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Single Mothers' Perceptions of Police Encounters and Effectiveness Related to Youth Gun Violence

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Abstract

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by

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MA, Boston University, 2009

BS, State University of New York at New Paltz, 2005

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

Single mothers and their children residing in high-crime communities (HCCs) in the United States are disproportionately exposed to crime, and therefore, the criminal justice system. Specific challenges of single motherhood in HCCs compound the link between juvenile offending and single-female-headed households. Little is known, however, about how single mothers in HCCs perceive and use the police as a resource to help prevent juvenile offending, specifically gun violence. The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of single mothers with police as they related to the arrest of their children for a gun crime. The research questions focused on understanding how single mothers in HCCs currently perceive the police in terms of effectiveness in preventing youth gun violence, if they currently use the police as part of a prevention strategy, and, if so, how they engage with the police. The theoretical base for this study was Husserl's transcendental phenomenological theory. Snowball sampling was used to identify 7 participants for individual interviews. Data from the interviews were coded and categorized for thematic analysis. Eleven themes emerged from the data analysis which highlighted the importance of officer demeanor and trust-building abilities. Findings also suggested that single mothers in HCCs should be regarded by police agencies as critical portals of information regarding youth gun crime. Study findings may be used to inform law enforcement policy makers of best practices for collaborating with single mothers in HCCs to prevent youth gun violence. Implementing these practices can help reduce the loss of life as a result of youth gun violence and reduce the number of youths arrested for gun crimes annually.

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Dedication

In honor of Tanya, Dee, Suzanne, Isabelle, Shaquannah, Holiday, and Tasha.

Thank you for your stories. Thank you for your wisdom.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The rationale for this study is based on the prevalence of youth gun violence in American society. The high incidence of youth arrested for gun-related crimes who reside in a single female-headed household highlighted a gap in the literature on youth gun violence from the perspective of single mothers. Exploring this issue from the perspective of single mothers can improve youth gun violence prevention strategies employed by community stakeholders, reduce the number of youth arrested for gun-related crimes, and prevent the loss of life from gun violence.

Background

Researchers show a link between juvenile offending and being raised in single-female-headed households. In low-income high-crime communities (HCCs), single mothers are often faced with a lack of resources and community support in their child-rearing efforts. As a consequence, youths from single-female-headed households are often disproportionately exposed to police and the justice system in comparison with their peers in middle- and upper-income, low-crime communities (Bell, 2016). Single mothers regularly interact with the police when officers become involved with youths from HCCs who have offended. Yet, little is known about the experiences and perceptions of single mothers who have interacted with police concerning their child's offending. This dearth of knowledge extends to instances in which these interactions take place concerning serious crimes, specifically gun crimes. Given the regularity with which police officers and single mothers interact in HCCs, and because the two groups can be viewed as stakeholders in efforts to mitigate youth gun violence in these communities, capturing the

experiences and perceptions of single mothers toward the police is valuable. With this

knowledge, police agencies and policy makers may be able to improve collaboration

efforts with single mothers while exploring new methods of youth gun crime prevention.

Problem Statement

Single mothers and their children residing in HCCs are disproportionately

exposed to crime and the criminal justice system. Research indicates a link between

households headed by single mothers in low-income HCCs and the number of youths

who become juvenile offenders (Singh & Kiran, 2014; Sogar, 2017). Researchers have

also found that living in a single-parent household and residing in an HCC are risk factors

for youth participation in a serious violent crime (Shetgiri, Boots, Lin, & Cheng, 2016).

These associations have resulted in low-income mothers and children from this

demographic being disproportionately exposed to the criminal justice system (Bell,

2016). According to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (2018),

one third of 16-24-year-olds are living in poverty, come from single-parent homes, and

are more likely to offend or become a victim of a crime. Some factors that contribute to

youth participation in violent crime include lack of youth supervision and monitoring

abilities while the mother is working (Calhoun, Glaser, Peiper, & Carr, 2015; Haegerich,

Oman, Vesely, Aspy, & Tolma, 2013; Sogar, 2017), lack of social and institutional

supports in the community (Sogar, 2017; Wong, 2017), and cynicism of social

institutions, particularly legal systems (Bell, 2016).

The literature reviewed for this study indicates that researchers have investigated

the problem of youth participation in serious violent crimes by scrutinizing policies and

legal systems that impact single mothers. These systems include incarceration rates of disadvantaged males (Turney, 2017), welfare reform (Gonzalez, et al., 2007; Pinderhughes, et al., 2001; Strom & McDonald, 2007), and living in high-crime environments (Hitchens & Payne, 2017). None of the literature reviewed included an exploration of the experiences of single mothers' interactions with police regarding children who were arrested for a gun-related crime. Dubisar (2018) addressed the lack of women's perspectives, specifically those of African American mothers, on this matter in academic and popular discourse. According to Dubisar, media and public officials attend to the plight of African American mothers only upon the loss of their children to gun violence.

In accordance with the tenets of feminist standpoint theory and the call for increased female contribution to knowledge production (Richardson, 2004), I conducted this study to provide a platform for single mothers to voice their experiences with police officers as they related to their child's involvement with a gun crime. I also sought to address the gap in the literature on youth gun crime prevention in HCCs. These data can be used by policy makers to formulate or change policies on how police departments engage with and assist single mothers to address the problem of youth gun violence in HCCs.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of single mothers with police as they relate to the arrest of their children for a gun crime. With this understanding, policy makers may be able to develop guidance on how police agencies

can better assist single mothers in mitigating youth gun violence in HCCs. I employed an individual interview method to explore how single mothers perceived their interactions with police on the issue of youth violence prevention. I also explored the perceptions of single mothers regarding how to work with police to prevent future youth gun violence in their communities.

Research Questions

Research Question 1: What is the experience of single mothers with children who were involved with gun crime toward the use and function of police on this issue?

Research Question 2: In what ways do single mothers believe police can improve their approach toward mitigating youth gun crimes in their community? Based upon their observations and experiences, what could be done differently?

Research Question 3: In what ways do single mothers believe police can collaborate with them as stakeholders in the fight against youth violence to improve prevention of youth involvement with gun violence?

Theoretical Foundation

The theoretical basis for this study was Husserl's transcendental phenomenology. This framework provides a philosophical approach to understanding human experiences by capturing and describing how people experience a phenomenon, thereby revealing the meaning and essence of the lived experience (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015). Transcendental phenomenology is grounded in the belief that knowledge and the essence of experience are gained through reflection on subjective acts and their objective outcomes (Husserl, 1975). According to Husserl, the only thing individuals know for

certain is what appears before them in their consciousness, and "that fact is a guarantee of its objectivity" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 57).

Transcendental phenomenology theory provided a framework through which to capture the lived experiences of single mothers related to their interactions with police regarding youth gun crime. In interviewing these mothers, I drew from the research methods framework for transcendental phenomenology that Moustakas (1994) developed based upon Husserl's seminal work. In this framework, the researcher avoids suppositions, approaches a specific topic freshly and naively, constructs a question to guide the study and, through bracketing and analysis of the data, draws findings that will guide further research (Moustakas, 1994). The perspectives of single mothers regarding their interactions with police is critical knowledge needed to address the social problem of youth gun violence in the United States. In Chapter 2, I review the literature on transcendental phenomenology to further illustrate how its major theoretical propositions aligned with this research.

Nature of the Study

The methodology of this study was qualitative. I conducted the study using individual phenomenological interviews of participants. The qualitative individual interview method aligned with the focus of this study: understanding how single mothers in HCCs perceived their experiences with police when their child was arrested for a gun crime. Phenomenological interviewing allows the researcher to capture the lived experiences of participants and examine how those experiences are similar and different (Patton, 2015).

I used a snowball sampling strategy to identify seven interview participants. Due to the sensitive nature of the research topic, accessing participants through formal institutions or criminal justice agencies presented ethical challenges in terms of gaining permission to share client data. Many of these challenges were alleviated by utilizing snowball sampling. In accordance with Patton's (2015) method, I identified key informants in the study community who were in contact with single mothers fitting the research criteria. Two sources of key informants were practitioners and service providers at several local agencies. Upon receiving referrals from professionals, I worked with agency liaisons to contact potential participants and invited them to participate in interviews. I then asked the participants if they could refer other single mothers who met the case criteria.

I selected cases using the following criteria: single mothers of youth released from probation or currently on probation and charged with a gun crime (i.e., possession of a weapon or unlawful use of a weapon). Choosing single mothers of juveniles currently on probation or released from probation ensured that all cases were adjudicated. Further, it narrowed the data sources to participant-specific choices. These choices were aligned with the research goals and questions of this study (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), the dependability of a study relies on the ability of the data to answer the research questions. By accessing single mothers through referrals from practitioners, I was able to maintain the dependability of the data and improve its rigor. I had certainty that the participants had similar experiences within the same juvenile justice processes in the Mid-Hudson Valley region of New York State.

I conducted the interviews in a comfortable, confidential setting. I structured the interviews using suggestions from Ravitch and Carl (2016), including being mindful of the participant's comfort and time, appropriately structuring questions, asking open-ended questions, and providing opportunities for the participant to clarify or add information. After the information from the interviews was transcribed and coded, it was analyzed for emerging themes. I present the themes that emerged from data analysis in Chapter 4. Single mothers are a vital, yet marginalized and understudied, stakeholder group connected to the issue of youth gun violence. Husserl's transcendental phenomenology theory provided an effective framework for studying the experiences of single mothers related to their interactions with police when their child was arrested for a gun crime.

Definitions

The following are terms used in this study and their definitions:

Gun crime: Any gun-related crime in the New York State Penal Code, Article 265.00, including

- criminal possession of a weapon,

- criminal possession of a weapon on school grounds,

- criminal possession of a firearm,

- unlawful possession of weapons by persons under 16,

- criminal use of a firearm, and

- criminal sale of a firearm.

Single mother: A female individual who is parenting or has parented a child/children as the primary caregiver.

Assumptions

Assumptions in this research included the belief that all participants shared the experiences of single motherhood and the arrest of a child for a gun crime. I further assumed that all participants would be honest and forthcoming in their responses on the questionnaires and throughout the interview process. Another assumption was that the sample group was representative of single mothers in HCCs in the Mid-Hudson Valley region of New York State. The final assumption was found within the phenomenological framework: The phenomenological approach assumes there is an essence to a shared experience (Patton, 2015). These assumptions were necessary in the context of this study to establish study participation criteria and to offer a framework so that the study can be replicated in other geographic regions in the future.

Scope and Delimitations

The specific aspects of the research problem that were addressed in this study included the link between juvenile offending and residing in single-female-headed households. Specifically, I examined the perceptions that single mothers had of their interactions with police regarding gun-related offenses for which their children were arrested. Focusing on single mothers' experiences addressed the gap in the literature on their voices and perceptions on youth gun violence and interacting with police.

I chose to limit this study to single mothers in the Hudson Valley, New York, area. I also limited the study to those single mothers who had the shared experience of

interacting with police when their child was arrested for a gun crime. The children of

participating mothers had to have cases that had been adjudicated. Therefore, this study

was limited to single mothers whose children were currently on probation, in a secure

juvenile facility, or who already served the terms of their correctional treatment.

Other limitations of this study arose during the data collection stage. I received a

telephone call from a single father who wished to participate in the study but had to

decline his request. Due to the population parameters of this study, single fathers and

nonsingle parents were barred from participation. Furthermore, all study participants

reported interactions with male police officers only. Therefore, this study does not

include data concerning single mothers interacting with female officers during the arrest

of a child for a gun crime. This study does have the potential to be replicated in other

HCCs experiencing youth gun crime to bolster the transferability of the findings.

<p align="center">**Limitations**</p>

Due to funding and time constraints, I had limited access to the population of

interest. Because the study took place in a small city in the Hudson Valley region of New

York State, the sample excluded single mothers from suburban or rural areas. The study

may have also excluded single mothers who had chosen not to partake in services offered

through local nonprofit agencies, as the snowball sampling method I employed began

with professionals serving this population. To address the geographical limitation of the

study, I provide an in-depth description of the data collection method in Chapter 3 so that

this study can be replicated in other geographical locations.

Significance

The link between juvenile offending and single-parent households is referenced throughout criminological research (Siegel, 2017; Sogar, 2017; Wong, 2017). In low-income HCCs, social supports are often in high demand. The demand places a strain on the expediency of these organizations in their service to the community. In many instances, single mothers who reside in these communities cannot obtain the level of support they need to prevent their children from engaging in criminal activity (Bell, 2016). Under these circumstances, single mothers may reach out for the only available and accessible social support organization in a given moment: the police. How single mothers in HCCs perceive their experiences with police regarding their child's involvement with gun-related crime had not been studied, according to my review of the literature. This topic is important to the public policy and administration field because knowing how this demographic navigates police encounters and services can inform law enforcement policy and collaboration with single mothers on strategies for keeping youths away from gun violence.

According to Callahan et al. (2012), collaboration is an integral component of social change; actions from many sources and angles are often required for meaningful and successful shifts to occur. For most, pathways of offending begin in childhood (Callahan et al, 2012). A systems-thinking approach can provide a successful foundation for change. Specifically, a collaborative effort and systems thinking can be utilized by police and community stakeholders to mitigate the specific vulnerabilities that children from single-female-headed households experience within an HCC. Stakeholders can use

this approach to bolster social bonds and social controls (i.e., improve levels of capable

guardians; Cohen & Felson, 1979), offer activities, and improve relationships and

connections with the police and other social supports.

Single mothers in HCCs express distrust in their neighborhoods and surrounding

social supports (Bell, 2016; Cebalio & McLoyd, 2002; Gonzalez et al., 2012; Richardson

& Van Brakle, 2013). It was my intention that this research would empower single

mothers to make connections within their community, specifically with the police, and

vice versa. Furthermore, it is my hope that with the knowledge gained regarding how

single mothers in HCCs perceive and use police services to mitigate youth gun violence,

policy makers can devise new ways to collaborate with single mothers in steering youths

in HCCs from pathways of offending.

Summary

In Chapter 1, I provided background information on past research concerning

single mothers in high-crime areas and interactions between this demographic and

communities and institutions, specifically the police. Researchers have identified

numerous risk factors pertaining to youth involvement with crime, particularly gun

crimes committed by youths from single-female-headed households. However, none of

the research I reviewed addressed the experiences of single mothers encountering the

police in cases involving youth gun crime. In Chapter 2, I provide an in-depth

examination of the available literature on the study topic. This literature supports the

importance of exploring the experiences and perceptions of single mothers in their

interactions with police related to their children's involvement in a gun crime.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The prevalence of youths from single-mother households who become involved with gun violence is high in the United States (Marrano, 2015; Singh & Kiran, 2014; Sogar, 2017). In HCCs, single mothers are often left to rely on the police and the juvenile justice system in the absence of family and neighborhood support (Bell, 2016; Richardson & Van Brakle, 2013). This literature review supported the importance of exploring the experiences of single mothers in their interactions with police and their perceptions and usage of police in matters where their own children were involved with a gun crime.

