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Responding to Gun Murders in Syracuse, NY:  
A Multilevel, Multimodal Interventions Approach

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Abstract:

Syracuse, New York had the highest rate of murders of cities in New York State in 2016, the violence rivaling that in large cities, like Chicago, IL, which are the focus of much attention in the media. We have documented the sources, patterning, and perpetuation of gun violence in Syracuse. Much violence follows from a form of feuding over neighborhood turf and over resources that have become limited by the decline of the economy and social supports in this rustbelt city, perpetuating patterns of structural violence. Murders and violence result in physical, emotional, and other psychological trauma among neighborhood residents. In this paper we briefly summarize the antecedents and patterning of gun violence in Syracuse before turning to describing and evaluating our efforts to interrupt this violence. We describe the Trauma Response Team, which trains and sends community members to every shooting incident to separate and de-escalate tensions, and protect first-responders on the spot, and at local hospital emergency rooms, associated efforts to help adolescents engage in more constructive patterns of interactions through a community based program, Team Angel, and we describe a successful program for elementary and middle school students.

Responding to Gun Murders in Syracuse, New York

On 16 October 2015, front page of *The Syracuse Post Standard*, printed a story headlined “Slain Teen Knew 3 Other Murder Victims” (Pucci 2015). The story described how a 15 year old young man was shot in what police suspected was a drive by shooting. The story first focused on how the suspect had evaded the police by entering a cemetery near the Syracuse University causing the campus to lockdown for six hours, before it gave details about the young man, in a repeated asymmetry of reaction noted by community members (see, Rubinstein et al. 201). When the brief article did turn to the young man it noted that “Throughout the year he had filled his Facebook account with posts memorializing three of his friends shot to death” (Pucci 2015:A1). A photograph of the young man associated with the article showed that at the time he was murdered that he was wearing around his neck a pendant made from the laminated pictures of his

late friends. This small news item encapsulates much about the nature of violent conflict in Syracuse, and about the trauma experienced as a result.

Gun violence and gun murders have been a persistent problem in Syracuse, New York. The local newspaper, *The Syracuse Post Standard*, too often carries stories of people who have been murdered or maimed by gun violence like the one referenced above. In fact, in 2016 the city had the highest rate of murders of cities in New York State. The rate of murders in the city equals or surpasses the rate in many other U.S. cities. Although the specifics differ in important ways, in nearly all of the places experiencing gun violence the social patterning of that violence reflects tit-for-tat, or retaliatory feuding. In Syracuse this tit-for-tat activity revolves around rival neighborhoods. The persistence of this pattern suggests that the conflicts underlying gun violence in American cities are intractable, in Coleman's sense. They are,

intense, deadlocked, and resistant to de-escalation or resolution. They tend to persist over time, with alternating periods of greater and lesser intensity. Intractable conflicts come to focus on needs or values that are of fundamental importance to the parties. The conflict pervades all aspects of the parties' lives, and they see no way to end it short of utterly destroying the other side. Each party's dominant motive is to harm the other. Such conflicts resist common resolution techniques, such as negotiation, mediation, or diplomacy (Coleman 2000:428).

Many efforts to address these conflicts do so by engaging gun violence perpetrators directly. For example, in cities where gangs are a problem, by seeking to get gang members to give up gang membership and behaviors.

In this paper, in contrast, we describe efforts to transform the intractable situation of gun murders and neighborhood violence in Syracuse, NY by attending to the community that suffers

the trauma resulting from gun violence as a means of breaking the cycles of violence experienced in the city. Rather than focusing only on the perpetrators of violence and seeking to convince them to alter their behavior, we approach the problem by focusing the multiple contextual factors that enflame and perpetuate violence. By taking this approach, we develop interventions that address conflict somewhat indirectly in what can be described as iterative, multifactor interventions.

To explain this intervention approach we begin by describing the setting and antecedents of the conflict. Then we describe the ways in which this violence affects community members. We treat this as suggesting pathways to intervention. We next briefly describe three interventions developed to interrupt the cycles of neighborhood gun violence, each of which focuses on a different phase and level of the conflict. Finally, we summarize the results of these efforts. We propose that while addressing intractable conflicts directly may reinforce rather than reduce the conflict, iterative multifactor intervention can change sufficiently the conditions supporting the conflict so that the reduction of conflict follows naturally.

