Becoming a Shooter

Megan Kang
Princeton University

Sociologists have extensively studied gun violence but paid less attention to how firearms shape the identities and life trajectories of those who carry them. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and life-course interviews in Chicago, I examine how individuals develop reputations as *shooters* and the obstacles they face in shedding this label. The erosion of gang control over gun markets, coupled with the status attached to being a shooter, heighten pressures to cultivate violent reputations. Youth move from acquiring a gun to becoming a shooter through rituals and public displays that transform gun carrying into a social identity. Three mechanisms make shooter identities particularly durable: the lethality of firearms creates lasting rival networks; social media preserves shooter reputations through permanent digital archives; and widespread firearm availability creates a dilemma where former shooters feel they cannot unilaterally disarm while rivals remain armed. For former shooters, conventional turning points like school, romantic relationships, and work can become sites of vulnerability rather than transformation. This study reveals how guns function as social forces that make exit from violence increasingly difficult even after behavioral change occurs.

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Gun violence imposes staggering social costs and is now the leading cause of death among American children and teens (Goldstick et al. 2022). Shooters are a crucial part of this problem. While they constitute only a fraction of the population, they account for a disproportionate share of gun violence. One study found that 70% of nonfatal shootings in Chicago involved co-offending networks of fewer than 6% of the city's population (Papachristos et al. 2015), a pattern replicated across major cities (Dong et al. 2024). Gun violence interventions typically assume that changing behavior and providing opportunities facilitate desistance from crime. But this logic breaks down when people stop using guns illegally while their reputations persist. Programs serving those at highest risk must address both changing behavior and managing durable labels. Those that neglect how reputations constrain former shooters' daily lives may prove ineffective or may even inadvertently increase participants' vulnerability.

Firearms are central to American life, yet sociological theory often treats them as background conditions rather than driving forces of violence and inequality (Hureau 2022). Prior work has documented the effects of gun violence on communities (Papachristos 2009; Sharkey 2010; Lee 2012; Ralph 2014; Papachristos et al. 2015; Auyero 2015; Vargas 2016; Sharkey 2018b; Stuart 2020; Hureau and Wilson 2021; Wooten 2022). Less attention has been paid, however, to how guns shape the identities and trajectories of those who carry them. Drawing on two years of ethnographic fieldwork and 37 life-course interviews with gang-involved teenagers and adults in Chicago, I examine how youth acquire a reputation as a "shooter"—a street label given to individuals recognized as having the willingness and capacity to use firearms—and the obstacles they face in shedding this label. Youth often acquire guns because they feel unsafe in high-crime neighborhoods. But this study shows how that decision can beget a cycle that pushes individuals even further to society's margins while increasing their risk. In this way, America's gun landscape transforms age-limited criminal behavior into lasting social identities, creating situations where individuals cease criminal activity but cannot shed its reputation.

For shooters, desistance is undermined when gun-related reputations compromise the very institutions and relationships meant to facilitate exit from crime. This occurs through three mechanisms: First, the lethality of firearms creates rival networks with longer memories and higher stakes than other forms of adolescent crime. Traditional pathways out of deviance—including school, work and romantic relationships—become sites of continued risk when they bring former enemies into proximity or expose loved ones to violence. Second, social media preserves and amplifies shooter reputations through digital archives that follow individuals across social contexts. These online traces undermine anonymity and become tools for social control by rivals, friends, and family members who can invoke past violence to influence present behavior. Third, widespread firearm availability creates a double bind: Those seeking to exit gun involvement find it difficult to unilaterally disarm when rivals remain armed, but continuing to wield a gun illegally prevents full integration into mainstream society.

What begins as act to reclaim respect and power becomes a deviant identity when others recognize a person as a shooter. Once labeled a shooter, the social bonds meant to facilitate desistance often become sites of heightened vulnerability rather than of protection and transformation. Thus, while illegal gun carrying is typically age-limited, with most youth carriers stopping before adulthood (Lanfear et al. 2024), its consequences persist after the gun is set down because conventional exit pathways become compromised. The shooter identity emerges within structural conditions that transform adolescent missteps into life-course constraints.

My study contributes to several domains of sociology. It extends labeling theory by showing how contemporary technologies facilitate how deviance forms and persists. I demonstrate how firearms alongside social media make identity change not just difficult, but increasingly precarious, as these technologies expand the reach and durability of deviant labels. Additionally, it resolves a puzzle in life course criminology: If gun carrying is age-limited, why do its effects persist? I argue that labels obstruct the desistance process even after behavior changes, as lasting rivalries and shooter reputations transform conventional turning points like marriage, school, or employment into sites of heightened vulnerability rather than sites of transformation. Lastly, this study identifies guns as important drivers of cumulative disadvantage in contemporary America. Beyond instruments of violence or symbolic objects, guns are active forces that socialize youth into violence and undermine desistance from crime. Unlike other forms of delinquency, guns transform adolescent mistakes into lasting reputations with consequences that persist well into adulthood.

TRENDS IN U.S. GUN AVAILABILITY

Recent changes in gun policy and production have made it possible for adolescent deviance to have repercussions that persist long after the behavior stops. This section outlines trends in U.S. gun availability and describes how guns have been conceptualized in the social science literature.

Over the past two decades, many U.S. states have relaxed firearm restrictions, repealing permit requirements and regulations enacted during the 1990s and 2010s (Sharkey and Kang 2023a). These shifts were reinforced by Supreme Court rulings that expanded individual gun rights and narrowed the scope of gun regulations, fueling an unprecedented boom in civilian gun ownership. Firearm manufacturing has nearly tripled its output since 2000 and imported guns have doubled in the past decade (Thrush 2022). The U.S. firearm stock has increased by 40% since the 1990s (Azrael et al. 2017), with the sharpest rise occurring in the past five years. Between 2019 and 2021, 7.5 million Americans became first-time gun owners, with notable increases within new demographics: female, Black, and Hispanic buyers (Miller et al. 2022). This surge in the supply and demand of firearms coincided with record-high gun deaths in 2021, prompting the U.S. surgeon general to declare gun violence a public health crisis in 2024. Despite the diversification in new gun owners, the most common reason Americans give for owning a firearm has remained consistent since the 1970s: self-protection. But what, exactly, do Americans believe they need protection from?

Sociologists have broken new ground on this question, shifting attention from proximate motivations for gun ownership (e.g., self-protection) to the social anxieties that underlie them. This work identifies a range of concerns among gun owners, including fear of crime (Shapira and Simon 2018), narratives of political victimization (Kleck et al. 2011), economic precarity (Sola and Warner 2024), anxieties over racial transformation (Stroud 2017; Metzl 2019; Carlson 2019), and declining trust in state institutions (Carlson 2015). At the core of these accounts is a pervasive sense that safety has become an individual responsibility. As one gun merchant put it, "When you have uncertainty, you have to have a guarantee, and the only guarantee in this country is the right to protect yourself" (Carlson 2023).

This emerging sociology of guns illuminates how firearms operate as symbolic objects among many legal gun owners, for whom guns represent more than a desire for protection, but a way of life (Yamane 2017). This is a critical intervention to a literature that has largely treated firearms as either instruments of self-defense or weapons of crime. However, the sociological

theories developed around what guns mean to legal gun owners is rarely extended to those who carry guns illegally—and who therefore are at highest risk of engaging in gun violence (Hureau and Wilson 2021). These individuals are typically examined through a different set of lenses: crime, risk, and public health.

Since the 1960s, researchers within criminology, public health, sociology and economics have built a robust literature on crime guns,[1] uncovering how illegal firearms fuel violence and harm communities (Zimring 1968; Cook 1979; Cook and Ludwig 2002; Cook et al. 2007; Braga and Cook 2018; Hureau and Braga 2018). This work has established foundational facts about guns in the U.S. Firearms make violent encounters more likely to end in death (Zimring 1968; Cook 1979) and are used in far more crimes in the U.S. than in any other country. This explain why, despite similar overall crime rates across wealthy nations, violence in the U.S. is uniquely lethal (Zimring and Hawkins 1997). Gun homicides in the U.S. occur at 25 times the rate of other wealthy nations (Grinshteyn and Hemenway 2016). Meanwhile, the lethality of firearm technology has increased. The guns and ammunition used in violent crime have evolved (Hargarten 2020; Hureau 2022; Fleegler et al. 2025) with the growing use of high-capacity magazines and machine gun conversion devices, such as Glock switches. These innovations have raised shooting fatality rates across American cities, where victims are now likely to be shot multiple times per incident (Braga and Cook 2018). The social costs of gun violence extend far beyond death and injury. Its "long reach" (Sharkey 2018b) distorts daily life, fuels disinvestment, and erodes community well-being (Cullen and Levitt 1999; Cook and Ludwig 2004b; Sharkey and Torrats-Espinosa 2017; Sharkey 2018a; Chalfin and McCrary 2018).

Research on the sources of crime guns reveals that the underground gun market is embedded within, not separate from, the legal gun market. Federally licensed dealers (FFLs) divert firearms to illegal markets through circumventing background checks and regulations through straw purchases, false identification, or corruption (Cook et al. 2014; Semenza et al. 2022; Shjarback et al. 2023; Griffiths et al. 2025). Like underage drinking, gun access often depends on someone willing to buy on behalf of a prohibited person. In low-prevalence areas, accessing a gun illegally can take days or remain out of reach, but in high-prevalence settings, transaction costs are lower, making crime guns more easily available (Hureau and Braga 2018). Porous state borders enable guns from permissive states to flow into restrictive ones. Cities like Chicago, Boston, and New York see over half their recovered crime guns originating from nearby states with lenient regulations (Cook et al. 2007, 2014; Suplina et al. 2017; Hureau and Braga 2018; Braga et al. 2021). In New York City, the average time-to-crime—the period between a gun's legal sale and its recovery in a crime—fell from 12 years in 2019 to just 9 years in 2022, indicating that firearms are moving into illegal markets at a faster pace as guns are becoming more easily available ("NYPD End-of-Year Crime Statistics" 2024).

Guns access and lethality have increased across the U.S. due changes in gun regulation and technology in recent decades. Gun scholars have explored the meanings firearms hold for legal owners and documented how crime guns are accessed and their effects on communities. But critical gaps remain: How does rising gun availability shape adolescent deviance? What does acquiring a gun illegally mean for a young person's identity and life trajectory? What happens when individuals attempt desistance from gun crime while their peers remain armed? These

[1]Crime guns are firearms possessed unlawfully or used in crime. Data on legal firearms are limited; our best measures are at the national and state level since the U.S. does not maintain a registry (Kang and Rasich 2023a, 2023b; Sharkey and Kang 2023b). Data on crime guns are even more limited, as official records capture only those recovered by police or reported by victims. Between 2017 and 2021, the ATF traced roughly 1.4 million guns, nearly 50,000 of which were linked to Chicago, highlighting the city's central role in illicit gun markets.

unresolved questions point to the need for a sociological account of how guns reconfigure the meaning of deviance and the pathways of desistance in an era of widespread firearm access.

WHEN SOCIAL BONDS BECOME VULNERABILITIES

The widespread availability of firearms combined with their increasing lethality has transformed the consequences of juvenile delinquency in ways that sociological theories have yet to account for. While life-course models of crime reveal how early deviance creates cascading disadvantages, they were developed during periods when guns were less available, and digital technologies did not exist to preserve and amplify deviant reputations. The intersection of social media and gun violence has altered how deviant labels form and persist, as digital platforms permanently record and circulate stigmatizing information while the heightened stakes of armed conflict make these reputations consequential and difficult to shed.

Criminal activity usually peaks in adolescence and declines by early adulthood (Laub and Sampson 1993, 2003; Caspi and Moffitt 1995; Agnew and Brezina 2022; Lanfear et al. 2024), yet its consequences often persist long after the behavior has ceased. The disconnect between deviant behavior and responses to that behavior has concerned sociologists for nearly a century (Tannenbaum 1938; Lemert 1951; Goffman 1959). Why do the effects of adolescent crime persist long after the initial behavior stopped?

