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To kill or to be killed? : an examination of influential factors within African American communities resulting in the rise of youth violence

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Telea Shepard Stovall
To Kill or to be Killed? An
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Within African American
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this exploratory qualitative study is to determine the perspectives of African American males pertaining to their beliefs about the prominent influential factors within their communities that are leading to the rise of youth violence. This study was undertaken to further explore the phenomenon of youth violence and to give a voice to the participants allowing them to share their experiences of living in a high crime urban neighborhood.

Narratives were gathered from twelve African American males between the ages of 18 and 25, using a structured self-designed interview guide. Participants were asked about youth violence, the characteristics of the city of Springfield, their beliefs about contributing factors, their thoughts about the "code of silence", and suggestions for implementing change.

The findings of the research showed that the males identified gaining or wanting respect, drugs, gangs, and poverty, in chronological order, as the prominent factors leading to youth violence. The results also confirmed that young black males are internalizing oppression and living by the code of silence as a means of feeling safe within their communities.

TO KILL OR TO BE KILLED? AN EXAMINATION OF INFLUENTIAL

FACTORS WITHIN AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITIES RESULTING IN

THE RISE OF YOUTH VIOLENCE

A project based upon an independent investigation,
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2007

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated in loving memory to my younger brothers whose lives were taken by youth violence in Springfield, Massachusetts. This is for you!

Darnell Jon Shepard

November 26, 1984 – May 22, 2004

and

Daylan Jerral Shepard

November 26, 1984 – July 10, 2004

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

For over a decade, youth violence has been an increasing problem among inner

city black males. African American communities are plagued with young people

committing violent acts against one another. Due to the large amounts of youth violence,

homicide has been the leading cause of death for black youth ages 15-24 (Spivak &

Prothrow-Smith; Reese, Vera, Thompson, & Reyes, 2001). Young people are no longer

fist fighting but, instead, are resorting to more dangerous or deadly forms of violence,

such as stabbings and shootings. Nowadays, it is more common for inner-city youth to

use guns as their weapon of choice to resolve disputes between one another. In today's

society, youth are growing up surrounded by youth violence (Wilkinson & Fagan, 2001)

and, consequently, are more accepting of violence as a means to resolve conflict.

Violence has become the norm.

There is a great need for social workers to explore the phenomenon that is

occurring within African American communities, contributing to the rise of youth

violence. In order to understand why youth are committing violence, it is important to

review the literature of environmental risk factors, socioeconomic risk factors, and

cultural influences that subject youth to violence. In addition, one must explore homicide

rates, gangs, accessibility to guns, poverty, inadequate education, lack of jobs, and lack of

resources to understand the complete representation of young people's lives. The need

for this proposed study is also supported by previous literature (Ellickson, Saner, and

McGuigan, 1997). This study suggests that one needs to understand the scope of the problem and its associated behaviors in order to curb the high amounts of youth violence. This research paper explores some of the socioeconomic and environmental factors that influence youth violence in African American communities while examining literature on violent acts exhibited by black youth.

The purpose of this study is to discover what African American communities can do to decrease the high amounts of youth violence. This study addresses the epidemic of youth violence from the perspective of young black males who frequently are forced to face the deadly reality in their communities. Society has become, as Charles Darwin stated, survival of the fittest, where those that are strong will survive while others who are not as strong will die. This study seeks to examine the following questions: (1) what are the prominent influential factors within African American communities that are leading to the rise of youth violence; and (2) are young black men internalizing oppression and living by the code of silence as a means of feeling safe within their communities?

This study begins to explore the root causes of youth violence through interviewing young black males in Springfield, Massachusetts, as it is important to examine the perspectives of the actual group that is committing the violent acts. The intention of this research is to understand the young black males' perceptions about youth violence and to gain a better understanding of internalized oppression that many black males experience. In addition, this study explores the young men's thoughts, views, and beliefs about the unwritten code of silence and their perception of fear or safety within their communities. For the study, 12 males from Springfield were interviewed to gain

insight regarding what factors influence young black males, in urban communities, to engage in youth violence. It is important to examine the perspectives from the actual group that is committing the violent acts. By doing this, one will get a complete scope of what the focus group believes are the prominent factors of youth violence. Most studies do not examine young people's perspective as to why youth violence is a problem within African American communities. Instead, previous literature examines the violent behavior of youth rather than questioning why they commit those violent acts (Braga, 2003; Cotton, Resnick, Browne, Martin, McCarraher, & Woods, 1994; Wilkinson & Fagan, 2001; Bolland, McCallum, Lian, Bailey, & Rowan, 2001; Ellickson, Saner, & McGuigan, 1997; Eddy, Whaley, & Chamberlain, 2004; Webster, Gainer, & Champion, 1993; Bjerregaard & Lizotte, 1995).

The issue of youth violence became a social problem in the city of Springfield in 2004, as there were 17 homicides committed by youth. In 2005, this statistic surpassed the previous year with 18 homicides. Springfield, a small city with a population consisting of mostly blacks and Puerto Ricans, is spiraling downward due to the lack of jobs and resources. The amount of poverty is increasing, neighborhoods are run-down with abandoned homes, and schools are underperforming. All these social and environmental stressors have lead to the deadly increase in violence. In addition, there are a high percentage of people on drugs, or selling drugs, with gangs and drug dealers taking over neighborhoods. The neighborhoods are segregated by race, and it appears most of the youth violence occurs is in the black dominated neighborhoods.

How many times do we hear about the high rates of violence in black communities? Do we think that this is just black-on-black crime because we feel that it

has nothing to do with us? Maybe we internalize the incidents as gang violence and feel that young black men should not be hanging on the streets. These questions entered the minds of most Springfield residents within the last year, and these questions called for action, not ignorance. It has become disheartening to watch the news and hear about another violent death that occurred in the city of Springfield, or to hear about the shootings and stabbings that happened during the night. In order to make change in society, black communities must become fed up with the high amount of deaths among our young black males.

When the violence hit home, taking members of my family away for eternity, I became compelled to make a difference and to bring about change. In May of 2004, I lost my 19-year-old younger brother Darnell, who was shot five times at a sweet 16-birthday party by a 16-year-old black male. Until this day no arrest has been made, even though there were over 100 youth present. The code of silence is keeping them quiet. Exactly six weeks later, I lost another brother, Darnell's twin Daylan, who was shot once during a drive by, and three hours of surgery was not enough to bring him back. The black male that murdered him was only 25 years old and was sentenced to life in prison without parole.

Initially, I thought that their deaths were random acts of violence, but eventually I began to develop conclusions about certain structures within the city of Springfield. Our overpopulated black community, availability of drugs and weapons, corrupt city officials, incompetent (not to mention corrupt) law enforcement officers, and society's perceptions about black-on-black crime caused this cycle of violence to impact my family in two separate instances over a six week span. My personal experiences informed my beliefs

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about youth violence, but at the same time I feel those beliefs changed as I further my education and conduct this research. I was aware that my perspective may have influenced the questions that I asked, the sample that I accrued, and the responses that I heard, but I designed my study to eliminate any of my personal biases from interfering with the findings. I was aware that this study might not provide the responses that I wanted to hear, but the purpose of my study was to reveal the actual experiences and perspectives of Springfield's youth. If I allowed myself to intervene, then it would have prevented me from hearing what my respondents had to say, and the voices of the youth would remain unheard.

Through this research study, I investigated how oppression, inequality, and the structures of our community contribute to the violence that is occurring within my city. I hope the findings of this study provide Springfield with the missing piece of the puzzle necessary to tackle youth violence. I feel this extremely important puzzle piece involves the perspectives of the very young people who are forced to choose either to kill or to be killed.

This study will help social workers identify programs and change policies based on the perspectives of young people who are impacted directly by the structure of their surrounding communities. In addition, the findings of this study can provide social workers with the information necessary to address the sources of youth violence, instead of targeting the youth committing the crimes. Finally, youth violence will be explored not only as isolated, individual acts; it will also be examined through a broader systematic and structural lens. My hope is that the information and insight gained from this study will allow social workers to be able to develop community, structural, and

environmental interventions within African American communities that would possibility decrease the amounts of youth violence.

In summary, this study examines the perspectives of young black males pertaining to the prominent influential factors within urban inner cities that lead to the increase of youth violence. The review of literature that follows addresses the research connected to the phenomenon of youth violence. The following section describes the methodology employed in this research, which also includes the Human Research Review Committee application for Smith College School for Social Work. Chapter IV presents the findings of the study, while Chapter V concludes with a discussion of the findings, particularly as it is compared with previous literature.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review will explore socioeconomic risk factors and developmental theories that influence young black men to engage in youth violence. The purpose of this study was to examine the perspectives of young black inner city males to determine which factors within their communities influence youth violence. Twelve African American males from the city of Springfield were interviewed and asked to share their beliefs about the structures of their neighborhoods that are leading to the increase of youth violence in Springfield.

While there is a growing body of literature on youth violence, much of the literature and research does not examine the subjective perspectives of the inner city youth committing violent acts. There is a great need for social workers to explore the phenomenon that is occurring within African American communities in order to understand why youth are perpetuating violent acts against one another. Social workers need to understand the scope of the problem and its associated behaviors in order to curb the high amounts of youth violence. The research questions examined are; what are the prominent influential factors within African American communities that are leading to the rise of youth violence? Are young black men internalizing oppression and living by a code of silence as a means of feeling safe within their communities? The research intended to provide a better understanding of youth violence within African American communities, and the research allowed the voices of inner city black males to be heard.

Most of the literature discussed in this review focuses on the behaviors of young people and the factors that contribute to youth violence in low-income communities. In addition, the articles examined the frequency of violent acts committed by youth including the criminal history of youth offenders (Braga, 2003; Cotton, Resnick, Browne, Martin, McCarraher, & Woods, 1994; Wilkinson & Fagan, 2001; Bolland, McCallum, Lian, Bailey, & Rowan, 2001; Ellickson, Saner, & McGuigan, 1997; Eddy, Whaley, & Chamberlain, 2004; Webster, Gainer, & Champion, 1993; Bjerregaard & Lizotte, 1995). Two influential studies examine violence from the perspective of youth (Mahiri & Conner, 2003; Reese, Vera, Thompson, & Reyes, 2001). Two articles explored the differences between males and females engaging in youth violence. These articles looked at several different types of violent acts youth commit (Webster, Gainer, & Champion, 1993; Ellickson, Saner, & McGuigan, 1997). The literature appears to focus on the negative aspects of youth violence, and most of the articles described youth violence from an individual lens. Young people are portrayed as seriously violent individuals throughout these studies. Most of the interventions target youth as being the problem.

In addition, socioeconomic risk factors including environmental influences, poverty, and inadequate education are explored. In certain sections of the review, discussion will focus on gun violence, gun ownership, and gang membership, and exposure to violence. The review concludes with a discussion of the theory of black youth identity development, the theory of oppression, and the culture of violence. Ending with strategies for responding to youth violence are explored.

Socioeconomic Risk Factors

Environmental Influences

Many social and environmental structures influence the rise of youth violence within black communities. Those influences include poverty, inequality, and social exclusion (Reese, Vera, Thompson, & Reyes, 2001). Williams, Stiffman, and O'Neal (1998) found that 40% of the African American youth in their study responded that youth violence is influenced by (1) environmental risk factors of exposure to violence, (2) deteriorated school environment, (3) negative peer environment, (4) traumatic experiences, and (5) behavioral risk factors of alcohol and substance use. Black communities are plagued with the above stated characteristics, and the corrosion in their environment leads them to engage in risk behaviors, including violence.

Studies suggest that environmental structures indirectly interfere with parents' and communities' ability to provide social support to curb youth violence. These environmental risk factors such as "exposure to violence, personal victimization, family discord, school grades, and unemployed head of household and physical punishment" contribute to the prevalence of youth violence (Williams, Stiffman, & O'Neal, 1998, para. 8). This study concludes that there is a strong relationship between environmental risk factors and black males engaging in violent acts. Young black youth are trapped in a social environment without any possibility of upward mobility due to their isolated communities, which lack economic stability and resources. These communities are also characterized by chronic unemployment, low wages, and racial inequality (Braga, 2003). Research clearly shows that the physical environment surrounding poor black youth are contributing to the rapid increase of youth violence. In addition, it is essential to

understand that the environmental stressors within inner cities are increasing the deadly rates of violence among black youth.

Not only are youth faced with these environmental forces but so are the parents. Parents have to deal with a multitude of stressors, such as being unable to find a job or working long hours for little pay. These factors contribute to parents not being very effective at fully supporting their youth (Sheidow, Gorman-Smith, Tolan, & Henry, 2001; Reese, Vera, Thompson, & Reyes, 2001). The majority of the good paying jobs are not located in predominately black cities, and the available jobs are primarily secondary labor markets which pay very low wages (Kramer, 2000; Bolland, McCallum, Lian, Bailey, & Rowan, 2001). One study argued that fewer than half of the black males between the ages of 25 and 44 who reside in inner cities are unemployed (Bolland, McCallum, Lian, Bailey, & Rowan, 2001). This could be due to the fact that "many black males are considered as less desirable employees and are less likely to be hired in most jobs" (Noguera, 1997, p. 147). Kramer (2000) argues that entrapment of underclass blacks in unemployment keeps them impoverished.

Poverty and Inequality

Poverty and violence are intimately related, and the intensity of poverty has increased in the past two decades (Bolland, McCallum, Lian, Bailey, & Rowan, 2001). The United States has the highest poverty level compared to other countries. The gap between the rich and the poor is only increasing, eliminating the middle class (Kramer, 2000; Bolland, McCallum, Lian, Bailey, & Rowan, 2001). Additionally, poor people become trapped in an impoverished living situation which is difficult to rise above. The above cited articles made the argument that growing up in extreme poverty creates strong

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pressures for youth to engage in violent crimes. According to Feigelman, Howard, Li, and Cross (2000) "for many urban and minority adolescents, especially those living in poverty, violence has become a way of responding to the daily pressures and the chronic threat of violence within their communities" (p. 202).

In correspondence to this statement, Parker (1989) summarizes the theoretical link between poverty and homicide. He suggested that "some individuals evaluate their socioeconomic position in relative terms and they are bothered by the perception that others have more desired social and economic resources" (p. 985). However, blacks are deprived of equal opportunities, and the structures of the American society prevent black people from acquiring the same resources that are available to white people. In the past, African American individuals believed in achieving the "American Dream" but in reality that dream is not obtainable to all races. As Oliver (1989) stated:

> The most fundamental assumption of the structural-cultural perspective is that the high rate of social problems among Blacks is the result of structural pressures and dysfunctional cultural adaptations to those pressures. The term structural pressures are used to refer to patterns of American political, economic, social, and cultural organization designed to perpetuate White superiority and Black inferiority. Thus, I argue that White racism and various patterns of racial discrimination are the predominant environmental pressures adversely impacting on the survival and progress of Black people (p. 17).

