

Shots Fired: Experiences of Gun Violence and Victimization in Toronto Social Housing

by

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ABSTRACT

In my dissertation, I examine how residents of a Toronto social housing project called Lawrence Heights – a *de facto* Canadian ghetto – manage the day-to-day realities of gun violence and victimization in their neighbourhood. Grounded in nearly 5-years of ethnographic fieldwork (including 75 formal interviews, hundreds of informal interviews, and thousands of pages of ethnographic field notes), my project engages with literature on street knowledge, street codes, and victimization to explore how random and recurring gun violence affects the actions and perceptions of local residents. More specifically, it examines how young black men in Lawrence Heights – the exclusive targets of gun violence in this community – negotiate the social and spatial realities of danger and risk in their neighborhood, relying on what I call ‘neighbourhood wisdom’ (chapter 3), ‘the code of survival’ (chapter 4), and the ‘on point - slipping framework’ (chapter 5). Ultimately, my findings illustrate that despite living in a *de facto* ghetto characterized by concentrated poverty, lethal violence, and disorder, residents of this Toronto social housing project have found ways to allow social and community life to continue – adapting, in other words, to an otherwise paralyzing socio-spatial milieu. This dissertation sheds light on the lived experiences of one of Canada’s most marginalized populations, calling for more nuanced and ‘on the ground’ understandings of poverty, crime, and victimization in the Canadian context.

PREFACE

This thesis is an original work by Luca Berardi. The research project, of which this thesis is a part, received research ethics approval from:

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DEDICATIONS

This thesis is dedicated to the memories of Rodolfo Zanotti and George Sammut, two of the warmest and most loving people I have ever known. I will carry them with me, always.

This thesis is also dedicated to the residents of Lawrence Heights, especially those who have lost their lives to gun violence.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Monk: Fucked up. Right after it happened, my boy called me, “Yo, come get me. I got shot”. “What?!” “Yo, I’m at Amaranth”. Me and my boy ran over there. I was one of the first people on the scene. Luca, if you seen the scene... [long pause]. It was just... ugh... it was just guys laid out everywhere. And the guy who got killed, his... his brain is on the pavement. Like his... I guess the bullet went through his head. So his brain is on the pavement and his boys are there tryin’a... they’re tryin’a hold his brain in his head, bro. They’re tryin’ to hold the man’s... they’re trying to hold him together, but he’s spillin’ out. He’s gone. All six of them got shot that night. [...] It was crazy. It was sick. I’ve just seen too much already. I’ve seen too much. Too many people shot. Like, you... you hear about the shootings. You’re not on every scene, you know what I mean, but me, in particular, I’ve been on a couple. I’ve been on too many for my count. Shit, I’ve been the scene myself, you know what I mean.

Luca: What happened that night? The night you were shot?

Monk: Me and my boy, we were leaving the apartment. He was leaving Jungle and I was going to get some food and that’s when it happened. What happened was, he... he... I don’t even know, man. We were standing right beside each other. I got shot, he didn’t. He made it out. The roles could’ve been reversed. [But] I remember what I was thinking. That’s the thing. When it first happened, when I first got shot, I didn’t realize I got shot. I felt it. And I heard it. But I didn’t know what it was. I just felt this extreme amount of pain in my leg and then I went and I stepped and I broke my own leg. But it was fucked up because I’m just like... after I hit the ground, I had like a ‘thinking moment’ where I couldn’t... Everything that was going on, I couldn’t process it. I’m only thinking in my own head, you know what I mean. I could see everything happening. I could see them in the car and they’re still shooting out the window, but in my head, I’m just like, “Holy shit, did I just get shot?” Kind of like daydreaming, you know what I mean. Like I’m awake. I could see everything. But I’m not focusing on that right now. I’m in my own zone. And then I just snapped out of it. (Monk, 26-year-old resident of Lawrence Heights)

Monk has witnessed too much. He has been *on* the scene of multiple shootings. He has *been* the scene of a shooting himself. He has had friends and family members killed within the boundaries of his neighbourhood. He loves his community but hates his neighbourhood. This is Lawrence Heights, “The Jungle”, shrouded in complexity and characterized by its contradictions. The community, composed of 3500 low-income residents, is warm, welcoming, and vibrant. The neighbourhood, a segregated social housing project in Toronto, Canada, is dilapidated, crime-

ridden, and in dire need of investment. It is, at once, incredibly loving and exceptionally violent. After nearly 5-years of ethnographic research, thousands of hours of fieldwork, and countless conversations with residents and stakeholders, it still remains nebulous to me.

The media has boiled down the community to a series of headlines: “Police Canvas Lawrence Heights After Five Shootings in Five Weeks” (City News 2016), “Man, 24, Critically Injured in Late Night Shooting in Lawrence Heights” (CBC News 2017), “15-Year-Old Boy Expected to Survive Lawrence Heights Shooting” (Toronto Star 2013). The City of Toronto, in partnership with the United Way, has labeled the area a “Priority Neighbourhood”¹ – a designation reserved for eleven neighbourhoods identified as high in crime and low in services, opportunities, and programming, particularly for young people (Toronto Star 2008). The local MP’s assessment, condensed into a digestible soundbite, reads, “Lawrence Heights carries with it the stigma of being ‘The Jungle’ because this community, this ghetto, has been created and walled off from the rest of the world. It’s a public disgrace” (National Post 2010). Yet, between the oscillating public narratives of urban isolation and gun violence, of ghettoization and crime, exists an often-forgotten truth – that there are people *living* in Lawrence Heights, coping with the day-to-day realities of concentrated poverty, segregation, and recurring gun violence.

This is likely not the Toronto that most are accustomed to hearing about. Indeed, as Canada’s largest and most ethnically diverse metropolis, it is often touted as one of the safest (The Economist 2017) and most livable cities (Metropolis 2015) in the world – a bastion of inclusivity and multiculturalism. Yet, over the last two decades, the city has witnessed a dramatic increase in the concentration of poverty and the spatial polarization of its neighbourhoods based on income and ethnicity (Hulchanski 2007; Walks and Bourne 2006). The deepest pockets of concentrated

¹ These are now called “Neighbourhood Improvement Areas” (City of Toronto 2018).

poverty and segregation in Toronto are found in social housing developments, inhabited by some of the poorest and most marginalized populations in the country (UWGT 2004, 2011).

In the United States and much of Europe, both an empirical and perceived link exists between “social housing” and “the ghetto” (Venkatesh 2000), with these two terms used interchangeably in the literature and being all but synonymous in the public imagination. And while it is certainly possible to find housing projects that are not ghettos, and ghettos that are not housing projects, the two spaces have been fused by what they perceivably share in common – social disorder, crime, violence, marginalization, exclusion, physical segregation, and a lack of collective efficacy (Sampson 1990; Sampson et al. 2010; Venkatesh 2006; Wilson 1996).

Yet, in Canada, research on both social housing and the ghetto is incredibly limited, while studies examining the link between the two constructs are practically non-existent. The handful of studies that do exist focus on broad patterns of racial and class-based segregation at the census tract level, concluding, quite unequivocally, that *US-style* ghettos do not exist in Canadian cities (Peters 2005; Walks and Bourne 2006). Yet, researchers in Canada have not systematically examined the lived experiences of individuals residing in these isolated pockets of concentrated poverty. In fact, aside from Urbanik (2017) and the research found herein, there have been no ethnographic accounts of social housing in Canada. This is particularly troubling for Canadian criminology, as there is little qualitative evidence about how the spatial concentration of poverty (Wilson 1987) may be affecting how Canadians experience crime, violence, and disorder on the ground (for exceptions, see Thompson, Bucierius, and Luguya 2013; Urbanik, Thompson, and Bucierius 2017). In the absence of Canadian literature on these issues, I turn to debates on the American ghetto to provide the theoretical foundation upon which my three substantive chapters are built.

The research presented in this dissertation delves below the media headlines, official designations, and condensed soundbites – indeed, below the census tract – to examine the impact of deep and concentrated poverty on the lives and experiences of Toronto social housing residents. It articulates how residents of Lawrence Heights cope with the realities of gun violence in their everyday lives – more specifically, how young black men safely negotiate physical space and the emotional effects of victimization in a community that is perceived, treated, and embodied as ghetto.

*** **

This chapter provides a general introduction to the overall subject matter, including an overview of pertinent literature on the ghetto, which frames all three of my journal article-style papers – comprising Chapters 3, 4, and 5 of the dissertation. While each of these substantive chapters addresses a separate research question, and thus stands alone as an individual contribution to our theoretical and empirical understanding of a particular topic (street knowledge, street codes, and experiences of violent victimization, respectively), all three chapters are related in their focus on how gun violence affects young black men in Lawrence Heights – the exclusive targets of gun violence in this community. Indeed, all three chapters illuminate the role of local context – in this case, concentrated poverty, segregation, and unfettered violence – in shaping the perceptions, actions, and experiences of those living and operating in a *de-facto* ghetto. Thus, I draw upon scholarship on the ghetto to anchor my analyses, serving as both a theoretical tool and a necessary backdrop for contextualizing the actions and beliefs of residents.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND GUIDING QUESTIONS

My dissertation developed from an interest in better understanding the lived experiences of Canada's urban poor. To do this, I engaged in an in-depth examination of concentrated poverty in the Canadian context, exploring what it *looks like* and *feels like* for residents of a Toronto social housing project called Lawrence Heights. Following the ethnographic tradition of Herbert Gans (1962), Carol Stack (1974), and Sudhir Venkatesh (2000), I conducted what is best described as a “neighbourhood study,” collecting data on various facets of community life, including, but not limited to: precarious housing and employment, community cohesion and resilience, segregation and exclusion, police-community relations, neighbourhood revitalization, local gang structures, drug dealing, prostitution, gun violence, and victimization. The purpose of this research was to uncover the challenges and triumphs of social housing residents by exploring the issues that were most pertinent to them in their daily lives. Over time, the topic of gun violence and victimization began dominating my conversations, interviews, and fieldnotes, while emerging as a fundamental component of all of the other topics I was studying.

My dissertation, therefore, provides an *ethnographic analysis of how young black men in Lawrence Heights, a pocket of concentrated poverty in Toronto, Canada, negotiate the threat of gun violence in their everyday lives and manage the stigma of victimization when it ultimately occurs*. It reveals that vulnerable and marginalized young men accomplish these feats by relying on parochial forms of: i) street knowledge (what I call “neighbourhood wisdom”); ii) street codes (what I call “the code of survival”), and; iii) victimization narratives (what I call the “on point - slipping” framework).² Taken *in toto*, this research demonstrates the capacity of individuals to

² The term “parochial”, as it is used in modern-day parlance, tends to carry negative connotations, referring to actions or beliefs that are limited, narrow-minded, uninformed, or even naïve in outlook and scope. Throughout the

adapt and respond to seemingly insurmountable challenges, framing and reframing their social and physical worlds in ways that allow some semblance of public life to continue. Ultimately, at its core, it serves as a detailed account of how individual and collective agency operates within structural disadvantage, allowing vulnerable residents at least some reprieve from the hardships of daily life.

While the study of gun violence and victimization is typically considered the domain of criminologists, the research found in this dissertation may be of interest to a broader set of readers, including those studying urban poverty, ghettos, and disadvantaged neighbourhoods. It may also be of interest to urban planners, law enforcement agencies, social housing providers, and community-based organizations looking for insight into how vulnerable populations in Canada experience their social and spatial surroundings in ways that may not be intuitive to outsiders.

THE GHETTO

“The ghetto is ferment, paradox, conflict, and dilemma. Yet within its pervasive pathology exists a surprising human resilience. The ghetto is hope, it is despair, it is churches, and bars. It is aspiration for change, and it is apathy. It is vibrancy, it is stagnation. It is courage, and it is defeatism. It is cooperation and concern, and it is suspicion, competitiveness, and rejection. It is the surge toward assimilation, and it is alienation and withdrawal within the protective walls of the ghetto” (Clark 1965: 11-12).

In this section, I present a comprehensive analysis of the ghetto as a theoretical construct, beginning with its emergence in the European-Jewish context and its eventual adaptation for contextualizing the experiences of blacks in America. While I present research on the historical formation of the ghetto and “the *processes* by which it comes into being and without which it cannot exist” (Gans 2008: 353), my ethnographic work rests on an understanding of the ghetto as

dissertation, I use the original definition of the term “parochial” to describe actions and beliefs that are characteristic of a local church parish and surrounding district.

an *institution of social-spatial closure and control* (Wacquant 2001, 2012). This shifts our analytical gaze away from historical analyses, preoccupied with definitions and metrics (Pattillo 2003; Walks and Bourne 2006; Wilson 1987), towards those that examine how these spaces are socially conceived, reproduced, and experienced by individuals and groups on the ground (Wacquant 2001, 2012).

I call upon this literature to anchor my dissertation, as it provides the theoretical framework necessary for understanding the decisions and actions of young black men on the streets of Lawrence Heights – a group that acts and reacts to experiences of gun violence, not in a vacuum, but within a milieu that is, at once, restrictive and generative, structured and structuring (Bourdieu 2005). While each of my substantive chapters focus on a distinct topic, all three are grounded in the lived experiences of social housing residents who must negotiate the unique barriers that come along with living in a *de-facto* ghetto. Without this theoretical foundation, the perceptions and actions of residents outlined in this dissertation cannot be fully appreciated or understood.

The Jewish Ghetto: The History, Etymology, and Racialization of the ‘Other’

The concept of the ghetto dates back to 16th century Europe and refers to the physical space where the Venetian Senate segregated a growing Jewish population.³ The first Jewish inhabitants of the city were moneylenders, an occupation that Christians were barred from, as usury was considered unclean and sinful (Haynes and Hutchison 2012). “The very role that Jews played,” Haynes and Hutchison (2012: ix) note, “was proof of their difference from Christians and their social debasement”.

³ The Jewish ghetto was not an exclusively Venetian phenomenon. By the late 1700s, Jewish ghettos had emerged across Europe in cities such as Prague, Frankfurt, and Mainz, as well as in many Polish cities (Haynes and Hutchison 2012: xvi).

In 1516, in response to the growing influx of Jews in Venice, the Venetian Senate directed all Jewish residents towards the Ghetto Nuovo (New Ghetto). Indeed, the term “ghetto” derived from the Italian *getto* and the verb *gettare*, which referred to the original use of the site as a foundry (Duneier 2016). This area was encapsulated by brick walls, locked gates, and nightly police patrols, which not only ensured that inhabitants remained inside after sundown, but protected them from external threats (Haynes and Hutchison 2012). Interestingly, scholars have noted that this externally imposed, social-cum-spatial “othering” process actually brought the Jewish population closer together. It gave rise to feelings of safety, security, and belonging, as well as to a unique culture where art, music, and religion flourished within its walls (Duneier 2016; Haynes and Hutchison 2012). In short, racialization and segregation at the hands of the oppressor gave rise to solidarity and a rich culture amongst the oppressed.

The Emergence of the American Ghetto

By the late 19th century, anti-Semitism had taken hold across much of Europe and Jews began taking refuge in the United States. A mass migration soon followed, leading to the formation of large Jewish ghettos in both New York and Chicago. While anti-Semitism in the US was less prevalent than in Europe, it was still strong enough to cast Jews as “the other,” pushing them into the least desirable pockets of large American cities.

In 1928, Wirth argued that the Jewish ghetto in Chicago was similar to other ethnic neighbourhoods of first-settlement, where recent immigrants would dwell, temporarily, until they were financially stable enough to assimilate into the wider society. Wirth (1928) understood the ghetto as a “natural area” – one that all immigrant groups simply “passed through” following the

Jewish model of assimilation and succession⁴ (Haynes and Hutchison 2012). Unfortunately, Wirth's (1928) assessment was incorrect. By 1960s, with anti-Semitism fading in the US, Jewish ghettos began to disintegrate, making way for a growing and notably disenfranchised black population, which still remains largely ensnared within its boundaries.

Drake and Cayton, breaking from “scholars who had defined [the ghetto] as an area of voluntary first settlement leading towards assimilation” (Haynes and Hutchison 2012: xxi), argued that the segregation of blacks was “primarily the result of white people's attitudes toward having Negroes as neighbors. Because some white Chicagoans do not wish colored neighbors, formal and informal controls are used to isolate the latter within congested all-Negro neighbourhoods” (Drake and Cayton 1945: 174). This spawned a new set of scholarship on the black ghetto, linking growing levels of involuntary segregation to white hostility and the state.⁵

Some years later, Clark (1965: 11) built on this idea, reframing the theoretical understanding of the US ghetto from an area of *voluntary* first-settlement to an area of *involuntary* segregation of a particular group at the hands of the dominant majority. He described the US ghetto as the “restriction of persons to a special area and the limiting of their freedom of choice on the basis of skin color” (Clark 1965: 11). By 1965, the association between the ghetto and the Jewish population had largely disappeared in the US. However, it became nearly synonymous with black

⁴ Wirth (1928: 66), describing the patterns of the ghetto: “The occupation of this area by the Jews, it seems, is merely a passing phase of a long process in which one population group has been crowded out by another... Each racial group tends to settle in the part of the city which, from the point of view of the rents, standards of living, accessibility, and tolerance, makes the reproduction of Old World life easiest... The Jews have successfully replaced the Germans, the Irish, and the Bohemians, and have themselves been displaced by the Poles and Lithuanians, the Italians, the Greeks, and Turks, and finally the Negro... The Negro, like the immigrant, is segregated in the city into a racial colony; economic factors, race, prejudice, and cultural difference combine to set him apart”.

⁵ Weaver (1948), for example, was one of the first to provide a holistic analysis of housing segregation in the US. Not only did he note that Chicago was “leading the way” in the racial segregation of housing, but argued that ghetto patterns of residence were initiated and promoted by “certain institutions” (i.e., the federal government). See also: Osofsky (1963), Spear (1967), and Kusmer (1976) who stressed the role of white racial animosity in determining black opportunity in the city.

people and black culture and used in the academic literature to describe nearly all African American neighbourhoods, including social housing developments (Haynes and Hutchison 2012).

Contemporary Readings of the US Ghetto: Race, Class, or Institution of Closure and Control

Contemporary debates on the definition and boundaries of the American ghetto tend to describe it as either: a) an area demarcated by certain socio-spatial characteristics, or; b) an institution of closure, exploitation, and control. While there are certainly debates across the two perspectives, there is also strong disagreement *within* the first category itself – i.e., amongst scholars who place greater emphasis on either the importance of class (Wilson 1987, 1996; Jargowsky and Bane 1991) or race (Masey and Denton 1993; Patillo 2003).

Perhaps the most famous scholar of the ghetto is William Julius Wilson, who examined structural changes in the economy and analyzed their impact on black class structure and the composition of inner-city neighbourhoods. Breaking from historical understandings of ghettoization outlined in the previous section, Wilson (1978, 1987, 1996) argues that *class*, not race, is the most important factor determining the life chances of blacks in large US cities.

In *The Declining Significance of Race*, he paints a picture of a changing US metropolis, marked by the growing segregation of blacks from whites (i.e., racial segregation) and the bifurcation of the African American community (i.e., class segregation). According to Wilson (1978), civil rights victories sparked opportunities for blacks to enter into fields of employment that were previously blocked off or reserved for whites. This allowed qualified blacks to increase their socio-economic position relative to their lower-class counterparts, leaving the latter increasingly marginalized and excluded. According to Wilson (1978), lower class blacks were not faring poorly because they were black; rather, “they were unskilled in a labor market that had decreasing demand for such workers” (Patillo 2003: 1050).

In *The Truly Disadvantaged*, Wilson (1987) illustrates that prior to the Civil Rights era, black neighbourhoods had representation from a wide range of socio-economic classes. However, with the introduction of fair housing laws and affirmative action programs, large cities like Chicago started experiencing “black flight” – the mass exodus of the black middle class from African American neighbourhoods. This meant that those who remained – i.e., the poorest of the black population – were doubly segregated, by both race *and* class. Soon, labour market exclusion, cuts to federal funding for inner-city programs, and growing levels of isolation in deteriorating inner-city areas culminated in a spike in concentrated poverty and, eventually, the formation of the black ghetto, predominantly in sprawling social housing developments. (Wilson 1987).

Simultaneously, increasing levels of unemployment and the outmigration of the black middle class had a negative impact on important institutions of social control in black neighbourhoods, such as churches, community groups, and corner stores. Consequently, these areas of concentrated poverty began to see an increase in social disorganization, where formal and informal social control dwindled, giving rise to higher levels of crime, violence, and gang involvement (Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls 2010). Focusing on structural changes as both the culprit *and* the solution, Wilson argued that increasing the employment rates of residents in the black ghetto would reduce the spatial concentration of poverty and its related symptoms (Hutchison 2012).

To test and elaborate hypotheses put forth in *The Truly Disadvantaged*, Wilson (2003) adopted Jargowsky and Bane’s (1991: 239) class-based definition of the ghetto as:

An area in which the overall poverty rate in a census tract is greater than 40 percent. The ghetto poor are then those poor, of any race or ethnic group, who live in such high poverty census tracts... It is important to distinguish our definition of ghetto tracts based on a poverty criterion from a definition based on racial composition. Not all majority black tracts are ghettos under our definition nor are all ghettos black.

Given the prominent and historical role of race relations in the US, a number of prominent sociologists, including Mary Pattillo (2003), strongly criticized Wilson's class-based operationalization of the term.

In her own work, Pattillo (2003) argues that *race*, not class, is the key characteristic of the American ghetto. Like Wilson, her definition includes areas of concentrated poverty and joblessness; however, it also extends to working and middle class black neighbourhoods as well. She argues that class-based definitions obscure the fact that many lower and middle class blacks in the US face the same issues as blacks living in extreme poverty – i.e., limited access to permanent and stable employment, lack of quality education, and threats to personal safety and security (Hutchison 2012). “Making the black middle class a visible part of black communities,” therefore, “highlights its spatial connection to the black poor, which is contrasted with the ability of the white middle class to distance itself from urban poverty” (Pattillo 2000: 225). Understandably then, her definition of the ghetto includes “the entirety of the spatially segregated and contiguous black community” (Pattillo 2003: 1053), consistent with the work of Wirth (1928), Drake and Cayton (1945), and Clark (1965).

For two decades, Wacquant has tied issues of race, class, marginalization, and exclusion to historical and contemporary state policies and practices. In *Deadly Symbiosis*, he argues that the ghetto exists as part of a wider set of institutions that have served to control and encapsulate the black population in the US for over four hundred years, with this process taking on a number of institutional forms. The first three “peculiar institutions” of slavery (1619-1865), the Jim Crow regime (Southern US, 1865-1965), and the communal ghetto (Northern US, 1915-1968), all served two major functions: labour extraction and the social-spatial ostracization of the black population (Wacquant 2001: 99).

The communal ghetto, however, which ceased to exist by the late 1960s, differed from the others inasmuch as it serves as a “double-edged, socio-spatial formation” (2001) or a “Janus-faced institution” (2004, 2012). For the dominant category, it served to confine and control; for the dominated, however, it served as an integrative and protective device, buffering the population from constant contact with the dominant while fostering community building within its boundaries (Wacquant 2004). For Wacquant (2004: 5), then, “Enforced isolation from the outside leads to the intensification of social exchange and cultural sharing inside,” making it more akin to the Jewish ghettos in Europe.

