Approaches to Preventing and Intervening With Gun Violence

There are many different kinds of dreams. But in the long tradition of African American activism, dreams have typically been linked to concrete aspirations for social reform.

— Lawrence Ralph, 2014, p. 6

INTRODUCTION

Readers are well grounded on why urban gun violence is a salient issue in this country and worthy of attention from a national, urban-specific, academic, social science, and helping professions perspective, and provided case illustrations to draw lessons from in crafting urban-focused interventions. The previous chapter laid out a multifaceted picture of gun violence ramifications and how gun violence changed the nation’s social fabric, often in invisible ways. The importance of local context cannot be overly emphasized in shaping how helping professions can best aid in preventing and intervening at an early point in gun violence, but that does not mean that the national picture cannot provide a broader context from to understand local situations. That chapter also started to lay out why
certain gun violence approaches have seen acceptance throughout the country, with particular relevance to urban communities.

Interventions requiring many different institutional and community partners have garnered saliency as pathways to solve gun violence. Multifaceted interventions by their nature are complex, requiring contextual grounding to maximize success and take localized circumstances into account. A cookie-cutter approach is ill advised. Successful interventions also require cooperation of multiorganizational entities, all requiring considerable expenditure of time, energy, and other resources. In addition, these approaches require engendering trust.

Impactful interventions are predicated on strong and explicit values, underpinning how social scientists view gun violence causes (Lizotte & Hendrix, 2019) and the research questions important to answer. These values are rarely articulated in scholarly publications even though presenting them aids in understanding key assumptions, or biases, guiding the scholarship. The challenge of bringing together a multidisciplinary approach and a wide cross section of helping professions, which are understandably numerous, is minimized when concepts cross academic and professional lines. These concepts are founded on cherished values that are operationalized in addressing urban gun violence. These interventions often fail to explicate values, principles, and key concepts shaping their unfolding, missing valuable dimensions in understanding the rationales for research and strategy implementation.

This chapter seeks to correct this omission by starting with a set of intersecting values before focusing on the characteristics of successful community interventions, setting the stage for why urban self-help organizations must be a part of these efforts. These values do not receive the depth of attention because each requires a book to do justice to their importance and complexity. These values are on display throughout the book, however. Finally, this chapter discusses major national approaches to prevent urban gun violence that have shown promise, with an emphasis on examples that helping professions will typically consider in local self-help efforts.
VALUES AND CONCEPTS UNDERPINNING SUCCESSFUL COMMUNITY INTERVENTIONS

No book on urban gun research and practice would be complete without attention to key concepts and principles, including undergirding values, that set the foundation for the development of research and interventions. An embrace of a set of guiding values can be conceptualized as DNA shaping how social interventions unfold, highlighting sociopolitical forces and therefore assuming an instrumental role in understanding the rationales for these approaches. Values, in turn, are powerful forces influencing our world outlooks and behaviors as social scientists and practitioners, and those covered in this chapter should not be surprising. How these values are operationalized, however, means turning to principles because of how they help concretize this worldview. Principles allow the integration of theory to facilitate shaping all aspects of practice and knowledge creation.

Gun-focused community interventions bring hope because of their importance as well as frustrations, particularly when we try to convert research findings and theory into action. I am fond of saying to plan is human, but to implement is simply divine. The social sciences and helping professions must bring practicality to research, scholarship, and practice. Community interventions typically require great flexibility in plan implementation, and this is no more so with gun violence. Socially navigating these rough seas requires a guidance system that has the North Star as a fixture; values are our North Star, shaping guiding principles. Staying true to one’s principles is critical in navigating the turbulent social and political times associated with gun violence, gun control, and the law enforcement/legal system.

Readers may ask about the relationship between values and guiding principles. I think of values, which are highly subjective, as a guide for creating interventions and a bridge between values and theory. When death means an instrumental member of a support system is lost, it takes on greater significance. When it is a parent, the magnitude of the
consequences is immense. Five values stand out in providing a unifying vision:

1. Community empowerment
2. Participatory democracy
3. Strengths/resiliency/assets first
4. Collaboration/partnerships
5. Social justice

These values are highly interrelated. Chances are very good that if you subscribe to one, the others will follow closely, and they will cluster together, providing boundaries that shape gun violence interventions.

As a social worker, these values resonate with my profession and are ideally suited for finding multidisciplinary solutions to intentional gun violence because of how values, and the concepts that they are founded upon, are not exclusive to social work. Helping professions embracing similar values are in a propitious position to establish collaborations with urban self-help organizations. The immense problem of gun violence must bring together academic disciplines and helping professions to enhance the power of collaborations shaping public policies grounded in the operative reality of urban residents. Where the arenas of views overlap remains fertile ground for partnerships.

Community Empowerment

It is no surprise that empowerment starts our discussion because of its central role in the education of urban-focused social scientists and helping professionals. It is a value that can find a home in individual, family, group, organizational, and community-centered practice, facilitating the addressing of complex social problems. Life-altering violence necessitates extraordinary responses, with empowerment a central feature of these actions and is a central element in self-help efforts (Riessman & Carroll, 1995). Self-help represents self-determination, a highly attractive concept
within urban communities that see external forces dictating daily activities, and it is a key aspect of empowerment.

Empowerment was originally conceptualized by Barbara Solomon (1976), a social worker, I am proud to say, as a strategy and an intervention. Empowerment has different meanings according to context, and its goal can range from lofty societal transformation focused on achieving social justice to mastering a challenging task, no matter how trivial—how I can be empowered to eat a green vegetable, for instance. How it is conceptualized and operationalized is dependent on a community’s vision when applied from a collective viewpoint. Self-help initiatives primarily address need internally rather than relying on external sources (Riessman & Carroll, 1995).

