

EXPLORING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF BLACK MALES IN PHILADELPHIA
AROUND GUN VIOLENCE AND THE BEHAVIORS/ACTIVITIES
THAT ENCOURAGE GUN CULTURE

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Executive Summary

ManUpPHL is a non-profit whose mission is to step into the lives of men who are statistically most likely to be victims or perpetrators of gun violence in Philadelphia. By providing these young men with mentoring, accountability, resources, and consistency, ManUpPHL aims to change lives, while bettering our communities.

In recent years there have been numerous attempts with varying levels of success to address the gun violence epidemic that continues to plague Philadelphia. While city officials, public educators, community leaders, industry leaders, and others have all been willing participants in addressing these challenges, we have collectively failed to listen to those most impacted by gun culture - young black men. The **“Listening to the Streets”** initiative was created to give these young men a voice. As the primary victims and perpetrators of violence and gun activity, these young men through focus groups (cohorts) provide unique perspective on root causes of said behavior and activities, but most importantly they provide possible solutions.

ManUpPHL recently used some of the “Listening to the Streets” cohorts to empirically explore the lived experiences of young Black males in Philadelphia around gun violence, behaviors and activities that encourage gun culture, and possible solutions to deter said behavior. Grounded in racial identity and social disorganization theories, the research identified eight essential meanings or themes that descriptively captured lived experiences around the phenomenon. Themes identified include: (1) trauma, (2) family influence, (3) relationships, (4) self-worth, (5) communal limitations, (6) communications, (7) formal education, and (8) real-time engagement.

While the qualitative study afforded participants the opportunity to share their sentiments around gun culture, it also allowed for these young men to provide insight in the form of

recommendations on what an engaged community could do decrease gun culture and related activities. Five central recommendations emerged including: (1) Partner 10 incarcerated leaders with 10 community agencies to address gun violence from the inside out, (2) Create 300 jobs tailored to those who are most at-risk for being involved in gun violence, (3) Create a parallel educational experience for middle and high school students who are at high risk to be impacted by gun violence, (4) Create mental health substations in communities heavily impacted by gun violence, (5) Train and develop “resource connectors” to connect those engaged in gun violence with tangible resources and alternatives.

It is the goal of ManUpPHL to use the study’s findings and future cohorts of “Listening to the Streets” to continue compiling data to expand research, while developing recommendations and solutions to address gun culture in Philadelphia. Partnerships with additional stakeholders including media, community organizations, educators, business/industry, philanthropists, politicians, and others will be critical as disrupting the culture of gun violence in Philadelphia has become our highest priority.

Purpose

Many scholars have examined gun violence (at length) among Black males in urban America. These studies have provided insight into a range of topics and issues that have included structural conditions, politics, and economics to name a few. Absent (or limited) from the literature, however, has been the lived experiences of young Black males in Philadelphia around gun violence and the behaviors/activities that encourage gun culture. This study attempts to minimize gaps in social science research by exploring Black males' lived experiences around gun culture in Philadelphia. The investigator(s) will utilize race identity, and social disorganization theories, while utilizing ManUpPHL's "**Listening to the Streets**" cohorts to deduce reality (ontology) and knowledge (epistemology) amongst participants. In this interpretive study, by acting as the primary instrument for data collection through "**Listening to the Streets**", the investigator will build an extensive collection of thick description or detailed records concerning context, people, actions, and their perceptions of participants as the basis for inductive generation of what is happening within a phenomenon (Locke et al., 2010).

The research questions that will guide this study are:

RQ1: How do young Black males in Philadelphia describe their lived experiences associated with gun violence?

RQ2: How do young Black males in Philadelphia describe how their behaviors and activities influence gun culture?

RQ3: How do young Black males in Philadelphia describe solutions to deter gun violence?

Ideally, the study's findings will contribute to social science literature, but more importantly provide a practitioner friendly roadmap and framework for citywide stakeholders to combat the challenges associated with gun culture and violence in Philadelphia.

Literature Review

Race Identity Theory

Race identity simplified is how an individual views themselves in accordance with their race. Nevertheless, the true complexity of the term can be attributed to a variety of societal affairs. For the Black American, race has commonly been used as a means of separation, discrimination, and negation of power. Therefore, when faced with racial identity, the question is not only how they see themselves, but also how the world sees them.

When discussing the perception of the Black American, stereotypes play a fundamental role in the characterization. Historically society has associated Black people, especially men, to aggressive and criminal behaviors (Welch, 2007). The stereotypic criminal view of the Black race is so strong that crime and race are often discussed interchangeably (Welch, 2007). These negative stereotypes can lead to stereotype threat, the fear of confirming negative stereotypes, which brings about diminished performance (Cohen & Garcia, 2008). In a 12-man research study of the effects of racial stereotyping on black men and crime, each participant revealed that criminal stereotyping resulted in an aversive impact on identity (Ford, 2014). Psychologically, people need to see themselves in a positive manner to feel self-integrity. Unfortunately, the minority identity does not fulfill this euphoric role (Cohen & Garcia, 2008). The Black American's identity is often held hostage to negative stereotypes. Additionally, the mental warfare between self and perception can ultimately lead to the fulfillment of a violent false narrative.

