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Youth and Gun Violence : The Outstanding Case for Prevention

Margaret Shaw
Director of Analysis and Exchange

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Margaret Shaw
International Centre for the Prevention of Crime

*This paper was originally written as an invited contribution to the Small Arms Survey, in the preparation of a chapter in their Annual Report, **Small Arms Survey 2006: Unfinished Business**. Chapter 12 of that report '**Few Options but the Gun: Angry Young Men**' looks at the role of young men in armed violence. (www.smallarmssurvey.org)*

*The Small Arms Survey is an independent research organization based at the Graduate Institute for International Studies in Geneva. Its mission is to serve as a major public resource on all aspects of the small arms trade and its impact. The chapter '**Few Option but the Gun: Angry Young Men**' seeks to answer three questions:*

- *Why are young men the primary perpetrators of armed violence?*
- *What role do small arms play in this phenomenon?*
- *Have interventions designed to prevent or reduce armed violence adequately tackled the complex relationship that exists between young men and small arms?*

The paper below looks at interventions and evidence on the effectiveness of prevention strategies and programmes. It is predicated on the fact that gun violence is primarily perpetrated by young men, who are also the majority of the victims, and is often associated with illegal trade in guns and drugs; that in many regions of the world the level of deaths has reached epidemic proportions; and that gun-related violence is also a major concern in cities in many developed countries ...

Youth and Gun Violence: The Outstanding Case for Prevention

The World Health Organization estimates that 199,000 youth murders took place in 2000 (WHO, 2002). What should be the response to this situation which affects so many young men in so many regions of the world? Is repression and deterrence the best response? Are tougher laws and policing, more punitive sentencing and longer incarceration the answer? Are such young men to be treated in the same way as adults who use small arms? Should we focus on the young men themselves or on the factors which put them at risk of gun use? What lessons can be drawn from the recent experience of countries which have faced an expansion in gun use among children and young men?

What is clear is that the complexity of youth gun violence in terms of its causes, and the wide variety of forms it takes in different countries and regions, means that **no simple or single approach is going to provide lasting and sustainable solutions**. While international conventions and protocols must continue to be enforced to help reduce the *supply* of small arms, it can be argued that much more needs to be done to reduce the *demand* for small arms among young men (McIntyre & Weiss, 2003).

Internationally, there is now an emerging consensus that the best, most effective, and lasting response to youth violence, is to develop a **balanced and strategic prevention approach**. This includes strengthening local communities, changing attitudes towards gun use, offering alternatives to young people growing up, and reducing the opportunities for accessing guns, as well as working with those young people who are already immersed in a violent gun culture to help them return to a safer and healthier way of life. It requires a multi or interdisciplinary approach, with a **broad and comprehensive coalition of partners** especially at the local level, and grounded in a broad **public health and community safety** perspective. Indeed, the emphasis is on *how* to work, as much as on *what* to do.

Such an approach is supported by the UN *Guidelines for the Prevention of Crime* adopted in 2002 (UN, 2002), and exemplified by Workshop 3 on *Strategies and Best Practices in Crime Prevention, in Particular in Relation to Urban areas and Youth at Risk*, which took place at the 11th UN Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice in Bangkok in 2005 (UNODC, 2005; ICPC, 2005). Promoting community safety through strategic prevention has been shown to be far more cost-effective and cost-beneficial than suppression or deterrent approaches (Shaw, 2001; US Surgeon General, 2001; *Children, Youth and Gun Violence*, 2002).

The circumstances which place young people at risk of violence, either as victims or offenders, are very similar across countries – they are also points for intervention and protection.