What does community empowerment have to do with urban gun violence? Aiyer, Zimmerman, Morrel-Samuels, and Reischl (2015, p. 137) tied community empowerment to communities that feel safe, increasing the relevance of this value and concept to urban violence:

Busy streets indicate safe, urban neighborhoods that exhibit a certain vibrancy, which promotes prosocial behavior. More specifically, busy streets are safe areas where businesses are flourishing, homes are occupied and well maintained, and residents are socially engaged with one another. Not only does such urban activity indicate safety, this positive energy may also influence individual behavior. Neighborhood energy determines whether people are attracted to or deterred from an area, how people behave in the area, and ultimately influences economic prosperity by encouraging or discouraging growth and expansion. Furthermore, urbanites often follow the adage of safety in numbers.

Unsafe communities equate with disempowerment and the compromising of promise and potential.

The concept of community stress has ascended in importance in understanding and addressing health and income inequities, violence, and other structural/environmental factors, with multiple manifestations of
Community empowerment being a central goal for intervention development (Forenza, Lardier, Reid, Garcia-Reid, & Bermea, 2019). Community empowerment goes beyond urban violence, with aspects easily captured through research and others proving very challenging, but important nevertheless. Personal relationships, such as friendships, can develop through healing interactions, expanding social networks and bringing positive outcomes from tragic events (Delgado, 2017b).

Community empowerment can be operationalized in various ways, whether defined geographically or along specific group lines, such as women and how they have assumed active and leadership roles within anti–gun violence efforts (Salvi, 2019). One way that community empowerment has found relevance in urban practice consists of three components: (a) intracommunity (resident social relationships); (b) interactional (creation of trust and social capital); and (c) behavioral (collaborations between residents and organizations that result in collective actions) (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995; N. A. Peterson & Zimmerman, 2004). These components lend themselves to gun violence interventions and engagement of self-help organizations as partners.

Community empowerment must include significant groups, such as youth (Torres-Harding, Baber, Hilvers, Hobbs, & Maly, 2018), as addressed in discussion of partnerships in this chapter. Community empowerment is a value and multifaceted construct predicated on social justice principles (Christens, 2019). Photovoice, for example, is a research and empowering intervention that urban youth can employ in understanding the causes and interventions for addressing it (Delgado, 2015; Nutt, 2019).

Trust must be an integral part of this value (Schutz, 2019) and, quite frankly, permeate the other values in this chapter. Achieving a high trust level is easier said than done, particularly in contexts where there is a long legacy of state misdeeds, making achieving this goal a long and difficult process (Delgado, 2020b). There is no substitute for trust, regardless of how arduous and lengthy a road, it is still a goal worth striving for to make progress on gun violence.

Initiatives targeting returning gang members, such as Advance Peace in Fresno, California, although proving too controversial to pass a city
council vote (Charles, 2019), still holds great promise in addressing urban gun violence when seeking to empower through education and civic engagement projects (Velez, 2019):

Foster and Gonzalez talk to gang members—young and old—to keep the peace. Fresno Police Captain Mark Salazar told Valley Public Radio two months ago that the work Foster’s done has been effective in decreasing shootings. Foster’s focus is in southwest Fresno because that’s his neighborhood, or his ‘hood’ as he called it. Foster said he reached out to Gonzalez because he knows a different part of the city. In the gang culture, Gonzalez said, there’s a racial divide and that’s why working together is critical. “Like Aaron said, he can only talk to the kids in his neighborhood, the gangs he’s familiar with,” Gonzalez said. “I can do my part with the gangs I’m familiar with, the people I was part of.” Gonzalez speaks to youth groups at Barrios Unidos monthly. He networks with families he knows so he can go into their neighborhoods to empower kids through education and civic engagement.

These types of initiatives to engage and empower communities cannot transpire without trust being present and the legitimacy of those engaged in crafting these activities, an essential element in any community-centered efforts to stem gun violence. Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles is an example of how re-entering former gang members can give back to their communities (Deuchar, 2018).

Participatory Democracy

Interventions premised on support of community residents and institutions must embrace the value of participatory democracy, which is closely connected to community empowerment. Urban participatory strategies are empowering of disenfranchised residents such as women (Frederick & Lee, 2019). We can appreciate what this value means in a democracy,
although one that is flawed, such as ours. The refrain, “If you are not at the table, you are on the table,” comes to mind when discussing community interventions to curb gun violence. Meaningful participation, to continue with the table metaphor, means that you are at the table, selecting the meal and music and deciding who is an invited guest. Readers get the gist about community participation, particularly with groups that historically have not played an active role in shaping policies and programs, such as youth (Schoenfeld, Bennett, Manganella, & Kemp, 2019).

Self-help is premised on participatory values and principles and fills a critical void in conventional service delivery. Self-help organizations elicit the voices and engagement of those with firsthand knowledge of violence. This may appear as simplistic, but it is far from that because of the rarity of giving legitimacy to these individuals, and those who surround them, in an atmosphere that is affirming and respectful. Victim voices, including collective testimony, must not be limited to the seeking of help but must also be systematically incorporated into programming and activities that tap their experiences and dreams, and urban self-help organizations do this.

Providing participation options increases these organizations’ effectiveness. Engaging residents and decreasing their marginalization also translates into a reduction of cynicism, opens boundaries, and improves collective efficacy, all key factors in reducing neighborhood violence and making the community more amenable to outsiders being accepted for assistance (K. J. Brown & Weil, 2019). Suspicion of outsiders severely limits partnerships in reducing gun violence because these resources are essential in supporting internal efforts.

The value of participation is one that stands as a foundation for any community effort to be successful, regardless of focus. It takes on even greater significance with gun violence because of fears surrounding this urban issue. Contagious diseases usually involve some form of stigma but not fear of life, with retaliation being a very real threat when residents cooperate with law enforcement. Meaningfully bringing community participation to life will involve socially navigating a series of potential barriers.
Any resident engaging in making a community safe from gun violence must be thought of as a hero (Thompson, 2018).