Social Disorganization Theory

Shaw and Mckay's theory on social disorganization purposes that violence and crime occur because of a community's failure to maintain a structurally sound environment (Rose & Clear, 1998). They hypothesize that a community's failure to succeed can be analyzed through variables such as poverty, ethnic heterogeneity, and residential mobility (Sampson & Groves, 1989). Black communities often struggle to maintain stability within the three variables due to an influx of poverty, inconsistent community leadership, and incarceration removing individuals from society (Rose & Clear, 1998). "Community violence, being a form of interpersonal violence, can have lasting effects on the individuals such as psychological distress, trauma, depression and anxiety." (Burrell et al., 2021). Rose and Clear's (1998) research has shown increased neighborhood involvement and connectedness has been negatively correlated to violence and crime. Therefore, when comparing violence in the Black community to the often-disorganized community structure, it is fair to fault the violence witnessed to the effects of the disorganized environment on the individual members.

Research Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of young Black males in Philadelphia around gun violence and the behaviors/activities that encourage gun culture. Presented are the study's findings by exploring the lived experiences of multiple cohorts of young Black male Philadelphians. Included in this section are the following components: recruitment and focus group procedures; participant demographics; transcription and theme development using NVivo 12 software, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS); and the hermeneutic phenomenological method of data analysis.

Focus group interviews were recorded digitally to allow for complete verbatim transcription. The interview is the most prominent data-collection tool in qualitative research, allowing the researcher to access subjects' perceptions, meanings, and definitions of a situation, as well as their construction of reality (Punch, 2013).

The study included the following three primary research questions:

RQ1: How do young Black males in Philadelphia describe their lived experiences associated with gun violence?

RQ2: How do young Black males in Philadelphia describe how their behaviors and activities influence gun culture?

RQ3: How do young Black males in Philadelphia describe solutions to deter gun violence?

The focus group interviews for the present study followed a semi-structured format, with predetermined questions where the order of inquiry was modified based on the researcher's perception (van Teijlingen, 2014). Interviews were also recorded via audio, transcribed, and categorized using NVivo 12 software to sort sentiment, themes, and attributes.

Moustakas's (1994) Method of Analysis of Phenomenological Data, also advanced by Kleiman (2004), was used for this study and provided a seven-step approach to analyzing collected data. Essential meanings are presented here according to the central research questions, using data text to support participants' views and expressions (Ani, 2017).

Recruitment Procedures and Interviews

Kitzinger (1996) and Morgan (1996) posit that the primary advantage of focus-group interviews is the purposeful use of participant interactions to generate data. The three main components of focus-group research include (1) a method devoted to data collection, (2)

interaction as a source of data, and (3) the investigator's active role in creating group discussions for data collection (Morgan, 1996). Calder (1977) argues that focus groups can be phenomenological in that they give access to common-sense conceptions and everyday explanations of those studied.

For this study, focus-group interviews were useful for reflecting the social realities of young Black males in Philadelphia through direct access to the language and concepts that structured their experiences (Hughes & DuMont, 1993). This researcher does understand that focus-group interviews are not as strong as other data-collection methods in providing a rich understanding of participants' knowledge of the phenomenon in context.

Contact was initially made with a gatekeeper who held a prominent position at ManUpPHL. According to Rattani and Johns (2017), gatekeepers serve as consultants between the investigator and potential participants in terms of study recruitment strategies and conduct. Additionally, gatekeepers aid in setting and ensuring expectations between the researcher and study participants. The gatekeeper for this study was a volunteer for ManUpPHL who provided the research team with a list of nine subjects that opted to participate in the focus group interviews.

The list of prospective research participants who met the research criteria were selected using purposeful sampling (Ani, 2017). The focus groups were conducted in-person and recorded by two methods: a digital smartphone recorder using the rev.com app and field notes. The average focus group lasted approximately 2 hours.

In this phenomenological study, the researcher was restrained by eliciting life experiences and hearing and reporting the informants' narrative perspectives (DePoy & Gitlin, 2011). These narratives, or textural descriptions, enabled the researcher to derive structural themes or essential

meanings through phenomenological reduction. Through this process of imaginative variation, the researcher understood there was no single inroad to truth, but countless possibilities emerged and were intimately connected with the essence and meaning of the subjects' experiences (Moustakas, 1994). According to Kafle (2011), through this process, themes or layers emerge that were previously either hidden or had not been seen before. This study employed composite textural description, "an integration of all of the individual textural descriptions into a group or universal textural description" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 182).

Participant Demographics

Participants from different backgrounds that were connected to ManUpPHL were recruited for this study and each given a stipend of \$240. All considered themselves familiar with gun culture and violence, but they brought a wide range of personal, family and neighborhood experiences to the study. Participants selected or were given pseudonyms to protect their identities. The demographic data of the participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Participants' Demographic Data

Participant Pseudonym	Neighborhood	Age	Race	Gender
DD	North Philadelphia	19	Black	M
MM	North Philadelphia	20	Black	M
ZA	South Philadelphia	21	Black	M
KB	Overbrook	24	Black	M
NS	North Philadelphia	26	Black	M

TM	Frankford	26	Black	M
CM	North Philadelphia	35	Black	M

Transcription and Analysis

Audio recordings from the interviews were sent to Rev.com, a professional transcription service for verbatim transcription. Focus-group sessions for this study were uploaded and coded using NVivo 12, a data-management web application that allows researchers to organize, import, code, manage and analyze text, audio, video, email, images, spreadsheets, surveys, etc. All transcripts were subsequently analyzed using the aforementioned software. Some examples of the verbatim transcripts from the interviews that illustrate participants' lived experiences of the phenomenon relative to the essential meanings are shared in the Elaboration of Findings section.

