

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# “It's a mass shooting in the hood everyday”: Black and Latine youth organizers' reflections on structural racism and community gun violence

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## Abstract

This study investigated young Black and Latine organizers' perceptions of how mainstream narratives of gun violence relate to and influence their antigun violence organizing work. We analyzed interview data from 22 Black and Latine young people (Mage = 19.91, 55% women) who were engaged in gun violence prevention organizations in the United States. The results centered on three themes: (1) Young people's journeys of gaining awareness of structural racism through personal experience with gun violence, (2) media's perpetuation of structural racism through its dismissal of community gun violence, and (3) the need for community-based solutions to address the root causes of gun violence. These findings shed light on how societal elements, including the media, policy-makers, and white-led gun violence prevention organizations, perpetuate structural racism and pose challenges to the organizing efforts of Black and Latine youth. Furthermore, these findings amplify young Black and Latine gun violence prevention organizers' experiences with gun violence and their frustrations towards the discriminatory media portrayals of gun violence in their communities, as well as recognize the importance of their organizing work.

## KEYWORDS

community-based organizing, gun violence prevention, racial discrimination, trauma, young adults

## Highlights

- Black and Latine youth organizers' voices are important for understanding gun violence
- Media's harmful dismissal of community gun violence is a symptom of structural racism.
- Community-based solutions are important to addressing to community gun violence.

## INTRODUCTION

In response to the 2018 mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, youth across the country mobilized against gun violence and demanded changes to gun legislation, specifically stricter gun control laws (Bernstein et al., 2019). Since 2018, the United States has seen a surge in youth-led gun violence prevention organizing nationally, sparking increased discussions and strategic approaches to address this issue (Emeran, 2021). However, long before the Parkland mass shooting, Black and Latine youth

organizers have been tackling issues around gun violence through grassroots initiatives and policy advocacy (McMillan & Bernstein, 2022). Unfortunately, young Black and Latine organizers' stories and experiences are largely omitted from media narratives and gun violence prevention research (McMillan & Bernstein, 2022; Tergesen, 2021). It is important to recognize the distinctions between public mass shootings, often afflicting predominantly white communities, and the more prevalent forms of gun violence in Black and Latine communities. Gun violence in Black and Latine communities is often rooted in structural issues, such as systemic racism,

economic deprivation, and community disinvestment, which create conditions for interpersonal violence and police violence (Voisin, 2019). In contrast, mass shootings in predominantly white communities, such as school shootings, tend to be driven by different factors, including mental health crises and social isolation (Bernstein et al., 2019). In Black and Latine communities, where gun violence is shaped by broader structural factors, youth organizers' voices are crucial. Their personal experiences with gun violence may shape their understanding and solutions to community gun violence. We aim to understand how they perceive the connection between structural racism and community gun violence, and how their experiences with gun violence influence their perspectives and strategies in gun violence prevention work.

## Youth civic engagement and gun violence

Youth civic engagement is critical in the fight to end gun violence. Previous research has demonstrated the role of youth activism in shaping policy debates and public discourse. The March for Our Lives movement, led exclusively by youth, significantly influenced national conversation about gun control and pushed legislative change (Emeran, 2021; Tergesen, 2021). Youths' voices and relentless advocacy work resulted in millions across the nation calling for national policy change that would tighten gun access. Youth of color have been particularly impactful in highlighting the intersections of systemic inequalities and gun violence, driving public attention toward broader social justice issues within the gun violence prevention movement (Bernstein et al., 2019; Wray-Lake & Abrams, 2020). Through their activism, these youth have reframed public narratives, challenging dominant perspectives on gun violence and advocating for more comprehensive policy solutions that address the root causes of violence in marginalized communities (Bernstein et al., 2019; Tergesen, 2021). However, the experiences of Black and Latine youth organizers in the gun violence prevention space has been underexplored, despite their significant contributions to addressing community-level violence.

## Urban community gun violence and youth

Gun violence disproportionately impacts urban Black and Latine communities (Kegler et al., 2022; Light & Ulmer, 2016). Gun homicide has been the leading cause of death for Black men ages 15 to 44 since 1981 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2023). Community gun violence contributes to community trauma that has detrimental long-term physical and mental health effects (Pinderhughes et al., 2015). The negative

impacts of community gun violence are particularly detrimental for young people's health and mental health (Bancalari et al., 2022). Gun violence is a major risk to U.S. Black and Latine communities.

Police violence, a significant form of gun violence, disproportionately impacts Black and Latine youth as police practices often target and hyper-surveil impoverished, urban communities (Mesic et al., 2018). This results in increased police contact, leading to daily stigmatization and harassment, particularly for Black and Latino boys (Rios, 2011), who are more likely than white youth to encounter the police before eighth grade (McGlynn-Wright et al., 2022). In addition to police violence, Black and Latine youth face heightened exposure to gun homicides. Studies have found that Black and Latine youth faced a three to seven times higher likelihood of encountering a gun homicide in the past year than white youth, and experienced such incidents more recently and in closer proximity to their homes (Kravitz-Wirtz et al., 2022). One study found that over half of Black youth and about half of Latine youth live less than a mile away from the location of a recent gun homicide (Kravitz-Wirtz et al., 2022). Despite making up only 14%, Black youth account for 46% of all youth gun deaths (Gramlich, 2023), and gun violence is the leading cause of death for Latino boys aged 18 years old and under (CDC, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2023).

