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*How Youthful Offenders  
Perceive Gun Violence*

*Julie H. Goldberg, William Schwabe*

*Supported by the  
National Institute of Justice*

*Criminal Justice*

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# *How youthful offenders perceive gun violence*

*Julie H. Goldberg and William Schwabe*

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## **PREFACE**

This Documented Briefing describes the methodology and findings of an exploratory pilot study whose research goal was to identify points of influence, at the individual level, that might deter gun violence by youth.

The study was conducted in July and August 1998. It is part of a two-year project, Problem-Solving Strategies for Dealing with Youth- and Gang-Related Firearms Violence, funded by the National Institute of Justice and begun in June 1998. The overall objective of the project is to help reduce youth shootings in the Los Angeles area.

The original inspiration for the project was the success of Boston's efforts to reduce youth homicides. In Boston, agencies worked together to focus deterrence, which resulted in impressive reductions in homicides (David Kennedy, "Pulling Levers: Getting Deterrence Right," *National Institute of Justice Journal*, July 1998).

Because the effectiveness of deterrence or inducements depends, in part, on the perceptions of the target population, this study was conducted to explore youthful offenders' perceptions associated with gun carrying, use, and victimization. The study may help those designing violence reduction strategies better understand what may be more or less likely to deter or otherwise affect youth gun violence.

## SUMMARY

This study, based on interviews with 36 youthful offenders in Los Angeles Juvenile Hall, examined the youths' perceptions of risks and benefits of carrying or using firearms. Such perceptions would seemingly be germane to our more extended research objective of developing law enforcement strategies aimed at deterring youth firearms violence.

All the youths interviewed had committed delinquent acts; four had committed murder. Most of the youths who were interviewed were members of street gangs, but only 24 percent said they intended to remain involved with a gang.

The majority of those interviewed stated their belief that they have a choice of whether or not to carry a gun. Most also acknowledged that it is wrong to shoot a person to gain respect or to get something they want, though nearly 60 percent thought it acceptable to use a gun in response to one's family being hurt.

Most of these youth had experienced violence, and many expected to be victimized, arrested, or die in the next year. They expressed various reasons for expecting they might be shot on the street even if they themselves were to stop "gang banging." They tended not to expect that police could protect them from being shot.

*Past research identified factors that predict delinquency*

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- Pre-existing risk factors, such as low SES and parental drug use
- Exposure to community-level violence
- Previous victimization and fear of crime
- Personality traits, such as anti-social conduct and low impulse control

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Past research has identified factors predicting delinquency, such as

- pre-existing risk factors
- exposure to community-level violence
- previous victimization and fear of crime
- personality traits.

The current research is not so much concerned with predictors of delinquency, many of which do not lend themselves to short-term interventions, nor are they necessarily the same as predictors of gun-related violence. Nor is this research concerned with delinquency *per se*; rather, it is concerned with what may be factors influencing gun-related violence.

Recent work by Sheley and Wright surveyed “average” high school youths’ experience with weapons and violence (Joseph F. Sheley and James D. Wright, “High School Youths, Weapons and Violence: A National Survey,” National Institute of Justice, *Research in Brief*, October 1998). This study asks some of the same questions, but it poses them to delinquent youth in custody rather than average male teenagers.

## *Focus of this research project*

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- Examine more proximal indicators of gun violence
  - how individuals perceive the choice to carry and use a gun
- Advantage of this approach
  - allows researchers to develop appropriate deterrence messages

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This research examined a more proximal indicator of violence: how individuals perceive the decision to carry or use a gun.

In order to change behavior through an intervention, there are two prerequisites:

- Individuals need to believe that they have a choice about arming themselves on the street.
- Individuals need to connect consequences with their actions, such as the positive and negative consequences of using a gun.

Clearly, this is not the only path to deterrence; but by understanding how individuals think about the choice to use a gun, one may be better able to develop targeted intervention messages.

Moreover, this approach seems easier than trying to change pre-existing risk factors, such as whether one's parents were educated or whether one was born into poverty.

## *Perceptions that might influence gun-related behaviors*

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- Can earn more money with guns
- Can earn admiration of peers
- No perceived alternative
- Underestimate or undervalue likelihood of death or injury
- Underestimate likelihood of arrest or imprisonment
- Arrest or imprisonment holds no deterrent value

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We assume that youths' decisions about carrying or using guns are influenced, at least to some extent, by their perceptions or beliefs. Some of these relate to instrumental gains associated with guns.

- Youths may believe they can earn more money with guns—if, for instance, they are earning money through criminal activity.
- Youths may believe they will gain the admiration of their peers if they use a gun, or lose it if seen as unwilling (or afraid) to use one.
- Youths may believe that they have no real choice but to carry a gun, because everyone on the street is carrying and/or the police cannot protect them.