Advanced Moustakas Method of Analysis

Kleiman (2004) advanced the framework developed by Moustakas (1994) in analyzing collected data. The seven-step process includes (1) getting a sense of the whole, (2) discriminating meaning units, (3) condensing meaning units, (4) finding essential meanings, (5) elaborating on findings, (6), substantiating raw data, and (7) critically analyzing the researcher's work.

Getting a sense of the whole. The first step in the data-analysis process for this study was getting a sense of the whole, which the researcher accomplished by reading the transcribed focus group responses in their entirety to gain a global perspective. According to Kleiman (2004), "The global sense is important for determining how the parts might be constituted" (p. 5). As previously mentioned, Rev.com's transcription services were used to obtain verbatim

responses from the study's subjects. To achieve maximum openness, the transcript reading took place with the attitude of phenomenological reduction, which Kleiman (2004) posits requires a two-step process.

The first step is to withhold prior knowledge of the phenomenon (or bracketing) so the researcher may take the participants' lived experiences precisely as they are described. To identify biases and presuppositions prior to the interviews and data analysis, the researcher dialogued with colleagues and peers who questioned and brought forward the researcher's awareness of previous knowledge, experiences, and beliefs about gun culture. This researcher disclosed in dialogue with colleagues and peers the origins of gun culture, particularly around the killings of Black inner-city males. This researcher's experiences and beliefs associated with gun culture was limited, which contributed to his attentiveness to and openness about the descriptions participants shared.

The second part of the phenomenological reduction process that supports getting a sense of the whole is to withhold any existential claims, which means to consider what is given precisely as it is given as presence or a phenomenon (Giorgi, 2004). Textural data is provided to demonstrate the participants' lived experiences with the phenomenon. For example, existential claims were acknowledged in the raw emotion, tone, inflection, and delivery of experiences

Speaker KB shared when he was questioned about friends that have been victimized or perpetrated acts of gun violence and his relationship with them:

"I try to break apart from all the chaos. Things just started getting worse. I got homies that are beefing with each other. I'm at the point where I just stay in my lane, I do my own thing...I just rather not be in the middle of it...you got to pick a side"

Speaker TM invoked the needs and desires of physical things when he was asked about tangible activities that influence gun culture:

“Everybody praises the motherfucker who got the ice on and...praise the drug dealers. These Niggas ain’t doing shit but making our community worse”

Focus group sessions with study participants supported the researcher in getting a sense of the whole. Nuances of experiences were conveyed through facial expressions, gestures, tears, silence, and other vocal dynamics (Kleiman, 2004).

Discriminate meaning units. The second step in the process of analyzing collected data is to discriminate meaning units. According to Graneheim and Lundman (2004), a meaning unit is the constellation of words or statements that relate to the same central unit. For this study, the researcher considered “meaning units as words, sentences or paragraphs containing aspects related to each other through their content and context” (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004, p. 106). The researcher used questions to assist in the process of discriminating meaning units. Rarely did participants’ words evoke a rapid or drastic shift in meaning units, as the focus group script prompted relevant and timely responses. Having grasped the essence of the whole, the researcher read through the text once more with the specific aim of discriminating meaning units from the subject’s perspective with the focus on the gun culture phenomenon (Thorkildsen & Raholm, 2010). Upon uploading focus group transcripts into NVivo 12, text about the participants’ experiences relevant to the questions was extracted and brought together into singular nodes, or central units. Nodes were created to assist this researcher in categorizing data input into NVivo 12. Given the structure and sequencing of questions within the study, of the eight nodes, the inquiries prompted eight to nine participants to answer, and references to each node ranged between 11 and 18. Table 2 illustrates the nodes that were created, having

been derived from the main research questions; the nodes' identified meaning units; the number of participants who referenced each node; and the number of times each node was referenced.

Table 2

Nodes Created from Main Research Questions

Research Question	Node	Meaning Unit	Respondents	References
RQ1	Personal experience as a victim or perpetrator of gun violence and its effect.	Becoming numb to the pain; this has become the norm, yet recognizing the trauma	9	15
RQ1	Friends or family members who have been victimized or perpetrated acts of gun violence and its effect including your relationships.	Family got me into this life, as fathers were not around or growing up imitating what we are surrounded by. Family understands the dire situation by praying and attempting to demonstrate how to live	9	13
RQ1	How you have seen your peers get involved in gun culture and what were your impressions?	A bond is developed, as we all live in this sick village. Friends become everything more than riches where we are in this together and retribution is a necessity	8	24
RQ2	What are the cognitive behaviors that influence participation in gun culture	Reputations and the need for retaliation have become primary drivers. There is an overriding lack of love internally that is a result of actions from family, community, and government	9	10
RQ2	What are the tangible activities that influence participation in gun culture	Neighborhood and block affiliation are prevalent. Failing schools and lack of financial resources restrict options	9	20
RQ3	What can you do to deter or eliminate gun violence	Continue to learn by talking to others within our communities	9	15
RQ3	What can the community do to	Gun education within our schools is necessary. No one	9	14

	deter or eliminate gun violence	talks to young people and assumptions are being made on what needs to be thought (in schools)		
RQ3	What can elected officials do to deter or eliminate gun violence	Elected official must be more present in the neighborhoods. Laws and policies must be enacted in real-time to combat these challenges	9	18

Condensing meaning units. After the focus groups, text was sorted into eight meaning units or content areas, the next step was to condense meaning units. Here, Kleiman (2004) suggests the researcher condense units to make sense of them. Condensing meaning units required consolidating text from meaning units that served as critical to participant interviews based on the primary research question to be addressed. Condensing meaning units was a manageable process and supported by NVivo 12. Meaning units were condensed from interviews using NVivo 12 software query and word-frequency functionalities, thus producing a condensed meaning unit. Table 3 shows the meaning unit, the condensed meaning unit, and essential meaning.