Oliver (1989) claimed that racism and discrimination have a direct affect on Black people's ability to progress in American. Peterson and Krivo (1993) join Oliver's notion asserting that "inequality reinforces ethnic and class differences and engenders pervasive conflict" (p. 1002). Blacks are more likely than whites to live in areas with limited opportunities that lack resources and provide limited supports for success. Thus, black youth are experiencing additional stress as they perceive that society as a whole is

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devaluating their racial group, and they may act out violently as a means to cope with stressful racial circumstances (Caldwell, Kohn-Wood, Schmeelk-Cone, Chavous, & Zimmerman, 2004). The economic forces of poverty and inequality tend to foster violence indirectly, but these risk factors do not operate in isolation.

Inadequate Education

The alarming high levels of poverty and inequality are combined with other factors such as academic underachievement, the decrease of funds for education, and the shift from a blue-collar economy to a technological economy (Reese, Vera, Thompson, & Reyes, 2001). Williams, Stiffman, and O'Neal (1998) found that violent behaviors are directly related to deteriorated schools and a disorganized school environment. The conditions of schools within black communities lack educational resources such as books, computers, gym equipment, and modern technology. In addition to the lack of supplies, inner city schools have over-crowded classrooms, punitive behavior systems, less structured classrooms, high dropout rates, and less parent involvement (Tobin & Sprague, 2000).

Several factors from the school environment impact black student's ability to achieve academic success, and Baker (2005) makes the argument that "lack of access to equal education through various resources could be blamed for deliberate educational structures that produce low academic achievement for African American students" (p. 251). An article from USA Today provided statistics stating that black students' academic skills are four grade levels behind white students' and black students' are overrepresented in special education classes and underrepresented in gifted classes ("Bridging Racial," 2002). While this statement is certainly true, the article does not

explore in depth the ways that poverty and racism impact black students. In addition, the pressures of stress and worry about racism impacts what could be productive study time for students. One must also consider the violent environment that black students reside in, which demands a lot of energy for basic survival. Consequently, poor black youth know the reality of these factors that are present in their communities and school environments, which causes them to form a negative outlook on their future (Reese, Vera, Thompson, & Reyes, 2001).

<div align="center">*Gun Violence, Gun Ownership, and Gang Membership*</div>

The structure of our society can negatively affect the development of black youth in inner cities. This is demonstrated in youth's rising rates of drug use, victimization by violent acts, the perpetration of violent acts, and the assembly of street gangs. Studies show that "risk factors for violent behaviors differ across racial groups" (Williams, Stiffman, O'Neal, 1998, para. 5). Violence is the greatest health risk within African American communities, and homicide is the leading cause of death for black youth ages 15-24. As many as one in nine black males lives will be cut short by gun violence (Bolland, McCallum, Lian, Bailey, & Rowan, 2001; Reese, Vera, Thompson, & Reyes, 2001; Braga, 2003). Young black males are at the highest risk of losing their lives to gun violence because black inner city males have a high exposure to guns (Wilkinson & Fagan, 2001; Bolland, McCallum, Lian, Bailey, & Rowan 2001).

In their longitudinal study exploring the frequency of violent acts by teenagers, Ellickson, Saner, and McGuigan (1997) found that males are more likely than females to engage in most types of violence. In this study, males scored higher than females in almost every area measured for violence including gang fights, carrying a hidden

weapon, attacking someone with the intent to hurt or kill, and hitting/threatening to hit someone not in the family (Reese, Vera, Thompson, & Reyes, 2001).

One study explored the ways in which the prevalence of gun ownership, gun carrying, and gun use among youth has a direct effect on the increase of violent behaviors within inner cities (Wilkinson & Fagan, 2001). The majority of the youth, who carry a gun on a regular basis, do so, as a means to provide self-protection. Black youth that are involved in drugs, violence, and the criminal justice system are more likely to carry guns. Youth are solving the majority of their disputes and conflicts with guns mostly because guns are easily accessible. When conflict arises, youth either resort to using their own guns or they borrow a gun from gangs or other sources, and death is most likely the end result (Cook & Ludwig, 2004). Youth are not aware that "pulling a gun automatically increases the intensity of the conflict and limits the number of choices available to all parties" and reality then comes into play to either kill or be killed (Wilkinson & Fagan, 2001, p. 123). Bolland, McCallum, Lian, Bailey, and Rowan (2001) found that 75% of the youth in their study believe that "it is best to live for today and let tomorrow take care of itself" (p. 242). The findings indicated that youth who carry guns for self-protection are more likely to engage or commit gun violence and street crimes, in comparison to youth who do not own guns or youth who possess guns for sport. Inner city youth that live by the code on the streets are pressured to own guns by other gang members and compelled to use guns as their means of defense against threats (Braga, 2003).

The Code of Silence

The code of silence is an unwritten law of the streets that prevents young people from speaking out about crimes that they have witnessed. The Wikipedia Encyclopedia

(2007) defines this concept as follows: "a code of silence is when someone witnesses or is privy to the knowledge of an illegal or heinous act, but puts comradery or loyalty to the "unit" above informing the public or proper authorities." Within African American communities the code of silence is contrasted with the term "snitch" also known as "tattle," "rat," or "narc" in other communities. A "snitch" is a self-centered person who gets other people in trouble by telling information to the authorities (Spitalli, 2003).

The powerful force behind the code of silence prevents young people from disclosing information about each other to adults (Fleischauer, 2001; Spitalli, 2003). One study conducted by the Secret Service found that in more than 75 % of the school violence incidents, the perpetrators told someone first about their plans of violence (Spitalli, 2003). Even though studies show that other youth are the first ones made aware of the potential violence that is brewing (Fleischauer, 2001); the code of silence makes young people reluctant to "snitch." This causes youth to remain silent or "feel that it isn't their jobs to tell anybody" (Spitalli, 2003, p. 56). "Added to that reluctance is a fear of violent retribution" (Halbig, 2000, para. 3). Young people fear being a target themselves if they speak out to turn someone in or report a crime (Spitalli, 2003; Fleischauer, 2001). Spitalli (2003) emphasizes that there is a heavy price to pay for "snitching", such as social ostracism, solitary confinement, retaliation, and losing one's reputation. Black youth live by the unspoken law of the streets, and the streets have always respected the code of silence. Young people learn quickly not to be a "snitch" even if they are exposed to violence as witnesses or victims.

Exposure to Violence

Selner-O'Hagan, Kindlon, Buka, Raudenbush, and Earls (1998) claim that "either through victimization, perpetration, or witnessing, young people, especially those in urban settings, will tend to have higher levels of exposure to violence in their communities, homes, and schools" (p. 215). This is linked to the results of two articles which found that youth who engage in violence are more likely to repeat some form of violent act in the future (Eddy, Whaley, & Chamberlain, 2004; Ellickson, Saner, McGuigan, 1997). One out of four (23%) of youth who committed criminal actions is likely to commit repeated acts of violence (Ellickson, Saner, & McGuigan, 1997; Eddy, Whaley, & Chamberlain, 2004). It may be that youth in "urban communities are often exposed to multiple violent events and to a variety of types of violence" (Sheidow, Gorman-Smith, Tolan, & Henry, 2001). One study found that the local news media depicted over half (55 %) of their stories on youth also concerned violence, and 84% of the stories on the news involved the context of violence (Dorfman, Woodruff, Chavez, & Wallack, 1997).

In correlation, Sheidow, Gorman-Smith, Tolan, and Henry (2001) found that 93.6% of the participants in their study reported high exposure to violence, both witnessing and victimization. In addition, the study found that exposure to high amounts of violence is hindering young black people from envisioning or achieving success. Also there are research studies that suggest exposing youth to violence during their upbringing enables the cycle of violence to persevere (Selner-O'Hagan, Kindlon, Buka, Raudenbush, & Earls 1998).

Although youth in black communities are exposed to violence, Wijeyesinghe and Jackson III (2001) expressed the importance in "gaining an understanding of why some Blacks seemed to be extremely angry at their life circumstances, while others, who seemed to live in the same circumstances, were not as angry" (p.10). As adolescents change internally, their development is not only affected by exposure to violence but their identity is also influenced by their interactions with peers and atmosphere of the surrounding society.

<div align="center">Developmental Theories</div>

Theory of Black Identity Development

Identity development is an important aspect of the period of adolescents and in the developmental process adolescence "strive to discover who they are as a person" (Lee & Wicker, n.d., para. 1). Berzoff, Flanagan, & Hertz (2002) and Lee & Wicker (n.d.) examine Erickson's theory of the eight stages of development. Erickson proposes that adolescents are typically in the fifth stage, which he called identity versus identity confusion. In this developmental stage adolescents are not focused on how they identity themselves, but rather they are concerned with how they appear to be in the eyes of other people. Erickson notes that adolescents in this stage are trying to achieve a stable sense of self and adolescents are concerned about how they are viewed by others rather than how they view themselves (Berzoff, Flanagan, & Hertz, 2002; Lee & Wicker, n.d.). Lee and Wicker (n.d.) make the argument that "the racism, discrimination, and oppression that ethnic minority individuals encounter, as a result of living in a society dominated by the standards and norms of the White society, has an impact on their identity development" (para. 2).

The theoretical literature suggests that the identity of African American youth is socially constructed based on important others in the social environment which function as self models. Youth internalize what they can become in the future by viewing what adults in their environment have become (Oyserman, Grant, & Ager, 1995). Berzoff, Flanagan, & Hertz (2002) found it important to note that:

> He [Erickson] always argued that the meaning of an adolescent's behavior had to be understood within the sociocultural and historical contexts in which the adolescent develops. In his studies with the Sioux Indians, he explored how an adolescent's identity may be shaped in the context of a disenfranchised culture. Erickson was careful to state that simply because an adolescent was socially or economically disenfranchised, she would not be seen as deviant. If adolescents, as was true for many Sioux Indians, engage in seemly pathological behaviors such as truancy or passive aggression, these should be understood as adaptive response to the disruption of their continuous identities and communities (pp. 115-116).

Young black males are taught the world is hostile, and "those who perceive that they live in a hostile environment perceive that violence is necessary for survival" (Washington, 1997, p. 7). Oyserman, Grant, & Ager (1995) imply that the environmental setting of African American communities constructs young people's behaviors, thoughts, feelings, and actions. One must understand how the streets of black communities are effecting the perceptions that black people internalize (Wijeyesinghe & Jackson III, 2001). Adolescent development is influenced when youth live in an environment in which they experience high rates of violence, poverty, drugs, and hopelessness. Thinking about how violence is associated with the cultural and environmental factors surrounding black males, one can understand how their sense of self is deeply rooted in the belief that they must be violent to survive.

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Theory of Oppression

Oppression theory posits that the disproportionate rates of violence among blacks are the direct effect of the high poverty rates (Washington, 1997). This article also explores how poverty contributes to the harsh social living conditions of African American communities, which inevitably leads to violence. Oppression theory suggests that blacks should unite to overcome the common oppression that they suffer (Shelby, 2002). Through this theoretical lens, Shelby (2002) begins his article on common oppression with a quote from Frederick Douglass:

> We are one with you under the ban of prejudice and proscription—one with you under the slander of inferiority—one with you in social and political disfranchisement. What you suffer, we suffer; what you endure, we endure. We are indissolubly united, and must fall or flourish together (p. 231).

Access to the American goals of academic achievement, occupational and social prestige, upward mobility, financial success, and material acquisition by legitimate means is blocked by society for African Americans (Washington, 1997). In his article, Parker (1989) claims that blacks become frustrated as they realize there is nothing they can do to improve their situations and overcome their oppression. It is out of frustration that blacks are perpetuating violent acts in response to the built up aggression of being oppressed. However, the violence is not directed at the source of the frustration but rather at other black community members who are enduring the same economic struggles (Washington, 1997; Parker, 1989). To reduce the impact of environmental stressors influencing black youth to engage in violence African Americans must act collectively to end oppression (Shelby, 2002).

As indicated above, oppressed black communities contribute to the amount of violence and poverty that prolong the existence of violence. Black youth are being raised in cities where violence plays a significant role in survival. Black youth learn to do whatever is necessary to obtain their basic needs. When conceptualizing a link between black identity development and oppression theory one must consider how the setting of the environment shapes and influences the identity that black males adapt. The prevalence of violence within black communities has resulted in black people creating and adapting to a culture that is defined by several forms of violence.

Culture of Violence

Williams (2004) contends that the culture of violence could potentially wipe out the African American race, and Parker (1989) argues that society allows individuals to use violence as a legitimate means of solving problems. "The disproportionate rates of criminal violence among blacks are a product of their commitment to subculture values and norms that condone violence as acceptable means of resolving interpersonal conflict" (Washington, 1997, p. 6). The subculture of the inner city glorifies violence. Young black males represent less than half of the entire population but at the same time they are responsible for half of the violence in America (Williams, 2004). The cycle of violence may be transmitted from generation to generation. In addition, the cycle may be developed individually because of situational factors (Parker, 1989), including but not limited to deteriorating family values, the failure of government housing programs, over crowding in poor urban centers, under funded public schools, and an inner city that glorifies violence and derides conventional family values (Williams, 2004). Young black males growing up in inner cities develop violent traits as they are becoming men

(Washington, 1997). Washington's perspective and analysis of the culture of violence is helpful because he discusses possible solutions and preventative programs that could shift the process and the destruction of youth violence.

Incorporating Young People

There are many strategies that explore preventing youth violence through the promotion of community commitment, which indicates that youth involvement is one fundamental way to address and change the issue of violence. It is necessary to incorporate young people to be part of or included in community action so that they can contribute to rebuilding the community (Zeldin, 2004). In order for youth to engage in the change mechanism, public misconceptions that label black youth as "dangerous" or "delinquent" must diminish in the eyes of the media and society as a whole. These negative perceptions have turned youth into scapegoats in society while preventing the actual source of youth violence from being addressed (Mahiri & Conner, 2003; Braga, 2003; Ellickson, Saner, McGuigan, 1997). Youth will become contributing citizens once integrated into community structures and organizations rather than being viewed as individuals in need of services. Involving youth in community change efforts will allow young people to become empowered to stand against youth violence and to develop their own strategies for prevention (Zeldin, 2004).

