008:209). We might say that those young men had been consumed by consumption.

In considering whether their findings might transfer to the participants in the current study, it seems important to note that the history, and continuing existence, of racial injustice in the U.S. promotes a strong sense of social exclusion and social injustice on the part of low-income minority youth (see Kozol 2005), despite the fact that my participants, with one exception, declined to acknowledge or discuss racial discrimination when talking with me. (On the several occasions when I asked whether participants felt that racial discrimination had affected their cases, they answered in the negative.) In this

sense, at least, delinquency by minority youth in the U.S. can be viewed as having a political and social character that the UK authors found lacking in their sample.

Nonetheless, like Hall, Winlow, and Ancrum, U.S. researchers as well as the public at large still ask whether the demise of traditional (African American and Latino) culture, collective (positive) identity, and politics (in the form of political consciousness as a motivator for organizing and activism) have left a void that consumption has rushed to fill. Some of the participants' mothers, at least, have sought to dampen their sons' ardor to consume, in an attempt to keep them away from street crime.

Financial capability, street vulnerability

The passage from childhood through adolescence to adulthood is often viewed along several dimensions, as movement from vulnerability to agency, dependence to independence, and irresponsibility to responsibility. These participants, in what many would view as vulnerable circumstances, constructed themselves as capable agents, although their agency was not always viewed as positive, by themselves or others. While still dependent on their families for housing, the young men often sought to be financially independent for many of their other needs. In doing so, they tried to act as responsible young adults in some ways, making money to take part of the financial burden off their mothers' shoulders. Despite forays into the world of legal employment, several of these teenagers found that the menial jobs available to them either did not last or did not hold their interest when compared to the myriad attractions of the streets.

This chapter has sought to lay a foundation for the argument that will be developed further in the chapters that follow. The participants described many environmental stressors and few protective factors, or supports, that most law-abiding children would take for granted. Primary among these stressors were violence exposure

and poverty, usually within the context of a female-headed household where participants felt, as they entered adolescence, that they should cease to be provided for and should instead assume, to a greater or lesser extent, the role of a provider. These many challenges, along with the paucity of supports, shaped the young men's movement to the street, where they constructed a type of capable masculinity that permitted them to survive, and even to thrive in many ways. These adaptations, however, presented them with new challenges.

A surplus of violence and a shortage of money were among the most salient features of participants' life worlds prior to the time of their gun acquisition. While participants viewed most of their responses to their circumstances as adaptive, at least at the time, I will suggest in the next chapter that some responses, such as selling drugs and joining gangs, propelled them into even riskier contexts which made gun acquisition seem sensible. The courses of action that participants forged in order to reduce their material vulnerability and to meet other, non-material, needs were soon perceived by these actors as increasing their physical vulnerability.

Chapter Summary

This chapter explored some of the challenges faced by participants in their environments, and explained how they coped by learning to normalize violence and to address many of their needs in the streets. Participants, all young men of color, described growing up in violent, poverty-stricken neighborhoods, and sometimes in violent families. Most participants lived in female-headed households, usually with their mothers. As they entered their teens, many participants began to experience their financial dependence on their mothers as both burdensome to their mothers and inconsistent with their emerging masculine identities. They responded to this perception

by entering into the illicit street economy, sometimes after disappointments in, or in conjunction with, employment in the legal job market. While some participants used their income primarily to provide for their own wants and needs, many contributed to the support of the household in varying degrees. The illegal source of this support was sometimes openly acknowledged and sometimes not, seemingly constituting a source of ambivalent feelings on the part of both parent and child. Participants also found non-material rewards in their street associations and activities, including excitement, fun, and the companionship of peers.

Chapter Four

‘The Streets’ as Lifestyle

When I started gettin’ into the streets, I started gangbanging, I started hustlin’ and things, and then, eventually, it just come. It’s not like a specific time when you decide it come, you just come across it, like one of your homies give you one, your friends give you one, you find one, or you get you a connect that sell guns and you just buy it. Tim Myers (June 2, 2011)

As Tim described the acquisition of his first gun, it simply came into his hands at the appropriate time in his life, when he started getting “into the streets”, being active in a gang, and selling drugs. At the same time, he suggested that his own, almost organic, experience of getting a gun could be generalized to that of other similarly situated young men.

Pathways to Gun Acquisition

In this chapter I examine the process of gun acquisition, which encompasses the factors that prompted participants to acquire guns and how they did so. I also examine their changing experiences of normality and embodiment in their environments, first without and then with guns, as well as participants’ enjoyment of guns, and how they say guns made them feel. In exploring their experiences of normality, I discovered that a geographical space that may have felt “normal” or “regular” to participants before they began to engage in illegal activities was experienced as requiring the protection of a gun once they became involved in the “street” lifestyle. Moreover, gun possession was often experienced in an embodied way, sometimes changing the way participants felt about both their environments and themselves. I identified one primary pathway to gun acquisition and another less typical one, but both can be characterized as reactive coping strategies, in terms of Spencer’s Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory model (Spencer 1995).

Just as Tim says in the quotation above, the guns often came to the boys, as often as the boys sought out the guns. While some participants acquired guns as gifts from peers or older men in the neighborhood who introduced them to guns, others simply found guns or purchased them from a variety of intermediaries, often referred to as “connects”. Yet, in view of the high levels of violence exposure and victimization described by participants in the previous chapter, as well as their early fascination with guns, it seems appropriate to consider at the outset why they were not motivated to acquire a gun sooner.

Juvenile Offenders Frame Their Worlds

When I asked participants to describe their neighborhoods, they typically responded as follows:

Keith: Well, it’s basically the same thing that you see anywhere—the drugs, gangs, when you go outside, crack heads everywhere. That’s what I’m used to, so I don’t really know anything different, so that’s regular to me.

Ernie: Rough. . . . Like that’s the only place I really grew up at, so, I don’t know other cities, but to me it’s like, a bunch of gangs, and everybody sells drugs, and almost everybody got a gun . . . I always feel safe because I grew up there, know everybody, so, I really didn’t care about being harmed or anything.

Tim: Yeah, I would feel safe; no, I wouldn’t say “safe”, actually, because there’s stuff that go on around there, but, to a person like me, that was normal to me. People shootin’ at each other, people gettin’ shot almost every day, people sellin’ drugs, that was normal. So I was so immune to it; I, that’s what I adapted to, so that wasn’t really like, um, fearful of this, because this is what I see every day.

Participants said they felt their surroundings to be “regular” or “normal”, because that was what they were used to, and what they had always known. Most participants considered a neighborhood with high levels of gang activity, drug activity, and gun violence to be the taken-for-granted background of their daily existence.

They were clear on another point, however, which was that if you are “in the streets”, you need a gun. It was not the high ambient level of violence that seemed to occupy their minds, but rather the increased level of vulnerability that attended their “street lifestyle”. They also asserted that it was entirely possible to live in their neighborhoods and not need a gun. As several put it, “it all depends on their lifestyle”.

What participants sometimes referred to as their “lifestyle”, they most frequently simply called “being in the streets”. Although they resided in houses or apartments, these young men, much like the Brazilian street children described by Tobias Hecht (1998) in *At Home in the Street*, “speak of the street not as a mere physical place but as a way of life” (Hecht 1998: 22). To these young gun offenders, the idea of being “in the streets” encompasses all the things that they acknowledge to increase their exposure to violence, such as staying out late at night, socializing in venues where violence is likely to erupt, dealing drugs, joining gangs, and committing both property and violent crimes. While other adolescents from their area might confine themselves largely to spaces such as school, home, church, and organized activities, these young men feel themselves both pushed and pulled to take another path. They exemplify Herbert Blumer’s concept (1969), derived from George Herbert Mead, that a person, albeit within certain constraints, selects and thereby creates his own environment, because although they and many others may live together in the same violent neighborhood, these young men have selected, while not freely, the most dangerous activities, hours, locations, and associates to constitute their personal ecology. As Blumer puts it, “people may be living side by side yet be living in different worlds” (Blumer, 1969:11), and participants told me that a young man from their same neighborhood who did not share their “lifestyle”, and who

therefore was not what they considered to be “in the streets”, would not have the same need for a gun as they felt they did.

Kilal, when asked why he wanted a gun when he was fifteen, explained that “I was in the streets real thick, so, for protection.” He explained why other young men could live in his neighborhood and not need a gun: “It all depends on how they live their lifestyle.” As for those in the neighborhood who did have guns, he said, “I don’t give them any thoughts. It’s just their lifestyle; they’re obviously in the streets, and they need protection from something.” When I asked Keith, who had described his neighborhood as full of drugs, gangs, and crackheads, whether he had felt the need for a gun before he joined a gang, he explained why he had not: “Not really, ‘cause I wasn’t really into the streets; I wasn’t really out like that. If I was doin’ anything it was like sports or school or out with friends.” Following up again later, I asked whether he believed he would have wanted a gun if he hadn’t been involved with that group. Keith responded, “I think I still would have been involved with sports. And my time would have been occupied, so I wouldn’t have been in the streets, and I wouldn’t need the gun.”

Arlie Hochschild (1983) conceptualizes emotions, including fear, as being constituted of both interactionist and biological elements, and argues that emotion has a “signal” function, warning “us of where we stand vis-à-vis outer or inner events.” As such, “what does and does not stand out as a ‘signal’ presupposes certain culturally taken-for-granted ways of seeing and holding expectations about the world . . .” (Hochschild 1983:28). Her observation echoes Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) figure/background schema which notes that the perceived is shaped by its context (Merleau-Ponty 1962:11) because “[t]he perceptual ‘something’ is always in the middle

of something else, it is always part of a ‘field’” (Merleau-Ponty 1962:4). One may argue that the “normal” environment of their dangerous neighborhoods does not “signal” to these young men in a particular way, but the enhanced danger presented by the circumstances of their lives “in the street” is sufficiently noticeable that they feel the need to arm themselves against it. Again, as Merleau-Ponty stresses, “[a] really homogeneous area offering *nothing to perception* cannot be given to *any perception*” (Merleau-Ponty 4, emphasis in original). Taking the statements of the participants at face value, one must conclude that they do not fear their neighborhood itself, but rather the particular threats they have encountered and expect to encounter. The young men describe these threats as arising from their lifestyle in the streets, and generally say that these particular encounters have prompted their initial gun acquisition.

In Keith’s particular situation, he and members of his gang attended a party where a fight broke out between his group and another group, and someone from the other group pulled out a gun. Keith then decided that he should get a gun so that he would not feel as vulnerable if he were in a similar situation again. He anticipated that this might happen because his gang and the other one shared the same neighborhood, and he believed his gang would be likely to “bump heads with them any time” Before his gang involvement, he did not perceive such a threat, and just viewed the usual background of gun and drug activity in his neighborhood as “regular”. Similarly Ernie, who joined the Crips at age nine, said he was in seventh grade when his gang was having repeated fights with members of a rival gang. He reported that it was this inter-gang violence that prompted his gun acquisition. He said he had always felt safe in his drug- and gun-infested neighborhood, because he grew up there and knew everybody. It was the fights

that accompanied his involvement with the gang that made him believe he should get a gun. This amplified level of risk arising from involvement with the streets stood out, or signaled, something different from the background of neighborhood drug and gun violence to which participants were accustomed. Although they rarely used the word “fear”, these young men now felt a want or need for a gun.

Peer influence or sphere influence

Participants never referenced the idea of peer pressure, whether to get into the streets in the first place or to acquire a gun once there, except to deny its relevance. Quinto, for example, spontaneously introduced the term into our discussion, only to reject it, after I suggested that his friends were telling him he had to join in a particular fight. He responded, “Naw, they didn’t peer pressure, they just asked me, like, ‘Yo, bro, these guys over there, they talk shit about you’, and all this.” Perhaps in this case it would be more accurate to say that his friends played the role of instigators (Wilkinson & Fagan 2001:179-180).

Rather, participants said they were drawn to the streets by its attractions, such as seeing others with money when they themselves had none, for example, and were motivated to get a gun in response to specific threats that they faced. In this sense, their accounts support Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck’s conclusions that, instead of peer pressure, a desire to be around other young men who are participating in the same type of activities that interest them (the “birds of a feather” theory) is the dynamic that brings these actors together. After conducting a new analysis of the Glueck data as well as considering more recent research, Robert Sampson and John Laub reached the same conclusion (Sampson & Laub, 1993:116-117), that self-selection and the group nature of delinquency were more important than the influence of peers. More recently, although

Jan Kornelis Dijkstra and colleagues' quantitative study of friendship networks (2010) found that juvenile males' weapon-carrying tended to more closely resemble that of their friends over time, they also found that the perceived attractiveness of weapon-carriers as friends, as well as respondents' prior aggression, played a role. Based on the current participants' reports that the situational threats in their new circumstances were the impetus for their gun acquisition, I would suggest that the chronological sequence identified by Dijkstra and colleagues signifies not peer pressure, but, if you will, sphere pressure. The many risk factors pervading the worlds in which these young men lived, from home stressors to neighborhood features to macrolevel influences, created, as David Oswell (2013) put it when discussing Nigerian youth, "spaces of emergent solidarities and precarious social and economic innovation" (Oswell 2013:159). In the same way, I would argue that participants' circumstances and surroundings created the pressure for these young men to join together in ways that advanced their shared interests. The context provided by the interview data supports the interpretation that the milieu in which the participants were moving provided the impetus to have a gun, although new, armed, associates may also have come along with participants' immersion in the street lifestyle.

Moreover, Sampson and Laub argue, following Lee Robins (1966), that the insignificant influence of delinquent siblings suggests that adolescents tend to select friends who are similar to themselves in behavior and attitudes (1993:116-117). They also cite the difficulty of interpreting temporal ordering in searching for the effect of peers on delinquency, since, as Farrington noted, most delinquent acts are committed in groups, and "those who commit such acts will almost inevitably have delinquent friends" (1993:104). Likewise, self-report measurements of offending and delinquent peers, as

Gottfredson and Hirschi point out, “may, almost by definition, be measuring the same underlying theoretical construct of delinquent peers” (1993:104).

From the perspective of the young men themselves, however, perhaps another factor in these participants’ inclination to downplay the role of peer pressure or influence is the importance they attach to identifying themselves as strong and independent young men. Nonetheless, once the participants have selected their peer group, it seems that these chosen peers are likely to influence the young men’s actions, as will be discussed more fully in Chapter 5, where one young man said he fired toward another group when he was showing off his gun and his friends then pointed out that their enemies were right across the street. This participant reflected that he sometimes was not certain whether he was trying to prove to himself or to his friends that he was a “gangster”, but he did feel that he was trying to prove something. Another participant reported shooting at rival gang members who were taunting him and two of his fellow gang members. He did not make explicit the influence of his peers, although it seems reasonable to infer that their presence was a salient factor. As Deanna Wilkinson and Jeffrey Fagan (2001) argue, the social and situational nature of adolescent violence highlights the influence of third parties, for good or for ill, as these others can act either as “instigators” or as “peacemakers” (Wilkinson & Fagan, 2001:179-180).

The institutional ethos, wherein residents are encouraged to take responsibility for their own conduct, may also contribute to participants’ tendency to focus on their own reasons for their actions. Just after completing my field research, I had the opportunity to observe a focus group of detained juveniles discussing what types of programs and interventions they would consider helpful in preventing future offending. When one

member of our group of visitors asked what challenges the young men faced out on the street that could lead to further involvement in the juvenile justice system, a white resident who had attained the highest level of privileges in the detention center offered that “people you hang with” could pose a challenge. At this, an African American young man who had been previously incarcerated and was about to return to the Juvenile Justice Commission to serve a term for a new offense, made an animated rebuttal. He derided the other resident’s response as something that “they”, indicating our group of adult visitors, should say, not the young offenders. Rather, he maintained that “you choose the people you hang with, and if you want to get into trouble, you will hang with the people who are going to get into trouble”. He argued further that everyone on the street knows who those people are, because it is obvious to all. His forceful rejoinder that one chooses one’s associates with eyes wide open, however, does not refute the argument that those associates, once chosen, are likely to influence one’s actions. My suggestion is that young men growing up in environments such as those typical of the study participants are influenced to engage in illegal activities by multiple stressors in multiple spheres, and that peer pressure is hardly the most important one.

Initial Gun Acquisition

Participants had little difficulty recalling and recounting their reasons for acquiring their first guns. Ernie was a member of the Crips, and said he was tired of seeing his friends beaten up by the older and bigger members of a rival gang. He decided to employ a gun when members of his gang made a pre-emptive strike against the other group, which he felt would deter the rivals from further predations against the members of his gang. At that point, Ernie purchased a gun for his fellow gang member to wield during the attack. As Ernie put it, “You know, you can’t beat everybody, so I bought a

gun.” Exactly how Ernie acquired this first gun is explored in greater detail later in this chapter.

Several of those who sold drugs felt that this made them more vulnerable, and this sense of vulnerability prompted them to obtain a gun. Kevin, who sold drugs for his older brothers, said he felt that it was important to have a gun if you were selling drugs “because people envy you. Like, people just see that you got somethin’ they don’t got, and they want it, so they try to take it from you. . . Money, drugs, chains, jewelry, anything. They’ll try to take it.” Kevin obtained his first gun from one of his brothers. Kilal, too, said that once he “started being in the streets more” at around age fifteen, he began at first to handle friends’ guns, and eventually to acquire his own. Although he never officially joined a gang, his friends were members of the Crips, and a friend gave him his first gun because “we had a lot of ‘beef’ goin’ around”. At the same time, Kilal was selling heroin and crack cocaine, and this eventually made him feel even more vulnerable:

I started makin’ a lot of money, and for some reason I started bringin’ a lot of attention to myself because of the money that I was makin’, and a lot of people started, . . . they started hatin’ on me, people try to, like, people try to rob me a couple of times, and from then on I knew I needed to keep my gun on me.

Elijah Anderson documented the dangers of visibly having more money or material possessions than one’s inner-city neighbors in *Code of the Street* (1999). For Kilal, who was a partisan of the Crips, these dangers were compounded by his involvement in ongoing gang hostilities. For both Kevin and Kilal, being drawn in by the street’s magnetic attractions also meant being exposed to elevated levels of risk, prompting their acquisition of guns.

For them, it was neither the general nature of their neighborhoods nor the threat of random or anonymous violence that prompted their gun acquisition, even though they may have conceptualized their motivations as falling under the rubric of “protection”. Rather, within their dangerous environments, particular interpersonal threats arising from their activities and associations appeared salient. Other, more non-specific, dangers seemed to constitute simply the backdrop of neighborhood life.

This pathway seemed to constitute the typical avenue to gun possession. Participants who grew up in urban neighborhoods felt relatively comfortable, not perceiving the need for a gun until they entered the realm of gang fighting or drug dealing.

Tony’s story: not “normal” for him

There was only one participant, Tony, who said he had obtained a gun simply for protection from random street violence. Tony, however, had lived in the suburbs until he was ten years old. It was “much better” there but, as he put it, “my mom just moved!” Tony’s experience highlights the powerlessness of children to choose their own environments. Like the other participants, he described his current neighborhood as a place where murders, robberies, assaults, thefts, burglaries, and a lot of drug activity, including outdoor sales, took place. Once he stepped outside of his home, even in the daytime, he did not feel safe, because “anything could happen”, like a “drive-by shooting” or “somebody just walk up and try to rob you.” While the other participants said this was the only environment they had ever known, and that they were “used to it”, Tony, having lived in a quiet suburb until he was ten, seemed unable to get used to it. Even though his own illicit activities were limited to smoking marijuana, drinking alcohol, and being outside after curfew—what teenagers might do with some regularity in

many urban and suburban communities in the US—he felt that he needed a gun in order to feel safe in this neighborhood. Tony defined being “in the streets” differently than other participants had. For him, “in the streets” just meant literally being out at night, visiting friends, hanging out, smoking cigarettes and marijuana, and drinking. Once he had saved up the fifty dollars he needed to purchase his first and only gun, he felt that he could “walk anywhere, don’t really have to watch my back and worry about somethin’ happenin’ . . . I felt safe.”

In Merleau-Ponty’s terms, the background level of violence pervading his city neighborhood never came to feel like just the “field” for him, as it did for those who had been born and raised there. In Hochschild’s terms, he was never able to take his new surroundings for granted, and they continued to elicit signals of fear. Tony had had no charges prior to being arrested with a loaded nine millimeter handgun at two o’clock in the morning. Also, atypically, he had never even tested the gun because he did not know a safe place to do so. In this group of participants, Tony was the sole representative of a second pathway to gun acquisition, one where the motivation to obtain a gun arose from a severe sense of discomfort in his neighborhood, unconnected with street fighting or drug dealing, but simply due to not being “immune” to his environment, as Tim had put it.

Tony said he had no gun exposure in his home, but was first exposed to guns when he was fifteen or sixteen and saw the movie, *Scarface* (the 1983 remake with Al Pacino). Tony had particularly noted one element of the plot relating to the protagonist’s gun use—that “when they tried to come in his house, he used it to protect himself”, and Tony thought this type of defense might work for him, too. He then began asking around

in order to learn something about guns, how they were used, and where one could be obtained.

Tony was not in a gang, did not sell drugs, and did not have “beefs” with others to worry about. Though he had never been shot at or robbed, he said he imagined being the victim in such a scenario “all the time”. People he knew--older, younger, and his own age--had been shot or robbed at gunpoint. It was because of these crimes that he felt he needed a gun for protection. He explicitly stated that he would feel “unsafe” if he were walking around at night without a gun: “You could just be walkin’ somewhere, and just get caught in a cross-fire, or somethin’.” For this reason, he “didn’t walk around a lot; just go to a friend house, and then we used to walk to a store, and stuff like that”.

Yet, with a gun in his possession, Tony’s experience of his life world was completely different. As Nancy Lesko (1996:152) discussed in “Denaturalizing Adolescence”, his “relationship to the world”, his perspective and perception, changed once he had acquired what he viewed as a new ability to travel through the space around him. Just as, when one learns to swim, a lake changes from being perceived as something that could not be crossed to something to which one has access (Lesko, 1996:152), once Tony had a gun, he ceased to feel unsafe in the streets, and felt that he could walk anywhere without worrying. Although his newly perceived capability to navigate the streets did not arise from the acquisition of a physical skill, it still seems appropriate to say that he has, as Lesko puts it, “*incorporated*” this new ability (emphasis in original).

Similarly, Merleau-Ponty (1962) had argued, using the example of a person who has learned to drive a car, that one is essentially “transplanted” into these instruments,

“or, conversely . . . incorporate[s] them into the bulk of our own body”. From the point of view of the person who is experiencing it, the phenomenon of walking around the street has changed. Carrying a gun, for Tony, exemplified “our power of dilating our being in the world, or changing our existence by appropriating fresh instruments.” (Merleau-Ponty 1962:143). In this way, Tony’s embodied experience of the streets can be understood as having been expanded from one of perceived vulnerability to one of perceived agency. He now “can walk anywhere.” Unfortunately for him, once he is released and returns to the same neighborhood, he must face the decision whether to resume carrying a gun. He acknowledged that this prospect has caused him considerable concern.

Although Tony reported that the majority of people he knew sold drugs, he explained that he didn’t do it because “I felt as though I’d be a follower if I just did it because they was doin’ it”. He declined to sell drugs despite being invited on several occasions to do so, providing an illustration of a young man who did not respond to peer pressure, or at least peer invitations. In response to my questions, he acknowledged that he didn’t need the money and that his mother was able to provide what he needed. Not perceiving an acute need to obtain income, he did not find the sale of drugs to be irresistibly attractive.

While this study cannot address the question of how many other relatively law-abiding young men like Tony may be carrying guns for “pure protection” from random street crime, Daniel W. Webster, Patricia Gainer, and Howard Champion (1993) found that, in a population of junior high school students in Washington, D.C., gun carrying tended to be associated with highly aggressive delinquency, rather than purely defensive

behavior. Among their sample, all the boys who had been arrested on drug-related charges also carried a gun, and many of them had social networks that were involved in violence. The authors explicitly stated, “Our findings are not consistent with the image of otherwise law-abiding youths carrying guns solely for protection.” (Webster, Gainer, & Champion, 1993:1607) Tony, however, did not obtain a gun until he was seventeen years old, and, as Webster, Gainer, and Champion acknowledged, “less deviant and aggressive adolescents may later decide to start carrying guns purely for reasons of self-defense.” Not only may such low-profile gun carriers often manage to avoid arrest, but a young man without a history of delinquency arrested for simple gun possession could frequently receive a non-custodial disposition, and would therefore not appear in a sample drawn from incarcerated youth. In short, this study cannot shed light on how many more young men like Tony may acquire guns through a pathway that does not include other types of offending.

The obverse of Tony’s move at age ten from a safe suburban neighborhood to one perceived as dangerous is the previously discussed situation of Nate, who moved from the rough projects to a “nice, calm neighborhood” at the same age. Just as Tony never felt at home on the crime-ridden streets of his new city, neither could Nate accustom himself to the quiet atmosphere of his aunt’s area, returning again and again to the projects.

Getting guns: Old heads, new heads, and “connects”

Aside from Tony, every participant who acknowledged gun involvement related his gun acquisition to his lifestyle, as they often called it, of being in the streets. As Tim, the young man whose quotation leads off this chapter, said, “when you’re in the streets, all around you is . . . guns, drugs, money, and it’s just a combination of everything.” As

he outlined the process, a gun just comes into a young man's life when the circumstances seem to call for it. Another young drug dealer likewise described his first gun being put into his hand when he was fifteen, by an older person who saw that he was getting into the street. Owen recalled, "My man had gave it to me", saying to him, "'Cuz, you're gonna need this.'"

Yet another gun-carrier, who eventually became both a drug dealer and a robber of drug dealers, reported receiving his first gun when he was fourteen. After someone pointed a gun at him late one night, he told a friend who was already selling drugs about it, and the friend gave him a loaded .357 magnum revolver to keep. According to this participant, whose name was Xavier, the gun donor's motivation was probably a combination of friendship and recruiting.

Many participants were given guns by so-called "old heads" in the neighborhood. Victor, incarcerated for armed robbery, had been primarily stealing cars and getting into lots of fights when he decided it was time for him to get a gun. He talked to one of the older guys, or "old heads", as he said, who had previously shown him guns, and this man gave him a new .32 revolver, still in the box, as a gift. Another participant, Sam, asked his cousin to get him his first gun when the cousin traveled to Virginia, and his cousin likewise did not charge him for the gun, but provided it as a gift. Finally, Kevin, whose father was incarcerated, acquired his first gun as he joined his older brothers' drug-dealing business. When I asked whether it was routine to issue drug-selling novices a gun as part of their work equipment, Kevin said that it was not if "they too young . . . dumb, trigger-happy; but somebody older, like my age or somethin', like fifteen,

probably if they got, like, common sense, then if that person ask for it, they'll give them something small, nothing big."

Only one participant reported receiving his first gun from his father. Leon was not the first participant to preface his response to one of my questions with, "Well, actually, you won't believe it when I tell you", but, when I encouraged him to continue, he responded that he received the gun when "my father gave it to me". Leon, incarcerated for armed robbery, said his father was a drug dealer who left the family home at the request of Leon's mother, who did not approve of his activities. Shortly after his father had moved out, Leon was living with his mother, his older sister, his younger brother, and his stepfather. According to Leon, his father gave him the gun, a .380 revolver, "just so I could protect myself and my little brother and my family." His father had previously given Leon BB guns, to which his mother had also objected, but this time he gave him a revolver in a bag, along with a box of bullets. While a number of participants seemed to have been adultified by their mothers in the absence of another man in the house, this was the sole example of a young man having a gun thrust into his hands by a parent and being charged to protect his family. Leon carried that gun until he was arrested with it. After it was confiscated, he acquired a series of other guns until he was arrested for his current offense, an armed robbery of a liquor store. The receipt of guns from family members, here a cousin, brothers, and a father, however, is consistent with findings by Philip J. Cook, Jens Ludwig, Sudhir Venkatesh, and Anthony A. Braga (2007). During the course of their study of underground gun markets, Venkatesh interviewed non-gang-affiliated youths aged eighteen through twenty-one who had

owned guns, and found that forty percent of them reported obtaining their gun from a relative. (Cook et al., 2007:597)

Several other participants did not feel the need to purchase their own guns, as guns were readily available for use within their social networks. Nate, who said he had committed numerous armed robberies with guns, even though he was currently incarcerated for an armed robbery with a knife, said that from the time he was fourteen, guns were always available to him: “Like, everybody in my project had guns. . . Like if you needed a gun, if you needed it, like to go rob somebody, you was like, give me the gun, and they’d give it to you.” Nate said the first gun he handled was a two-shot derringer which, despite its small size, he was able to use for armed robberies: “I never really bought it. It’s just like any time we needed it I knew where to get it from . . . It would be stashed, or it would be with somebody, and then, after like the small guns, started using big guns.” When I asked whether he had ever purchased a gun, Nate replied, “No, I don’t need to. Why buy it when I can go down the block and go use it?”