The most recent incarnation of the ghetto is what Wacquant (2008a, 2008b) calls the “hyperghetto”. While the communal ghetto “served as a reservoir of unskilled labor for factories and its dense web of organizations offered a buffer against white domination,” the hyperghetto lacks an economic function and is absent of communal organizations, “which have been replaced by state institutions of social control” (Wacquant 2008a: 114). This new manifestation of the ghetto has simply become a “one-dimensional machinery for naked relegation, a human warehouse wherein are discarded those segments of urban society deemed disreputable, derelict, and dangerous” (Wacquant 2001: 107) – i.e., the unemployed, criminals, and welfare recipients.

Wacquant’s work on the ghetto as an institution of closure and control is particularly relevant for my own research on experiences of gun violence in Toronto social housing. Although he places race, as opposed to class, at the heart of his analysis of the ghetto, his work provides a strong theoretical foundation for grounding and contextualizing the lived experiences of Toronto social housing residents, who, in response to *external* pressures from class-based spatial segregation, have developed their own set of *internal* processes and practices that govern daily life. In Lawrence Heights, this response to the extant milieu has manifested itself in the form of

neighbourhood wisdom (chapter 3), the code of survival (chapter 4), and the ‘on point - slipping’ framework (chapter 5).

Unfortunately, as the three substantive chapters illustrate, these internal processes – deployed to improve the well-being of residents as they negotiate the threat of gun violence in their neighbourhood – have created yet another set of barriers that residents must negotiate on a daily basis. Wacquant’s descriptions of the ghetto as a Janus-faced institution, therefore, is particularly relevant for understanding the case of Lawrence Heights, where residents find themselves governed by both the rules of larger society *and* those of the ghetto.

Canadian Ghettos (?) and Neighbourhood Disadvantage

“In Canada,” Urbanik (2017: 9) notes, “areas like Toronto’s *Regent Park* neighbourhood, Vancouver’s downtown *Eastside*, Winnipeg’s *North End*, Edmonton’s *Boyle Street*, Regina’s *North Central*, and Aboriginal reserve communities like *Hobbema/Maskwasis* have garnered international reputations for being impoverished, racialized, crime and drug filled ‘ghettos’”. The Canadian news media is largely responsible for the stigmatization of these areas by portraying crime, violence, and victimization as explanations for their continued disinvestment and dilapidation, conflating the causes and consequences of concentrated poverty and disadvantage. As a result, “broader public knowledge of some of Canada’s poorest areas is skewed towards the manifestations of ‘social ills’ within these spaces, often neglecting the conditions that our most vulnerable populations struggle with” (Urbanik 2017: 10).

Academic research on disadvantaged neighbourhoods (including social housing projects) is limited in Canada, with studies focusing predominantly on health-related outcomes of living in poor neighbourhoods, e.g., increased levels of drug and alcohol consumption (Matheson et al. 2012), suicidal thoughts (Dupere et al. 2009), sexual activity (Dupere et al. 2008), and BMI levels

(Matheson, Moineddin, and Glazier 2008), to name a few. Another set of literature centers around the impact of urban redevelopment and social mix on social housing residents (August 2014; Bucerius et al. 2017; Rowe and Dunn 2014; Thompson et al. 2013). Interestingly, Canadian criminologists have paid little attention to these pockets of concentrated poverty, which is surprising given the strong link in the US literature between neighbourhood disadvantage and crime, violence, and victimization (Kubrin and Weitzer 2003; Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls 1997). Moreover, aside from research conducted by Urbanik (2017), there have been no ethnographic accounts of the lived experiences and realities of residents living in pockets of deep and concentrated poverty in Canada. Consequently, “Canadian criminology still lacks a holistic understanding of how the conditions of these areas influence crime, violence, and victimization” (Urbanik 2017: 11).

Moving from neighbourhood disadvantage to ghettoization, we find that within the Canadian context, research on the ghetto is practically non-existent. The few studies that do exist come out of geography and urban planning, where scholars have attempted to identify the presence or absence of ghettos in relation to trends in the spatial distribution of poverty and minority concentration – relying heavily on US measures and constructs. There have been no sociological assessments of, or debates around, whether urban ghettos exist in Canadian cities or what they may look like given Canada’s unique history and culture.⁶ It is not surprising that the limited attempts

⁶ Perhaps the only exception is an early report by Clairmont and Magill (1973) on Africville, a black community in the city of Halifax that was dismantled (and its population relocated) in the late-1960s. Despite the term “ghetto” only being used three times in the report (and never formally defined), Africville was, for all intents and purposes, a black Canadian ghetto. Residents lived in extreme poverty in an isolated section of the city where they were deprived of key resources and services, such as adequate public transportation, education, sewage, water, and garbage collection. Further, and similar to Wacquant’s (2004) understanding of the ghetto as a Janus-faced institution of closure and control, this physical marginalization was coupled with social exclusion so that “Africville was obliged to develop structures parallel to those found elsewhere in the city” (Clairmont and Magill 1973: 65).

to define and understand ghettoization have concluded, definitively and categorically, that *US-style* ghettos do not exist in Canadian cities.

Perhaps the most well-known Canadian study on the topic comes from geographers Walks and Bourne (2006). Using census data from 1991 to 2001, they examine whether “US-style” urban ghettos exist in large Canadian cities by untangling the relationship between spatial patterns of minority concentration and neighbourhood poverty. In line with other geographers, demographers, and political scientists (see Bauder and Sharpe 2002; Balakrishnan and Gyimah 2003; Myles and Hou 2004; Peters 2005), they conclude that “ghettoization along US lines is not a factor in Canadian cities” as “high levels of racial concentration do not automatically imply greater neighbourhood poverty” (Walks and Bourne 2006: 273, 290) (see Kazemipur and Halli 2000, for an exception).

While Walks and Bourne (2006) may be correct to conclude that *US-style* ghettos do not exist in Canadian cities, this does not necessarily rule out the existence of ghettos in Canada. Indeed, we currently have no sense of what *Canadian-style* ghettos may look like or how they may manifest themselves. Moreover, while this body of research identifies patterns of ethnic and racial segregation, which is a key feature of the American ghetto (Massey and Denton 1993; Pattillo 2003; Wacquant 2004; Wilson 1987), it does not assess the impact of spatial segregation or its effects on the lives and experiences of Canadians.⁷

⁷ While broad, census level data may be effective in identifying ghettos in the US – where spatial patterns of racial segregation and concentrated poverty are stark and all-encompassing (Massey and Denton 1993) – they are simply too large and indiscriminate of a measure to get a fair reading of this phenomenon in Canada. In Toronto, for example, racial segregation is not nearly as dichotomized or severe as in the US. Where it does exist, it is typically on a voluntary basis (e.g., via ethnic enclaves) and at a much more micro level (see Murdie and Ghosh 2009). It is not unusual, therefore, to find small neighbourhoods of extreme poverty adjacent to, or even embedded within, otherwise wealthy census tracts – much different than the widespread segregation of blacks in the US, as outlined by Wilson (1987) and Pattillo (2003). Despite the best efforts of urban geographers and planners, macro-level census data may simply not be a sharp enough tool for commenting on the presence or absence of ghettos in cities like Toronto, where

In the hope of uncovering a more context-specific framework for understanding the lived experience of social housing residents, I turned to literature on Canada's Indigenous population. While studies on poverty in Canada show that Indigenous peoples are over-represented among the urban poor (Lee 2000; Graham and Peters 2002; Drost and Richards 2003; Heisz and McLeod 2004) and tend to be concentrated in poor urban neighbourhoods (Richards 2001; Heisz and McLeod 2004), few studies have examined the relationship between Indigenous poverty/segregation and urban ghettos, not even in the context of "urban reserves". The limited research that does exist suffers from the same pitfalls noted above, with researchers adopting US-centric definitions to map out demographic patterns and trends among the Indigenous population (Carter, Polevychok, and Sargent 2003; Peters 2005, 2007).

Not surprisingly, we are left with the conclusion that, although living in extremely poor, marginalized, and stigmatized spaces, Indigenous peoples in Canada do not live in *US-style* urban ghettos, "as [their] settlement patterns in Canadian cities do not replicate the experience of concentrated segregation that is found in many US cities" (Peters 2005, p. 364). While somewhat reassuring (though perhaps erroneously so), this does not help our understanding of what ghettos may look like in the *Canadian* context or their potential impact on the lives, opportunities, and experiences of those within.

the most intense pockets of poverty and disadvantage exist at a more micro-level – i.e., within social housing developments scattered around the city (UWGT 2004, 2011). Lawrence Heights, for example, is a relatively small pocket of concentrated poverty that is directly adjacent to two wealthy neighbourhoods. At the census level, it is divided down the middle and sits in two separate tracts – each of which is shared with an affluent neighbourhood. As such, the racial, ethnic, and economic makeup of Lawrence Heights is absorbed into, and thus averaged out by, the two wealthy neighbourhoods it shares its tracts with. Lawrence Heights is not alone in this regard: a number of social housing developments in Toronto are similarly situated next to some of the wealthiest areas of the city. Given their size and geographic position, it is not surprising that Toronto social housing developments have not been identified as potential "ghettos" at the census level.

DISSERTATION STRUCTURE AND OVERVIEW

My dissertation is organized into six chapters. Following this introduction, I present my setting and methodology (chapter 2) and then three substantive papers (chapters 3-5). Each of these chapters (3-5) stands alone as its own analytical paper, contributing to our understanding of how Toronto social housing residents experience gun violence and victimization. More specifically, they examine how young black men in Lawrence Heights, the exclusive targets of gun violence in this community, negotiate the physical and emotional uncertainties of living and operating in a perilous setting.⁸

In Chapter 3, *Neighbourhood Wisdom: An Ethnographic Study of Localized Street Knowledge*,⁹ I argue for the re-examination of the concept of street knowledge – an interpretive framework used by vulnerable individuals to mitigate risk in a wide range of socio-spatial settings. Grounded in the experiences of Lawrence Heights residents, I demonstrate that street knowledge is more parochial than the current literature suggests. Weaving together discussions of risk, violence, and physical space, I make an empirically driven argument for binding the scope of street knowledge, coining the term “neighbourhood wisdom” to account for its localized nature. I demonstrate that this lens for mitigating risk is derived directly from “the local” – i.e., from the social and spatial particularities of a given locale. As such, its protective function is largely confined to the particular geographic location from which it emerges, exists, and operates.

Chapter 4, *The Code of Survival: Avoiding Violent Victimization in Toronto Social Housing*,¹⁰ examines how young black men in Lawrence Heights have come to rely on a set of street codes

⁸ While the journal article-style approach to this thesis has led to some repetition within the three substantive chapters, this is mostly limited to the methodology sections, as data collection techniques did not drastically change across the substantive chapters.

⁹ This sole-authored chapter is currently under review by a criminology journal.

¹⁰ This sole-authored chapter is currently being prepared for submission to a criminology journal.

and techniques for safely navigate the built form of their neighbourhood. I not only illustrate how these mechanisms operate in action, but argue that they form an integral part of the street habitus of young black men in Lawrence Heights, allowing them to act and react, instinctively and often unconsciously, to potential threats in their local environment. I show that despite how precarious their social milieu may seem, street codes and the techniques for action that they engender provide undercurrents of order and predictability that are essential for the functioning of daily life.¹¹

In Chapter 5, *“You Won’t Catch Me Slippin’”*: *How Streetwise Young Men Interpret the Victimization Experiences of Others*,¹² I analyse what happens when street knowledge and street codes fail and someone is shot or killed within the boundaries of Lawrence Heights. My findings suggest that streetwise young men bend the victimization experiences of others in ways that either: a) shift culpability and blame from perpetrator to victim or b) completely absolve the victim of any responsibility for the incident. In doing this, young men draw boundaries between themselves and those who “slipped” (applied to streetwise victims) and those who “didn’t know any better” (applied to non-streetwise victims) – in the process, transforming a precarious environment into one that is perceivably manageable through persistent hyper-vigilance (or what participants call being “on point”).

The concluding chapter (Chapter 6) brings together the research findings, revealing the interconnectedness of these parochial forms of street knowledge, street codes, and victimization narratives within a space that is perceived, treated, and embodied as ghetto. It then addresses the study’s broader implications for academic scholarship and possible directions for future research.

¹¹ See Table 1 for a short summary of ‘neighbourhood wisdom’ and the ‘code of survival’ in relation to Elijah Anderson’s ‘street wisdom’ (1990) and ‘code of the street’ (1999), respectively. To be used as a quick reference.

¹² This sole-authored chapter is currently being prepared for submission to a criminology journal.

Table 1: Descriptions of Various Forms of Street Knowledge & Street Codes

CHAPTER 3	CHAPTER 4
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Street Knowledge</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interpretive framework, existing within individual, used to read, respond to, and avoid potential threats in public. 	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Street Codes</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set of socially prescribed rules and strategies for action, shared by group or culture, that facilitates continuation of social life in perilous settings.
<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Street Wisdom</i> (Anderson)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exists internally, within individual. • Form of street knowledge that hinges on social interaction – i.e., on actor’s ability to read cues and signals that others give off in public. • Once acquired, can be used to avoid danger in wide range of socio-spatial settings. 	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Code of the Street</i> (Anderson)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exists socially. • Set of informal rules governing interpersonal public behavior, particularly use of violence. • Violence is mechanism through which ‘respect’ is gained, lost, maintained. • Offensive street code: even those seeking to avoid violence must perform it to ensure personal safety.
<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Neighbourhood Wisdom</i> (Berardi)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exists internally, within individual. • Bespoke form of street knowledge tailored to idiosyncrasies of particular locality. • Protective value limited to social and spatial context from which knowledge was developed. • Takes on different form, depending on local context – e.g., nature of threat, layout of physical space, etc. 	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Code of Survival</i> (Berardi)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exists socially. • Set of informal rules and techniques governing interaction between individuals and built-form of physical environment. • Purely defensive street code: does not hinge on use of violence to ensure safety; not grounded in notions of ‘honour’ or ‘respect’ • Exists for fundamental purpose of ensuring safety, without aggressive element.

CHAPTER TWO

FIELDSITE AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I describe some troubling trends in the changing composition of Toronto's neighbourhoods based on income and ethnicity. I then provide details about my research site, including information about the Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC) and the Lawrence Heights neighbourhood. From there, I discuss how I gained access to, and built rapport with, the community and its residents. Finally, I provide a detailed explanation of my approach to data collection and analysis, including interviewing, participant-observation, note-taking, and the triangulation of data.

TORONTO: THE CHANGING COMPOSITION OF NEIGHBOURHOODS

In 2004, Toronto's understanding of poverty was transformed with the release of *Poverty by Postal Code*, a ground-breaking report outlining the rising rates of low-income families and their intense concentration within poor neighbourhoods.¹³ This concentration has led to a tremendous increase in the number of "higher poverty" neighbourhoods in the city, from 30 in 1981 to 120 in 2001.¹⁴ Interestingly, this increase has been particularly pronounced in the inner suburbs, where the combined total of "higher poverty" neighbourhoods jumped from 15 to 92 in just twenty

¹³ Family poverty rates in Toronto jumped by approximately 7% (from 13.3% to 19.4%) in two decades, so that one in five families were living in poverty in 2001. Perhaps more disturbing is that the concentration of poor families in high poverty neighbourhoods also increased, from 17.8% in 1981 to over 43% by 2001 (UWGT 2004: 4).

¹⁴ "Higher poverty" neighbourhoods refer to areas where 26% or more of the families in the neighbourhood have incomes below the Low Income Cut-Off, which is a measure developed by Statistics Canada to compare the relative economic well-being among Canadian households. Using this measure, a Toronto family of two adults and two children would be considered "poor" (in 2004) if their income was less than \$36,247. "Higher poverty" neighbourhoods, then, include areas defined as "high poverty," where family poverty rates range from 26% to 39.9%, and "very high poverty" neighbourhoods where family poverty rates are 40% or more (UWGT 2004: 10).

years.¹⁵ This has been coupled with shifts in the resident profile of these areas, with poor visible minority and immigrant families encompassing a larger proportion of the total ‘poor’ family population in these areas (UWGT 2004).¹⁶

In a follow-up report titled *Vertical Poverty*, the United Way of Greater Toronto (UWGT 2011) found that high-rise apartment buildings are increasingly becoming the sites of concentrated poverty within neighbourhoods. The city, for example, witnessed a sizeable increase in the percentage of low-income families renting high-rise units between 1981 (34%) and 2006 (43%). As a result, low-income families are now taking on a larger share of the total high-rise tenant population. While 25% of all families in high-rise buildings were “poor” in 1981, this increased to 40% by 2006, suggesting that “vertical poverty” is a growing issue in Toronto neighbourhoods, particularly in social housing complexes dispersed throughout the city.

As a result, the city is becoming increasingly polarized by income and, to some degree, ethnicity. Examining the spatial distribution of income between 1970 and 2000, Hulchanski (2007) finds that the proportion of middle-income neighbourhoods has dropped significantly (from 66% to 32%), with the majority of this loss accounted for by an increase in low-income neighbourhoods (jumping from 19% to 50%).¹⁷ In other words, Toronto has transitioned from a city where the majority of neighbourhoods were middle-class to one where “middle-income neighbourhoods are now a minority and half of the city’s neighbourhoods are low-income” (Hulchanski 2007: 5; see *Figures 1 & 2*). This has led to what Hulchanski (2007) describes as “the three cities within

¹⁵ This is similar to patterns in older US metropolitan areas in the Northeast and Midwest, where poverty and poor neighbourhoods are concentrating in the inner-suburbs (see Lee 2011, Madden 2003).

¹⁶ The immigrant family population accounted for 50% of the total “poor” family population in “higher poverty” neighbourhoods in 1981; this jumped to 67% by 2001. The picture is even starker for visible minority families: “In 1981, visible minority families accounted for 37.4% of the total “poor” family population in “higher poverty” neighbourhoods, but by 2001, this [had] increased to 77.5%” (UWGT 2004: 12).

¹⁷ A very small proportion of this can be accounted for by an increase in high-income neighbourhoods, which only jumped from 15% to 18% over this same time period (Hulchanski 2007).

Toronto,” with neighbourhoods consolidating into three distinct geographic groupings based on disparate socio-economic and ethno-cultural variables.

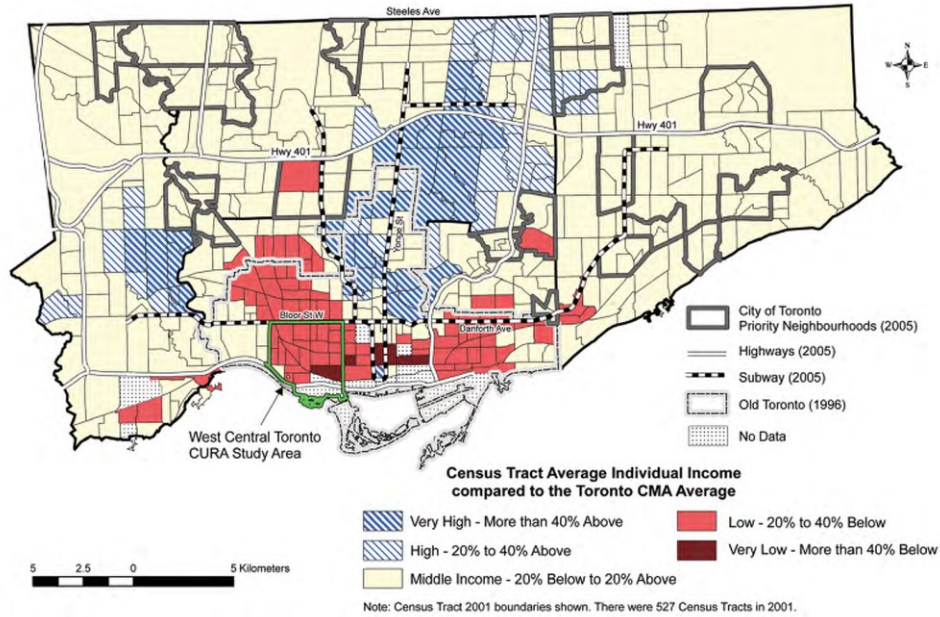


Figure 1: Average Individual Income, City of Toronto, 1970

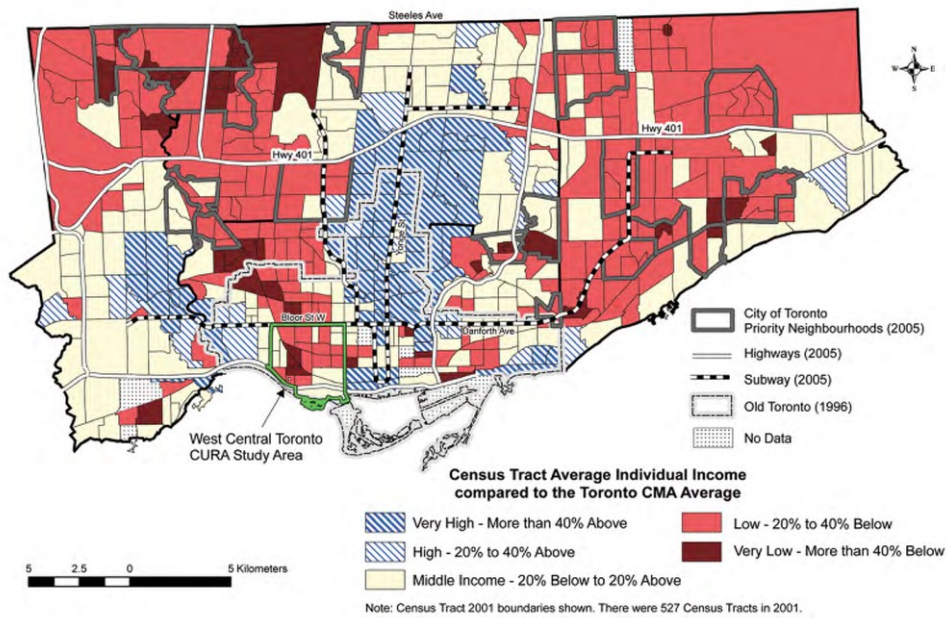


Figure 2: Average Individual Income, City of Toronto, 2000

Source: Reprinted from “The Three Cities within Toronto: Income polarization among Toronto’s Neighbourhoods, 1970-2000,” by D. Hulchanski, 2007, *Centre for Urban & Community Studies Research Bulletin*, 41, p. 3.

The first city, consisting of high-income neighbourhoods, is clustered around the downtown core and sprawls north along the subway line. This cluster of neighbourhoods enjoys an average individual income that is at least 20% *above* the Toronto average and its population is characterized as mainly white (84%). The second city, consisting of a dwindling middle-class with an average income of 20% *above or below* the Toronto average, is situated around the high-income cluster, somewhat buffering it from a growing mass of low-income neighbourhoods. This third city, with an average individual income of at least 20% *below* the Toronto average, has formed in the suburbs to the east and west and is disproportionately inhabited by recent immigrants (62% are first-generation immigrants) and visible minorities (12% Black, 14% Chinese, and 17% South Asian, for a total of 43%).

The flurry of findings on urban poverty in Toronto, triggered by UWGT's report over a decade ago, is disturbing on a number of levels. First, they point to a continuation of spatial polarization across the city based on income and, to some extent, race and ethnicity. Next, and more significantly, the findings paint broad strokes across census tracts, often washing out data on deep pockets of poverty found in small and isolated pockets of social housing – increasingly home to the Toronto's most chronically poor and marginalized (UWGT 2011). American literature has concluded that these spaces of intense poverty and segregation are precisely where the ghetto forms and flourishes (Gans 2008; Wacquant 2001; Wilson 1987). Yet, on-the-ground studies on social housing in Toronto are non-existent and, consequently, we know little about how living in these spaces structures the lives, actions, and opportunities of residents.