Arrest and imprisonment may not deter behavior for any of these reasons:

- They are likely to get probation and do not care.
- Juvenile Hall is not considered to be that bad (three meals a day, school).
- Going to Juvenile Hall may be considered a rite of passage, especially for leadership roles in gangs; one needs to have been on the “inside” for a while.
- They underestimate the likelihood of being tried as an adult for using a gun and the accompanying severity of punishment. Typically juveniles' sentences last only until they are 18 years old.
- They do not believe they are going to live past the age of 20.
- They do not believe they have any real future opportunities.

*Each set of perceptions could lead to a different policy*

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- Can earn more money with guns ⇒make gun carrying less profitable
- Can earn admiration of peers ⇒create peer-related costs
- No perceived alternative ⇒reduce guns on the street
- Underestimate or undervalue likelihood of death or injury ⇒ provide education
- Underestimate likelihood of arrest or imprisonment ⇒make arrests more salient
- Arrest or imprisonment holds no deterrent value ⇒increase punishments, or create real paths to future opportunities

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Each set of perceptions, if actually held by young people, could imply a different policy response. If, for example, decisions are influenced by peer admiration, it might be effective to create or increase peer-related costs of carrying or using a gun. In the Boston Gun Project, an entire gang was punished for one member's having been caught using a gun.

Perception of no alternative might suggest a policy aimed at reducing the number of guns in the hands of enemy gangs.

Underestimation of death or injury could yield to education of individuals about the likelihood and severity of injury, especially to one's loved ones. Family repeatedly came out as important to these youths, so this may be a point of impact.

Underestimation of arrest/punishment might suggest advertising arrests and convictions in the neighborhood or increasing certainty of arrest.

Failure to deter could, in part, be because long-term punishment often involves spending time at what is know as "camp" up in the mountains. They are basically too far from anything to get into much trouble. But this is clearly not seen as punishment. They get to go into the mountains and swim and hike, and they feel free. It's much better than Juvenile Hall.

This is not to suggest that these policy approaches are easy to implement or inexpensive, but if we have limited resources, it's best to target what really matters—the beliefs that are driving the behavior.

## *Methodology*

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- 20-30 minute interview in Juvenile Hall
- Validity of the data
  - Presence was endorsed by staff
  - Treated minors as research informants
  - Rewarding to talk to someone outside of the justice system
  - Data analyses present a very consistent story

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Separate, one-on-one interviews were held with the youths, who were very attentive and willing to participate.

A staff member introduced the interviewer to the youths. The interviewer explained the research project, and then asked for their consent. The interviewer explained RAND's interest in understanding why so many youths are shooting each other out on the street—but we don't know why, so we're talking to youth who've been out there. They responded well to being treated with respect and given the opportunity to tell their story and demonstrate their expertise.

Self-reported gang membership was positively correlated with having seen a gun, carrying a gun, using a gun, having been shot at, having a friend who was shot, and having been in trouble with the police before.

## *Structure of the survey*

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- Demographics
- Experiences
- Values
- Expectations and perceptions
  - General
  - Scenario-specific

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In addition to asking about the traditional set of risk factors (exposure, victimization, and delinquency), the interviewer asked about their future expectations. Since deterrence is a future-based message (do something now, pay later), we wanted to understand how these individuals perceived the future, both positive and negative expectations.

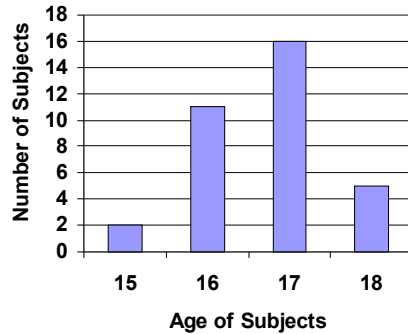
We also asked about whether they perceived a choice about using a gun on the street and what, if anything, could protect them from being victimized. In addition, we asked about when it's acceptable to shoot someone.

Finally, we asked them to respond to a fictional scenario in which there was the opportunity to shoot someone. We asked about whether they would shoot or not, and the consequences of both shooting and not shooting (need to ask about the opportunity costs of not acting). In addition, we wanted to see if they were sensitive to contextual factors, so we posited three variations to the scenario. First, they are alone, outside of their neighborhood, and a car with four people drives by, stops, and asks where they are from. Then we asked them to imagine that they are alone, but inside of their neighborhood. Finally, we asked them to imagine being inside their neighborhood, but this time their friends are with them.

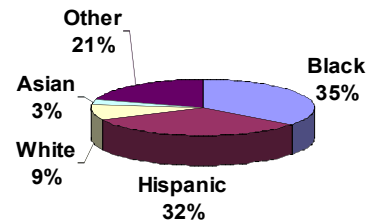
This scenario was developed after talking to youths in Juvenile Hall and asking them about situations where they could use a gun. We wanted to create a scenario where there was a real choice about using a gun or not, which we believe we achieved in this scenario, as the findings will indicate.

