



**THE JUSTICE
COLLABORATORY**

YALE LAW SCHOOL

**How do Communities Respond
to Gun Violence Prevention Policies?**

A Community-Focused Study of Gun Violence Prevention Work in New Haven, CT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The primary goal of this project was to explore how gun violence prevention work impacts individuals considered at high risk of being directly impacted by gun violence. The current study aimed to elevate the voices of gun violence prevention program participants and impacted communities who can best attest to the influence and power of the message and services received.

Gun Violence Prevention Models and Projects

The **Group Violence Intervention (GVI)** model used in this work is a focused-deterrence strategy that targets groups of people at high risk of gun violence. GVI is facilitated by law enforcement agencies that identify individuals who are associated with or members of groups responsible for shootings. These individuals receive an anti-violence message from law enforcement agencies partnered with community representatives and social services providers. In New Haven, CT, **Project Safe Neighborhoods (2002)** and **Project Longevity (2012)** are current initiatives modeled after the GVI strategy.

Cure Violence is a public health approach to address violence as a disease to be treated by violence interrupters in the community that mediate conflicts. One prominent community-based organization that modeled the Cure Violence Approach in New Haven, CT is **Connecticut Violence Intervention Program (CTVIP)**.

The Community Perspective

Numerous evaluations across the nation highlight the success of the GVI and Cure Violence programs. However, many of these policy evaluations do not include the perspectives of the people closest to the problem and they also fall short of addressing the complexities and concurrent, environmental factors underlying participation within GVI initiatives. To this end, the current study explored how individuals at high risk of gun violence benefit from gun violence prevention services whether simultaneously participating in a GVI strategy or not.

The current study emphasized why the field of gun violence prevention policy needs studies that are designed to elucidate the critical components of such programs from the community perspective, with results that show that the theory of change accurately represents the impact mechanisms at work on the ground. This project, therefore, proposed an exploratory, qualitative study of initiatives to address gun violence in New Haven, CT. The goal was to explore how gun violence prevention work impacts individuals considered at high risk of being perpetrators or victims of gun violence.

Participatory Action Research (PAR) model

The current study focused on participants' experiences with gun violence in New Haven, CT and their experiences with service providers, namely Project Longevity, Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN), and CTVIP, in addition to people who had firearm-related offenses that did not participate in any violence prevention programming. This project utilizes a Participatory Action Research (PAR) model to address two overarching research questions: (1) How do individuals and communities impacted by gun violence experience its impacts?; (2) How do individuals and communities experience gun violence prevention work? The research team explored how individuals and communities perceive the services and messaging embedded in gun violence prevention initiatives. Using a PAR model, the research team intentionally shifted the traditional power dynamics of research projects in which the researcher (considered the "expert") dictates and leads the data collection and analytical processes. This approach united academic researchers and individuals most impacted by gun violence, as community co-researchers and active partners involved in the development of the current study.

Community co-researchers' responsibilities included:

- Identifying relevant violence prevention services
- Contributing to the development, revision, and finalization of the research instrument
- Identifying potential participants and conducting interviews through snowball sampling
- Contributing to the dissemination of findings that will inform current and future gun violence prevention work in Connecticut and beyond.

Study Findings:

GROUP VIOLENCE INTERVENTION MODEL

- **Participants said the aspect of the program they liked the least was the threats and intimidation from law enforcement that was perceived as objectification and dehumanization.** The punitive strategies that are embedded in the focused deterrence model are not well received by participants and may actually contribute to further division between law enforcement and the communities they serve.
- **Participants most liked the presentation of resources** (i.e., access to job opportunities and training) that were offered from social service providers at Project Longevity and PSN call-ins. Additionally, participants resonated with the testimonials from victims and mothers who lost their children to gun violence.
- **Most participants expressed that the most important aspect of the program was the availability of resources and referrals to services.** All participants clearly understood the messaging portrayed in the program, and some people echoed the same sentiments to "stop the violence" and make safer decisions that positively impact their community.

- For the majority of participants, their views on guns and gun violence changed as a result of their incarceration, maturity, or some other factor *not* directly linked to their participation in the program. Some participants felt the length of the call-in intervention was too short to affect real change in their perspective and behavior.

INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCE OF GUN VIOLENCE

- Many participants who used guns and harmed others with guns also experienced the same harm they inflicted onto others. Some participants carried guns for protection but did not actually use them against another person. A small proportion of participants said their connection to gun violence was established solely through their association with friends who carried guns.
- Forty-six participants have been incarcerated for a firearm-related offense. The most common offenses were criminal possession of a firearm, carrying a pistol without a permit, assault, murder, and unlawful discharge of a firearm.
- Participants said they carried and/or used guns for the purposes of: self-protection, defending one's family, retaliation for past conflict, robbery, and to gain respect and power in one's neighborhood.
- Forty-three participants said they did not feel the need to carry a gun today due to increased self-awareness, emotional intelligence, improved communication and comprehension skills, improved conflict resolution skills, and the intentional choice to change association with areas and people that led to past conflicts.

Next Steps and Recommendations:

Results of this study showed that participants perceived intimidation tactics utilized in GVI programs as ineffective and counterproductive in deterring their personal involvement in gun violence. Future violence prevention programming should rely less on intimidation strategies and instead emphasize connecting participants to resources tailored to their individual needs and use strategies that repair trust with communities to address the root causes of gun violence.

The Credible Messenger mentorship model, in which formerly incarcerated individuals are trained as mentors in their community to engage with youth and prevent violence, can be effective in building trust with youth at the center of gun violence. The mentorship model is strengthened by the authentic relationships formed between mentors and mentees who have similar lived experiences. Mentors engage with mentees through the perspective of having overcome the same barriers and obstacles that mentees are currently facing. Credible messengers equip their mentees with the same tools that helped them to make transformative changes and stay on a positive path toward self-determination. Additional research is needed to explore the foundational factors that support this mentorship model.

Individuals who have recently returned from incarceration need services, access to resources and jobs that provide a livable wage and opportunities for true growth and advancement.

Investment and funding opportunities should be prioritized for healing-centered, trauma-informed interventions and community-based violence prevention organizations that measure holistic outcomes beyond recidivism, compliance, and violations. Examples of holistic outcomes include mental and physical health, educational milestones, community involvement, etc.

Youth need structured activity that is focused on positive prosocial development and provides a pathway for higher educational attainment, entrepreneurship, and career development.

Participants recommended that youth at the center of gun violence need programming that promotes conflict resolution skills, teamwork, problem solving, and critical thinking skills via specific platforms such as sports, recreation, and artistic expression. Youth need structured activity that is focused on positive prosocial development and provides a pathway for

higher educational attainment, entrepreneurship, and career development. Additionally, current and future violence prevention programming should be co-developed by people who have been directly impacted to increase equitable inclusion and participation in services that impact them and their community.

Within the greater New Haven area, more collaboration and enhanced connection between service providers in the reentry field is essential to ensure that individuals who have recently returned home from incarceration receive the resources needed to get on a pathway to thrive instead of merely surviving. New Haven's Office of Violence Prevention's current collaboration strategy should continue to facilitate these efforts and build on the existing model.

BACKGROUND

Although overall violent crime rates steadily declined following the early to mid-1990s, reducing levels of gun and gang violence in inner cities continues to be a focus of U.S. criminal justice systems (Braga and Weisburd, 2012; Braga et al, 2018; Kennedy, 2009; McGarrell et al., 2013). To quell the previous violence epidemic, by the turn of the century almost every state in the U.S. enacted legislation that increased the penalties for gang-related offenses, therefore increasing the number of male adolescents and young adults who entered the adult criminal justice system (Myers, 2005). These laws relied heavily on deterrence to decrease gun violence, and they sometimes were combined with community prevention and intervention programs to discourage involvement in crime.

RESPONDING TO GUN VIOLENCE: THE GROUP VIOLENCE INTERVENTION (GVI) MODEL

In the 1990s, it also became clear that a small proportion of an area's population accounts for a disproportionately large amount of urban violence. This finding, coupled with the ineffectiveness of traditional law enforcement approaches, drove the development of the focused-deterrence strategy named Group Violence Intervention (GVI) model.

The GVI model targets a specific criminal behavior (gun violence) of a subset of offenders (high risk street groups). It involves law enforcement identification of individuals who are associated with or members of groups responsible for shootings. These individuals receive a unified community message against violence centered on the consequences of further violence and access to resources through a collaboration with law enforcement agencies, community members, and social service providers.

Since the demonstrated success of Boston's Operation Ceasefire (1996), the GVI model has increasingly been used as a tool to reduce urban gun violence, receiving support from private foundations as well as federal and state governments. Similar supportive findings were uncovered in Indianapolis (Chermak and McGarrell, 2004; McGarrell et al., 2006; Corsaro and McGarrell, 2009), Stockton, California (Braga, 2008), and Lowell, Massachusetts (Braga et al., 2008), with the intervention being associated with significant reductions in homicide, gun homicide, aggravated assaults with a gun, and gang homicide. More recent research by Braga and colleagues (2013, 2014) reevaluated Operation Ceasefire and found the intervention led to a 31% drop in the total number of shootings involving Boston gangs, and total shootings went down for both targeted gangs and other gangs who took notice, suggesting a "diffusion of benefits" effect.

In New Haven, CT, two current initiatives are modeled after the GVI strategy, Project Safe Neighborhoods (2002) and Project Longevity (2012).

Evaluating Gun Violence Intervention Strategies

Numerous evaluations across the nation point to the success of GVI programs like Project Longevity. Yet, as often acknowledged by authors, such policy evaluations present a series of methodological challenges:

- First, and primarily, GVI interventions are not designed as randomized controlled trials. This is because the targeted communities are not chosen randomly, but rather for their high rates of gun violence.
- Second, GVI initiatives do not operate in a vacuum, in the sense that potential outcome measures such as shootings, felonies involving a firearm, prosecution numbers, participation of high risk population in social programs, etc. may be affected by other, simultaneous anti-violence efforts. For this reason, this study explores how individuals at high risk of gun violence benefit from other gun violence prevention services whether simultaneously participating in a GVI strategy or not.
- Third, GVI initiatives may coexist with changes in other relevant environmental variables. For example, as demonstrated by the literature on “neighborhood effects,” various social processes and neighborhood-level characteristics (e.g., employment, poverty, income inequality, educational attainment, etc.) impact crime rates. Such impacts, however, are difficult to measure with precision.
- Lastly, traditional outcome measures depend on continuous and high-quality data collection by law enforcement, program administrators and social service providers, who often experience data management updates and turnover of key personnel.

