



'GOTTA MAKE YOUR OWN HEAVEN':

GUNS, SAFETY,
AND THE EDGE
OF ADULTHOOD
IN NEW YORK
CITY

Basaime Spate, Anjelica Camacho,
and Elise White
Center for Court Innovation
April 7, 2021

Study Overview

Goal to Understand:

- Why are young people carrying guns?
- What are their social networks like, and how are guns part of those networks?

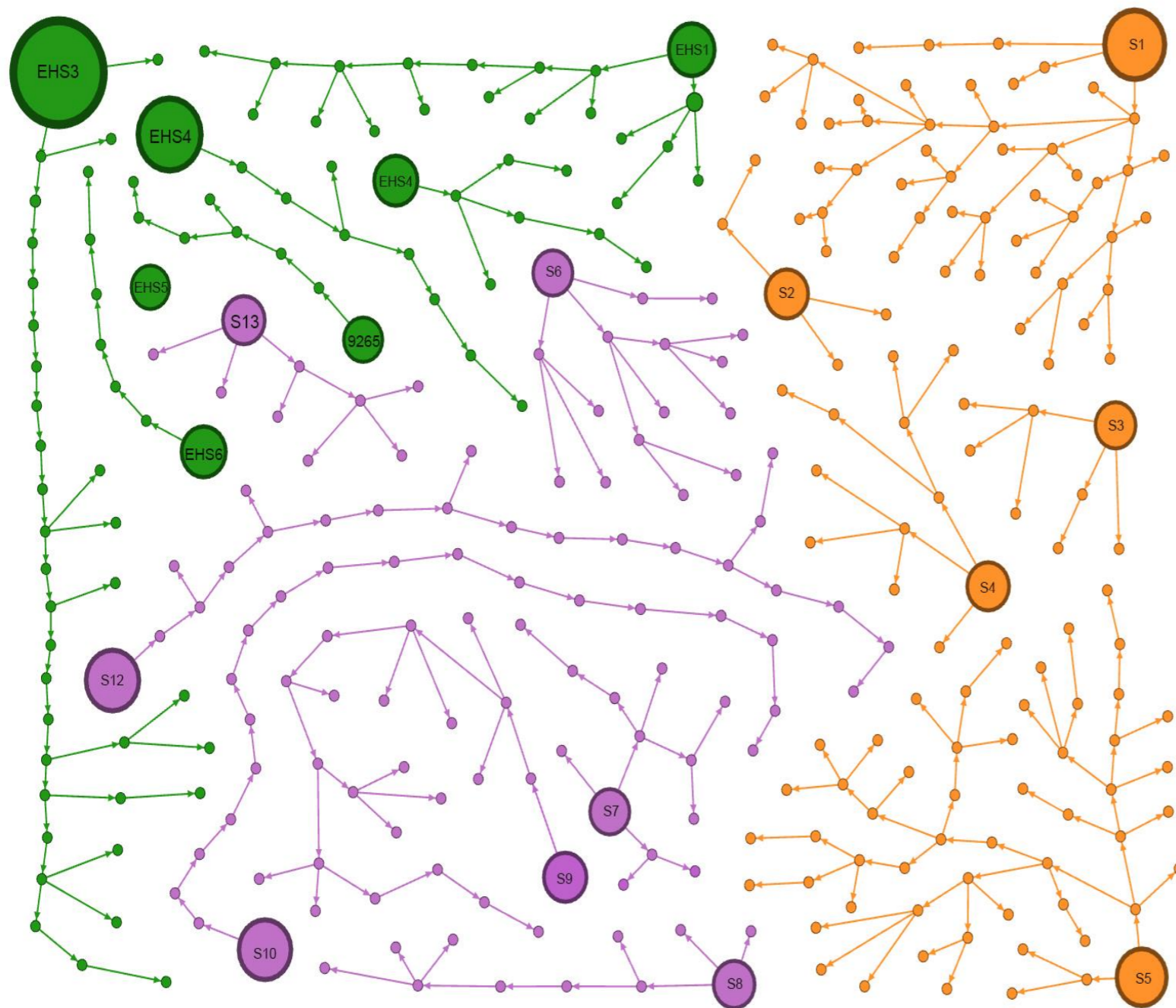
Locations:

- Morrisania, Brownsville, East Harlem

Eligibility Criteria:

