

Hamilton
LEVITT CENTER

A Report of the Arthur Levitt Center for Public Affairs

**Youth Gun
Violence in
Utica, New York:
Causes, Context
and Prevention**

February 2025

prepared by
students in the
Levitt Center
Justice Lab at
Hamilton College,
Fall 2024

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Preface

by Frank Anechiarico

Maynard-Knox Professor of Government and Law
Faculty Director of the Levitt Center for Public Affairs
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A number of people informed and assisted the student authors of this report. This group, recruited by Ralph Eannace and Scott McNamara, includes Utica Mayor Michael Galime, Oneida County Sheriff Robert Maciol, Utica Police Chief Mark Williams, Rome Police Chief Kevin James, Oneida County Family Court Judge Randal Caldwell, and Save our Streets Director Roosevelt Patterson.

The staff of the Levitt Center provided support and funding for this project and made the field study in Albany possible. The Center also supported and supervised the coordination of the four courses in the Justice Lab. The Levitt Center staff is led by Administrative Director Christina Willemsen and includes Interim Assistant Director of Community Based Learning Rachael Clark, Communications and Media Assistant Simon Stanco, Program Coordinator- Experiential Learning Janelle Perry, Interim Programming Coordinator Christina Strong, and Office Assistant Heather Bogolyubova.

Introduction

The topic of this report grew out of a meeting in February, 2024, of Levitt Center staff with Utica Mayor Michael Galime and Mayoral Chief of Staff Michael Gentile. The evident need for a comprehensive assessment of local efforts to prevent youth gun violence led the Levitt Center to organize a public opinion survey and an integrated set of four college courses on the topic. This report is the work of 16 Hamilton College students enrolled in those courses, which comprised the Levitt Center Justice Lab on Youth Gun Violence. The Lab courses, offered in the fall of 2024, were:

- “Practicum on Best Practices for Policy on Prevention of Youth Gun Violence”
Instructor: Ralph Eannace, Adjunct Professor and Judge of the Utica City Court, ret.
Levitt Center Community Partner: Scott McNamara, former Oneida County District Attorney
- “Causes and Context of Youth Gun Violence”

Instructor: Frank Anechiarico, Maynard-Knox Professor of Government and Law

- “Safety, Danger and Risk”

Instructor: Marianne Janack, John Stewart Kennedy Professor of Philosophy

- “Restorative Justice”

Instructor: Jeffrey McArn, Senior Lecturer in Religious Studies

In addition to reviewing existing research on the topic, Ralph Eannace and Scott McNamara organized interviews for students with the chiefs of the largest police departments in the local area, family court judges, probation officers, members of gun violence prevention teams, the regional crime analysis team, and community members engaged in gun violence prevention. Further, Scott McNamara arranged for students to attend the annual conference in Albany of the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services.

Students also had access to data collected in the Survey of Quality of Life in Central New York and the Mohawk Valley (conducted by the Hamilton Levitt Center and the Colgate Upstate Institute and administered by Zogby Analytics in September, 2024). The survey included questions about public safety, economic security, various public services as well as questions specifically related to youth gun violence.

Note on Production of the Report

For purposes of this report, ChatGPT software was used to condense, in the report below, and to summarize, in this introduction, the over 450 pages written by students. However, all the work condensed or summarized here is drawn from the original research and writing done by the Justice Lab students.

- February 25, 2025

Executive Summary

Social and Economic Influences

The persistence of gun violence is tied to economic hardships, deindustrialization, and residential segregation. The decline of manufacturing jobs in Utica has led to high unemployment and poverty, especially in areas like Cornhill and West Utica, where poverty rates are significantly above national averages. Economic deprivation contributes to criminal activity, as young people struggle to find legitimate employment. Segregation and historical redlining have reinforced economic disparities, limiting opportunities for upward mobility.

Cultural factors, such as the "code of the street," further perpetuate violence, as young people adopt aggressive behaviors to gain respect and self-protection. The prevalence of single-parent households and weak community networks correlate with higher crime rates, as family structure and civic engagement are linked to lower violence levels.

Crime Perceptions and Policy Responses

A Hamilton-Colgate Poll, conducted in September, 2024, shows that economic status influences crime perception, with lower-income individuals expressing greater concern over rising violence. Racial disparities also affect safety perceptions, with Black and Hispanic residents reporting heightened fears compared to their white counterparts. Addressing these issues requires economic revitalization, improved education, and strategic community policing.

Interventions and Policy Recommendations

Economic initiatives, such as job training programs, have shown promise in reducing recidivism. However, funding gaps hinder sustained progress. Revitalization efforts like the Downtown Revitalization Initiative (DRI) and Cornhill Project aim to stimulate economic growth but lack direct crime prevention strategies. Community Development Block Grants (CDBG) could be restructured to prioritize anti-violence programs.

Successful models from other cities offer guidance. Chicago's Neighborhood Opportunity Fund provides direct financial support to businesses in high-crime areas, while Richmond, CA's Peacemaker Fellowship has significantly reduced gun violence through mentorship and stipends for at-risk youth. Expanding youth employment programs and integrating economic support with violence prevention efforts could yield significant benefits.

Family and Psychological Development

Intergenerational trauma and exposure to violence are major contributors to youth involvement in crime. Research indicates that children from abusive or violent households are more likely to engage in criminal activity. Neurological studies also reveal that trauma alters brain function, increasing aggression and impulsivity.

Utica's refugee population faces additional challenges, as many families have experienced war-related trauma. The city lacks adequate trauma-informed services, exacerbating mental health issues and increasing the risk of violent behavior. Expanding mental health programs and integrating trauma care into community initiatives is crucial.

Educational Interventions

Schools play a critical role in shaping youth behavior, but disciplinary policies often push at-risk students toward criminal activity. High suspension rates, particularly among minority students, contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline. While School Resource Officers (SROs) aim to enhance safety, inconsistent training and unclear roles sometimes lead to over-policing rather than constructive intervention.

Restorative justice approaches, which emphasize conflict resolution and community accountability, have proven effective in reducing suspensions and improving school climates. Cities like Chicago and Oakland have successfully integrated these programs, leading to better student outcomes. Implementing similar practices in Utica's schools could reduce disciplinary disparities and prevent youth from entering the criminal justice system.

Criminal Justice Reforms

Law enforcement strategies significantly impact community trust and violence prevention. While some Utica residents support aggressive policing, distrust in the justice system remains high,

particularly among marginalized groups. Recent incidents, including police-involved shootings, have fueled calls for reform.

Community policing initiatives, such as Utica's Community Outreach Team, aim to build trust, but skepticism persists. Alternatives to incarceration, including Teen Accountability Courts and mentorship programs, offer promising solutions. Research suggests that community-based interventions are more effective than detention in reducing recidivism.

Racial disparities in the juvenile justice system remain a concern, with Black youth disproportionately affected by harsher sentencing. Diversifying law enforcement and implementing implicit bias training could improve interactions between police and communities.

Recommendations for Addressing Gun Violence in Utica, NY

Economic and Community-Based Interventions

- Expand Job Training and Employment Programs
 - Revive Gun Violence Prevention Grants
 - Provide at-risk youth with employment opportunities, reducing their involvement in crime.
- Implement a Neighborhood Investment Fund
 - Modeled after Chicago's Neighborhood Opportunity Fund
 - This initiative would offer direct financial grants to businesses in high-crime areas to foster economic revitalization and reduce violence.
- Strengthen Violence Interruption Programs
 - Expand SNUG and other street outreach initiatives to mediate conflicts before they escalate and provide at-risk youth with social and economic support.

Law Enforcement and Enhanced Community Policing

- Enhance Community Policing Strategies
 - Increase funding and support for trust-building initiatives between law enforcement and communities to improve cooperation and crime reporting.
- Implement Restorative Justice Training for Police
 - Train officers in de-escalation tactics

- Use trauma-informed policing to prevent excessive force incidents
- Establish a Police-Community Trust Initiative
 - Encourage open dialogue between law enforcement and residents, particularly in high-crime neighborhoods, to rebuild trust and improve public safety.

Criminal Justice System Reforms

- Expand Alternative Sentencing Programs
 - Increase access to Teen Accountability Courts
 - Community-based interventions as alternatives to incarceration, reducing youth recidivism rates.
- Address Racial Disparities in Gun-Related Sentencing
 - Implement implicit bias training for law enforcement and court officials to ensure fair treatment of all youth offenders.
- Enhance Reentry Programs for Formerly Incarcerated Youth
 - Provide structured support, including mentorship, job training, and mental health services, to prevent reoffending and facilitate reintegration.

