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Social Processes in Adolescent Violence

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Introduction

A variety of crime indicators tell us that juvenile violence is declining (Snyder and Sickmund, 1999). Homicide victimization and offending are at their lowest levels in a decade. Data from the National Crime Victimization Survey reveal substantial declines in both serious violence and simple assault, juvenile victimization as well as violent victimization by juveniles. These recent trends have not yet been adequately explained by crime researchers. Despite the salutory reductions, violent crime by and against juveniles continues to be a source of public concern and commands considerable resources of our nation's criminal justice and health delivery systems. We lack definitive answers to the puzzle of declining crime rates and to basic questions regarding the initiation, persistence, and desistance of violent offending.

The research described here does not attempt to provide answers to such questions. It focuses neither on offenders nor on victims, but instead seeks to understand the situational factors or circumstances surrounding juvenile violence. Thus, we are concerned here with interactions among adolescents that lead to violent exchanges, the intentions and emotions experienced by the participants, and the role of audiences in instigating, escalating, or defusing violent interactions. Each of these aspects of violent encounters among juveniles may be influenced by gangs, substance use, or the presence of guns. Our focus is on the social processes of the violent incident or the micro-level processes that encompass this form of social interaction. A better understanding of these processes could offer useful direction for efforts to reduce juvenile violence.

The microprocess study is a component of the Juvenile Violence in Los Angeles research project supported by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. The research design employed a variety of methods to investigate violent incidents ranging from simple

assault to homicide and assessed youthful violent offenders and victims as well as youth with no

direct violence exposure. Project reports cover the characteristics of adolescent homicide

(Maxson, Sternheimer, and Klein, 1998) and compare adolescent with other forms of homicide

(Maxson, Klein, and Sternheimer, 2000). Both draw on an intensive data collection from law

enforcement homicide files. Another report that describes the patterns of violence involvement

by youth residing in Los Angeles area neighborhoods with high rates of violence is in

preparation. Each component of the Juvenile Violence in Los Angeles study had a core set of

interrelated research objectives.

In this research, we use a minimally structured interview guide to elicit youth accounts of

the violent incidents in which they have been involved. Our primary goal was to examine the

context in which youth violence occurs. Particular attention was accorded to gangs, substance

use and guns as situational factors in this context. Building on recent research by Decker

(1995), Lockwood (1997), Anderson (1998), and Fagan and Wilkinson (1998), we were alert to

the roles of audience members in escalating conflicts among adolescents. Research also suggests

the significance of the perceptions and attitudes of youth toward violence and the meanings they

attribute to violent conflict resolution (Anderson, 1998; Decker, 1996; Fagan and Wilkinson,

1998). Thus, another research objective was to examine the identity and status processes in these

violent transactions. A final objective was to cull the implications of the research findings for

youth violence prevention efforts. In the final section of this report, we discuss the study

findings relative to other recent research efforts and suggest directions for practitioners implied

by these findings.

METHODS AND SAMPLE DESCRIPTION

Accessing the Sample and Data Collection Procedures

In depth "microprocess" interviews were conducted with a subsample of a larger component of the Los Angeles Juvenile Violence Study. This larger component was a household survey that was conducted in eight Los Angeles county neighborhoods selected for high juvenile violence rates as determined by police arrest data. Six of these areas were in the city of Los Angeles.

In the household survey, a random sample of residences was approached by an interviewer. Where households included at least one male youth between the ages of 12 and 17 years, participation in the household survey was elicited. Face to face interviews with 347 youth spanned a range of individual, family, peer, school and neighborhood factors drawn from the literature on the causes and correlates of youth violence.

The survey contained several questions on violent incidents. If the youth respondent reported either victimization or offending in any one of five (5) violent incident categories[1] within the six months prior to the household interview, and at the conclusion of this survey expressed interest in participating in a follow-up study (this component), the respondent was eligible for participation in the microprocess component.

The microprocess component was not initiated until the household survey component was completed. In order to minimize the loss of cases due to residential mobility, the eligible respondents were contacted, in order, from the most recently completed household interviews to the older interviews; the interviews that were conducted during the first part of the household

survey, in general, were contacted last. Since the household survey data collection spanned more than 18 months, there was as much as a two-year time lag between the two interviews. The microprocess sample aged an average of 15 months (range 1 month to 25 months) beyond the time of the household survey.

The sample target was sixty interviews. A substantial percentage of the household survey sample (55%) indicated neither recent victimization nor offending. Therefore, the initial eligible pool was 156 youth. Contact was attempted with 112 youth in order to complete the targeted number of microprocess interviews. Even with the tracking information (e.g., names and phone numbers of neighbors and relatives) provided by these youth, locating many of them after a span of several months was challenging. Despite several attempts, trackers were unable to locate 30 (27%) youth. Seventeen youth (15%) refused to be interviewed for the second time. Finally, eight youth agreed to be interviewed but were screened out in the early stages of the interview as they could not recall involvement in any violent incidents over the past two years, including those they reported earlier in the household survey.

Analysis of the characteristics of refusals and "unable to locate" groups revealed three noteworthy patterns. Expectedly, as we reached further into the eligible pool (i.e., youth that had been surveyed in the beginning stages of the household component), youth were more difficult to locate. Second, older youth were less likely to be included in the final sample of the microprocess component because they aged out of the targeted incident range (i.e., recalled incidents occurred after the age of 18) and they were more likely to refuse participation in the second interview. These older youth were also more difficult to find as they had moved out of

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[1] The type of violence included throwing rocks or bottles at people (or having them thrown at you), being in a gang fight, hitting someone with the idea of hurting them (or being hit), attacking someone with a weapon (or being

5

their primary caretaker's household into their own homes. Finally, youth residents in one area accounted for a higher proportion of refusals. We were unable to determine the reasons for this area-specific pattern. After one year of data collection (October 1997 to October 1998), we reached a point of diminishing returns and concluded the active period of collection. Thus, although sixty-five interviews were conducted, only 54 are in the final sample. In addition to the eight youths who could recall no violence involvement, three interviews were discarded because the interviewer erred in accepting descriptions of events that occurred more than two years prior to the interview (there may have been more recent events that the interviewer failed to capture).

There were five interviewers throughout the active period of the collection. Two of these also conducted the household survey and were thus acquainted with the sample neighborhoods, and in many cases had conducted the household survey with the youth. Two of the remaining interviewers were residents of one of the sample areas. There were three men and two were women.

The interviewers were monitored closely by the component director and were in close contact with the component director throughout the data collection phase through weekly updates, office visits with completed interviews, or quarterly staff meetings. The interviewers participated in a two-day training session, which included mock interviews and an extensive discussion of the interview schedule. Each interviewer was issued an interview manual that addressed a variety of issues that the interviewer may encounter during an interview and out in the field. A micro-cassette recorder and a supply of batteries, tapes and interview schedules were also provided.

