Seeing Guns to See Urban Violence: Racial Inequality & Neighborhood Context

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Guns are central to the comprehension of the racial inequalities in neighborhood violence. This may sound simple when presented so plainly. However, its significance derives from the limited consideration that the neighborhood research paradigm has given guns: they are typically conceived of as a background condition of disadvantaged neighborhoods where violence is concentrated. Instead, I argue that guns belong at the forefront of neighborhood analyses of violence. Employing the logic and language of the ecological approach, I maintain that guns must be considered as mechanisms of neighborhood violence, with the unequal distribution of guns serving as a critical link between neighborhood structural conditions and rates of violence. Furthermore, I make the case that American gun policy should be understood as a set of macrostructural forces that represent a historic and persistent source of disadvantage in poor Black neighborhoods.

The ecological approach to the study of crime and violence represents one of the most distinctive, enduring, and empirically supported paradigms of criminological research. At its heart, this approach promotes understanding the unequal distribution of violence across neighborhoods as a function not of essentialist qualities of their residents, but rather of spatially patterned inequalities that influence community capacity to control violence. Drawing inspiration from the theoretic development of sociologists Robert Sampson and William Julius Wilson's classic article "Toward a Theory of Race, Crime, and Urban Inequality," researchers working in the ecological tradition over the last two decades have wrestled with two key problems in the study of neighborhood violence.[1] First, what are the links that connect the structural features of neighborhoods – like poverty and racial composition – to violence? These links have come to be referred to as the mechanisms of neighborhood violence. And second, how do factors originating outside of the confines of neighborhoods – such as large economic shifts and discriminatory housing policies – concentrate within specif-

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ic neighborhoods in ways that influence disadvantage and violence? These factors have typically been called macrostructural forces.

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The stakes that interest me are how scholars see – or do not see – the problem of urban violence. Scholarly theories are powerful because they provide ways of seeing the world, and – as any researcher working in the domain of criminal justice can ill afford to forget – these theories are consequential for how they resonate in the domains of policy and public discourse. In this case, it is the ecological paradigm's difficulty in seeing guns in neighborhood context that has led to three intellectual and practical problems of representing urban violence to ourselves and our publics. The first is a lack of clarity regarding the very character of urban violence itself: the rates of violent crime analyzed as outcome, the harms estimated as following from exposure to violence, the palpable neighborhood fear and stigma generated by violence, and the actual damage to human flesh and bone – all are overwhelmingly produced by guns. The second is a misrecognition of the prevalence of guns in disadvantaged neighborhoods as a product principally of criminal demand – even if such demand is structured by multiple inequalities – rather than patterned by racialized gun policies with historic and contemporary roots. And third, without a clear accounting for guns in neighborhood context, the leading mechanisms of the ecological paradigm – such as neighborhood codes of violence – risk implying that those in disadvantaged neighborhoods are dispositionally inclined toward violence, seamlessly attaching to long-standing stereotypes of Black criminality.[2] In contrast, an analytic image of the neighborhood context of violence that makes guns visible as a source of structural inequality can help the ecological paradigm better elaborate its core proposition: the primacy of social context over people in explaining violence.

In 1995, shortly after gun violence had peaked in many major American cities, Sampson and Wilson put forward one of the most transformative practical and intellectual contributions in a long line of ecological research investigating the connection between community structure and rates of crime.[3] They first

challenged readers to accept that the violence in disadvantaged Black neighborhoods was a real phenomenon.[4] This was, in many ways, a radical proposition. At a time when academics and practitioners rightly worried about drawing conclusions from overall crime statistics that could represent biases in policing and criminal justice processing – and thus (re)stigmatizing disadvantaged minority communities – Sampson and Wilson showed that racial inequality in involvement in serious violence was beyond dispute. Following a moment of pause to reconsider the veracity of race-specific homicide statistics, Sampson and Wilson upended the contemporary "statistical discourse"[5] surrounding urban violence that described such statistics as products of "black-on-black violence"[6] driven by a demographic boom of young Black superpredators.[7] Instead of attributing intense racial disparities in homicide to Black cultural pathology or manipulated police statistics, or simply choosing to ignore them altogether, Sampson and Wilson insisted that racial inequalities in violence were products of the vastly different social circumstances in which Blacks and Whites lived. Thus, it made little sense to search for the cause of surging "Black violence"; the causes of crime were invariant by race and could be found by exploring structural differences in community context – differences that were animated by a historical legacy of residential segregation.

