Becoming a Shooter

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Sociologists have long examined urban violence but have paid far less attention to how guns shape the lives of those who carry them. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth interviews with teenagers and young men in Chicago, this study examines how youth acquire a reputation as a *shooter* and the obstacles they face in shedding this label. The erosion of gang control over the underground gun market, coupled with the status attached to being a shooter, heightens pressures to arm oneself and cultivate a reputation for violence. An individual moves from acquiring a gun to becoming a shooter through a series of rituals and public displays, transforming the behavior of gun carrying into a social identity. Unlike other forms of deviance, gun violence generates durable reputations, fueling cycles of retaliation and constraining exit options. The dilemma of unilateral disarmament magnifies the risks of exit and reinforces continued involvement in illegal gun carrying. Guns are not only tools of violence or protection; they are active social forces in the formation and persistence of deviant identities by socializing individuals into violence, circumscribing their relationships and mobility, and marking them with a label that constrains their futures.

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Gun violence distinguishes the United States from its peer countries. While overall crime rates across high-income countries are comparable, American crime is uniquely lethal due to its firearm stock (Cook 1979; Zimring and Hawkins 1997), which exceeds the number of United States residents. Gun homicides in the U.S. occur at 25 times the rate of other wealthy nations (Grinshteyn and Hemenway 2016). Although homicides make up just 0.2% of all criminal offenses, they account for nearly 70% of the per capita cost of crime (Chalfin and McCrary 2018) by driving residential flight (Cullen and Levitt 1999) and disrupting daily routines (Auyero, Bourgois, and Scheper-Hughes 2015), institutional trust (Vargas 2016), and economic mobility (Sharkey and Torrats-Espinosa 2017). Gun violence stems from and perpetuates extreme disadvantage (Mann, Edin, and Shaefer 2024; Sharkey and Sampson 2015).

Its consequences for American children and teens are especially dire. Proximity to violence alters adolescent development and relationships (Anderson 2000; Harding 2010; Jones 2010) and erodes school performance and attendance (Sharkey 2010; Torrats-Espinosa 2020). Rising rates of gun ownership in recent decades have only exacerbated the risks. As of 2020, firearms are the leading cause of death for American children and teens (Goldstick et al. 2022), and since 2013, the gun death rate among American youth has more than doubled (CDC). For many growing up in the U.S. today, guns are no longer exceptional, they are part of the everyday landscape.

Despite their outsized prevalence and impact on American society, firearms remain largely peripheral in sociology.[1] While a growing sociological literature examines the causes and consequences of gun violence (Papachristos 2009; Sharkey 2010; Lee 2012; Papachristos, Braga, and Hureau 2012; Ralph 2014; Papachristos, Wildeman, and Roberto 2015; Sharkey 2018a; Hureau and Wilson 2021; Wooten 2022; Lanfear et al. 2023), less attention has been paid to the guns themselves—or to those who wield them. As Hureau argues, firearms are central to understanding racial inequality and violence today, yet sociologists often treat them as background conditions rather

[1]Although prior sociological studies illuminate the meanings of guns among licensed owners (Carlson 2015; Stroud 2017; Shapira and Simon 2018), they do not extend to those who carry guns illegally or use them for violence. In contrast, I focus on crime guns: firearms possessed unlawfully or used in crime. Data on them remain limited and official records capture only a subset of illegal firearms, primarily those recovered by police or reported by victims. Between 2017 and 2021, roughly 1.4 million guns were traced through the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF). Despite its relatively strict gun control policies, Chicago led the nation, with nearly 50,000 traced crime guns during this period, underscoring the city's role as both a recipient and redistributor of firearms within illicit markets.

than primary drivers (Hureau 2022). Extending this approach, I argue that crime guns are not only instruments of violence and protection, but social forces that socialize some users into violent identities and reconfigure status, relationships, and life trajectories. Recognizing this is essential to understanding the persistence of illegal gun carrying and the endurance of violence cycles in urban America.

Drawing on 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork and 37 in-depth interviews with gang affiliated teenagers and young men in Chicago, I examine how the figure of the *shooter* has emerged as an elite identity within street networks today, even as it deepens the exclusion of its users from mainstream institutions. My analysis unfolds in three parts. First, I identify the conditions that led to the ascendence of the shooter identity. Second, I trace the process through which individuals move from acquiring a gun to being labeled a shooter. Finally, I examine why the shooter label is so difficult to shed and its role in constraining trajectories and severing access to "turning points" that might otherwise facilitate desistance (Laub and Sampson 1993, 2003).

This study points to how sociology of deviance can reveal the social logic behind behaviors that appear irrational and self-destructive (Aksoy and Szekely 2025; Becker 1963; Gambetta 2005). A foundational insight from this tradition is that deviance often emerges not from predisposition but through experiences. In his seminal *AJS* article "Becoming a Marijuana User," Becker (1953) argues that deviance unfolds through interactions. Individuals progress from smoking marijuana to becoming users as they learn to associate deviant acts with positive social experiences and incorporate them into their identity (Becker 1953). A similar process unfolds with crime gun use. In high-crime neighborhoods, youth may initially acquire firearms for legible reasons—self-defense, status, or control—but for some, carrying and shooting a gun become core to their identity.

But unlike Becker's marijuana users who could simply stop smoking when the pleasure faded, desisting from gun use is not straightforward. Retaliation cycles persist regardless of individual intent to desist, and widespread firearm availability creates a dilemma of unilateral disarmament because putting a gun down can be dangerous when one's adversaries have not done the same. Hence, while the shooter label may provide reputational gains in the streets, it creates lasting

barriers to mobility by cutting young men off from the opportunities and relationships that might help them desist. Even moving away offers little escape.

By examining the case of the shooter, I show how firearms have become central to the formation and persistence of deviant identities among urban youth today. Guns not only facilitate violence but induct certain users into violent lifestyles that are difficult to shed. The appeal and consequences of these identities are inseparable from the structural conditions in which they take shape. In "unforgiving places" (Ludwig 2025) marked by poverty, weak governance, and widespread gun access, adolescent missteps have outsized consequences. What might otherwise be fleeting delinquency, like experimenting with marijuana, becomes a durable identity. Understanding how guns shape identity and opportunity in urban America is essential to understanding not only why young people pick up guns, but why they struggle to put them down.

RECENT TRENDS IN U.S. GUN AVAILABILITY

While guns have been an enduring fixture of American life, recent shifts in policy, production, and technology have transformed their availability and impact. 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 2023). These policy shifts were reinforced by Supreme Court rulings that expanded individual gun rights and narrowed the scope of permissible regulation. *District of Columbia v. Heller* (2008) reinterpreted the Second Amendment as guaranteeing an individual right to firearm possession for self-defense, while *New York State Rifle & Pistol Association v. Bruen* (2022) made it harder for states to justify restrictions on public carry. Together, these rulings have not only constrained state and local regulatory authority but have emboldened a broader political and legal movement to deregulate firearms. Meanwhile, firearm production has surged, with annual manufacturing nearly tripling its output since 2000 and imported guns doubling in the past decade (Thrush 2022).

The convergence of legal, political, and industrial changes in firearm access has fueled an unprecedented boom in civilian gun ownership. 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 adults became first-time gun owners, with increases among new demographics: female, Black, and Hispanic buyers (Miller, Zhang, and Azrael 2022). This surge in supply and demand coincided with record-high gun deaths in 2021 (Figure 1), prompting the U.S. surgeon general to declare gun violence a public health crisis in 2024.

The growing supply of firearms in states with permissive gun laws is connected to growing supply of guns used in crimes, especially in urban centers.[2] In cities like Chicago, Boston, and New York City, over half of recovered crime guns originate from nearby states with more lenient gun regulations (Braga et al. 2021; Cook et al. 2007, 2014; Hureau and Braga 2018; Suplina, Keller, and McCarron 2017). 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 widely available (NYPD End-of-Year Crime Statistics 2024). In 2023, Illinois recorded its highest number of recovered crime guns in the past decade, with over half traced back to a single city: Chicago.[3]

RISING GUN VIOLENCE AND ERODIED INFORMAL SOCIAL CONTROL IN CHICAGO

America's "crime gap" between its safest and most dangerous neighborhoods (Papachristos, Brazil, and Cheng 2018) is starkly visible in Chicago.[4] Landmark studies in urban sociology explore the factors leading to the 1990s crime spike (Wilson 1987; Anderson 1999) and its eventual decline (Sharkey 2018b). However, "the great crime decline" has not lasted in Chicago's Black neighborhoods. After two decades of decline and stability in violent crime, Chicago saw a sudden

[2]A key challenge in firearm research is the lack of reliable estimates of local gun availability (Azrael, Cook, and Miller 2004; Cook and Ludwig 2006; Kang and Rasich 2023). Estimating illegal guns is even harder, given that most gun measurements rely on self-reported data which are unlikely to accurately capture guns owned without a license. An imperfect proxy for illegal gun availability is the number of firearms recovered by law enforcement per year, or gun trace data. These figures are noisy because they reflect not only gun prevalence, but also variation in policing, retrieval efforts, and reporting. In the absence of better measures, they offer a useful indicator.