RESEARCH SITE

The Toronto Community Housing Corporation

The Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC) is the largest provider of social housing in Canada and the second largest in North America. It was created on January 1st, 2002, through the amalgamation of the Toronto Housing Company¹⁸ and the Metropolitan Toronto Housing Corporation.¹⁹ It is currently owned and operated by the City of Toronto as a non-profit organization and is governed by a Board of Directors, which consists of the Mayor, three City Councillors, and nine citizens, two of whom are elected TCHC tenants (Crean 2013).

Currently, TCHC houses approximately 110,000 low-income tenants living in nearly 60,000 moderate and low-income households scattered across 2100 buildings – including high, mid, and low-rise apartments, as well as houses and townhouses (TCHC 2017). Much like the rest of city, residents of TCHC come from diverse backgrounds, with tenants of different ages, races, ethnicities, religions, and life experiences sharing buildings and neighbourhoods. Recent figures from TCHC (2017) show that 38% of its residents are children and youth, 37% are adults, and 25% are seniors (59-years plus), with 23% of residents living with mental health issues. Nearly 90% of households pay rent-geared-to-income (RGI), with 29% of those households reporting that they live with a member with a disability. Nearly 30% of households consist of single-parent families. Despite this diversity, a single thread brings all TCHC tenants together – namely, chronic poverty and the need for subsidized housing. And this need is swelling, with the TCHC “wait list” for subsidized housing growing steadily and at a record-breaking pace since the 2008 economic recession (Shapcott 2012, 2013).

¹⁸ Toronto Housing Authority was created in 1999 through a merger of the Metropolitan Toronto Housing Company Ltd. and the City of Toronto Non-Profit Housing Corporation (also known at that time as Cityhome) (TCHC 2017).

¹⁹ Metropolitan Toronto Housing Corporation was previously known as Metro Toronto Housing Authority – an organization that managed provincial public housing units in the city (TCHC 2017).

This increased need could not come at a worse time, with TCHC struggling to maintain its aging and deteriorating housing stock without deepening its \$862-million capital repair backlog (TCHC 2013). In order to fund repairs, it has sold-off some of its stand-alone units. Additionally, it has leveraged private and public funding for the most transformative policy shift in its history – i.e., the revitalization of some of its largest and most infamous social housing projects, including Regent Park and Lawrence Heights.

Lawrence Heights

Lawrence Heights, a TCHC development and “priority neighbourhood” located north of the city’s downtown core,²⁰ embodies the ailments and opportunities of social housing in Toronto. As one of the largest housing projects in Canada, it straddles two of Toronto’s most affluent census tracts and is only steps away from one of North America’s most profitable shopping centres. It is composed of 65 hectares of land that are jointly owned by TCHC, the Toronto District School Board, RioCan, and the City of Toronto.²¹ The neighbourhood was built in the late 1950s in response to the city’s growing low-income population and post-war housing shortage. Since then, it has provided subsidized housing to countless waves of low-income residents and recent immigrants from all over the world (Toronto City Planning, 2008).

Today, Lawrence Heights is officially home to approximately 3,500 TCHC tenants.²² Currently, the site holds 1,208 rent-g geared-to-income social housing units, “making it one of the least densely

²⁰ Lawrence Heights was considered a “priority neighbourhood” for quite some time. This was a term used by the City of Toronto and the United Way of Greater Toronto to describe areas “that score[d] at least 20% lower than the city average on 11 socioeconomic indicators (including income, employment, literacy, and housing affordability), offer[ed] poor accessibility to essential services, and experience[d] high violent crime rates” (Mayor and Dotto 2014: 307). “Priority Neighbourhoods” are now called “Neighbourhood Improvement Areas”.

²¹ RioCan is Canada’s largest real estate investment trust, which focuses exclusively on retail real estate.

²² The official figure is actually unknown, as some families under-represent the number of individuals on lease agreements in order to avoid increased rent, while others over-represent this number to maintain their current housing and avoid being downsized or evicted.

populated neighbourhoods in the City of Toronto” (Sterling and Cappe 2009: 6).²³ The buildings generally consist of a combination of two-storey townhouses and four-storey low-rise apartment buildings (see *Figure 3*). These structures sit in large courtyards that have been constructed around concrete parking lots and under-fertilized grass fields. The courtyards have a single point of entry and exit onto a winding collector road called Varna Drive. Unlike the grid pattern that is used across the rest of the city, the roadways in Lawrence Heights are a labyrinth of twists and turns, dead end-streets, and cul-de-sacs, giving way to the moniker “Jungle” or “Jungle City” (see *Figure 4*).²⁴ The neighbourhood is designed around a series of open spaces and parkettes, which are linked together by footpaths that diminish pedestrian contact with public streets.²⁵

²³ Lawrence Heights was designed around the Garden City model of urban planning, which placed an emphasis on “large, communal open spaces to encourage interaction and pride in community living” (Sterling and Cappe 2009). A product of its time, Lawrence Heights is, in fact, one of the *least* densely populated neighbourhoods in all of Toronto. Ironically, however, it is precisely this lack of density, the abundance of open spaces, the well-lit streets, and the easily accessible main ring-road that make Lawrence Heights one of the most dangerous pockets of the city and the site of a disproportionate number of drive-by shootings and homicides.

²⁴ There is considerable disagreement among residents about the origin of this term. Some suggest that taxi drivers labelled the area “Jungle” because of how confusing the roadways are to navigate, making it incredibly difficult to get in or out of the neighbourhood. Others suggest that “Jungle” is a racial moniker, referring to the large proportion of blacks in the area. Others still, suggest that “Jungle” refers to the abundance of open green spaces and high levels of crime and violence. Whatever its origin, youth in the community (both men and women) use the terms for its street capital and often refer to their neighbourhood as “Jungz,” “Jungle City,” or “JC”.

²⁵ This intricate network of footpaths and shortcuts are utilized by many of the young men in my sample, who avoid the main streets as much as possible, particularly after dark, for fear of falling victim to drive-by shootings.



Figure 3: Lawrence Heights, June 2013



Figure 4: Lawrence Heights Graffiti, "Jungle"

Geographically, Lawrence Heights sits adjacent to two wealthy neighbourhoods (one to the east, another to the west). When it was initially constructed, “[the neighbourhood] had Flemington Park as its centrepiece, an open space that constituted the neighbourhood’s main organizational and circulation element. In the mid-1970s, the city built the Allen Expressway through the park, dividing the community in half by a four-lane freeway [see *Figure 5*]. The result is, as one city report notes, “a community isolated in compartments, full of disconnected walkways and under-supervised and under-utilized park space [...] with a host of safety and connectivity issues” (Mayor and Dotto 2014: 308).

Remnants of an eight-foot tall chain-link fence, which, until recently, ran along the entire perimeter of Lawrence Heights, are still visible – a reminder to residents of their social, physical, and symbolic segregation from the rest of the city.²⁶ The community is literally an encapsulated pocket of concentrated poverty and disadvantage, where residents experience many of the social ills and hardships associated with ghettos and ghetto life, including high levels of crime and violence.

²⁶ For example, due to its rough reputation, taxi drivers will not enter Lawrence Heights after midnight, even if they are called in advance to a particular address in the area. If someone needs a cab after this time, they must walk outside of the neighbourhood and be picked up on the outskirts. This is the same for those wishing to be dropped off in the area after midnight – taxis will have residents get out at the perimeter of the neighbourhood, where they are forced to walk the rest of the way. I later found out this is a reason why young men rarely leave the neighbourhood in the evening, as they fear being the victims of drive-by shootings during the walk to and from the taxicab. Similarly, residents cannot have food delivered to their homes after dark, as delivery drivers refuse to enter the area out of fear. I experienced this first hand when two of my key participant asked me if I could “order us a pizza” at around 11:30pm. I did not think much of it, obliged, and went through the process of placing the order. Everything was fine until I provided my participant’s address. After a few moments of silence, the person on the other line said, “For some reason, our drivers can’t deliver to that area past 6:00pm. It’s noted here”. My two key participants had a good laugh and explained that taxicabs and food deliveries were not an option in the community after a certain time, as a number of armed robberies had the entire neighbourhood blacklisted.

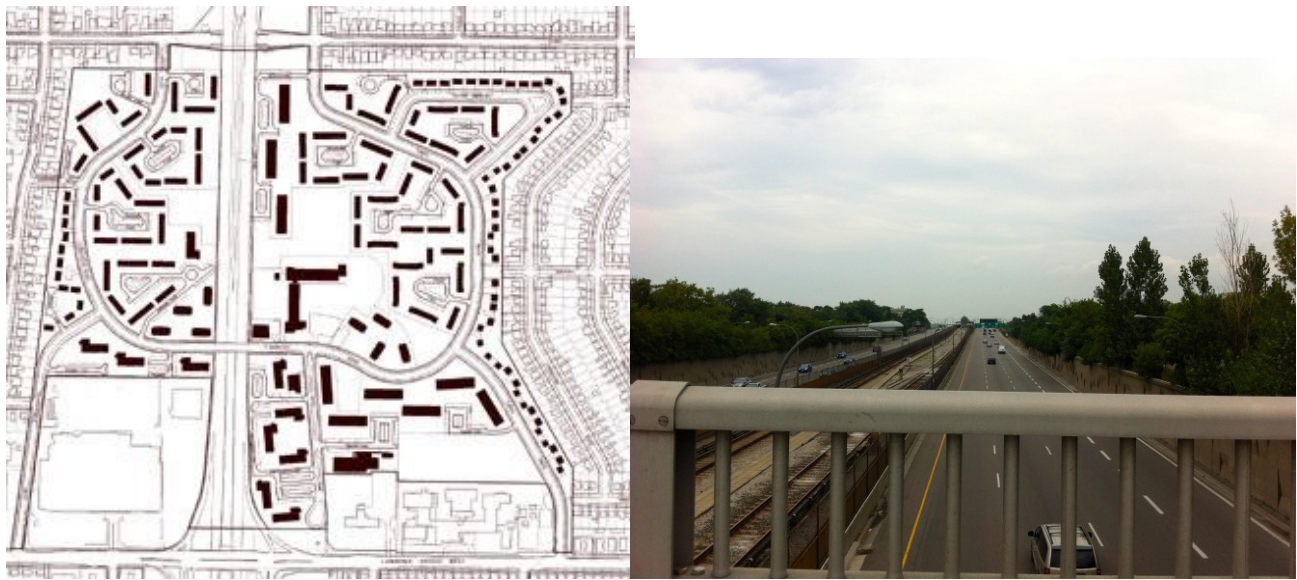


Figure 5: Map of Lawrence Heights & Photograph of Expressway from Bridge

Source: Reprinted from *Lawrence Heights: A CMHC model neighbourhood*, by L. deSorcy.

Like the city within which it is embedded, Lawrence Heights is home to an eclectic mix of ethnic and racial groups, including large Jamaican and Somali populations, as well as shrinking populations from Nova Scotia and New Brunswick (City of Toronto 2010). The neighbourhood is home to a large number of recent immigrants and is characterized by high levels of poverty, low rates of employment and educational attainment, as well as a high percentage of single-parent families and young people (City of Toronto 2010). Unfortunately, precise demographic figures do not exist for Lawrence Heights, as the relatively small neighbourhood is divided at the census level where it is absorbed into two much larger and wealthier neighbourhoods – washing away any measurable disadvantage.²⁷ There has been little investment in the neighbourhood’s physical infrastructure and, consequently, the quality of its housing stock has been rapidly deteriorating.

²⁷ As Simpson (2008:10) notes, “The City of Toronto uses Statistic Canada data aggregated at the census tract level to define a neighbourhood. The Allen Garden Freeway, which divides Lawrence Heights, is one of the features used to separate two neighbourhoods and so Lawrence Heights data falls into both the Englemount-Lawrence neighbourhood to the east, and the Yorkdale-Glen Park neighbourhood to the west. In total there were 12,640 households in these neighbourhoods in 2001; with its 1,208 units, Lawrence Heights made up 9.56% of the households in this combined neighbourhood”.

The buildings and units themselves are decrepit. During my fieldwork, a number of units experienced serious problems – e.g., major flooding due to structural issues, an apartment fire caused by faulty electrical work, and a bathtub falling through the floor of one unit and into another below – which resulted in major setbacks for residents. These happenings were above and beyond the “typical” issues that residents faced on a regular basis – e.g., stubborn bedbug infestations that ripped through apartment complexes, large holes and cracks in the foundations of buildings, recurring cockroach problems that required frequent fumigation, excessive mould and mildew that was detrimental to the health of residents, frequent blackouts and outages that left buildings without electricity or water for over 24 hours, entire apartment buildings going months without reliable heat, and high levels of crime and violence that ravaged the social fabric of the community (see *Figure 6*).



Figure 6: The Outside of a 4-Storey Building and Break-and-Enter in Progress

Below is an excerpt taken from my fieldnotes on May 27th, 2012. In it, I describe walking through the neighbourhood on a typical afternoon. I include it to offer readers a flavour of what Lawrence Heights looks, sounds, and feels like:

Given the physical layout of the community – hidden behind Lawrence Avenue West – there are only a few streets in and out of the neighbourhood. The rest of the streets are dead-ends and cul-de-sacs, making the area a nightmare to navigate with a vehicle and, to many, intimidating and frightening to walk through on foot. Nevertheless, I begin my walk from the shopping mall parking lot just outside of the neighbourhood towards the Lawrence Heights Community Centre (LHCC). It is unbearably hot today. I am forced to take one of the many footpaths that connect residents to the rest of the city. Because Lawrence Heights is so insulated from its surrounding area, I've always found the pathways to be akin to a sort of teleportation device. Today is no different. In the 30 seconds that it takes me to walk through the pathway, I feel like I have transported from the city of Toronto into Lawrence Heights – a very different world.

The first thing I notice is the noise, or lack thereof. Everything is quiet. Not in an eerie, horror film-type way. Just calm and still. As I hop onto the sidewalk and begin crossing the bridge over the Allen Road Expressway, I look down to find cars flowing nicely for 1:30pm. I know that in a few hours, the Allen [Expressway] will be backed-up and the noise in the neighbourhood will pick up once again.

As I continue along, I look to my left at a cluster of two-story townhouses – brown, beige, and worn-down and -out. While the doors, window frames, fences, and lighting are all the same on each home, the drapes, air conditioners, and front-yard patio furniture (consisting of an eclectic mix of old dining room chairs, torn up lazyboyz, and plastic milk crates) are all different. I notice an older black gentleman, well into his eighties, standing behind a screen door in his sleeveless undershirt, peering outside. His neighbor, a white man in his late forties, is wearing awkwardly high light brown short-shorts that look like they are from the 1980s. He walks from his ankle-high, uncut grass, over to a lawn chair that is set-up in front of his house, just under his windowsill. He plants himself down heavily and scratches his bushy beard, which I hear from across the street. The old man behind the door examines his neighbor's movements, looks over at me, and then retreats deeper into his home, where I lose sight of him – leaving his front door open, but the screen door shut.

After making it across the bridge, I turn right on Replin Road and make my way down the street towards the LHCC. Along the way, I notice the smell of freshly cut grass and tire treads from the seated lawnmowers that must have just recently finished – the remnants of cut grass still piled up to the left and right sides of the tire tracks. As I step onto the street, I narrowly miss a deep pothole – it's one of those that will continue to grow unless repaired, as the asphalt is chipping and crumbling away in large chunks. I notice the beige paint on a number of townhouses peeling back, exposing a much more faded beige from decades past. There is litter collecting against the side of one of the townhouses, as if the wind had picked up the junk and pushed it up against its walls – McDonald's cups, granola bar wrappers, pieces of plastic wrap, and individual-sized orange juice bottles. For a public housing development, Lawrence Heights has a lot of green space.

I continue trudging down Replin Road towards the community centre. All of the buildings in Lawrence Heights are under four-storeys and, coupled with the numerous open green spaces, shade in the neighbourhood is sparse. I see some other residents trying to beat the heat. There is a group of five young men in their mid-to-late twenties – four black and one white – hanging out against the outside wall of one of the two-storey buildings. They're trying to stay cool by utilizing the shade provided by their building. I hear one guy calling the other a “bitch” and playfully trying to kick an old barstool out from under him. The man, pressing down on the barstool with his weight to avoid getting the equivalent of slew footed, gets up, straightens out his back and smiles – the kicker takes a few steps back, and returns a mischievous smile.

As my substantive chapters (3-5) illustrate, “residents of Lawrence Heights are also much more likely to experience or witness violence than those living in Toronto’s downtown. Like other priority areas, Lawrence Heights is characterized by high crime and substance abuse rates [...]. Many families indicate that they do not feel safe and fear leaving their homes after dark [Raphael et al. 1997]. Nor do residents feel they can turn to police for protection; police-community relations have been poor since the 1980s, when ‘Toronto police launched a series of intensive raids targeting (predominantly black) low income neighbourhoods [...]. Residents likened them to an invasion’ [Raphael et al. 1997, p. 58]” (Mayor and Dotto 2014: 308). Levels of neighbourhood violence and its impact on residents and the community will be discussed, in much greater detail, in the following chapters.

GAINING ACCESS AND BUILDING RAPPORT

I entered my field site for the first time in late 2009, as an evaluator for a gang exit project called Prevention Intervention Toronto (PIT). As a Masters student, I was responsible for conducting structured interviews with “at-risk” youth from Lawrence Heights, collecting data on their personal background, family structure, criminal involvement, drug use patterns, and gang affiliations. I soon realized, however, that respondents would often over-exaggerate their

delinquency in order to pass the screener and move on to the paid portion of the interview – a more extreme manifestation of the “interviewer effect” (Brewer 2000).²⁸

The more interviews I did, the more troubled I became with the veracity of the data.²⁹ These initial experiences shed light on the potential limitations of relying solely on interviews in studies of poverty, crime, and victimization, and ultimately pushed me towards ethnography (Palys and Atchison 2008).³⁰ The value of the latter became clear to me during an interview with James, a young black resident who later became a key participant in my own research. In pressing him on his criminal involvement, he slowly looked up from the interview table and asked, “Why should I tell you *anything* about me?” James, of course, was referring to the issue of “trust” (or the lack thereof) between us – something that financial compensation, alone, could never broker.³¹ In that moment, I realized that gaining a deeper, richer, and more holistic understanding of the lives and experiences of residents would rest on my ability to establish respect, trust, and rapport with individuals and the community. The ethnographic approach seemed most appropriate for achieving this.

About six months into the PIT Project I started actively exploring beyond the interview room, moving timidly through the LHCC and informally chatting with the young men and women that frequented the space. In time, I learned about their lives, their favourite sports teams, their future aspirations, and their experiences as camp counsellors, manual labourers, retail clerks, and

²⁸ Bourgois (1995: 12) goes so far as to state that, “most of the criminologists and sociologists who painstakingly undertake epidemiological surveys on crime and substance abuse collect fabrications”.

²⁹ By the end of the PIT Project, I had conducted approximately 75 interviews in Lawrence Heights – all with residents of the community between the ages of 13-24. I also conducted a handful of stakeholder interviews with employees from some of the agencies in the area. The experience helped sharpen my interview skills and guide me towards ethnography as a method for understanding poverty, violence, and exclusion.

³⁰ I was struck by the limitations of interviews in providing a *deep* understanding of life in social housing and how “place” structures lives.

³¹ See Bourgois 1995, Bucerius 2014, and Venkatesh 2008, for discussion on the limited role of financial honorarium for building trust between researcher and participants.

students. From these extended forays, I also learned about issues that youth in the community found important: violence was a big deal, policing was a popular topic, and the proposed revitalization was sometimes peppered throughout our discussions.

In the first year of my PhD, I temporarily exited Lawrence Heights to focus on coursework and scholarship application writing. I also took time away from the field to try and shake a handful of monikers bestowed upon me from my time with the PIT Project – two of my personal favourites being “Leonard” (referring to “Leonard Hofstadter, PhD,” a nerdy fictional character on the television show *The Big Bang Theory*) and “The UofT guy with the money” (or simply “White Money,” referring to both my race and the cash I carried with me to pay for interviews). I was particularly worried about re-negotiating my role as researcher (Gold 1958; Snow, Benford, and Anderson 1986), as I would be re-entering the neighbourhood without honoraria and a much more intensive (and intrusive) research method.³² I felt that taking time away from the community and gaining a better understanding of ethnography, revitalization, and urban poverty could palliate many of these obstacles.³³

I re-entered the field during the second year of my PhD. In line with a grounded theory approach to ethnography (Glaser 1992; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1990), I

³² Snow et al. (1986) suggest that while an ethnographer can theoretically take on a number of roles, the outcome of an ethnographic study relies heavily on the “particular role that is derived within the field setting”. Understandably, my ability to re-negotiate my role within Lawrence Heights caused much stress prior to my re-entry.

³³ In the first year of my PhD, I took two directed reading courses. The first was on “Ethnography” where I read and critically analyzed fifteen full-length ethnographies, which provided invaluable insight into methods, reflexivity, the process of gaining access, the challenges associated with ‘writing culture’ (see Clifford and Marcus 1986), and the strengths and limitations of the ethnographic approach. The second reading course centred on the theoretical work of Pierre Bourdieu and scholars that have successfully employed some of his key theories to the fields of social suffering and poverty. I also undertook RA work for a separate project being conducted by Professors Bucarius and Thompson, combing through academic literature on revitalization, concentrated poverty, and social mix. Here I learned more about the impending revitalization of Lawrence Heights and the lack of sociological literature on ghettoization in Canada. Finally, I enrolled in “Ethnographic Field Methods”, where I learned the craft of ethnography – e.g., writing fieldnotes, depicting scenes, delivering thick description, conducting formal and informal interviews, utilizing go-alongs as a data collection tool, coding, shifting from data to theory, and publishing ethnographic work.

decided to allow the specifics of the project, including the research topic itself, to emerge naturally and inductively from the fieldwork and data – something that I found simultaneously exciting and terrifying. With no real contacts to call upon, I simply showed up to the LHCC.³⁴

There, I met with Irene, a white woman in her mid-50s, who served as the recreation coordinator. Thankfully, she remembered me from my work with the PIT Project. “You’re back,” she said, walking through the front doors of the community centre, “I thought the interviews were over”. I explained that although the PIT Project was over, I was interested in doing my own research in Lawrence heights. Within minutes, I found myself in the process of negotiating access through Irene, who served as a “gatekeeper” in the community (see Bucerius 2013; Whyte 1969, for the role of gatekeepers in granting access). Irene was extremely well connected among residents and agencies, having served as the recreation coordinator in Lawrence Heights for over thirty years. Moreover, her “stamp of approval” on my project was crucial because I needed a “home base” in the community from which I could operate – somewhere that I could anchor myself and become a local fixture.³⁵ Serving as one of the only communal spaces in Lawrence Heights, the community centre seemed like the most viable option.

I informed Irene that I wanted to do a “neighbourhood study,” spending as much time in Lawrence Heights as possible and talking to different residents and stakeholders along the way.

³⁴ At this point, I had obtained ethics approval from the University of Toronto, where the review board requested a detailed description of my proposed study, the age and vulnerability of my sample, my recruitment strategies, honorarium amounts, researcher-participant relationships, and a number of other important questions. I repeated this process at the University of Alberta, where similar details were requested. While I had no problem providing such detailed accounts of my proposed research, I found the process challenging given my inductive approach.