Ultimately, the power of Sampson and Wilson's ecological-contextual approach was not simply that it offered a satisfying alternative to the typical racialized discourse on violent crime but that it was – and continues to be – fundamentally correct.[8] Over the past two decades, a sizable research literature has emerged that has generally confirmed Sampson and Wilson's theoretical perspective. In the broadest strokes, this research has shown that: 1) neighborhood structural disadvantage consistently predicts violence;[9] 2) the relationship between neighborhood structural disadvantage and violence holds for predominantly Black, White, and Latino neighborhoods;[10] 3) there is extreme inequality in neighborhood context by race that makes comparison practically impossible – in fact, the most disadvantaged White neighborhoods are typically better off than the least disadvantaged Black neighborhoods;[11] and 4) enduring race-based disadvantage in neighborhood context – in terms of exposure to violence, poverty, and prospects for upward mobility – has persisted over the last two decades in spite of large structural shifts that have influenced American cities, such as the great crime decline and concentrated immigration from Latin America.[12]

Although supported by a powerful empirical base, there is still unfinished business in the evolution of the neighborhood research paradigm. The foremost unsolved problem is the identification of *mechanisms* that help to explain the association between unequal neighborhood conditions and violence.[13] Empirical research has generally identified and tested (with support) cultural codes of violence and informal social control as key mechanisms that link neighborhood racial inequality to violence, but many more have been hypothesized or are log-

ically implied by observed ecological dissimilarities in residential context.[14] Research developments have especially prompted reconsideration of how the criminal justice system influences neighborhood racial inequality, as well as how the long-standing historic and political character of neighborhood inequalities might be implicated in violence.

The position I advance is that research into neighborhood gun use, access, and control can help to resolve some of the long-standing and emerging puzzles in ecological research. Guns can play a key role in facilitating the continued development of the research into neighborhood violence by better specifying its mechanisms, through generating powerful examples of how local violence is patterned by higher-order macrostructural forces and, ultimately, in helping to realize the potential of a theory of contextual causality in the study of violence.[15]

How are guns mechanisms for neighborhood violence? One line of argument flows from thinking of guns as the principal tool used for creating the anomalous violence problem that is concentrated in America's Black and brown disadvantaged neighborhoods. This instrumental perspective regards the comparatively high rates of deadly American violence as unattainable without the mechanical advantage afforded by guns. The second line of argument explored here trades thinking of how guns serve as concrete mechanisms for thinking of how guns are implicated in the theoretical mechanisms of community violence, especially the exercise of informal neighborhood social control.

Criminological and public health researchers have long drawn attention to the outsized role that guns play in shaping the character of American violence. More than two-thirds of homicides in the United States are committed by gun, and more gun homicides are committed each year in the United States than in all other high-income Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) nations combined.[16] In 2017, there were more than 14,000 victims of gun homicide and more than 107,000 people nonfatally wounded in gun assaults in the United States.[17]

That this exposure to serious violence is sharply stratified by race is a social fact of contemporary American society. Although American Blacks make up approximately 13 percent of the population, they consistently account for more than half of homicide victims, producing a simple Black-White homicide ratio that typically exceeds 7:1, despite recent historic declines in violence. This inequality in exposure to homicide is so significant that it accounts for more than 18 percent (more than one year of life) of the 5.44-year Black-White life expectancy gap among men.[18] What has been underappreciated is the role that guns play in underpinning these inequalities in life chances; between 2013 and 2017, 82.3 percent of the 44,523 Black homicide victims were killed by guns compared with 58.6 percent of the 26,465 non-Hispanic White victims. For young Black men – the modal catego-

ry of homicide victims – well over 90 percent are killed by guns.[19] Yet these Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) figures only understate the extent of Black homicide as well as the role that guns play in it because they are known to substantially undercount fatal police shootings.

