

RESEARCH ARTICLE**WE DON'T TALK TO POLICE****“Oh hell no, we don't talk to police”****Insights on the lack of cooperation in police investigations of urban gun violence**Rod K. Brunson¹ | Brian A. Wade²¹Northeastern University²Rutgers University—Newark**Correspondence**

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Research Summary: We conducted face-to-face interviews with 50 young Black men, residents of high-crime neighborhoods in Brooklyn and the Bronx, individuals who had considerable knowledge about illegal gun markets and the resulting bloodshed. Our findings confirm that distressed milieus reliably fail to produce cooperative witnesses as a result of the cumulative impact of anti-snitching edicts, fear of retaliation, legal cynicism, and high-risk victims' normative views toward self-help.

Policy Implications: Disadvantaged communities of color typically have low fatal and nonfatal shooting clearance rates in part as a result of poor witness cooperation. Diminished clearance rates have also been shown to intensify minority residents' claims that officers do not care about keeping them or their neighborhoods safe. Respondents' accounts identify three overlapping areas instructive for informing public policy: (1) reducing gun violence so that high-risk individuals live in objectively safer areas, (2) using intermediaries to launch grassroots campaigns countering pro-violence and anti-snitching norms, and (3) improving police–minority community relations.

KEYWORDS

clearance rates, crime reporting, police–community relations, underpolicing, urban violence, victimization

Police administrators often hold press conferences after particularly heinous street violence, surrounded by victims' inconsolable loved ones. Routinely, while standing at the podium, city officials

will decry the lack of eyewitnesses willing to come forward with valuable information. Although much has been written about bystanders' reticence to cooperate with investigators as a result of reduced police legitimacy, "stop snitching" campaigns, and fear of retaliation, we have little firsthand information from those at considerable risk for becoming victims and perpetrators of urban gun violence. We conducted in-depth, face-to-face interviews with young Black men living in Bronx and Brooklyn high-crime neighborhoods, individuals with extensive knowledge about New York City's illegal gun markets and the ensuing violence.¹ Their perspectives are critical toward better understanding the persistent challenges many police departments face in partnering with citizens to develop effective crime-control strategies.

Crime scene investigators frequently express tremendous frustration after tirelessly canvassing for potential witnesses in urban areas characterized by low fatal and nonfatal shooting clearance rates. The situation is worsened because most gun violence occurs in disadvantaged minority neighborhoods, typically at the hands of gang- and drug-involved individuals. The aforementioned types of shootings are least likely to be solved and disproportionately comprise young Black males as victims and offenders. Finally, distressed milieus have reliably failed to produce cooperative witnesses as a result of the cumulative impact of anti-snitching edicts, fear of retaliation, legal cynicism, and high-risk victims' normative views toward self-help.

Over- and underpolicing simultaneously underway in certain communities have strained already fragile police–minority citizen relations, critically reducing officers' legitimacy in the eyes of law-abiding individuals and those embedded in high-risk networks. For example, heavy-handed crime-control efforts, coupled with poor service delivery, help to shape Blacks' collective belief that police are incapable of, or unconcerned with, effectively addressing violence occurring in distressed communities of color while seemingly always managing to protect valiantly majority White neighborhoods. Irrespective of their veracity, widespread claims of racially biased policing have the potential to exacerbate community violence because rather than involving the police, disaffected residents might elect to settle disputes on their own in the hope of preserving reputations and fending off future attacks. Also, coercive threats from individuals involved in violent offending networks likely successfully discourage would-be witnesses from coming forward, leading officers to conclude hastily that "anti-snitching" is universally endorsed.

Rarely included in contemporary discussions of race, place, and policing is recognition that similar to their counterparts from other racial groups, most Black citizens are law-abiding and support the notion that officers must play a critical role in effective public safety strategies. Thus, ample opportunities for mutually beneficial police–minority community partnerships should exist, including in persistent pockets of concentrated disadvantage. Regrettably, the promise of meaningful police–citizen collaboration is unwittingly undermined when Blacks participate in demonstrations of civil unrest after dubious police actions. The resulting disquiet is inadvertently intensified when some police leaders struggle to understand that whereas people of color generally support law enforcement, they might occasionally emphatically denounce individual officer's misdeeds. This unreconciled tension fuels mischaracterizations of Blacks as tolerant of crime, contributing to ineffective policing strategies that leave residents feeling perpetually unsafe.

In our study, we extend the findings of prior scholarship that have cast considerable light on street norms guiding anti-snitching sentiments, self-help remedies, and urban violence. We purposely focus on the lived experiences of individuals at considerable risk of being shot and shooting others. Examining study participants' real-world reasons for not providing evidence to help investigators reduce and solve shootings might be instructive for developing policy in the hope of safeguarding persons whose lives might literally depend on their own, as well as on their fellow community members,' earnest cooperation.

In an abundant body of criminological research, scholars have reliably shown that in any given jurisdiction, a few chronic offenders are responsible for a disproportionate amount of shootings and killings. This subgroup is also overrepresented among gang- and drug-related gun violence that has consistently proven extremely difficult for police to clear. Unfortunately, however, researchers have not produced information that would assist policy makers in developing strategies for reducing this particular brand of firearm violence.

Study findings have consistently demonstrated that how effectively officers execute their law enforcement duties has profound implications for improved citizen confidence and cooperation. Conversely, poor police performance, in particular concerning fatal and nonfatal shooting investigations, allows dangerous suspects to remain free to strike again or risk being shot themselves, ultimately denying justice to historically underserved crime victims. Altogether, these conditions erode faith in police not only among individuals embedded in high-risk criminal networks but also among law-abiding residents.

In the current study, we elucidate the durability of historical, tenuous police–minority community relations and its impending barriers for implementing effective policing strategies. In particular, young men were unapologetic about distrusting the police and struggled mightily when afforded opportunities to offer helpful policy solutions. Although study participants’ narratives are extremely cynical, they underscore that sustainable public safety initiatives should focus on (a) reducing gun violence so that high-risk individuals live in objectively safer areas, (b) using intermediaries to launch grassroots campaigns countering pro-violence and anti-snitching norms, and (c) improving police–minority community relations.

1 | LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 | Violent crime clearance rates and legal cynicism

Although a sizeable amount of scholarship has fittingly been focused on the “great American Crime Decline,” beginning in the early 1990s (Blumstein & Rosenfeld, 1998; Blumstein & Wallman, 2000; Levitt, 2004; Zimring, 2006), less emphasis has been placed on understanding another noteworthy reduction: the nationwide decrease in violent crime clearance rates (Ousey & Lee, 2010; Riedel & Jarvis, 1999)—including both gun homicides and nonfatal gun assaults (Roberts & Lyons, 2009). These figures represent the proportion of violent incidents for which an arrest is made, reflecting a continuous and striking decline during the past five decades (Braga & Dusseault, 2018; Jarvis & Regoeczi, 2009; Wellford & Cronin, 2000). Research findings show that more than 90% of U.S. homicides were cleared in 1960 (Ousey & Lee, 2010); currently, however, that figure hovers at or near 60% (Braga & Dusseault, 2018; Jarvis & Regoeczi, 2009; Ousey & Lee, 2010; Regoeczi, Kennedy, & Silverman, 2000; Riedel, 2008). Historically, much of the violent crime in the United States has been concentrated in disadvantaged communities of color (Krivo & Peterson, 1996; Krivo, Peterson, & Kuhl, 2009; Sampson & Wilson, 1995; Ulmer, Harris, & Steffensmeier, 2012), socioeconomically distressed urban settings where African Americans disproportionately reside (Peterson & Krivo, 2010). Notwithstanding, the majority of public spaces within disadvantaged neighborhoods are generally safe. Specifically, violence is densely concentrated within a small number of dangerous settings. For example, findings from a study in which the spatial concentration of gun violence in Boston, MA, was examined demonstrated that during a 30-year period, 5% of the city’s street blocks generated approximately 75% of fatal and nonfatal shootings (Braga, Papachristos, & Hureau, 2010).