Tracking and Regulation of Guns

- Disrupting Gun Trafficking Networks
 - Strengthen tracing efforts using ATF's eTrace program.
 - Enhance collaboration between local, state, and federal agencies to curb illegal firearm imports through the Iron Pipeline.
- Advancing Gun Tracking Technologies
 - Implement microstamping technology to help trace firearms used in crimes.
 - Consider financial incentives for purchasing microstamped firearms, modeled after programs in New Jersey.
- Expanding Community-Based Interventions
 - Support initiatives like Gun Involved Violence Elimination (GIVE) and SNUG to engage at-risk youth.
 - Increase the role of faith-based organizations and restorative justice programs in conflict mediation and rehabilitation.
 - Expand mental health services to address trauma associated with gun violence.

- Comprehensive Policy and Community Coordination
 - Focus law enforcement efforts on disrupting illegal firearm supply chains.
 - Prioritize preventive measures to steer at-risk youth away from gun-related crime.
 - Foster collaboration between policymakers, law enforcement, and community leaders for a holistic response.

Education and School Policy Reforms

- Reforming School Resource Officers (SROs) and School Policing
 - Establish permanent school resource officers instead of rotating personnel to build trust with students.
 - Require specialized training in adolescent mental health, conflict resolution, and trauma-informed policing.
 - Develop clear guidelines in Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) to prevent SROs from being involved in routine discipline.
 - Encourage mentorship roles for officers to improve community-police relations and student engagement.
- Alternatives to Exclusionary Discipline
 - Shift from suspensions and expulsions to restorative justice programs that emphasize conflict resolution and accountability.
 - Implement structured behavioral interventions to keep at-risk students engaged in their education.
 - Reduce racial disparities in disciplinary actions by revising school codes of conduct and training staff in implicit bias.
 - Expand mental health resources in schools to address underlying behavioral concerns.
- Improving Educational Support for At-Risk Students
 - Enhance mentorship programs within schools to provide guidance for students facing challenges.
 - Expand alternative education models, such as community schools that integrate academic and social services.
 - Strengthen early childhood education programs and increase accessibility to pre-kindergarten to reduce long-term risks of violence.
 - Provide transportation assistance for students in underserved areas to improve school attendance.

- o Increase representation of male role models in early childhood education to improve emotional regulation in young boys.
- Enhancing Community Collaboration and Support Services
 - o Strengthen partnerships between schools, community organizations, and law enforcement to provide holistic student support.
 - o Expand youth employment programs and career training initiatives to provide alternatives to criminal behavior.
 - o Improve access to grant funding for community organizations that provide educational and mentoring services.
 - o Develop structured outreach programs that include conflict mediation and educational support for at-risk youth.

By integrating these gun violence prevention strategies with economic revitalization, community engagement, education and justice system reforms, Utica can create safer neighborhoods and offer youth pathways away from crime.

Chapter 1. Social Environment

Part A. Causes and Context

Introduction

The issue of youth gun violence in Utica, New York, has deep historical and socio-economic roots that must be critically examined. This study explores the contributing factors behind this persistent crisis, emphasizing economic instability, social structures, and cultural influences that shape young people's engagement with firearms. It evaluates statistical data, sociological theories, and policy frameworks to identify viable solutions to reduce gun-related crime in the city.

Economic Hardships and Their Role in Violence

Economic disparities significantly influence crime rates, particularly in post-industrial cities like Utica. The decline of manufacturing jobs over the last five decades has left many residents struggling to secure stable employment, leading to increased poverty and social dislocation. Between 1970 and 2014, manufacturing jobs in New York State plummeted, with the Utica-Rome region experiencing some of the highest losses (Bacheller, 2016). With limited access to well-paying jobs, younger residents may resort to alternative means of financial survival, some of which involve illicit activities.

The Consequences of Deindustrialization

The large-scale economic downturn affected working-class families, forcing them into precarious living conditions. The collapse of the local industrial sector led to high unemployment rates, which created cycles of generational poverty. This financial insecurity is especially pronounced in Utica's Cornhill and West Utica neighborhoods, where the poverty rate hovers around 47%, significantly higher than the national average (Mason, 2024). The lack of financial opportunities has fueled desperation that often leads to violence, with young people feeling that traditional employment paths are inaccessible.

The Impact of Residential Segregation

The Geographic Divide

Mid-20th century urban planning policies reinforced segregation, preventing lower-income families from accessing resources that might improve their circumstances. The historic practice of redlining, where financial institutions refused loans to residents in minority communities, has had a lasting impact on the economic and social composition of Utica. The resulting concentration of poverty perpetuates crime and limits opportunities for upward mobility (Chetty et al., 2014). Without access to quality education and employment, youth are more likely to engage in behaviors that increase their risk of involvement in gun violence.

Cultural and Social Dynamics of Crime

The Role of Street Codes

The emergence of an informal set of behavioral expectations, often referred to as the “code of the street,” has become prevalent in economically marginalized communities (Anderson, 1999). This code dictates that individuals must display toughness and a willingness to resort to violence to gain respect and protect themselves from perceived threats. This deeply ingrained social norm influences young people’s attitudes toward firearms, framing them as necessary tools for survival in their environment.

Family Structure and Community Networks

Stable family structures and strong social connections are crucial in shaping an individual’s future. Research shows that children raised in single-parent households face more significant challenges in achieving upward mobility, as demonstrated by a correlation coefficient of -0.76 between single-parent households and lower financial success (Chetty et al., 2014). Additionally, social engagement within communities, such as voter participation and involvement in local organizations, plays a key role in fostering environments that discourage criminal behavior (Goetz & Rupasingha, 2008).

Statistical Trends in Crime Perception

Survey data collected in 2024 by the Hamilton College Levitt Center and Colgate University reveal a strong relationship between economic status and perceptions of safety in Utica. As indicated in Table 1, individuals earning less than \$50,000 annually are more likely to report

worsening economic conditions and heightened concerns about crime than those in higher income brackets.

Table 1. Relationship between Yearly Income and Perception of Economic Conditions

Income Bracket	Getting Better	Getting Worse	About the Same	Not Sure	Total
<\$50K	14.2%	50.8%	29.9%	5.2%	n=468
\$50K-\$100K	20.0%	46.6%	29.9%	3.5%	321
\$100K+	41.7%	29.4%	27.4%	1.5%	174

Similarly, data suggest that perceptions of safety vary significantly across racial groups, as indicated in Table 2. Black and Hispanic residents report greater concern over crime in their neighborhoods compared to white residents.

Table 2. Relationship between Race and Perception of Safety

Race	Better Off	Worse Off	About the Same	Not Sure
White	18.8%	44.5%	35.1%	1.7%
Hispanic	34.2%	29.8%	35.1%	0.9%
Black	32.0%	26.2%	38.5%	3.2%
Asian	12.8%	55.1%	28.1%	4.1%

Conclusion

Youth gun violence in Utica is a multifaceted issue driven by economic instability, social inequities, and cultural norms that normalize aggression and firearm use. Addressing this crisis requires a comprehensive approach, including economic revitalization, enhanced educational opportunities, and community-oriented policing reforms.

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Chapter 1. Social Environment

Part B. Best Practices

Introduction

Gun violence in Utica is deeply intertwined with structural economic disadvantages, necessitating carefully targeted policy interventions. This paper evaluates existing economic initiatives in the region, their potential to reduce firearm-related crime, and offers new evidence-based recommendations. These solutions draw from successful case studies in similar urban environments and emphasize the importance of proactive, community-driven change (Neithart, 2024; Carbone, 2024).

Current Economic Policies in Utica

Mohawk Valley EDGE and Workforce Development

Mohawk Valley EDGE is a regional economic development entity that primarily aims to attract businesses in manufacturing and technology. While beneficial for economic growth, its initiatives do not directly target high-crime neighborhoods or populations at risk for violence. A more focused effort is necessary to ensure that economic gains translate to crime reduction (Mohawk Valley EDGE, n.d.).

The Oneida County Workforce Development Program is more specifically targeted, offering job training for marginalized and vulnerable populations, particularly those with prior justice system involvement. However, past programs such as the Gun Violence Prevention Grant, which provided job opportunities specifically for at-risk youth, are no longer operational, highlighting a gap in sustainable intervention (Working Solutions, 2024).