In the literature review, I explore factors related to youth gun possession and youth gun violence. I examine the historical context and current state of youth gun violence in the United States and what prevention measures have proven effective to date. The parental role in gun violence prevention is discussed and, more specifically, the challenges of parenting in an HCC, especially as a single mother, are considered. Finally, I review research on how single mothers in HCCs engage with and perceive police; this discussion includes accounts of parents who have experienced police detention of their child. It was my goal to illuminate challenges specific to single mothers in terms of mitigating their children's involvement in gun violence as well as illustrate their experiences and views of police in HCCs. I also provide more information on the theoretical framework of this dissertation, transcendental phenomenology, and how it supported the importance of considering the experiences of single mothers in the struggle

to mitigate youth gun violence across the United States. I begin this chapter by reviewing the literature search strategy, after which I provide more information the theoretical foundation. I then review the current literature on youth gun violence and the parental role in youth violence prevention.

Literature Search Strategy

I conducted a literature search using the Walden University Library databases Academic Search Premier, Google Scholar, ProQuest Criminal Justice Database, Psych INFO, SAGE Journals, and Political Science Complete. The list of terms used in the literature search included *youth gun violence*, *parental influences and perceptions of youth gun violence*, *disadvantaged mothers and police*, *single mothers and police*, *police strategies and youth gun violence*, *mother and youth gun crimes*, *juvenile gun possession*, *juvenile gun carrying*, and *juvenile gun use*. Because there was little research available on the topic of single mothers interacting with police in general, and specifically concerning youth gun crime, I employed the search terms and conducted the literature review based upon topics that were generated from those terms. The result was a literature review that largely revealed information on the scope of the youth gun violence issue, youth offenders from single-parent households, and challenges specific to parenting, especially single parenting, in an HCC.

Theoretical Foundation

I used transcendental phenomenology as the theoretical foundation for the study. Transcendental phenomenological theory emerged out of a desire to find a way to study the connections between human consciousness and the material world (Moustakas, 1994).

Descartes (1977) expanded upon this idea and theorized that knowledge emerges from self-evidence, and because this knowledge exists through intuition or reason, it could be depended upon as solid, true judgment. In this way, Descartes sought no other knowledge "than that which could be found in myself" (p. 119). This concept was further explained by Moustakas (1994) with the assertion, "all objects of knowledge must conform to experience. Knowledge of objects resides in the subjective sources of the self" (p. 45). The three sources of self are sense, imagination, and apperception (Kant, 1966).

Echoing Descartes, Brentano (1973) stated, "experience alone is my teacher" (p. xv). Further cementing the foundation of transcendental phenomenology, Schutz (1973) championed the notion that neither common sense nor science could develop without accounting for what is actual in experience (p. 290). Husserl (1975) expanded upon Brentano's sentiment by further exploring the intentional nature of consciousness, self-evidence, inner-perception, and the idea that knowledge is dependent upon self-experience.

Husserl's transcendental phenomenology relies solely on data from an individual's conscience experiences. These experiences are relayed through reflection upon what "appears before us in consciousness, and that very fact is a guarantee of its objectivity" (Moustakas, 1994). Harmon (1991) stated, "We do not learn about reality from controlled experiments but rather by identifying with the observed" (p. 53).

In transcendental phenomenology, the role of the researcher is to abstain from biases and preconceived notions, construct a research question to guide the study, and present findings in the data to serve as the basis for future research (Moustakas, 1994).

Contemporary researchers have used transcendental phenomenology to understand the first-hand experiences of participants who have encountered the phenomena being explored. For example, in the justice system realm, Kautz (2017) used transcendental phenomenology to explore the adaptations of adolescents whose parents were incarcerated. In a different context, Freidus (2017) used this theoretical base to explore the experiences of men who committed to romantic relationships with younger breast cancer survivors. As explained by Moustakas (1994), transcendental phenomenology is effectively used when the type of research being conducted places reliance upon the lived experiences of individuals who have encountered the phenomenon of interest.

In the national discussion on youth gun violence, the lived experiences of single mothers are absent; yet, the link between violent juvenile offenders and single-female-headed households persists (Marano, 2015; Singh & Kiran, 2014; Sogar, 2017). Transcendental phenomenological theory provided a framework through which to capture the lived experiences of this demographic. The perspectives of single mothers regarding their interactions with police and the ways in which collaborations could be forged with police are critical knowledge needed to address the social problem of youth gun violence in the United States. I concluded that a transcendental phenomenological design would be appropriate to elicit single mothers' perspectives on their interactions with police in matters of youth gun violence.

Literature Review Related to Key Variables and/or Concepts

History and Scope of Youth Gun Violence in America

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP, 2018) defined youth gun violence incidents as follows: "when a gun or firearm is present in the process of a youth (ages 10-24) intentionally using force or power to threaten or harm others" (p. 1). In the mid-1980s, lawmakers in the United States initiated federal-level efforts to address increasing levels of gun-related homicides and assaults by youths (Petrocino et al., 2015). These trends peaked in 1993 after a 158% increase in gun-related homicides by 15-to-24-year-olds over the previous 9 years (Sheppard et al., 2000). During the 1990s, the OJJDP facilitated multiple studies focused on urban areas that were intended to reduce crime and gang violence. These seminal longitudinal studies culminated in the OJJDP *Comprehensive Strategy for Serious, Violent, and Chronic Juvenile Offenders* (Huizinga, Loeber, & Thornberry, 1995). In this publication the researchers disclosed correlative factors of juvenile offending.

More recent studies have evolved to incorporate correlates of violent youth offending, such as unstable families, neighborhood conditions, cumulative disadvantage, deviant peers, and mental health challenges. This has led to the public health approach to mitigating youth gun violence. The public health approach applies a broad, systemic approach to understanding the issue and seeks to propose viable solutions (Kuehne, 2013). Despite funding shortages, social service, and law enforcement agencies have continued to implement cross-system, multi-agency approaches to address this issue

(Petrosino et al., 2015). Prior to discussing the literature on these programs, consideration of current statistical data on youth gun violence is explored.

Drawing from the *Uniform Crime Report Supplementary Homicide Reports*, Puzzanchera, Chamberlin, and Kang (2018) found an estimated 699 homicides with a firearm were committed by known youths between the ages of 12-24 in 2016. This represented an overall significant decrease in juvenile firearm-related homicides since a high of 2,271 in 1994; however, between 2001 and 2016, the percentage of juvenile firearm-related homicides increased from 62% to 80% (OJJDP, 2018).

Demographic datasets provided by the OJJDP included age, sex, and race. Firearm-related juvenile homicide offenders (JHOs) reflected a trend of increased offending with age. In 2016, approximately 9% of the offenders were under age 15, while 79% of the offenders were age 16 or 17 (OJJDP, 2018). Female offenders remained stable at fewer than 100 JHOs implicated in firearm-related homicide each year since 2002. Male offenders reached a low of 658 firearm-related homicides in 2013; however, that number steadily increased between 2013 and 2016 to 809 homicides (OJJDP, 2018). Trends by race of JHOs reflected a peak for black youths in 1993 (1,779 homicides), a number that quadrupled since 1984. For white youths, JHOs peaked in 1994 (1,004 homicides), a number that doubled since 1984. Between their respective peak years and the year 2016, the number of JHOs declined through the early 2000s for both race groups. Between 2012 and 2016, black JHOs steadily increased from 426 to 536 firearm homicides. In the same period, white JHOs fluctuated between 245 and 306 firearm homicides (OJJDP, 2018).

Aside from homicides perpetrated by juveniles with a firearm, juvenile firearm carrying rates are tracked by the Center for Disease Control. According to the OJJDP (2018) in 2017, about 1 in 6 (16%) high school students said they carried a weapon in the past 30 days. This reflected a downward trend from 1 in 5 (22%) in 1993. In the *1991-2017 High School Youth Risk Behavior Survey* (2017), 4.8% of all high school students reported carrying a gun to school in the year 2017. Of the 4.8%, 7.7% were male, 1.9 % were female, 4.1% were white, 6.5% were black, and 5.9% were Hispanic/Latino.

The overall trends in the data reflect a substantial decrease in juvenile gun-related crime and gun-carrying since the early 1990s. Juvenile gun possession and related offending, while significantly lower than the peaks seen in the early 1990s, have steadily climbed in recent years.

Current Evidence-Based Practices and Programs

Evidence-based practices and programs have shown to significantly reduce the occurrence of youth gun violence include community-driven interventions, hot spots policing strategies, weapon ban laws, and stricter probation requirements for juvenile gun offenders (OJJDP, 2016).

Braga and Weisburd (2012) studied focused-deterrence strategies. These are community-based strategies that begin with selecting an issue (i.e., youth homicide), developing an interagency working group, for example, social services and law enforcement, and developing a response to targeted offenders or groups. A variety of sanctions were used to decrease the initial issue. Successful examples of this strategy include the programs Operation Ceasefire, the Indianapolis Violence Reduction

Partnership, Operation Peacekeeper, Cure Violence, and the Milwaukee Homicide Review Commission (OJJDP, 2016; Petrosino et al., 2015). These programs have resulted in statistically significant decreases in youth homicides, gun assaults, and recovered handguns (Braga, Kennedy, Waring, & Piehl, 2001; Petrosino et al., 2015; Pierce, 2005).

Hot spots policing is the identification by law enforcement of a small geographical area where crime is concentrated and highly predictable (Braga, Papachristos, & Hureau, 2012). This policing strategy has shown a significant but smaller impact on reducing crime overall in the targeted area.

It can be surmised that laws and policies at the state and federal levels are intended to reduce youth access to guns; however, little is known about how these actions specifically impact youth gun possession and use. The OJJDP acknowledges a dearth in research specific to the prevalence and predictors of youth gun violence and calls for increased research to these ends to inform future policies and programs targeted specifically toward youth gun violence, rather than gun violence overall.

Factors Associated With Youth Gun Possession and Gun Violence

The literature representing major factors associated with youth gun possession and violence spanned work focusing exclusively on individual traits (e.g., mental health status, associated risk behaviors) to ecological conditions, such as neighborhood structural characteristics that foster challenges specific to parenting in HCCs, and the highly correlative association of parent-child relationship/family structure with youth engagement in gun violence.

Mental health and risk behaviors. Beginning with literature that reflected efforts to understand the typology of youths likely to possess and use guns, mental health status and risk behaviors have been examined. Mental health problems among juvenile delinquents are significantly higher than for non-delinquent youths; the estimated range has spanned from 40 to 70% higher for delinquent youths (Fazel, Doll, & Langstrom, 2008; Katsiyannis et al., 2004; Mallet, Stoddard, & Seck, 2009). While the findings from these efforts are valid in certain cases, it is recognized that attempts to view this issue solely in terms of mental health challenges are inadequate. Ruggles and Rajan (2014) argued that treating one risk factor at a time (i.e., mental health) is not useful in preventing youth gun possession and violence and encouraged a broader development of computational methods to identify other indicators and risk factors. They identified six behavioral clusters that were highly associated with gun possession among youths: (a) physical activity and nutrition; (b) disordered eating, suicide, and sexual violence; (c) weapon carrying and physical safety; (d) alcohol, marijuana, and cigarette use; (e) drug use on school property; and (f) overall drug use. Depression, anger, anxiety, and fear are other risk factors that are highly correlated with risky behaviors in youths, including gun carrying (DuRant, Krowchuk, Kreiter, Sinal, & Woods, 1999; Juan & Hemenway, 2017; Shetgiri et al., 2016).

While much of the public focus on youth violence and gun violence centers around mental health, it is important to understand the sources of negative mental health states among youths (Watts et al., 2018). In the proceeding paragraphs, several of these potential sources are discussed.

Challenges to parenting in HCCs. Haegerich et al. (2013) examined the impact of neighborhood social processes and structural characteristics on youth violence and weapon carrying. Concentrated disadvantage, educational failure, joblessness, low socioeconomic status, crime, violence, single-mother households, residential instability, and low rates of homeownership were reliable community indicators of youth violence (Haegerich et al., 2013; Richardson, Jr. & Van Brakle, 2013). Youths living in areas of concentrated poverty experienced decreased resources and services and greater economic strain. This resulted in higher levels of delinquency (Sogar, 2017) and increased reliance on the juvenile justice system in lieu of reliance on kin, neighbors, and neighborhood social systems (Bell, 2016; Richardson Jr. & Van Brakle, 2013).

Along with neighborhood social processes and structural characteristics, youth and parental perceptions of danger and violence in their neighborhoods were found to impact the likelihood of youths engaging in risk-taking behaviors. Notably, these perceptions increased the likelihood of youth weapon carrying and physical aggression, and the likelihood of both increased in public housing spaces and disordered areas (Haegerich et al., 2013). Studies have also shown that youths who have been exposed to violence in their neighborhoods were more likely to perceive situations as threatening, thus, increasing the likelihood of weapons carrying and physical aggression (Lindstrom-Johnson et al., 2010). In general, youths living in environments of poverty and violence were more likely to develop a desire to carry a gun (Marano, 2015).

The documentation of challenges specific to parenting children in HCCs has provided a basis to study strategies used by parents to protect their children from

witnessing, experiencing, and engaging in violence. Common strategies included

engaging in open dialogues with children, increasing monitoring, and screening friends

(Horowitz, McKay, & Marshall, 2005), chaperonage, and curfews (Jarrett, 1997a). Voisin

et al. (2016) studied parental attempts to manage youth exposure to violence in African

American families. Three themes emerged: (a) "sheltering" (keeping children off the

streets), (b) "chauffeuring" (transporting or accompanying children to and from places,

(c) "removal" (enrolling children in schools outside of their neighborhood). Two findings

from this study were consistent with previous research suggesting parental strategies are

gender-specific, and parental perception of social processes and efficacy of the

surrounding community play an important role in strategy development.

Parenting black males in economically deprived HCCs has been studied

extensively (Anderson, 1999; Furstenberg, Jr. et al., 2000; Jarrett 1995, 1997a; Rankin &

Quane, 2003). Richardson and Van Brakle (2013) focused specifically on parental

strategies to keep black males safe in adverse neighborhood conditions. Their findings

revealed that parental ability to generate social capital significantly impacted whether

black male youths "resist, desist, or persist in engaging in adolescent risk behaviors

associated with youth violence over the adolescent life course" (p. 262).

Parental perceptions of their community also play a significant role in how

parents in HCCs strategize against youth exposure to violence. Several studies revealed

that parenting strategies, in situations where the caregiver perceived high levels of

neighborhood danger, were directly impacted by this perception. Lower levels of positive

parenting style, warmth, and behavioral control were recorded in numerous studies

(Chung & Steinberg, 2006; Gayles, Coatsworth, Pantin, & Szapocznik, 2009; Gonzalez et al., 2011; Pinderhughes, Nix, Foster, & Jones, 2001; Tolan, Gorman-Smith, & Henry, 2003) and were attributed to chronic stressors in the lives of parents in HCCs (Hill & Herman-Stahl, 2002; McLoyd, 1990). Two leading chronic stressors included crime and social isolation (Ceballo & McLoyd, 2002; Weintraub & Wolf, 1983; Wilson, 1987).

Where parents experienced social isolation, including the absence of kin and social trust of neighbors, and faced barriers to developing social relationships in the community, perceptions of the community were negative (Cuellar et al., 2015). In these instances, parents were likely to rely on formal social controls for support, specifically mental health institutions and the juvenile justice system (Bell, 2016; Richardson Jr. & VanBrakle, 2013). As discussed later, this increases the exposure of youths to the criminal justice system, especially in the cases of youths from single-female-headed households.