THE CURE VIOLENCE MODEL

The Cure Violence model (2000), founded by Dr. Gary Slutkin in Chicago, utilizes a public health approach to address and treat violence as a disease. Within this model, violence interrupters in the community play a pivotal role in mediating conflicts and disrupting the cycle of violence (Butts et al., 2015). Violence interrupters, also known as neighborhood change agents and/or credible messengers are street outreach workers with lived experience and credibility in the communities that they serve. They are trained in how to de-escalate conflicts in real time, build relationships with people at the center of gun violence, and support individual healing and transformation. The Cure Violence model has been effective in cities such as Baltimore, Chicago, New York City, and Philadelphia where shootings and homicides decreased by over 30%. For every \$1 invested in Cure Violence, cities can save up to \$18 in reduced medical costs and criminal legal system costs (Dholakia & Gilbert, 2021).

Connecticut Violence Intervention Program (CTVIP), founded in June 2019, is New Haven's non-profit replication of Chicago's Cure Violence (previously known as Ceasefire). CTVIP is led by credible messengers also referred to as Violence Prevention Professionals (VPPs) who are certified mentors with lived experiences of gun violence that support youth aged 13-24 who are directly impacted by violence throughout New Haven.

Together, these insights challenge the strength of policy evaluations that rely exclusively on quantitative causal inferences. Moreover, quantitative analyses often leave out the voice of program beneficiaries and impacted communities, who, in the case of GVI and other gun violence prevention interventions, can best attest to the influence and power of the message and services received.

We argue that the field of gun violence prevention policy needs studies that are designed to elucidate the critical components of such programs from the community perspective, with results that show that the theory of change accurately represents the impact and mechanisms at work on the ground.

This project, therefore, proposed an exploratory, qualitative study of initiatives that work to address gun violence in New Haven, CT. The goal was to explore how gun violence prevention work impacts individuals considered at high risk of being perpetrators or victims of gun violence.

This study included violence prevention initiatives based on the GVI model such as Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN) and Project Longevity. In addition, we also included other initiatives, acknowledging the complex interplay between individual, family, peer, community, institutional, and societal factors that affect gun violence.

METHODOLOGY

The current study used a Participatory Action Research (PAR) model to address two overarching research questions: (1) How do individuals and communities impacted by gun violence experience its impacts?; (2) How do individuals and communities experience gun violence prevention work? The research team was particularly interested in exploring how individuals and communities perceived the messages underlying gun violence prevention initiatives and the services provided by them. These initiatives were identified and selected by the research team in conjunction with community co-researchers.

The PAR model seeks to change the traditional power dynamics of research projects in which the researcher (considered the “expert”) dictates and leads the data collection and analytical processes. The goal of the current study was to include the voices of community members impacted by gun violence prevention initiatives in New Haven, not only as research subjects, but as partners actively involved in the development of this project. Community co-researchers are

In this PAR model, community co-researchers were invited to:

- identify relevant violence prevention services to be considered in the study;
- develop, revise, and finalize the research instrument;
- identify potential participants and conduct interviews through snowball sampling;
- contribute to data analysis and subsequent drafting of policy recommendations;
- be involved in the dissemination of findings that will inform current and future gun violence prevention work in Connecticut and beyond.

Findings from this study were based on analyses of the semi-structured interview transcripts. Analyses highlighted community perceptions of gun violence prevention work and their opinions regarding the development of effective, community-endorsed violence prevention initiatives.

Participatory Action Research Approach	Traditional Research Approaches
All partners (i.e., researchers and community co-researchers) are considered equal with no one person ranking above the other	Researchers observe and learn about research subjects
The research process is an ongoing open dialogue between researchers and community members	Researchers are viewed as the expert on the issue being studied
Researchers are not experts, instead they are facilitators who participate in the everyday lives of community members	Objectivity when approaching an issue is valued over subjective experiences
Researchers form partnerships with community members to collectively identify relevant issues, develop interview questions, collect data, and produce results	Research is best conducted from an “outside” perspective
Acknowledges and attempts to repair past harm with the community from research studies conducted without proper compensation or meaningful inclusion	The research agenda is shaped by stakeholders and political actors without including the community in the decision-making process
Co-learning and capacity building among all partners	Subjects only have one role which ends once data collection is finalized
Dissemination of findings and knowledge gained to all partners involved as co-authors through a process of ongoing feedback.	Findings are disseminated exclusively on academic platforms for scholarly audiences

STUDY PURPOSE & GOALS

This community-based project was an exploratory, qualitative study of gun violence prevention initiatives in New Haven, CT. Current studies of gun violence prevention work that rely exclusively on quantitative causal inferences often leave out the voices of the most directly impacted program participants and community members who can best attest to the influence and power of the message and services received. The current study highlights the critical perceptions of gun violence prevention efforts from the community perspective, in order to explore whether theories of change accurately represent the impact mechanisms at work on the ground. The research team used a Community-based Participatory Action Research (CBPAR) approach; researchers worked in collaboration with community members with lived experience of gun violence to design the research instrument and collect data. In this study, researchers explored how gun violence prevention work impacts individuals considered at high risk of being perpetrators and/or victims of gun violence. Analyses from qualitative interviews centered on the perspectives of these individuals.

Goals of the current study include but are not limited to:

- Uplifting community-centered knowledge about gun violence prevention initiatives;
- Improving experiences and perceptions of gun violence prevention services for directly impacted participants to meet individualized needs; and
- Informing gun violence prevention program development to better promote resilience for high-risk individuals on their transformative path toward healing.

STUDY DESIGN

Unlike traditional research approaches where researchers observe participants, CBPAR researchers form equal partnerships with community members to collectively identify relevant issues, develop the research instrument, identify prospective study participants, conduct interviews, collect data, contribute to data analysis and policy recommendations, and participate in the dissemination of research findings. Community researchers possess a level of expertise in the issues surrounding gun violence that most researchers may not as they do not live proximity to the issue. Additionally, community researchers add credibility to the study, their involvement helping to gain community trust and buy-in, this in turn strengthens recruitment and outreach efforts.

RISKS OF STUDY PARTICIPATION

This study involved no risk of physical harm to participants, but there were potential risks related to emotional stress and confidentiality breach.

Emotional stress: Some participants may find it uncomfortable to answer questions about their experience related to being considered “at high risk for gun violence” and receiving gun violence prevention services. This discomfort may trigger negative feelings (e.g., anxiety, stress, anger, powerlessness, etc.).

The research team took proactive steps to minimize emotional risk. First, researchers did not pressure potential respondents to participate in the study. Second, researchers informed volunteers that participation can be withdrawn at any moment, and that questions may be skipped. Second, researchers maintained a relaxed, safe environment and reminded participants of the research goals, that their views were important and that their individual answers were confidential and will not be submitted to any type of judgement.

Confidentiality breach risk: There was a small chance of confidentiality breach in this project. Participants were interviewed by community co-researchers, but because the research team used snowball sampling, some participants knew that other individuals participated in the study. The content of the interviews, however, was not accessible to research participants and remained confidential and only accessible to the research team. To minimize the risk of a confidentiality breach, the research team took precautions to safely store any and all research data. Electronic data was collected on password-protected hardware and stored in a secure server. Interviewers did not keep records of communication with interviewees made with the purpose of arranging a date/time for the interview.

Both risks (emotional stress and confidentiality breach) were small and outweighed by the knowledge to be gained by this research. This project’s objective was to give voice to beneficiaries of gun violence prevention services to contribute to the existing literature on gun violence prevention and the development of policies to prevent gun violence.

BENEFITS OF STUDY PARTICIPATION

The primary benefit of this study was that it increased our collective knowledge of beneficiaries’ perceptions of gun violence prevention services. More specifically, this study generated data that will allow us to improve gun violence prevention initiatives by informing policies and efforts seeking both a reduction of gun violence victimization, parole/probation violations, and re-incarceration and the elevation of successful community reentry services. Each interviewee received a \$30 incentive (Visa gift card) for their participation in the study.

RECRUITMENT OF COMMUNITY CO-RESEARCHERS

In order to reach the target population, initial efforts focused on establishing connections with leaders from community organizations and influential people (e.g., subject matter experts, violence interrupters, street outreach workers, advocates, activists, directors of non-profit organizations, faith leaders, social service providers, probation officers, New Haven community management teams, employment programs, and the New Haven public library system) in the field of gun violence prevention in New Haven. Members of the research team (Jania and Camila) used their current networks to develop new contacts and sent them introductory emails. Jania and Camila engaged with 70 individuals via email and phone to recruit community co-researchers. The inclusion criteria for community co-researchers was limited to adult (aged 18+) New Haven residents directly impacted by gun violence who are not currently on parole. Institutional Review Board (IRB) requirements stated that people on parole or under state supervision were unable to participate in the current study as community co-researchers. No previous research experience was required for community co-researchers.

Jania and Camila had in-person meetings, zoom meetings, and phone calls with over 40 individuals and 10 organizations¹. Physical copies of the recruitment flyers were posted at the Goodwill Community Reentry Services office, Project MORE Reentry Welcome Center, CT Violence Intervention Program, EMERGE CT, New Haven parole and probation offices, and branches of the New Haven public library system. Additionally, researchers spread the word about the project through an appearance on a local radio show, a presentation at a New Haven Reentry Roundtable meeting, and attendance at community management team meetings. Through these meetings, researchers gave a brief description of the project, the goals, the potential impact on the community, the intended population, and the roles and responsibilities of community co-researchers.

Some of the meetings with community contacts led to referrals to potential community co-researchers and people who may know potential community co-researchers. Jania, the research coordinator, created an interest form with essential questions to confirm whether an individual qualifies as a community co-researcher under the conditions of the study. Once the interest form was completed, meetings were scheduled with 24 individuals, nine in-person and 15 over Zoom. From these meetings, 12 individuals were selected as community co-researchers. These recruitment meetings took place from November of 2021 to February of 2022. Given the Covid-19 Omicron wave following the 2021 holidays, and in compliance with Yale Health and Safety guidelines, January and February 2022 meetings were held exclusively over Zoom. The inability to meet in person and the research team's return to remote work delayed the recruitment strategy and initial meetings.