Similarly, Xavier, who was incarcerated for an armed robbery with a sawed-off shotgun, said this shotgun was always stored under a porch on the corner where he sold drugs. He said he had no idea where it originally came from, and did not consider the gun to be his; rather, “different people in the area use it, I mean, everybody had access to it”; more specifically, “the people I was with”. Other participants who sold drugs described shared guns or “stashed guns” that would always be somewhere on their drug corner, and, like Xavier, another participant spoke of such guns as though they belonged to the landscape, always having been there:

DM: Where’d you get the shotguns?

Naheem: I don’t know. . . It was like passed down to us. It was the block’s.

Naheem said he, his brothers, and the other dealers who sold drugs on this block never even used these shotguns that seemed to have come with the drug territory, preferring to use handguns for whatever they may have needed to do. Naheem's account once again highlights the pervasive presence of guns in participants' environments--guns that are "just there", like the two that Tim found. Whether these "lost and found" guns were forgotten, inoperable, abandoned because they had been used in a crime and could have connected their owners to a shooting if found in their possession, or something else, they serve to punctuate their settings as places where gun violence is an everyday occurrence. Many of these guns were communal objects, or "group guns", shared by anyone connected, for example, to that drug corner. Although the particular weapon's origin may have been shrouded in the mists of time, its location was known to all connected with the enterprise, and it was available for their use.

Participants who sought to purchase guns, as Tim suggested in the opening quotation, would get themselves a "connect"; that is, an intermediary, be it a broker, a supplier, or simply a mutual acquaintance, and just buy their first guns. For example, Quinto described the purchase of his first gun, a slightly used .32 revolver:

I had bought me a .32. . . . From one of, somebody, somebody, I don't know. One of my bulls, he had it. He had a .32; he had a connect. . . Yeah, it came in the box and everything . . . it had five shells, plus he gave me a box [of ammunition] . . . I bought it for two fifty. He used it before, but it wasn't damaged, like. . . . He shot it a couple of times. . . It was basically new.

Ernie, too, a drug dealer and gang member, said, "I called one of the boys on my set, and he knows somebody that sells guns, like a connect. So he linked me to him. I met up with him, and I bought it."

The many participants who purchased guns did not describe any difficulty in doing so. As Naheem said, “If you was to try to get a gun, like buy one or somethin’, see, in the hood, you, like, go places, you know everybody that sell a gun, like that. Everybody’s sellin’ ‘em. Ask a person that you probably know. And just, go ask them.”

Even Tony, who was not involved in street crime beyond smoking marijuana, simply asked around among the older men in the neighborhood, and readily found a gun to purchase for fifty dollars, although he never tested it for operability.

These men who provided guns were often just a few years older than the participants, sometimes involved in the participants’ illegal activities, and sometimes not. In the absence of fathers in the lives of most of the young men, the “old heads” were regarded as older, wiser street veterans, even though they sometimes had a financial interest in the boys’ activities as well. These men either had guns or knew where to get them, and regularly helped to equip the adolescents for their lives in the street.

Elijah Anderson (1999) had discussed the role of “old heads” in the inner city, explaining that the original “old heads” were traditional, positive African American male role models who lived in the neighborhood and could guide boys informally, particularly if a boy’s father was not in the home. However, as most middle-class and many stable working-class men left these neighborhoods during the latter part of the twentieth century, the traditional “old head” faded from these young men’s life worlds. (Wilson, 1987:7-8) The men who were left behind in these communities, as both Anderson and Prudence Carter (2005) argue, may be viewed as “new heads”, who instead model the street lifestyle and its rewards. (Carter, 2005:139) These men, still referred to as “old heads” by participants, served as ready sources for participants’ first guns when the

young men decided they were ready for them. The new “old heads” continued to mentor and guide the young men of the neighborhood, but instead of guiding them in traditional avenues, they helped them to navigate their lives in the street. They provided participants with what these young men considered to be valuable social capital in their communities, connecting them with what was viewed as a critical material asset in their shared milieu.

As Cook and colleagues (2007) suggested, underground gun markets may vary from state to state and from city to city, but these New Jersey juvenile gun offenders reported that guns were easy to find. Guns also seemed to be available in a wide range of prices, although a review of their general quality and reliability is beyond the scope of this study.

It seemed that as participants entered the street fraternity, whether as gang members, workers in a drug set, or just starting to “hang”, a gun often became a part of their lives. While some purchased them, through well-known networks, other relied on “group guns” that were always available, or used guns that had been given to them. The constellation of guns, drugs, money, and violence was part of the fabric of their life worlds. As the old heads served to socialize younger adolescents into the life of the street, both the older men and the neophytes may have gained a sort of legitimacy from their social bond.

Unpacking “Protection”

As discussed earlier, the participants in this study had typically traveled in dangerous circles prior to the time of their incarceration. They had originally acquired their guns for protection, and several described particular situations that either had occurred or which they anticipated might occur when a gun could be used defensively.

Kilal, for example, was a drug dealer and adjudicated armed robber who, after being robbed at gunpoint, decided that he needed to carry his gun routinely. When another person, believed by Kilal to be an associate of the person who had recently robbed him, attempted to do the same, Kilal said he defended himself with his gun, although he declined to provide specific details. When I asked how he managed to avoid being robbed on this occasion, Kilal replied, “‘Cause I had my gun on me, and stuff just got hectic . . . Nobody didn’t get hurt, but . . . yeah.” Whether he fired his gun, used it as a blunt weapon, or merely brandished it was unclear, but Kilal’s point was that his gun had served to protect him from being robbed a second time.

Ernie, also a drug dealer and adjudicated armed robber, denied that a person would need a gun just because he sold drugs, but traced the usual connection for me: “It’s just when people got money, the gun is what comes with the money, ‘cause it really might prevent anything else.” Thus, in Ernie’s mind, too, drugs, money, violence, and guns tended to cluster together, with a gun being viewed as “prevention” in the drug seller’s environment.

He also viewed his high school as a place where he needed protection, saying, “That school was bad. I mean, I had a gun before I got locked up [referring to an earlier period of incarceration prior to beginning high school], but goin’ up to that school MAKES you just want to bring the gun in school. Like, everything, everybody’s fightin’.” Ernie himself was among those fighting, often becoming, as he put it, “dragged into” fights on behalf of one of his boys. He spoke of going to school one Monday, “and I caught two of them, I beat both of them up, so while I’m beating them up, I look up, and there’s more of ‘em coming with machetes and stuff.” Ernie

complained that “nobody did nothin’” about the boys with the machetes in school. He said he “didn’t wanna tell, so I didn’t go to school for like a week after that. Then when I finally came back to school, I brought my gun with me. ‘Cause, like, it was just gettin’ deep now.” Conflicts from the street were brought into the school by Ernie and, apparently, by others, with the result that Ernie felt the same need for a gun in school as he did on the street. Also as on the street, Ernie viewed himself as the protector of his boys, and would not hesitate to take on their enemies within the school walls. He did not consider it appropriate to seek help from the school staff, and therefore believed he was left with the alternatives of absenting himself from school or arming himself when he attended.

Victor had likewise been adjudicated for armed robbery, although it was his co-defendant who had wielded Victor’s gun. Prior to the armed robbery, he had served as a look-out during other robberies, and fought a lot. He reported that he had originally obtained his first and only gun by approaching an “old head” in his neighborhood, because he felt he might need to protect himself from violence resulting from interpersonal conflicts. Victor said that while it used to be that you would fight someone and then it was over, things were no longer that way: “Growin’ up now, there ain’t no more fightin’, . . . they’re gonna wanna kill you, . . . it’s never over. . . Today, you can get in a fight in a moment, and they might decide to pull it out and shoot you.” He summed it up, “Nowadays, if you fight somebody, you might as well just shoot ‘em”, although he said he had never done so. Victor denied expecting someone actually to come after him, “but if it ever happened, if it ever did, it just got to the point where I knew I needed to protect myself.” Although Victor was not in a gang and did not sell drugs, between his

fighting, stealing cars, and serving as a lookout for other robberies before participating in the one for which he was adjudicated, he was probably justified in sensing that his street activities had reached the point where he faced an increased risk of violent victimization. His belief that he now needed a gun to protect himself from these risks was understandable.

As several researchers using a public health model have suggested, contagion theory can be applied to the spread of guns in a community. Describing the same dynamic that Victor outlined, Alfred Blumstein, Frederick Rivara, and Richard Rosenfield (2000) argued that “the presence of an armed group in the population increases the likelihood that others will become armed to protect themselves” (Blumstein, Rivara, & Rosenfield, 2000: 529; see also Loftin, 1986). While someone like Victor might once have felt that he could successfully defend himself against foreseeable threats by fighting, the widespread use of firearms had made him feel that he, too, needed a gun.

Kjerstin Andersson’s 2008 study of Swedish youths in detention, however, serves as a reminder that the American inner-city context, with its broad diffusion of guns taken for granted by both researchers and these participants, is not universal. Andersson’s Swedish young men viewed carrying a weapon, by which they meant a knife, as unmanly. Andersson reported one of her participants declaring that “‘over his dead body’ would he ever walk around armed if he felt threatened. Carrying around a knife would implicate that you are not man enough to face the danger of a threat.” (Andersson, 2008:74) Andersson’s research suggests that the meaning of manliness among violent youth can vary based upon the type of weapons prevalent in their environment. Among her Swedish youth, carrying any weapon at all could be considered unmanly, because, in

an environment where a knife is the most lethal weapon one is likely to face, being a skilled fighter could see one through most violent encounters. In such a society, strong fists can garner more respect than carrying a weapon. In the American “gunfighter nation” it is normative to associate gun use with men (Slotkin 1992) and, in some environments, with masculinity. As Victor suggested, the prevalence of guns in his neighborhood has rendered his skills as a fighter virtually obsolete. Later in this chapter, participants will discuss the place of guns in their own identity processes, sometimes problematizing the connection between guns and masculinity.

Guns also could protect participants from insults, or at least make them feel that they did not need to tolerate insults. Quinto said, “When I don’t got a gun, I feel like I have to fall back more, like, anybody can say somethin’ to me --“Oh, you bitch-ass nigger”-- like that, and I won’t do nuttin’.” But with a gun, while he said he wouldn’t shoot somebody, he would let him know that he had a gun and scare him, or smack him, as he claimed to have done in the past, “because I had that power. Let’s put it like this. If I smacked them, if he know I have a gun on me, he’s not gonna do nothin’.”

Quinto had obtained his first gun because of a group of boys who wanted to fight him as a result of something he had done on the street, and he was concerned that they might jump him. He said he didn’t want to fight them, and had told them so, but he worried that “they was just gonna let me stroll into somethin’, and they was gonna end up jumpin’ me or whatever”. He had been selling drugs since he was fourteen, but it was not until this conflict occurred, when he was fifteen, that he felt the need for a gun. Some, but not all, drug-selling participants felt that a gun was necessary to protect themselves from the threats inherent to the drug trade. It is worth noting that Quinto was

currently incarcerated for possessing a gun that he had just retrieved from his room because he anticipated trouble from interlopers on his drug territory that day. He later explained that one of the protective benefits of a gun was that its mere presence, made known to one's adversary, could be used to avoid or pre-empt a fight: "Because he know that once he lift his finger to try to punch me, I'm gonna shoot at him. . . All I gotta do is tuck it right here [indicating his waistband], tuck my sweater right here, under the gun . . ."

Cook and colleagues (2007) documented similar violence-prevention functions of gun-carrying among non-incarcerated youths in Chicago, as did Anderson in Philadelphia (1999:240). The importance of "respect" on the street, as both Anderson's *Code of the Street* and the above participant's remarks illustrate, is not a matter of mere vanity, but goes to the issue of personal safety, as others may probe for weaknesses, both verbally and physically. Having a gun is viewed by participants as protection from physical attack, from verbal attack, and from being obliged to engage in a fight when one is not inclined to do so.

Still, consistent with most participants' assertions that a person living in their neighborhood would not require a gun if he were not in the street lifestyle, Garot (2010) presented the case of a young man in a gang-ridden Los Angeles neighborhood who was not in the streets, and who felt relatively safe. This young man said the gangbangers didn't bother him because he didn't look like a gangbanger, but simply went about his business (Garot 2010:138-139). He maintained that it was looking and acting like a gang member that led to difficulties. Garot therefore argued that the young man who avoids the "street" presentation has more freedom of movement in his neighborhood. This

seemed to be the perception of participants in the current study, who did not feel the need for a gun until they were in the street and did not believe others not in the “lifestyle” needed one either. While we did not explicitly discuss the idea of “looking street” as increasing one’s vulnerability, several participants spoke of their increased vulnerability due to the risk that their previous victims might retaliate against them. This risk prompted two participants to wear bullet-proof vests on a regular basis and, as will be discussed in Chapter 6, even this precaution did not protect one of the two from being shot by someone he had shot at in the past.

Exploring the question of motivations for gun possession quantitatively, Joseph Sheley and James Wright (1993) had surveyed incarcerated juvenile offenders in four states, including New Jersey. Using a self-administered questionnaire with primarily forced-choice items, they demonstrated how broadly their respondents conceptualized the protective function of guns. For example, prominent among the reasons respondents felt it was important to carry a gun during an armed robbery was for protection from possible violent resistance or retaliation by an armed victim. Sheley and Wright’s respondents, all serious juvenile offenders, also endorsed the more conventional protective functions of guns offered to them on the questionnaire.

While Sheley and Wright concluded that the “perception that one’s very survival depends on being armed makes a weapon a necessity at nearly any cost” (Sheley & Wright, 1993:387), I would suggest that it is important to emphasize that this perception is not universal among young men of color in the inner-city. Sheley and Wright’s self-administered questionnaire elicited a great deal of useful information from the serious juvenile offenders who responded to it. However, it was not designed to illuminate how

these young men came to be gun users, or their changing perceptions of the risks they faced before and after they became involved in other types of offending. The participants in the current study distinguished between their perceived need for a gun once they were “in the streets” and both their own perceptions before they were in the streets and the imputed perceptions of others who were not in the streets. They felt that neither they nor their neighbors needed a gun unless they were into the street “lifestyle.” For this reason, placing the focus on the phenomenologically different life worlds that young men in the same neighborhood can experience, I would offer a qualification to Sheley and Wright’s conclusion that “gun-related crime . . . will likely decrease only when juveniles are convinced that they do not have to carry guns for protection.” I would shift the emphasis to suggest that gun-related crime will likely decrease only when juveniles are convinced that they do not have to, or want to, embrace the street lifestyle, with its attendant risks. Whether this is likely to occur under the conditions currently prevailing in the inner cities is the challenge facing policymakers and practitioners, as well as individual families.

Guns as consumer objects and symbols: “Everybody likes a Glock”

Participants’ feelings about guns ranged from aversion to self-proclaimed infatuation. Thomas praised the special qualities of the Glock .40 handgun: “The Glock .40? It’s powerful. Um, it don’t got no safety on it; the gun is made out of plastic, so it can be interpreted as a BB gun, if you want to.” He concluded, as though it were obvious, “But, everybody likes a Glock.”

In fact participants often had differing gun preferences. While several maintained that functionality was their only criterion, others expressed distinct aesthetic concerns. When I asked Kevin whether there were particular things that made a gun attractive to him, he answered simply, “that it would take someone off the earth”. Xavier, who had a

number of different guns, said, “As long as it shot, I wanted it.” Ernie said of his first gun, “It was ugly. I didn’t care.”

One utilitarian preference expressed by several participants was for revolvers, because they do not leave potentially incriminating shell casings behind when fired, as automatics do. As Ernie explained, “when you shoot a revolver, the shells stay inside the gun.” Conversely, Leon, while acknowledging this advantage of revolvers, maintained that he was more persuaded by aesthetic concerns, telling me, “but what I don’t like about revolvers is, because they look like Western guns. I really don’t like the Western-like look.” Victor, in turn, expressed an aesthetic preference for revolvers, saying he “likes how they look.” He described his first gun, a revolver, as black and chrome, and expanded upon the appeal of guns: “I liked guns. I like how they look. I like the way they sound, and pop when they’re shot.”

Sam reported asking his cousin to pick up a small gun for him when he went to Virginia, telling his cousin he “wanted somethin’ I could wear around my neck.” Sam explained to me that such a gun is hung on a shoestring threaded through the gun’s sight, so that when the wearer is stopped by the police and told to pull his shirt up, no gun will be visible around his waist. As Sam told me, “To wear your gun on a shoestring around your neck, that’s real ghetto.” He seemed to suggest that, beyond the practical advantage of avoiding arrest, this manner of wearing a gun was also an expression of insider street culture, marking the wearer as authentically “ghetto”. Sam’s cousin said he had paid only nine dollars for this small gun, and gave it to Sam as a gift.

Several participants considered themselves to be gun collectors, and would purchase more than one gun at a time. Leon reported buying three guns on one occasion

from the same seller, and Xavier also recalled having three guns at the same time. Ernie bought an unusual “handgun/rifle” because he had never seen or heard of anything like it.

Participants often displayed the nuanced knowledge of gun connoisseurs. Leon expressed regret that he had been locked up a month after getting a new gun, “so I couldn’t really enjoy the gun as I wanted to”. He explained that he liked to “go shootin’”, saying, “You can go to a park, you can line up cans and stuff, and practice your aim”, or “go on top of the railroads, and shoot off the railroads.” He enthusiastically compared the sounds made by various handguns and shotguns, describing how and where he tested each one. Expanding on the theme of gun enjoyment, Quinto went a step further when recalling a celebratory New Year’s Eve session of shooting guns in the air, in the company of his stepfather and other friends. He provided distinct sound effects for each of the different caliber guns used in the celebration, from “Bonk, bonk, bonk, bonk!” to “Donk, donk, donk!”, and “Bah, bah, bah!” to a fast “Bop, bop, bop, bop, bop”. Not surprisingly, Quinto declared that he liked guns, rhapsodizing, “The way that it’s noise, like the noise, the spark, when it come out, all of that! I like all of them, the ones with clips, the revolvers, it’s just special. . . . There’s just somethin’ about ‘em! I’m attracted to it!”

Quinto was not alone in his enthusiasm. Xavier exclaimed, “I’m infatuated with guns!” Sam, incarcerated for robbery, said that it was initially just his love for guns that prompted his desire for one:

Sam: I just WANTED a gun.

DM: Okay, so, ‘cause you, now why would you say that you wanted a gun?

Sam: ‘Cause I liked toy guns, cap guns, I just always liked to have them. I liked the pow!

DM: Did you say power?

Sam: Pow!

DM: Pow.

Sam: Like the kickback, all of that. I just love it.

Later, however, Sam continued to describe things that would make a gun attractive to him, saying, “Just the way it looked; if I could hold it in my hands”. When I sought to clarify his response by asking if he was speaking of the gun’s appearance, he responded, “The power.” For Sam, the tactile attraction of the gun encompassed its association with power. To hold a gun in his hands meant to hold power.

Clearly, the various sensual pleasures of guns, especially their appearance and their sounds, contributed significantly to their appeal for many participants, but the subtext that underlay the materiality of gun possession seemed to be one of power: power to protect and, as will be discussed later, power to obtain money, respect, and a feeling of competence and self-worth. All the same, every participant who acknowledged possessing a gun was able to describe his first gun, no matter how many more had come after it, suggesting that the gun was not only a symbol in its generic form, but had importance as an individuated material object as well. Moreover, many of these young men presented themselves as knowledgeable consumers, collectors, and even connoisseurs, of guns.

The least demanding or sentimental gun consumer was Tony, the relatively law-abiding participant who wanted a gun purely for protection as he walked around the streets of his city at night. He said he had no preferences whatsoever concerning the kind of gun he wanted to purchase, and never even test-fired his gun once he had it. For him, finding a gun he liked was not the problem; rather, because he did not have an

independent source of income, he needed to save up money from little side jobs and his allowance before he could make his fifty dollar purchase. In truth, it seemed that Tony's gun served mainly as a talisman that made him feel safe simply by carrying it.

Finally, Vernon, although incarcerated for both selling drugs and possessing a gun, expressed his aversion to guns, saying that his co-defendant was carrying a gun when they were arrested during a drug sale: "I wouldn't use 'em. I'd rather fight straight. But guns, that's lethal and serious. . . taking lives and all, I ain't into that. I'm more into makin' money."

This explicit aversion to guns was anomalous among the study participants, although several other adjudicated gun offenders said it was a co-defendant or someone else who had the gun he was charged with possessing, and one participant suggested that the gun with which he was charged was an abandoned one or was planted by the police. As the sample was comprised primarily of gun offenders, it was to be expected that most participants would have positive feelings about guns. Vernon also said he preferred not to carry a gun because "if you get arrested, I'd rather have possession of drugs, and not have possession of a weapon; then I'd have two cases." Nonetheless, because he and his friend were arrested together while "serving" a customer, as Vernon put it, he was viewed as having constructive possession of the gun even though it was not on his person. Having his colleague hold the gun as they worked together, which could still provide Vernon with the presumed protective benefits of the gun, did not insulate him from the gun charge as he had hoped.

Ernie's story: an unreliable product

Ernie, who had joined the Crips at age nine, became involved in many group-based fights while in junior high. As he put it, "I was always brawlin'." He began

selling crack cocaine when he was in seventh grade, but did not feel the need for a gun while he was selling drugs, reasoning that if he were to be robbed he would not have an opportunity to reach for a gun, and the robbers might then take his gun as well. His description of how his perceived need for a gun evolved shows that, in addition to Victor's example of contagion as a motivation for gun acquisition, escalation also could operate to prompt a gun purchase. Ernie recalled that the fights between his "little gang" and another group began with less lethal weapons:

Like, one of my boys had fought with they boys at a park, playing basketball, and one of my boys got jumped, 'cause he beat his boy up, and they called everybody else, and they jumped him. So that just started a big situation. So . . . ever since then, it's just been like a big little war.

At first the fights were with fists, but then, "maybe bats, bricks . . . no guns." When I asked who escalated the fights from fists to bats and bricks, Ernie laughed and said, "I don't even know. I really don't know."

However, Ernie felt that his group was suffering unfairly because "every time we go to the area, we can never find them, and any time we walk around, they find us, like, they find us one by one." On top of this, Ernie regarded his adversaries as bigger and older, and after his "boys" had been repeatedly picked off one by one and beaten up by the rivals, he felt the best defense would be a good offense, with a gun as an equalizer. As Ernie put it, "you can't beat everybody, so, I bought a gun." He seemed to view the planned attack within the rubric of protection, broadly speaking, and said the purchase of the gun was his friend's idea, as the friend knew somebody who had one to sell.

However, Ernie, still in seventh grade, was selling drugs at the time, and therefore had the funds to finance the purchase. The gun seller met Ernie and his friend, and sold Ernie a .38 revolver. When a girl told Ernie's gang that the rivals were having a party, Ernie

saw an opportunity “to catch all of them at this one spot”. To Ernie’s chagrin, “the gun ended up bein’ broke”, as they learned during the attack:

We went over there, and, like, kicked in their windows and stuff, . . . and they came out, knives and stuff, and my boy had the gun, he pulled it out, starts like trying to pull it, and wasn’t nothin’ happenin’. So then we started fightin’, beatin’ him with the gun, and I’m wonderin’ why he started beatin’ him instead of shootin’ him. And when we ran, or whatever, then he told me what happened. . . The pin was missin’.

Cook and colleagues (2007) had noted that gun quality can sometimes be an issue in underground gun markets, but Ernie said he managed to obtain relief as a dissatisfied consumer:

DM: Did you go back to the seller or anything?

Ernie: Yeah, I got my money back. . . . and I kept his gun, too.

DM: . . . Did he say he wanted the gun back?

Ernie: Naw, he knew, he must’ve knew it was broke, he gave me my money back.

As Ernie related this episode of gang fighting, the line between having a gun for protection and having one for retribution blurred somewhat. Ernie claimed, “We didn’t start the problems. . . They jumped one of ours, so we felt as though we gotta get even, we wasn’t gonna let it ride like that.” Ernie implied that permitting an attack to go unanswered would suggest to their rivals that his gang could be assaulted with impunity. In this way, a lack of “respect” could result in a lack of personal safety. As fists gave way to bats and bricks, and these in turn gave way to knives and guns, the escalating lethality of the weapons used increased the chances that someone would be killed or seriously injured. Ernie’s efforts to protect his “boys” and establish his young gang’s

standing as formidable adversaries were typical of participants who were in gangs or otherwise engaged in street fighting.

“[T]he distinction between victim and perpetrator is often vague” from the perspective of juvenile gun offenders, as Sheley and Wright (1993:386) noted after analyzing the results of their surveys. Nonetheless, it is possible to view juvenile gun possession and use along a continuum ranging from pure protection to purely aggressive use, with the oscillating offensive/defensive dynamic of gang and street violence, or “beef”, as participants called it, somewhere in the middle. The participants in the current study readily acknowledged the occasions when their gun use was motivated by factors other than protection, as will appear more clearly in the next chapter. The pattern that emerges from the data, however, is that their initial gun acquisition was driven by a desire for protection, albeit broadly conceived and contextualized within their “street” activities. Sheley and Wright likewise found that “the desire for protection and the need to arm oneself against enemies were the primary reasons to obtain a gun, easily outpacing all other motivations.” (Sheley & Wright, 1993:385) It should be re-emphasized that Sheley and Wright’s respondents, all serious juvenile offenders, similarly defined protection quite broadly.

Ernie himself subsequently acquired other guns, and, as will be explored later, expanded his use of them from gang hostilities to other activities motivated by profit and, as he related, by the quest for excitement.

Guns and Identity

Two young men, housed in different facilities, spoke of guns as making them feel like Superman. Victor described how he felt when he had a gun in this way: “I could say

you feel a little more masculine. Kind of more cocky, better say. I don't know. I don't know. Kind of like Superman, more. In a way . . . you know you got like back-up, like an army, like."

Xavier put it this way:

I felt as, I felt more protected. I felt protected. I just thought nothing could happen to me while I had the gun in my possession . . . [W]hen you got a gun in your pocket, you feel like you're Superman. . . It's like you're Superman, and the only thing that can stop you is kryptonite, and there ain't none, so there's nothing to stop you.

Xavier said he had ceased to believe that nothing could happen to a person with a gun in his possession, but his earlier sense of invincibility had enabled him to rob drug dealers and feel as if he "couldn't be touched".

Conversely, Leon, another armed robber, said, "When I don't have a gun on me, I felt naked, and stuff. I felt I could be harmed; that I could be harmed." He contrasted this feeling with the way he felt when surrounded by his collection of guns: "Just having a different collection of guns just made me, it makes you feel like you got power. Just, I had power within myself. Like, if you want something, nine times out of ten you're gonna get it, if you got a gun."

Thomas, too, drew on a discourse of a gun as bringing feelings of power:

Thomas: With a gun in my hand, nothing was scary.

DM: How would you describe your state of mind at the time?

Thomas: State of mind at the time, I'd describe it as, um, fearless, fearless. I felt powerful; I felt like nothin' could stop me.

DM: And, where do you think the feeling of powerfulness came from?

Thomas: Definitely my hand, because I had the gun in it.

His last response was quite literal, but at the same time illustrates how the sense of power from the gun becomes embodied in the person who holds it. Thomas's account demonstrates once again Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological argument that the instrument is experientially incorporated into the bulk of the person's own body (1962:143). Leon, in the previous quotation, similarly referred to having power "within myself" when surrounded by his guns, evidently experiencing his own person as embodying the guns' power.

Several other participants, however, seemed self-consciously aware that the idea of the gun as incorporated into their bodies, an extension of their bodies, or changing their embodied experience could raise problematic identity issues. Keith, in response to my asking whether he felt any differently about himself when he had a gun, replied, "No, not at all." When I pressed him on whether there was any kind of power dynamic going on, he repeated, simply, "No." Keith emphasized that he just felt safer in case he should find himself in another situation similar to the one he said had prompted his gun acquisition, when someone from another gang pulled a gun on him at a party. Perhaps significantly, Keith, although a drug dealer, had never been charged with using his gun in any way, instead being charged with possession of the gun following a car stop. His non-use of his gun and denial that it was tied up with his self-image is consistent with his statement that he only carried it in case he was attacked again.

However, Ernie, an armed robber, also responded in the negative when asked whether a gun made him feel a certain way: "No. Some people feel like they bigger with a gun, but you could die if you got a gun right in your hand. And so, I don't think a gun

should change a person. . . I think it was just something that had to be around.” To provide a little context for his statement, however, Ernie had told me his cousin had been killed while holding two guns in his hands, so Ernie had good reason for contemplating the vulnerability of a person carrying a gun, or even two.

Finally, Nate, who said he had used guns to commit many armed robberies, rejected the idea that having a gun changed the way he felt about himself or his surroundings:

Nate: No. I don't feel different, from when I have a gun in my hands, or when I don't have a gun in my hands.

DM: No? Okay.

Nate: I'm a powerful man.

Although he certainly presented a powerful physical appearance, Nate's claim to power rang somewhat hollow with me in view of both his current lack of freedom and his harrowing early life experiences. In his book, *Asylums* (1961), Erving Goffman noted the particular need of the institutionalized person to insist upon, or call attention to, his personal dignity, since most of the usual accoutrements of one's "identity kit" have been stripped away for the duration of his period of confinement. Nate's denial, toward the end of our interview, that he felt different when he had a gun in his hands seemed somewhat unconvincing because of his earlier statements. When I asked him what he liked about committing robberies, he said, "I used to like the feeling of having power, like." He also said he liked the money. He would sometimes rob people without using a gun, and other times he would use one. But when discussing guns specifically, Nate had said, "That's why I had a gun. Just to know the power of a gun, to get what I want when I want it."

