



First time gun carrying and the primary prevention of youth gun violence for African American youth living in extreme poverty

Richard Spano*

Indiana University, Department of Criminal Justice, 315 Sycamore Hall, Bloomington, IN 47405, USA

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ABSTRACT

First time gun carrying is specified as a logical starting point for the primary prevention of youth gun violence, which is also consistent with the public health approach to the prevention of firearm injuries for at risk African American youth. However, it is difficult to disentangle youth gun violence from other aspects of violence that are concentrated in high poverty settings. Insights from developmental life-course criminology (DLC) are used to: (1) categorize first time gun carrying as a critical inflection point in the development of youth violence; and (2) categorize exposure to violence in the community as a developmental pathway for first time gun carrying for youth attempting to prevent and/or deter future violent victimization. The ecological–transactional model of community violence provides a more nuanced breakdown of the impact of exposure to violence in the community on first time gun carrying given the embeddedness of contexts that shape child and adolescent development in high poverty settings. Finally, several areas for future research are outlined that include a need to better integrate gun carrying into existing theories as well as future longitudinal studies of high risk African American youth.

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Contents

1. Criminal careers, initiation of criminal behavior, and first time gun carrying	84
2. The public health approach to the primary prevention of firearm related injury	85
3. Problems and prospects in the study of first time offending versus first time gun carrying	85
4. Putting youth gun carrying in context: the ecological–transactional model of community violence	85
4.1. Strengths and weaknesses of the ecological–transactional model of community violence	86
5. Summary and conclusion	86
5.1. Directions for future research	86
Acknowledgements	87
References	87

Although violent crime rates in the U.S. have dropped since the 1990s, youth gun violence has remained a significant public health threat facing African American youth living in high poverty, urban neighborhoods (Cook & Laub, 2002). The increased use of handguns by minority youth has been linked with the dramatic rise in homicide rates for African American youth, which peaked in the early 1990s (Blumstein, 2002). More recent trends indicate that gun violence has continued to exact a toll on urban minority youth. The most severe consequence of youth gun violence is homicide victimization, which is the leading cause of death for African American youth (CDC, 2006). An even

more widespread problem is the number of nonfatal firearm injuries attributed to assault, which was 6.25 times more common among African American youth compared to firearm related fatalities in 2006 (CDC, 2006, 2009a). Christoffel (2007) recently argued that firearm injuries in the U.S. represented an endemic public health threat since the rate of firearm injuries has remained stable over time.

Garborino, Bradshaw, and Vorrasi (2002) suggested that youth gun violence should be examined as an outgrowth of youth gun carrying, which changed the dynamic of ordinary fights and other violent encounters between urban minority youth. Blumstein (2002) described how the active recruitment of juveniles to participate in drug dealing in the 1990s resulted in gun carrying that was originally limited to urban minority youth involved in the drug trade. However, demand for firearms increased over time due to the growth in gun

* Tel.: +1 812 856 1441 (office); fax: +1 812 855 5522.
 E-mail address: rspano@indiana.edu.

carrying by urban minority youth living in these areas which were not involved in the drug trade and were motivated to carry a gun for protection (Blumstein, 2002). Since youth and adolescents are impulsive, have little skill in dispute settlement, and represent an at-risk group for fighting (Garborino et al., 2002), gun carrying by urban minority youth has been identified as a key contributor to the high rates of firearm related injury and mortality.

As a result, the CDC has targeted the reduction of youth gun carrying as a critical component in its efforts to prevent youth gun violence (CDC, 1992; Rivara, 2002). The core of the CDC's mission is to amass a body of scientific evidence as a basis for policies and interventions that can be used as a basis for the primary prevention of youth violence (Hammond, Whitaker, Lutzker, Mercy, & Chin, 2006). In other words, instead of focusing on the aftereffects of youth gun violence (i.e., firearm injuries and fatalities), one of the CDC's highest priority is to advance our understanding of factors that lead at risk youth to carry a gun to prevent firearm injuries and fatalities from happening in the first place (Hammond et al., 2006).

Primary prevention of youth gun violence for urban minority youth represents a straightforward application of the public health approach to violence prevention, but there are several challenges to overcome before making meaningful progress toward this goal. One critical challenge is that the bulk of individual level data on youth gun carrying is based on cross-sectional data (Wilkinson & Fagan, 2001). More importantly, little research has focused on identifying the antecedents of youth gun carrying (Ash, Kellerman, Fuqua-Whitley, & Johnson, 1996; Brennen & Moore, 2009; Wilkinson & Fagan, 2001). However, the CDC mandate implies that longitudinal data is a minimal requirement to establish risk and protective factors as precursors for youth gun carrying.