## Demographics

- Age



- Race



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We interviewed 36 youths in total, but eliminated two cases for the following reasons:

- One youth was either under the influence of drugs or brain damaged—he could not follow a sentence from beginning to end.
- One youth was not believable—he was probably trying to impress the interviewer. (He said he was from Beverly Hills, that his dad had a lot of money, etc.) Also, his responses were very inconsistent.

Most of those remaining were 16 to 17 years old. The majority were black or Hispanic.

*Most of the youth were in gangs, but many expressed intent to get out*

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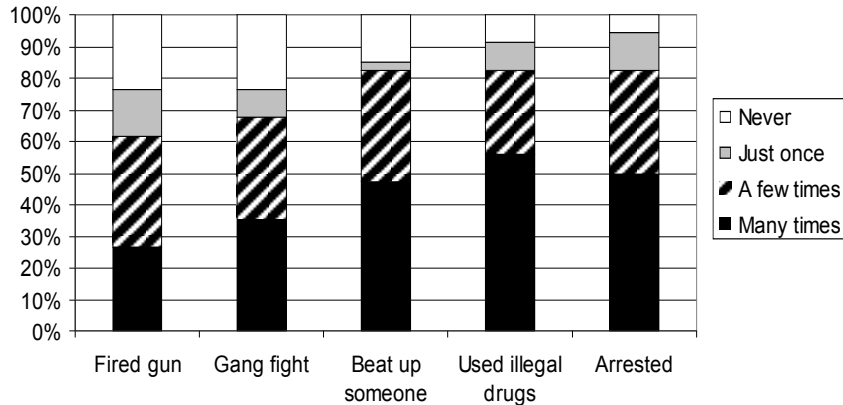


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Seventy-six percent of the youths interviewed had been in gangs.

Most claimed intent to get out of their gangs. If this is honest intent, it may be useful for law enforcement agencies to act in ways that facilitate—or at least do not impede—youths' desire to drop their gang associations.

## *Delinquent acts*



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All the youths had committed delinquent acts:

- 75 percent had fired a gun.
- 75 percent had been in a gang fight.
- 85 percent had beaten someone up.

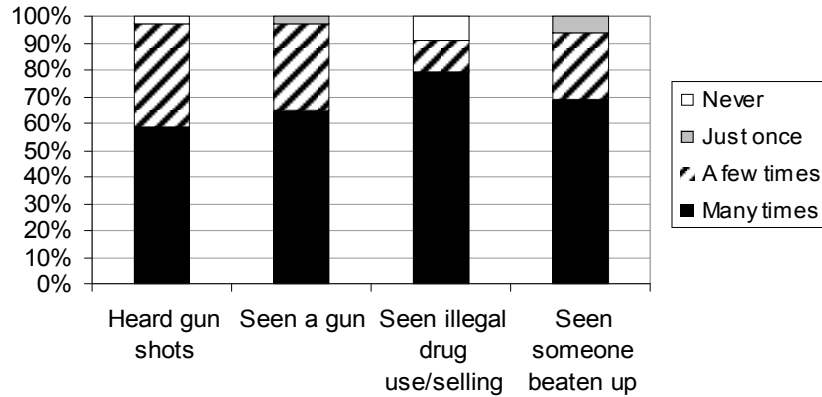
Almost all had tried illegal drugs and were arrested before, at least a few times.

Eighty-five percent had been in Juvenile Hall before.

These youths were not Boy Scouts. We asked them about the most serious crime they had committed for which they were caught for and the most serious crime they had committed but for which they were never caught:

- 4 had committed murder (2 never caught).
- 2 had attempted murder.
- 9 had committed assaults with a deadly weapon.
- 11 had committed strong-arm robberies.
- 5 had shot at people (none ever caught).
- 8 had been in possession of drugs with intent to deal.
- 6 had been charged with gun possession.
- 12 had committed burglaries.

## *Exposure to community-level violence*

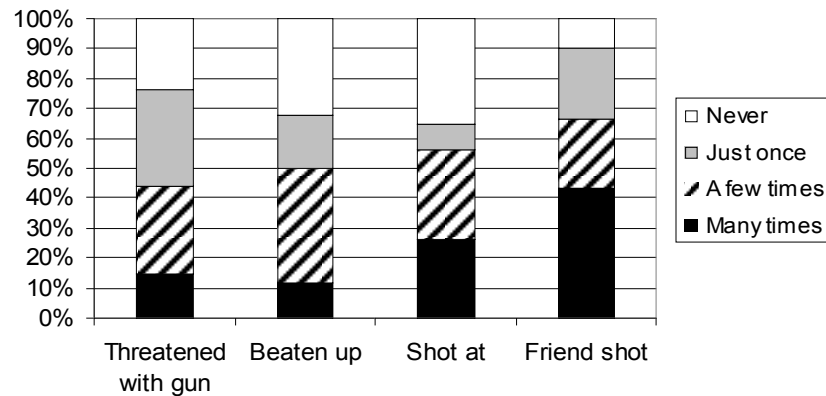


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We asked a general frequency measure of their exposure to community-level crime and violence: never, one time, a few times, or many times over the last couple of years.