[3]Chicago's gun trace data is managed by the Chicago Police Department and not publicly available for 2014-2023.

[4] Beyond Chicago, the proliferation of guns has had outsized impacts on America's poorest communities, where structural disadvantage and concentrated violence intersect. In some cities, just 3% of street blocks account for over half of all shootings (Braga, Papachristos, and Hureau 2010), and these hotspots remain remarkably stable across decades (Sharkey 2013; Schnell et al. 2017). Gun violence spreads through social networks; proximity to someone involved in a shooting increases one's own likelihood of becoming a victim or perpetrator (Papachristos 2009; Papachristos et al. 2024; Papachristos, Braga, and Hureau 2012; Papachristos, Wildeman, and Roberto 2015). The impact is especially stark for young Black men, for whom gun homicide is now the leading cause of death, occurring at rates 20 times higher than for White men, and surpassing the next nine leading causes combined (Grinshteyn and Hemenway 2016).

and dramatic spike in homicides in 2016, with 764 murders, or a 58% increase from the previous year. This surge in violence 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 (Figure 2), meaning it was more dangerous to grow up Black in Chicago's in recent years than during the crime wave of the 1980s to 1990s. Notably, the increase in homicides was specific to the city's Black population; neither Latino nor White residents saw equivalent increases in homicide rates. Moreover, the surge was driven by *gun* crimes (i.e., gun robberies, non-fatal shootings, firearm homicides), which saw significantly sharper increases compared to non-gun crimes (i.e. non-firearm violent crimes, property crimes) (University of Chicago Crime Lab 2017). This suggests that factors distinct to Chicago's Black neighborhoods related to guns played a role in the city's crime wave of the last few years.[5]

A potential explanation for Chicago's recent spike in violence that has not been explored in the literature but coincides with this timeline is the breakdown of the city's Black gangs.[6] During the late 20th century, "corporate gangs" dominated Chicago's South and West Sides, operating as structured enterprises that regulated the drug economy and maintained order within their ranks (Moore and Stuart 2022; Venkatesh 1997). With large profits available from the crack economy, gangs had an economic incentive to minimize violence and maintain order. A single gang war could reduce drug sales by 20–30% (Levitt and Venkatesh 2000) and unruly members might garner unwanted attention to the gang's presence. Young recruits were assigned roles that provided them with status and constraints (Ralph 2014) and were often overseen by a "chief," who answered to a board-like leadership under a "king" (Venkatesh 2008). But law enforcement interventions in the 1990s and early 2000s—including Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) Act prosecutions and enhanced sentencing (Aspholm 2020; Vargas 2014) and the demolition of public housing (Law, Papachristos, and de Vries n.d.)—destabilized the corporate gang structures.

[5]Researchers at the University of Chicago Crime Lab analyzed the 2016 spike and found that none of the traditional explanations for increases in violent crime could account for this event. They examined weather patterns, changes in policing practices such as arrest rates, and spending on education and social services and found that none of these factors could explain the sudden surge. They show that the abrupt increase in gun violence at the onset of 2016 ruled out policy changes such as lax gun laws in nearby states, court handling of gun cases, as well as structural conditions like poverty and racial segregation. They note the limitations of their analysis due to a lack of qualitative data: "We unfortunately cannot say much about…shifting gang structures, rivalries, and disputes, or changes in the use of social media by Chicago gangs…because we are unable to measure these factors."
[6]There has been some evidence showing that Hispanic gangs have changed as well (Vargas 2014), however they are relatively intact compared to Chicago's Black gangs.

Thousands of fragmented, neighborhood-based cliques have emerged to take their place (Hagedorn et al. 2019; Aspholm 2020; Moore and Stuart 2022; Kang 2025).

While a lack of governance within criminal groups can hypothetically reduce the potential for violent conflict, shifts toward more fragmented systems of criminal governance also introduce the potential for a different sort of violence (Blattman 2022; Lessing 2018; Skarbek 2014). In these fragmented contexts like the gang landscape in Chicago today, 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 forthcoming). This explanation aligns with what we see in Chicago's administrative crime data: sharp and unpredictable rises in gun violence (University of Chicago Crime Lab 2017) caused primarily by disputes over personal matters rather than instrumental causes[7] (Ludwig 2025) concentrated among a small fraction of adolescents and young men in a handful of neighborhoods (Sharkey and Marsteller 2022).

The breakdown of informal social control and recent spikes in gun violence in Chicago's most disadvantaged neighborhoods have profoundly shaped the circumstances in which my study participants came of age. These dynamics are intensified by the growing availability—and durability—of firearms. Guns acquired during the crack epidemic not only remain in circulation in inner-city neighborhoods like Chicago's West Side, but as one estimate suggests, account for one-tenth of the life expectancy gap between Black and White men in the U.S. today (Evans, Garthwaite, and Moore 2022). Moreover, after a 2013 ruling that deemed Illinois' ban on concealed carry unconstitutional, Illinois became a "shall-issue" state. Research shows that when states expand gun access, we observe increases in gun deaths (Sharkey and Kang 2023), racial disparities in policing and homicide (Williams 2018), and fatal police shootings of both armed and unarmed individuals (Nagin 2020). This suggests that lenient gun policy not only increases firearm access for legal gun owners but likely increases the flow of firearms to the underground economy, making policing more

[7] Data from the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), for example, show that over 80% of all violent crimes are assaults: arguments that turn into violence. The same is true even for gun violence (Ludwig 2025).

precarious and violence more unequal. Together, these events provide background for why some youth may seek safety through acquiring a gun.

LACK OF GUNS IN CANONICAL URBAN ETHNOGRAPHIES

Urban ethnographers have long interrogated the conditions that give rise to violence and, in turn, how violence shapes social life. Yet one of its key mechanisms remains largely unexamined in this literature: guns.

Early urban ethnographers from the Chicago School revealed how concentrated disadvantage with cities fosters illicit economies, street gangs, and persistent violence (Suttles 1970; Thrasher 1927; Whyte 1943). These pioneering studies contributed to a broader understanding of how violence and criminality arise from patterns in neighborhoods rather than individual pathology. Firearms are absent from these foundational accounts, in part because they were less prevalent in the social worlds these scholars examined.[8] Nevertheless, the early Chicago School's emphasis on the ecological factors of crime provides a framework for understanding how firearm availability influences forms of delinquency today.

Subsequent work built on these insights to trace how violence proliferates in urban communities weakened by economic disinvestment and institutional decline (Wilson 1987), often serving as a form of informal social control within these truly disadvantaged neighborhoods. From the 1980s to early 2000s, urban ethnographers documented how interpersonal violence structured daily life in high-crime neighborhoods, but these accounts rarely foreground firearms despite their increasing availability in American society.

Take the example of Ray, the ruthless drug boss in Bourgois's *In Search of Respect*, who was known for his violent displays to maintain control over his crack houses in East Harlem. Ray shocked his workers by sticking their fingers in electric sockets and engaged in brutal acts of sodomy to enforce order, but guns are absent from his enforcement arsenal (Bourgois 1996). Anderson's *Code of the Street* devotes just a single page to guns, framing them as a byproduct of the drug trade and a

[8] In the mid-20th century (1948–1952), criminologist Martin Wolfgang found that only 33% of Philadelphia homicides involved a gun, a figure that has since risen to 92%, reflecting national trends (Wolfgang 1957). While pre 1973-gun circulation data is scarce, estimates suggest a profound transformation in American gun culture since 1950 (Kang and Rasich 2023; Yamane 2017).

tool that promoted honesty. He writes, "The prevalence of and ready access to guns may keep certain strangers more honest and more careful in how they approach others" (Anderson 2000). Guns play a minimal role in Jones's *Between Good and Ghetto*. While Jones observes that "it is not uncommon for adolescent, inner-city girls to witness or directly encounter gun violence," only one respondent, Danielle, mentions a gun. Danielle recounts her first close encounter with a gun, tucked into her boyfriend's waistband, as a thrilling, almost cinematic experience (Jones 2010). Harding's *Living the Drama* highlights the importance of peer influence in how youth navigate violence but does not mention guns as part of these networks (Harding 2010) and Pattillo's *Black Picket Fences* treats guns as an extension of gang life rather than a distinct force shaping adolescent risk (Pattillo 2013).

Recent gang ethnographies reveal the normalization of firearms in contemporary street networks but portray them as peripheral rather than central to urban life. In *Ballad of the Bullet*, Stuart notes that the Chicago South Side Corner Crew members faced difficulty acquiring reliable weapons. The firearms they did have access to functioned primarily as accessories for drillers'[9] online content. He states, "The disintegration of the crack economy means youth today possess fewer of the reasons and resources that once drove violence. There are fewer gang hierarchies to climb. Fewer drug markets to fight over. Fewer guns available to do the fighting" (Stuart 2020). In *The Digital Street*, Lane mentions that firearms appear in Harlem's online gangbanging scene between 2009 and 2012 but admits, "Gun photos were exceedingly rare. When they appeared, it was a dare to police" (Lane 2019). Vargas's study of Chicago's West Side gangs details escalating shootings but attributes them to leadership vacuums rather than changes in firearm access or distribution (Vargas 2016). These studies highlight that in the post-"corporate gang era" (Moore and Stuart 2022; Venkatesh 1997), gangs have shifted away from economic and territorial disputes toward conflicts centered on personal reputations. While my findings align with this shift, I demonstrate that gang disputes and reputations are increasingly inseparable from guns.