Conversely, other studies found that parental perception of neighborhood danger had a positive influence on parenting strategies. In these cases, parents engaged in higher levels of positive parenting behaviors and parental monitoring (Jones, Forehand, O'Connell, Armistead, & Brody, 2005; Vieno, Nation, Perkins, Pastore, & Santinello, 2010). Finally, another set of studies suggested that parental perception of neighborhood danger found null associations with parenting behaviors (Dorsey & Forehand, 2003; Law & Barber, 2006; Taylor, 2000).

Parental relationships and family structure. It is noted across the literature that juveniles who carry weapons and engage in physical violence have often experienced

troubled developmental pathways and family adversity (Calhoun et al., 2015). The

literature indicated that parental relationships and family structure have an overwhelming

impact on youth gun violence through numerous avenues.

Grounded in social bond theory and attachment theory, parental presence and

support are critical to successful transitions from childhood to adulthood (Tapi, Alarid, &

Hutcherson, 2015). Mack, Lieber, Featherstone, and Monserud (2007), and Sogar (2017)

found that levels of attachment between parents and adolescents, especially maternal

attachment, made a difference in the adolescent's likelihood of participating in

delinquency. In circumstances where parent-child relationships are compromised, the

likelihood of youths engaging in violence increases (Haegerich et al., 2013; Sogar, 2017).

In many cases, parent-child relationships are compromised by a lack of interaction

associated with low parental monitoring of the child and by the challenges of single-

parenting.

Parental absence theory and monitoring. Family disruption has long been

considered a predictor of youth crime (Sampson, 1987). According to Sampson's

research, there are three central reasons to explain this phenomenon: (a) youths from

single-parent or divorced parent homes commit more crime, (b) single-parent and

divorced families are less likely to participate in community organizations, and therefore,

the community control capacity is diminished, and (c) these parents are less able to

monitor their children's activities.

Beyond Sampson's work, the idea that youths from HCCs who engage in violence

often receive lower levels of parental monitoring than their peers is widely documented

across the literature (Cuellar et al., 2015; Haegerich et al., 2013; Rodriguez, 2015). In terms of adolescent delinquency, social control theory holds that adolescents can engage in deviant behavior when social controls, such as parental supervision, are absent (Cernkovich & Giordano, 1987). Parental absence theory is a revision of social control theory. Wells and Rankin (1991) found that delinquency is 10%-15% higher in adolescents who had an absent parent as a result of divorce or separation. Clearly, challenges to effective parental monitoring arise in single-parent households where the parent has numerous demands and responsibilities that must be met, which often leaves less opportunity to monitor a child. This results in the increased likelihood that a child will engage in delinquency (Mack et al., 2007).

Single-female-headed households. The literature associated with single-parenting in HCCs revealed that being raised in a single-parent family is a strong predictor of youth engagement in crime (Sampson & Groves, 1989; Veysey & Messner, 1999; Wong, 2017). However, specific associations are explored between youths who engage in offending and who also live in a single-female-headed household (SFH). Single mothers face unique challenges in comparison to single-father- and two-parent families.

The concentration of SFHs in a community is used as a poverty indicator in numerous official measurements. For example, the construct of neighborhood disadvantage has been measured by data from the U.S. Census, including unemployment rates, percentage of households living below the poverty line, and percentage of single-female-headed households (Cuellar et al., 2013). Poverty and economic disadvantage are

well-documented causal factors of juvenile offending. Hoffman (2006) found that single

mothers were significantly more likely to live in an economically disadvantaged area than

single fathers. Building upon this, single mothers have less aggregate education and

income than single fathers do (Zhan & Pandy, 2004), which leaves single mothers with

the burden of navigating numerous issues related to living in a low-income, economically

disadvantaged area. The manifestation of these factors is the correlation they share with

delinquency and youth crime (Wong, 2017).

Several studies have explored the link between SFHs and juvenile offending.

Elliott et al. (1996) compared two samples of youths from Denver and Chicago. They

found that neighborhood disadvantage and the prevalence of single-parent families

(mostly SFHs) indirectly affected delinquency through informal social control. Welsh,

Stokes, and Greene (2000) used the same variables to study data from 43 middle schools

in Philadelphia and found the prevalence of single-parent families (mostly SFHs)

significantly impacted levels of in-school delinquency. McNulty and Bellair (2003) used

the percentage of households headed by single women as one of four central indicators of

concentrated disadvantage. Their findings showed a direct effect on the prevalence of

adolescent fighting. Lee and Bartowski (2004) also used the variable of percentage of

households headed by women as an indicator of concentrated disadvantage and found

positive effects on both rural and urban youth homicide rates. McDonald and Gover

(2005) studied the change in concentrated disadvantage over time in 159 U.S. cities.

Again, the variable of SFHs was used in their construct of concentrated disadvantage.

The findings showed that the change in concentrated disadvantage over time was causally

related to youth-on-youth homicide. Finally, Strom and McDonald (2007) studied city-level socioeconomic disadvantage and its impact on youth homicide rates in 155 U.S. cities in the 1980s and 1990s. The percentage of SFHs was included in their socioeconomic disadvantage construct. Their findings indicated that city-level disadvantage was a significant cause in homicide rates among black teenagers, white teenagers, and black young adults.

Specific inquiry into black SFHs is represented in the literature as well. Sampson (1987) found that black households headed by females had a conducive effect on black juvenile homicide rates (see also, Ousey, 2000; Shihadeh & Steffensmeier, 1994). Marano's (2015) phenomenological study of minority juvenile males incarcerated for gun-related offenses revealed a prevalent trend: The vast majority of participants lived in SFHs. Marano's study highlighted a commonality of financial strain in SFHs, which led to consistent participant reports of feeling responsible to at least pay for their own needs. Marano observed that participants seemed acutely aware of their mothers' financial strain, and thus, felt it was incumbent upon them to contribute to the household financially. Further, many of the participants expressed discomfort in being supported by a financially struggling woman. These feelings led to participation in gun-related crimes yielding financial gain, including drug dealing and robbery.

Other research indicated some advantages for youths from SFHs that should mitigate juvenile offending. This research was grounded in the maternal hypothesis theory, which suggests that the mother has more effective control of the child than the father. It is believed that the mother-child bond beginning at infancy, more frequent

communication, and the more time a mother spends with the child as opposed to the father results in greater control (Eitle, 2006; Hemovich & Crano, 2009). According to Wong (2017), single mothers may exert just as much social control over their child as they would in a two-parent family compared to fathers who fare significantly worse. Wong concluded that living with a single mother should result in lower levels of delinquency than living with a single father. Studies that support Wong's hypothesis included Cookston's (1999) study of youths from single-mother and single-father homes. Cookston found that youths from single-father homes had the lowest levels of monitoring, whereas youths from single-mother homes had lower rates of alcohol and drug use and delinquency. Mack et al. (2007) studied the link between family processes and delinquency and found that maternal attachment was the strongest predictor of whether youths engaged in delinquency. This concept was later reiterated by Sogar (2017), who found that maternal attachment and maternal supervision were significant predictors of delinquent behavior across cultures. Other studies depicted maternal warmth and control as strong variables that combat delinquency (Amato & Kane, 2011; Dunifon & Kowaleski-Jones, 2002). Although researchers disagree on the type of impact being raised in a SFH has on juvenile offending, it is clear that the relationship between a single mother and her child is critical to whether the child becomes involved in offending overall.

Single Mothers' Uses and Perceptions of the Criminal Justice System

A commonality throughout the literature on juvenile offending and SFHs is that the mother's role is critical. Acknowledging the link between SFHs and juvenile

offending, it is, therefore, important to understand how single mothers perceive and utilize the criminal justice system. Limited research has been completed to these ends. Some research has been conducted into parental experiences with law enforcement upon being notified of their child's detention by police (Church, MacNeil, Martin, & Nelson-Gardell, 2009; MacNeil, Church, Nelson-Gardell, & Young, 2015). While this body of literature addressed parents of both sexes, it largely focused on mothers. Bell (2016) focused specifically on disadvantaged mothers and their usage and perceptions of the criminal justice system.

Grounded in family systems theory, Church et al. (2009) noted that the detention or arrest of a child had a critical impact on the family as a whole, specifically on the child. This study primarily involved single mothers with multiple children. They were responsible for managing their household and providing financial support. Each mother had a low-paying job. The study specifically explored the initial reactions of parents to their child's detention or arrest and explored parental feelings about the juvenile justice process and how they perceived their experience of being involved in the juvenile justice system. Four major themes emerged from the data analysis: (a) feeling frustrated and confused, (b) a perception of the system as being fair, (c) the juvenile justice system assuming a parental role, and (d) the influence of detention on family dynamics.

Of particular relevance to this dissertation, parents were asked how they felt about their interactions with the authorities they dealt with during their child's detention. Several of the parents expressed that communication with authorities was unclear, thus, producing anger and frustration. For example, "parents believed that they were not being

told the entire truth about their child's situation, and some suggested that their children were being treated unfairly" (p. 15). Further evidence of unclear communication was expressed specifically concerning the clarity of instructions they were given. Despite these reported challenges, parents rarely blamed the justice system for their child's detention and believed that they were treated fairly overall by specific members of the juvenile justice system. Other positive outcomes expressed by single parents included a feeling of finally having a "partner" to help them with their child's behavior and a sense of burden-lifting from their role as disciplinarian.

MacNeil et al. (2015) continued the work of Church et al. (2009) by studying more in-depth the initial emotional reactions, cognitive processing, and behavioral responses of parents toward their child's detention. Portions of the findings captured the experiences of parents as they interacted with members of the juvenile justice system. Of the eight single parents interviewed for this study, seven were women.

The recurring theme of frustration and sometimes anger toward officers was also present in this study, similar to Church's 2009 study. Parents specifically reported officers did not help them fully understand what had taken place, and instead referred them to case documentation for answers. Conversely, parents also reported that communication between the police and their child was clear and calm, and sometimes, that was the impression parents had of their own communication with the police. A new observation shared by parents in this study was that the seriousness of what occurred was often conveyed through how the officers communicated and conducted themselves. One parent noted that she did not believe her son understood the severity of what he had done

until the officer spoke directly to her and her son. She also noted they were treated with respect and that a bad situation was handled in the best way possible by the police.

In another study concerning the use and perception of police by single mothers, Bell (2016) explored the concept of legal cynicism in disadvantaged black neighborhoods. Despite the legal cynicism, members of these communities call the police at a higher rate than whites and members of the middle class. Specifically, mothers in these communities "exact social control over their partners and children through police notification" (p. 314). This is largely attributed to the lack of familial and community support expressed by women in these communities.

Bell researched how legal cynicism fits with occasional reliance on the police by mothers in these communities. Her central finding was the concept of situational trust: Mothers shelved feelings of legal cynicism toward police in specific scenarios. Bell described these exceptions to legal cynicism as "strategies that enable occasional proactive engagement with police" (p. 316). The four strategies are as follows:

- *Officer exceptionalism:* Mothers hold cynical views of the police as an institution but view the individual officers who patrol their neighborhoods on a daily basis as more trustworthy.

- *Domain specificity:* Mothers see police as effective interveners for issues occurring inside or near the home, but ineffective responders to street crime.

- *Therapeutic consequences:* Mothers are more likely to trust police officers when they believe the call will result in a beneficial outcome for the target of the call.

- *Institutional navigation:* Mothers believe that calling the police sometimes protects them from, or gives them leverage with, other institutions.

Findings from Bell's study are similar to previous work by Richardson and Van Brakle (2013). Single black mothers in HCCs reported distrust of neighbors, weak social ties, and a lack of familial and community-based support. With limited options in terms of assistance and support from the community, single mothers often turned to the juvenile justice system for help with their struggling child (Bell, 2016; Richardson & VanBrakle, 2013). In many instances, this had unfavorable outcomes for the mother and child, as these children are then exposed to the criminal justice system disproportionately and, on certain occasions, where it would otherwise not have been necessary if adequate familial and community support were present. According to Bell (2016), calling the police can lead to unpredictable consequences for family members, including arrest.

Other studies that explored the use and perceptions of the police by mothers included a study of black and Latino boys in Oakland, California. Rios (2011) found that, in the process of adhering to institutional messages about parenting and behavior, mothers called the police on their children, inadvertently labeling them as criminal. Rios posited that mothers are part of a "youth control complex," including police, probation officers, community centers, schools, the media, and other institutions.

Youth Gun Violence and Media Depiction of Mothers

The dearth of empirical research on the experiences of single mothers related to youth gun crime pushes the inquiry beyond scholarly sources to the realm of news reporting and journalism. In this realm, mothers and single mothers are portrayed

primarily in two categories: as grieving or as engaged in activism. In reference to the latter, mothers who are interviewed have usually lost a child to gun violence. Dubisar (2018) stated:

> reports feature the reactions of victims' mothers, placing them in the position of having to make meaning of their children's deaths and thereby endow these children's lives with value in a racist culture that devalues African American youth, the most likely victims of gun violence. (p. 195)

In the African American community this sentiment was echoed by Lezley McSpadden, mother of Michael Brown, in her remarks about the mother's role after losing a child to gun-related homicide:

> When their children are killed, mothers are expected to say something. To help keep the peace. To help make change. But what can I possibly say? I just know we need to do something. We are taught to be peaceful, but we aren't at peace.

In terms of activism, a multitude of anti-gun groups comprised exclusively of mothers has been highlighted in journalism reporting. A common theme of needing to be heard and "getting the word out" on the issue of youth gun violence was exemplified across several interviews with mothers. Adekoya and Stark-Miller (2018) interviewed mothers who lost children to gun violence. One mother explained her engagement in activism based on the need to be heard: "If I don't go out here and speak about it, then who's gonna do it? How is anybody gonna know about how all of us mothers feel?" In Wilmington, Delaware, one mother started a group called 302 MAFIA (302 is Wilmington's area code, and MAFIA stands for Mothers and Fathers in Action). Part of

302 MAFIA's mission is to inform other parents like her, who were "walking blind" while their children started to engage in gun violence.

Across the literature review, a significant lack of scholarship on the subject of single mothers and youth gun violence in academia is apparent. Further, when this demographic has been given a platform to speak on the subject via journalistic efforts, a theme of desiring to be heard on the subject and getting the word out to other mothers comes to the forefront.

Conclusion

In the literature review, factors related to youth gun possession and youth gun violence were outlined. The historical context and current state of youth gun violence in America and what prevention measures have been effective were discussed. Current literature on youth gun violence considered numerous factors related to offending, including mental and emotional health, the parental role in gun violence prevention, challenges of parenting in a HCC, and the challenges and benefits to youth residing in single-female-headed households. Additionally, the use and perceptions of police by single mothers in HCC were explored, as well as the accounts of parents who have experienced police detention of their child. Finally, the dearth of scholarly inquiry regarding single mothers and youth gun crime was explored and magnified by the need to extend the search for this information into the realm of journalism and news reporting. In this realm, it was discovered that mothers were largely portrayed as members of one of two primary groups: grieving mothers or mothers engaged in activism. The themes of needing to be heard on this issue and the desire to "get the word out" to other mothers

emerged with clarity when surveying journalistic efforts toward exploring the viewpoints of mothers impacted by youth gun violence.