Most have been exposed to violent behavior, and most reported “Many times.”

## *Personal and vicarious victimization*



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Most of the youths had themselves been victims:

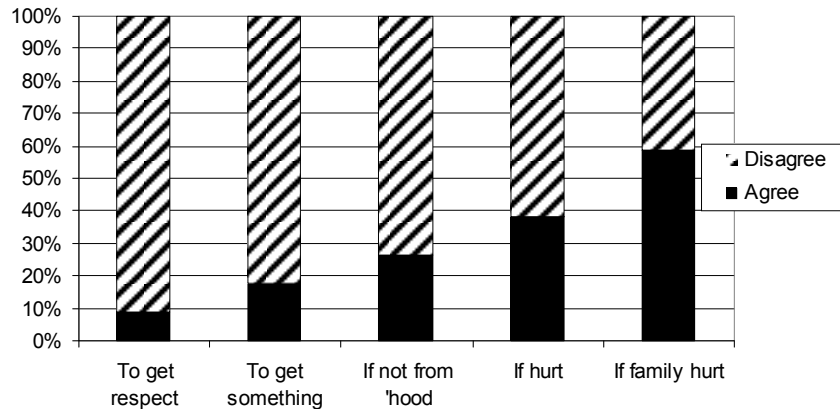
- Three-quarters had been threatened with a gun at least once.
- Two-thirds had been beaten up at least once.
- Two-thirds had been shot at at least once.

Almost all had at least one friend who had been shot.

But unlike exposure, there were a lot of "Nevers," and most of their victimization happened only once or a few times rather than many times.

## *Justifications for gun use*

Statement: It's ok to shoot a person ....



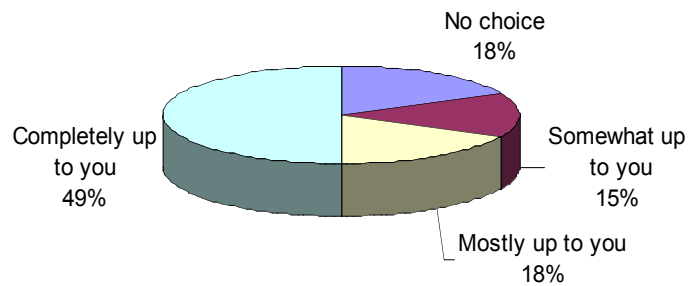
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They also recognized that it's wrong to use a gun. They overwhelmingly disagreed with all the reasons to shoot someone with a gun except if their family were hurt or insulted, which could arguably be considered self-defense.

## *Perceived choice to carry a gun*

Question: How much of a choice do you really have when it comes to carrying a gun or not?



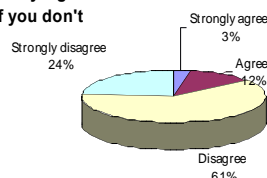
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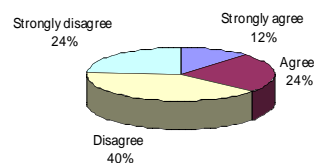
However, despite their experiences of victimization, exposure to violence, and the perceptions of a very dangerous, out-of control world, they still perceive a choice about arming themselves on the street—either somewhat or completely up to them.

## *Justifications for carrying a gun*

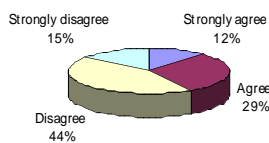
**You can make much more money if you carry a gun than if you don't**



**I need to carry a gun because of the work I do**



**I need to carry a gun because all my enemies are carrying guns**



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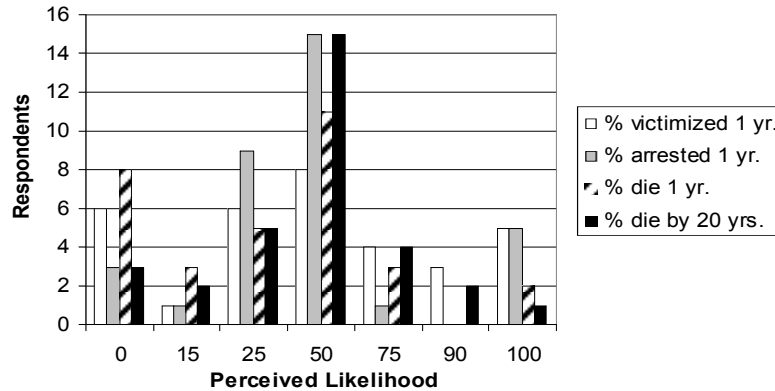
Moreover, they are not carrying guns completely for instrumental purposes—for the money. They're generally carrying guns because of what they're doing—like selling drugs—or because of who they are—gang members who have enemies.