- 16-24 years old
- Carried/owned a gun (87%)
- Shot or shot at (81%)

Methodology



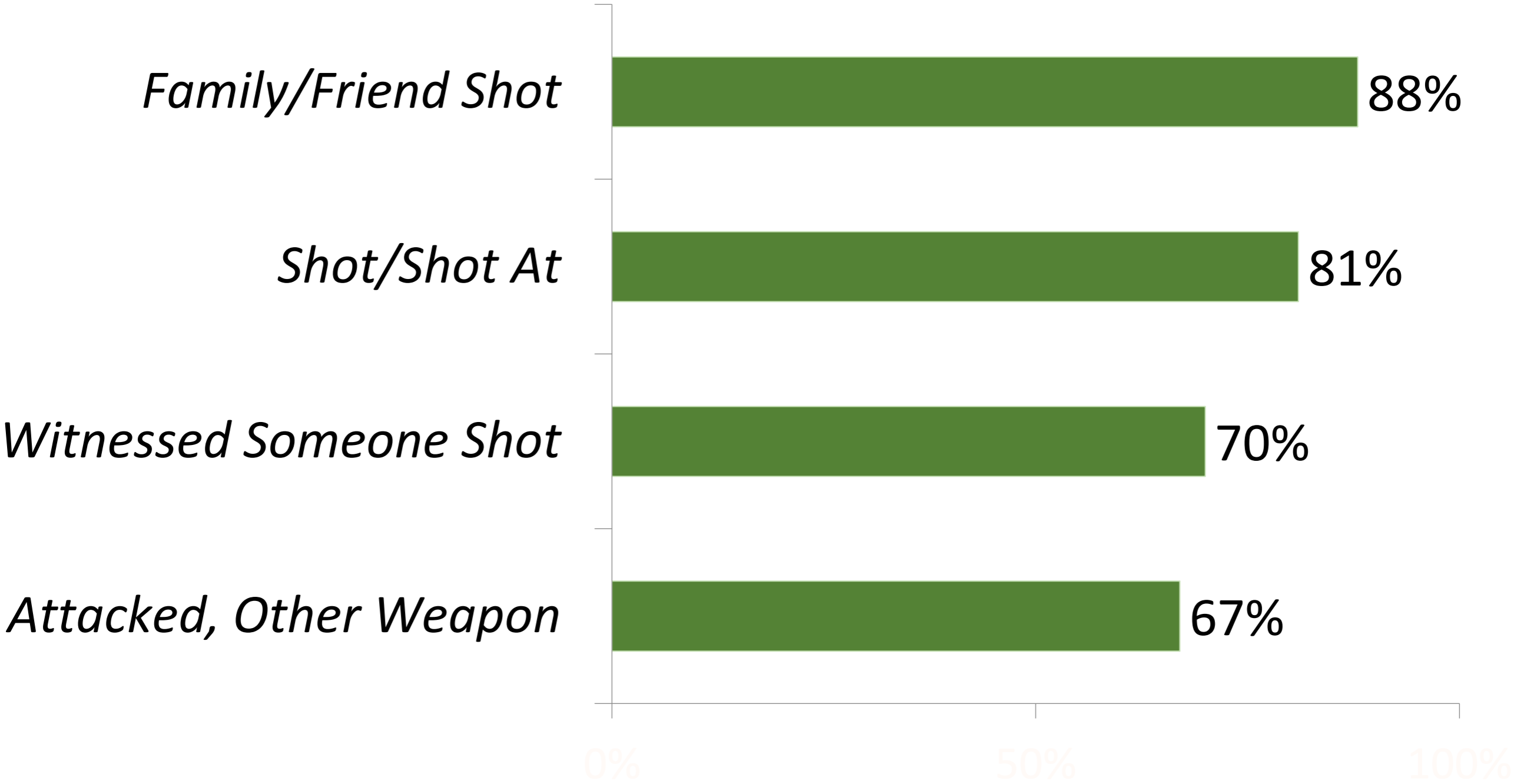
Green = East Harlem Purple = Brownsville Orange = Morrisania

- Participatory methods
- Respondent-driven sampling
- Seed recruitment
- Mixed methods interviews

Overview of Our Sample

- 330 young adults
- Gender:
 - 79% men
 - 21% women
- Race/Ethnicity:
 - 71% Black
 - 14% Latinx
 - 9% Multiracial
- Public Housing Resident: 78%
- Have Children: 37%
- Currently in School: 40%

Violent Victimization Was Widespread



Victimization Was Often Related to...