In response to community gun violence, Black and Latine youth often have to find innovative ways to safely navigate their communities (Wray-Lake & Abrams, 2020). As Black and Latine youth organizers in urban contexts often have personal exposure to gun violence, understanding how their experiences shape their broader views of gun violence, including the role of structural racism, is important for building knowledge about community resilience and developing strategies that leverage existing strengths to effectively combat violence.

## Structural racism and gun violence

Structural racism—racist policies and practices ingrained in societal systems and structures—create an array of adverse outcomes among racially marginalized individuals. Critical race theory (CRT) provides a framework for understanding how these systemic inequities are not incidental but intentionally embedded in social, political, and economic structures to perpetuate racial hierarchies (Crenshaw, 1989). Historically, Black and Latine communities have been neglected and geographically separated from crucial resources due to structural racism, which directly contributes to structural inequities (Rothstein, 2017). CRT emphasizes that practices like redlining, which barred Black and Latine families from home ownership in certain neighborhoods, were not

isolated events but part of a broader system of racial segregation that has ongoing consequences. As a result, redlined communities have a greater proportion of Black residents, diminished property values, and elevated poverty levels (Rothstein, 2017). These policies concentrated poverty and disadvantage in marginalized communities, which, as CRT underscores, created the structural conditions for community gun violence (Voisin, 2019). Moreover, research has shown that racial residential segregation—an enduring form of structural racism—is a major predictor of racial disparity rates in firearm homicides (Wong et al., 2020). According to CRT, these disparities are not merely the result of individual behaviors but are reinforced through systemic practices, such as hyper-policing and disproportionate sentencing in Black and Latine communities, further entrenching the cycle of violence and mistrust in legal institutions (Alexander, 2012). Economic divestment and educational disparities, also highlighted by CRT as manifestations of structural racism, limit opportunities for individuals in these communities, increasing their vulnerability to violence (Kravitz-Wirtz et al., 2022). A CRT lens clarifies that structural racism is not just a backdrop but an active mechanism shaping the conditions that lead to gun violence, reinforcing the need to incorporate these structural factors into gun violence prevention efforts.

Empowerment theory (Rappaport, 1987) also provides a useful framework for this study, helping to explain processes by which Black and Latine youth organizers develop a sense of control and agency in the face of systemic forces contributing to gun violence. Psychological empowerment refers to internal processes by which individuals gain control over their lives and feel capable of challenging systems of inequality (Christens et al., 2023; Zimmerman, 1995), and has emotional, cognitive, relational, and behavioral components (Christens and Peterson, 2012). Young people often use the language of empowerment to describe their civic engagement experiences (Christens et al., 2023; Wray-Lake & Abrams, 2020). In community psychology, social work, and other applied social sciences, psychological empowerment is often viewed within the context of oppression and is essential for developing individual and collective capacities to combat systemic inequalities, such as systemic racism (cf. Christens, 2024). Thus, empowerment theory offers a useful lens through which to understand Black and Latine youth's experiences with community gun violence and organizing. In the context of community gun violence, psychological empowerment is evident as youth organizers draw on their lived experiences with violence to develop critical awareness of structural inequities and cultivate self-efficacy. Through this lens, we document these youth's experiences in coming to understand structural racism and identify solutions to community gun violence.

## Rationale and purpose

This study examines how Black and Latine young organizers understand structural racism and community gun violence through their personal experiences with gun violence and organizing as youth. Our primary research questions were: (1) How do young Black and Latine organizers connect their experiences of trauma and community gun violence to their understandings of structural racism?, and (2) How do young Black and Latine organizers' perceptions of structural racism impact their antigun violence efforts? While scant literature on youth civic engagement has investigated the perspectives of Black and Latine youth organizers in gun violence prevention organizations, one study that did explore their experiences found that these youth faced multiple forms of racism within their national gun violence prevention organization (Wilf et al., 2024). Research on urban youth and gun violence has focused on Black and Latine youth's experiences of gun violence and its prevalence (Bancalari et al., 2022; Kravitz-Wirtz et al., 2022). This study extends beyond the existing literature by examining how structural racism creates barriers for Black and Latine individuals engaged in antigun violence organizing work. As most Black and Latine young people in this study reside in neighborhoods with high rates of gun violence, these young people's experiences can shed light on the impact of structural racism on the organizing efforts of Black and Latine youth. As Black and Latine youth organizers in urban contexts often have personal exposure to gun violence, understanding how their experiences shape their broader views of gun violence, including the role of structural racism, is important for building knowledge about community resilience and developing strategies that leverage existing strengths to combat violence.