What should be made of this brutal association between guns and lethal violence? Medical professionals and public health researchers have long accepted the link between the kind of weapon used in an assault and the probability of death,[20] but policy consensus has lagged behind, held up by the subterfuge debate over murderous intent embodied in the shibboleth "guns don't kill people, people kill people." In a series of papers dating back a half-century, criminologist Franklin Zimring compared Chicago gun attacks with knife attacks to show that though murderous intent was difficult to ascertain, it was at least as present in knife attacks as gun attacks. Still, guns produced a fatal outcome five times more often than knives.[21] In a follow-up study focused on shootings, Zimring further addressed the ambivalent nature of intent. He found that fatal and nonfatal shootings resembled one another in virtually all observable ways; whether the victim lived or died appeared to be mostly a matter of luck. In this stochastic process, the key systematic factor that influenced shooting fatality was the caliber of the gun used, with larger-caliber guns associated with greater likelihood of fatality.[22] Criminologists Anthony Braga and Philip Cook recently produced a functional replication of Zimring's study using improved shooting data from Boston and more sophisticated analytic techniques; this study too found that shootings with larger-caliber guns were associated with lethality, even though they were no more accurate or likely to result in multiple shooting wounds than their smaller-caliber counterparts.[23]

This research forcefully emphasizes that the type of weapon used – and even the type of gun used – is a critical matter of concern for scholars and practitioners in the area of urban violence. It further suggests that the distribution of different types of weapons across ecological context is important for shaping overall rates of violence. From this perspective, the concentration of guns at the neighborhood level can be understood as a form of structural inequality, with the neighborhood serving as a mediator of extralocal factors known to influence the prevalence of guns, such as social and geographic proximity to gun-dense contexts.

For a research paradigm that has generally focused on violence as an outcome, rather than a process in its own right, thinking of guns as a mechanism of violence can be theoretically generative. In analyzing the doing of violence, insights from microsociology – the branch of sociology most concerned with analyzing face-to-face interactions and intimate social situations – align nicely with the population-based findings of public health research in ways that provide useful clues for neighborhood-level researchers regarding the importance of guns. Drawing upon a wide array of data sources – especially video footage, military research, and first-

hand accounts of violent situations – the overarching finding of the microsociological investigation into violence is that interpersonal violence is rare and difficult to perform, even among conflictual situations in which a violent outcome seems predestined. Most people are unwilling combatants who fail at performing violence, and those who succeed must find situational advantages they can use to overcome the confrontational tension and fear inherent in conflict.[24] And one critical source of advantage is a gun. Especially because of their ability to increase the distance between combatants – as well as create opportunities for surprise and domination – guns provide a technological adaptation to overcoming the situational forces that keep violence in check.[25] For unwilling combatants – and it requires reminding that most people engaged in urban violence probably fit in this category – guns make the doing of violence easier as well as deadlier.[26]

What do these observations mean – in terms of theory and practice – for an ecological research tradition that prides itself on focusing on community conditions rather than the criminal propensity of individuals? Most simply, they imply that the distribution of guns across ecological contexts should be understood as a measurable structural property of neighborhoods, and one that is influenced by spatial, network, macrostructural, and historic forces. This way of seeing how guns serve as concrete mechanisms in the doing of violence, however, raises further questions regarding how guns might influence the neighborhood paradigm's foremost theoretical mechanisms used to explain the social processes that link neighborhood structural conditions to rates of violence. For example, how might the neighborhood concentration of guns influence the enactment of social control, long understood as the key community brake upon violence? It seems intuitive that tools that make violence easier will, all else being equal, make the control of violence more difficult. In neighborhood context, then, the ability to recognize and intervene in each potentially conflictual situation becomes more consequential. Yet neighborhood researchers have recently problematized the doing of social control, questioning the conditions under which neighbors intervene in crime and highlighting how it is often stressful and costly to those who – often reluctantly – get involved.[27] This burden weighs heaviest in historically marginalized neighborhoods, where even the most engaged and committed citizenry can be overcome by the sheer volume and seriousness of challenges to safety.[28] Guns thus not only raise the stakes of violence, but also complicate the process of intervention into behavior in public space, the factor most central to contemporary understanding of neighborhood social control.