A small but growing body of ethnographic work centers guns in its analysis of urban life. Hureau and Braga show that guns are not merely weapons but socially meaningful objects, exchanged within personal networks rather than through structured underground markets (Hureau

[9] Rappers who make music about gang violence. *Drilling* refers to shooting.

and Braga 2018). Venkatesh follows two teenagers in Chicago as they navigate the pressures of acquiring a firearm, illustrating how guns function as both a resource and a liability, shaping youths' aspirations, fears, and social standing (Venkatesh 2022). Wooten shows that just the presence of a gun can escalate petty disputes into full-fledged beefs, heightening the stakes of otherwise routine conflicts and pushing those at risk of violence towards isolation and even deeper marginalization (Wooten 2022). These studies suggest a broader trend: Understanding contemporary life in urban America requires centering firearms themselves—not just the violence they facilitate—as structural features of marginalized communities (Hureau 2022).

GUNS AS SOCIAL FORCES

Scholars across disciplines have offered different conceptualizations of firearms, yet few have examined how guns actively shape the lives of those who carry them.

Criminologists were the first to study guns systematically, beginning in the 1960s with a foundational insight: Firearms are not incidental to violent crime but have a plausibly causal effect on its outcomes. Wolfgang's early work on homicides in Philadelphia laid the groundwork for this approach (Wolfgang 1957), and was later bolstered by Zimring's (1968) demonstration that even when intent remains constant, the presence of a gun increases the likelihood of fatality in crime (Zimring 1967, 1977). Cook (1979) extended this insight to robbery, showing that guns not only elevate the risk of fatality (victims are three times as likely to die when a robber uses a gun rather than a knife or razor) but also shape the dynamics of the crime itself. Robbers with guns choose different targets, intimidate more effectively, and inflict injury more often (Cook 1979, 1983). This work reshaped how researchers understood crime—moving beyond a focus on offender motivation to assessing "instrumentality," that is, the weapon's role in producing harm. This approach has been extended to explore how firearm caliber (Braga and Cook 2018) and bullets (Fleegler et al. 2025) affect case fatality rates. The instrumentality approach is key to much of what researchers know about guns in the U.S. and how they relate to crime.

In economics, public health, and epidemiology, guns are typically treated as risk factors or externalities that produce community and population-level harm beyond crime. This work has shown

that guns impose staggering social costs and found ways to estimate precisely what those are. The social costs of gun violence is not only felt through deaths and injuries but also through the anticipation and consequences of violence—what Sharkey calls "the long reach of violence"—that distorts daily routines, drives disinvestment, and erodes community well-being (Chalfin and McCrary 2018; Phillip J. Cook and Ludwig 2004; Cook and Ludwig 2006; Cullen and Levitt 1999; Sharkey 2018a). Much of the toll lies less in the number of actual victims than in the anxiety and pervasive efforts to avoid becoming one (Cook 2020; Phillip J. Cook and Ludwig 2004). This anticipation generates a recursive loop of fear, dislocation, and armed self-protection. Decades of health research have documented the elevated risk of homicide, suicide, and unintentional injury associated with firearm access, particularly in the home (Kellermann et al. 1993; Miller, Azrael, and Hemenway 2002; Webster 2022; Wintemute 2015). This literature has treated gun violence not just as a criminal justice issue, but as a public health crisis that disproportionately harms Black Americans, young men, and residents of urban neighborhoods (Kalesan et al. 2016; Webster and Wintemute 2015).

A third body of work, largely sociological, shifts attention from the effects of guns to their symbolic and political meanings, particularly among legal gun owners. Rather than focusing on violence itself, these studies examine how guns serve as cultural repertoires for navigating insecurity, asserting identity, and negotiating moral order. Carlson's *Citizen-Protectors* (2015) shows how men use firearms to reclaim authority in the face of state failure, economic decline, and growing social isolation. Here guns are framed as more than weapons; they are civic responsibilities, moral obligations, and signs of masculine competence (Carlson 2015). Stroud (2017) analyzes concealed carry practices in Texas, where guns symbolize racialized and gendered ideals of protection. "Good guys with guns" are imagined as white, paternal figures defending their families and communities (Stroud 2017, 2020). Shapira and Simon (2018) show how gun trainers cultivate an oppositional political culture rooted in distrust of the state and reverence for individual sovereignty, embedding guns within broader ideologies of discipline and control (Shapira and Simon 2018). Together, this literature reframes gun ownership as a socially learned practice shaped by schemas of risk and pleasure in the embodied experience of carrying. Although these scholars illuminate how guns hold meaning among legal carriers, they remain disconnected from the realities of illegal gun use in

structurally marginalized communities. This paper builds on their insights by extending the sociological analysis of guns, focused on the meanings they hold for their carriers, to a context in which carrying moves beyond the symbolic or political realm.

This study departs from previous approaches to investigating guns by advancing a conceptualization of *guns as social forces*. I argue that in addition to tools of crime, risk factors, or symbols of identity, firearms are active agents in the socialization of young people into deviant identities in the U.S. today. In contexts marked by structural disadvantage, eroded informal control, and saturated gun access, firearms shape not just whether violence occurs, but how young people come to see themselves and are seen by others. Guns facilitate a shift from juvenile delinquency to *being* a shooter—a transformation that reorients one's relationships, routines, and future. As this study shows, guns are deeply entangled in the formation and persistence of identities that are difficult to shed, even long after the weapon is put down.

I investigate the experiences of teenagers and young men known for carrying and shooting crime guns. They are known within their community as *shooters*, a social category that has received little scholarly attention, in part because it was less salient in earlier eras. While not representative of most residents or even gang members in poor, urban neighborhoods, this subset[10] is marked by exceptionally high levels of exposure to and participation in violence. Their significance lies not in their representativeness[11] but in their outsized influence on patterns of violence and street culture. For instance, one study estimates that 70% of nonfatal shootings in Chicago occurred within networks representing just 6% of the population (Papachristos et al. 2015), a pattern that arises in other cities such as Dallas, Boston, and Minneapolis (Dong, Houser, and Koper 2024). Focusing on these edge cases sharpens our understanding of how deviant identities are forged, legitimated, and maintained. As I show in my findings, the small number who reach the shooter rank only contributes to its status as elite within street networks.

The process of becoming a shooter and attempting to shed this identity offers an ideal site for theorizing guns as social forces. Tracing the progression reveals how firearms come to carry social

[10] My fieldwork suggests that approximately 1 out of every 4 or 5 gang members in a group may be known as a shooter.
[11] For instance, a recent paper by Lanfear, Kirk and Sampson (2024) finds that most concealed carry that begins in adolescence usually does not translate into life-long persistent carrying, especially life-long illegal carrying.

meaning, guide behavior, and inscribe durable reputations. This process is often gradual, socially mediated, and embedded in everyday interactions—and qualitative research is well suited to capture how this unfolds. In highlighting the relational and identity-forming aspects of gun carrying, this paper reframes firearms as active elements in the social reproduction of violence and inequality.

DATA AND METHODS

Field Site and Access

I conducted 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork (February 2023-July 2024) in Chicago to examine how gun availability and violence shape daily life. I lived in North Lawndale on the city's West Side for a year and in Hyde Park on the South Side for the remainder but maintained contact with my core subjects after leaving the field.

I first moved to Chicago in 2017, when the city was reckoning with a major uptick in gun violence and joined a research team evaluating a community violence intervention in the South and West Sides. This affiliation positioned me within an established research apparatus that opened doors that might otherwise have been closed. It facilitated my ability to build relationships with community members who were at the forefront of violence prevention work and who would become key to my access in the present study.

When I re-entered the field in 2023 for this study, I elected to work in the same communities but to focus on younger individuals. Criminological research consistently shows that violent offending rises in late adolescence, peaks in the late teens to early 20s, and then declines (Agnew and Brezina 2022; Caspi and Moffitt 1995; Lanfear, Kirk, and Sampson 2024; Laub and Sampson 1993, 2003). I decided not to re-enter the field through affiliations with the program I had previously partnered with. Instead, I began volunteering at a boxing gym run by former gang members from the neighborhood who I had met at a back-to-school event in the summer of 2022. The boxing gym served as both a recreational and outreach space, drawing youth from the surrounding neighborhoods. My sustained presence at the boxing gym enabled me to build trust gradually, outside of external institutional affiliations. Access to street involved youth came through two longtime street

outreach workers employed at the gym, Charles[12] (63) and China (54), both of whom were former gang members and widely respected for their ability to mediate conflicts and navigate neighborhood dynamics. I met Charles in 2017 and China in 2022 through my previous work in North Lawndale and they were central to my ability to move through networks that might otherwise have remained closed to outsiders.