Analysis

Some of the strengths exhibited in these articles included tracking and surveying large groups of youth ranging from 249 participants to 4,586 participants (Sheidow, Gorman-Smith, Tolan, & Henry, 2001; Ellickson, Saner, & McGuigan, 1997; Webster, Gainer, & Champion, 1993; Wilkinson & Fagan, 2001; Braga, 2003; Cotton, Resnick,

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Browne, Martin, McCarraher, & Woods, 1994; Bolland, McCallum, Lian, Bailey, & Rowan, 2001). One study examined local television news channels (Dorfman, Woodruff, Chavez, & Wallack, 1997), five studies were longitudinal relational designs (Sheidow, Gorman-Smith, Tolan, & Henry, 2001; Ellickson, Saner, & McGuigan, 1997; Braga, 2003; Eddy, Whaley, & Chamberlain, 2004; Bjerregaard & Lizotte, 1995), two studies were qualitative descriptive designs (Mahiri & Conner, 2003; Reese, Vera, Thompson, & Reyes, 2001), and four studies were quantitative research designs (Webster, Gainer, & Champion, 1993; Wilkinson & Fagan, 2001; Cotton, Resnick, Browne, Martin, McCarraher, & Woods, 1994; Bolland, McCallum, Lian, Bailey, & Rowan, 2001) .

The most significant strength was found in one article where the researchers discussed the importance of having an African American person administer a survey to black students so that the students would be able to personally identify with the survey administrator (Cotton, Resnick, Browne, Marin, McCarraher, & Woods, 1994). Conversely, the common weakness is that most of the studies did not explore the participant's perspectives to hear the subjective thoughts about why they engage in violent behaviors. Instead, the studies examined quantitative variables such as the numbers of times the participants engaged in violent acts. Another limitation found in two of the studies was that majority of the participants, ranging from 70 to 85 percent, where white youth but the study discusses the findings applying them to all youth from different racial backgrounds (Ellickson, Saner, & McGuigan, 1997; Braga, 2003; Eddy, Whaley, & Chamberlain, 2004; Bjerregaard & Lizotte, 1995). These studies cannot generalize their findings because the sample was not representative of the larger youth group discussed.

Summary

The empirical research viewed here covers a wide range of literature on youth violence and examined the characteristics of and factors that contribute to youth violence. This chapter explored socioeconomic risk factors for youth violence presenting an overview of environmental influences, poverty, inequality, and inadequate education. As shown above, all of these risk factors either directly or indirectly influence youth violence within African American communities. In addition, this chapter illustrated how gun violence and gang membership influences youth to engage in violent behaviors towards one another. On the other hand, the literature discussed in this review was unsuccessful at examining the perspectives of the youth who are being blamed for the increase of youth violence. As a result, the above stated studies and literature review highlight some critical questions that drove the design of my research study which will be discussed in the following section.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Study Purpose and Questions

The research questions explored by this thesis were: (1) what are the prominent influential factors within African American communities that are leading to the rise of youth violence; and (2) are young black men internalizing oppression and living by a code of silence as a means of feeling safe within their communities?   A qualitative design method was used to gather and analyze data from African American males who have some experience with youth violence, including, but not limited to, being a victim of violence, being a survivor of violence, or being a young male that has participated in violent acts. The aims of descriptive research are to provide a better understanding and to clarify the nature of the phenomenon (Anastas, 1999). This research design was selected to determine what the problem of youth violence looks like from the perspectives of young black males. The method used was a fixed interview, which asked open-ended questions to gather narratives from the participants. The purpose of this study was to discover what African American communities can do, from a young black male perspective, to decrease the high amounts of youth violence.

Sample

The participants of this study were selected through non-probability techniques of snowball and convenience sampling. The sampling method was purposive, as the participants were chosen based on their availability and their ability to meet the selection

criteria. The sample was not representative of the larger study population because random selection procedures were not used. The collected descriptive data from the participants can be expected to be "true" for unobserved members of the larger population (Anastas, 1999).

The sample of this study consisted of 12 males between the ages of 18 to 25; two were 18, four were 19, three were 20, one was 21, one was 22, and one was 24. All of the participants identify as African American males and all have been Springfield residents. Seven out of the 12 participants live in the Mason Square area; two live in the Forest Park area; one live in the Pine Point area; and two live in the 16 Acres area. All participants have had some experience with youth violence including: being a perpetrator, a victim, or a survivor of violence. The participants were knowledgeable about the recent homicides in Springfield, have peers who were victims, or have peers who are perpetrators of youth violence. Three males in the study were advocates or community activists against youth violence.

Of the 12 participants, eight grew up in a one parent home, one grew up in a two parent home, one grew up in a foster home, one grew up half in a one parent home and the other half in a two parent home, and one grew up half in a one parent home and the other half in a foster home. In addition, six participants were from the lower socioeconomic class, five were from the middle class, and one was from the upper class. As for occupation, eight of the participants were employed while four participants were unemployed. The education levels of the participants consisted of three attending college; one completing some college; two graduating from high school; five completing some high school, and one receiving a GED.

The recruitment and selection of participants was conducted using the snowball method. The researcher contacted friends, co-workers, and acquaintances asking them to inform people who might be interested and qualified as a participant. In addition, the researcher contacted, by word of mouth, different community leaders who work with youth in the city of Springfield. The community leaders gave information about the study to males who might be willing to participate in the study. A participant consent form was provided to the community leaders and was then given to the participants prior to the interview. The community leaders and agencies were informed about the confidentiality rights of the participants to ensure that the participants were fully protected and that their identity was not breached. The researcher's relationship with community leaders and previous work in the city of Springfield allowed access to participants through different community agencies. Four participants were obtained from Alive with Awareness Knowledge and Empowerment (AWAKE) and the Martin Luther King Community Center. Of the other participants, two were obtained from the Johnson Life Center, one through a family friend; and the other five participants were obtained from Dunbar Community Center.

Participants were interviewed throughout the month of February into the first week of March 2007. Interview days and times were set up with the participants via the participants' contacts. Most of the scheduled times were during the evenings and nights because those were the times the centers provided activities for older youth. Each week different agencies were attended to interview the participants. There were days where no interviews were conducted. Some of the time spent at the centers consisted of waiting for participants, finding empty rooms to interview in, waiting for participants to finish

their basketball games, finding new quiet places during the middle of the interviews, and looking for the participants' contacts. All of the above made the interview process very challenging.

Participation in this study was open to all African American males who resided in the city of Springfield regardless of socioeconomic status, religion, sexual orientation, and education level. This study excluded females from participating because within the city of Springfield black males are mostly the victims or perpetrators of violent acts.

Data Collection Methods

Data was collected in face-to-face format from the convenience snowball sample of 12 young African American males. An open-ended unstructured interview was used (see Appendix D) following a brief demographics questionnaire (see Appendix C). All participants were asked the same set of standard questions although additional questions varied as subjects were often asked to elaborate on or clarify certain responses. Approximately an hour was designated to conduct an interview allowing time to provide introductions, to answer any questions, and then to provide some time to debrief and handout a list of referral sources (see Appendix E). The actual recorded interviews lasted approximately 20 to 25 minutes. Only the researcher conducted and transcribed the interviews. Permission to digitally record the interview was requested and obtained before any recording took place. To ensure confidentiality, participants' names were not used while recording the interviews. Interviews were used as the data collection method because it accomplished the study purposes. The purpose of the study was to explore what African American communities can do to decrease the high amounts of youth violence from the perspectives of young black males.

The interviews, was presented in a manner that was non-intrusive. The data was collected as consistently as possible throughout all interviews. The data collection methods were standardized and the response categories for questions were fixed. The interview consisted of 17 questions, and the questions were written for the purpose of this study. The nature of the open-ended response questions had to do with the participant's perception of the influential factors within their African American communities resulting in the rise of youth violence. Participants were asked to reflect on the structures of the city of Springfield, what factors contribute to violence, what needs to change, how Springfield may have responded or not, and their beliefs about what would prevent youth violence from occurring in Springfield. The researcher asked about the code of silence, and their perspectives about the amount of fear young males are dealing with. In addition, the nature of the qualitative unstructured questions had to do with the perceived amount of safety in African American communities.

All appropriate efforts were made to protect the participants from any ill effects of participating in the interviews. This study was approved by the Human Subjects Review committee of the Institutional Review Board of the Smith College School for Social Work (see Appendix A). Participants read and signed the Consent Form (see Appendix B) which outlined their rights of participation, as well as some potential risks and benefits. The Human Subjects Review Board was concerned about the safety of both the participants and the researcher. This is understandable considering the nature and topic of the study. In addition, the researcher interviewed a population of individuals who are not supposed to talk with people outside of their community. However, being a woman of color, the researcher was a person who the participants identified with, and the

researcher was not viewed negatively by the black community.   In addition, for the past 3 years, the researcher has been a positive figure in the city of Springfield, working with young people to stop the high amount of youth violence. Additionally, the researcher interviewed participants who are not supposed to snitch and by participating in the study they were not snitching.   The researcher was not asking the participants to be a snitch but rather they were asked bout their views of a snitch. The study was conducted in a manner that did not require the participants to answer any incriminating questions about themselves or others. Additionally, being well known throughout the city of Springfield allowed the researcher as well as the participants to be safe throughout this study. The researcher made sure that the interviews were held in a secure place at a safe time. All of the interviews were conducted in an office of the community centers except one that was held at the home of a family friend.

Data Analysis

For the purpose of this exploratory study, the data was analyzed using content analysis on the narratives generated from the interviews. The researcher analyzed the descriptive questions including, age, location of residence, length of time residing in Springfield, education level, and occupation by using frequencies and percentages. The demographic responses were entered into an Excel worksheet, and the researcher looked for similarities and differences in the data. Themes were chosen from the entire body of data generated, and participants' answers were compared and contrasted. These themes were chosen based on consistency between participant responses, answers that directly addressed the research question or reactions that were poignant. Each interview was transcribed in its entirety and evaluated individually for general themes. Throughout this

process the researcher kept notes of what was being doing and why. After the data was transcribed, the researcher used content analysis. The qualitative data was counted up to determine how many people answered the same way. Finally, the researcher used thematic analysis to look at the themes that were connected, and some of those themes were consistent with the literature.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

This qualitative study explored the perceptions of African American males
pertaining to youth violence, their beliefs about contributing factors, and change
mechanisms that are helpful or need to be implemented for prevention. The purpose of
this study was to examine the perspectives of young black inner city males to determine
which factors within their communities influence youth violence. Therefore, my research
questions were: (1) what are the prominent influential factors within African American
communities that are leading to the rise of youth violence; and (2) are young black men
internalizing oppression and living by a code of silence as a means of feeling safe within
their communities?   This study represented an effort to shed light on the phenomenon of
youth violence, whose rates are increasing disproportionately within black communities.
Most of the literature examines the frequency and amount of violent acts young people
commit. In contrast, this study explored the perspectives of young people to figure out
the reasons they engage in violent acts. Participants in this study represent a population
that is often not asked their opinion about what happens in their lives. In all, this study
provided the participants with the opportunity to share their experiences of living in a
high crime urban area.

The following chapter presents the findings of the collected data obtained from
African American males who were interviewed for my study. The beginning of this
chapter presents an overview of the demographic information which includes descriptions

of the neighborhood characteristics. The themes discussed below were selected from the

information collected in the interviews because of their particular relevance to the topic

or because of similarities in the participants' responses. The findings were grouped by

themes based on the following areas of questions: (1) what does the term youth violence

mean; (2) describe the good and bad aspects of Springfield; (3) what factors do you feel

most contribute to youth violence in Springfield; (4) what is one thing you think most

needs to change to prevent youth violence; (5) is there a "code of silence" in Springfield

and what does it mean; (6) what does it mean to be a snitch; (7) do you feel safe and do

you ever fear being a target of violence; (8) is there anything being done in Springfield to

stop the violence; and (9) what would you say to the young people as a means of

"speaking out" about youth violence.

Sample Characteristics

The sample of this study consisted of twelve African American males who have

resided within the city of Springfield, Massachusetts all of their lives. The age range was

between 18 and 25, with eleven participants 22 or under. In terms of age; 16% (n=2)

were 18, 33% (n=4) were 19, 25% (n=3) were 20, 9% (n=1) was 21, 9% (n=1) was 22,

and 9% (n=1) was 24. Out of the 12 participants, 58% (n=7) reside in the Mason Square

area, 16% reside in the Forest Park area, 16% (n=2) reside in the 16 Acres area, and 9%

(=1) reside in the Pine Point area. In the participant pool, 66% (n=8) of the participants

grew up in a one parent home, 9% (n=1) grew up on a two parent home, 9% (n=1) grew

up half in a one parent home and half in a two parent home, 9% (n=1) grew in a foster

home, 9% (n=1) grew up half in a one parent home and half in a foster home. Of the 12

participants, 50% (n=6) were from the lower socioeconomic class, 41% (n=5) were from

the middle class, and 9% (n=1) were from the upper class. As for occupation, 66% (n=8) are employed and 33% (n=4) are unemployed. Of the participants, 41% (n=5) completed some high school, 25% (n=3) attend college, 16% (n=2) graduated from high school, 9% (n=1) received a GED, and 9% (n=1) completed some college.

<center>*Youth Violence*</center>

This section details the participants' responses to questions pertaining to their beliefs about youth violence. The data will be presented in the following subsections: definitions of youth violence, family experiences, and peer engagement.

Definitions of Youth Violence

When asked to define the term youth violence, two individuals responded that youth violence is associated with gangs or with being a member of a certain group. One of those participants talked about how the media and music industry influences youth violence. However, most of the participants (n=8) stated that youth violence is a range of physical harm as minor as fighting and as severe as killing, stabbing, or shooting. Of those, a few the participants (n=3) responded that the physical violence conducted at the hands of the youth are unnecessary actions without a reason behind them. One participant added to the notion that youth violence is not only physical harm but also has mental and emotional effects. This is demonstrated in the following narrative:

> Youth violence means young people killing each other. Killing each other mentally meaning that starting fads for example like you are supposed to be cool if you are dumb and cool if you don't go to school. Killing each other physically meaning they are shooting each other down and all that. They are selling drugs in the neighborhood killing our community. They are also killing each other emotionally because every time they take one of our brothers or sisters out somebody is emotionally wrecked somewhere.

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Aside from describing youth violence as physical acts, one participant explained that the youth engaging in those acts are out of control:

> When I think of youth violence it's probably like out of control adolescents or unguided adolescents. With adolescence its all types of violence because when you're young your mind is open to do anything. I know of a couple of or just about all or most of the kids that do all the crazy stuff that you hear about in Springfield so it is all types of things with youth violence.