Strengths/Resiliency/Assets First

The topic of strengths/resiliency/assets first, as addressed in the introductory chapter, is only touched on here. Its importance made it necessary to introduce it early, and its prominence requires reintroducing it in depth here. A strength/resiliency/assets value stance, which is emphasized throughout this book, has strong support within a wide range of social sciences and professions (Meichenbaum, 2017).

Self-help organizations embrace the importance of innovation, and tapping positive community attributes is a core element in their success. Resiliency is primarily associated with individuals and families, but has also found its way into communities (Ellis, 2019). Gun violence interventions must also systematically build community capacity, including economic dimensions (Bayouth, Lukens-Bull, Gurien, Tepas, & Crandall, 2019), introducing innovative practices in service to their communities. These efforts serve to build hope and confidence.

A sea of grief with small islands of hope is one way to describe heavily gun-scarred neighborhoods and the narratives surrounding this form of violence. Although there is a tendency to emphasize the sea of grief metaphor, the islands (assets) are extremely important and must never be lost sight of to eschew victimizing the victims even further, in similar fashion to how the media often covers the death of gun victims and rarely their lives. Victimizing the dead or the injured through negative labeling of them only further aggravates the healing process for family and friends.

High-risk and low-resourced community violence does not materialize in similar fashion in other geographical settings due to the high presence of multiple forms of lethal and nonlethal sources and high social needs (Campie, Patrosino, Fronius, & Read, 2017). Labeling entire communities as risk prone does an injustice to these communities, and those blanket
statements are counterproductive to getting resident participation in gun initiatives.

Violence deters civic engagement, and it is critical that we never lose sight of a community’s assets while still acknowledging a wide range of social conditions and needs that can compound gun violence. We must eschew focusing on risk factors without corresponding attention to resiliency/strength factors, and this means that only part of an equation is the focus when focus on an entire equation is in order (Bell, 2017).

Embracing a value that all human beings and communities bring indigenous resources (instrumental and expressive) that can be mobilized to help others is a fundamental foundation for exercising this value, including those with histories of involvement in the juvenile justice system (Jeffries, Myers, Kringen, & Schack, 2019). Practitioners are cognizant of the importance of not losing sight of factors that have helped those facing great adversity survive and even thrive. Building on these resources, individual as well as community, stands as a logical first choice in developing strategies focused on gun violence. This mindset and value mean that we should systematically identify these indigenous resources (Delgado & Humm-Delgado, 2013).

Family as an early and primary source of building resiliency is well embraced and does not need extensive review in this section. Resiliency is a complex construct that is far from fixed or static (Meichenbaum, 2017, p. 11): “Resilience is not a trait that a youth is born with or automatically keeps once it is achieved. Resilience is a complex interactive process that entails characteristics of the child, the family, extra familial relationships and school/community factors.” Identifying and fostering resiliency, nevertheless, still brings challenges for social scientists and helping professionals.

A friendship network can be a strong buttress to family, although we rarely associate this support system among urban youth; the system can be enhanced through carefully crafted community initiatives (Delgado, 2017b). Rather, we generally equate urban youth social networks with problems. Enhancing a network can be a part of a well-coordinated gun violence prevention strategy. Getting youth involvement in community
initiatives, as with self-help organizations, translates into opportunities to build resiliency and strengths in service to their community and casts youth as playing prominent roles within their communities, countering stereotypes that they are a prime cause of gun violence and have nothing to offer their communities other than pain and suffering.

Ironically, it does not have to be a stranger or enemy killing someone; it can also entail someone close killing their friend because of some concerns that they have about information getting out that could compromise or even lead to their arrest. A child’s murder is complicated when it is not a stranger who kills, but rather someone who is a relative or friend (Wiebe & Bloos, 2019):

After her son was shot to death, one Kansas City mother found her cause. But she has not chosen to advocate against guns. Rather she has chosen to focus on children, particularly those caught in what she calls a “revolving circle of brokenness and hurt and pain.” Murdice Sims has heard dozens of harrowing stories from bereaved mothers since her own son died 14 years ago. One woman told her about the day her toddler shot his twin sister while playing with a gun. Another mom described the death of her daughter, whose husband shot her, then himself in front of their children. Yet another lost her son when his best friend became enraged during an argument and shot him. With each telling, Sims relives the loss of her son, Jeremey Groves, shot and killed late one spring night in 2004 while out with friends in Kansas City, Kansas.

These instances sharpen how this violence epidemic is centered on one’s social network (Kotlowitz, 2019).

Tapping religious institutions unites these institutions with other community assets in addressing gun violence (Seedat et al., 2016). Houses of worship are places within the African American community, for example, where members expect to support each other during times of crisis and sadness, as in the case of women in two New Orleans, Louisiana, congregations, where they mourn and memorialize their dead sons and
grandsons who have been victims of gun violence (R. L. Carter, 2018). These institutions play an important role in their community’s health and can be tapped in a community-centered approach to gun violence (J. Williams et al., 2019).

When youth are viewed as assets rather than deficits and mobilized in service to their communities through civic engagement projects, they bring an often-missing dimension to efforts on violence (Jain et al., 2019, p. 26):

Exposure to community violence and low civic engagement co-exist for many youth and are often compounded by socioeconomic disadvantage. Many have documented growing cumulative disadvantage and community violence in cities. . . . Meanwhile, others have studied the experiences of structurally marginalized urban youth, finding they are less likely to be civically engaged, but that those who do engage benefit more than their structurally supported peers.

Adolescents surviving gun violence may be more comfortable turning to peer networks than their own families, and more so when their peers have gone through a loss and grieving process.

The afterschool period provides an important setting for youth to heal (Mueller, 2017). Youth, as in Chicago, Illinois, identify the importance of engaging in positive afterschool pursuits and access to safe parks (Rigg, McNeish, Schadrac, Gonzalez, & Tran, 2019). Crime occurs throughout a community, and parks are no exception; reducing their use compromises health (lack of physical exercise) and safety (fear of being injured or killed) in multiple ways (B. Han, Cohen, Derose, Li, & Williamson, 2018).