My primary field site, North Lawndale, is a historically Black neighborhood on Chicago's West Side that has been shaped by migration, economic shifts, and disinvestment. Once a thriving industrial hub and birthplace to the Vice Lords, one of the nation's largest gangs, it has endured decades of job loss, segregation, and concentrated poverty. At the time of my fieldwork, North Lawndale was 78% Black, with around 30,400 residents, a median household income of $33,334 (less than half the citywide average) and an unemployment rate of 15% (ACS 2018–2022). Nearly 40% of households lived below the poverty line, and 2,120 lots were vacant (Morsey et al. 2021). It ranked among Chicago's most violent neighborhoods, along with five others that accounted for over half of the city's homicides in recent years.

As an Asian American woman conducting fieldwork in a predominantly Black neighborhood, I stood out. My social position differed from that of my respondents, who were primarily Black teenage boys and young men. I entered the field at age 30, with an upper-middle-class background. I was never in a gang, nor did I grow up in a neighborhood plagued by violence. My prior work as a high school teacher in Detroit gave me insight into how violence and poverty constrain youth trajectories—an experience that transformed my understanding of American inequality in ways that sociology later helped me name. I cannot fully disentangle how my identity shaped data collection, but I recognize that it conferred both advantages and limitations. As an outsider, some respondents may have viewed me with suspicion or withheld certain experiences and beliefs. My distance from their lived experience meant I brought my own assumptions into the field that shaped the questions I asked and what drew my attention. At the same time, being a minority woman from a different background may have allowed others to speak more freely than they might have with someone from

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

within their community. My outsider status meant I took little for granted, prompting me to probe what might otherwise be considered self-evident. The most consequential aspect of my positionality may not have been my race or gender, but how I actively positioned myself in relation to others.

I adapted to the needs of each moment and each participant, at times taking on the role of auntie, driver, mentor, babysitter, emergency contact, and photographer, among others. I deliberately tried to bring a sense of calm and steadiness to each interaction with my subjects—most of whom were younger than me and living through extreme hardship—without offering advice or stepping in. I believe the key to being able to access the lives of my participants was repeatedly showing up with my full self, something participants told me mattered to them. I was never an insider; I intentionally maintained a degree of distance. I shared few details about my personal life or beliefs with my study participants. But I bore witness to their lives in all their complexity and fullness. In doing so, I earned a different kind of trust that came not from my background but presence.

Although I did not feel personally at risk of victimization, violence was a constant presence in the neighborhood. In my first week living in North Lawndale, a young man was shot on my block. A few months later, a mass shooting occurred at a Halloween party that Charles and China attended where 15 people were shot. A 16-year-old with disabilities was shot at a gas station a few streets away from where I lived. The SWAT unit shut down my entire block after my upstairs neighbor threatened to shoot his children. At my corner store, neighbors discussed recent shootings while catching up. In my backseat, kids scrolled crime-tracking apps, and teenage girls researched potential dates' risk of gun violence before meeting them.

Because I frequently drove and spent time with youth involved in active gang conflict, I learned to navigate space carefully and minimized time in public while accompanying them. My subjects reclined their seats whenever they were in my car and wore face masks when in public to avoid being spotted by rivals. I backed into parking spots for a quick exit if necessary. Over time, these adaptations became normal, but instances of violence consistently undermined my ability to focus and engage in daily matters beyond my immediate circumstance, something the literature documents as a side effect of exposure to violence (Sharkey 2018a).

Ethnographic Sample

For nearly two years I followed a core group of four teenagers and young men ages 16 to 20—Jay (age 16), Grenshaw (age 17), Tony (age 20), and Dion (age 20)—each with histories of illegal gun carrying and use. They all came from families with deep ties to Black gangs on Chicago's West Side, where street affiliations were expected and distancing oneself meant defying family norms. Three of four (Jay, Grenshaw, and Dion) had been shot and had also shot at others, marking them as *shooters*. This is a term used by community members for recognized gang members known for carrying and shooting guns. The label is not simply an online reputation, but one established through actual gun use in the streets. The reputation did not require a criminal record: Grenshaw and Dion had never been arrested when I first met them but still were known as shooters. Tony was the only one of my core subjects who was not a shooter and carried a firearm while selling drugs. Tony had a speech impediment and learning disability. His two older brothers—TY, a non-core participant in this study, and another brother Tito, who was murdered before I met Tony—were shooters and shielded Tony from this role. I gradually built trust, first spending time with them alongside Charles and China, and eventually with them each independently on my own. Since Jay and Grenshaw were minors when I met them, I received consent from their mothers in addition to their assent to participate in my study. I described my purpose as conducting research to understand the barriers young people face when "stepping back from the streets," which was how community members described desistance.

All four had enrolled at West Side High School,[13] an alternative school for students with behavioral challenges, in fall 2022. Theur trajectories fractured when two were shot leaving school a few months later when Jay was targeted by his rivals and Dion was caught in the crossfire. Fearing their safety, the four of them dropped out and dispersed. Over the next year, I followed them as they tried to distance themselves from their past lives. I spent extensive time with them and their networks, including their girlfriends, mothers, siblings, cousins, teachers, parole officers, doctors, and friends. I accompanied them to school, the gym, emergency room visits, funerals, court hearings, social service appointments, job interviews, football games, and even prom. While in the field, I

[13] Name changed of all schools mentioned

recorded most conversations with my participants' consent. I took jottings throughout the day and typed them up into fieldnotes within a day or two while they were fresh in my mind. In this paper, quoted text was transcribed verbatim from a recorder, whereas italicized text denotes summarized versions of conversations from my fieldnotes.

By embedding myself in the lives of my participants and cultivating sustained relationships with them and those closest to them I was able to observe not just what people said, but what they did. This is a central virtue of ethnographic work (Desmond 2012). These long-term relationships allowed me to trace how events unfolded across time and across 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 implemented safety protocols in collaboration with my advisors, IRB, and legal counsel. Before entering the field, I obtained an NIH Certificate of Confidentiality to protect participants and received trauma training before and during fieldwork to ensure my presence and questions did not put them at greater risk. I established procedures for handling disclosures of self-harm or harm to others (both of which occurred during my study) and maintained ongoing informed consent from participants and their guardians. When participants expressed an intent to harm themselves or others, I contacted their primary guardian or mentor to ensure they received support and that the threat would not be acted upon. In these moments, 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. Although I never personally witnessed gun violence or facilitated it (e.g., I never knowingly allowed guns in my car), study participants occasionally disclosed information that carried legal and ethical ambiguity. In such instances, I refrained from probing further and sought guidance from advisors and legal counsel. I prioritized minimizing risk for participants and myself even if it meant suspending research temporarily.

Interviews

To complement the observational data, I also draw on in-depth 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.

While fieldwork provided access to the embodied and often inarticulable ways that shooter identities shaped everyday life—insights that might not surface in one-off 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. In particular, the interviews 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.

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 further explore the topic (see appendix).

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 and why reputations for gun use developed and persisted, and what the consequences were on individuals' 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 violence, 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 how changes in Chicago's gang landscape have created new pathways for young people to access guns and cultivate reputations as shooters. First, the collapse of corporate gang hierarchies has created incentives for youth to use violence as a means of gaining status and self-protection. Second, as centralized gang control has eroded, so too has the informal regulation of the underground gun market, making it easier for youth to buy and sell guns. These shifts are intensified by social media, which serves as a stage where firearms are flaunted and reputations are rapidly constructed, challenged, and circulated.

Over the past two decades, Chicago's Black street gangs have undergone a significant transformation in how authority and status are organized. During the height of the corporate gang era (1980-searly 2000s), Chicago's gangs were hierarchically structured with well-defined leadership roles and chains of command (Venkatesh 1997; Kang 2025). Local sets were managed by chiefs selected for their managerial skills (Hagedorn 1988; Venkatesh 2008). The case of JT, the focal subject in Venkatesh's ethnography of the "Black Kings" in the Robert Taylor Homes, illustrates this model. JT acted as a street-level manager, enforcing internal rules, coordinating economic activity, and cultivating relationships with the surrounding community (Venkatesh 2008). Within the corporate gang structure, violence was by no means infrequent, but it was managed (Levitt and Venkatesh 2000; Venkatesh 1997; Venkatesh and Levitt 2000).

The dismantling of corporate gangs led to a breakdown in the hierarchies that once conferred status and regulated violence (Hagedorn et al. 2019; Aspholm 2020; Kang 2025). In Chicago's emerging street order, profits through drug sales are scarce and gang chiefs are no longer selected for managerial capacity. Instead, owning and wielding guns has become a primary means of accruing status, safety, and respect. In this new order, the figure of the shooter has taken shape as a distinct social category central to street life. As Matty, age 35, a street outreach worker and former Vice Lord, put it, "They following the shooters. If you ain't clapping [shooting], they ain't following you."

How did this social identity gain prominence? The shooter is not a new social category, but one with greater distinction and lethality today due to changing material and social conditions. As classic theories of deviance suggest, individuals respond to the constraints and opportunities of their social environments by adapting available means to achieve status and recognition (Becker 1963; Merton 1938). This aligns with contemporary life-course models that demonstrate how macro-historical contexts influence the frequency and timing of gun carrying (Lanfear et al. 2024; Neil and Sampson 2021). The breakdown of corporate gangs left a vacuum in informal social control and status allocation. Without centralized leadership to impose norms or mediate conflict, youth navigate more fragmented and unpredictable terrain. Role ambiguity generates uncertainty about social standing and expectations, particularly in "symmetric relations" where peers are prone to interpret one another's actions as status threats (Gould 2003). In such contexts, violence operates as a visible

and credible signal of dominance, both a means of asserting position and deterring future threats (Gambetta 2011; Lynn and Podolny 2011; Przepiorka et al. 2020).