The concept of "cumulative disadvantage" helps explain this puzzle. This idea synthesizes labeling theory with an age-graded theory of informal social control within a life-course developmental framework (Sampson and Laub 2004). While drawing from labeling theory's recognition that official reactions to "primary deviance"—such as arrest, formal labeling, and incarceration—foster continued criminal behavior through "secondary deviance" (Lemert 1951), the theory extends beyond labeling theory by emphasizing how delinquent behavior systematically weakens the social and institutional bonds that tether adults to conventional society.

According to this framework, the continuity of criminal behavior reflects more the stability of social responses to deviance than of individual deviant traits (Laub and Sampson 1993; Caspi and Moffitt 1995). Early antisocial behavior generates negative institutional responses across family, school, peers, and state sanctions, creating "cumulative continuity" where early delinquency triggers reactions that channel individuals toward continued antisocial behavior. This operates through formal and informal domains: Labeling children as deviant at home and at school creates educational disadvantages (Hagan and Palloni 1990; Rios 2011), while criminal records create employment barriers beyond formal disqualification (Pager 2003; Western 2006), and incarceration disrupts familial bonds and constrains relationship opportunities (Edin et al. 2004; Massoglia et al. 2011; Turney 2014). Longitudinal research demonstrates how racial inequalities in early social contexts drive persistent arrest disparities, with Black and Hispanic individuals experiencing cumulative disadvantages across multiple domains from childhood through adulthood (Sampson and Neil 2024).

Cumulative disadvantage can be disrupted by cultivating social bonds that serve as "turning points" out of criminal careers by providing social control and anchoring new identities (Sampson and Laub 1993; Laub and Sampson 2003). Research has consistently demonstrated the importance marriage (Sampson et al. 2006), stable employment (Uggen 2011), military service (Bouffard 2003), fatherhood (Edin et al. 2004), and educational achievement (Swisher and Dennison 2016) in facilitating desistance. These turning points are theorized to work through multiple mechanisms: providing structure and routine (Osgood et al. 1996), generating informal

social control through attachment to conventional others (Hirschi 1969), and offering pathways for cognitive and identity transformation (Maruna 2001; Giordano et al. 2002).

Contemporary gun availability and social media technologies, however, fundamentally transform how social bonds operate within processes of labeling and desistance. Rather than serving as protective buffers, these technologies can convert close relationships into potential sites of vulnerably and make it harder to leave old identities behind. Understanding how disadvantage compounds in the digital age requires examining how these technologies reshape the very social bonds that life-course theories theorize as pathways to desistance.

Digital labeling creates permanent, searchable records that follow individuals across different social settings, enabling new forms of social control that transcend geographic and temporal boundaries. These changes manifest across multiple domains. Social media platforms create digital gang membership (online traces of gang affiliation) that persists after individuals distance themselves from gang activities (Lane 2019; Stuart 2020), online conflicts escalate offline violence by expanding audiences (Patton et al. 2014), and law enforcement agencies increasingly rely on digital data for arrest and prosecution decisions (Brayne 2014, 2020). Research reveals how "context collapse" enables peer groups to transcend spatial and temporal boundaries when constructing deviant identities (boyd 2010, 2014), while online communities leverage viral sharing, hashtag campaigns, and algorithmic distribution to institutionalize criminal labels. Social media has altered both who can apply deviant labels and how those labels are constructed and maintained. Rather than occurring through formal institutions, labeling now operates through distributed networks of peers who can collectively create and enforce reputations through viral content and digital archives (Adler and Adler 2002).

Social media represent only one dimension of how labeling has transformed in contemporary society. Guns introduce a second critical vector that alters labeling processes and the protective capacity of social bonds. Unlike other forms of deviance, gun violence creates durable reputations that carry serious risks for both labeled individuals and their social networks. Gun violence can also transform relationships into potential liabilities, creating a paradox for desistance theories: The very social bonds theorized as pathways out of crime become sources of vulnerability that expose individuals and their loved ones to danger, or enable social control by exploiting shooters' liabilities. The shooter identity thus illustrates how firearms exacerbate disadvantage precisely through, not despite, individuals' engagement with legitimate institutions and pro-social relationships.

FROM COLLECTIVE TO INDIVIDUAL SAFETY: A CHICAGO CASE STUDY

Chicago provides a theoretically motivated case because it allows us to observe the transition from collective to individual safety as it unfolds, rather than inferring this shift from cross-sectional data or retrospective accounts. The city's transformation from corporate gang governance to fragmented cliques creates a rare natural experiment for examining how safety strategies reorganize when collective mechanisms collapse. We can observe how cumulative disadvantage accelerates and changes when informal social control mechanisms break down (Vargas 2014; Aspholm 2020; Kang 2025), alongside increased gun availability (Ludwig 2025) and a rise in online gangbanging (Stuart 2020), creating the structural conditions for adolescent gun use to take on new meanings.

After two decades of decline and stability in violent crime, Chicago experienced a sudden and dramatic spike in homicides in 2016, with 764 murders representing a 58% increase from the previous year. This surge continued until its peak in 2021, when the homicide rate for Black

Chicagoans soared to an all-time high of 85 per 100,000 people, meaning it was more dangerous to grow up Black in Chicago recently than during the crime wave of the 1980s to 1990s. Crucially, this increase was both racially specific—neither Latino nor White residents saw equivalent increases—and weapon-specific, driven primarily by gun crimes rather than other forms of violence (University of Chicago Crime Lab 2017).

Chicago's recent violence surge illustrates how processes of cumulative disadvantage are accelerated when guns become more readily available and informal social control is eroded. During the late 20th century, "corporate gangs" dominated Chicago's South and West Sides, operating as structured organizations that maintained some degree of informal social control (Venkatesh 1997; Moore and Stuart 2022). These groups had economic incentives to minimize unpredictable violence—a single gang war could reduce drug sales by 20-30% (Levitt and Venkatesh 2000)—and developed hierarchical structures that constrained individual members while providing status and identity (Venkatesh 2008; Ralph 2014). But targeted crime interventions in the 1990s and early 2000s, including RICO prosecutions and enhanced sentencing (Aspholm 2020; Vargas 2014), alongside the demolition of public housing dismantled corporate gang structures without replacing their regulatory functions. The result was not the elimination of criminal organization but its fragmentation into thousands of neighborhood-based cliques (Hagedorn et al. 2019; Aspholm 2020). Hence, interventions designed to reduce crime inadvertently eliminated forms of informal social control over violence (Vargas 2014; Kang 2025), creating conditions where safety shifted from a collective to individual concern.

While the breakdown of governance within criminal groups can hypothetically lead to a reduction in violent conflict, shifts toward more fragmented systems of criminal governance also introduce the potential for a different sort of violence (Skarbek 2014; Lessing 2018; Blattman 2022). In fragmented contexts, violence is often driven by cycles of honor and revenge rather than economic motives. Without structured groups to regulate members, retaliatory "tit-for-tat" cycles have the potential to escalate unchecked, resulting in greater volatility in violence (Vargas 2014; Blattman n.d.). Role ambiguity heightens uncertainty about norms and expectations, especially in symmetric peer relations where actions are easily construed as status threats (Gould 2003). Violence, in turn, becomes both a pre-emptive signal of dominance and a means of deterring future threats (Gambetta 2011; Lynn and Podolny 2011; Przepiorka et al. 2020).

The growing availability and lethality of firearms intensified these dynamics. Illinois's transition to a "shall issue" concealed carry state after 2013 expanded firearm access, increasing not only legal gun ownership but also the flow of firearms to underground markets. In 2023, Illinois recorded its highest number of recovered crime guns in the past decade, with over half traced back to Chicago. This confluence of factors—fragmented informal social control, persistent individual grievances, widespread gun access, and digital amplification—created the structural conditions under which youth felt that they needed to take safety into their own hands.

Chicago's theoretical value lies not in its representativeness but in the unusual visibility of processes that may be present but less observable elsewhere. While few cities follow Chicago's exact model, many urban areas face analogous transitions as traditional sources of informal social control weaken and gun availability and violence have risen. When informal social control mechanisms break down, individuals can no longer rely on community-wide norms and interventions to ensure their protection, forcing them to seek individual solutions to collective problems. This shift aligns with what Carlson (2023) identifies as a broader national transition toward individualized responsibility for protection through gun ownership (Carlson 2023). The paradox is that these seemingly rational protective strategies—acquiring firearms for

self-defense—can place youth from disadvantaged contexts on trajectories characterized by feedback loops that further entrench their marginalization.

DATA AND METHODS

Field Site and Access

I conducted two years of ethnographic fieldwork in Chicago to examine how gun availability and violence shape daily life. I lived in North Lawndale, on the West Side, for a year and in Hyde Park on the South Side for the remainder, while maintaining contact with core participants after relocating.

I first moved to Chicago in 2017 to join a research team evaluating a community violence intervention on the South and West Sides. That role embedded me in an established research infrastructure and helped build relationships with community members at the forefront of violence prevention work. Those connections were critical to gaining access for this study.

When I reentered the field in 2023, I chose to work in the same neighborhoods but focus on younger cohorts since criminological research shows that violent offending peaks in the late teens to early twenties. Rather than return through previous institutional partnerships, I began volunteering at a boxing gym run by former gang members I had met at a back-to-school event in 2022. The gym served as both a recreational and outreach space for youth from surrounding neighborhoods. My sustained presence there allowed me to build trust independently from external affiliations. Access to street-involved youth came through two longtime outreach workers at the gym—Charles (63) and China (54)[2]—both former gang members respected for their ability to mediate conflict. I had first met Charles in 2017 and China in 2022. They were instrumental in helping me move through networks that would otherwise have remained closed to outsiders.

My primary site, North Lawndale, is a historically Black neighborhood shaped by migration, industrial decline, and decades of disinvestment. Once a manufacturing hub and the birthplace of the Vice Lords, it had, by the time of fieldwork, a population that was 78% Black, a median household income of $33,334, and an unemployment rate of 15% (ACS 2018–2022). Nearly 40% of residents lived below the poverty line, and 2,120 lots sat vacant (Morsey et al. 2021). North Lawndale ranked among the most violent areas of Chicago, alongside five other neighborhoods responsible for over half the city's recent homicides.

I was 30 when I entered the field, an Asian American woman from an upper-middle-class background, with no experience in gangs or growing up in a high crime neighborhood. My work as a high school teacher in Detroit exposed me to how poverty and violence constrain youth trajectories—an experience that transformed my understanding of American inequality in ways that sociology later helped me name. As an outsider, some participants may have withheld certain views or experiences; at the same time, my distance may have created space for candor among others. The most important aspect of my positionality, however, may have been less about my racial or gender identity than how I actively positioned myself in the field. I adapted to the needs of each interaction, at times acting as a confidant, auntie, driver, mentor, babysitter, and emergency contact. I aimed to bring steadiness to my relationships without offering advice or intervening. I believe the key to being able to access the lives of my participants was repeatedly showing up, something participants told me mattered to them.

[2]Subjects' names were changed to protect their privacy, except for Cmdr. Betancourt, Charles, and China, who elected to use their real names.

Ethnographic Sample

For two years, I followed a core group of four Black teenagers and young men—Jay (16), Grenshaw (17), Tony (20), and Dion (20)—each with histories of illegal gun carrying and use. All came from families with deep gang ties on Chicago's West Side, where street affiliation was often expected and distancing oneself meant defying family norms. Three of the four (Jay, Grenshaw, and Dion) had been shot and had also shot at others, marking them as shooters. The label is not simply an online reputation, but one established through actual gun use in the streets. The label does not require a criminal record. When I met them, neither Grenshaw nor Dion had ever been arrested, yet both were widely recognized as shooters. Tony, the only non-shooter in the group, carried a gun only while selling drugs. I met the boys through Charles and China and built trust gradually, eventually spending time with each of them independently. Since Jay and Grenshaw were minors when I met them, I obtained assent from them and consent from their mothers. I described my project as research on the barriers young people face when "stepping back from the streets," a local phrase for desistance.