Scholarly examinations of homicide clearances consistently result in findings that drug- and gang-related killings are, by far, the least likely to be solved; these incidents also disproportionately

involve young Black men as suspects and perpetrators. Research results have also revealed that homicides committed with firearms are less likely to be cleared compared with fatalities involving other types of instruments (e.g., knives, blunt objects, and hands/fists/feet; Addington, 2006, 2007; Baskin & Sommers, 2010; Litwin, 2004; McEwen & Regoeczi, 2015; Puckett & Lundman, 2003; Regoeczi et al., 2000; Roberts, 2007; Schroeder & White, 2009; Wellford et al., 1999). Although homicide clearance rates have been a major focus of criminological research, most shooting victims survive (Lee, 2012; Rich, 2009). For instance, an analysis of U.S. firearm fatalities found a mortality rate of one homicide for every six nonfatal shootings (Cook, Rivera-Aguirre, Cerdá, & Wintemute, 2017), which has potentially important implications for the increased threat of retaliatory violence (Jacobs & Wright, 2010; Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003; Ratcliffe & Rengert, 2009).

Furthermore, in an examination of fatal and nonfatal shootings in Durham, NC, researchers found that an arrest was made in half of all gun homicides; less than 10% of nonfatal shootings, however, resulted in arrest (Cook, Ho, & Shilling, 2017). Similarly, in a study of fatal and nonfatal shootings in New Orleans, LA, researchers revealed that 53% of homicides were cleared compared with approximately one in ten nonfatal shootings (Schirmer, 2017). Differences in clearance rates are noteworthy considering that the underlying dynamics (e.g., victim–offender relationship) of fatal and nonfatal shootings are incredibly similar (Braga & Cook, 2018; Zimring, 1972). For instance, Queally and Friedman (2012, para. 9) aptly noted that, “the only difference between a nonfatal shooting and a homicide might be a combination of aim, luck and a good hospital trauma ward.” Thus, criminologists should expand scholarly attention to include nonfatalities in the hope that resulting insights may also prove useful toward improved crime control.

Irrespective of socioeconomic profile, community members expect officers to make just decisions, holding offenders accountable through timely identification and apprehension (Braga & Dusseault, 2018; Moore, 2002; Moore & Braga, 2004). Therefore, offense clearance rates represent a fundamental metric for evaluating police performance (Braga & Dusseault, 2008; Cook, 1979). Researchers have attributed variation in clearance rates to an array of factors, including victim–offender relationships (Dugan, Nagin, & Rosenfeld, 2003; Ousey & Lee, 2010), victim–offender characteristics (e.g., race, class, gender, and age; Braga, Turchan, & Barao, 2018; Lee, 2005; Roberts, 2007; Taylor, Holleran, & Topalli, 2009), investigative tactics (Braga & Dusseault, 2018; Carter & Carter, 2016; Gilbert, 1982; Jang, Hoover, & Lawton, 2008; Wellford & Cronin, 2000; Wellford et al., 1999), evidence processing (Baskin & Sommers, 2010; McEwen, 2010; Schroeder & White, 2009), community context (Borg & Parker, 2001; Ousey & Lee, 2010; Regoeczi & Jarvis, 2013; Roberts, 2008), and lack of citizen cooperation (Jarvis & Regoeczi, 2012; Regoeczi & Jarvis, 2013). Scholars have consistently shown that cooperating witnesses substantially increase the likelihood of cases being cleared (Baskin & Sommers, 2010; Peterson, Sommers, Baskin, & Johnson, 2010; Wellford et al., 1999), especially eyewitnesses (Regoeczi & Jarvis, 2013). Thus, improving fatal and nonfatal shooting clearance rates in disadvantaged urban areas—places disproportionately impacted by drug- and gang-related incidents—requires increasing bystanders’ willingness to come forward with credible information. The previously mentioned goal represents a daunting challenge for law enforcement given the clustering of serious violent offending in ecologically dangerous places, combined with the implausibility that investigators might enjoy unprecedented cooperation from those at substantial risk of becoming shooting victims.

1.2 | Anti-snitching, street codes, and pro-violence norms

Despite public opinion, the code of silence is not unique to distressed communities of color. In fact, remaining quiet when rules are violated has a storied past (Clampet-Lundquist, Carr, & Kefalas, 2015; Hallsworth & Young, 2008; Kleinig, 2001; Pinder & Harlos, 2001). The *omerta*, the Italian mafia’s

blood oath of silence, and the time-honored “tattletale” moniker represent two clear examples of cultural expectations to mind one’s own business at all times. Much of the criminological literature on uncooperative witnesses has been focused on diminished police legitimacy and the popularized “Stop Snitching” movement, which inadvertently indicates that the issue is exclusive to inner-city residents. Although Elijah Anderson (1999) asserted that an anti-snitching code of silence was integral to the urban subculture (i.e., “street code”), the mantra gained increased national attention in 2004 when Baltimore, MD, rapper Skinny Suge released a DVD titled, “Stop Snitching!” (Clampet-Lundquist et al., 2015). Citizens who supply the police with information about criminal activity are susceptible not only to the application of the stigmatizing label but also to serious physical injury (Clampet-Lundquist et al., 2015; Downing & Copeland, 2015; Morris, 2010; Rosenfeld et al., 2003; Woldoff & Weiss, 2010). As such, there are real-world implications for cooperating with the police.

Even though much scholarly attention has been devoted to examining urban residents’ adherence to Anderson’s (1999) street code tenets, witnesses’ pragmatic reasons for withholding information have not been the focus of social inquiry. In the few studies on the topic, however, researchers have unearthed inconsistencies regarding what truly constitutes snitching in active offenders’ minds (Jacques & Wright, 2013; Rosenfeld et al., 2003; Woldoff & Weiss, 2010). Furthermore, although diminished police legitimacy provides justification against cooperation, it may not comprehensively explain why law-abiding residents are reticent to come forward with testimony that might reasonably lead to violent suspects’ apprehension and prosecution.

The results of social network analysis consistently have shown that a small number of chronic offenders accounts for most shooting incidents, both as perpetrators and as victims (Papachristos, Braga, & Hureau, 2012; Papachristos, Braga, Piza, & Grossman, 2015; Papachristos & Wildeman, 2014; Papachristos, Wildeman, & Roberto, 2015). This modest number of persistent lawbreakers may comprise neighborhood residents who firmly embrace the street code. On the other hand, the broader community might more selectively apply the code depending on specific circumstances. For example, onlookers might be more willing to step forward with critical information when violence befalls young or older victims (Anderson, 1999; Matsuda, Melde, Taylor, Freng, & Esbensen, 2013; Stewart, Schreck, & Simons, 2006). It is reasonable to conclude that residents of high-crime neighborhoods are overwhelmingly law-abiding and may therefore have compelling reasons for not cooperating with the police, reasons having nothing to do with endorsing an anti-snitching code. That is, violent offending networks brazenly use fear, intimidation, and brutality to assure that “decent” residents will prudently weigh the costs of cooperating with the police.

1.3 | Legal cynicism stemming from under- and overpolicing

The result of persistently elevated crime rates in communities of color, coupled with residents’ widespread mistrust of police, has contributed to growing concern that disadvantaged neighborhoods routinely experience “underpolicing” (Burke, 2013). Furthermore, in some ecological settings, citizens are more likely to report frequently enduring aggressive policing strategies aimed at reducing violent crime (Brunson & Miller, 2006a, 2006b; Gau & Brunson, 2010; Solis, Portillos, & Brunson, 2009; Weitzer, 2015). Although several scholars have questioned the crime-control efficacy of heavy-handed policing tactics (Harcourt, 2009; Harcourt & Ludwig, 2006; Herbert, 2001; Hinkle & Weisburd, 2008; Kelling & Coles, 1996), such initiatives also come with tremendous and enduring social costs (Gau & Brunson, 2010; Geller, Fagan, Tyler, & Link, 2014; Howell, 2009; Sampson & Raudenbush, 2004). For example, the use of aggressive policing tactics has the potential to leave disaffected residents perpetually feeling “overpoliced” (Burke, 2013; Kushnick, 1999), deepening their widespread belief that racial bias permeates the policing profession (Brunson & Weitzer, 2009;

Weitzer & Tuch, 2005). As a result, many inhabitants of disadvantaged communities simultaneously experience over- and underpolicing, questioning whether officers prioritize reducing crime or are preoccupied with cracking down on minor offenses (Brunson & Gau, 2014; Gau & Brunson, 2010). Consequently, Blacks often experience alienation and marginalization in public encounters and are more likely to express high levels of cynicism toward the police and, by extension, the overall criminal justice system (Anderson, 1999; Matsuda et al., 2013).