By comparison, Sheley and Wright (*op. cit.*, p. 6) reported the following frequency of stated reasons for carrying weapons among 40 respondents:

- 43% I needed protection.
- 10% I used the weapon in a crime.
- 18% To scare someone.
- 18% To get back at someone.
- 10% Most of my friends carry them.
- 10% It made me feel important.

In our interviews, we asked what it would take to stop using a gun. One minor said that he needed a gun because he was in the Crips gang and he went into the Bloods' neighborhood to sell his drugs. When asked why he went into the rival gang's neighborhood, he said because he made more money that way.

## *Negative future expectations*



	Victim	Arrested	Die	Die by 20
$\mu$	49	46	35	46
$\sigma$	35	29	30	26

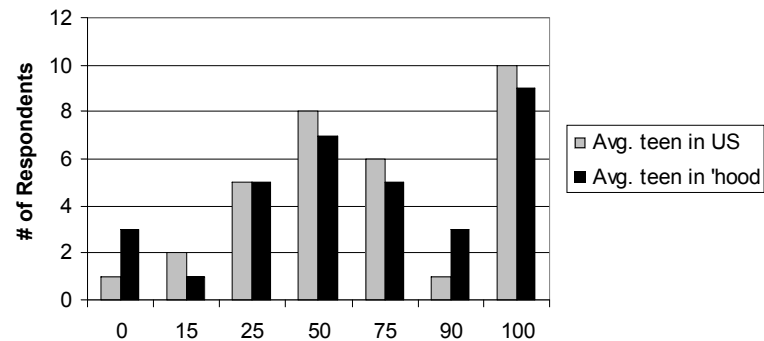
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For these probability questions, we presented the scale as 0 percent meaning it will never happen, 100 percent means it's certain to happen, and 50 percent means it's up to chance, 50/50.

Almost half the youths interviewed think it's up to chance, 50/50, whether or not they'll be victimized, arrested, or die.

## *Expectations of future gun victimization*

Question: What is the chance that an average U.S. teenager (or one in your neighborhood) will be shot at in the next year?



	US	'hood	Perceived Likelihood
$\mu$	63	62	
$\sigma$	32	35	

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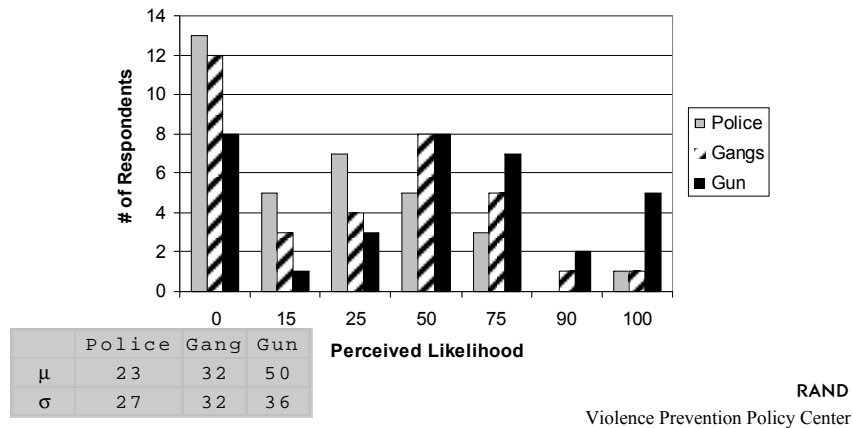
We asked them the likelihood that an average teenager in the U.S. or an average teenager in their neighborhood would be shot at in the next year.

About one-third of the youths thought it was certain that an average teenager in their neighborhood or anywhere in the United States would be shot at within the next year. Interestingly, they perceive the world outside of their neighborhood to be even more dangerous.

Many of the youths said they could be shot just walking to the mall, so they thought the only real way to stay safe was to never leave their house, or to get a car so they never have to walk on the streets.

## *Protection from victimization*

Question: What is the chance that the police, gangs, or a gun can protect you from being the victim of a violent crime?



Almost 40 percent of the youths think the police, and even gangs, cannot protect them, but most think a gun can protect them to some extent and that, if you want to be certain, a gun can be relied on to protect you 100 percent of the time.

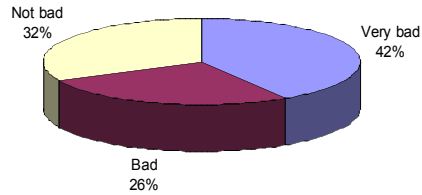
Following up on this question, we asked if anything else could keep them safe on the street. In response, several minors said a bullet-proof vest (which the gangs have on hand to distribute when needed), and one minor said, “better aim.”

An extension of this idea of not feeling safe on the street was what we repeatedly heard about being “known.” This means being identified as a gang member, either by reputation or appearance. So even if they were to stop “gang-banging” (which some gangs allow only through death), they could still be shot on the street for four reasons.