## POSITIONALITY

Our backgrounds and experiences shaped our approach and analysis. The first author, a Black cisgender woman, has limited personal exposure to gun violence; however, she shared some social and racial experiences with participants, fostering connections. While this was a strength, she limited self-disclosure during interviews to encourage participant openness. The second author, a white cisgender woman, was raised socioeconomically privileged with minimal community violence exposure. She mitigated potential bias by extensive memoing on her positionality, collaborating closely with the team, and centering participants' voices in analysis. The third author, a Black cisgender woman from a lower-middle class background, related to participants through shared identities and systemic racism awareness. Though lacking personal encounters with violence, she selectively disclosed information to create a conducive environment for

participant sharing. The fourth author, a white cisgender woman, research youth civic engagement, including actions challenging social and racial injustices. Although she has explored racism and civic engagement amid community gun violence, she lacks personal experience and holds potential biases due to racial privilege. We centered participants' words and viewed participants as experts in their community's experiences with gun violence.

## METHOD

### Participants

Data came from semi-structured virtual interviews with 22 young people (55% women) from September 2021 to July 2022 recruited via social media. U.S. young people identified as Black (59%), Latine (36%), or Afro-Latine (5%), were between the ages of 18–22 ( $M_{\text{age}} = 19.91$ ), and actively participated in gun violence prevention organizations (see Table 1 for further details). Participants resided in 21 urban areas: 10 in the Northeast, 4 in the Midwest, 5 in the South, and 2 in the West. Participants connected to gun violence prevention organizations across the country were contacted via Twitter and Instagram. The first and second authors went through the followers of organizations to identify eligible participants, who were (1) 15–22 years old, (2) resided in the U.S., (3) identified as Black and/or Latine, and (4) had engaged in a gun violence prevention organization. We messaged 45 prospective participants to introduce the study, confirm eligibility, and invite them. Of these, 22 responded and confirmed their participation.

### Procedure

The first and second authors conducted and recorded interviews via Zoom after oral consent was obtained. Participants were told that information shared would be reported under a pseudonym, with identifying details removed. At the end of the interview, which lasted about 45 min, participants received a \$20 stipend via Venmo, Amazon gift card, or Paypal. Interview transcriptions were done using Otter.ai, after which the first three authors reviewed the transcripts for accuracy before deleting the original audio recordings. Identifying details like names, state or city of residence, and educational institutions were removed to protect participants' identity.

### Interview protocol

Interviews explored participants' journeys into gun violence prevention organizing, experiences and organizing

**TABLE 1** Participant demographics.

Pseudonym	Gender and pronouns	Racial identification <sup>a</sup>	Age
Nita	Woman, she/her	White Latina	20
Ellen	Woman, she/her	Latina	20
Aubrey	Woman, she/her	Dominican (Hispanic Black)	20
Janet	Woman, she/her	Black/African	18
Yasmin	Woman, she/her	Black	22
Jared	Man, he/him	Black	22
Sydney	Nonbinary, they/she	Black	21
Hailey	Woman, she/her	Black	20
Grant	Man, he/him	Black and Asian	18
Jaden	Man, he/him	Black	19
Hilary	Woman, she/her	Black	18
Margaret	Woman, she/her	Afro-Latina	18
Ashley	Woman, she/her	Black	21
Jackie	Woman, she/her	Latina	19
James	Man, he/him	Latino	19
Kirby	Woman, she/her	Latina	22
Terrance	Man, he/him	Black	22
John	Man, he/him	Black	19
Selena	Woman, she/they	Latina	21
Will	Man, he/him	Latinx (Caribbean)	21
Tyler	Man, he/him	Black	20
Jordan	Man, he/him	Black	18

<sup>a</sup>Racial identification and gender are presented exactly as self-identified by participants.

efforts, and opinions on gun violence prevention work. Though the participants were all young adults at the time of the interviews, the interviews primarily focused on their time organizing as adolescents in gun violence prevention organizations. Participants were asked about their backgrounds, how they became involved in activism, and whether specific events or role models influenced their engagement. To examine their organizational experiences, we asked about both positive and negative aspects, including whether challenges they faced were related to their identities. We also inquired about how they processed difficult experiences, sought support, and which resources were most helpful in their healing journey. These questions provided insight into how young organizers navigate and sustain their activism despite challenges, for the full interview protocol, see Supporting Material S1.

## Data analysis

The team applied reflexive thematic analysis to code transcripts for core concepts and used analytic memo writing to determine major themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022). First, the first three authors wrote and discussed memos exploring high-level ideas and narratives from the transcripts, aligning with the research questions and examining their positionality. Next, they engaged in open coding on two transcripts, developing codes that centered participants' voices using similar language. Through this process and team discussions, a codebook was created with three parent codes relevant to the research questions: personal gun violence experience, structural discrimination, and community-based solutions, each with child codes. The first two authors then applied these codes using Dedoose, an online qualitative analysis software, to all transcripts, ensuring consistency through regular discussions. Once coding was completed, each team member wrote memos on all codes, guided by the research questions. These memos helped to further explore and refine the coded data. The first author then analyzed the co-occurrences of codes to deepen the analysis. This involved examining how different codes appeared together within the data, which helped to identify patterns and relationships between different concepts. Finally, through reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022), the team synthesized these patterns and relationships to finalize three overarching themes. This process involved iteratively reviewing and refining the themes to ensure they accurately represented the data and addressed the research questions.