As meaning units were condensed, it was important for the study to maintain a disciplinary perspective. Largely unconscious, disciplinary perspective influences how research and teachings within a prescribed discipline are pursued (Szostak, 2015). The research team remained faithful to the disciplinary perspective of young black men. In other studies, even though the participants could share characteristics with those in the present study, it would be legitimate to impose disciplinary perspectives of sociology, psychology, or pedagogy (Kleiman, 2004). However, meaning units have been properly analyzed and condensed from the disciplinary perspective of young Black males in Philadelphia.

Finding essential meaning. The next part of the data-analysis procedure required subjecting the transformed meaning units into the FIV process. According to Kleiman (2004), the FIV process is used to determine which of the meaning units is essential for and constitutive of a fixed identity for the phenomenon under study. Using this device, an experience of young Black males in Philadelphia was subjected to every imaginable variation among its meaning units to see how far it could be stretched before losing its identity. FIV is a type of mental experimentation in which the researcher intentionally alters via his or her imagination different aspects of the experience as conveyed by the informant, either by taking from or adding to the proposed transformation (Spiegelberg & Schuhmann, 1982). The point of this exercise is to “imaginatively stretch the proposed transformation to the edges until it no longer describes the experience underlying the subjects’ naïve description” (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 55).

For this study, this researcher enacted FIV by asking the question, “Is this phenomenon still the same if we imaginatively change or delete this theme from the phenomenon?” (van Manen, 1990, p. 107). Using imaginary conversations or scenarios, the researcher attempted to construct additional cases around identified meaning units while removing young Black males in Philadelphia as the context. For example, young Black males in Philadelphia was removed from the meaning unit that encapsulated “becoming numb to the pain; this has become the norm, yet recognizing the trauma” of this group, the FIV process verified that the theme belonged to the phenomenon rather than being incidental. According to Polkinghorne (1989), the FIV process or transformation should be publicly verifiable so other researchers agree that the transformed expression does not describe a process that is contained in the original expression. Removed from the context of young Black males in Philadelphia, “What can you do to

deter or eliminate gun violence” (Node 5) and “Friends or family members who have been victimized or perpetrated acts of gun violence and its effect including your relationships” (Node 2) continued to resonate, allowing for the phenomenological nod, acknowledging a good description that recognizes an experience that was had or could have been had (van Manen, 1990) by others, even outside the phenomenon of study.

Elaborating on findings. The fifth step in the data-analysis process was to elaborate on the findings, which included describing essential meaning. Through the FIV process, the meaning units were condensed and then abstracted and labeled with an essential meaning. During this step and through horizontalization, this researcher identified relevant statements and deleted similar statements (Moustakas, 1994), resulting in the creation of textual analysis and descriptions of what study participants expressed. Table 3 illustrates meaning units, condensed meaning units, and essential meaning.

Table 3

Meaning Unit, Condensed Meaning Unit, and Essential Meaning (Horizontalization)

Meaning Unit	Condensed Meaning Unit	Essential Meaning
Becoming numb to the pain; this has become the norm, yet recognizing the trauma	Activity has become normalized and trauma inducing	Trauma
Family got me into this life, as fathers were not around or growing up imitating what we are surrounded by. Family understands the dire situation by praying and attempting to demonstrate how to live	Observing role models in the family that are negative and positive	Family influence
A bond is developed, as we all live in this sick village. Friends become everything more than riches where we are in this together and retribution is a necessity	Connection and relationships with peers are of the utmost importance in the streets	Relationships
Reputations and the need for retaliation have become primary drivers. There is an overriding	Outside influences drive internal struggles and self-hatred	Self-worth

lack of love internally that is a result of actions from family, community, and government		
Neighborhood and block affiliation are prevalent. Failing schools and lack of financial resources restrict options	Affiliation with impoverished communities and systems strengthens the culture	Communal limitations
Continue to learn by talking to others within our communities	Lacking foundational knowledge of institutions and those within the community	Communications
Gun education within our schools is necessary. No one talks to young people and assumptions are being made on what needs to be thought (in schools)	Reimagination of what is of value within formal education; hearing from the constituency	Formal education
Elected official must be more present in the neighborhoods. Laws and policies must be enacted in real-time to combat these challenges	Becoming a priority of policy makers and not an afterthought to combat current challenges around violence	Real-time engagement

The whole context of what informants shared was considered when condensing and labeling meaning units with essential meanings (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004).

The following essential meanings based on the meaning units were identified and represented in this study as themes: (1) trauma, (2) family influence, (3) relationships, (4) self-worth, (5) communal limitations, (6) communications, (7) formal education, and (8) real-time engagement. Essential themes were defined and clarified with examples from the raw data (Kleinman, 2004) and textural data is offered as follows:

1. *Trauma* has not been accurately identified as a challenge of those that have been impacted by gun violence. Within the context of this study, there is a pain and numbness being absorbed by young black men in Philadelphia that is not being addressed.