Calls for research into understanding more about micro-level accounts of specific experiences with the police and more about how individual people understand their specific engagements with police are at the center of the effort to understand how cultural orientation, neighborhood disadvantage, and family structure impact police-citizen relations. Therefore, considering the evidence supporting the critical role mothers, especially single mothers, play in their child's propensity to become involved with gun violence, it is imperative to explore the micro-level accounts of police contacts by single mothers concerning the pressing matter of juvenile gun crime.

Chapter 3 explores the methodology to study the experiences of single mothers with police specific to their child's arrest for a gun crime.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to better understand the lived experiences of single mothers with police related to the arrest of their children for a gun crime. With this understanding, police agencies may be able to assist single mothers in mitigating youth gun violence in HCCs. I employed an individual, phenomenological interview design using snowball sampling to identify seven participants. Data from the interviews were bracketed, coded, and categorized for thematic analysis. The study was designed to explore how single mothers perceived their interactions with police concerning their child's involvement with a gun crime. I also explored the perceptions of single mothers toward working with police to prevent future youth gun violence in their communities. The applicability of the individual interview to this study is discussed in detail in this chapter. The research design and rationale; the role of the researcher; and the procedures for recruitment, participation, data collection, and data analysis plan are also discussed.

Research Design and Rationale

I sought to answer the following research questions:

Research Question 1: What is the experience of single mothers with children who were involved with gun crime toward the use and function of police on this issue?

Research Question 2: In what ways do single mothers believe police can improve their approach toward mitigating youth gun crimes in their community? Based upon their observations and experiences, what could be done differently?

Research Question 3: In what ways do single mothers believe police can collaborate with them as stakeholders in the fight against youth violence to improve the prevention of youth involvement with gun violence?

I employed a qualitative research methodology involving phenomenological inquiry. Using this approach allowed me to explore how single mothers experienced and perceived their interactions with police related to youth gun crimes. Presumably, single mothers and police officers are stakeholders in youth safety; exploring the experiences of single mothers and police involved with a serious type of juvenile offending is critical to understanding how police and single mothers can best collaborate in prevention efforts.

To explore the study phenomenon, I employed the phenomenological interview method. Phenomenological interviewing allows researchers to capture the lived experience of a person who has experienced the phenomenon being studied (Van Manen, 1990). According to Moustakas (1994), phenomenological interviews are interactive with the intent of ascertaining a detailed account of the phenomenon that is being studied.

By using qualitative interviewing, researchers are able to gain insight into participants' lived experience and how they construct and make sense of their reality. It also provides the benefit of examining how the lived experiences of study participants are similar and different from other participants (Ravitch & Carl, 2015). This method was therefore well suited to the goal of this study, which was to explore how single mothers perceived their encounters with officers who arrested their children for gun crimes and to uncover the similarities and differences among those experiences.

Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher in qualitative research is that of the primary data collection instrument. Because of this role, the researcher must identify any biases, personal values, or assumptions before the study is conducted (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I have worked in the law enforcement profession for 13 years, part of which was spent as a police officer in a high-crime city. I have frequently encountered single mothers struggling with juvenile offending. By engaging in reflexivity and journaling for the duration of the research process, I remained cognizant of how my past experiences potentially influenced the study. I also took steps (see the "Issues of Trustworthiness" section of this chapter) to mitigate the potential for bias. As I discuss more fully in that section, my involvement with participants did not present any ethical issues or conflicts of interest.

I was trained in the skills and methods required to conduct the designed study. I have interviewed persons regarding criminal activity and concerning topics of a sensitive and private nature over 100 times over the course of my career. I therefore felt prepared to handle the different stages of the research process. Prior to conducting the study, my role was to complete a thorough literature review on the topic and develop research questions. During the participant interviews, my role was to facilitate and record the interview. Once the study concluded, my role was to transcribe and review the data, report the results, formulate conclusions, and identify opportunities for future research.

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

I used a snowball sampling method to identify single mothers in the Hudson Valley, New York, area who have had a child arrested for a gun crime and who have had direct interaction with police over this matter. I began the process by asking regional professionals who interact with single mothers for suggestions on potential participants. I contacted 40 professionals spanning the public service field by e-mail for potential referrals. I then sent study invitations to candidates who contacted me by telephone or e-mail. Three participants referred additional contacts appropriate for the criteria of the study. I used snowball sampling based on the sensitive and personal nature of the phenomenon being studied and after making preliminary inquiries regarding feasibility issues. I approached local police and probation departments to assess the likelihood of having a department representative contact single mothers fitting the proposed criteria. After determining that this approach would present ethical and legal challenges that could not be overcome, I decided to use the snowball sampling technique.

To begin identifying participants, I contacted two community professionals connected to women who fit the participant criteria. Using these well-situated professionals, I asked for potential referrals. To maintain privacy, I asked that the agency representatives give potential study participants a letter authored by me explaining the study and inviting women to participate voluntarily. The letter included multiple ways to contact me to allow potential participants to communicate in a way that was most comfortable for them (see Appendix A).

Participants were selected upon the following criteria: single motherhood, mother of a child arrested for a gun crime, and the ability to recall interaction with police regarding her child's gun crime. I conducted interviews with seven single mothers. This number of participants was sufficient to achieve thick description and saturation of the information that was being relayed during interviews.

Procedures for Recruitment, Data Collection, and Participation

I sent letters to the referred single mothers requesting their participation in the study. The letters fully explained the purpose and reason for the study. Participants were asked to respond within 10 days if they wanted to participate and/or refer additional candidates.

Once interested individuals contacted me, I made a follow-up telephone call to introduce the participants to the study. If the individual was still interested, I conducted the initial screening assessment (Criteria Qualifier, see Appendix B). If the candidate was qualified and still interested in participating, I scheduled a time to meet with the candidate to review and complete a consent form and a data collection sheet (see Appendix C for the data collection sheet).

I set a convenient time and date to conduct the interview with each participant. The interviews took place in a private conference room on the campus of Dutchess Community College in Poughkeepsie, New York.

Gullestad's (1984) study, *Kitchen Table Societies,* depicted the kitchen table as a place for women's moral discourse. Gullestad's case study revealed that the kitchen table was used by women as "the place to reconcile two different worlds—hearth and home

and going out" (p. 255). Gullestad further stated that values, social identities, conflicts, and solidarities were aired in this space. In many cases, the kitchen table is a place where women go to find support and to share life situations. Based upon Gullestad's work, the atmosphere where the interviews took place was designed with the kitchen table imagery in mind.

When conducting the interviews, I followed best practices and procedures as represented in the literature. The interview began with open-ended questions of a non-sensitive nature to allow the participants to familiarize themselves with the researcher and their surroundings. After establishing a rapport with participants, I asked an open-ended question to start a conversation. I guided the interview when necessary and had a list of potential open-ended questions to use (see Appendix D).

At the conclusion of the interview, participants were debriefed by me and given my contact information and information for appropriate counseling as required. I informed the participants that they would be receiving a transcript of their session within two weeks so that they could review it for accuracy. I also explained the steps that would follow before the study was published. It was reiterated that any questions or concerns could be directed to me at any time in the future.

The audiotaped data were transcribed by me and sent to the participants for review. Participants were asked if they wanted to add anything after reflecting upon their contributions. Once approval was gained from the participants, I bracketed, coded, and analyzed the transcripts for themes. I also reviewed my notes and memos to remind me of

thoughts that arose during the process. I engaged in reflexivity via rigorous journaling to uncover any biases impacting the analysis of the data.

Data Analysis Plan

Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2007) suggested that Glaser and Strauss' (1967) method of constant comparison could be used effectively to analyze phenomenological interview data. There are three major stages in this method. The first stage is open coding. In this stage, the data are grouped into smaller units and given a code by the researcher (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). In the second stage or axial coding, the codes are grouped into categories. In the third stage or selective coding, the researcher identifies themes that represent the content of each category (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Further data analysis was conducted from notes taken by the researcher during the interviews. This information was used alongside the transcription of the interviews to create a richer representation of the data that were collected (Fontana & Frey, 2005).

In totality, the data analysis included the audio recording of the session and notes of the researcher. The researcher engaged in constant comparison of all data sets throughout the process.

<center>**Issues of Trustworthiness**</center>

The trustworthiness of qualitative research relies on credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

In this study, the establishment of credibility commenced with my consistent practices of reflexivity and journaling. During data collection, I continued to collect data until saturation was reached. Once saturation of the information was achieved, and the

data were transcribed, further credibility was established by allowing participants to check my work and make necessary corrections. During data analysis, I assessed alternative conclusions and rival explanations. Patton (2015) suggested doing this by looking for ways to organize data differently that may yield alternative conclusions. To those ends, I chose to code the data using multiple coding methods. Finally, credibility was bolstered by a rigorous peer-review process by the researcher's dissertation committee members.

Transferability reflects how qualitative studies can be applied in broader contexts (Ravitch & Carl, 2015). To establish transferability in this study, I provided thick description of the data, including direct quotations of participants, allowing readers to develop their own meanings and significance from the data. Transferability was also achieved by describing the setting and participants, describing contextual factors of the study, and a clear explanation of the researcher's interpretation of the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2015), all of which are reflected in this study.

I established the dependability of the study by justifying the chosen research methods, data collection methods, and data analysis methods and illustrating how they aligned with the research questions. I also used perspectival triangulation by engaging people with various roles and occupations related to the study to uncover "range, nuance, complexity, disagreement, and generative tensions in perspectives and in the data set as a whole" (Ravitch & Carl, 2015, p. 196). Specifically, I gained the perspectives of justice system personnel and caseworkers with the experience of working on cases involving juvenile gun crimes.

In qualitative research, confirmability is established through managing biases and the role they play in researcher interpretation. Qualitative researchers must present confirmable data, but with the acknowledgment that pure objectivity cannot be achieved. According to Miles, et al. (2014), researchers must prove "relative neutrality and reasonable freedom from unacknowledged researcher biases—at the minimum explicitness about the inevitable biases that exist" (p. 311). To achieve confirmability, I used triangulation methods, reflexivity processes, and external audits of the work.

Ethical Procedures

I made ethics a top priority throughout the study. Gaining approval of the Walden University Institutional Review Board was the first step in ensuring ethical compliance. Working with research participants requires informed consent from each participant. I utilized a letter of informed consent containing, "a fair explanation of procedures, description of risks reasonably to be expected, a description of benefits reasonably to be expected, an offer of inquiry regarding the procedures, and an instruction that the person is free to withdraw" (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 2008, p. 15).

In assessing the risk to human participants, I remained cognizant that the subject matter of inquiry was of a private and personal nature and could cause some emotional stress to participants. I provided contact information for counselors to each participant.

Concerning the data, all names of participants and their children were anonymous. The recorded session, notes, and other personal information were secured in a safe location throughout the study and for the required time after the study was completed. Once that time expires, all documentation will be destroyed. I was the only person who

could access any of the study materials via password-protected documents, a password-protected computer, and a locked filing cabinet for paperwork and recordings.

Summary

The goal of this chapter was to justify and explain the research methods that were used to answer the research questions of this study. The applicability of the individual interview method to this study was outlined. The research design and rationale, the role of the researcher, the procedures for recruitment, participation, data collection, and the data analysis plan were also discussed. This study was designed to facilitate capturing the experiences of single mothers' interactions with police officers in a matter of their child's arrest for a gun crime. The goal of Chapter 4 is to provide the results of the study ascertained by following the methodology outlined in Chapter 3.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological research was to explore the lived experiences of single mothers with police as they relate to the arrest of their children for a gun crime. There is a dearth of literature on the interactions of single mothers and police in HCCs despite the regular occurrence of these interactions (Bell, 2016). I conducted this study to explore the perspectives of single mothers about their past interactions with police specific to their child's arrest for a gun crime. I also wanted to explore the perceptions of single mothers toward working with police to combat youth gun violence. The intended outcome of this study was the dissemination of information to community stakeholders and law enforcement personnel to guide policy creation related to police interactions with single mothers. Findings from the study may also provide insight on how law enforcement agencies can collaborate with single mothers to combat youth gun violence.

The research questions that shaped this study were as follows:

Research Question 1: What is the experience of single mothers with children who were involved with gun crime toward the use and function of police on this issue?

Research Question 2: In what ways do single mothers believe police can improve their approach toward mitigating youth gun crimes in their community? Based upon their observations and experiences, what could be done differently?

Research Question 3: In what ways do single mothers believe police can collaborate with them as stakeholders in the fight against youth violence to improve prevention of youth involvement with gun violence?

In Chapter 4, I explain the demographics of study participants and the data collection and data analysis processes. Evidence of trustworthiness is addressed in terms of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. I also present the results of the study and discuss how they relate to the research questions.

Setting

I used snowball sampling to recruit potential study candidates. I first gained permission from a local nonprofit agency to post study invitation flyers in a building. I sent the study invitations to approximately 50 professionals whom I perceived would have contact with the target study population asking them to share the invitation with other professionals or women whom they believed fit the study criteria.

Women who were interested in participating in the study contacted me directly. In a telephone conversation, I explained the purpose of the study and reviewed the criteria (see Appendix B) to participate in the study. Of the 12 women who contacted me, ten were qualified to participate in the study, and seven opted to schedule an interview. At each interview, I reviewed the participation consent letter with the interviewee and obtained the participant's signature. I then completed the participant data collection sheet (see Appendix C) and used the interview protocol sheet (see Appendix D) to conduct the face-to-face interview.

Demographics

According to Creswell (2009), phenomenological studies should be conducted with five to 25 participants to yield sufficient data to fully address the research questions. This study had seven participants, each of whom met the following study criteria: (a) single mother who has or had the primary role of raising her child, (b) the child had been arrested for a gun-related crime, and (c) the participant had interaction with police as a result of this arrest. I asked each participant to provide an alternative first name to uphold participant confidentiality. I used the alternative first names of participants in my records and in this dissertation. I conducted and transcribed all interviews myself. I used the Participant Data Collection Sheet to record each participant's study alias, a preferred method of contact, number of children, and the age and sex of each child.

Data Collection

I obtained approval from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (#11-14-19-0417923) to collect data from November 14, 2019, to November 14, 2020. Potential participants contacted me by e-mail or telephone to learn more about the study. During the initial contact, I reviewed the purpose of the study and completed the criteria qualifier (see Appendix B) with the participant. I asked the participant to schedule a date and time for the face-to-face interview. Interviews were conducted in a private office at a community college. Prior to the interview, each participant reviewed and signed a participation consent letter. All interviews were recorded using a SONY digital audio recorder. I completed individual interviews with a total of seven participants. Interviews

were conducted on dates and times selected by the participants between January 15,

2020, and March 1, 2020. On average, the interviews lasted 45 minutes each.

Data Analysis

According to Saldana (2011), researchers conducting phenomenological studies

assume that what is reported to the interviewer represents the essence of a phenomenon in

a narrative format. Phenomenological interviewing captures the lived experience of a

person who has experienced the phenomenon being studied (Van Manen, 1990). In this

study, I used the data collected from individual face-to-face interviews to capture the

essence of the lived experiences of single mothers who have had a child arrested for a

gun crime. By analyzing the data collected from the interviews, I was able to gain a

deeper understanding of the study phenomena. In addition to the information provided by

single mothers, direct quotes from them are used throughout this chapter where possible

to honor their individual voices and to ensure that the essential meaning of their

responses was captured.

