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**Opinion**

**Why so many young Chicago men pull the trigger**

By: ARTHUR J. LURIGIO AND SIDNEY H. WEISSMAN



Photo by Scott Olson / Getty Images

*So far in 2017, more than 1,200 people have been shot and 220 killed in Chicago. Shockingly, 30 of those deaths were children 18 or younger. As Memorial Day approaches—historically one of the city's most violent weekends—Crain's examines a facet of the issue that isn't often discussed: the psychological reason so many young men in Chicago are pulling the trigger. This is Part 1 of a three-part series by two local researchers who have spent years interviewing young offenders. Parts 2 and 3 will publish online this week at* [**ChicagoBusiness.com/gunpsych**](http://www.chicagobusiness.com/gunpsych)*.*

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The sobering statistics suggest that the rate of violence in Chicago this year could run apace with [**the dramatic levels registered in 2016,**](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/28/us/chicago-murder-rate-gun-deaths.html?_r=0) which saw more than 750 homicides and 3,600 shootings—the highest in 20 years.

The inability to quell the violence is alarming. So is the fact that these numbers exceed the joint total of those documented for New York City and Los Angeles, cities with a combined population nearly four times that of Chicago.

While Chicago differs from its larger counterparts in terms of deadly violence, the three cities mirror one another when you look at some of the causes: pockets of blight with crushing intergenerational poverty, widespread illegal handgun possession and rampant mistrust between police and communities of color. In all three cities, male adolescents or young adults commit the bulk of homicides. Plus New York and LA have [**experienced their own episodes of police misconduct**](https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/10/us/los-angeles-police-officers-acted-improperly-in-shooting-of-ezell-ford-commission-finds.html?rref=collection%2Ftimestopic%2FPolice%20Brutality%20and%20Misconduct&action=click&contentCollection=timestopics&region=stream&module=stream_unit&version=search&contentPlacement=2&pgtype=collection) that shared similarities with the [**shooting of Laquan McDonald.**](http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/laquanmcdonald/ct-graphics-laquan-mcdonald-officers-fired-timeline-htmlstory.html)

But Chicago's homicide rate cannot be explained simply by demographic characteristics, impoverishment, the ready availability of illegal handguns or alienation from the police in minority neighborhoods. All play a role, but the major factors promoting violence are likely to lie elsewhere.

**Decoding the psychology of gun violence**

*Why are so many young Chicago men pulling the trigger? Two researchers who've spent years interviewing offenders examine the brain science behind violence in this three-part series.*

[**Part 1: Why so many young Chicago men pull the trigger**](http://www.chicagobusiness.com/article/20170519/ISSUE07/170519818)
How neglect and growing up a witness to violence alter the teen brain.

**Part 2: How gang psychology plays out in Chicago streets**
The search for affirmation, validation and an illusory sense of safety and respect. *Coming Tuesday.*

**Part 3: What brain science suggests we do to fix the problem**
Put simply, violence is a public health problem. The most effective interventions should start at the community level. *Coming Wednesday.*

Based on many years of interactions with young men who were in jail, on probation supervision or in treatment, we believe that "elsewhere" mostly rests at the intersection of Chicago youths' psychological vulnerability and the environments and circumstances that encourage the expression of violent tendencies. This conclusion stems from our varied careers and professional activities, which include regular contact with detainees in the Cook County Jail who are receiving behavioral health care services, as well as the directorship of a youth clinic that served the Near North Side and Cabrini-Green.

All of the young men we encountered have either experienced or witnessed violent acts or knew someone who had. For years, we have explored the psychological characteristics of youths who commit violent crimes in Chicago and other large cities—specifically, how their thoughts and feelings affect their behavior in the streets where they shoot and are shot at by young men very much like them. We have studied the psychology of their personal and interpersonal interactions. And we have analyzed the social conditions that have fostered violence in Chicago and contributed to such psychological dysfunction.

What we hope to arrive at are strategies for encouraging children to grow into healthy adults, thereby creating safer neighborhoods.

**BRAIN DEVELOPMENT**

All adolescents must master basic psychological and developmental tasks. The steps toward this mastery start at home and in primary school. Yet the highest proportions of incarcerated fathers hail from Chicago's most violent communities.

The young offenders we met were often raised in single-parent homes, loosely supervised and poorly parented. They were more likely than kids from more stable families and households to experience violent acts that can lead to childhood post-traumatic stress disorder. Adding to these children's neglect, they are products of a primary school system with few resources and overextended teachers. They enter the crime-prone years of adolescence with numerous challenges that set the stage for delinquency and early criminal pursuits.

Then, during adolescence, these at-risk youths move out from under the umbrella of their families and have even less parental oversight. This coincides with a time when the adolescent brain is naturally reorganizing, which**​** can create its own brand of instability.

In a supportive household, parents help modulate this internal instability. In teens raised in stable homes, the brain forms critical new pathways and develops abstract thinking skills that enable adolescents to function effectively in complex situations and new contexts. They start mapping their future trajectories, and that helps guide their actions and decisions. When feeling impulses to engage in destructive behavior (e.g. truancy, vandalism, alcohol use), teens raised in stable households have a greater capacity to control their urges and actions because they can better visualize consequences and are more concerned about the approval of the adults in their lives.