Family Experiences

After the participants were asked to define youth violence, they were asked "how does your family feel about youth violence?" Four of the participants responded that their family is against youth violence as one interviewee replied, "Against it. They want unity in the city. In terms of looking at the city in the terms of violence, I can't stay that there has ever been unity- sound unity." Another participant stated that his family is does not agree with youth violence but he adds that the violence is normal: "My family been through a lot and you know it effected them a lot. Living in the neighborhood that I live in it drives my mother nuts but I am used to it because of my age." Another participant had similar remarks:

> Well we definitely don't agree with it. It's something we see on the television over and over. It's disgusting! We feel like it is something that should not be happening in this place in Springfield. We hear a lot of it and funerals and things like that so we see a lot of the after math.

Several participants (n=4) indicated that their family does not like youth violence because they have lost a loved one to violent acts. One male stated, "They don't like it because a lot people in my family have been in a lot of violence meaning they have been hurt by violent acts." This theme is further demonstrated as one participant explains:

> They don't like it at all I know my moms don't. For one thing she is a parent that lost a son to youth violence so I know that she is against it. I am against it

because unfortunately I had to go threw the pain and the struggle of losing a little brother so I'm not really with it.

As the participants discussed how youth violence impacted their family the theme of the ripple effect emerged as another respondent agreed, reporting, "One of the kids that did get killed in Springfield was a close friend of mine and my family knew him so it had a ripple effect on them too." This idea was also expressed by another male:

They are not for it at all and my family is against it. I lost a cousin during 2004 when all the murders went down. I lost a very close cousin. So my family is all against it you know what I mean it is real crazy. That had a big impact on my family.

A few of the participants (n=2) reported that their parents educated them about youth violence and raised them to be nonviolent. However, the remaining participants (n=2) responded that their family does not want to tolerate the violence in Springfield and would like to move out.

Well they don't really tolerate it but they just really want to get away from it. I guess they feel that there is not anything they can do personally but they are trying to get as far away from it as possible. They are trying to move from Springfield it is too much for them.

Another stated:

They want to get out of Springfield to be honest with you. They want to get out of Springfield all together because of all the killing and people just killing each other. You can't walk down the street without somebody asking you what group you are with or what colors you are wearing. I wear any color that I wear so it don't even matter to me, I don't rep nobody .

Peer Engagement

Aside from the participants' family experiences with youth violence, the previous narrative also mentioned how peers can influence one's decision to engage in violent behaviors or gang activity. Participants were asked if they had friends that engage in

youth violence, and if so, how? In discussing the first question, a few of the participants

(n=3) stated that they do not have friends that engage in violent behaviors. One

interviewee reported, "I only hang out with older people and they are in their 30's. I

don't hang out with the young guys because they are crazy and they don't know how to

act." Another participant responded, "No because I cut them off." As another participant

stated, "I would not call them friends because my friends have the same beliefs that I do.

I tend to surround myself around people of my persuasion." However, a majority of the

participants (n=9) reported that they have friends that engage in youth violence; two

stated that they have associates that commit violent acts. As one male expresses, "Well I

have a little bit of friends but I know a lot of people so my associates are doing this

stuff."

In discussing the second part of the question, one male summarized the responses

of most of the participants that stated they have friends that "are involved in violence like

gang related, shooting, drug dealing, committing robberies, and everything else."

Another participant added that his friends engage in "afterschool fights and shootings"

and he continues "I know them. I went to school with them, the young ones at least."

One male explains how his friends engage in violence:

> How? Gangs fights they are ready to fight, being ready to fight even if it is a
> normal day. They leave their house ready, and they just make a few phone calls if
> it is necessary. They are pretty much prepared for battle everyday. Even if they
> are carrying something or not, they are still prepared. That is how they are.

Another participant spoke more specifically about peer involvement with gangs:

> I have a lot of friends in gangs and stuff like that but they are not bad people just
> because they are in gangs it is just they are trying to feel or be a part of the circle.
> The gangs are the only way out. In a way, gangs are big in Springfield, and in a
> way, they are not because people just think that they are hard. There is just a

bunch of egos going around. Hard to call them gangs a cause there is just the streets; no leaders, no colors, no nothing they are running around crazy.

Characteristics of Springfield and Contribution to Youth Violence

The second section of questions directly referred to the participants' perceptions about the city of Springfield and their beliefs about what factors were leading to youth violence there. This section is further divided into three subsections: description of Springfield, factors leading to youth violence, and poverty and oppression.

Description of Springfield

Participants were asked to describe the good and bad aspects of Springfield and most of the participants talked in depth about the negative aspects. There were four major themes that emerged which included feeling that there is nothing good about Springfield, believing that there has been an increase in violence since 2004, feeling that Springfield is too small, and stating that Springfield is the birth place of basketball.

Five participants indicated that they believed that Springfield does not have anything good to offer, as one male stated, "There is nothing here in Springfield; there's nothing here and it is too small." Another male agreed with this comment as he added, "Everything about Springfield is bad, everything like the people. Well in general, Springfield is going down the drain." A different participant spoke specifically about the lack of programs and the lack of productive activities for youth:

> There isn't really too much good about Springfield because I feel that they don't have enough programs going on. I just feel that they don't have enough things going on for the kids where they leave the kids out to do nothing. The kids have nothing else to do but shoot and sell drugs, and do this, that, and the third. I feel like if there was more for the kids to do then there would not be so much violence. I mean occasionally you are going to have the ones that is going to do this or that is going to do that but it would not be as bad as it is now.

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Two male's responses were very similar as one clearly phrased, "There is just too much

drama here." The other male indicated that a negative aspect of Springfield is a lack of

control and order:

> I don't really see anything good about it you can say Springfield is not really well
> right now. I don't think that it is a bad city just certain areas. But if it keeps up
> and it doesn't get controlled, then it probably would become a bad city. There is
> no order in those certain areas. Its like areas in Springfield are not respected by
> the police and stuff because if something happens then they don't really care.
> When something goes down they don't really pay too much attention to it as they
> should. They respond but I don't think they care that much. I don't blame them
> because there is only so much a person can take. I guess people are getting tired
> of it and they feel that it is pointless.

In addition to the participants reporting that Springfield does not have any good

aspects, some of the interviewees (n=5) noted that there has been an increase of violence

over the past couple of years especially since 2004. One male said that, "in these last

couple of years as far as it being bad there has been a whole lot of shootings, a whole lot

of fighting, a lot of people getting arresting, and selling drugs and things like that.

Springfield has not been the same. Things changed in 2004, Springfield went down

hard." A response by another male was similar as he discussed that there have been, "too

many killings here. It has been like this for a good while, a couple of years." This

participant went on to say, "The last couple of yeas it has been real wild, and I have had a

couple of friends that passed away about 2 years ago. That hit me hard in 2004, it was a

hectic year." Another participant described the bad aspects of Springfield as being

"crazy" as a result of "all the brothers locked up and getting killed and just getting into

these reckless beefs [fights] over whatever it is constantly. I mean that's just nuts. You

are dealing with so much when it comes to that but just generally it is crazy." Two other

males described Springfield as "one of the worse" cities because "there is shootings all of

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the time, people getting robbed, and there is a lot of killings all over town." The other

participant went into depth as he talked about how the rising rates of youth violence have

labeled Springfield as shown in the following:

> The violence was a very high rate to the point where we was labeled in the country like at the top. I think we were actually before New York and New York is a pretty big state. We are only a little city and we were already labeled. Springfield I think has gotten a lot better. It has calmed down. There is still enough violence but not as much as there was in the past 3 or 4 years of violence. It has lowered since I can remember the whole summer when a bunch of teens that I did not know personally but I came into contact with were killed.

Three participants indicated that Springfield is a very intimate city and two of

these males stated, "Springfield is kind of small and a lot goes one." The other male

went on to add, "It is small and you see too many people at the same time and you keep

on running into them. You can not go somewhere without running into someone that you

don't like or they don't like you for whatever reason and you don't even know about it."

In contrast, another male felt that, "Springfield is a small town which in some case makes

it bad and in some cases it makes it good." He went on to report the good aspects of

being an intimate city as he stated, "It is very intimate because it is small and it's not too

many things you can get away with because it is small. Everybody knows each other that

is a reason why it may be good at times because people might need support and it is not

as widespread as other cities."

A few of the participants (n=3) stated that Springfield is "the birth place of

basketball" which was found to be a good aspect of Springfield as two of those

interviewees reported. On the other hand, the other male explained what is bad about

Springfield as he stated, "This is the birthplace of basketball and they don't have enough

basketball or they really don't have enough nothing going on here." Another participant

explained, "I can't really say too many bad things because there is bad everywhere." He continued on to discuss the positive aspects of Springfield in which he noted, "We have a lot of good high schools especially Putnam and we have a lot of good colleges that attracts people from out of state. We have a lot of opportunities here." One participant felt differently:

> From what I'm seeing there aren't too many options or umm there aren't too many opportunities here in Springfield, such as jobs for an example. And us being minorities the education here, we are thought of as underperforming and you know it's not really the place to be. What is bad about Springfield? After school, there is nothing to do after school. There are programs like this [Community Center] but very few kids know about them. Its just not enough programs and just not enough to do for kids our age. I really can't blame the people it's the kids they are making the environment like this for us but then again if you don't have anything to do then its wasted time and then kids get into things and get caught up in stuff because they don't have nothing to do. They are like "Yo you want to go do this. Sure I ain't got anything else to do." They go and rob a store because there is nothing else to do and they get caught up get into the system. This is what is really going on. It's just the simple fact that kids are that bored that they go out try to rob ice cream trucks. There are no programs. And then jobs are so hard to get but when you do get one you don't make enough. Its not like when you get a job things are all taken care of cause then you might have bills, kids now are pregnant, and some of them live on their own. A lot of them dropped out of school.

Factors Leading to Youth Violence

Participants were asked three questions regarding to contributing factors: 1). What factors do you feel most contribute to violence in Springfield? 2). If you could pick one or more factors from the list below that most contribute to youth violence, what would they be and why? 3). Does poverty contribute to youth violence in Springfield? If so how? Participants were only asked the third question if they did not choose poverty from the list in the second question.

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In discussing the first question, a few participants (n=2) noted that both drugs and territory are leading to violence and they felt that youth, "are fighting over territory and that is how it all started. Then it leads to other things." These two participants further discussed, "it is basically about the drug sales" because "it is in the paper [money], and it is drug lead. However, other interviewees (n=2) stated that peers are influencing other youth to engage in violent behaviors. One male explained, "It's like all your friends that you would know around here and you consider your friends is with some type of group. Most of your friends will be like "you want to be my friend then join this group it is safer." If you don't join a group then something could happen or they could switch up on you and not try to be your friend or they could be on the other side and be two faced about it." This idea is portrayed in the following statement by another participant:

> I think it's the kids who are out here who are just influenced by the older ones who are basically pulling them in. A lot of what I seen or what I know they either chose not to place themselves in a setting where they are comfortable or they are just placing themselves in it. Kids are placing themselves where they are comfortable, such as places to go or someone to talk to, things like that. They are not really comfortable in a home or at a friends house and they would rather go to the streets. Something is just pulling them to the streets.

Some of the participants (n=3) indicated that the lack of parental support and the lack of role models contribute to violence in Springfield. One male stated, "Kids don't have any direction," and another male added, "some parenting could help especially more supervision of what children are doing." This theme is illustrated below by another participant:

> Probably the parents because there are not enough people who can just sit down and teach a kid not to do this or this is bad or this is good. They [kids] grow up on a one track mind thinking this is the way to be and you have people out there on the streets that they are looking up to. Then the people that they are looking up to are not doing well themselves and they are not role models so there are not

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enough role models. Then the parents they are not there in their kids lives so then there is no one there to teach them really. I know a couple of my friends who are like that and it is sad because they really don't understand right from wrong.

A few participants (n=2) reported that "pride and reputation" influence violence as one male explained that "youth want to react not because personally they may feel some way but because what everyone else is thinking or feeling." The other male explained that "young people here have the macho tough and hard attitude." Another male stated that youth violence is a "phase and it's a fad" and he also adds that the media and music industry contribute to the "gangster mentality." One interviewee felt that the "lack of a personal relationship with God for everybody not just young people" is leading to violence in Springfield. Another respondent stated his opinion as he spoke at length about what is leading to violence is Springfield:

> Stupidity- people come out there and think that they have to represent their territory and Springfield is very small compared to what I have actually seen and the conflicts in Springfield are nothing compare to the real, the real hood in different cities. This is just a small portion of what the hood could be like. There is not any fighting anymore. Fist fighting is not even in; when they want the hands people pull out a gun. It's just how it is nowadays and people are like that and that's probably been a punk to just pull out a gun and kill somebody. If you are going to fight then you are going to fight. In talking to my father he was like it is not like it was back in the day when he was growing up. He would always say at least they did fought they did fight, and they fought with their fists. It wasn't until recently when people started getting guns and just killing because either they are scared of fighting or they are going to loose. I don't personally think that anybody is Springfield is hard and people say there are hard because they got guns but guns don't make you hard. People are scared or people will say that they are gangster because they are carrying a gun but that is not gangster. A real gangster will fight you even if they do kill you they will kill you with their fists. They don't have to pull of the gun. People think that because you carry a gun that you are a G [gangster] but even if you can't fight you pull out your gun so if you are losing you pull out your gun. Or if somebody talks trash then you say I got the heat in my back pocket but that does not make you a gangster. Carrying a gun, having a gun, and killing people is not being gangster. A lot of young people in Springfield have guns even if people don't know about it. A lot

of kids have guns a lot of them. Some of them might not really use them but they still have them.

For the second question, the participants were asked to choose one or more factors that contribute to youth violence from the following list: gangs, safety, poor education, no cops, poverty, fear, lack of jobs, access to guns, lack of money, respect, drugs, and retaliation. Majority of the participants (n=11) chose multiple factors from the list. However, one male indicated that all of these factors are present within Springfield, and these factors contribute equally to youth violence. Each interviewee discussed more than one factor from the list, and the major factors reported by the eleven participants included: drugs (n=6), gangs (n=5), lack of jobs (n=4), respect (n=6), access to guns (n=4), fear (n=3), safety (n=1), and poverty (n=5), which will be discussed in the following section. An additional factor was added to the list by two of the males that chose poverty -- they discussed single parent homes (n=2).