### The Context and Conflict

Syracuse is one of a number of once prosperous cities that have suffered economic and social decline during the latter 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Syracuse's earlier prosperity was based on a strong manufacturing sector and on its playing an important role in commerce due to its location in the geographic center of New York State and its place on the Erie Canal, which consolidated the city's place as a center of commercial activity. As a result of these advantages, throughout most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the city was a setting in which people could prosper. Well-paying jobs in 11 major industries were available to people who had skilled trades or who had stopped their formal education after completing high school (Lane et al. 2017). In the latter 20<sup>th</sup>

century major manufacturing and industries in the city failed economically or moved out of the area. Even companies that were founded or flourished in Syracuse, like the Carrier Corporation, closed or moved. In contrast to earlier times, Syracuse University is currently the largest private employer in the Central New York region.

In addition to economic decline, a number of additional factors have contributed to the disruption of the social fabric of the city. Because we have described these factors in detail elsewhere, we mention them only briefly here in order to provide context (see, Lane et al. 2017 for further details). Parallel with the decline in the economic base of the city due to its deindustrialization, two other factors – urban renewal and the “war on drugs” -- played important roles in unravelling the city’s social fabric.

Syracuse has the distinction of having “the highest level of poverty concentration among blacks and Hispanics of the one hundred largest metropolitan areas” (Jargowsky 2015:8). This situation has roots in the early and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century when during the Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) evaluated neighborhoods on a four tiered system from First to Fourth Grade. Neighborhoods in the First Grade category being considered most desirable, and those in the Fourth Grade least desirable. The term “redlining” originates from the colors used on the Residential Security Maps to designate various neighborhoods, and to shunt African Americans and other minorities into lower grade residential areas and rental housing (The Preservation Association of Central New York nd). Thus, establishing a pattern of segregation throughout the city, but simultaneously creating some vibrant, mix-use, ethnically diverse, urban neighborhoods, like the 15<sup>th</sup> Ward.

Beginning in 1961 urban renewal led to the disruption of functioning communities in the city and the displacing the residents from areas affected by it, as happened elsewhere as well

(see, Fullilove 2005). Especially significant was the razing of the core of the city's 15<sup>th</sup> Ward, which dispersed a multiethnic population among which the African American residents moved mainly to the city's South and Southwest sides, locations to which they were channeled by mortgage and rental restrictions. The extension of Interstate 81 through the Syracuse on a raised roadway bisected the city, separating former 15<sup>th</sup> Ward residents of the South and Southwest from their kith and kin and from their customary patterns of shopping and support.

Along with the disruptions caused by urban renewal, those who were dispersed, especially African Americans, found themselves forced into increasingly segregated areas because of redlining and rental discrimination. This set the stage for the current circumstance of extreme segregation in the city.

A decade later the ramping up of the war against drugs with the passage of the Rockefeller Drug Laws, which prescribed draconian and disproportionate sentencing for drug offenses. The subsequent use of Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Acts statutes (RICO statutes), added to the local woes created by deindustrialization, urban renewal and the construction of the interstate bisecting the city. These law enforcement efforts resulted in dramatic disproportionate incarceration of African American males, whose imprisonment extracted them from the community. The resulting demographic imbalances disrupted families, altered family structures, removed potential role models from the community, and realigned gender relationships

The compound and cumulative effects of these processes led to patterns of self-reliance within communities that felt cut off from government services, and, as happens in such situations to increasing the role of place in identity formation. In turn, as we discuss below, intensely

territorial identities create the conditions for conflicts to arise between competing neighborhoods and to violent feuding, creating a cycle that transforms into intractable conflict.

The intractable conflict is manifest in patterns of shootings and retaliatory shootings in the city. Taking a finer grained look at the patterning of this violence, our research group, using data from the Syracuse Police Department, mapped every gunshot and gun murder in the city from January 2009-July 2015. The Map below displays the result of that work. The map shows the distinct clustering's of gunshots and deaths in the city in a pattern that reflects the intense segregation that resulted from the processes describe above. Our approach focuses on the gunshot clusters as units of analysis and locations for intervention.