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attacked), and using a weapon or force to make someone give you money or things (or being robbed).

Upon completion of training, the interviewers were given a list of eligible youth to contact for interviews. The information given to the interviewer was as detailed as possible. For example, along with the name, age, and address of the youth and his neighbor and/or relative, interviewers also received the history of tracking done on the first survey. This history provided the interviewers with a sense of the accessibility to the youth and any peculiarities during the first interview and with the residence or sample area. The interviewer also was given the date of first interview, name of the primary caretaker, and the types of incidents the youth reported during the first interview.

In most cases, a telephone number was provided. Thus, the first contact was made by phone. If this method proved unsuccessful, the interviewer visited the residence in the hopes of interviewing the youth or determining if he still was living in the residence. Six relocated youth were successfully interviewed. Only after a confirmation that the youth was no longer in the residence and/or "inaccessible" (i.e., moved out of state) did the interviewer return this "eligible" to the component director. The component director would, as a last attempt, send a letter to the old address on file to capture a forwarding address. Thirty letters were sent out and only one youth contacted our office for an interview.

The interviews took place in the youth's residence in a central location (i.e., living room or kitchen table). However, if the interviewer determined that there could be a loss of privacy and confidentiality, the interview would move to a bedroom (door open), the porch, or in some cases, a car. The length of the interviews ranged from 45 minutes to three hours, with interviews lasting on average one hour and forty-five minutes. At the conclusion of the interview, the youth was paid $30.

With one exception, the interviews were recorded with the youth's consent, and transcribed. The interviewers also took notes on the interview schedule in case of recorder malfunction, tape breakage or difficulty in deciphering the dialogue during transcription. The interviewers were expected to fill in missing portions of the interview if the transcriber could not understand or hear the taped interview. Three interviews were entirely reconstructed using the interviewer notes. Interviewers reviewed the tape for any malfunction, supplemented notes where passages were unclear, and kept a journal explaining any impressions from the interview and/or anomalies that occurred during the contact with the youth.

Finally, the coding and cleaning of the interview data were accomplished with the aid of the qualitative software, NUDIST. The transcribed interviews were uploaded into the system to create a database for the project. A series of "nodes" or categories were devised to organize the interview data. Each interview was coded by the component director and entered into the system by one coder.

Characteristics of the Sample

The analytic focus of this component is on the violent incident rather than on characteristics of individuals who are involved in violence. The individual, family, peer, school and neighborhood factors associated with violence involvement are addressed in a separate report derived from the household survey component. Reflecting the race/ethnic composition of the study neighborhoods, the 54 adolescents who completed the microprocess interview were black or Latino (see Table 1). Subject ages at the time of the microprocess interview were well distributed among the categories with slightly more youth falling in the younger and older age ranges.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Interviewed Youth (N=54)

Gender	100 percent male
Race/Ethnicity	42 percent black 56 percent Hispanic/Latino 2 percent bi-racial
Age	35 percent 12-14 years 28 percent 15-16 years 37 percent 17-19 years

The microprocess interview sample has a higher proportion of blacks than the household sample (42% vs. 28%) and fewer youth in the lowest age category (35% vs. 55%). The age difference between the two samples is the result of the lag time between the two sets of interviews. The ethnic difference reflects the higher exposure to violence among blacks than Latinos found in the household sample.

Incident Definition and Characteristics

The interview schedule was devised to elicit a full description of different types of violent incidents, with a focus on a variety of situational or contextual factors. In order to gain rapport with the youth, each interview began with the youth providing some information on his neighborhood, including life in the neighborhood, safety issues and comparisons to other neighborhoods. After completing this section, the interviewer recited a script soliciting the most recent violent incident experienced by the youth. Following the reporting of the first/most recent incident, the youth was prompted to describe violent incidents in the following prioritized sequence: gang, gun/firearm, fights (without weapons), and other weapon use. This tactic was utilized to elicit reports about different types of incidents. If these series of prompts did not produce any recollection of violence participation, the youth was again reminded of the incidents

he reporting during the household survey. The youth was interviewed about up to three separate incidents.

Youth responses to these procedures often included accounts of events in which they were not directly involved or did not fall within the parameters of the study's definition of a violent incident (described below). Interviewers were trained to convey to subjects the nature of the incidents of interest and to discuss the meaning of the terms employed in the interview. The interviewer determined whether the event met study eligibility requirements from a series of questions posed at the beginning of each recollection from the youth.

For this study, an eligible violent incident has three necessary features. First, there must be a series of events that occur within a relatively contained frame of time, usually with a noted beginning and ending (not lasting more than a 24-hour period). Prior interactions or events that were related to or precipitated the incident were recorded, but analysis focused on the events most proximal to violent interactions. The second feature of an eligible incident was that there needed to be two or more individuals involved in an altercation that produces acts of aggression. The interviewed youth had to be one of these individuals. The youth could be a victim and/or offender but not solely a witness or audience member. Finally, the incident must have occurred within two years of the microprocess interview. This prevented the inclusion of incidents that were so old that the youth would have difficulty remembering the particulars of the incidents with sufficient detail.

The violent incidents in the study included intentional, interpersonal, physical injury or the credible threat of such injury. An act of aggression must have been present. Injury severity ranged from a gunshot or knife wound to a black eye or bruise. If there was no physical injury, a

10

strong, credible and present threat of injury such as putting a knife to an individual's neck was present.

Violent incidents involving weapons were broken down into two categories: guns/firearms and other weapons. A gun incident has two features. The first is that a gun is utilized by either participant in the violent incident (the youth or some other person involved), and second, the gun must be fired or used in a threatening manner such as pointing the gun or releasing the safety. Other weapons incidents included any instrument other than a firearm that was used as a weapon by a participant in the violent incident. The presence of guns with other weapons was categorized as a gun incident. The use of hands and feet with no other weapon was a separate category, fights.

Finally, a violent incident was considered a gang incident if either the interviewed youth or the other person(s) involved in the incident was a gang member. A gang motive for the conflict was not necessary; gang membership of participants was sufficient. Gang witnesses or audience members were not sufficient to categorize the incident as a gang incident.

Because the youth selected for this microprocess component resided in neighborhoods with the highest juvenile violence arrest rates in Los Angeles county and were pre-screened for violent offending and/or victimization in the household interview, we anticipated that many sampled youth could report on numerous specific incidents of violence. The interview schedule was designed to capture reports of the types of incidents of most interest—those with gang and/or gun involvement.