One participant who identified drugs as a factor said that when people are on drugs they are easily influenced which causes them to engage in things that would not do if they were not under the influence. Another male discussed the factor of drugs in different manner as he stated, "a lot of my friends are caught up in the image that you have to have certain things and you have to be a certain way. In order to get that, drugs is the main way to get what you don't have, the money part." Four out of the six participants that selected drugs also choose gangs as a factor that leads to violence. Two interviewees reported that gangs in Springfield are unavoidable because "you can go on every street basically and there is some type of gang known of or some type of gang you have not even heard of." The other male added, "When you are talking about Springfield

they're [gangs] everywhere." One male discussed how gangs are beneficial to some youth as he noted, "the reason why kids turn out the way that they are is because they don't have a stable home and they a have a lot of hurt so they join gangs. Even though gangs are bad they do provide shelter and family. The positive things about joining a gang are that you will get stability and you will get a family."

Four participants made reference to lack of jobs as a contributing factor for youth violence for the reason that "there are not that many jobs out there." One respondent reported what he constantly hears from the youth in Springfield:

> "We need jobs, we need jobs!" A lot of kids need jobs and if they had jobs then they would not be in the streets. There are jobs out there and they are hiring all the time but I don't understand why they can't get a job. It is hard for me to get a job because I was walking around taking the buses everywhere. Then I went threw someone that I knew and I got hired a couple of weeks later. If I did not have any connections then I would be out crazy running the streets. I would be a fool.

Another participant had a similar response:

> You know youth apply for jobs but you can't, I mean, it's not that easy to get one even at burger king or something like that. You think it would be easy but it's really not that easy to get a job. Because it's really about who you know not what you know but who you know. Young people can't get jobs and drugs are everywhere. Where can't you get drugs in Springfield?

One interviewee noted, "Quite a few people in Springfield can not get jobs. Then when they do illegal things you can't really blame them though. If you can't get a job then you have to do what you have to do. They are just trying to survive."

As for the participants that mentioned respect, five out of the six talked in detail about respect, stating very different reasons about how respect leads to violence. Two participants reported, "Everyone wants respect -- to feel wanted, to feel loved" and "once they do some violence to someone else they get respect from the streets, hood credits."

Another male agreed as he stated, "there is a lot of people out here who think the have earned some type of respect because they walk the street with their head high. They sell poison to our communities and they make money off of it." The other two participants expressed that people in Springfield lack respect for others which "is going to lead to something else."

In discussing access to guns, of the four participants that chose this factor most of the males (n=3) stated that it is "very easy for kids to get there hands on a gun" and they emphasized that young kids have access to guns. One participant expressed, "Nowadays you got kids 13 and 14 [years old] walking around with guns" another interviewee reported, "now I see a lot of young kids with big guns not those little guns, but big ones." Two participants asked similar questions about youth having access to guns as they asked, "Where are the guns coming from?" and "Where do they get guns from?" Another male shared his experience of his first visit to the shooting range as he stated, "when I held my first gun I know that I never felt so powerful. You feel like a completely different person, it creates a new personality."

A few participants (n=3) reported that fear contributes to violence and one male expressed, "the most important one is fear. Fear of not being accepted, fear of being put on a shelf, and fear of everything. Fear of not being successful." Another participant stated, "the fear is to better themselves. They feel like they have to be stuck here. They see what is going on around them and they see what they are growing up into. They have a fear to better themselves and go on." The other male had a different perspective as he described fear as, "everyone is afraid of something and most of the people are doing this stuff are afraid, afraid for their lives." On the other hand, one participant selected safety

as a factor because "if we took the proper precautions some of this could be avoided by examples."

Poverty and Oppression

Participants were asked about their perceptions of poverty being a contributing factor of youth violence if the participants did not select poverty from the list of possible factors. Several participants (n=7) reported that poverty is a factor leading to violence. One male that did not choose poverty from the list also discussed single parent homes as connected to poverty:

> Poverty could play apart of it because there is a lot of kids growing up in single parent homes. They see their mom having to struggle with the kids, the bills, and do this and do that. A lot of times the kids feel that they have to be out there because it is not coming from no where else. They see their mom struggling or they see their dad struggling. If their mom is doing this, and their dad is doing that, then they feel like they have to be out there. Everybody wants to wear the Timberlands or the Nikes; everybody wants to be fresh to death.

Another participant responded:

> First of all, it starts with the mothers and the fathers. There are a lot of babies having babies, which brings that baby into a bad situation already. Then when that baby grows older, I am not slashing fathers or nothing because I am a man and I know what I plan on doing when I have a family, but 9 times out of 10 the fathers don't stick around. So now, the kid has to grow up, and the mom is struggling. He [the kid] is fighting for school clothes and this and that. So the first opportunity that he sees to get out he is going to take it. And if it means picking up a gun and robbing somebody and potentially shooting someone, he is going to take it.

A participant stated, "A lot of kids live poorly -- especially urban kids. They live in the hood and in the ghettos of Springfield." Two participants explained how being impoverished "will cause someone to maybe rob somebody." Another male reported, "If you are broke then you are going to find some way to get it. You rob somebody to get it,

shoot somebody to take it, and they are doing what they got to do to get by." Another interviewee noted that people fear poverty.

Some respondents (n=3) indicated that poverty "somewhat" contributes to violence and one participant noted that there is a lot of poverty in Springfield. Another male stated that poverty "contributes financially because a lot of kids don't have the things that they need." One participant agreed with this statement above and he reported, "A lot of people in Springfield don't have much, especially younger kids." In contrast with majority of the participants, a few males (n=2) stated that poverty does not contribute to youth violence.

Silent Laws of the Streets

This section details the participants' perception about the unwritten laws of the streets, beliefs about snitching, and thoughts of how snitches are treated by the surrounding community. The data are presented in the following four subsections: code of silence, definition of a snitch, thoughts about snitching, and pros and cons of snitching. This will be followed by a section on the participants' opinions related to safety and fear of being a target of violence in Springfield.

The Code of Silence

After the participants were asked to identify factors that contribute to violence in Springfield, they were asked, "Do you believe there is a code of silence in Springfield?" This question contained two sub questions which were: what does the code of silence mean, and what are the effects of the code of silence in your community?

In responding to the first question, the majority of the participants (n=9) reported "yes" the code of silence exists within Springfield, while a few participants (n=3) stated

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that they did not believe there is a code of silence in Springfield. All of the nine males

that responded "yes" had similar definitions of the phrase code of silence as the males

used the word "snitch" to describe the answer to the question. One male did not

understand the term code of silence as he asked, "What do you mean? Like no snitching

or not cooperating with the cops, yeah I believe that happens." One male had a similar

response as he spoke about the code of silence from the perspective that "cops are not

respected at all and they are viewed as the enemy." Another participant described, "The

code of silence is where something happens and people around see what is going on and

they know what happened. Nobody wants to snitch; nobody wants to tell the police.

Then they feel like they are a snitch, and there are consequences for snitching, a lot of

people feel that way." A respondent added, "People don't want to be labeled as a snitch."

One participant explained the code as simply, "hear no evil, see no evil. It's very

powerful." Another interviewee stated that people are not "bold enough" to step up to

speak out which "forces people to just step back and stay in their comfort zone and stay

in the code of silence." Some of the participants (n=3) spoke at length about all three

questions:

> The code of silence has to do with no snitching, and it is a code that says not to snitch. It is affecting Springfield in a negative way because the more people that don't say nothing is the more that something is going to happen but it is fear. Probably people are scared and they don't want to say anything because they are afraid of what is going to happen to them. But they don't know that that fear is bring us down. The more fear you have, the more stuff is going to happen. You are not helping and you are not preventing it you are helping it in a way.

Another participant agreed with this narrative as he explained:

> The code of silence means don't snitch, don't tell, and that whole loyalty thing you know keep your mouth closed. The loyalty is to each other, loyalty to that gang or to that group. Yes, it is having an effect on the community. When I am

looking at it I am trying to see it from both, you know, the code of silence and how it affects those who actually want to keep the code and then the other. I mean it hurts, it hurts the city. I got so many friends right now whose mom and people still don't know who killed their kid. It's kind of a rock and a hard place to some people. There may be people who would actually want to come forth and say whatever they have to say, but then it's like "okay well, if I do this then my life is in danger." In some respect it [the code] hinders, it keeps us back, and it hinders what needs to be done to get closure to some things.

In contrast, one male described how the code is positive and maintains structure in the community:

Everybody makes it seem like it [the code of silence] is a conspiracy or something like that but its not. It's like a natural thing. "You don't see what you can't say or you don't say what you can't see". So that's what happens to a lot of people when things happen. It's like, "I didn't see it so I can't really say." Unfortunately, the code of silence really, personally I think the code of silence, is maintaining. Should I say? Maintaining the death rate because if there was no code of silence, I think the death rates would be a lot higher because these people travel in groups. If somebody does something and you see it. Then you tell and he [that person] goes down. His [that person's] boy gets you [for telling] and now you are dead. Then somebody sees his boy kill you and they tell on him. Then his boy [that killed you] goes down. His boy comes and gets [kills] him that told; now the next person is dead. So it is going to keep going back and forth. So what the code of silence does, need I say, it maintains. When someone breaks the code of silence that is when there is going to be a disaster. Disasters happened every so often but when you break the code of silence that's just asking for trouble.

Definition of a Snitch

When asked to describe a snitch, all of the participants (n=12) mentioned that snitching has to do with "telling". One interviewee reported that, "A snitch is telling anything, just telling." Another male agreed as he stated, "A snitch that would be a person who tells, who runs and tells." Other terms used to describe a snitch included: tattle tail (n=3), sellout (n=1), traitor (n=1), rat (n=1), and the feds (n=1). Three males reported that a snitch "is someone who has knowledge of some crime committed who tells the police about what they saw." Another participated noted, "You have information

and you tell it to the wrong people. The wrong people this is what society calls the wrong people such as the cops, a principle, or a teacher if you're in school it depends on your situation basically its adults and the people who have authority." One male stated that a snitch is "somebody that can't keep things to themselves." Two males had similar responses as one male stated that a snitch is "a person that tells the truth unnecessarily" and the other participant reported that a snitch is "talking out of turn." A participant stated that a snitch is "a person who tells on somebody for they own personal benefit and to tell on somebody who is doing wrong". The male in the following narrative described, "A snitch is someone who tells on another person. As far as these streets go someone telling on someone who did something either they were caught up in a situation that they wanted to get out of or they had to tell on the other person to get out of their situation." Another participant described his perception of a snitch as the following:

> I feel like a snitch is a person who is involved in the same type of crime and who is doing the same things. If I am a drug dealer, and I am hanging with someone, and he is a drug dealer too. Then when he gets caught and he does not want to do all that time by himself and the police offer him a deal. He is not taking the time because of whatever reason [such as] he may have kids or nobody wants to be locked up for 25 years. So some people do what they got to do so that they won't get that time. That is basically why a lot of people tell so that they can get time taken off.

For the second part of that question the participants were asked, what does it mean to be a snitch in Springfield? Seven out the twelve participants responded to this question. A few interviewees (n=2) reported that it is best to stay away from people who have been labeled as a snitch because "if you don't stay away from them then they are going to tell on you too." The second male further explained, "People feel like they can't trust you. No trust no love, tough love." Two other participants noted that snitches

"can't even walk around the streets because of your own safety because they broke the code of silence." The other male agreed, reporting, "Snitches get beat up, outcaste, and possibly killed." Some interviewees (n=3) explained the lack of respect that snitches have as one male stated that "like the saying says 'snitches get stitches.' Basically if you are a snitch then you are not going to be liked by many people at all and that is going to lead to more violence. Snitches are probably the least respected people out of all." Another participant reported, "You're at the bottom of the barrel. Nobody wants to mess with you like that and you get no respect for being a snitch. Once you snitch one time then you lost it, you lost all your cool points and they went out of the window." One participant discussed the lack of respect in further detail:

> A snitch is the worst thing that you can ever be. A snitch gets no respect and nobody wants to be around you because people get nervous. You have people watching you and people think crazy, especially the drug dealers that get nervous that you will tell again. People like to gossip, and they don't want you to gossip their business around because they are afraid that you might go back and tell the authorities.

Thoughts About Snitching

Participants were quick to point their attitudes about snitching and many respondents (n=4) stated that they "don't know" because it "depends on the situation" that the person is faced with. Likewise, four other participants do no agree with snitching and one male reported, "If something happens, I just feel like you should keep it and just mind your business. If something was to happen and they came to me and said, 'You were there did you see what happened?' I mean honesty I would say that I did not see anything because I just don't want to be involved." Another male explained that snitching, "It ain't good because when you leave this world all you got is what they

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thought of you. It is not what you did it is what your name is. If you snitch they aint

going to think about you or say, 'Rest in peace to this snitch.' So all you got it is your

name, and if you mess that up, then you ain't got nothing." Another male clearly states,

"I don't agree with it." One male expresses that he has, "Low tolerance I got very low

tolerance for snitching. If you snitch on me than you might as well consider me not to be

your friend. I am just going to stop talking to you; it is kind of hard to try to be

somebody's friend if they are snitching." However, a few participants (n=3) seemed to

accept snitching. As one male noted, "You have to do what you have to do; that is

basic." Another interviewee agreed with this statement as he reported, "I think if

somebody see something or know about someone getting murdered. I think that it is a

good thing for them to be a snitch." One participant reported that he would snitch, "If

somebody that I knew was going to hurt my brother or anybody in my family." He

continued, adding that he was not worried about losing his respect on the streets: "The

respect is only coming from people who have no respect really they are lacking the

respect. Nobody respects the people from the streets or gangs but nobody wants to speak

out against them either." One male spoke at length about his attitude about snitching:

> My attitude is like, it really goes like this. There are certain silent rules that
> everybody lives by. And you can't just go around telling on everything that
> everybody does because if someone went around telling on everything that I did I
> know I would be in a lot of trouble. There's just certain thing, I mean, some
> things are just meant to be told if you are going to go to jail for life for something
> that you did not do. There are certain ways that you can get around telling on the
> person but get yourself out of trouble. That's what people don't know, they either
> just go to jail for life because you want to be considered a legend on the streets
> but they locked up it's like, "I went down as not a snitch but I'm in jail for life."
> Then the person that does snitch they spit out a name and then they are walking
> the streets freely. It does not take you walking up to somebody saying or asking
> if they are a snitch because it's all in the newspaper. And then when you free to
> go they know you spit somebody's name out because there is no way a shooting

or some violence goes down in Springfield and then they pick you up and then let you go. There is no way to explain yourself because they already know that you are a snitch.