## RESULTS

We identified three main themes that were interconnected and reflected young people's journeys in moving from witnesses of community gun violence to organizers in the gun violence prevention space. Participants connected their individual experiences with gun violence to structural racism and described how the mainstream media upheld structural racism through harmful stigmas of community gun violence. This led them to emphasize the importance of structural and community-based solutions to addressing gun violence. These interconnected experiences influenced the ways that Black and Latine organizers engaged in gun violence prevention work.

### Young people's personal tragedies and structural racism<sup>1</sup>

The young organizers drew connections between personal experiences of trauma and their understandings of

community gun violence in two main ways. First, they recognized the ongoing trauma and potential for future tragedy within their communities, which heightens the urgency of addressing community gun violence. Second, participants explicitly identified structural racism as a root cause of this violence and the persistent inequities faced by Black and Latine communities. This understanding of structural racism as a fundamental factor in both their personal experiences and broader community violence underscores the depth of their awareness and the critical lens through which they view their organizing efforts.

### Continuing trauma

In each interview, the young organizers described their personal experiences with gun violence and the impact of these experiences on their lives. These experiences of gun violence were up close and personal and inflicted lasting trauma on young people from a young age. Multiple organizers recalled early-age memories of siblings dying due to gun violence in their neighborhood. Jared (22, Black cisgender man) shared, "I got involved when I was a little kid... my brother [name], he was shot and killed at church," and Margaret (18, Afro-Latina cisgender woman) informed us that she "got involved in with [organization name] when [her] brother was shot and killed" in the park. Organizing became an outlet for many young organizers after they lost a close family member or friend. These instances of gun violence also deeply impacted the organizers' well-being. Margaret shared that her brother's death "took a toll on" her. Sydney (21, Black nonbinary person) was also intensely affected by the death of her brother as she described: "I was 6 years old... [and] he took the bullets for me... I'm screaming at the top of my lungs, and my brother died in my arms." At a young age, Sydney not only had to grapple with her brother's death but also with witnessing his death first-hand. For young organizers, the death of loved ones marked them with grief and trauma from early in life. This early emotional connection to preventing gun violence established their motivation for organizing work.

The young organizers described gun violence as a daily occurrence in their communities, leading them to feel a pressing need to address this issue. In this way, the trauma of losing someone was compounded by continuing violence in their neighborhoods, and gun violence was a local and deeply personal issue, rather than a national one. Yasmin (22, cisgender Black woman) shared that she "was just very passionate about gun violence prevention because of being from [city] and just knowing classmates who have been killed by gun violence. And it's crazy because this year alone, I know three people who I grew up with who were killed by gun violence." Young people consistently expressed the urgency of addressing community gun violence by listing family members and friends who had passed and noting the

<sup>1</sup>Content warning: For readers who may have a personal connection to gun violence, please note that the first theme contains quotes from young organizers about their direct experiences with gun violence that may be difficult to read.

short time between the deaths. Jaden (19, Black cisgender man) emphatically explained:

My dad got killed, and people been getting killed around me my whole life... I lost someone when I was 5 years old... my grandad was shot in the head the next year... my cousin was shot... Just living in these neighborhoods people get shot all the time... my teammate got killed. And then my stepdad got killed the next year.

Jaden's experiences highlights youths' heartbreak and trauma as their lives were constantly upended by gun violence; thus, they stressed a high urgency to address the issue of gun violence as they saw their neighborhoods in a state of emergency.

### **Structural racism and community gun violence**

The young people's traumatic experiences with community gun violence helped them deeply understand the operation of structural racism in their communities. Ellen (20, Latina cisgender woman) pointed out that "there aren't resources to help students [schools], especially those who come from, like neighborhoods where they might deal with generational trauma... [and] economic barriers." Youths' critical understanding of how structural racism perpetuates issues like poverty and unemployment led them to call for systemic changes to address the racial disparities that underlie these inequities. Ellen recognized the impact of structural racism on her community, noting that a lack of resources—especially for students facing generational trauma and economic barriers—was a direct contributor to the gun violence affecting her neighborhood. Margaret lived her whole life in "underfunded neighborhoods... [and they were] neighborhoods that have been taken advantage of," highlighting how systemic disinvestment in Black and Latine communities perpetuates structural racism. Participants emphasized that the lack of essential resources, driven by these systemic inequities, not only upholds racial disparities but also fuels community gun violence, leading to deeply traumatic experiences for youth and their communities. Additionally, mainstream media reinforced these inequities by stigmatizing underfunded Black and Latine neighborhoods, further entrenching the societal narrative that overlooks the role of structural racism in contributing to community gun violence.