What is also evident is that while the causes of youth violence are very similar across cultures and countries, there is a need to tailor and adapt strategies and interventions to the wide variety of **contexts** found in different countries and regions. Projects responding to gun use by urban youth gangs in developed countries, for example, may not be appropriate or replicable in Latin American, Caribbean or African countries with organized armed youth gangs (Dowdney, 2005), nor in circumstances where youth have joined, or been forced into armed militia and vigilante groups (Florquin & Berman, 2005; Wille, 2005). Even within countries, youth gun violence takes different forms requiring rather different approaches from city to city (Braga, 2004). In addition, many regions and countries in development will not have the capacity and resources available to replicate such policies.ⁱ

There is also a consensus around youth violence and offending in general, that it is better for policies and programmes to **invest in and support young people** (and their families) through preventive approaches, than to exclude or incarcerate them (Shaw, 2001; Thornton et al. 2002). This is based on the clear evidence of the problems inherent in the **exclusion** of young people from mainstream society, including ethnic and cultural minorities; on the importance of recognizing the **rights of children and young people**, including their rights to public space, and on the benefits of including them in the planning and delivery of programmes. Promoting the participation of youth at risk is increasingly recognized as an important way to respond to their social exclusion and develop effective interventions.

Young people are a major source of knowledge of their own needs and on what can be done, are well placed to work with their peers, and can act as powerful researchers, trainers, advocates, and designers of programmes and projects (UN-HABITAT, 2004a & b).

Finally, account needs to be taken of the diverse needs and experiences of young people from **different ethnic and cultural backgrounds** in the planning and development of policies and programmes, and the importance of **gender**. This means a focus on the different needs and experiences of young women and men growing up, and the significance of masculinity and femininity (INSTRAW, 2002; UNICEF, 2002), especially important in the case of young men and gun violence.

Experience in Northern countries

Until the 1980s in most Northern countries, it would appear that little public policy, research or action was devoted to the issue of gun use among children and youth, nor to its prevention. To a large extent, the focus was on adults, and the restriction of gun ownership. With the exception of the United States, there was relatively little gun-violence in criminal activity.

This situation changed, especially in the United States, from 1985 to 1998, when an epidemic of gun violence by young men focused attention on the urgency of the need to develop prevention policies and programmes (Fagan, 2002; Reich, Culross & Berman, 2002). At the peak of this epidemic in 1994, nearly 6,000 young men under the age of 20 died from firearms in the US, apart from the many more injured. The entire increase in youth homicides over this period was due to guns, and there was often a high degree of overlap between victims and offenders (Braga, 2004). In other developed countries levels of gun use by young men have historically been far lower, although since 2000 there have been reported increases in gun carrying and use by young men in a number of countries including England and Wales (HMIC, 2004; Bullock & Tilley, 2002) and Canada, notably in the City of Toronto (Toronto, 2005).ⁱⁱ

Given this situation, the great majority of youth gun prevention experience is American, and closely intertwined with strategies and programmes targeting the reduction or prevention of youth violence, gangs and drugs. The use of guns by young men is not synonymous with gang membership, or drug dealing or use, but there is often a considerable overlap in terms of their locations, and the types of young men most likely to be involved in violence.

From policing and crime control to multi-partnership responses

Initial responses to the epidemic of youth gun violence in the US were to use tough enforcement and deterrence, based on a problem-solving approach.ⁱⁱⁱ New York's *Order Maintenance Policing* employed aggressive stop and search tactics.

Gradually a broader range of policing strategies based on a variety of local city and community partnerships emerged, including the *Boston Gun Project*, *Chicago Alternative Policing Strategy* and *Neighbourhood Policing* in San Diego (Fagan, 2002; Decker, 2003). Other criminal justice partnership interventions developed specific youth courts for gun-related offences with therapeutic interventions, or trained police officers in child development and mental health. Some initiatives tried to develop and strengthen community capacity and change attitudes to gun use and violence, but usually combined with punitive interventions and aggressive campaigns targeting gun-users.^{iv v}

How effective have such approaches been in reducing youth gun violence? While a number of these projects appeared initially to have considerable success in reducing youth gun-violence, it is apparent that there was also a general decline in rates of youth gun violence in US cities from 1994 onwards.^{vi} As Fagan concludes ‘these case studies do suggest that policing alone cannot contain lethal youth violence’ (op. cit. p. 147). He also underlines the importance of focusing on guns and gun violence, not just on [young] people, incorporating procedural justice and moral legitimacy, and promoting citizen-police interactions that will produce security. Aggressive and punitive approaches, such as those used in New York City, targeted racial and cultural groups (and areas of social disadvantage) raising concerns about increasing the distrust between the police and such groups and areas, racial profiling, inequalities and social exclusion. Nor do such approaches help to build long-term solutions. In Boston, the strength of community involvement has been seen as a very important aspect of its success. The police worked in partnership with a coalition of black clergy who helped mobilize the local community (Winship & Berrien, 1999).