In this study, I used the transcribed data from each interview to develop in vivo

and concept codes from the data. I used in vivo coding in a conscious effort to honor the

voices of single mothers on the topic of youth gun crime as these voices are not

represented in the literature, based on my research. I developed concept codes by

employing Glaser and Strauss's (1967) constant comparison strategies between

transcribed interview data sets to develop code categories. The code categories were

ultimately developed into major themes that emerged across the data sets.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

The base of trustworthiness in any study is the researcher's honesty and integrity (Saldana, 2011). It was my goal to engage consistently in journaling and reflexivity to ensure that personal experiences or biases did not impede data analysis or transparency in the writing of this study. At each step, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability remained central goals for the completion of this investigation.

Credibility

To ensure credibility in this study, I consistently practiced reflexivity and journaling. I am a former police officer who worked in a small high-crime city in which I had numerous interactions with single mothers whose children experienced police contact for various reasons. I used reflexivity and journaling to mitigate the potential for bias based on my previous experiences as a police officer. By reflecting upon and journaling about the interviews I conducted with single mothers immediately after they were completed, I was able to create a written record of my personal interpretations of the interview. I used these records as a check for any bias throughout the data analysis process.

Further bolstering credibility, I conducted interviews with single mothers until a level of saturation was observed. Once the interviews were completed, and after I transcribed the data, I implemented member checking by sharing findings with the participants to allow them to assess the accuracy of the work (see Creswell, 2009). After member checking was completed, I assessed the data for alternative conclusions and rival explanations, as suggested by Patton (2015). Patton argued that by looking for ways to

organize data differently, alternative conclusions about what the data reveal are possible.

Coding the data using different coding methods allowed me to organize and analyze the

data from multiple perspectives. Finally, I shared the study with my dissertation

committee members and other doctoral-level scholars and implementing their feedback.

Transferability

As stated in Chapter 3, I sought to provide thick description of the data. Lincoln

and Guba (1985) described thick description as a data-gathering method of a

phenomenon that is detailed to the extent that it can be evaluated and replicated in

another setting or group. Part of ensuring thick description was using direct quotes from

the single mothers, whom I interviewed, which accurately depict their descriptions of the

phenomena.

I also sought to provide complete descriptions of the setting and participants with

a clear explanation of my interpretation of the data, as suggested by Ravitch and Carl

(2015).

Dependability

The dependability of this study was grounded in my justification of the chosen

research methods, data collection methods, data analysis methods, and the explanation of

how these methods aligned with the research questions. I also used perspectival

triangulation by consistently engaging with professionals in roles related to the study to

gain different perspectives on the data set (Ravitch & Carl, 2015). The perspectives of the

participants after reviewing the study were also used as a method of triangulation.

This study was conducted with the intention that the essence of single mothers who had the experience of a child getting arrested for a gun crime would be captured. To accomplish this, thick description, audio recordings of interviews, reflexive journaling, and peer review were employed to ensure dependability.

Confirmability

Study confirmability is achieved through accurate data collection and ethical, accurate reporting of study findings. This includes the acknowledgment of inevitable biases that exist (Miles et al., 2014). To establish confirmability, I used triangulation methods, engaged in reflexive journaling, and solicited external audits of the study from peer reviewers.

<div align="center">

Results

</div>

I explored the lived experiences of single mothers who have experienced the arrest of a child for a gun crime. Specifically, I designed this study to capture the perceptions of single mothers regarding their encounters with police concerning their child's arrest and to capture their experiences and ideas about how to improve the youth gun crime issue in their communities as well as how to improve how police interact with single mothers on this issue.

The single mothers in this study all resided in the Mid-Hudson Valley area of New York State and were voluntary participants. The single mothers interviewed included one white mother, one Hispanic mother, and five African American mothers. Each mother interviewed disclosed that she was employed, the head of her household, and was parenting more than one child at the time of the gun crime arrest. Every mother

interviewed reported the arrest of a male child. Most mothers were employed in service-sector jobs, including a certified nursing assistant, an accountant assistant, an office assistant, and a home health aide. They all reported being life-long residents of their communities.

Of note, four of the seven mothers interviewed shared the experience of having a son arrested for a gun crime, and then later experienced the death of that son as a result of gun violence.

A phenomenological, face-to-face interview methodology employing open-ended questions was used to achieve thick description of the study phenomena. It was my intention to encourage single mothers to describe their interactions with police and ideas about effective methods toward mitigating youth gun crime openly. I transcribed each interview verbatim from audio recordings. I also used a reflexive journal to record my thoughts during and after the interviews and to capture any noteworthy, non-verbal communication.

By using the constant comparison method, I coded and analyzed the data, which led to several emergent themes concerning the three research questions of the study:

Research Question 1: What is the experience of single mothers with children who were involved with gun crime toward the use and function of police on this issue?

Research Question 2: In what ways do single mothers believe police can improve their approach toward mitigating youth gun crimes in their community? Based upon their observations and experiences, what could be done differently?

Research Question 3: In what ways do single mothers believe police can collaborate with them as stakeholders in the fight against youth violence to improve prevention of youth involvement with gun violence?

The research questions were informed by the theoretical framework of the study—Husserl's transcendental phenomenology. Transcendental phenomenological inquiry allowed for the phenomenon of single mothers' encounters with police and youth gun crime to be understood purely through their description of how they experienced this phenomenon in their own thoughts and words. In this way, the meaning and essence of the study participants' lived experiences were revealed (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015).

In this section, I have outlined the findings for each research question, including the themes that emerged from the data analysis process. I have also included direct quotes from study participants, as often as possible, which support these themes. Participants are referred to by a self-selected alias.

Research Question 1

Research Question 1 was, What is the experience of single mothers with children who were involved with gun crime toward the use and function of police on this issue?

To establish a foundation for communication on this topic, I asked each participant to tell me about youth gun crime in her community in general and to share her overall feelings toward interacting with police in her community.

Regarding youth gun crime, each participant indicated an awareness of the extent of the problem. Responses ranged from Suzanne's point of view that it is "kind of bad," to Dee's belief that "It is rampant," Holiday and Tasha's identical responses of "It is out

of control," and Isabelle's belief that "It needs to be seriously handled." Other observations on the subject included the belief that guns are too easy to access for youths and that the gun violence issue is increasing.

Overall, feelings toward interacting with the police in the participants' respective communities were mostly positive. In some cases, the participants' positive or negative feelings were attributed to personal experiences in the past, specific relationships with specific officers, or hinged upon the type of situation being handled and the type of officer responding. Shaquanna stated that she loved talking to the police in her neighborhood. "If I see them, I speak. They speak. . . . I don't have a problem." Shaquanna also shared that after interacting with police officers when her son was murdered, her feelings about interacting with police shifted because she felt that the officers assigned to her son's case "really cared" and she saw that it was "not just a job for them." Dee reported a similar experience in that her previous beliefs about police officers shifted based on her interactions during the investigation of her son's murder. Dee also remarked that she felt the police were important, needed, and were there for safety. Isabelle stated she had "no problem" interacting with them because she has interacted with most of them in the past.

Tanya's overall feeling toward interacting with police in her community was expressed in a word she chose—"Iffy." Tanya explained that how a situation plays out depends on what the issue is (acts such as traffic accidents and vandalism usually have better outcomes than more serious cases), depends on the officer (how the officer acts and treats the citizens), and how the citizen has been treated in the past by the police. In

terms of how the officer acts and treats citizens, Holiday echoed this sentiment when she stated, "The police are somewhat helpful, but sometimes, it feels like you're another statistic and they just don't care." The participants also had varying perceptions of police interaction regarding a child's gun-related arrest.

      Tanya. Tanya described the course of her day leading up to a late-night knock on her door by two police officers asking to speak with her son. She described the interaction as "not comfortable" and stated that the police officers were "not nice at all." She described one officer as "stand-offish" and the other as a "Rambo type" who was "going to get to the bottom of this." Tanya said that the next six months to one year after her son's arrest was "like a nightmare." On a personal level, Tanya shared the following:

> It was just such a nightmare, and some of the officers knew where I was coming from. I was like "It's my son's birthday . . ." It was so messed up. It was so messy. I thought I was going to end up in the state hospital. Oh, it was just so much. Just thinking about it—I thought I was gonna lose my mind. My son's 17 years old. A murder. But anyway, that was my first encounter. It wasn't a good one. They're never good ones, but . . .

In Tanya's experience, throughout the process of her son's arrest and case, she thought how she perceived the officers and her experience "depended on the officer." She found that some were more understanding than others, and when those officers addressed her, she "believed them" and was willing to work with them. On the contrary, officers whom she perceived were "giving [her] attitude" did not compel her to cooperate with them.

When asked whether she thought the officers did anything well, Tanya took some time to think. Ultimately, she said, "Nothing stood out." When asked what she perceived the officers did not do well, Tanya expressed that the primary thing to her was that they did not make her feel comfortable. Tanya explained what she meant in greater detail:

> You know, make me feel like you understand where I'm coming from. It depends on how you [the officers] approach the situation. If you want to help people, then you gotta make people feel—especially parents, you know? I know my son is in trouble. I'm a single, working mom. I can't watch him 24/7. But he's still my son.

Concerning her interactions with police for her son's gun crime, Tanya stated that overall she knew the officers "were doing their job" and they had "heard it all"; however, Tanya still felt that officers could not treat every case as though they fit "one mold" because "not everybody is the same." In general, Tanya believed that officers needed to "tone it down with everybody and make everybody feel comfortable enough to open up," or they risk "losing out on a lot" in terms of cooperation and information from the community.

Dee. Dee shared that, although her son had been arrested for a gun crime, her encounters with the police throughout the process were "very positive." Dee felt that her interactions were positive because of how she was treated. On the day her son was arrested, the police told her "exactly what had happened" and "educated [her] on the next steps of what would happen in terms of arraignment and court." Dee remarked that she felt the police "respected [her] as a mother" and noted that it took having her son arrested for a gun crime for her to change her view of the police. Dee credited this experience for being the impetus to work within her community to make positive changes in police-

citizen interactions. She had always had strong ties to her community, and with her desire

to change police-citizen actions therein, Dee began to put forth a message to her

neighbors. Dee explained:

> One of the ways I was able to change some of the views was to say to people,
>
> "You trust me. If I trust them and you trust me, you follow my lead because I trust
>
> them." That was one way. And it was effective for me.

Dee's impression of how the officers interacted with her was positive. Dee felt that the

officers and detectives were "professional, honest, and open." Dee continued to say:

> I already had thought, "okay, this is gonna be a really bad experience," so I was
>
> gonna put my defense mechanisms up, and here we go—completely opposite. I
>
> was never expecting to be talked to that way, which was a very positive thing for
>
> me.

Dee believed that the officers communicated well, and she cited communication as the

key to a good experience. She also believed that the officers were understanding,

receptive, and respectful. Dee recalled a moment in her encounter:

> They were understanding. I'll never forget the one officer said, "I totally
>
> understand you're upset. But just give us a chance to . . ." You know, the
>
> reception—he was very receptive to what I was saying.

Dee stated that in her case, she could not think of anything she would have liked to be

handled differently; however, she knows that not everyone has an experience like hers.

Suzanne. Suzanne received news about her son's arrest for a gun crime while she was at work. She described the visceral reaction she had as she tried to process her son's situation:

> My heart dropped down to my stomach. It dropped down to my stomach. I couldn't even focus the rest of the day. I didn't know what it meant. I just didn't know what it meant.

Suzanne described the weeks following her son's arrest as confusing, overwhelming, and uncertain. To determine what was going to happen to him, Suzanne began asking questions of the police despite her fear of being seen as "a bother":

> They [the police] weren't too bad, but you know I never got the specific things that went down the day he was arrested. I never got that. Nobody really had the time. I was just one of those whiny mothers.

She recalled that when an officer explained to her that this was a felony case and that her son was definitely "going away," that is when it "hit [her]." Suzanne stated she "hasn't been the same since."

Suzanne shared that she had family members who were police officers, and her mother was a corrections officer, so she did know what police were up against and felt that she possessed an understanding of how they may have viewed her son's situation. She did note that she sensed once the police knew her son had a family and some backing behind him, they seemed to be more "supportive" of her and her son's case.

When asked whether she felt there was anything specific the police did not do well in handling the case, Suzanne shared the following:

They didn't pay attention to the parent. They just didn't. I was just— I was the loser's parent. That's how it felt. Nobody really got ahold of me and said, "Listen—this is what's going on with your kid, and you need to know this." You know it's pretty much like, "Oh! Here comes another kid." It was just—you know, like a common thing. To me, it wasn't common, but to them, it was very common, you know? It was weird. I needed someone's shoulder to cry on, and I didn't have that. What do I do next? The cops would—"What do you mean, what do you do next? Get your son some help"—that kind of thing.

Suzanne reported that after she had some time to process what was happening, albeit with limited information from the police, she found resolve. She realized that there was nothing she could do; the police were now the parent in a sense. Suzanne told herself that they would "get through this one way or another." She opted to move on, not talk about it, and pray that her son got better.

Isabelle. Isabelle was a life-long resident of her community and said that she had interacted with most of the cops. She outlined that overall, she was comfortable with them, and this remained true when interacting with the police regarding her son's arrest for a gun crime. In her son's case, he was told by a detective that he could bring a gun to the station to turn in, no questions asked, as part of a gun buy-back program. When her son brought the gun to the station, the detective he made the agreement with was not working. Due to miscommunication, her son was arrested for criminal possession of a weapon by other officers. Isabelle immediately spoke with the arresting officers and explained the situation to them:

When the officers arrested him, he was telling them, "I was supposed to bring it to the detective." They didn't want to hear that, because "Oh, we got an arrest. We got another gun off the street." So, I being me, went and spoke to the detective, and it took a while, but they straightened everything out.

Overall, Isabelle believed that the police were respectful, but they should have listened to her and her son. Isabelle thought that her interaction with the police in this instance and in other instances were different from interactions that most single mothers have because of her familiarity with them and the strategies she had devised for better outcomes:

If I can't get it done, I will start at the bottom and work my way to the top. And if it doesn't work like that, sometimes, I have to start at the top and work my way to the bottom. But see, we're not gonna give me a run-around. A lot of single mothers don't know what to do. And if you don't know what to do, you are going to end up with astronomical bail. Because they know you're a poor person, and you won't be able to make it. I had the resources, whereas a lot of other women don't.

Shaquanna. Shaquanna spoke with the police before her son was arrested. She was familiar with most of the police officers in her community. After the police explained to her about her son's situation, she requested that they allow her to bring her son to them. They agreed, and Shaquanna brought him to the police station. She explained, "I'd rather bring him in and be there when they ask questions or whatever, instead of them picking him up, and him fighting and not know what's going on."

Something that stood out to Shaquanna about this interaction with the police was that they respected her wishes. Shaquanna also expressed mutual respect for the officers and stated her philosophy with her son was always, "If he's wrong, he's wrong," and if so, he must do what he has to do with the police to make up for his judgment. Shaquanna said she would always be by her son's side regardless, but she would let him know that he was wrong to do what he had done.