All had enrolled at an alternative school for students with behavioral challenges, in fall 2022. Their paths diverged after Jay was targeted and shot leaving school, with Dion caught in the crossfire. Fearing for their safety, the four of them dropped out and scattered. I continued following them over the next year as they attempted to separate from street life. I also spent extensive time with their networks: girlfriends, mothers, siblings, cousins, teachers, parole officers, doctors, and friends. I conducted interviews with several of these individuals, who were secondary study participants and consented to participating. I accompanied my core subjects to school, the gym, emergency rooms, funerals, court hearings, social services, job interviews, football games, and even prom.

With participant consent, I recorded most conversations, took jottings throughout the day, and typed full fieldnotes within one to two days while my memories were fresh. Verbatim quotes in this paper come from recorded conversations; italicized text reflects reconstructed dialogue from fieldnotes. Embedding myself in their lives and building sustained relationships allowed me to observe not only what participants said, but what they did—one of the core virtues of ethnographic work (Desmond 2012). These long-term relationships allowed me to trace how events unfolded across time and a network of actors. This was especially important given that I investigated activities for which there are many reasons to withhold or distort the truth about.

Given the high-risk nature of this work, I developed safety protocols in collaboration with my advisors, IRB, and legal counsel. I obtained an NIH Certificate of Confidentiality to protect participants, completed trauma training before and during fieldwork, and implemented protocols for handling disclosures of self-harm or threats of harm to others, both of which arose during the study. In such moments, I contacted their primary guardian or mentor to ensure they received support and that the threat would not be acted upon. I also tried to help the participant calm down by taking them to get a meal or walking with them around a safe place before leaving them on their own. Because I often drove and spent time with youth involved in active conflicts, I adopted several safety protocols. My participants reclined their seats in my car and wore masks to avoid detection from potential threats. While I never witnessed or facilitated gun violence (e.g., I never knowingly allowed firearms in my car), participants occasionally disclosed sensitive or legally ambiguous information. In those cases, I refrained from probing further and consulted with advisors and legal counsel. My priority was minimizing risk for participants and myself even if that meant suspending data collection temporarily.

Interviews

I also draw on in-depth, life-course interviews with 37 adult men with a history of illegal gun use that were conducted in 2022 by the author and a team of researchers. Fieldwork provided access to the embodied and often inarticulable ways that shooter identities shaped everyday life that might not surface in interviews due to limited trust or the difficulty of narrating certain motives (Jerolmack and Khan 2014). The interviews offer a broader sample of life histories that illuminate how and why individuals first came to carry guns and how that decision shaped their trajectories later into adulthood, which I could not observe directly in my fieldwork. Together, the fieldwork and interviews offer complementary forms of evidence. The former reveals the situated, relational dynamics of the shooter identity, while the latter maps wider patterns in the acquisition and consequences of gun use over time and later into adulthood.

These 37 cases are a subset from a larger dataset of interviews with 99 Black and Hispanic current or former participants in the Rapid Employment and Development Initiative (READI), a community-based violence intervention offering employment and wrap around support services. Those referred to READI by various gatekeepers, including the court and street outreach workers, have exhibited high rates of violence exposure and interactions with the justice system: 35% had been shot, and 98% had been arrested, with an average of 17 arrests prior to joining the program (Bhatt et al. 2024). Founded in 2017, READI serves neighborhoods with high homicide rates, including Englewood, North Lawndale, Austin, and West Garfield.

The purpose of these interviews was to understand READI participants' life histories before, during, and after program involvement to get a better sense of the how the program mechanisms worked. Although it is very likely that more than 37 of the 99 respondents had experiences with crime guns, the interview guide did not explicitly ask about gun use. Instead, this subset of 37 brought up personal gun use on their own, without prompting. Once an individual mentioned his experience with guns or gun violence, follow-up questions were used to explore the topic further.

Interview respondents, aged 18 to 48 (average age 26), were recruited through on-site observations, referrals from outreach workers, and participant networks. Interviews, typically conducted in familiar public spaces, were designed to ensure respondent comfort and safety. A team of six interviewers helped conduct interviews, guided by a protocol emphasizing sensitive and reflexive practices to minimize retraumatization. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and a detailed codebook was developed to capture key themes using MAXQDA software. Transcripts were double coded by two different coders with weekly meetings to resolve discrepancies.

Analysis

I did not enter the field intending to study shooters. My initial goal was to understand the barriers gang-affiliated teenagers face when attempting to step back from street life. At the outset I had encountered the term *shooter* in passing through interviews with older gang members, but I did not yet grasp its salience as a social identity. Only through sustained fieldwork did I come to see the shooter not simply as someone who had shot a gun, but as a recognized figure whose status, obligations, and risks shaped how others responded to them and how they saw themselves.

As in Seim's approach to emergent inquiry, my research questions sharpened through prolonged immersion (Seim 2020). What began as a broader investigation of desistance evolved into a more focused exploration of how reputations for gun use developed and persisted, and what the consequences were on individual lives. This conceptual shift emerged inductively

through extensive listening, spending time with participants, coding fieldnotes, delving into the literature, and reading interview transcripts. This approach made room for unanticipated patterns to inform a broader understanding of deviance and desistance. As in prior ethnographies (Duneier 2001; Auyero 2015), I regularly shared my ideas with participants, especially Charles and China, whose insights and corrections helped ensure my claims are accurate.

THE CONDITIONS THAT GIVE RISE TO SHOOTERS

This section describes three structural conditions that have transformed how guns and shooting create durable reputations with lasting consequences that shape coming of age in urban America: (1) the collapse of corporate gangs, which weakened informal social control and shifting norms around violence; (2) the decentralization of gun markets, with familial and online networks replacing gang oversight; and (3) the rise of social media, which expanded the stage for gun use, amplifying both the rewards and the risks involved. The city's particular intensity in experiencing these shifts makes it a valuable lens for understanding processes that, while varying in degree and timing, are reshaping youth violence across American cities facing similar social fragmentation along with rising gun availability and social media proliferation.

Weakened Informal Social Control & Shifting Norms Around Violence

In the late 20th century, Chicago's corporate gangs operated like businesses, managing the drug trade and maintaining internal order to protect profits and avoid law enforcement (Moore and Stuart 2022; Venkatesh 1997; Levitt and Venkatesh 2000). That source of informal social control has since unraveled, along with the norms that once governed violence.

William Betancourt, a Puerto Rican veteran with three decades of policing Chicago's West Side, reflected on how the collapse of the corporate gang has reshaped patterns of street violence. Known for his stout build and charismatic personality, he earned the nickname "Mighty Mouse" from residents in his district. Betancourt rose through the ranks from officer to sergeant, lieutenant, and eventually, Commander of Chicago Police District's 10th District in 2023, encompassing North Lawndale and Little Village.

"When I came on, there was structure in the gangs," Commander Betancourt stated, "And in order for you to do what we call 'a drive-by' or 'a hit,' you had to get approval from a chief." Today, with that structure gone, younger members set the terms. He asked, "How does a 14-year-old tell another 14-year-old that [shooting innocents] is not right if they're riding together? Neither one has a concept of right or wrong."

Commander Betancourt acknowledged that police alone could not provide public safety. He said, "We don't have any kind of actual logical structure to say, 'Hey, no, we can't do that. We can't victimize our own neighborhoods." In his view, effective social control depended on the support of older gang leaders. Their demise, he argued, contributed to the rise in harm to bystanders. He said, "The most disturbing thing for me… is the violence directed at even the innocents. Back then, if you crossed that line, you had repercussions. They actually violated (i.e., beat) you because you should know better."

Betancourt recounted a case early in his career to illustrate how the corporate gangs once enforced street codes, "A little boy was out on his Big Wheel. … Gang members shot at each other, and the boy caught a bullet. Now he's paralyzed. Within four hours, we knew who did it. The gang turned them over. [Shooting an innocent kid] was a no-no. In today's day and age, they don't do that."

While early exposure to violence and local gun prevalence strongly predict teen gun carrying (Cook and Ludwig 2004a; Lanfear et al. 2024), not all youth respond to violence by arming themselves. Adolescents in neighborhoods with higher collective efficacy are significantly less likely to carry firearms, even when exposed to violence (Molnar et al. 2004). However, the collapse of Chicago's corporate gangs over the last two decades dismantled systems of informal social control that once maintained group norms and punished violators (Kang 2025). Where corporate gangs once regulated when, where, and against whom violence occurred, fragmented cliques now operate with greater volatility driven by honor and revenge rather than economic logics. An "every man for himself" mentality has emerged among younger cohorts, shifting norms such that innocents are viewed as acceptable casualties and no space is off-limits. The result is a transformation in violence from structured and spatially contained to diffuse and unpredictable. Violence now erupts across previously protected spaces like schools, funerals, and family gatherings, creating a pervasive sense of vulnerability that makes gun violence exposure routine. Today, over half of Black Chicagoans have witnessed a shooting by age 20 (Lanfear et al. 2023)—a grim reality evident throughout my fieldwork.

During the year I lived in North Lawndale, gun violence was a routine fact of life. In my first week, a young man was shot on my block. A few months later, 15 people were shot at a Halloween party where Charles and China were guests at. A teenager with disabilities was shot at a gas station by my apartment. Tony's older brother, Tito, was killed at his grandmother's funeral while mourning her death. A SWAT team shut down my street after my upstairs neighbor threatened to shoot his two children. Such instances of gun violence consistently undermined my ability to focus and engage in daily matters beyond my immediate circumstance, a documented condition of exposure to violence (Sharkey 2018b).

Tim, 30, was an active gang member at the end of corporate gang era and reflected on how the rules around legitimate violence gave way to a logic of self-preservation. He stated, "I was at a block party, and the dudes I was into it with, the 'opps' (opposition), shot me three times with my daughter in my hand." That moment, Tim said, shattered his faith in the old rules. Tim reasoned, "Why should I listen to my big homie telling me, 'Don't shoot people with kids,' if they just shot me with my kid and my mom? They could've killed my daughter." Tim regretted that he and his affiliates played a role in ushering in the new street equilibrium where self-preservation eclipsed collective concerns. He observed, "All it takes is one bad apple to spoil a bunch. … and it becomes a chain reaction. … That's why [kids are shooting] in broad daylight now, in grocery stores, in front of people. Because it's like, how do you take the chance of letting this person pass who might kill you?"

Even those not directly involved in gangs learn to manage its risks. At the corner store, neighbors swapped updates on recent shootings. In my backseat, teens scrolled crime-tracking apps as casually as checking the weather. A car ride in October 2023 illustrates how teenage girls with street ties develop strategies to assess danger and avoid becoming collateral victims.

That morning around 11 a.m., I was driving Jay's younger sister Taylor, a pretty 15-year-old who wore her hair in two high afro puffs and often kept to herself while scrolling on her phone, and his girlfriend Yaya, also 15, a sharp and spunky girl who wore her hair in long braids and had an opinion on many matters. When I picked up Taylor, a group of young men stood on the usual corner on her block, selling marijuana to a constant stream of cars.

"It's decent living there," Taylor said of her home when she got in my car, "but there are shootings sometimes, and it can get close to the house."

Yaya added, “They used to shoot by my old house, but they don’t shoot by my new house. … The street where I’m at have a lot of white folks and elderly. It be so quiet and I’m like, this is crazy and weird.”

When I asked if they had witnessed anyone being shot, Taylor replied, “I’ve seen it happen twice. Some boy got shot in front of me at the train station. And then my friend was shot at a party. … I had gone to the backyard but when I came back out my friend’s finger was shot.”

Yaya chimed in, “Especially if you hanging out with boys. If it’s just girls, it’s cool. But if boys come around, I gotta make sure I know who they is. Everything about them. You don’t know who’s into it with who, especially nowadays with gram (Instagram) stuff.”

“You can’t be around just anybody,” Taylor echoed, “You don’t know who into it with who.”