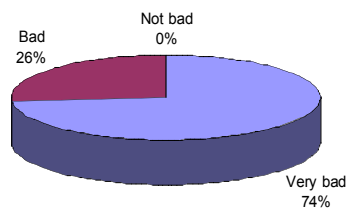
- (1) Rival gang members still perceive you as an enemy and don’t believe/care that you’ve quit, because you still killed their “homey.”
- (2) They can be shot at just because they are hanging around gang member friends, even if they are no longer gang-banging.
- (3) The police still harass them, e.g., they ask them what they’re doing on the street and what kind of trouble they’re in.
- (4) They perceive the world to be a very dangerous place where anyone can be shot at anywhere.

## *Perceived aversion to probation or incarceration*

How bad would probation be?



How bad would incarceration be?

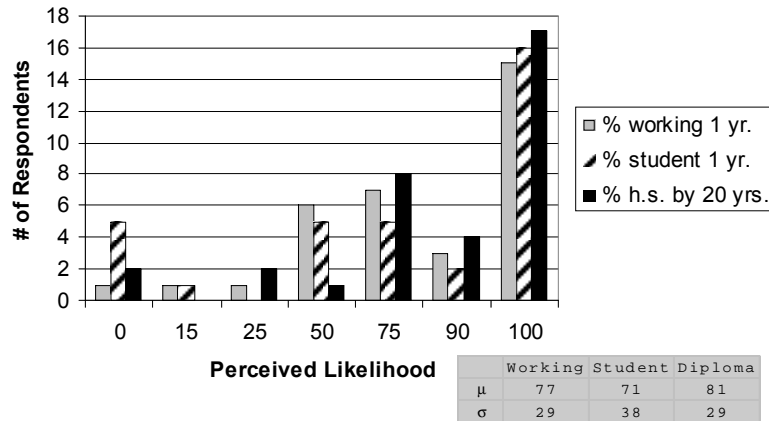


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The youths we interviewed saw incarceration as far worse than probation. Despite their past, they still perceive future educational and employment opportunities. About half thought that they would definitely be working in a year, be in school, and get their high school diplomas by the time they turned 20.

## *Positive future expectations*



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Some may say this reflects overly optimistic or unrealistic expectations, but the interviewer had a different impression. When responding to these questions, they often qualified the response with, “Well, I really want to get my high school diploma, so I’ll say 95 percent chance.” This hopefulness may represent their awareness of the few ways to get out of the gang life. For some, the only way out is death. But if they do survive, there is also another way. These stories had an almost folkloric quality—they talked about someone they knew or had heard of who had gotten away from the neighborhood, by leaving the neighborhood, the state, or even the country. They started a new life with a new family, often with their own child, and got a job. Though they would always be from the ’hood, and would still represent their neighborhood, they were in a different stage of their life, and this was respected by the gang. Informal conversations with probation officers and staff confirmed this method—getting more education and getting out—as one of the few ways of escaping gang life.

Moreover, this motivation to get out is strong. One minor was in Juvenile Hall because he had violated his probation just before getting out of placement. He believed that he “messed up” because he recognized that if he were to go back on the street, there was nothing there for him except to start hanging out with his gang. But in the justice system, he could get his GED and have a chance for a different life. (He had already used up his last chances on the outside; he had been thrown out of school so many times—both regular school and continuation school—they had asked him not to return).

## *The scenario*

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- Imagine you're by yourself walking down a street in another neighborhood at night. Suddenly four people who look like gang members drive by in a car and stop. They ask you where you're from ....

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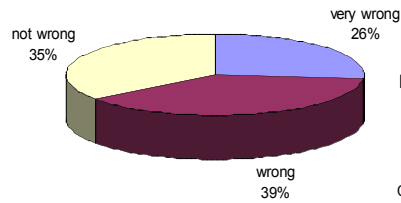
The scenario posited a simple situation most of these youths saw as threatening:

Imagine you're by yourself walking down a street in another neighborhood at night. Suddenly four people who look like gang members drive by in a car and stop.

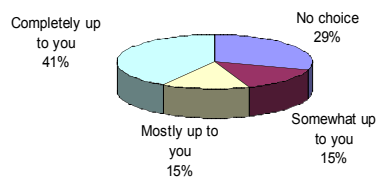
They ask you where you're from ....

## *Values and choices under scenario assumptions*

**How wrong is it to shoot or threaten in this situation**



**How much choice about shooting in this situation**



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Most of the youths thought it was wrong to shoot in this situation, but 35 percent said it was not wrong.

Most thought they had a choice, but 29 percent saw no choice, and another 15 percent thought they had relatively little choice.

*Average perceived risks under scenario assumptions*

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- Chance you could avoid confrontation 44%
- Chance they would shoot at you 57%
- Chance you would shoot at car 51%
- Chance person you shot would die 59%
- Chance you'd get arrested 55%
- Chance you could be tried as adult for shooting someone 86%

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Most of the possibilities listed above were seen as chance events, with all likelihoods in the vicinity of 50 percent, except for the chance that these mostly 16-to-17-year-olds would be tried as adults. Clearly, they had gotten the message that a juvenile who shoots may be tried as an adult.