¹ Organizations included: CT Violence Intervention Program, EMERGE CT, Project MORE, Sport Academy, Project Safe Neighborhoods, Ice the Beef, New Haven Healthy Start, New Haven Works, Urban League of Southern Connecticut, and Hangtime New Haven

There was a total of 31 referrals to potential community co-researchers that were received between November 2021 and March 2022. Referrals included: 6 individuals from CT Violence Intervention Program, 6 individuals from Roger Johnson (a faith leader in New Haven), 5 individuals from EMERGE CT, 3 individuals from Project MORE, 2 individuals from the Sport Academy, 3 individuals from a community co-researcher, 3 individuals from a posted flyer in the library, 1 individual from Project Safe Neighborhoods, 1 individual from Aisha Elm at New Haven Probation Department, and 1 individual from a community contact. The majority of referrals came from violence prevention organizations and employment organizations. Out of those 31 referrals, 2 community co-researchers were referred by EMERGE CT. There was an intentional effort to recruit women, people who identify as Hispanic, and individuals under the age of 40 to ensure that the research team was diverse and representative of the intended population.

Twelve individuals were selected in accordance with the pre-defined eligibility criteria:

- *Significant knowledge* or familiarity with the local community: individuals who were born and raised in the New Haven area or who have resided in the area for several years, demonstrating knowledge of its different neighborhoods, socio-economic disparities, and geographic distribution of crime and violence.
- *Lived experience of gun violence*: individuals who have contributed to or been victimized by gun violence, or individuals who lost loved ones to gun violence.
- *Not presently under community supervision*. In compliance with the Yale IRB, individuals under community supervision (probation or parole) were deemed ineligible for employment as community co-researchers. Because community co-researchers were conducting interviews in public spaces in New Haven, such restriction was intended to protect those under community supervision from inadvertently violating their parole or probation conditions by traveling to restricted areas or by being in proximity with individuals they were prohibited from having contact with.
- *Not presently involved with local gun violence prevention services*. Because the interview questionnaire includes questions about participants' perceptions of such services, the conducting of interviews by individuals associated with service providers could represent a conflict of interest.

On March 7, 2022, after Health and Safety restrictions were eased, the first in-person meeting with the research team was organized with 12 CCRs in attendance. At that moment, given that some community co-researchers were unable to produce proof of COVID-19 vaccination, meetings were initially held off campus and later at the Yale Law School building. Some CCRs identified as past contributors to gun violence, victims of gun violence, and/or close family members of people

who were lost to gun violence. One community co-researcher was deemed ineligible due to a conflict of interest with his employment by a gun violence prevention service provider. Two CCRs were unable to participate given that they lived some distance from New Haven. Three CCRs were deemed ineligible due to their parole status. One community co-researcher withdrew from the study due to life circumstances. Six community co-researchers withdrew from the study due to personal and work conflicts that affected their availability to attend meetings. Community co-researchers mostly identify as Black, non-Hispanic New Haven residents. Three CCRs identify as female. Six community co-researchers contributed to developing the research instrument. Four community co-researchers did not continue with the study after finalizing the questionnaire due to personal circumstances that hindered their ability and availability to conduct interviews in the community. Moving into the interviewing phase, 2 community co-researchers, Dawn Poindexter and Maurice Keitt, conducted the majority of interviews.

RESEARCH INSTRUMENT DEVELOPMENT

From March to October of 2022, multiple meetings were held with the research team in which the following research activities were accomplished:

Training sessions

- Introduction to the project
- Introduction to research ethics and human research subjects' protection
- Introduction to research methods and community-based participatory action research
- Introduction to researchers' roles and responsibilities
- Introduction to gun violence prevention models

Design of the interview questionnaire

The research team discussed an interview questionnaire with questions that fall under three overarching themes:

- History of exposure to and involvement in gun violence
- Experience with gun violence prevention programs
- Perception of gun violence prevention program interventions

Interview training sessions

- Active and compassionate listening
- Interviewing techniques and etiquette
- Obtaining informed consent and securing confidentiality
- Interview practice (mock interviews)

CCRs obtained certification from CIRTification: Community Involvement in Research Training. CCRs were compensated for their time and contributions to the study using the graduate student research assistant pay rate. Each community co-researcher received and signed a professional service agreement outlining the responsibilities of the research position. Researchers roleplayed mock interview scenarios and learned coping skills and tools such as body scanning, practicing gratitude, holding space, naming emotions, and deep listening to use in response to triggers they may experience while conducting interviews.

Across a series of six 2-hour focus group workshops, the research team discussed themes and topics surrounding the three violence prevention programs and their underlying frameworks:

...the group was able to improve their consistency and flow, create probes to elicit more detailed and distinct responses from participants, and provide constructive feedback.

Group Violence Intervention theory and Cure Violence theory. After researchers gained a solid understanding of how the programs operate in the New Haven community, the research team identified important themes such as trust between participants and service providers, participants' level of perceived safety while working with service providers, effectiveness of the programs' messaging and services, and participants' understanding and comprehension of the purpose and requirements of the program. From these discussion notes, the research team collectively narrowed down

these themes into questions to generate the first draft of the research questionnaire with sections including: experience with gun violence, experience with gun violence prevention programs, and perception of gun violence prevention program interventions. CCRs' cumulative lived experiences of gun violence shaped the interview questions to ensure their relevance and significance to the community with the overall goal of reducing gun violence in New Haven. The research team reviewed each question in a group discussion where we made revisions based on relevancy, repetition, comprehension, significance, and translatability. Before conducting interviews, CCRs participated in a series of mock interview sessions in groups of three. Each person was assigned one of three roles: interviewer, interviewee, and observer. From this exercise, the group was able to improve their consistency and flow, create probes to elicit more detailed and distinct responses from participants, and provide constructive feedback.

PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT

CCRs developed research materials, recruited potential participants, and conducted qualitative interviews. Research materials included study recruitment flyers, screening questions, verbal consent form, a semi-structured research questionnaire, a field notes form, an incentive tracking form, and a resource guide. Study recruitment flyers included a brief description of the study, along with the requirements of study participation and compensation. Contact information for the research coordinator was included on a flyer as well as a QR code to directly access the screening questions form. Incentive tracking forms listed the card numbers, dates, and initials for every Visa gift that researchers distributed to participants upon completion of interviews. Field notes forms were completed by community co-researchers after each interview to get referrals from participants and debrief any issues or pertinent information that the researcher experienced throughout the process of recruiting and interviewing the participant. Resource guides were created to provide a list of trauma-informed care providers in the New Haven area that may be relevant to the population of individuals directly impacted by gun violence who may have recently returned home from incarceration and may be in need of additional services to improve their quality of life.

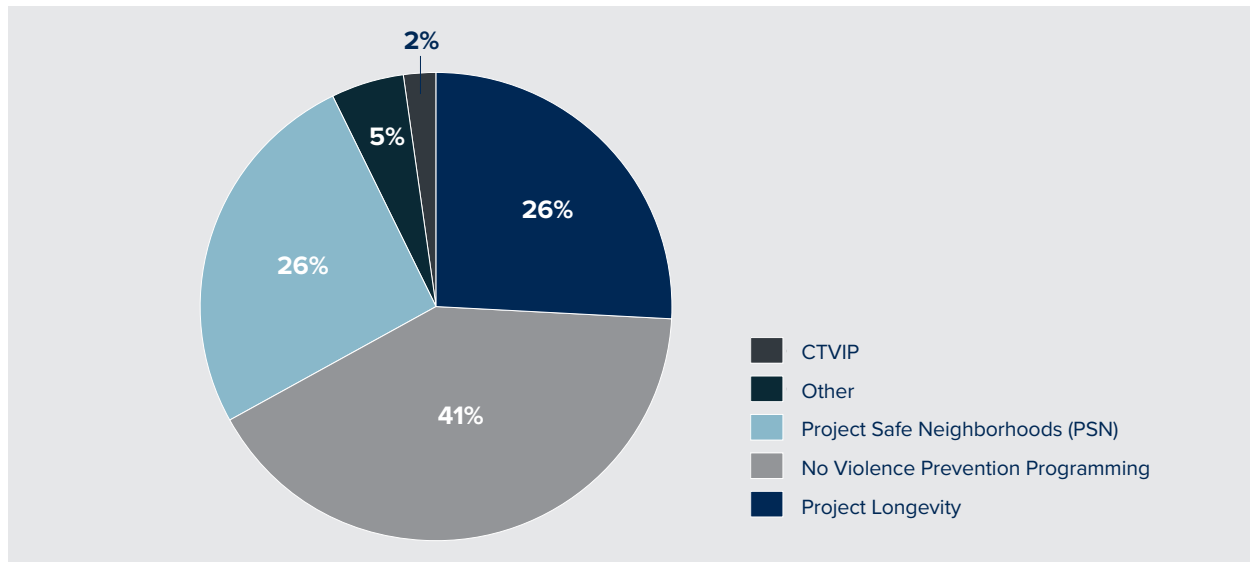
The research team developed a set of screening questions for participants to complete prior to conducting interviews. Screening questions included basic demographics (age, gender, race, and employment status) and targeted inclusion criteria questions. The research team used a Google Form to create screening questions which were accessible via QR code on the recruitment flyer. Screening questions were completed by prospective participants online or by researchers via phone call. Researchers then assessed the responses to the screening questions to determine if an individual was eligible to participate in the study based on the defined inclusion criteria.

Inclusion criteria:

- Adult (18+) New Haven residents
- Prior or current direct involvement in gun violence,
- May have been previously sentenced with a gun offense
- Participated in a gun violence prevention program such as Project Longevity, Project Safe Neighborhoods, or Connecticut Violence Intervention Program

Due to the limitations of engagement with the current study's specific population, the research team expanded the inclusion criteria to allow a maximum of 30 interviews from people who were involved in gun violence and may have a previous gun charge but did not participate in any of the three eligible programs. Individuals who did not meet the inclusion criteria were excluded from the study with the exception of the 30 participants who did not participate in Project Longevity, PSN, or CTVIP.