When asked if there was anything she thought the officers could have done differently in her son's case, Shaquanna replied, "On my behalf, no—honestly."

Holiday. In terms of how the police interacted with Holiday and handled her son's case, she shared thoughts on what she believed the police did well and what they did not do well.

Holiday thought that the police were "okay" with her, but in terms of their work, they did not "investigate hard enough" and put her son's case "on the back burner." Holiday also presented an alternative to the situation:

> I mean, okay, I can't say it's all their fault. Nowadays, you don't have people coming forward. So, I can't blame it on them. They can't do anything with no information. So, they don't have any information they pretty much can't move forward. I should be mindful of that.

Holiday also shared that her interaction was especially positive with one officer in particular:

He's great. You know if I leave a message for him to call me back, he does. And

he calls to check up on me from time to time. I have a good rapport with him. I

want to say I feel that he does care and that he's trying.

Holiday also discussed that growing up in her community, she used to know the police

officers by face, and sometimes by name. She thought that was not the case as often

anymore within the community.

Tasha. Tasha stated that she was comfortable interacting with the police in her

neighborhood normally, but on the occasion of her son's arrest for a gun crime, her

experience was not favorable. Tasha explained:

It was stressful. It was horrible because they came and ransacked my house

looking for a gun. We didn't have nowhere to go and all that. They treated us like

shit. Made us stand outside and everything. Horrible.

Tasha explained that there was one officer who treated her well and was "real nice"

during the entire process; however, "the rest were jerks." She also expressed that there

were a couple of officers in general with whom she was comfortable, but the rest of them

she "has no words for."

Tasha could not point to anything that she thought the officers did well overall,

but strongly believed that they should have handled her son's case differently. "I think

they should have looked at things a little more deeply and questioned everybody that was

involved, which they didn't. I never understood that."

Themes From Research Question 1

  Officer disposition and perceived influence of previous police interaction. The first theme that arose from RQ1 was that how single mothers thought about their interaction with the police concerning the arrest of their child depended foremost on the officer's approach and demeanor. In instances where single mothers perceived that the officer cared about the situation and was approachable, perceptions were positive. If the officer was perceived as rude, disrespectful, and unwilling to answer questions, perceptions were negative.

  Another factor that influenced the perceptions of single mothers consisted of previous interactions with police. The mothers who disclosed they had previous interactions with police officers in the community mostly reported a positive experience. These mothers also felt comfortable speaking with the officers regarding their child's arrest and several named specific officers with whom they regularly communicated. Mothers who disclosed past mistreatment by the police reported mostly negative perceptions of their experiences with officers when their children were arrested.

  Using the same words used by the single mothers in this study, a perceived lack of "respect," "honesty," and "open communication" resulted in less cooperation from the single mother. Conversely, respectful, open interactions resulted in positive outcomes and perceptions.

  Focus on the single mother. The second theme that arose from RQ1 was a consistently expressed need to be "put at ease" and made to feel "safe" and "comfortable" in a situation where a child is arrested. Some participants thought the officers did

facilitate a feeling of safety and comfort. The participants who did not feel this way also shared memories of feeling "confused," "fearful," and being "overwhelmed" while interacting with officers.

Another consistently expressed need of the single mothers was the need for information. It was important to know what the next steps would be in their child's case, who they could contact to ask questions as they arose, and information on where they could go for counseling, support, and guidance.

Divergent coping strategies. Some of the stories relayed by the participants about their experiences with police when their children were arrested for a gun crime included how they coped with the situation. In most cases where single mothers had past interaction with officers, they coped and moved forward pragmatically. Some strategies included working with the police to get their child into custody safely, devising plans for home life and other children, and a resolve to move forward from the matter.

In other situations, single mothers described visceral reactions they had during and after the experience. They also regarded their child's arrest as a life-changing event and, therefore, employed strategies to cope with the experience as such. These included counseling, relocating, and managing feelings of guilt and stress.

Tough love in partnership with police. Part of many interactions with police included descriptions of how the single mother worked with the police to ensure the best outcome possible. "Tough love" approaches to parenting were exhibited, including sentiments toward having to "pay the price" for committing a crime and leaving older children in police custody so that they would reflect on their actions. Mothers described

discussing their child's pending arrest with police officers and, in a few cases, making a deal with the police that would allow the mother to bring her child to the police station in lieu of the police going to find and arrest the child. Mothers relayed a need to feel as though they had some control over the situation and, subsequently, wanted to be a part of the process. These mothers also expressed a similar sentiment of motherhood loyalty to their children while, at the same time, an understanding of the necessity of working with police and of their child having to accept the consequences of their actions.

Research Question 2

Research Question 2 was, In what ways do single mothers believe police can improve their approach toward mitigating youth gun crimes in their community? Based upon their observations and experiences, what could be done differently? I asked study participants to share their beliefs about how well police were dealing with youth gun violence in their communities. They were also asked to share any thoughts on what they would like to see done differently. Most participants expressed recognition of police efforts compared to the extent of the youth gun violence problem in their communities. Other sentiments of dissatisfaction were presented, followed by suggestions for improvement. Additionally, participants were asked to imagine, in the role of chief of police, how they would instruct officers to interact with single mothers, specifically in a situation where her child was arrested for a gun-related offense. This exercise yielded several suggestions.

Tanya. Tanya expressed that she sincerely thought the police were trying; however, given the extent of the youth gun crime problem in her community, she believed it was not possible for the police to "stay on top of it." Tanya explained:

> It's so overwhelming right now to this day, it's impossible for them to stay on top of it. It's totally out of control right now. And I know this personally. You know the young males, they can get a gun like that. They can get a gun, they can sell drugs, and there's no way for the police to stay on top of it. They just can't.

When asked about how she would instruct officers to interact with single mothers experiencing the arrest of a child for a gun crime, Tanya answered "compassion" immediately:

> You go right in and make them feel like you care about the whole situation—you understand the mother, you understand that this is her child and that she's concerned. You can feel that. You feel for her. And you want to help the both of them. "I understand, I don't want you to think I'm here to hurt your child, I want to help you in any way that I can, but I have to do my job." Go in with some kind of feeling so that everybody's not ready for the boxing ring.

Tanya also expressed that in general, the officers "need to tone it down a little and talk to them like people."

Dee. Dee thought the police in her community were "doing well." She stated that it could always be better. However, she did not blame the officers for lack of effort. Dee highlighted political issues and funding allotment as major barriers to improving police capabilities toward mitigating youth gun crime. Dee explained:

Because of the lack of money, we haven't been able to do such a great job. I do

think we have competent individuals who are in our county right now that could

absolutely get a handle on this, but we are unable to do so, and funding plays a

major role.

Dee also expressed that she would "love to see the city hire a gang prevention

specialist" but recognized the funding for positions such as these was not there.

In terms of instructing police officers on how to interact with single mothers,

Dee's responses centered around empathy and respect:

Be very respectful. Address them by Ms., Mrs., because I think that absolutely

shows the respect. Be empathetic when you are dealing with the situation

regardless of what happened because that's the only way you're ever gonna

establish a positive relationship and possibly get the answers that you're seeking.

Suzanne. When asked how well she believed police were dealing with youth gun

crime in her community, Suzanne responded by considering the position of the police

officers:

You know what? They're up against so much. I know things that go on in the

streets. I know the crap that goes on. And I can't imagine— I couldn't imagine

being a police officer, not in this day and age. Anything can happen. Anything

can happen. A lot of violence. It's so dangerous.

To improve how officers interact with single mothers in gun-related arrest cases, Suzanne

prioritized resources, and counseling. She felt strongly that officers should have a sheet

of resources for mothers to seek assistance in navigating the whole legal process. She felt

the same about counseling resources for the parent. In terms of how the parent is treated, Suzanne offered the following:

> Handle the parents with kid gloves because nobody really knows what's going on in that house and what's really going on with the kid. The child is a troublemaker. That's what the police see, but there's something else going on.

Isabelle. Isabelle shared that she believed the police needed to be more proactive in handling the issue in her community. She perceived that, for various reasons, the police "slack on investigations." Isabelle explained:

> I notice that once police slack on investigations, when it starts getting warmer, all hell breaks loose. I think that during cold weather and hot weather, they need to stay on the policing as far as weapons. If you hear somebody has a gun, pull 'em over because they might just have one, and they might be on their way to doing something to somebody. You have to keep on the community. And you have to, no matter who it is, black, white, Chinese, if you hear that a kid got a gun, you gotta get that gun. Check 'em. Just don't give up because it's cold and you think nothing's gonna happen cos weather don't stop crime.

Isabelle said that another challenge that police and single mothers must overcome is eliminating the stigma of being viewed as a "rat" or a "snitch" if seen speaking with police. Isabelle thought that when you care about your community and share information with police that they should know, "You're not a rat. You're a safety guard."

The advice Isabelle would give police officers on interacting with single mothers of children arrested for gun crimes was as follows:

Listen to the parent. Some of us lie. Some single mothers lie. You know, we want

our kid home. But then you still have to listen to the parent. You can't shrug her

off because what she might be trying to do, especially with the younger kids, 14

and 15, what she might be doing is, in a round-about way, reaching out for help. If

you brush her off, she's not gonna be cooperative with you the next time

something happens. She might know what happened and won't talk to you

because you didn't listen to her when she was reaching out to you in that round-

about way.

Shaquanna. Shaquanna felt positive about the police efforts toward mitigating

gun crime but also felt as though there were not enough officers to truly deal with the

issue. She explained:

I think they doing pretty good, but I just wish they can get them off the street. I

think they need more officers, though. Really. On the street. I'm just being honest.

Because they're over here on the south side, you better believe all the dramas

gonna go on on the north side. There's not enough of them to cover this area.

Specific to how police officers should interact with single mothers who have had a child

arrested for a gun crime, Shaquanna said:

Don't wait. I think they should not only interact with single mothers when their

kids are in trouble, but they should, when they see parents on the street—"How

you doing? How's your day? Can I help you with something?" Don't just wait

until the child is in trouble and then want to interact with me.

Holiday. Holiday was not sure how well the police were handling the youth gun crime issue in her community. In terms of interacting with single mothers on the issue, Holiday echoed the sentiments of Dee and Isabelle not to give up on cases. She also stated the importance of empathy, straightforwardness, and honesty.

Tasha. Tasha thought that the police were not handling the youth gun crime issue well in her community but did not want to provide further details. To improve interactions with single mothers on the issue, Tasha stated that, unlike what she experienced, she would like to see the police act more fairly.

If they are not too sure who did it, they need to get whoever was involved and charge them with the same thing until they find out who really did it.

Tasha further explained that greater trust would be established if the officers listened to the mothers. She expressed that the mothers know their kids best, and they know "what's happening in the streets for the most part," so gaining trust and respect by listening could net valuable information toward solving cases.

Themes From Research Question 2

Recognition of police efforts. When asked how well they believed police were dealing with the gun crime issue in their communities, single mothers expressed that they believed the police were "trying," "doing the best that they can," and several also mentioned the specific recognition and understanding of what police "are up against." Throughout each interview, the scope of the youth gun crime issue from the perspective of the participants was relayed as "out of control," "the worst it has ever been," "overwhelming," and to the point that the police cannot "stay on top of it."

Serious attention and funding to address youth gun crime. Participants explained that for police and community members to mitigate youth gun crime, resources are needed. In addition to overall funding, suggestions of hiring more officers, hiring gang prevention specialists, and getting the attention of lawmakers so that they truly understand the scope of the issue were expressed. One participant stated that she thought their children and situations did not matter to lawmakers in the state capital because it did not directly impact them. She thought that it would take something bad happening to lawmakers or someone they love before they would allocate appropriate resources to address youth gun crime in poorer communities.

"Slacking cannot happen". The desire for police to remain consistent in following up on tips and information and not to give up on cases was reiterated across interviews. An approach of tenacity was suggested, especially when rumors are shared with the police about which kids may have guns. Mothers felt that these kids and their friends should always be checked.

Another concept that emerged was that, when the weather is bad, specifically in winter months, there is a perception that people can get away with things because they think that officers are laxer. The overall sentiment was best summarized by one mother, who stated, "slacking cannot happen. They have to stay on the community no matter what."

Finally, mothers expressed a wish that officers not give up on cases no matter what. The concept that the truth is known by someone in the community was relayed and

that giving up sends the wrong message to other kids who are involved or thinking of becoming involved in gun-related crime.

The remaining themes from RQ2 stemmed from single mothers' thoughts on how they would instruct officers to interact with single mothers when their child is arrested for a gun crime.

Placing the parent at ease. Participants had different ideas about how to make a single mother in a similar situation feel comfortable and safe but, regardless of the method, this theme was present in every interview. Common ideas included a calm approach by officers, "toning it down," and speaking to single mothers "like normal people." Other ideas included being respectful, honest, communicative, supportive, and providing resources for the next steps and counseling.

Some participants also expressed that officers who were empathetic toward the single mother and the child served as a great comfort in a difficult time. Officers who were communicative and willing to answer questions and offer guidance were also cited as comforting.

Respectful treatment yields positive outcomes. Respectful treatment was mentioned numerous times as a method for building better relationships between community members and police. One participant shared that she had interactions with officers who were respectful toward her and officers who were not. When the officers were not respectful, she said she reacted by not cooperating or providing information.

Respectful treatment was also referred to as a means to build trust, which then yields better communication, cooperation, and removes barriers to future information-sharing between officers and single mothers.

Familiarity. Several participants made the point that officers should be more familiar to single mothers in the community. This included increasing everyday interactions by inquiring with single mothers how their children are doing, asking how things have been in the neighborhood, and showing a general interest in what is going on in the community. The primary message was that police officers should not wait to interact with single mothers until their children are in trouble; rather, police officers should interact with them regularly when there is no trouble, fear, or danger. Ultimately, the familiarity that is established will make mothers more likely to ask questions and share information with police because it is "a lot easier to go to somebody that you know or someone that is familiar that you know you can trust."

Research Question 3

Research Question 3 was, In what ways do single mothers believe police can collaborate with them as stakeholders in the fight against youth violence to improve prevention of youth involvement with gun violence? Many of the suggestions given for partnering efforts between police and single mothers in the community involved coming together regularly and starting groups for support and information-sharing purposes. Other suggestions called for a more personal approach in terms of the quality of the interaction and establishing trust and cooperation.

Tanya. Tanya said that the police must interact more frequently—and better—with single mothers. She thought, "it all starts with the parent." In her community, Tanya recognized many parents were trying to keep their kids off the street. She suggested forming a group where parents and police could talk openly about what was going on with youths in the community.

Dee. Dee also suggested a regular monthly forum for parents and police. Dee would like to see a focus group of single mothers form so that they could get organized and present viable suggestions to the police. She remarked that single mothers were "the powerful ones out in the community," and it was imperative that their voices were heard on this issue. She also recommended more community involvement with single mothers consistently to gain trust and familiarity with the local police. Dee believed that the perception of single mothers in her community was that if they called the police with information about youth gun activity, the youth in question is going to get "beat up" by the police. She made it clear that it was a real and constant fear among mothers she knows. If mothers were to get to know a few officers on a more personal basis, Dee believed they would feel more compelled to inform the police of gun activity because there would be more trust and openness between the parties.