Revitalization Efforts: DRI and Cornhill Project

The Downtown Revitalization Initiative (DRI) is a major economic development program funded by New York State, which granted Utica \$10 million for infrastructure improvements and business development. While this has been instrumental in revitalizing the city's downtown, its

geographic limitations prevent meaningful intervention in neighborhoods with the highest rates of firearm violence (City of Utica, 2024). The Cornhill Revitalization Project, a \$74 million investment into one of the city's most economically disadvantaged areas, holds more promise for community uplift. However, it remains primarily focused on affordable housing and general community development rather than explicitly tackling violence prevention (City of Utica, 2024).

Community Development Block Grants (CDBG)

Each year, Utica receives approximately \$2.5 million in CDBG funding, allocated to various community programs. While some of these funds are directed toward youth recreation and employment, a relatively small percentage explicitly addresses the issue of youth violence. The absence of funding for targeted intervention programs suggests a need for restructuring allocations to prioritize crime prevention and social services that directly impact at-risk populations (HUD, 2024).

Policy Recommendations

Neighborhood Investment Fund: Lessons from Chicago

Chicago's Neighborhood Opportunity Fund (NOF) has demonstrated how direct financial grants to local businesses in high-crime neighborhoods can be an effective tool for economic revitalization and violence reduction. Unlike traditional business loans, NOF offers grants that do not require repayment, enabling sustainable economic growth in struggling communities (City of Chicago, 2024). Utica might adapt this model on a smaller scale, reallocating a portion of Cornhill Project funds or CDBG resources to create a micro-grant program for entrepreneurs in neighborhoods with high crime rates. Research shows that economic investments in struggling communities lead to substantial crime reductions, as seen in a study from Philadelphia, where structural investments were linked to a nearly 30% decrease in violent crime (Brookings, 2024).

The Peacemaker Fellowship: Richmond, CA's Approach

Richmond, CA, pioneered an innovative approach to violence reduction through the Peacemaker Fellowship, a program that provides mentorship, employment training, and direct cash stipends to individuals at high risk for engaging in gun violence. This initiative has yielded extraordinary results, including a 66% reduction in firearm-related assaults over a seven-year period (Advance

Peace, 2024). The City of Utica could build upon its past Gun Violence Prevention Grant framework to establish a structured program mirroring the Peacemaker Fellowship. With a \$3 million surplus in unallocated ARPA funding, the city has a critical opportunity to implement this model and address the root socioeconomic causes of violence before federal funds expire (Aiello, 2024).

Community and Youth Engagement

Enhancing Youth Employment Programs

Empirical research has consistently demonstrated the link between youth employment and reduced criminal activity. A study evaluating New York City’s Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP) found that participation reduced arrests among at-risk youth by 17% (Kessler et al., 2021). Utica’s SYEP currently serves approximately 400 young people annually, but expanding its eligibility criteria and improving job placements in industries that offer career advancement potential could significantly enhance its effectiveness (Oneida County, 2024).

Street Outreach and Conflict Mediation

The SNUG program, which operates under ICAN, follows a public health-based approach to violence interruption. Trained outreach workers engage with at-risk youth, mediate conflicts, and provide resources for education and employment (ICAN, 2024). However, evaluations of similar programs nationwide indicate that stronger goal-setting frameworks and expanded representation from diverse cultural backgrounds can enhance their success (Decker et al., 2008). Integrating SNUG with city-sponsored economic support programs would provide a more holistic intervention strategy.

School and Community Collaboration

Strengthening School-Based Interventions

While the Young Scholars Program is an effective initiative for academically promising students from marginalized backgrounds, it does not specifically target youth most at risk for criminal involvement (Young Scholars, 2024). Schools should integrate mentorship and alternative education models that support students with behavioral challenges. Oakland, California’s community school model has successfully reduced suspension rates and increased educational attainment through in-school restorative justice programs (Oakland Unified School District,

2024). Utica could replicate this approach to reduce school-based exclusions and reengage students in positive academic and social environments. It should be noted that, as this report is being drafted, the Utica School District has begun afterschool activities in its buildings.

Improving Access to Grants for Community Organizations

Many nonprofit organizations in Utica struggle to secure grant funding due to bureaucratic complexities. A partnership with local universities could provide grant-writing assistance, similar to Towson University's G.I.V.E. initiative, which connects students with small nonprofits in need of funding support (Towson University, 2024). This initiative could be adapted to leverage local academic institutions such as Hamilton College, Utica University and SUNY IT to support Utica's community organizations.

Conclusion

Utica's existing economic programs have laid the groundwork for long-term development, but a more targeted approach to gun violence prevention is essential. By integrating economic revitalization efforts with structured social support programs, the city can foster both economic growth and public safety. Adapting evidence-based models such as the Peacemaker Fellowship and the Neighborhood Opportunity Fund will enable Utica to address violence at its root causes, ensuring sustainable, community-driven change.

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Chapter 2. Family and Psychological Development

Part A. Causes and Context

Intergenerational Effects on Youth Gun Violence

This paper delves into the profound impact of intergenerational transmission of violence and trauma as a major contributor to youth gun violence. The discussion integrates scholarly literature, real-world cases from the city of Utica, and findings from the *Quality of Life Poll of Central New York and the Mohawk Valley* (Hamilton College Levitt Center for Public Affairs and Colgate University Upstate Institute, 2024). The evidence presented underscores the deeply embedded cycles of violence that persist across generations, shaping youth behavior and increasing their vulnerability to gun-related crimes.

Relevant Scholarly Literature and Research

Research consistently highlights the critical role of familial and environmental influences on youth violence. Kathryn Seifert (2012) identified that youth violence is heavily affected by abusive parental behaviors and hostile parenting styles. These negative influences can lead children to normalize aggressive responses to conflict, perpetuating cycles of violence. The intergenerational transmission of violence theory posits that children exposed to domestic violence, either as victims or witnesses, are significantly more likely to replicate such behaviors in their own lives (Seifert, 2012).

Supporting this perspective, Black, Sussman, and Unger (2010) conducted an in-depth study that demonstrated a strong correlation between exposure to interpersonal violence and later perpetration of similar violence. Their research involved a self-report questionnaire where participants recalled instances of physical or psychological violence in their households. The study reinforced the finding that early exposure to such violence significantly increases the likelihood of engaging in violent behavior later in life. These findings reinforce the critical need for intervention at the family level to disrupt the cycle of violence.

Beyond behavioral modeling, trauma's biological and neurological effects further perpetuate violent tendencies. Yehuda and Lehrner (2018) examined how trauma alters genetic expression, particularly through epigenetic modifications. Their study found that individuals who endured

severe trauma exhibited altered stress response mechanisms due to increased methylation of glucocorticoid receptor (GR) promoters, which regulate emotional regulation and coping abilities. These epigenetic modifications are then passed down to offspring, predisposing them to heightened stress sensitivity and aggression. The findings emphasize that trauma is not only a psychological issue but also a biological phenomenon with lasting generational consequences.

Table 1 provides insight into the prevalence of family exposure to gun violence across different age groups.

Age Group Family Exposure to Gun Violence Percentage (%)

18-34	Yes	18.71%
	No	81.29%
35-64	Yes	11.01%
	No	88.99%
65+	Yes	0.58%
	No	99.42%

(Source: Quality of Life Poll, 2024)

Local Situation in Utica

Utica has been grappling with persistent challenges related to youth violence, much of which is rooted in intergenerational trauma. In 2023, over 18,500 child abuse cases were reported across New York, with Oneida County accounting for approximately 3,976 cases (Oneida County, 2024). Interviews with local professionals provide compelling evidence of the widespread impact of trauma on Utica’s youth.

Judge Randal Caldwell, who presides over the Teen Accountability Court (TAC), noted that nearly all high-risk youth assessed by the Youth Assessment Screening Instrument (YASI) exhibit histories of childhood trauma, abuse, or neglect. This trauma, left unaddressed, manifests in aggressive behavior, delinquency, and eventual entanglement in violent activities.

Michael Pracht, Mobile Crisis Assessment Law Enforcement Partnership Crisis Program Coordinator at the Neighborhood Center, reinforced this view. He observed that youth in Utica frequently come from households marked by domestic violence, substance abuse, and neglect.

These adverse conditions create an environment where aggression becomes a survival mechanism, increasing the likelihood of violent behavior in adolescence and adulthood.