³⁵ See Venkatesh (2000), for the importance of a consistent location for ethnographers conducting “neighbourhood studies”. In contrast to ethnographers who follow a particular group (e.g., drug dealers [see Bourgois (1995); Bucerius (2014)], drug users [Becker (1963); Bourgois and Schonberg (2009)], gang members [Jankowski (1991); Venkatesh (2008)], or sex workers [Maher (2000)]), I would be located within a particular neighbourhood. This placed my work closer to ethnographic neighbourhood studies, such as those by Clark (1965), Gans (1982), Small (2004), Stack (1974), Venkatesh (2000), and Wirth (1928).

Although Irene expressed interest in what I was proposing, she seemed sceptical – both in my ability to build strong relationships with the community and to see the project through to completion.³⁶ Regardless, I asked for suggestions on how to build trust with different community members and make my presence known. She suggested a mutually beneficial, almost symbiotic arrangement: “I’m short on staff. If you’re interested, you can help with the programs here at the [community] centre. You’ll meet all kinds of residents. This really is the focal point of the community”. She went on to explain the detrimental impact of the recent wave of budget cuts on her ability to staff the facility and its programs. In the process, she also informed me that nearly all of the staff at the community centre were hired locally: “James...you know James, right? I’ll put you in touch with him. He works here at the camp and in the gardens and he’s on the Revitalization Committee too...for Housing [TCHC]. You’ll learn a lot from him. Even Calvin and Wendell, they’re great too, and they’ve lived here their entire lives. You’ll love the staff here”.

I jumped at the opportunity and “took the job” as an unpaid volunteer at the LHCC (see Bucierus 2014, Fetterman 1998, Venkatesh 2000, for the utility of volunteer-work in gaining access). Over the next seven months, I became an informal camp counsellor, tutor, and makeshift gardener, helping Irene, James, and other residents and staff with programs at the LHCC (Oakley 1981). All of them knew that I was conducting research and most agreed to take part in some capacity or another. I started spending three days a week there, helping James mentor and supervise children

³⁶ Interestingly, in an informal interview with Irene almost a year later, she confessed that she thought I would be discouraged within the first few weeks of fieldwork and give up. This was a common sentiment among a number of residents, especially those I had grown closest to. The Lawrence Heights community generally has a strong distrust of outsiders, including agencies, journalists, and academics. To many, researchers and journalists were one and the same – both have come and gone on a whim and “usually end up getting their shit wrong anyway” (Jocelyn). To avoid this same pitfall, I would often introduce myself to new residents by telling them about my approach to research (i.e., long-term, embedded ethnography) as opposed to my research interests. This set me apart from the reporters who only materialized after a shooting and the countless researchers that merely “show up and disappear within a month” (Irene).

from the neighbourhood between the ages of 6 and 15. Depending on what was going on and what the staffing situation was like, I would typically spend anywhere from three to seven hours a day at the community centre.³⁷

By November 2012, I was in Lawrence Heights from Monday to Friday, and also played organized ball-hockey with residents at the LHCC every Sunday for nearly six-months. Unfortunately, in the middle of December my research relationship with James came to an end, although we still remained congenial. I continued to frequent the LHCC, which proved invaluable for “gaining access” to different segments of the population. My ongoing presence made me a common fixture or “honorary resident,” as some members of the community called me. This facilitated my smooth transition into the streets and, eventually, into the homes and lives of residents.

From the first week that I entered the field until the final days before exiting, I religiously attended *every single* community meeting that I was aware of (well over 150 in total), meticulously taking notes and listening to residents voice their opinions on a number of ongoing and pressing issues. I joined the Lawrence Heights Inter-Organizational Network (LHION), which connects local agencies and service providers to each other and to residents, as well as a handful of its subcommittees, including those pertaining to safety, revitalization, education, youth employment,

³⁷ When Irene would retire for the evening, James, his brother Wendell, and their good friend Calvin would run the community centre until closing (11:00pm). “After-hours” activities would include large basketball tournaments, weight lifting, and informal group discussions among the young men that frequented the space (it was unusual to find a woman at the LHCC after 9:00pm and I was typically the only white person in the building). Interestingly, the men that showed up for “after hours” could rarely be found wandering the neighbourhood during the day – they were the “night crowd”, which I came to learn as I started hanging out with James after camp and later into the evenings. These young men had a wide range of experiences with the criminal justice system and a deep understanding of the Lawrence Heights underworld. Some had criminal charges (e.g., possession of a controlled substance, possession for the purposes of trafficking, unauthorized possession of a firearm), while others had clean records. Some had personal experiences with violence while others suffered vicariously. Nearly all of them had been hassled by, and therefore resented, the Toronto police.

food security, and seniors. I also became a member of 32 Division's Community Policing Liaison Committee (CPLC), which brought together police officers and residents within the division's catchment area.³⁸ Sitting around these tables, I gained valuable insight into the daytime politics of Lawrence Heights, the role of local agencies and service providers, as well as the grievances that residents had towards them.

In late December 2012, I was introduced to a different set of residents at a community meeting. It is here, by chance, that I met one of my key participants, without whom this research would not have been possible.³⁹ Jocelyn, a young black mother of two in her mid-twenties, had lived in Lawrence Heights for nine years when initially I met her. Throughout the community meeting, it became evident that she was well connected to both residents and local agencies in the neighbourhood. When the session ended, she intercepted me outside to ask who I was and what I was doing in Lawrence Heights. A conversation ensued and, over the next month, she became increasingly interested in my project.

I explained that I wanted to learn what life was like in Lawrence Heights, both the good and the bad, and that I was hoping to do this by simply being present, talking to residents, and experiencing things first-hand. Jocelyn was intrigued by my "strange" approach, but agreed that it was the best way to understand the community and its residents. After a handful of long chats, she agreed to be a key participant in my study, but made it clear that she did not want to read or sign any papers (or "do paperwork," referring to my consent forms). The relationship that emerged over the course

³⁸ Despite having a large police presence in the area, 32 Division did not have a single resident from Lawrence Heights sitting on this committee (until I convinced a key participant to attend with me). Through these meetings, I became increasingly close to both the Superintendent and the Inspector of the Division. I also developed strong relationships with a handful of Neighbourhood Officers and Community Resource Officers, all of whom knew about my project. When it was time for interviews, these close relationships made tape-recording, which is typically a major issue in policing studies (Marks 2004), completely straightforward and painless.

³⁹ See Whyte's (1969) *Street Corner Society* for the role of luck in the recruitment of key participants.

of the next year was one of mutual understanding and trust, with Jocelyn just as interested in my world as I was in hers – as she planned on “doing school” again soon.

Snow et al. (1986) outline four possible “roles” that ethnographers can assume in the field – there is the controlled skeptic, the buddy-researcher, the credentialist expert, and the ardent activist. Accordingly, the information and data that researchers become privy to in the field depends largely on the particular role they adopt – or, more accurately, the role that is bestowed upon them by their participants. While I sometimes embodied elements of each of these roles, most of the participants (and all of my key participants) generally viewed me as a “buddy-researcher” (Snow et al. 1986) – similar to Powdermaker’s (1966) “stranger and friend” dichotomy. This permitted me to transition, quite fluidly, between friend and outsider. Most importantly, and on a more pragmatic level, it allowed me to become extremely close with participants as “friend,” but also allowed me to invoke “the researcher” to create distance when certain questionable or unethical situations would arise. For example, I could visit and interview key participants at their homes, share food, drinks, and stories with them, but not feel pressured to smoke marijuana or touch a firearm. This role, therefore, allowed me to be part of the daily lives of residents, but only inasmuch as I chose to be, creating the niche in which “the actual work of the ethnographer gets done” (Adler and Adler 1987: 17).

As my relationship with Jocelyn grew, she made sure I made the right connections, got the “real stories”, and experienced what life was really like in social housing (or “the “hood,” as she called it). This is similar to the accounts of other urban ethnographers whose studies would not be possible (or would look much different) without the enthusiasm and openness of key participants (e.g., Bourgois 1995; Bucierius 2014; Duneier 1999; Venkatesh 2000, 2008; Whyte 1969). I began accompanying her practically everywhere she went, which connected me to people and groups that

I would have otherwise never met – in the ethnographic literature, this data collection technique is called “shadowing” (Kusenbach 2003). She also started setting up “meet-ups,” where she would call upon various people in her extended network to informally (and sometimes formally) chat with me about poverty, crime, violence, and their experiences in Lawrence Heights.⁴⁰

Through conversations with other residents, I learned that Jocelyn was not only well connected to the “day crowd,” but also had a deep understanding of the “night crowd” as well.⁴¹ Her boyfriend Monk, it turns out, was plugged into the underground economy of Lawrence Heights, and when Jocelyn finally introduced me to the “night crowd,” a whole new world emerged. Much of what I learned about crime, gun violence, and deep poverty in Lawrence Heights was through Jocelyn and, eventually, through her boyfriend, his friends, and other streetwise residents from the community.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLE

Consistent with the approach of many urban ethnographers that venture into unfamiliar field sites, I re-entered Lawrence Heights in 2012, without a particular set of research questions in mind (e.g., Bourgois 1995; Bourgois and Schonberg 2009; Bucierius 2014; Duneier 1999; Venkatesh 2000). Instead, I had a broad interest in studying micro-level interactions in a disadvantaged

⁴⁰ While Jocelyn would always be present for the first couple of meetings with a new contact – chatting with us in a group setting, guiding the conversation, and sometimes “calling bullshit” on others – she would encourage me to continue to meet with them on my own. Consequently, a few of the individuals she introduced me to later became key participants in their own right, guiding my research in different directions.

⁴¹ “Day crowd” and “night crowd” were terms used by residents to describe the two worlds that co-exist in Lawrence Heights. The “day crowd” consisted of agencies and residents that took part in the weekly meetings surrounding a myriad of topics. Many of the residents in the day crowd were seniors (or approaching it) and the majority were women. The “night crowd,” on the other hand, referred to the young men (and some women) that had a stake in the illicit economy of Lawrence Heights – be it as drug dealers, gun pushers, or users. This crowd would never attend community meetings and would rarely be caught outside during the daytime. Their days began after 6:00pm and would run into the early hours of the morning. Jocelyn had an equal footing in both of these worlds. By day, she would work at a local NGO and take part in the community meetings (even chairing some that she found most important). She knew everybody at these meetings, including the dozens of “agency people” that attended. In the evening, however, she hung-out with her boyfriend and his friends who, in varying capacities, were involved in the neighbourhood’s illicit economy.

Canadian social housing complex. From the outset, I tried to allow my participants (and the data) to inform and guide my work as much as possible, without forcing my own hypotheses and preconceptions onto my sample – I simply “went where the research took me”, so to speak. In this respect, I strived towards Glaser and Strauss’ (1967) “grounded theory,” hoping that it would serve as more than just “an approving bumper sticker” – often cited, though rarely executed fully (Bryman and Burgess 1994: 6).

As Brewer (2000: 152) notes, “Grounded theory requires the use of inductive analysis, which is built up from the ground rather than imposed from above. [This] requires that the analysis during these stages is always embedded in the data themselves, so that the analytical categories emerge from the data, are faithful to it and...capture people's voices accurately”. Eventually, through this constant interplay between data collection and data analysis, the researcher is able to “exemplify, extend, develop, or modify their codes, leading to the eventual refinement of [their] theory” (Brewer 2000: 153).

While I did my best to abide by the grounded theory approach, I was unable to fully execute it in its purest form. I allowed the research topic and questions to emerge organically through the interplay between data collection and analysis; however, I was not able to “formally” analyse my data while in the field. Instead, my research topic and questions emerged informally (though still inductively) through my fieldwork and my constant discussions with key participants and my supervisor. This was a pragmatic decision that I had to make once my fieldwork intensified, as I had little time (between a hectic fieldwork schedule, interviewing, writing fieldnotes, and transcribing) to formally code the data.⁴²

⁴² I am further hesitant in claiming a purely grounded theory approach because one of its main tenets is that literature reviews should come *after* the examination of empirical data. This, it is argued, prevents pre-existing research from

My research sample consisted primarily of residents (or former residents) of Lawrence Heights between the ages of 16 and 87. Most were first- and second-generation Jamaicans and Somalis, though many were white and identified as second- or third-generation Canadians. A number of stakeholders that played a role in the lives of residents were also included in the study. In a neighbourhood of approximately 3500 people, I came to know approximately one hundred residents on a personal level. Naturally, I became much closer to some (e.g., my key participants) than others. Although I spent the majority of my time within the boundaries of Lawrence Heights, I would often venture outside of the area with participants. Sometimes, this was for a specific purpose, while other times it was just to “get out of Lawrence Heights” – a space in which many residents felt “trapped,” speaking volumes to the closure and control that comes along with life inside Toronto social housing.⁴³ I also started walking through the neighbourhood on my own, stopping to informally chat with familiar faces and, given the right scenario, introduce myself to unfamiliar people as well.⁴⁴

contaminating data analysis and spoiling the emergence of innovative theories (Glaser and Strauss 1967). I do worry about this point for a number of reasons: 1) I did extensive research on revitalization for a separate project prior to entering the field; 2) I am familiar with a wide range of criminological literature, particularly on gangs, drug dealing, and the informal economy, and; 3) due to my work with the PIT Project, I spent a significant amount of time in Lawrence Heights prior to my own fieldwork. All three of these points make me uncomfortable about fully championing this approach. I should note, however, that a chasm exists between Glaser and Strauss, the founding fathers of grounded theory, over “the extent to which researchers should avoid all relevant material prior to the analysis of the data” (Pettigrew 2000: 257). While Glaser (1992) remains firm on avoiding all literature until the completion of data analysis, Strauss and Corbin (1990) argue that it is unrealistic to assume that researchers enter the field with a *tabula rasa*. Further, adopting Glaser’s approach as a graduate student is difficult, particularly given departmental pressure for students to outline their research, define their questions, and apply for internal and external funding – all of which require some knowledge of the topic prior to entering the field.

⁴³ The fact that I often had access to a vehicle was important, as many residents felt “stuck” or “stranded” inside the bounded, stigmatized, and dilapidated space that is Lawrence Heights. They would often ask if we could just get into my car and “go for a drive, just to get out of the area” (Jennifer). Sometimes there was a specific location or purpose for the trip (e.g., picking up groceries or going to visit a friend); often, however, the drive was simply to escape the community for a short period time.

⁴⁴ These started as daytime strolls but eventually turned into evening walks as well. Although the latter gave me quite a bit of anxiety and put me on edge, I found the experiences to be important in getting a sense of what residents felt and experienced on an ongoing basis – see Chapters 3 and 4, in particular. While I frequently met new people during the day, I rarely stopped to chat with unfamiliar faces during the night. I would, however, find myself in the backyards, homes, or vehicles of residents I knew quite well, often into the early hours of the morning.

Common among most ethnographic studies are issues surrounding the representativeness of samples and, consequently, the generalizability of findings (Palys and Atchison 2008). This was something I was prepared and willing to sacrifice in return for richer data and a more in-depth understanding of the lives of social housing residents (Brewer 2000). While Stake (1998) argues that ethnographic case studies can, in fact, allow for the generalizability of findings, this requires commitment to a more disciplined and scientific form of sampling. This is something that I did not (and later could not) adhere to, as it interfered with my inductive approach to fieldwork and, given the sensitive nature of my topics, was not feasible. Consequently, like most contemporary ethnographers, I adopted a wide range of non-probability sampling techniques (for other examples, see Anderson 1999, Bourgois 1995, Bucerius 2014, Desmond 2007, Duneier 1999, Garot 2010, Maher 2000, Rios 2011) – some of which crossed methodological paradigms.

I initially began with what Geertz (1998) calls “deep hanging out”. This calls for researchers to physically immerse themselves in a group or space for extended periods of time on an informal level. In my case, I would often find myself “hanging out” in Lawrence Heights for no particular reason. I would show up to the neighbourhood, casually walk through it, chat with residents in their doorways or backyards, do some reading or jot notes on a park bench, help someone move furniture, grab an impromptu coffee. None of this (nor the data that emerged from it) was premeditated or scripted; rather, it was a natural upshot of my extended presence in the community and my widely recognized role as “buddy-researcher” (Snow et al. 1986).

As time went on and my contacts grew stronger, I would typically show up for a particular reason – e.g., to hang out with key participants, attend a meeting or a community event, or conduct interviews. This did not equate to less time in the community; in fact, at the peak of my fieldwork, I was typically in Lawrence Heights between four to six days a week and between six to eight

hours a day.⁴⁵ It was this process of “deep hanging out” that facilitated my ability to make crucial contacts and, eventually, expedite the interview process.

I never distributed flyers or advertised my study to the community in any way. Rather, residents and stakeholders came to know about me through word of mouth and my constant presence in the area. Aside from participants obtained through “deep hanging out,” I also relied heavily on my key participants who would constantly secure new contacts for my study. This is similar to snowball sampling, and a variation called “respondent-driven sampling” (Heckathorn 1997), where existing participants recruit others within their network to take part in the research – a technique that is particularly useful for tapping into hidden, deviant, or vulnerable populations (Marshall and Rossman 2011). In my case, this snowballing would often happen during the course of hanging out, where key participants would randomly bump into friends or acquaintances and conversations between all of us would ensue, followed by an exchange of contact information for follow-up meetings and interviews. In other cases, I would receive phone calls or text messages from key participants about “someone you should meet”.⁴⁶

I adopted a mixed-method, qualitative approach to data collection. Upon entering the field, I made a conscious decision to forgo formal interviews for at least one year. This allowed me to

⁴⁵ Although, naturally, I spent much more *and* much less time there as well. In some cases, I would arrive in the morning and head home in the late afternoon, other times I would show up in the evenings and stay until the early hours of the morning, and sometimes I would spend my entire day in Lawrence Heights, bouncing from place to place, person to person, eating breakfast, lunch, and dinner in or around the community.

⁴⁶ I never felt that race was an issue in gaining access to Lawrence Heights. In fact, I would argue that being white in a predominantly (though by no means exclusively) black research site actually *improved* my ability to gain access and obtain rich data. I would typically stand out in the neighbourhood (as much a function of my race as my dress) and, having heard of the “white researcher,” residents would often approach me on the street or at the community centre. My status as an outsider (both in terms of my race and class) also allowed me to be naïve and ask otherwise asinine questions: Why is it that only black guys are getting shot in Lawrence Heights? How does welfare work? Why is it so hard to get out of social housing? My role as “buddy-researcher,” thus, granted me insider *and* outsider status, which, at least initially, allowed to gain in-depth knowledge without testing the patience of participants, who were generally accepting and sympathetic to my ignorance about their world (see Bucerius 2013, for discussion on insider-outsider status).

take time to get to know both residents and the community, to build rapport and mutual trust, understanding, and respect, and to allow pressing topics and issues to emerge naturally from discussions, observations, and daily happenings (see Desmond 2007, Venkatesh 2000, for detailed discussions on building rapport prior to conducting formal interviews). Thus, during my first year in Lawrence Heights, I limited myself to taking detailed fieldnotes on: 1) informal conversations with participants, 2) observations on their lives and routines, 3) notes on the physical spaces that made up the neighbourhood, and 4) the various events and situations that transpired during my presence in the field (Emerson et al. 1995).

I was particularly keen on taking fieldnotes during community meetings as well (Emerson et al. 1995). This was never an issue, as I publicized my intention of taking notes before the commencement of each meeting; moreover, these meetings were open to the public and detailed notes and minutes were recorded and circulated amongst participants each week.⁴⁷ I soon became known for my perfect attendance and would often be stopped by residents in the community and asked to summarize meetings they had missed.⁴⁸

I also took detailed fieldnotes on my experiences at the community centre. Although I tried to take fieldnotes on-site a handful of times, I soon gave up on this practice. Instead, I would typically write-out my fieldnotes as soon as I got home or, if there was something particularly pressing, I would “go grab a coffee” or “use the bathroom” and quickly jot out important exchanges or

⁴⁷ I became quasi “famous” for my note-taking ability and, as I transitioned into a more familiar fixture, I would often submit meeting minutes at the request of the chairs.

⁴⁸ As my network expanded, I started receiving calls from residents about last minute changes to meeting schedules or emergency meetings (e.g., after a homicide). This was in stark contrast to my initial experiences of showing up to empty rooms, only to find out that meetings had been postponed, cancelled, or had changed locations without my knowledge.

dialogues – the ethnographer’s “weak bladder” and sudden urges to “head out for a second” are diligently noted in the literature (see Bucerius 2014, Emerson et al. 1995, Venkatesh 2008).⁴⁹

As time went on and my research intensified (due to longer hours in the field and the commencement of formal interviews), my fieldnotes became less detailed and frequent.⁵⁰ Eventually, I began to only document the most important parts of my day and sometimes I would skip days altogether. Prior to exiting the field, I was in Lawrence Heights nearly seven days a week, spending most of my time with the “night crowd” – which meant, not surprisingly, showing up to Lawrence Heights in the late evening and remaining there until the early hours of the morning. Regardless of how hard I tried, keeping pace with daily fieldnotes was simply not feasible given this schedule.

Another important method I used to collect data was the “go-along,” which typically involved shadowing key participants as they went about their daily routines, interacting with both individuals and their physical environment (Kusenbach 2003). This method yielded rich and meaningful data, as it allowed me to observe and ask questions about the social and spatial cues that emerged throughout the go-along – discussions and observations that would have likely never occurred without an often coincidental prompt. This was particularly effective in shedding light on how residents interacted with the world outside of Lawrence Heights – i.e., it illustrated the stigma they faced once they left their isolated neighbourhood and the challenges they encountered

⁴⁹ My decision to desist from writing fieldnotes on-site had nothing to do with trying to “hide” what I was doing, as those that frequented the space knew about my study and methods; rather, it was a purely pragmatic decision based on the fact that my note taking was altering the natural flow and rhythm of conversation, causing everyone (myself included) to take on a more formal and stand-offish demeanour.

⁵⁰ This gradual reduction in the quantity and quality of fieldnotes over the course of an ethnographic research project is common and well documented (see Maher 2000).

in successfully navigating the outside world. This, again, is telling of the socio-spatial closure and control that residents experienced as members of Lawrence Heights.

Over time, and as I became closer to my key participants, the line between “shadowing” and “hanging out” dissolved. While I typically initiated the go-along during the early stages of my research, I increasingly found myself being invited out by key participants to various events or activities.⁵¹ I soon realized that I did not need to formally interview participants to learn about their lives or hear about their experiences; I merely had to be present – sometimes as “buddy,” other times as “researcher” – as they lived through them (Snow et al. 1986).

During go-alongs and deep hanging out, I would ask key participants if I could tape-record our informal conversations for future transcription. This is not something I would do on every occasion and I was sensitive about when and whom I would ask. Unlike with jotting fieldnotes, I never found the tape-recorder to influence these informal conversations in any negative way – something I attribute to my strong rapport with my sample. In fact, one key participant (Jocelyn) would often berate me for forgetting my recorder and “missing all this good stuff,” while another (Chris) once took its absence as a personal affront, questioning whether I thought his opinion was “not good enough for the tape-recorder” (see Contreras 2013, for the instrumental and sometimes cathartic role of the recorder in interviews with marginalized populations). Key participants (and some of the more familiar individuals in my sample) would be the subject of countless observations, go-alongs, and interviews (both formal and informal). When I did not tape-record these instances, I would try to capture as much as possible in my daily fieldnotes.

⁵¹ Go-alongs would range from mundane activities (e.g., strolls around the neighbourhood or visits to the local bank, health clinic, mechanic, coffee shop, or grocery store) to more exceptional happenings (e.g., birthday lunches, sporting events, and graduations, as well as trips to the cemetery, prison, police station, and court).