Figure 1. Program Participation



RECRUITMENT STRATEGY

Initially, the research team planned to recruit participants directly from contact lists we anticipated would be shared from the three violence prevention programs. Due to changes in leadership and organizational structural, the research team was unable to obtain contact lists from Project Longevity. Members of the research team met with program managers and violence prevention professionals at Connecticut Violence Intervention Program to post flyers on multiple occasions. Since CTVIP engages primarily with youth, the program’s participants signed non-sharing agreements which prevented direct transfer of participants’ contact information to researchers for this study. Through an established connection with program leadership at Project Safe Neighborhoods New Haven, the research team was able to obtain contact lists of program participants through a signed data sharing agreement which stated that contact information will only be used for the purposes of recruitment in the current study. Using contact lists from PSN, researchers called participants’ phone numbers, explained the current study and compensation for participation, screened interested prospective participants for inclusion in the current study, and scheduled interviews.

After redirecting the focus from direct recruitment from the three programs, the research team prioritized recruitment through flyers, snowball sampling, and community events at local reentry and violence prevention organizations to contact over 200 individuals. In shifting the recruitment efforts to focus more on identifying and attending relevant community events, the research team was able to more effectively recruit and interview participants at first contact. The challenge of

relying solely on contact lists for recruitment was that the numbers may no longer be current and the follow-up with participants was difficult when prospective participants become unresponsive. Therefore, the research team concluded that it was best to focus efforts on recruiting and interviewing at community events. In total, the research team organized eight community recruitment events where members of the research team gave presentations on the study and recruited participants. Some of these events were hosted at local community organizations such as Project MORE's Walter Brooks Halfway House and EMERGE CT. One of these community events was a Project Safe Neighborhoods call-in.

STUDY PROCESS

- **Recruitment** – via flyers, snowball sampling/ referrals, community events
- **Screening** – participants completed screening questions where they were screened for eligibility and inclusion. A total of 95 prospective participants were recruited and completed screening forms. Only 65 individuals met the eligibility criteria for inclusion in the current study. Out of the 65 eligible participants, 56 individuals participated in the current study. Individuals were ineligible to participate in interviews if they did not participate in a relevant gun violence prevention program and if they did not have any direct involvement in gun violence.
- **Interviews** – Interview locations include: public libraries, coffee shops, barber shops, and community centers. Researchers began interviews by introducing themselves and giving informed consent. A consent script was read by the interviewer and oral consent was recorded (using the same password encrypted devices that interviewers used to record the interviews). Due to the confidentiality of participants' identity, researchers obtained verbal consent from each participant prior to conducting interviews. Participants were offered a written copy of the consent script, time to review it, and were given the opportunity to ask any questions before giving oral consent. After interviews were completed, researchers distributed the incentive card and the resource guide to the participant. Researchers then completed the incentive tracking form and field notes form. For virtual interviews, researchers read the verbal consent form to interviewees, obtained verbal consent, and conducted the audio-recorded interview. After the recording device was stopped, researchers scheduled a time and location to drop off the incentive card to the participant.
- **Data** - Audio of interviews was recorded and securely transferred to a password-protected Box drive file. The average interview duration was approximately 30 minutes. All interview audio files were transcribed into de-identified written transcripts by GMR Transcription services, a third-party professional transcription company. Interview transcripts were uploaded into MAXQDA and coded by two coders.

Interview debriefing sessions were held on a monthly basis for the research team to openly discuss any challenges or insights they encountered throughout the interviewing process. Researchers expressed feelings that arose during particularly emotionally stimulating interviews, and the group offered coping strategies and alternatives to transfer participants if interviewers felt uncomfortable. Additionally, interview debriefing sessions were used to discuss ways to improve the recruitment strategy and develop creative strategies to follow up with participants by using different outreach methods (calls, texts, in-person engagements) and even offering a virtual option (Zoom, Facetime, phone call) to conduct interviews. The research coordinator also facilitated weekly individual check-ins with community co-researchers from the beginning phases of the project throughout the study until data collection was completed.

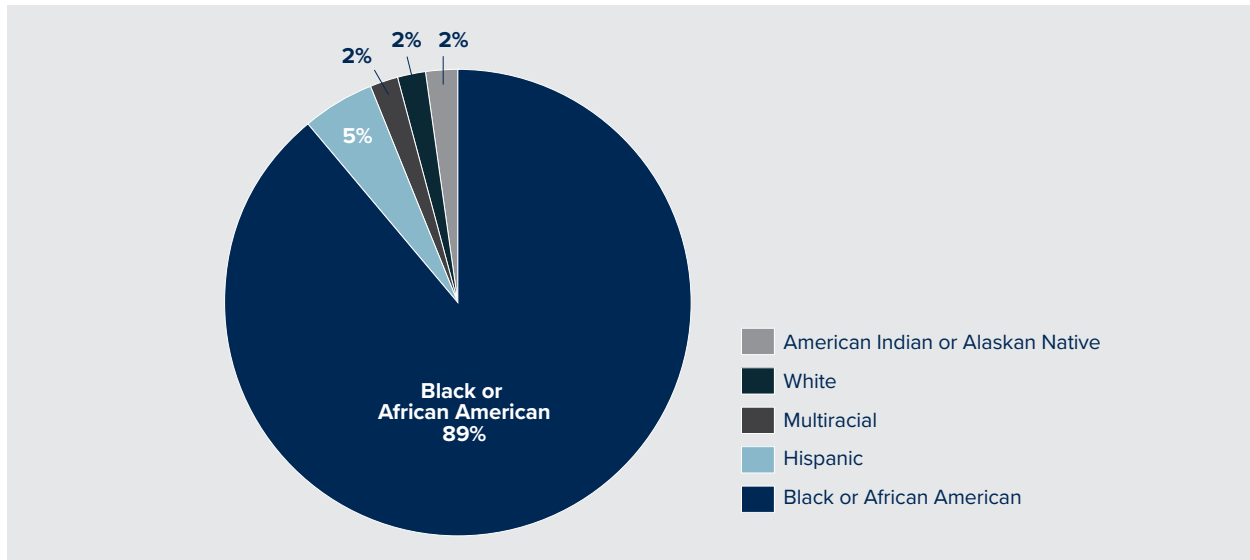
ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

Participant Count	Gender	Average Age	Race	Employment Status
56	All male	44	89% Black/ African American	43% Unemployed

Fifty-six individuals participated in this study, all of whom identified as male, and 89% of which identified as Black/African American. Participants ranged from the ages of 20 to 64, with an average age of 44. The majority of participants were unemployed at 43%, with 18 working full-time, 11 working part-time, and 3 whom were self-employed. Twenty people in total were excluded from the study, with seven being ineligible, and thirteen eligible prospective participants who researchers were unable to follow up with. The research team estimated that we reached over 200+ individuals in recruitment.

Figure 2. Participant Racial Background



EXPERIENCES WITH GUN VIOLENCE

AGE OF FIRST EXPOSURE TO GUNS AND GUN VIOLENCE

The overwhelming majority of participants, 54%, were exposed to guns and gun violence between the ages of 13 and 17, with 20% of our sample being exposed between the ages of 10 and 12, and another 20% being exposed between the ages of 5 and 9.

Table 2. Participant Age of First Exposure to Guns

Age of First Exposure to Guns

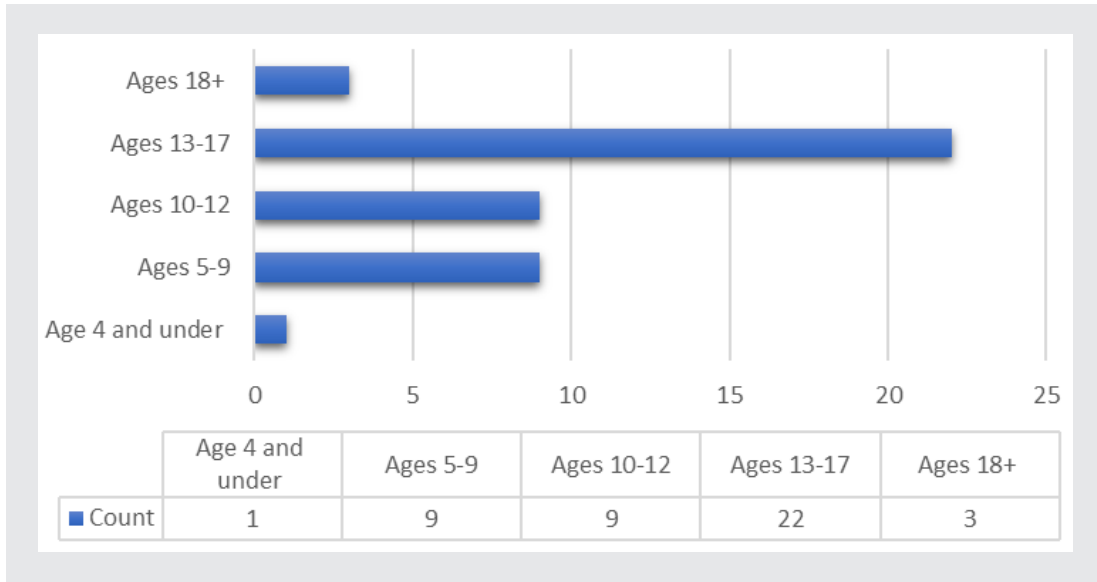
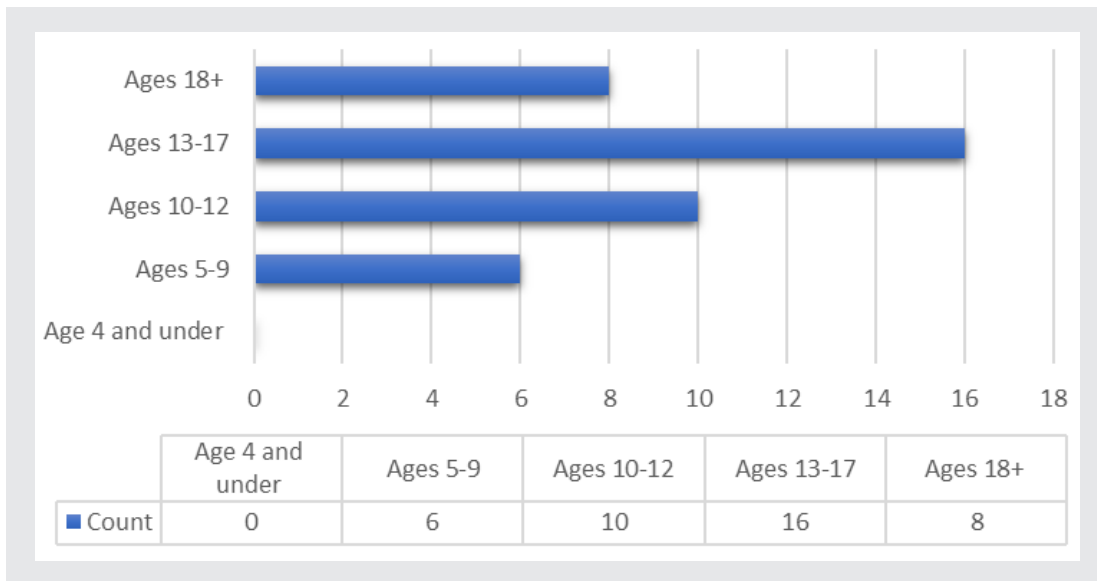