A unique factor influencing Utica’s youth is the city’s substantial refugee population. Over the past decade, approximately 17,000 refugees have resettled in Utica, constituting a substantial portion of the city’s total population. While resettlement provides opportunities for a fresh start, it may also introduce psychological stressors related to adapting to a new environment. Refugee children can sometimes experience vicarious trauma from their parents, who may have survived war, persecution, or displacement. This intergenerational trauma, combined with socioeconomic disadvantages, may be related to risk of engaging in violence.

Table 2 demonstrates the disparities in support for trauma-informed services across different regions in Utica.

Region	Support for Trauma-Informed Services (%)
Utica	12.00%
New Hartford	37.50%
Other Regions	24.18%

(Source: Quality of Life Poll, 2024)

Existing Interventions and Gaps

Efforts to mitigate youth violence in Utica have primarily revolved around community outreach programs, yet significant gaps remain. One such initiative, SNUG, is a violence intervention and prevention program that employs credible messengers—individuals with lived experience—to mentor at-risk youth. According to project manager Shannon Patterson, SNUG workers maintain daily contact with their highest-risk cases, offering both guidance and tangible resources such as food and employment assistance. However, Patterson notes that while the program has shown promise, it remains underfunded and lacks the capacity to reach all vulnerable youth.

Other community organizations, including Thea Bowman House and ICAN (Integrated Community Alternatives Network), provide critical support services, but they face similar funding constraints. Mental health services, particularly trauma-informed care, remain underutilized, as evidenced by public opinion data presented in Table 3.

Region	Mental Health as a Leading Cause of Gun Violence (%)
Utica	48.00%
New Hartford	25.00%
Other Regions	32.82%

(Source: *Quality of Life Poll, 2024*)

Conclusion

The intergenerational transmission of violence and trauma is a fundamental driver of youth gun violence. The interplay between behavioral modeling, epigenetic changes, and socioeconomic stressors perpetuates a cycle that is difficult to break without targeted intervention. The data and local testimonies presented in this paper highlight the urgency of expanding trauma-informed care, increasing funding for preventive programs, and fostering community awareness to address the root causes of violence. Only through comprehensive and sustained efforts can we hope to break the cycle of violence and create a safer future for Utica's youth.

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Chapter 2. Family and Psychological Development

Part B. Best Practices

A Multi-Dimensional Approach

Youth gun violence presents a complex public health and social challenge requiring a combination of early childhood interventions, trauma-informed care, and community-based mentoring programs. The research analyzed offers insights into different methodologies that address this pervasive issue from multiple angles. Each of these approaches contributes to a holistic framework that can inform effective interventions in Utica and beyond.

Community Health Interventions and Mentoring-Based Solutions

A central theme emerging from the research is the effectiveness of community-based interventions in preventing youth violence. Mentorship programs, particularly those involving credible messengers, have been found to provide an essential support system for at-risk youth. These initiatives align with evidence suggesting that sustained mentorship can reduce delinquency rates and improve educational outcomes. The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) defines mentorship as a structured relationship between an adult or older peer and youth, designed to build resilience and reduce antisocial behaviors (OJJDP, n.d.).

Studies indicate that the success of these programs is contingent on careful mentor-mentee matching and sustained engagement. Crime Solutions, an evidence-based initiative evaluating justice interventions, reports that mentorship programs have a statistically significant effect on reducing delinquent behavior and improving academic performance (Raposa et al., 2019). Furthermore, credible messenger programs—where mentors share lived experiences with at-risk youth—show promise in increasing program adherence and long-term success rates (Martinez et al., 2022).

A challenge for these initiatives is evaluation. Traditional metrics, such as recidivism rates, do not always capture the full impact of mentorship. Holistic assessments incorporating school attendance, employment, and psychological well-being may provide a more accurate measure of

success. Expanding evaluation frameworks to include these factors can enhance the sustainability and effectiveness of community-based mentoring efforts.

Trauma-Informed Care as a Preventative Strategy

Another key aspect of youth gun violence prevention is addressing trauma and its intergenerational effects. Research highlights the importance of trauma-informed care (TIC) in mitigating the behavioral and psychological patterns that contribute to violent behavior. Studies on the long-term impact of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) indicate that exposure to trauma significantly increases the likelihood of engaging in violent acts later in life (Felitti et al., 1998).

Several trauma-informed models have demonstrated effectiveness. The Greater Newark Healthcare Coalition integrates trauma screening and intervention within school and healthcare settings, identifying at-risk individuals early and providing targeted mental health services (GNHCC, n.d.). Similarly, Montefiore Medical Group has expanded ACEs screening from infancy through adolescence, ensuring comprehensive mental health support for children in underserved areas (Montefiore Medical Group, n.d.).

One successful policing initiative, implemented in Colonie, New York, utilizes data-driven mental health tracking to provide officers with information about individuals' trauma histories. This enables law enforcement to engage in de-escalation strategies rather than relying on force (Fitzsimmons, 2024). Given that trauma-related behavioral responses often lead to negative encounters with authorities, embedding TIC principles into police training could reduce violent interactions and improve community relations.

A primary barrier to expanding trauma-informed interventions is consistency in application. While some healthcare providers and social workers in Utica have received TIC training, interviews with professionals reveal gaps in implementation. Establishing standardized, mandatory training and reinforcing these practices through annual refreshers would improve consistency and effectiveness.

Early Childhood Development and Violence Prevention

Research strongly supports early childhood education as a preventative measure against later involvement in violence. Expanding pre-kindergarten programs using a community school model is one proposed solution, given that early interventions have been linked to long-term reductions

in crime rates. A National Bureau of Economic Research study found that a 10% increase in early education funding correlates with a 15% reduction in adult arrests (Baron, 2022).

Universal pre-kindergarten (UPK) programs, when integrated with wraparound services, create a structured support system for young children. The Learning Policy Institute (2017) outlines four key components essential to community school models: integrated student supports, expanded learning time, family and community engagement, and collaborative leadership. Programs incorporating these pillars have demonstrated significant reductions in later violent behavior (Bishop, 2021).

One significant barrier to accessing early childhood programs in Utica is transportation. Many families in lower-income neighborhoods lack reliable access to pre-K education due to logistical challenges. Addressing this issue through targeted funding for transportation services would increase participation and ensure that at-risk children benefit from structured early learning environments (Domingue, 2024).

Another issue is the gender disparity in early education staffing. Research indicates that male role models in early childhood education contribute to improved emotional regulation in boys and decrease aggressive behavior (Hurd, 2009). Implementing mentorship programs that involve high school or college students as assistants in pre-K classrooms could help address this imbalance and provide young children with diverse role models.

Tables and Data Analysis

The following table summarizes key program interventions and their projected impact.

Intervention Type	Target Population	Key Benefits	Challenges
Mentorship Programs (Credible Messengers)	At-risk youth	Reduces delinquency, improves academics	Lack of comprehensive evaluation
Trauma-Informed Care	Youth with ACEs	Improves behavioral responses, reduces recidivism	Funding, inconsistent application
Early Childhood Education (UPK)	Preschool-age children	Reduces future criminality, improves emotional regulation	Lack of transportation, staff shortages

Conclusion and Recommendations

A multi-layered approach is necessary to address youth gun violence effectively. Community mentoring programs, particularly those involving credible messengers, offer a promising strategy

for engagement. Trauma-informed healthcare and law enforcement training can mitigate the psychological and behavioral consequences of early trauma. Expanding early education through community schools provides long-term preventative benefits. However, challenges such as inconsistent evaluation metrics, resource constraints, and accessibility barriers must be addressed to maximize impact. Future research should focus on longitudinal studies assessing the sustained effects of these interventions.

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Chapter 3. School Environment

Part A. Causes and Context

The Role of School Resource Officers

Ensuring the safety of students has become a central concern in school districts across the country. As incidents of violence increase, school administrators and policymakers have sought solutions to maintain order and provide a secure environment. One widely implemented measure is the deployment of School Resource Officers, who are usually either active-duty or retired law enforcement personnel permanently assigned to schools (Avila-Acosta et al., 2023). Their role extends beyond law enforcement, incorporating mentorship and conflict resolution. However, studies on the effectiveness of School Resource Officers have produced mixed results. Some findings suggest that their presence deters violence and improves school climate, while others indicate that they contribute to the criminalization of student behavior (James & McCallion, 2013). The challenge of evaluating these programs is compounded by inconsistent data collection, as many school districts do not comprehensively track the impact or cost of School Resource Officers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023).