In total, I conducted seventy-five formal interviews: 50 with residents and 25 with key stakeholders.⁵² I continued interviewing until I reached a point of thematic saturation (Small 2009). Most formal interviews were open-ended and semi-structured, lasting around two hours – the longest was four hours, the shortest was one hour. With these types of interviews, “Researchers give themselves the latitude to ask whatever they want, in the form and order they determine” (Brewer 2000: 66). The rationale behind this type of interview is that, if done well, it takes the form of a natural conversation (albeit one that is gently guided by the researcher), imparting respondents with greater latitude to provide more in-depth, personal, and meaningful answers to open-ended questions (Brewer 2000).

These interviews touched upon the life histories of participants and their perceptions on a broad array of topics, including revitalization, safety, crime, policing, drugs, the ghetto, gun violence and victimization, neighbourhood disputes (or “beefs”), employment, social assistance, the role of local agencies, social capital, and life in social housing. Respondents were not asked about all of these topics; nor would this have been possible (given time constraints) or fruitful (as not all residents were interested in or knowledgeable about *all* topics).⁵³ Instead, I handpicked particular themes and questions based on what I believed to be pertinent to each of my individual participants.⁵⁴

⁵² All names of individuals are pseudonyms.

⁵³ For example, seniors had little to say when employment was brought up. Similarly, young men in the illicit economy did not want to talk about the role of local agencies in the community. Introducing such topics was a sure way to kill a conversation or disrupt the rhythm of an interview.

⁵⁴ Interviews with residents include those in both the formal and informal economy. The list for stakeholders includes: police officers from 32 Division (patrol officers, neighbourhood officers, the Superintendent, and the Unit Commander), Members of Parliament representing Lawrence Heights (one active and one retired), City of Toronto employees (an urban planner, parks and recreation coordinator, social development officer, and a handful of camp counsellors), local agency staff (two harm reduction workers, one crisis response worker, and one youth worker), and Toronto Community Housing employees (including one that was dismissed following a scandal).

This was possible because I conducted my formal interviews late into my fieldwork, which meant I knew each of my interviewees quite personally before I interviewed them. My selection of topics and themes, therefore, was not random, but based on countless informal interviews and thousands of hours in the field. When I finally started asking residents for formal interviews, I did not experience any roadblocks and conducted interviews with every single respondent I had asked. Interestingly, the last two interviews I conducted before exiting the field were with residents who, for fear of being left out, contacted *me* for an interview.

These formal interviews were supplemented with hundreds of informal interviews. The locations of formal and informal interviews varied. Many took place at the local community centre, though most were conducted at the homes of residents, at the nearby shopping mall, and at coffee shops around the area. All of the interviews were audio-recorded, with the consent of participants, and later transcribed and coded. I also audio-recorded some casual conversations, though most were documented through field jottings and took the form of ethnographic fieldnotes (Emerson et al. 1995). I analyzed all of the data using NVivo10.

Most methodological approaches to ethnography view the triangulation of data, undertaken through multiple methods, as an important means of increasing the validity of findings (Duneier 1999).⁵⁵ In line with “humanist, positivist, and post-postmodern notions of ethnography,” triangulation is seen as “a procedure for improving the correspondence between the analysis and the “reality” it [seeks] to represent faithfully” (Brewer 2000: 75). This approach to data,

⁵⁵ Postmodern ethnography is the exception here. Those that fall into this methodological camp, “question the ability of any method to represent “reality” accurately,” as “there is no one fixed reality” but many that are “socially constructed” (Brewer 2000: 23). In this sense, the issue of validity is inconsequential to postmodern ethnographers. However, they do still utilize data triangulation as an alternative to validation (see Denzin and Lincoln 1998). Personally, while I do not prescribe to one particular methodology, I do align myself with post-postmodern ethnographers on this issue, agreeing that “while no knowledge is certain, there are phenomena that exist independent of us as researchers and knowledge claims about them can be judged reasonably accurately in terms of their likely truth” (Brewer 2004: 320).

championed as “methodological pragmatism” by some (Burgess 1982: 163) and “the kitchen sink approach” by others (Miller 1997: 24), “is recommended in all types of ethnography [as it] ensures a more rounded picture of the one symbolic reality because various sources of data are used to explore it” (Brewer 2000: 76).

In line with this approach, I triangulated my data as best as possible to ensure that information from interviews and field observations could be confirmed by multiple sources (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983). I have, for example, gone online to check news reports, YouTube videos, and other media sources to validate or refute claims. I have been handed (and have also asked for) personal (or “informal”) documents, such as letters and diaries, as well as official (or “formal”) documents, such as eviction notices, emergency transfer forms, police reports, welfare cheques, medical documents, report cards, and bank statements – all to check and recheck the validity of my data (see Brewer 2000, for the role of documents in ethnographic research). Wherever possible, I drew connections between what individuals had told me and what I actually witnessed through participant-observation. In most cases, there was a strong consistency across various sources of data (with expected variations in minor details and facts). In other cases, however, there were large disconnects, which pushed me to investigate these issues more deeply.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ I should note that I did not triangulate the data in the hope of coming to some “single or absolute truth”. Rather, I did so to gain better insight into the ways that participants themselves *perceived* and *constructed* “the truth” and to explore what false or incomplete information could tell me about how they perceived themselves and how they wanted others to perceive them – in this way, uncovering what is *not* said can sometimes be as insightful as what *is* said (Goffman 1959).

CHAPTER THREE

NEIGHBORHOOD WISDOM: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF LOCALIZED STREET KNOWLEDGE

Abstract: There is a dearth of research on the characteristics, value, and scope of street knowledge. The few studies that exist suggest that, once acquired, street knowledge is used to mitigate danger and risk across a wide range of socio-spatial settings. Based on five years of ethnographic research in a Toronto social housing project affected by gun violence, I challenge this assumption, demonstrating the locally oriented nature of street knowledge – i.e., it is grounded in, and shaped by, the particularities of a given locale. To account for this, I introduce the concept of ‘neighbourhood wisdom’ – a parochial form of street knowledge tailored to the idiosyncrasies of place and calibrated for neutralizing distinctly local threats. These findings have implications for our understanding of street knowledge, both as a theoretical construct and as a practical tool used by individuals operating in perilous settings.

INTRODUCTION

Growing up here, it just sharpens your senses. It makes you more aware of your surroundings – aware of who you’re hanging out with, where you’re hanging out, what time you’re outside at. You always gotta be paying attention, cause a shooting can happen any time. Like if I hear a car skid off, I’m automatically ready for a drive-by. A tire pops, my mind automatically goes to a gunshot. A car’s driving real slow, I’m watching it closely, you know. You really gotta be able to identify what’s dangerous and what’s not dangerous out here, just cause the stakes are so high. – Calvin

Despite how disorganized some communities may seem (Shaw and McKay 1942), ethnographers have long demonstrated an undercurrent of order and predictability that structures daily life (Bourgois 1995; Duneier 1999; Pattillo 1998). People living in poor and crime-ridden communities dissect their social and spatial worlds in ways that make them more manageable, formulating organic responses to the dangers and uncertainties around them (Stuart 2016a). Informal networks and ties become makeshift safety nets crucial for everyday survival (Desmond 2012; Stack 1974), while street codes emerge to lessen the probability of random violence, making daily life more predictable and presumably safer (Anderson 1999).

The focus of this article is on street knowledge – an interpretive lens used to read, respond to, and avoid potential threats in public. Those who rely on street knowledge come to categorize people and places along continuums of trustful and suspicious, safe and dangerous. The age, sex, race, gender, and comportment of others in public come to signal (among other things) the safety or risk they may pose, while physical space is assessed for how it might contribute to the prospect of victimization. This ongoing categorization of people and space makes the world more manageable by making it more intelligible, and is key to how people strive towards safety in otherwise perilous settings (Anderson 1990; Stuart 2016a).

The most influential contribution to our understanding of street knowledge comes from the work of Anderson (1990), who, through the concept of ‘street wisdom,’ provides one of the few examinations of street knowledge in its own right. According to Anderson (1990: 5), street wisdom is a tool that, “Allows one to ‘see through’ public situations, to anticipate what is about to happen based on the cues and signals” that others give off in public.

While Anderson provides a fascinating account of social life, he is vague about the generalizability of street wisdom as a theoretical construct. It is unclear, for example, whether this lens is unique to ‘The Village’ (his field site) or also exists in other localities in the U.S. and abroad – what the latter might look like is left unaddressed. The practical limitations of street wisdom are also obscure. Is it, for example, valuable across a range of socio-spatial settings, moving with individuals across all kinds of “uncertain public places” (Anderson 1990: 5), or is its utility bound by time and place?

My article presents a more nuanced analysis of street knowledge – one that highlights its protective value by outlining its theoretical limitations. Previous research has largely overlooked the significance of ‘the local’ in defining objective risk, its subjective framing, and its associated

response strategies. Based on almost five years of ethnographic fieldwork in a Toronto social housing project, I bring the local to the fore, highlighting its pivotal role in shaping the characteristics of street knowledge on the ground.⁵⁷ This has implications for the relevance and value of street knowledge outside of the immediate locality from which it emerges. Indeed, this local-general tension in theory exists in many ethnographic accounts. This work is no exception.

The site of my study is Lawrence Heights⁵⁸ – a community that has experienced more than a decade of gun violence resulting from ongoing conflicts (or ‘beefs’) with other social housing projects scattered across the city. These beefs have manifested themselves in the form of drive-by shootings, with members of rival social housing projects entering the neighbourhood and indiscriminately shooting at young black men – part of a deadly cycle of inter-neighbourhood retaliatory violence (Garot 2009). In response, some residents have come to rely on street knowledge to safely navigate their neighbourhood.

Yet, they do not deploy a generic version of street knowledge, applicable across settings (Anderson 1990), but what I call *neighbourhood wisdom* – a bespoke form of street knowledge that is tailored to the idiosyncrasies of a particular locality, sensitive to its unique social and physical layout and honed to neutralize threats in that space. Consequently, its value in assessing danger and curtailing risk is largely limited to ‘the local,’ however defined by practitioners on the ground.⁵⁹ While neighbourhood wisdom likely exists in other areas (i.e., outside of Lawrence

⁵⁷ This study received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Boards at the University of Alberta and the University of Toronto.

⁵⁸ While the names of participants are pseudonyms, the name of the neighbourhood is not. This was a decision made in conjunction with community members. It is also in line with other urban ethnographers who have protected the identity of participants while identifying their research sites for purposes of transparency and replicability. See, for example, Duneier (2006), Vargas (2016), Venkatesh (2000).

⁵⁹ For some, like residents of Lawrence Heights, this might be the neighbourhood; for others, it might be a block or street corner within a neighbourhood. This largely depends on individual patterns of mobility and knowledge of the social and spatial environment.

Heights), its exact form and function will, by definition, be determined by the social and spatial characteristics of *that* particular place and the dangers and risks found there. Naturally, then, neighbourhood wisdom will manifest itself differently in different localities. Indeed, this is part of my analytical point.

Below, I summarize the scholarly literature on street knowledge, highlighting a general lack of attention to its limitations and to the role of ‘the local’. After describing my field site and methods, I turn to my findings. I use ethnographic data to outline the characteristics, value, and scope of neighbourhood wisdom as it exists in Lawrence Heights. My intention is not to analyze neighbourhood wisdom in action, but to illustrate that the local environment is a fundamental component of street knowledge – one that must not be overlooked when assessing how vulnerable individuals interpret and navigate perilous settings. I conclude by highlighting why the local matters (Sampson 2013), how neighbourhood wisdom contributes to our understanding of street knowledge, and offer suggestions for future lines of research.

STREET KNOWLEDGE: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In his classic study *Streetwise*, Anderson (1990) illustrates that in the absence of police, the urban poor must broker their own safety and self-preservation. Under these conditions, individuals develop ‘street wisdom’, which he describes as “largely a state of mind”, which causes individuals to become “...alive to dangerous situations, drawing on a developing repertoire of ruses and schemes for travelling the streets safely” (Anderson 1990: 5-6). It hinges on one’s capacity to interpret social interactions and to effectively scrutinize how others look, speak, and behave in public (Anderson 1990: 208).

Yet, Anderson (1990) does not directly connect the concept of street wisdom to the distinct social and physical features of his field site. Indeed, he often describes street wisdom with such

abstraction that the local environment (from which it ostensibly emerged) seems to bear no relevance on either its form or application. Of course, this may be intentional – an indication that street wisdom is relevant across a wide range of socio-spatial settings (though there is no indication of this in his analysis). Still, by not incorporating the local environment, Anderson misses the opportunity to comment on if and how the idiosyncrasies of his field site might influence the form, function, and scope of this interpretive lens.

Leaning on Anderson (1990), Stuart (2016a: 279) analyses how individuals living in *over-policed* communities develop and deploy ‘cop wisdom’ – defined as “a particular cultural frame by which [residents of Los Angeles’ Skid Row] render seemingly-random police activity more legible, predictable, and manipulable”. Stuart (2016b: 21) examines street knowledge in action, identifying various tactics that Skid Row residents use to “evade, deflect, and subvert officers’ paternalistic interventions”. Reflecting on its general applicability in other settings, he states that, “Precisely *how* residents in other neighbourhoods and cities mobilize their cop wisdom depends in large part on how they are policed and on what particular appearances and behaviors officers deem suspicious and worthy of intervention” (Stuart 2016b: 260). He hinges its broader applicability, in other words, on the nature of social interaction between actors in a given locale, but is silent on the role that local geography might play in its transferability across settings.

Aside from Anderson and Stuart, few have explicitly attempted to *theorize* about street knowledge. Some scholars mention it in passing or conflate it with similar concepts like ‘street codes’.⁶⁰ Others focus on street knowledge *in action*, taking its theoretical scope (and thus its practical value) for granted.

⁶⁰ Despite being separate constructs, studies often conflate ‘street knowledge’ and ‘street codes’. Admittedly, both can be acquired through socialization and can help people navigate the uncertainties of everyday life in dangerous spaces.

Goffman (2014), for example, depicts how street knowledge helps young men with warrants ‘dip and dodge’ the police, but does not comment on its theoretical value or limitations. She offers only a short depiction of how it operates in action, calling this interpretive lens an ‘awareness’:

One of the first things that [a man on the run] develops is a heightened awareness of police officers – what they look like, how they move, where and when they are likely to appear. He learns the models of their undercover cars, the ways they hold their bodies and the cut of their hair, the timing and location of their typical routes. His awareness of the police never seems to leave him (Goffman 2014: 23).

These men “learned how to navigate the alleyways, weave through traffic, and identify local residents willing to hide them for a little while” (Goffman 2014: 25). They developed, in other words, a form of street knowledge valuable for avoiding the law – one that seemingly moved with them across time and space.

Similarly, Chasteen (1994: 325), in a study of how single women negotiate their environment, found participants reporting “...a way of *seeing the world around them* [emphasis added] that is shared and related to the need to protect themselves spatially from attacks from unknown men in public places”. McNulty (1994), in her study of how ‘common sense knowledge’ is generated among police, found that officers develop a ‘sixth sense,’ which influences their perceptions and actions in ways that help them safely navigate the ‘many ambiguous situations’ they encounter on the street.

Fraser (2013: 974) explores the “deep-seated, preconscious connections between young people and space” in his study of youth gangs in post-industrial Glasgow. He demonstrates how ‘street habitus,’ defined as “the inclusion of a well-known locale into unconscious actions”, provides the ‘Langview boys’ in his study with an acute sense of the physical layout of their neighbourhood

Yet, the former functions as an interpretive lens that exists within the individual, shaping micro-level decisions and actions; the latter serve as sets of informal rules of behaviour that exist socially (i.e., outside of the individual).

and sophisticated ways of moving through it (Fraser 2013: 974). He delicately links this habitus to the spatial immobility of these youth, who, without disposable income, find themselves carving and re-carving the streets around their neighbourhood in pursuit of leisure and entertainment (Fraser 2015). Yet, Fraser (2013, 2015) does not equate street habitus to street knowledge; it is not presented as a lens for dissecting potential threats in physical space, but as a mechanism for better understanding the relationship between youth gangs, territorialism, and identity formation in the post-industrial city.

These studies contribute to our general understanding of street knowledge by highlighting its practical application in different social and spatial settings. Yet, how the idiosyncrasies of a given locale might affect the form and function of street knowledge has been largely overlooked. To help fill this gap, I introduce the concept of neighbourhood wisdom. My research in Lawrence Heights analyses the intimate relationship between street knowledge and the local environment, illustrating how the unique social and spatial characteristics of an area form the very foundation of this interpretive lens. Acknowledging the importance of the local, however, requires recalibrating our understanding of the general applicability of street knowledge and its protective value in mitigating risk across a range of settings.

SETTINGS & METHODS

This study is situated in Toronto's Lawrence Heights community, one of the largest social housing projects in Canada (Paperny 2010). The neighbourhood is located north of the downtown core and sits on 65 hectares of land jointly owned by the City of Toronto, the Toronto District School Board, the RioCan Corporation, and the Toronto Community Housing Corporation

(TCHC).⁶¹ Built in the late-1950s, it has provided subsidized housing to waves of low-income residents and recent immigrants (Toronto City Planning 2008). It is composed entirely of social housing, containing 1208 rent-g geared-to-income units that house approximately 3500 residents; there is absolutely no retail or commercial space within its boundaries.

Unfortunately, official demographic data on the community do not exist.⁶² However, partial figures for 2015, obtained through personal communications with the landlord, confirm that Lawrence Heights is a young community, with 59% of residents under the age of 25. Approximately 75% of households have children, with 77% of those households consisting of single-parent families. Low levels of educational attainment, high unemployment rates, and an average household income of \$15,647 (almost five times below the city average [Carrick 2015]), have coalesced to make daily life challenging.

Neighbourhood-level data on homicides and firearm-related offences are also difficult to obtain in the Canadian context (Thompson 2009). While Toronto police release yearly statistics on homicide (averaging approximately 70 per year between 2005 and 2015), these figures are not broken-down by precinct or by neighbourhoods within those precincts year-over-year (Toronto Police Service, personal email communication in 2017). However, in a series of exposés, *The Globe and Mail* found that for social housing residents, “the likelihood of falling victim to violent crime in general, and murder in particular, far exceeds that of the rest of the city’s population” with this group “at least four times as likely to be murdered as someone living elsewhere in the [city]” (Davis and Appleby 2011).

⁶¹ TCHC is the second largest provider of social housing in North America. RioCan is Canada's largest real estate investment trust, which focuses exclusively on retail real estate.

⁶² Official data from TCHC on resident composition are not publically available.

Lawrence Heights, a social housing development afflicted by gun violence, is far from immune. Over a specific thirty-month period of fieldwork, which was described by residents and police as ‘relatively calm,’ I attended three funerals for young men shot and killed on the streets of Lawrence Heights; another four men were wounded by gunfire in the neighbourhood during that same time. There were likely other cases I was not privy to.⁶³ Gun violence has taken its toll on this tightly knit community of 3500 people, with lives taken prematurely, bodies permanently disfigured, and social life disrupted. The looming threat of victimization structures daily life and peppers local narratives, affecting how people interact with each other and with the built-form of the neighbourhood.

The buildings in Lawrence Heights are crumbling and in desperate need of repair. Two-story townhouses and four-story apartment blocks sit in courts, which are connected by an intricate network of footpaths. A single collector road, which loops around the neighbourhood, breaks off into a maze of dead-end streets and cul-de-sacs. Due to its confusing physical layout and its abundance of green spaces, Lawrence Heights has earned the nickname ‘Jungle’ or ‘Jungle City’.⁶⁴ In 2007, city councillors voted to revitalize the neighbourhood, calling for the demolition and reconstruction of all 1208 subsidized housing units and the addition of 4000-plus market-priced units. Phase 1 began in August 2015, with the entire project slated for completion by 2035 (TCHC 2017).

⁶³ Most shooting victims are not fatally wounded (Lee 2013). Of those who survive, some treat their own wounds and do not report the incident to police (Goffman 2014). I was personally aware of such a case in Lawrence Heights, where a gunshot victim had his leg-wound cleaned and packed by friends in the laundry room of an apartment building. Thus, my count likely under-estimates the actual number of cases where somebody was struck by gunfire. Moreover, this does not include cases where perpetrators shot into the air or into the homes of residents, but did not wound anyone.

⁶⁴ The media has racialized this moniker, highlighting that the neighbourhood is majority black. Residents, however, did not support this explanation. Regardless, many local residents and stakeholders have embraced the moniker and use it in everyday parlance.

The data presented herein are part of a larger ethnographic research project, most aptly described as a ‘neighbourhood study’ (see Gans 1962; Stack 1974), which examines the daily lives and experiences of Toronto social housing residents. In total, I spent close to five years conducting ethnographic research in the community, entering in December 2009 and exiting in August 2014. Since then, I have returned on four occasions, each time for two-week blocks, to conduct follow-up interviews with key participants. During my fieldwork, I typically spent between four to six days a week in the neighbourhood, usually for six to eight hours a day. Like other ethnographers (Buceri 2014; Duneier 1999), I adopted an inductive or ‘grounded theory’ approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967), allowing themes to emerge organically from my field site by simultaneously collecting, coding, and analyzing data.

To build rapport, I engaged in ‘deep hanging out’ (Geertz 1998), immersing myself in the community for an extended period of time while making a conscious effort to be present at different times of day and night – shedding light on both the mundane and the extra-ordinary. I also used the ‘go-along’ method (Kusenbach 2003) to shadow key participants as they went about daily life. I shadowed people to the grocery store, beauty salon, mechanic, daycare center, welfare office, and health center. I joined as they visited friends and family in the hospital and in prison. I did crisis response work and community outreach with healthcare staff, daily rounds with local maintenance workers, and ride-alongs with neighbourhood police officers. As I folded deeper into the social fabric of the community, participants began inviting me to birthday parties, graduations, and get-togethers; they also asked me to attend court hearings, memorial walks, and funerals for victims of gun violence. I eventually became what Buceri (2013) calls a ‘trusted outsider’ – privy to insider knowledge despite my outsider status. On a practical level, this meant I was

embedded enough to ask difficult and pointed questions, yet far enough removed to unpack the macro-level forces shaping their lives.

The majority of my sample consists of community residents – men and women between the ages of 16 and 87. Most were first- and second-generation Jamaicans and Somalis, though many were white and identified as second- or third-generation Canadians. In a neighbourhood of around 3500 people, I came to know approximately one hundred residents on a personal level. Many played a significant role in the project, either formally (e.g., as interviewees and/or key participants) or informally (e.g., as local guides or springboards for research ideas). I also had countless conversations with others who kept me up-to-date on local happenings and helped me further triangulate my data.

In total, I conducted seventy-five formal interviews: fifty with residents and twenty-five with key stakeholders, including local police officers, city councillors, social workers, welfare officers, recreation centre staff, urban planners, and representatives of the landlord, as well as harm-reduction, crisis-response, and youth workers. Interviews were open-ended and semi-structured (Brewer 2000). Most formal interviews lasted around two hours – the longest was four hours, the shortest was one hour.

Formal interviews were supplemented with hundreds of informal interviews. The locations of these interviews varied. Many took place at the local community centre, though most were conducted at the homes of residents, at the nearby shopping mall, and at coffee shops around the area. On exceptionally hot days, I would conduct interviews in my car – parked, with the air conditioning running. All of the interviews were audio-recorded, with the consent of participants, and later transcribed and coded. I also audio-recorded some casual conversations, though most

were documented through field jottings and took the form of ethnographic fieldnotes (Emerson et al. 1995). I analyzed all of the data using NVivo10.