*Average perceived risks under scenario assumptions*

---

- Chance shooting would gain respect for you 48%
- Chance not shooting would lose respect for you 27%
- Chance probation if arrested 63%
- Chance > 1 year incarceration if arrested 75%
- Chance > 1 year would gain you respect 58%

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Shooting in this situation might or might not gain one respect, but it would not likely result in a loss of peer respect.

Incarceration might be a vehicle for gaining respect; so incarceration, though viewed as bad, was seen as not entirely without merit.

*Perceived likelihood of shooting under  
alternative scenario assumptions*

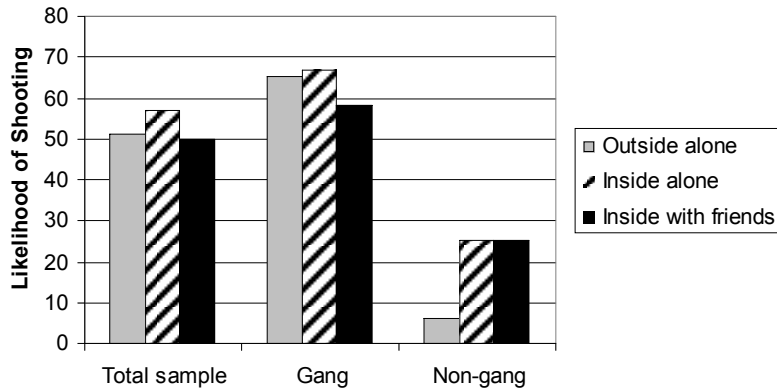
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- Imagine you're by yourself walking down a street in another neighborhood at night. Suddenly four people who look like gang members drive by in a car and stop. They ask you where you're from.
  - Chance you would shoot at car 51%
- ... in your own neighborhood ...
  - Chance you would shoot at car 57%
- ... with your friends ...
  - Chance you would shoot at car 50%

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Scenario variations prompted only slightly different responses.

## *Sensitivity to context*



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The three variations on the scenario were not seen as representing different degrees of safety.

There are three effects here:

- (1) Main effect—respondents, when alone, are more likely to shoot inside of their neighborhood than outside.
- (2) There was an interaction with gang membership—gang members were more likely to shoot, overall. Moreover, gang members were less discriminating about shooting inside or outside their neighborhood. However, non-gang members were substantially more likely to shoot inside their neighborhood than outside.
- (3) Gang members were less likely to shoot if their friends were around for one of two reasons:
  - (a) Their friends will shoot for them.
  - (b) They distrust friends because they will “rat them out.”

## *Characteristics of shooters*

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- Respondents who would shoot in the scenario were more likely to
  - be exposed to community-level violence (non-shooters (NS) Mean = 2.8, shooters (S) Mean = 3.5,  $p < .001$ )
  - be victims of violence (NS Mean = 1.7, S Mean = 2.2,  $p < .01$ )
  - have committed acts of delinquency (NS Mean = 1.8, S Mean = 2.9,  $p < .01$ )

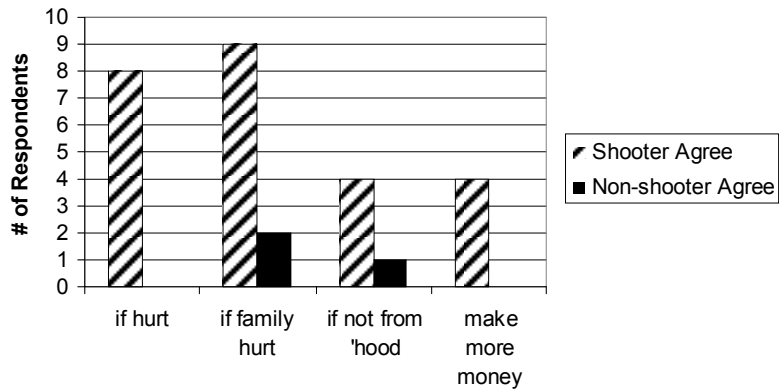
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We divided respondents into those who said they *certainly would* shoot in the fictional scenario and those who said they *absolutely would not* shoot. There were 11 youths who said they would absolutely not shoot and 13 who said they certainly would shoot in this situation. So, for the next set of analyses, we looked at only these 24 respondents.

As expected, they exhibited significantly more traditional risk factors.