But without the benefits of parental nurturing and early education, young people who have been neglected at home and school often develop intellectual and emotional disorders that limit their capacity to regulate their feelings. They don't foresee a viable future, and they aren't prepared for more demanding life situations as they enter adulthood.

We have observed that young adult offenders begin their adolescent years with a variety of deficits. Many can read or communicate only at rudimentary levels. Low verbal intelligence interferes with the formulation of plans, the interpretation of life experiences and the appreciation of consequences. What's more, primary school classes and teachers can't maintain an environment or access the resources to address the behaviors associated with childhood PTSD.

We also see that students who are either the most ill-prepared to learn or the least able to focus in the classroom attend school the least, falling further behind peers. High school exposes them to embarrassing and humiliating experiences. Their disorganized and dysfunctional families provide little encouragement for them to stay and learn. In response, they drop out. Not surprisingly, the neighborhoods with the highest numbers of shootings and homicides also have the highest rates of high school failures.

Without the cognitive and interpersonal skills that prepare them to respond proportionately to perceived disrespect, threats or harm, these emotionally underdeveloped young people can't explain their actions or even identify or articulate their thoughts or feelings. They respond to minor verbal attacks and perceived threats with eruptions of impulsive violence. They don't have the tools to meet the demands of urban social life. Restricted psychological functioning prompts them to use violence as their primary means of expressing and defining themselves. The gun becomes their instrument for protection, communication, dispute resolution—and esteem building.

**BACK TO LA AND NYC**

So what is different about these troubled Chicago youths compared with those in New York and LA? After all, young men in all three cities live under similar circumstances and hardships. But there are significant differences among the cities that appear at all levels: historical, political and economic.

Nearly 20 years ago, for example, the Los Angeles Police Department added 1,000 officers and shifted its focus from an arrest- heavy to a service-heavy style of enforcement. Police officers were rewarded for community outreach activities. No such sustained efforts have ever been implemented in Chicago, and the gulf between the police and community grows ever wider.

The LAPD used the Racketeer Influenced & Corrupt Organizations Act to charge and convict gang leaders and other members with the crimes of their compatriots, even if they only conspired with the perpetrators. Large numbers of gang members were incarcerated with that strategy. Under Superintendent Jody Weis (2008-11), the CPD only threatened to invoke but never systematically employed RICO against Chicago gangs. Today, barely a quarter of homicide perpetrators—many of them gang members—are even arrested in Chicago.

The LAPD also used civil injunctions or abatement laws to rid the streets of congregations of gang members. Empty corners provide no one to shoot at or no opportunity to be the victim of a shooting. From 1992 to 1999, Chicago tried a similar strategy based on curfew violations and loitering, but it was deemed unconstitutional.

In LA and New York, many insular gang neighborhoods and strongholds have gradually become gentrified. For example, New York City's five boroughs have experienced dramatic changes in population demographics and rising property values, even in the most crime-ridden neighborhoods. With the rise in housing stock, gang members have lost the turf they depended on for identity and safety. What's more, a cab ride through pockets of Brooklyn and the Bronx reveals differences from Chicago in terms of community integration and structure. Readily apparent in these boroughs are established ethnic, cultural and community identities that solidify neighborhoods and create a protective air of civility and order that is missing from Chicago's most violent areas.

LA, meanwhile, has invested heavily in sustainable communities, churches, after- school programs and other initiatives, such as Homeboy Industries, founded by Father**​** Greg Boyle, which provides gang members with jobs and job training, as well as tattoo removal and legal services. In contrast, Chicago's most effective anti-gang program, Cease Fire (known now as Cure Violence), has been decimated by budget cuts due largely to partisan political wrangling in Springfield.

In LA and New York, fewer and fewer fractured, rudderless groups of violent young men live in small spaces with no cop presence, a lot of time on their hands and a lot of guns. For 50 or more years, the most gang- infested and violent neighborhoods in Chicago have remained isolated, destitute and neglected. Instead, the city has opted to invest more in already prosperous communities—especially the South Loop and now the West Loop, which are expanding with new real estate developments and well-heeled residents. Meanwhile, North Lawndale, Garfield Park, New City, Englewood and other poor neighborhoods continue the downward spiral of deterioration and decay. More plans are laid for new skyscrapers in some neighborhoods, while empty storefronts and abandoned homes languish in others. In these communities, more innocent children are laid to rest.

| http://www.chicagobusiness.com/assets/jpg/issue/20170522-lurigio.jpg | http://www.chicagobusiness.com/assets/jpg/issue/20170522-weissman.jpg | ***ARTHUR J. LURIGIO*** *(Ieft) is a professor of psychology and of criminal justice and criminology at Loyola University Chicago, where he is the senior associate dean for faculty, a faculty scholar and a master researcher in the College of Arts & Sciences.****DR. SIDNEY H. WEISSMAN*** *(right) is clinical professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Northwestern University's Feinberg School of Medicine. He is also on the faculty and board of the Chicago Institute for Psychoanalysis.* |
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