FINDINGS: NEIGHBOURHOOD WISDOM IN LAWRENCE HEIGHTS

In this article, I focus on neighbourhood wisdom as it pertains to the assessment of risk and danger in a particular locality – Lawrence Heights. Neighbourhood wisdom is a move away from broad generalizations about the scope and effectiveness of street knowledge, ostensibly applicable in a variety of urban contexts, and a step towards an understanding that is localized and bounded, both theoretically and practically. It acknowledges the potential for convergence in function across similar settings, yet emphasizes local variation in form.⁶⁵

The version of neighbourhood wisdom operating in Lawrence Heights has two defining characteristics: the social and the spatial. The *social component* is grounded in a rich understanding of local context, local history of past shootings, and personal experiences of firearm-related victimization in the community. It is further supplemented with knowledge of local ‘hood politics’ – i.e., the state of neighbourhood affairs, from internal happenings in the underground economy to shifts in inter-neighbourhood allegiances and rivalries.

The *spatial component* of neighbourhood wisdom, on the other hand, includes a deep understanding of the physical makeup of Lawrence Heights, though one that goes beyond a topographical mastery of its layout. Understanding the nuances of the area – the buildings, streets, footpaths, parks, and bridges – requires a socially infused reading of physical space, including an

⁶⁵ Fraser (2015) makes a similar proclamation, arguing that Bourdieuan notions like field, habitus, and capital help reconcile the local-general tension in gang research. In discussing street culture, he states: “If it is true that national boundaries are no longer the governing force in individual identities, and that global forces are creating marked similarities in geographically distant communities, it follows that there may exist *homologies of habitus* between these diverse locations” (Fraser 2015: 44). Yet, he is quick to note that although gangs and street culture “may be comparable across diverse geographical contexts, they are always locally constituted” (Fraser 2015: 55).

acute awareness of where gun violence typically occurs. This produces both ‘safe zones’ and ‘kill zones’, which ‘hoodwise residents must stay abreast of to safely navigate the neighbourhood.

The Social: Local Context, History, and ‘Hood Politics

Neighbourhood wisdom requires an acute awareness of *local context* – i.e., detailed knowledge about the types of threats most prevalent in an area and the general profile of perpetrators and victims found there. Almost everyone I spoke to in Lawrence Heights, from residents to stakeholders, was intimately familiar with these details. Councillor Frank Kennington, a politician whose riding includes Lawrence Heights, displayed this local knowledge when I asked where the violence comes from:

Everything I’ve heard from residents, the police, and local agencies suggests that much of the gun violence, if not all, comes from people who are not from the neighbourhood... So it’s not Lawrence Heights kids driving through the area and shooting other Lawrence Heights kids. It’s coming from outside.

When I asked Irene, the recreation coordinator at the community center for the last 30 years, if she could elaborate on some of the challenges faced by residents, she responded:

Well, the main challenge is that Lawrence Heights is not safe. There’s the constant threat of drive-by shootings that happen any time of day or night... And the targets in all of these shootings – well, they’re not always targeted shootings, but the people that have been shot and killed – have all been young black men, sort of teenage to mid-30s.

Councillor Kennington and Irene, like the residents in my sample, identified gun violence – more specifically, the drive-by – as the most pressing threat faced by the community.

Moreover, they recognized that while targets of gun violence were exclusively young, black, and male, perpetrators were often random and indiscriminate in choosing victims within that demographic category. In other words, every young black man between the age of 15 and 35 was a potential target, regardless of their involvement in or knowledge of these inter-neighbourhood

conflicts. Not surprisingly, this created a precarious situation for all young black men in Lawrence Heights, who found themselves unable to safely walk through their neighbourhood without risking violent victimization.

I asked 32-year old Chaddy, a second-generation Jamaican-Canadian and resident of 28 years, if he could explain the indiscriminate nature of this violence. He said:

Look, man, back in the day, if we had problems with somebody we'd go after that person directly, you know what I'm sayin'. These days, they [members of rival social housing projects] come after the *community*. If they got a problem with one person, they'll attack the whole community. So if you're a black male, you're gonna get it. If Jungle's at war with another 'hood and you're *this* color [pointing to his forearm], watch out.

He continued:

A couple years ago, when this whole Jungle-Neptune⁶⁶ beef started, there was like 30-somethin' shootings in a single summer. Only black guys [were] getting shot out here. But we had to have this big meeting at the health centre cause the staff were all scared. All the white staff were freakin' out, worried about gettin' shot. I finally got up and said, "Yo, listen up. The only people who got anythin' to worry about..." and I pointed to me and the three other black guys in the room. "We gotta worry. We're the black males. We're the endangered species here".

Most of the young black men I spent time with in Lawrence Heights were acutely aware of the nature of gun violence in their community and its effect on their daily lives. Indeed, this awareness of *the need to be aware* formed the very foundation of their neighbourhood wisdom.

Emmett, a 34-year-old Jamaican-Canadian and long-time resident, made this clear to me as we sat in the control room of his makeshift recording studio, waiting for a local rapper to arrive. I asked how he felt about the randomness and frequency of gun violence. After several short quips, he elaborated:

Look, it concerns me. But does it scare me? No. Cause what's that fear gonna do for you? Nothing, brother. There's [gun]shots going off all the time, but what am I

⁶⁶ Neptune is an adjacent housing project that is less than a two-minute drive away.

supposed to do about it? Run away? Where to? This is where I *live*, right. So all you can really do is be *aware* of it so you can try and prevent it.

Understanding the local nuances of danger and risk guided the actions of ‘hoodwise residents within the confines of Lawrence Heights. Alex, a second-generation Jamaican-Canadian approaching his 30s, touched on this point when I asked about the sort of knowledge necessary for avoiding gun violence in the neighbourhood:

To be honest, you just gotta know your environment, know your surroundings [...]. The longer you grow up here, the longer you’re in the neighbourhood, the more you’re able to *feel* what’s goin’ on and *understand* what’s goin’ on, you know, and you work around it. I’ve lived here for so long that I know how to react to it. I can try to prevent it.

When Emmett, Alex, and others emphasize their ability ‘feel’ and ‘understand’ what is ‘going on’ in their community, they are referencing their neighbourhood wisdom – that parochial framework that is specifically calibrated to mitigate risk and danger within the boundaries of Lawrence Heights.⁶⁷

The social component of neighbourhood wisdom also includes a deep understanding of the *local history* of violence and victimization. This includes knowledge of past shootings (including where, when, why, and how they took place) and personal experiences with gun violence in the neighbourhood. Naturally, certain physical features of the area carried deep social and symbolic meaning for residents, infused by local experiences of suffering and loss. For example, when I asked Calvin about the local bridge, he explained that past shootings had significantly altered his perceptions of it. In an interview, he said:

⁶⁷ The term “parochial” tends to carry negative connotations, referring to actions or beliefs that are limited, narrow-minded, uninformed, or even naïve in outlook and scope. Throughout the dissertation, I use the original definition of the term “parochial” to describe actions and beliefs that are characteristic of a local church parish and surrounding district.

I feel uncomfortable walking over the bridge because, for me, living here my whole life, I know of past issues of violence that happened there. There's been lots of shootings on it and even around it, so it's always been a big concern for me.

When I asked if he could recall the names of people who were shot on or around the bridge and how those shootings took place, his responses were lucid. When asked if he could recall his first memory of a fatal shooting on the bridge, he replied:

Well, when I was about nine or ten, there was a shooting that happened, a deadly shooting, right at the bottom of the bridge. And for me, having that *knowledge* at such a young age, seeing all that, it kinda traumatized me... There's always a bit of discomfort in knowing those things and having that knowledge. Maybe it's just a superstition, but knowing about these past shootings, I just... It changes how you think. So I usually try and avoid the bridge. I try and take another route if I can.

Local cases of victimization framed residents' assessments of risk and danger within the confines of Lawrence Heights, shaping how they responded to threats in the area.

Neighbourhood wisdom, at least in Lawrence Heights, also involves an acute awareness of the changing routines of the local police department. In his ethnographic study, Stuart (2016b) found that residents of Skid Row learned to avoid the police while out on the streets. In Lawrence Heights, 'hoodwise residents learned to avoid *the streets* in the absence of police. Irene, the recreation coordinator, brought this to my attention as we sat in her office and watched parents and older siblings drop off children at the afterschool program, which started at 4:00pm. Out of approximately fifty children that attended the program, only two were dropped off by male chaperones. I asked about this, expecting a tale about absentee fathers in the ghetto. Instead, she responded:

Well, sometimes [perpetrators] come and shoot up the area at around 4:00pm, cause they know the community [police] officers do a shift change at that time. The division can't get anybody back down here until about 5 o'clock, right. So anybody looking to do a shooting knows they're not gonna have the police to worry about at that time. But a lot of residents know that too, especially the young guys. So it's not a coincidence that it's always the moms dropping off the kids at programming. Most

of the guys, especially when they've lived here for a while, they know about the shift change and that they're vulnerable at that time, so they try to stay indoors if they can.

The scholarly literature on street culture typically portrays the relationship between youth and police as antagonistic and fractured, especially in marginalized communities (Anderson 1990, 1999; Bourgois 1995; Bucarius 2014; Patillo 1998; Sandberg and Pedersen 2011; Stuart 2016). In Lawrence Heights, the relationship was more nuanced. While youth expressed frustration around constant police harassment (mostly in the form of carding and stop-and-frisk practices), they also described feeling less vulnerable to gun violence when police were present in the area. Unfortunately, this tradeoff – i.e., tolerating over-policing for increased safety and security – did not always materialize on the ground.

This was evident during an interview with Unit Commander Odesto and Inspector Fredrick, the two highest-ranking police officers at the local division. When asked what was being done about drive-by shootings in Lawrence Heights, Inspector Fredrick, more politician than police officer, offered a surprisingly candid response, which tacitly confirmed Irene's observations:

Our presence, I think, certainly deters drive-by shootings to some degree, you know, but even that is... Look, are there gangsters who will wait us out? Of course there are. You know, "The cops are there, let's wait until they leave". If their intended purpose is to do a drive-by, then if they're patient enough, they'll be able to do it. We can't be everywhere, all the time.

Hoodwise residents recognized the limitations of police protection and developed ways to work around it – e.g., staying indoors during shift change or only coming outside for a cigarette when police officers were nearby. This attention to local patterns of policing helped youth make micro-level decisions about risk and danger in Lawrence Heights. Yet, this sort of crucial local knowledge was not always available through direct observations of routine behavior.

Indeed, one of the most important tenets of neighbourhood wisdom in Lawrence Heights is insight into *future* threats. This requires an understanding of the neighbourhood beefs and 'hood

politics, which shape the climate of gun violence in the area. Jocelyn, a 26-year old resident and key participant, was adamant that, although seemingly random, gun violence was at least somewhat predictable – though residents had to be ‘plugged in’ to a specific set of local networks to benefit from this foresight. Over the course of my fieldwork, she introduced me to a group of men (and a few women) who formed the criminal underbelly of Lawrence Heights, responsible for robberies, shootings, and beatings in other parts of the city. Not surprisingly, this activity often sparked retaliatory violence, which rained down on Lawrence Heights in the hours, days, and weeks after an incident. I learned that timely knowledge of the criminal activities of this group helped other residents predict patterns of retaliatory violence. Jocelyn explained this to me in an interview:

Jocelyn: Okay, here’s an example. The other week a group of eight guys from Jungle went to do an ‘eat’...

Luca: A what?

Jocelyn: They call it an ‘eat’ when they rob somebody for a bunch of shit – money, drugs, guns, whatever. Now this person who got robbed, he knows that [the perpetrators] were from Jungle. So, a few days later, him and his boys get in the car and come shoot up the place. Now, those eight guys who did the eat, *they* know why Jungle got shot up. *Anybody else* they told knows why it got shot up. But that guy who got *touched* [shot]? *He* probably don’t know. And that’s why it’s good to know certain people that are connected, that know the ‘hood politics. Like my boyfriend, he doesn’t really go outside as much since he got shot, but people still call him and let him know, “Yo, this is what happened today. We did this. We did that. Lay low for a while”. So, a lot of guys in the area, when they know something went down, they’re extra careful outside or they just stay inside.

After our interview, I asked Jocelyn if she could introduce me to her boyfriend Monk. A few days later, the three of us sat in the living room of their first-floor apartment talking about beefs, ‘hood politics, and gun violence in Lawrence Heights. When I asked Monk how he knew when it was safe or dangerous to be outside, he responded:

As long as you’re good in the ‘hood, then you know what’s happening on the streets. As long as you’re respected [in the neighbourhood], they’re gonna let you know

what's going on. And that [knowledge] keeps you informed – it keeps you safe, right. Like when that whole Neptune-Jungle beef was going on, most of us knew. So after a certain time, you'd tend to not be outside as much or try to not be in the neighbourhood altogether cause the risk of getting shot was so much higher. But now that beef is done. It's quashed.

A firm grasp of local knowledge – in this case, of the changing nature of neighbourhood beefs – can increase one's safety on the streets of Lawrence Heights. This knowledge, shared through social networks (Clampet-Lundquist, 2010), shaped how 'hoodwise individuals interpreted and interacted with the neighbourhood: some were "extra careful", while others would "stay indoors" or "try to not be in the neighbourhood altogether". Ilan (2013: 18) describes this shared knowledge as 'street social capital,' defined as "the resources available to individuals through social networks which allow them to thrive within the street field". In this case, however, replacing the term "thrive" with "survive" better captures the realities of life for young black men in Lawrence Heights.

The Spatial: Hotspots, Safe Zones, and the 'Out of Place'

The physical layout of Lawrence Heights is disorienting, even for local residents. It contributes to feelings of vulnerability and danger; yet, not all pockets of the neighbourhood leave residents feeling equally exposed. Jay, for example, narrows down these areas to, "...spots that are just *bait*," where, "somebody could come up to you and do something and you got nowhere to go". When I asked how he interacted with those risky spots, he laughed and said, "Yeah. We just avoid those areas".

The local bridge is considered 'bait,' as is the underpass leading to the subway station – colloquially known as over-bridge and under-bridge, respectively. As Irene explained: "Over-bridge and under-bridge are probably the two most unsafe places in the community. Under-bridge

because it's isolated and dark and there's no place to hide. Over bridge because it's bright and open, with no place to hide".

There is nothing inherently unsafe or dangerous about the bridge or the underpass; both are built to code and serve their intended function – to physically connect an otherwise divided neighbourhood. Yet, gun violence has altered the way 'hoodwise residents perceive and interact with the built environment. In Lawrence Heights, safely navigating the neighbourhood requires a socially infused reading of physical space – one that is sensitive to the nuances and history of gun violence and to the 'hood politics and ever-changing status of neighbourhood beefs.

Neighbourhood wisdom is evident in the micro-level decisions that residents make as they interact with the physical features of Lawrence Heights. For example, 'hoodwise residents avoided open and well-lit streets, opting instead for the intricate network of footpaths snaking through the neighbourhood's interior. For outsiders and non-'hoodwise residents, the footpaths were a sure way to get lost. I found myself disoriented on a number of occasions, relying on the goodwill of residents to get me back onto the main road where I could re-orient myself. Yet, footpaths served an important function for vulnerable young men. Officer Eric, a community police officer stationed in Lawrence Heights for almost two years, explained:

They provide protection for some of the young guys in the area. Instead of walking on the main street, which a lot of them will never do because of the risk of drive-bys, right, they walk through the courts using the paths. It gives them some cover and protection and lets them get around the neighbourhood safely – more safely than Varna [the main road], at least.

To get a better sense of how the footpaths increased the safety and mobility of young black men, I often tagged along as residents used them to move around the neighbourhood. For instance, after leaving the community center with Calvin one night at around 10:00pm, I asked if I could walk home with him. The area around the community center, typically bustling with children in

the afternoon, was dark, quiet, and eerie – as it was on most evenings after sunset. Less than 15 seconds into our journey, Calvin veered us off the sidewalk and onto a makeshift dirt-path that cut between two apartment buildings. I tried to pay attention to his comportment. He was neither jumpy nor flustered, but exuded an awareness of his local surroundings – a casual confidence in his ability to safely navigate the neighbourhood.

As we emerged from the cover provided by the buildings and approached Varna Drive, the open and well-lit ring road, he suddenly stopped. Half tucked behind a utility box, I turned to see what Calvin was looking at – headlights, signaling that a car was coming around the bend about 150-feet to our right. As we waited for it to pass, he maintained casual conversation, keeping an eye on both the car and on me. When it was beyond eyeshot, he set off again. We quickly crossed the open and brightly lit street and jumped back onto a path. Once we re-entered the interior of the neighbourhood, he fully returned to our conversation. I asked him why he used the footpaths as opposed to the main road, which would get him home much faster. Without losing pace, he replied:

I don't know, man, for me, I just feel safer using the paths than the main street. But that could be different for somebody that doesn't live here, right. They might feel safer on Varna, cause there's cars passing by and there's more lighting and all that. But for me, cause of all the drive-bys, I'm going to limit how much time I'm out in the open and just try and avoid random cars as much as possible. That's why I use the paths and the courts to get places around here.

For Calvin, walking along the main road (like casually strolling across the bridge) clashed heavily with his neighbourhood wisdom – it went against what he knew about gun violence and safety within the confines of Lawrence Heights. Past shootings on Varna and the bridge signaled that these areas were 'bait' and should be avoided.

In Lawrence Heights, the spatial component of neighbourhood wisdom also includes an uncanny ability to identify things that are 'out of place' in the physical environment. Given the randomness and frequency of drive-by shootings, 'hoodwise residents were constantly on the

lookout for unknown or suspicious-looking vehicles. When I asked Calvin what made cars ‘suspicious,’ he said:

Color of the car. Model of the car. Lots of times they’re four-door, usually black, or off black, with dark tints. Even though it’s just a car, your senses go off. Like, “Holy, that car looks *so* suspicious”. So you keep an eye on it and keep your distance. You start paying attention to a bunch of little things. Did it come in and out without stopping? Without picking anybody up or dropping anybody off? Cause that’s suspicious, right. That could mean they’re either lost or scoping out the area for a drive-by.

There is nothing inherently suspicious about a dark, four-door vehicle with tinted windows (even one that is driving slow or is seemingly lost). In most neighbourhoods, this would not garner much attention or concern. But within the confines of Lawrence Heights, where drive-by shootings have been claiming the lives of young men for over a decade, ‘hoodwise residents have become acutely aware of the appearance of vehicles and how they move through physical space. This nuanced interpretation is a clear manifestation of the parochial nature of street knowledge – grounded in, and bounded by, the particularities of place and calibrated to mitigate the specific risks and dangers found there.

In the Absence of Neighbourhood Wisdom

In Lawrence Heights, the practical value of neighbourhood wisdom comes to the fore in light of a shooting. In the absence of a critical incident, this interpretive lens remains largely at the level of the unconscious, shaping how residents think and act but in ways that are not always apparent to them. Neighbourhood wisdom is so internalized through daily use that, for practitioners, it verges on commonsensical, almost precluding explanation. Yet, shootings forced ‘hoodwise residents to re-evaluate how they interpreted risk and responded to danger in their neighbourhood. Consequently, these events served as gateways through which I could ask about, and eventually unpack, the concept.

For example, when I asked Alex about local cases of gun violence and of the profile of recent victims, he responded:

To be honest, the people thinkin' it's all peachy out here, those are the people it usually happens to. A lot of guys that get shot here, they're not from the area for that long, maybe three or four years, so they don't really know the culture or how to move through here. They don't think, like, "Yo, I gotta be more careful. I can't just walk out in the light. I have to take this little back street cause it's safer". It's not their fault either. We're prisoners in our own community, you know what I'm sayin'. But still, you gotta be aware of that fact and you gotta adapt to the situation.

Alex draws a clear (negative) correlation between length of time in the neighbourhood and risk of violent victimization. Yet, he implies that neighbourhood wisdom – that deep knowledge of the local “culture” (social) and a refined sense of how to safely “move through here” (spatial) – can help mitigate that risk. In the absence of this locally-attuned street knowledge, the socio-spatial setting could be misinterpreted as docile or “peachy” when, in fact, it might actually be incredibly hostile.

James, a 24-year old resident and key participant, shared similar sentiments when he described the shooting death of 27-year old Jonathan. He said:

[Jonathan] got killed out in the Lawrence Heights schoolyard last year. He wasn't actually *from* Jungle, but his baby-mama lived here, so he was just sleepin' here once and a while. But he... I don't know, man, it's just one of those things where, like, there was an *active* beef going on in the 'hood at the time and he was just chillin' outside, late at night, in the open. So it's guys that aren't really aware of what's goin' on around here, not really aware of the politics and the beefs... Those are the guys that usually get touched [shot or killed].

Jonathan was not naïve to the dangers of life in Toronto social housing. He grew up in a housing project just 10 minutes away from Lawrence Heights and was considered street smart by those who knew him. By all accounts, he possessed what Anderson (1990) calls ‘street wisdom’. Yet, as James suggests, Jonathan lacked neighbourhood wisdom: that locally oriented form of street knowledge that comes from an intimate awareness of, and hypersensitivity to, “what's goin' on

around *here*". Without a firm grasp of the local "politics and beefs", Jonathan inadvertently placed himself in a compromising position "outside, late at night, in the open".

The shooting death of 24-year old Raynard offers further insight into just how local street knowledge is. When I interviewed Monk about the incident, he said:

The last two guys that got killed here, they were living in Lawrence Heights for under five years. Like Raynard. He only lived here for two years before he got killed. He came from Rexdale [another Toronto social housing project]. He was just walking his dog. No problem with anybody. But if he kinda knew more about what was going on and understood more of the 'hood politics, he probably wouldn't have been walking his dog at that time of night. It's just that *level of understanding*. It's like, yeah, you can walk your dog in Rosedale [one of Toronto's most affluent neighbourhoods] any time you want. Maybe he walked his dog at night in Rexdale too, I don't know. But walking your dog *here*? In *this* neighbourhood? At *night*? It's just....

Through this tragic case, Monk underscores the importance of neighbourhood wisdom. He suggests that, despite growing up in Rexdale, a social housing development 20-minutes away and ripe with its own history of violence and victimization, Raynard lacked the requisite lens for assessing danger and avoiding risk in *Lawrence Heights*.⁶⁸ Monk, like others I spoke to, believed that a more refined "level of understanding" of what constitutes safe and risky behaviour within the confines of Lawrence Heights might have saved Raynard's life, deterring him from walking his dog on a well-lit road that 'hoodwise residents avoid at all costs.

CONCLUSION: WHY 'THE LOCAL' MATTERS

For the last 25 years, Anderson's (1990) concept of street wisdom has dominated our understanding of street knowledge. Yet, it largely overlooks how the local environment influences

⁶⁸ This can be taken as an example of what Bourdieu calls 'hysteresis'. Shamma and Sandberg (2016: 17) describe this as a "situation where the structure of habitus lags behind the conditions of the objective world". Thus, Jonathan and Raynard may have possessed an "inappropriately calibrated" habitus (Bourdieu 1990: 62) – one attuned to danger and risk in Chalkfarm and Rexdale, but not to Lawrence Heights. Indeed, Shamma and Sandberg (2016: 18) state that, "the discrepancy between the original conditions that gave rise to a particular habitus and the changed circumstances of external reality may give rise to all manners of conflicts and confusion".

the form, function, and scope of this interpretive lens. Sensitive to this oversight, neighbourhood wisdom highlights that in perilous spaces, safety and security hinge on distinctly *local* understandings of risk and danger. Users mine their social and spatial milieu for pertinent information and then turn that knowledge inwards, allowing them to assess potential threats and dangers within *that* space. Far from being applicable in all sorts of uncertain public spaces (Anderson 1990), my findings suggest that the scope and protective value of street knowledge are largely limited. Neighbourhood wisdom adds to our understanding of street knowledge by tightening its theoretical gamut and calling for a re-consideration of its general applicability across time and space.