Pros and Cons of Snitching

Participants were asked, what are the advantages and disadvantages of being a snitch and majority of the participants (n=7) stated, "There are no advantages of being a snitch." A few interviewees (n=3) reported there is only one advantage of snitching, and they all explained different perspectives. One male noted that the, "advantage is doing the right thing" as another male stated, "the advantage would be justice being brought about." The other participant stated, "The good thing about being a snitch is that you know a lot. You have to know a lot to be a snitch or you are the inside man so you can get a lot of information that somebody else would need." He continued on to conclude, "If you were a law enforcer it would be good to be a snitch." One interviewee responded that the advantages of being a snitch "depends on the situation" and one male discussed some advantages as he reported, "you might get lesser time and when you do go to jail they might put you in a certain part of jail where you are not around the population called PC. Protective custody is where you are not around population so nobody can get to you. And they also move people or relocate people to different states and towns."

In discussing the disadvantages of being a snitch the following themes emerged: loose respect (n=6), loose friends (n=5), lack of trust (n=4), disliked or frowned upon (n=4), harmed physically (n=4), fear (n=3), isolation (n=3), increase of enemies (n=1), and life being threatened (n=1). All of the participants had very different responses that they explained the themes stated above. As one participant identified that disadvantages as, "lack of trust, lack of respect, and decrease in friends, those all the disadvantages."

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Another male agreed, saying, "The disadvantages are that nobody will respect you for one, nobody will want to have a personal serious relationship with you, and nobody will trust you or except you." One interviewee responded similar as he noted, "The disadvantages are you will not be respected, you will have a lot of enemies, you will not be trusted, and if it gets out like that that you are a snitch, then your life will probably be miserable." One respondent defined the disadvantages as the following:

> You can't trust them. You lose all of your trust, and it is hard to gain that trust back from that person after they snitch on them especially if they were your friend or someone close. People will see you as somebody not to be around with and that is that. You lose the friend that you thought you had, but you can change from being a snitch. But it is going to be hard to gain back what you had because you lied too much and you spread too much gossip.

Another participant reported that people, "will start threatening them, disrespecting them, and giving them the cold shoulder." Two other males noted that snitches will "loose respect" as one added "you are frowned upon." Another male explains how "a lot of people are not going to talk to them because they snitched, eve their own boys and people that they are down with." Two interviewees talked about the fact that "if everyone knows that you snitched there is that fear" because "things can really happen to people said to be a snitch, possibly harm." One male further explained the disadvantages and potential harm if one is labeled as a snitch in the following:

> The disadvantages of being a snitch is you can get somebody in trouble who is not supposed to be in trouble because a lot of people that the cops pick up a lot of the times did not do it and then they will pick up somebody and ask them about it. Just because they heard on the news or they seen the picture they will say that it was him. So then they will get somebody in trouble that is really not supposed to be in trouble or in the end will end up killed over telling on somebody which is really ridiculous.

Another participant discussed the repercussions of snitching below:

The disadvantages of being a snitch are you might get killed or beat up. I mean there are so many things that could happen [to snitches] in the streets and in jail. You can get beat up in jail or if you go upstate somebody might stab you or you can get killed in jail. It is not impossible because it has happened. There is a fear that goes along with snitching and you don't want to be known as no snitch.

Perception of Safety and Fear

Participants were asked to explain two questions regarding safety which was, do you feel safe in Springfield? If the participants responded "no" then they were asked the second question. What would Springfield need to make you feel safe? A few of the participants (n=2) reported "I don't feel safe in Springfield." One responded, "There is too much stuff. The shootings and all that you cant walk outside during a certain time at night. I just don't feel safe at all I would rather be in a car, if I am in a car then I feel safe but not walking." He continued on to explain, "Before I felt safe in Springfield back in elementary school but stuff changes as soon you hit middle school. It is like a big step as soon as you get in the 6th grade people start to change how they act." The second participant answered the question of what is needed to make him feel safe and he noted, "Springfield would have to get a lot of these criminals off these streets. The criminals are the ones that are actually doing these shootings and they are ones who are on these corners selling these drugs." However, two males reported that they feel safe in Springfield to a certain extent. One of these males stated:

To an extent, I mean I feel safe a little bit you know I have my brothers and I have my family around here and they know a lot of people but sometimes that is not enough. If somebody wants you touched then you can get touched it is as simple as that. I try to avoid all of that. It is about how you carry yourself if you hang around with that crowd where people don't have love for them.

The other male added a different perspective in the following narrative:

I don't really feel endangered but I feel safe but then I don't feel safe. It's not really that I don't feel safe it's that I feel uncomfortable. Springfield is not somewhere that I want to grow up and die. I don't want to be in Springfield. I want to see different parts of the world, and I don't want to get stuck here. Most kids go to high school, if they are lucky they graduate, and then you see them walking up and down State Street. I don't want to be one of those kids. I see a lot of my friends that graduated last year and they are still here in Springfield, and I don't want that to be me. I want to do more I want to do the whole college experience.

On the other hand, majority of the interviewees (n=8) reported that they do feel safe in Springfield. Two males feel safe because "I have lived here all of my life and I aint going to be scared" and the other male stated, "I have always felt safe in Springfield because I have family members that have respect." Three participants report that they feel safe as one male reported "I have a very basic simple life." As another male added, "I don't go anywhere and I don't get into trouble. I stay to myself and the couple of friends that I have." One participant responded, "I definitely feel safe because I am not involved in any activity that would lead to me feeling unsafe. I am not caught up in crowds. I don't go out. I don't get mixed up in all of the parties and all of that craziness you know drinking and smoking. I don't get involved in all of that which can lead to possible violent encounters." Two interviewees reported feeling safe because "I don't have to worry" because "I keep my mouth shut, mind my business, and stay out of trouble." Another male explained why he does feel safe in Springfield:

Yeah I feel safe because I don't think my life is being threatened in anyway. I don't have any confrontations with people, no conflict, I have a lot of friends, and I know a lot of people. In the streets and not in the streets I know a mixture of both. I avoided conflict because I am positive. Don't talk a lot people talk and get in trouble. Don't say anything to get yourself in trouble. You don't have to have conflict with anybody if you do not want to. If you are an overall cool person just relax and make a lot of friend and be nice to everybody.

After the questions about safety the participants were asked, do you ever fear being a target of violence? Interestingly, ten out of the twelve participants responded, "no" they do not fear being a target of violence. Half of those participants reported that "you can't live your life in fear" and one male added, "Because it is going to happen then it is going to happen." One interviewee reported, "Everything happens for a reason so I can't even think about that or walk around like something might happen because your thoughts produce things." Another participant noted that he "can't worry about what people can do to him." A participant shared his personal experiences and what he was thinking when he was shot as he stated, "I didn't fear it." Another male discussed an incident when he was almost shot and this male was thinking "if he is going to shoot me then he is going to shoot me." Another interviewee reported that he does not fear being a target of violence because he stays to himself. This male explained the "key to being safe is to do what you got to do to live life. Don't get into trouble. Don't talk about nobody and don't get into something that you can not handle." Two other males agreed, saying, "no because I don't associate myself with the streets." One interviewee indicated that he knows a lot of people and he does not have fear because "I am cool with everybody so I really do not have any enemies." Another male spoke about how he is used to this lifestyle in the following:

> No, I guess that has to do with how I grew up. Violence was everywhere so it is not really nothing new to me and I guess I am just used to violence. I am just aware of what is going on around me. "Don't let anybody catch you slipping."

In contrast with the majority, one male stated he fears being a target of violence "sometimes because it can happen at any time" and the other male stated, "maybe with a

couple of people being with certain people." He then stated, "Being with someone who is not highly favored in the street then you can have a little fear."

Implications for Change

This section details the participants' responses to questions pertaining to what is needed in order to prevent youth violence from occurring in Springfield. This section is further divided into four subsections: suggestions for preventing youth violence, change mechanisms implemented in Springfield, stopping youth violence, and speaking out to youth about violence.

Suggestions for Preventing Youth Violence

Nine out the twelve participants indicated suggestions for change. A few participants reported that they did not know what needs to change in Springfield to prevent youth violence. A majority of the respondents (n=4) reported that Springfield needs more unity in the community and more unity within the community based organizations. One participant noted, "unity --because if our young black people in Springfield was more united, more together, more understanding, and more intimate then it would not be like this now." Another participant said, "We just need to come together and respect each other as a people." Two males reported that unity is needed in the community centers:

> More community involvement more community centers coming together as one because everybody is separate. All the community centers should get together and do one big project because there has not been anything done as a whole. NES is doing one thing, Dunbar is doing one thing, and MLK is doing another there is not any whole. They need to get together to do one big project [such as] a community forum because that would help.
> …

I think that there needs to be a greater role played by these different organizations that are going on in Springfield. You may have a particular agency, organization, or center that is trying to do something to combat youth violence but then it becomes a "Ronald's place" is the one that is putting this on instead of "Jimmy's place." So then it becomes more of we want to get known kind of thing and it gets mixed up. As a community as a collective we should just come together in these meetings. I am sick of going to meetings, talking about gang violence, and talking about what we can do. I think we need to make actions. Be proactive instead of reactive. Right now you know thank God, at least to my knowledge, that has not been a murder yet this week but right now where is the people? You don't have people fighting right now in this moment trying to stop something, but when somebody gets killed then it becomes an issue an they become reactive. Not to say that is everybody but generally speaking I feel that's what happening.

Two respondents noted that Springfield needs, "to change the message being brought out" about youth violence and the other male reported that "we need to work on reaching a generation and being able to connect to them." Some participants (n=3) stated that youth need more activities to keep them off the streets and one participant said, "community centers keep kids off the streets but it is on the people to come. I think of the things that keep kids of the streets one summer was sports and basketball." Another male added, "They need to offer more things to the kids and give them something to look forward to." A third participant made a similar statement:

Probably just more to do; there is nothing to do. More activities, we definitely need more activities because that would prevent youth violence from happening, especially during the summer. There is nothing to do during the summer and more of the violence comes out during the summer. Somebody is guaranteed to die at least every single summer guaranteed.

Change Mechanisms Implemented in Springfield

Participants were asked the following two questions: Is anything being done in Springfield to stop the violence? If so, are those ideas working to help stop the violence? Five participants indicated there is nothing being done in Springfield to stop the violence. One male clearly stated, "I don't see any changes because there is nothing being done."

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Another participant responded no as he explained, "With all of these unsolved murders --

nope I don't think so." One participant discussed a conversation that the police

commissioner conducted at a press conference and the interviewee explained,

> No I don't think so because when I was watching the news the police
> commissioner was talking about it and he said "What could you do? It is just
> "gang bangers killing gang bangers." Basically, he is going to let them do what
> they do. I don't believe him either, because it is not just gang bangers killing
> gang bangers and that they are not messing with the other people. The people
> holding the power in Springfield, the officials, do not think that it is a problem
> because it is not affecting them. But he does have a point because there is a lot of
> black people dying and black people are the main ones killing each other and the
> main ones going to jail that I how it is going down.

Another interviewee responded that he "doesn't see anything being done" and he later

stated that there has been an increase of police officers. In response he noted, "I really

don't think more police is helping at all because what the police is doing they are

aggravating the situation so when they are adding more cops they are adding fuel to the

fire." One male spoke about how Springfield will always be the same:

> There aint nothing being done and aint nothing that could be done. There is
> nothing to be done because there is always going to be violence where ever you
> go. It aint got to be gang violence but there is going to be violence. If there
> wasn't any violence then the world would not be right. In Springfield this is just a
> little bit of violence there is worse places than this, way worse places. I feel like
> this, everybody is their own man. I used to play basketball; I never sold drugs;
> [even though] I grew up around people at used to sell drugs. As I got older, I got
> older, and it just stuck with me and I started doing me. Aint like I chose it but it
> was around me. You don't need nobody to slap you and tell you to do this. If
> you aint going to help yourself then aint nobody else going to help you. What is
> he going to do be in your ear you are going to do what you want to do anyways?
> That is how I see it. They been telling me my whole life go to school, go to
> school, and I went the other way. I heard them but shit I choose to go the other
> way. Aint nobody put no gun to my head. I did it myself so I can't blame nobody
> for me getting shot and I can't blame nobody for me going to jail but myself.

On the other note, a majority of the participants (n=7) reported "yes" things are being

done in Springfield to help stop the violence and those ideas are working. Five out of the

seven respondents noted that there has been an increase of police officers in Springfield.

One male stated, "I think the law enforcement is probably the only thing that is helping

out. I think that it is working. I have seen a change and there is more cops patrolling out

at night in certain neighborhoods at night just watching and there is a cop everywhere

nowadays." Another participant had a similar response as he noted in the following:

> I see that they have more feds and more cops on the streets. I think they need
> more people involved and the cops on the streets are helping a little bit. I see a lot
> of dudes that used to sell drugs and had their business on and going have been
> shut down now. There are a lot of undercover cops out here and they are trying to
> clean up Springfield and keep the noise quiet.

One participant described ideas for change that could be implemented by the police

officers, community programs, and the faith based community:

> Yes, I know that Springfield recently picked up an extra detail with the state
> police and you know they have these different units for guns and unit for drugs.
> For the effort of the police, they are doing their thing. With the community based
> organizations, I feel like collectively everybody does something different that
> would help the community or youth so I say the community centers are doing
> their jobs. The faith based community you have a lot of churches out here who
> are doing their things but I would personally like to see a lot more coming from
> that community because that is the community that holds all the keys.

Similar to the narrative above, one male reported that the community based organizations

are helping because the programs are getting kids off the streets as "they get a lot of kids

to come play basketball." Two other males reported that the police are helping out as

"some drugs have been taken off the streets and a lot of people have been going to jail."

In contrast, one male felt that "the police arresting people scared a lot of people because

it was unexpected" as the other male reports that he "haven't seen any changes yet." One

interviewed noted that there are things being done but "it is not strong enough or it is not

good enough."

Stopping Youth Violence

When asked, what do you think will stop youth violence from occurring within Springfield, some participants (n=5) made suggestion for change. However, a majority of the participants stated either that nothing can be done (n=3) or that they did not know what could stop the violence (n=4). Of the participants who gave suggestions, a few (n=2) reported that spirituality is needed to help change. One male stated, "Prayer is the only thing. Everything else has been exhausted except pulling more from Him [God]." The other male reported that Springfield needs, " a person strong enough or gifted enough to reach people's hearts and minds and let them know why youth violence is a waste of time, a waste of energy, a waste of muscle, and a waste of strength." Another participant suggested that "if we can get a heavy message out there that there are places like Dunbar, MLK, and the South End [Community Center] where you can really go. Get help with your homework. Get you off the streets." Another interviewee reported that keeping people in school and "not letting them leave in the middle of the school day" will stop the violence. One male stated:

> I think getting rid of the drugs because I think the violence is from the drugs so they should get more of the drugs off the streets and the guns too. They would have to get the people that know all this information and start snitching. Start talking that is the only way. Start communicating because that is the only thing that is going to get Springfield shaped up is if people start talking. That is my opinion.