I felt that, perhaps, when he insisted, “I’m a powerful man”, it was because I had backed him into a corner by asking forthrightly whether having a gun had changed how he felt “about yourself or your surroundings, or anything”. Acknowledging that “the gun makes the man” was clearly a concession that Nate was unwilling to make, and I sensed that he pushed back when he saw that this was what I was suggesting. As Nate’s bid for me to recognize him as a powerful man with or without a gun fell rather flat, I quickly shifted our discussion to a less threatening topic. Nevertheless, he had been adamant that his sense of himself as a powerful man did not depend upon whether he had a gun. As he said this, I also wondered whether the institutional programming he was experiencing included efforts to separate young gun offenders’ identities from their guns, in the hope of instilling in them a strong sense of self that did not depend upon having a weapon.

In the same way that Nate insisted upon being recognized as a powerful man during our conversation, Connell (2005), Messerschmidt (1993), and E. Anderson (1999) argue that it is precisely because of their relatively powerless social positioning that low-income urban young men of color often feel so keenly the need to establish a strong masculine identity that both they and others can (and must) respect. At the same time, such respect often translates, in daily interpersonal interactions, to personal safety.

For many of these young men, irrespective of how they reconciled the gun’s place in their self-image, a gun meant the difference between extreme vulnerability, feeling naked, able to be harmed, and the extreme of feeling protected and powerful, unable to be touched, like Superman in a world where there is no kryptonite. The question of why some participants readily acknowledged the role of the gun in their identity processes while others did not is an interesting one that can perhaps be explored in the future.

What participants describe, however, is consistent with recent actor-network theory, which locates agency as often being distributed across the human and the non-human. Together the young man and the gun form a unit, or “cyborg”, which is more capable than the young man alone (Oswell 2013:70).

“Why wouldn’t I have a gun?”

Participants’ accounts of their pathways to gun acquisition illuminated the processes of mutual construction that gave form to their life worlds. As these young men described their gun acquisition and use, they were both shaped by and actively shaped their violent environments. The interactional dynamics of contagion and escalation that helped to drive gun acquisition underscore this mutually constructive quality.

Shepherded into the world of gun possession by older males as well as their peers, these boys were socialized by their childhood and adolescent experiences to view guns as sensible responses to the threats around them. Moreover, for young men who were socially powerless in many ways, the instant power conferred by gun possession often proved irresistible, particularly for those who had embraced the most perilous social contexts within their dangerous neighborhoods.

Many participants considered their gun possession to be transformative, whether simply as an effective tool or for their identity processes. They experienced having a gun as changing their feelings of vulnerability into feelings of agency. For Tony, who after moving from the suburbs never felt his urban environment to be “normal”, having a gun made him feel able to walk around the streets at night, something he could not do without one. For most of the other participants, having a gun was experienced as protective against the risks they had assumed upon entering the street lifestyle. Being known as a

drug dealer, for example, often made a young man a target for robbery, creating a powerful nexus among drugs, money, violence, and guns.

Having a gun likewise could protect a participant from feeling that he had to suffer insults, and thereby change his experience from being one who had to “fall back” to one who could command the type of respect that is valuable on the street. For gang members or others engaged in street fighting, a gun could avert a fight, or be used either defensively or offensively if a fight occurred. Guns were also consumed as objects of “love”, “infatuation”, and “fascination”, and used for fun and excitement in an environment that was often boring.

As Tim explained in the quotation at the beginning of this chapter, when the time was “right” in the participant’s life world, a gun just came to him via any of a number of avenues as the participant got into the streets and began selling drugs, “gangbanging”, or both. In terms of Spencer’s PVEST model, acquiring a gun can be seen as another reactive coping strategy, clearly viewed by participants as an adaptive response to their circumstances at the time.

The guns possessed by participants, originally acquired for protection, often came to be used in other ways, as will be discussed in the next chapter. Whether as a symbol of power, a useful instrument, or a consumer item to be admired and enjoyed, a gun served many functions for these participants. As Nate summed it up,

Why wouldn’t I have a gun? A gun is a key to anything you wanna do. A gun could be a souvenir, or you could use it to get what you want. That’s why I had a gun. Just to know the power of a gun, to get what I want when I want it.

Chapter Summary

This chapter explored gun acquisition, conceptualizing it as a reactive coping strategy for the young man living “the street lifestyle”, and exposed to its enhanced level of risk. Participants described the typical pathway to gun acquisition as leading through a period of pre-gun delinquency. They explained that, while law-abiding people in their neighborhoods, including themselves in their pre-delinquent days, did not need guns, a gun was a necessity for those “living the street lifestyle”. This was because their street activities, such as selling drugs or engaging in street fights with a gang, exposed them to an increased likelihood of violent encounters. Most participants conceptualized their initial gun acquisition in terms of protection, albeit broadly defined. They reported no difficulty in acquiring guns, finding older men, or “old heads”, in the neighborhood to be ready sources or guides in this regard. Participants found that their guns served many purposes for them, providing not only protection, but also fun, excitement, and enjoyment as objects of desire. In addition, guns often figured in the young men’s identity processes, making them feel “powerful” and sometimes “more masculine”.

Chapter Five

Feelings about Producing Violence

I always knew a gun was for protection; I knew that. But once I knew that you could use it for more than protection, that's when I started doin' this.

Thomas Tulane (March 5, 2011)

Thomas was referring to using a gun to commit robberies, and his statement was consistent with those of other participants who quickly began to appreciate the offensive, as well as defensive, potential of their guns. Participants explained that they had acquired their guns after they were already selling drugs, robbing people, or engaging in street fighting. With the exception of Tony Kenwood, who had moved to the city from the suburbs at the age of ten, participants said their guns initially served as protection for their street lifestyles. Several young men whose street activities were drug-related said they never expanded their gun use beyond its protective functions. As Thomas stated above, however, if a young man was robbing people or engaging in street fighting, or was ready to do so, he would often realize how helpful a gun could be.

In this chapter I explore participants' experience of producing violence, usually with guns. Having become immersed in the lifestyle of the streets and acquired guns for protection in this milieu, many participants began to use their guns in other ways. Just as participants' gun acquisition had been viewed by them as part of a pathway out of material deprivation, powerlessness and vulnerability, some now saw that they could use their guns in more aggressive ways. The process of moving from protective to aggressive uses of guns did not take place for all participants, and those who did use guns aggressively against others described their feelings about the violence they produced in a variety of ways. In terms of Spencer's PVEST model (1995), participants' reactive coping strategy of gun acquisition, described in the previous chapter, in some cases

evolved into an emergent identity as a gun carrier, and included a stable coping response of gun use. If participants found that gun use was helpful in solving their problems, they tended to incorporate it into their repertoire of responses to their life worlds.

When possible, I attempted to investigate with participants the unfolding of the violent event as an example of situated interaction, as Deanna Wilkinson and Jeffrey Fagan (2001) suggested, in order to show the microinteractions that brought about what were often highly contingent outcomes, such as shootings (2001:169-170). David Farrington and Brandon Welsh (2007:19) observed that the point at which the risk or potentiality for crime becomes an actuality in a given situation has been an understudied event. As Wilkinson and Fagan proposed, an interactionist approach from the perspective of the young gun offender can help us to deconstruct various dynamics of the event, illuminating the multiple choices and decisions that lead to the final outcome. With a few notable exceptions, researchers are generally not privy to the unfolding of the violent event itself and, even when they are, the actor may not provide a narrative of his own thoughts and feelings that precipitated the violent outcome, leaving the researcher to make inferences from observed actions. However, several of the participants in this study provided detailed recollections of occasions on which they produced violence, explaining as well how they remembered feeling at the time.

None of the participants in this study had been adjudicated delinquent for shooting or killing anyone, although three had been adjudicated delinquent for attempted murder with a knife. However, to the extent that they felt comfortable doing so, participants discussed various types of shootings, at persons or property, for which they had not been adjudicated. I also discuss in this chapter participants' accounts of several

episodes of violence without guns, both because their dynamics are similar in many ways to gun crimes and because, just as guns fulfill many functions for these young men, violence itself, with or without guns, also serves many roles for them.

I begin with two accounts of episodes of gun violence provided by participants, in order to illustrate the ways in which shootings erupted among some of these young men. These accounts exemplify several of this chapter's primary themes, which are how violence was produced by adolescents, how participants felt about the violence they produced, and how carrying a loaded gun made it all too easy for a young man to respond with lethal violence. Seven participants said they had shot at people, and another four preferred not to say.

In the first example, Quinto explains how his gun was able to assist him in performing what Hochschild and Thorne would call his shame work; he both expressed his anger and restored his own sense of pride through an act of gun violence. While no one was injured in this incident, and Quinto was never arrested or charged in connection with it, the episode illustrates how a gun carried ostensibly for protection can become an offensive weapon in the street battle for respect.

How Quinto got his dignity back

Quinto, a drug dealer, set the scene for what eventually happened by explaining that he had previously told a younger boy of about fourteen, who was just starting to sell drugs after having served as a runner (running drugs back and forth for other dealers on the street), that if anyone bothered him, he could come to Quinto for help, because Quinto carried a gun. Quinto said he had then shown his gun to the young boy to illustrate his point. One day shortly thereafter, when Quinto was walking to the corner store to buy a cigar, this young boy, now flush with cash, came by in a car. As Quinto emphasized, the

reason he himself was walking to the store was “‘cause I didn’t have no car”. The boy approached Quinto and showed him a lot of money, asking where he might be able to get a gun. Once again Quinto emphasized to me that he felt this boy had quickly eclipsed his own success, saying, “He knew how to get that money, better than I could.” The boy continued to press Quinto, now inquiring about the .32 that Quinto had previously shown him. Quinto said he told the boy he had sold it, and “he looked at me weird”. The boy then said something to Quinto that Quinto interpreted as disrespectful, and walked away from him. (It is notable that, although he related this story in minute detail, Quinto did not tell me what the boy had said that was so offensive, although presumably it was something suggesting that Quinto was so insignificant an actor that he did not need a gun. Just as Quinto had been evasive about confessing himself to be a “rice-eater” in Chapter Three, the actual insulting remark was probably too injurious to his pride for him to repeat it to me.) As Quinto reprised his overall impression of the encounter, “Would you come up and talk to me, then when you ask me for a certain object, and then when I say, ‘Nah, I need it’, you’re just gonna turn your back on me, and you’re all . . . some bullshit, and walk to one of your boys and start talkin’?”

Quinto evidently believed that this younger boy had made him feel, in front of others, less of a person than the young and successful up-and-coming drug dealer, who drove up in a car while Quinto was on foot, flashed a lot of money, and implied (or said) that he had more need of Quinto’s gun than Quinto did. When Quinto declined to accommodate him, the boy turned his back on him dismissively, and walked off to talk to one of his boys, presumably about Quinto. Quinto was made to feel that, in short order, he had declined in status from the respected elder (or “old head”, young though he was)

to the unimportant person who had less need for a gun than this young boy with the car, the money, and the “boys”.

Finding this situation unbearable, Quinto continued on his way to the store and bought his cigar, fuming all the while. He then pulled his hoodie up over his head, and entered an alley where he had a view of the boy’s car. As he hid behind a protruding board, he saw the boy and one of his associates sitting in the car, and shot the car full of holes with the .25 he was then carrying. When the police arrived upon hearing the gunshots, the younger boy had to abandon the car and flee, as he was clearly unlicensed and did not own the vehicle. Quinto’s gratification at dispossessing the boy of the car was complete when the boy and his friend ran past Quinto as he was walking home, and Quinto was able to smile at him and ask blandly, “What happened, bro?” Quinto laughed as he delivered this punch line, clearly satisfied that he had restored his honor through the act of retaliation.

As Wilkinson and Fagan (2001) suggested, studying the unfolding of this violent event as narrated by Quinto permits us to enter into his interpretive frame of the situated interactions between him and the boy that brought about the shooting. In so doing, we observers and analysts can garner something of his definition of the situation. What Farrington and Welsh (2007) call “the moment when the potentiality for offending becomes the actuality of offending” (2007:19) is seen as dependent upon a multitude of factors, including the “weird look” that the boy gave Quinto before he turned his back on him and walked away, and the presence of a bystander, in this case the young boy’s associate, that may have converted a private conversation into a public humiliation. Wilkinson and Fagan identified the presence of bystanders as one of the critical factors in

either inhibiting or precipitating the occurrence of a violent event (Wilkinson & Fagan, 2001:174).

We could also analyze this interaction in terms of mutually unsuccessful bids for recognition (Gee, 2000:109), with Quinto's bid to be recognized as a successful man of the street and capable protector being rejected by the boy, and the boy's bid to be recognized by Quinto as the new big man in the neighborhood being rejected in turn by Quinto in front of the boy's associate, prompting the boy to walk off in a huff. The incident reveals how perceived vulnerability, fragile masculine identity, loss of public respect, anger, and the agency conferred by a loaded gun combine to form a violent outcome in the form of a triumphant narrative.

In addition, this example suggests how such socially meaningful interactions have the potential to spawn a pattern of escalating retaliation. An affront that results in the shooting of one's car could in turn lead to the perceived need for violent retaliation against the assailant. Quinto, who one week felt protective toward the younger boy, shot up his car the next week, and the following week could have been shot by the same young man or one of his partisans. An exchange that some might view as trivial could easily have had fatal consequences. While Quinto did not raise this issue, other participants did, as will be discussed in the next chapter. Also, as Quinto was careful to explain, in order to understand the violent event it was important to appreciate its context. From Quinto's perspective, the interaction that led to the shooting had its genesis days earlier when Quinto offered his protection to the younger boy and showed him his gun.

What seemed remarkable about Quinto's account was the "you are there" quality of his narrative, which included an interior perspective that permitted me, as his audience,

to hear not only what happened, but also how Quinto reacted to each segment of the interaction, and why he found the boy's comments and conduct so offensive. This advantaged view rendered both his anger and his reaction comprehensible to me, clearly an outsider to this social world. In Charles Horton Cooley's terms (1902:184), Quinto's "looking-glass self" suffered grievous damage on this occasion and, perhaps, was partially repaired by relating the incident to me. His imagination of his appearance to the other boy and his imagination of the boy's judgment of his appearance caused him such mortification that he could not restrain his impulse to strike back, especially in a way that attacked a symbol of the other's superior status, his car.

Quinto also related the bodily experience of preparing for the shooting and, just as he had earlier described how he breathed immediately prior to firing at the rat in his kitchen when he was much younger, he spoke now of taking three breaths before firing at the car, forming his lips into an "O" shape to demonstrate inhaling, then making a breathing noise and exhaling, repeating this process three times before describing the shooting itself. Quinto's ability to recall and communicate both his emotional and physical experience so vividly helped me to understand an event that I might otherwise have found opaque.

In retrospect, even Quinto conceded that the slight he suffered may not have been deliberate, and that his own perception of the boy's words and actions may not have been what the boy had in mind. As Quinto put it, "What motivated me to, uh, shoot at him was that, uh, he had played me. Actually he didn't, but in my mind, he did. Like he didn't play me, but in my mind he did play me." Intended or not, the actions that resulted in Quinto's sense that he had been "played" produced a rich store of memories and

feelings, and his decision to volunteer such a detailed account permitted me to comprehend what he had experienced and why he reacted as he did. In return, as Americo Paredes (1977) suggested, I expressed my appreciation of the performative aspect of Quinto's rendering of this story, with its satisfying (for him) denouement. While I have no way of being certain, it was entirely possible that the narrative he had shared with me was among Quinto's cherished anecdotes, despite the fact that, in the version I heard, Quinto presented himself as an insecure young man who could not even impress a younger boy in the neighborhood with his drug-dealer persona.

A gang shooting Ernie “didn’t want to get into”

Ernie also described a shooting that may have been precipitated by the presence of other young men. As Ernie recalled the event, it too seemed to follow the highly contingent interactive script described by Wilkinson and Fagan. Unlike the confrontation Ernie described in the previous chapter, which he sought out by crashing the party of a rival gang, Ernie said of this episode, “I didn’t even want to get into it with them.” Although Ernie was currently incarcerated on a gun possession charge, he had never been arrested for the shooting he described here. As background for this narrative, Ernie said he had originally joined the Crips at age nine because he thought their deportment was much more appealing than that of the Bloods. He said they never acted crazy and would not permit anyone else to act crazy on the block where he lived. According to Ernie, these Crips “kept that block straight”, and “wouldn’t let nobody come over and rob”, “break windows”, or do anything that would “bring cops to that area. You weren’t even allowed to argue with your own mother.” Ernie said, “They wouldn’t let nothing happen

to the kids” on the block, although he conceded that these Crips, like “everybody on that block”, sold drugs.

On the day of the shooting, Ernie and three of his friends were on Ernie’s own block when two members of the Bloods confronted them, and, in keeping with the tradition of not doing anything that would attract police, Ernie said his attitude was that “I didn’t want to bring no trouble to my block”. He reported that he was walking away, but the two Bloods “just kept comin’ at me”, “sayin’ stuff, calling us all types of things”, and when he still continued to ignore them, the Bloods began “throwing rocks and everything. Just kept comin’ and comin’.” Ernie, carrying a gun, said he did not feel threatened, and maintained that he was determined to let it go because he lived there. Although it is unclear from Ernie’s account what caused the Crips finally to rise to the bait, Ernie said the Bloods “kept throwing stuff”, and “So we made a U-turn, we went towards them, now they finally walkin’ away, right, they like nothing just happened. And then, my boys like called out to ‘em, and they turned around, said a few things, he threw a bottle at me, so I start shootin’.” Ernie emptied the entire clip, and then ran seven or eight blocks before discarding the gun in some bushes. As for the outcome of the shooting, when I ventured to ask Ernie whether he had hit anybody, he dropped his voice very low and said, unconvincingly, “I don’t know.” He did say, in response to my question, that he never heard anything about the episode afterwards, and never saw either of the two boys again.

The outcome of the incident, as recounted by Ernie, seemed to turn on the decision of Ernie and his friends to “make a U-turn” and begin following the Bloods once they had begun to walk away, coupled with the conduct of Ernie’s boys in calling out to

the Bloods, prompting the retreating Bloods to turn, make some more remarks, and throw a bottle at Ernie.

This episode illustrates how an adolescent with a gun, even though unwilling to become involved in a shooting on his own block, can be goaded into doing something clearly against his better judgment that could easily have, and for all I know may have, ended someone's life. I believed Ernie was sincere in his initial reluctance to engage in this fight, but he seemed to have been overtaken by events, and this ultimately caused him to fail to live up to his ideal of not bringing trouble to the block. Apparently both the persistent taunting by his rivals and the evident desire of his peers to engage them overcame Ernie's reserve. Carrying a loaded gun made it all too easy to respond with lethal violence.

After this interview, which was the second one in the project, I learned to clarify responses that seemed evasive or unconvincing by suggesting to participants that it would be helpful for me to know whether, for example, Ernie really didn't know whether his shots had hit anybody or whether he would prefer not to discuss it. This proved to be a useful approach in subsequent interviews, and several participants revised their responses to acknowledge that they did not feel comfortable giving a straightforward answer. Such responses usually signaled that a particular discussion topic had reached the point where the participant had become concerned about incriminating himself, and I would then move on to something else. Although participants had been cautioned both in writing and at the beginning of the interview not to discuss, for example, any unsolved homicides, or to provide any specific information such as dates, places, or names related to any offenses for which they had not already been adjudicated, participants

understandably had varying comfort levels for discussing, even in non-specific terms, offenses for which they feared they might still be charged.

As the previous two examples suggest, some participants offered narratives that were so thorough in describing both their past actions and their mental processes leading up to a violent event that their involvement in the events became easy to understand.

Framing juvenile gun violence, first from an etic perspective

Many law-abiding adults are at ease with the idea of having and using guns for protection, for sport, and, as in the case of gun collectors and sportsmen, for enjoyment as material objects. Even using a gun, or as in Quinto's case a BB gun, for pest control may be seen as having its conventional analog in shooting rodents or other small game. These more or less socially approved uses of guns are now more widely accepted for women as well, as Lindsay McCrum's 2011 photo book, *Chicks with Guns*, illustrates.

Yet, while the participants in this study belong to the gender category that we most frequently associate with guns, their gun possession seems problematic for a number of reasons. Among the most important is that we do not like to associate children with violence, for social and moral reasons, finding such an association antithetical to our customary concept of childhood (Rosen 2005). In addition, the age of the participants is not typically associated with responsible gun use; that is, most people view children and adolescents as too immature to handle firearms without adult supervision. Laws concerning gun possession and use are generally congruent with this view, and current research on adolescent brain development can be interpreted as supporting it as well (Ronald Dahl & Linda Spear 2004). Compounding the concern about age is the urban setting in which participants typically possessed their guns. The traditional image of the rural young person with a gun, in contrast, seems less threatening, the wide-open spaces

suggesting more socially acceptable uses of guns. While participants in this study, like rural youth, used their guns for target shooting and exuberant New Year's Eve celebrations, engaging in these activities in an urban setting seems inherently more life-threatening. Still, as with participants' desire for protection, their enjoyment of guns is not difficult to understand. Guns are an iconic part of American history and culture, and American popular culture, including film, has contributed for over a hundred years to guns being viewed not simply as useful tools, but to their being fetishized, and the men who used them portrayed as strong protagonists, whether hero, villain, or anti-hero (Slotkin, 1992:380). Finally, however, considerations of race and class also complicate the etic perspective on juvenile gun possession and use, as low-income urban young men of color, even without guns, signal danger to many observers. These participants' age, race, class, gender, and urban location, none of which they have chosen, combine to marginalize them in the minds of many, and often in their own minds (Young, 2004). Not coincidentally, the high rates of gun violence in many low-income urban neighborhoods of color cast juvenile gun possession in a menacing light. All these factors combine to shape our view of gun possession by the participants in this study.

As this exploration moves beyond the more familiar territory of socially accepted ways of using guns, however, understanding the young person's perspective proves more challenging. In the contemporary western world, the use of guns to settle personal disputes, including matters of honor or respect, is generally viewed as outdated, at best. The eras of both the duel and the righteous Wild West shootout have faded although, as Anderson points out, the ancient code that requires men to fight for their honor persists in some communities. Anderson names working-class Scotch-Irish, Italian, and Hispanic

communities, in addition to the inner-city African American communities whose violence he was seeking to explicate, as among those pockets where the operation of the code can be still observed (Anderson, 1999:84). While participants did not explicitly reference such ethnic or racial mandates, much of their gun violence arising from disputes over individual respect or family honor can be viewed within this traditional frame. Yet, as Anderson argues, urban poverty, the often ruthless nature of the underground drug economy, and the abundance of guns intensify the likelihood that disputes will culminate in gun violence.

In other types of violent gun offending, such as armed robbery, the actor's perspective, and the decision-making process which his perspective produces, may be even more difficult to grasp. Perhaps here more than anywhere else in this study, Maurice Merleau-Ponty's admonition that we are "necessarily destined never to experience the presence of another person to himself" (1970:364) is fitting. This project, while addressing how and why participants said they acquired and used guns, what they used them for, and how guns made them feel, cannot answer the question of why some of these boys, the armed robbers in particular, were able to suppress or deny feelings of empathy for their victims. Philippe Bourgois (1995), in his ethnography of Latino crack dealers in East Harlem, argued that suffering "is a solvent of human integrity" (Bourgois, 1995:15), and, if true in the case of these young men, it would probably require more than one sixty to ninety minute interview to understand fully how this process evolved for each of them. Alford Young (2004), however, in his exploration of *The Minds of Marginalized Black Men*, characterized the portrait Bourgois created of his subjects' "specific cultural milieu" as "sometimes unnecessarily pejorative" (Young, 2004:211).

In the present study, I have attempted to heed Howard Stevenson's recommendation that research with minority urban youth be approached with "a curious appreciation of their world" (Stevenson, 1997:50). After all, each of these incarcerated participants has already been judged; my goal is to achieve a better comprehension of the life worlds that brought them to this place.

Analysis of the dynamics of these young men's gun violence is further complicated by the fact that participants used guns for both instrumental and expressive reasons, often during the same event. The instrumental roles included protection as well as use as a tool for committing crimes, while the expressive roles encompassed identity-related elements such as the demonstration of power or anger (Stretesky et al., 2007:486). Because a gun can serve as a symbol, a marker, or a badge of belonging, in addition to its instrumental functions, it was important for participants to provide sufficient context in their descriptions of the violence in which they engaged for this complexity to be appreciated. The process of meaning-making for such objects and actions, as Blumer explained, grows out of social interaction, specifically, "the ways in which other persons act toward the person with regard to the thing" (Blumer, 1969:4). The multiple meanings of the gun and gun violence for participants may therefore be best understood, as Goffman described it, by putting "yourself in the position of those engaging in this conduct so you can understand what meanings they attribute to it" (Goffman, 1959:15). The two previous accounts of violent offending were described at some length in order that the multiple functions of gun violence, and other kinds of violence as well, could be seen both among and within the various interactions.

Framing gun violence from participants' perspectives

In the quotation at the beginning of this chapter, Thomas was referring to committing armed robbery, for which he was currently incarcerated. He was among nine participants who reported that they both committed robberies and sold drugs. Like one other participant, he maintained that he only robbed drug dealers, believing this was not as bad as robbing innocent people. Yet he conceded, “robbin’ is robbin’”. He reported that on one occasion when he watched his friend rob an “old lady”, he was thinking, “That’s really messed up.” Thomas distinguished himself from his friend who had robbed the elderly woman, while at the same time explaining why the friend would do so:

In my head I was thinking, that’s really messed up. But then again I knew what type of life he was living; he didn’t have nowhere to live, I mean, he couldn’t make the moves like I was makin’, he wasn’t in the social area that I was in. I’m thinkin’ to myself that that’s messed up, but then again I’m thinkin’, like, at least he gonna be alright for the night. So, yeah, I do feel sympathy. But that’s just me. There’s some people out there that’s ruthless, like, they don’t care about nobody; they don’t care about nothin’; they rob their mom if their mom had the right amount of money.

Thomas positioned himself as less desperate than his friend, and therefore able to select what he considered to be more appropriate targets for his robberies. He considered himself to be better situated socially, at least having a place to live, and thus able to make more well-considered “moves”. At the same time, he denounced some robbers as “ruthless” for failing to show any sympathy or to discriminate between suitable and unsuitable victims.

For Thomas, robbery was not about anger or anything personal: “It’s got nothing to do with them”, meaning the victims. It was simply a way to get money quickly. Thomas maintained that he didn’t like robbing people or stealing, but said sometimes he

had to do it. In the case of his last armed robbery, for example, he had recently been released from detention, and said he needed money and a supply of drugs in order to get back into the drug-selling business, so he robbed some drug dealers in their home. He recounted the story of this robbery, for which he was now incarcerated, as a chaotic episode wherein several gunshots had been fired inside a confined and crowded space. He and two armed associates had entered a home where men, children, and a dog were present. As Thomas noted, the robbery had not gone according to plan. While he wanted the two male drug dealers to be present to show him where the money and drugs were hidden, he had not counted on the children or the effect of the dog. The barking pit bull alarmed his two co-defendants, and, adding to the disorder of the event, Thomas's clip fell out of his gun when he tried to fire it at the dog; he then had to struggle to regain control over his victims and the scene. He eventually succeeded in obtaining a large amount of money and drugs from the house, and said he was able to sell a lot of the drugs and hide the money before he was arrested. Although Thomas said he sometimes had to rob people in order to get money, he also said he could have lived in his parent's home, but did not wish to abide by the rules there, preferring to live with his girlfriend. His mother, by whom he had been raised, lived with a drug dealer whom Thomas described as abusive toward him. Thomas had been sent to live with his biological father, but said this living arrangement did not work out because he could not tolerate being ordered around by a man he had just met. In addition, Thomas believed he should have been free to come and go as he pleased, spending time with his girlfriend and staying out late. Thomas said his father "kicked him out" because he was getting in too much trouble, but his father still brought him some soup when Thomas had the flu. His account highlights

a number of issues, including one of the familiar practices used by adolescents to explain why their violent offending is not as bad as it might seem.

Sidestepping guilty feelings

One way the armed robbers avoided feelings of remorse was to distinguish “between appropriate and inappropriate targets”, as Gresham Sykes and David Matza (1957) noted long ago (Sykes & Matza 1957:666). While Thomas and another participant, Xavier, said they only robbed drug dealers, others, such as Nate and Leon, said they did not rob women or the elderly. One participant claimed his victims could run or defend themselves if they wanted to, and another, describing a robbery for which he had previously been incarcerated, said the victim was “flossin’”; that is, “lookin’ like you got money . . . chains and everything”. Leon, too, said he looked for a person in an expensive car or with nice jewelry, saying, “I see what I can see on them; so, like, if you’re flashing, you’re gonna be robbed.” Leon and Ernie both intimated that such ostentation was almost tantamount to an invitation to be robbed. As Sykes and Matza argued, such “neutralization techniques” permit adolescents to minimize the crime by suggesting that the victim, because of who he is or how he is acting, is not really that much of a victim (Sykes & Matza, 1957:667-668). At the same time, robberies such as those described by Thomas, Xavier, Nate and Leon prompted other participants, especially those involved in selling drugs, to feel the need to carry a gun. Being known as a drug dealer could be enough, without more, to invite robberies, but if the young man also used the income to adorn himself with jewelry or to drive a nice car, he would stand out even more readily to other young men who were looking for someone to rob.