However, a full appreciation of ‘why the local matters’ in the conceptualization and performance of street knowledge requires a discussion of the macro-level processes and practices that shape daily life on the ground. In many ways, neoliberalism has contributed to the exposure of already vulnerable populations to even greater levels of poverty, crime, and victimization (Harvey 2005). The retrenchment of the welfare state has resulted in major cutbacks to services and programs vital for the sustenance of daily life (Garland 2016), while punitive penal practices have increased, with the state ‘punishing the poor’ through harsh criminal sentences and aggressive police tactics (Wacquant 2009). Disadvantaged communities have found themselves under-serviced by the welfare arm of the state while simultaneously over-policed and under-protected by its penal arm (Stuart 2016a). This has left places like Lawrence Heights dually exposed (both to police exploits and to unfettered street violence), forcing residents to negotiate their own safety and self-preservation.

Neighbourhood wisdom must be understood within this broader context, where concentrated poverty and the growing immobility of the urban poor shape daily life in peculiar ways. Research

has found that when people settle into (or are relegated to) disadvantaged pockets of the city, they increasingly ‘stay put’ (Rosen 2017; Sharkey 2013).⁶⁹ Lack of affordable housing, stable employment, and accessible transportation coalesce to lock people into pockets of disadvantage (Wilson 1987, 1996), restricting them to their immediate environment – often to their neighbourhood or adjacent areas (Venkatesh 1997).

Finding it increasingly difficult to venture beyond the boundaries of their neighbourhood (Fraser 2015), they develop an acute sense of the local. The neighbourhood becomes the site of most, if not all, social interactions and activities, including violence and victimization (Buceri, 2014). Under these conditions, street knowledge becomes localized too.

Indeed, neighbourhood wisdom can help explain why so many young people living in dangerous environments classify their neighbourhoods as ‘safe’ (Clampet-Lundquist 2010; Merry 1981). An interpretive lens calibrated to the local, despite how violent or crime-ridden the local may be, provides a certain comfort and familiarity with that space – an ability to categorize and manage the otherwise perilous. Yet, as scholars of street culture illustrate, there is typically a negative correlation between the accumulation of ‘street capital’ and upward mobility in the legitimate sphere (Bourgois 1995; Buceri 2014; Sandberg 2008a). In this sense, while neighbourhood wisdom may help people stay safe and alive in dangerous settings, it may also trap them in particular socio-economic (and thus spatial) positions – allowing them to ‘get by,’ but not ‘get out’ of poverty. As such, neighbourhood wisdom must not only be understood as an organic micro-level response to danger and risk, but also a consequence of broader macro-level processes

⁶⁹ See Wacquant (1992) for discussions on “territorial fixation” that emerges from advanced marginality.

that coerce vulnerable populations into brokering their own safety and security – ultimately contributing to their own immobility in the process.

I have defined neighbourhood wisdom as a locally oriented framework for mitigating risk and danger in perilous settings. What has yet to be explored is if and how neighbourhood wisdom can be used more positively, i.e., for the benefit and betterment of the local population that yields it. As an interpretive lens for dissecting the local, neighbourhood wisdom may carry other advantages, such as insights into the availability of local jobs (be it in the formal or informal economy) or details about who might be offering informal daycare in the community. It may guide residents to local agencies that are willing to bend the rules to help families in need or to specific police officers that may be trusted with sensitive information. This avenue of future research might help us better understand how the urban poor leverage local knowledge to ‘get ahead,’ and not just to ‘get by’. It might also shed light on how the local can, at once, serve as a site of vulnerability and resilience, susceptibility and subsistence.

Future scholars should attempt to identify and empirically test the protective value of neighbourhood wisdom in other localities, moving beyond the North American ghetto to the favelas of Brazil, the banlieues of France, the shantytowns of Argentina, and the slums of India. This is an empirical question that demands further exploration. Researchers should also consider if and how this place-based lens emerges in non-neighbourhood settings – e.g., among inmates in a prison, police officers in a precinct, rescue workers on a mountain range, firefighters in a catchment area, or bullied children in a school. The presence of ongoing risk and vulnerability within a confined setting will likely spawn locally oriented interpretations and responses, tailored to the unique features of that space and honed to increase safety within it. Like Sampson (2013: 5), therefore, I encourage future scholars – from urban ethnographers to quantitative researchers –

to “relentlessly focus on context”, bringing the nuances of the local back to the center of neighbourhood studies. What we find might surprise us.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE CODE OF SURVIVAL: AVOIDING VIOLENT VICTIMIZATION IN TORONTO SOCIAL HOUSING

Abstract: Sociologists have largely accepted that a “code of the street” exists in many inner-city neighbourhoods, governing the use of violence as a means for gaining and maintaining respect. Drawing on five years of ethnographic research with residents of a Toronto social housing project called Lawrence Heights, this article introduces a different type of street code – one that exists and operates for the sole purpose of violence prevention, with no offensive element whatsoever. This purely defensive street code, what I call the ‘code of survival’, provides users with a set of socially prescribed rules and techniques for interacting with the built-form of their environment. In the case of Lawrence Heights, a community plagued by gun violence resulting from inter-neighbourhood conflict with other social housing projects in the city, this code is supplemented by an interpretive framework that vulnerable young men use to identify and respond to threats in their immediate environment. Findings shed light on how residents use these tools, on the ground, in ways that allow public life to continue.

INTRODUCTION

The biggest safety concern in Lawrence Heights is the gun violence that erupts in the neighbourhood. It’s above and beyond what just living in the city offers. [...] Right now, people don’t feel safe enough to do things and so there’s a heightened tension – kind of like residents are walking on eggshells all the time. And the result is that people don’t do regular things. [...] There are all of these normal rhythms of life that should be no big deal, that are a very big deal in Lawrence Heights. But residents find ways to adapt. – Councillor Frank Kennington, Toronto MP.

Left unchecked, persistent threats to the safety and security of individuals and communities can result in the breakdown of public life. This is particularly salient for populations living in pockets of deep and concentrated poverty (Wilson 1987), where vulnerability and risk are compounded by high levels of crime and violence (Bourgois 1995; Miller 2008), over- and under-policing (Anderson 1990; Stuart 2016a), and the retrenchment of the welfare state (Garland 2016; Wacquant 2009). Yet, even in the most deprived inner-city areas, where crime, violence, and

victimization are commonplace, and where ‘normal rhythms of life’ are disrupted, individuals and groups find ways to carry on, often adopting a host of rules, strategies, and techniques that order the otherwise disordered – allowing public life to continue.

Perhaps the most significant study of cultural adaptations to inner-city violence is Elijah Anderson’s (1999: 33) *Code of the Street*, which examines how violence is negotiated between individuals at the micro-level and used as a tool to gain and maintain ‘respect’. Anderson (1999: 33) argues that “street culture has evolved a ‘code of the street’, which amounts to a set of informal rules governing interpersonal public behavior, particularly violence. The rules prescribe both the proper comportment and the proper way to respond if challenged”. In other words, the code of the street has a distinct ordering effect. It defines the sorts of situations where violence is appropriate and, thus, allows inner-city residents to respond appropriately. In so doing, it also provides structure and predictability to an otherwise seemingly volatile urban landscape. Since this seminal publication, other researchers have relied on Anderson’s code of the street to explain the value systems or guiding principles governing interpersonal violence amongst particular groups of individuals in particular social settings.

In his study of Dominican drug robbers in the Bronx, for example, Contreras (2013) found that the men in his sample used violence in a systematic way – i.e., according to some semblance of a ‘code’ – where stick-up kids extracted money and drugs from dealers through violence and torture. These attacks were neither spontaneous nor haphazard, but methodically orchestrated and grounded in shared understandings of when, how, and why violence should be used, and against whom (see Jacobs 2000, for similar findings). Bourgois (1995), in his study of Puerto Rican crack dealers in East Harlem, discovered that the men in his sample also followed a street code and used

violence, including sexual violence, as a means to gain ‘respect’ and street credit amongst peers in the face of marginalization and social exclusion.

In her study of a black middle-class-community in Chicago, Patillo (1998) found that to maintain high levels of social organization, gang members used the credible threat of violence to keep drug dealers from selling within the boundaries of the neighbourhood. Bucerius (2014), in her study of Muslim drug dealers in Frankfurt, Germany, found that the men in her sample rarely used violence to settle personal or drug-related disputes, given its propensity to attract police attention. On the rare occasions that violence was used, it was done to defend one’s ‘honour’. Here, too, some semblance of a street code governed the use of interpersonal violence – in this case, reserving it only for the most serious of situations.

In their own way, each of these scholars contribute to our understanding of how the code of the street governs the *use* of violence amongst their participants. Unfortunately, little attention has been paid to the prospect of street codes that govern the *avoidance* of violent victimization. This oversight is surprising, given that individuals do not spend the majority of their day-to-day in an offensive position, i.e., committing violence. In fact, ethnographic studies consistently show that the use of violence against others encompasses only a small part of people’s daily lives, even for populations that are particularly violence-prone – e.g., gang members (Patillo 1998; Urbanik 2017; Venkatesh 2008), drug dealers (Bourgois 1995; Bucerius 2014), and drug robbers (Contreras 2013; Jacob 2000). Most individuals, including those living in disadvantaged communities, predominantly exist in and operate from a neutral or defensive position, i.e., not thinking about victimization or actively trying to avoid it.

This article aims to redress this gap in our understanding by introducing a purely *defensive* street code, what I call ‘the code of survival’. Individuals living in perilous settings rely on it for

the sole purpose of avoiding violent victimization while out in public. I draw on almost 5 years of ethnographic research to demonstrate the crucial role of this street code in the lives of residents of Lawrence Heights – one of Canada’s oldest and largest social housing projects. For the past decade, Lawrence Heights has been plagued by recurring gun violence – the result of ongoing ‘beefs’ with other social housing projects in the city. While these beefs, and the violence they engender, typically revolve around only a handful of residents from these warring communities (including young men from Lawrence Heights, who commit similar acts in other areas), the ramifications of these conflicts are community-wide – i.e., any young black male is a target for retaliatory violence, simply by virtue of residing in a warring neighbourhood.

To avoid violent victimization, residents have come to rely on a set of socially prescribed rules, strategies, and techniques to safely navigate the built-form of their neighbourhood. Unlike Anderson’s (1999) code of the street, which governs patterns of social interaction, the street code presented herein governs interaction between individuals and physical space – between actors and their physical environment. Some of Lawrence Heights’ most vulnerable residents have also developed a sort of habitus of the street, what I call ‘neighbourhood wisdom’, which imbues its users with an interpretive framework for assessing and responding to potential threats in the neighbourhood. My findings demonstrate that, together, the code of survival and neighbourhood wisdom provide residents with some semblance of safety and security as they go about daily life in their community, ordering the otherwise disordered in ways that allow public life to continue.

Below I discuss my methodology and sample. Next, I describe Toronto’s Lawrence Heights community and demonstrate how gun violence has manifested itself in the neighbourhood, i.e., where it comes from, the form it takes, and whom it affects most acutely. I then turn to my findings, where I outline the main tenets of the code of survival and neighbourhood wisdom,

demonstrating how they are relied upon by residents to safely navigate the physical contours of their neighbourhood – an otherwise perilous socio-spatial setting.

SETTING, METHODOLOGY, & SAMPLE

Toronto's Lawrence Heights community is one of Canada's oldest and largest social housing projects (Paperny 2010). Built in the late-1950s in response to Canada's post-war housing shortage, it sits on 65 hectares of land that is predominantly owned by the Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC) – the second largest provider of social housing in North America. The neighbourhood is composed entirely of social housing. There are 1208 rent-gear-to-income units, which house approximately 3500 residents. There is no retail or commercial space within its boundaries, though this is likely to change with neighbourhood revitalization, which formally commenced in August 2015 and is slated for completion in 2035 (TCHC 2017).

While official demographics on the community do not exist,⁷⁰ partial figures from 2015 suggest Lawrence Heights is a young community, with 59% of residents under the age of 25.⁷¹ Approximately 75% of households have children, with 77% of those households consisting of single-parent families. The community is characterized by low levels of educational attainment, high unemployment rates, and an average household income of \$15,647 in 2015– almost one-fifth below the city average (Carrick 2015).

Neighbourhood-level data on homicides and firearm-related offences are also difficult to obtain in the Canadian context (Thompson 2009). Although Toronto police release yearly statistics on homicide (averaging approximately 70 per year between 2005 and 2015), these figures are not

⁷⁰ Official data from TCHC on resident composition are not publically available.

⁷¹ These data were obtained through personal communication with the research team at TCHC.

broken-down by precinct or by neighbourhoods within those precincts year-over-year.⁷² However, in a series of exposés, *The Globe and Mail* found that for social housing residents, “the likelihood of falling victim to violent crime in general, and murder in particular, far exceeds that of the rest of the city’s population” with this group “at least four times as likely to be murdered as someone living elsewhere in the [city]” (Davis and Appleby 2011).

Like other social housing projects in the city, Lawrence Heights is plagued by recurring gun violence (City News 2016). Over a specific thirty-month period of fieldwork, which was described by residents and police as ‘relatively calm,’ I attended three funerals for young men shot and killed on the streets of Lawrence Heights; another four men were wounded by gunfire in the neighbourhood during that same time. There were likely other cases I was not privy to.⁷³ The looming threat of victimization structures daily life and peppers local narratives, affecting how people interact with each other and with the built-form of the neighbourhood.

The buildings in Lawrence Heights are crumbling and in desperate need of repair. Two-story townhouses and four-story apartment blocks sit in courts, which are connected by an intricate network of footpaths. A single collector road called Varna Drive, which loops around the neighbourhood, breaks off into a maze of dead-end streets and cul-de-sacs. Due to its confusing physical layout and its abundance of green spaces, Lawrence Heights has earned the nickname ‘Jungle’ or ‘Jungle City’.⁷⁴

⁷² This was confirmed through personal email and telephone communication with the Toronto Police Service, Headquarters, in 2017.

⁷³ Other research shows that most shooting victims are not fatally wounded (Lee 2013). Of those who survive, some treat their own wounds and do not report the incident to police (Goffman 2014). Thus, my count likely under-estimates the actual number of cases where somebody was struck by gunfire, and does not include cases where perpetrators fired into homes, vehicles, and into the air without striking anyone.

⁷⁴ The media has racialized this moniker, highlighting that the neighbourhood is majority black. Residents, however, did not support this explanation. Regardless, many local residents and stakeholders have embraced the moniker and use it in everyday parlance.

The data presented herein are part of a larger ethnographic research project, most aptly described as a ‘neighbourhood study’ (see Gans 1962, Stack 1974), which examines the daily lives and experiences of Toronto social housing residents. In total, I spent close to five years conducting ethnographic research in the community, entering in December 2009 and exiting in August 2014. Since then, I have returned on four occasions, each time for two-week blocks, to conduct follow-up interviews with key participants. During my fieldwork, I typically spent between four to six days a week in the neighbourhood, usually for six to eight hours a day.

To build rapport, I engaged in ‘deep hanging out’ (Geertz 1998) and also used the ‘go-along’ method (Kusenbach 2003) to shadow key participants as they went about daily life both inside and outside of the neighbourhood. I eventually became what Bucerius (2013) calls a ‘trusted outsider’ – privy to insider knowledge despite my outsider status. On a practical level, this meant I was embedded enough to ask difficult and pointed questions, yet removed enough to unpack the macro-level forces structuring daily life.

My sample consists primarily of community residents between the ages of 16 and 87. Most were first- and second-generation Jamaicans and Somalis, though many were white and self-identified as second- or third-generation Canadians. In total, I conducted seventy-five formal interviews: fifty with residents and twenty-five with key stakeholders, including local police officers, city councillors, social workers, welfare officers, recreation centre staff, urban planners, and representatives of the landlord, as well as harm-reduction, crisis-response, and youth workers. Interviews were open-ended and semi-structured (Brewer 2000). Most formal interviews lasted around two hours – the longest was four hours, the shortest was one hour.

Formal interviews were supplemented by hundreds of informal interviews. The locations of these interviews varied and include the local community centre, health centre, shopping mall, and

a number of coffee shops around the area, as well as community park benches, Toronto city hall, local police departments, the homes of participants, and my car. All of the interviews were audio-recorded, with the consent of participants, and later transcribed and coded. I also audio-recorded some casual conversations, though most were documented through field jottings and took the form of ethnographic fieldnotes (Emerson et al. 1995). I analysed all of the data using NVivo10.

The analysis presented herein focuses primarily on the lived experiences of young black men from the community. As will become apparent, they are the exclusive targets of gun violence in Lawrence Heights and, consequently, the group most reliant on the code of survival. Although the majority of excerpts are taken from interviews with this particular group of residents, my analysis is supported by interviews, conversations, and participant-observation with other residents (including women, children, and seniors) and local stakeholders (e.g., teachers, community police officers, MPs, etc.).

LOCAL CONTEXT: NEIGHBORHOOD BEEFING, POLICING, GUN VIOLENCE

I never had a dream. I know it sounds crazy, but my teachers used to ask me all the time, “Write your dreams down, Emmett”. I never had a dream, yo. My dream was to live past twenty-one and God bless I did [taps his chest]. *That* was my dream, yo, ‘cause that was the stigma of my age group. As a black man, a black youth, you’re lucky to pass twenty-one around here.⁷⁵ – Emmett, 34-year-old resident

The threat of gun violence in Lawrence Heights is real and ever looming. It structures the lives and experiences of residents in concrete ways, including how they negotiate risk in their everyday lives. Understanding the nuances of gun violence in the neighbourhood, therefore, is essential for understanding individual and communal response strategies. The following section sheds light on

⁷⁵ This is certainly not a demographic reality, but indicative of the fatalistic attitude that many young black men in Lawrence Heights carry due to their experiences with gun violence and victimization.

the characteristics of gun violence in Lawrence Heights – why and how it occurs, and who it affects most directly.

When I asked 26-year-old Monk, a Jamaican-Canadian and long-time resident, where the gun violence in Lawrence Heights comes from, he replied:

Listen Luca, majority of people here in Jungle are friends. All this gun shit, it's coming from *outside* neighbourhoods. A Jungle youth's not gonna shoot a kid from his own fuckin' neighbourhood, you know what I'm sayin'. He probably grew up with him. Knows his mom, his dad, his little brother. Knows everythin' about him. He's not gonna do him no harm. It's the *next* guy, comin' from *outside* you gotta worry about, sittin' in his car all night waitin' for anyone he sees walkin' by. *That's* the guy you gotta worry about. *That's* the guy that's gonna shoot up the place.

He continued:

If Jungle has a problem with another 'hood, you can get shot whether you're involved or not. After I got shot, they shot this next kid comin' home from school – 15-years-old, no problems with anybody, you know. But these guys come in with that mentality like, “Yo, I don't care *who* you are. If I see *anyone*...any black male in Jungle, I'm gonna shoot them”. That's their goal. To pick off as many bodies as they can.

Over the course of my research, I learned that the vast majority of shootings in Lawrence Heights were the result of external conflicts (or “neighbourhood beefs”) with other social housing projects scattered across the city – a cycle of retaliatory violence in which a small group of Lawrence Heights residents were also involved in, as perpetrators. Over the last decade, these beefs have manifested themselves in the form of drive-by shootings, with members of rival social housing projects entering Lawrence Heights and shooting at young black men, exclusively and indiscriminately – i.e., irrespective of one's involvement in these wider conflicts.

In an interview, Emmett, a 34-year-old Jamaican-Canadian, spoke to me about the connection between gun violence, race, and gender. After commenting on his inability to walk the

neighbourhood freely without risking violent victimization, I asked him if I would have the same issue (hinting at, though never explicitly referencing, my status as a young white male). He replied:

Getting shot out here is a male black thing, man. As a white guy, you can literally walk around here any time you want, day and night. You're not a target. Most people who come do drive-bys, they're looking for someone specific or they get frustrated cause they can't find that guy and they just hit anybody. When I say "anybody", they're looking for guys like me. Don't worry, nobody's gonna trouble you out here, bro. But if you're this colour [pointing to his forearm], it's a whole different thing, man.

This intimate relationship between gun violence, gender, and race (and to some degree, age) was common knowledge amongst residents and key stakeholders. In fact, when I asked long-time residents if they could recall of any cases involving gunshot victims that had not been young, black, and male, they could not do so. I repeated this same exercise with police officers at the local division; they too could not recall any such case.

Both Monk and Emmett also touched upon the random and indiscriminate nature of these shootings – i.e., that any black male between the age of 15 and 35 was a potential target,⁷⁶ regardless of their involvement in (or even knowledge of) these neighbourhood beefs. Indeed, the engagement of just a few young men from Lawrence Heights in this cycle of retaliatory violence was enough to implicate the entire community. Not surprisingly, the random nature of these shootings created a precarious situation for all young black men in the area, who found themselves unable walk around their own neighbourhood without risking violent victimization.

Unfortunately, police have struggled to address the situation. Inspector Fredrick, one of the highest-ranking police officers at the local division, described the difficulties of preventing drive-by shootings, despite best efforts on the part of police. He said:

⁷⁶ This age range is an estimation based on data that I compiled about the ages of gunshot victims in the community. I asked the Toronto Police Service if they could provide me with official data; they were unable to fulfill my request.

I think that Lawrence Heights, regrettably, has been touched by gun violence, you know, more than its fair share... And our presence, I think, certainly deters drive-by shootings to some degree, you know, but even that is... Look, are there gangsters who will wait us out? Of course there are. You know, “The cops are there, let’s wait until they leave”. If their intended purpose is to do a drive-by, then if they’re patient enough, they’ll be able to do it. We can’t be everywhere, all the time.

In the absence of effective policing, young black men have been left to their own devices to identify and manage risk in their neighbourhood. Against this backdrop of exposure and vulnerability, the code of survival has emerged to govern how individuals negotiate a violent social milieu. This purely defensive street code infuses order and stability back into the lives of residents, allowing some semblance of social and public life to continue – especially for those most acutely affected.

FINDINGS

Most of the young men I spent time with in Lawrence Heights relied on a combination of street knowledge and street codes to safely navigate the built-form of their neighbourhood. This allowed them to effectively negotiate the threat of violent victimization on an ongoing basis. Although some overlap exists between street knowledge and street codes, the two concepts are theoretically distinct.

Street knowledge is an interpretive framework that some individuals acquire in response to living and/or operating in perilous settings. This framework exists *within* the individual, allowing those who possess it to read, respond to, and thus avoid potential threats in public (Anderson 1990; Stuart 2016a). The maneuvers that this framework generates can be both proactive and reactive, conscious and subconscious, making it akin to a sort of habitus of the street – one which often precludes explanation (Bourdieu 2005; Fraser 2015; Sandberg 2008a).

Street codes, on the other hand, exist *socially*. They are shared cultural adaptations to the uncertainties of life found in dangerous spaces (Anderson 1999), providing users with socially

prescribed rules and techniques for mitigating risk while out in public. The following section demonstrates the practical value of street codes and street knowledge in the daily lives of young black men from Lawrence Heights, who navigate their neighbourhood in ways that reinfuse some semblance of agency in the face of overwhelming structural constraints.