Table 3. Participant Age of First Exposure to Gun Violence

Age of First Exposure to Gun Violence



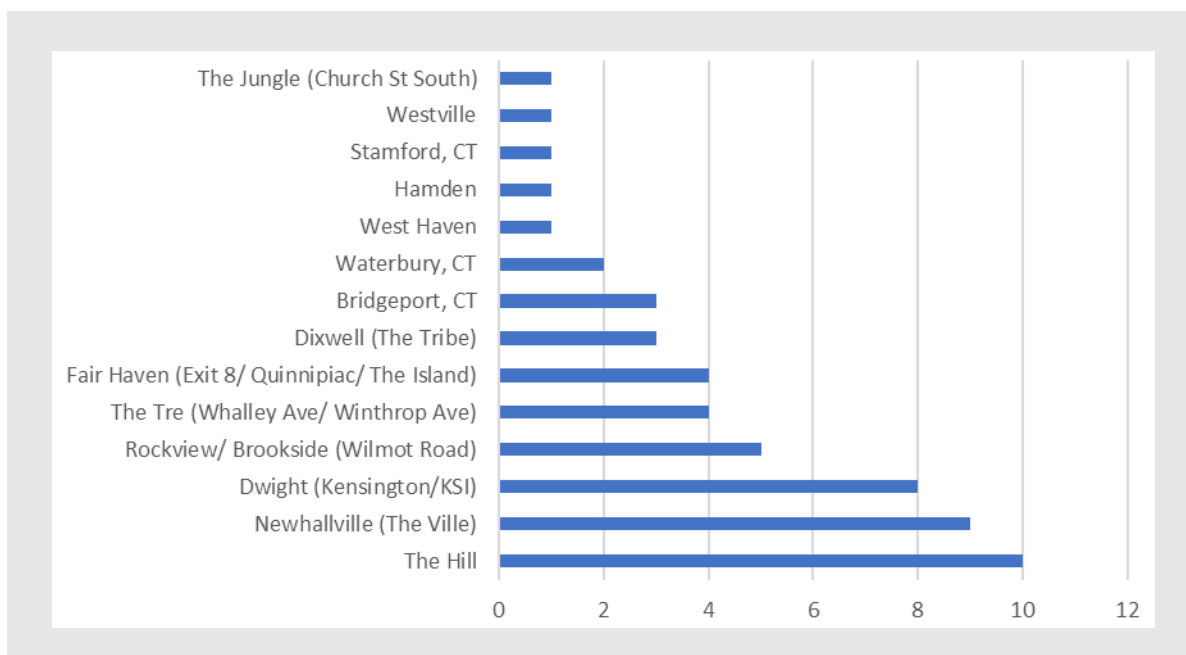
CONTEXT OF EXPOSURE

The nature and context of these experiences were overwhelmingly negative and included witnessing someone shot in broad daylight, losing a close family member or friend to gun violence, or using a gun in retaliation to defend a family member. For many of our respondents these experiences were incredibly traumatizing and heartbreaking. For many others, these experiences served as an introduction to the street and a gun-carrying culture, one in which a gun is a way to demand respect and a means of protection, especially for those engaged in the drug game.

Other respondents had more neutral experiences, viewing exposure to guns as something that was normalized in their homes associated with protection, or for some, the military. And still, a few others had experiences they characterized as “positive” which revolved around gun safety and the best practices for owning and using a firearm.

Table 4. Participant Neighborhood/Area of Origin

Participant Neighborhood/ Area of Origin



The table above provides more context regarding the geographical environments in which participants were raised and first exposed to guns and gun violence in New Haven and neighboring areas throughout the state. The majority of participants came from areas of the city that have experienced high levels of gun violence, these include The Hill, Newhallville, and the Dwight-Kensington area.

Others thought of this violence mostly as relating to “street violence,” or violence relating to the trafficking of drugs or what others saw as “street justice”—retaliation due to an act of disrespect that was either directly or indirectly directed towards them, a loved one, or a close friend, leading many to carry guns as a means of protection and safety. When speaking about these instances, most respondents discussed the changing nature of gun violence in the city—skewing towards a younger, mostly teenage population—who are often seen as the primary perpetrators.

“ We didn’t start using guns until later on in life. Nowadays the kids are picking up guns earlier. They’re not fighting. And then coupled with gang violence, being in gangs and stuff like that, I think that plays a major part in it as well. Because they’re looking for an identity in the streets. ”

“ These kids are playing with something they really don’t know about. And that’s life. ”

But discussions around youth and children also emerged as interviewees discussed these thoughts in relation to the protection of their own children from gun violence.

“ I think of personal safety for my own kids. ”

KNOWLEDGE OF RULES/LAWS AROUND GUNS

When asked about their knowledge about guns growing up, participants discussed an array of formal and informal rules that they were either familiar with or exposed to during childhood and young adulthood. When it came to formal rules and laws, the majority of respondents reported that they were not aware of any formal rules or laws around guns. For those that did have some knowledge, many cited the fact that they needed a license or permit to carry a gun legally. And, if found without one, participants were aware that incarceration was a certainty. In addition, participants mentioned mobilizing their 2nd Amendment right to bear arms.

When it came to informal rules about guns, or “street rules,” the overwhelming majority of respondents could almost recite verbatim the most important rule about guns, or what the research team referred to as “The Golden Rule” of guns on the street:

“ Don’t pull it out unless you plan on using it. ”

Only followed by another important rule about gun carrying:

“ It’s better to be caught with one [a gun] than without one. ”

“ Keep that thang handy. ”

CONNECTION TO GUN VIOLENCE

For many of the men that were interviewed, their connection to gun violence ran deep. The overwhelming majority of the men not only reported being gun users, and for many, former perpetrators of gun violence, but also reported having been hurt by guns in some capacity—having lost loved ones to gun violence or having been shot themselves—pointing to the stark reality and cyclical nature of gun violence. Others were connected as gun carriers, with the primary intention of protecting their families, and no intention of using.

“ I basically had a gun in my house for protection. I got a lot of kids, and I was in a bad area. And a lot of bad things was happening in that area. And I felt I needed a gun for protection, so I had one. ”

In addition, some participants were outliers, and were connected to guns through their networks, or because they purchased a gun illegally.

“ I been around people who used guns. I can’t really control that, but I have said to them, ‘You don’t gotta take it to that level..’ But at the end of the day I can’t control no man. ”

EVER USED A GUN

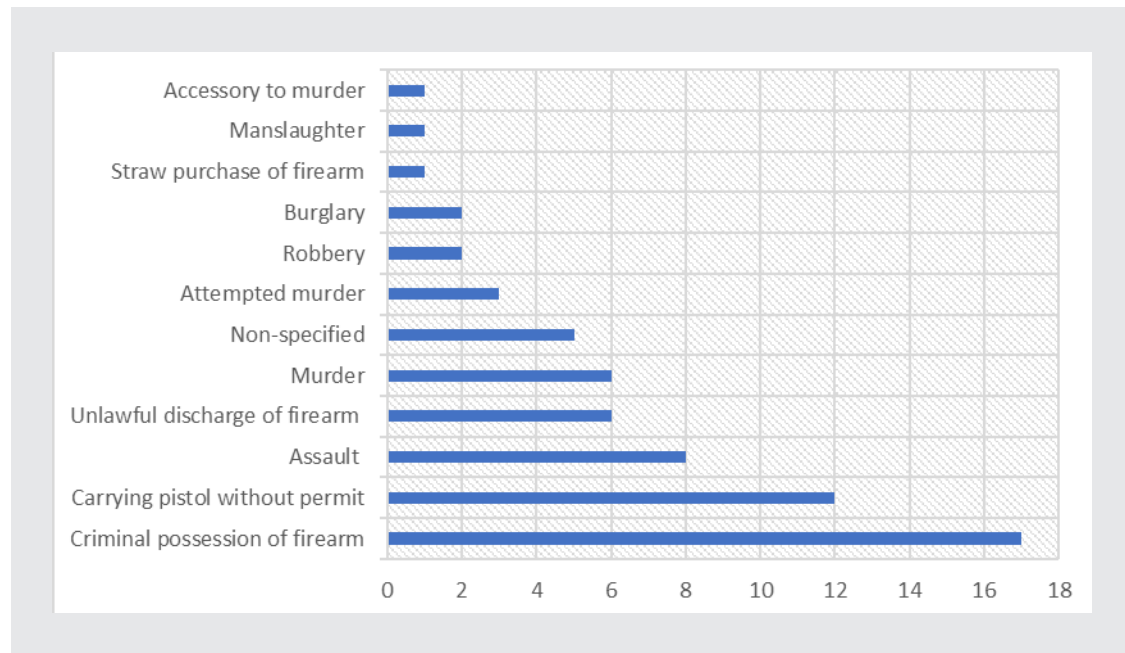
When discussing whether someone had ever used a gun, the overwhelming majority of respondents said that they had and provided context around these experiences. These experiences ranged from genuine curiosity, such as practicing for the first time and shooting it off in the air, to carrying a gun for self protection and as a mode to gain respect amongst peers. But for the majority of those interviewed, these experiences revolved around the use of guns to carry out a crime, to intimidate and collect a debt, to use in retaliation to settle a beef, or used in self-defense against an aggressor.