With heightened emotion Yaya exclaimed, “I’m not tryna get backdoored. These boys be getting killed, and they not even in it no more. Like Jay—he don’t gangbang [anymore], but people still don’t like him. If they see him, they not gonna be like, ‘oh he cool now.’ No. They remember what he said. What they said. That don’t go away.”

I asked the girls, “So even though you guys aren’t affiliated, you still have to watch out every day?”

Yaya replied, “Well I wouldn’t say every single day, but if you going out with people—if boys come around—I got to make sure I know them and know everything about them.”

When I asked her what kind of questions she asks, Yaya laughed at my naivety, flashing a full smile of braces. She replied, “Oh baby, I do my research! I don’t ask no questions. Instagram tell you everything. I scroll through their followers, see who they following, who follow them. If I see something off, I’m gone.” She opened her phone to show me how she uses Instagram to do this research, “All you got to do is look.” She pulled up a profile—young Black boy with dreads, gun in his story and said, “I won’t hang out around him.” Another with guns on a table. “Wouldn’t hang out with him.” Then she pulled up a light-skinned boy with cornrows playing basketball. “Now I’d hang around him, cuz he’s like a basketball player.”

In addition to undermining former norms around violence, the collapse of corporate gangs dismantled the organizational hierarchies that once conferred status and enforced internal order (Hagedorn et al. 2019; Aspholm 2020; Kang 2025). During their peak from the 1980s to early 2000s, corporate gang chapters were managed by chiefs selected for their managerial skill. JT, the focal subject in Venkatesh’s ethnography of a South Side corporate gang, illustrates this model. JT acted as a street-level manager, administering rules, coordinating economic activity, and cultivating relationships with the community (Venkatesh 2008).

That structure no longer holds. Profits from drug sales have diminished, and gang leaders are no longer promoted for their ability to maintain order. Instead, the capacity to use violence—especially with firearms—has become a primary route to status in gangs. In this new order, the shooter has emerged as a distinct and elite category within street life.

“They following the shooters,” said Matty, 35, a former Vice Lord who became an outreach worker. “If you ain’t clapping [shooting], they ain’t following you.”

Antonne, 32, a READI participant and former gang member explained, “Basically, clout means fame. And not being famous for the right reasons. You just known in your area for being a shooter… [If you are] a 14-year-old, why you got a gun? … [The gun] gave him clout. … Now anytime he come around, what motherf**kers think? ‘Oh, he got a gun on him. Don’t play with him. … He made a name for himself of being a shooter.’”

Tony's older brother TY, 20, described street life as a chessboard, "This shit just like chess. Every n***a out here worth points." He believed youth often picked up guns not for defensive purposes, but to be known. TY explained the logic, "Shorty don't know why he's shooting. … He just want to be something. He just want to have a name." That recognition can also carry value beyond the street. China observed, "You got a certain category of girls that feel like if their boyfriend is a shooter, nobody's going to mess with them."

Even youth without education, housing, or formal skills can achieve recognition as a shooter from those who matter most to him. Jay, 16, was a skinny kid with a mercurial personality that swung from charismatic and charming to moody and resistant. He had a sweet sincerity about him that made those around him want to help him. In 2021, Jay's father was shot and killed outside their home. Jay's father was not only the chief of a gang, but the provider for the extended family. When he was killed, Jay's extended family was impacted. A month later, Jay bought his first gun, a Ruger LCP, for $300, dropped out of school, and was declared chief of a new clique named after Jay's father and formed in his memory. Jay's uncles assigned him two cousins for protection and tasked him with revenge. Jay embraced the role at first, regularly carried a gun, posted photos, and "slid" (hunted) on rivals. Through these performances, he earned a reputation as a protector within his family and a local celebrity in the streets.

The shooter is not a new figure, but its distinction and lethality have intensified due to shifting material and social conditions. Building the reputation as a shooter requires not only performance but access—access that was once controlled by gangs and is now shaped by new forms of distribution.

Decentralized Gun Markets

In earlier decades, gangs served as gatekeepers that distributed firearms and regulated their use to minimize internal disorder and law enforcement scrutiny (Cook et al. 2007; Hureau and Braga 2018). A 2013 survey of Cook County Jail inmates found that 70% of illegal gun transactions occurred through street connections overseen by gang leadership (Cook et al. 2015). One gang member in their study explained, "The gang leaders, they'll choose and pick who to go out and get the guns and bring 'em back," while another observed, "You've got to be associated because gangs is gonna sell it and gonna supply it" (Cook et al. 2015). This is why in the early 2000s, Chicago's underground gun market was "thin," characterized by high transaction costs and significant price markups (Cook et al. 2007). At that time, youth often joined gangs to access tightly controlled firearms (Thornberry 2003).

China, 54, was a former Black Disciple "bully," a rare role for women given its mandate to enforce internal discipline, sometimes through violence. She drove a Lincoln sedan outfitted with a booming stereo, so people knew it was her from a block away and kept a baseball bat in the backseat in case she needed to break up a fight. A Bluetooth earpiece was a constant accessory, allowing China to manage the steady stream of calls from her many roles in local nonprofits supporting youth. With her raspy voice from chain-smoking Newport menthols and a no-bullshit demeanor, China recounted the "prerequisites" she had to meet before receiving her first gun. In the 1980s, older gang members took her to a farm in Waukegan to train before allowing her to carry a firearm. China was tasked with shooting cans to prove her accuracy before being allowed to carry her own firearm.

Charles, 63, a former Vice Lord and military veteran, was animated and outgoing, with a daily uniform of rotating baseball caps and colorful sneakers. After spending the '90s incarcerated, he believed his relentless street outreach was his way to make up for lost time.

Charles's street credibility and effervescent "love for his shorties" granted him access to even the most hardened youth. Charles explained how older gang members of the corporate gang era kept careful track of the group's firearm stock to maintain order and coordinate violence. Charles recalled, "Branch Elites (mid-level leaders) were told by Universal Elites (higher-level leaders) to make a listing of all guns on their deck and who was responsible for their safekeeping." He described how this allowed them to wage war more effectively, "Vice Lords were in a war with Gangster Goon Squad due to the attempted murder and beat down of two [Vice Lords] on the peripheral of the Holy City (Vice Lord Territory). When this occurred, all guns could be confiscated by Universal Elites and used in the defense of the Vice Lord Nation."

The gang-regulated underground gun market—documented in both the literature (Cook et al. 2007; Hureau and Braga 2018) and in China and Charles's accounts—no longer exists in Chicago's West Side. None of my core subjects acquired firearms through gang leaders or demonstrated proficiency before receiving a weapon. Instead, access flowed through social media, theft, and family. Firearms were treated as fluid assets that were bought, sold, traded, or loaned depending on conflict or financial need.

By the time I met 17-year-old Grenshaw, a confident ladies' man who was clever but lazy and had a penchant for trendy streetwear, he had already cycled through five different guns, none of which came through his gang. Grenshaw explained, "There's three ways you can get a gun. You can rob someone, you can buy it, or someone can give it to you." He had done all three. Grenshaw's first gun was stolen, and then he used that gun to trade and upgrade the rest. Many of his transactions began on social media, where sellers posted gun photos with prices. Buyers "slid up" through direct messages to arrange meetups. Jay also bought and sold his guns through Instagram through these same tactics.

Although there are fewer hoops to jump through to acquire a gun, these unregulated exchanges carried other risks. Both Grenshaw and Jay lost money while trying to purchase guns. Grenshaw handed $900 to a co-worker to facilitate a gun purchase through a supposed contact, but the gun and money never appeared. Jay lost $450 and was held up at gunpoint by someone he had arranged to buy from through Instagram. For poor youth, these were not trivial losses. Grenshaw's $900 came from a month's work at a factory through grueling night shifts. Jay's $450 came from his summer job at an anti-violence nonprofit and his disability check.

Despite the costs, guns were valued above items most people would prioritize. For instance, Grenshaw slept on a broken futon in an apartment he shared with his mother and brother. Their living room had no furniture except for an old swivel chair. Some months, Jay couldn't afford the $35 needed to pay his phone bill and relied on Wi-Fi to stay connected. Their other expenses included Ubers, food, marijuana, and occasionally clothes for themselves or their girlfriends.

Others loaned guns through family ties. Dion, 20, was a taciturn young man who wore the same brown Nike hoodie every day and a black ski mask to conceal his identity whenever he was outside. His uncle was a former king of a major West Side gang; this meant that Dion was born into a "royal" gang family with a reputation known across the South and West Sides. Dion did not personally own a gun and instead borrowed from relatives whenever he needed one. He showed me his family's collection of at least 10 handguns, which they shared for defensive purposes and a few larger capacity guns with switches for the times they were at war. Although Dion had disengaged from street life after being shot in 2022, his last name and past still marked him. He remained armed for self-protection.

Tony, 20, was a slender and sincere young man with a speech impediment and learning disability who wore his heart in his sleeve. His older brothers—TY, a non-core participant, and Tito—had protected him from violence. Tony also received guns from uncles, cousins, or brothers, and carried when he sold drugs outside. These were loaned with no formal prerequisites, no training, no vetting.

Social Media

In addition to decentralizing underground gun markets, social media has expanded the audience for violence and transformed how reputations are built, challenged, and preserved. Across my subjects' and their networks' social media, guns were ubiquitous, rivals were taunted, and hunts for enemies were live streamed. A single gun photo could send a clear message: *If you come for me, I'll be ready.* Teenagers posed with firearms the way others might pose with designer bags. Guns were displayed online with fresh outfits and matching sneakers. In times of war, heavier weapons surfaced online with ominous caption such as, "I don't let shit slide I just ain't got you yet. Hold tight I'm coming."

Beyond displays of firepower, social media became a venue for mocking death through dark humor. After a school shooting, Jay showed me an Instagram story depicting two teens' bodies on the pavement, overlaid with skull emojis, laughing faces, and the song *Another One Bites the Dust*. When a girl was shot near Jay's home, a video of her lifeless in her car circulated with laughing emojis. A YouTube video titled "Hit wit da switch," made about her death, was shared on Facebook more than 800 times in a week, with comments like "the valet parked her shit near a tree, very kind," or "excuse me, you can't park there!!!!"

Past research highlights some of the mechanisms through which social media alters the stakes of gangbanging. Stuart (2020) shows how social media has become central to street life, amplifying visibility and turning gang conflict into social and monetary capital. Viral posts can translate into local fame, music promotion, or monetized views, creating incentives to perform aggression online. These performances can also serve a strategic function. Public displays of toughness can reduce uncertainty and defuse future conflict by signaling one's capacity to retaliate (Szekely and Gambetta 2020). Online platforms provide low-cost arenas to project one's "violence potential" (Gambetta 2009), allowing individuals to deter rivals and display their strength without facing immediate physical risk. Social media also expands the stage where interpersonal conflicts unfold, raising both social pressure and the risk of escalation (Patton et al. 2013, 2014, 2018; Lane 2019). Lane (2019) recounts a school fight that, once posted online, transformed into a high-stakes public drama in the "digital streets." As views and comments mounted, the conflict demanded a response days after the fight had ended (Lane 2019).

I observed each of these mechanisms play out in my fieldwork. A particular story reveals how they unfolded in action. In December 2023, a video circulated on Instagram showing Jay being held at gunpoint by Lilski, a stickup kid he'd contacted to buy a Glock. Jay showed up at Lilski's doorstep in a black puffer coat gifted from Yaya with a button pin honoring his deceased father on his chest. On camera, Lilski forced Jay to unlock his phone and transfer him the money with a gun pointed at his face. The video, edited with laughing and finger-pointing emojis, trap music, and a devil-face emoji at its center, was posted under an alias and shared more than 1,800 times in a single day.

A few days after the video went viral, Jay's uncle gave him and his cousins matching Smith & Wesson 6906 pistols, warning, *You better get that Lilski kid back or your name will never be clear on the streets.* Charles echoed the stakes, "Jay will be open season unless he

retaliates." Jay had stopped posting gun photos in the preceding months, but the incident reignited his illicit activities. Days later, he and his cousins posted images with their new pistols and a Draco NAK9 (a "baby AK-47") to signify an attack. They were preparing to strike back.