Leon also cited the ubiquity of armed robbery as a justification to continue doing it: “Well, it just make you feel like if you stop, then somebody else still gonna be doin’

it, so, what's the need for you to stop?" Leon sought to normalize his robbing by making reference to its prevalence in his environment. When I asked the question that elicited this response, I had been attempting to prick his social conscience by pointing out that he had been robbed by people just like him, and that he in turn was robbing people just like him, but my appeal to solidarity did not resonate. His racial, class, age, and gender similarity to his victims was not seen as a reason to refrain from robbing them. On the contrary, by pointing out that women and the elderly were inappropriate victims, Leon reinforced his understanding that young men were the proper demographic group to target as victims. In this regard, he underscores Antony Whitehead's (2005) argument that men demonstrate manhood in relation to other men (Whitehead 2005:412).

According to Whitehead's thesis, a young man cannot prove his masculinity by attacking a woman or an aged man. That the young men Leon would victimize were likely to be of the same race and class as he was presumably resulted from the preponderance of persons of color in his world, rather than from an intentional choice to target them. The other participants in this study also victimized young men of color, in keeping with the pattern documented elsewhere that most crime is intraracial (Messner & South 1986: 976, 979).

The prevailing explanation for this pattern is based on access, in that offenders tend to exploit the easiest opportunities. As people who live, work, and socialize near one another tend to have the same social demographics, this makes them the most convenient victims. In effect, the combination of ready access, a tendency to exclude other age and gender groups from the target pool, and a preference for demonstrating manhood in relation to other men leaves young men of color as the target of choice. Community members and outside researchers alike have noted the intraracial and intra-class nature of

juvenile violence. The impact of gun violence by young men of color, in particular, upon other young men of color is one of its most troubling features.

Emotion and “feeling rules”

Participants’ responses to questions about how they felt before, during, and after violent events raised another issue, however: the more general question of what types of feelings, if any, a person “should” have about his violent offending. Unlike Quinto, who had freely acknowledged that the reason he was burning the front of his neighbor’s house was that he was bored, some participants were hesitant to say that crime could serve as entertainment.

Ernie, describing the commission of numerous armed robberies even though he said he was making plenty of money selling drugs, maintained that he didn’t really need the money, and that he started doing armed robberies to accompany his friend. Messerschmidt, among others, would consider this group behavior to be a sort of bonding activity, a way of constructing a tough and productive masculinity. (Messerschmidt, 1993:107) Ernie said that he sometimes would use a gun and sometimes a knife for these robberies. He reported that he soon discovered that robbing people was such an easy way to obtain money that it was hard to resist. In response to a question about whether it was fun, he replied, “Naw, it can’t be fun robbin’ people.” But a follow-up question asking whether it was scary prompted this response: “Yeah, it was scary; it was like . . . a rush. It was like, it’s just kinda like when you’re in it, it’s like you’re in a movie. And when you’re getting away, when you got away, like you got this joy, like, it’s like a roller coaster sometimes.” He agreed that robbery was a thrilling kind of crime. His choice of words, describing committing robbery as a rush, like being in a movie, like a roller

coaster, and as producing joy, made it clear that he was getting more than just money from committing these offenses.

Yet when he was first asked whether these robberies were fun, Ernie rejected the possibility out of hand, saying robbing people can't be fun. His initial reaction suggested that he was calibrating his reported emotions against a yardstick of socially appropriate "feeling rules". Hochschild (1979) introduced the concept of feeling rules, which she defined as "social guidelines that direct how we want to try to feel" (Hochschild 1979:563). She pointed out that "feeling rules reflect patterns of social membership. Some rules may be nearly universal, such as the rule that one should not enjoy killing or witnessing the killing of a human being, including oneself. Other rules are unique to particular social groups . . . (Hochschild 1979:566).

She suggests that the ways we are "supposed" to feel in different situations are socially constructed, and that people in social groups are aware of the feeling rules for various occasions that apply to members of that group. While Ernie clearly experienced these robberies as thrilling and fun, like being in a movie, as he put it, he demonstrated his awareness of the feeling rule that robbery was not supposed to be fun for the perpetrator. While he may have seen it as acceptable to disregard this mainstream feeling rule when among his peers, where other rules may have applied, his reaction to my question was almost one of shock that I should suggest that robbing people could be fun. Yet his vivid description of his remembered feelings during the experience itself belied his original conventional reaction. Another participant, Earl, likewise seemed to be aghast when I asked whether fun might have been part of his motivation for being a lookout in the armed robbery for which he was incarcerated: "What? Robbery?? Fun???"

Hochschild explains that feeling rules go beyond the usual conception of impression management, as they involve the type of “deep acting” where a person seeks actually to feel the appropriate emotion, rather than simply to display it. The fact that Ernie’s protestation was so swiftly followed by a recollection of the joy he felt suggests that he had not quite succeeded in convincing himself that robbing people cannot be fun.

At the same time, by using such vivid and widely understood images as riding on a roller coaster or feeling as though one is in a movie to describe his feelings during a robbery, Ernie sought to communicate his experience of the events in such a way that I too could sense something of what he experienced. As Mead argues, in order to have genuine communication, rather than simply sharing a common language, people must have ideas in common, and this includes responses in common with the other person’s shared ideas (Mead 1934:259). Paredes (1977) suggests that the absence of such shared understandings can be a barrier in cross-cultural interviewing, and he offers ways for researchers to be aware of, and to overcome, these barriers. When the research participants themselves, however, extend themselves to enable a shared understanding on the part of a researcher from another culture by bridging the gap through references to common experiences, what Mead calls genuine communication can occur. Several participants went to great lengths to “put me in their shoes” in their attempts to have me understand their feelings or their actions.

From another perspective, Ernie’s initial assertion that robbery can’t be fun may also be an example of what Heith Copes and Andy Hochstetler (2010) call a “penitent reconstruction”, which they define as a form of retrospective account provided by a prisoner after he has experienced the consequences of his criminal activity (Copes &

Hochstetler 2010:56). As Copes and Hochstetler suggest, the penitent reconstruction may reflect “a more thoughtful and potentially more regretful interpretation” of the offender’s acts than that which prevailed at the time of the offense. Both concepts, those of feeling rules and penitent reconstructions, illustrate aspects of the socially constructed nature of feelings in retrospective accounts. The penitent reconstruction may also reflect the, possibly temporary, influence of the institutional environment, which is designed to encourage reflection with the goal of instilling a more socially approved cognitive view of one’s antisocial behavior. While the purpose of both feeling rules and the juvenile institutional ethos is to bring the person’s feelings into line with those accepted by a given social group, Ernie’s positive memories of his feelings during the commission of robberies seemed almost to override any regrets that he had developed in the interim. Accepting the authenticity of such gratifying feelings, the institution’s more modest aim may often be to convince the inmate, at the least, that the possible rewards of such offending are not worth its consequences, consistent with specific deterrence theory and the rational choice model of decision making.

Mixed motivations and the subjective experience of robbery

Several other participants said the fun and the money were both important reasons that robbery was attractive to them. Luke said he had committed numerous armed robberies with guns before being arrested for the one for which he was incarcerated. During that robbery, Luke’s friend wielded the gun, while Luke took the male victim’s earrings, chain, and money. He said he felt “excited” during the robbery, but felt disappointed after this one only because he didn’t get away with it. He denied feeling bad after his previous successful robberies, and maintained that both the money

and the excitement drew him to this type of crime. Luke described himself as consumed by the desire to do an armed robbery the way a “cokehead” needed his drug:

Luke: But sometimes it wouldn't be a gun, though. Like, I could have had a knife on me. Whatever I had on me, I'd use it. . . . Before it, uh, I'd feel needy, just anxious to get a person.

DM: When you say needy, needing what?

Luke: I need it. It's like when you're taking drugs. Say a cokehead, and he stop usin' for a couple days, usually he gonna wanna come back, 'cause he need it. It was sick. So that's how it was with me, it just making me sick, not like “sick” sick, but wanting to have to do something so that I could get more money. . . and that's it, I just go get one more person.

DM: That's a good question that you talked about before, were you needy of the money or the excitement, or equally, or what?

Luke: I would say equally.

In addition to feeling excited during the robbery, Luke said that afterwards, “I just feel proud of myself”. When I asked what he was proud of, Luke said, “That I got the job done. I coulda been caught.” What Katz called the “seductions of crime” were described by participants as many and varied, including excitement, power, a sense of accomplishment, and of course, in the case of armed robbery, money (Katz, 1988).

Kenneth likewise enjoyed the transgressive aspect of robbery, saying it was “exciting”: “it's like when you know you're gettin' ready to be doin' somethin' you know you're not supposed to be doin', it just feel different; you feel good.” Kenneth was carrying a switchblade knife rather than a gun during the robbery for which he was incarcerated, but said he didn't use it. Instead, he hit the victim in the face, and later learned that he had broken the bone around the victim's eye. He took the victim's cell phone, house keys, and over a hundred dollars. He said he did not make a demand or announce that this was a robbery, but simply hit the victim immediately and took his

stuff. Kenneth was a member of the Crips, and recalled that when he did carry a gun, “It makes you feel like can’t nobody touch you.” Jack Katz includes the idea of “being mean” among the seductions of crimes where others are overpowered, as well as among the seductions of the weapons that can be used to do so. He contrasts “being mean” with simply showing power:

In contrast to “power”, “being mean” captures the project at stake: to assume a tough, alien posture beyond all danger of mockery and metaphysical doubt that ensures that one will be taken seriously. These things excite by attesting to a purpose that transcends the material utility of power. (Katz, 1988:106)

While participants did not frame the excitement that attracted them to armed robbery in Katz’s terms, his description does capture the alienation seemingly necessary for the project of overpowering another person and taking his property. As Katz argues, the same excitement is engendered by possessing weapons that can be used to compel others to take seriously the intentions of those who wield them. This perspective provides an additional gloss, not explicitly articulated by participants but helpful in explaining their actions, on the power of the gun, the attraction of armed robbery, and, by extension, on producing violence in general. When Kenneth described the excitement he felt as he approached a stranger and, without preamble, punched him in the face hard enough to fracture a bone, his feelings seemed to arise from more than simply the utilitarian ability to acquire the man’s phone, keys, and cash. In our single interviews, the young men who chose to speak with me did not explicitly voice their alienation, or what Katz referred to in the above quotation as their metaphysical doubts about whether they would be taken seriously, but their alienation often seemed implicit in the actions they described. Likewise, their gratification at being taken seriously, and recognized as someone who must be obeyed, was clearly important to them.

Other participants maintained that they robbed people only for the money, denying that fun or excitement played any part. Leon, for example, said there was nothing besides the money that made him feel good about committing an armed robbery: “No, there’s nothin’ else that makes me feel good, ‘cause givin’ fear to somebody else really don’t make me feel good.”

Instead, he described a combination of a racing heart and a “rage” that he said was not anger, but nerves, accompanying his armed robberies, and suggested that these feelings helped to keep him safe, but at the same time drove him to continue robbing:

At my first robbery . . . goin’ towards the robbery, I was really, you know, heart beatin’ fast, . . . but after I seen how fast they give it up, it’s so much easier [with a gun] than strong-arm robbery. . . Even after, until I’m stayed put, until I’m in a safe place, my heart beats fast. But it’s just a rage, though.

DM: Now what do you mean by rage?

Leon: Like, your heart beats fast, you’re gonna be a little scared, so, when you’re scared, you’re gonna do the right thing, you’re gonna make it to a safe place so you won’t be in danger, won’t be in harm’s way. By the cops, or by the victim comin’ back for retaliation, anything like that, because things like that can happen, too.

DM: . . . What do you mean when you say rage?

Leon: Well, with the rage, you do not wanna stop. One robbery not gonna be enough. Like, when I did this robbery I’m locked up for now. . . . It wasn’t gonna be the only one. I was actually gonna go and do two, do like two more. . .

DM: But what does the rage mean? Do you mean like anger, or in a different way?

Leon: Well it like, not even like the rage of anger, like the rage of nerves. It’s the nerves be raging, it be screamin’ like you wanna do somethin’, you wanna get away, you know what I’m sayin’?

DM: Okay, but what, so you say, is it, how does it, now this is the kind of rage that makes you do another robbery right after you just got done doing one, right?

Leon: Yeah . . . You go out to a different town, and do it all over again.

DM: And so what is that feeling inside you? What does it feel like?

Leon: It feel good! 'Cause I know I could be sittin' for a while with a little money, I know I don't be havin' to worry 'cause, I'm not gonna rob every day. So, if I can get a good amount of money, to last me a week, or two weeks, or maybe even longer than that, I'll get that amount of money and I'll just live with it. Then when I need it again, I'll just go out and do it again.

Leon described raging, screaming nerves that drove him to do armed robbery after armed robbery until he felt he had enough money to stop for a while. His description suggests the complex meanings of, and relationships among, money, power, and autonomy in motivating his behavior.

Nate seemed equally driven, but emphasized how his "love" for robbery developed. At first, he said, he admired people who sold drugs and robbed people:

I see them doin' it so I'm gonna do it; it was more like follow the leader game. But after I started doin' it, I started gettin' a love for it, like. It was more like, when I was doin' the robberies, I used to like the feeling of havin' power, like. And the money.

He said he would sometimes "do ten armed robberies in a night, and not get caught". At around age fourteen, he and his friends would order Chinese food or pizza delivery, and then rob the delivery person. He said he would get an adrenaline rush right before the robbery. As time went on, however, Nate seemed to become emotionally dependent upon the rush:

And it got to where it was what I needed to do and I had to do. It's just what I needed, what I needed for myself, to keep goin'. It got to where, like, if I don't smoke, I don't feel right. So with me, robbing people was the same thing. Early in the morning I'd be lookin' to get somebody, to rob 'em.

Nate, by his own description, seemed to embody the title theme of Jack Katz's book, *Seductions of Crime* (1988). As he recalled his subjective experience, he had been initially drawn in by his admiration for other robbers, and then held by the magnetic attractions of robbery, including both its psychic and monetary rewards. His description

of the phenomenology of being a robber in some ways parallels that of Howard Becker's subjects in "Becoming a Marihuana User" (1953) in that the meaning of robbing, or at least its effect on him, seemed to change over time, until he became psychologically addicted to it. Katz, in *Seductions of Crime*, argued that the widespread belief that crime is motivated by material concerns has blinded researchers to the subjective experience of the offender, in which not only non-economic, but non-rational, motivations are critical. (Katz, 1988:10) In this regard, Nate reported that he did not need the money at all, as he had lived, since age ten, in a comfortable neighborhood with an aunt who gave him plenty of spending money. Perhaps, like guns, robbery has multiple ways of seducing participants. Those who committed robberies cited fun, money, excitement, "feeling good", exercising power, and just plain love of robbery as among its lures.

It also seems relevant to mention here the changes in reward sensitivity that neurobiologists have recently discovered to occur during the adolescent years. Researchers in adolescent brain development note that reward-seeking behavior is intensified during this period, accounting for food-, sex-, and drug-related behaviors that make young people so susceptible to eating disorders and addiction (Kelley, Schochet, & Landry 2004:28-31). As the participants in the above sections describe the "rush", the emotional "need", and the intensely gratifying "feelings" that make them "go get" another robbery victim, the parallels they themselves draw to addiction seem particularly apt. Ann Kelley, Terri Schochet, and Charles Landry (2004) argue that the very same drives that impel both human and animal adolescents toward risk-taking as they move from the dependence of childhood toward the independence of adulthood expose young people to increased morbidity and mortality during these years.

This argument dovetails with that of Oswell (2013), in which he draws upon Jacques Lacan to propose that agency is distributed across the unconscious and the conscious in such a way that “what is said and known by the subject can never be transparent, the basis of reflexive knowledge and the means of control” (Oswell 2013:65). When one combines Katz’s discussion of non-rational motivations for crime with participants’ own descriptions and the above research on reward-seeking and risk-taking behaviors, Oswell’s vivid image appears more realistic than fantastic: “Children, as it were, are given the driving seat of a car with no controls, but with the illusion of a steering wheel that works, and a whole lot of baggage that keeps popping up from the back seat, distracting the driving” (Oswell 2013:66). While it is undoubtedly true that juvenile gun offenders rob people because they want their money, there seems to be a lot more going on.

Power to purchase

By directing our attention to the relevance of both material and non-economic motivations for robbery, Katz prompts us to question the emotional and symbolic meaning not only of robbery, but of its nominal object, money. The excitement and power dynamics that complicate the seemingly straightforward project of robbery also attach themselves to the money obtained thereby, as the title of Elizabeth Chin’s 2001 book, *Purchasing Power*, implies. The converse of purchasing power, the powerlessness to purchase, pervades the life worlds of many of the participants, and its effects demonstrate, as Chin points out, that “consumption is a fundamentally social process”(Chin 2001:29).

In the second chapter of her book, Chin offers a broad-ranging critique of the sensationalistic media trope of the “combat consumer”, her term for “the ‘inner city’

youthful consumer” who commits violent crimes in order to obtain “sneakers, a flashy gold chain, or a car” (Chin 2001:30). She argues that not only has this image been used to mischaracterize consumption by “Black kids” in general, but that it strips consumption by African Americans of its historical and social context. The result of this decontextualization has been a “complex, twisted skein of ideas” that tends to pathologize Black consumption as morally corrupt and to contrast it, especially that of the poor, to the “norm” of mainstream, or White, consumption (Chin 2001:60).

But the “combat consumer” trope also decontextualizes the adolescent’s consumption of clothing or luxury items from the life world of the individual child, ignoring the broad range of things that children need which cost money but are outside the scope of the “combat consuming” image. Children need food, shelter, and many other material things, but the combat consumer trope does not encompass the image of Quinto going from his father’s home to his mother’s home in search of food, and coming up empty at both places. Nor does it account for such practices as participants Xavier, Naheem, Kevin, and others, described in Chapter 3, contributing to the payment of household bills. It obscures the provider role that their purchasing power permitted young offenders to perform, such as thirteen year-old Kenneth’s taking his mother and sister to the annual carnival in his town, or taking them out to eat on other occasions, with the proceeds from his robberies. In other words, the “combat consumer” trope selectively presents only the most visible and sensationalistic tip of the consuming iceberg, that which is congruent with the representation of consumption by inner-city youth as pathological. Participants in this study also spent the money they obtained on a host of more basic needs; in addition to buying food and clothing for themselves, many provided

both essential and symbolic caregiving for family members. Thirteen participants said they spent the proceeds of their drug sales or robberies on clothes, seven named food, seven cited giving money to their mothers, or contributing to bills or family needs, and four others were not more specific than to say they spent it on stuff they needed, spending money, or simply not having to ask their mothers for money. Not only the getting of the money but also the spending of it could be exciting and empowering social experiences. Money, power, fun, excitement, guns and violence were often knitted closely together in complex ways that blended the material and the symbolic, the physical and the emotional.

Managing, suppressing, or embracing bad feelings about violent offending

The young offenders who described committing robberies reported similar physiological responses accompanying the offenses, but little in the way of empathy for their robbery victims. Sam, though denying any feelings of compassion for his victims, did express relief that he still experienced the physical symptoms of an adrenaline rush and rapid heartbeat prior to committing an armed robbery. He opined that being able to commit such an offense without having a physical reaction would mean that he had passed some dangerous threshold that he did not wish to cross. He thus acknowledged his own “feeling rule” in that he expected his body to “signal” him that he was doing something out of the ordinary prior to an armed robbery, shooting, or even a fight:

. . . I don't know if you know, but, every time we all about to fight, my heart start beatin' real fast. . . . And before I robbed 'em, my heart started beatin' real fast. . . . My adrenaline get pumpin'. If my adrenaline not pumpin', that's a BAD thing, 'cause that means I LIKE it. If I do somethin' and my adrenaline not pumpin', my heart not beatin' fast, that means I'm too used to it and I need to stop. I'm serious. If I can do it, if I can shoot somebody, and feel no, nothing, and my heart not beating, I'm not nervous, that mean I'm, there's somethin' wrong with me, I need some help.

After prefacing his explanation with an acknowledgment that I might not have personal experience with the phenomenon he was about to describe, Sam gave me his interpretation of his physiological response to impending violence. To him, the “rush” seemed to mean that he was not a sociopath. While he did not feel guilt, he was relieved to feel something.

Other participants took a utilitarian approach to their feelings, which tended to involve deliberately suppressing any qualms they might have. When I asked Leon what kind of mental process he went through to tell himself that it was okay to commit an armed robbery, he explained, “Ah, you really don’t think about is it okay to do it . . . sometimes [you feel bad]; you can’t let it get to you, though. . . Because then you might feel that you shouldn’t do it.” In response to my follow-up question whether he meant that if he felt bad, he “would kind of push those feelings out of his head”, Leon responded, “Yeahh. I try to push them out of my head.” In describing the emotion work that attended his robbing, Leon acknowledged that he might feel bad for a victim, for example, upon seeing “the way they cry for their stuff back”, but it was at these times that he said he couldn’t let it get to him. Any humane feelings that intruded needed to be suppressed so that the armed robber could feel the way he knew he was supposed to feel. Focusing on the task of armed robbery seemed to require that he dehumanize the victim, at least to some extent.

Victor gave a similar account of his mental preparation for the armed robbery for which he had been adjudicated. The background for that robbery was that he and two co-defendants had decided to find a drug dealer to rob because, as Victor explained, they had been to the movies, had then started drinking, and saw that their “money was gettin’ a

little low". During the robbery, his male co-defendant carried the gun, and Victor went through the victim's pockets while their female co-defendant stayed in the car. He said that before the robbery, "you wanna feel more dominant". As Victor described it, "I guess your testosterone's buildin' up." When I asked if he felt anything for the armed robbery victims, either the previous times when he was just a lookout or this time when he was an active participant, Victor explained, "No. You can't. You're not supposed to," because that would just "make you feel bad." He said, "You gotta have a 'don't care' attitude. That's how you have to go about it." When I asked whether that attitude became natural or whether he had to make himself have it, Victor said, "For me, I just don't care." After hearing that both he and the victim were young African American males from the same city, I asked Victor whether he ever thought, "That could be me." His response was, "No. You just don't care. You don't put that thought in your mind. . . . At that time, you're not worried about that. You don't wanna even try to think about it. It doesn't even come into your brain."

Of course, as Leon candidly stated, it would not be useful to recognize feelings of empathy for one's victims, since to do so would interfere with the project of robbing them. The only practical feeling rule for armed robbers is not to have any feelings about the victim. Yet Leon complicated his account by claiming, on the one hand, that putting people in fear did not give him pleasure, while at the same time acknowledging, "if I pull the gun and put them in fear, then I ain't gotta do nothin' with the gun. It does make me feel good to know that they gotta fear me now", but this is because "only a stupid person fights me then." According to Leon, the power of the gun to make the victim turn over his possessions without a fight was gratifying, although putting victims in fear was not

pleasurable for its own sake. If Leon's account can be taken at face value, he describes a somewhat more nuanced emotional experience of armed robbery than does Nate, who simply says he "loves" committing robberies, for the power and the money, and doesn't feel right if he's not doing it. Combining Leon's account of the feelings that impelled him to commit robberies with the feelings that he, Sam, and Victor described toward victims, it appears that having a gun enabled Leon to accomplish the robbery with a minimum of effort; that is, he did not have to beat the person up in order to take his money, as he said he needed to do before using a gun. For him, the power of the gun was that by showing it during a robbery, he did not have to use additional force. From his point of view, it reduced the amount of interaction he needed to have with the victim.

In their retrospective accounts, participants seemed able to call up and reflect upon their remembered emotional states, while at the same time reporting a minimal concern for what their victims experienced. Victor drew connections between his own conception of masculinity and the dominant physicality of armed robbery when he explained both that he feels "a little more masculine" when he has a gun, and that, in preparing for a robbery, "you wanna feel more dominant; I guess your testosterone's buildin' up." Some other participants explicitly rejected any connection between masculinity and either guns or violence.

Doing violence, doing gender and doing emotion

Anderson argues that the concept of "manhood" for those on the street implies precisely such physicality and ruthlessness (Anderson 1999: 91), and that the armed robbery in particular provides a rich site for the playing out of issues of power, respect, and alienation (1999:124-125). Hecht found the same dynamic to be present among the street children of Brazil, when "a young adolescent explained to [him] with a certain tone

of pleasure, ‘We ask people for money and they say ‘I don’t have anything’. You point a thirty-eight at them and then you see how fast they come up with some’” (Hecht 1998:214). For an alienated adolescent in the United States or Brazil, a gun can provide the power to compel, if not respect, at least compliance with a demand for money. Without a gun, the same person may feel that he has no power, no respect, and no way to get money.

Participants’ expressed absence of compassionate feelings for their victims raises several issues, including the gendered nature of emotion. Emotion, of course, has long been viewed as highly gendered, at least in Western cultures, and emotional gendering is viewed as suiting men for violence and women for nurturing. As Stephanie Shields (2002) has pointed out, gendering of emotion was first described as biological in origin (Shields 2002: 70). As the fields of psychology and sociology emerged in the nineteenth century, an evolutionary basis was ascribed to men’s more violent, less sympathetic emotional constitutions:

In the course of the struggles for existence among wild tribes those tribes survived in which the men were not only powerful and courageous, but aggressive, unscrupulous, intensely egoistic. Necessarily, then, the men of the conquering races which gave origin to the civilized races, were men in whom the brutal characteristics were dominant. (Shields, 78, quoting from Herbert Spencer’s 1902 *The Study of Sociology*, 342)

Brutality and unscrupulousness were thus associated in early sociological literature with masculine survival through the evolutionary course. While these characteristics are not overtly approved for men who live in contemporary Western societies, they remain associated with masculinity rather than femininity. Today, however, many theorists view both gender identities and emotional identities as socially

constructed, rather than biologically given (Hochschild 1983, Shields 2002, Connell 2005). Children are seen as being socialized into their gender identities, as well as their racial or ethnic, and class identities. As Herbert Spencer argued over a century ago, an emotional identity is still associated with one's gender, and may be associated with one's race and class as well, although Shields suggests that this has not been as well researched (Shields 2002:49). Today race, place, and class may combine to forge a particular emotional identity among both male and female adolescents, with the result that violence is now considered to be more common or normative even among young women in these same under-resourced inner-city communities of color (Jones 2010; Miller 2010).

Young men have many models to draw upon when learning to "do emotion". For the young men who participated in this study, those models are likely to be men of color who live in low-income urban neighborhoods, and media representations of men in similar environments. Mothers, too, as well as peers, teach boys what emotions are appropriate (Shields 2002:95). Messerschmidt cites bell hooks's description of how her brother was socialized into masculine behavior and emotion: "In our southern black patriarchal home, being a boy meant learning to be tough, to mask one's feelings, to stand one's ground and fight" (Messerschmidt 1993:111). Perhaps it would be appropriate to say that some young men are socialized out of certain emotions, and the question remains whether they simply mask these emotions, deny them, or eradicate them.

One participant recalled that when he was eleven or twelve years old he began to play a game his group called "knock-out". In this game, the group of boys would select a victim of approximately their own age, hit him and take whatever he had in his pockets. If the first assailant's punch did not knock the boy out, the other members of the group

would take turns hitting him until the boy lost consciousness. Often the victims would have no money at all, but getting money was not necessarily the point because, as Sam said, “that was fun to us.” From this game the boys progressed to beating up homeless men who were sleeping on the street, as well as other “crackheads” and “fiends”. Next for Sam came armed robberies with borrowed guns, and finally robberies with his own gun. In this way, Sam was socialized into a particular form of violent masculinity, whose performance left little room for empathizing with victims. The same participant, who said he had shot at a lot of people, responded this way when I asked whether he thought his shots had ever hit anybody: “I think I had a couple people’s mothers crying in the hospital a couple of days”. Significantly, he reserved his compassion for the boys’ mothers, rather than for the victims themselves. (This compassion for women is congruent with some participants saying categorically that they never robbed women, and none admitting to doing so, although robbing women was also likely disfavored as “unmasculine” [Whitehead 2005].). Discussing the armed robbery for which he was currently incarcerated, Sam first told me that he did not feel anything for the victim because it was not his intention to hurt him, “as long as he give it up”. He initially volunteered that he probably would not have fired his gun even if the victim had resisted, but, reconsidering, he amended his response to say, “I ain’t gonna lie to you, I probably would have shot him.” Far from resisting, however, the Black male victim, who was texting on his cell phone as he exited the train station, began to cry when Sam pointed a gun at him and asked him, “Do you want to die?” He turned his entire wallet over to Sam, who did not then realize that the victim could identify him even in a ski mask because they had a mutual friend. Staying true to his “street guy” persona throughout our

interview, Sam maintained that if he were ever robbed he would decline to identify his assailant to the police and take his “revenge” upon the robber himself.