Youth activism is a promising approach to violence prevention and integrates the values covered in this section (Aspholm & Mattaini, 2017; Wray-Lake, 2019). Having youth involved in this type of protest bodes well for communities because as they age, they bring a wealth of experience. Encouraging and investing in youth is an investment in a community’s assets with immediate and long-term benefits.
It is fitting to end this section with an important reminder of cities possessing assets (McCoy, 2020):

Urban communities are not simply bastions of violence. They are communities rich with neighbors who care about and support each other and grassroots organizers that create and implement programs to interrupt and prevent violence. However, their efforts cannot be the only or primary response. We must remember that gun violence is never normal and it impacts each of us. We must also acknowledge survivors and respond to their needs. We can no longer afford to ignore such a pervasive problem.

Collaborations/Partnerships

No one person, regardless of purpose and talents, can stop urban gun violence, although as witnessed with the establishers of self-help organizations, one person can certainly be a significant catalyst. Thus, it is appropriate to bring attention to partnerships and coalitions (Forenza et al., 2019). Interventions discussed in the section that follows in this chapter are based on partnerships and coalitions because of the immensity of the goal of reducing or stopping urban gun violence.

A literature overview shows numerous collaborations on gun violence interventions, and the following are examples: emergency rooms (Shepherd, 2001); infectious diseases physicians (Zheng & Mushatt, 2019); pediatricians (Tsou & Barnes, 2016); public health (Shepherd & Sumner, 2017); and education (E. R. Smith & Gill Lopez, 2016). Clearly, collaborations across disciplines and professions offer great potential. Collaborations must be considered from a localized perspective. Houses of worship often head or play a prominent role in these initiatives. When these partnerships involve the police, a moment of caution must be exercised if law enforcement does not enjoy the trust of the community (Brunson, Braga, Hureau, & Pegram, 2015). The same factors apply to self-help organizations because their institutional legitimacy is critical for their
success and must not be compromised by the negative institutional legitimacy that law enforcement brings in cases where they are not trusted.

Seeking assistance in time of need is natural, particularly during periods of crises. Coming together can go by many different labels—partnerships, collaborations, cooperation—covering different configurations and commitments. Further, academics and practitioners can be a part of these endeavors, bringing tremendous potential for achievements and frustrations also. Urban gun violence is such an occasion. We see this value on television and other media outlets when mass shootings occur, with El Paso, Texas, and Dayton, Ohio, the latest examples. When communities experience multiple gun deaths and injuries, as in urban America, we do not witness national indignation and the marshaling of resources and goodwill that customarily accompany mass shootings.

The value undergirding establishment of a mechanism bringing together academics with helping professionals is quite common and can be found in courses and scholarly literature. It is not unusual to find funders of interventions, gun focused and otherwise, to require formal relationships between various academic and institutional entities to qualify for some grant. The same motivation must be sought in addressing urban community gun violence. These partnerships must enlist institutions and individuals we normally would not associate as part of an intervention. Neighborhood coalitions must engage local businesses because these establishments have vital economic and social interests in this issue (Irvin-Erickson et al., 2016).

Most successful efforts on urban gun violence interventions involved coalitions and partnerships and even enlisted the assistance of entities that normally would not work together, such as the police. These relationships require expenditure of considerable time and energy to overcome mistrust and stereotypes, and that is to be expected or normalized. Readers have no doubt encountered this phenomenon, and I certainly have as an academic venturing into communities where I do not live. Although we can point to multidisciplinary collaborations to achieve significant community changes, it would be disingenuous of me not to point out there are barriers that exist between collaborating partners. Different language,
concepts, and historical traditions make collaborations and partnerships difficult to achieve.

Social Justice

A social justice value permeates all dimensions of developing an understanding of urban gun violence. Enacting this value as a goal and process lends itself to gun violence assessment and interventions, helping to bring together providers, academics, and community residents. Community participation can overcome despair and hopelessness through the initiation of civic engagement projects with an explicit embrace of social justice, even in war-torn countries (Grain & Land, 2017). Meaningful community participation cannot transpire without a social justice compass.

The disproportionate impact gun violence has on communities of color cannot be divorced from a racialized state tied to segregation in living area and institutions that are meant to address their needs. Self-help organizations are testaments to how inequities foster gun violence and why this problem cannot be divorced from its current day and historical contextual grounding.

MAJOR GUN VIOLENCE COMMUNITY INTERVENTIONS

I deviate from conventional wisdom of discussing successful interventions by starting this section with the unsuccessful ones. Numerous books can be written on how we failed to address gun violence, with sufficient material for a synopsis to be provided, setting an unusual context for this chapter (B. Smith, 2017):

A 2012 meta-study [Makarios & Pratt, 2012] was conducted on prior gun violence reduction research, and offers a wealth of important takeaways. It found that stiffer prison sentences for crime in general, waiting periods and background checks for gun purchases, gun buyback
programs, public safety campaigns, and safe storage laws are the least effective ways to address gun violence. These findings may be surprising and counterintuitive, but we owe it to victims of gun violence to value the strength of research over our own gut-feelings. Though there are certainly studies that can be found to support any one of these approaches, such studies are like those that call climate change into question— their outlier status in meta-studies demonstrates how out of step they are with prevailing wisdom.

Lessons learned from failed attempts, which can be depressing, can still have value by informing efforts with a higher probability of achieving success. Admittedly, this is a deficit approach, but one that still has heuristic value.

How to reduce or stop gun violence has many different responses, such as using curfews, which have been found to have limited success but with controversy (Carr & Doleac, 2016), and the role severe weather plays in influencing violence (Carr & Doleac, 2018). Weather, in this instance, high heat and humidity, increases crime, explaining why summer is a high-crime/high-violence period in the nation’s cities, with corresponding low police enforcement, raising implications on how climate change may influence crime in urban centers (Heilmann & Kahn, 2019).