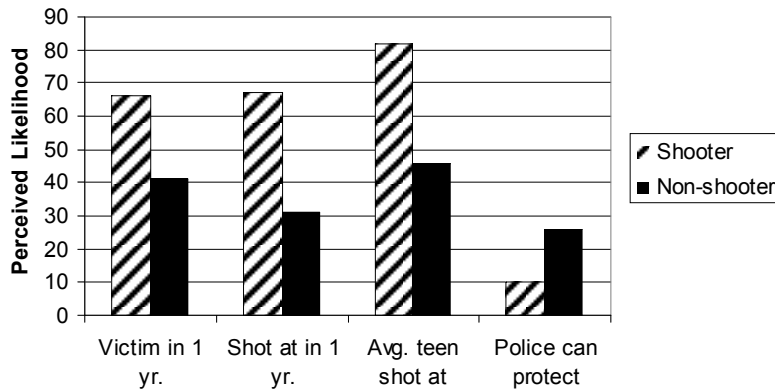
## *Shooters endorse more justifications to shoot*



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Unlike the majority of the sample, those who said they would shoot in the scenario overwhelmingly endorsed reasons to shoot, and they also saw instrumental gains from carrying a gun.

## *Shooters predict a future they cannot control*



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Moreover, they had extremely negative future expectations.

This presents a consistent picture: Those who were willing to use a gun were more likely to feel justified in using a gun, overall, and to view the world as a dangerous, out-of-control place.

## *Perceptions of the choice matter*

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- Perceptions accounted for variance above- and-beyond past experiences ( $R^2 \Delta = .35$ ,  $p < .001$ )
- Shooting predicted by the belief that
  - it is not wrong to shoot ( $\beta = .99$ ,  $p < .001$ )
  - there is no choice ( $\beta = -.14$ ,  $p = .05$ )

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But this is the real question: Do perceptions of the situation itself matter, over and above past experiences and pre-existing beliefs?

The answer is “yes.” We conducted a series of hierarchical regressions, entering first their past experiences (exposure, victimization, delinquency) and then their perceptions of the situation. Perceptions of the situation significantly increased the amount of variance accounted for.

First, shooting was associated with the belief that it’s not wrong to shoot. This was usually talked about as a method of self-defense. They presented a picture of a world where the best defense is a good offense—shoot first or be shot. Moreover, they saw little choice—it’s either me or them.

## *Not unaware of future consequences*

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- Shooting associated with the belief that
  - likely to get arrested ( $\beta = .85, p < .001$ )
  - likely to be tried as an adult ( $\beta = .32, p < .001$ )
- Some evidence of discounting of future consequences
  - less likely to think incarceration bad ( $\beta = .31, p < .01$ )

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In addition, one could not argue that they did not know about the consequences. Shooting was significantly associated with the belief that they could be arrested and tried as an adult. But the latter may simply reflect the fact that many were almost 18 years old and the knowledge that the courts are more and more willing to try individuals as adults for violent crimes.

Discounting future bads (incarceration is not that bad), or reflecting their real experience? Many of them had been in prison and/or placement and have survived.

## *Complex influence of friends*

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- Shooting associated with the belief that
  - not get more respect if shot ( $\beta = -.64, p < .001$ )
  - not lose respect if did not shoot ( $\beta = -.28, p < .001$ )
- If did get arrested for shooting
  - would gain peers' admiration for serving time in prison ( $\beta = .20, p < .05$ )

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Over and over we heard that *this is not about getting more respect from peers*. They already had the respect of their peers, but probably because of the violent acts they had committed in the past.

On the other hand, the belief that they would be respected if they served time may reflect the important influence of their friends, but this influence is mostly negative. It's true that their friends will throw them a party when they get out of prison and respect their violent behavior, but when it comes to getting help, they're not going to their homies. They're looking toward family. Their relationship with their homey buddies is mostly out of necessity—to protect their back—but they really don't trust them as far as they can throw them, as will be seen next.

## *Concluding observations*

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- All respondents recognized
  - the choice to shoot
  - consequences of shooting
- Possible points of influence
  - change norms
  - build on positive expectations

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Going back to the set of perceptions mentioned at the beginning, two perceptions were found necessary for a deterrence message even to be heard: (1) a perceived choice about shooting and (2) a perceived connection between the act of shooting and the consequences. Respondents overwhelmingly perceived a choice, and they were extremely aware of likelihood of arrest, imprisonment, and death. So, there seem to be two possible points of influence:

(1) Change the norms regarding gun violence. Even among this high-risk sample, some individuals said they definitely would not shoot. Moreover, they saw few reasons that justified shooting, and they reported feeling more control over their future. We're not saying that it's easy to change the belief that violence is acceptable, but anti-smoking forces did change the perceived acceptability of smoking. Now it's almost a criminal act, especially in California.

(2) Build on their strengths. Shooters were significantly more likely than non-shooters to believe that they'll get a high school diploma by age 20. So provide them with the resources they need, such as education, so they can get out of the neighborhood and out of a life filled with violence. Most told us there are no resources for them, and the way police "help" them is by throwing them in prison. Ironically, in prison gang ties are strengthened, and they learn new criminal tricks. It may be that these youths can be reached, and they shouldn't be forsaken.