The compounding adverse impact of over- and underpolicing exacerbates African Americans' view that racial animus is at the center of these issues, undermining police legitimacy in their eyes (Corsaro, Frank, & Ozer, 2015; Kirk & Matsuda, 2011; Kirk & Papachristos, 2011; Sampson & Bartusch, 1998). Kirk and Matsuda (2011:443) explained that legal cynicism is "a cultural orientation in which the law and the agents of its enforcement are viewed as illegitimate, unresponsive, and ill-equipped to ensure public safety." Police officers are the most visible agents of the criminal justice system, tasked with equitably upholding the rule of law (Hough, Jackson, Bradford, Myhill, & Quinton, 2010). Abuse of police authority potentially serves not only to damage people's sense of obligation to obey directives (Mearns, Tyler, & Gardener, 2015; Sunshine & Tyler, 2003; Tyler, 2004) but also to damage public perception of officers' moral authority (Hough et al., 2010). Communities where the police are perceived as executing their duties in an inherently unfair or biased manner are laden with legal cynicism (Gau & Brunson, 2010; Kirk & Papachristos, 2011; Sampson & Bartusch, 1998).

The consequences of legal cynicism extend beyond the erosion of faith in policing and its ancillary institutions. For example, study findings have shown that legal cynicism is directly related to individuals' endorsement of self-help attitudes and behaviors, namely, retaliatory violence (Gau & Brunson, 2015; Kane, 2005; Kirk & Papachristos, 2011). In this way, underpolicing, especially in disadvantaged urban communities, has the potential to exacerbate neighborhood violence (Corsaro et al., 2015; Gau & Brunson, 2015). Elevated rates of violence also leave distressed neighborhoods vulnerable to aggressive policing tactics, further eroding citizen trust and confidence. Thus, beleaguered inner-city residents report being trapped in a cycle of endless violence (Hill & Jones, 1997; Rasmussen, Aber, & Bhana, 2004). Citizen perception of unrelenting lawlessness further diminishes police effectiveness, reducing the likelihood that bystanders will view cooperating with investigators as a worthwhile strategy (Asbury, 2010; Kirk & Matsuda, 2011; Kirk & Papachristos, 2011). Therefore, it matters greatly how police go about executing their law enforcement duties, including investigating fatal- and nonfatal shootings. For example, even though it is pragmatic for departments to steer resources toward the most active offenders and the places they congregate, officers should also be mindful that most neighborhood residents are law-abiding, potential witnesses.

The goal of the current research is to examine in-depth, young Black men's experiences with gun violence (both as perpetrators and as victims). We conducted face-to-face interviews with high-risk Brooklyn and Bronx residents, individuals who (a) reported living dangerous lifestyles, (b) were embedded in social networks that endorsed retaliatory violence and anti-snitching, (c) disliked police, and (d) were knowledgeable about New York City's illegal gun markets and the resulting bloodshed. Our study is based on the belief that including the perspectives of those disproportionately responsible for firearm violence holds great promise for reducing crime and delivering justice to victims through improved police effectiveness.

2 | METHODOLOGY AND STUDY SETTINGS

Our data are derived from a larger study of illicit firearm markets in four New York Police Department (NYPD) precincts, within the Bronx (42nd) and Brooklyn (67th, 77th, and 79th). Between May and

TABLE 1 Select study setting characteristics

| Characteristic | Brooklyn | Bronx | | Citywide | |
|------------------------------|------------------------------|----------|------------------------------|-----------|----|
| | Respondents' Neighborhood | Brooklyn | Respondents' Neighborhood | The Bronx | |
| % African American | 64 | 31 | 35 | 30 | 22 |
| % Poverty | 27 | 23 | 35 | 31 | 20 |
| % Unemployment | 11 | 9 | 12 | 13 | 9 |
| % Female Headed Household | 27 | 19 | 33 | 30 | 18 |

Source. 2012–2016 American Community Survey 5-year estimates retrieved from New York City Population FactFinder <https://popfactfinder.planning.nyc.gov> (accessed 5/8/19).

December 2017, we conducted surveys and in-depth interviews with 50 young Black men between the ages of 18 to 29 (with a mean age of 20.9). Participation was voluntary, and the research team used donated meeting rooms that afforded privacy. Respondents were compensated \$50 and assured strict confidentiality.² Twenty-six young men were drawn from Brooklyn and 24 from the Bronx.³

We enlisted the New York City Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice (MOCJ) and four Cure Violence sites (operating in Brooklyn and the Bronx) to help recruit potential respondents. Cure Violence offices are mostly staffed by ex-gang members and formerly incarcerated persons, who provide a wide range of social services to individuals at elevated risk of becoming shooting victims and/or perpetrators as a result of their dangerous lifestyles (i.e., persons with ties to illicit gun markets, active and former gang members, and shooting survivors). We were also assisted by several grassroots, community liaisons, including clergy affiliated with nearby churches and other faith-based institutions.

We focus on high-risk individuals because a steady stream of criminological research has resulted in scholars identifying them as the group that accounts for a disproportionate amount of fatal- and nonfatal shootings. As such, understanding their perceptions of, and experiences with, police investigations in the aftermath of gun violence is crucial for informing scholarship on effective policing, especially in disadvantaged, urban communities. Study findings have also shown that high-risk individuals (along with members of their friendship and kinship networks) have real-world reasons for not coming forward with information, which are often shaped by cultural and community dynamics (Clampet-Lundquist et al., 2015; Downing & Copeland, 2014; Jacques & Wright, 2013; Rosenfeld et al., 2003; Woldoff & Weiss, 2010).

New York City's stringent gun laws, record reduction in firearm violence, and widely heralded reputation as one of the safest big cities in America, make it an appropriate study setting.⁴ For example, despite the City's restrictive gun control policies, loosely structured illicit markets continue to operate in the most distressed neighborhoods. Table 1 shows that study participants were recruited from areas characterized by disproportionate rates of poverty, high unemployment, and female-headed households. Scholars have long associated these ecological contexts with both diminished police legitimacy and increased legal cynicism (Fagan & Davies, 2000; Gau & Brunson, 2010; Kane, 2005; Kirk & Matsuda, 2011; Sampson & Bartusch, 1998); factors shown to greatly impact residents' refusal to cooperate with the police (Baumer, 2002; Carr, Napolitano, & Keating, 2007; Desmond, Papachristos, & Kirk, 2016).

Table 2 highlights that our study settings also register higher crime rates than the overall boroughs where they are nestled and the city average for at least some index crimes. Brooklyn precincts accounted for 25.0% of homicides and approximately 20.0% of aggravated assaults in the borough despite only accounting for 13.0% of the total population. Similarly, the Bronx precinct accounted for 11.0% of

TABLE 2 Local crime rates (per 100,000 residents)

| Offense Category | Brooklyn Respondents' | Bronx Respondents' | | New York City | |
|------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| | Precincts (pop. 336,619) | Brooklyn (pop. 2,649,000) | Precinct (pop. 79,762) | The Bronx (pop. 1,471,000) | (pop. 8,538,000) |
| Murder | 8.3 (<i>n</i> = 28) | 4.2 (<i>n</i> = 111) | 10.0 (<i>n</i> = 8) | 4.9 (<i>n</i> = 72) | 3.4 (<i>n</i> = 292) |
| Rape | 27.0 (<i>n</i> = 91) | 17.4 (<i>n</i> = 461) | 38.8 (<i>n</i> = 31) | 22.5 (<i>n</i> = 331) | 16.9 (<i>n</i> = 1,449) |
| Robbery | 243.9 (<i>n</i> = 821) | 169.5 (<i>n</i> = 4,490) | 305.9 (<i>n</i> = 244) | 241.3 (<i>n</i> = 3,550) | 163.5 (<i>n</i> = 13,956) |
| Felony Assault | 365.4 (<i>n</i> = 1,230) | 229.9 (<i>n</i> = 6,089) | 547.9 (<i>n</i> = 437) | 373.0 (<i>n</i> = 5,488) | 234.9 (<i>n</i> = 20,052) |

Source. New York Police Department, 2017: <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/nypd/stats/crime-statistics/crime-statistics-landing.page> (accessed 07/21/18).