### **Mainstream media's harmful dismissal of community gun violence**

Young organizers' urgency to address community gun violence was driven by their perceptions of structural,

specifically the media's blatant disregard of ongoing community gun violence in Black and Latine communities while focusing on white communities. From the interviews, this theme of media bias and racial disparity emerged and was deemed incredibly important to the participants as youth as they engaged in gun violence prevention efforts. This awareness of preferential treatment fueled their commitment to advocating for their own communities and ensuring their needs are not overlooked.

### **Mainstream media's downplay of the importance of community gun violence**

The young organizers described the media's failure to treat the ongoing gun violence in predominantly Black and Latine communities as an urgent crisis. Hailey (20, Black cisgender woman) felt anger in how "gun violence is framed when it comes to mass shootings... We only think about gun violence and the mass shooting that happens, but... communities of color" also experience gun violence. Hailey conveyed that "gun violence" has become exclusively associated with mass shootings, leading to the neglect of other forms of gun-related violence, particularly those affecting communities of color. Tyler (20, Black cisgender man) saw the media's role in the widespread association between gun violence and mass shootings, reflecting that "mass shootings do get more media coverage because they're so rare versus community gun violence that happens all the time in hundreds of, even thousands of communities across the US." Youth believed that the public had become unmoved by the frequent occurrence of community gun violence in urban neighborhoods. Terrance (22, Black cisgender man) responded to this normalization of community gun violence, saying "[media] talking about this mass shooting that just happened, y'all making this announcement. Seven people got killed in my hood yesterday... it's a mass shooting in the hood everyday, like y'all gotta tighten up on stuff." Terrance called for the news media to improve their coverage of gun violence and move beyond a singular type of gun violence. Participants felt that community gun violence, despite its high fatality rates, received insufficient media coverage, highlighting a significant disparity in attention.

Participants highlighted how the media centers gun violence that impacts white individuals, such as mass shootings. As Hailey described gun violence "happens frequently... 24/7 around the clock... [But the media] don't really pay attention to [gun violence prevention] organizations that are family of people of color." Along with recognizing the connection between structural racism and community gun violence as youth, participants also saw the media's ignoring of community gun violence in Black and Latine communities as rooted in racism. Janet shared:

When all the students start dying [in school shootings] ... everyone's, finally seeing it, but then when Black kids are... dying all the time, it's nothing... [It's] crazy to read... all of us have to die for something to happen. But when the minority of someone is getting killed, it's nothing.

Similarly, Janet emphasized that the consistent death of Black kids due to gun violence did not draw widespread attention. She highlighted that gun violence became a more recognized urgent social issue due to the deaths of white students, thus drawing a stark racial difference in gun violence representation in the media. Initially, when Margaret saw high national media coverage of mass shootings like the Parkland tragedy, she shared:

I was really angry... [and] many Black and Latinx youth were angry as well, because it took a white organization to finally have a spotlight on gun violence. Gun violence has been around Black and Latinx neighborhoods for a long time. So seeing them rise up so quickly talking about the same things that we're talking about, but, it is affecting our communities more... made me so angry because so many of them, they don't understand for real. When they think of gun violence, they think of a person being killed... when we talk about gun violence, we just don't talk about how people are getting killed. We talk about how we're being killed. How we as Black and Latine youth are being killed.

Participants expressed anger with the media's apparent bias, noting that it seemed to prioritize coverage of gun violence when majority white-led organizations addressed the issue, while often overlooking Black and Latine-led organizations' efforts. Margaret argued that Black and Latine communities were impacted more, and more often, by gun violence, and youth in these communities face vastly different kinds of gun violence threats. Ultimately, participants shared that without consistent media coverage that advocated for solutions to community gun violence, it would continue as a normalized issue within Black and Latine communities.

### **Biased mainstream media support of white-led gun violence prevention organizations**

Participants reacted to mainstream media's positive and uplifting portrayals of predominantly white gun violence prevention organizations. They felt angry and confused when white youth organizers were heard and spotlighted

and thus helped control the media narrative regarding gun violence. Terrance stated that "the empathy for... white kids...they bringing people to tears... There ain't none of that for the hood, though. It's just alright, go back and talk to your local representative." The public's response to violence in urban communities was non-existent compared to the emotional and financial support offered to white youth. Sydney shared, "You see Black youth always screaming for their freedom, freedom for their community. But the second a white person does it, they all automatically care." Sydney's use of the word "screaming" underscored Black youth's heartfelt call for assistance; despite their continuous advocacy, society has not fully recognized or responded to their pleas. Youth felt the community's racial and socioeconomic makeup directly determined whether the community members were seen as deserving of public support.

Participants pointed out racially bias media coverage led to disproportionate amounts of coverage of majority white-led organizations. Kirby (22, Latina cisgender woman) explained:

[Why do you think that Parkland students received widespread media attention?] Because they're white. To me, there's no other clear answer [and I] don't want to minimize their trauma and like what they've been through... but also I think that they are very privileged to have the spotlight that they have.