Shields considers the social meaning of emotion to be about telling the boys from the girls (Shields 2002:166). She argues that, as boys perform their gender and emotion identities, they learn through their social interactions that the “tender emotions” of sympathy and pity are associated with women. Moreover, as Candace West and Don Zimmerman argue (2009), the interactional perspective on the ways in which people “do gender” can be expanded to help us understand how gender, race, and class can all be viewed as a “social doing” that structures how we “do difference” (West & Zimmerman, 2009:114). Particularly in the case of those young men of color who are forging their masculine identities in the streets, it appears that they are socialized into violence partly by being schooled in how they should feel about violence. Participants’ positive feelings about violent activities showed that, for them, violence could be described as fun as well as instrumental. Like guns and armed robbery, violence in general could fulfill many roles for these young men.

Violence with, and on behalf of, others

Producing violence, for example, was something participants did for the benefit of family members as well as for themselves, often in their role as protectors. Xavier was currently incarcerated for an offense committed with a sawed-off shotgun. He said the episode began as an attempt to intimidate an older male of around nineteen or twenty who was bothering his female “little cousin”. Xavier’s cousin, with whom Xavier lived, had complained to him that a local drug dealer kept approaching her with sexual overtures while she was on her way to school. Xavier, also a drug dealer, recalled, “I was supposed to scare him with the shotgun”, but the attempt was unsuccessful. After Xavier

displayed the unloaded shotgun and told the man to leave his cousin alone, the man simply called Xavier some names and then, when Xavier pointed the gun at him, “smacked it down to hit me”. The incident evolved first into a fistfight, and then the older man produced a small bat. He was knocked down and, in the scuffle, his chain and cell phone fell to the ground. The event ended as an armed robbery because Xavier and his friend took the chain and phone before they left. Although Xavier volunteered that he did in fact engage in the practice of robbing drug dealers, he was emphatic that on this occasion, “it wasn’t supposed to be a robbery, though, and that was the whole thing!”

From Xavier’s perspective, this violent event was comprised of several elements, but did not seem to him like an armed robbery because he did not enter the interaction with the intention of taking the man’s property by force. It was important to Xavier to emphasize to me that robbery was not what this incident was about. The completed event demonstrates, however, the many different functions that violence can serve even in one interaction. Xavier had armed himself with a sawed-off shotgun before approaching the older man in an effort to look formidable when he warned the man to stay away from his cousin. As Katz would put it, he wished to be taken seriously, and expected the shotgun to help in this presentation. Xavier’s threat to use violence in his bid to be recognized as a powerful protector, however, was rejected by the man, and Xavier then felt obligated to fight him in order to gain or retain some respect. Certainly, the alternative of retreating would have left not only his cousin, but also Xavier, in a worse position than when he started. Before the fight ended, the other man had produced a bat, and Xavier evidently enlisted his friend, whom he had brought along as back-up, to assist him in subduing his adversary. As Xavier told the story, the man’s chain was broken when Xavier grabbed

him by the neck to throw him to the ground, and the cell phone fell out during the same struggle. Having been insulted by the man he had hoped to intimidate, Xavier could not resist punctuating the interaction by seizing the man's chain and phone as he departed. While, in the context of the entire interaction, this parting gesture may have been seen by Xavier as equivalent to kicking sand in the man's face, the power dynamic became the same as that in any robbery. Xavier had ultimately overpowered the man by force and taken his property, and even he later recognized that, as the event unfolded, it had eventually acquired all the legal elements of an armed robbery. Yet violence to protect another, violence to retaliate for an insult, and violence to overpower someone who had attempted to hit him with a bat, and finally to prove that he had done so by taking his property, are all implicated in this episode.

A parallel account of violence on behalf of a female family member was provided by Kevin, who was incarcerated for beating another young man about the head with a gun. However, he described an earlier offense, without a gun, for which he had not been arrested. Kevin explained how, on that occasion, he had had to settle for assaulting a female proxy when the man he wanted to assault was not readily available: "Well, he had hit my sister, and I went to his baby mom house, but he wasn't there, and that was when I beat his baby mom up." Kevin was the oldest male in his household at the time, and felt it was incumbent upon him to avenge a wrong done to a female member of his family, a norm Adrian Nicole LeBlanc had described in *Random Family* (2003:343). Despite his inability to locate his intended target, Kevin had successfully demonstrated that no one could hit his sister with impunity.

Likewise, Mark described the attempted murder for which he was adjudicated as having been committed on his younger brother's behalf. Mark said he had stabbed a boy of about his own age, seventeen, because the boy said he wanted to fight Mark's brother, a middle school student. Although that offense had been committed with a knife, Mark said he had purchased his first gun when he was fifteen and would often carry a gun if he anticipated trouble. He spoke, without directly implicating himself, of gang fights where his gang would use every kind of weapon from fists to bats, bottles, chains, knives and guns, to injure their opponents. He had suffered a broken ankle during one fight after being kicked while he was already on the ground. Mark said he did not believe in displaying a gun simply in an attempt to scare somebody off: "As far as takin' a gun out . . . If you're gonna take somethin' out, you're gonna use it. Otherwise, what's the point?" Mark denied feeling any remorse on occasions when he did use a gun, although he declined to go into specifics about particular shootings. Asked what he felt after using a gun, he answered, "Nuttin', really. I didn't feel nuttin'". He said he had become involved with his gang first by socializing with them and going to parties, and then they started fighting together. Mark, who had come to New Jersey from Mexico with his family, placed a high value on the mutual ties of loyalty and trust he experienced within his largely Latino gang, and said his gang would sometimes initiate fights "because other people thought they were tough, and we'd, like, put 'em in their place, I guess."

Gang violence

Ten out of twenty-five participants considered themselves to be gang members, while an additional young man viewed himself as merely "affiliated", but not technically a member of a gang. Each one said he had joined his gang while on the street and not while in custody. This study was not focused on gang violence as such, and much of the

violence that may have taken place within a gang context is discussed in other sections that deal more directly with my research questions, such as how and why guns were acquired, how they were used, and how they made participants feel. Moreover, many participants who identified as gang members declined to discuss their gang activities because of group norms that discouraged such discussion. Nonetheless, several participants spoke of matters that seemed to emanate from the gang ethos, and I discuss them separately here. Not surprisingly, their remarks allude to violence by one group against another group, as well as group norms that encouraged violence toward outsiders and loyalty to fellow gang members.

Sam belonged to a gang called Mob Piru, but declined to say why he had joined or to discuss its activities. He said he had shot at a lot of people, but never got caught for it. He was currently incarcerated for an armed robbery with a gun. Sam preferred not to provide details of his gang-related shootings, asking rhetorically, “What can somebody do to me for something they don’t know about?” He nevertheless obliged me by providing the example of an occasion when he and his friends left a party and “somebody start shootin’ at us! . . . When we came outside and people started shootin’, we just started shootin’, too. . . Kill or be killed.”

Upon seeing my reaction to his “kill or be killed” statement, Sam emphatically assured me that I would have done the same thing under the circumstances: “No! I’m telling you, if you were out on the streets, and you were chillin’ in the hood, and you got a gun in your hand, I’m telling you. You might say that now, but if somebody start shooting at you, you’ll shoot back.” I had no doubt that I was listening to the voice of experience, and recognized that Sam had attempted to normalize some of his own

previous instances of producing gun violence for me, albeit with the use of several big “ifs” required to put me in exactly the same context.

On the other hand, Thomas, a member of the Bloods, had decided after reflection while in custody that many of the times he had shot at people were merely attempts to impress others or, even worse in his eyes, to prove to himself that he was tough enough: “I was always tryin’ to prove myself. If I wasn’t tryin’ to prove myself to somebody else, I was tryin’ to prove myself to myself . . . that I was a gangster.”

While the views Thomas expressed to me could well have been characterized as penitent reconstructions, he indeed provided one example of a time when he had shot at people that seemed frivolous, at best. He said the first time he had fired at someone without provocation he was in the company of his cousin and others who were discussing a gang-related “beef”, and everybody was showing off their guns. Thomas, unimpressed by the guns the others had, said he was displaying his Glock .40 “for everybody to look at, and see how big it is”, when one of his companions pointed out a group of people across the street, standing in front of a store. These people were “the opposite group of people that we didn’t like”, and Thomas, feeling that he had been put on the spot, “started shootin’, the crowd started runnin’, and they start shootin’ back.”

The next occasion when Thomas shot at somebody arose out of the gang’s involvement in the drug trade. As Thomas described his position in the gang at that time, “I was holdin’ a little bit of power with the gang. . . I was high up; I could tell people what to do.” One of the subordinate members that he was paying to sell drugs for him failed to turn over the proceeds from the drug sales, and Thomas said he shot at this person, but did not hit him.

Finally, Thomas said he had shot at a member of the Crips with whom he also had a dispute over money. Thomas claimed that his shots were intended as warning shots:

Yeah, I wasn't, I wasn't really shootin' at him to hit him or kill him; at the time I didn't really know the rules of the game. The rules of the game is, if you draw on somebody, you gotta kill 'im. Because if you don't, they're gonna come after you, and that could be YOUR life. I was shootin' to let him know that I was there, like, that it could happen, any time you think I'm not around, I'm around.

Thomas's naiveté ended when the other person did in fact come after him, and the outcome of that encounter will be described in the next chapter. Evidently, Thomas later internalized what he had called "the rules of the game", because when I asked whether he had ever hit anyone when he shot at them, he availed himself of his option not to talk about it.

Loyalty ties, of course, are another important part of gang violence, as Mark pointed out when he said he knew his fellow members of the Eighteenth Street gang would be right there for him if he called upon them, and that they in turn could count on him. Tim, a member of the Bloods, alluded to similar ties of loyalty when he explained that the difference between a friend and an associate is that a friend is loyal to you, cares about you, and would be by you whether you were right or wrong.

Many roles of violence

Philippe Bourgois (2012) described how, during the course of his research in an inner-city Latino community, he witnessed violence among boys and adult men together serving as a kind of glue to bind members of the community to each other. In what Bourgois called "the moral economy of violence" community violence, sometimes in the form of group fights, functioned as a form of social capital that was both instrumental and expressive, permitting men and boys alike to draw upon their ready reserves of anger to enforce community norms and to defend themselves, their families, and friends from

insults or injury (Bourgois, 2012). His findings suggest that the boys and adolescent males he studied were socialized into public, or communal, forms of violence in an organic way, absorbing this form of violence and being absorbed by it as they observed and interacted with the men of their neighborhood. This dynamic is similar to the ways in which participants often acquired guns through neighborhood “old heads”, and shows how an environment suffused with both gun violence and other forms of violence becomes normalized for young men. While the mechanism of acquiring these street values is consistent with traditional social learning theory (Sutherland, 1939; Bandura & Walters, 1963), the process Bourgois describes of boys being socialized into a form of community violence that is viewed as adaptive by much of the neighborhood helps to illuminate why young men find such violence to be so captivating. Similarly, when “old heads” both modeled gun violence and groomed young men of the neighborhood by helping them to acquire guns, participants found it both natural and easy to be inducted into a street lifestyle where gun violence was pervasive.

It is clear from participants’ accounts that engaging in violence served many functions in their life worlds. Among these were fun and excitement, bonding, making money through robberies or employing violence to enforce financial obligations, enforcing respect from others and shoring up one’s self-image, and protection, both in a conventionally defensive way and also broadly conceived as in the context of gang fighting. This violence could occur with or without guns, but guns added a symbolic or mythic gloss to violent activities, in addition to rendering them more lethal. On the basis of these participants’ accounts, both gun use in particular and violence in general can be

viewed as pathways utilized by participants to make their way out of some of the constraints they experienced.

As participants often emphasized, however, the outcomes of these processes are not determined purely by structural constraints. While the street lifestyle may often be the most visible path before them, these young people emphasized that they have agency and can choose different lines of action, including whether to participate in or avoid the life of the street. As an adolescent girl in Nikki Jones's *Between Good and Ghetto* put it, "It's not where you live, it's how you live." (Jones, 2010:68) Yet one participant, while acknowledging that there were "good things" he could have done instead of engaging in delinquent behavior, summarized his experience of his neighborhood by saying, "you gotta search with a fine magnifying glass to find something good to do." At least for these participants, the "good things" they could have been doing were less visible, less attractive, or both.

Anger and alienation – present but not accounted for

Anger, alienation, and racism were not among the subjects that these young men cared to discuss in explicit terms. While several participants offered to recount specific violent incidents prompted by anger, the anger they described was of the sort that arose out of situated interpersonal interactions. The more generalized anger and alienation often described in the literature was rarely discussed by participants. Occasionally, however, glimpses of alienation would appear, as when Ernie described returning to selling drugs after being fired from his job because he felt, at that time, that selling drugs was what he was good at. A similar feeling may have been present during the robbery for which he had been previously incarcerated, and the many other robberies in which he said he had participated. In Ernie's description of his "demoralized" state after losing

his job, one can hear echoes of the strain described by Robert Merton (1938) when he wrote of “the acute pressures created by the discrepancy between culturally induced goals and socially structured opportunities” (Merton 1938/1964:178).

The ways in which socially structured opportunities were related to race and class was a topic that few participants discussed, yet it seems likely that many, if not all, were well aware of such processes. While Quinto simply compared his own situation unfavorably with that of people who lived in the suburbs and had money for things like vacations, Tim had done a great deal of reading in the three years that he had been incarcerated, and was well versed in the politicized discourse of race and class inequalities. The extent to which Tim’s pre-incarceration thoughts about social inequalities might have influenced his self-described “gangbanging” is unclear, but Howard Stevenson has pointed out that “[t]he idea that urban African American youth may be angry (e.g., pissed) should not be a surprise given their social experiences” (Stevenson, 1997:42). They “often feel misinterpreted, disrespected, and angry about their life possibilities”, or “Missed, Dissed, and Pissed”, as he called his 1997 article. In the study on which that article was based, Stevenson discovered that his sample of low-income African American youth, who were students in an urban community social skills development program, did in fact score higher than a nationally standardized sample of adolescents in self-reported anger experience and expression. (1997:45-46).

Pedro Noguera (2003) found it difficult to discern whether race or class was the more salient feature for African American boys’ anger. In “The Trouble with Black Boys” he argued that structure, culture, and individual choice and agency are all important in adolescent development (2003:440). Noguera believed that Black males,

evidently without regard to class, learned at an early age that by presenting a tough exterior it was easier to avoid threats or attacks (2003:454-455). But he also speculated, based on a good deal of experience, that the treatment to which Black males are subjected in school or on the streets may, as he put it, “elicit postures of aggression and ferocity toward the world” (2003:455). Noguera and Stevenson thus concur that the negative reception that young African American males receive from the world at large may contribute to their negative outlook and response to the world.

Participants, on the other hand, tended to place the origins of such feelings squarely in the intimately interpersonal realm, rather than in the macrosystems of broad social attitudes or forces. Kevin believed his angry feelings stemmed from being beaten by his mother’s former boyfriend, as well as from seeing his mother beaten by the same man. Norman, who used to get into lots of fights, felt he had benefited from techniques he had learned in anger management programs. Saying he “was always a happy boy, playing around, playful person,” he could not explain why he had grown into an adolescent who would fight at the slightest verbal provocation: “And I just got older and I had anger problems; I don’t know where that come from.”

Thomas, rather than connecting his robbing of drug dealers to any angry feelings, made a point of saying he cultivated a calm mental state in preparation for a robbery:

That’s why I like to go in and do things calm, with no problems. ‘Cause if I go to rob somebody and I’m angry . . . I’m gonna end up doin’ somethin’ to that person. And so, believe it or not, I really don’t like violence. Sometimes you just gotta send out somebody a lesson to learn. It’s more of a physical thing, ‘cause once I feel my body gettin’ hot, and once I feel my heart start beatin’ fast, it’s just, there’s no thinkin’ after that. There’s no stoppin’ me.

Thomas’s point was that the calm and deliberate state of mind he needed for his robberies was incompatible with the “no thinkin’” state he experienced when he was

angry. He spoke, in general terms, of times when he had shot at people in anger, failing to stop and think before doing so. When asked to recall one of those occasions and consider what it would have taken for him to have walked away instead of shooting, Thomas answered, “It had to, to be honest wit’ you, it might sound weird, but it had to have been for my mom to have been there to tell me, ‘It’s not worth it,’ and say, ‘It’s time to come home’.” In fact, organizing mothers to intervene and stop street violence is one of the strategies described in David Kennedy’s 2011 book, *Don’t Shoot*. For himself, however, Thomas expressed the hope that upon his release he would hear his own voice telling him it was not worth it, if he again found himself in a situation where he was tempted to commit a violent act.

In general, participants did not narrate their violent offending explicitly in terms of the types of anger and alienation that theorists describe. That they did not choose to expound upon such feelings about their life worlds does not mean that they did not experience them. Within the scope of the many feelings they did describe, such as feeling power when committing an armed robbery or just holding a gun, or feeling, after losing a legitimate job, that selling drugs was the thing they were good at, or finding fun in beating up drug addicts, the listener can detect a wide-ranging feeling of powerlessness, exclusion from conventional opportunities, and needing to feel that there are some people below them in the social hierarchy.

Bridging the gap between etic and emic perspectives

In this chapter I have attempted to capture participants’ views of their own violent offending, and to contextualize it both in terms of their worlds and in terms of the interpersonal interactions that led to violent events. Participants sometimes attempted to justify their violent offending and to suppress or deny feelings of empathy for their

victims. At other times they expressed regret for their actions, and, at least in retrospect, believed they could have and should have handled some situations differently.

While it would not be difficult to imagine an adult immersed in the street lifestyle responding to insults and other stressors as these participants did, their impulsive reactions at times seemed to exemplify what many consider to be a characteristic feature of the incompletely developed adolescent brain. As Beatriz Luna and John Sweeney (2004) demonstrated through their functional magnetic resonance imaging studies, what they called “top-down cognitive control of behavior” has not fully matured during adolescence (Luna & Sweeney, 2004:296-318). As one participant said, he hoped that he had by now internalized a voice that would tell him, on future occasions when he might be tempted to respond with violence, that it was not worth it.

However, participants described the many ways in which violence, whether economically motivated or not, did seem to be worth it. Both violence in general and gun violence in particular provided fun, excitement, camaraderie, money, power, and other gratifications that may otherwise have been lacking in their lives. Several armed robbers vividly described their emotional or psychological addictions to armed robbery, comparing their compulsions to engage in this activity to those of a “cokehead” and a smoker. As young men, participants had been socialized into particular ways of viewing and participating in violence, sometimes on their own behalf, and sometimes on behalf of others, that served to normalize their activities.

Guns, gun violence, and violence in general served participants as pathways out of feeling powerless, ineffectual, bored, dependent, and vulnerable. When these ways of coping seemed to participants to serve their needs, they became stable coping responses,

as Spencer calls them in her PVEST model (1995). At the same time, these activities often exposed participants to new levels of vulnerability, as will be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter Summary

This chapter traced the continuing development of some participants' emergent identities as gun carriers. As they found gun use to be helpful in a variety of situations, gun violence became a stable coping response for them. Participants described their violent offending and the feelings that accompanied it. Many, but by no means all, participants found that once they had acquired guns for defensive purposes they expanded their gun use to include more aggressive activities. They sometimes minimized their culpability by employing traditional techniques of neutralization. They also explained how suppressing feelings of empathy toward victims of violent crimes such as armed robbery facilitated the execution of these projects. Some participants had been socialized into violence as young boys, and guns simply expanded their repertoire. Others found that they became emotionally addicted to the thrill of robbing people, and likened the feeling to a drug addiction. Several participants described the unfolding of conflict-based violent gun events in detail, emphasizing the interactional and contingent aspects of each step leading to the ultimate violent outcome. Not only gun violence but violence in general proved to be rewarding for participants in many ways. It was often a means to an economic end, but it also served as a way to defend or restore personal, family, or peer-group honor, a source of fun and excitement, or a way for young men to bond. In an environment where participants often felt powerless, violence in general and gun violence in particular produced gratifying feelings of power.

Chapter Six

Negative outcomes, uncertain outlooks

Like, people that I robbed in the past, they still look for me, so I never walk around without a gun, and I never walk around without a vest.

Leon Benson (June 1, 2011)

I have dreams all the time that when I go out, I'm gonna get killed . . . I always have to watch my back . . . There's times when I've left my gun in the house, I've left my vest in the house, and just went outside to play basketball with my friends. I wasn't in that type of lifestyle. It felt so good, just to be laughin' and playin' . . . That every car that go by, I don't have to look, or every time somebody walk by, I have to look. I mean it felt good. I just wish I could have chose the other life. . . Gettin' money the easy way, it's really not easy. To have to be on point twenty-four, seven. I'd rather just sit at a desk and not have to worry about nothin', and just type all day, and know I can go home, and know I'm gonna be alright . . . I lost so many people, just livin' this life.

Thomas Tulane (March 5, 2011)

The participants in this study described many negative outcomes of their interactions and activities in the streets. Of course, one experience they all shared was the loss of their freedom during the term of their incarceration. As several participants expressed, they had missed out on important teenage experiences that could never be replaced, such as proms and graduations with their childhood friends.

But as Leon and Thomas explained above, another outcome of their violent offending was that even while they were still free, they felt trapped. They both lived in fear, during their waking and sleeping hours, of enemies they had made on the street. This chapter will explore various negative outcomes described by participants as attending their lifestyles. In terms of Spencer's PVEST (2003), these outcomes make up the last phase of her identity development framework. They constitute the unproductive coping outcomes that have resulted from participants' emergent identities as young men of the street, gun carriers, and violent offenders. Rather than attaining positive outcomes such as high achievement and positive relationships, participants find themselves

incarcerated and facing uncertain futures. Their experiences and perspectives show the lived processes underlying previous research findings. Gun-carrying, gang involvement, engaging in delinquency, and adhering to the code of the street all help young men in the streets to feel less fearful, at least initially, while increasing their actual risk of harm. These young men took control of their circumstances and environments in ways that they thought would improve their life worlds. While they did not tend to view themselves as victims, the actions they took often resulted in their becoming victims in a variety of ways. As Spencer notes, however, the PVEST identity framework recycles across the life span, and participants can “try different coping strategies, and redefine how they and others view themselves” (Spencer 2003:134). As most participants would be returning to the same environments from which they came, they and the JJC staff were aware that such redefinition would likely prove challenging.

Shot for a reason

Suffering actual or anticipated retaliation was one of the consequences of producing violence for these young men. As Victor said in an earlier chapter, once you make an enemy on the street, “It’s never over”, “they’re gonna wanna kill you”, and “you’re gonna end up shootin’ somebody.” Participants often learned that the aggrieved party might retaliate in kind or by escalating the level of violence. The three participants who had suffered gunshot wounds all reported being “shot for a reason” in the excerpts below.

Thomas was shot as he returned home one night, despite wearing a bulletproof vest and watching his back, as he described in the opening quotation. One bullet’s impact was blunted by his vest, but the other one wounded him in the leg. He had

previously fired at his assailant because of a dispute over money, although Thomas maintained that he had not intended to hit the other man on that occasion. As Thomas learned, the victim did not take being fired at lightly, and waited for an opportunity to catch Thomas as he was walking home:

So when I look up, I hear bullets goin'. I hear a gun goin' off, and I just see a blue light comin' out the gun. I got hit in the back once, but I had the vest on, so I was alright. . . He hit me in my leg, so I was gonna get to the house, but my whole, my jeans was just full of blood. . . I called my girlfriend, her sister's a nurse, so she came over, she took it out . . . and she stitched me up herself. I had a bruised back for like a week.

Kevin likewise framed the gunshot wounds he received in terms of previous exchanges in his social world. He sustained injuries to both his leg and his jaw during the shooting he described, and pointed out the small scar on his jaw. He explained what led up to the shooting:

DM: So, uh, what was that about?

Kevin: Well, he had hit my sister, and I went to his baby mom house, but he wasn't there, and that was when I beat his baby mom up.

DM: Okay, so he had hit your sister, you went to his baby mom house lookin' for him, he wasn't there, so you beat her up.

Kevin: Yeah.

DM: So then he came back and, did he ambush you when he shot you . . . ?

Kevin: No, I was sitting out on my steps, and I seen somebody walking up. . . and he came from the side, I seen him, and I went to go get up, I felt something hard pop against me, and against my leg, and I fell.

Kevin suffered "a little fracture" of his jaw, and did not seem surprised that he had had to pay a price for beating up the mother of his assailant's child. Nick, the other participant who showed me his gunshot wounds, had been shot in the chest and upper arms. He declined to have his interview recorded, and did not acknowledge his culpability in the offense for which he was incarcerated, possession of a gun that had

been found in a car in which he was one of several passengers. He did say that he sold drugs, primarily crack cocaine. Nick did not care to discuss the details of his own gun victimization, but said it happened because of what he was doing at the time. He offered that “what goes around comes around,” and said he had brought the shooting upon himself.

While there are many victims of random gun violence, each of these young men believed he had been shot for reasons arising out of his interactions and activities in the street. There seem to be at least three levels of exposure to violent victimization in the neighborhoods where these young men reside. First there is what participants referred to as the “normal” exposure to random violence, including gun violence, to which young men who grew up in these neighborhoods seemed to become acclimated, and which did not prompt them to acquire guns. Next is the increased exposure of the young men who are “in the streets” and who may be targeted in an impersonal way, such as the drug dealer who may be targeted for robbery because he is viewed as likely to have money or drugs. I argue that this type of exposure did prompt participants to acquire guns. Finally, there is the exposure of the person who is known to produce violence, whether by robbing people, shooting at people, or hurting people’s family members. These young men are likely already to have guns, and are targeted for violence in a more personal way, often in retaliation for violent offenses they have committed in the past. Others are literally “gunning” for them.

Wilkinson found that, among violent events she categorized as “with guns”, “with other weapons”, or “with no weapons”, her respondents considered retaliation to be most likely following violent events that involved guns (Wilkinson 2003:205). It is not

surprising that young men in the street lifestyle who have been shot, shot at, or threatened with a gun are the most likely to consider retaliation necessary or appropriate. As Tim explained, “You shot at me, so now we’re shootin’ at each other. . .I just know that you tried to kill me, and it’s not even now. . .Next time I see you, it’s on.”

Victimization in Offending Populations

It is notable that three of the twenty-six participants in this study were shot before turning eighteen, but this number merely invites further inquiry into the rates at which offenders experience violent victimization. In a similar “snapshot” study published in 1995, John May, a physician, discovered that 26 percent of adult men admitted to the Cook County Correctional Facility in Chicago had experienced prior gunshot wounds (May et al., 1995:164). Of the sample studied by May, 70.8 percent were African American and another 10 percent were either Mexican American or Puerto Rican (1995:163). Dr. May also noted that in addition to those wounded offenders who survived to be arrested again, in large urban areas anywhere from 44 to 67 percent of homicide victims had prior criminal records. May added that most of those victims were young men, and most were killed with guns. Other researchers have studied violent victimization among juvenile offenders.

A longitudinal study of Pittsburgh youth found an even more pronounced impact on young African American men. Rolf Loeber, Mary DeLamatre, George Tita and colleagues (1999) found that one hundred percent of the young men killed by guns during the course of their study, and 90.5 percent of those wounded by guns, were African American (Loeber, DeLamatre, Tita et al., 1999:345). The family backgrounds and offense histories of the victimized Pittsburgh youth are in many ways similar to those of the young men depicted in the previous chapters, and the authors’ findings suggest not

only that offending leads to victimization, but, more specifically, that gun-carrying leads to gun victimization . The young men from Pittsburgh who were shot or killed were most likely to have mothers who were single (88 percent versus 66 percent), unemployed (43 percent versus 24 percent), poorer, and receiving public assistance than those children who were not victimized (Loeber, DeLamatre, Tita et al., 1999:347). Likewise, 84 percent of participants in the current study were raised in female-headed households. While I did not determine how many of these women were unemployed or receiving public assistance, the pathway described by many participants was that, with a poor single mother or mother figure, employed or not, the young men felt pressure to get into the street and make money, which led to their acquisition of a gun. The typical participant was raised by a mother who was struggling financially, as were the victims in the Pittsburgh study. (As discussed in Chapter 3, the participants in the current study tended to be ill at ease when discussing family finances and, since they had signed on for a study about guns and not poverty, I considered it an unfair intrusion to question them too directly about their mother's sources of income. If a participant opened that door, I would go through it, but I did not ask each participant where the family's money came from.) The Pittsburgh victims tended to be drug sellers and to carry guns. Of the New Jersey participants, at least 68 percent reported selling drugs, and all participants except one either admitted having a gun, was adjudicated delinquent for having a gun, or was adjudicated delinquent for an armed robbery where his co-defendant carried a gun, although this summary includes one participant who committed an armed robbery with a BB gun. The Pittsburgh victims were killed in gang-related or drug-related disputes, or as the result of the escalation of a previous conflict. Four of the nine deceased Pittsburgh

victims for whom there were police records were armed at the time of their death. As the authors concluded from these results, “The data suggest that these delinquent activities led to victimization . . . In short, the proximal events leading to death tended to be serious delinquent activities.” (1999:349)

These findings, which I believe are relevant for the New Jersey youth, including the Latino participants, make it easy to understand why Thomas said, “I lost so many people, just livin’ this life.” At least fourteen of the New Jersey participants had friends or family members who had been shot. At one of the transitional programs I visited, the superintendent mentioned that two of the program’s graduates had been shot and killed a few days earlier in two separate incidents on the same day. The events were believed to have been gang-related.