- Speaker TM shared, *“My dad passed away from gun violence while my mom was pregnant with me...I was later shot down the street from where my dad was killed.”*
- Speaker KB said, *“there ain’t no therapy for what is going on in the street”*
- Speaker CM explained, *“If it’s a single parent home, there should be a group therapy session.”*

2. *Family influence* albeit positive or negative plays a critical role in the development of young black men from Philadelphia. From fathers to cousins and praying grandmas family either sets the stage of young black men and their street activities (or lack thereof).

- Speaker TM explained, *“...and I thank god for my uncles..I learned from them to be involved with and to take care of your kids .”*
- Speaker ZA said, *“My own cousin gave me a gun...my first gun.”*
- Speaker ZA stated, *“I never had no dad. So nobody told me what I was doing was wrong...a mom cannot raise no man.”*

3. *Relationships* in the context of this study meant an ecosystem of connectivity and loyalty.

- Speaker ZA shared, *“You will hop in the streets just because your friend dies...it’s just about revenge.”*
- Speaker ZA explained, *“I pulled up to the streets because I lost my friend...I lost my closest homie. Let me in.”*

- Speaker CM said, *“Damn! I can’t even have a conversation with this man before he pulls a gun out. No conversation at all.”*

4. *Self-worth*, as identified by study participants, was a relevant factor for young black men in Philadelphia. Not to be confused with self-esteem, self-worth is internal sense of being good enough and worthy of love.

- Speaker TM stated, *“You got to respect something and a lot of us, we don’t got respect for nothing.”*
- Speaker ZA stated, *“We all die, ain’t nobody trying to die now and we want to live peaceful lives but that’s most likely is not going to happen because we from Philly.”*
- Speaker ZA explained, *“...because we don’t see health, positivity, success. You know what I mean? We only seeing bad stuff. A lot of negativity, so, it ain’t no hope.”*

5. *Communal limitations* were widely recognized by young black men in Philadelphia influence participation in gun culture. The infrastructure of the communities are destined for failure.

- Speaker ZA, *“Make everything equal. It’s not equal. And we see it, because we getting the bad end of it...The whites, the Asians, all the other races, they not getting the short stick of everything.”*
- Speaker ZA explained, *“...because the people who got the guns, they run the community. The peoples who live in the community is scared to even approach the people with the guns.”*

- Speaker ZA said, *“Most of the time at school, they don’t let you pick [internship] though. They’ll assign you one, so that’s where a lot of people fall at, because they not really doing what they want to do.”*

6. *Communications* was expressed by young black males in Philadelphia as an important component to deter gun violence. The ability to communicate across all stakeholders including victims, perpetrators of violence, community members, law enforcement and government officials will be critical as individuals listen, learn and lead.

- Speaker ZA explained, *“People think I’m a bully. I don’t know how to communicate, and all that.”*
- Speaker NS shared, *“...they just throwing it out in the universe and whoever catches it, well they catch it...you know who you are talking to...it’s basically indirect talking creating unnecessary beef”.*
- According to Speaker NS, *“gun violence happens because people don’t ask for help.”*

7. *Formal education* has not supported efforts or initiatives to minimize gun violence. In fact, the structure of formal education in the city lead to many of the challenges associated with gun violence in the city.

- Speaker NS shared, *“...it all started from school, school beefs that lead to outside of school [and neighborhood beef].”*
- Speaker NS said, *“...no kid left behind? What is that? That’s basically telling us to give up. Y’all don’t allow us to fail, y’all just putting us in the next grade. That’s giving up on us. Ain’t none of this normal”*

- Speaker ZA explained, “*Schools need to change whats going on outside of school. Hold kids accountable, meaning know how to clock in, meaning know how to come to school on time. Every grade level and every student got a responsibility in the school to show that they have some type of responsibility when they get there.*”

8. *Real-time engagement* is a marketing strategy around having the right technology, the right data, and the right approach to collaboration that could be adapted to solutions around gun violence. Having the right variables in real time will impact communities plagued by gun violence.

- According to Speaker ZA, “*I wanna hear from success people, who not stuck in the same environment as me. I’m willing to learn...you just got to know somebody in that community already trying to make a change.*”
- Speaker CM stated, “*...everyone have to get involved from churches through police districts through the state senate within the area, your neighborhood. Showing that our neighborhoods can be clean and safe*”
- Speaker CM suggested, “*...as much as they promote COVID safety and vaccines, they need to promote getting rid of gun violence in our neighborhoods. Have commercials, have posters out. Get celebrities involved, just as much as how celebrities want us to promote the end of COVID and taking the shot.*”

Structure of the Phenomenon of Interest

The structure is the major finding of a descriptive phenomenology inquiry (Kleiman, 2004). According to Moustakas (1994), using structural descriptions, the researcher provides a

distinct and clear account of essential meaning and context that make up the underlying dynamics of lived experiences. In this study, the researcher articulated a structure using an interpretivist viewpoint based upon the phenomenon of young Black males in Philadelphia around gun violence.

Structural description for essential meaning: Trauma. Young black men in Philadelphia are experiencing all forms of trauma including acute, chronic, and complex. Identifying, providing coping mechanisms and support are critical to interrupt the cycle of gun violence.