Guns further influence other theoretical mechanisms of neighborhood violence, such as neighborhood codes of violence. These codes are theorized to legitimize the use of violence in disadvantaged neighborhoods as part of a cultural response to alienation from the formal justice system and structural conditions of exclusion and deprivation.[29] In this model, neighborhood-level acceptance of

the code serves to explain the connection between structural disadvantage and violence, an idea that has found support in the empirical literature.[30] Yet because guns are so critical to the accomplishment of serious violence, it is likely that the neighborhood availability of guns mediates the relationship between the code and rates of serious violence in that neighborhood. More fundamentally, a theory of cultural codes of violence without guns at its center leaves the door open to the belief that high rates of homicide in poor, Black neighborhoods – even after accounting for structural forces – are driven principally by the distribution of murderous intent rather than the distribution of deadly tools that make possible the vast majority of homicides in such contexts. A focus on gun use and concentration could sharpen understanding of many theoretical mechanisms of neighborhood violence, from legal cynicism and legal estrangement through analysis of spatial and network processes.[31] However, this would require ecological researchers to recognize guns as relevant to the study of violence, not merely in some generic sense, but as a crucial matter of analysis.

William Julius Wilson deployed the concept of macrostructural forces to describe how large societal changes (especially deindustrialization and the out-migration of the Black middle class in the post–civil rights era) remade American inner cities, leading to a historically novel form of concentrated poverty and social isolation that resulted in a distinct Black underclass.[32] Sampson and Wilson's ecological approach expanded this framing of macrostructural forces to include deliberate policy decisions such as urban renewal, redlining, and the siting of public housing in segregated areas.[33] These decisions further concentrated poverty, exacerbated segregation, and increased the ecological dissimilarity in the residential contexts of Black and White Americans with predictable results for violent outcomes. Here I employ Sampson and Wilson's logic to argue that the basic patterns of American gun policy represent textbook examples of macrostructural forces that have systematically determined the amount and character of serious urban violence. Furthermore, these policy forces, while rooted in history, continue to shift in ways that disproportionately stress poor and Black neighborhoods striving to control violence. I first discuss the contours of these recent shifts and follow with a brief discussion of the racialized character of contemporary American gun policy.

Recent macrostructural shifts in gun ownership and gun technology. Even after accounting for the changes flowing from the great crime decline, the essential elements of urban violence may not appear appreciably different than those of the 1990s. The overarching story seems to be one of persistence: young men of color in disadvantaged areas being harmed by gun violence stemming from interpersonal, group, and drug disputes in contexts of unreliable police protection. And while policy and media discourse has centered on gun access among those with

mental illness and changes in military-inspired weapons technology that make for deadlier mass shootings, the most important shifts in gun access and gun technology – and certainly those most likely to influence urban violence – have gone mostly unnoticed and undebated. Stated simply, the patterns of everyday American guns have shifted radically in recent decades.

Virtually all guns used in illegal violence originate legally (via import or manufacture), entering the market through sale by federally licensed gun dealers. Activity in this "primary" market – and the civilian stock of guns that it generates – is consequential because federal firearms commerce is notoriously porous, with guns involved in crime being diverted by unregulated sales of used guns, straw purchases, and theft. What is more, recent research suggests that illegal guns proximate to violence in cities like Chicago and Boston follow the patterns of the primary market, but with some delay; such guns are approximately ten years old and most likely illegally diverted by a series of undocumented transactions.[34] Because guns are not registered in most jurisdictions, the best evidence for the stock and flow of American guns has been generated by survey estimates. And the most recent survey evidence suggests a dramatic increase in the stock of civilian guns since the mid-1990s.[35] Specifically, over the last two decades, the civilian stock of firearms is estimated to have grown from 192 million to 265 million guns, with the handgun stock almost doubling over this period (65 million in 1994 to 113 million in 2015). Semiautomatic pistols, which in 1994 made up approximately 40 percent of a much smaller handgun stock, now make up the majority (62 percent) of American handguns. Consistent with other recent survey evidence, firearm owners' primary motivation for owning guns is to protect themselves from people; this is especially true among handgun owners (76 percent) and represents a shift from the 1990s when the most common reason for ownership was recreation.