Several months later, a participant who was confined in another area of the state for an armed robbery reflected on his philosophy, shared by many participants, that “everything happens for a reason.” When he said he believed he had been locked up for a reason, I asked what he thought the reason was, and he replied, “A lot of things been happening. You never know. One of them bodies out there could have been mine.” As he himself had declared, if he were the victim of a robbery he would not leave the matter in the hands of the police, but would take his own revenge on the robber. This participant, Sam, explained, “Cause in my mind, I want revenge,” and he seemed worried that one of his victims might likewise prefer violent retaliation to legal recourse. Participants sometimes described their time incarcerated as “time out”, and it seemed that they too perceived that, at the least, their dangerous trajectories had been temporarily interrupted, if not changed.

Michael Vaughn, Matthew Howard, and Lisa Harper-Chang (2006) also explored the relationship among street activities, weapon-carrying, and violent victimization, and found that selling drugs, gang fighting, and drug use, much more than prior victimization, were the best predictors of weapon-carrying. Moreover, they found that weapon-carrying “increases the risk for interpersonal violence stemming from the use of firearms or other weapons” (Vaughn, Howard & Harper-Chang, 2006:324). While weapon-carrying, especially gun-carrying, made many of the participants in the current study feel less vulnerable and more agentive, the evidence is persuasive that these young men, at least those who engaged in aggressive behaviors, greatly increased their risk of violent victimization by carrying guns.

Feeling less fearful, being less safe

The research findings concerning gang participation and victimization parallel those regarding gun-carrying and victimization. Dana Peterson, Terrance Taylor and Finn-Aage Esbensen (2004) discovered that, even though a large proportion of the young men they studied who joined a gang said they did so for protection, their actual rate of victimization increased during their period of affiliation with the gang (Peterson, Taylor & Esbensen, 2004:812). As the authors suggest, this is likely because youth who engage in offending behavior, such as gang-related activities, are often in situations where violence is likely to occur. Yet Chris Melde, Terrance Taylor, and Finn-Aage Esbensen (2009) found that, just as with gun-carrying, youth felt less fearful, while in fact they were more likely to suffer violent victimization, after joining gangs. The gang-involved youth also accurately perceived that their risk of victimization was increased during their time with the gang. The authors therefore found a contradiction between the young men’s objective beliefs about their victimization risk and their subjective feelings of

being less fearful while in a gang. To help explain this apparent paradox, they pointed to the feelings that young gang members described. The sense that their fellow gang members had their back provided them with peace of mind or emotional protection that more than compensated for their awareness of an increased objective risk of harm. As the authors put it, gang membership may serve a protective function, “albeit in the emotive sense alone” (2009:588). We might therefore say that both having a gun and being in a gang provide more emotional than physical protection for young men in the street, making them feel either safer or less fearful, while at the same time making them more likely to be harmed.

Although participants in the current study said they joined gangs for social reasons rather than for protection, the key point is that they likely increased their chances of being injured or killed by doing so, just as they did by carrying guns. Eight of the ten participants who identified themselves as gang members said they joined for social reasons, stating that they were already friends or family members of the people in their gangs so it seemed like the thing to do, or looked up to members of that gang because “they were the coolest ones”, and so on. One said he joined for “the love, the money, the drugs, the love”. This participant was among several who said their gangs were organized around drug sales, adding an economic as well as a social reason for joining. None said they joined for protection. Nevertheless, many participants experienced their life worlds as significantly improved both by gun-carrying and by gang involvement, and this perception tended to persist at the time of our interviews. Several participants stated that, while they hoped to stay out of trouble upon their release, they would maintain their gang ties and membership, which they considered to be central to their identities. Keith,

for example, said, “I am what I am as far as the gang, so I can’t just say that I’m going to stop completely all my contact with them, ‘cause I know that would be a lie. . .” Thomas likewise maintained, “I mean, I’m ready to live life like I’m supposed to, it’s just that, inside my head, I know I’m always gonna be Blood, and even if I tell people I’m not, in my head I’m a think, like, in reality, I know I am.”

Finally, Melde alone (2009) examined victimization perception and risk with delinquents in general, rather than gang members specifically. He found that “[i]n the end, involvement in a delinquent lifestyle actually serves to decrease fear of victimization while increasing the actual likelihood of experiencing such an incident” (Melde, 2009:800). This finding seems congruent with participant Kenneth’s report that when he first started stealing cars and robbing people he had some hesitation, but the more he did it, the less he thought about the possible consequences to himself. When I asked whether he ever worried about his robbery victims attacking him with a weapon, he said he did not, because “I was just livin’ the life”.

Living the Code of the Street

Two other studies have explored the dangers of the street lifestyle by using Elijah Anderson’s 1999 ethnographic study, *Code of the Street*, as their point of departure. Anderson had set out to answer several questions about the dynamics of interpersonal violence in low-income urban neighborhoods, including how the people of the neighborhood perceived their situation, what behavior patterns resulted from these perceptions, and what the consequences of these behaviors were (Anderson, 1999:11). He found that some young people, perceiving themselves as vulnerable, chose to adopt the self-presentation of “badness” (1999:112), which he defined as an intimidating façade

intended to deter potential attackers. He discussed the aims and the consequences of this presentation as revealed through his observations and interviews (1999:10).

Anderson suggested that the very presentation that is adopted for the purpose of ensuring one's personal security is also likely to threaten it (1999:92). His thesis thus encompassed the concept that, while the presentation of "badness" is intended to constitute a protective factor, it may well function as a risk factor in the urban environment.

Not surprisingly, this provocative dynamic inspired several researchers to explore various aspects of the code of the street using other methods. In their 2006 article, "I Ain't Gonna Let No One Disrespect Me", Eric Stewart, Christopher Schreck and Ronald Simons addressed the question, "Does the code of the street reduce or increase violent victimization among African American adolescents?" After conducting surveys and interviews in two waves with youth from Georgia and Iowa, the authors concluded that adopting the code of the street increases violent victimization (Stewart, Schreck & Simons 2006:443). The authors sought to measure the extent to which youth identified with statements such as, "It is important to show others that you cannot be intimidated" (2006:437). To measure violent victimization, they asked the young people how many times in the last year they had been physically attacked to the point that they had bruises, cuts, or broken bones (2006:436).

The authors explained their findings in terms of the code of the street by noting that the street culture requires that one not subordinate oneself to others and allow disrespect to go unchallenged; however, it does allow those following the street code

to be disrespectful, belligerent, and confrontational toward others to gain or maintain respect (Anderson 1999:92). In other words, the street code calls for individuals to engage in precisely the kind of behaviors that one should not be prepared to tolerate from others (2006:446).

With their project of operationalizing and quantifying Anderson's theory, the authors seemed to take the code of the street to its logical conclusion. While they claimed that their findings differed from those reached by Anderson (Stewart, Schreck, & Simons, 2006:446), a close reading of Anderson (Anderson, 1999:75, 92) shows that he had anticipated increased victimization as a potential outcome of adhering to the code. In view of the fact that Anderson reviewed and made acknowledged contributions to this article (Authors' note, 428, and notes 3 and 14, at 453 and 454 respectively), it seems more accurate to describe the article, as the abstract does (2006:428), as an extension of *Code of the Street*.

Two of the article's authors, Eric Stewart and Ronald Simons, followed this study up with another, using the same data set, and found that adherence to the code of the street results in increased violent offending behavior as well (Stewart & Simons, 2009). Thus, adherence to the code, like gun-carrying, gang membership, and engaging in delinquency, seems to confer at once both increased feelings of agency and increased vulnerability.

Mark's statement to me that his gang would fight other gangs because "Sometimes other people thought they were tough, and we'd like, put 'em in their place" provides an example of how the code encourages young men both to maintain a "disrespectful, belligerent, and confrontational" stance and at the same time not tolerate

such a presentation from their rivals (Stewart & Simons 2009). Other participants expressed varying degrees of adherence to the numerous tenets of the street code. Thomas, for example, said he really didn't like violence, "but sometimes you just gotta send somebody out a lesson to learn." The tension inherent in such a code, as the above studies demonstrated, would seem almost inevitably to lead both to increased violent offending as well as increased violent victimization. With regard to the code's relationship to the construction of public masculine identities, Wilkinson goes so far as to suggest that "violence is the single most critical resource for gaining status among those inner-city males who frequently participate in street life" (Wilkinson 2003:248). While the current study is focused neither on status nor the code of the street as such, another entire project could possibly be generated from the same data by operationalizing themes from Anderson's *The Code of the Street* (1999) and seeking to organize the interview data according to those themes.

The fearlessness, or what Anderson refers to as "nerve", displayed by many juvenile gun offenders facilitates their engagement in behavior that leads them into confrontations with others similarly armed. These studies help to explain both why victimization is so high among juvenile offenders and why it is so difficult to persuade young people to abandon the street, when its rewards are so great.

Participants' views on their dangerous life worlds

Although participants rarely talked about being fearful, their dangerous life worlds often left them in an uneasy place between hypervigilance and fatalism. The participant most literally in an uneasy place was Kilal, affiliated with the Crips but living in a neighborhood dominated by Bloods. He said,

I just watched my back, if they would see me going in and out the house. . . The projects was right across the street . . . so if I was on my way to the house, you could see me go in and out the house, though, so I would have certain times when I would come in and out of the house, that I know there won't be anybody around that would see me coming.

Kilal's belief that he needed to sneak in and out of his own house in order to avoid harm from a rival gang was an extreme example, as most participants felt relatively safe within a limited area surrounding their homes. Kilal described his apartment as surrounded by members of a gang that would be likely to attack him, so he attempted to keep a low profile when entering and exiting his home. Other young men, however, while avoiding admissions of fear, spoke of some abiding concerns.

Tim and Mark mentioned the importance of loyalty and of having friends whom they could trust. Simultaneously, Tim seemed concerned that there might be no safe haven even among those he held close. He had differentiated between the terms "friends" and "associates", saying friends would be with you whether you were right or wrong. Yet he also declared that "it can be your own friends are the ones that shoot you, kill you. Like the ones that know you the best are the one that get you, I'm sayin', and I was always told that, so that's what I used to go by." The fact that Tim's beloved stepfather had been shot and killed, as Tim presumed, by his associates in the drug trade, probably reinforced this lesson for him. Leon, too, while concerned about retaliation from people he had robbed, claimed he was also concerned about being shot by everyone else as well:

Leon: From strangers, it could be ev-, nowadays, it could be your friends that'll kill you. You never know; it could be a family member—I know somebody whose brother killed him, and friends kill friends all the time. So, like the ones you keep close to you be the ones that do you in, so, you gotta even watch out for them.

DM: So you kind of feel that at any given time you could be shot by almost anybody?

Leon: Anybody.

This fear of violent injury even from friends, as expressed by Tim and Leon, would seem to complicate the process of social bonding, at least for these two participants. Norman, another participant, may have been alluding to something similar when he said he limited his circle of friends to two or three close ones, in order to avoid “beef and drama”. Similarly, Quinto, explaining the reason he bought his first gun, said, “I started to see, like, that people, you can’t trust everybody you chill with”. I did not ascertain whether this was a widespread fear among these young men in the streets, but, as Tim was in a gang while Leon, Norman, and Quinto were not, gang membership did not seem to eliminate the concern entirely.

Anticipated early death

I explored the idea of present concerns versus future plans a little further with Tim, who had always done well in school and loved school sports, but had drifted away from school into the drug trade and “gangbanging”. I wanted to know why he had not found the “stay-in-school” success narrative persuasive:

DM: So I’m sure that people would say to you, like, “Stay in school, you’ll get money down the road”, but you didn’t want it down the road.

Tim: No. I couldn’t wait ‘til down the road. And down the road ain’t promised, to tell you the truth. You know how people say, “Here today, gone tomorrow”, you could be here today, gone today. You know what I’m saying? We could die at any minute, and that’s the only thing we are promised in this lifetime—death. So, uh,

DM: Did you really have that feeling, that anything could happen to you at any time?

Tim: Yeah! Really, that’s true! That’s reality to anybody, rather it’s from violence, murder, homicide, or heart attack or a stroke or somethin’. Anybody

can die at any time. So, I was always livin' with that state of mind. Like tomorrow is not promised.

Tim went on to describe how risky life was in his neighborhood, even for someone who was simply out walking his dog, and maintained that his view that he could die at any time affected his actions. His remarks raised the issue, also discussed in the literature, of whether his view that he could die at any time affected his offending, or his offending colored his view of his chances of dying. The question of how the idea of anticipated early death affects young people's decision-making has been the subject of considerable research. In their article, "Might Not be a Tomorrow", Timothy Brezina, Erdal Tekin, and Volkan Topalli (2009) used both national survey data and interviews with active street offenders to study the relationship between this sense of "futurelessness" and youth crime. While the authors found both a strong and positive association between the two, they believed the causal ordering is still somewhat unclear (Brezina, Tekin & Topalli, 2009:1119). While on the one hand it appears plausible that anticipated early death could result in what the authors call "a lack of investment in conventional pursuits, namely, those associated with delayed benefits, such as school or legitimate work", they point out that it is also possible that the increased risks to one's own personal safety inherent in offending may result in an increased belief in one's anticipated early death. Tim's remarks about not being able to "wait until down the road" would seem to suggest the former view, while Thomas's statement that "livin' this life" (the life of an armed robber) had prompted constant nightmares about being killed, would support the latter view. Also, as Brezina, Tekin and Topalli point out, anticipated early death may serve as another rationalization, or neutralization technique, to justify

offending. Finally, both offending and a belief in one's anticipated early death may mutually reinforce each other, resulting in a feedback loop.

The authors also suggested that a young person's acceptance of the possibility of early death may enhance his fearlessness during risky criminal pursuits (2009:1121). In this way, the knowledge of vulnerability can, paradoxically, lead to fearlessness, which provides a sense of freedom and (often criminal) agency. Brezina, Tekin, and Topalli likened the attitudes of their study participants to coping responses that arise during wartime, quoting war correspondent Robert Cox (2006:8) on "facing the daily threat of violent death":

Courage, I discovered while covering the 'dirty war' in Argentina, is a relatively simple matter of overcoming fear. I realized one day that I could deal with the idea that I would be killed, simply by accepting it as fact. The knot in my stomach loosened considerably after that. There was no reason to fear being killed once that reality had been accepted. It is fear itself that makes one afraid . . . Some Iraqi reporters explain that their ability to function is because they accept their inevitable date with death (Brezina, Tekin & Topalli, 2009:1116).

A similar acceptance of the real possibility of violent death seems the best explanation for the fearlessness with which the New Jersey participants embraced their street activities. While it could be argued that they did not discuss their fear because it would have been incompatible with their masculine street presentations to do so, it seems more likely that, had they not found an acceptable way of dealing with the high risk of death inherent in their lifestyle, they would have abandoned their street pursuits in favor of something less fraught with danger. Even while participants spoke of a gun as making them feel that nobody could touch them, they articulated a cognitive awareness that this was not the case, occasionally pointing out that one can be killed when carrying a gun, or even two guns, as in the case of one participant's cousin. A gun seemed to provide more

of an emotional “feeling” of invincibility than an actual belief that one could not be harmed and, combined with an acceptance of the knowledge that death was a possible outcome, gave many participants the fearlessness or “nerve” to engage in high-risk activities.

It is not difficult to understand how the belief that one is likely to die soon, whether accurate or not, can influence one’s actions. To the extent that such a belief allows young men to embrace a violent lifestyle that often kills them, it can be compared to Robert Merton’s concept of the self-fulfilling prophecy, prediction, or belief. While, strictly speaking, Merton defined the self-fulfilling belief as “producing the very circumstances erroneously assumed to exist” (Merton, 1964:128), in this case the belief in anticipated early death may serve to exacerbate a genuine risk of early death by leading young men to disregard such risks due to a fatalistic belief that they are likely to die early anyway. Their perceptions may thus lead them into interacting with their environment in such a way that their belief becomes a fact. As Merton explains, “if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (Merton, 1964:421). Merton distinguished between the self-fulfilling prophecy as a sociological dynamic and as an individual psychological dynamic, but I would suggest that for young men like the participants in the current study the two dynamics may blend to create a disastrous outcome that exists at both the individual and sociological level, with each dynamic reinforcing the other. The relationship between individual vulnerability and agency parallels that between social structure and agency, as the structural elements that result in the child’s vulnerability, such as poverty, dangerous neighborhoods, a hostile world, racial or ethnic discrimination, and a lack of opportunity, may lead the youth into both

offending and a belief in his early death. His actions thus make his dangerous environment even more dangerous for him.

Tim explained how he now viewed his encapsulation, to borrow a term from John Ogbu (2004), in the world in which he grew up:

Like, this is my own little theory. Like, what you know is what you're taught. We all come into this world as little babies, and we don't know anything but what our parents teach us and what we see. . . If you're born, and you're taught somethin', and that is all you know, which means you're BLIND to everything else, that is what you know. And that, eventually, is what you're gonna do. I'm sayin', if you was born, and your father or mother was to tell you strictly, "Sports, sports, sports", it's a good chance that you're gonna grow up and play some sports. . . 'Cause that's really what you were taught, and that's all you know, and you just blind to everything else, that's what you eventually gonna do. Like, probably like ninety percent of the time, that's what you're gonna do.

Tim believed that growing up in his neighborhood had left him "blind" to other ways of living. He said he was now able to see that he had sold drugs and joined a gang because that was the life he saw all around him, including at home, with a stepfather who sold drugs.

The related idea of fatalism, which has been noted by Brezina, Tekin, and Topalli (2009), among others, seems both to reflect and shape participants' limited sense of agency to influence their life worlds. Luke, at one point, explained his attraction to the street life by saying, "Some people like the good life, some people like the bad life." He was at the time incarcerated for an armed robbery with a gun, saying he had committed many. He also sold drugs and was a member of the Bloods. When I invited him to consider whether any other kind of excitement might have satisfied him, he said he used to play football, "but I dropped out." He continued, "You can't do much about it", because "not many people like me make it, so . . ." I tried to clarify whether he meant

that there was something specific to him that led him to believe he wouldn't "make it" in football, or whether he was speaking in more general terms:

Luke: I'm just sayin', like, people in gangs, doin' the things that I'm doin', out there, usually don't make it too far. Some of us don't even live past twenty-five, like. Some do, some don't.

DM: Well, does the idea of not living past twenty-five bother you?

Luke: I don't really know. I WANNA live past twenty-five, but if I can't I can't. If I don't, there's nuttin' I can do. The fact is, I didn't choose this life. This life chose me.

DM: Do you really think that? That's a good way of putting it. Why do you think the life chose you?

Luke: Because, I don't know. Everything happens for a reason. You know.

Luke seemed to view his life as tightly circumscribed both in terms of longevity and opportunity. When I asked whether he believed there was anything that might have made things different, Luke echoed many of his fellow participants by saying, "If I had a father figure, then maybe . . .", before trailing off. By declaring that "This life chose me", Luke seemed to suggest that fate had selected his path for him, and that he was powerless to change it: "There's nuttin' I can do."

Luke's remarks illustrate one reason why communicating victimization risk to young gang members and armed robbers can be such a hard sell. As Melde suggested (2009:802-803), these young men must first be convinced that they have the power to influence their probability of being victims of violence, and that their fate has not already been fully determined by outside forces. The four participants who maintained that "everything happens for a reason" seemed prepared, in some respects at least, to accept whatever fate held in store for them. While this stoic outlook may have been adaptive for coping with some of their difficult life circumstances, it could not do much for them as an

empowerment philosophy. In other words, it seems important for these young men to believe that they are capable and competent social actors who can create safer social spaces for themselves by making decisions about their hours, locations, associates, and activities that will keep them more distant from violence, despite the structure and street culture that surround them. When many aspects of their lives conspire to convince them that they are powerless, except to commit crimes, this belief in itself may be difficult to attain.

Beyond the challenge of convincing young offenders that they can reduce their probability of violent victimization by turning away from the street lifestyle, however, there is another obstacle. The many young men who embrace the street life must also find or be persuaded that the law-abiding life is worth living, as the myriad rewards and gratifications of the street continue to seem more appealing than the alternatives available to them. As discussed in previous chapters, the “stickiness” of the street is difficult to overcome, and several armed robbers described being emotionally addicted to armed robbery. For many young offenders, the prospect of an early death while enjoying the street life’s rewards is more palatable than the alternatives of having no income and little excitement, or a boring, low-paying job and no status.

What could have made a difference?

Participants most frequently named two things they believed could have made a difference in their lives: growing up in a better neighborhood, and having a positive father figure. Although I did not ask all participants this question, nine said that growing up in a different neighborhood would have helped, five cited having a dependable father or father figure, and four named both of these things. Having a job or having more money, staying in school and involved with school sports, and staying away from “that

group” also were mentioned. Tim, who was being raised by a working mother who, by his description, seemed very caring, also believed being able to talk at length with an adult who was not exhausted or pre-occupied would have been helpful:

Tim: And another thing, though. See, when you grow up, they’re, some people just need that counsel, like, somebody to talk to, because people don’t got that, you know what I’m sayin’? People don’t got, the truth is, people work, people got a life, people got bills to pay, come home from work, tired, ‘cause there’s a lot of things people do in their lifetime, and they don’t have a lot of time to actually sit there with their child, and talk to ‘em, see what I’m sayin’?

DM: Yep. Long, heavy talks.

Tim: Yeah. Long, heavy talks—emotional talks, you know what I mean? Because some people may be havin’ thoughts, and feelin’ some type of way, but another person to express their feelings to, and sometimes that may be all that people need! I’m saying, they don’t take that time, so, that could be another thing wrong.

I asked Tim whether he believed a mother could fulfill this role:

Tim: I think, naw, I’m not gonna say that it would take a man, it could take a female, too, but I think a man, it would be better. Because, only a man can teach a boy how to be a man. A female can’t teach you how to be a man because she’s not a man. All she can teach you is what she know about a man, and what she was taught. But to teach you, ain’t nobody can teach you how to be a man but a man. You know what I’m sayin’?

Tim’s career goal was to counsel kids who had been in trouble. He said he had never robbed anyone, but had sold drugs, carried a gun, and engaged in “gangbanging”. He had read a great deal, and spoke about race and class dynamics, diplomatically eliding the two by saying that lower- and middle-class Whites as well as Blacks were suffering from current economic policies. He did not have any children, but spoke of the plight of men who did:

Tim: When you think about it, though, when you’re in the hood, or you’re in the streets, let’s say, or, and you try, you try to get a job, and you know right now, the employment rate is, like, goin’ down. And you’re tryin’ to work. But you can’t. You can’t get a job. You can’t get hired. But you got kids, and you got a family. And you still have to support your family, and if you can’t get a job, and let’s say

that you even tried programs, and things that'll help you, and like nothin' is comin' through for you, but you still have to be that man and provide for your family, and if they're not givin' you no jobs, and they're not lettin' you work, or whatever, make a steady income, but they throw drugs at you, more than likely, you're gonna sell 'em.

Tim concluded, "So it was basically that for a lot of people, like all of them from where I'm from. That's what they know. They's father probably was gangbangin', their grandfather was probably in the streets, you know what I'm sayin'? It's like a cycle. Everybody goes through it." Tim's "little theory" combined social learning theory, a structural, opportunity-based argument, and a gender-based "man must provide" piece. Added to his earlier remark that once a young man gets into the streets, "a gun just comes" to him, Tim provided a cradle-to-early grave schema for the life of many young men in his city. Unfortunately, his little theory seemed all too accurate, with the possible qualification that for the participants in this study, the "man must provide" part seemed to begin while they were still boys under their mother's roof, either providing for themselves or contributing to the household at large precisely because their fathers did not provide for them.

Tim would soon be at a crossroads, re-entering the world as an adult looking for a legitimate and satisfying job, possibly helping youth in a community program, as many other ex-juvenile offenders have done. It was clear, however, that if he hit a dead end, particularly once he had children, he could easily return to the drug trade, where he believed his stepfather had been killed. It seemed that, for him, a job would make all the difference between a safe and productive life and the risk of being consumed by gun violence as his stepfather had been.

The programming in the juvenile institutions I visited recognizes environmental influences, as residents and staff alike are well aware that most of the residents come from similarly criminogenic environments. However, staff must, of necessity, emphasize the role of free will, or choice, in the future lives of the young men. As Goffman (1961) pointed out when discussing institutional discipline, “total institutions can little afford this particular kind of determinism.” Goffman continued:

Inmates must be caused to *self-direct* themselves in a manageable way, and, for this to be promoted, both desired and undesired conduct must be defined as springing from the personal will and character of the individual inmate himself, and defined as something he can himself do something about (Goffman 1961:87, emphasis in original).

Over fifty years later, Goffman’s observation remains pertinent. Moreover, the focus on self-determination applies not only to institutional discipline, but also to the rehabilitation philosophy, because the staff know only too well that most of the young men will be returning not to a changed world, but to the same world from which they came. This is true even if vocational, educational, and other resources are provided as part of the programming leading up to re-entry into the community. Accordingly Ernie, having consumed more than a year of institutional programming, made a point of adding, after citing his violent neighborhood as the source of his offending, “Yeah, but it’s also my choice. I could have stayed out of it. I controlled what I did . . . if I just chose the right things . . .”

The incarcerated young men are encouraged to reframe their perceptions of themselves as actors in the world who, within the constraints of their environments, can choose not to engage in gun violence. Most said they planned to do this by focusing on family, school, and work. Soon to be released, Ernie had a one year-old daughter that he

had never seen, and an uncertain relationship with the baby's mother. After I wished him the best of luck, he replied, "Well, I think that might be a little tough."

In fact, the good intentions of many young men did not long survive their return to the community. At one recruiting session for participants in this study, the assistant superintendent who introduced me to the young men recognized a resident who had successfully completed a transitional program and been released a few months earlier. When the young man lingered after the session to ask the superintendent a question, the superintendent asked him, "What happened? You were doing so good!" The resident replied that he had been arrested on a new gun charge. They both seemed distressed as the young man explained that he got into something on the street. Evidently whatever the problem was that the boy had encountered, a gun still seemed like the answer, as the street absorbed him once again.

From dreams to plans

Thomas told me, "I wanted to be a basketball player, but that dream wasn't strong enough. Me wantin' money was for me stronger than wanting to be a basketball player." His observation echoed that of Luke, cited earlier. Luke loved the excitement of playing football, but said, "Not too many people like me make it." Both turned to armed robbery, Thomas specializing in robbing drug dealers, and Luke just seeking good targets on the street.

Sports were the only aspiration any of the participants mentioned having prior to becoming offenders, although I didn't question them about their early goals. While a career as a professional athlete is not a low aspiration, neither is it a practical one for more than a very few young men. Jay MacLeod (1995) explored the idea of leveled aspirations among White boys living in a housing project in *Ain't No Makin' It*. As

MacLeod demonstrated, the environments in which some young men grow up tend to limit their dreams, as they see those around them constrained by their circumstances, and anticipate similar outcomes for themselves. The participants in this study seemed to come from environments that not only limited their dreams to unrealistic ones, but drew them into contexts that could prevent them from achieving those or any other dreams.

At least seven participants had been athletes during their student days, and clearly valued their fit and strong bodies as a “personal resource”, to use the words of Alford Young (2004). Whether on the football field, the basketball court, street fighting, or pulling off a robbery, they likely regarded the human capital represented by their bodies as “one of their best assets”, as Young said of the marginalized Black men he studied (Young 2004:174). Perhaps this was another reason so many participants claimed to eschew the use of hard drugs. Nick said proudly, as he admired his athletic physique reflected in a nearby window, “Do you know anybody who uses crack that looks like me?”

With so few other resources at their disposal, it is hardly surprising that participants would look to their athletic abilities as their hope for the future. Young described the value low-income young men placed on this material resource:

[F]or these men, the body played a particular role in their worldview. Focusing on the body allowed the men to highlight the single aspect of their lives that they could control and potentially master in the quest for upward mobility. Their body represented all that they could bring to the world of work . . . (Young 2004:174)

Yet the dream of being a professional athlete had slipped away as the more pressing concerns of daily life drew participants away from school and into the street. Moreover, their sharp minds, much in evidence during our interviews, ceased to be

trained for the types of jobs or careers that might provide them with a good income in today's job market.