The structure of the interview schedule accorded priority to obtaining accounts of gang incidents over those without gang involvement. This emphasis reflected the goals of the larger project, the context of youth violence in Los Angeles, and the investigators' interests. In a

continuation of our program of gang research, the microprocess component afforded the opportunity to explore the dynamics of gang violence in a situational context.

A second major objective of the larger project concerned firearm use. Increased availability and use of firearms was a major contributor to elevated rates of youth homicide during the late 1980s. Thus, a priority was placed on soliciting accounts of violent incidents that included firearms.

The microprocess interviews with the 54 youths failed to generate the volume of incident descriptions originally anticipated. After applying the incident eligibility criteria presented earlier, just 82 incidents were available for analysis. Most youth (29 or 54%) could describe just one violent incident over the two years preceding the interview. Twenty-two youth (41%) recounted two incidents, and just 3 youth (5%) described three incidents. While the possibility that the interview method led to underreporting of violence exists, the more likely explanation is that we overestimated the degree of violence involvement of this sample. Research that targets unincarcerated youth samples must accommodate to low violence prevalence rates. When alerted to the lower than anticipated multiple incident rates in this sample, we considered relaxing the criteria for violence, but opted to retain the study's focus on interpersonal acts of aggression with injuries or the credible threat of injury.

The interview procedures yielded a range of incident types that frame the analyses reported in the following sections. The frequency of incident types is shown in Table 2, ordered according to the priorities incorporated into the protocol (see first column, which separates gang incidents from nongang which are listed by weapon type). Table 2 also shows the distribution of weapons used with the gang cases integrated. It should be noted that because the interview

12

protocol directed reports of certain types of incidents over others, this distribution is not

representative of the violent incident profiles of these youths.[2]

Table 2: Frequency of Types of Incidents

	Gang Separated	Gang Integrated
Gang-involved	27% (22)	---
Gun use/threat	9% (7)	13% (11)
Fights (no weapons)	46% (38)	65% (53)
Other weapon use	18% (15)	22% (18)
Total	100% (82)	100% (82)

Just over one-fourth of the incidents included a gang member participant. Fights were the

most common form of incident reported. The use of guns occurred in just 13 percent of cases.

More common than guns was the presence of other weapons, usually knives. Despite the

location of the research in Los Angeles neighborhoods selected for youth violence and the use of

procedures geared toward capturing the most serious end of the violence spectrum, the incidents

reported here can be characterized as mid-range or of moderate seriousness. Guns and life-

threatening injury are rare, yet these events presented the youths with the threat of real harm.

These incidents are more reflective of the violence experienced by youth living in high-risk

neighborhoods than the far more unusual homicide events addressed by our earlier report

(Maxson et al., 1998).

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[2] For example, a second or third gang incident would not be recorded if the youth was involved in non-gang gun incidents.

13

INCIDENT CHARACTERISTICS

The results of this incident analysis will be presented in two sections. First, a general descriptive overview of the incidents reported by the youth sample will be given. Here, characteristics of the setting (location, day of week, time) and weapons, drug and gang involvement will provide a general profile of the incidents. The nuances of audience participation emerged as a focus in this part of the analysis, and concludes this section on incident characteristics. These situational characteristics provide a context for the next section that highlights qualitative aspects of the data.

Setting Characteristics

The times and locations of these incidents reflect adolescent routines and lifestyles. Most of the incidents took place during weekdays, and relatively few on weekends. The majority occurred during the daytime, and these were roughly split between an after-school category (from 3-6pm) and during school hours. Just one-fourth of the incidents took place in the evening or night, presenting a sharp contrast with adolescent homicides, which frequently occur late at night. Unfortunately, missing data on day of the week precluded a more detailed analysis of time by day, but the youths' reports of incident location reinforce this depiction of risk during school day, daytime hours.

Although location of the incident could be coded in just over half of the incidents, the most common single location cited was on school grounds. Seventeen of the incidents took place in school playgrounds, gyms, hallways, bathrooms and classrooms. Another common location was neighborhood streets (11), cars (4), or parking areas (4). A third category encompassed places where youth congregate: parks or basketball courts (6), parties or clubs (4), and malls (1). Strikingly, just two incidents occurred in a residence. Again, the case numbers are too small for

further breakdown, but we could find no distinct pattern of weapon type and location. About three-fourths of the school-located incidents were fistfights, approximating the distribution among all incidents (65%).

The times and locations of these incidents suggest that youth violence prevention and intervention programs might be profitably focused on school settings and after school activities. These data lend support to the recent attention ascribed to violence prevention in schools, but suggest also that such efforts should not preclude a continued focus on other community locales, particularly those most attractive to youth.

Focal Issues: Gangs, Drugs and Guns

Gang involvement, drug and/or alcohol use, and gun access are pivotal issues in youth violence research and prevention. Accordingly, the interview protocol was structured to capture these elements as they surfaced in the youths' depictions of these violent incidents. The prevalence of gang involvement was far lower in these moderately serious events than was the case in our analyses of adolescent homicides, where four out of five incidents had gang member participants. Similarly, gun presence was rarely a feature of the non-lethal violent interactions but were used in 90 percent of adolescent homicides. While we believe that drug and alcohol use were not recorded reliably in the police homicide investigation files (see Maxson, et al., 1998), these substances did not figure prominently in youth accounts of non-lethal violence either. This section details the aspects of these three focal issues emerging in the youths' reports. In general, gangs, drugs, and guns did not surface as critical vectors in these incidents.

Gangs

Twenty-two (27%) of the incidents were selected as gang-involved on the basis of gang membership of one of the primary participants. Few respondents identified themselves as gang

members. In most instances, the gang incident designation arose from the respondent's perception that his opponent was a gang member, but as will be discussed later, such perceptions are often based on stereotypic notions of gangs. Just nine of the incidents were reported to have gang motives, typically attributed to rivalry between opposing gangs. The 22 gang cases were examined for distinctive patterns that emerged in our investigation of adolescent gang homicides. Among homicides, it was found that gang involvement was correlated with a variety of distinct case characteristics (e.g., ecological contexts, weapons, circumstances and participants). Comparable differences between gang and non-gang non-lethal violent incidents did not emerge. Similar to the non-gang incidents, violent encounters with gang members were most often fistfights (15 of the 22), and rarely involved firearms (4 cases). They usually took place during the week and during daytime hours. School locations were cited in seven gang incidents, which was the most common location mentioned, but this variable was not adequately captured in half of the cases. Finally, and surprising from the standpoint of our homicide research, gang cases did not appear more likely to have audiences present on the incident scene.

Despite the lack of a distinctive pattern of characteristics among gang cases, many of these incidents reflected the behavioral indicators of gang aggression that are common in homicides. The throwing of hand signs, the hard, cold stares commonly called "mad dogging," and gang-specific verbal challenges were prominent in the youths' accounts. Each indicator was present in about half of the gang cases.