This substantial increase in handgun stock, and especially the increase in semiautomatic pistols, has interacted with technological changes that have reshaped the basic profile of the semiautomatic pistol in just two decades. In short, as semiautomatic pistols have proliferated – and if trends continue, they will soon eclipse rifles as the most common type of firearm in the United States – they have generally become smaller and capable of firing larger-caliber ammunition that had previously been the domain of larger-frame pistols.[36] This evolution was not produced by market forces alone, however, but was advanced by policy intervention in the form of widespread implementation of "concealed carry" laws in the 1980s and 1990s. The concealed carrying of guns was generally prohibited for most of U.S. history,[37] and into the 1980s, nineteen states maintained an outright ban on the practice.[38] Concerted lobbying efforts by the National Rifle Association, especially during the 1990s and 2000s, produced the present policy landscape, in which concealed carry is permitted in all fifty states.

This concealed carry policy wave generated a new market segment for gun manufacturers, particularly among gun enthusiasts eager to exercise their newfound right to carry in public space. These guns further needed sufficient "stopping power" to be perceived as suitable for self-defense. Between 1990 and 2017, American gun manufacturers increased production of "medium" (.380-caliber and 9mm) semiautomatic pistols by a factor of five. "Large" caliber semiautomatic pistols (.40, .45, and .50) increased by a factor of three, while production of the once-prominent .22 pistol increased just 16 percent.[39] Unsurprisingly, this shift in the population of American guns has already influenced the types of guns used in crime. Among guns used in crimes traced by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF) between 2012 and 2017, the proportion of medium-caliber guns nearly doubled, large-caliber guns increased by 40 percent, and smaller-caliber guns demonstrated no meaningful increase.[40] More important, recent research has shown that gun caliber is associated with fatality and that change in the composition of guns used in violence is capable of meaningfully influencing crime rates at the metropolitan level. For example, Braga and Cook estimated that if shooters in Boston had all used small-caliber guns – rather than medium and large ones – the city's homicide rate would have been reduced by nearly 40 percent.[41]

The upshot of what might be perceived to be technical gunspeak is that broad shifts in the composition and technical sophistication of common American guns are negatively influencing the life chances of (especially Black) Americans. Quietly, and with little public deliberation, a new class of handgun has emerged – the concealed carry – that is better adapted to street use due to its portable and concealable properties. After all, the typical illegal gun possession case simply represents concealed carry without the permission of the state. And because shootings are spatially and demographically concentrated among Black Americans, the nation's experiment with concealed carry and the new class of weapon it has produced is being felt more on urban street corners and in emergency rooms than in other contested public spaces (such as university campuses and coffee shops). Social scientists are only just now beginning to detect the general effects of these shifts. After long debates over whether concealed carry would produce more or less crime, the evidence is now clear that permissive "right to carry" concealed carry laws (adopted by thirty-three states) are associated with 13 – 15 percent increases in violent crime over the span of a decade.[42] What is more, owing to increased severity of gunshot wounds, longitudinal analyses of trauma center admissions have shown that case fatality rates for gunshot wounds are increasing, even as they have been stable or decreasing for all other types of injury.[43]

It would be tempting to predict the impending doom likely to result from these macrostructural shifts in guns, but such predictions often fare poorly for both the predictor and the society upon which the prediction is leveled. Instead of considering how changes in weapon stock might serve to undo the great crime decline –

or worse yet, bring about a new homicide epidemic – social scientists might consider what might have been if the great decline in American violence had been accompanied by a corresponding great gun decline, or more modestly, a counterfactual world where the distribution of handgun calibers remained at 1990 levels. Braga and Cook's research provides a clue that America, by direct means of its policy choices, likely sacrificed a substantial share of Black life that would have otherwise been saved by the great crime decline.[44] These are questions worthy of future research. In the meantime, scholars and practitioners would do well to consider not just how these shifts are shaping outcomes, but how they are likely to shape underlying community processes and the efficacy of available policy options to prevent violence. For example, if it is indeed true that homicide is contagious,[45] then small changes in the probability of a shooting being lethal have dramatic consequences for the success of street outreach practitioners tasked with interrupting cycles of retaliatory violence.