A second related point is to specify how violent crime, which is concentrated in high poverty settings, contributes to youth gun carrying. More specifically, gun carrying is one aspect of a multi-faceted problem facing African American urban youth and adolescents who are an at risk group for both violent victimization as well as violent offending (Spano & Bolland, 2011, in press; Spano et al., 2012). A related body of research has also documented that the vast majority of youth living in high poverty settings were exposed to very severe forms of violence in the community either directly (as victims) or indirectly (i.e., as witnesses) (Stein, Jaycox, Kataoka, Rhodes, & Vestal, 2003). For example, Bell and Jenkins (1993) found that 65% of school aged children reported witnessing a serious assault, 33% had witnessed a homicide, 23% had been threatened with a knife, and 11% had been shot at in their study of African American youth in Chicago. Similarly, Campbell and Schwarz (1996) found that 46% had witnessed a robbery, 55% had witnessed a stabbing, 21% had been a victim of a stabbing, and 24% had been caught in gun crossfire in their urban sample of sixth grade students. The take home message from a large body of both cross-sectional and longitudinal data is that exposure to violence in the community is a strong predictor of violent behavior for youth and adolescents (Margolin & Gordis, 2000). Exposure to violence and violent behavior also represent two distinct motivations for gun carrying (offensive versus defensive), which correspond with the two opposing viewpoints related to the broader gun control debate (Spano & Bolland, in press; Spano et al., 2012).

Although a wide variety of factors have been used to account for youth gun carrying (see Wilkinson & Fagan, 2001 for a review), the CDC's National Center for Injury Prevention and Control has established two research priorities as part of its efforts oriented toward the prevention of youth violence (CDC, 2009b). The first is to increase our understanding about the links between youth violent behavior and other manifestations of violence that impact the lives of youth living in high poverty settings (i.e., violent victimization, exposure to violence). The second is to better integrate multiple forms of violence into prevention initiatives to better leverage limited resources. As a result, the overarching objective of this review is to draw insights from the career criminal approach (CCA), public health, developmental criminology, and the

ecological–transactional model of community violence to disentangle the effects of youth gun carrying and the high rates of violent crime in high poverty settings. A secondary objective is to highlight how these insights can be integrated into efforts aimed at the primary prevention of youth gun violence. The first section will introduce the concept of the criminal career and the utility of focusing on first time gun carrying to establish the temporal sequencing between different aspects of violence in the community (exposure to violence, violent victimization, and violent behavior) and youth gun carrying. The second section will overview how the CCA's emphasis on first time gun carrying dovetails with public health efforts directed at the primary prevention of firearm related injury. The third section will focus on more recent longitudinal research conducted using the developmental life course criminology (DLC) perspective to highlight: (1) the challenges in studying the initiation of criminal behavior; (2) how gun carrying represents a developmental marker which can be viewed as an outgrowth of violent behavior; and (3) how exposure to violence in the community can motivate youth to carry guns for defensive purposes. The fourth section will use the ecological–transactional model of community violence to illustrate the nested nature of adolescent development in high poverty settings, provide a more nuanced breakdown of the effects of exposure to violence on adolescent development, and describe how gun carrying can be integrated into this model of youth and adolescent development in high risk settings. The fifth section will synthesize these insights and outline areas for future research.

1. Criminal careers, initiation of criminal behavior, and first time gun carrying

The CCA defines a criminal career as a longitudinal sequence of offending that has a beginning (onset or initiation), a middle (duration), and an end (dropout or desistance) (Blumstein, Cohen, & Farrington, 1988). One implicit assumption of the CCA is that there are different causal influences at play for the onset, duration, and desistance from criminal behavior, which underscores the importance of increasing our understanding of how different configurations of risk and protective factors act as a springboard for future criminal behavior. The bulk of the research on the “beginning” of criminal careers has established that early onset of criminal behavior is a strong predictor of a criminal career characterized by high rate offending, repeat offending and serious violent offending in adolescence and adulthood (see Piquero, Farrington, & Blumstein, 2007 for a review). In other words, age of onset for criminal behavior has been specified as a developmental marker and key independent variable to account for serious and extensive criminal careers. However, little research has focused on identifying the precursors for initiation or onset of criminal offending (Farrington, 2003), which is surprising since the identification of malleable precursors for first time offending has been recognized as a key prerequisite for interventions aimed at preventing delinquency (Farrington et al., 1990; Tolan & Thomas, 1995).

The same framework can be applied to the primary prevention of youth gun violence by focusing identifying why youth carry a gun for the first time. As noted above, the CCA provides a more detailed breakdown of criminal behavior over time so that longitudinal data can be used to establish the temporal sequencing between youth gun carrying and different aspects of violence in the community. However, it is unclear if different manifestations of violence in the community are distinct developmental pathways that also represent stepping stones leading to first time gun carrying for at-risk youth (Farrington et al., 1990). Lizotte, Krohn, Howell, Tobin, and Howard (2000) used longitudinal panel data on at-risk youth from the Rochester Youth Development Study (RYDS) to examine the impact of gang membership, drug sales, and peer gun ownership for protection on youth gun carrying for early versus late adolescence, but did not focus on identifying determinants of first time gun carrying. Only a handful of studies by Spano and colleagues have focused on the precursors of first time gun carrying by

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