Kirby and other young organizers acknowledged the trauma experienced by white youth organizers and empathized with their trauma. They also underscored that the extensive attention given to white youth was a form of privilege. Jackie (19, Latina cisgender woman) reflected that "there's definitely other organized gun violence prevention organizations [and the creation of March for Our Lives was not] super different from other circumstances. But I think at that time, they had a lot of resources." Jackie believed that the approach taken by March for Our Lives in response to gun violence was not distinct from how other organizations have handled similar circumstances. Therefore, she attributed the attention and support white organizers received from the media and public to them having the privilege and the resources to garner widespread support.

### **Structural solutions to address gun violence and collaboration between organizations**

Young organizers' views on structural racism shaped their critique of gun violence prevention efforts, noting that most funding targets gun control, ignoring the structural issues in their communities. This led them to advocate for solutions focused on Black and Latine

communities' specific needs. Their frustration with funding priorities highlights their awareness of how structural racism perpetuates inequities in addressing gun violence.

## Policy solutions and structural racism

Young organizers voiced frustrations and concerns that mainstream media's limited focus created a single narrative around gun violence as mass shootings, excluding other forms of gun violence, such as police violence. This exclusion led to policy solutions that overlooked the underlying structural problems that contributed to the gun violence within their communities. Ashley (21, Black cisgender woman) raised concerns about this view and shared:

The issue was why aren't we talking about police violence, kids that look like me, who experience gun violence at the hands of police?... Gun violence comes in every form, whether it be at the hands of a partner, or at the hands of just yourself, [or] at the hands of police... there's multiple causes to gun violence, not just mental health issues or bullying... But rather structural issues of concern like food insecurity in schools, segregation, and capitalism, and... white supremacy.

Ashley noted that “mental health” and “bullying” are often raised by mainstream media as potential causes for mass school shootings, contributing to a singular narrative of gun violence that ignores the structural and racist causes of community gun violence. After reviewing the gun violence prevention policies advocated for by white-led organizations, Ellen explained:

None of these bills really affected Black and Latinx people, it was more so mass shooting bills...that's how the gun violence conversation started to get attention because white people were dying in their own high schools, so that was also infuriating... [they] had all of these resources, and... not a lot of people at that time knew what urban gun violence was, and how it is rooted in so many different things like lack of education, lack of housing, lack of medical care.

Ellen termed the gun violence prevention bills as “mass shooting bills,” as she found that these bills addressed gun violence from a narrow, white-centered view. Youth organizers emphasized how proposed policy solutions further perpetuated structural racism in neglecting to address structural inequities in Black and Latine communities.

Participants emphasized that community-engaged organizing would result in more comprehensive national and local legislation that addressed the root causes of community gun violence. In response to laws like assault rifle bans that were supported by many national gun violence prevention organizations, Will (21, Latino cisgender man) noted, “It seemed like changing laws or getting new gun violence prevention laws was the goal, instead of a focus on the community.” Once again, youth felt that communities affected by gun violence were overlooked and left out of the solution. Jared explained:

I understand gun legislation is definitely important. But that really only addresses the mass shooting side of gun violence. And when we talk about [how] we need education help, we need job readiness programs, we need a lot of things in our communities to stop day to day violence... it's a lot of other factors with poverty, education, and... the justice system, incarceration, it's a lot of things that are coming together to create our problems for gun violence. And we just keep talking about gun legislation.

Jared named foundational factors that influence gun violence, and particularly how structural racism played a role in systematically disenfranchising Black and Latine communities in ways that led to community gun violence. Participants emphasized that the remedy to gun violence does not solely lie in legislation but includes tackling gun violence comprehensively. They called for better representation and collaboration with community-based organizations.

## Centering and supporting community-based work

Participants emphasized community-led initiatives as a solution to addressing community gun violence. Young organizers provided examples of community-based work they engaged in and how it helped uplift their community. Terrance took part in several different events, explaining:

We had a food drive, where we gave out free groceries. And then we had another food drive where we gave out home-cooked meals, stuff like that... really can benefit the community... Seeing how much [the] community really needs it, and them thank us, they needed it so hard, especially because COVID hit them really bad.

Terrance shared examples of community work that offered critical support, given the interconnected nature

of issues, such as poverty and lack of government funding for education, with community gun violence. Furthermore, participants emphasized that a community-led approach ensured that the community's current circumstances determined the support offered, rather than relying on misconceptions about community needs. Janet described her organization:

We have a lot of free and reduced lunch schools in [city]. So then we would go into those buildings, and then we'd help kids who look like us...I'd go and mentor a little Black girl.

Empowering the community through mentorship was a strategy youth used to support their community. This strategy recognizes that the power to effect change lies within the community itself, emphasizing a holistic approach to addressing community gun violence.

As part of their community-based strategies for addressing violence, some organizers engaged in education-focused programming in their community. Ellen developed "social media campaigns to inform people of color about what I had learned about gun violence, police brutality, racism, and how all of these things were interconnected." Nita described her experience learning about societal issues influencing her community. She was "educated on subjects like intersectionality, identity, violence towards Black women, young Black men... And we started working together to do other workshops for other people. And then we evolved into... town halls about gun prevention in the [region name] area." Empowerment through education and voting was viewed by Jordan (18, Black cisgender man) as the "most meaningful work." He shared:

Just sitting behind the table, registering folks to vote. You know, that is when you're actually doing the nitty [gritty]...Standing behind the governor or a senator...talking about legislation or signing a bill into law... does not do anything...does not mean anything for the 1000s and 1000s, of Black and Latinx youth, where I'm from...What does mean something is the work that I do behind that table, which is getting them to vote, making sure that they're educated on not only their political rights, but their social and economic rights.