Racial disadvantage produced by American gun policy. Alongside the regulation of militias, hunting laws, and carry laws, one of the most common categories of early American gun laws – laws that were in many ways more robust than those of the present day – were those that prohibited Native Americans, slaves, and Black free people from possessing guns.[46] Although a full treatment of the role of race in shaping American gun laws is beyond the scope of this section, it must be recognized that the historical record of Blacks' access to guns and their rights to self-defense has been marked by a profound current of doubt regarding African American humanity and citizenship. Over the last half-century, however, the racialized impacts of American gun regulation have been generated by ostensibly race-neutral policies. Yet race is inextricably woven into contemporary American gun policy's core fact: in a space of heated debate over the balance between collective security and individual gun rights, the achievement of gun policy has been reached by means of consensus that guns should be regulated through the criminal justice system.[47] Of course, one of the main insights of sociological scholarship of the last two decades is that the criminal justice system – particularly through policing strategies and incarceration – has become a key source of social stratification that has uniquely disadvantaged African Americans.[48] The policing and punishment of guns is a part of this story.[49]

By many accounts, the 1968 Gun Control Act (GCA) – the cornerstone of contemporary gun policy – was a relative of the civil rights legislation of its time. Because the law was born from civil rights concerns (spurred by the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy) as well as general anxiety over urban crime, it can be understood within a broader historical analysis of federal crime legislation that purported to address racial inequality by means of crime control – with disastrous consequences for disadvantaged Black neighborhoods in urban America.[50] At its heart, the GCA "essentially protects strong-law states

from states that prefer to see guns only lightly regulated."[51] The law established the use of a gun in a felony as a federal crime, created new rules for federal gun dealers, expanded bans on interstate shipments of guns, and added to the disqualifying conditions for prohibited possessors.[52]

Although the GCA established much of the regulatory framework for a new American gun policy, the enforcement of these regulations was made possible by the 1968 Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act; this act created the modern ATF by mandating that the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax Division of the Treasury Department regulate gun sales and further established the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA) to provide administrative support to the Johnson administration's nascent war on crime. Historian Elizabeth Hinton has argued that the creation of the LEAA represented two important turns in American social policy. First, it marked a shift in the Johnson administration away from great society programs and toward addressing urban social problems through policing and penal control. And second, the LEAA provided a historically novel mechanism by which the federal government could shape the agenda for local crime control and criminal justice operations.[53]

And in the new era of American gun regulation, an agenda needed setting. For the restructured ATF, a hybrid law enforcement and regulatory agency, the central question of the period – and one that endures to the present day – was where to focus its efforts. At the site of gun sales (regulation)? Or at the site of illegal gun use (law enforcement)? By the mid-1970s, the matter was settled: the federal government and its local partners should curb rising street crime in the segregated inner city by focusing on the enforcement of illegal gun possession. The Ford administration, via its 1975 "Operation Disarm the Criminal," aggressively pursued a place-based gun control strategy that openly targeted the inner city, selectively banning small concealable handguns in Black disadvantaged areas, while doubling the number of ATF agents engaged in urban street investigation. Although the ATF had already generated evidence of widespread gun trafficking from Southern states in major cities like New York, the focus on gun possession among urban Blacks was justified on two grounds. First, while the GCA established rules that barred gun sales to prohibited persons, enforcement was practically impossible due to the lack of a background check system; punishing possessors was simpler by contrast. And second, applying newfound federal law and resources to the problem of gun possession multiplied the effect of existing LEAA federal/local partnership efforts in the segregated inner city – especially career criminal programs – that facilitated crime control through the removal of repeat criminals. As Hinton has noted, one enduring feature of these 1970s place-based gun punishment efforts was that they generated statistical evidence for the prevalence of illegal gun carrying among disadvantaged young Black people, evidence that would be used as a warrant for future enforcement efforts.[54]