TABLE 3 Select respondent characteristics

| Characteristics | Brooklyn | Bronx |
|---|--------------------|--------------------|
| Race/Ethnicity | | |
| Black | 26 | 24 |
| Age | | |
| Mean | 21.6 | 22.7 |
| Range | 18 to 29 years old | 18 to 29 years old |
| Length of time residing in neighborhood | | |
| Mean | 13.1 years | 13.5 years |
| Range | 2 to 29 years | 3 to 27 years |

homicides and 8.0% of aggravated assaults in the borough, despite merely comprising 5.0% of the total population.⁵

As Table 3 demonstrates, our sampling was purposive in nature. Specifically, the goal was to interview young Black men between the ages of 18 and 29, high-risk individuals having extensive knowledge about NYC illicit gun markets. Furthermore, our respondents reported having lived in their respective neighborhoods for an average of 13 years, allowing them to reflect on perceived changes in local firearm violence.

Table 4 reveals young men's answers to survey questions regarding their direct and vicarious experiences with gun violence. As shown, the overwhelming majority of respondents (*n* = 47, 94%) reported having a friend or family member who was a victim of gun violence, with an average of 9.3 known shooting victims. Furthermore, 74% (*n* = 37) of study participants reported having been victims of gun violence themselves. More than half of our respondents (*n* = 27, 54%) reported being former gang members, and approximately a quarter of our sample (*n* = 13, 26%) identified themselves as active gang members. In addition, approximately two thirds of respondents (*n* = 33, 66%) reported having possessed at least one gun within the past 5 years, with an average of three firearms. Thus, our sample was composed of individuals involved in, and very knowledgeable about, underground gun markets (as well as about the ensuing violence).

TABLE 4 Direct and vicarious experiences with gun violence

| | | |
|--|----------|-------|
| Ever had a friend or family member shot or shot at | | |
| Yes | 47 | |
| No | 2 | |
| No response | 1 | |
| Number of people that you know who have been shot or shot at | | |
| 1–10 | 26 | |
| 11–20 | 9 | |
| 20 or greater | 9 | |
| Other | 2 | |
| No response | 4 | |
| Have you ever been shot or shot at | | |
| Yes | 37 | |
| No | 12 | |
| No response | 1 | |
| Ever had a friend or family member shot or shot at | | |
| | BROOKLYN | BRONX |
| Yes | 24 | 23 |
| No | 1 | 1 |
| No response | 1 | 0 |
| Number of people that you know who have been shot or shot at | | |
| 1–10 | 15 | 11 |
| 11–20 | 5 | 4 |
| 20 or greater | 2 | 7 |
| Other | 1 | 1 |
| No response | 3 | 1 |
| Have you ever been shot or shot at | | |
| Yes | 18 | 19 |
| No | 7 | 5 |
| No response | 1 | 0 |

As a result of the sensitive nature of our research, we took great care to establish rapport with agency staff, clergy, neighborhood-based liaisons, and potential respondents. For example, interviewers engaged in a series of relationship-building activities for an entire year prior to starting data collection, including canvassing study neighborhoods alongside outreach workers, organizing writing and career development workshops for high-risk individuals, and attending local anti-violence rallies immediately after fatal and nonfatal shootings. Throughout the project, research team members also participated in a wide range of community events, including health and wellness expos, block parties, field trips for youth enrolled in an employment program, and food drives for nearby homeless shelters.

The interview team consisted of one male and two female Ph.D. students. The male was raised in and, at the time of data collection, lived in one of the study neighborhoods. Interviewers were in their late twenties or early thirties. Two were African American, and the remaining interviewer was of East Indian descent. Data collection began with the administration of informed consent, an assurance of confidentiality, and a series of prescreening questions—all used to ensure that potential participants met the stated enrollment criteria (i.e., that they were sufficiently knowledgeable of illegal gun markets in

the study settings). Respondents were then asked to participate in an interviewer-administrated survey and an audio-recorded, in-depth interview, typically lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. The audio recordings were later transcribed in their entirety—and serve as the primary data for our analysis.

We used data from the survey portion of interviews to provide complementary, contextual information. Specifically, the surveys were designed to elicit data about respondents' overall perceptions of neighborhood crime and disorder. For example, respondents were asked about the pervasiveness of serious violent crime (e.g., robberies and shootings) and physical disorder (e.g., graffiti, abandoned buildings, and open-air drug markets). The in-depth interviews were semistructured, with several open-ended questions that allowed for considerable probing. For instance, respondents were asked to provide detailed descriptions of illegal gun markets and firearm offenses. They were also asked to share their own victimization experiences; views on gangs, drugs, and guns; as well as their perceptions of law enforcement effectiveness. Lastly, we sought study participants' recommendations regarding how NYPD officers and high-risk, young Black males might work together in the hope of enhanced public safety.

Semistructured interviews allow for researchers to examine how study participants make sense of their lived experiences. Detailed analysis of respondents' accounts has been shown to assist scholars toward "arriving at meanings or culturally embedded normative explanations [for behavior, because they] represent ways in which people organize views of themselves, of others, and of their social worlds" (Orbuch, 1997, p. 455). This approach is particularly important for understanding young men's decisions on whether or not to cooperate with shooting investigations because few scholars have considered this specific population in their studies as a credible starting point for social inquiry (but see Carr et al., 2007; Clampet-Lundquist et al., 2015).

Some criminologists have argued for including offender perspectives toward better understandings of various types of crime (Jacques & Wright, 2013; Presser, 2009). We chose our methodological approach to support the perspective that critical information can be acquired through direct communication with offenders simply because "they know things that others, including police and some victims, do not know" (Jacques & Wright, 2013, p. 550). Furthermore, using research with data obtained directly from those immersed in difficult to access networks (i.e., hidden populations) provides us with "an opportunity to re-evaluate existing concepts, typologies, and theories," and inform how they "may be altered to achieve greater levels of validity, generality, and simplicity" (Jacques & Wright, 2013, p. 550).

Efforts to increase clearance rates are often influenced by the cooperation of key witnesses (Braga & Dusseault, 2018; Chaiken, Greenwood, & Petersilia, 1977; Decker, 1996). Our choice of study design, consisting of in-depth interviews with individuals most likely to be contacted by police after gun violence, allows for us to gain important insights regarding high-risk individuals' pragmatic, or real-world, reasons for shying away from providing evidence. We took special care to ensure that the themes and concepts developed through our analysis captured the most common patterns reflected in respondents' detailed accounts. This was achieved using grounded theory methods, including the search for, and explication of, deviant cases (Strauss, 1987).

Each researcher read transcripts in their entirety before engaging in the initial coding stage. Then, each team member independently coded and analyzed the interview transcripts (recording extensive handwritten notes in the margins) to identify common themes—that is, open coding (Strauss, 1987). Researchers all met to compare coding and reach agreement on axial coding, which became the preliminary subthemes. Once team members agreed on the recurrent themes, they reexamined interview transcripts. When there was divergence on preliminary coding, team members discussed the discrepancies and reached consensus. Finally, researchers ensured that the quoted material typified the most common themes and subthemes in respondents' narratives.

3 | STUDY FINDINGS

Our primary goal is to offer a nuanced understanding of high-risk individuals' reluctance to cooperate with police during shooting investigations. We begin by examining young men's widespread mistrust of the police, stemming from under- and overpolicing. Then, we investigate the convergence of respondents' negative attitudes toward the police and their beliefs regarding the ubiquity of local gun violence. A third prominent subtheme revealed young men's preference for self-help strategies over cooperating with the police. Lastly, we examine how study participants weigh street and criminal justice consequences when deciding whether or not to carry guns. Our results corroborate with and extend prior research findings on urban gun violence, highlighting the urgent need for policies geared toward improving police effectiveness.

4 | MISTRUST RESULTING FROM OVER- AND UNDERPOLICING

Several respondents reported having had firsthand, negative police interactions. For example, Curtis described how frequent, unwelcome police encounters helped to shape his deep-seated distrust of officers. He noted:

[T]he police threatened me with guns more than anyone else has ever so I'm not comfortable with police at all.... One time I was playin' basketball in the park with my brother and cops [came telling] everybody [to] get out the park. So I took one more shot and was about to go get my basketball and a cop said, "I told you [to leave]" and pulled a gun in my face so I just left the ball and went.