Tim, age 30, offered a firsthand account of how the collapse of the former gang order created an environment where violence was less regulated and more unpredictable. He believed that 2010 was "when everything really started changing around the city of Chicago." Tim recalled, "I was at a block party, and the dudes I was into it with, what you would call the "opps" (opposition), they end up shooting me with my daughter in my hand. They shot me three times." That moment shattered the street norms Tim had been taught. He reasoned, "Why should I listen to the rules my big homie is telling me like, 'Yo, don't shoot people with kids, don't shoot people with their grandmas… if they just shot me with my kid and mom? They could have killed my daughter." Tim believed the "shoot first" mentality stemmed from the breakdown of norms around violence in his generation: "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 the middle of the streets, in grocery stores, in front of people. Because it's like, how do you take the chance of letting this person pass that then kill somebody to you or… that might try to kill you?"

A reputation for violence functions as both a deterrent to attackers and a pathway to status, anchoring an emerging hierarchy that rewards visible and costly displays of violence. As Antonne, age 32, 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. Shorty be on Facebook with guns, Instagram, don't play with him… He made a name for himself of being a shooter.'" The status associated with being a shooter may also have payoffs outside street networks. As 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 formal skills, education, or housing can achieve recognition through being known as a shooter. Jay was born into a legacy of violence. His parents came from rival gangs but fell in love despite their affiliations. In 2021, Jay's father was shot and killed outside their home. A month later, Jay bought his first gun, a Ruger LCP, for $300. Jay dropped out of school and was

declared the chief of a crew formed in his father's memory. His uncles assigned him two armed cousins for protection and tasked him with avenging his father's murder. Jay began regularly carrying a gun, sought out rivals, and routinely posted photos and videos of himself and his cousins "sliding," driving around armed to hunt rivals. These acts earned him recognition online and in the streets as a local celebrity.

Across my subjects' and their networks' social media, guns were ubiquitous, rivals were taunted, and hunts for enemies were live streamed. 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 and killed near Jay's home, a video of her dead in her car covered in laughing emojis spread quickly. A YouTube video titled "Hit wit da switch," made about her death was shared on Facebook over 800 times in a week, with darkly humorous comments like "the valet parked her shit near a tree, very kind" or "excuse me, you can't park there!!!!"

Research by Stuart (2020) and Lane (2019) documents how social media has become central to street life, amplifying visibility and expanding the audience for performances of toughness. Desmond Patton and colleagues have demonstrated how platforms like Twitter, Facebook and Instagram create new stages for beefs to emerge, escalate, and sometimes spill into offline violence (Desmond Upton Patton et al. 2018; Patton et al. 2014; Patton, Eschmann, and Butler 2013). In this context, guns serve not just as tools of violence but as props in a public performance of credibility. Signals of toughness can reduce uncertainty and defuse future conflict by revealing one's capacity to fight without requiring actual violence (Szekely and Gambetta 2020). This provides one explanation for the widespread phenomenon of youth posting images of themselves with guns on social media. Online platforms serve as low-cost arenas for projecting one's "violence potential" (Gambetta 2009), allowing individuals to broadcast strength and deter rivals without immediate physical risk. Guns are clear and costly signals of one's capacity to enact violence, given the risks involved in obtaining and displaying them. The fact that only a few are willing to incur these risks enhances the shooter's high status.

Charles drew a distinction between ordinary gun carriers and those known as shooters. He explained, "[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 echoed this, "Anybody can hold a gun. Anybody can walk around with a gun. Everybody ain't going to shoot. That's the difference." But the ability to build a reputation as a shooter depends not only on performative display but also on access to firearms—access that has been transformed by recent shifts in gang organization.

In addition to creating new incentives for cultivating a violent reputation, the weakening of gang structures in Chicago and ubiquity of social media have reshaped underground gun markets. In earlier decades, gangs served as gatekeepers, not only distributing illegal firearms but also regulating 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, Parker, and Pollack 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).

Today, that regulation has collapsed. Two longtime residents and workers on Chicago's West Side affirmed that the characterization of gang-controlled access of underground gun markets was once accurate but is no longer true. Commander Betancourt of the Chicago Police Department and China, a former gang enforcer turned outreach worker, described how gang decentralization has altered access to and norms around guns.

Betancourt, now the Commander of Chicago's 10th District which includes North Lawndale, recalled how gang chiefs once enforced rules around gun violence. He told me, "When I came on, there was structure in the gangs. And in order for you as an individual to do what we call 'the drive-by' or 'a hit' on a rival gang member, you had to get approval from a chief." Now, without

leadership's oversight, younger members dictate their own rules. Betancourt pointed out, "How does a 14-year-old tell another 14-year-old that [shooting innocents] is not right if that 14-year-old is riding with the other 14-year-old? Neither one has a concept of right or wrong." China echoed this shift, recounting the "prerequisites" before she received 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. "Violence was pervasive," she said of the corporate gang era, "but it was controlled. Now there's no structure, and it's like nobody teach them that this [hands] is better than [a gun] any day."

This loosening of control over gun access and usage was reflected in my fieldwork. None of my core subjects acquired firearms through gang leaders or demonstrated proficiency before receiving a weapon. Instead, access flowed through peer networks, online platforms, 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, he had cycled through five different guns, and none were acquired through a gang. He 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. 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 primarily bought and sold his guns through Instagram (Figures 3-5). Both Grenshaw and Jay downplayed the risk of police surveillance, believing they were shielded by private accounts and online aliases.

However, these unregulated exchanges carried other risks. Both Grenshaw and Jay had lost money when trying to purchase guns during the time I followed them. 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 after being held up at gunpoint by someone he had arranged to buy from through Instagram. Despite these risks, their perceived value of gun ownership remained high.

Others acquired guns through family ties. Dion, whose uncle was a former gang leader of a large West Side project, did not personally own a gun and instead borrowed firearms from relatives whenever he needed one. Dion showed me his family's collection of at least 10 different handguns

his family shared for defensive purposes and a few large capacity guns with switches[14] 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 and Jay also received guns from uncles, cousins, or brothers. These were often loaned with no formal prerequisites, no training, no vetting.

The shooter identity emerged from new opportunity structures that increased access to guns and elevated the status of those who shoot them. But youth rarely begin with lethal intent or a full grasp of the logic of street violence when they first pick up a gun. Becoming a shooter is a gradual process shaped by experience, ritual, and external recognition. The key question is not just why youth carry firearms, but how gun carrying evolves into a social identity.

BECOMING A SHOOTER: HOW THE LABEL BECOMES REAL

How does someone transition from carrying a gun to being labeled a shooter? The shooter identity develops through a series of experiences and rituals that are reinforced by external recognition. This career unfolds in four stages: (1) acquiring a gun, (2) carrying it, (3) shooting it, and (4) being labeled a shooter.

Acquiring

For the participants in my study, acquiring a gun was often described as a natural progression from childhood games to high-stakes conflict in a world where the threat of violence was common. Most made this decision in their pre-teen to early teenage years, when direct exposure to gun violence accelerates (Lanfear et al. 2023) but the consequences of illegal gun possession are difficult to grasp. Whether for protection or status, these participants' initial choice to obtain a gun set off a chain reaction in ways they could not yet foresee.

Tatum, age 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

[14] devices that convert a semi-automatic firearm into a fully automatic weapon

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, age 24, recalled 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 described, teens are very 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.”

As Tatum and King’s stories reveal, 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 (Dillard et al. 2024; Fontaine et al. 2018; Sierra-Arévalo 2016). 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). The desire to acquire illegal firearms is compounded by police cynicism (Hureau and Wilson 2021), the local prevalence of gun ownership (Cook and Ludwig 2004), and exposure to gun violence before age 15, which more than doubles the likelihood of adolescent carrying (Lanfear et al. 2024).

Safety and status concerns often drive adolescents to first pick up a gun, but these explanations cannot fully account for those who build reputations as shooters. Nor does it explain why some youth commit gun violence time and time again. These behaviors reflect a shift that begins in the next phase: carrying.

Carrying

Through frequent carrying, guns become more than weapon; they become a source of power and mechanisms of loyalty and connection. For Tim, age 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. I seen a lot of them spend the rest of their life in jail." At 8, Tim watched a man get shot 35 times 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 became easy. By 12, 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: "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." At 13, he was charged with attempted murder and spent two years in juvenile detention. When he got out, "[Carrying a gun] was a daily thing."