Community interventions are not new to the gun violence field, with multiple examples achieving national prominence, such as “Concentrated Deterrence” or “Focused Deterrence,” and “Operation Cease Fire.” These efforts bring elements with a potential for reducing gun violence when adapted to local conditions, requiring setting aside political turf to facilitate needed collaboration.

“Concentrated Deterrence” or “Focused Deterrence”: Deterrence, focused or concentrated, as manifested through Chicago’s offender notification meetings, have proven successful in reducing violence by those who recently left incarceration. Studies showed that focused deterrence programs can reduce gun violence (Cook, 2017). Deterrence interventions are designed to take into account local priorities and circumstances and generally consist of six major components: (a) increased law enforcement
resources target hot spots and chronic offenders; (b) there is enhanced prosecution of specific types of crimes or offenders; (c) social services are mobilized at the “nexus of the crime producing dynamics”; (d) there are concerted and targeted efforts to enlist community partners most impacted by the crime(s); (e) researchers assume an active and influential role; and (f) direct communication is made with offenders on the consequences they will face if they persist in engaging in crime (Trinkner, 2019).

Concentrated deterrence, started in Boston, Massachusetts, and adopted in other cities, showed promise by rallying on key institutions coming together, although with formidable challenges (Corsaro & Engel, 2015, p. 499):

Focused deterrence initiatives are applauded for but also highlight longstanding tensions in our conceptualization of the very work of the criminal justice system. Balancing the objectives of due process and crime control . . . satisfying shifting public opinion and the need for political expediency . . . ; and managing the on-the-ground, day-to-day functions of complex bureaucracies with deeply embedded cultures and practices is extraordinarily complicated. Focused deterrence strategies can push police organizations out of their comfort zone in that they require surveillance and crime control functions in tandem with social support and community capacity-building activities that are still anathema to many police organizations. (p. 499)

Efforts such as concentrated deterrence highlight the need for community-based comprehensive and coordinated campaigns, bringing together public health, social, and criminal justice, although with challenges.

The formerly incarcerated are a group spotlighted in major violence-focused initiatives. Jones’s (2018) The Chosen Ones: Black Men and the Politics of Redemption provides a detailed portrait of how San Francisco, California’s African American/Black men, with histories of violence and incarceration in their lives, sought redemption for past violent deeds. The Parolee-Based Focused Deterrence Program has found success by calling
attention to the importance of targeting specific groups with a high probability of engaging in violent acts, with any comprehensive effort targeting community violence needing such a component (Clark-Moorman, Rydberg, & McGarrell, 2018; Trinkner, 2019). The formerly incarcerated must be taken into account in any comprehensive urban gun violence initiative (Rossi, 2017). Targeting the formerly incarcerated takes on importance as efforts to release them take hold in the nation, with COVID-19 possibly accelerating this movement. Engaging self-help organizations helps the re-entry process for the formerly incarcerated (Anta & Men, 2018; Bellamy et al., 2019).

Concentrated attention sends a message that must be sustained over an extended period to ultimately reduce and sustain gains. This concerted effort allows a period of relief that must not be wasted, further galvanizing support and creating hope for a safer future. Using a military analogy is appropriate: winning a battle carries an understanding that this does not equate to winning a war. Going home after the battle allows networks to be re-established over a period of time, creating cynicism from residents who have seen this in the past. For those of us accustomed to funding cycles and deadlines, a concentrated effort will follow these parameters, but communities do not share this worldview.

Cynicism is not limited to community residents. Police also must contend with its presence (Abt, 2019b, pp. 68–69):

Legal cynicism is present not only within communities but among the police, too, and with the same troubling potential for violence. While considerably less studied, it is clear that cynicism exists among many in law enforcement, and that it likely impacts their performance in problematic ways. There are many reasons why police might become cynical. Police know better than most that with regard to urban violence, today’s victim is often tomorrow’s perpetrator.

It is important, however, that we do not automatically consider victims to become perpetrators. We need a much more nuanced understanding of the triggers that cause this shift in roles.
Focused deterrence relies heavily on partnerships with local law enforcement, and when there is respect and trust between the police and the community, implementation is facilitated, and when not present, it meets with limited success at best (Brunson, 2015). Police killings of unarmed people of color complicates collaborations on gun violence, starting in childhood and extending into adulthood. It is inadvisable for gun initiatives to ignore the role of police in this violence (Cooper & Fullilove, 2016; Smith Lee & Robinson, 2019).

There is a need for more nuanced police enforcement approaches with communities of color; overpolicing results in a distrust of the police and reluctance to report crime and potentially dangerous developing situations. Underpolicing, in turn, causes a response detrimental to stopping gun violence because there is community reluctance to report due to the belief that law enforcement will not follow up. Local police are expected to play an important role in any comprehensive community-centered strategy.

Procedural injustice has a significant impact on crime reporting, underscoring the importance of police–community relations, “as poor perceptions of the police and reliance on oneself for protection and justice reduce cooperation with the police, especially among minorities” (Kwak et al., Dierenfeldt, & McNEeley, 2019, p. 25). Community policing, in essence, has been signaled out as a key component of any community-centered comprehensive strategy for addressing crime (Herbert, Beckett, & Stuart, 2018; Keith, 2018; D. M. Kennedy, 2019).

There is a tremendous difference between eliminating gun violence and reducing or controlling its manifestations and escalation. A focused deterrence approach is characterized by how public health has conceptualized the causes of violence and the importance of enlisting a coalition of resources with a specific focus on what are understood to be the reasons for gun violence (Braga & Weisburd, 2015):

Focused deterrence strategies are a recent addition to an emerging collection of evidence based violent gun injury prevention practices available to policy makers and practitioners. Briefly, focused deterrence strategies seek to change offender behavior by understanding
underlying violence-producing dynamics and conditions that sustain recurring violent gun injury problems and by implementing a blended strategy of law enforcement, community mobilization, and social service actions. (p. 56)

Boston’s success was largely due to mobilization of a wide range of resources that normally would not collaborate on gun violence (Braga, Turchan, & Winship, 2019).