GUN RELATED OFFENSES

Due to the nature of many of these events, the majority of respondents served time for gun-related offenses, such as, criminal possession of a firearm, carrying a pistol without a permit, assault, unlawful discharge, murder, attempted murder, and burglary.

Table 5. Participant Self-Reported Gun-Related Offenses

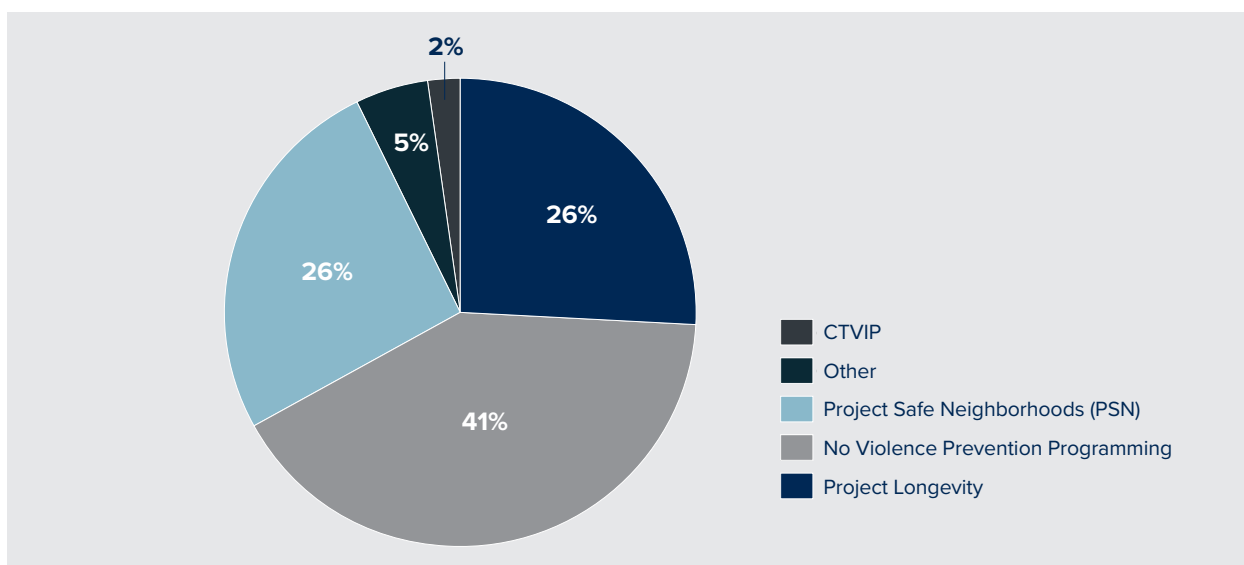
Participant Self-Reported Gun-Related Offenses



EXPERIENCE WITH GUN VIOLENCE PREVENTION PROGRAMS

There was an equal number of respondents who participated in Project Longevity (26%) and Project Safe Neighborhoods (26%). There was only one CT Violence Intervention Program participant which accounted for (2%) of the total sample. After expanding the eligibility criteria to reach more participants, the research team included people who did not participate in any violence prevention programming (41%).

Figure 1. Program Participation



LIKED MOST ABOUT PROGRAM

For those participants who did participate in one of the violence prevention programs, many cited the resources as an aspect of the program that they liked most, specifically around job training, food assistance, and access to employment. Other participants found the testimonials from the victims as most impactful, especially the powerful stories from parents who had lost children to gun violence. And still, others found the general messaging of the program as a unique aspect, centered on ending community gun violence and building a sense of community among a wide range of community members.

LIKES LEAST ABOUT PROGRAM

However, the majority of interviewees had serious concerns about the approach of the programs they participated in, most citing that they especially disliked the scare tactics used during meetings such as intimidating looks and the threat of swift and harsh punishment. More specifically,

participants viewed the messaging by police as deeply dehumanizing and objectifying through the display of mugshots and the use of demeaning language—which many felt was void of respect and dignity.

“ On the screen seeing some friends I grew up with...we were incarcerated when we were 15, 16 years old. And we had some youth. Kinda made me feel funny, we were being talked about not as persons but as subjects. And not just subjects, but objects. Just so-and-so, 10 years. So-and-so, 4 years. No care about the causes and reasonings and what they went through mentally, emotionally and the trauma that got them to make the decisions they made...not really respecting the personhood that everybody makes mistakes. ”

“ Just having the police look at you for an hour and a half, and just looking at you. I’m saying POs are staring at you. You know, it’s awkward. You know what I mean? ”

“ Sort of like a ‘Scared Straight’ type of program with all the law enforcement there. I don’t feel like that part of it is really necessary because, like I said, people know the consequences of their actions already. ”

“ Basically, the intimidation. The intimidation factor is just—like you didn’t need that because it could turn people left completely from what you were trying to achieve. I didn’t like that at all. ”

“ You don’t have to threaten people, just provide people with the information, and allow them to grasp that information. And when they leave there, the choices that they make is on them. ”

“ At the end of the day I’m a man, I have complete control of my faculties. Like, look at me as such. You understand what I’m saying? And I don’t give a fuck what I’ve done in the past or what I may do in the future. That fact is that fact. I’m a person just like you’re a person. We made different choices. We grew up in different places. But, don’t look down on me. ”

For many individuals, the “idle” threats and intimidation by police and law enforcement during these meetings felt like an extension of the profiling and stereotyping many already experience every day on the street. Many saw these meetings as an extension of the persistent surveillance they have been subjected to for much of their lives.

Participants also reported disliking temporal programming elements such as the time of day or the length of meetings. Additionally many disliked what they perceived as a lack of resources.

VIEWS ON GUNS AFTER PROGRAM

After participating in these violence prevention programs, participants assessed the program’s impact on their views regarding guns and gun violence. For some, the messaging behind these programs resonated, citing participants own desire to not want to go back to jail, in addition to the conversations around harm and its impact on individuals, families, and the community at large. For these participants, victim testimonies had the greatest effect on shaping their views after the program.

“ I don’t wanna go back to jail...And I don’t wanna hurt nobody. I don’t wanna hurt nobody because nine times out of ten, you hurt somebody, somebody’s going to hurt you. For every action is a reaction. ”

“ It was the constant talk about the harm, the real harm that could be done with it. ”

“ Hearing the victims’ families really made me think a lot. ”

But, for the majority of participants we interviewed, individuals stated that the violence prevention programs did not have an impact on altering their views on guns and gun violence. Rather, many attributed the change in their views to their time spent in prison and through some of the programs they participated in while incarcerated. Others attributed their change to their journey and becoming wiser and more mature. For some, this was directly correlated to their experience as parents:

“ My kids for the most part, feel me? I mean I’ve got two sons, so I ain’t trying to have them in the streets, no running around shooting shit up. So, they was more like my main reason, really the only thing that made me want to change and be a little different. So, I mean I can’t be out here doing that shit and then telling them they can’t do that shit. ”

“ It wasn’t just me going to jail doing eight years. Hell no. My son was two years old, bro. I lost out on eight years of my son life. To this day, our relationship is still fucked up because of everything that was done and said while I was gone, while I was missing in action... So, I just made a promise to myself not to do no shit like that no more. ”

Many participants stood firm in their beliefs regarding the Second Amendment, the need and ability to protect themselves and their families, while others saw gun violence as endemic with no end in sight.

“ I think every citizen can legally carry a firearm. I think that should be best for people in general. People should protect their property, protect their family. Whereas gun violence, I don’t agree with that. ”

“ Not necessarily. I know the value, especially in today’s society. I know the value of being able to protect yourself and your family, but I know not to go about it the illegal route though. ”

“No, because I don’t think that it’s been effective to bring about change. We are still seeing people getting shot in our neighborhoods on a daily basis. ”

IMPACT ON PERSONAL SAFETY

Given the structure and nature of these gun violence prevention programs, participating in them can potentially impact the safety of participants. During interviews, participants had a variety of interpretations when it came to what personal safety meant as well as the ways their participation in the program had an impact on them. Many participants felt their participation in the program had a negative impact on their personal safety stating how the program itself put “a target on your back,” ostensibly trying to stop them from using guns, which many viewed as their only form of protection. Others discussed how this brought negative attention, essentially broadcasting their personal business to others, giving them more information on them and making them feel a bit exposed. And still for others, it brought back personal traumas and feelings of paranoia.

“Being in programs like that could give somebody a reason to not like you ‘cause you’re trying to stop something they wanna do. So, basically, trying to stop gun violence could possibly get guns off the street, and guns could protect somebody. So, you’re basically taking someone's protection away. ”

“Not in a positive way. I believe in the Second Amendment. I believe still that I have the right to carry a firearm to protect myself. ”

“Definitely. Not only do I have PTSD, I’m always paranoid in the sense of going back to jail. ”

Other participants saw the program as positively impacting their safety, feeling as though their participation in the program gave them a better perspective and way of thinking about gun violence and the ability to establish connections with others in their community.

“ Yeah, it made me look at things and say, ‘Hey, I can get back to doing what I’m doing. I ain’t gotta live this life. ”

“ I would say it impacted my safety because it teaches us that people that carry guns and stuff like that, you don’t have to be around that to enjoy life. ”

“ On a personal level, yes, because I have been able to connect with the individuals in the audience. And through that ability to connect, I’m able to establish relationships with them. So, I think I’m less likely to be their victim. ”

However, many others felt that their participation did not impact their safety at all or interpreted the question differently, pointing to the fact that their participation would not stop someone from wanting to be violent against them,

“ Hell no. Honestly, I could feel how I feel about guns, but that doesn’t stop the next person from wanting to be violent. You feel me? ”

PROJECT SAFE NEIGHBORHOODS AND PROJECT LONGEVITY

Participants in the study attended either Project Safe Neighborhoods or Project Longevity between the years of 2009 and 2023. Reflecting on their experiences, participants shared their insights. When asked whether participants would have attended these programs had they not been required to, the overwhelming majority said “no.” Given that many participants had discussed the intimidation tactics used during these meetings, and that many felt objectified, it is not a surprise that most would not voluntarily engage in these programs on their own. However, there were some participants who felt that even though they did not directly benefit from the program, they felt their personal experiences with gun violence and the legal system would be important to share in that setting nonetheless.