Gang members (the respondent, his opponent, or gang affiliated audience-observers) frequently used distinctive hand signs to "claim" their gang:

> They was throwing up signs...[They do that] because they were saying, you know, they were tough. 03-924

16

Verbal challenges ranged from asking the youth where he was from (our homicide research reveals that there are few safe answers to this query) to taunting with the gang name before, during and after the incident. Verbal challenges and hand signs often were used together:

> He threw it [hand sign] and said, '[his gang]...' [He did it] to make himself look bad, I suppose. 08-621

> [He claimed his gang] by shouting, just shouting it out...and throwing up, you know, the signs. 04-1231

Mad dogging was a common feature in gang incidents, but also occasionally surfaced in encounters that had no other gang indicators. As is illustrated by the following quote, mad dogging sometimes engendered violent responses.

> Yeah. While they were talking to us. It was like they were mad dogging us and we were mad dogging them back...So I guess it was just a problem from there. 09-220

The analysis of gang elements of these youthful violent encounters yields little direction for prevention programming. Only a handful of the incidents were gang-on-gang events and even though gang behaviors served as a catalyst for violence in some cases, we could find no distinctive pattern that might guide special gang intervention efforts. On the contrary, these data suggest that a gang-specific focus to such efforts might well miss the mark, as a full three-fourths of the violent encounters reported by the sample of respondents contained no gang aspects at all. Gang motives were rare. The typical explanation, reported in half of all cases, was previous altercations or negative encounters between the youth and his opponent or some other person close to either party. These were personal conflicts reflecting a history of just not "getting along," and a few (6) instances of conflicts over girl friends. Such conflicts may well be inevitable among adolescent males, yet they need not escalate to violent resolutions. Our analysis did not find gang issues to be significant instigators.

17

Alcohol and Drug Use

The violence research literature finds alcohol and drug use to be important factors in involvement in serious and violent offending, as well as in the escalation of conflict to violence (Huizinga and Jacob-Chien, 1998). In the violent incidents reported by this youth sample, neither alcohol nor drug use appeared to be a significant feature. Fourteen respondents stated that their opponents had been drinking during, or just prior to, the conflict. In six of these, the respondent acknowledged drinking as well and in one additional case the respondent was drinking but the opponent was not. In total, alcohol consumption was reported in less than one in five incidents, and relatively few respondents reported that alcohol affected the escalation or the outcome of the conflict. More common were denials of any effect:

He probably would have did that to me even if he wasn't with the alcohol. 04-852

That's just what they do. They don't have to be drinking alcohol to be like that. 05-581

Sometimes alcohol emerged as an element in the accounts of violence, but was imbedded with a host of other factors. For example, one respondent mentioned alcohol, guns, and gang issues in his depiction of a violent encounter:

They turned from cool to rowdy in a few seconds and it was just like…they planned it…get drunk, trip on somebody so somebody else will trip so they can come shoot up this party…we tellin' them we don't gang bang, we just graduated from school…and it was time for us to leave. 09-220

Reports of drug use were similarly rare in these cases (17), and most youth could not describe an effect on the outcome. In a few cases, a psycho-pharmacological effect of drugs appeared to escalate the incident:

Cause weed make you feel like you have power. Weed has, will change your mind. From the reactions I have with people, you know, before and after, you know, they change their whole appearance…. But from the reaction, I think he was on narcotics.

Cause he hada be on alcohol and narcotics cause he had heart, you know, unless he's just mentally crazy. 04-1231

It gave him more guts...more strength. 08-1097

Of the eight incidents where youths cited a drug effect, six involved marijuana use.

Gun Use

None of the youths admitted possessing a firearm in these cases. Opponents had guns in 11 (13%) of all recorded incidents and only in three was the gun fired. One youth respondent was shot multiple times. Usually, firearms were used in a threatening manner, such as pointing the gun at the youth or his companion, or with the more subtle approach of revealing a gun tucked in the waistband of his pants. Occasionally, youths reported that an uninvolved witness had a gun (three additional cases). The small number of gun cases makes analyses of further characteristics difficult, but we could detect no suggestion of any particular pattern. The location of these gun incidents varied from a parking lot at a school dance, to a park, to a youth club, to the streets. Just one incident involved a shooting from one car to another. Their occurrence appeared distributed throughout the week. Four of the 11 cases involved gang members.

While guns were not present in the vast majority of our incidents, they surfaced in youth accounts in other ways. When asked whether they were afraid during the incident, and if so why, the anticipation of serious injury from firearms was notable.

> When he (older guy) was on the ground...I felt more vulnerable then. Because the older guy, I didn't know if he could have been putting off some type of weapon...he could have even had a gun, try shooting us...You figure somebody that old come up to you, they got some kind of weapon on them. 05-1230

> I didn't know what he could have done. He could have...picked up a weapon or something. 09-226

> When I heard about the gun...Guns kill. Stupid people...guns kill. 05-311

In contrast, one youth made it clear that guns were not a source of fear to him.

> During the fight at the moment, I didn't care if he took out a gun. I would tell him, 'you make sure you kill me, because I am going to come back for you.' At the time, I was not thinking about it...I wanted to get my anger out. 03-082

In summary, the issues that seem to garnish the most attention in the public discourse about youth violence–gangs, drugs, and guns–did not surface as critical dimensions in these youths' accounts of the violence they experience. While some incidents are gang involved–about one in four–most are not. And gang involvement does not appear, in these non-lethal incidents, to carry with it the distinctive qualities we've identified in homicides. Some of these incidents involve alcohol and/or drugs–about one in five–but most do not. And no strong evidence for serious effects of substance use on violence escalation was found. Finally, gun use was also uncommon in these accounts; most were fistfights. While it is important to remember that this is a limited sample of accounts of violent incidents, from a non-representative sample of youth, these findings raise challenges for policy makers and violence prevention advocates. Policies and programs based on the characteristics of youth homicides have far less relevance for the types of violence described by these youths. These violent incidents are fights most often stemming from prior altercations, among boys who just don't get along with one another. High profile programs targeted at gangs, or at drugs, or at guns, are unlikely to have an impact on these far more common forms of youth violence.

Audiences to Violent Youth Encounters

One of the strongest themes to emerge from the data was the presence of an audience in these violent incidents. A witness or audience member is an individual who is at the incident as an observer. Usually, this person is an uninvolved person who watches the incident as it unfolds. Sometimes witnesses act to escalate the altercation or may attempt to intervene to stop the

conflict. The relative non-involvement and the neutral status of the person (at least at the onset of the incident) distinguish audience members from participants [either the youth or his opponent(s)]. Within the 82 incidents, 20 cases could not be coded for this variable because of ambiguous youth accounts. Just 10 cases had no one present beyond the participants. Fifty-two incidents had an audience. The audience/witness number ranged from 1 to 150; the median was 10 audience members. Four types of audience reaction were apparent: escalating, de-escalating, a combination of escalating/de-escalating, and passive.