This approach is also predicated on not only data grounding taking into account factors contributing to this violence but also grounding strategies within local circumstances to maximize resources by enlisting a variety of local health, educational, and social service resources, including law enforcement. Focused deterrence, as in Kansas City, may not have a lasting impact after the first year of implementation (A. M. Fox & Novak, 2018).

It is tempting to have neighborhoods as a unit of analysis and a context for interventions; we cannot ignore how social networks wield incredible influence in the presence and the unfolding of gun violence, including families playing an active role. Although our society has a propensity to romanticize families, we must not do this. We must keep in mind that families can also play a role in increasing the risk for gun violence. Parental firearm possession, for instance, increases youth having a greater propensity for firearm possession and violence risk and involvement (Sigel, Mattson, & Mercado, 2019). Being violence prone does not mean that gun absence will lead to less violence since individuals may use other weapons, such as knives, with a potential to be less lethal.

Gun violence, particularly urban centered, as in the case of the middle of summer in 2019, witnessed a series of deadly encounters, accentuating the role of weather in shaping gun use (M. A. Williams & Bassett, 2019):

This summer, U.S. cities have experienced unconscionable spikes in gun violence. Just this past weekend 12 people were shot, one fatally, in Brooklyn, and a mass shooting in Gilroy, Calif., left three dead. In early June, Chicago witnessed 52 shootings during a single weekend, including 10 fatalities. In Washington, D.C., 19 people were shot in
five days, including 11-year-old Karon Brown, killed in a car on the way to football practice. Nine people were shot during one eight-hour period in Baltimore this month. Even in Boston, which sees lower levels of gun violence than most major U.S. cities, at least 19 people have been shot since July 3, and the city’s non-fatal gun injuries have risen by nearly 20% since 2018. After the recent spate of Boston shootings, Mayor Marty Walsh touted the state’s strong gun laws even as he lamented the city’s levels of violence: “You still have a weekend like this. And it makes you think, God, what more can you do? But there has to be more.

A seasonal dimension on urban gun use also highlights how weather becomes an instrumental factor, calling for increased initiatives during this seasonal period, and why the case illustrations highlighted in Chapter 3 show increased activities during this period.

Prevailing approaches fall into three fields—public health, criminal justice, and social work. There are dramatic differences between public health, with an emphasis on youth at particular risk and community, and a criminal justice approach (emphasis on arrests) and social work, which clearly falls within a public health stance through a participatory focus on communities. A combination and coordination of these approaches has shown promise for reducing urban gun violence (Cerdá, Tracy, & Keyes, 2018). Some professions have long legacies of community involvement (Reisch & Andrews, 2014).

It bears pausing at this juncture to interject how COVID-19 has shaped the public health landscape in urban America. City mayors, for example, are confronted with the public health challenge of addressing COVID-19 and gun deaths, both taking a particularly heavy toll on people and communities of color (Donaghue, 2020):

Everytown for Gun Safety is urging mayors to prioritize gun violence intervention programs, which have seen success using outreach teams to stop violence before it starts. Gun violence has for years disproportionally impacted communities of color struggling with
health care inequalities, unemployment, poverty and lower levels of education. Now, those same communities are hardest hit by corona-virus, and advocates say the two crises have created a “perfect storm.”

COVID-19 has further exposed gross inequities in health status, care access, and precarious economic conditions. The hospital beds and equipment that are required to save the lives of gunshot victims are often the same as used to save the lives of COVID-19 victims, and sadly, they are not mutually exclusive (Kaufman, 2020):

We need I.C.U. beds, we need ventilators, we need personnel to care for the wave of Covid-19 patients. But gunshot victims are now fighting for space and resources inside America’s overcrowded I.C.U.s. As our I.C.U.s fill up with patients struggling to breathe, we look around and ask: Can we save a bed, can we save two beds, for the gunshot victims we know are coming next? Who can watch these ventilated patients if we have to call doctors to the operating room to give a hand?

Social distancing, we can argue, reduces the likelihood of conflicts resulting from physical contacts. However, it can also increase domestic violence because of an inability to move freely outside of the home. Shootings have increased in cities such as Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in April 2020, where shootings were up 17% compared to the past year, most likely reflecting poor outlooks on life; Chicago also experienced an increase in shootings and deaths, with gun violence increasing by 24% compared to last year, and concomitantly experienced high numbers of COVID-19 cases and deaths (Zaru, 2020). Boston also has not escaped an increase in gun violence during this period (Ellement & Berg, 2020).

The summer of 2020 has proven to be particularly challenging for urban communities because it is during this period that the number of shootings increase and there are more people in the streets.

Understanding the process and patterns escalating from disputes to gun fatalities is critical in developing interventions that can escalate into
lethal outcomes (Berg, 2019). Cure Violence, a public health antiviolence program, relies on “violence interrupters” and has many supporters because of its success (Webster, 2015). They often resemble the composition of the communities they serve and often come from those communities, helping to minimize barriers between themselves and those they hope to influence. Their goal is to de-escalate violent incidents, such as shootings, by employing individuals who understand street cultural dynamics and are able to connect with those most at risk to commit or become victims of gun violence. Interrupting incidents that can result in revenge shootings is an early intervention. The Cure Violence Campaign found an international audience, as witnessed in Trinidad and Tobago (Maguire, Oakley, & Corsaro, 2018).

Oakland’s success in reducing homicides by understanding local circumstances (0.1% of residents were responsible for the majority of homicides) allowed local authorities and communities to craft intervention strategies addressing gang-related activities involving 30-year-olds, a much older cohort than expected (McLively, 2019): “We hope that many more cities will be inspired by Oakland’s journey and use this report as a starting point and a roadmap for leveraging the power of partnership to address serious violence. When it comes to breaking the cycle of violence in our most impacted cities and communities, we don’t have a moment to lose.”