Grenshaw described how carrying a gun altered his relationships. He recalled, "My OG (mom) wasn't buying no shoes or none of that. … She had to pay rent every two weeks," he said. With unmet needs at home, he resorted to robbing gas stations at 12, using a spray-painted water gun. At 13, 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." Despite the 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 with 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. But it also brings the risk of arrest and the pressure to use it. Failure to do so risks being labeled a "goofy," slang for someone who is inauthentic or cowardly. As Antonne pointed out, once you've built a reputation, others may test it by forcing you to prove it through violence. Antonne explained, "Sometime you be put in that position where they... wanna check your realness. … They gonna force his hand. [They'd say,] 'Hey shorty, hey shoot at him,' … They know you got it, so, and if you don't do it, whatchu is? You fake. But if you do do it, now your clout just really went up."

The act of regularly carrying a gun generates public interactions that reinforce the gun's symbolic power, status, and attention it draws. Over time, some individuals link their gun to their sense of self. But carrying also sets off a cascade of consequences by entrenching its users further in a street identity, encouraging risk-taking, and increasing the likelihood of use. Paradoxically, while many carry for protection, doing so often heightens their exposure to violence by emboldening behavior and attracting threats (Loughran et al. 2016).

Sean, age 30, described how being robbed at gunpoint at age 15 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."

Antwon, age 23, was recently released from prison for a gun case and had been cycling in and out of prison since age 15. That was also when he became a victim of gun violence. He stated,

"Once they shot at me, I'm like, it ain't no fight no more. It's time for me to get a gun. So I got me a gun, got caught with it. After that, I was just locked in. I'm in the streets now." What began as a decision driven by self-protection quickly became a turning point. Carrying a gun anchored Antown's sense of belonging to the streets.

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 identity that generates rivals, invites notoriety, and cements one's reputation as a shooter. This act is what distinguishes individuals like Tony, who carry for safety and protection, from those like Jay, Grenshaw, and Dion, for whom guns are a way of life. Being a shooter brings status but also risk, including the possibility of being "backdoored" (betrayed by an affiliate) or targeted for revenge, as well as compromising the safety of loved ones. To protect themselves, shooters further embrace the street lifestyle, deepening their isolation and exclusion.

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 explained how neglect drove him toward petty crime, eventually leading him to seek a gun for protection: "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 age 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: "When I got robbed, it made me realize, 'Man, I shot them. They going to come after me. The police going to come after

me.'… I ain't know who they was, so I just reacted as any man should. Then, I start getting into the streets more."

For some, the cumulative losses and solitary lifestyle associated with being a shooter becomes internalized into a dark worldview. James, age 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. … 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, age 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, age 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," he 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 numbness, shooters often turn to drugs and guns as ritualized forms of emotional release. 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. Similarly, the emotional gratification of violence emerges through experience. Gun use is not always a response to threat or deprivation; it can become a source of connection and catharsis. Violence can offer pleasure (Becker 1953), "sneaky thrills" (Katz 1988), and a way to release frustration and assert dignity (Wacquant 2004). Acts like shooting, stealing cars, or livestreaming confrontations also function as interaction rituals that generate shared emotional energy and reinforce group solidarity (Collins 2014). These experiences serve as synchronizing events that affirm collective identity and strengthen group ties (Moule, Decker, and Pyrooz 2017). This is especially important in a world where the tight-knit gang structures, traditions, and codes no longer exist. This dynamic is demonstrated in Jay's story. For him, sliding was more than retaliation; it was a ritual.

On a cold night in January 2024, Jay posted a photo of an orange ecstasy pill with the caption: "Watch this next run 🏃💨 I'm bck in that mode 🏠." His cousin soon uploaded a video of them joyriding in a stolen car. That weekend, Jay and his cousins had celebrated a 16th birthday by stealing cars and plotting revenge against Lilski, a stickup kid who had humiliated Jay just days

earlier. Jay had tried to buy a gun from Lilski, but the transaction turned into a setup. Instead of selling Jay the advertised gun, Lilski pointed it at Jay while forcing him to unlock his phone and transfer the money while filming the encounter as Jay stood frozen in his black puffy coat wearing a button pin of his deceased father on his chest. The footage went viral, shared over 1,800 times in just one day before it was finally taken down. The pressure to retaliate was immediate. Jay's uncle gave him a pistol while urging him: *You better get that Lilski kid back or your name will never be clear on the streets*.

After taking ecstasy, Jay and his group rode the Red Line to the South Side, stole three cars, and spent hours cruising and tracking Lilski's live feed. They posted videos of their exploits on social media. When I asked him why he did that, Jay replied, "I did that for fun and to slide on Lilski." The performance was fueled by drugs, drill music, and social media—each element intensifying the moment, transforming violence into ritual. As with the football hooligans in Bill Buford's *Among the Thugs*, the appeal wasn't only in the retribution but the euphoric pull of collective violence. After experiencing a mob firsthand Buford wrote, "Violence is one of the most intensely lived experiences and… one of the most intense pleasures. … For the first time I am able to understand… an experience of absolute completeness" (Buford 1990).

Labeled

Once labeled a shooter, a person's life changes irreversibly. Though he may gain status within his networks, 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 distances 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 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.

Jay became a locally known figure after hunting down the men who were responsible for his father's death, but the visibility came at a price. With Charles' support, Jay enrolled in West Side High School, for a fresh start and started enjoying school for the frist time ever. But a few monther into school, his rivals found out he was there and shot him. Dion was shot because he stood next to Jay at a bus stop after school. Jay's mom and sister were also compromised. For two years I was in and around the field, they had to move three times after rivals discovered their home address.

As Jay's experiences reveal, the shooter identity doesn't just put individuals at risk, it brings danger to those around them. CJ, age 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, do something to 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, 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, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002), and access to turning points that create routine and social control (Bersani and Doherty 2018; Laub and Sampson 1993, 2003). Others highlight the emergence of new social roles through fatherhood and marriage (Edin, Nelson, and Paranal 2004; Laub, Nagin, and Sampson 1998), narrative reconstruction (Maruna 2001), settling down (Massoglia and Uggen 2010), or aging (Agnew and Brezina 2022; Caspi and Moffitt 1995).

Desisting from gun violence, however, is uniquely constrained. Unlike drug use or property crime, shootings fuel 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 offers 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.

Jaquil, age 25, 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. Despite two ongoing gun cases and looming prison time, he remained unwilling to disarm. 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." 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. I got to be able to go places. I can’t, even though I’m branded, it’s there.”

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. TY was tired of shooting and being shot at. One year prior to our interview, his older brother was shot and killed at their grandma’s funeral block party. After that incident, TY kept his ski mask on when in public and his gun strapped to him. 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. When they get your location, they looking for you. ... It’s tit for tat.”

Even years after putting the gun down, former shooters could not fully reenter public life. Terrance, age 41, described the toll this vigilance takes on his daily life. “Half of the time, I ain’t come out. Half of the time, like yesterday, 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.” Mario, 24, who was enrolled in READI, chose isolation over the risk of interaction. He said, “I try to stay away from people because it’s going to prevent me from hurting somebody or keep me out of trouble. … I’d rather stay out of the way or be unseen than be seen and hurt.” Tim, 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.”

These fears of unilateral disarmament weren’t simply paranoia. During my fieldwork, I met young men who had done everything right only to be pulled back into violence when they were least expecting it. Sidney, age 27, had a warm demeanor despite a rough past. He had been shot with seven times while walking near his home in 2018 and lost several family members to gun violence,

including his closest 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.

Anthony, age 24, 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. Despite his background, Anthony had found his way out of the streets. 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 streets. He had a huge smile throughout his interview and was committed to leaving his life on the streets to pursue something different. Still, he recognized the difficulty of change: "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 in the neighborhood and surrounding areas were killed after laying down their guns and making lasting strides towards a different path. For Charles and China, these losses were 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.

Why don't these young men just move away? For many, leaving Chicago wasn't an option. Under-resourced youth often lack the financial means to relocate, and even those with family elsewhere often found similar conditions waiting for them. Of the four young men I followed closely, three coped by isolating at home. They cut ties with gang affiliated friends and replaced street outings with time spent at home with their girlfriends. Only Jay managed to leave the city for extended periods, but his journey illustrates that moving away isn't always enough.

When I met Jay in April 2023, he was sixteen, jittery, and wore a black ski mask everywhere he went. The previous year, he was shot by his rivals while leaving his high school. When I met him six months later, Jay had physically recovered but remained hypervigilant. His mentor (Charles) arranged for him to leave Chicago to live with a relative in another state. The destination was undisclosed, even to me at first. At sixteen, Jay was a fugitive—not from law enforcement, but from rival shooters. 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. 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 move.

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. At that time, 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, where Jay's rivals could see. 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 was being held at gunpoint by Lilski surfaced on Instagram. The pressure to retaliate was intense. Even Charles warned me, "Jay will be open season unless he retaliates."

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.

In early months of 2024, Jay and his cousins took a stolen gun to a party at a hotel. Early in the morning, a friend asked to see the gun. When Jay refused, the friend reached for it and then Jay shot him. The friend narrowly survived. When recounting the incident to me, Jay showed no remorse. He believed he had done what was necessary. 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.

Not all my subjects' paths were as dramatic as Jay's. Most of the time, shedding the shooter label was a mundane process marked by long stretches in isolation. 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 West Side High School and is on track to graduate in 2025. 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 closest brother Tito was shot and killed at his grandmother's 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 continued to carry a gun selectively and posted photos with guns online at times, even as he described himself as being "out the streets." He enrolled in an online GED program (which was safer than re-enrolling in high school) 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. In 2025, he bought a used black Nissan sedan and now drives himself.