An escalating audience displays actions that "intensify" the altercation. Thirteen of the incidents had escalating audience members.

> I guess people just like to see people react...So I guess they just wanted to see
> how I was going to react personally...So they were trying to pump me up. 05-1230

Many of these escalating audience members were the youths' peers whereas the age composition of de-escalating audiences was more varied.

There were nine incidents with de-escalating audience members. A de-escalating audience's actions reduce the intensity or serve to stop the altercation. Family members, older neighbors, school personnel, and some bystanders were common de-escalators. Nine incidents had audience members who both escalated and de-escalated the violent act. On occasion, an individual audience member would shift roles as the incident progressed.

> I'd say when he, when he (opponent's father-in-law) kind of stopped it, it was pretty much
> over except he just hit me twice. 05-1074

The fourth type of audience, passive, does not participate in any action during the course of the incident. There were 14 incidents that involved passive audience members. They are just "watching" the incident. Members of passive audiences included peers, family members, school

personnel, neighbors and strangers. No category of person was more common than any other category.

It is perhaps not surprising that peer audiences are likely to escalate conflict. More surprising was that in a similar number of incidents, observers, often adults, and sometimes, family members or school authorities, did nothing to intervene in the situation. We mentioned earlier that non-violent conflict resolution training might be the most beneficial prevention technique to address the types of incidents captured in this research. The analysis of audience roles described here implies that such training might profitably be extended to other residents of neighborhoods at high-risk for youth violence.

YOUTH PERCEPTIONS OF VIOLENCE INVOLVEMENT

To this point in this analysis, we have emphasized the quantification of the interview responses about violence involvement. It is also our intention, however, to try to capture a bit more phenomenologically the youths' perceptions and attitudes about these incidents. At this point we depart from the categorical analysis and elaborate the feelings of violence as suggested by the youths and as understood by our interviewers and as interpreted by us.

Victim and Offender Roles

Early in the analysis it became apparent that the clear designation of opposing roles in many of our violent incidents would be problematic. Simplistic notions of predatory offenders and innocent victims often became hard to maintain in neighborhoods where violence between youths is either commonplace or commonly anticipated.

In studies using police reports or other official recording of incidents, we have used role designations such as suspect, offender, victim, informant, and witness. We had hoped to use these same designations in the current analysis as well. For example, we used designations of

audience or witnesses to the events to describe their impact on the escalation or de-escalation of the levels of violence. We hoped as well to view separately the role of "immediate" participants (the direct opponents) and the roles of "aligned" participants on the victim's side and offender's side in the conflict. In official reports, this is possible because investigating officers are accustomed to making such differentiation to frame their descriptions for assumed clarity and evidentiary utility.

We found that youth did not conceptualize the involved individuals through these more legalistic lenses. They described individual modes of participation in more fluid terms, often as ambiguous points along a continuum of participation, and it is these descriptions that our interviewers attempted to capture. Participation ranged from passivity or mere observation on one end of the continuum to active involvement as victim, or offender, or audience. An individual's role often changed during the course of an incident.

For purposes of the collection of the data, it was not important for the interviewer to ascertain whether the youth was the victim and/or the offender; this determination was to be made during the data analysis. Instead, we stressed to the interviewer that he/she must attempt to clarify the opposing sides. However, even this proved difficult for the interviewers. Furthermore, along with the difficulty in categorizing participation of individuals at the scene, it was difficult to capture victim and/or offender status later at the coding and analysis stage of the component. The fluidity of participation is prevalent in the actions of the youth and the participants as well. Thus, we changed our terminology slightly to accommodate this feature. The youth and his "opponent," at times, exhibited both victim and offender actions.

Two Bases of Knowledge

The dynamic nature of participation roles emerged as a hallmark of these youthful violent incidents. Another emergent theme was the differences among youths in perception or knowledge of surroundings, people, expected outcomes and actions. These differences were found in three areas that, together, factor into almost any discussion of juvenile-involved violence, particularly in the Los Angeles region. These areas are gangs, drugs/alcohol and guns.

In these three areas, the sampled youth seem to exhibit two levels of knowledge and/or perception. Although gang incidents comprise less than 30 percent (22 out of 82) of the total incidents collected for this component, the youths' descriptions are full of references to gang characteristics within these incidents and, also in their neighborhoods. Some youth appear very knowledgeable about their surroundings, circumstances they may encounter, individuals within their communities, and the expected actions of these individuals. Their statements were based on experience and observation.

> I very much doubt he is [a gang member] because the crowd that he said he's affiliated with. I see the crowd all the time. I never see him, never...I'll probably be at the park...and they have their little picnics...and I never see him.   04-1231

They are aware of the gang activities and members within the neighborhoods.

> They had tattoos over [their] body. They were sagging. They were throwing gang signs. For sure, a gang. I know their gang name.   08-434

> They know...you know they know that we know where they from. There...wouldn't be another gang in that place. Another gang would know...there gonna be gangsters there from my school in the same place...They'd know they'd be there...And like we know them. We know that they go to the school. They...off in that gang. We know. 07-694

This subset of the youth has a more detailed knowledge of individuals, particularly gang members, in their neighborhoods. One youth's explanation or justification for labeling or indicating that an individual in the incident is a gang member illustrates this.

> They symbolized the gangs through hands. They verbalized their gangs.
> Gang tattooed on their shoulders, arms, chest, forehead. [They do that]
> because that's where they are from. That's what they represent. 05-311

The second group of youth suggests a different source for their knowledge, one that is not based on experience or observation but on stereotypes and perhaps, media exposure. This may be surprising to many because we perceive that all youth living within violent neighborhoods where drugs/alcohol, gangs and guns abound are at least, knowledgeable about them.

Although few youth respondents admitted gang membership, there were many opponents that the youth identified as gang members. Some of these assessments appeared to be based on stereotypes. For instance, many youth responded to interviewer queries about information sources for the attribution of an opponent or audience member's gang membership by citing stereotypic gang dress or other distinguishing characteristics.

> The other looked like a gang member. This is because, he wore baggy
> pants and a tank top. 05-331

> The other guys looked like they were [gang members]. They looked like
> it because they were bald. 10-337

> I don't think [they were gang members]...cuz they were pretty old
> already. 07-694

> Cause the way he was dressed...the rough, rough look...eyes kinda
> squinched down...the way he was just like riding around like observing
> everything...[laughs]... like somebody after him. 04-606

Quite possibly, these youth are conditioned to suspect dangerous or tough looking individuals as likely gang members. When they are assessing the situations and the individuals within these

situations, they seem to resort to these stereotypes. For this set of youth, it might be safer to assume an individual is a gang member than to err in doing the opposite. An error of this type may result in possible injury, even death.