Safe Cities is program with wide recognition for success in reducing urban violence involving guns. In Baltimore, Maryland, it had success within high-violence neighborhoods, as well as bordering communities (Webster, Whitehill, Vernick, & Curriero, 2013). The Safe Streets intervention, as in Baltimore, found youth did change their attitudes in using violence to settle disputes (Milam et al., 2016), a key element in any urban-focused initiative.

A review of Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN) across the country found promising results (McGarrell, Perez, Carter, Daffron, 2018; Petrosino et al., 2019). Chicago’s PSN, considered one of the nations’ longest running and most evaluated violence prevention programs, however, found mixed results, varying by time period and police districts (Grunwald &
Papachristos, 2017). A similar effort targeting Washington, D.C., found implementing community and family-focused violence prevention efforts was arduous and challenging, with the need to offer intensive services and support minimizing obstacles (Lum, Olaghere, Koper, & Wu, 2016).

Convergence of substance misuse and guns is a deadly intersection of two social issues (Abaya, Atte, Herres, Diamond, & Fein, 2019; G. Banks et al., 2017; P. M. Carter, Cranford, et al., 2020). The relationship between urban alcohol outlet density, life expectancy, and violence is particularly strong and generally escaped attention in the development of crime intervention strategies (Furr-Holden et al., 2019), even though the relationship is part of the contextual setting. These institutions are part of a neighborhood’s social fabric, yet can be counterproductive and discourage community investments, although we should not automatically assume this. Thus, a case-by-case assessment is in order.

Further, gangs and drugs are a deadly combination from a gun violence standpoint (Bergen-Cico et al., 2014; McLean, Robinson, & Densley, 2018). Operation Ceasefire recognized the ramifications of these two forces coming together and mobilizing a wide range of community resources, including law enforcement, successfully in many localities, including Boston; Cincinnati, Ohio; Hempstead Village, New York; High Point, North Carolina; Minneapolis, Minnesota; Nashville, Tennessee; New Haven, Connecticut; Rockford, Illinois; Portland, Oregon; and Stockton, California (Hemenway, 2012). The focus was on gun shooting and not belonging to a gang or engaging in selling drugs. This initiative got local gang members to a forum where this operation was announced, with speakers (grandmothers, mothers, clergy, and others) sharing how gun violence dramatically altered their lives. Operation Ceasefire, unfortunately, lost funding, and in Boston, the degree of gun violence increased dramatically by 160% between 2000 and 2006 (Braga, Hureau, & Winship, 2008).

Gun interventions can be found throughout the country. Urban youth can assume meaningful roles by supporting them as peer educators and other community issues (E. Jenkins et al., 2020). This principle fits well within the self-help organizational movement, as well as other community-centered organizations. Recruiting, training, and supporting youth in this
role also invests in their communities and establishes a well-prepared source of potential staff as they age out and become adults.

There are current efforts for youth of color becoming proficient in treating gunshot wound trauma, bringing a participatory/civic engagement and peer-mentoring approach to the field, premised on an empowerment and a strengths/assets perspective (Calhoun, 2019). These efforts fill an important service gap, but one with youth prepared to negotiate urban life.

Enlisting and training bystanders, particularly on hemorrhage control and scene safety, to intervene in trauma encounters increases their willingness to assist victims and saving lives, as witnessed in a Chicago initiative (Tatebe et al., 2019). Adolescents, such as in Chicago’s Good Kids Mad City, are becoming first responders with training in applying tourniquets (using a jacket or shoelace) and doing cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR), preventing gunshot victims from bleeding out, which are viewed as life skills (Ali, 2019a):

Darrion, a soft-spoken rising ninth-grader who lives in the South Side neighborhood of Englewood, was there to learn life-saving skills in case he comes across a shooting victim. One out of every five teens ages 15 to 17 living in Chicago’s South and West Sides has witnessed a fatal shooting, according to data collected by the Chicago Center for Youth Violence Prevention at the University of Chicago. From September 2011 until 2018, nearly 1,700 children under the age of 17 were shot in Chicago, and 174 were killed.”

In St. Louis, there is another innovative effort in this arena. There is a call for gun interventions targeting urban African American/Black males, since this form of death disproportionately impacts male individuals aged 15 to 24 years and is greater than the next nine most common causes combined. The Acute Bleeding Control (ABC) program is one such intervention and focuses on bleeding control (Andrade, Hayes, & Punch, 2019):

The Acute Bleeding Control (ABC) program includes the entire BC course but has a strategic focus on groups most at risk of experiencing
GV. We seek to bring appropriate BC training to communities affected by GV and to equip our participants with trauma first aid (TFA) kits. Participants assemble TFA kits from provided materials, including a tourniquet, hemostatic gauze, regular gauze, adhesive compression tape, trauma shears, a permanent marker, and gloves. Kits are personalized by offering different colored materials and properly fitted gloves. By allowing participants to create their own TFA kits, we ensure that they have interacted with the materials in their kit and know where to find them if the need arises. Individually sourcing the materials and assembling the kits onsite has allowed us to significantly reduce the cost of TFA kits.

Sadly, efforts such as those discussed will increasingly find receptive audiences in other urban communities because of the realization that lives can be saved by enlisting communities. Other similar innovative efforts will no doubt follow suit.

These skill sets are more appropriate for soldiers in a war zone than in the nation’s streets. There is also a call for nursing to take a leading role in promoting community bleeding control training, and bringing lessons from the battlefield, to save lives (Carman, 2019, p. 53):

Trauma victims can die from uncontrolled bleeding within minutes. Based on the amount of evidence, preparedness is nonnegotiable. This preparedness is inevitably multifactorial, and must benefit from the efforts of various stakeholders, from emergency medical services and other first responders to physicians. Nurses, with their focus on prevention and maintaining health, are natural leaders in the initiative to stop preventable deaths due to gun violence and other mass trauma events.