“ I made it my own business to stand up there in front of a bunch of men that I don’t know, and tell them brothers like—it’s bigger than jail. ”

PROGRAM IMPACT ON LIFE AND GUN VIOLENCE IN THE COMMUNITY

When discussing the impact of gun violence prevention programs on the lives of those who participated in them, many participants had different interpretations—some were positive, others negative, and others felt that the program had no impact on them at all. Many discussed the programs negative impact, or how their approach felt ineffective in promoting the intended change.

“ It hurt more than helped...Overall, it was kind of like trying to use fear to make us make a decision where we know even from parenting that that doesn't work. Using people and saying, 'Oh, three years, this could be you.' We just left there. We know that. ”

“ It could have been closer-knit, a conversation, like 'Hey. This is what you guys did. These things obviously played a role in your incarceration and your victim, and all these things behind it. And let's talk about what you can do now.' ”

“ The main thing that stuck with me was that I felt that they were bullying people. It was their approach, just the way they presented it. ”

Many others discussed the ways in which these programs impacted their lives in positive ways, several pointing to the impact of the testimonials and speakers, and how these programs themselves instill a greater sense of community.

“ The way they put it, it's true. If you don't subject yourself to that, you can be a productive citizen in this environment. ”

“ The stories coming from real people. This was actual people telling their stories on the path people go down. ”

“ I got a 16 year old son, and an 8 year old daughter, and it’s not only just my kids, it’s children period, you know what I mean? Because gun violence is crazy. I may have got caught with one, but I never hurt nobody with a gun. ”

“ Big time because forming these little groups and stuff like this is just like a blessing, especially to the neighborhoods we’re in. ”

Lastly, many other participants felt that their participation in these violence prevention programs had no impact on their lives, several citing that many of these changes were already happening prior to the program, while others pointed to the continued persistence of gun violence as evidence of their ineffectiveness.

TRUST IN PROGRAM STAFF

When it came to discussing trust within these programs and those organizing these efforts, participants had a variety of perspectives. Some questioned the true intentions of those at the helm, others pointed to their threatening approach as cause to disqualify them, while others trusted these individuals to be exactly who they claimed to be.

“ I didn’t feel like people were really dedicated here to try to help me. It came off like, ‘All right we gonna say this and whatever happens, happens.’ ”

“ It was just a formality. Everything was a formality for benefits to get these people to come to the program to have them think a certain way, act a certain way. It wasn’t genuine. ”

“ Like you put us in a room full of people who are intimidators. Like these people are ready to lock us right up. Yeah, they smile in our face, yeah, they probably want us to do good at the moment, but the minute we leave outside these rooms, some of them look at us like, ‘Who the fuck is this person?’ ”

“Trust is a big word, you know what I mean? So, it’s like I’d trust them to be exactly who they are, know what I mean? Nothing more, nothing less.”

For those participants who did have trust in program staff, it was never all-embracing, but some gave program staff the benefit of the doubt:

“I would say probably about 90% because sometimes in the back of your mind you still think, I don’t really know them...I don’t know what they’re doing after this. That’s just in the back of your head. I don’t know why they go home and do after this. But I trusted the majority of it.”

“These people—they in these positions for a reason, so I’m figuring what they telling me is the truth, so I’m gonna go on that until they steer me wrong.”

MESSAGE PERCEPTION

For those participating in these programs, one thing was very clear: “If you are caught with a gun, you will be incarcerated.” This was a sentiment echoed by nearly every participant.

“Stay straight or your ass goin’ back to jail. There’s no other way around it. It’s not hard to read in between anything that those people were saying, it was directed at everybody sitting down.”

“The core message was if you end up with a gun, you will be incarcerated. That was the core message.”

“Put the guns away or go to jail. It was clear.”

“To me, the purpose was, basically, to stop gun violence. And us that was there have gun charges.”

MOST IMPORTANT PART OF PROGRAM

When discussing the most important aspects of programs, participants often referred to the resources and connections they were able to make, others pointed to the unified message, and many more cited the importance of the impact statements made by victim families and those who had turned their lives around after incarceration.

“The most important part was, I’m not gonna lie, it was hearing that boy’s mom who lost her child. She was telling us, ‘Listen, you don’t only hurt who you’re beefing with, you’re hurting their family.’ ”

“Seeing how you could do wrong and turn your life around. That meant a lot to me because in a lot of people’s eyes, they feel like after either one or so many wrongdoings that you’re never gonna change. ”

CONNECTICUT VIOLENCE INTERVENTION PROGRAM (CTVIP)

While the majority of participants were involved in either Project Safe Neighborhood or Project Longevity, there was one participant who reflected on their experiences with the Connecticut Violence Intervention Program (CTVIP) after attending the program in 2023.

The participant’s involvement in the program revolved around mentorship and speaking on his experiences in relation to his experience with gun violence. In addition, it involved sharing his knowledge of music and providing youth a creative outlook to express themselves. This individual was referred to CTVIP by one of the credible messengers. This participant characterized his relationship with his mentor as a positive one.

“His perspective is, ‘Utilize this time to make sure you get out the hood,’ because he said I have potential. ”

When discussing the most important aspect of the program, this participant cited music as key. For him, music was an outlet. Something he saw as a vehicle out of poverty. In particular, he discussed the power of influence around music and its ability to save one's life.

Unlike other approaches, CTVIP appeared to take a more creative approach to curbing gun violence, using creative outlets like music and the power of mentorship as key aspects to mitigating the effects of gun violence in New Haven.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS GUN VIOLENCE

PROBLEM SOLVING AFTER PROGRAM

After inquiring about their experience in violence prevention programs, participants were asked whether they would solve problems differently today. The overwhelming majority stated that they would, with many pointing to the ways in which they have grown both in terms of their emotional maturity, but also their ability to diffuse conflict in healthier ways—some crediting programming in prison that helped them make this change. While others drew on their connection to family and their children as reasons that were of much greater importance to them now.

“Yo, I breathe more now. I breathe. Just when I used to have the shortest wick, now if I know it’s a situation that could be talked about and we could both get an understanding, I’m willing to do that...So, it’s just like—I think more. I think more than react. I try to breathe. Because at the end of the day, somebody’s always going through something. ”

“I feel more open to communicate more, know what I’m saying, versus you know, snap judgment, snap reactions. ”

“Well, definitely I’m not so quick to react when I wanna be violent. I been had comprehension and conflict resolution skills, but I didn’t use them all the time. I learned how to be better because in jail I was in the True Unit. So, I learned how to do all these things and have patience with the young men and have patience with myself. ”

GUN CARRYING TODAY

For many of these men, their sentiments on problem solving understandably spilled over into the perspectives on the need to carry a gun today. The overwhelming majority of participants discussed how they did not feel the need to carry a firearm today, many citing how they have learned how to “stay out the way,” while many others attributed this view to self-awareness and growth, based on their unique experiences.

“ I don’t have no problems with nobody. I’m out the way. I’m not in the streets. There is no need to bring a target on my back for nothing. ”

“ I just think I’m more in control of my emotions and the situations that I place myself in more so now than in the past. ”

While some participants may feel similar to those just mentioned, others still have strong views about their right to protect themselves and their families, while several more point to the persistence of gun violence as all the reasons needed to continue carrying a firearm.

“ I think every citizen should carry a gun to a degree. I think every citizen should have the right to protect their family, their home, their property. But just to carry a gun and tote it around—no. ”

“ Yes, I do. Just the ongoing violence, senseless violence, sporadic shootings, stuff that’s going on in the world. ”

ASSOCIATION WITH GUNS CHANGED

The overwhelming majority of participants discussed whether and how their association with guns had changed over time as well as the factors that contributed to this change. Many credited the growth, maturity, and lessons learned from their experiences as key contributors to changing their views and association with guns. For many this meant not hanging around the same groups of people, for others it meant finding a new outlook through their faith, and still others who never wanted to be reminded of the hurt and pain caused by firearms again.

“ I was kinda infatuated with guns, but when you see how much it can cause pain and stuff like that to people you don’t really wanna be around that. ”

“ For the most part, man, I try to stay away from all the actual drama. I mean I’m not that type of person, not no more. You feel me? So, I try to stay away from that, what’s gonna put me back in the element, you know? ”

“ Yeah, I would say because I mentioned ‘Scared Straight’ earlier, but incarceration scared me straight to know not to be around them. ”

RESOURCES, PROGRAMS, INDIVIDUALS THAT HELPED MAKE CHANGES

When it comes to the resources, programs, and individuals that participants credited in aiding them in making these changes, interviewees overwhelmingly identified their family, children, and support system as key factors. While many others looked inward and credited themselves for being able to make these changes on their own. And a few others pointed to the resources and programs available to them during incarceration, in addition to the mentorship they received from others.

“ I have to say my children, especially my daughter. Because I was slipping away and she grew up—I haven’t been in prison, knock on wood, since 2017. That’s been almost six years coming up. But the thing is, she said she was proud of me, especially when I started pulling stuff back together. And now I’m working towards getting everything back together. I have a plan now where I’ll be back to normal by the next three months. ”

“ No, the changes came from me, not from a program I did, not from talking to anybody. It just came from me. ”

“ So, I’ve been through every program that you can name inside of DOC. I’ve been through conflict resolution, domestic violence, anger management, embracing fatherhood, probably over 20 programs. So, I learned how to take them and adapt and use them within myself and to give them and share the information with others. ”

RESOURCES, PROGRAMS, INDIVIDUALS THAT COULD BE HELPFUL

While participants discussed the people, programs, and resources that supported them in making their changes, they also reflected on those they felt could be helpful to those currently involved in gun violence. Most participants discussed the importance of youth programming, the role of mentoring and credible messengers, and identified avenues for future programming they saw could make a difference in the community.