#### Nature of Community Trauma

Our research team has conducted a number of studies to understand neighborhood violence and resulting trauma in Syracuse. These include: street addiction, feuding vs. gang patterns, trauma and disruptions in education. Our community partners, with our input, have also developed a set of interventions, including: the Trauma Response Team (TRT), establishment of a community-based non-profit—the Street Addictions Institute Inc. (SAII), support and advocacy for youth involved with the criminal justice system, enhanced access to therapeutic care, support for violence de-escalation in elementary school, and grief support for youth through art. We discuss each of those issues below.

*Street Addiction:* Our first published study on neighborhood violence tested a hypothesis of Timothy Jennings-Bey (“Noble”) our community collaborator (Bergen-Cico et al. 2014). While taking a college-level course on addictions, Noble realized that the patterns described for such behavioral addictions as gambling fit very well with what youth involved in street-level illicit activities experience. We conducted qualitative interviews with 12 individuals who had

been involved with such criminal activity who reported that the draw of street “action” led them to experience craving, withdrawal when they stopped, and preoccupation with the activity. One interviewee described,

I mean the sight the smell, the feel, well the memory of how a gun feels in my hands... I mean I’m done with it, but damn there’s a longing there.

Bullets, beautiful ... tarnished casings... damn I need a piece. But, I resist. I will resist. I have resisted.

This article was the first recognition of the potentially addictive draw of street activity in the published literature. We believe that two factors promote this draw: 1) the excitement of street crime, such as that involving guns and running from police, and 2) the intense bonding of youth with each other, especially in light of the fact that many of the youth come from troubled families in which their emotional needs may remain unmet. We further anticipate that the addiction draw of the street likely affects adolescents, rather than those who are older, because neurodevelopment in the late teen years makes youth more vulnerable to addictions.

*Feuding vs. Gang Patterns:* Many commentators describe the neighborhood violence in Syracuse as “gang” behavior, rather than feuding. We have found this to be a community-level misdiagnosis. The federal definition of a gang involves is based on it being an association of at least three individuals, whose members adopt particular colors or signs for group identity, whose purpose is to make money via crime as well as to consolidate power (see, e.g., National Institute of Justice 2011). The organization of a gang involves a hierarchical structure, with members, rules, and regular meetings. In Syracuse, the communities of color have been divided into over 15 neighborhood-turf areas by youth residing in each area, with names such as Bricktown, 110, and Brighton Brigade. The youth residents in each area have adopted colors and signs to identify

their “turf.” However, the residents of each of the neighborhood turf geographies do not otherwise fit the federal definition of a gang in that there is no formal organization, no rules, no meetings, and no hierarchical structure.

A review by our research team of the *Syracuse Post Standard* for five years focused on two categories: 1) neighborhood violence (injury and/or murder other than that committed during a burglary or intra-partner or intra-family violence) and 2) arrests for drug sales or intent to sell drugs. In the first category, we found numerous examples of youth (age 15 years to the late 20s) who shot or stabbed others, often those from other turf areas over personal disputes, such as retaliation for a previous assault on a family member or close person or in reaction to an episode of insult or disrespect. In the second category, we found numerous instances of arrests for drugs, including heroin, cocaine, and marijuana, often involving many kilos of the illicit product. Our key finding is that there is almost no overlap in the individuals arrested for drug sales or intent to sell drugs and the perpetrators and victims of neighborhood trauma. To be clear, if the neighborhood violence resulted from a gang pattern, the violence would probably involve drug sales. However, for the most part it does not. Our analysis concluded that the pattern of the violence, and the correct community diagnosis, is that it is feuding among small geographical turf areas.

So, why is it important to be precise about the correct community diagnosis? The criminal justice personnel in Syracuse have used the anti-racketeering RICO legislation in their arrests and prosecutions since 2003 (Syracuse Police Department 2018). RICO laws were originally meant to be used in trials for organized crime, but in Syracuse they are applied geographically. That means that when individuals who live in a turf area commit a crime, they may be charged with violating the federal RICO law, which increases the potential length of their



sentence. If the correct diagnosis was that the pattern involved a gang, as in organized crime, use of the RICO laws for 14 years would be expected to reduce the violence. But, instead the violence has persisted (Larsen et al. 2017). Additionally, various well-meaning non-profit programs, in partnership with the police, have brought together residents from feuding turf areas to reconcile, a process that has not worked because there is no hierarchy and no leaders in charge who could enforce any reconciliation.