The other guy was [a gang member]. Most people are. 04-632

The more knowledgeable group discussed gang membership in fluid terms. For example, when prompted about their membership status or the status of others, some youth indicate that they themselves are not members but hang out with gang members because they are childhood friends. Some youth stated that they were members but aren't anymore or they weren't members and now are.

> I asked the youth about [not a gang member] because previously he had said he was a member of [a gang], his neighborhood gang, but he had never been initiated in. I asked him whether he considered himself a member of this gang, and he said, 'not right now.' I asked, 'What about at the time of the incident?' And he said, 'No, not really.' The youth still associated with members of this gang at the time of the interview. 01-012

Youth may associate or affiliate with a gang at any given time. The determinants for affiliation, or for membership during certain situations, circumstances, or periods of time for these youth are important to uncover to understand the persistent presence and the allure of gangs for youth. Membership may not be as clearly demarcated as suggested in some research studies, and certainly as suggested in many official documents and legislation.

However, if the youth within high violence neighborhoods do not view gang membership or affiliation in the same ways that outsiders do, the low numbers of admitted gang members in our data may be a function of the difference in perception of gang membership. That is, a youth who spends time with his childhood friends who are gang members may be considered a gang member to outside individuals or law enforcement agencies. Further, this same youth may, at

times, be a participant in violent incidents. Yet, the only motivation for his participation may be one childhood friend sticking up for another. Furthermore, we must be aware that among our sampled youth, some may be more knowledgeable and some less knowledgeable about their surroundings. Living in a violence-prone neighborhood does not presuppose this. A resident youth perceives his situations, his actions, and the action of others based on knowledge or information from sources that are often inaccurate, sometimes inflated, and not easily predicted.

Guns and Drugs

These two levels of knowledge, informed and stereotypic, are found in discussions of guns and drugs/alcohol as well. Discussions of drugs/alcohol, guns and gangs often appear in the same incident descriptions and are connected by youth to one another. Thus, the connection of gangs, guns and drugs mentioned extensively in the literature and within the public sphere is manifested within these data as well. Many youth believe that if a gang member is involved in the incident, the presence of a gun is expected.

> He probably did [had a gun]. He probably had a...razorblade in his
> mouth...[I got that] because of watching TV...Just a weapon on him
> because he is gangster. 04-606

Furthermore, the youth pepper their discussions of incidents by stating that there were rumors of somebody (either witnesses or others involved) having a gun with the possibility of use if the incident escalated into a more lengthy and serious altercation.

> [Having a gun makes a difference]...if they have had guns, they would have shot us. 03-
> 924

Similarly, the picture or "knowledge" of drugs is also linked to gangs.

It is important to repeat that these findings are from the youths' perspective. That is, the presence of alcohol or drug consumption and their impact on the escalation into violence is

judged by the youth to be significant to the outcome of the dispute. It may be subject to the youths' decision to discuss the effects of drugs/alcohol, their own consumption, or even the difficulty in ascertaining the drug and alcohol use by the other participants.

Most respondents were either unwilling or unable to describe drug use specific to the situation. Respondents indicated that their opponent(s) took drugs in 17 cases. Some respondents seemed knowledgeable about the method of detecting drug use. For example, they are able to distinguish between the effects of different drugs on a person.

> If it was drugs, then I think he must have sniffed some cocaine, somethin'
> to be windy like that...You gotta be on somethin'...The way he was talking,
> it sounded like he had a little drool to his mouth. 04-1231

Others characterized drug use as a feature of gang members who get involved in violence.

> Them gangsters like to get...high...Just the way they are. 07-694

Although we were able to describe two modes of knowledge on gangs, drug and gun knowledge is more diffuse. The perceived linkage between the gangs, guns, and drugs emerges in the incident descriptions, but the feature with the weakest connection is drugs.

Emotions and Status Elements in Violent Interactions

One of the issues of interest for this component was to view the youth's emotional state either preceding, during, or following the incidents. It is difficult to capture these emotions within other forms of data collection. Even in detailed interviews, emotions that the youth experience during an incident can be hard to capture, either because they don't remember or they don't articulate them well. Nevertheless, there are some recurrent themes in many of the youths' descriptions.

Each respondent was asked to determine when, during the course of the incident, they felt three different emotions: fear, anger, and relief. Youth often felt relief and happiness when they were winning or felt that they were actually beating their opponent(s).

> Happy when I was hitting him... and it felt good... I felt happiest when I last hit him... I just hit him and that felt good. That was the cleanest one, that's like the best one. 05-1074

With respect to anger, many focused on the opponent's actions that, in their eyes, precipitated the violence. The next frequently mentioned category was that there was no time that the youth felt anger. Finally, smaller numbers indicated that they felt angry immediately after the incident or felt anger only during the incident.

The sampled youth indicate that they experienced fear when they felt the incident could get worse—either with the threat of a gun or use of another weapon, or a chance for a serious injury resulting from the continuation of the incident. Some of the youth experienced fear at the very beginning of the incident while others indicated that they were fearful when they thought that someone might find out that they were involved in the incident and their involvement would get them in trouble.

Many youth expressed emotions attached to specific violent activity. Others described the motives of the incident in more functional terms.

> They just want to prove their manhood to each other and they want to send the message out that they thought they could get over on [us]. That we were punks basically. Just respect and they thought we were pushovers. 05-1230

Many of our sampled youth felt that, within the context of these reported incidents, they had no other alternative action but to act violently. Youth in 38 different incidents indicated that they had reacted appropriately to the set of circumstances as compared to youth in 23 incidents in

which they felt they had reacted inappropriately. Using violence is not seen as deviating from the norm.

> If somebody threatens you, you don't know what to expect, like you
> don't know if they're gonna really do it or you don't know if you should
> just throw up your shirt and...forget about it. But, for me,...incidents like
> that...it's real hard though, it's hard. 04-852

> And he pushed my friend...And my friend just kind of fall back and then,
> my friend sock him. But it was no violence. He socked him. 05-1230

Guns and drugs were discussed as functional elements in these incidents. Guns were used to intimidate opponents, to provide status among peers, and to engender respect or create fear.