In discussing the responses from the participants that reported nothing can be done (n=30, one male clearly stated, "Nothing can be done not that I know of. Maybe the only thing that could have changed to help me was if I stayed in school." The other two participants expressed that "it's really up to the youth when it really comes down to it. You really

can't do nothing about it. It's the individual him or herself that can turn stuff around."

The second male, agreed:

> It has to be up to the youth, they made the decision to start it, and they have to make the decision to stop it. It is a fad, it is a phase, and it's going to change. Some fads hang out longer than the rest and some fads never go out. But hopefully this is one that the youth will realize it's a fungus and it is spreading and it is killing each other. Pretty soon it is going to kill them so hopefully they will realize that this fad or this phase is not cool.

Speaking Out to Youth about Violence

The majority of the participants (n=11) spoke at length about what they would to say to young people in relation to youth violence and one participant was "not really sure" what he would say to the youth. Many of the respondents (n=5) mentioned that they would tell young people about the importance of school. One male stated, "Put yourself in school and focus on something that you are good at -- use your talents." Another participant noted, "Just stay in school no matter what just tough it out, ride it out, no matter what happens." One male phrased it, "go to college -- that is the only way to stay safe." One respondent said that school keeps you active and he also tell young people to "get involved with afterschool programs." As one male noted,

> Just stay out of the streets and keep your head in the books because staying in the streets aint going to get you no where but in jail. The streets will also get you 6 feet under, just being honest and being real with people. School is more important than trying to sell drugs or being in a gang. Education is more important.

Some of the participants (n=3) indentified that it is important for youth to think about their actions and one male said, "This is stupid now that I am older. It was stupid when I was doing it but it took me a while to figure it out. After you start losing people and people getting shot you grow up." Another interviewee reported that he would ask the

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youth a series of questions to get them to think about their actions in the following

statement:

> Can you really live with somebody dead on your conscious? I would get inside
> there head and ask them just a simple question of how would you feel? How do
> you think that kid's mother feels? How do you think that kid's sister feels or that
> kid's brother? Every time I hear about a shooting or every time someone runs up
> on me I think about it in my head I'm like "I'm not fighting this kid or I'm not
> going to get into no confrontation with this kid because if I hurt him or if he hurts
> me then what is my family and what is my mom going to feel like? What is my
> sister going to feel like or my little brother who is looking up to me watching me?
> It is all about a positive example, lead by example.

Another participant shared a comparable intervention that he would used to speak out to

young people about youth violence:

> I probably just tell them that they are killing each other for no reason and if they
> keep it up aint nobody going to be left. I probably would just cut it sweet and
> short. I would not sugar coat anything. They are killing each other for no reason
> because if you really think about it a gang? What are you fighting for, territory?
> Back in the day that is what they fought for but these gangs don't have anything.
> And I don't think of them as actual gangs it is like little I don't know what to call
> it, people getting together. What are they fighting for? Nothing because they aint
> getting nothing out of it and it is not like they are fighting for money or
> something. I bet you half of them could not even answer. You can not say
> respect, for what? Can't anybody answer that and then they are fighting for
> nothing.

Initially one participant did not know what he would stay to the youth but he would

approach them in "a way that they understand you and a way that they can relate to you."

A few males (n=2) stated that encourage the youth to focus on their future. One

participant reported, "I would tell them to try to look past the temporally present situation

and focus on the future. Be focused and don't look at the now because the now is just the

now but the future is something to strive for." One participant reported:

> Don't settle for where you are basically anybody can do anything or be anything
> that is a true fact if they actually apply themselves. People don't have to live in
> the streets; people don't have to sell drugs people don't.   Sometimes it is

understandable that people may have to do what they got to do to survive but there is always an alternative. A lot of people don't have hope and they don't admit it. A lot of people don't have any hope or any positive figures or anything positive about their lives to fall back on so the only thing they can fall back on is the streets cause the streets will give them a home.

Summary

Twelve African American males who have resided in Springfield all of their lives were interviewed to explore the influential factors within their communities leading to youth violence. Participants' narratives provided insight into the realities that they face everyday while living a high crime area. The males were willing to share their experiences and they were thoughtful with their responses which show the value of asking young people to be the experts regarding youth violence. Overall, the males discussed how peers influence youth to engage in violence, the lack of guidance from parental figures, the pressures of the code of silence, and they believed that change mechanisms will be ineffective. The finding showed that participants believe that there a number of factors within their communities leading to violence. However, respect and drugs were found to the most influential risk factors for youth violence. In the next chapter, the implications of these findings are discussed.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

This study examined which factors within African American communities contribute to youth violence from the perspectives of inner city black males. Current literature suggests that socioeconomic risk factors, including environmental structures, chronic unemployment, and inadequate education, can influence violence. Additionally, current literature tells us that the prevalence of access to guns and gang membership within black communities is leading to the increase of youth violence. In addition, there is a growing body of literature that reveals how poverty and inequality indirectly influences young people to engage in violent acts. However, the research on youth violence defines youth as being a source of the problem and does not focus on the perspectives of youth, which this study aimed to achieve.

Participants' narratives provided insight into the prominent influential factors that are leading to the rise of youth violence. The findings of the research showed that the males identified both respect and drugs as the most prominent factors resulting in the rise of youth violence. In addition, many participants also cited gangs and poverty as contributing factors leading to youth violence. These factors were consistent with findings of previous research studies. In addition, the results confirmed that black men are internalizing oppression and living by the code of the streets as a means of feeling safe within their communities. What emerged from their stories that is missing from the literature included the following: how violence is understood and incorporated into their

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lifestyles, the role of gaining or wanting respect, the influence of single parent homes, the

lack of direction from role models, and young people's perception of fear and safety.

Findings showed that participants' definitions of youth violence slightly varied

but were mostly defined as physical harm inflicted onto another youth by means of

fighting, stabbing, shooting, or killing. Most participants indicated that their families

have had negative experiences of youth violence and their families are against violence

because some have lost loved ones. In terms of peer involvement, participants noted that

they have friends and associates who engage in violent behaviors. Also the findings

showed that participants' descriptions of their neighborhoods were mostly negative as

they identified several factors within Springfield that they feel result in the increase of

violence. Participants believed that poverty plays a major role in youth violence.

Furthermore, the findings illustrated how snitches are negatively viewed and

harmfully treated by others in their surrounding communities. The males clearly

indicated that there are no benefits from being a snitch and that this only reinforce the

code of silence. Another significant finding showed that participants' personally feel safe

even though they are living in an extremely violent and dangerous environment. This

sense of safety was connected to the participants' expression of lack of fear of being a

target of violence. Finally, general observations about change mechanisms and advice

for young people about youth violence emerged from the findings.

This chapter discusses the findings in the following order: youth violence,

characteristics of Springfield, contributing factors to youth violence, silent laws of the

streets, perception of safety and fear, and stopping youth violence. The chapter closes

with a discussion of implications for social work practice and recommendations for future research.

Youth Violence

Definitions of Youth Violence

The findings indicate that there is no clear definition of the term youth violence. Responses indicated that youth violence is: associated with gangs, different types of inflicted physical harm, and learned behaviors from rappers and the media. The different types of definitions makes it hard for one to pinpoint what youth violence is and it is difficult to tackle a problem that has not been defined. Participants reported that youth violence is unnecessary violent behaviors at the hands of youth. The participants were able to identify the random types of violent acts but they were unable to explain why youth are being violent towards one another. The violence in communities has been going on for so long that the youth can not remember how the initial "beef" began. These males are fighting a war without any cause or purpose.

The above arguments leads to question are the youth really out of control and unguided, as one male reported? Youth are using violence in an attempt to regain control of their chaotic environments because "every time they take one of our brothers or sisters out somebody is emotionally wrecked somewhere." This is attributed the prevalence of youth violence to high exposure to violence because all of the participants discussed witnessing or victimization of violent acts throughout their narratives. These males have witnessed and undergone an incredible amount of violent experiences as an ongoing part of their lifespan. According to Selner-O'Hagan, Kindlon, Buka, Raudenbush, and Earls (1998) exposing youth to high amounts of violence only perpetuates the cycle of violence

to persevere. The males were really trying to say that they learned how to be violent by watching others in Springfield handle their problems, conflicts, and disputes in violent manners. In other words, youth often become products of their environments.

Family Reactions to Youth Violence

The respondents expressed that their families have had negative experiences with youth violence and they have lost loved ones or family friends to violence in Springfield. This finding is understandable considering that youth violence impacts family members and those in the surrounding community, as demonstrated by participants' discussion of "the ripple effect."   This idea of the ripple effect can be explained as one person's actions affecting several other people, because we have no choice but to feel each others' pain. In addition, the findings illustrated how that unbearable pain may cause families to move away so that they would no longer have to tolerate the violence. Surprisingly, only a few participants discussed wanting to leave Springfield and few males were not looking for a way out. However, they may not be able to see the light at the end of the tunnel --therefore they can not think how life would be without the violence. In a sense, the violent living environment may have deeply affected the respondents in a manner that they believe they are trapped without any means of escaping.

Influence of Peers

After being asked about family experiences with youth violence, the participants were asked if they had friends who engage in violent behaviors. Current literature indicated that a negative peer environment influences youth violence (Williams, Stiffman, & O'Neal, 1998); however, most of the males in this study indicated that they

were not able to separate themselves from peers who engage in violent behaviors. This illustrates how males are pressured by their peers to be "part of the circle" which leads them to engage in similar behaviors as their friends. In reality, the pressure to be part of a group or to belong forces youth to "hang out" with friends that engage in violent behaviors which increases the likelihood that they will be influenced to act violently.

Characteristics of Springfield

One interesting idea, found in the results, was that participants expressed that Springfield does not have anything good to offer, referring to the lack of activities available to the youth. Although the city has several youth programs, the programs do not have a lot of kids participating. A reason for this could be that the youth do not have a chance to advocate for programs or activities that they find beneficial. Additionally, most of the community meetings in Springfield consist of program directors that have developed new youth programs but the audience who they are addressing only includes young people who are already involved in youth programs and adults. The messages about youth activities have not reached the youth who are hanging on the streets.

In addition to youth programs not reaching all of the youth, most of the youth centers do not provide services and activities for youth who are over 18 years old. This is the age that young males need more support, not less, because society views them as adults. It is during this time period that young males graduate from high school and begin looking for jobs. However, due to the lack of jobs, once youth can not find a job, they have nothing to do but hang out with their friends who also are not working or who are not involved in any youth programs. This is indicated in the literature review, which

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discusses how black youth are trapped in a social environment without any upward mobility.

In discussing good aspects about Springfield, the finding showed that the participants mentioned the birthplace of basketball and wanting more basketball activities. The main activity that these males want to do is play basketball. This could be understood, in part, as their perception that the only successful black males that make it out of "the hood" are professional basketball players, providing a sense of hope to many young people. Also, this speaks to the lack of positive role models, identified in the findings of this study, which found that young people do not have any direction or positive role models who they can look up too.

Another significant finding showed that the participants spoke freely about the increase of youth violence and identified the year of 2004 as the turning point when the youth violence began to intensify in Springfield. As discussed in the introduction chapter, Springfield had 17 homicides in 2004 which increased the following year. Currently, three years later there have been 10 young people who have been killed at the hands of other youth in Springfield. In the middle of May of this year there was yet another youth killed due to youth violence. The victim was a 14-year-old girl who was standing on a porch, when a car of four young black males drove by firing shots into a crowd of people. She was killed instantly even though she was not the desired target. Previous literature had further indicated that violence is the greatest health risk for black communities and homicide is the leading cause of death for black youth (Bolland, McCallum, Lian, Bailey, & Rowan, 2001; Braga, 2003; Reese, Vera, Thompson, &

Reyes, 2001). In that one incident the city lost the lives of five African American youth; one life lost to death and four lives lost to imprisonment.

Factors Contributing to Youth Violence

In discussion of the influential factors leading to youth violence the interesting results were about the lack of parental support. The participants indicated that parents are not available to teach their youth. This finding was unexpected from the study but it is an important result because the males recognize that the role of parental figures is missing from the lives of young people. This idea supports previous literature that suggests the lack of parental support could be due to the multiple stressors, which prevent parents from supporting their children (Sheidow, Gorman-Smith, Tolan, & Henry, 2001; Reese, Vera, Thompson, & Reyes, 2001). Parents in urban communities are dealing with working long hours for little pay, being unemployed, finding means to pay bills, and raising children in single parent homes.

Another interesting theme that emerged was the idea that violence is necessary to protect pride and reputation. There is a gap in the literature concerning the findings about pride and reputation and there is a pressure for males to perform and to uphold the "tough and hard attitude." Most of the time young people do not want to carry out the actions that the group suggests but are very worried about their reputation. Youth are concerned that their peers will reject them if they fail to follow through and participant in all of the violent activities as other group members. Young people get a bad reputation when they do not behave violently and this also sends the message that they can not protect what belongs to them. These young people then become prey to the other youth that are willing to do whatever it takes to build their reputation. The prideful attitude develops

once a young person commits a violent act. The person feels empowered and views himself as invincible as he gains respect from his peers.

One additional unexpected finding about factors contributing to violence, which stood out in the study, was respect. There was no found literature to support this finding. There are various ways that respect leads to violence; most young black males do not get respect from society so they look for respect from the streets. Having respect provides youth with a sense of power and with that power develops an unexplained fear from the community. For these males respect takes the place of love and they internalize that they are being loved through others respecting them. This makes me question the amount of love our youth are getting from their families because the youth are turning to the streets to fill the void in their lives.

Another significant finding was related to the availability of guns. Participants showed a great deal of insight as to how accessible guns are for young people. There are kids as young as 13 years old that are able to get their hands on a gun. "Where do they get guns from?" According to Cook and Ludwig (2004) young people can either borrow a gun from gangs or other sources. The youth are using guns to solve their disputes and youth are also carrying a gun as a means of self protection. Young people have to be ready to defend themselves when a situation arises, and they are aware that the other young person might have a gun. In this case, the young person with the most amount of power, meaning gun power, will win the battle. Youth know the reality of the streets, and they are only left with two choices which are to either kill or be killed.