Suzanne. Suzanne's suggestions centered on building personal relationships with police officers:

> You know the police need to be a little bit more regular, you know? Like regular faces. I mean, I'm not expecting Mayberry, like Andy Griffith, but having the police officers not be so intimidating and kind of interact on an everyday basis out

there. And be regular. Be those regular faces. Be familiar. I think it's a lot easier

to go to somebody that is familiar that you know you can trust. And trust is a big

issue.

Isabelle. At the time of our interview, Isabelle had just read an article about

another nearby police department that hosted monthly "Coffee with a Cop" meet-ups.

She was impressed by this concept and thought it could truly work in her community:

I mean, if you could sit down with a cop, you don't have to tell them everything

you know, but you could learn to get a feel for them. Learn if you can trust this

cop. Learn where his mentality is. Also, while you're learning him, he's learning

you. So, this way, you can come together and maybe prevent some of these things

with these kids out here. Because you're learning each other's integrity. Coffee

with Cops. Learning who is policing your community. Get to know one another. I

like that. I thought that was a pretty good concept. Who knows what would

happen here?

Isabelle outlined one potential barrier to implementing this program in her community,

and that was the "rat" and "snitch" stigma she previously mentioned as something that

must be overcome.

That mentality of, "oh, rat." If you are seen talking to the police. And that's

what's wrong. The rat. Oh, that's a rat. He's a rat. She's a rat. Why are you

downgrading somebody who's trying to help your community?

Shaquanna. Shaquanna believed that progress could be made if the single

mothers and police officers worked together to provide activities for youth in the

community. "If they had a game room or something and put officers there, what could go wrong?" Shaquanna said that she realized there were not enough officers for this type of endeavor, but also thought that a big difference could be made toward relationship-building with single mothers if officers simply interacted with them when their children were not in trouble:

> Just walk up to them, and—"how you doing?" Make somebody feel comfortable to want to talk to them about their kid or what they think their kid is doing or whatever the case may be. Don't just speak to them because their kid is in trouble. Don't just stand there like you're better than them cos you have a badge and a gun, cos anybody could carry a gun.

Holiday. Holiday would have liked to see the police offer talks to single mothers and other parents about what was going on in the community. She also thought that police could offer advice on what signs to be aware of regarding the ability of kids to obtain guns, especially in the case of single mothers who have male children. Holiday explained:

> I think giving lectures on—especially to younger single moms nowadays having young males growing up—to be mindful when their children go out, to know who their friends are. And I want to say, sometimes, check their bookbags and coats because mothers don't know, ya know? And just because they have their bookbag doesn't mean they are going to school. A lot of them nowadays carry bookbags just to conceal a weapon. So, teach mothers to be mindful—mindful of their children.

Tasha. Tasha would also have liked to see programs for the kids designed by single mothers and community police officers. Part of Tasha's program would be trust-building between youth and police. Her strategy also included a mandated component:

> I think they should have a lot more programs for these kids. Like dealing with the police and gaining trust for them. And as far as out here, the gun violence is like on a hundred. They should have programs where they *make* kids participate. Like start with every single kid on probation. Make them do it.

Themes From Research Question 3

Parent-police groups. The majority of study participants believed that the most effective way for police to collaborate with single mothers was to form a group that regularly met, comprised of parents and police officers. The suggested the formats and foci of these groups varied. One idea was to have a monthly "meet-up" in which police and parents shared information and ask questions. Another idea was to have more formal lectures by the police on issues related to keeping youth away from guns, narcotics, and violence. One participant championed the "Coffee with a Cop" initiative. She especially liked this concept because it would allow single mothers the opportunity not only to get to know police officers in their neighborhoods but allow them to develop a trusting relationship through which they could communicate openly. Most participants viewed the ability to openly communicate with local police officers as the key to preventing youth gun crime in their communities.

A final sentiment recorded regarding police-parent groups was the need for single mothers to be heard on the issue of youth gun violence. As one mother remarked, "No one ever asks us. No one ever hears our voices."

Youth-focused initiatives. Participants suggested that single mothers and police should work together to identify and/or create safe locations for youth to congregate and partake in organized activities. Several of the mothers expressed that there was nothing for youths to do in the community and that many of them were getting into trouble absent structured activities. One suggestion was to set up a game room and have officers there at set times to interact with the local youths. As mentioned previously, it was much preferred that officers interact with the community on a day-to-day basis when there was no cause for concern to build trust and establish communication.

Summary

This study was designed to explore the experiences of single mothers who had encountered police interaction over the arrest of their children for a gun-related crime. This study also sought to capture single mothers' ideas toward improving the youth gun crime issue in their communities and working with police officers to attain those ends.

Three research questions were devised to gain knowledge on the aforementioned goals of the study and served as the guide to examine:

RQ1: What is the experience of single mothers with children who were involved with gun crime toward the use and function of police on this issue?

RQ2: In what ways do single mothers believe police can improve their approach toward mitigating youth gun crimes in their community? Based upon their observations and experiences, what could be done differently?

RQ3: In what ways do single mothers believe police can collaborate with them as stakeholders in the fight against youth violence to improve prevention of youth involvement with gun violence?

Major themes that emerged from RQ1 included how single mothers felt about their interactions with officers depended greatly on how the officer conducted himself and how he treated the single mother. Another theme highlighted the need for some focus to be placed on the single mother in juvenile gun crime arrests to ensure questions are answered, and guidance and clarity are maintained throughout the process. Single mothers also developed strategies for working through their child's arrest, including working with police in some instances to maintain a level of control over the situation.

Themes from RQ2 included an overall belief that police were trying to mitigate youth gun crime, but with the equal feeling that police faced significant challenges to this, particularly in terms of funding and legislative attention. While most participants agreed the police were making efforts in their communities, they also thought changes could be made in terms of increasing follow-through on tips and cold cases, focusing on being respectful toward community members to achieve positive outcomes and to be familiar to community members through everyday interactions with them when there was no crime, trouble, or fear.

In terms of RQ3, suggestions for more effective collaboration with police to mitigate youth gun crime, single mothers suggested several formats for police-parent groups, and structured youth activities in the community to give kids something to do as well as an opportunity to get to know local police officers.

In the next chapter, this research provides a framework to interpret the study's findings, limitations, recommendations, and social change implications.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

Despite the frequency of interactions between single mothers and police in HCCs, few researchers have studied such interactions. This lack of research includes interactions involving gun-crime-related arrests of youths from single-female-headed households. The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of single mothers with police as they relate to the arrest of their children for a gun crime. Stakeholders may be able to use the study findings to improve how police agencies engage with single mothers to mitigate youth gun violence in HCCs.

Seven single mothers shared their experiences interacting with police when their sons were arrested for a gun crime. They shared perspectives on what they thought police did well and did not do well in the process of their sons' arrests. The study participants also discussed how they believed police were handling the issue of youth gun violence in their communities and how police could collaborate with single mothers to mitigate youth gun violence. I anticipate that the findings from this study could facilitate social change by highlighting the important role of single mothers in HCCs and why it is beneficial for police and single mothers to collaborate on addressing youth offending, specifically youth gun violence. The findings from this study could be used by community policing divisions and stakeholder community organizations as a starting point to incorporate single mothers into youth violence prevention efforts.

Twelve themes emerged from the data: (a) officer disposition and previous interactions influenced perceptions, (b) need for focus on the single mother, (c) divergent

coping strategies, (d) tough love in partnership with police, (e) recognition of police efforts, (f) serious attention and funding to address youth gun violence, (g) "slacking cannot happen," (h) placing the parent at ease, (i) respectful treatment results in positive outcomes, (j) familiarity, (k) parent-police groups, and (l) youth-focused initiatives. k The remainder of the themes were novel and contributed microb-level accounts of specific experiences single mothers had with police officers and how they understood their specific experiences. I begin this chapter by elaborating on the thematic findings of the study, both historically supported and newly discovered.

Interpretation of the Findings

Using a phenomenological individual interview design, I asked the participating single mothers to share their lived experiences of interactions with police when their child was arrested for a gun crime. The conceptual framework for this study was Husserl's transcendental phenomenology. Limited research related to interactions between single mothers and police, and specifically the unexplored interaction between the parties concerning youth gun crime arrests, exists. Therefore, the transcendental phenomenology framework allowed for study participants to share new information from a highly personalized perspective.

Officer Disposition and Previous Police Encounters Influence Perception

In the literature regarding successful police-citizen interactions, how the officer approaches and handles situations and people are consistently cited as major factors in how citizen perceive their experience with police (see Bell, 2016; Church et al., 2009). Another leading influence on the public's perception of police encounters is past

experiences interacting with police. When past experiences were satisfactory, and interactions were perceived as respectful and honest, participants' perceptions of police encounters were positive.

The officer's approach toward the single mother and past experiences, both positive and negative, with officers were leading factors influencing the perception of the police in this study. Single mothers, such as Dee, Shaquanna, and Isabelle, reflected upon their past experiences with police officers in their community during their interviews. These mothers reported feeling comfortable working with police because they had positive encounters with them previously. In the specific instances of their sons' arrests for a gun crime, these mothers also reported that officers were respectful and communicated openly and clearly.

Tanya's and Tasha's experiences involved officers whom they perceived as rude, disrespectful, and uncaring. They attributed negative perceptions of how police handled their sons' arrests to these unfavorable interactions. Tanya's believed that she had a "good cop/bad cop" situation. She specifically noted the differences between the two officers during her interview. The officer who was more communicative and respectful was favored over the other officer whom Tanya described as "Rambo-like" and short with her. To summarize her thoughts on how the officer approached her, Tanya used the expression, "tone it down." Suzanne and Holiday reported a sense of being treated like "the next case," a "number," or a "statistic." In these instances, the mothers were left feeling confused and frustrated. Church et al. (2009) reported similar parental feelings toward the juvenile justice system process.

Several of the mothers interviewed highlighted specific officers who worked on their sons' cases and left a significantly positive impression on them. Bell (2016) used the term *officer exceptionalism* in her study of how African American mothers selectively use police. In this study, stories of officer exceptionalism appeared to have a strong impact on how each mother felt about her police interaction and her child's arrest overall. Holiday shared that the officer who worked on her son's case and subsequent homicide still called to "checkup" on her. Shaquanna, who also eventually lost her son to gun violence, specifically named an officer whom she credited for being open and honest, keeping her informed, and getting her through difficult moments. Shaquanna still spoke with this officer regularly. Isabelle and Dee named specific officers whom they trusted and went to with questions and problems. They commended these officers for their past actions and for the way they handled their sons' arrests.

Need for Focus on the Single Mother

A consistent theme that arose across interviews was the single mothers' desire for help, guidance, and comfort in tangible and intangible ways. The mothers expressed a desire for clarity, resources, counseling, contacts, telephone numbers, and reliable information. Suzanne wished the officers had a sheet of paper they could have handed to her with vital information so that she could understand the process of what was going to happen to her son. She also expressed that she would have benefited from information on counseling for her family and herself.

A lack of understanding and clarity throughout the process was cited as a cause for stress among participants. The participating mothers wanted reassurance that their

questions would be answered and that they would be kept informed of every development in their sons' cases. These sentiments are consistent with the findings from previous studies related to successful perceptions and outcomes for parents navigating the justice system (Church et al., 2009; MacNeil et al., 2013). In these studies, participants consistently stated that open communication was critical as they navigated their childrens' processes through the system.

Divergent Coping Strategies

Study participants exhibited a duality in the strategies they used to cope with their sons' arrests. Mothers like Dee, Isabelle, Shaquanna, and Holiday, who reported past experiences with police, shared a strategy of holding their sons accountable and an attitude of getting through the situation pragmatically. These mothers reported engaging in cooperative efforts with the officers to maintain some control over their sons' outcomes. For example, Dee, Isabelle, and Shaquanna requested that the officers allow them to bring their sons to the police station, rather than having the police pick them up, to ensure their presence during questioning and proceedings. Isabelle imparted her theories on how to work effectively within the system. She noted that because she knew officers and knew how the system works, she thought that outcomes for her and her children had been favorable in the past. She acknowledged that she felt bad for single mothers who were not well versed in the system, and she stated that it was easy to take advantage of these mothers. Isabelle was direct in her assertion that her previous experiences and knowledge allowed her to remain calm anytime her sons had a police encounter. To be clear, Isabelle, Dee, and Shaquanna reported encounters with police for

various reasons and on various occasions in the past, and all reported feeling comfortable speaking and working with officers.

Other study participants, including Suzanne and Tanya, relayed that their sons' arrests were life-changing events for them. These mothers shared stories of visceral reactions they had when they learned of their sons' arrests and how the process would unfold. Particularly in Suzanne's case, a lack of familiarity with the judicial process and a lack of interaction with police on her own behalf and on her son's behalf appeared to add to feelings of confusion, stress, and uneasiness. To cope with their sons' arrests, these mothers described going through emotional difficulty but finally arriving at a point where they put their feelings aside and moved forward. Nonetheless, both mothers indicated this event "changed [their] lives forever."

Tough Love in Partnership With Police

Mothers in this study engaged in similar parenting strategies as parents in previous studies that were designed to understand specific challenges to parenting in HCCs. Increases in parental monitoring and screening friends (Voisin et al., 2016) were cited by mothers in this study as a method to shield their children from criminal activity and to avoid police intervention. All of the mothers in the study reported knowing that their sons were making unfavorable choices in activities and with whom they were associating prior to their arrests. Concerning this knowledge, the mothers reported unanimously that "tough love" informed their approaches to managing their sons' behaviors and decisions. Ultimately, the "tough love" approach extended to cooperating with police when their sons were arrested. In terms of cooperating with police, the

mothers reported sentiments of "raising [their] sons right" and to "know the difference between right and wrong." They expressed their loyalty to their sons and the idea of standing by their sides through the process. However, they also expressed recognition of the fact that their sons had to face their punishments because of their choices. In turn, the mothers expressed support and understanding for the police and acknowledged that "they have a job to do."

Tough love in collaboration with police as a theme also appeared in the mothers' favorable responses to working with police within their communities to mitigate youth gun violence. This is explored later in the discussion.

Recognition of Police Efforts

Throughout the interviews, regardless of how well or not so well the mothers thought police were dealing with youth gun crime, there was a perception that the police were putting forth the effort to combat it. Several mothers made remarks on how severe the issue was and expressed an understanding that the police were up against a lot in terms of stemming the problem. Isabelle and Tasha pointed out the ease with which youth could acquire guns. Tanya shared that she "knows personally" that the young males in her community can easily get a gun and drugs and that she thought that, although the police were trying, the problems were too overwhelming. Dee believed that the officers were doing a lot of work in her community to mitigate youth gun crime but thought that, without funding and political backing, officers would not be able to impact the issue significantly.

Serious Attention and Funding to Address Youth Gun Violence

In the literature review, several examples of how HCCs have stemmed youth gun violence were offered. Examples of empirically proven efforts required community, police, and political attention in addition to adequate funding. Braga and Weisburd (2012) studied focused-deterrence strategies. These strategies incorporate stakeholders to focus upon and eliminate a specific issue in a community. Focused-deterrence strategies have been used in cities such as Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Camden, New Jersey; and Wilmington, Delaware, to address the issue of youth gun violence (Braga & Weisburd, 2012). Several of the mothers in this study proposed a similar concept to be employed in their community to deal with the youth gun violence problem.