*Documenting Community-Wide Trauma:* Our analysis has included mapping the gunshots and murders for 2009 to 2015, which demonstrated that there are distinct gun-shot clusters in Syracuse and other areas with fewer gun-shots (Larsen et al. 2017). We then conducted a survey of 111 residents (Lane 2017) in the gunshot clusters, first administering a PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) screening tool, which demonstrated that 52% of the respondents screened positive for PTSD. Second, we asked respondents how many individuals they had known personally who had been murdered. The majority knew 10 or more murder victims. Although this survey was not based on a random sample of the neighborhoods (which would have been dangerous for our team to undertake), this level of trauma is alarming.

An additional aspect of trauma to the youth, which may be adding to their emotional reactivity to insults and disrespect, comes from police efforts to control crime, notably the stop and frisk pattern, which has been documented to be conducted in a racially biased manner (see, e.g., Horrace and Rohlin 2010). Understandably, the police are struggling to control an out-of-control situation of violence. But frisking of young men involves patting very near to their genitals in public is an action that in another setting could characterize sexual assault (Butler 2017, Gwynne 2013). While it may reveal hidden illicit items, at the same time it may ratchet up the young man's trauma and simmering anger. African American males in Syracuse have reported to our

research team that during adolescence they were frisked by police more than once per month. One man described how some police would touch his scrotum roughly, causing tremendous pain and fear. He also said that he observed police strip searching young males in semi-public locations, such as behind a house, allowing children and many others to see the young man's uncovered genitals. The resulting humiliation intensifies the young men's heightened sensitivity to slights against their dignity in other areas of life, contributing to their "going from zero to sixty" in neighborhood conflicts.

*Disruptions in education:* A third aspect of the wide-spread trauma affects children in school. We conducted an analysis of the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade reading and math scores in all 19 elementary schools in Syracuse, comparing those scores with the number of gunshots around each school (Bergen-Cico et al. nd). The schools located within gunshot clusters had 50% lower reading and math scores on yearly standardized tests. Interviews with the teachers in one of the lowest performing schools indicated that students' emotional reactivity is so severe that teachers and staff have often been injured by students. At other times, the teachers reported, the students have had to shelter in place when gunshots were heard outside of the classroom windows during class session.

*The Trauma Response Team (TRT):* Begun in 2010, the TRT was started by a group of volunteer residents living in the highest murder neighborhoods, and is a partnership among a number of community based organizations (e.g., Mothers Against Gun Violence), emergency responders (e.g., the Syracuse Police Department), healthcare organizations (e.g., Upstate University Hospital, a level 1 trauma center), and faculty at Syracuse University (Jennings-Bey et al. 2015). The warranting principle for the TRT is that neighborhood violence leads to trauma which in turn leads a desire for vengeance, which creates the conditions for retaliatory shootings

and homicide. The TRT is now partially funded by the City of Syracuse and operated by the Street Addiction Institute Inc. TRT members respond to every neighborhood homicide in Syracuse. TRT members use a violence de-escalation approach to calming tension among the many community members who gather when there is an injury or murder, separating rival factions and offering assistance to family members of the victim. TRT offers the same community support and violence de-escalation outside of the level-one trauma Emergency Department. This support not only helps the families and reduces further injury among bystanders, but also it provides safety for the first responders.

*Street Addiction Institute Inc. (SAII):* By 2015, it became clear that the community members of our team needed their own non-profit agency, so with Syracuse University faculty help and the assistance of the Syracuse University student law clinic, together we established the Street Addiction Institute Inc. as a legally registered 501c3. Now entering its third year of operations, SAII has numerous contracts with city government, local libraries, the mall, and other localities to provide outreach to traumatized residents, and community. In doing this work they have developed a model of non-confrontational violence de-escalation that is now part of SAII's formal training for all staff and volunteers.

*Support and advocacy for criminal justice system involved youth:* This project, funded by Onondaga County Probation Department in 2016, provides case management, advocacy and support for 55 youth between the ages of 13 to 17, who have been involved with the criminal justice system to prevent recidivism. With this project, SAII partnered with the Onondaga County Family Court, Syracuse Police Department, Probation, Mothers Against Gun Violence, and Syracuse University faculty and students.