Structural description for essential meaning: Family Influence. The adage it takes a village to raise a child is true, however starting with a strong family structure and influences are essential in the life of young black men to minimize participation in gun culture.

Structural description for essential meaning: Relationships. A bond is formed, not in terms of intimacy but an emotional connection to others encouraged by trust, vulnerability, acceptance and shared values or experiences.

Structural description for essential meaning: Self-worth. Devalued by society, young black men have continued to question their worth and abilities. The need for “things” or accomplishments have been drivers forcing young black men to question internal abilities thus the need to participate in violence and gun culture. Explicitly aligns with tenets of race identity and negation of power.

Structural description for essential meaning: Communal limitations. Broken and impoverished communities lead to broken individuals. Systems or structures have not been established to alter the trajectory of the neighborhoods and environments that young black males call home. Racial Identity and Social Disorganization theories frames the disparities tied to

structural violence, institutional racism, and social injustices that penetrate the communities occupied by black men.

Structural description for essential meaning: Communications. There continues to be a major void in the act of giving, receiving, and sharing information among young black men and communal stakeholders. This research may have presented one of the only opportunities for these young men to be heard by listening to their stories and experiences.

Structural description for essential meaning: Formal Education. Educational structures within Philadelphia have been outdated and have not been altered to address current needs and trends of black men in the 21st century. The need to pivot and consideration of alternative education and educational development will be necessary.

Structural description for essential meaning: Real-time engagement. Similar to the need in updating and addressing formal education, real-time engagement is needed around other constructs that impact young black men in Philadelphia. Strategies around policing, local representation, industry, and other areas need to be modified to address current needs as they present themselves.

Substantiating the Raw Data

The next step in the data-analysis process was to return to the raw data. Because the richness of phenomenology lies in raw data, researchers must return to raw data descriptions to justify the articulations of the essential meaning and general structure (Kleiman, 2004). In returning to the raw data for this study, the investigator utilized manual text-mining techniques and strategies to assist in justifying essential meanings. Text mining is “the discovery and extraction of interesting, non-trivial knowledge from free or unstructured text” (Kao & Poteet, 2007, p. 1). While NVivo 12 provided computer-aided text analysis for the study by extracting

patterns and counting word/term frequencies, the size and scope of collected data afforded the researcher the opportunity to manually mine text, as well.

NVivo 12 allowed for text clustering through the creation of nodes. It supported the study by asking, “How can I form groups of text?” The researcher returned to the raw data and deployed the text-mining activity of “summarization” to address the question, “How can I summarize text and extract keywords and key sentences?” (Kobayashi, Mol, Berkers, Kismihok, & Den Hartog, 2018, p. 737). The researcher was able to measure the importance of each sentence (word) of the transcript when returning to the raw data by manually matching patterns and extracting keywords and key phrases with highlighting. An example of this process is illustrated in Figure 1 for the essential meaning of trauma. This manual process involved identifying exact matches, stemmed words, synonyms, and specializations within the raw data.

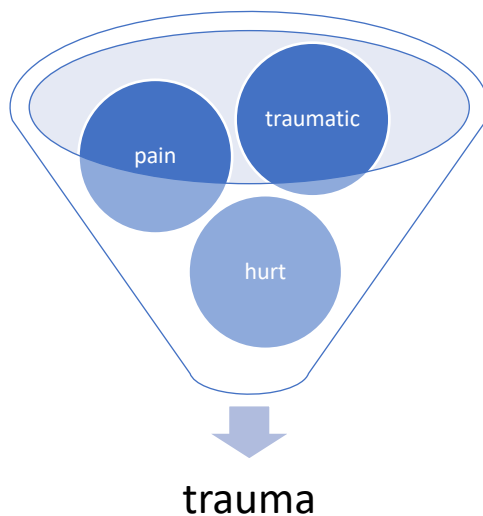


Figure 1. Manual text-mining process for the essential meaning of trauma.

Critical Analysis

The final step in the data-analysis process required the researcher to critically analyze his work. In this study, the critical-analysis stage included verifying that concrete, detailed descriptions had been obtained from participants; phenomenological reduction had been maintained throughout the analysis and essential meanings had been discovered; a structure had been articulated; and the results had been verified in the raw data (Kleiman, 2004). The researcher used the focus groups moderators to assist in the critical analysis of the study and to confirm analysis as a critical step, as posited by Colaizzi (1978).

ManUpPHL moderators were asked to justify the essential meanings and general structure of this study. Additionally, they were able to review the investigator's analyses by reviewing a summary and description of identified essential meanings and, where new or relevant data was offered, viewed data that had been incorporated into the analysis. The moderator's input also afforded the researcher the opportunity for member-checking to improve accuracy, credibility, and validity of the data obtained during the interview process (Harper & Cole, 2012).

Summary

Research findings portion of this paper described the data-collection and -analysis process of a phenomenological study that explored the lived experiences of young Black males in Philadelphia around gun violence and the behaviors/activities that encourage gun culture. This included the participant recruitment and focus group process, analysis of data using both the NVivo 12 web application and text mining, and development of eight essential meanings. The following essential emerging themes were identified: (1) trauma, (2) family influence, (3) relationships, (4) self-worth, (5) communal limitations, (6) communications, (7) formal

education, and (8) real-time engagement. The eight essential meanings arose from a process of reduction according to phenomenological processes.