Just as the segregated inner city had been established as the site of gun punishment, repeated political attacks on the ATF beginning in the 1970s sought to ensure that the fledgling agency did not stray far beyond the ecological setting where "real crime" occurred. In a series of congressional hearings in the late 1970s and into the early 1980s, the ATF was repeatedly excoriated for its overreach – not into the segregated inner city – but into the business of predominantly White gun retailers and gun collectors, who were given the platform to testify to the ATF's excess in the investigation of illegal sales and the seizure of weapons. Summarizing the tenor and content of these hearings, Senator Orrin Hatch wrote in a 1982 report of the Senate Judiciary Committee:

> Based upon these hearings it is apparent that enforcement tactics made possible by current federal firearms laws are constitutionally, legally, and practically reprehensible. Although Congress adopted the Gun Control Act with the primary object of limiting access of felons and high-risk groups to firearms, the overbreadth of the law has led to neglect of precisely this area of enforcement.... To be sure, genuine criminals are sometimes prosecuted under other sections of the law. Yet, subsequent to these hearings, BATF stated that 55 percent of its gun law prosecutions overall involve persons with no record of a felony conviction, and a third involve citizens with no prior police contact at all. The Subcommittee received evidence that BATF has primarily devoted its firearms enforcement efforts to the apprehension, upon technical malum prohibitum charges, of individuals who lack all criminal intent and knowledge.[55]

The short-term result of such calls to adjust the site of ATF attention was the passage of the 1986 Firearm Owners Protection Act, which drastically reduced the oversight exposure of gun dealers, limited ATF inspections to one per dealer per year, permitted interstate gun purchases, and preemptively banned any federal registry of firearms, owners, or gun transfers.[56] But the long-term result of such sustained political pressure and increasing practical barriers to meaningful oversight has been a gradual shift in ATF's limited resources away from its regulatory function and toward its law enforcement function.[57] After decades of intentional underfunding, the contemporary ATF now inspects fewer than 10 percent of the more than 130,000 licensed gun dealers in a typical year (8 percent in 2017) and devotes less than one-fifth of its 5,100 person staff to such inspections.[58] In contrast, the agency's investigation capacity has proportionally increased in recent years (about 2,600 agents in 2017), but ATF agents have generally come to specialize in the suppression of urban violent crime, a trend that accelerated after the ATF moved from the Treasury to become part of the Department of Justice in 2002.[59] Due to staffing limitations, these ATF field agents typically partner with urban law enforcement to address violent street crime through multijurisdictional initiatives such as Project Exile, Project Safe Neighborhoods, and the Violent Crime Impact Team, all of which make extensive use of harsh federal penalties for end

users of guns. In many respects, then, the contemporary situation resembles that of the early 1970s, wherein federal resources allocated to the general regulation of guns have instead been disproportionately directed to enforcement efforts that result in the punishment of urban minority citizens.

In coarsened form, the central tendency of contemporary American gun policy has been the development of robust infrastructure for the punishment of illegal gun possession in the inner city while ensuring practical immunity for upstream gun sellers and manufacturers. This discussion has not even scratched the surface of the remarkable range of these protections enshrined in policy, including criminal liability (such as the Firearms Owners Protection Act of 1986), civil liability (such as the Protection of Lawful Commerce in Arms Act of 2005),[60] and even harms to firearm dealer reputation (such as the Tiahardt Amendments of 2003 and 2004).[61] Nor has sufficient attention been provided to the inequalities in gun punishment, a topic that I take on elsewhere.[62] Instead, I have sought to draw attention to the ecological underpinnings of contemporary American gun policy, emphasizing how this policy has been spatialized and racialized from its inception. Understood as a macrostructural force, contemporary American gun policy has thus played a historic role in broadening the ecological dissimilarity and inequality between predominantly Black and White residential contexts in ways that directly shape neighborhood violence. For segregated urban neighborhoods, the disadvantage resulting from concentrated violence and punishment is not an artifact of history but represents a legacy of inequality that has influenced the developmental trajectories of neighborhoods themselves.