DISCUSSION

For some youth, carrying a gun can feel like the best way to secure safety, respect, and status in an environment where these guarantees often feel elusive. Yet the act of carrying an illegal gun sets off cascading consequences, transforming adolescent decisions into lasting identities. Once labeled a shooter, individuals become increasingly isolated from mainstream institutions critical to their life trajectories—school, work, and positive relationships—deepening their entanglement in cycles of violence and exclusion even long after they put down their guns. Their testimonies and experiences reveal how guns are more than instruments of violence; they are social objects that shape relationships, reputations, and the fabric of daily life itself.

This study aims to explain the rise of the *shooter* identity by situating it within broader structural trends: the increasing availability of guns, spikes in gun violence, and the erosion of traditional sources of informal social control on the street. In this shifting context, firearms become both a means of protection and a pathway to elite status within a reconfigured street hierarchy. Initially, a gun functions as a powerful form of symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1986), conferring status, protection, and credibility within street networks and, at times, beyond. In this sense, adolescent gun use is not always a reaction to insecurity; it is also a means of asserting agency within an alternative social order.

Those who not only carry guns but are also willing to use them accumulate the most recognition, earning admiration and reinforcement from peers, families, and local networks. Yet, in contexts of deep marginality, forms of capital can invert: What once conferred value becomes a liability (Wacquant 1998). This double bind is most apparent in the transition to adulthood, when the very status once secured by gun ownership begins to limit access to legitimate opportunities. Involvement in gun violence cuts off educational and workforce pathways, making reintegration into mainstream institutions difficult. Legal entanglements, social stigma, and the enduring threat of retaliation further isolate individuals, reinforcing their reliance on street networks even as they transition out of active violence. Over time, the once-valuable symbolic capital of a reputation for

shooting becomes persistent negative social capital—a label and set of associations that foreclose outside pathways.

This study calls for a reconceptualization of crime guns within sociological research and policy discourse, not merely as instruments of violence or correlates of poverty and crime, but as active social forces that shape identities, relationships, and life chances. The findings illustrate how guns facilitate a process of socialization into violence and engender a durable identity—the shooter—that proves difficult to shed. In doing so, this analysis extends recent sociological scholarship on the cultural meanings of firearms among legal gun owners, where guns are imbued with moral purpose, masculine responsibility, and political autonomy (Carlson 2015; Stroud 2017; Shapira and Simon 2018). It also builds on a long tradition of criminological work that positions firearms as central mechanisms in the production and diffusion of violence (Cook 1983; Braga et al. 2010; Hureau and Braga 2018). Recognizing guns as a form of socialization into deviant identifies helps explain of how violence develops and persists in the context of America's recent spikes in guns and gun violence.

Alongside the central claim to treat guns as social forces, this work advances and reframes core sociological perspectives on how deviance develops. Becker (1953) argued that deviant behavior precedes deviant motivation: Individuals do not begin with a fixed set of motives but instead learn to enjoy and sustain deviant acts through repeated participation and reinforcement. Illegal gun use follows a similar trajectory. Adolescents often acquire guns for protection or status, but as their use becomes recognized and ritualized, firearms become core to their social identities. Shooting a gun marks a transition from a deviant behavior into a deviant identity, one that reshapes relationships, structures opportunity, and constrains future choices. Unlike Becker's marijuana users who could abandon the habit when it no longer yielded pleasure, shooters cannot simply walk away even when they desperately want to.

Leading desistance theories posit that individuals age out of crime as they acquire social bonds to work, school, and family (Bersani and Doherty 2018; Laub and Sampson 1993, 2001, 2003). Yet, in high-violence neighborhoods, these same institutions can be sites of vulnerability rather than refuge. Jay's story exemplifies this paradox: His return to school and legitimate work made him easier to locate, increasing his exposure to rivals. Similarly, the notion that cognitive

transformations drive desistance (Giordano et al. 2002) is complicated by the realities of a world saturated with guns. Gun violence is self-perpetuating, structured by cycles of retaliation that persist regardless of an individual's intent to desist. This structural dilemma—akin to unilateral disarmament in war (Schelling 1960)—helps explain why standard models of desistance often fail to account for adolescent gun involvement.

Beyond the dilemma of unilateral disarmament, youths who engage in illegal gun use often find themselves burdened with the label of a shooter long after they've put down their guns. Traditional labeling theory emphasizes the role of formal institutions such as courts, police, and schools in reinforcing deviant identities (Becker 1963; Goffman 2010; Lemert 1951; Pager 2003; Rios 2011; Tannenbaum 1938). However, this study reveals that informal labeling by peers, family members, and street networks operates in a similarly restrictive fashion. Unlike some forms of stigma that can be concealed or strategically downplayed (Goffman 1959, 1986), the shooter label is a public and persistent marker, reinforced by both community narratives and digital traces that make erasure nearly impossible.

Social media makes it even harder to leave a stained reputation behind. Unlike the traditional labeling mechanisms described by Becker (1953) and Goffman (1959, 1986), where stigma is managed through face-to-face interactions, today's youth must also contend with digitally archived identity that can be used against them at any time. Not only law enforcement, but also community members use online spaces to surveil and reinforce labels, contributing to what Rios (2011) calls a "youth control complex," that is, a web of institutional and social forces that sustain a criminal identity even for those attempting to leave it behind (Rios 2011). Like in Goffman's (2014) study of men on the run from the police in Philadelphia, my participants' most personal relationships occasionally became sites of reinforcement of the label they hoped to escape. Whereas Goffman describes women on 6th Street using a man's legal precariousness or probation as a weapon to dictate behavior or punish him (Goffman 2014: 100), girlfriends in my study could exploit a shooter's vulnerability to violence through social media. Jay's girlfriend used social media as a tool of control, blackmailing him with the threat of exposing past violent acts. Meanwhile, his own mother,

concerned that he was becoming too deeply involved in street life again, sent screenshots of Jay's gun posts to his parole officer.

These findings point to several urgent policy implications. First, this study underscores the need to intervene in violence much earlier. The most consequential shift in identity formation often occurs between the ages of 10 and 15, before reputations calcify and networks become entrenched. 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 online, is essential to disrupting the social reproduction of the shooter identity.

Third, this study provides an explanation for why jobs programs alone rarely reduce violence involvement (Ludwig and Schnepel 2025). For individuals deeply entrenched in violence, the shooter identity is sticky, reputationally consequential, and difficult to shed through economic incentives or opportunity. Grenshaw and Jay, for example, 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 increases—not decreases—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.

Illegal gun use is often treated as a policy issue to be addressed through law enforcement or regulation. Yet 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. While the process of becoming a shooter parallels general delinquency onset, the presence of firearms heightens the consequences of adolescent missteps. Once labeled a shooter, traditional pathways out of crime constrict. The same behaviors that once offered protection and status ultimately sever ties to school, work, and family. By showing how shooting guns becomes an identity, this study reveals how deviance is not only produced but made durable. Picking up a gun is easy but putting it down is far more difficult.

FIGURES

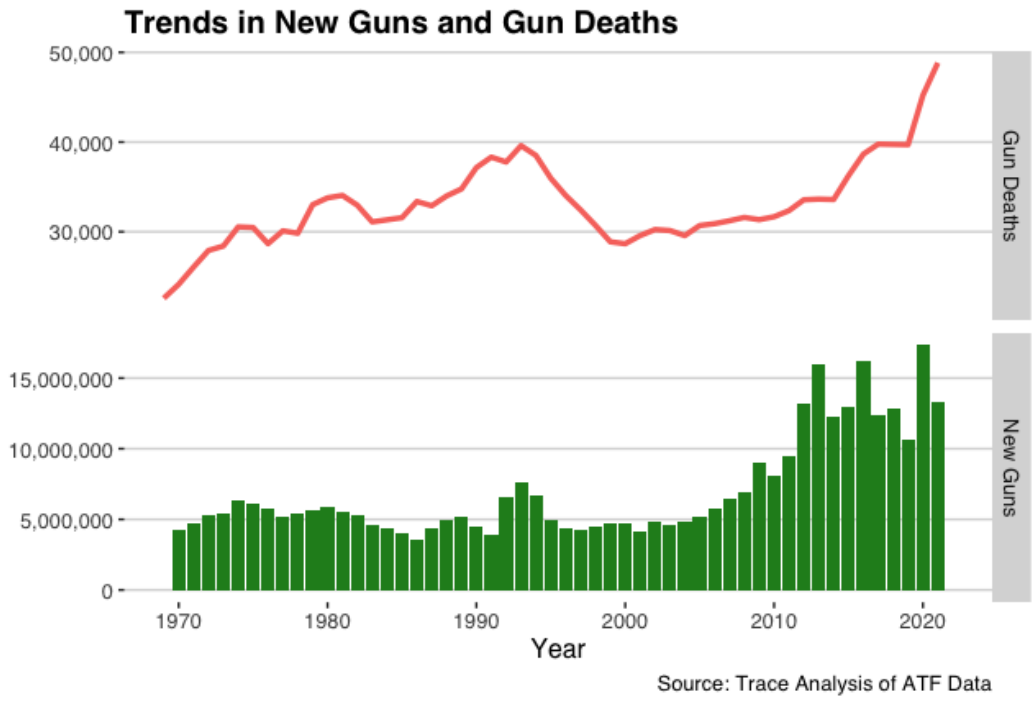


Figure 1: Guns deaths rise and fall alongside firearm production. Both peaked in 2021.