Exclusionary Discipline and Its Impacts

Harsh disciplinary policies, such as suspensions and expulsions, disproportionately affect students from marginalized backgrounds. Data consistently show that Black and Hispanic students, as well as students with disabilities, are disciplined at significantly higher rates than their peers (Krause et al., 2024). These punitive measures not only disrupt students' education but also increase the likelihood of future interactions with the criminal justice system, a phenomenon known as the school-to-prison pipeline (Counts et al., 2023). In the Utica City School District, the application of zero-tolerance policies has resulted in a surge in suspension rates, exceeding state averages and leaving many students disengaged from learning. The connection between unstructured time due to suspensions and increased youth criminal activity is well-documented, raising concerns about the long-term consequences of exclusionary discipline (ProPublica Miseducation, 2018; NYSED, 2024).

The Historical Development of School Resource Officers

The incorporation of law enforcement into educational settings has evolved significantly over time. The initial goal of School Resource Officers in the 1950s was to foster positive relationships between law enforcement and young people during a period of racial and social tension (The American Bar Association, 2023). However, as concerns over school safety intensified in the 1990s following high-profile incidents like the Columbine High School shooting, the federal government increased funding for School Resource Officers through initiatives such as the Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act of 1994 and the COPS in Schools program (Mbekeani-Wiley, 2017). While federal funding decreased in the mid-2000s, state and local governments continued to allocate substantial resources to maintain these programs, with annual spending exceeding two billion dollars (Avila-Acosta et al., 2023). Despite these investments, the lack of uniform training and oversight has resulted in inconsistent outcomes across school districts (Williams et al., 2022).

Training and Policy Standards for School Resource Officers

The effectiveness of School Resource Officers largely depends on the training they receive. While some states mandate specialized training for officers assigned to schools, others provide little to no guidance. In 2018, New York State introduced legislation requiring school districts to develop safety plans, and in 2023, additional measures were enacted to establish clearer guidelines for school-based law enforcement (NY Educ L § 2801-A, 2023). Despite these developments, there is still no statewide requirement for de-escalation training, trauma-informed policing, or crisis intervention techniques related to adolescent mental health (Thurau et al., 2019). The National Association of School Resource Officers offers a voluntary 40-hour certification program covering legal considerations and conflict resolution, but participation in this training remains optional (Counts et al., 2023). In Utica, law enforcement officials report that some officers undergo training, but the level of consistency in preparation remains uncertain (Noonan, 2024).

Memorandums of Understanding and School Policing Agreements

School districts often formalize their relationships with law enforcement agencies through Memorandums of Understanding, which outline the responsibilities and limitations of School Resource Officers. These agreements aim to prevent officers from becoming entangled in routine disciplinary matters, reserving their intervention for serious safety threats (Williams et al., 2022). In New York, state law mandates that such agreements align with school codes of conduct, yet

enforcement of these provisions remains weak. In Utica, the Memorandum of Understanding primarily focuses on financial arrangements rather than operational protocols, leading to ambiguity in how officers should interact with students and school administrators (Siriano, 2024).

Challenges with School Resource Officers in Utica

The implementation of the School Resource Officer program in Utica presents several challenges. Unlike some districts that assign permanent officers to schools, Utica relies on a model where police officers volunteer for overtime shifts, creating a revolving door of personnel (Siriano, 2024). This instability prevents officers from building long-term relationships with students, reducing their effectiveness as mentors and problem-solvers. Research suggests that in schools where officers have established trust with students over multiple years, there are fewer disciplinary referrals and a greater willingness among students to report safety concerns (Canady, 2021). In contrast, the lack of continuity in Utica's program undermines these potential benefits and hinders proactive conflict resolution efforts (Finn et al., 2005).

The Utica City School District Disciplinary Framework

The Utica City School District follows a structured system for classifying student infractions.

- Level 1 category includes minor infractions such as classroom disruptions, insubordination, and minor instances of disrespect. These behaviors typically result in warnings, lunch detentions, or in-school suspensions.
- Level 2 infractions are more serious and include bullying, vandalism, and repeated disruptive behavior. These incidents may lead to more extended suspensions or required parental intervention.
- Level 3 violations involve severe misconduct, such as possession of weapons, acts of violence, and drug-related offenses.

These infractions trigger immediate law enforcement involvement and potential expulsion. The district enforces a mandatory one-year suspension policy for students found with weapons on campus (Utica City School District et al., 2024). Although intended to maintain safety, these policies have disproportionately impacted Black and Hispanic students, raising concerns about racial disparities in school discipline (ProPublica Miseducation, 2018).

Future Directions for School Safety and Reform

Despite significant investments in school safety initiatives, challenges remain in addressing youth violence effectively. The lack of uniform training for School Resource Officers, inconsistencies in enforcement, and ambiguity in their roles undermine the effectiveness of these programs (Williams et al., 2022). Additionally, exclusionary discipline policies continue to push marginalized students out of the educational system and into the criminal justice system (Weaver & Swank, 2020). Moving forward, school districts must explore alternative approaches such as restorative justice, which emphasizes conflict resolution and accountability rather than punitive measures. Expanding access to mental health resources and fostering stronger partnerships between schools and community organizations will also be critical in promoting a safe and supportive educational environment (Adukia et al., 2023). By shifting toward a more holistic model of school safety, educators and policymakers can work toward reducing violence while ensuring that students receive the support they need to thrive.

School Enforcement and Discipline Best Practices

Utica faces significant challenges related to youth violence, but strategic changes within the Utica City School District can enhance community trust, lower crime rates, and create better educational outcomes (Rudge, 2024). When school resource officers act as mentors, studies suggest that community-police relations improve, safety increases, and students develop a greater sense of trust (Finn et al., 2005a, p.255). Assigning permanent officers fosters relationships, allowing them to recognize and address safety concerns before conflicts escalate (Siriano, 2024).

Suspension and expulsion policies often lead to adverse outcomes for students, including mental health struggles, a higher likelihood of criminal behavior, and disengagement from education (Krause et al., 2024, p. 69-70). Minority students face disproportionate disciplinary action, which further exacerbates systemic inequalities (ProPublica Miseducation, 2018). Alternatives such as restorative justice and vocational training can offer students meaningful pathways to success, reducing crime rates and fostering positive school environments (Steinberg & Lacoë, 2017, p. 49).

School Resource Officers and Training

Currently, Utica employs school protection officers and school resource officers. School protection officers primarily focus on perimeter checks and surveillance to address external threats (Siriano, 2024). In contrast, school resource officers work within the schools but do not consistently receive specialized training in juvenile policing. These officers volunteer for shifts, leading to frequent turnover and a lack of sustained relationships with students and faculty (Finn et al., 2005b, p.7).

Training requirements for school resource officers in New York State remain inconsistent. Future legislation may mandate comprehensive training in areas such as adolescent mental health, conflict resolution, and trauma-informed care (State Of New York Police Juvenile Officers Association, Inc., 2024). Implementing these measures in Utica preemptively would ensure better preparedness and improved relationships between officers and students (Noonan, 2024).

Strengthening School Safety through Permanent Officers

Building trust with students requires consistent and reliable interactions (Canady, 2021, p.6). When school resource officers remain in their positions long-term, they can serve as mentors, intervene in conflicts before they escalate, and provide students with a sense of security (Finn et al., 2005a, p.255). Officers selected for these roles should have prior experience working with youth and demonstrate strong communication skills (Siriano, 2024). Encouraging more officers to take on these roles can be achieved by offering benefits such as stable schedules and professional development opportunities (Finn et al., 2005b, p.4).

Programs across the country have demonstrated that when officers engage with students beyond their traditional policing duties, they create an environment where students feel comfortable reporting concerns (Williams et al., 2024). By participating in school activities and maintaining a presence in classrooms, officers can prevent incidents before they occur (Finn et al., 2005a, p.363-368). Establishing physical office spaces within schools for officers to meet with students privately would further support relationship-building efforts (Siriano, 2024).

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Chapter 3. School Environment

Part B. Best Practices

Defining Roles through Memorandums of Understanding

To avoid confusion and potential conflicts, the responsibilities of school resource officers should be clearly defined (Finn et al., 2005b, p.362). Memorandums of understanding between law enforcement agencies and school districts should delineate the distinction between disciplinary actions handled by school administrators and those that require law enforcement involvement (Williams et al., 2022, p.8-10). Without clear guidelines, officers may become overly involved in minor disciplinary matters, leading to the unnecessary criminalization of students (Siriano, 2024).