> The guy who had it, flashed it. I think it was to scare us. I don't think he would
> have used it...Having a firearm made a difference because I think it scared my
> friend. 05-331

> I think he wanted...his friends, you know to brag. 04-1231

> [He didn't use it] cause it's scary...I don't think he would have. 05-1074

The duration and intensity of the incidents may escalate the use of the gun to actually firing instead of just the threat. Further exploration into the mechanisms for the actual use of firearms is needed to ascertain the move from a status builder, fear-producer to an actual injury-inflicting, potentially fatal function. Our data suggest, in most cases, that guns are not used to cause injury or death.

Many of the youth in this sample either saw the use of violence as status enhancing or actually used violence in this manner. In some cases, they explicitly state that violence, guns and aggressive actions are used to enhance themselves to the audience. Also, the youth believed that the presence of guns, whether by the involved participants or the audience, is utilized by the owner to intimidate those individuals in the incident (both participants and audience members).

> You know how they put up their shirt like to scare you like they have a
> gun or something. 07-694

Similarly, the respondents felt that drugs could provide courage. According to some respondents, the consumption of a controlled substance by one of the participants made the incident worse.

> It gave him more guts...More strength. 08-1097

Many of the respondents indicated that drugs gave the user a sense of fearlessness or power and thus, they would do things that they would not normally do.

> You know, they say...drugs make you do...un-normal things so I
> think...drugs helped him to do it. 05-176

> It keeps the emotions rise up. It plays something that really ain't there but gives
> you a feeling that something's really there. 05-311

Guns and drugs enhanced status. Similarly, anticipation of audience members' reaction to the violence sometimes provided a catalyst to violence. Most of the youth in the sample indicated that the decisions they and others made to behave violently in these situations were partly based on how others would see their actions. Approved actions can enhance status, but also provide a context for the risk of lost status.

> There was a whole lot of ways they could have...just left it alone, without it
> escalating to what it did. Cuz...it was mostly like they were trying to impress
> other people. But the people that they were trying to impress couldn't see
> anyway. 09-220

The need to "save face," "act tough," or "defend themselves" was explicitly stated by just a handful of adolescents. However, elements of status enhancement permeate these accounts of violent encounters, particularly in the presence of audiences. As discussed earlier, audience members can intervene directly during the course of the incident in either an escalating or de-escalating fashion, or both. But regardless of any direct action taken, audiences also function in

a critical role as mere audiences, as observers to character contests, able to confer or diminish the status of participants.

The Violent Neighborhood Context

Two final and clearly related points can be drawn from these interviews, both stemming in part from the fact that our interviews were done in eight of the most violent areas for youth in Los Angeles County. The first is our impression that, for many respondents, the incidents they reported and the presence of violence within them were quite "natural." They accepted the violence as a normal part of their young lives. While there were expressions of fear and anger, there was also quite a bit of relief and even pleasure in the use of violence as an interpersonal mechanism. Violence was not surprising, not unexpected, and in some real sense, normal.

The second point is particularly pertinent to thoughts about conflict resolution. In answer to interviewer probes of whether the incidents had taught any lessons, of whether the youth would respond differently the next time, many indicated that they would respond in much the same way again. The experience of fear and anger reported by many were not sufficient to overcome violent behavior as normative responses.

These normative responses to confrontational incidents appeared to be a function of the neighborhoods canvassed. The widespread visibility of gangs, guns, and drugs has effects beyond those directly involved. The majority of youth who completed the household survey reported being warned by parents about gangs, a lot of gang activity, gang rivalries close by, and a lot of talk about gang in their neighborhood. Over one-third of the youth said that there was pressure on neighborhood youth to join gangs. One in four youths knew where they could get a gun in their neighborhood and specified an average of four specific places they could go to get a

gun. Violence exposure begats violence in a circular fashion. In such circumstances, it is neighborhoods more than individuals who must be the focus of attempts at social change.

SUMMARY, DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR VIOLENCE INTERVENTION

This study used an in-depth interview method to gather information about 82 violent encounters from 54 male adolescents. The subjects participated in a prior household survey of youth residing in Los Angeles neighborhoods noted for high rates of juvenile violence. Surveyed youth who indicated violent victimization or offending during the six months prior to the survey (45% of surveyed sample of 347 subjects) were eligible for the follow-up interview. The most recently surveyed youth were targeted for the microprocess interview component. Considerable attrition (42% of those with whom contact was attempted) was due to residential mobility and refusals.

This attrition limits the ability to generalize these youths' accounts of their violence experiences. However, the violent incidents in this sample closely resemble the 250 events reported by Lockwood (1997) from his interviews with 110 students from a middle school and alternative high school in economically disadvantaged sections of two large cities located in the Midwest and the South. In this larger sample, two-thirds of the events involved fights, participants were usually known to one another, and about 60 percent included the presence of third parties or audiences. In the Los Angeles study, 65 percent of the incidents were fights, strangers were rarely involved, and audiences were present in 63 percent of the events that permitted such coding. In both samples, school grounds were the most common locations for youth violence, but a higher proportion of the events reported by Lockwood occurred in or around residential areas (23%) than in the Los Angeles sample. Lockwood did not report the

time or day distribution of incidents, but the frequency of school settings in his sample suggests that school days and times could be another similarity between the two event samples.

The violent events reported by these community youth samples provide a sharp contrast to depictions from interviews with incarcerated youth (see, for example, Sheley and Wright, 1995) and from archival extractions from adolescent homicide records. Because much public concern and social policy about youth violence relies on the more readily available homicide data, it is important to emphasize that the patterns of homicide are quite different from the violence that most youth, even youth residing in relatively violent neighborhoods, encounter. Our comparisons of the data from two separate components of the Juvenile Violence in Los Angeles study illustrate this. Adolescent homicides occur at different times and places than the far-less-than-lethal violent events, and they are considerably more likely to involve guns and street gang dynamics (Maxson et al., 1998). The two types of youth violence require different approaches to prevention and intervention, a point to which we will return shortly.

This study's findings rely on an event-based analysis which views violence as interpersonal, situated transactions (Luckenbill, 1977). As described by Fagan and Wilkinson (1998), "situational approaches view violent events as interactions involving the confluence of motivations, perception, technology [in their case, guns], the social control attributes of the immediate setting, and the ascribed meaning and status attached to the violent act" (128). These analyses focused on three areas of social processes that shaped these violent events, 1) violence as a forum for the demonstration of values, 2) the multi-dimensional roles of audiences, and 3) gangs, guns and substance use as situational factors.