*Enhanced access to therapeutic care:* Early on our community-university partnership, we realized that community members suffering from trauma needed a referral source for therapy. To meet this need the Syracuse University Marriage and Family Therapy (MFT) clinic offered its services free of charge. The MFT clinic provides therapy to individuals, families, and groups by graduate students under the supervision of faculty with clinical licenses. Our community partners recommended that the students undergo cultural competence training, which they offered to help provide, a suggestion the MFT faculty enthusiastically supported. Together with our community colleagues, we developed a two-part module for a Masters-level core course for MFT students, integrating cultural competence with the *Framework*. This module has been delivered to MFT students and faculty yearly since 2015 (Lane et al. nd).

Syracuse University Falk College Dean Diane Lyden Murphy allocated office space to the SAI staff, pro bono, in the MFT building to facilitate the collaboration of SAI and MFT in developing programs that address community mental health needs. SAI staff and MFT faculty, with the support of the Community Foundation, and the John Snow Foundation, delivered a series of workshops to teachers, first responders, case managers, and clinicians who work with the traumatized Syracuse residents (Newell and MacNeil 2010). The workshops addressed the secondary trauma that those professionals experience, in a model of Trauma- Informed Practice developed by MFT professor Linda Stone Fish (Barrett and Fish 2014). Syracuse University professor Dessa Bergen-Cico offered mindfulness meditation training to SAI staff and parents of young children at a minority-run community center in one of the hardest hit neighborhoods in Syracuse.

*Support for violence de-escalation in elementary school:* Nine SAI staff, as a part of the TRT, conducted a pilot intervention in a Syracuse elementary school, which was located in one

of the most dangerous gunshot cluster. Numerous faculty and staff in this school had been hurt by students, resulting in medical leaves and workers' compensation claims. SAII staff worked with school children to enhance their ability to overcome their own lived experiences directly related to neighborhood conflict.

The TRT staff assumed the role of mentors to the students whose previous behavior was identified as repeatedly troubled (defined by school administrators as Level II and Level III). The purpose of the program was to reduce the amount of documented Level III behaviors for repeat offenders by 25%. TRT student-mentors used a violence de-escalation approach, developed in their earlier work on street addiction, and neighborhood trauma reduction. They also used insights from the work of Najah Salaam, whose research on the impact of violence on student learning was conducted in Syracuse (Jennings-Bey 2015, 2016). Notably, the TRT mentors were African American and lived in the local community, so they were known to many of the students' families, with whom they communicated about the students' behavior. The results of this intervention were assessed at the end of the academic year, which was eight months after its inception. This analysis showed a 45% decrease in Level III behaviors among students (Owora et al. nd).

Mindfulness approaches to trauma reduction: Syracuse University professors Dessa Bergen-Cico and Rachel Razza have offered mindfulness meditation training to SAII staff and pregnant and parenting young women living in violence "hot zones" in the city of Syracuse. Since 2012, Bergen-Cico and Razza have also been working with Head Start and Pre-K teachers to integrate trauma informed mindful yoga for young children living in these violence hot zones. Their research has found significant improvements in self-regulation and emotional regulation among children who have engaged in mindful yoga (Razza, Bergen-Cico, and Raymond 2013,

Razza, Lisner, and Bergen-Cico nd). Razza and Bergen-Cico are now working with several elementary schools to integrate these programs to foster resiliency and promote psychological well-being.

*Grief support for youth through art:* In the neighborhoods in Syracuse which experience the gun violence and murders, adolescents and young adults participate in a number of memory work practices that help them to weave the symbolic meanings that enable individuals to feel as though they are participating in something greater than themselves (Rubinstein et al. 201). These practices are directed towards creating legacies of, and communicating meaning for, the lives of those who have been killed, through artifacts, language, and rituals of mourning. The creative attention employed in making and disseminating the memorials provide a focus for grieving, a way to psychologically manage the unremitting and unpredictable death. The memorial artifacts, and the process of creating, wearing and honoring the dead through artifacts and language, give the youth a focus for their grief. Unfortunately, however, in some cases the proliferation of such artifacts becomes the focus of plans for revenge and retaliation for previous acts of violence.