Education efforts equipped youth and community members with a deeper understanding and recognition of the broader systems of oppression contributing to the gun violence in their community. This insight, intertwining education with policy advocacy, is foundational for the youth's community-centered approach to

developing effective strategies and initiatives collaboratively in gun violence prevention organizing.

Young organizers provided suggestions on how national gun violence prevention organizations could help smaller community-based organizations and how all gun violence prevention activists can participate in community-level work. The suggestions ranged from directly asking community members what they needed to redirecting funds to the community and macro-level initiatives like national legislation. Ashley felt that it was "best to get people to organize their community because they know their community best" rather than outsiders making the decisions. This practice acknowledges the agency and expertise of community members. On the other hand, Ellen underscored that for "urban gun violence...there's no specific solution... there's not one bill that can stop it." Though policy has a major impact on gun violence in urban communities, participants emphasized that solutions to solve gun violence in urban communities must encompass a wide range of approaches that tackle the issue comprehensively from all angles. This more holistic approach reflected the way youth understood that structural racism had systematically deprived their communities of resources, ranging from education to employment, health care and access to transportation. Thus, James recommended:

[Building] work spaces where you can directly engage with the people in your community. Like mutual aid type programs or... intervention programs, more on the ground, stuff where people from the community can be the ones that carry out this study.

Along these lines, Selena (21, Latina cisgender woman) advocated for:

Really focusing or opening their eyes to what gun violence is and can be and what it can look like with domestic violence... and then providing more support on the ground. So seeing what this community needs, providing funding for that., not showcasing the policy side of it., focusing on the intersection of gun violence. So provide mutual aid for these communities, um, I think is really, really important.

Despite the varying approaches to community-led initiatives, active engagement with community members and providing both immediate support and educational assistance was featured in young people's recommendations for gun violence prevention organizing. These strategies expand the present work of gun violence prevention organizations and allow them to build stronger

connections with community members who are directly impacted by gun violence.

## DISCUSSION

This study qualitatively explores how young Black and Latine gun violence prevention organizers understand the relationship between structural racism and community gun violence through their personal experiences and activism. Most research on gun violence prevention focuses on white-led organizations, overlooking Black and Latine communities (McMillan & Bernstein, 2022). While the literature highlights community violence's effects on youth health (Bancalari et al., 2022), little has examined how young organizers perceive structural racism's role in shaping gun violence and its impact on their organizing (Grant et al., 2023; McMillan & Bernstein, 2022; Ortega-Williams, 2021).

Building on Empowerment Theory (Rappaport, 1987), our findings illustrate how young Black and Latine organizers confront structural inequities that drive community gun violence by fostering a sense of personal agency and self-efficacy (Zimmerman, 1995). Through their organizing, youth empower themselves as community changemakers, enhancing their psychological resilience and ability to envision a different future for their communities (Maton, 2008). This process allows them to transform the emotional and psychological toll of violence into motivation for action, fostering personal growth and a sense of purpose (Schwartz & Suyemoto, 2013). Our findings highlight how youth use their lived experiences with trauma to build confidence in their ability to effect change and overcome systemic barriers (Christens et al., 2021). By centering psychological empowerment, this study demonstrates how addressing the emotional impacts of structural racism can amplify the capacity for individual resilience and agency, offering a critical perspective often overlooked in policy discussions focused solely on gun legislation (Christens & Peterson, 2012). Our study also highlights youth's perceptions of media bias as a reflection of structural racism. Consistent with prior research (Dixon & Williams, 2015; Parham-Payne, 2014), youth emphasized how the media disproportionately focuses on mass shootings in predominantly white communities, neglecting the persistent violence in Black and Latine neighborhoods. By portraying white victims as more deserving of sympathy, media coverage reinforces public perception that gun violence primarily affects white communities (Berryessa et al., 2022), leading to policy solutions that overlook the root causes of violence in communities of color (Saad, 2013). This perpetuates racial hierarchies by shaping who is deemed worthy of concern (Tergesen, 2021; White et al., 2021) and aligns with ideal victim theory (Christie, 1986), which suggests that society sympathizes more with victims fitting an idealized

profile—often white, innocent, and middle-class. In contrast, Black and Latine victims are often portrayed as culpable for their own victimization, further marginalizing these communities.