Summer is a time for children to play and learn gunfire lifesaving measures (Beckett, Bond Graham, & Clayton, 2019):

Abéné Clayton spent a day with Elana Bolds, a local activist in Richmond, California, teaching children how to avoid being caught
in a crossfire. In Oakland, the work of violence prevention, often coordinated through grassroots community organizations and churches, feels as vital as it did in the 1990s, when the city’s gun violence epidemic peaked. Many of the city’s neighborhoods are still stricken by shootings, despite a sharp decline over the past five years, which has been attributed to Oakland’s Operation Ceasefire violence prevention initiative.

Oakland’s Ceasefire was modeled on Boston.

Much fanfare has been levied on the importance of community initiatives, with local leadership and a cross section of institutions addressing a variety of social problems and crises, with gun violence being a prime example of this call for comprehensive approaches tapping local institutions with requisite legitimacy and representing their constituency regarding social justice (Abt, 2019a).

Social workers are aware of the critical role that participatory democracy plays in shaping community development, ownership of initiatives, and the empowerment that ensues (Soska & Ohmer, 2018). Social work, of course, does not have a monopoly on this stance (C. Williams, 2018): “As public health educators and researchers, we firmly believe there is no disease we cannot cure, gun violence included. But no epidemic can be eradicated without the efforts of a village.” A can-do attitude is built on optimism and more powerful when it involves “we” in the sentence.

Basing community initiatives on youth of color trauma conceptualization, a subjective phenomenon but critical in shaping their sense of well-being, including using their own words, increases the likelihood of success in reaching these youth (Henderson, 2019). Self-help organizations understand this and provide professionals with requisite vocabulary and context to increase message effectiveness. Viewing community participation through a self-help lens offers great potential for expanding civic engagement. These organizations provide opportunities for reluctant resident engagement with formal organizations (Fader, VanZant, & Henson, 2019).

Addressing gun violence has taken a variety of shapes (Delgado, 2019; Frazer et al., 2018), including developing grassroots organizations
specifically focused on gun violence created by the families and most likely mothers of victims leading these efforts. These organizations are invariably started by loved ones of those killed by guns. Organizations such as the Louis D. Brown Peace Institute (Boston) and Mothers With a Message (San Diego, CA), for example, typify efforts to bring solace to a victim’s family and putting social and political pressure to pass legislation and support to aid families and prevent the use of guns and violence.

Enlisting local participation is widely embraced with a long tradition gaining saliency. Nevertheless, there is a counterargument to having victims and survivors not weigh in on finding solutions to their tragedies, and this cannot be ignored in understanding opposition to community-led initiatives, as reported by Somin (2019) on comments made by Kyle Kashua at the 2019 NRA Convention:

I explained why it’s a mistake to give special credence to the policy views of victims of horrible tragedies. Surviving a school shooting, or some other awful event, doesn’t give you any special insight into the moral and policy questions at stake. Survivors deserve empathy and respect—but not deference to their policy views, except in rare instances where they have genuine expertise on the subject. . . . Often, the real reason for focusing attention on victims and survivors is not the value of their insights, but the way in which they tug at our emotional heart-strings. Opposition to policies promoted by survivors of a recent horrific event is easy to denounce as callous and unfeeling. Here, we would do well to remember that our immediate emotional reactions to tragedy are rarely a useful guide to policy. All too often, giving in to such feelings results in policies that create more harm and injustice than they prevent.

This stance is an antithesis of this book’s values. Victims are the best experts of their lives, bringing an experiential legitimacy view in shaping policies and interventions. Slogans, and we can add self-help organization names, play an important role from a media standpoint (Gabor, 2016).
One has only to focus on the names of self-help organizations to understand the messages they convey to their broader community. Youth must play influential roles shaping gun violence policies (Krantz, 2019; Rahamim, 2018) because this issue impacts them in particular, and they are aware of gun use the social context (Parsons, et al., 2018):

Young people are not simply victims of gun violence in this country, they are among the leading voices calling for change to the nation’s weak gun laws and deadly gun culture. Organizers of the Black Lives Matter movement; survivors of the Parkland shooting; youth organizers working in cities hardest hit by gun violence, such as Chicago, Baltimore, and St. Louis, have all lent their voices to an increasingly loud call to action. These young people do not just want to reform gun laws—they are also demanding that the issue of gun violence be examined as part of a complex and intersectional web of issues that also include community disinvestment, criminal justice reform, and policing. They are advocating not only for solutions to make schools safer from mass shootings but also for holistic and intersectional solutions that will help make all communities safer.

Not having youth at the table setting the agenda decreases the likelihood of success for any strategy hoping to influence youth behaviors. Youth benefit from positive adult engagement, but it must not be condescending and should be viewed as a partnership (Eisman, Lee, Hsieh, Stoddard, & Zimmerman, 2018).

Self-help youth-led organizations on gun violence also exist, showing how this violence is addressed when focused on this age group (Tulop, 2018): (a) March for Our Lives; (b) Students Demand Action; (c) Team Enough; (d) Orange Generation; (e) StudentsMarch.Org; (f) Youth Over Guns; and (g) National Die-In. These organizations reemphasize social action and youth, although adults can be a part of these efforts (Nishimoto, 2019). This section includes one children-focused organization to contrast with the adult-focused organizations, although the latter also involve youth programs. There is a desperate need to capture the appeal
and power of the self-help movement and the lessons learned shared with other communities facing similar challenges. This book fills a knowledge gap in the puzzle.

CONCLUSION

This chapter helps us better understand the interplay of key factors shaping how gun violence is manifested and successfully addressed within urban communities, setting the stage for urban self-help organizations in any community-based strategy to address gun violence. The factors raised in this chapter are worthy of considerably more attention. The following chapter addresses what many readers have greatly anticipated—case illustrations. These cases integrate key concepts, statistics, and historical grounding and why self-help organizations will prove to be a critical element in any urban strategy on gun violence.