During participants' "time out" from the streets, the adults around them sought to replace their old dreams, including those of being successful criminals, with new dreams suited to the world of work. For some young men, the focus was on academics, and for others, vocational training. Many participants had earned, or were earning, their high school diplomas at the institution, and these diplomas would bear the name of their home district high schools rather than that of the institution. This practice was in keeping with other traditional features of the juvenile justice system, such as the confidentiality of juvenile records, designed to facilitate the young men's access to future opportunities, unimpeded by the stigma of a public record of offending or incarceration. Others had earned their G.E.D.'s, and several participants in the transitional programs were already earning college credits at local county colleges. Some attended off-site vocational programs such as culinary training that could lead to jobs at those programs or elsewhere. Norman had transferred from one transitional facility to another specifically to take advantage of the culinary program available there. At the time of our interview, Vernon was due to be released in two weeks and planned to live with relatives in Georgia, where he hoped to be an EKG technician; he had recently completed an EKG course and obtained certification at a nearby county college. Tim hoped for employment, ideally in a sports-related program, where he could work with kids who had been in trouble. Kenneth, as discussed in Chapter 3, had received a job offer from his father to work in his construction business. Several residents were hoping their mothers could introduce them

to jobs at their current places of employment. Another thought he might work in sanitation, and sell some marijuana on the side.

These dreams were not as glamorous as the lives of professional athletes, nor as exciting as those of the characters they admired in films such as *Scarface* or *New Jack City*. Whether participants could embrace these less exciting lives depended partly on whether they could succeed in finding jobs in the legal economy, partly on whether they were genuinely ready to leave the street life behind, and partly on a host of other factors. Thomas sounded quite sincere when he said, in the quotation that opens this chapter, that he was tired of always looking over his shoulder, and was ready to abandon the perils of the street in favor of a more humdrum life.

He already had been shot, and now had a child to think about. Like the six other participants who were already fathers or about to be fathers, he probably wondered whether he would manage to be a better father to his daughter than his own father had been to him. On the subject of his daughter, he offered, somewhat tentatively, “So maybe, I’m hopin’ that she is gonna keep me honest when I get home.” But I thought he sounded rather dubious about even this aspiration, perhaps because he and the baby’s mother were no longer together.

Significance of the gun

In an environment where violence is acceptable, even encouraged, and guns are plentiful, these young men found that, in the short term at least, their many needs, for money, respect, protection, power, fun and excitement, could be met by guns. Guns, which could serve so many purposes, seemed to offer a ready pathway out of many of the participants’ wide-ranging troubles. As participants framed their worlds, they told me

how they attempted to take control of their circumstances as competent actors in a realm where money, guns, violence and drugs were closely intertwined.

These young men attempted to exchange their vulnerability for agency, their shame for dignity, and their dependence for independence. Even when discussing their violent offending, they often narrated themselves as protectors or providers, constructing themselves as capable men who met their many challenges head-on. In many of these projects, a gun, whether as a tool or a symbol, was key. The contexts that shaped participants' identities, and the emerging identities that in turn shaped their contexts, created an important place for the gun in their lives.

This chapter explored some of the negative outcomes, such as incarceration, being shot, and living in fear of retaliation or other violent victimization that participants faced in the course of, and as a result of, their street lifestyles. It also examined participants' reflections upon what might have made a difference in their lives before they began offending, and considered their plans for the future upon their release. Participants most frequently offered that growing up in a better neighborhood and having a father might have kept them away from delinquency. It seemed that even if some had tired of the risks inherent in the street lifestyle and had benefited from the institutional programming and mentoring at the Juvenile Justice Commission, their futures remained quite uncertain. One important factor in determining whether these young men could remain law-abiding and free for the rest of their lives would likely be their ability to find legal jobs with which to support themselves. Nineteen participants explicitly cited money as a motivation for their offending, whether committing robberies or selling drugs. An additional three participants reported selling drugs but did not explicitly cite money as the

reason, although an economic motive would seem to be a strong possibility. If they could acquire a meaningful stake in the legal economy, participants might conclude that the attractions of the street lifestyle and the rewards of illegal gun use were no longer worth their attendant risks.

Chapter Summary

This chapter discusses ways in which gun possession and use, while appearing to participants as an adaptive response in the short term, resulted in various negative outcomes, or what Spencer calls unproductive coping outcomes. Some participants found that their violent offending had serious repercussions aside from their current status as incarcerated persons. The three participants who had been shot all related their injuries to their own activities, two of them specifying that the shootings were in retaliation for their own violence, and the third saying more vaguely that “what goes around comes around”. Two participants, including one who had been shot, wore bullet-proof vests and reported that they were rarely free of the fear of violent retaliation. Earlier quantitative studies support their fears, with findings that gun-carrying youth, gang-involved youth, and delinquent youth are all more likely to suffer violent victimization, including death, than others not involved in similar activities. Participants reflected on what might have prevented them from offending, with growing up in a better neighborhood and having a positive and supportive father figure the most frequent responses. They shared their plans for the future, hoping for legal work that would help to keep them from being re-incarcerated. As nineteen out of twenty-five participants cited money as a motivation for at least some of their offending, and an additional three participants reported selling drugs, their belief that a legal source of income could help to keep them safe and free from further arrest appears warranted. For this group of participants, the street lifestyle,

with its attendant gun possession and use, provided only a short-term solution to their many challenges, and presented multiple hazards of its own.

Chapter Seven

Conclusion: “A Gun is a Key to Anything You Wanna Do”

Many of the questions that this study sought to address appear very concrete and straightforward: How did participants acquire guns? Why did they acquire them? What did they do with them? As participants discussed these matters, it became apparent that they and I drew upon dissimilar discourses to frame their worlds. For me, as researcher, the discourse of childhood vulnerability and agency--what Oswell (2013) refers to in the delinquency context as the couplet of “dangerous child”-“child in danger” (Oswell 2013:160)--was initially salient and consequently framed my approach to the problem and the problem itself. For the incarcerated young men with whom I spoke, a different discourse and framework seemed to be operative. This was the discourse of the agency and hence power conferred by the gun. As a generally law-abiding, and indeed once law-enforcing, middle class professional, a firearm from my perspective indicated and perhaps invited trouble. For these youth who oriented themselves to a particular notion of the “street,” guns offered protection and a measure of status. The two perspectives coalesced in this project to suggest that for the adolescent participants, guns were often conceptually situated at the place where vulnerability meets, and is transformed into, agency; that is, “A gun is a key to anything you wanna do.”

The current incarnation of the young, male gunman that is the subject of this study is often viewed by those outside of his community as something of a new or alien development perhaps because he is likely to be a young man of color. Yet, the contemporary gun-wielding male arguably represents the latest manifestation of a long American tradition of guns and gun violence, with roots in the mythology of the American West, and even earlier (Slotkin 1992). Slotkin (1992) conceptualized his

Gunfighter Nation study in terms of the American frontier as myth, metaphor, and reality. He noted that upon the closing of the frontier just before the turn of the twentieth century, there was widespread concern about how and where the young men of America would find opportunity; that is, how they would be able to create a social and economic space for themselves.

Both the urban gangsters of the early twentieth century and the modern juvenile “gangstas” seem to have turned inward toward the home fronts of their own cities, making a frontier of illegal opportunity in their own communities. Unlike the historical and literary “social bandits” of the nineteenth century, they take aim, not at the moneyed classes or their institutions, but at their own neighbors, who are unlikely to be much better off than they are. Viewed within this tradition, the youth toting a firearm can be regarded as addressing his socially and economically powerless position by using a gun to get what he wants and thereby fitting into, rather than challenging, an American cultural script for appropriate male action. Guns allow him to get things done.

This figure can also be seen through the lens of mid-nineteenth century English formulations of delinquency, as an outgrowth of the traditional social problem of the urban child who takes care of himself through illegal means (Oswell 2013:146-147). As Sampson and Laub (1993:3) demonstrated, race and drugs are but the most recent factors to appear salient in connection with juvenile delinquency. Philippe Bourgois (1995) noted, with regard to the illegal drug trade that serves as the basis of much of the inner-city’s underground economy as well as its street culture, that “illegal enterprise, however, embroils most of its participants in lifestyles of violence, substance abuse, and internalized rage” (Bourgois 1995:9). He continued:

Contradictorily, therefore, the street culture of resistance is predicated on the destruction of its participants and the community harboring them. In other words, although street culture emerges out of a personal search for dignity and a rejection of racism and subjugation, it ultimately becomes an active agent in personal degradation and community ruin.

Bourgois entitled his 1995 book *In Search of Respect*, and I argue that the young participants in the current study, as they searched for a social and economic place for themselves, similarly embroiled themselves and their communities in a continuing ruinous process. As the young men took what they described as the obvious path in front of them, often armed with guns, they found not a way out of their subjugation, but injury and confinement.

It is unclear from this study the extent to which any of these men understood themselves through these perspectives. What is clear is that the current combination of economic hardship, racism and geographical concentration has proved especially deadly for many young men and also for others, and that guns serve as a way through, a vehicle for, their life worlds as they see them.

Spencer's PVEST as a frame for analysis

In terms of Spencer's Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory, participants explained how the risks and challenges presented by their environments created stress for them, to which they responded in various ways. Tony, who had moved to the city from the suburbs when he was ten, was the only participant who felt so stressed by the ambient level of violence in his relatively new neighborhood that he believed he needed a gun for protection even though he was not involved in street crime. Most of the other participants found gun possession and use to be a helpful coping strategy for their lives in the street. The perceived positive outcomes from having a gun

encouraged their further gun use. For example, Quinto's gratification at being able to retaliate for an insult by shooting the other person's car helped to reinforce his belief that with a gun, he didn't have to tolerate slights to his dignity. Many participants coped with money pressures by selling drugs, and this activity provided sufficient rewards that they continued doing it. Kevin said, "When I saw how fast the money come, I stopped askin' my mom for a dollar—I had dollars in my pocket." Many spoke with pleasure of the "fast money" and how much they enjoyed it, even to the point where this fast money disincentivized lawful employment. Naheem came to feel that his legal job was a waste of his time, as he could have been selling drugs instead. Ernie and Xavier coped with disappointments in the legal job market by turning (or returning) to drug sales and robbery. As Ernie described his feelings after losing his job, he thought, "Fuck it, I'll sell drugs; that's what I'm good at." Xavier described a similar thought process when his job applications netted no results and his father repeatedly let him down. He said his view was, "That's all right—I'll get it myself", and he did.

But these coping strategies in turn gave rise to the perceived need for a gun, as the risks inherent in the drug trade or other street activities prompted a desire for protection. Participants endorsed the effectiveness of this coping strategy, with two of them saying they felt like Superman when they had a gun, as though nobody could harm them. Others expressed similar sentiments, saying they felt protected.

As these strategies proved effective, they became stable responses for many participants, and they embraced the identity of the gun-carrying adolescent. Nate's observation, "Why wouldn't I have a gun?" may have summed it up best.

Chapter six discussed some of the negative outcomes of participants' activities and their gun violence. In terms of Spencer's PVEST, their incarceration itself must be viewed as a negative outcome. As Spencer points out, her model is a recursive one that "recycles" throughout the life course, as people "encounter new risks and stressors, try different coping strategies, and redefine how they and others view themselves" (Spencer et al., 2003:134). For the participants in this study, the risks and stressors they encounter upon their release may not be new ones, but rather the same ones they faced before their incarceration. Even if they have embraced new coping strategies while in custody, these strategies may not withstand the pressures of their familiar environments. One example discussed earlier was that of the young man who did well in his transitional program, but was back with the Juvenile Justice Commission on a new gun charge after he got into something on the street, evidently much to his own disappointment as well as that of the JJC staff. Another was a young man I encountered while observing a focus group at a detention center. He was returning to the custody of the Juvenile Justice Commission for a second term, with a recently acquired bullet in his leg. His view was that, in order for adolescents like him to make a change, they would need to be able to find jobs when they came home; otherwise the same economic pressures that attracted them to illegal activities in the first place would do so again, as they had with him.

Main findings

The overarching theme emerging from the interviews was the multiplicity of meanings that guns held for these young men. Guns meant protection for both the participant and others, in fantasy as well as reality. One participant described how he had wished for a gun as little boy, so that he might protect his mother from her abusive

boyfriend. Another used a gun in an attempt to make someone stop harassing his younger female cousin. A third participant was shot because he had beaten up his assailant's girlfriend. Among the valuable functions of guns were not only protection or defense, but getting and holding onto money, enforcing respect, feeling powerful, or simply enjoyment. Street fighting, sometimes in gangs, was also an arena for gun use, in which issues of respect, power, fun and excitement were again implicated. Many participants admired and even fetishized guns as consumer objects, saying they "loved" guns, or were "fascinated" or "infatuated" with them. Guns sometimes figured prominently in participants' identity processes, making them feel "more masculine" or "powerful". Such descriptions highlighted the ways in which gun possession could include an element of embodiment, as the young men incorporated the gun's perceived strength. By appropriating the power of the gun, participants ceased to feel "naked" or as though they could be harmed.

Guns also symbolized the negative aspects of participants' life worlds. One youth explicitly identified early gun exposure as a marker of a less-than-ideal childhood, saying, "If you don't see a gun between [ages] eight and twelve, you've had a good life." A young drug dealer who preferred not to carry a gun (although his partner carried one) called guns "lethal" and "serious", saying, "Takin' lives and all, I ain't into that."

Their pathways to gun acquisition and use show how participants both were shaped by and shaped their ecologies. The typical participant was pushed and pulled to the streets by economic and social forces. Many responded to the economic pressures on their families, usually headed by their mothers, by seeking income to provide for their own needs or to contribute to the household at large. Even those participants who made

forays into the world of legal work ultimately found themselves participating in the illegal economy. These processes occurred as participants began to construct a masculine identity that precluded their financial dependence on their struggling mothers. The dynamic of the child provider with an illegal source of income proved troublesome for many participants and parents, who negotiated this terrain between parent and child in a variety of ways. Participants sometimes conveyed both their own and their parents' squeamishness regarding this topic when discussing it with me. Relations of dependence and independence, responsibility and irresponsibility, and parental authority and adolescent autonomy were clearly implicated, while pride and shame seemed to commingle as participants described their roles as providers. The streets were also a powerful source of social attractions, and the combination of social and economic inducements often defeated the school ambitions of even good students. Ten participants reported that they were gang members and an eleventh was "affiliated", but each said his gang involvement pre-dated his incarceration.

Participants who had grown up in the neighborhoods where they were arrested viewed their surroundings as "normal" or "regular". The surrounding violence became normalized for them, and they said they did not feel the need for a gun for protection until they were "in the street lifestyle". The pathway to gun acquisition, then, led through a period of pre-gun offending, such as selling drugs, group fights, or committing strong-arm robberies. At some point most participants perceived that their new "street" ecologies exposed them to a level of risk of violent victimization which exceeded that to which they were accustomed. This was when they usually became interested in acquiring a gun, and they reported no difficulty in doing so. Guns could be found, borrowed,

received as gifts, or purchased, often with the aid of “old heads” in the neighborhood. These “old heads”, sometimes just a few years older than the participants, were men who had street knowledge which they were pleased to share with participants, sometimes gratuitously in the manner of mentors, and sometimes with an eye toward recruiting them into their own enterprises.

Some participants expanded their gun use from defensive to aggressive uses, committing armed robberies, engaging in gun battles in the street, or using a gun to avenge slights to their individual or family honor. As they described the eruption of several violent conflicts in detail, it was clear that having a gun made it too easy for participants to resort to lethal violence. In addition, several described how they suppressed any feelings of empathy for armed robbery victims, noting that acknowledging such feelings would interfere with the project of robbing them. Others said they had become emotionally addicted to committing armed robberies in the same way that a drug addict needed his drugs. Both gun violence and violence in general could produce gratification beyond simple monetary rewards, although some participants maintained that it was all about the money. Certainly money, guns, autonomy, and conceptions of masculinity were intertwined in participants’ discussions of their violent offending.

Participants suffered other repercussions as a result of their street activities, in addition to the loss of liberty that they all shared. Three had been shot, each attributing the shooting to his own actions, and two, including one of those who had suffered gunshot injuries, routinely wore bullet-proof vests to protect themselves from retaliation

by former victims. Many reported that friends and family members had been killed as a result of “living this life”.

The juveniles who were attracted to the street lifestyle by its economic and social rewards often discovered that they needed guns to feel protected there. The guns themselves also held multiple attractions for these youth, as well as facilitating the escalation of conflicts to lethal levels. Juveniles in the streets were well aware that they could become targets for retaliation by others. This knowledge led some participants to believe that their incarceration had happened “for a reason”, with one participant saying, “One of those bodies out there could have been mine”.

Policy and interventions

One of the strengths of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory, especially as applied in intervention frameworks such as J. David Hawkins and Richard F. Catalano’s (1992) “Communities That Care” model, is its ability to illustrate that interventions and policies intended to address public health problems such as youth gun violence must take place at multiple levels. Interventions at the level of individual young people are critical, but the spheres of family, neighborhood and school must also be addressed. Moreover, the broader cultural and economic structures that produce and maintain the environments in which youth gun violence thrives are likely to continue generating juvenile gun offenders as long as they remain unchanged.

At the individual level, a myriad of interventions throughout the private, non-profit, and public sectors proliferate, often including collaborations among multiple sectors and agencies. Individual young people can be self-referred, court-referred, or can connect with interventions and services in a number of other ways. The important point

for this discussion is that it is sometimes apparent that an individual child or adolescent can benefit from some type of intervention, and people are often able to mobilize and address the issues of an individual young person, with varying degrees of success. As both private and public funders now tend to demand an evaluation piece for programs and projects, the complementary trends toward evidence-based practice in program design and evaluation of outcomes should promote both new and established efforts that show the most promise in addressing the needs of individual adolescents. Current initiatives directed toward young offenders, and those considered to be at risk of offending, span the continuum from prevention to re-entry, and feature programming specific to young people's needs at all points in between.

As this study has shown, some boys join gangs as early as age nine, and handle guns even earlier. Recent initiatives in some locales have included programs for children prior to the third grade level intended to divert them from involvement with gangs and guns. For adolescents, jobs are of paramount importance as alternatives to the street economy. Both the money itself and the pride of being a provider and accomplishing something are clearly central to their survival as well as their identities. This study demonstrates that many young men are determined to obtain money, and will do so in whatever way they can. Moreover, many of those who are making money in the streets are likely to feel that they need a gun, either for protection or for other reasons. Jobs or careers that provide economic security as well as a sense of dignity and accomplishment can therefore be viewed as a crucial form of crime prevention, and worth the investment they may require. This investment is likely to include job training and placement

programs. While some young men may choose the “fast money” of the street over a legal job, at least for a time, it is critical that legal employment be a real option.

When such job programs are already established, it is important for program directors to be attentive to the needs of their clients and be prepared to adjust their programming to respond to those needs. For example, interventions that begin as job training programs may, of necessity, grow into more holistic ones addressing broader issues. One program in Camden, New Jersey, called Hopeworks, recently expanded its focus beyond training in computer skills in order to better accomplish its original mission. After exploring why some of its young clients who had received job training and been placed with employers did not succeed, Hopeworks began to address issues of trauma and loss, similar to those described by participants in the current study. Program staff believed these unaddressed issues were interfering with the ability of their clients to maintain the types of work relationships and habits necessary to sustain their employment. It is too soon to tell whether this innovation will improve their clients’ outcomes, but we may learn that it is important to incorporate such a component when readying youth with similar experiences for the world of work. The same program has also expanded to address a need of some of its clients who are starting college, by providing housing in a supportive environment where residents can not only live and study, but also continue to access the support staff of the Hopeworks program. By identifying and addressing multiple barriers to success, this program can strengthen its clients for both work and higher education. Funders therefore should be open to the potential of flexible and iterative program designs that respond to the needs of young clients as they become apparent.

The domain of the family, too, is often the focus of intervention efforts. In fact, as discussed earlier, “the parents” are often blamed for all the problems of an offending adolescent. Many times the parents themselves are crying out to the family court for help, as they feel their parenting relationship with their adolescent child spinning out of control. The experiences of the participants in the current study suggest that one area of family dynamics relevant to gun offending may be the pressure many young men feel to take on a provider role. The assumption of such a role may have unintended consequences within the family, such as subversion of parental authority, or inversion of power relations between parent and child. These problems may often remain unresolved, only to surface when the power struggle results in a crisis that brings the family into court. Multi-systemic therapy is one approach to problem-solving that provides intensive family therapy in the home setting. It is designed to build upon the existing strengths within the family across a number of domains. By helping the family to understand some of the processes that lead to shifts in power dynamics and roles, such interventions may assist family members in addressing some of the relational issues that are occurring within the home. The importance of strengthening families at multiple points, including during the period when a juvenile offender is incarcerated and upon his re-entry into the community, has become the focus of increased attention in recent years. Still, there remain many gaps in supportive services for families of court-involved youth, which need to be addressed in order to reduce the adolescent’s risk of re-offending. Among the participants in the current study were a young man who came out of detention and did not feel that he could go home, one who couldn’t find enough food to eat at either of his parents’ residences, and one who said he “don’t really got no family”.

Much violence among young men plays out in neighborhood and school contexts, and participants in this study described how violent events that erupted among adolescents in the streets often spilled over into school. At times these events were the result of such longstanding “beefs” that participants could not even remember what had started the hostilities. The group dynamics that spark violence among young men present themselves as inviting points of intervention for community initiatives, nowadays often in partnership with academia. Several promising models have been identified to intervene either before or after violent events occur, in an effort to prevent further bloodshed in the neighborhood. David Kennedy’s 2011 book, *Don’t Shoot*, describes one such model, which mobilizes various community resources, including street workers and mothers, to interrupt patterns of escalating retaliation. Another model takes advantage of the hospitalization period following shootings as the point of intervention with adolescent victims, exploiting both the patient’s temporary status as a captive audience and his acute awareness, at that point, of his vulnerability to injury. Schools, too, have initiated programs designed to interrupt violence. Among the strengths of creative approaches such as these, which capitalize on relationships built between adolescents and caring adults in the community, is that they can present young people with palatable alternatives to “shooting it out”.

As important as efforts in all the previous spheres are, it is the supply of and the demand for guns that enable and generate juvenile gun violence. Not surprisingly, these have been the most intractable challenges to address. Whether we believe that “guns kill people” or that “people with guns kill people”, it is the combination of the two that has created the serious problem of gun fatalities and injuries, as Philip Cook and Jens Ludwig

(2000) have pointed out. One line of macro-level reform initiatives seeks to reduce the number of gunshot injuries and fatalities by influencing the availability of guns. Cook and colleagues (1995, 2000, 2007) have investigated both legal and underground gun markets, seeking to identify the points at which it might be feasible to reduce the supply of guns that reach the hands of gun offenders (Cook, Molliconi, & Cole 1995; Cook & Ludwig 2000; Cook, Ludwig, Venkatesh, & Braga 2007). Supply-side approaches could be a significant part of the solution, although they are beyond the scope of this dissertation.

We know that the demand for guns among juvenile offenders is robust, and participants in the current study have abundantly demonstrated that they have no difficulty in acquiring them. In view of this reality, macro-level approaches that address the demand side of juvenile gun acquisition are critical if anything is to change. This study has confirmed, using data from participants with documented gun possession, what Ash and colleagues (1996) found in their study of detained youth: that juveniles with guns will often use them for more than protection, even if protection was the original reason for acquiring them. Taken together with the findings of Webster, Gainer, and Champion, (1993), Vaughn, Howard, and Harper-Chang (2006), and Dijkstra (2010) that the juveniles who acquire guns and other weapons tend to be those who engage in assaultive behavior, it is plain why juvenile gun possession is so deadly.

Macro-level changes, of course, are not likely to be quick fixes. Nonetheless, approaches that confine their efforts at reducing juvenile gun violence to those which focus on individuals, families, and even neighborhoods or schools are limited in the sense that they do not get to the root of the problem. To the extent that media and cultural

representations of gun violence have encouraged young people to acquire and use guns, efforts to change the image of gun violence could be worthwhile. Joy Osofsky (1997) argued that de-glamorizing the violence that is currently so prevalent in media representations could be one way to reduce violence and victimization (Osofsky 1997:328). As she points out, media campaigns have been effective in changing public perceptions of such public health issues as seatbelt usage and cigarette smoking. In fact, public service announcements have recently begun to appear on television showing a person holding a handgun, along with the message, delivered by an African American male on camera, that violence is “uncool”. If the association of guns with masculinity and power, so long fortified in American culture, could be subverted, perhaps the allure of guns for powerless young men could be weakened. This is a tall order, however, as the experience of these young men, according to the participants in this study, has largely confirmed them in the belief that a gun confers power, at least in the short term.

Yet, even changing the image of guns and gun violence seems easier than changing the conditions that make guns so attractive to these participants. Middle-class young men soon outgrow their boyish desire to play with toy guns. They generally leave their interest in guns behind, except perhaps for sporting uses and home protection, as they turn to more adult pursuits that lead them toward their life goals. The participants in this study, however, found guns more, not less, relevant to their lives as they entered adolescence. The grown-up pursuits to which they turned, such as making money in the streets, exposed them to levels of danger that made having a gun seem sensible.

As Carter (2005) demonstrated in her study of African American and Latino adolescents, the more socially isolated her subjects and their parents were, the less likely

the youth were to feel connected to conventional routes to success, such as school achievement (Carter 2005:143-153). Yet, as Oswell (2013) points out, these isolated and alienated youth embrace mainstream American values, including consumerism, in a “whole-hearted” and “desperate” way. This combination of disconnectedness from the means to prosperity and connection to its material objectives leaves these young men in the position of being “microconsumers”, simultaneously pursuing mass-produced goods and excluded from real wealth (Oswell 2013:155). The money that participants acquired through their drug sales and robberies bought them clothing and jewelry, but could not lift them or their families out of their poverty. On the contrary, as Loeber and colleagues (1999) found, the gun-carrying young men from the poorest families in their study were the most likely to be killed in the course of their delinquent activities. In Merton’s terms, the profound attenuation between culturally sanctioned goals and the perceived permissible means of attaining these goals has resulted in an unstable society, certainly in the neighborhoods where these participants reside (Merton 1957:135). The normlessness that pervades these neighborhoods can likewise be viewed in the context of genuine privation, which participants sometimes sought to remedy by using the same means that the adult men around them employed.

The effects of social structures, such as the connections between race, place, and privilege, and between poverty and family structure, often left participants feeling that having a gun was the best way to attain control over their life worlds. These conditions are likely to continue generating juvenile gun offenders unless and until they are addressed.

Limitations and directions for future research

This particular group of offenders had no adjudications or convictions for homicide or shootings, so we did not have the opportunity to discuss, for example, either the antecedents or the embodied experiences of committing such acts, except in non-specific ways concerning shootings that were not the subject of arrests. Marie Rosenkrantz Lindegaard (2010), on the other hand, interviewed a South African young man who had recently been released following a five-year term for murder. This youth provided a vivid description of his recollection of the bodily experience of committing a violent assault, recounting the feelings of power and relief that accompanied such acts. He also described his emotional state during the commission of the murder as “a very dark place” that he did not want to get into again (Lindegaard 2010:114). Among the questions that remain for me are the extent to which juvenile gun offenders who have been adjudicated, or convicted in adult courts, for the gravest offenses had different early life experiences, adolescent activities, world views, and identities than the participants in the current study. In the alternative, would the primary difference be simply the fortuitous circumstance that they had been arrested for offenses where someone was seriously injured or killed, whereas the participants in this study may have committed similar offenses but avoided arrest?

Another potential limitation is that only three participants in this study were still under eighteen years of age at the time of their interviews. It is unclear whether a younger group of participants would paint a different picture. I was unable to overcome the hurdle of parents who did not return consent forms. Nor was I able to gain access to the parents in order to attempt to procure their consent. It is to be hoped that a more nuanced

way of balancing the competing rights of the parents to control access to their child, the institution's duty as custodian of the child to perform a gatekeeping function as regards the parents, and the child's right to make his voice heard in interview studies can be found in future projects.

This study leaves many other questions to be answered by future research. For example, I did not examine why some participants embraced the gun's importance to their identities while others explicitly rejected such a discourse, insisting that the gun was nothing more to them than a tool. In addition, I was left to infer many things about parental attitudes from their sons' accounts. A research project exploring issues raised in this study from the parents' perspectives could be enlightening.

Looking back, looking ahead

As a prosecutor of juveniles in a blighted city, I would often think about the young people growing up in its bleakest neighborhoods as I drove home to a comfortable suburb. Some were detained awaiting trial or sentencing for various offenses, while others were incarcerated or recently released. Among other things, I wondered how they experienced their surroundings. During the course of this study, I deepened my understanding of the ways in which participants interpreted their life worlds and took action based on those interpretations. I learned that, both in their home communities and in their conversations with me, they were determined to show that they were capable actors who met the challenges they faced. Their coping strategies, however, included embracing the street lifestyle, which entailed acquiring and using guns.

It would be a mistake to view contemporary gun violence by these young men of color as something outside of our home-grown American culture. These participants may

be alienated, but they are not alien. Rather, as on the earlier frontier, young men today use guns to defend against threats, to provide for self and family, to dominate territory by displacing others, and more. The illegal means they use to construct a social and economic space for themselves make gun use seem sensible to them, if not to us.

I embarked on this study with the belief that guns were dangerous for juveniles, likely to result in their injury, death, or incarceration. The participants shared with me their belief that guns were useful to them in many ways: for protection, fun, money, respect, and power. I learned that, in their worlds, there is ample evidence to support both perspectives. The challenge for those who envision a future without epidemic gun violence by and against young people is to create an environment where young men will not believe a gun is the key to anything they want to do.