‘These case studies suggest that policing alone cannot contain lethal youth violence. The challenge to policing, then, is to contain the epidemic nature of gun violence while promoting social control and regulation to resist future waves of gun violence. Police actions are not likely to stop the cycle of youth gun violence, but their tactics can shape the history of that violence: how long it persists, how serious it is at its peak, and whether its aftermath hastens or forestalls future epidemics. Strategies that balance security, social control and legitimacy are essential to shift norms on a scale that matches the prevalence of lethal youth violence.’ (Fagan, 2002, p. 147)

Similar approaches have been developed in other countries. In the UK, the *Manchester Multi-Agency Gang Strategy* (MMAGS) is a Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership based on strong police and local government involvement, set up in 2001 specifically to tackle street gangs using firearms in the city. Partly modeled on the Boston project, it combines a tough law enforcement and deterrence approach, with supportive programmes for at-risk and convicted youth, (HMIC, 2004 p.33).

Primarily, however, such strategies involve criminal justice organizations, and ‘typically require a concerted concentration of police manpower and resources over an extended period of time’ (Lab, forthcoming p.39). Nor do they target the causal social and economic conditions resulting in poverty and exclusion, or help to build prevention.

A major conclusion has been that youth gun violence prevention requires comprehensive initiatives, involving multiple strategies addressing risk and protective factors (Lizotte & Sheppard, 2001).

Public health and community safety approaches ‘Youth violence prevention is achievable’

A broader consensus has emerged on the long-term benefits of a public health and community safety approach to youth violence. This is the basis of the World Health Organization’s *World Report on Violence and Health* (WHO, 2002), and that of the US Surgeon General on youth violence (US Report of the Surgeon General, 2001). Given the risk and protective factors associated with most youth offending, and especially with violence and gun violence, many prevention initiatives target those risk and protective factors, and the most at-risk groups, individuals or areas. Thus such an approach views youth violence as a major public health problem, rather than exclusively a criminal justice one.^{viii} It focuses on preventing future death and injury among youth, using a broad community-based approach.

Again there is an emphasis on *how* to apply such an approach, by defining the problem, its incidence and trends through extensive data collection, identifying the causes and associated risk and protective factors, designing and implementing interventions targeting those causes, evaluating their effectiveness, and disseminating the results of successful practice to educate the public. Thus initiatives target individual, family, community, and social factors, drawing on evidence-based research and practice of well-implemented and evaluated programmes (Thornton et al., 2002; Hoffman, 2005). As the US Surgeon General’s report concludes ‘youth violence prevention is not an intractable problem...it is a behavior that we can understand, treat, and prevent.’ (Chapter 6).

Thus based on accumulated experience of youth violence reduction in a number of countries, reducing the demand for guns among young men requires a range of interventions including:

Targeted support for high-risk children and youth:

- Early intervention home visiting, parental and family support programmes
- Targeted and school-based educational and curriculum programmes to change attitudes and behaviours to violence
- Conflict resolution, peace-building and peace-making training
- Cross-cultural youth life-skills and leadership training
- Projects around gender and masculinity
- Mentoring programmes to provide on-going support
- Education, job training, micro-credit and job-creation to provide alternative outlets for young people

Targeting high-risk areas, local communities and the general public:

- Child and youth recreational and cultural programmes
- School-based educational and curriculum programmes to change attitudes
- Projects to strengthen community capacity
- Slum up-grading and urban renewal
- Public education campaigns to change attitudes, behaviour and social norms using creative media (internet, film, music, etc.)

Targeting children and young men already using guns, exiting correctional systems, gangs or militia:

- Education, job training, micro-credit and job-creation to provide alternative economic outlets for young men
- Providing social, health and economic support services
- Mentoring programmes to provide on-going supports
- Life-skills and leadership training

The Needs of War Affected Children. Malan, 2000.