To help youth honor their murdered family members and friends, but move them from preoccupation with vengeance to a more positive future, Najah Salaam, the SAI staff, Hope for the Bereaved and Syracuse University faculty and students have begun a pilot program of grief support for youth using art. The goal of this intervention is to develop a culturally appropriate model to reach urban youth with grief support to help them develop resilience and coping strategies in an environment of ongoing violence and repeated murders.

### Conclusion

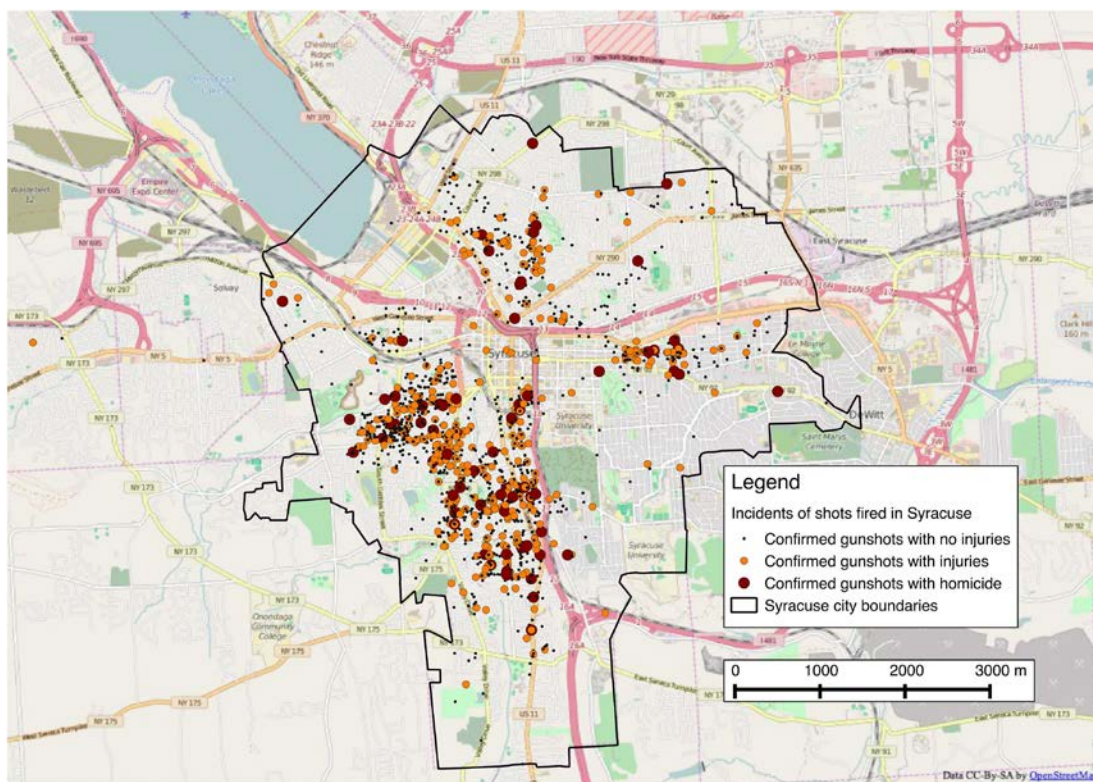
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patterning of gun violence in Syracuse before turning to describing and evaluating our efforts to interrupt this violence. We describe the Trauma Response Team, which trains and sends community members to every shooting incident to separate and de-escalate tensions, and protect first-responders on the spot, and at local hospital emergency rooms, associated efforts to help adolescents engage in more constructive patterns of interactions through a community based program, Team Angel, and we describe a successful program for elementary and middle school students.

Taken together these initiatives illustrate one approach to diagnosing and approaching intervention in intractable conflict. Recognizing that the conflict is perpetuated by a number of intertwined structural, social, and psychological factors, we argue that focusing directly on the violent manifestations the conflict is not an effective approach. Rather, the work we describe seeks to unravel the strands that perpetuate the conflict by recognizing the humanity of those caught in the web of retaliatory violence and traumatized by it. To do this we develop iterative multilevel and multimodal interventions that build upon one another and collectively have affects that are greater than any one of the interventions taken alone.

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## Gunshots and Gunshot Deaths, Syracuse, NY 2009-2015



Source: Larsen 2017

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