What is missing in the public conversation about gun violence in poverty stricken areas is any attempt to delve into how guns and gun use can “make sense” to those delivered to these situations. To attempt to do so, as I have in this study, can subject the researcher to vague suspicion of somehow accepting the violence as inevitable.

APPENDICES

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Appendix A
Interview Protocol

Where are you from?

How long have you been here?

What are you here (incarcerated) for?

Can you tell me about how that happened? Walk me through it?

Is this your first time at JJC?

If not, how many times before have you been committed?

Where were you (housed) during your previous commitments?

How old are you now?

When was the first time you remember seeing a gun?

Where was it?

How did you feel about it?

Could you tell me about the first time you had a gun (if had one)?

What kind was it?

Where did it come from?

When did it happen?

How did it happen?

Why did you have it?

(If a prompt is necessary ask, was it for work? [i.e., drug dealing], to commit some other crime, general protection, to be part of group, to feel a certain way?)

What did you think about it?

Did it change how you felt?

About yourself? How?

About your surroundings? How?

Who were you living with when you were arrested?

What was your neighborhood like?

Did you feel safe inside your house?

Did you feel safe once you stepped outside of your house?

What was school like for you?

(At the time of your acquisition of a gun), what was happening for you at school?

What else was happening with your life then? (In addition to asking about school, ask about work, any community groups, family, social life, etc.)

How did your school experiences, community groups, child welfare involvement, etc., affect you?

Were you in a gang?

Have you ever been shot? Shot at?

Have friends of yours been shot?

Have you ever been robbed?

Could you tell me about the first time you used a gun?

How did you use it? (threaten, shoot, show off? something else?)

What kind was it?

Where did it come from?

When did it happen?

How did it happen?

What did you think about it?

Did it change how you felt?

About yourself? How?

About your surroundings? How?

Have you ever shot at anybody?

(If he made money from his offending) What did you spend your money on?

Did your family know where your money came from?

Did you ever have another gun charge (or offense) before this one?

(If yes) Did that experience change the way you felt about having/using a gun? If so, how?

Does your current charge/incarceration change the way you feel about having/using a gun? If so, how? What about the experience made you see things differently?

What kinds of things about a gun make it more attractive to you?

Do you think there was a time when something could have been done to keep you from wanting/needing a gun, or using one?

(If yes) When would that time have been?

What do you think might have made a difference?

(If used a gun) What would it have taken for you to have walked away at that point? (before using the gun)

What do you think could keep you from coming back here? (being re-incarcerated? reoffending?)

Is there anything I left out that you would like to tell me about?

Thank you, and so on.

Appendix B

Demographic and Data Snapshot of 25 Participants

Caveat: Some categories are indicated by minimums due to incomplete data.

Current offense: Unlawful possession of a gun - 9

Armed robbery with a gun – 7

Armed robbery with a gun, but he was the lookout – 1

Armed robbery with a BB gun – 1

Aggravated assault with a gun (beating, not shooting) - 1

Attempted murder with a knife – 2

Armed robbery with a knife - 1

Strong-arm robbery (robbery without a weapon) – 1

Aggravated Assault with a car (boy denies the assault) – 1

Drug distribution (previous adjudication for robbery) - 1

Age - Mode 18, Mean 18

Race - 22 African American, 2 Latino, 1 self-described as half African American, half Latino

Family composition - 17 lived with mothers, 3 with aunts, one with grandmother, 3 with mother and father, and one with father

Had a gun – 19 participants said they had guns, 1 had a BB gun, and 5 said they did not have guns, even though some had been adjudicated delinquent for gun possession

Money motive - 19 participants said at least some of their offending was motivated by the desire to obtain money, and an additional 3 said they sold drugs, without explicitly citing money as a motive.

Previous juvenile court history – At least 18 participants had previous charges

Sold drugs – At least 17 participants sold drugs.

Robberies – 13 participants said they had committed robberies

Shot a gun – 10 participants said they had used a gun to shoot, and 4 preferred not to say

Shot at a person – 7 participants said they had shot at a person, and 4 preferred not to say

Gangs – 10 participants said they were gang members, and an 11th said he was “affiliated”. All said their gang involvement pre-dated their incarceration.

Robbery victim – At least 6 participants had been robbed.

Family/friends shot – At least 14 participants had family members or friends who had been shot

Been shot at – At least 12 participants had been shot at

Gunshot wound – 3 participants had been shot

Bad neighborhood – At least eighteen participants characterized their neighborhoods as bad, but only one participant said he obtained a gun because of his neighborhood.

Had children - At least five participants already had children, and two more were expectant fathers.

Work history – At least six participants had earned money legally at some point.

Sports - At least 7 participants had played on school sports teams, and one of these also played in a traveling league. An additional participant played at the Boys and Girls Club.

Appendix C

Background information/sketches on named participants

David Quinn – 18 year-old African American currently incarcerated for gun possession, a .38 caliber revolver. He said that as he entered his teens, he began to feel that he was too old to ask his mother for money “to live his life with”, and went to the streets to make money for himself. He said he didn’t feel a pressing need for money, “but everybody has wants, so that’s about it.” He said he was speaking of clothes, shoes, even a car, if he had the money. He has been shot at, but not hit, in connection with his street activities, which he declined to describe in detail, but he said it involved doing things he shouldn’t have been doing. He has had a number of guns, some of which he paid cash for, and some of which were just handed to him. He didn’t always carry his gun, and didn’t carry it when he went to parties or even walking around in the city, just when he was doing those certain things. He also declined to say whether he ever felt the need to shoot his gun. He actually lived in a quiet town, but went to the nearby city, where he had relatives, to engage in his illegal money-making activities. From around ages 7 through 16, he played football, as a linebacker, and basketball. Once his street activities became a priority, he stopped going to school and stopped playing sports. He was not in a gang, and lived with his mother, his grandfather, and one sibling.

Earl Quaid – 19 year-old African American incarcerated for armed robbery, for which he was a lookout. He said he did not enter the house with his two adult co-defendants who had the gun. He had previously been incarcerated for distribution of cocaine. He was not in a gang. He lived with his mother and younger sister. His father lived elsewhere, but was involved in his life. Earl said he did not have or use guns, but said

those around him who sold drugs did have them. He would use his money from selling cocaine to buy clothes and sneakers and “enjoy himself”, and would also save his money to buy more drugs to sell. He said he still has some of the money “stashed”. He did well in school, and said he would go to school and then go out and sell drugs. He said he feels badly about embarrassing his father, who runs a basketball league “trying to help troubled kids stay off the street, and he can’t help his own kid.” He also feels badly about embarrassing his mother, who would have gotten him anything he wanted. He just graduated from a program at the local county college, and says he’s going to culinary school upon his release.

Ernie Madison – 19 year-old African American, a member of Crips gang since he was nine years old, and lived with his mother and her fiancé. He is currently incarcerated for gun possession, and said he has previous adjudications for armed robbery with a knife, burglary, criminal trespass and drug distribution. He has a child. He grew up in a rough part of the city, full of gangs, drugs, and guns. He started selling crack in seventh grade, but says he liked school, and did well in middle school and high school. However, he said his high school was a dangerous place that would make you want to bring a gun to school. He said, “Everybody want money. . . If you get it when you’re home, if you get a lot of it, ain’t nothing to run away from.” He used the money he obtained for “anything I wanted. Like clothes, food, whatever. I ain’t gotta ask my mother for nothin’.” He has shot at people, and has had many friends and relatives who have been shot. He has had a number of guns, but only purchased two of them. He talked about different kinds of guns that he likes. He had a legal job at Victoria’s Secret, but when he lost that job, he became “demoralized” and resumed selling drugs. On gun acquisition, “Almost all of us were

dealing, you got a lot of money, and with the money comes guns, so”, “When you have money, people aren’t going to like it; people are going to come after you for certain reasons.” He laughed and emphatically said no when I asked whether he or his group used crack, but when I asked what he thought of those who bought it from him, he simply answered, “That was their business.” He believed that growing up in a different type of area, without so many gangs, drugs, and guns, might have made things different for him.

Keith Samuels – 18 year-old African American currently incarcerated for gun possession, who said he had previous adjudications for receiving stolen property and joyriding. He is a member of a gang, and lived with his mother and two younger siblings. He described his neighborhood as full of drugs, gangs, and “crackheads”. He said school was easy for him, and he played varsity football his freshman year in high school, but he lost interest in school and dropped out of football, preferring to hang out with friends, and with “females”. He didn’t feel the need for a gun when he “wasn’t really into the streets”, but once he was in the streets and joined a gang, he felt he needed one. He was also selling drugs. He said he never used his gun, not even to threaten somebody, but he felt that it ensured his safety. He said the only gun he ever had was the one with which he was arrested. He worked for a while at a university food court. He plans to attend Middlesex County College.

Kenneth Urban – 15 year-old African American incarcerated at 13 for robbery and possession of a switchblade knife. He lived with his mother and sister. His relationship with his father was strained and intermittent. He was a member of the Crips, and said he had committed robberies since he was 10, but did not sell drugs. He had guns, but didn’t commit crimes with guns. Guns made him feel like “can’t nobody touch you”. He was

stabbed in retaliation for robbing someone's younger brother, and has been shot at, but not shot. He would use robbery proceeds to buy "clothes and stuff", would sometimes take his mother and sister out to eat, and once took them to a carnival. He also gave a lot of money to his sister. He liked school and did well, but got into lots of fights which resulted in suspensions. He had an earlier arrest for arson, which he described as an accident, plus car theft, burglary, and other weapons charges. He liked revolvers, and his first gun was a Smith and Wesson .38 caliber revolver. Before being locked up at age 13, he was looking for a job, and says he might have stayed out of trouble if he he'd had one.

Kevin Jesus – 18 year-old with a Latino name who described himself as half Puerto Rican and half African American, incarcerated for beating someone over the head with a gun. He did this because the victim was selling beat [fake drugs] in front of Kevin's house, which was Kevin's drug-selling territory. He was a member of the Bloods. He lived with his mother and five younger siblings, and his father was incarcerated. He had two children of his own, and was previously shot in retaliation for avenging a wrong against his sister. He did not consider it appropriate to identify his assailant in court, and declined to do so. He said a drug dealer needs a gun because people envy you and will try to take what you have. He liked selling drugs because he didn't have to keep asking his mother for money, and instead could help her out. He said he had anger, and believed this may have come from being beaten up for no reason by his mother's ex-boyfriend, who also beat her up. He felt that the anger management program at JJC may help him when he gets out.

Kilal Carson – 18 year-old African-American who was incarcerated for armed robbery of a convenience store, and gun possession for the same incident. He said he had done

other robberies before getting caught for this one. He was not technically in a gang, but considered himself “affiliated” with the Crips. He lived with his mother. His first gun exposure was at age 10, when his father showed him one when they were in a car. He thought it was cool. He got his first gun for protection in the streets, and since then has bought some and received others from friends. He sold heroin and crack. He would spend his money on himself for clothes, partying, and drugs, and would give his mother money if she needed it. He said his mother had money problems and knew where his money was coming from. He said school was wild and violent, and he was involved in the fights. He declined to discuss his other gun involvement besides armed robberies. He said he felt more powerful and safer when he had a gun. He has been shot at, but not shot. He believed his tough neighborhood “had everything to do with” why he got in trouble.

Kyle Cameron - 18 year-old African American who seemed quite out of place, with a very pleasant and preppy demeanor. He was incarcerated for allegedly hitting a police car, which he denied, and then leading the police on a long car chase, which he admitted. The charge was aggravated assault with a deadly weapon, the car. He came from a tiny town right down the road from the institution, in a semi-rural area. He was previously on probation for minor offenses such as disorderly conduct and criminal mischief. He had no personal gun involvement, although a half-brother with whom he lived briefly was in a gang and had guns. He lived with his great-aunt, who had adopted him, but lived for a while with his mother and brother in a bad neighborhood. While living there, he lost friends and relatives to gun violence. He had graduated from high school and was already

enrolled in the local county college. He wanted to transfer to a school in New York City, and also wanted to join the military.

Leon Benson – 18 year-old African American incarcerated for armed robbery of a liquor store with a gun. He said he had been robbing people since he was 11, but not always with a gun. He also sold heroin, crack, and weed. He lived with his mother, who told his father to leave because he was a “big-time drug dealer” and she disapproved of what he was doing. This happened when Leon was 14, and his father gave him a gun and bullets when he left so Leon could protect the family. Leon was not in a gang. He had shot at people and had been shot at, and would rather not say whether he hit anyone he shot at. He wore a bullet-proof vest because he worried about retaliation from people he “robbed in the past”. He enjoyed different kinds of guns and the different sounds they make, and liked the feeling of power he got from having a gun. He had been robbed at gunpoint several times. He said his mother was strained for money and that “I feel as if I go get it by myself, that’s less I need to get from her.” He rejected the idea of violence as a part of masculinity: “No. The image of a man don’t come from violence.”

Luke Carter – 18 year-old African American incarcerated for armed robbery, which he committed with a friend who wielded a .357. They robbed a young man they targeted because he had nice clothes and jewelry. He had gotten away with similar robberies. Sometimes he was the gunman, and sometimes he was alone. Luke was a member of the Bloods, and lived with his mother and younger brother. He had been shot at, but not shot, and he had shot at others. He has a child. He liked both the money and the excitement from robberies, and would buy clothes, drugs, and drugs to sell. He sold cocaine. He liked guns as material objects, and the way they made him feel, and all the

things he could do with a gun. He didn't like school and "wanted to get money", so he dropped out. He enjoyed both robbing, and fighting with other gangs. He said he had lost a couple of good friends "to this life". He thought that if he'd had a father figure or been raised in "another environment", things might have been different. He said he didn't rob females. He said his previous charges included other robberies, assault charges, and drug charges. He would also rob people with a knife, or just strong-arm. He compared his need to do robberies to the way a "cokehead" needs to do drugs. He wanted to be a good father to his daughter, not like his own father.

Mark Tobias – 18 year-old Latino incarcerated for attempted murder with a knife. He came from Mexico with his family when he was 6, and first shot a gun in Mexico, in the company of his father and grandfather outside their home. He was a gang member, and declined to say whether he had used a gun against opponents in street fights. He said the reason for the stabbing was that someone at school said he wanted to fight Mark's younger brother. He bought his first gun when he was 15. He sold cocaine and other drugs. His gang engaged in street fights, using any kind of weapon they had, including fists, chains, bats, bottles, knives, and guns. As his parents had moved to another area, he was hoping to join them and make a "new start" upon his release. He was about to graduate from high school through the JJC.

Naheem Lewis - 19 year-old African American incarcerated for a drug distribution charge, who previously was on probation for a strong-arm robbery. He and a friend beat up a man and took his cell phone and his book bag containing a laptop computer, as the man got off the train. Naheem owned a gun, but said he had only fired it to shoo away the kids on the block who would disrupt his drug business. He was not in a gang. He

lived with his mother and his brothers. He was expecting a baby, but was not sure the baby was his, as the baby's mother was his Number 2 girl, not his Number 1 girl. He sold coke and heroin. Naheem said the robbery was his first and his last, as he knew he got off "very easy" with probation, and that people could serve a lot of time for robberies. He viewed the gun he had as protection. He was drawn to the money from drug dealing, and would give some of it to his mother. He had an argument with "a father figure" in his life, and was planning to attempt a reconciliation upon his release.

Nate Ingram – 19 year old African American incarcerated for an armed robbery where his female co-defendant had the knife. Although Nate said he committed many armed robberies with guns, he said he approached this victim intending to do a strong-arm robbery, when the girl he was with came off the porch and joined in on the robbery with a knife. Nate was a member of the Bloods and lived with his aunt. His father had been a drug-dealer who died, and his mother suffered from alcoholism and a nervous breakdown following his father's death, so at age ten Nate and his brother went to live with their aunt. Nate had been incarcerated for three and a half years, since he was 15. He said his current term included aggravated assault, weapons, car theft, and drug charges in addition to the robbery. He would also sell drugs, and would spend the proceeds on clothes, weed, and so on. He said his aunt was quite well off and gave him plenty of food and money, but he preferred returning to the projects and getting in trouble with his friends. He said he "had to go get money", although he described it as more of an emotional need than a financial need. He said he liked the feeling of having power that he got from doing robberies. He liked guns, but said he never shot anyone, although he might hit someone

with a gun during a robbery if they didn't comply immediately. He said, "A gun is a key to anything you wanna do."

Nick Morris – 18 year-old African American incarcerated for a violation of probation on an underlying charge of gun possession, which he denied. He declined to have his interview recorded. Nick said his parents were married, and that he had two older siblings and one younger one, and he was "the only criminal". He sold crack cocaine, but only smoked marijuana. He showed me multiple scars from gunshot wounds that appeared to be from a shotgun blast, as they extended from one shoulder across his chest and to the other shoulder. He said he still has bullet fragments in his chest. He said his high school was the type of place that would make you want to carry a gun if you didn't already have one, and thought that growing up in a nicer environment might have made a difference for him, but he also said he had made bad choices.

Norman Nelson – 18 year-old African American incarcerated for a gun charge, which he denied, saying his friend threw the gun away when he saw the police approaching, and Norman was charged with it. He was not in a gang. Norman had a child, and lived with his mother, his daughter, two brothers, a sister, and his girlfriend, who moved between his mother's and her mother's homes. He said he did not sell drugs or have guns, despite his current adjudication. He said he limited his circle of friends to two or three in order to avoid beefs and drama. He was on probation for aggravated assault when he incurred this arrest. He said anger and being quick to fight had been problems for him, and he believed he had benefited from the different anger management programs he had experienced. He was looking forward to the Fathers on Track program that would be part of his transitional program. He had been granted a requested transfer to his current

facility so that he could take advantage of the strong off-site culinary arts program that he had just completed, and he hoped to get a job there upon his release.

Owen Irving – 21 year-old African American incarcerated for the past three years for an attempted murder with a knife. His home was with his mother, but he had been living with a friend who got him started selling drugs, and the friend's mother. He was not in a gang; nor were his adversaries in the fight that resulted in the attempted murder charge. He sold drugs ("marijuana, ecstasy, crack, whatever"), and usually carried a gun. He said the stabbing was the culmination of a long-running beef that started with a fistfight, and then there was shooting on both sides, and on the day of the stabbing he was caught without his gun and grabbed the knife from his mother's house. He said he actually stabbed about 6 people during the melee, but was only charged with the serious one. He sold drugs because "it was the money, man", and used the money to buy clothes, liquor, weed, guns, a car, food, "whatever". "I wanted my own shit. The money made me feel good!" Sometimes he would give his mother some money, but mostly he just wasn't having to ask her for any. When she noticed him wearing clothes she hadn't bought for him, she objected, yelling, "Take that shit off!" He said he had shot at lots of people, usually in crowds, but didn't know if he ever hit anyone because he didn't stand around to see.

Quinto Navarro – 17 year-old Latino incarcerated for gun possession. He lived with his father, and visited his mother who lived nearby. He was not in a gang. He said his brother was locked up for a long, long time. He had sold crack and marijuana since he was around 14, and had two previous drug charges. When arrested this time, he had just retrieved his gun from the house to ward off some interlopers that "his boys" selling

drugs had complained about. He loved guns, and came from a drug-selling family, where guns were in the house. He said he spent most of his drug proceeds on food, and food seemed scarce in his house. He loved guns as material objects, for how they made him feel, and for what they could do. He said he had shot at people, but had never hit anybody. He suggested I watch the film *New Jack City* to get a visual picture of what he was describing about needing guns in case of a beef. He described being robbed at gunpoint, and said he doesn't commit robberies.

Sam Lord – 17 year-old African American incarcerated for armed robbery with a gun. He lived with his grandmother and two cousins. He received his first term of probation for a simple assault, and next was charged with attempted burglary prior to this. He was in a gang. He did not sell drugs, but had done other robberies. He had been robbed twice. He selected this victim, a youngish Black male, as the victim came off the light rail train because he had a phone, a book bag, and was walking toward the white section of town, so Sam thought, “Good, he’s probably got something in that book bag.” He loved guns, and was knowledgeable about different kinds. He would sometimes entertain the girls by showing them his gun, and he said they weren’t surprised because, “What homie don’t carry a gun?” He had “shot at a lot of people”, and thought he “had a couple people’s mothers crying in the hospital a couple of days.”

Thomas Tulane – African American over eighteen (I didn’t ask his age) incarcerated for armed robbery with a gun. He was raised by his mother, but had recently come to live with his father, who was a stranger to him, and it didn’t work out, so he was living at various places and then with his girlfriend. He was a member of the Bloods, and said he sold drugs and robbed drug dealers. He had been shot, even while wearing a bullet-proof

vest, and had shot at a number of people, but preferred not to say whether he had hit anyone when he shot at them. He has a daughter. He said he was previously incarcerated in New York for gang participation and robbery. The current robbery was of a drug dealer, who called the police and reported the robbery. He said he had an abusive stepfather who was a drug dealer, and lived in a dangerous apartment building with bullet holes in the doors. It was there that he saw his first gun. Once he started selling drugs, he used the money to buy “food, clothes, sneakers”. He felt that having a real dad might have made a difference for him, and living in a different area. “Yeah, I woulda been perfect. I know I would have been a good kid. I know I would have been in college right now. I would have been that guy, right now, that I look at TV and I see people playing basketball—I would have been that guy on TV.” “But . . . I still look at it as this—I think everything happens for a reason. And I really don’t know that reason yet, but I’m pretty sure it’s gonna come real soon.”

Tim Myers – 19 year-old African American incarcerated since he was 16 for possession of a loaded gun. This gun was the second of two guns that he had found. He lived with his mother “and her boyfriend at the time”. He had been a member of the Bloods, but, unlike other participants, said he was not anymore. He said he never shot anybody, but was shot at. He said his stepfather, with whom he had been close, was a drug dealer who was shot and killed when Tim was 13. He said his stepfather’s public occupation was owning an automobile dealership, but Tim said he eventually figured out that his father sold drugs, and believed he was killed as a result of this. Tim sold crack cocaine, and also got into lots of fights. He had previously been on probation for aggravated assault (fracturing someone’s facial bone in a fight after school), having a stolen car, and other

gun charges. He said his gang mainly sold drugs, but said there was also “a lot of beef”, “a lot of shootin’, a lot of killin’”. He’d had many guns, acquired in a variety of ways. Once he saw that I was attempting to trace his acquisition of his various guns, he said, “Like, if I keep telling you how many guns I had, I’m gonna be goin’ on all afternoon.” He said he was never an “all-out gangster”, but was mainly interested in making money. He distinguished between those who needed to sell drugs to live, and himself, saying he sold drugs not to live, but to “live it up”.

Tony Kenwood – 18 year-old African American incarcerated for possession of a loaded gun. He lived with his mother and little brother, but staff said he had older brothers who were incarcerated. He was not in a gang, he did not sell drugs, and he had no previous history of adjudications. He had never been shot at or robbed, but he knew plenty of people who had been shot. He did not move to the city from the suburbs until he was ten, and was fearful any time he left his house, even in the daytime. He liked to stay out late at night just socializing with his friends, smoking, drinking, and walking around, but felt that he could be a victim of violent crime at any time. After watching the film *Scarface*, starring Al Pacino, he thought he could get a gun for protection, and eventually did so. He believed that living in a different neighborhood and having a helpful father to guide him might have made a difference for him. He was concerned about how he would handle his fear of the streets upon his release, as just staying in the house didn’t appeal to him either. Tony represented the atypical path to gun acquisition among the study participants.

Vernon Campion – 19 year-old African American incarcerated for gun possession and conspiracy to distribute crack cocaine. He said he didn’t like guns, and that his co-

defendant, with whom he was selling drugs, was the one who had the gun. He lived with his mother and his father, and was to be released in two weeks. He said he was attracted to the streets and to selling drugs because of the money. He lived in the projects. While on the one hand he said money wasn't that tight at home, on the other hand he said he would "help out as needed" with the household "bills". He thought his parents knew where the money came from. He said he wanted to do things "for myself", to "have my own money" and "buy what I wanted", which was clothes, cars, and jewels. He would have an adult rent cars for him from legitimate car rental companies. He said he didn't drink or use drugs, and was known among his friends to be "anti-gun"; everyone on his drug set knew that he would not handle any guns.

Victor Kane – 18 year-old African American incarcerated for armed robbery with a gun, which he said was wielded by his co-defendant. He lived with his mother and little sister, and he was expecting a baby. During his current offense, he robbed a drug dealer on the corner, and the person who was with the victim ran and called the police. He said he was drinking with an adult male and female, and when they saw that their money was getting low, they decided to get some money fast by robbing a drug dealer. The female co-defendant stayed in the car. He was not in a gang, and did not sell drugs. He said he never shot at anyone or pointed a gun at anyone. He had previous adjudications for stealing a car and hitting a school security guard. He said he had stolen a couple of cars, which he drove for a while and then let his friends use, but did not consider himself to be a car thief. He said he'd had other guns before the one that his co-defendant used during the robbery. He said he fought a lot, and that nowadays it seemed as though the fight was never over until somebody got shot. Also, he liked guns, and said they made him "feel a

little more masculine”, “kind of like Superman”. He had been a lookout for other robberies, but said this was the first one in which he’d participated actively. He said he did it for the money, and denied getting any other emotional gratification from robbery.

Xavier Donovan – 18 year-old African American incarcerated for armed robbery with a gun. He lived with his aunt and cousins, but would also go back and forth between there and his mother’s. He was not in a gang. He sold crack cocaine and robbed drug dealers, but the current offense “wasn’t supposed to be a robbery”. Rather, it began as an attempt to intimidate a drug dealer who was bothering his female cousin, escalated to a fight, and ended with Xavier taking the victim’s chain and phone, which ended up on the ground. He helped his aunt to pay some of the bills while living with her. He understood that both his mother and his aunt were struggling financially, and he would also spend his money on clothes, stuff for his aunt, and other things. He thought his mother and aunt both “pretty much knew” where his money came from. Having a gun made him feel powerful, protected, and “like Superman, and there’s no kryptonite”. He said he was “infatuated with guns”. He talked about different occasions when he would use his guns, such as when someone disrespected him, his family, his boys, or “tried to take money from us”. He first said he didn’t want to discuss whether he had shot at anyone, but later described various “valid reasons” he fired at people, such as the time when, after he had robbed somebody, he thought the victim was going to try to run him down with his car. He said he hit the car, not the driver. He expressed concern that people he fired guns at might want to come after him. He talked about people being jealous and wanting to harm him, including a woman who tried to set him up to be robbed. When I asked what he did when he found out, he said, “I don’t wanna talk about that”.

(Of the 25 completed interviews, only one participant, Ned, is not discussed by name in the data chapters. However, in the interest of completeness, I include a brief sketch of his interview below.)

Ned Davis – 18 year-old African American incarcerated for armed robbery, allegedly with an unloaded BB gun that the police later recovered from his house. His previous adjudications were for assault (fighting), disorderly conduct (fighting), and criminal mischief. He lived with his mother and older brother. He was not in a gang, and said he never had a real gun. He smoked weed. He declined to have his interview recorded, perhaps because he had a recall hearing coming up and didn't want to take any chances. He committed the robbery with his two adult cousins, a male who assisted him and a female who stayed in the car. His share of the proceeds was \$200, but they got caught after the female codefendant used one of the stolen credit cards, and his cousins then implicated him. He at one point said he did the robbery for the money, but then said he had no urgent need for money, and said he's not sure why he did it. He liked school and did well there, playing basketball on the school team. He earned his high school diploma from his home school district while he was incarcerated. He wanted to go to trade school for auto body work. He did not consider himself to be "in the streets". The armed robbery seemed somewhat aberrational for him, and he seemed to have done it against his better judgment without really knowing why.

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Curriculum Vitae

Diane Marano

Education:

- 1969-1973: University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pa.
Major: History Degree: B.A., cum laude
- 1975-1978: Rutgers University School of Law, Camden, New Jersey
Degree: J.D.

Work history:

- 1973-1975: Mutual Benefit Life Insurance Company, Newark, New Jersey
Home office life underwriter
- 1978-1979: Law Clerk to the Honorable Michael R. Imbriani, J.S.C.
Somerville, New Jersey
- 1979-1981: Associate, Law Firm of Kelleher, Ross, and Moore
Somerville, New Jersey
- 1982-2007: Assistant Prosecutor, Camden County Prosecutor's Office
Camden, New Jersey

Publications:

- 2008: "What's Right in Moral Psychology?", with Daniel Hart and Dianne Fabii; review of *Moral Psychology* in *PsycCritiques*, online journal, November 12, 2008, Vol. 53, Release 46, Article 1
- 2012: "The Out-of-Place Child: The State's Right to Intervene in Private Affairs", essay for *Orphan to Apprentice* exhibit catalog, Museum of Early Trades and Crafts, Madison, New Jersey
- Forthcoming: Short entry on "Juvenile Offenders" for the *Encyclopedia of Youth Cultures in America*; Simon J. Bronner and Cindy Dell Clark, Eds.