Reforming Discipline Practices through Restorative Justice

High suspension rates correlate with long-term negative outcomes for students (Krause et al., 2024, p. 69-70). Restorative justice approaches offer an alternative by emphasizing accountability, dialogue, and conflict resolution rather than punitive measures (Taylor, 2024). Schools that have adopted restorative justice models have seen reductions in suspension rates, improvements in student behavior, and higher graduation rates (Steinberg & Lacoë, 2017, p.50).

Chicago Public Schools successfully integrated restorative justice practices, leading to a decline in student arrests and disciplinary actions (Adukia et al., 2023). Similarly, the Ithaca School District reported improvements in school climate and attendance following the implementation of restorative practices (Taylor, 2024). The Utica City School District's current zero-tolerance policy for violent offenses results in an overuse of suspensions, disproportionately affecting Black students (Civil Rights Data Collection Office for Civil Rights, 2018). Shifting towards a restorative approach would keep more students engaged in their education while addressing underlying behavioral concerns (Weaver & Swank, 2020, p.6).

Addressing Threats and Risks in Schools

Threat assessment requires a collaborative effort between school staff, law enforcement, and community organizations (Franco, 2024). Utica's threat assessment team includes teachers, case

workers, and police officers, who work together to evaluate risks and implement intervention strategies (Seifert, 2011, p.212). The Safe School Mohawk Valley initiative provides valuable training in crisis intervention and conflict resolution, helping school personnel respond effectively to student safety concerns (Franco, 2024).

A comprehensive threat assessment process involves evaluating environmental factors, student behavior, and mental health history (Seifert, 2011, #237). Personalized safety plans should be developed for at-risk students, incorporating parental involvement and continuous monitoring to ensure positive outcomes (James Franco, personal communication, 11/21/2024).

Community Partnerships and Holistic Interventions

Collaboration between schools and community organizations strengthens student support systems (Griffith & Buck, n.d.). Programs such as SNUG, ICAN, and Hillside Work-Scholarship have demonstrated success in keeping students engaged and away from criminal activity (Patterson, 2024). These initiatives offer mentorship, educational assistance, and career readiness programs to help students navigate challenges both inside and outside the classroom (LeBlanc, n.d.).

In addition to mentorship programs, school-based mental health services should be expanded (Morton, n.d.). Providing students with access to counseling and social-emotional learning initiatives can address underlying issues that contribute to behavioral problems (Ye et al., 2023, p.1). Community organizations that offer after-school programs also play a crucial role in fostering safe and supportive environments for students (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007).

Moving Forward with Sustainable Solutions

The Utica City School District can create a safer and more supportive educational environment by implementing permanent school resource officers, expanding restorative justice practices, and strengthening community partnerships (Adukia et al., 2023). Clear guidelines for school safety officers, comprehensive training programs, and proactive interventions for at-risk students will contribute to long-term improvements in school climate and student outcomes (NYSED, 2024).

By prioritizing mentorship, alternative disciplinary strategies, and holistic support systems, Utica can address youth violence and ensure that students have the resources they need to succeed both in school and in their communities (Finn et al., 2005a, p.366).

Community and Youth Engagement

Enhancing Youth Employment Programs

Empirical research has consistently demonstrated the link between youth employment and reduced criminal activity. A study evaluating New York City’s Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP) found that participation reduced arrests among at-risk youth by 17% (Kessler et al., 2021). Utica’s SYEP currently serves approximately 400 young people annually, but expanding its eligibility criteria and improving job placements in industries that offer career advancement potential could significantly enhance its effectiveness (Oneida County, 2024).

Street Outreach and Conflict Mediation

The SNUG program, which operates under ICAN, follows a public health-based approach to violence interruption. Trained outreach workers engage with at-risk youth, mediate conflicts, and provide resources for education and employment (ICAN, 2024). However, evaluations of similar programs nationwide indicate that stronger goal-setting frameworks and expanded representation from diverse cultural backgrounds can enhance their success (Decker et al., 2008). Integrating SNUG with city-sponsored economic support programs would provide a more holistic intervention strategy.

School and Community Collaboration

Strengthening School-Based Interventions

While the Young Scholars Program is an effective initiative for academically promising students from marginalized backgrounds, it does not specifically target youth most at risk for criminal involvement (Young Scholars, 2024). Schools should integrate mentorship and alternative education models that support students with behavioral challenges. Oakland, CA’s community school model has successfully reduced suspension rates and increased educational attainment through in-school restorative justice programs (Oakland Unified School District, 2024). Utica could replicate this approach to reduce school-based exclusions and reengage students in positive academic and social environments.

Improving Access to Grants for Community Organizations

Many nonprofit organizations in Utica struggle to secure grant funding due to bureaucratic complexities. A partnership with local universities could provide grant-writing assistance, similar to Towson University's G.I.V.E. initiative, which connects students with small nonprofits in need of funding support (Towson University, 2024). This initiative could be adapted to leverage local academic institutions such as Hamilton College to support Utica's community organizations.

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Chapter 4. Criminal Justice Institutions

Introduction

Law enforcement strategies, community perception of crime, and systemic policies shape the effectiveness of interventions designed to curb violence. Research suggests that building trust between law enforcement and communities, implementing restorative justice practices, and considering the social determinants of violence can help address this crisis (Schuck, 2019).

Community and Law Enforcement Collaboration

The concept of co-production emphasizes shared responsibility between police and the community in addressing public safety concerns. This approach enhances police legitimacy, fostering greater public trust and cooperation (Schuck, 2019). The City of Utica has implemented initiatives aligning with this model, including the Community Outreach Team (COT), which aims to improve police-community relations by addressing neighborhood concerns through proactive engagement (City of Utica, 2020). Officers in this program participate in community events, speak at schools, and engage with residents to build long-term trust.

A pilot program, the Police-Community Trust Building Initiative, seeks to enhance dialogue between officers and residents. Funded by the Department of Criminal Justice Services, this initiative has shown initial improvements in individual officer trust, though skepticism about the institution remains (DCJS, 2024). Data from the 2024 Quality of Life Poll highlights disparities in perceptions of safety. While only 16% of Utica respondents felt "Very Safe" in their neighborhoods, that figure rose to 62.5% in nearby New Hartford, underscoring the need for trust-building measures (Hamilton College Levitt Center & Colgate University Upstate Institute, 2024).

Police Strategies and Community Perceptions

Law enforcement often employs hot-spot policing as a response to crime, a method that residents in high-violence areas frequently support. However, trust in government remains low among those who favor aggressive policing. Among respondents advocating for increased police presence, 26.6% reported no faith in the state government to manage crime effectively (Zogby,

2024). This paradox suggests that while residents desire safer neighborhoods, they remain skeptical of systemic approaches to law enforcement.

Research on police interactions with marginalized communities highlights significant disparities. Studies confirm that individuals from racial and ethnic minority groups are more likely to view law enforcement with suspicion (NIJ, 2013). A survey of Cornhill, a predominantly minority neighborhood in Utica, found that 60% of respondents did not trust the police, compared to 84% of white respondents in other parts of the city who rated police relations as excellent (Survey of Public Opinion and Experience of Law Enforcement, 2020).

The Impact of High-Profile Police Incidents

A major challenge to police-community trust arises from incidents involving excessive force. The fatal shooting by a police officer of a 13-year-old in Utica in June 2024 sparked protests and intensified local demands for accountability (Hutchinson, 2024). Following the incident, over 1,000 residents protested, demanding structural reforms (Caputo, 2024).

This distrust mirrors national trends. Research indicates that public willingness to call law enforcement declined significantly after high-profile cases of aggressive police response, particularly in communities of color (Brantingham et al., 2022). In Los Angeles, violent crime-related calls to police dropped after the murder of George Floyd, illustrating the extent of damaged trust in law enforcement institutions.

Youth Justice and the Effectiveness of Incarceration

The juvenile justice system faces scrutiny over its effectiveness in rehabilitating young offenders. Studies indicate that youth incarceration correlates with high recidivism rates. A 2011 study found that 70–80% of incarcerated youths were rearrested within three years of release (Mendel, 2011). In New York, 89% of males and 81% of females formerly incarcerated as youth faced adult arrests by age 28 (Colman et al., 2008).

The Raise the Age legislation, implemented in 2017, aimed to reduce youth incarceration by treating offenders under 18 differently within the justice system. While this policy has decreased youth placements in adult facilities, law enforcement officials argue that it has limited their ability to prosecute violent youth (Fletcher, 2024). Incarceration, rather than serving as a

deterrent, exacerbates social and economic disadvantages, increasing the likelihood of future offenses (Gilman et al., 2015).