Lastly, in terms of factors leading to youth violence, one theme that surfaced in their narratives was observations about the influence of single parent homes. This result

is important because this finding emerged while the males were discussing poverty. These males noticed that there are several single parent homes in their communities. Youth realize that their parent is struggling financially which is one of the reasons young people take any opportunity available to make money such as robbing somebody or selling drugs. There are a lot of families in Springfield that are surviving on the money that their children are making illegally. These parents are aware that their children are selling drugs and hustling on the streets but their children are also paying mortgages, car payments, and other household bills. Consequently, the parents overlook their child's behavior. Youth do not have legitimate means of survival so they are resorting to illegitimate means to help take care of themselves and their families.

<div align="center">Silent Laws of the Streets</div>

Findings showed the participants believed there is a code of silence that exists within the city of Springfield. This code of silence is a very powerful entity which has negative affects on the community as a whole. The code of silence gives the power and control to the ones who are committing the crimes. People who witnessed the crimes will not speak out to authority figures especially the police for fear of repercussions. Consequently, this prevents change from occurring and it also blocks closure. For example, my brother was killed three years ago, and his case is still opened because no one is willing to testify against the person who took his life. Over one hundred young people including some adults witnessed the incident but fear is keeping them silent. Fear is a contributing factor that maintains the code of silence. This is also predicted by the literature (Spitalli, 2003; Habig, 2000; Fleischauer, 2001), which shows that people fear that telling will cause revenge to be taken out upon them.

It is not only that they do not want to snitch but people are afraid of the repercussions because "there are consequences for snitching." Some of the possible consequences that snitches are subjected to ranged from being a social outcaste to possibly being killed. The findings of this study support the information from a previous study concerning the punishments for breaking the code of silence (Spitalli, 2003). Considering the potential negative outcomes it is understandable why the participants were not able to identify any advantages of being a snitch. The risk of being labeled as a snitch is another factor that is leading to the increase of youth violence. There is a high price to pay for snitching, which often averts people from telling what they have witnessed. In all, the silent laws of the streets causes the cycle of violence to continue.

Perception of Safety and Fear

As previously discussed, participants reported that they feel safe in Springfield even though the crime rates are increasing. This could be understood since the males are used to living in a violent environment which has become the norm for them. Participants could also be desensitized to the violence because they have been exposed to violence throughout their entire lifespan. Additionally, inner city black males can not verbalize that they do not feel safe because this would cause them to internalize these feelings. Then they would not be able to function in their chaotic environment.

In terms of discussing fear, interestingly, participants also noted that they do not fear being a target of violence. This result was unexpected as the males felt that they have to live for today and let tomorrow take care of itself. In the literature, one study confirmed these results as 75% of the youth expressed similar responses about their perspective of fear (Bolland, McCallum, Lian, Bailey, & Rowan, 2001). The youth's

lack of fear is a coping mechanism which is needed for their survival. These participants have to live daily in dangerous environments simply because they do not have anywhere else to go. As a coping strategy, they can not view the only world that they have been exposed to as dangerous or scary. What other opportunities of mobility are available to the black youth who are trapped in dying city? Young people are aware that the individuals who are able to rise above their circumstances are individuals who do not share the same characteristics as they do which illustrates a loss of hope.

Stopping Youth Violence

In discussing suggestions for change mechanisms that would stop youth violence from occurring within Springfield, the viewpoints of the participants were unenthusiastic and depressing. The responses illustrated that either nothing can be done or they did not know what could be helpful to being about change. This shows that the young people have a sense of hopelessness because they feel that they just have to deal with the deadly violence that is taking over their neighborhoods. However, hopelessness only perpetuates the problem because young people believe that they do not have anything to live for. Youth are willing to give up their lives to the streets and continue to be violent towards one another. There has to be ways to restore hope to the young black males who are entrapped in a world filled with violence and death.

Summary

Overall, the young males in Springfield responded that both respect and drugs were the most influential factors leading to youth violence. The second most common factors indicated were gangs and poverty. Additionally, the findings showed that a negative peer environment influences youth to engage in violent behaviors. In addition,

the unexpected results of this study found that the participants believed that the youth in Springfield lack parental support and positive role models. The males feel that parents do not have time to teach them and that they do not have role models to look up to.

Even though there has been a deadly increase of violence in recent years, the participants reported feeling safe while living in their dangerous environments and they do not fear being a target of violence. Furthermore, the majority of the participants indicated that the code of silence exists within the city of Springfield. The males discussed how the negative repercussions of snitching prevent people from speaking out against violent acts that they have witnessed.

In addition, there is a sense of hopelessness in the responses of the males pertaining to their beliefs about what is needed to create change and to decrease the amount of violence. Most of the participants believe that nothing can be done to prevent violence. However, this only enables the problem of youth violence allowing it to continue to be an issue. In all, these results illustrate the importance of addressing the phenomenon of youth violence.

Implications for Social Work Practice

The findings of this study show a great need for social workers to examine the perspectives of young African American males in order to identify which factors are contributing to the increase of youth violence within their communities. Social workers should modify policies and implement community change mechanisms within African American communities. A large number of participants feel hopeless about ending the violence and they have internalized the problem of youth violence. This is a strong implication that participants in some way, shape, or form believe that they have created

the problem of youth violence. However, social workers should use the strength based approach to help the youth understand that they are not the problem but rather the problem is the problem. Young people do not have to continue to feel personally responsible for the rise of youth violence; therefore, social workers must help the community realize the external factors that are influencing youth to engage in violent acts. Social workers should make it their responsibility to inspire, motivate, and encourage inner city youth to envision the world being different. There is a need for young people to channel their angry aggressions of being oppressed, having limited access to resources and jobs, and having no means of upward mobility towards change mechanisms. Most importantly social workers should try to restore their sense of hope because hope will allow inner city youth to see their lives without violence, gangs, drugs, and essentially it will provide room for change and growth.

In order to understand how the streets influence youth violence social workers have to address this phenomenon from the individuals who have some direct or indirect experience with youth violence. Most participants expressed the pain and sorrow of the aftermath of youth violence which implies a need for therapy and support services for those who have witnessed their friends being killed or those who have harmed someone else or those who are survivors of violence. This may be very challenging because people within the black communities have negative stereotypes about therapy and those who seek counseling. This message has to be dismantled because our young people do not know what to do with their feelings of anger, rage, and hate for those who have caused them to feel pain. However, this only perpetuates the cycle of violence to continue as young people believe that the only way to relinquish their pain to make the

other person experience the pain that they had gone through. Social workers in clinical practice should help young people normalized their feelings and experiences. In reality, many youth who have been traumatized by violence are not getting what they need either emotionally, physically, spiritually, or mentally because there is a lack of support from parents and positive role models. As social workers, we can not continue to do nothing and allow our youth to die by the life of the streets. Rather we must intervene to provide young males with an alternative choice in life instead of choosing to kill or be killed.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

In considering the findings presented in this study, it is important to note that the city of Springfield where the research took place has been marked by chronic violence for the past few years, and subsequently, the males who were studied have been consumed in the media, political, and individual struggles of combating youth violence. The limitations in my study were connected to the sample population, small sample size, and predetermined focus of this study. Therefore, it is difficult to determine whether these results would be similar and generalized to the larger population.

Additionally, a limitation of this study can be seen in the interpretation of data by this researcher as it is uncertain how my association with the community may have influenced the responses of the participants. For example, I became well known throughout Springfield after my brothers were killed and participants may or may not have felt the need to answer in a certain manner. They may have altered their responses in order to give the answers that they thought I was looking for or they may have felt a need to protect the researcher from the harsh realities of their lives knowing that it was the same lifestyles of that my brothers possessed.

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Lastly, as demonstrated by the literature review, there is limited research available that examines the perspectives of the young people who are directly affected by youth violence. Further research is need to explore what factors are contributing to violence in African American communities and the voices of the youth should not be overlooked. Rather, young people should be incorporated in the change mechanisms which would also replace the lack of hope. Also, future research should explore how violence is understood and incorporated into the lifestyles of youth, how gaining or wanting respect influences youth to engage in violent behaviors, and how the role of safety and fear have decreased amongst inner city youth. In all, future research should tackle some aspect of the phenomenon of youth violence which has taken over several African American communities.

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Appendix A

Human Subject Review Approval Letter

December 13, 2006

Telea Shepard
33 Norman Terrace, Apt. 5
Feeding Hills, MA 01030

Dear Telea,

Your final set of revisions has been reviewed and all is now in order. We are happy to approve your project and wish you success in developing it. It is an interesting and very useful effort and could yield some very helpful information about these young men whose opinions have rarely been sought.

Please note the following requirements:

Consent Forms: All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

Maintaining Data: You must retain signed consent documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

Renewal: You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

Completion: You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Good luck with your study.

Sincerely,

Ann Hartman, D.S.W.
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

Cc: Claudia Bepko, Research Advisor

Appendix B

Participant Consent Form

Dear Participant:

My name is Telea Shepard and I am a graduate student at Smith College School for Social Work. I am conducting a study to examine the perspective of young black inner city males to determine which factors within the city of Springfield influence youth violence. The data from this study will be used for my thesis, publications, and presentations on this topic. The study is being conducted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Social Work degree at Smith College School for Social Work.

Nature of Participation
You are being asked to participate because you are between the ages of 18 to 25 years old. In addition, you are being asked to participate because you have some experience with youth violence including but not limited to, being a victim of violence, being a survivor of violence, or being young male that has engaged in violent acts. In addition, you may know about the recent homicides in Springfield, have peers who are victims, or have peers who engage in of youth violence which would may you eligible for participation in this study. If you choose to participate, I will interview you will be asked questions about why young males in Springfield engage in youth violence, what influences youth violence, and questions about your thoughts regarding the code of silence (snitching). At the beginning of the interview, I will ask you to provide demographic information about yourself.

I will interview you in person, the interview will be tape-recorded, and the interview will last approximately 30 minutes to an hour. We will meet at a place at a mutual agreement such as in an office in the community center, or in an office at your school. I will try to provide a confidential space upon agreement.

Confidentiality
Your interview will be tape-recorded. I will say not say your name while the tape is operating so that you will not be identified by name on this tape. The tapes, notes, and transcriptions will be identified only by a code and all other identifying information will be removed to ensure the confidentially of your information and participation. The list that contains the names and codes will be kept in a separate location, and the signed consent form will be kept separate from the research data.

I will take notes during the interview to refer back to for future reference. Upon completing my thesis as I report my findings, I will not use any identifiable quotes or information from the interview. Once the interview is completed, the tapes will be listened to and transcribed by myself. No other transcriber will be used.

I will keep all the data including original interview notes, interview data, audiotapes, and informed consent forms for three years in a locked and secure place. This is according to the federal guidelines. After the three-year period, either I will continue to keep data in a locked and secure place or I will destroy all data.

Benefits

The benefits you may gain are new ideas about the youth violence that is occurring with in your community and you will have the opportunity to reflect on your experiences. Another benefit is that this study provides a chance for your voice to be heard. An additional benefit that you may obtain is to provide support to your peers and make a difference within your community.

You will not receive monetary compensation for your participation in this study.

Risks

You may experience risks from participating in the study. There is a risk that you may be uncomfortable discussing aspects of your community which you value and cherish. You may risk having to reflect on a painful experience which is collectively shared amount all residents in the city of Springfield. Another potential risk is that you may be concerned that your confidentiality may be breached from people assuming that you are participating in the study.

To ensure your safety and protection I will make every attempt to find a place to meet where your confidentiality can be maintained. I will make sure that we meet in a secure place at a safe time. We will meet in places such as a youth center that services a number of youth concerning different issues so that people will not know that you are participating in a study.

Enclosed with this consent form is a list of community youth agency resources that you may refer to if you experience any distress as a result of participation in this study.

Rights of Participation

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You have the right to skip any question, the right to stop the interview at any point, and the right to withdraw at the end of the data collection. You can withdraw from the study at any point during the data collection process without any penalty. If you decide to withdraw, all data describing you will be immediately destroyed.

You have until March 1, 2007 to withdraw from the study; after this date, I will begin writing my thesis.

YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND

UNDERSTOOD THE ABOVE INFORMATION; THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE

OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

Signature of participant: Date:

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCHER: DATE:

If you have any questions or wish to withdraw your consent, please contact: Telea Shepard at (413) 364-4077 or email teleashepard3@hotmail.com.

Please keep this copy for your records!

Appendix C

Demographic Survey

1. How old are you?
2. Where do you live?
3. How long have you lived there?
4. What neighborhood do you live in?
5. What is your highest level of education completed?
6. Are you lower class, middle class, or upper class?
7. Did you grow up in a two parent home, one parent home, foster home, or other?
8. What is your occupation?

Appendix D

Interview Guide

1. What does the term youth violence mean to you?

2. How does your family feel about youth violence?

3. Do you have friends that engage in youth violence?
      -If so how?

4. Describe Springfield: what is good about it and what is bad about it?

5. What factor(s) do you feel most contributes to violence in Springfield?

6. If you could pick one or more factors from the list below that most contributes to youth violence, what would it be and why?
      -Gangs, safety, poor education, no cops, poverty, fear, lack of jobs, access to guns, lack of money, respect, drugs, and retaliation

7. What is one thing you think most needs to change in Springfield to prevent youth violence?

8. Does poverty contribute to youth violence in Springfield? If so how?

9. Do you believe there is a "code of silence" in Springfield? What does the "code of silence" mean? What are the effects of the "code of silence" in your community?

10. Describe a "snitch"? What does it mean to be a "snitch" in Springfield?

11. What is your attitude to about "snitching"?

12. What are the advantages/disadvantages of being a "snitch"?

13. Do you feel safe in Springfield? Explain.
      -If not, what would Springfield need to make you feel safe?

14. Do you ever fear being a target of violence? Why?

15. Is anything being done in Springfield to stop the violence? If so are those ideas working to help stop the violence?

16. What do you think would stop youth violence from occurring within Springfield?

17. If you had a chance for your voice to be heard as a means of "speaking out" about youth violence, what would you say? Why would that message be important?

Appendix E

Referral Sources

A.W.A.K.E.

Alive with Awareness, Knowledge, and Empowerment Inc.
Martin Luther King Jr. Community Center (Office Location)
106 Wilbraham Road, Springfield MA
(413) 746-2064

NORTHERN EDUCATIONAL SERVICES (NES)

Johnson Life Center
736 State Street, Springfield MA
(413) 787-2101

Dunbar Community Center
33 Oak Street, Springfield MA
(413) 788-6143

Martin Luther King Jr. Community Center
106 Wilbraham Road, Springfield MA
(413) 746-3655

S.O.U.R.C.E.
Saving Others, Utilizing Resources, Collectively for Empowerment
209 King Street, Springfield MA
(413) 783-7221