“ I actually feel like you have to catch the kids that are prone to it earlier. So, it should be more like after school programs and mentorship programs, sports, a lot of stuff like that just to keep them away from that certain aspect of society. I feel like once you make your mind up and choose that path, it’s hard to change a mind. ”

“ Just a lot of mentoring and bringing in positive people that’s been through it to talk to some of the youth and give them alternative ways to handle their problems. ”

“ We need programs that focus on emotional and cognitive development. ”

“ We need people that’s really dedicated and that’s serious that is going to do it, and that is gonna dedicated their life. Because that is what it takes, All that playing games and you’re doing it for a check or for money, that’s not what it’s about. ”

STUDY CHALLENGES

BUILDING TRUST AND STRENGTHENING PARTNERSHIPS WITH COMMUNITY CO-RESEARCHERS

In listening to the CCRs, the New Haven community's distrust of Yale University became apparent early on in the research process. Many New Haven residents view Yale as a historically oppressive and exclusionary institution that hoards valuable resources and ignores the needs of its surrounding neighborhoods. CCRs also expressed distrust of research in general. This skepticism is based on their experiences having witnessed policy and social science research projects that seek community members' participation but do not facilitate or deliver concrete improvements in their neighborhoods.

In an effort to build trust and strengthen the relationships among the research team members, there were intentional efforts made to ensure that all key project decisions were made collaboratively and democratically by the group. The research team continuously welcomed and considered input from all group members. When the research team addressed issues involving operational procedures, the team created a resolution to pay researchers using stipend payments. Following the advice of a CBPAR consultant, Dr. Anjuli Fahlberg of Tufts University, the research team established a routine of conducting individual check-ins after each meeting to provide dedicated space and time for community co-researchers to express their concerns and suggestions. These calls were incredibly fruitful for the team to gain a better sense of the group dynamic, resolve misunderstandings and acknowledge individual needs. Additionally, the research team decided to dedicate ten minutes at the beginning of each meeting to discuss any news or events related to gun violence in the city, state, and even nationally. These discussions helped stimulate ideas and conversation prior to beginning each session which minimized the frequency of tangents.

RETENTION OF COMMUNITY CO-RESEARCHERS

Continuous participation of community co-researchers was an initial challenge of this project. Many of the individuals initially recruited had personal justifications for dropping out (e.g., scheduling conflicts, prior commitments, workload complications, dissatisfaction with payment processing, and the inability to complete the Human Research Subjects Protection training requirement, among others). To overcome this challenge, the research team increased meeting time flexibility and individualized support for those who had difficulties completing the trainings. Of the initial group of 12 community co-researchers, 6 CCRs remained and consistently attended meetings to develop the research instrument.

At the start of the data collection phase, only 2 community co-researchers remained engaged in study participant recruitment and they conducted the majority of interviews. Some CCRs left the study after obtaining full time employment, other CCRs had to leave the study due to personal or family circumstances, and a few CCRs left the study because they believed the time commitment did not align with the hourly compensation rate. Most community co-researchers were unable to continue working on the study due to their inability to commit to the study for 5-10 hours a week for the full term. With the intention of providing clarity and assurance, CCRs were given a Professional Service Agreement (PSA) that outlined the time commitment, expectations, and responsibilities of the community researcher role. The remaining 2 community co-researchers were provided with a monthly stipend to allot for additional recruitment efforts and interviews.

DELAYED FINAL IRB APPROVAL

Yale University's IRB required community co-researchers to identify as unaffiliated investigators, provide a written signature on an unaffiliated investigator form, and submit resumes in order to be added to the protocol as researchers. CCRs were unable to be paid until the IRB accepted this form and acknowledged them as external researcher team members. This ordeal slightly delayed our progress, as the research team had to wait until the IRB accepted and processed the forms to proceed working on the study.

After the interview instrument was finalized by the research team, it was submitted with recruitment materials to the Yale University IRB. Given that the questionnaire explored topics related to individuals' relationship with gun violence, history of gun violence involvement and other sensitive topics, the Yale IRB required the Principal Investigator, Professor Tracey Meares, to obtain a certificate of confidentiality (CoC) issued by the National Institute of Health (NIH). The IRB also required a revision of the IRB protocol by the Connecticut Department of Corrections (CT DOC). A CoC issued by the NIH was successfully obtained and the CT DOC deemed a review by their IRB committee unnecessary. Time to fulfill these requirements required us to push back the recruitment start date (originally planned for August 2022, to October 2022).

RECRUITMENT OF STUDY PARTICIPANTS

During the planning stages of this project, gun violence prevention programs expressed support and willingness to assist with recruitment of interview participants. However, securing these programs' cooperation proved more difficult than expected. Project Longevity, for example, went through significant changes during the study with turnover of key leadership, and the oversight of its administrative structure passed on to an organization called Justice Education Center. Project Safe Neighborhoods shared clients' contact information with the research team, but not all phone numbers were accurate or active. CTVIP's leadership agreed to cooperate with the project, but

upon clarification from their data analyst, it was determined that due to previously signed privacy agreements the organization was unable to share participant data. In light of these challenges, the research team developed a recruitment strategy that involved advertising the study throughout the community by word of mouth, distribution of flyers, outreach to community leaders, and community event recruitment.

STUDY HIGHLIGHTS

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT TRAININGS

Co-active coaching

To support professional development and demonstrate commitment and reciprocity to the CCR team, a series of professional sessions were generated. The first professional development session was a 90-minute co-active coaching session with Eric Rey, a capacity-building training partner with Co-Creating Effective and Inclusive Organizations. Eric is a long-term New Haven resident who was referred to us by Alden Woodcock, the director of Emerge CT. Eric led a group of six community co-researchers, along with six Yale researchers in a tailored session to help prepare the team for conducting interviews with people who have lived experience of gun violence. The group learned tools such as body scanning, practicing gratitude, holding space, naming emotions, deep listening to use in response to triggers researchers may experience when conducting interviews. Everyone split into small groups of three and each person was able to roleplay in the positions of speaker, listener, and space-holder which allowed us to practice being present in the moment and fully acknowledging our feelings and bodily responses to the person in front of us. Community co-researchers utilized these skills to cope with vicarious trauma that may arise when discussing very personal experiences with gun violence, which helped them feel prepared to hold space and conduct interviews.

Grant writing

Jackie Downing, Senior Director of Grantmaking and Nonprofit Support at The Community Foundation for Greater New Haven, led a 90-minute introductory grant writing session for the second professional development session. The grant writing session focused on researching grant opportunities, responding to requests for proposals, doing background research and writing proposals, developing strategic/business plans, tracking program inputs, outputs, and outcomes, results-based accountability evaluation, and budget forms. Community co-researchers were given resources to assist with the grant application process. One CCR followed up with Community Foundation and was approved for a grant for her nonprofit youth violence prevention organization.

Financial advising

Robert Hornbuckle, an independent financial advisor, led a financial planning session which covered investment planning, insurance planning, and retirement planning. CCRs asked specific questions regarding their current financial situation and future goals. Specifically, the research team discussed different scenarios in which term insurance or whole life insurance would be preferable, how to minimize short-term capital gains taxes, how to manage credit discrepancies, and how to take account of one's monthly expenses in relation to income.

ENHANCED RESEARCH SKILLSET

Community co-researchers gained hands-on experience in developing a semi-structured interview questionnaire, interviewing human participants, collecting audio data, and analyzing preliminary findings. Throughout this study, CCRs were exposed to all processes that encompass qualitative research studies, which helped sharpen their perspective as researchers and community members to resolve issues that directly impact their communities. Community co-researchers also contributed to a reflective interview piece that will be published in an academic journal (where CCRs will be listed as co-authors).

CONNECTION TO NEW OPPORTUNITIES IN RESEARCH/NON-PROFITS

Dawn Poindexter, a lead community co-researcher, used the skills and experiences nurtured and developed through her role as CCR to apply for, and secure, a community foundation grant to further develop her youth violence prevention programming (roleplay scenarios) in NHV middle schools. With this grant, she received direct instruction on grant writing for non-profit organizations.

Maurice Keitt, another lead community co-researcher, utilized his enhanced skillset to propose study ideas in his current position at Emerge CT, a reentry work training program. Maurice plans to develop his research ideas into a research study that will help expand and improve the services offered at Emerge CT. Maurice expressed that the current study helped him to think more critically about how to ask the right questions, ones that will cultivate meaningful data. In his personal and professional networks, Maurice feels like this study helped him strengthen his current connections in the field of violence prevention while also building new relationships with violence interrupters and credible messengers in the community.

PAR CONSULTATION

Members of the research team (Camila and Jania) met with Dr. Anjali Fahlberg (Tufts University), a CBPAR researcher and facilitator, to discuss the current study and start an ongoing conversation for assistance with the implementation of PAR principles and practices in community-based research. Dr. Fahlberg contributed to the current study as a consultant and an additional source of accountability and clarification to help us cultivate an inclusive space for collective decision-making and research collaboration. Given Dr. Fahlberg's experience conducting PAR projects, members of the research team consulted with her to discuss challenges we experienced with this project, specifically surrounding relationship building.

RECOMMENDATIONS

PROGRAM SPECIFIC IMPROVEMENTS

Eliminate punitive approaches and threatening messaging. Focused deterrence strategies that emphasize punitive posturing and threatening messages to program participants may not be the most effective method to engage with people at the center of gun violence. These scare tactics and threats, transmitted by law enforcement at call-ins may actually be counterproductive to building trust. Future programming should rely less on threats and instead emphasize connecting participants to resources tailored to their individual needs and use strategies that repair trust with communities to address the root causes of gun violence.

Need for meaningful support. Programs should emphasize and lead with addressing the root causes of gun violence in communities. Program staff should be able to help connect individuals with referrals to resources and services that are tailored to the needs of participants.

Follow through is critical. Resource coordinators at violence prevention programs should implement simple follow-up strategies, such as text message reminders for participants in order to assist in connecting individuals to services and resources.

Meaningful community-based approaches, incorporating expert knowledge. Current and future violence prevention programming should be co-developed by people who have been directly impacted. This would increase equitable inclusion and participation in services that impact them and their community.

Accessible legal education about firearms for youth and community members. Participants stated that while growing up they had no formal knowledge of laws about guns. Consequently, some participants did not learn about the illegality of firearms until they were charged for criminal possession of a firearm. Violence prevention organizations should inform youth of the local laws regarding firearms along with the repercussions of carrying a pistol without a permit. Making youth aware of the consequences of illegal firearm possession may be helpful in deterring and preventing gun violence.

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