Verbatim quotes of informants were provided to highlight the experiences of young Black males in Philadelphia around gun violence. Structural descriptions were also offered to provide the researcher's perception of the phenomenon.

Finally, a critical analysis was conducted, aided by input from ManUp PHL moderators to improve accuracy, credibility, and validity of analyzed data.

Recommendations

This study's findings provide a foundation from which future research may continue to explore the lived experiences of young Black males in Philadelphia around gun violence and the behaviors/activities that encourage gun culture. More importantly, the qualitative study afforded these young men the opportunity to share thoughts around this phenomenon, while providing insight through recommendations on what an engaged community could do curtail said activities and behaviors. Five tangible recommendations that were shared by study participants have been developed around essential meanings that have emerged from this study:

1. Partner 10 incarcerated leaders with 10 community agencies to address gun violence from the inside out.

"If it was my program, I would talk to convicted felons who got gun cases, violent cases, shootings, murders. I want to talk to them first, so that way I could see if I could get them on page to help me talk to the other ones ... They the ones that got life and stuff like that, and football numbers and all that. Who else they going to listen to than the person that's next in line? I'm saying we should do more." – Speaker NS

Direct the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections to identify 10 incarcerated leaders who have created successful anti-violence initiatives within the prison system. Then partner those leaders with community-based non-profits that can activate existing support systems for returning citizens. This approach creates space for dialogue with those who have engaged in gun

violence, and does so by first acknowledging and then utilizing the existing prison leadership structure. Among the approximately 5,100 Pennsylvania inmates serving life sentences, there are numerous men and women who are already doing this work. One of them is Dr. Thomas Robinson, who earned his doctorate while serving life without the possibility of parole.

Dr. Robinson created the Community Forgiveness and Restoration program, which engages lifers to prepare inmates for their release through a multi-week curriculum. Through partnerships with faith-based institutions, CFR creates a community that connects with these returning citizens, links them with a life coach on the outside, and assists them with gaining employment. One of the men who worked directly with Dr. Robinson to administer CFR at Graterford prison has been released and is currently employed in the Philadelphia District Attorney's Office. Two men who were mentored by Dr. Robinson are currently employed by the City of Philadelphia.

We recommend that the Department of Corrections provide additional support to Dr. Robinson and nine additional prison-based leaders. We further recommend that the state of Pennsylvania and the City of Philadelphia seek \$300,000 in philanthropic support to assist community organizations who work directly with 50 of the returning citizens who complete prisoner-led anti-violence programs. Essential meanings identified that align with this recommendation include relationships, self-worth, communications, and real-time engagement.

2. Create 300 jobs tailored to those who are most at-risk for being involved in gun violence.

"You gotta come up with a better business than the game." – Speaker MM

Recruit 10 private sector employers to provide jobs at a \$30,000 annual rate to 300 people who are most at risk for being involved in gun violence. This targeted \$9 million

investment would focus on young Black and Latino males residing in zip codes where unemployment and poverty have helped to drive the increase in shootings. Participating employers should be intentional in focusing on those with criminal records. Such records are one of the main barriers to employment, and as a June 2021 study by the Philadelphia Department of Public Health indicates, unemployment is a key driver of gun violence.

In the study, [Chronic Male Unemployment and Gun Violence in Philadelphia](#), researchers found that Philadelphia zip codes where 39-to-50 percent of males were chronically unemployed experienced between 273 and 290 shootings per zip code from 2015 to 2020. By way of contrast, zip codes where chronic male unemployment was between 1 and 8 percent had fewer than 12 shootings per zip code over the same time period.

Investing in work to stem the tide of gun violence makes economic sense. Not only because the \$9 million cost of employing 300 people at a living wage is much lower than the \$12 million cost of incarcerating those same individuals in state prisons. It makes sense because these individuals would become taxpayers.

To incentivize private employers to engage in this approach, we recommend that the City of Philadelphia and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania provide tax breaks to participating employers to offset up to fifty percent of salary costs. We further recommend that medical institutions in the City of Philadelphia donate the cost of medical care for these employees, thus reducing the cost of benefits.

As Listening to the Streets participants repeatedly stated, minimum wage employment is not a sufficient incentive for those who have had the opportunity to make money quickly through illicit means. Gainful employment with family sustaining wages is needed, and if private

employers are given tax incentives to provide it, Philadelphia can create a better business than the drug game. Essential meanings that align with funding employment include self-worth, communal limitations, formal education, and real-time engagement.

3. Create a parallel educational experience for middle and high school students who are at high risk to be impacted by gun violence

“We all go to one school, because we C-grade or below. So, we got to go to that school and be around the kids that don't want to learn nothing. So, they put us in that setting, and it's like, ‘Give up.’ That's basically what it is. The solution is, just stop with that. They need to get rid of feeder schools. Period. I'm talking about from ninth grade. When I found out what it was. ‘Oh, this is a feeder school. This is what we got to go to because you didn't get your right grades.’ But I'm like, ‘Oh, I applied for Central. I applied to School of the Future. I applied to Saul. Yo, can y'all give me some help, so I can get into one of these? ... So basically, it's like you guys want me to turn into a monster, because you're putting me around with other monsters. So, I had no option but to become that, too, to protect myself.” – Speaker NS

Partner each Philadelphia area university with the School District of Philadelphia to create magnet school experiences for 500 students hailing from the zip codes most affected by gun violence. Students would not be admitted based on grade point average or test scores. Rather, they would be admitted based on their ability to think critically, their skill in navigating adversity, and their willingness to learn. Each university would work with its college of education to create rich educational experiences for students who express a desire to receive them. This program would function like an internship, with the student spending half the day in their neighborhood school, and half the day at the university. They would receive high school and college credit for their coursework, and would receive points toward their admission to the university upon completing high school.