- Nutrition
- Health (STD's and drug use)
- Trust and self esteem
- Human dignity, participation
- Rehabilitation benefits
- Preparation of family to reintegrate them
- Amnesty for acts committed
- Protection from new recruitment
- Mental disarmament

Reducing the demand for guns requires a willingness to invest in young people and their communities, to protect their rights, to include them in the development and implementation of projects, and as change agents with their peers (UN-HABITAT, 2004a; CORDAID, 2004). This can range from the analysis, design and implementation of projects in public spaces with young people^{viii}, to projects with youth gangs in Argentina, Brazil or Guatemala, street youth in South Africa, or indigenous youth in Australia.

Strategic interventions which illustrate some of these principles and promote youth inclusion, participation and rights include the *Stay Alive* programme in the City of Belo Horizonte, Brazil. Established in 2002, it uses a problem-oriented and multi-partnership approach, and targets the most violent slum areas of the city, where levels of homicide from gun use among young men under 24 years of age rose sharply in the late 1990's (ICPC, 2005). *Stay Alive* has implemented a range of youth support, recreational, cultural, education and training programmes, and works with a broad community and institutional partnership which includes the city, police and public attorney, local business and community organizations, and the state university. Homicides in the targeted areas decreased by 47% in the first 30 months of the project.

In Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, the *Fight for Peace* project (*Luta Pela Paz*) developed by the NGO *Viva Rio*, focuses on providing alternatives to gun and gang-related life-styles for young men in high risk *favelas*. These are young people involved in organized armed violence. The programme provides skills, education, sports and job-training activities as alternatives to the drug trade (ICPC, 2005; Dowdney, 2005).

These are similar to some of the programmes developed for the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) of child soldiers. Other projects in Latin America and the Caribbean, supported by, for example, the international NGO CORDAID, provide alternatives to *maras*, training young men and women as peer health workers, or work with armed gang members wanting to leave gangs. This has included job and skills training as well as a programme to remove gang tattoos, a major barrier to reintegration into the local community (CORDAID, 2004).

Youth as a force for the future

Nevertheless, many youth violence prevention interventions focus heavily on high-risk youth or their families, and pay less attention to the social and economic conditions which help generate youth violence, gangs and gun-use. The most common response to youth gun violence has often been punitive enforcement and aggressive crime control, a short-term, and ultimately, very costly approach which increases social exclusion and may exacerbate it.

Communities, cities and countries need long-term solutions which can only be achieved by working in a balanced and strategic way to reduce the factors which place those young men at risk – not just from the presence of drugs or the supply of guns - but through investing in them and working to strengthen the factors which will protect them as they grow up, offer them alternatives life choices, facilitate their participation in decision-making, and strengthen their communities to change attitudes to violence. Such young men represent both a major market for exploitation, and a major asset for the economic development of cities and countries.

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ⁱ For example, many of the policing strategies developed in the US require intensive police and prosecutorial investment as well as extensive correctional services.

ⁱⁱ In both cases, this is largely restricted to one or two major cities, and levels of homicide are overall far lower than in the US. In England and Wales less than ½ of 1% of all reported crime is gun-related, and there were 68 such homicides in 2003-4. In Toronto, Canada there were 64 gun-related homicides in 2004, compared with 450 in Chicago, a US city of a comparable size.

ⁱⁱⁱ This includes detailed crime analysis mapping and analyzing of incidents, and targeting high-risk offenders and 'hot-spots' or high-risk areas.

^{iv} Often referred to as the 'pulling levers' approach developed in Boston.

^v This also applies to the 2001 US Federal initiative *Project Safe Neighbourhoods* which applies a heavily aggressive enforcement message.

^{vi} Eg. Youth gun homicides fell by 75% in Boston between 1990-98. By 2003, however, US Juvenile arrests for violence were the lowest since 1987, and for murder, the lowest since at least 1980 (Snyder, 2005).

^{vii} Apart from homicides, many non-fatal injuries result from youth gun violence, as well as suicides and accidental deaths.

^{viii} White, R. (2002). *Public Spaces for Young People*. NSW Australia: Australian Youth Foundation & national campaign Against Violence & Crime.