Demonstration of Values. These interviews demonstrate the importance of toughness and the willingness to use physical means to respond to challenges to social identity. Fagan and

Wilkinson (1998) note the centrality of toughness to adolescent masculine identity and its source of considerable status among adolescents. Anderson also finds toughness to be a focal concern in the ongoing "campaign for respect" that is a key word in the code of the streets (1998:82). Fagan (1998) argues that street rules for getting and maintaining respect through aggressive behavior provoked "decent" youth "to situationally adopt a tough demeanor and perhaps behave violently in order to navigate through an otherwise hostile and possibly dangerous environment" (2). The values of toughness, respect, and social dominance are integral to status maintenance among interviewed youths. Violent interactions provide a forum for the expression of these values and function to reinforce these values. The juxtaposition of two quotations provided earlier aptly illustrates this point:

> They just want to provide their manhood to each other and they want to send the message out that they thought they could get over on [us]. That we were punks basically. Just respect and they thought we were pushovers. 05-1230

> Happy when I was hitting him...and it felt good. 05-1074

Lockwood (1997) recommends the promotion of programs that encourage civil values. In their recent review of youth violence prevention programs, Howell and Hawkins (1998) discuss a variety of efforts that might be categorized as value training or transformation. These include playground behavior management for pre-adolescent, anti-bullying programs and skill development related to anger management, impulse control, empathy, and nonviolent conflict resolution. Claims of effectiveness of these programs are generally supported by evidence-based evaluation results. Such results suggest that early childhood and adolescent interventions regarding values are promising efforts to convert the dominance of street values that permeate the accounts of violent encounters in our study and others. This conversion is predicated on the targeting of such programs toward youth at the highest risk for violence involvement, with

35

treatment modalities that have meaning for the intended recipients. Lockwood (1997) recommends that such programs focus on the "opening moves" of violent transactions or the relatively minor insults, physical aggression, or challenges that initiate a patterned sequence to violence (see also Luckenbill and Doyle, 1989).

Multi-dimensional Roles of Audiences. Third parties were often present to witness these violent encounters. The role of third parties has been addressed by other violence researchers (Fagan, 1998), particularly in homicides (Decker, 1995; Luckenbill and Doyle, 1989; Hepburn, Felson and Steadman, 1983). Each of these authors notes important influences that audiences exert and several describe a variety of roles. For example, Felson and Steadman (1983) differentiate joiners, instigators, and mediators. Decker (1995) identifies five roles: surrogates, incapable guardians, facilitators, precipitators, and bystanders. Our analysis described escalating, de-escalating, passive, and combination audiences. Peers were most prevalent in escalating audiences, adults of various types in de-escalating violence. While no one category of audience was particularly dominant, we noted the higher frequency of passive audiences. This finding contrasts with the patterns typical of the homicide studies noted above, but may be due to the use of police records in homicide research.

The passive audiences included peers, family members, school personnel, neighbors, and strangers. Our research does not address the reasons why these individuals merely watched the violent events unfold; perhaps it was fear, idle curiosity, or emotional detachment. Further research is needed to explore the social processes of the passive observer in violent transactions as an abject failure of social control. Nevertheless, the potential of such passivity suggests an opportunity for the value transformation programs described above to promote positive intervention.

One further role of audiences should be noted. Peers and other audience members may become active participants in other violent encounters. Decker (1995; 1996a) has proposed that homicides may be linked through "homicide networks." "These networks link victims, suspects and witnesses to assaultive violence and can explain how a witness to one event can become the victim or suspect in another event" (1996:446). He develops Loftin's (1986) concept of contagion to suggest that networks facilitate the spread of violence. Exposure to violence may precipitate further violence involvement through a modeling process or by the inculcation of norms or expectations. Fagan and Wilkinson (1998:143) note "the 'audience' as an amplifier of the social identity won through violence helps to perpetuate the street code." The network concept draws on a transactional framework to recognize a direct linkage between violent encounters. Incidents are linked directly through common participants and audiences and by the motives for any given event.

The youth in our sample often referenced a prior altercation as the motive for violent incidents. Retaliation among rival gangs surfaces as a common motive in gang homicides (Maxson and Klein, 1996) and in other forms of gang violence (Decker, 1996). Retaliation and the broader context of prior conflicts is an important factor in our largely nongang violent incidents and was cited by Lockwood (1997) as the primary justification for violence. This linkage between violent transactions reinforces the import of violence prevention efforts. Deflecting the violent course of opening moves may remove the catalyst for future occurrences.

Gangs, Substance Use and Guns as Situational Factors. Gangs, drug and/or alcohol intoxication, and gun presence were anticipated to represent important contingencies in the situational context of youth violence. In the majority of incidents, this was not the case. These features may represent background issues in violent transactions between youth. For example,

some youth anticipated that an opponent might have a gun, and recalled fear at this prospect. Guns were present in 17 percent of all incidents but were fired in just three events. Firearms may be part of the normative construct that these youths attach to violent interactions, but they rarely surface during the events. Fagan and Wilkinson (1998) argue that guns play a significant role in the development of an "ecology of danger" among adolescents in inner-city neighborhoods. The anticipation of gun possession by opponents may increase the demand for firearms by youth. In this sense, normative constructs about gun availability and attendant threats to feelings of personal safety may have a direct effect on increasing the incidence and severity of youth violence. There is no evidence of this dynamic in our interviews, but the fear of gun injury expressed by subjects is worth noting.

Drug or alcohol intoxication (usually in opponents) was reported by a minority of youths, and was rarely perceived by them as affecting the escalation or outcome of the conflict. These substances were either not in the foreground of the violent transactions or were dismissed as unimportant. "They don't have to be drinking alcohol to be like that," summed up one youth.

Gang dynamics were somewhat more common than guns or substance use, but surfaced less often than anticipated. Twenty-seven percent of the incidents had gang participants according to the youths, but as we have noted, their attributions of gang membership are sometimes of questionable reliability. Just nine of the incidents were gang-motivated. Clearly recognizable gang behaviors were noted in several events.

Similar to the situation with guns, the import of gangs appears to be a background rather than a foreground element. These are part of the cultural frame that these youth use to interpret their experience of violence. Youth are aware of gang activity in their neighborhoods and are warned about it by their parents and other adults. Gangs constitute an important component of

the ecology of danger to these youth, yet are not often directly linked to the violence which they experience. That violence typically does not involve gangs, or drugs, or illegal substance use. These violent incidents arose most often from personal conflicts among the youth and his opponent or a third party. The most promising interventions would focus on the appropriate management of such conflicts and only secondarily be concerned with gangs, drugs, or guns.

These policy guidelines are in direct contrast to those emerging from our analysis of adolescent homicides in Los Angeles. Gang and gun issues are at the forefront of homicides and we discussed a variety of interventions that specifically target these factors. These recommendations were firmly grounded in the evidence provided by the homicide data yet such programs clearly are less relevant to the broader spectrum of youth violence described here. The distinctions we have drawn between homicides and non lethal forms of youth violence provide a critical reminder to policy makers and program developers: prevention and intervention efforts must be calibrated to the specific characteristics of the violence problem identified and these will vary from community to community.

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