In this way, social media does not simply reflect violence, it helps instigate it. A private moment of vulnerability can be replayed, publicly disseminated, and archived. For young men like Jay, visibility amplifies both recognition and risk. The shooter identity forms not only through behavior, but through how those behaviors are captured and circulated online. The pressure to perform toughness can reignite conflicts that might otherwise have faded.

BECOMING A SHOOTER: HOW THE LABEL BECOMES REAL

The process of becoming a shooter is like the process of adopting other deviant identities, but the stakes are much higher when guns are involved. In his classic *AJS* article, "Becoming a Marijuana User," Becker (1953) traced how deviance emerges through interaction. Individuals progress from smoking marijuana to becoming marijuana users as they learn to associate deviant acts with positive social experiences and incorporate them into their identity (Becker 1953). A similar process unfolds around gun use in high-crime neighborhoods. Youth may initially acquire guns for reasons akin to legal gun owners, such as protection for oneself and one's loved ones. But for some, guns become core to their identity through ritualized usage and external recognition. But unlike Becker's marijuana users, who could simply stop smoking when the pleasure faded, desisting from gun use is not straightforward.

This section draws on interviews with READI participants and ethnographic vignettes to show how the shooter career unfolds in cumulative stages: (1) acquiring a gun, (2) carrying it, (3) shooting it, and (4) being labeled.

Acquiring

Acquiring a gun was often described as a natural progression from childhood delinquency to high-stakes conflict. Most made this decision in their pre-teen to early teenage years, when direct exposure to gun violence accelerates (Lanfear et al. 2023) and when individuals are most susceptible to risk taking.

Tatum, 27, described how childish play fights spiraled into gun fights with lethal consequences. Tatum reflected, "You got a big group of kids, but then you got some that want to play fight. We all playing first, but then it turns serious." One afternoon, afterschool roughhousing escalated into his first encounter with gun violence. Tatum recalled, "My friend, he stole they bike. And when he tried to get away, they started shooting… and they killed him. I was 14. That's how we knew we had to start playing with guns because they started playing with them first." Tatum and his friends were unprepared for this level of violence. He said, "We thought the worst that could happen was they'd beat him up and take the bike back."

King, 24, described his progression from childhood pranks to handling real firearms. King shared, "We was out here, throwing [firecrackers]… then it went to throwing eggs… paintball guns… and pellet guns. I loved that. I wanted to be just like the rest of my homies." At 13 years old, he acquired his first gun and enjoyed the attention it brought. King recalled, "We were 13, 14, walking around with guns on us. The girls liked it." As King's experience illustrates, teens are highly attuned to how guns bring attention but lack a full understanding of what a gun could do. King said, "It's only fun when you ain't facing the consequences. … Back then, I ain't thinking about death. I ain't know people could die from bullet. I thought people died of natural causes."

Tatum and King's seeming indifference to the consequences guns is difficult to understand without accounting for the developmental stage at which most respondents in my study first acquired a gun: ages 12-16. During this period, the brain's reward systems mature faster than the regions responsible for judgment and impulse control, making teenagers especially sensitive to peer influence while less able to assess long-term risks (Casey et al. 2008). These developmental vulnerabilities are compounded by environmental risks. Studies show that the local prevalence of firearms (Cook and Ludwig 2004), exposure to gun violence before age 15 (Lanfear et al. 2024), and police cynicism (Hureau and Wilson 2021) substantially increase the likelihood of illegal gun acquisition. These factors produce "wicked environments" (Hogarth 2001), in which adolescent behaviors that might be benign elsewhere yield devastating consequences.

While developmental and structural factors help explain how guns become accessible and appealing, they do not fully capture the moral calculus young people who acquire a gun make. Many had already seen what guns could do at a very young age. Their choice may not have been based on short-term thinking but on resignation—a belief that, if violence was inevitable, they might as well be prepared.

At age 25, Jaquil had carried a gun for over a decade, a habit born of early trauma. At five, he lost his three-year-old brother in a shooting. At 14, Jaquil got his first gun, just weeks after a close friend was murdered. As Jaquil put it, he sought, "The *feeling* of being safe. … Everybody can die with a gun on them, but it's just the fact that at least I had it, I tried." Unlike the more linear narratives of picking up a gun for protection without understanding the consequences, Jaquil expressed a more fatalistic worldview, in which a gun did not mean assurance but a hedge against the inevitable. His account reveals that teenagers are not always naive about the risks of guns; rather, some see guns as leverage in a world where safety feels out of reach.

The decision to acquire a gun often begins as an attempt to exert agency in a world marked by instability. These testimonies mirror the literature on illegal gun carrying that emphasizes self-protection and respect (Sierra-Arévalo 2016; Fontaine et al. 2018; Dillard et al. 2024; Liddell-Quintyn et al. 2025). One gang-affiliated respondent in a study of Chicago's underground gun market encapsulated this sentiment: "Without a gun, who [is] going to fear me? Who [is] going to take me seriously? Nobody. I'm a pussy unless I got my gun" (Cook et al. 2007). Similarly, in a survey of 141 active offenders in Chicago, 83% acquired guns mainly for protection (Sierra-Arévalo 2016). In such contexts, acquiring a gun is often seen as a precautionary measure. Young people report arming themselves not out of intent to harm, but out of concern that others around them may be armed and pose a threat (Hemenway et al. 1996; Wilkinson et al. 2009).

Safety and status concerns often drive adolescents to first pick up a gun, but these explanations alone cannot account for those who go on to build reputations as shooters. Nor does it explain why some youth commit gun crimes time and time again. The answer may lie less in need for safety or material desires than in the power that guns confer within their social world. These behaviors reflect a shift that begins in the next phase: carrying.

Carrying

Through frequent carrying, guns become more than a weapon; they become a source of power that alters one's self-conception and relationships. At 13-years-old, Grenshaw acquired his first gun, a Smith & Wesson, through a planned robbery with friends. One friend, already

armed, helped him take it. “We put a gun to him and took it. That was my first gun,” he explained. Carrying a gun earned Grenshaw respect from the older guys in the neighborhood. His most prized possession, a Draco semi-automatic rifle, was purchased with two friends as a shared asset. He told me, “We used to walk up the block… [and the older guys would say,] ‘Yeah, the gun n***as,’” he recalled. “It was like, we were just kids with guns.” When asked why he flaunted his gun despite the risks, Grenshaw admitted, “That made n***as not play with us. And that made them be cool with us. They not deriding me.”

In addition to reputational benefits, carrying a gun also came with pressure to use it. Grenshaw recalled, “People be like, ‘Do something with your gun or you’re a goofy.’ Like, ‘What you just sitting around with your gun for?’” Grenshaw was arrested for illegal gun carrying on the eve of his 18th birthday, narrowly avoiding an adult felony. Grenshaw’s trajectory reveals how gun carrying allows youth with limited resources to subvert power dynamics and accumulate resources while also risking arrest and the temptation to use it.

For others, carrying a gun was seen as a way to show devotion to loved ones. For Tim, 30, street life didn’t feel like a choice; it was the world he was born into. He said, “My whole family was in the streets. My whole family. So I seen a lot of my family get killed.” At 8, Tim watched a man get shot in broad daylight. A year later, he saw his cousin shot in the face. Tim recalled, “It made me more aware, like, man, people would do this stuff anyway… And it made me start carrying guns more. I think I had my first gun about nine.” By 11, Tim had a second gun and learned that firing it was easy. By the time Tim was a teenager, guns symbolized more than protection, they were a sign of loyalty. When a friend or family member hesitated to shoot a rival, Tim stepped in. He reasoned, “These are the n***as that did show me love. So if they don’t want to do it, I’ll do it for them.” The idea of gun carrying as a form of moral obligation that Tim described parallels Carlson (2015) and Stroud’s (2016) descriptions of legal gun owners. In both cases, firearms are not merely tools of self-defense, but symbols of duty, care, and belonging.

The act of regularly carrying a gun generates public interactions that reinforce the gun’s symbolic power, meaning, and attention it draws. But carrying also sets off cascading consequences by entrenching its users further in a street identity. As Antwon, 23, stated, “I got me a gun, got caught with it. After that, I was just locked in. I’m in the streets now.” This feeling of being “locked in” reflects how firearms alter young people’s relationship to risk and social interaction. Gun carrying generates visible performances of toughness that invite both positive and negative attention. The weapon becomes a solution to problems it helps create: As carrying generates conflicts and attention, youth feel increasingly compelled to remain armed. Thus, regularly carrying a gun anchors youth further to the streets and increases the likelihood of usage. Paradoxically, while many carry for protection, doing so heightens their chance of arrest and enacting violence by emboldening behavior and attracting threats (Loughran et al. 2016).

Sean, 30, described how being robbed at gunpoint as a teenager changed his relationship with guns. Before the incident, he carried a gun sporadically; after Sean never left home without one. The experience left Sean feeling powerless “because a person put me on the ground at the age of 15 and they had power over me and I couldn’t do nothing. Because if I move, he’ll shoot me in my head. He was grown, I’m a kid. ... When I felt that power that he had on me and I peed on myself and all that, embarrassed, I’m like, ‘Man, now I got to keep my gun on me. ... Next person think they gonna rob me, I’m shooting them.’”

Even though carrying a gun made Sean feel safe, it also led him to take more risks. “I felt that power from having a gun and robbing people… I just felt invincible.” Sean explained how carrying a gun affected his behavior. He stated, “Before I didn’t have a gun, I try to die down a

lot of stuff… not argue. … But once I had that gun… I just knew with this gun, if anything go down, I can use it to take somebody's life. But without the gun, I just felt regular, like a regular person. The gun do give you power."

Shooting

The pivotal moment in the formation of the shooter identity is the first time a person shoots a gun at another person. In this stage, what was once a risky behavior transforms into a lasting reputation that generates rivals, serious legal entanglements, and notoriety. This act is what sets apart individuals like Tony, who carry for safety and protection, from those like Jay, Grenshaw, and Dion, for whom guns are a way of life.

Charles distinguished shooters from ordinary carriers, "[The shooters are] the ones that's going to take care of that clique business. The other seven, they ain't fixing to do that. But these three right here, man, they'll take a life." China agreed, "Anybody can hold a gun. Anybody can walk around with a gun. Everybody ain't going to shoot. That's the difference."

TY learned to take care of himself at an early age. His and Tony' mother, who struggled with drug addiction, didn't pick him up from juvenile detention the day he was supposed to be released. He remained there for three additional months, spending his 11th birthday behind bars. TY recalled, "When I got out [of jail], ain't feel like nobody love me. So, I start doing everything possible. Mobbing everything. Stealing everything. Hijacks. I didn't care. I had to feed myself… It all started with a water gun. Me and my cousin painted it black… start robbing people at nighttime. I end up coming up on a little money, buy me a gun. I got a Glock 19 with a 30 clip." But owning a gun made TY a target for others.

At 14, TY was selling drugs on his usual corner at night when he was ambushed. He recalled, "Four boys came out, all black. I ain't even seen them coming. I ain't know which way they came from. I'm so focused on [money]. … They tried to rob me. I ain't going to lie to you. I shot them." This moment deepened TY's entrenchment in street life. "It made me realize, 'Man, I shot them. They going to come after me. The police going to come after me,'" TY said, "Then, I start getting into the streets more."

Being a shooter invites risk, including felony arrest, getting "backdoored" (betrayed by an affiliate) or targeted for revenge, and compromising the safety of loved ones. This risk pushes shooters further to embrace the street lifestyle, deepening their isolation and exclusion. For some, the cumulative losses and solitary lifestyle associated with being a shooter becomes internalized into a dark worldview.

James, 19, shared how the constant anticipation of death became part of his daily mindset. "Be prepared to die. I wake up like that every day," James admitted, "I feel like if my paranoia go down, I'm going to die. I feel like I'm not going to be on point about everything and every person." Jason, 24, described how the logic of the streets distorted his thinking and constrained his aspirations, "My mind was really twisted. I couldn't see the vision I needed to see to experience the life I wanted." Instead, his thoughts were consumed by retaliation: "I want to go do things to people too." William, 29, believed he was no longer a civilian because he had lost his capacity to feel remorse over hurting others. "I ain't been a civilian since I was eight," William said, "You got to lose little feelings. … To sleep at night, you got to be a different type of monster."