- Gang-related altercations
- Romantic disputes
- Being in wrong place at wrong time

I never really thought I was gonna get shot. [...] They was looking for some dude that was in the park I was playing in [...], hopped out [of] the car and started shooting.

- Victimization → Distrust in Others → Weapons

I don't trust people because I got stabbed before. [...] I ran to the park trying to ask people for tissues, expected them to call the cops, try to call the ambulance. They didn't call the ambulance; they stopped the basketball game to look at me.

Generalized Fear

- Carrying a gun because of a pervasive sense of neighborhood mistrust and a feeling that they could be victimized at any time

I'm a paranoid person ever since I got stabbed. I come out of work and nobody's after me [...] I still be lookin' behind me. I don't trust nobody. You never know when a random person just say [...], "I'm not feelin' good today. I'm gonna shoot this nigga, just because he's here. [...] He got a job. He's makin' money. I'm not makin' money. I'm fuckin' miserable. I'm gonna shoot this nigga.

Localized Fear

- Carrying a gun as protection from retaliation

Motherfucker owed me some bread and he [...] kept talking bad on my name, talking crazy about me, talking about I ain't gonna do shit [...] And when I seen him, he try to front on me. [...] Motherfucker already tried to back out on it, shoot at me before I even got down to tell my story so I have to shoot back and I have to defend myself.

I got beef. I got shot and I been shot at. Niggas I done robbed, niggas I done took niggas' chain. I done embarrassed grown-ass men. So I need [a gun]. I'm a female. Niggas want to shoot at you.

Fear of the Police

- Carrying a gun as protection from the police

You gotta protect your life because the cops might shoot you. That's why I think to myself, "Why is it they don't want us to bear arms but they bear arms and pull out on us?"

They're picking off people for no reason. [...] So Imma carry mine because I have to protect myself from you now. It's not a regular person I gotta worry about. I gotta protect myself from the people who are made to protect and serve us. And that is the most scariest thing in the world.

Gun Carrying to Increase Feelings of Safety

- Safe when carrying a gun: 78%
- Safe when not carrying a gun: 63%
- Feeling unprotected from other gun users by police but simultaneously being punished for self-protecting through gun carrying

I worry about getting in trouble with the police or the law because I know it's against the law to have any type of weapon without a license, but at the same time, I just feel like I need to carry it to make sure generally I'm safe.

Gun Use as Self-defense

- 60% reported using a gun in self defense
- Flashed to stop an immediate threat

I was getting jumped by these kids [...] and I just pulled the gun out. It helped 'cause they stopped beating me up. They just stopped.

- Used as response to an attack

I got jumped. I was with my best friend. She the only reason why I really ain't get "beat up" beat up. She was on top of me while I was getting jumped. They didn't want to hit her. After a while they just stopped. After that I went back over there. You could say it's self defense but not at the moment. I defended myself because I went back and I retaliated. I shot somebody.

Caution Around Gun Use

- Many talked about exercising restraint

I'm not gonna just pull it out, tryna shoot you for no reason.

Our number one rule was just: "Don't bust unless you need to bust."

- 67% reported using marijuana daily, and talked about its calming effect

I've been in positions where I'm hot and wanna go pick up my gun [...] and then I smoke and I'm thinking completely different. Like, "Yo, I'm wilding." Like, "That shit wasn't even worth it."

Gang Involvement

- 88% reported ever being involved in a gang
- 60% still active in their gang
- Reasons for joining and gang “family”
 - Protection
 - Family history
 - Material support (money, food, housing)
 - Love and emotional support

These people love me. They may be harsh. It may come with this, it may come with that. I'd rather harsh love than no love.