Likewise, Maurice described how negative police interactions caused him to conclude that officers are committed to harassing young Black males. He stated:

A cop would arrest me for just being me, I got arrested for just walking, I just got arrested for a bunch of nonsense, so when it comes to cops...they will arrest you for having a pencil.

Similarly, Patrick made clear that his misgivings about the police stemmed from what he considered a needlessly aggressive arrest. He explained:

I don't care about the police. I don't like the police....They always botherin' me....They came in my house and beat me up cause they had a phone call that I tried to stab my mother which is [a lie]. They came in and restrained me and they bust[ed] my head on the corner of the door in my house. They banged my head twice but the first time it didn't bust. The second time it did.

In addition to offering graphic depictions of direct, negative police encounters, more than half of study participants ($n = 27$, 54%) also pointed to widely publicized instances of officer misconduct as justification for their entrenched mistrust—in particular, nationwide coverage of fatal police shootings of unarmed Black men. Referencing a recent spate of officer-involved killings of Black suspects, Abdul stated, “every time I see a Black cop, I [ask] why did you become a cop?” they be ...talking their little nonsense... whatever, yeah, I understand... but listen... these White [cops] killing us Black people.”

Expressions of legal cynicism were so intense among our sample that more than 90% of respondents ($n = 46$, 92%) reported that they would not call the police if they or a loved one were ever threatened with gun violence. Although New York City has experienced a historic reduction in violent crime

and homicide rates, they remain elevated in a small number of the city's most disadvantaged neighborhoods, including where our study participants lived. Persistently high crime rates in these communities, coupled with the NYPD's history of aggressive enforcement of minor drug infractions, have resulted in residents feeling simultaneously subjected to under- and overpolicing. Here, Curtis described an upsetting interaction with plainclothes officers:

I remember one time... my grandma sent me to the store and the cops [were] in undercover gear and they were in a van. I'm coming back from the store... these cops in regular clothes just jump out a car and... pulled a gun on me... I was about to run. And if I ran I woulda died... cause if you see people in regular clothing, your natural instinct is to run if they pull a gun on you. [The officer] said, "don't move"... and then they searched to see if I had drugs on me... they asked me if I have any drugs on me. I couldn't talk cause I was so [scared] but they was searchin' for drugs. So that's what the cops search for. They're not really searchin' for guns.

Similar to Curtis, many of our respondents ($n = 32$, 64%) expressed frustration with the NYPD's emphasis on low-level crimes, arguing that police were more interested in enforcing drug infractions or in harassing Black people rather than in focusing their efforts on apprehending those responsible for committing violent crime. Bryce provided a concrete example of young men's agitation concerning over- and underpolicing:

I really hate the cops... I deadass (seriously) hate them.... They don't do nothin'... they be schemin' on niggas in the park tryin' to smoke a blunt but a nigga down the block got shot and where was you at? You sat here schemin' on me tryin' to smoke this blunt. Tryin' to lock me up for smokin' this blunt, [while] somebody down the block got shot and you coulda [arrested the shooter]. But you schemin' on me right here smokin' this blunt. I hate cops... I swear.

Maurice also lamented about the NYPD's inability to curtail widespread violence in his community, questioning whether officers really cared about Black children. He noted:

That's what I don't understand about cops, [they] don't do enough to protect the kids out here, kids is still getting shot, people still getting killed... you say you're serving and protecting, people still getting killed, kids still getting shot, so what y'all want these people to do in these neighborhoods?... just to sit back and watch while their kids die? It makes no sense... that's not fair, so we're supposed to sit back and wait, watch our kids bleed out, shot up... until ya'll get your fifteen [minute] response after y'all drinking y'all coffee... talking to [your own kids] making sure y'all kids good... and then you're going to check on our kids after our kids are probably dead already.

Therefore, as a result of young men's widespread distrust of the police and deeply rooted legal cynicism regarding the overall criminal justice system, many respondents endorsed self-help attitudes and behaviors. In particular, several young men justified their decisions to take the law into their own hands, citing officers' repeated failure to apprehend shooting suspects quickly and dispense justice.

4.1 | Legal cynicism, "beefs," and gun violence

The prevalence of gun violence in young men's lives contributed substantially to their unfavorable evaluations of the police. In particular, respondents believed that officers were either incapable of, or not genuinely interested in, keeping them and their communities safe. For example, study participants

frequently cited the NYPD's repeated poor performance when it came to arresting and holding accountable persons responsible for neighborhood firearm violence.

In condemning police inaction to local gun violence, our respondents expressed considerable legal cynicism (Sampson & Bartusch, 1998). Most respondents ($n = 38$, 76%) offered decidedly negative commentary about the police, courts, and the district attorney's office. Moreover, young men were steadfast in their belief that the U.S. justice system operated oppressively and was not dedicated to delivering sorely needed justice, especially in minority communities. Several respondents provided examples that called into question officers' commitment to curtailing community violence. In fact, some young men provided accounts depicting officers needlessly instigating violence, displaying cavalier attitudes toward potential crime victims.

For instance, Andre described how NYPD officers intentionally tried to pit him against a notorious local shooter, needlessly compromising his physical safety. He explained:

[There] was this kid [that just] used to shoot people...and the cops knew about him...so one time the cops told me... "that boy gon' get (shoot) you." ...I don't think [police] really here to clean the streets up. They just here. I don't know what they here for.

Respondents' collective mistrust of police was demonstrated in their justifications for not cooperating in shooting investigations. This is especially striking given our sample of high-risk individuals. As we previously noted (see Table 4), an overwhelming majority of respondents reported having both direct and indirect experiences with gun violence. Recall, 74% of study participants said that they had been shot or shot at. In addition, nearly everyone in our study reported knowing at least one person who had been a victim of firearm violence.

Bryce noted:

The cops ain't good. Cops is crooked...They try to work you over (trick you into confessing). Cops ain't good. Even your lawyer tell you that. [My lawyer says], "Yo, don't talk to the cops....Don't talk to them"...they be fuckin' niggas over. Deadass (seriously)...I hate the cops.

Study participants reported that most gun violence stemmed from trivial conflicts or "beefs." For instance, Julian recalled that he and a group of friends were shot at "[because of] nothing really...an argument, misunderstanding." Similarly, Mitch explained, "[beefs are about people] not liking each other...that's all it's about, it's petty." Desean summarized, "if it's not about money, it's not really anything to beef over. That's how I feel but [others] beef over 'oh son was talking to my girl' and then [individuals] turn that beef into another level." And Chris recounted how tempers flared during a pickup basketball game, resulting in suspects shooting at his friend:

I guess it was like a hard foul or something, and...it led to a scuffle and someone pulled out a gun and they fired at [my friend] but they didn't hit him, and I guess he was scared... for me it was natural...stuff like that happens...you get desensitized to certain things.

An alarming number of respondents ($n = 45$, 90%) insisted that the looming threat of gun violence influenced their decisions to carry. Damon offered a litany of everyday situations that warranted him being armed:

If you goin' somewhere and you gon' see somebody that you got beef with like [at] a party. Or if you know you got to go to a[n] area and you know over there a lot of people don't like you, you gon' carry [a gun]. Or if you just outside chillin' and you know people like to [walk] in your hood and you got [enemies] who like to come over there and think

they gon' [attack] or think they gon' run over there and take over the hood. You gon' have to back that up so you come outside with it (your gun).

Jay, a repeat gunshot victim, provided a similar outlook regarding why he and his friends frequently carried:

We carry that shit (gun) everywhere, everywhere. I carry that shit to school, I carry that shit, to my girl's crib, my mom's crib, I just, [know] where [my enemies] live and [I know] who's like...in my head, the gang [spies], I know that they be over there...I gotta carry it in bad places.

Respondents reported witnessing several instances of what they considered random shootings. These incidents engendered a heightened sense of fear among study participants, reinforcing their decisions to carry weapons. In particular, young men were convinced that their own victimization was mostly unavoidable. For example, Miguel reasoned that merely being out in public was extremely risky. He noted:

Just bein' around the wrong people and standin' around crowds that you're not supposed to be around. When they come for certain individuals inside of that crowd and it's like they just come and they start shootin.' They don't care who they hit as long as they see [their enemies] out there.