Amid ongoing trauma, isolation, and emotional numbness, shooters often turn to drugs and guns as ritualized forms of release. After being shot, Grenshaw developed an addiction to Oxycodone for physical recovery and to dull his emotional pain. Jay became dependent on

Percocet and overdosed three times during the two years I followed him, leading to intense emergency room stays that were traumatic for him, his family, and myself. Tony regularly took doses of MDMA, describing it as the only time he felt anything at all. Ecstasy was commonly ingested before shootings to build up energy.

On a cold night in the early months of 2024, Jay posted a photo on Instagram of an orange ecstasy pill with the caption: "Watch this next run 🏃💨 I'm bck in that mode 🏠." Soon after, his cousin uploaded a video of them joyriding in a stolen car. That weekend, Jay and his cousins celebrated a homie's 16th birthday by stealing cars and plotting revenge against Lilski, the stickup kid who had humiliated Jay with the viral video. After taking ecstasy, Jay and his group rode the subway to the South Side, stole three cars, and spent hours cruising and tracking Lilski's live feed intending to shoot him if they found him. They posted photos and videos of their exploits on social media, though they did not find him that night. When I asked him why he did that, Jay replied nonchalantly, "I did that for fun and to slide on Lilski." The night was fueled by drugs, drill music, and social media, which transformed the experience into a group ritual.

As Becker (1953) observed of marijuana users, people do not start off enjoying smoking marijuana; rather, they must learn to derive pleasure from its effects. So too with firearms: The emotional gratification of guns and shooting is not innate but acquired. Gun use is not always a response to threat or deprivation; it can become a source of connection and catharsis. Violence can offer "sneaky thrills" (Katz 1988) and a way to release frustration and assert dignity (Wacquant 2004). Acts like shooting, stealing cars, or livestreaming armed confrontations also function as interaction rituals that generate shared emotional energy (Collins 2014) and deepen group solidarity (Moule et al. 2017). This is especially salient in a landscape where the collectivist gang structures have eroded.

A few weeks after Jay's night of car theft and sliding, Jay and his cousins brought a stolen Draco gun to a hotel party to show it off to girls they planned to meet up with. Early that morning when the party died down, a friend asked Jay to see the gun. When Jay refused, the friend reached for the gun and Jay shot him. The friend narrowly survived. Jay and his cousins left the victim at the hotel and fled the scene. When recounting the incident to me, Jay showed no remorse and told me he believed the shooting was justified. This wasn't his first time firing at someone, but it was the first time he had done so—or at least admitted to it—during the year I'd known him. The fact that Jay shot a friend, not a rival or someone like Lilski, was difficult for me to understand. It made me question whether his lack of remorse was genuine, or simply part of a performance he had constructed. Around that time, Jay's use of Percocet and ecstasy intensified, as did his depression.

Labeled

Once labeled a shooter, a person's life changes profoundly. He cannot show his face anywhere that his rivals might see him. He can no longer move freely through his neighborhood, take public transportation, or attend social events without extreme precautions. As Tim explained, "By 15, when everybody else was going to house parties and stuff, I couldn't do it no more. They was trying to kill me. I did so much to create a reputation. … The decision I made kind of forced the lifestyle on me."

After Grenshaw became a known shooter, he almost never walked his block unarmed. He traveled only by car, never by bus or train, and when he did walk, he wore a facemask and carried his Draco semiautomatic rifle tied with a shoestring beneath his jacket. He even brought

it along when walking his girlfriend Mari home, even though she lived just three blocks away, or when making a quick trip to the corner store.

For a full year after Dion got shot outside West Side High, his life narrowed to a single route: home to the boxing gym and back. Each time I saw him outside, he wore a hood and ski mask and moved quickly, as if navigating a warzone. He had a difficult time trusting people outside his small circle and spoke few words to me for the first six months I knew him.

Jay became a locally known figure after hunting down the men responsible for his father's death, but that visibility came at a cost. With Charles's help, he enrolled at an alternative high school for a fresh start and, for the first time, began to enjoy school. But just a few months in, rivals discovered he was there and shot him. Dion had been shot as well, simply for standing next to Jay. Jay's mother and sister were also put at risk once Jay was labeled. During the two years I spent in and around the field, they had to relocate three times after rivals learned of their address in fear that they would hurt them in Jay's stead.

Jay understood that his reputation affected those around him and took precautions when he was in public with others. Whenever we drove through his neighborhood, he would pull up his hood and recline the seat until he was nearly horizontal so no one could see him riding with me. As soon as we reached the freeway or a different part of the city, he would sit upright and remove his hood. The ritual was automatic, a vigilant habit shaped by a heightened sense of threat and responsibility for both our safety.

As Jay's experiences reveal, the shooter identity doesn't just put individuals at risk, it brings danger to those around them. CJ, 31, described how deeply that fear shaped his daily life. He recalled, "Every time I leave the house, I had to leave with my gun. … It was stressful, knowing that any day you can go to jail or any day somebody could walk up and kill you." But the hardest part wasn't just protecting himself, it was the threat to his loved ones. CJ stated, "My sister and them, my immediate family, I didn't want peoples knowing they was my family, because I didn't want nobody going to harm them. Baby mamas, I didn't want nobody knowing they was my baby mama, because I know somebody'd go harm them if they can't get me."

Deviance develops as individuals come to associate certain acts with positive social experiences, gradually incorporating them into their sense of self (Becker 1953). The young men in this study were initially drawn to guns for the status and security they offered. What began as a desire for protection and respect can become pleasurable and identity-defining through ritual and external recognition. Yet this transformation comes at a cost. Carrying a gun creates expectations and obligations that often led to its use. Each shot fired escalated conflicts, fueled retaliation, and narrowed life choices and compromised relationships, trapping young men in deeper cycles of violence and marginality.

WHY THE SHOOTER LABEL IS SO HARD TO SHED

Becker (1953) argued that quitting marijuana is a matter of individual volition; users stop when they no longer enjoy the experience. This view aligns with leading desistance theories, which emphasize an individual's "readiness to change" (Bushway and Paternoster 2013), cognitive transformation (Giordano et al. 2002), and access to turning points that create routine and social control (Laub and Sampson 1993, 2003; Bersani and Doherty 2018). Others highlight the emergence of new roles through fatherhood and marriage (Laub et al. 1998; Edin et al. 2004), narrative reconstruction (Maruna 2001), settling down (Massoglia and Uggen 2010), or aging (Caspi and Moffitt 1995; Agnew and Brezina 2022).

Desisting from gun violence, however, is uniquely constrained. Unlike drug use or property crime, guns fuel lethal cycles of retaliation that persist regardless of an individual's intent to exit. Widespread firearm availability exacerbates this dilemma, creating a structural problem of unilateral disarmament in which relinquishing one's gun does not guarantee one's rivals will do the same. As a result, young men with stained reputations fear that desisting from gun carrying makes them especially vulnerable to attack. Even relocation or social isolation offer little protection when social ties remain embedded in violent networks. Ceasing to carry and use guns is shaped not just by individual agency but also by the social and material conditions that sustain gun violence.

Unilateral Disarmament

For shooters wanting to leave the streets, the hardest part wasn't their own decision, it was the impossibility of predicting the behavior of those still in the streets. By age 18, TY was tired of shooting and being shot at. After his older brother was shot and killed at their grandma's funeral, TY wanted to leave the streets but felt constrained by his past. He explained, "I can't be out. I got to keep my gun on me. I got to stay on my Ps and Qs, watch over my shoulder. Honestly, I'm tired of doing that shit. I know a lot of others tired of doing that shit, too. But, it's the way that people live. People will say you can change, but that don't mean them people who are after you are going to change. ... Y'all shed blood. You get a good job so you leave the streets alone, thinking they won't come after you. ... It's tit for tat."

After a decade as a shooter, Jaquil was exhausted. "I feel old as hell. I be tired. I'm 25 now. … I got like 20 friends, dead. Not no sickness. They got smoked. … We been in war. I feel like an army veteran. … It's just, we got to keep this persona up to show we can't show no weakness. We can't show that we tired of this shit." Even as he regretted his path, he felt trapped in. Jaquil admitted, "I've been wanting to get out. … I wish I would have did something different. I regret being a part of this shit that's going on, cause ain't nobody gonna win 'til all the players in the game dead or in jail. It's a never-ending cycle." In addition to feeling stuck in the endless wheel of violence, Jaquil felt trapped by his stained reputation that remained online. "I got to work," Jaquil said, "I got to be able to go places. I can't, even though I'm branded, it's there." Despite two ongoing gun cases and looming prison time, he remained unwilling to disarm.

These fears of unilateral disarmament weren't simply paranoia. During my fieldwork, I met young men who had overcome major obstacles to leave the streets only to be pulled back into violence when they were least expecting it. Sidney, 27, had a large statue and a kind demeanor despite a rough past. He had been shot near his home in 2018 and lost several family members to gun violence, including his brother. He wore a silver chain necklace with his brother's photo when I interviewed him. After finishing all 18 months of READI where he was considered a top-tier participant, Sidney became a manager at Dunkin' Donuts, moved into his own apartment, and purchased his dream car: a vintage baby blue Volkswagen van. Then, in April 2024 two years after having left his past life behind, Sidney was shot and killed while leaving work by rivals who had hunted him at a moment when he would be unarmed and vulnerable to attack.

Anthony, 24, was a charming young man with dreads tied back and warm eyes. He had grown up surrounded by gang life and joined at age 11. "I never thought about being good. … We grow up around it, so it's normal," he said. When I met him in the spring of 2022, he had just returned from a cross-country road trip that made him realize how much is out there beyond

Chicago's West Side. He had an optimistic attitude and was committed to leaving the streets to pursue something different. Still, he recognized the difficulty of change. Anthony told me, "It's hard because it's the unknown. … I don't know what's on the other side of the change." Nine days after our interview, Anthony was shot and killed while walking through a park near his home by an unidentified driver in a SUV.

These tragedies weren't isolated events. During my time in North Lawndale, several young men were killed after laying down their guns and making lasting strides towards a different path. For Charles and China, these losses felt deeply personal. China had to check herself into a psychiatric hospital after losing two young men she had mentored for over a decade during the summer of 2024. Charles, who rarely lost his cool, broke down after one of his "shorties," who was succeeding as a videographer, was killed in a drive-by outside of his house. The reality for shooters and those who support them is that leaving the life is not enough to guarantee safety in a gun-filled society.

When Moving Isn't Enough

Three of the four core participants I followed never attempted to leave Chicago as a pathway to exit the streets. But their rootedness was often more affective than strictly due to material constraints. They had relatives in other cities who they could have lived with but never pursued those options. For Tony, Dion, and Grenshaw, the prospect of leaving meant severing connections to the few people and places that provided meaning and stability in otherwise chaotic lives. Their neighborhoods, despite the violence, represented familiarity and belonging and offered bonds that proved more powerful than opportunities elsewhere.

Geographic mobility has long been theorized as a pathway out of disadvantage, yet my participants' reluctance to relocate reflects deeper tensions between individual agency and structural constraints. Moving requires not just the means to leave, but the social and cultural capital to navigate new environments. For young men whose identities and relationships were deeply embedded in particular places, relocation meant not opportunity but exile.

Only Jay managed to leave for extended periods, but his experience reveals the fundamental limitations of geographic solutions to relational problems. Jay's trajectory illustrates a deeper paradox: Relocation fails when the very social bonds theorized as protective in life-course models become liabilities that travel across geographic boundaries. His story demonstrates that moving isn't enough because violence is not confined to place; it circulates through the relational networks that connect individuals across time and space.