This pilot program would not require any capital funding, since it would take place in existing facilities and utilize available equipment. Operational funding totaling \$1000 per child could be provided by foundations or corporate sponsors. This investment, totaling \$500,000,

would assist with transportation and other expenses associated with the program. Best of all, it would disrupt the school to prison pipeline, and create a pathway of a different sort.

Our schools don't have to be what our Listening to the Streets participants described – places where conflict boils over on social media and explodes into neighborhood gun violence. By partnering with universities, we can create lessons that are real; lessons that not only give students the how, but also the why.

In the words of participant ZA, *“It's too much BS in school. It's not real enough. You know what I mean? The school, you get like two teachers that's real and that's fun. So, let's have it all real. Teach all real stuff. Have a principal that'll change everything up.”*

Launching a pilot program that gives at-risk students a chance to engage in something real not only gives them the opportunity for a better education. It stops gun violence in the place where it too often begins—school. Trauma, self-worth, formal education, and real-time engagement are essential meanings that align with this recommendation.

4. Create mental health substations in communities heavily impacted by gun violence.

“Everybody should have a therapist or somebody they should talk to. I think if people got that amount of money and we could put into some type of program where the youth, a mass youth, would be able to have somebody they could come and talk to on a daily basis instead of, if they don't, they just go somewhere else and just do whatever. That's most likely what's happening now. So, if they had some place they could come to on a daily basis and just talk to anybody, or somebody specifically that they want to talk to about what's going on in they lives, that would probably ease a lot of what's going on right now. – Speaker DD

Draft Philadelphia-based medical schools and Black licensed therapists to provide free, neighborhood-based mental health services in partnership with 16 community members who will be trained, paid and certified to assist. This \$500,000 investment in those community members would pay a \$30,000 annual salary for one year, and it could be funded by a community grantor

such as the Pew Fund for Health and Human Services, which offers grants to organizations that “support the health and well-being of local individuals and families in need.” The families impacted by gun violence fit Pew’s stated mission, especially since they have borne the brunt of the trauma associated with thousands of shootings and have largely done so without adequate mental health services. In this, Philadelphia is not alone.

In a 2017 study, the American Psychiatric Association found that “only one in three African Americans who need mental health care receive it.” That disparity is driven by multiple factors, including a lack of health insurance, a scarcity of culturally competent mental health care providers, and the near-absence of Black providers. In addition, there is a stigma attached to mental health in the Black community, and there is an abiding mistrust of the medical profession driven by historical racism and unethical experiments. All of those realities must be acknowledged, but in communities where gun violence is creating out ongoing trauma, those realities must quickly be overcome.

Listening to the Streets participants repeatedly indicated that emotional hurt is often present long before gunshots are fired. From broken family relationships to generational poverty, from unaddressed grief to post-traumatic stress disorder, the young people who engage in gun violence experience trauma throughout their lives. The resultant mental health issues are almost universally untreated. We can change that by partnering established institutions, a targeted funder, qualified Black therapists and trusted community members to provide culturally competent mental health services on the ground. The essential meanings of trauma, self-worth, communal limitations, communications, and real-time engagement associate with this recommendation.

5. Train and develop “resource connectors” to connect those engaged in gun violence with tangible resources and alternatives

“You can't just go build a bond with somebody who got a gun on the streets. You got to already have that bond with them, he got to already be close with you, because it's hard to open up to people in the streets. It's hard to communicate. People in the streets got harder communication skills ... You just got to know somebody in that community already trying to make a change.” – Speaker ZA

Partner with Philadelphia’s professional sports community to raise \$1 million to contract with 30 “resource connectors” who will assist young people seeking to leave gun violence behind. These individuals will be existing community members—people who are already known and trusted by those with whom they will work. Their job will be to personally connect young people to the resources we have recommended, and to other resources that already exist.

Trained by local universities, and working in partnership with corporate, foundation, non-profit, governmental, and community-based entities, these individuals will be equipped with a list of options that will help them to bring personalized services to communities ravaged by gun violence. These services and supports include, but are not limited to, individual and family therapy, life skills training, educational opportunities, vocational training, life coaching, and most importantly, jobs.

To achieve this end, resource connectors will use a strategy similar to the model that is frequently utilized to serve the needs of at-risk children in school settings. They will “wrap around” a youth and their family in their home, school, and neighborhood. Utilizing trusted community members to implement this comprehensive approach builds on the traditional “credible messenger” model by working with young people before the conflict begins, rather than trying to convince them to peacefully settle arguments that could lead to gun violence.

Resource connectors can be grandmothers, neighbors, teachers, or friends; people whose credibility springs from the fact that they are “already trying to make a change.” By combining the credible messenger and wrap-around approaches, and expanding them beyond their traditional boundaries, Philadelphia can create a national model for advocates who move proactively to reduce gun violence—not through programs, but through relationships. Funding community-based advocates address the essential meanings of family influence, relationships, self-worth, communications, and real-time engagement.

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