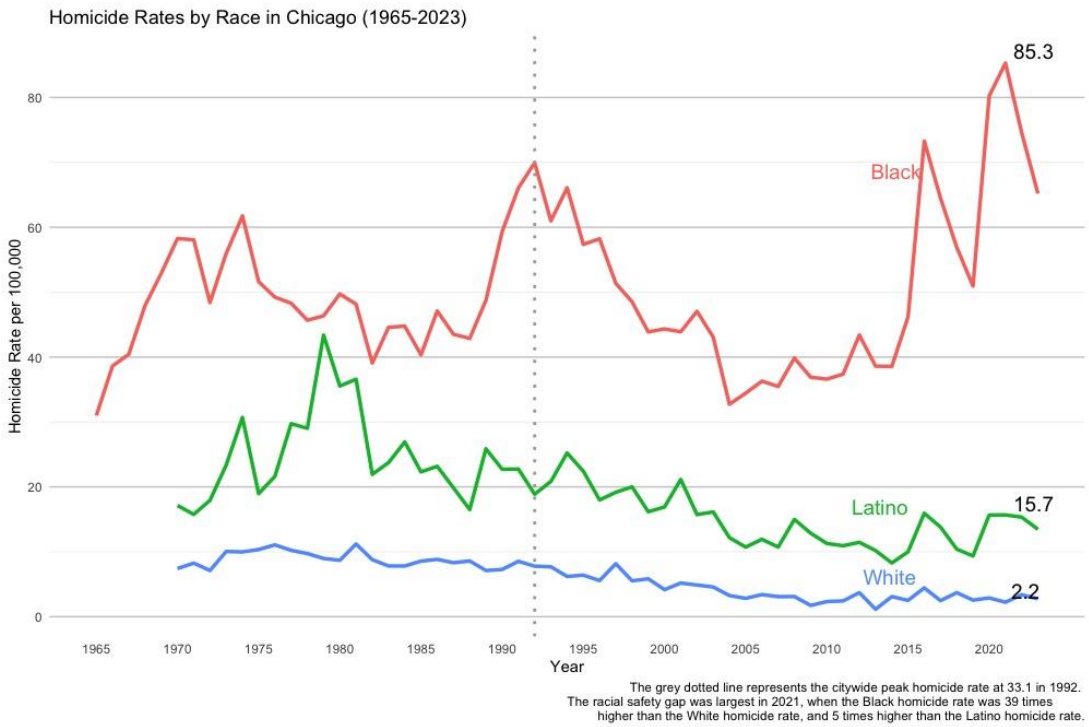
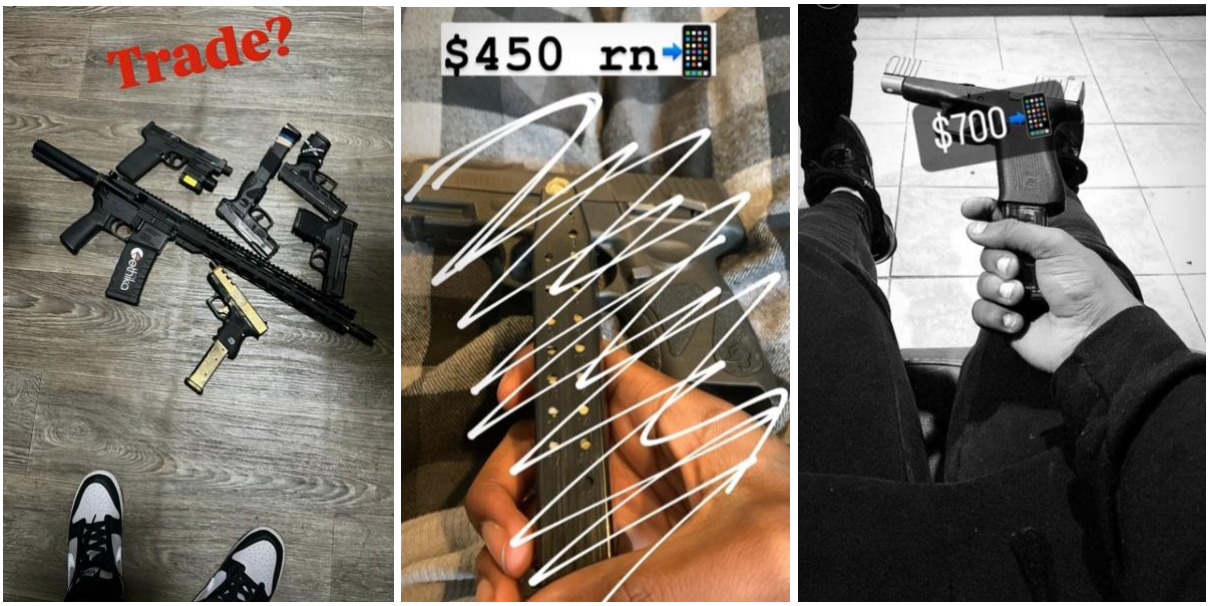


Figure 2: Homicide rates in Chicago by race 1965-2023, replicated and extended from a graph made by UChicago Crime Lab for NYTimes with Chicago Police Department data



Figures 3-5: Screenshots of subjects' gun sales/trades on Instagram and Facebook

APPENDIX

Responses to Heightened Violence

Ask these at the end of the interview, right before the concluding "Looking forward" section. If these topics happen to come up naturally in another section, you may ask these questions there.

Script: This next section is going to ask about how gun violence has affected you and those around you. Before we proceed, I want to remind you that everything you say will be confidential, but you do not have to answer any question that you don't want to. Your thoughts on this next section will be passed onto people whose job it is to create better programs and policies in response to heightened gun violence.

Part 1: Trends in Gun Violence

A. Think back to a time when the gun violence seemed especially bad around here or you felt like you and those in your community were at greater risk of being caught in the crossfires.
    a. When was this? [get as specific as possible]
    b. How long did this period of heightened violence last? A weekend, month, year?
    c. Tell me the whole story of happened leading up to this period either in your life or in the community that may have been related to it?
    d. How did you know that the violence had gotten bad?
        i. Probe: Did you hear about it from friends or neighbors?
        ii. Probe: Or did you learn about it on social media or the news?
    e. Did the violence go back down?
        i. If so, how did you know things were safer again?
B. During this period, was there anything you changed about your day-to-day routines? [*MAKE SURE TO ADDRESS ALL PROMPTS BELOW*]
    a. Did it change where you spend your time? Do you stay closer to home?

b. Are there any places you would avoid?
c. Did it change whether you would consider carrying a weapon with you when you left home?
d. Did it change how you navigated people you come across in your neighborhood?
e. Did it lead you to take any steps to protect yourself from being robbed or shot? If so, what did you do to protect yourself?
f. Is there anything else about your day-to-day you changed up after this incident?

Part 2: Gun Carrying

C. Some people in this neighborhood have told us that they carry a weapon with them to protect themselves during certain situations, whereas others have told us they feel like they feel less safe when they're carrying. What about you and people you know?
    a. *If they carry:*
        i. Tell me a story about when you or your friend/family member last decided to bring your weapon out with you.
            1. What happened right before you/they decided to bring it with you?
            2. Did having it with you affect how you interacted with others?
            3. How often would you say this happens?
        ii. What sorts of situations do you and your friends make sure not to bring your weapon out with you?
            1. Tell me a story about that.
    b. *If they do not carry:*
        i. Walk me through your decision not to carry.
        ii. Did you ever used to carry? Or did you always choose not to carry?
            1. *If a change:* What changed?
        iii. Are there places/situations you avoid because you choose not to carry?

Part 3: Specific Events [ONLY ASK IF R BRINGS UP A SPECIFIC ENOCUNTER THAT HAPPENED PERSONALLY OR TO R's NETWORK]

D. Think back to <u>the last time</u> you heard about friends or neighbors involved in a shooting, or during periods when there were lots of shootings going on. Walk me through the whole story of what happened.
    a. When did it happen?
    b. Where were you when you found out? Who told you?
    c. What went on through your mind in that moment?
    d. How often would you say this happens?
E. After you heard about this incident, is there anything you changed about your day-to-day routines? [*MAKE SURE TO ADDRESS ALL PROMPTS BELOW*]
    a. Did it change where you spend your time? Do you stay closer to home?
    b. Are there any places you would avoid after this incident?
    c. Did it change whether you would consider carrying a weapon with you when you left home?
    d. Did it change how you navigated people you come across in your neighborhood?
    e. Did it lead you to take any steps to protect yourself from being robbed or shot? If so, what did you do to protect yourself?
    f. Is there anything else about your day-to-day you changed up after this incident?

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