When I met Jay in early 2023, he was jittery and wore a black ski mask everywhere he went. The previous year, he had been shot by his rivals while leaving his high school. Six months later, Jay had physically recovered but remained hypervigilant. Charles arranged for him to leave Chicago to live with a relative in another state, with the destination undisclosed even to me initially. Even though he had relatives he could stay with for periods outside the city, loneliness, food insecurity, and unstable homes repeatedly pulled him back to the West Side.

He found the most stability in a northwest suburb outside of Chicago in the summer and fall of 2023, where his mother relocated him for a fresh start at a new high school away from the city. She was aided by staff at the boxing gym who created a GoFundMe page titled "Help a Family Get a Fresh Start" and raised a few thousand dollars to help them settle into their new life outside the city. In the final months of 2023, it seemed Jay had finally changed course against all odds. He was thriving at his new school, Northwest High, attending daily and earning A's and B's. He had even gotten a part-time job at a local restaurant where he worked after school. Jay

was focused on getting his driver's license, becoming a truck driver, and seeing the country when he graduated. He and his girlfriend Yaya were expecting a baby, and he was looking forward to having his own family. Jay was no longer carrying a gun or wearing a mask in public. He acted like a teenage boy for the first time since I'd known him.

Then, in a matter of weeks, everything unraveled. Jay lost his job when new management took over the restaurant and laid off most of the staff. Soon after, a rival from the West Side transferred to his new school, heightening his worry that the home his mom had worked so hard to secure would be exposed yet again. Then, Jay and his girlfriend Yaya suffered a miscarriage, followed by a bitter breakup. Jay claimed he had slept with someone else to make her angry. Yaya retaliated by posting his home address on Facebook and Instagram, where Jay's rivals could see it. A refrain Grenshaw often said—*never bring a girl to your home, always go to hers*—now made sense.

Within hours of their location being posted online, Jay's mother, fearing for her safety, relocated to a friend's home in Chicago. I quickly arrived at their home to drive Jay to a safe location. After this incident, Jay felt like he needed a gun again. He wasn't ready to leave behind his new life at Northwest High but felt like he needed protection in case his rivals found him. Five days later, the video of Jay being held at gunpoint by Lilski surfaced on Instagram.

These events left Jay spiraling. In the new year, Jay missed school repeatedly and relapsed into taking painkillers. His special education teacher, Mr. R, called me twice in a week about his decline. A week later, Jay snapped in class. He and Mr. R argued over an interaction with another teacher. Frustrated, Jay blurted, *I was trying to do good—that was the new Jay, and I don't like that Jay. I'm going back to my old ways. You don't know me. You know the fake Jay.*

Mr. R responded, *Jay, I can't force you to stay. You're almost 18. But the door's always open if you decide to figure out what you want.* Moments later, Jay stormed back in and declared, *I'll do whatever I want. I'm a gangster.* He roamed the hallways while ignoring staff. In the cafeteria, surrounded by students and security, he yelled, *I'm gonna shoot this place up!*

Threatening a school is a class-four felony but Jay refused to apologize. The school issued a warrant for his arrest. That was his last day at Northwest High, or any school since. Jay lost the new life he'd worked so hard for—his girlfriend, his school, his job, and the future life he had envisioned for himself as a father. He also crossed a red line with me when he brought a gun into my car and lied about it. Even Jay's mother refused to take him in, fearing for her younger daughter's safety. Jay spent his 18th birthday in prison for an array of gun crimes. By then, even his mother admitted she thought he was safer behind bars.

In 2025, Jay managed to move in with his aunt in another state, but the move violated the terms of his electronic monitoring, which required him to remain in Chicago. He was subsequently incarcerated for the violation. After his release, he relocated again with cousins in another state with proper legal permissions in place this time. But when a shooting occurred at the house where he was staying, he returned to Chicago once more.

Jay's relationships with family, romantic partners, and school—the ties that should facilitate desistance—repeatedly exposed him to violence or became tools for rivals to locate and threaten him. Yaya's posting of his address exemplifies how intimate relationships become tactical vulnerabilities in contexts of ongoing conflict. Jay's experience reveals that geographic mobility cannot overcome the fundamental problem facing former shooters: conventional turning points become sites of heightened vulnerability rather than transformation. His romantic relationship, which should have been a source of stability and motivation for change, became the

very mechanism through which his location was exposed to rivals. The social bonds meant to anchor his new life became the channels through which violence reappeared.

This dynamic helps explain why many former shooters opt for a different strategy entirely. Rather than seeking new relationships or geographic distance, they pursue deliberate isolation and social invisibility. If relationships become liabilities, then minimizing social connections becomes a rational strategy for survival. Yet as the experiences of Tony, Dion, and Grenshaw demonstrate, this creates its own forms of risk.

Becoming Forgotten

Not all my subjects' journeys were as dramatic as Jay's. Most of the time, shedding the shooter label was a mundane process marked by long stretches in isolation, what Charles called "becoming forgotten." Tony, Dion, and Grenshaw remained in their neighborhoods and were careful to avoid being seen in public while distancing themselves from their former lives. But remaining in place comes at a cost. They grew dependent on others (often girlfriends, aunts, or mothers) for safety, housing, and social connection. That reliance, in turn, created other forms of vulnerability.

Tony, my only core subject who was not shooter, was also the only one of the four to return to the alternative high school and is on track to graduate. He stopped selling drugs and spent most of his time at home with his girlfriend. Their relationship was physically abusive at times, and Tony contracted AIDS from her. Still, he stayed. He believed she was the only person who truly cared for him and consistently kept a roof over his head. Tony had been removed from his mother's care by child protection services at a young age and was raised by his grandmother, whose name was tattooed above his eyebrow after she passed away from Covid-19. Tony's brother Tito was murdered a few days later her funeral; his name is tattooed on Tony's neck. After Tony stopped selling drugs and gave up his gun, his dependence on his girlfriend deepened. For those attempting to exit the life without the means to leave the neighborhood, desistance often means exchanging one form of vulnerability for another.

Meanwhile, Dion kept to a strict routine, leaving the house only to go to the boxing gym, and gradually became more comfortable around me and others. Once he was banned from the gym for a week after the head coach discovered he had brought a gun inside. Dion stayed home that entire week playing video games. His favorite was one he could race cars through foreign cities. After that, Dion stopped carrying his gun to the gym. His mother was incarcerated for most of the time I knew him, so Dion spent nights on the couch at his older sister's condo. A few months after we met, Dion started dating a girl and moved in with her and her mother. Their child was born in the fall of 2024. Eventually, Dion was hired to work at the boxing gym. His world remained tightly bounded between home and the gym, maintaining a disciplined routine that allowed him to avoid the streets.

Grenshaw rarely carried a gun and occasionally posted photos with guns online, even as he described himself as being "out the streets." He wanted to return to school but did not feel like it would be safe for him to do so. He enrolled in an online GED program and spent most of his time at home smoking weed, watching YouTube, or with his girlfriend. I accompanied him to job interviews across the city, but never in his own neighborhood, where he feared being recognized by rivals. Eventually, he secured a job at a factory working night shifts. Still, the threat of recognition and retaliation shaped his everyday movements. He refused to take public transit and relied on rides from his mother or Uber, which limits where and when he can travel for work.

After Jay broke up with Yaya, he lost his primary source of connection and support. His mother had already moved out of their home, fearing that Jay's rivals would track them down even far out into the suburbs. Around this time, Jay's 16-year-old cousin returned from prison and became his main companion. Jay recognized that his cousin was a destructive influence and often told me he felt pulled back toward his old ways when they were together, but he had no other meaningful relationships to rely on. After his cousin was caught on camera breaking into a car and later entering their suburban apartment while armed, Jay's mother received an eviction notice from their landlord citing the incident. Rather than serving as sources of social control and conventional attachment, Jay's closest relationships had become liabilities through which his violent past could infiltrate and undermine his sincere attempts at change.

While their strategies varied, former shooters often seek to distance themselves from their pasts by becoming forgotten. But retreat isolated them from institutions, made them dependent on a handful of relationships (at times even abusive ones), and still could not erase their pasts. Even years after putting their guns down, former shooters struggled to fully reenter public life. Terrance, 41, described the toll this vigilance takes on his daily life years after his exit from the streets. Terrance said, "Half of the time, I ain't come out. I sat in that goddamn house. I don't give a f**k about how nice it is, I sit in the house…. You ain't never know who going to do something." Likewise, Tim, 30, who had long stopped carrying and was focused on work and fatherhood, felt constrained by the image others had of him. Tim stated, "I can't walk my daughter to the park in flip flops. I can't walk to just a random corner store unless it's a corner store where we all go to. I can't go to a park when everybody go to play basketball because [my rivals] might be up there and they not trying to fight me. They see me, they going to call they big homie and they going to come shoot."

DISCUSSION

Most criminal behavior peaks in adolescence and declines by early adulthood (Moffitt; Sampson and Laub 1993, 1997; Lanfear et al. 2024). Adolescent gun carrying typically functions as an age-graded, situational response to acute threat rather than a stable feature of personal identity. Exposure to violence before age 15 significantly increases the likelihood of carrying a gun as an adolescent, and early onset of carrying strongly predicts usage: 43% of those who began carrying in adolescence reported firing a gun before turning 21 (Hureau and Wilson 2021; Lanfear et al. 2023, 2024).

My findings reveal how the age-graded nature of illegal gun use can create consequences that extend long after the behavior stops. Drawing on two years of ethnographic fieldwork and 37 life-course interviews in Chicago, I demonstrate how youth become socialized into gun use and how, for some, those behaviors become entrenched into identities that defy conventional models of desistance. Unlike property crime or drug use, gun violence creates irreversible consequences—deaths, permanent injuries, and lasting rivalries—that structure social relationships for years. The lethality of firearms transforms what might otherwise be temporary adolescent conflicts into durable labels that are difficult to shed.

The shooter identity represents a form of deviance that becomes decoupled from behavior: where cessation of illegal gun use occurs without corresponding identity transformation. This decoupling challenges core assumptions of life-course models about how individuals exit criminal careers and reveals why conventional desistance pathways often fail for those marked as shooters.

When Behavior and Identity Diverge

Traditional desistance models predict that behavioral change and identity transformation occur in tandem. Key to successful desistance is the ability to "knife off" past identities and social networks tied to criminal activity (Maruna and Roy 2007), enabling individuals to access turning points that create pro-social bonds and a new identity (Sampson and Laub 2003). Previous research identifies various patterns of criminal career termination: *temporary desistance* where external constraints temporarily halt criminal activity (Kirk 2015) and *intermittent desistance* involving zig-zagging returns to crime despite underlying commitment to change (Laub and Sampson 2001; Piquero 2004). Desistance can also vary by offense type, with violent offenders facing distinct challenges compared to property offenders (Blumstein and Cohen 1987; Piquero et al. 2003). However, none of these models account for situations where behavioral change occurs while the former identity persists.

My analysis reveals that a history of illegal gun use can lead to situations where individuals cease illegal gun use but remain branded as shooters, constraining their daily lives and future opportunities. Three mechanisms that make the shooter label particularly resistant to change.

First, the lethality of guns creates lasting rival networks where grievances persist across years. Unlike other forms of deviance where consequences fade, shooting someone generates lasting antagonistic relationships and irreversible harm. Even when former shooters like Sidney and Anthony successfully completed violence intervention programs and secured legitimate employment, they remained vulnerable to lethal retaliation from rivals. As Jaquil explained after a decade of violence, "I've been wanting to get out. ... It's a never-ending cycle."

Second, social media preserves shooter reputations through archives that follow individuals across social contexts. Jay's robbery video demonstrates how social media transforms momentary vulnerabilities into public humiliations and raises the stakes of inaction. Grenshaw's gun photos remained on Instagram after he stopped carrying, leading him to feel the need to isolate and refuse to work a job in his own neighborhood where he might be recognized by someone who could identify him. Unlike traditional labeling that operated through face-to-face interactions, digital labeling persists independently of geographic proximity or temporal boundaries, making the shooter label a liability that undermines anonymity and can be weaponized for social control.