Our findings build on this literature by showing how young organizers interpret media narratives as perpetuating the invisibility of community gun violence and hindering resources and policy attention to address its root causes. Youth's critical consciousness of media bias informed their organizing strategies, as they sought to amplify community-based efforts and demand mental health resources for their neighborhoods. Moreover, youth highlighted how understanding of how structural racism impacts the gun violence prevention movement by narrowing its legislative focus—such as on assault rifle bans—and contributing to funding disparities that marginalize communities of color. Prior literature has documented interpersonal and organizational racism within multi-racial social movements (Gorski & Erakat, 2019; Ortega-Williams, 2021; Wilf et al., 2024), as well as the ways young Black and Latine organizers understand how historical legacies of trauma and violence affect their communities (Ortega-Williams, 2024). Our study findings challenge policy-centered views on gun violence, urging a more nuanced, intersectional approach that addresses how structural inequities foster violence. In doing so, this study pushes the field to reconsider the scope of gun violence prevention, advocating for a shift toward addressing root causes, such as structural racism, rather than focusing solely on gun control measures. Additionally, this study underscores the critical role that young Black and Latine organizers play in shaping a more comprehensive movement. Their grassroots efforts highlight the importance of community-led solutions, mental health resources, and empowerment through sociopolitical development, which center the voices and experiences of those most affected by community gun violence. By amplifying youth organizing, the study calls for a greater emphasis on systemic change driven by the communities themselves, as they are best equipped to identify and combat the root causes of violence in their neighborhoods.

## LIMITATIONS

There are limitations within this study that may have influenced the results. First, the study sample was specifically organizers from youth-led gun violence prevention organizations, which may not represent the experiences of youth in non-youth-led organizations. Youth in these organizations may have had similar or different experiences than the organizers in this study. Second, our recruitment strategy relied on convenience sampling through social media networks (Twitter and Instagram). Youth without a public social media account were not considered, which may result in a sample that differs in



motivations or experiences of gun violence compared to their peers without public accounts.

We acknowledge the limitation of offering a \$20 stipend to participants, especially given their socioeconomic marginalization and unpaid activism. We recommend providing a higher stipend, like the university's graduate student researcher rate, particularly for participants sharing potentially traumatic experiences. To address concerns about coercion in the IRB process, researchers can reference the history of extractive research in Black and Latine communities and its harmful impact (Kouritzin & Nakagawa, 2018).

## IMPLICATIONS

These findings possess several implications for practice and research. Community gun violence exists as a central problem in urban communities and creates deeply personal and traumatic experiences for community members, as communicated by the young organizers in this study. This impacts all youth-focused workers, including social workers and educators, who work with individuals from these areas. Youth-focused programs in communities with high gun violence should, therefore, incorporate a trauma-informed perspective to working with youth, who explained the negative impact of community violence on their mental wellbeing. The findings of this study align with and build upon prior research, such as a study by Grant et al. (2023), who developed the "Power through Black Community and Unity" model for community resilience among Black youth in high gun violence areas. This model provides a framework for community-based services to enhance safety, connection, and support for youth—recommendations that directly resonate with the youth organizers' call for systemic and community-based solutions in the present study. Additionally, it highlights the need for researchers to assess how social policies and racial justice initiatives may insufficiently address the impact of structural racism on marginalized groups. Finally, efforts to improve community mental health and wellbeing must address community gun violence as it influences various aspects of community well-being.

Youth reported feeling angry and saddened that the violent and tragic deaths of Black and Latine youth were effectively ignored by the media. Prior research shows that exposure to negative news directed at youth of color, such as viral videos of police killings of Black people, can negatively impact their mental health (Tynes et al., 2019). Our study raises a question for future research of whether the absence of media content can also lead to negative repercussions for youths' mental health. The youth saw scant media coverage of community gun violence as an example of how structural racism perpetuates inequities, which hinders resources to address root causes of gun violence, exacerbating racial marginalization.

Lastly, as recommended by the youth organizers, gun violence prevention organizations must consider all forms of gun violence, rather than centering one; traditional solutions proposed by national organizations often fail to prioritize Black and Latine communities, despite their disproportionate exposure to violence. Police violence is the sixth-leading cause of death for men in their late 20s, and the risk is compounded 2.5 times for Black men (Edwards et al., 2019). Over 50% of homicides against Black women are from intimate partner violence (Waller et al., 2024), and about half of intimate partner violence-related homicides involve a firearm (Zeoli et al., 2016). Expanding a policy focus on gun violence would allow for policies to focus more broadly on gun violence and incorporate a more widespread lens to the issues of gun violence. Community-led efforts should be considered, such as mutual aid and allocation of funds to community-based initiatives, as another way of tackling the structural causes of issues within Black and Latine communities that suffer from community gun violence. Good Kids Maad City and Youth Over Guns are examples of youth-led gun violence prevention organizations that center on empowering youth and investing resources into marginalized communities.

## CONCLUSION

The ongoing exposure to daily gun violence often drives Black and Latine youth organizers to join prevention efforts. Amid their activism, these youth confront persistent structural issues they view as root causes of gun violence in their communities. Positioned as critical actors, they offer unique expertise on addressing gun violence in heavily affected communities. The study underscores the significance of centering Black and Latine youth experiences to comprehend and combat structural racism's role in gun violence. Misconceptions and societal neglect exacerbate harm in marginalized communities, emphasizing the need for strategies addressing structural racism and prioritizing the needs of Black and Latine communities to effectively eliminate gun violence.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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