In agreement, Paul provided an account of a shooting where he narrowly escaped being killed. He explained:

We [were] in the big park right by my mom's, everybody on the basketball court playing...I look, I peep, I see there's a black car, Black dealer rental driving past the park, [someone] started [shooting], I'm running, my mom [shouted], "yo get down, watch the bullets, get down, don't run!" [The suspects kept] shooting, boom boom...one [bullet] fly right past my face.

Similar to Paul, most of our prior shooting victims ($n = 37$, 74%) were not always certain about assailants' identities or why they had been targeted ($n = 24$, 48%). Lance stated, "I think we got shot at from people that we was havin' some beef with back then. But we don't know exactly who." Respondents mainly considered their victimization risks indiscriminate and reasoned that beyond arming themselves, there was little that they could do to remain safe. A feeling of powerlessness was pervasive among young men, contributing to their increased anxiety about being killed merely because they were "in the wrong place at the wrong time." For example, Hakeem described being shot while attending a cookout:

I don't even know who shot me...I don't know who shot me, I just know that I was standing there, chillin, 3 shots went off and next thing I know, I looked down and I was bleeding.

For most respondents, commonplace activities such as walking through the neighborhood, shopping at local bodegas, and attending family gatherings, came with an increased risk of being murdered. For example, an exasperated Jonathan stated, "My cousin got shot, picking me up from school." And Ian remarked:

I was outside on the block, me and my friends just chilling. One of my homies had beef with somebody that was walking past. He went to say something to [the dude]...and the [person] just backed [up] and pulled out a gun. But he ain't really shoot or nothing, he just pulled it out to pull [it] out.

Likewise, Rich described being chased and shot at while hanging out on the block. He stated:

[W]hen I came home (from prison) it was already beef with another block...my face is known because I was taking pictures with people...so they know my face, so when they saw me, they were like "oh he's right there!" so they [started] chasing me...and they just stopped running and they turned around [started to] shoot and that's when it (the bullet) went through my jacket.

By the same token, Seth described being shot at after exiting New York City Transit, accompanied by his brother. Seth was expressly troubled that the shooting occurred "in broad daylight." He explained:

I was with [my brother] in downtown Brooklyn and we got on the bus...we fell asleep...So when we woke up we was on [Hodiamont] and [Clara]. My brother got beef on that block and the kids they saw him...they just pulled out [guns] and started shooting at him.

And Jay shared about perpetually feeling unsafe in his neighborhood. He specifically reflected on being attacked while waiting on his breakfast order at a local deli:

I can't even be outside in my own neighborhood right now because there's too much going on, I got beef on the other side of my neighborhood...I was in [Big B's], trying to get some food...my [friends] had did some stupid shit, I don't even know nothing about...I'm on the phone, I see something out the corner of my eye, I'm looking out the corner, something flashing and burning at the door...I'm like, "shit, this nigga [isn't] playing...and he pulled out [a gun] and he let go in the store...there's customers and all that...I had to jump over the counter...and then I went in the back, through the back alley...I don't never go back in [the deli] ...

Respondents consistently made statements reflecting their perceived helplessness regarding how best to stay safe. When emphasizing the volatility of neighborhood violence, study participants were adamant that "bullets have no names" and routinely made reference to several high-profile instances in which innocent bystanders (namely, children and older people) had been mistakenly murdered. For instance, Hakeem referenced a well-publicized killing that he considered particularly egregious. He explained, "[The suspects] came out and killed this lady, it was all over the news. I don't know why they were beefing [or] what they was beefing for." Likewise, Javaune recalled an incident involving a young mother killed while seated on a park bench. He noted:

[On Arlington and Palm], a girl got shot in her head...I really think she just got hit [in the] crossfire. I don't think she was supposed to get anything. She got a whole daughter...I don't know what she would be doin' to get shot...I think she was just there at the wrong time. She was in the wrong place...She just died. And she was mad (very) young.

Although young men understood the "randomness" of gun violence, they were especially troubled when undeserving victims were not spared, proclaiming these events completely unacceptable. Next, we explore study participants' expressed reasons for choosing retaliation over cooperating with the police.

4.2 | Self-help versus cooperating with the police

The overwhelming majority of our sample ($n = 46$, 92%) preferred self-help in the form of retaliatory violence over cooperating with police after shootings. Explaining his reverence for street vengeance, Jay stated:

If I go and tell the [cops and] this nigga fuck around and beat the case...this nigga still out here smoking blunts, doing everything while my [friend] dead, you feel me...that's

why I don't understand that snitching to the cops shit...this nigga shot my [friend]...a real nigga would just go out and kill that nigga.

As Jay's excerpt illustrates, some young men viewed the police as standing in the way of their own brand of holding suspects accountable. For instance, Andre explained how police patrols interfere with victims' and their friends' retaliation attempts. He noted, "you gon' get stopped by the cops tryin' to go do whatever you tryin' to do...like they patrolin' areas heavier. [So] you gotta be aware." Paul complained that officers' apprehension of his friend's suspected murderer prevented him from exacting revenge. He noted, "my guys and me, we heated (upset) about it so it's like we wanna retaliate but we can't."

Because respondents believed that police were ineffective when it came to protecting them, young men concluded that they were better off handling disputes themselves. Lance explained his attitude toward self-help over summoning cops:

At the end of the day, the police are the police and I'm like what's gon' happen? Alright, [if] I say somebody threaten me with a gun. What you gon' [do], go lock 'em up? You can't go lock 'em up cause you gotta get the gun. What imma do get a restrainin' order? That's corny. I might as well just keep matters in my own hands.

Similarly, Desean explained:

[Calling the police is] not accomplishing nothing. What I'mma do? Tell the police "some nigga just put a pistol to my face and said, "boy, if you say something bout me I'mma shoot you in yo head." What the police gonna do? Go look for the nigga? Lock them up?

In addition to lacking confidence in police as crime fighters, young men were reluctant to cooperate because they did not trust officers' motives. Attributing his distrust of police to accumulated negative interactions, when asked whether he would ever call the police, Bryce quipped, "Hell no, I would never talk to the cops." Likewise, Abdul explained, "that's not me, I don't talk to the police...I don't even like the police." Finally, Patrick said, "I would never talk to the police, period... They not here to help me. They just want to take somebody down, put somebody away."

Several respondents reported being unwilling to assist the police because of dehumanizing treatment that they encountered as crime victims and/or as potential witnesses. Jay noted, "it's been mad (several) times, when I've been shot at or been around a situation [involving] a gun...you can't just go to the [cops]...they [are] going [to] interrogate you, asking mad shit, 'oh you from this block...that mean you Crip, right?' I just leave that shit in the street." As Jay's comment demonstrates, respondents who had prior victimization experiences felt discounted in officers' eyes. In particular, young men believed that officers' intentionally denied Black shooting victims justice, withholding compassion and assistance as a result of their race and suspected involvement in street life. Shawn reasoned aloud, "What [the police] gonna do? I'm a Black male saying that somebody threatened me with a gun. They gonna look at me in my face and [ask], "Is there anything you wanna add to that, sir?" Abdul shared the details of an incident that, for him, clearly represented officers' callousness toward Black crime victims. He was particularly troubled that a detective arriving on scene after his friend was shot was seemingly more concerned with assaulting him, an eyewitness, than with apprehending suspect(s). Abdul explained, "[The detective] smacked me with a walkie-talkie, he threw it at my head...[the police] just kept telling me to shut up and [when I didn't], they threw the walkie-talkie at the back of my head." Finally, Marlon said that his misgivings about police officers worsened after he was shot and treated disrespectfully by investigators:

I got shot up here [on Wabada] and the cops [said] If I don't cooperate, then [they] gonna take me to jail, take me to jail for what? I didn't do anything to nobody, just because you

stereotyping me and feel that I know who did it, now I'm in trouble? There's cops out there that find out exactly who did it without anybody talking, that's people who love doing what they do. You understand? That's the way you gotta do it. You don't gotta drag people and belittle them and make them feel lesser than who they are to get stuff out them....That's why...I won't go to cops for nothing, if imma die, imma die...I ain't going to cops for nothing, I'll go to the ambulance before the cops.