Third, widespread firearm access creates a double bind for those trying to desist from gun crimes. Former shooters find it difficult to disarm in a world of still-armed rivals, yet they cannot fully integrate into mainstream society while remaining unlawfully armed. This dilemma—akin to unilateral disarmament in war (Schelling 1960)—helps explain why standard desistance models often fail for those with a history of gun involvement. For marked shooters, desistance often means substituting risk of violence with other forms of vulnerability. Dion exemplified this Catch-22: After being shot, he wanted to exit street life but described how he felt that he could not safely disarm given the threats of those still carrying around him. Therefore, he restricted his movements to a narrow route between home and the boxing gym. Even Tony, who was not a shooter but dropped out of the alternative high school when Jay and Dion were shot outside the school, faced similar constraints. Too scared to return to school for over a year, Tony became dependent on an abusive relationship that provided housing, connection, and safety.

When digital traces make past violence visible and rival networks persist across years, former shooters have a hard time knifing off their past lives and networks. This creates a departure from existing desistance models that assume behavioral and identity change occur in

tandem. Leading desistance theories posit that individuals age out of crime as they acquire social bonds to work, school, and family (Laub and Sampson 1993, 2001, 2003; Bersani and Doherty 2018), experience cognitive transformations (Giordano et al. 2002) and demonstrate "readiness for change" (Paternoster and Bushway 2009). But for former shooters in high-violence neighborhoods, a person's motivation to desist is insufficient when social bonds and institutions become sites of exposure rather than refuge.

The school shooting that left both Jay and Dion victim to gun violence occurred precisely because they had chosen conventional engagement over isolation. Later when Jay attempted to desist by moving to the suburbs, excelling in school, securing legitimate employment, his reputation repeatedly surfaced to undermine these efforts. Moreover, Jay became a liability to those closest to him, including his mother, sister, Charles, and even me. His family was forced to relocate multiple times when rivals discovered their addresses, and his presence put them at risk of secondary violence. Even the few people who maintained relationships with him often exacerbated his troubles.

These findings exemplify how guns, alongside social media, accelerate cumulative disadvantage in ways that differ from other forms of adolescent deviance. While cumulative disadvantage typically operates through the gradual accumulation of severed ties and constrained opportunities (Sampson and Laub 1997), gun involvement compresses this process and forecloses traditional pathways out. My analysis demonstrates that decoupled desistance occurs through three key mechanisms: the lethality of firearms creates lasting rival networks with persistent grievances, social media preserves shooter reputations through permanent digital archives that follow individuals across contexts, and widespread firearm availability creates a security dilemma where former shooters cannot safely disarm while rivals remain armed. These mechanisms transform conventional turning points like school, work, and family relationships into sites of vulnerability rather than pathways to transformation, making the shooter identity uniquely resistant to traditional desistance processes.

Implications for Studying and Intervening on Gun Violence

This study reconceptualizes crime guns not simply as tools of violence or correlates of poverty, but as active social forces that shape identities, relationships, and life chances. Guns play a central role in socializing youth into violence and anchoring a shooter identity that becomes difficult to shed. In doing so, this analysis extends work on the cultural meanings of guns among legal owners (Carlson 2015; Stroud 2017; Shapira and Simon 2018) while building on criminological research that identifies guns as central to the production and spread of violence (Cook 1983; Braga et al. 2010; Hureau and Braga 2018). Despite a wide literature on firearms, few studies examine how guns shape the lives of those who carry them.

I advance sociological analysis of firearms by shifting focus from symbolic ownership among legal gun users to the everyday, embodied experience of carrying among marginalized youth. The process of becoming and attempting to stop being a shooter reveals how guns trap young people into cycles of threat and response, transforming adolescent missteps into durable identities that are difficult to shed even after the gun is gone. This work paves the path for a sociology of firearms that moves beyond typologies of ownership or offending and instead theorizes guns as dynamic forces in the making and unmaking of individuals' trajectories, that is, placing them in a life-course framework. As gun availability continues to increase and digital technologies further expand the reach of reputational consequences, more youth may find themselves trapped in trajectories where past actions foreclose future possibilities.

Seeing guns in this way also has implications for designing effective interventions. First, this study underscores the need to intervene in violence much earlier. My findings suggest that the most consequential shift in identity formation for shooters often occurs between the ages of 10 and 15. Yet most violence prevention programs target adults, by which point efforts at change must overcome not only individual behavior but entire social identities. Interventions that reach youth before the shooter label takes hold may offer the most leverage for long-term violence reduction.

Second, any serious violence reduction strategy must address gun supply itself. That means not only strengthening federal firearm regulations but also disrupting the informal gun markets that now operate through social media platforms where illegal transactions often begin. Making firearms—especially high-lethality weapons—substantially harder to obtain and reducing the ease with which violence is signaled, is essential to disrupting the reproduction of the shooter identity.

Third, social media companies must be held accountable for the digital infrastructure that sustains gun violence. Platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook have become central venues where shooter reputations are constructed, preserved, and weaponized, yet current content moderation approaches fail to recognize how everyday gun violence is facilitated through digital archives that follow individuals across contexts and time. Jay's robbery video—shared over 1,800 times in a single day—illustrates how algorithmic amplification converts momentary vulnerability into lasting humiliation, reigniting conflicts that might otherwise fade. Meaningful efforts to reduce gun violence requires social media platforms to remove gun imagery and violent threats, modifying algorithms that reward viral violence content, and limiting the searchability of users' violent histories. Without addressing how digital technologies systematically preserve and amplify shooter identities, ground-level interventions will be limited in their capacity to undermine cycles of gun violence.

Fourth, this study provides an explanation for why jobs programs alone rarely reduce violence involvement (Ludwig and Schnepel 2025). Understanding decoupled desistance illuminates why conventional violence interventions often fail despite behavioral change among participants. Programs that focus exclusively on individual transformation—providing employment, education, or cognitive restructuring—may be insufficient when reputations persist beyond behavior. Grenshaw, Dion, and Jay struggled to find legitimate work in their neighborhoods because they feared being seen by rivals. Even after Sidney and Anthony completed READI and had disengaged from street life, both were murdered when former rivals located them. For some, reentering school or work can increase risk by heightening their visibility. This suggests the need for more radical interventions. Relocation programs, modeled after witness protection, may offer more promise by physically distancing individuals from networks of threat and recognition. But relocation alone is insufficient; sustained psychological care and social support are necessary for when past lives resurface.

These findings suggest that effective intervention requires attention to both behavioral modification and identity management. Programs must help participants navigate the ongoing constraints imposed by shooter reputations while supporting their efforts at conventional engagement. But the challenge is not only to design effective gun policy, it is to ensure such policies are politically feasible, equitably enforced, and resistant to reproducing racial harm. Even the most well-intended interventions will fall short if they are blocked in legislatures, implemented unevenly, or enforced in ways that deepen existing disparities (Carlson 2023). Recent evidence underscores the stakes: When states repeal restrictive gun laws or enact

permissive ones, firearm deaths among Black youth increase significantly, while rates among White youth remain unchanged (Faust et al. 2025). Research on repeal of permit-to-purchase laws similarly demonstrates how such policy changes disproportionately harm Black communities (Webster et al. 2014; Williams 2018). Moreover, increased gun availability creates additional dangers by making policing encounters more lethal (Nagin 2020), further amplifying the disparate impacts of guns. These findings reveal that policy shifts do not affect all groups equally. Rather, regulatory rollbacks of gun control compound the risks facing Black children and teens most acutely, reinforcing the structural conditions that make gun violence prevalent and deadly in already marginalized communities.

Scope Conditions and Future Directions

The shooter label is not just the consequence of individual choices, but of broader macro-historical shifts that have made it into a more visible and consequential social identity. Pathways into and out of crime are not static; they evolve in response to historical events and shifting institutional landscapes (Laub and Sampson 2003; Neil and Sampson 2021; Neil et al. 2021; Sampson and Neil 2024). As informal social control has eroded in Chicago's West Side, young people were increasingly left to manage violence and protection on their own. In earlier periods, corporate gangs played a central role in enforcing norms around gun acquisition, usage, and violence. Rising gun availability, decentralized underground gun markets, and prevalence of online gangbanging has elevated the visibility of the shooter. At the same time, Chicago has witnessed the highest spike in gun violence in recorded history within its Black neighborhoods—a surge that has further eroded the social fabric and collective efficacy necessary to buffer youth from harm. In response, some young people have sought to protect themselves by cultivating reputations for gun use as a form of self-defense and status. The tragedy is that while carrying a gun may offer temporary benefits, it sets in motion a series of consequences that deepen their marginalization and foreclose future opportunities.

This study has several important limitations. First, my ethnographic analysis focuses on youth who had already developed shooter reputations, limiting my ability to observe the initial transition processes from gun carrying to shooter identity formation and precluding identification of what distinguishes youth who carry guns but avoid shooter labels. While the life-course interviews with READI participants provide broader temporal perspective, I lack complete life histories for my four core ethnographic subjects, who were between ages 16-20 when I began fieldwork. Moreover, by studying individuals who had already acquired shooter identities, I cannot identify what distinguishes youth who carry guns but avoid shooter labels from those who become marked as shooters. Tony, the one core subject who carried a gun but was not a shooter serves as a sort of "control" case, and it is significant that he was the only one of the four to return to the alternative high school, suggesting that he was more easily able to rely on conventional turning points than the other three who never returned despite enjoying the school.

Additionally, my sample is geographically and demographically constrained—focusing on Black males from Chicago's West Side—which may limit generalizability across gender, race, geographic contexts, or cities with different gang structures and violence levels. My two-year fieldwork period, while intensive, may be insufficient to observe long-term desistance outcomes, as identity change can extend over years or decades. Another limitation is that because shooters with such widely known reputations are a relatively new phenomena, the oldest ones are currently in their 30s, which I include in my interview sample. This temporal constraint means we currently lack understanding of how shooter identities evolve across the full adult life course.

Future research might follow up across the life course as previous researchers have done in longitudinal qualitative studies (MacLeod 1987, 2009; Sampson and Laub 1993; Laub and Sampson 2003; Lareau 2011) to see how and if the consequences persisted in later decades.

Lastly, future research comparing youth with similar structural exposures, but different identity outcomes would strengthen claims about the mechanisms driving shooter identity formation and persistence. Future research might also examine variation in outcomes among youth with shooter reputations. Why do some individuals like Tony avoid shooter identities despite similar structural exposures? How do family resources or other protective factors influence trajectories? Additionally, comparative research across different urban contexts could illuminate how neighborhood-level factors moderate the relationship between gun involvement and identity persistence.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates how guns function as social forces that transform the relationship between deviant behavior and social identity. Once established, reputations for gun violence endure long after the gun is put down, shaping how others perceive former shooters, how institutions respond to them, and how they navigate public space. Unlike other forms of adolescent deviance, gun involvement produces consequences that resist traditional pathways out of crime and that do not easily fade with maturation, moving, or the formation of new social bonds. This study reveals how structural conditions—rising gun availability, digital connectivity, weakened informal social control—create environments where adolescent missteps can foreclose life chances in severe ways. In these unforgiving environments, decisions during periods of peak vulnerability can generate consequences that persist into adulthood. This represents an acceleration of cumulative disadvantage, where adolescent responses to existing inequalities activate multiple systems of exclusion that would otherwise accumulate gradually over years.

Illegal gun use is often treated as a policy issue to be addressed through law enforcement or regulation. But as this study demonstrates, it is also a social identity forged in conditions of structural disadvantage and sustained by the widespread availability of firearms. In these contexts, guns are not merely background conditions or correlates of crime; they are driving social forces that shape relationships, reputations, and life at the urban margins. By showing how shooting guns becomes an identity, this study reveals how deviance is not only formed but made durable. Addressing urban gun violence thus requires not only changing individual behavior but transforming the structural conditions that make shooter identities so difficult to shed. In contexts where picking up a gun is easy but putting it down proves much more difficult, effective interventions must target both the immediate availability of firearms and the broader social mechanisms that sustain violent reputations across time.

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