Alternatives to Youth Incarceration

Several alternatives to incarceration have emerged, aiming to prevent recidivism through community-based interventions. Oneida County's Teen Accountability Court (TAC) offers intensive probation supervision, cognitive behavioral intervention, and mentorship programs to divert youth from detention (Fletcher, 2024). Research suggests that alternative sentencing programs significantly reduce re-incarceration rates, with studies showing that high-risk youth receiving community-based interventions were one-third as likely to be incarcerated again (Latessa et al., 2014).

Other programs focus on early intervention. Rebuilding the Village, a community initiative in Utica, provides mentorship and educational support for at-risk youth, creating a structured environment that discourages gang involvement (Hamilton, 2024). Voices for the Voiceless, a nonprofit initiative led by formerly incarcerated individuals, seeks to assist youth in detention by preparing them for reintegration into society (Lucas, 2024).

Addressing Racial Disparities in Juvenile Justice

Racial disparities in the juvenile justice system remain a persistent issue. National data reveals that Black youth are six times more likely to be incarcerated than their white counterparts (Sickmund, 2022). A survey in Oneida and Herkimer Counties found that 53% of respondents believed race influenced court outcomes, with Black and Latino youth facing significantly harsher penalties than their white peers (Spinney, 2018).

Diversifying law enforcement agencies has shown promise in reducing disparities. A study of the Chicago Police Department found that Black and Hispanic officers made fewer stops and arrests of Black civilians and used force less frequently than their white counterparts (Ba et al., 2021). Female officers, regardless of race, also demonstrated significantly lower use of force, indicating that gender diversity plays a role in reshaping police practices.

Conclusion

Addressing youth gun violence requires a multifaceted approach that incorporates law enforcement reform, community-based initiatives, and policy changes. Trust in police remains a

critical factor in public safety, with co-production models offering a path toward improved relationships. Reducing youth incarceration and emphasizing rehabilitative approaches can help break cycles of violence while addressing systemic racial disparities. Community programs and alternative sentencing models provide promising solutions to prevent youth from entering the criminal justice system, fostering safer and more equitable communities.

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Chapter 4. Criminal Justice Institutions

Part B. Best Practices

Introduction

The traditional system of youth incarceration and probation in the United States has long been debated regarding its effectiveness in mitigating youth gun violence. Numerous studies highlight that incarcerating young offenders often results in higher recidivism rates, rather than rehabilitating them to be productive members of society. Youth who are incarcerated often struggle with future employment prospects, face greater risks of engaging in violent behavior upon release, and experience severe psychological and emotional distress that further entrenches them in a cycle of criminal activity (Ackerman et al., 2024; Garin et al., 2024; Hosie et al., 2024). Additionally, prolonged incarceration often exposes youth to hardened criminals, leading to further criminal socialization rather than deterrence.

Despite these scholarly insights, public perception often leans toward the necessity of harsher punitive measures. A significant portion of the community, particularly in Central New York, perceives strict sentencing and tough-on-crime policies as the only viable solution to combat rising crime rates. This belief is partially supported by deterrence theory, which suggests that the fear of punishment may prevent potential offenders from engaging in criminal activity. According to the Quality of Life Poll conducted in 2024, a majority of residents in the Mohawk Valley region support stricter enforcement and believe that youth offenders receive lenient punishments, ultimately leading to re-offenses.

Local law enforcement officials have publicly criticized current legislation, particularly the Raise the Age initiative, which they believe has resulted in inadequate consequences for youth offenders. Under these reforms, many youth offenders are either placed under probation supervision or sent back into their communities with minimal intervention, failing to provide sufficient deterrents or rehabilitative measures (Carville, 2024). Addressing youth gun violence, therefore, requires a nuanced approach that balances the evidence-based benefits of rehabilitation with the deterrent effects that the community and local officials deem necessary.

Past and Current Practices in Utica

Utica has historically utilized several intervention strategies to curb youth gun violence, including structured call-ins where known offenders were summoned to community meetings. These call-ins brought together law enforcement officials, social workers, business leaders, and community representatives, who collectively issued stern warnings while simultaneously providing opportunities for rehabilitation through vocational training and mental health support. However, multiple factors have led to the decline of this practice, including recent legislative changes that limit the enforceability of such mandates, a decline in public trust in law enforcement, and logistical constraints that make organizing these interventions increasingly difficult (Curley, 2024).

As an alternative, Utica has turned to a custom notification letter system, wherein high-risk individuals identified through an objective point-based assessment receive official warnings and information on support services. These letters are hand-delivered by credible messengers, such as individuals with previous criminal records who have successfully reformed. The effectiveness of these letters is still being evaluated, but initial reports suggest that only about 20% of recipients engage with the offered resources, limiting their overall impact (Fernald, 2024).

Teen Accountability Court (TAC) is currently one of the most structured rehabilitative initiatives available for high-risk youth offenders in Oneida County. This program serves as an alternative to incarceration, allowing young offenders to enter a closely monitored environment where they receive GPS tracking, frequent court check-ins, and behavioral intervention programs. Since its launch, TAC has been associated with a noticeable reduction in youth gun violence, but its resource-intensive nature prevents widespread participation. Judge Randal Caldwell and Senior Probation Officer Jim Sodja have noted that expanding TAC's reach is beneficial but requires significant additional funding and administrative support (Sodja, 2024).

Best Practices in Other Jurisdictions

Several cities have implemented innovative strategies to combat youth gun violence that Utica can model. One of the most notable programs is Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN) in Tampa, Florida. This initiative uses a meticulous, evidence-based risk assessment model to identify individuals most likely to engage in gun-related crimes. The identified individuals receive focused deterrence messaging, warning them of strict legal consequences while offering alternatives through education, job training, and mental health services. The collaboration

between law enforcement agencies and academic researchers has ensured ongoing evaluation, making it one of the most data-driven initiatives in the country (Fox et al., 2021).

Another successful model is Monroe County's Swift, Certain, and Fair (SCF) Program. Unlike traditional probation models that involve inconsistent enforcement of consequences, SCF emphasizes immediate responses to probation violations. Participants receive clear guidelines on expected behavior, and violations result in swift but proportionate consequences, such as short-term confinement or increased supervision. In addition to punitive measures, the program provides extensive cognitive behavioral therapy, vocational training, and mentorship programs. SCF's results indicate lower recidivism rates and better overall outcomes for participants compared to standard probation models (DCJS Knowledge Bank, 2024).

Recommendations for Utica

Given the successes of these programs, Utica should prioritize reviving and enhancing its structured call-in system. Unlike the previous call-ins, the revitalized model should incorporate an intensive follow-up mechanism, ensuring that participants engage with available resources. In addition to providing information about vocational training and counseling, call-ins should integrate structured mentorship programs, where at-risk youth receive continuous guidance from credible messengers who have successfully reformed their lives.

Another crucial recommendation is the expansion of Teen Accountability Court. By securing additional funding and leveraging public-private partnerships, Oneida County could increase the capacity of TAC, allowing more youth offenders to participate in structured rehabilitation. Incorporating elements of Monroe County's SCF model, such as immediate and proportionate consequences for program violations, would further enhance TAC's effectiveness.

The city should also invest in an enhanced data collection system to measure the success of various interventions. Partnering with local universities to conduct comprehensive evaluations of current programs would provide a clearer understanding of which strategies yield the best outcomes. Metrics should include recidivism rates, employment outcomes for former offenders, and the extent of participant engagement with support services.

Implementation Considerations

The feasibility of these initiatives depends on several factors, including funding, community engagement, and political will. Revitalizing call-ins would require logistical coordination between law enforcement agencies, community organizations, and local businesses willing to offer employment opportunities. One way to ensure sustainability is to create incentives for businesses that participate, such as tax breaks or grant opportunities.

TAC's expansion hinges on securing additional state or federal funding. Engaging in advocacy efforts to highlight the program's success and the need for further investment could encourage policymakers to allocate more resources. Additionally, increasing awareness about TAC's benefits among the public and officials may generate greater community support.

By implementing these recommendations, Utica has the opportunity to significantly reduce youth gun violence while addressing the concerns of both policymakers and the general public. A balanced approach that integrates rehabilitation with targeted deterrence can create a safer, more resilient community.

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Chapter 5. Guns

Part A. Causes and Context

Ghost Guns, The Iron Pipeline, and Youth Gun Violence: A Comprehensive Analysis

Introduction

While New York enforces some of the strictest gun laws in the nation (Giffords Law Center, 2024), illegal firearm possession among minors remains a significant concern. This paper examines three major aspects of youth gun access: ghost guns, the Iron Pipeline, and unregulated gun transactions, using data and findings from Utica, New York, and broader national trends.

