

## Book Review

### **Guns, Violence, and Identity Among African American and Latino Youth**

Deanna L. Wilkinson

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This book presents the findings of a research study undertaken by Wilkinson in the mid-1990s to gain a better understanding of the social worlds of violent adolescent males in two New York neighbourhoods. The study makes little use of available statistical data, but instead relies on some 125 interviews undertaken by peer interviewers with violent offenders covering over 300 violent or near-violent events. The book draws on the interviews and presents a detailed analysis of these accounts to provide an in-depth understanding of youth gun violence. By examining these events in the context of the two deprived urban neighbourhoods, the author explores processes of social control and behaviour and the role that guns play in shaping the behaviour and attitudes of these young men.

Violent events are described in detail to explore the availability of guns, their frequency of use, and the thought processes that lie behind their use to better understand decision-making during violent events.

Delving into the childhood experience of the sample, the author presents an account of a group of young males who have been failed on every level.

Family environment for the majority failed to provide a nurturing experience through childhood, and instead introduced them to drug and alcohol addiction, poverty, and domestic abuse with an absence of positive male role models within the home. In a similar vein, few of the sample had a productive journey through the education system and as a result found themselves void of the skills to pursue the scarce employment opportunities that are available. For many, drug dealing and criminal activity are attractive and lucrative options and for some, seen as the only viable option.

Worryingly, the cycle looks set to continue as for these young men, many of whom are already fathers, and gun violence and drug dealing have become normalized. With low horizons and few aspirations, these men look set to repeat the mistakes of their fathers and elders. Within neighbourhoods that are both void of resources and lacking community cohesion, behaviour is driven by fear. There is a sense that anything can happen at any time and the carrying of a gun is deemed necessary and indeed an attractive option.

There is little discussion or comment on the benefits or otherwise of strategies deployed in the U.S. at the local or national level to address the multiple problems of these young men, and for me, and indeed for U.K. policy development, that would have been a useful exploration. What comment there is seems to imply that, for U.S. policy makers, it is easier to tackle youth-related violence by focussing on removing young people from the community with get-tough policies than to seek preventative routes.

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For me, the greatest strength of this book is that it does not rely on statistics and second-hand reviews of case files to make its arguments. Instead, Wilkinson relies heavily on the accounts of the 125 young males taken directly from interview transcripts. With interviews facilitated by trained peer interviewers from the same neighbourhoods, the depth of detail is significant. In many cases, this makes harrowing reading as these young men recount their experiences of broken homes, domestic abuse, drugs, and violence. Given the high use of slang terms, this can make for difficult reading at times, but this is far outweighed by the sheer insight that results from such personal accounts that at times leaves the reader feeling like an outsider eavesdropping on a highly personal conversation.

On starting the book, I was unclear of its transferability to the U.K. experience. However, as the book progressed, there are almost unnerving premonitions of how the U.K. may become. These young men are children of a crack epidemic that hit the U.S. in 1980s, arriving in the U.K. several years later. The intermingling of this drug, with gang and gun culture, and the experience of living in deprived areas are already being echoed by young people living in similar neighbourhoods across the U.K. that are in the same way blighted by high unemployment and low educational achievement.

I found this book an engaging read, and a stark reminder of a need for further research in the U.K. to be undertaken into this subject area.

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