In late 2016, *The Baltimore Sun* released "Shoot to Kill," a multipart long-form investigation of the lethality of violence in Baltimore. In highlighting changes in case fatality rates of shootings as well as technological shifts in commonly available handguns, the article revealed something important about the dynamics of the city's street violence at the ground level. But the main thrust of the piece was given away by its title. After nodding to the links between racial segregation and the spatial concentration of violence, the story's author reached the conclusion that "more shooters are aiming for the head."[63] Drawing from interviews with police chiefs, outreach workers, and young people, the article's overarching story was of a Baltimore that had produced more young men who were groomed to be better at violence, a cohort that had come to possess more murderous intent than its predecessors.

By one way of thinking, such an article represents little more than an extension of a long line of public and social scientific discourse that serves to frame the problem of concentrated violence as one stemming from racialized cultural pathology. The piece made little attempt to situate the shifts in Baltimore's violence in an ecological context and its attending structural inequality, the social organization

of its neighborhoods, and its historic legacies of disadvantage. But even if it had made such efforts, how would the author's proximate insights about the role of guns in violence be woven into an expansive narrative of intergenerational neighborhood inequality? How could gun policy fit into a story of neighborhood trajectories? Or is it possible that a neighborhood-based framing would have led to the discussion of guns being scrapped altogether? Before issuing condemnation, we as scholars might do well to ask ourselves what other ways of seeing have we been able to offer our publics.

Herein lies the challenge for contemporary neighborhood-level research into violence. As this essay has argued, the ecological approach – and its insistence on the primacy of context over people – is still vitally important to a social policy area that has consistently explained racial disparities in violence as a function of enduring traits or bad values. But a key step in the neighborhood approach's continued vitality and relevance is dependent on the creation of an analytic frame expansive enough to consider guns as objects of analysis and, indeed, as sources of structural inequality. Simply put, neighborhood violence research must find a way to see guns. Doing so would represent a crucial step toward solving one of the hardest unsolved problems facing both society and the science of it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ENDNOTES

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[36] Regarding their capacity for harm, semiautomatic pistols are also notable for their capacity to fire more shots than the typical six/seven-shot revolver. While many semi-

automatic pistols come standard with a ten-round magazine (a detachable ammunition feeding device), higher-capacity magazines are a common aftermarket option (although they are illegal in many states). Philip Cook and Jens Ludwig found that semiautomatic pistols acquired in 1993 or 1994 averaged nearly two additional rounds of magazine capacity when compared to pistols acquired prior to those years. See Philip J. Cook and Jens Ludwig, *Guns in America: Results of a Comprehensive National Survey on Firearms Ownership and Use* (Washington, D.C.: The Police Foundation, 1996).

37 Robert J. Spitzer, *Guns across America: Reconciling Gun Rules and Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

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Incarceration in the United States). Here, too, as part of a bipartisan consensus, policy-makers (repeatedly) chose to address a complicated social matter–the regulation of guns–principally via punishment.

[50] Elizabeth Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2016).

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[60] The PLCAA essentially protects firearm dealers and manufacturers from liability when their guns are used in crime.

[61] In a series of consequential appropriation amendments in 2003 and 2004 proposed by Representative Todd Tiahardt (Kansas), the ATF was first prohibited from releasing the results of ATF traces, after Freedom of Information Act requests publicly exposed a number of gun dealers whose sales were disproportionately connected to violent crime in cities. Later Tiahardt amendments relaxed dealer inventory checks as part of regular ATF inspection, mandated the destruction of background check data by the FBI within twenty-four hours, and limited the use of ATF trace data to government officials. See Daniel W. Webster, Jon S. Vernick, Maria T. Bulzacchelli, and Katherine A. Vittes, "Temporal Association Between Federal Gun Laws and the Diversion of Guns to Criminals in Milwaukee," *Journal of Urban Health* 89 (1) (2012): 87–97.

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