The Rise of Ghost Guns

Ghost guns are untraceable firearms lacking serial numbers, often assembled from kits purchased online or manufactured using 3D printing technology (Simons, 2021). These weapons circumvent traditional gun control measures, making them attractive to criminals (Crump, 2023). Notably, ghost guns are disproportionately prevalent in states with stricter firearm regulations, such as California and New York, where legal gun access is more restricted (Maripuu, 2024).

The popularity of ghost guns has risen sharply. In 2019, the ATF recovered 10,000 ghost guns, representing a growing share of total firearm seizures (Wintemute, 2021). By 2021, this number had increased to nearly 20,000 (Whitehurst, 2024). The ATF's ability to regulate gun kits has been challenged in court, with ongoing legal battles, such as *VanDerStok v. Garland* (2024), influencing regulatory enforcement (VanSickle, 2024). In New York, the Biegel Unfinished Receiver Act and the Webster Untraceable Firearms Act criminalized the possession and distribution of unserialized firearms (Giffords Law Center, 2024), yet the proliferation of ghost guns persists.

The Iron Pipeline: Interstate Firearms Trafficking

The "Iron Pipeline" refers to the illegal movement of firearms from states with lenient gun laws, such as Georgia and Florida, to states with strict regulations like New York and Illinois (Braga, 2017). Criminal networks exploit the relatively easy access to firearms in these states, reselling them in urban centers at a markup (ATF, 2022).

Unlike illegal drug markets, firearm trafficking typically involves smaller transactions, often conducted among family and friends (Koper & Reuter, 1996). Firearms remain durable commodities that can be used or resold multiple times, complicating law enforcement efforts.

Stolen firearms also contribute significantly to illegal gun availability, with many being reported as "lost" by initial purchasers to avoid detection (Grosser, personal communication, 2024). A significant proportion of crime guns recovered in New York were originally purchased out of state, demonstrating the extent of this illicit network (ATF, 2024).

Unregulated Gun Transactions and Possession Among Youth

Youth gun possession is largely facilitated through private sales, straw purchasing, and theft (ATF, 2018). A review of 8,373 ATF investigations found that unlicensed dealers accounted for 40.7% of illegal firearm sales, with straw purchasers comprising 39.5% (ATF, 2024).

Sociological research highlights that youth often acquire guns not through direct purchases but via social networks. Nearly 48% of incarcerated youth surveyed stated that their first gun was given to them or found (Webster, 2002). Once they entered criminal networks, 86% obtained firearms through direct purchases or trades. This pattern aligns with Anderson's "code of the street," where respect and protection drive gun possession (Anderson, 1999). Guns are often seen as a means of asserting dominance, resolving disputes, and ensuring personal safety.

In Utica, an increase in unregulated firearm transactions has raised local concerns. A 2024 police investigation resulted in the seizure of 10 firearms linked to trafficking networks (Keeler, 2024). Furthermore, communal firearms—shared within groups and hidden in public places—pose a unique challenge, as they enable youth to access weapons without direct ownership (Grosser, personal communication, 2024).

Survey Results and Public Perceptions Recent survey data from the "Quality of Life in Central New York and the Mohawk Valley" project offers insight into local attitudes toward gun laws and youth violence.

Perceived Frequency of Youth Carrying Guns	Very Common	Somewhat Common	Not Too Common	Not Common at All	Not Sure	Sample Size
New Hartford	37.5%	50.0%	0.0%	0.0%	12.5%	8
East Utica	28.0%	44.0%	4.0%	0.0%	24.0%	25
West Utica	17.6%	50.0%	8.8%	5.9%	17.6%	34

These responses indicate a general perception that youth firearm possession is prevalent, with the highest concerns emerging in lower-income communities (Spectrum News Staff, 2023).

Additionally, a significant number of respondents across political affiliations supported stricter penalties for illegal firearm transactions (Pew Research Center, 2024).

Conclusion The proliferation of ghost guns, the persistence of the Iron Pipeline, and the accessibility of illegal firearms through unregulated transactions contribute to the ongoing issue of youth gun violence. While legislative efforts have made strides in limiting legal access to firearms, the demand for illegal guns remains strong, particularly among vulnerable youth populations.

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Chapter 5. Guns

Part B. Best Practices

Introduction

Policy solutions to the availability of guns to underage members of the community must balance enforcement, community interventions, and preventive measures to curb the spread of illicit firearms and mitigate their impact on public safety.

The Rise of Ghost Guns

Ghost guns, which are untraceable and assembled from kits, have proliferated in New York State despite strict regulations. New York's Biegel Unfinished Receiver Act and Webster Untraceable Firearms Act restrict access to unserialized frames and receivers, making it illegal to ship gun kits into the state. However, loopholes such as the unregulated "80 percent lowers" allow individuals to manufacture guns with minimal equipment. The increasing presence of 3D-printed firearms further complicates enforcement, as they are easy to produce and difficult to regulate (Halpern, 2023). Efforts to monitor 3D printer sales may be infeasible due to legal constraints.

Enforcement Strategies

Given the challenges in regulating ghost guns, law enforcement strategies must evolve. Officers should be trained to recognize ghost guns and 3D-printed firearms, similar to how they adapted to detecting meth labs in the 1990s. Data from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF) indicates a rise in seized ghost guns, with over one-seventh of Utica Police Department (UPD) firearm seizures in 2024 being ghost guns.

One effective approach involves leveraging National Integrated Ballistic Information Network (NIBIN) technology to trace shell casings and link firearms to crimes. Additionally, coordinating with federal agencies, such as the ATF, can provide resources and funding for more efficient gun

law enforcement (Kennedy et al., 2001). A focus on targeting suppliers rather than individual offenders aligns with the Pareto principle, which suggests that a small number of actors contribute disproportionately to gun trafficking.

The Impact of Raise the Age Legislation

The 2018 Raise the Age legislation in New York altered how older teens interact with the justice system, preventing them from being detained overnight for gun possession. This has created loopholes wherein adult offenders use teenagers to hold illegal firearms, as they are less likely to face severe consequences (New York Criminal Procedure Law, 2024). Law enforcement officials and district attorneys advocate for stricter accountability for juveniles caught with illegal firearms, such as ensuring that 16- to 17-year-olds charged with felony handgun possession remain in the youth part of the superior court rather than being diverted to family court (Halpern, 2023).

Gun Trafficking and the Iron Pipeline

Utica faces challenges due to the "Iron Pipeline," the network through which firearms are trafficked from states with lax gun laws, such as Georgia and Virginia, into New York. According to Everytown for Gun Safety (2024), firearms smuggled via this route supply a significant portion of illegal guns used in crimes in Utica. Strengthening firearm tracing efforts through ATF's eTrace program and increasing collaboration between local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies can mitigate the influx of illegal guns (Brenan, 2024).

Microstamping as a Preventative Measure

Microstamping technology, which engraves unique identifiers onto bullet casings when a firearm is discharged, could enhance gun tracking efforts. Though New York passed legislation in 2022 to investigate the feasibility of microstamping, implementation has been slow due to resistance from gun manufacturers and concerns over technological limitations (Brownlee, 2023). New Jersey has introduced rebates for purchasing microstamped firearms, which could serve as a model for New York.

Community-Based Solutions

Programs like Gun Involved Violence Elimination (GIVE) and SNUG utilize community outreach to reduce youth gun violence. GIVE employs "credible messengers"—former offenders

turned mentors—to engage at-risk youth, providing them with alternatives to crime (Patterson, 2024). Unlike GIVE, SNUG does not share information with law enforcement, which limits its role in directly disrupting gun trafficking networks.

Faith-based organizations and restorative justice programs also play a crucial role in addressing gun violence. Clergy members can mediate conflicts and provide moral guidance, while restorative justice programs focus on rehabilitation rather than punishment, reducing recidivism rates (Siddiqi & Fleisher, 2021). Additionally, mental health services should be expanded to address the trauma experienced by those affected by gun violence.

Conclusion

While legislative measures against ghost guns and increased enforcement strategies are critical, community outreach, gun tracking enhancements, and policy reforms targeting juvenile offenders must also be prioritized. Law enforcement must focus on disrupting the supply chain of illegal firearms, while community leaders work to prevent at-risk youth from engaging in gun-related crimes. Only through a combination of these efforts can Utica mitigate youth gun violence and create a safer future for its residents.

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