The concept of specific resource allocation to the issue of youth gun violence was mentioned by several mothers in their interviews. Dee thought that on a local level, there were willing politicians, police, and community constituents; but what she envisioned would require state or national funding. According to Dee, who was a community activist, there had not been any success in gaining the attention of lawmakers and politicians at the state level. For example, there was no national program, such as Operation Ceasefire, happening in her community. The local police department did participate in the New York State Gun-Involved Violence Elimination (GIVE) Initiative. Under this initiative, state funding was given to police agencies in HCCs to be "used for equipment, overtime, training, technical support, and personnel, such as crime analysts and prosecutors," all focused on gun crimes (NYSDCJS, 2020). Overall, the sentiment in this study was that the entire community must work together on this issue and on youth

safety in general to see real change. This sentiment folded into the mothers' willingness to collaborate with police. The desire to see more interaction between the police and parents and police and youth are discussed later. In Isabelle's words, fixing the issue of youth gun violence in her community will "take a village."

"Slacking Cannot Happen."

A theme that emerged from this study originated in a shared perception that, for various reasons, police sometimes "slack off" on youth gun crime and case follow-ups. Several of the mothers suggested that more aggressive follow-up on tips and leads needs to occur. Isabelle stated that she would like to see police take every tip seriously when they receive information that a juvenile has a gun. She urged police to "check them all," including their friends, because the kids tend to pass off contraband to each other—guns included.

Another shared perception was that when the weather is cold or rainy, and especially in the winter, the police "slack off." Mothers perceived that, when the weather was cold, the police believed less crime will happen, so they were not as proactive.

Finally, a concerted effort toward following up on cases, even when they appeared to have no further leads, was paramount. The mothers recognized that there was a dearth of citizen cooperation in many gun-related cases, but, despite that, they thought the police should not give up under any circumstances.

Placing the Parent at Ease

Echoing research by Church et al. (2009) and MacNeil et al. (2013), the single mothers in this study reported feeling frustrated and confused at times during the process

of their child's arrest and their trajectory through the justice system. A strong message of wanting to feel comfortable, safe, and assured during the process was conveyed in this study. Responses suggested that officers should show compassion and present themselves as caring, honest, and helpful to the parent. According to the mothers, a large piece of "feeling at ease" was the belief that positive, respectful communication was achieved, and a clear path forward was established. The officer's approach, demeanor, perceived level of care, and willingness to communicate openly had a direct impact on whether the mother felt comfortable in each case. A secondary link emerged among mothers who felt comfortable/at ease and their level of willingness to cooperate with police in their sons' cases and in the future.

Respectful Treatment Yields Positive Outcomes

When police officers were perceived as disrespectful, rude, or insincere, it impacted the level of cooperation the single mothers were willing to put forth in assisting police with their children's arrest. Further, if the single mother felt disrespected, it impacted her attitude toward assisting the police in a general sense. Since the single mothers consistently referred to each other in terms of community members who were "in the know" about what was going on, it is posited that they were a valuable source of information in police investigations.

For single mothers such as Shaquanna, who stated that her interactions with police had been positive and respectful, information sharing and interacting with police became common. Shaquanna believed that both parties could benefit from increased trust and communication and that it ultimately keeps the community safer.

Familiarity

Drawing from the concept of Bell's (2016) "officer exceptionalism," another way in which police and single mothers have worked together successfully is in instances where the single mother has identified a specific officer whom she trusts and speaks with regularly. In the cases described by the single mothers in this study, the officers with whom they still had regular contact were officers who went above and beyond to make them feel comfortable, respected, and informed. The mothers also shared that they continued to contact these officers with information and questions pertaining to the general safety of their communities and especially their children. The concept of having one solid connection with an officer deemed trustworthy and honest was cited as important and valuable to the single mothers who shared this commonality. Dee, Isabelle, Shaquanna, and Holiday named specific officers in their interviews and were happy to share stories about what the officers did to render themselves trustworthy and reliable in their estimations. Some of these actions included checking consistently on the single mother, leaving voicemails to see how the mother and her family were doing, advocating for the mother and her children, and connecting the mother and children with helpful resources in the community. Shaquanna offered the advice to officers not to wait until a child was in trouble to connect with the parents in the community; officers should be connecting with parents when there is no trouble as a means to prevent it by establishing trusted pathways to share information.

Parent-Police Groups

When asked what the police could do to collaborate with single mothers in the

community on prevention efforts, every mother interviewed described a version of a

police-parent group. Some of the suggestions focused on lecture-based, informative

presentations by police officers on youth-related issues. Other suggestions were framed

as information-sharing—"give and take" interactions between police and parents. Isabelle

shared that she recently learned about the "Coffee with a Cop" initiative and thought that

would be a great way to meet officers and establish relationships with officers who would

be considered trustworthy in terms of the "officer exceptionalism" philosophy. Overall,

there was a recognized value in connecting and sharing information between mothers and

community police officers regularly.

Youth-Focused Initiatives

Another suggestion for mitigating youth gun crime was ensuring the youth in the

community had places to gather and the ability to engage in activities. Dee and Isabelle

recounted the former YMCA in their community. They both thought that since the

YMCA closed and all its affiliated programs ended, there had been no central gathering

place for the youth. They believed that this had a major negative impact on the

community. Shaquanna suggested opening a small center for games and activities that

would be frequented by community police officers. She saw this option as a way to "keep

tabs" on youths, and allow the youths and officers to get to know each other.

Findings in Relation to Husserl's Transcendental Phenomenology Framework

The literature on youth gun violence presents a dearth of knowledge on the lived experiences of single mothers; yet, the link between violent juvenile offenders from single-female-headed households persists (Sogar, 2017; Singh & Kiran, 2014; Marano, 2015). Transcendental phenomenological theory provided a framework through which to capture the lived experiences of the single mothers to gain new knowledge from their perspectives on interactions with police specific to youth gun crime.

Transcendental phenomenology was consciously chosen as a framework because of the ability it provided not only to capture the lived experiences of single mothers, but it also presented the experiences in their own words in the discussion results. The intention of this was to ensure that single mothers would now be represented in the literature on youth gun crime and, more so, that their voices were accurately recorded and presented where they were not previously in the scholarly literature.

Several of the mothers interviewed remarked that they felt positive about sharing their stories because they had never been asked about their feelings and perceptions on the matter. Four of the mothers were in contact after the interview to share that talking about their experience was "helpful" and "therapeutic." By asking open-ended questions, participants were able to share as much or as little as they chose and did so without signs of hesitation.

By using Husserl's transcendental phenomenology, the goal of capturing the essence of the single mothers' experiences was accomplished by taking advantage of the

freedom this framework provided for the single mothers to recount their experiences on their own terms.

Limitations

Due to the phenomenological nature of this study, this research did not result in definitive conclusions. Rather, the study results are findings from the personal lived experiences of single mothers in HCCs who had interacted with police at a time when their children were arrested for a gun crime.

The study took place in small cities in the Hudson Valley region of New York, so the sample excluded single mothers from suburban or rural areas and was geographically limited overall. The study sample was relatively homogenous, consisting of five African American mothers, one Hispanic mother, and one Caucasian mother. Participation was limited to single mothers who had the primary responsibility of parenting their children, and who interacted with the police when her child was arrested for a gun-related offense. Therefore, the study eliminated mothers who were not single and mothers, single or not single, who may have interacted with police over other juvenile arrests.

The researcher received a telephone call from a single father who was interested in participating in the study. Due to the parameters set for the study population, the father was excluded from participation. Therefore, single fathers who have had the same experience as the single mothers interviewed in this study were not included.

Finally, the single mothers interviewed reported interacting solely with male officers concerning the arrest of solely male children. Therefore, female officers and female youths were not studied.

Recommendations

One recommendation is to conduct this study in different cities, particularly in cities that have implemented empirically proven youth gun violence prevention strategies. This would allow a deeper understanding of how various police departments are handling the youth gun crime issue. It would also allow researchers to determine if police officers in these jurisdictions are perceived differently by single mothers in their communities.

This study could also be conducted to include other types of juvenile offending, aside from gun-related offending. In cases of less serious offending, a comparison could be conducted between how the single mothers perceived their interactions with police over less serious offending and gun-related offending to detect if there are differences when the associated severity and/or violence levels are not as high.

This study could also be replicated using single fathers, grandmothers, and other guardians responsible for parenting a child to determine if alternative demographics perceive their interactions with police similarly or differently than single mothers.

Given the pattern uncovered in this study of single mothers who had a son arrested for a gun crime and later lost that son in a gun-related homicide, ample premises arise for future research on this phenomenon.

Implications

Several implications for social change at various levels are noted in the findings of this study. On an individual level, this study provided a platform for single mothers in HCCs to share their thoughts and experiences on how they interact with police. Several

of the single mothers interviewed mentioned that they regularly interacted with the police and view themselves and other single mothers as portals of critical information in their communities. By recognizing single mothers as sources of knowledge on youth gun crime, single mothers can be empowered and regarded as valuable members of community stakeholder groups, especially those involving police who are working to mitigate youth gun violence.

Police departments would be well-served to implement elements of the findings of this study into daily practices and departmental policies. Recognizing single mothers as portals of critical information should trigger an exploration of ways to communicate effectively and collaborate with them consistently. Trustworthy, respectful interactions were highly valued by single mothers in this study, and when interactions were not perceived as such, levels of willingness to cooperate with police declined. It would be ideal for police agencies to dedicate community policing efforts toward meeting with and supporting single mothers in their communities. It would also be ideal to incorporate single-mother representation on committees concerning police matters and community safety initiatives.

Individual police officers should feel empowered to establish and maintain bonds with single mothers in the community. Several single mothers in this study shared experiences in which they credited one officer for making a significant impact in their lives after their son's arrest. The officers mentioned were regarded as trustworthy, even in instances where other officers made the mothers feel uncomfortable or disrespected. A pattern of continuity in connecting, following up, and meeting for conversation had

positive impacts on the single mothers and left them feeling secure in the idea that they had someone they could trust on the force. These mothers also reported feeling no hesitation contacting that officer in the future for any reason. In this sense, individual officers can make significant inroads and build long-term relationships that are mutually beneficial for information-sharing and bridge-building through powerful community members—single mothers.

Conclusion

This study was designed to address the gap in the literature of single mothers' experiences and perceptions of interacting with police on the issue of youth gun crime. There have been limited studies conducted on parental perception of the juvenile justice system; however, the link between violent juvenile offending by youths from single-female-headed households persists and implores deeper investigation of the single-mother-police-officer dynamic.

A greater understanding of micro-level accounts of specific experiences with the police and how people understand their engagements with them are critical to the larger picture of understanding how cultural orientation, neighborhood disadvantage, and family structure impact police-citizen interactions. Findings from this study support the critical role mothers play in terms of their children's involvement with offending. These findings also support the significance and value of perceptions from single mothers on the issue of youth gun crime; however, further investigation with this population is necessary.

In conducting this study, it is the hope that a foundation has been laid for future research into the salient role of single mothers in community safety and police-citizen

engagement. It is also the hope that understanding of this role will inspire thoughtful

integration of single mothers into community safety initiatives and encourage proactive

relationship-building between police officers and their single-mother constituents.

       Single mothers and police officers in HCCs can be perceived as equal

stakeholders in youth safety. The optimal outcome of this study is that the findings will

merge these two stakeholder groups into a single, lasting collaboration for the safety and

general welfare of the youths in their communities.

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YOU ARE INVITED TO PARTICIPATE:
Research study about single mothers who have had a child arrested for a gun crime.

Hello,

My name is Janay Gasparini. I am a doctoral student at Walden University (IRB #), who will be conducting a research study that explores the experiences of single mothers who have had a child arrested for a gun crime and their experiences with the police on this matter.

The purpose of this study is to learn more about the experiences single mothers have from interacting with police when their children were arrested. The second purpose of this study is to explore how single mothers feel the police can partner with them to decrease gun crime in the community.

This research project will provide an opportunity for single mothers to discuss their own experiences in an interview. This will take place in a private room. Your identity will be kept confidential at all times.

It is my hope that by conducting this study together, we can add to the information needed to guide community policing methods and policies. The ultimate goal is to keep our community and children safe.

Single Mother: a female individual who is parenting or has parented a child/children as the primary caregiver.

If you are a single mother who has had a child arrested for a gun crime, your participation in this study is valuable. If you are not interested but know someone who may be, please share this information with her.

Please contact me, Janay Gasparini at [telephone number redacted], or janay.gasparini@waldenu.edu by _____ __, 2019 to learn more and participate in the study. I look forward to hearing from you and answering any questions you may have. Thank you.

Appendix B: Initial Screening Assessment (Criteria Qualifier)

Project Title: *Single Mothers' Experiences and Perceptions of Police Interaction Related to Their Child's Arrest for Gun Crime*

The information collected will be used solely for completing the dissertation research project identified above as partial fulfillment of requirements for the Ph.D. degree at Walden University.

- Single Mother: a female individual who is parenting or has parented a child/children as the primary caregiver. Would this definition describe you as a parent? Y___ N___

  (If no, thank candidate for her time and end screening)

In an effort to ensure the safety and voluntary participation of all women in this research, I will need to ask two questions. Do you have a moment?

- Are you under the age of 18?   <mark>Y</mark>   N
- Do you speak, read, and understand the English language fluently? Y   <mark>N</mark>

  (If any candidate responses are yellow, thank candidate and end screening)

You have met the qualifications to participate in the study. At this time, I would like to review the participation consent form with you to determine whether or not you would still like to participate.

Appendix C: Participant Data Collection Sheet

Middle name or name different from your real name (to maintain confidentiality):

_____
        *Please note this is how you will be identified on all paperwork and during our
focus group conversation.

Age: _____

Phone: _____   Email: _____

Number of Children: _____

Age and Gender of Children:

1. Age _____ Sex _____   4. Age _____ Sex _____

2. Age _____ Sex _____   5. Age _____ Sex _____

3. Age _____ Sex _____   6. Age _____ Sex _____

Appendix D: Interview Questions

Before we begin, I would like to remind you that your participation is completely voluntary. If you do not wish to participate for any reason you are free to leave at any time.

Opening Questions
Q: Can you tell me about youth gun crime in your community?

Q: What are your overall feelings toward interacting with police in your community?

Focused Questions
Q-1: Think back to the first encounter you had with a police officer when your child was arrested for the gun crime. Can you tell me about that experience?

Q-2: What was your impression of how the officer(s) handled the situation?

Q-3: Was there anything you thought the officer(s) did well?

Q-4: Was there anything you thought the officer(s) did not do well?

Q-5: Overall, how did you feel about your interaction with the officer(s)?

Q-6: How well do you believe police are dealing with youth gun crime in your community?

Q-7: If you were the Chief of Police, how would you instruct your officers on interacting with parents, particularly single mothers, when their child is arrested for a gun crime?

Q-8: How do you think police can partner with single mothers in an effort to prevent youth gun crime?