In addition to distrusting police and consistent with the urban subculture literature, many of our respondents reportedly embraced an anti-snitching edict. In fact, several young men made direct reference to the street code (see Anderson, 1999, for a full discussion). Respondents argued that cooperating with the police violated their personal morals and ethics, frequently refusing to do so on principle. When asked if he would report a threat of gun violence to the police, Sam responded, "I just can't do that...it's just against...my religion...it's just something I just can't do...I just don't feel comfortable doing that." In agreement, Chris offered, "No...that's just...a part of my culture....I'm not telling." Likewise, Maurice said, "I'm not the person that's going to...run and go to the cops...because if I run off and tell the cops, then the cops will make a whole report and it'll make it seem like I'm snitching...I don't do that." And Matt replied, "I can't....I'm not a snitch." Finally, Lance explained the informal, but well-understood, creed governing retaliation. He remarked, "the moral of the street code is if you pull out a gun on me and...you don't shoot me, you best believe if I do [get] the chance to shoot [you] or I'm around you and I do have a gun, I'm gonna shoot you."

For many young men in our sample, violent retaliation provided a sense of closure and contentment. In keeping with the street code, several respondents reported that persons willing to use violence are revered. Conversely, cooperating with police—or snitching—is considered contemptuous. Thus, young men consistently weighed the pros and cons of a contrived dichotomy: retaliating versus cooperating. Although study participants understood that plotting on rivals potentially put an even bigger target on their backs, they also realized that being labeled a snitch would prove devastating to their hard-earned status as rugged foot soldiers, credibility they unwisely believed would help to keep them safe. In the minds of some respondents, known shooters were less vulnerable to gun violence compared with the certain death that awaited snitches. As we noted earlier, however, young men had plenty of direct and vicarious evidence undercutting this notion.

Even though most respondents were emphatic about refusing to cooperate with the police under any circumstances, several young men reported that there were important caveats worth consideration. For instance, study participants conceded being willing to cooperate with police in a narrow set of situations: (a) crimes against female family members and intimates, and/or (b) when underage male siblings were threatened or faced danger. For example, after first emphatically proclaiming that he was decidedly unwilling to cooperate with police, when asked to ponder specific contexts, Kordell clarified that he would begrudgingly cooperate with police but only for his family's sake. He explained, "[when it comes to family], that's a different story." Likewise, Javaune responded, "I take my sisters too serious. And, Keegan said, "if it's something to do with my family, I'mma man up." And Ian explained:

[I]f I get the law involved, I'm helping my family...if they [are] relocated to a safer place and get the proper protection, I could be happy that their life is not in danger.

It is important to note that in addition to embracing the "anti-snitching" edict for themselves, they also routinely instilled fear in fellow community members for the purpose of guaranteeing their strict adherence to the code.

4.3 | On the block and criminal justice system consequences

Despite the majority of our sample ($n = 44$, 88%) acknowledging that they would assuredly face lengthy prison sentences if arrested with a gun, young men who reported habitually carrying were clear that fear of apprehension and resulting criminal justice sanctions were easily outweighed by perceived victimization risks. As we noted earlier, several respondents stressed that gun carrying was fundamental to urban street life. When asked whether he was concerned about being arrested with a firearm, Jay responded, “yeah, I worry about [getting caught], then again, I can’t worry about it, cuz like anything could happen to me and the cops, they’re not going to be there to save me or...to rescue me.” Jose’s response was equally sobering, reflecting the enigma that previously sanctioned (i.e., sentenced for carrying guns) study participants routinely faced. He reasoned, “people are afraid to die, so they don’t really care about the [criminal justice] system.” Likewise, Kyle explained, “I [didn’t] give a fuck about no gun consequences....I [was just trying to not] get killed. I ain’t tryna die...That was my thought process.” In agreement, Kordell explained, “[I] just didn’t [think about the consequences]. I wasn’t really doin’ anything. [The gun] was for my defense.” As noted earlier, several young men we interviewed reported seldom leaving their homes without a gun, offering that “a prison cell is better than a coffin.” Marlon also provided a blunt justification for carrying. He explained:

I feel like [carrying a gun is for] safety....Cause once you got a person that you know is ready to go (shoot) and is comin’ for you for whatever reason you gotta protect yourself....You not just gonna let anybody walk up on you and shoot you up because you scared to hold a gun or you don’t want to go to jail or you know that’s breakin’ the law. Well, I don’t want to die you know. That’s how some people think. I don’t want to die. I’d rather break the law, go to jail not to die. I’m still alive.

Study participants, despite their constant swagger, conceded feeling traumatized after being shot and acknowledged living in fear. Specifically, young men reported becoming unsettled whenever they came face to face with assailants who remained at large. Respondents were adamant that such occurrences were clear examples of police ineptitude, confirming for them that denial of justice to Black victims should have been foreseeable. Furthermore, study participants emphasized that the NYPD’s failure to arrest known shooters was critical to young men’s refusal to be caught “lacking” while in public. Gabriel, who had been fired at while standing in front of his grandmother’s house, explained that he armed himself because his attackers might return. He noted:

[B]asically it’s like either you gonna [carry] or you gonna lack....some people got a beef with niggas [be] ready to [shoot them] right in front [of] they house...for a lot of people it’s either [their] life or jail, you feel me? They’ll take jail before [death].

As highlighted earlier, the perceived inability of law enforcement to apprehend shooting suspects had profound effects on victims of gun violence. As a result of fear of repeat victimization, young men reported increased motivation to carry guns and were less concerned about harsh criminal justice penalties. For instance, Chris described his thought process soon after recovering from being wounded:

I was just thinking about my safety....I don’t wanna say that I was clueless to the consequences, I just didn’t care about them....because it was like, once you get shot, the only thing you care about is, [not] getting shot again, because it really, really hurt[s]...so I’m just like, I don’t want this to happen again.

Our study participants represent the small number of individuals whom researchers have consistently shown are at high risk for being shot and shooting others. As a result, these young men’s experiences are well positioned to inform policymaking concerning the who, why, and how of fatal and nonfatal

shootings. We recognize that our findings reveal disconcerting, thorny issues that cannot be resolved by simple, short-term strategies. Nonetheless, we maintain that efforts to hold offenders accountable and deliver sorely needed justice to crime victims must involve holistic approaches for improving trust among disaffected neighborhood residents and the police.

5 | POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Research findings reliably demonstrate that urban gun violence is highly concentrated among a modest number of individuals, who are linked together in tightly knit social networks (Papachristos et al., 2012; Papachristos, Braga, et al., 2015; Papachristos, Wildeman, et al., 2015). As our respondents explained, the timely arrest of assailants minimizes opportunities for retaliatory violence. Relatedly, police need credible information that is all too often withheld by victims and/or witnesses. Moreover, our findings highlight that harms resulting from revenge seeking are not restricted to shooting suspects and their rivals but jeopardize all community members' personal safety. Recall that our study participants recounted a litany of gun violence episodes in which innocent bystanders were struck during "random shootings" in public settings. Several young men also referenced instances of mistaken identity, resulting in tragedy.

As we noted earlier, young men's sobering accounts point to three overlapping areas instructive for informing public policy: (1) reducing gun violence so that high-risk individuals live in objectively safer areas; (2) using intermediaries to launch grassroots campaigns countering pro-violence and anti-snitching norms; and (3) improving police–minority community relations. We readily acknowledge that these policy prescriptions hinge primarily on the extent to which cadres of repeat, high-risk offenders will be persuaded to put down their guns. We are also mindful that several of our respondents expressed being afraid to leave home unarmed, with an overwhelming majority ($n = 47$, 94%) reporting that friends and family members had been targeted for gun assaults. Therefore, disarmament is more unlikely in ecological contexts where firearm violence is pervasive and individuals seemingly strike with impunity. We recommend that city leaders allocate additional resources to police units responsible for investigating nonfatal shootings in an effort to make high-risk places demonstrably safer (Cook et al., 2019, this issue). This is a worthwhile investment because not only do nonfatal incidents represent most shootings, but they also consistently produce untold residual violence, fear, and disorder, collectively undercutting police effectiveness.