Gangs and the Community

- Contributed to neighborhood conflicts
 - 89% said their gang clashes with other gangs
 - Beefs over territory, stolen money and drugs
 - Guns come out in serious conflicts with “ops”
- Also built positive interactions
 - Helping neighborhood kids (encouraging staying in school, providing school supplies and clothing)
 - Providing material support to residents (food)
 - Organizing community events (cookouts, basketball tournaments, food drives)

Alternative Economy as Survival

- Discrimination + criminal records → no access to mainstream economy → poverty → drug dealing + robbery

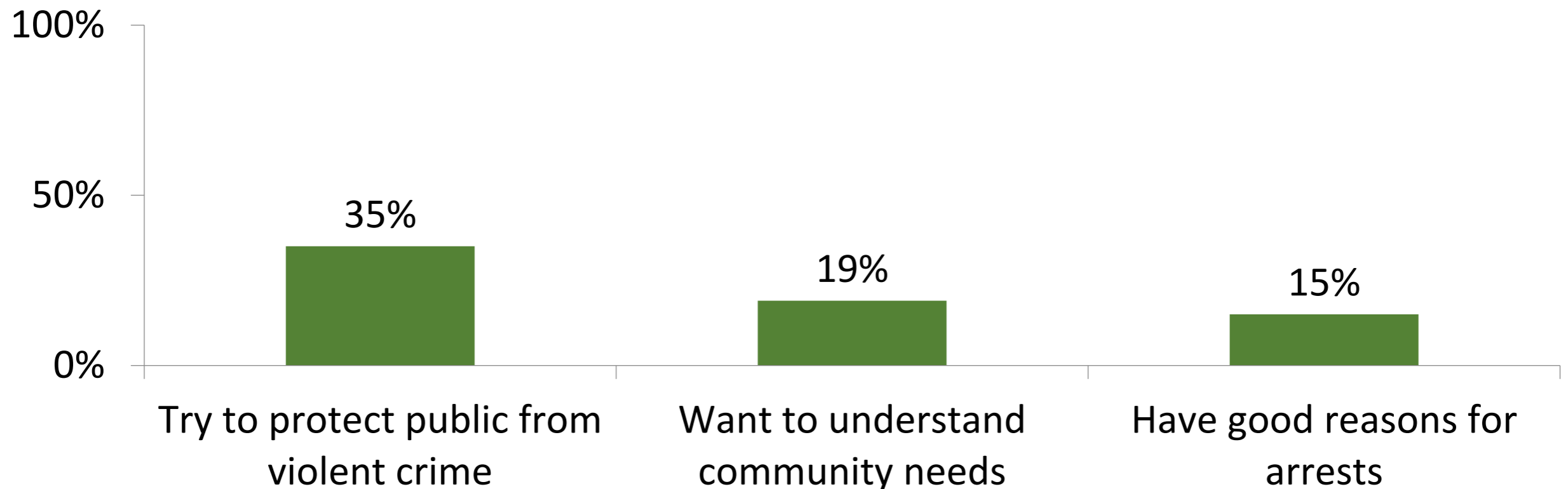
At least ten people probably got their OSHA card, right. I bet if we went across the street, at this new site, probably couldn't get us a job. [...] Why can't we do it? Why can't we work?

We gotta make our money happen. And one thing I can say, they don't make it nice for a Black man to live out here. You gotta make your own heaven out here.

- 20% said the ways in which they make money require a gun

Widespread Police Contact

- 91% stopped by the police in the last 2 years
 - Stopped an average of 10 times
- 88% ever arrested
 - Arrested an average of 7 times
- 63% ever incarcerated
- Lack of trust in police effectiveness



Primary Concerns About the Police

- Arrest for minor things
- Do not protect from violence or solve violent crimes
- Don't defuse situations
- Don't care about the community
- "They'll gun you down for anything"

We're not killing people [...] not hurting nobody. But when there's people out there actually getting hurt, they're nowhere to be found.

I've [...] watched a police officer come up to a situation that was happening [...] but it didn't seem as though he was trying to fix the situation [...] just looked like he was antagonizing it and putting fuel to the fire. [...] Shouldn't you try to calm that person down versus you engaging in argument with them?

Key Takeaways

- Youth mostly carrying to increase feelings of safety
- Extensive individual and community trauma
→ hyper-vigilance
- Potential targets both of other youth and of agents of the state who are theoretically in place to protect them, and efforts they take to provide for their own safety merely serve to increase their vulnerability from both

Recommendations

- Bring services to spaces important to youth
- Hire staff with street credibility who either already have, or can quickly build, initial trusting relationships with youth
- Invest in community safety strategies outside of the police
- Create education and employment pathways specifically for youth with criminal records
- Engage gang leadership in building comprehensive public safety

Contact Us

Elise White – elwhite@nycourts.gov