Focused deterrence-based models have a proven record for delivering improved police effectiveness, reducing gun violence in high-risk networks (Braga, Weisburd, & Turchan, 2018). For example, offender notifications (call-in meetings) provide opportunities for community leaders to deliver compassionate messages of support (e.g., through the promise of tailored social services) and law enforcement representatives, credible threats of swift action (i.e., arrests and prosecutions) should problem behaviors continue (see Brunson, 2015). The Boston Police Department (BPD)–Black clergy (Ten Point Coalition / TPC) partnership is perhaps one of the most widely heralded focused deterrence efforts as a result of its role in reducing violence among high-risk youths (Brunson, Braga, Hureau, & Pegram, 2015). TPC ministers were instrumental in mobilizing community members to work alongside law enforcement, connecting at-risk adolescents (and their families) to sorely needed services and strong communications regarding anti-violence norms.

Former gang-members, ex-offenders, clergy, and community leaders involved in the current research reported frequently quelling potentially violent disputes, including dissuading shooting victims' friends and families from retaliating. There have been corresponding favorable reports regarding programs enlisting third parties to help curtail youth violence within a growing number of embattled U.S. cities.

One particularly innovative approach is managed by St. Louis' Better Family Life (BFL) nonprofit organization, which oversees four strategically placed Gun Violence De-escalation Centers.⁶ BFL satellite offices function as safe havens where trained outreach workers ("ambassadors / emissaries") attempt to mediate festering disputes confidentially among adversaries.

The current research findings also reveal that some intermediaries might be well positioned to generate civic action, including launching grassroots campaigns aimed at stimulating a collective consciousness and increased stake in conformity among active offenders. Such efforts may change at-risk young men's conduct norms regarding gun carrying, seeking retaliation, and refusing to cooperate with the police. This multifaceted strategy may also be used to help mitigate the cumulative effect that problem behaviors have on fueling cycles of neighborhood violence. We offer some precautions regarding involving third parties in anti-violence work, however. In particular, intermediaries should not be expected to function as extensions of, or replacements for, the police. In particular, civilians lack necessary law enforcement training and government sanctioned authority. Hence, policy makers who decide to use intermediaries should avoid unintentionally putting them in dangerous or ethically compromising situations.

6 | DISCUSSION

The results of our investigation extend those of prior examinations of urban gun violence. In particular, we focus on young Black males' lived experiences, a demographic overrepresented among shooting victims and perpetrators but who rarely have their worldviews considered credible starting points for social inquiry. The goal of the current study was to use in-depth interviewing techniques to gain nuanced understandings of high-risk individuals' misgivings about cooperating with shooting investigations. Our findings underscore the pervasiveness of firearm violence in respondents' lives and their widespread misgivings about police effectiveness.

Scholars have repeatedly shown that during investigations of fatal and nonfatal shootings, witnesses' accounts represent the most crucial pieces of missing evidence (Braga & Dusseault, 2018; Chaiken et al., 1977; Decker, 1996; Regoeczi & Jarvis, 2013). Young Black males' negative perceptions of, and experiences with, the police (Brunson, 2007; Brunson & Miller, 2006a, 2006b; Gau & Brunson, 2010; Solis et al., 2009; Weitzer, 2015) have produced a powerful brand of legal cynicism (Sampson & Bartusch, 1998). Intense legal cynicism has made it increasingly difficult for law enforcement officials to procure cooperative witnesses. This interplay has given rise to conditions where violent offenders elude apprehension, remaining free to strike again or risk being shot or killed themselves, impacting both individuals in high-risk offending networks and law-abiding residents' overall safety.

The role of legal cynicism in hindering the apprehension and prosecution of violent offenders, and thus negatively impacting clearance rates, is straightforward. Legal cynicism tends to be greatest in high-crime, disadvantaged communities (Kirk & Matsuda, 2011; Sampson & Bartusch, 1998). As a result of a bevy of harmful social conditions, neighborhood residents report low levels of trust in the police as well as various institutions undergirding the criminal justice system. Much of the legal cynicism that respondents expressed stemmed from direct and vicarious negative, police encounters. Recall that respondents' detailed accounts are replete with descriptions of excessive use of force and other forms of police misconduct. Finally, in the minds of our respondents, the real risk of retaliatory violence, coupled with legal cynicism, made cooperation with law enforcement seem futile.

Moreover, study participants mentioned unrelenting community violence and constant fear of being killed as their primary reasons for carrying guns. Even though New York City has enjoyed unprecedented reductions in violent crime rates,^{7,8} such decreases have not been evenly distributed across

the five boroughs. Most of our respondents insisted that violence in the city had not improved. In fact, several study participants were steadfast that gun assaults where they lived had steadily worsened. This unwavering belief may be attributable to our high-risk sample, however. Moreover, our results indicate that the city's gun policies had little impact on young men's decisions to carry. For many of our respondents, being armed provided a much needed sense of security, inspiring a particular young man to announce unapologetically, "I'd rather be caught with it than without it."

Young men reported being well aware of NYPD investigators' struggles to clear fatal and nonfatal shootings. In fact, study participants made frequent reference to officers' inability to apprehend and prosecute assailants. As a result, respondents determined that police could not keep them safe and, as a result, endorsed self-help attitudes, believing that they had a better chance of handling disputes with notoriously violent individuals on their own. Study participants also ascribed the small probability that suspects would be arrested to their prevailing view that police did not care about making communities of color safe. Respondents also maintained that justice dispensed through the courts was not adequately punitive. Thus, rather than cooperate with the police, several young men preferred to take the law into their own hands, meting out exacting street justice. Study participants whose suspected shooters were apprehended and convicted seldom reported feeling a total sense of closure. In actuality, a handful of young men lamented their assailant's arrest because they were planning to retaliate.

Scholars should continue examining the link between citizen perceptions of underpolicing and their endorsement of self-help attitudes and behaviors. Although research findings have shown a relationship between aggressive policing and retaliation (Gau & Brunson, 2015), the impact of low clearance rates on citizen perceptions of police effectiveness and community safety has not been widely explored. Our findings emphasize that high-risk individuals' mistrust of police greatly hinders shooting investigations. As a result, study participants reported lack of faith in police effectiveness and questioned whether there was a genuine commitment to keeping them safe. Consequently, legal cynicism contributed to young men's decisions to seek justice through retaliation.

To date, scholars in only a few studies have been able to present nuanced renderings regarding the interplay of diminished clearance rates and citizen cooperation. Even though through our use of a qualitative study design we may limit generalizability, we call attention to the impact of low clearance rates on high-risk individuals' perceptions regarding whether justice might be served, ultimately shaping their attitudes toward enlisting self-help approaches. Our study design and methodological approach are used to elucidate myriad reasons why urban residents often refuse to cooperate with the police in the aftermath of shootings.

Our results are consistent with those of the broader literature regarding the relationship between legal cynicism and self-help. Furthermore, study findings reveal support for those of prior examinations concerning the adverse impact of heavy-handed crime-control efforts on police–minority community relations. We extend this growing body of work, highlighting the simultaneous impact of under- and overpolicing on neighborhood residents' reluctance to cooperate with the police. Future research should be aimed at quantitatively examining whether there is a causal link between clearance rates and retaliatory violence. An improved understanding of time ordering may go a long way toward informing crime-control policies and police investigative functions.

ENDNOTES

¹ The larger sample consists of 108 respondents (both men and women) between 18 and 53 years old, with a mean age of 29. We limit our discussion and analysis herein, however, to a subsample of young Black men between the ages of 18 and 29 (with a mean age of 20.9) given that they are overrepresented among shooting victims and perpetrators.

- ² Pseudonyms are used throughout the article for study participants and the potentially identifying landmarks they occasionally name.
- ³ We were intentional about not soliciting young men's home addresses. Instead, respondents were asked to provide the names of two cross streets closest to where they lived.
- ⁴ The University of Chicago Crime Lab's Multi-City Study of Underground Gun Markets includes an analysis of New York City's illicit gun market. See Cook, Ludwig, Venkatesh, & Braga, 2007, and Hureau & Braga, 2018, for an analysis of underground gun markets in Chicago and Boston, respectively.
- ⁵ The 2017 precinct- and borough-level crime statistics were retrieved from the NYPD crime data portal: <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/nypd/stats/crime-statistics/borough-and-precinct-crime-stats.page> (accessed August 21, 2018)
- ⁶ See <http://www.betterfamilylife.org>
- ⁷ See https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/nypd/downloads/pdf/analysis_and_planning/historical-crime-data/seven-major-felony-offenses-2000-2017.pdf
- ⁸ See <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/nypd/news/pr0105/fewest-annual-murders-shooting-incidents-ever-recorded-the-modern-era#/0>

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