THE CODE OF SURVIVAL

Elijah Anderson is arguably the most influential scholar on street codes. Indeed, *Code of the Street*, published nearly two decades ago, set the foundation for our understanding of the context and consequences of inner city violence, particularly with respect to America's urban poor. Anderson (1990: 10) argues that, "The code of the street emerges where the influence of the police ends and personal responsibility for one's safety is felt to begin, resulting in a kind of 'people's law' based on 'street justice'". "At the heart of this code," he continues, "is a set of prescriptions and proscriptions, or informal rules, of behaviour organized around a desperate search for respect that governs public social relations, especially violence [...]. Possessions of respect – and the credible threat of vengeance – is highly valued for shielding the ordinary person from the interpersonal violence of the street" (Anderson 1999: 9-10). This code is grounded in social interaction between actors, who struggle to increase (or maintain) their relative position to others within the social order of the streets.

Anderson (1999: 34) presents the code of the street as a defensive street code; with enough respect, gained through violence (or the credible *threat* of violence), "individuals can avoid being bothered in public". My research in Lawrence Heights does not support this claim. Like Collins (2008), I found the code of the street to be primarily offensive in nature, with the security it ostensibly provides to individuals and the community being largely illusory. "The so-called honour code of violence," Collins (2008: 230) notes, "is not an avoidance process, motivated by fear and

lack of security, but an aggressively pro-active one, motivated by seeking elite status”. This is peculiar, of course, because “the outcome that it allegedly brings about”, i.e., safety and security, “is undermined by the mechanism itself,” i.e., violence (Collins 2008: 230).

Moreover, Anderson’s code of the street sits at odds with a growing body of literature on violence and its performance in everyday life (Collins 2008; Contreras 2013, 2014). Collins (2008: 230), for example, argues that, “Violence is hard, not easy,” and that rituals of discourse “provide an ideology that covers up the real nature of violence – that it is hard to perform, that most people are not good at it, including those who are doing the bragging and swaggering”. This is supported by ethnographic accounts of gang members (Bucerus 2014), drug dealers (Bourgois 1995), and drug robbers (Contreras 2013), all of which highlights that, “...most people are not good at violent confrontations, and only with special circumstances are they able to carry them through” (Collins 2008: 230).

Despite its shortcomings, the code of the street does exist in Lawrence Heights. Young men and women in the community often vie for respect in their daily interactions within the community, be it at the recreation centre, on the playground, or at the local school. This jostling for status was typically achieved through bantering and verbal insults; less frequently, physical altercations would ensue. In some cases, these conflicts would result in reshuffled local social hierarchies (even if just momentarily); in other cases, when the distinction between winner and loser was unclear, both parties walked away with more respect amongst their peers, simply for displaying ‘nerve’ (Anderson 1999).

Interestingly, the code of the street also played out *across* social housing projects in the city. Indeed, much of the gun violence that plagues Toronto social housing is due to inter-neighbourhood conflicts. These ‘neighbourhood beefs’ can and should be understood as a

community-level manifestation of the code of the street, with residents of disadvantaged neighbourhoods using gun violence to gain status and respect within the street field (Shammas and Sandberg 2016).

Yet, Anderson's (1999) code of the street is not the only street code operating in the inner city. Despite the severity and frequency of gun violence occurring within the boundaries of Lawrence Heights, the vast majority of residents were non-violent. As law-abiding citizens, they attempted to prevent ongoing violence and victimization in their community (Venkatesh 2000). Residents were largely unconcerned about issues of respect, and focused their efforts on avoiding violent victimization. In other words, residents of Lawrence Heights spent the majority of their time in public on the defensive, not the offensive – trying to avoid violent confrontations and events as opposed to seeking them out to increase their 'juice' or respect (Anderson 1999).

Indeed, most residents of Lawrence Heights, including young black men (the exclusive targets of gun violence), also followed a purely *defensive* street code – what I call the 'code of survival' – as they went about daily life in the community. Vulnerable individuals relied on this code for the fundamental purpose of surviving daily life while navigating the *physical* contours of the neighbourhood. The code of survival, therefore, does not structure local hierarchies, does not require the use of violence to ensure safety, and is not predicated on notions such as 'honor' or 'respect'. This defensive street code governs how individuals interact with the built-form of their neighbourhood, without reliance on social interaction between perpetrator and potential victim.

It provides vulnerable individuals with crucial information about safe and dangerous pockets in the area and a prescribed set of rules and corresponding techniques for safely negotiating perilous local terrain. Ultimately, the code of survival provides residents with order and structure in an otherwise tumultuous environment. It allows for the continuation of daily life in a space where

fear, danger, risk, and uncertainty would otherwise prevail – threatening the social fabric of the community and jeopardizing public life for young black men.

***“Avoid Varna, take the footpaths”:* Identifying and Responding to ‘Bait’ Areas**

The Code of Survival is grounded in parochial understandings of physical space. This involves intimate knowledge of safe and dangerous pockets of one’s neighbourhood. Despite being discerning about their movements while out in the neighbourhood, most of the young men I hung out with found it difficult to explain why certain areas of Lawrence Heights were considered more dangerous than others. Usually, however, they would cite past shootings as evidence that an area was unsafe.

Local knowledge and shared experiences of gun violence informed residents’ decisions about when and where it was safe to walk. In an interview, 24-year-old Jay, told me, “Most people that live here already know where to walk, you know what I mean. We know where shit usually happens, so we just try and avoid those areas”. Asked if he could elaborate, he replied, “Basically, we look out for spots that are just *bait*,” where, “somebody could come up to you and do something and you got nowhere to go”.

Varna Drive, the main ring-road that hooks around the neighbourhood, is one of the most dangerous areas in Lawrence Heights and considered ‘bait’. It is well-lit, surrounded by open spaces, and serves as a popular detour for Torontonians looking to avoid traffic on the more congested streets to the north and south of the neighbourhood. This leave Lawrence Heights residents exposed to drive-by shootings. Ironically, and contradictory to theories of crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED), the bright lights, open sightlines, and the plethora of unknown vehicles driving through the area actually increase, not decrease, the vulnerability of residents as they walk along the main street.

Not surprisingly, young black men rarely walk along Varna Drive, especially not at night. This is because past cases of gun violence, coupled with environmental design issues, have taught residents that it should be avoided at all cost. In response, those with a firm grasp of the code of survival use the dark and winding footpaths, which snake through the interior of the neighbourhood, to get around the community. Jocelyn, a 26-year-old resident, explained this to me one night as we walked along the footpaths after a community BBQ. She said:

Jungle guys know this neighbourhood inside out. You have to remember that. Outsiders doing these shootings don't, so they usually don't get out of their cars when they come do dirt [a shooting]. They usually stick to [Varna Drive] and stay in their car so they don't get lost or trapped in Jungle. If you think like *that*, you see why these Jungle youths rather use the paths than Varna. Varna's too open. It's too lit up. So guys use the paths, even if it takes longer to get somewhere or whatever, cause it's just safer. Like, look at us now. We could get to my place in two minutes on Varna or ten minutes on the paths. Most guys will take the paths every single time. Cause they *know* nobody from Jungle is gonna bother them and they *know* no outsider is gonna be walking on the paths or hiding in a dark corner.

In an interview, 23-year-old GG reiterated resident's concerns about Varna Drive, stating that:

We don't walk on the main street at night. I don't wanna be the only one out there at 10:00 or 11:00 and then that one car comes rollin' down and spots you, 'cause you got nowhere to go. That's why we take the paths, 'cause me, I've been livin' here like 20 years. And out here, it's not some punk from Jungle I gotta worry about. It's that car I never seen before, you know, with the tints and the two guys in the back.

These excerpts capture a number of important points about the code of survival and its role in the lives of residents. Both Jocelyn and GG acknowledge that most young black men in Lawrence Heights are *aware* that walking along Varna Drive is dangerous and, in response, take the footpaths to get around the area. This locally accepted rule (i.e., Varna Drive is dangerous) and the corresponding response strategy (i.e., take footpaths) is an integral part of the code of survival as it exists and operates in Lawrence Heights.

Moreover, it is clear from Jocelyn's excerpt that the code cuts across gender lines. Most young women in the community are equally aware of the main tenets of the code, even though they are

not directly at risk of being shot while walking the streets of Lawrence Heights. When I interviewed 34-year-old Honey about gun violence, she exemplified this point: “I always have to remind myself, ‘Yeah, it’s *real* for these guys’. It’s not a problem for me. I’m a woman. I’m not involved in anything. I can walk anywhere I want in this community. Nobody’s gonna do me anything. But for these young guys, it’s real. It’s really real. They can’t just walk anywhere they please, you know?”.

Despite not needing to abide by it, women like Jocelyn and Honey are aware of the main tenets of the code because it exists *socially*, at the community level, and is transferred through social interaction amongst residents – i.e., between friends, romantic partners, and even between parents and children. Jay, a 24-year-old resident, made this clear to me in an interview: “After a shooting happens, everyone in the neighbourhood knows about it pretty much right away, ‘cause most people talk about it with each other and stuff. So, you’ll hear guys like, “It happened where? On Varna? Aight man, I ain’t walkin’ that way no more””.

The following excerpt, taken from a discussion with 22-year-old Calvin, illustrates just how strictly streetwise young men abide by the code of survival, which, despite increasing their safety, also complicates otherwise mundane decisions and actions:

Luca: So, how do you typically get home after your shift at the rec[reation] centre?

Calvin: Okay, so let’s say I start work at 2:00pm and I gotta leave at 11:00pm. If there was somebody driving home, we’d carpool. I’d just ask for a lift. If I had an available bike to use, I’d use it. So, there’s different ways to handle it. But for a long while, before I had my car, I was walking home at night at around 11:00pm after work. And for me it’s like, “I just gotta get onto the paths as fast as possible”.

Luca: So, what would your route be?

Calvin: I always try to stay away from Varna as much as possible. So if I have the opportunity to cut through the building complex and then end up on the street for a second and then hop onto another path, I’ll do that. Anything to stay away from that street, I’ll do it. If I can, I’ll even try to get home a lot earlier, you know, like before

the sun goes down. Other times, I'll wait until a certain time when I know there's less cars driving around. So, it's just how you look at it.

Luca: It sounds like a lot of planning. Do you ever have to go 'out of your way' to get back home?

Calvin: Not a lot of people will admit it to you, but I've seen it done. Me too. There's been times where the violence was so bad, like you're having different shootings happening every two days for like two weeks straight, so you're *extra* careful. Like, me, I know I can walk home from the [subway] station in five minutes on Varna, but I always wait for that bus – even though I know the bus is gonna take half hour. Better safe than sorry, that's how I look at it.

Young men like Calvin, who followed the code of survival, relied on these socially accepted rules and techniques for safely navigating physical space. Indeed, many of the young men I spent time with relied on the very same set of strategies for avoiding Varna Drive: taking the footpaths, carpooling, double-riding on a bicycle, relying on public transit, rearranging schedules to avoid walking at nighttime or during rush-hour (the latter seeing an increase in unknown vehicles driving through the area).

Yet, while abiding by the code may increase the safety of young black men, this comes at a heavy price – it limits individual agency, with residents obliging themselves to a prescribed set of rules and techniques, which often cause inconveniences. Despite this, young black men abide by the code because it provides structure and predictability, however contrived, in an otherwise tumultuous environment. In this sense, it is not surprising that most young black men choose to follow the code rather than ignore it – lived experience has taught them it is better to be “safe than sorry”.

Yet, this parochial street code is not available to everyone. Chaddy, a 32-year-old Jamaican-Canadian, made this clear in an interview: “Look,” he said, “if I didn't know you, I wouldn't tell you shit. That's why it's an *unwritten* rule, a *community* rule. That's *our* code. Just like back in the day when the natives used to have smoke signals. *You* couldn't read that and it wasn't *for* you to

read. And that's what this is". Indeed, the code of survival, with all of its rules and corresponding techniques, is a not common knowledge, not even amongst young black men who are most vulnerable to gun violence. It is something that is acquired through lived experience, social interaction, and the observation of other neighbourhood youth as they negotiate the built-form of the neighbourhood. Consequently, those most likely to be shot in Lawrence Heights are not long-time residents who were born and raised in the community, but those who are unfamiliar with local nuances of danger and risk and how to most affectively negotiate them – in other words, those without a firm grasp of the code of survival, as it exists and operates in a particular socio-spatial setting.

“You hear crickets out here at nighttime”: Knowing When Gun Violence Occurs

One of the major consequences of living under the constant threat of gun violence is that it limits when and where individuals can spend time in public. Indeed, one of the first things that struck me when I started my fieldwork in Lawrence Heights was the absence of young black men outdoors, particularly after dark. Only later did I learn that this absence was directly related to feelings of vulnerability – that the inability of police to protect residents from gun violence, coupled with a culture of neighbourhood beefing, pushed young black men indoors and away from public life.

Most young men from Lawrence Heights were not only attuned to *where* gun violence was likely to occur, but also *when* it was likely to occur. This included particularities about time of day and even the season. In Lawrence Heights, residents with a firm grasp of the code of survival were aware that gun violence almost always occurred at night, and spiked in the summer months when young men spent more time outside. In an interview, GG discussed this day versus night

dichotomy, and how the latter increased residents' exposure (and vulnerability) to gun violence.⁷⁷

He explained:

I've seen every race of people walk through the neighbourhood in the daytime. Black, White, Asian. I've seen old people. I've seen little kids walking through. Everybody's outside in the daytime. But at nighttime? You hear crickets out here at nighttime. And it's fuckin' terrible, cause like, yo, if you're a black guy and you *have* to be outside at nighttime, the probability of something happening to you skyrockets, 'cause you're the only one out here. There's nobody outside. You come through here at nighttime, even in your car, you gotta check your mirrors before you get out, you gotta look around, you gotta say a prayer, and then you run".

Monk expressed similar sentiments about the risks associated with being outside at night as a young black male. He said:

Monk: If you're a black youth, you can't come outside at night in our area. If you *gotta* go outside at night, it *has* to be in short bursts. You have to be going to a close location, cause...

Luca: Walking with a purpose, you mean?

Monk: It better be a good fuckin' purpose, you know what I mean? It better be worth it. What I'm sayin' is your distance can't be too far. It has to be like five-minutes, round trip, *maximum*, you know what I mean. I learned that the hard way. [Pause] Yeah, when nighttime comes, you don't wanna be outside.

Both GG and Monk highlight the dangers associated with being outside in Lawrence Heights at night. Unfortunately, Monk learned this the hard way, when he was shot in the leg trying to walk over to a friend's house one night. Indeed, Monk's victimization served as a data point – one of many – that young men referenced as evidence that staying indoors after dark was the safest option. As Monk's comments illustrate, he no longer ignores the tenets of the code and is much more selective about when he steps outside.

⁷⁷ Interestingly, in her study of African-American girls living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, Miller (2008: 61) found similar risk-avoidance strategies among women – i.e., that a major theme running through young women's accounts was, "avoiding neighbourhood spaces, altogether and especially at night".

Those with a firm grasp of the code understand that hanging out in public increased one's chances of being victimized, especially at night. Yet, the young men I spent time with did not passively accept being forced indoors and often resisted – they wanted to attend community BBQs, visit friends in the neighbourhood, and walk their children to the playground or to school. As Emmett told me one night as we walked along the footpaths, “I’m not gonna make anybody put me in jail, which is not bein’ behind bars, but stayin’ in your house all day and feelin’ scared”. And so, young black men from the community adapted to their social milieu. They found ways to allow social and public life to continue, being mindful of the environment in which they lived and the dangers associated with it.

For example, some of the youth I hung out with liked to gamble. During the summer months, instead of stuffing 15 men into a cramped apartment unit, they would wait until it was dark outside, open a few beers, and walk over to the local school to shoot dice against the wall. Given the risks involved, some in the community considered this practice foolish and irresponsible, myself included. Yet, there was also an understanding that the young men had enough street sense not to expose themselves to undue risk – a confidence that they carried with them as they negotiated the physical contours of the neighbourhood. The first time I asked about this practice, therefore, I was sure to ask the young men how they possibly felt safe hanging out in the schoolyard. The wall that they played dice against was brightly lit and visible from Varna Drive, only about 100-feet away, making the young men incredibly vulnerable to drive-by shootings. Indeed, when I asked Irene, the recreation coordinator at the local community centre where the most dangerous pocket of the neighbourhood was, she simply responded, “Basically anywhere under a street light”.

When I asked GG about the practicalities of safely gambling outside, at night, under a streetlight, he laughed and explained that when they wanted to shoot dice, they would just knock-

out the lights that lit-up the area immediately in front of the wall (and sometime a few others, for good measure), making them practically invisible to potential perpetrators driving along Varna Drive. Jocelyn confirmed this one night as I was driving her home from the mall. As we passed the school, she pointed and said, “Look in the schoolyard. Remember what I was saying? There’s only one [*laughing*] ... Look. It’s dark, right? Cause the guys shot the lights out. They don’t like the lights. There’s supposed to be four lights there, but they shoot them out all the time so there’s only one”. She continued, “Even if you go in the courts and the paths, they knock those lights out too. You know those poles? They always knock out a few lights. They know what they’re doing out here”.

Indeed, when shooting dice at the schoolyard, young men would supplement this safety technique by enforcing a strict ‘no yelling’ rule. They also always made sure that at least one of them was carrying a firearm in the event that they were attacked. Over time, as I spent more time with young men out in public, I realized that knocking out the streetlights was a common practice – an effective and locally accepted technique for mitigating risk while hanging out in public. It was a clear manifestation of resistance and individual agency. Despite how concretely gun violence structured their lives, actions, and experiences, young men in the community found ways to allow public life to continue. They found ways to adapt by following the code of survival and the locally accepted set of risk-avoidance strategies it provided them.

Yet, in some cases, young men found themselves in situations where the code was not helpful – where predetermined lines of action (or inaction) did not exist or were not useful for preventing victimization. In some cases, the situation required a spontaneous response, emerging from lived experience fostered within a specific socio-spatial milieu. This is what I refer to as ‘neighbourhood wisdom’, a locally-oriented, place-based version of street knowledge.

NEIGHBORHOOD WISDOM

Few scholars have explicitly examined the concept of street knowledge or its role in the lives of individuals experiencing ongoing risk. Those that have, depict it as an interpretive framework that, once acquired, is applicable in a wide range of situations across a host of socio-spatial settings (Anderson 1990; Goffman 2014; Stuart 2016b). My research in Lawrence Heights complicates these findings. Indeed, I introduced the concept of ‘neighbourhood wisdom’ to illustrate the more nuanced nature of street knowledge – one that is uniquely local, with its protective value largely limited to the particular socio-spatial environment from which it was cultivated. While I tackle the theoretical implications of this concept elsewhere (chapter 3), the proceeding section illustrates its practical value in the lives of young black men.

“Even though it’s just a car, your senses go off”: Identifying Suspicious-looking Vehicles

Due to the randomness and frequency of gun violence, some young black men have developed a locally-calibrated framework – one that is grounded in local knowledge, lived experience, and an intimate understanding of the threats inherent in one’s environment. In Lawrence Heights, gun violence typically comes in the form of drive-by shootings. Consequently, some residents have become unusually proficient at identifying what they call ‘suspicious-looking vehicles’, which enter the boundaries of the neighbourhood carrying assailants from rival social housing projects. Perpetrators typically ‘lurk’ in the neighbourhood for some time, scoping out their intended target(s), before shooting and speeding off.

When I asked Jay if he could pinpoint exactly what made a car ‘suspicious,’ he responded:

Basically, we’re lookin’ for what we call “beaters,” cause that’s what they use for drive-bys. They’re old and they’re usually Honda Civics, cause they’re the easiest to steal...And they’re *always* a dark colour. Like they never use a car where you look at it and say, ‘Yeah, that’s a red car,’ or ‘Yeah, that’s a white car’. So it’s usually a dark blue or dark green, so you can’t really tell what colour it is, you know. And then the

tints. They *always* got dark tints, so you never really know if they got guys in the back or what.

Similarly, when I asked Calvin how he managed the constant threat of gun violence, he replied, “Sometimes you get paranoid and you don’t even know why. There’s a car that looks suspicious and...”. I jumped in, “But why? What tips you off about the car?”. Calvin responded, “Tints. Color of the car. Model of the car. Lots of times the cars that do the drive-bys are black or off-black, with tints... Even though it’s just a car, you know, your senses go off, like, ‘*Holy*, that car looks *so* suspicious’. Cause sometimes you’ll look at a car and something’ll go off in your head, but you say, ‘Nah’. But then you get a call from somebody else in the area sayin’, ‘Yo, you see that car?’ and I’m like, ‘You know what? Yeah, I seen it, still, it came into the court, it didn’t drop anyone off, it didn’t stop and pick anyone up, it’s just circling’”.

In an interview with 29-year-old Alex, I asked how he handled the potential threat posed by unknown vehicles in the neighbourhood. He responded:

Not so much during the day, but night time, if you’re gonna leave a building, you would definitely look out into the parkin’ lot – see if there’s anybody sittin’ in a car that you don’t know, a car that you never seen before. If there’s three or four guys in a car you never really seen before, I don’t suggest you leave at that time. Wait for a second, go back in the house, chill, ask your friends, “Yo, you guys ever seen this car before?” Cause it can happen, just like that. Just like that.

On another occasion, I was hanging out at the community centre with 22-year-old Wendell and a few other young men. We were discussing a drive-by shooting that happened the night before. Wendell told the group that he had a sense that a drive-by was going to happen that night after seeing a suspicious vehicle lurking in the community. I asked him if he could elaborate, and the following exchange ensued:

Wendell: We recognize vehicles [that belong in Lawrence Heights], you know, so if we see an unknown vehicle, you’ll see everyone get alert.

Luca: Alert, how?

Wendell: Alert as in something could happen, 'cause we don't recognize the car. And sometimes, you know, cars drive suspiciously slow through here. Even if they're lost or whatever, someone [from the community] will get pissed off and go up to the car and be like, "Yo! What are you looking for?"

Luca: Really?

Wendell: Of course, man, 'cause it's serious shit, you know. No one wants to be looking the other way and then, "Boom, boom," you know what I mean. So people around here are alert to those things.

These excerpts highlight a number of important points about how residents classify potential threats, and how those classifications take on distinct meaning within the confines of the neighbourhood. There is nothing *objectively* suspicious about the features that Jay, Calvin, and Alex describe. Indeed, in the moments I spent with residents *outside* the boundaries of Lawrence Heights, they did not seem alarmed by the passing of old, beat-up Honda Civics – regardless of color, tint, or number of occupants. Yet, *within* the confines of Lawrence Heights, where the threat of drive-bys was real and ever-looming, young men developed this peculiar *subjectivity* for assessing risk – one where dark, four-door vehicles with tinted windows sparked a sense of anxiety and dread.

In addition to the aesthetic features of vehicles, residents were also attuned to its movements through physical space – e.g., where it went, how it got there, who it picked-up or dropped-off (if anyone), and responded accordingly. In some cases, residents would call each other to confirm their suspicions or notify other vulnerable residents to get indoors. In other cases, they would intercept vehicles and demand answers – something that I witnessed on a number of occasions, with my own sense of anxiety and dread.

“We got that sixth-sense”: Interpretive Framework, Subconscious Reaction, & The Habitus

The excerpts above also illustrate how neighbourhood wisdom enabled residents to make life-saving distinctions between trusted and suspicious, safe and dangerous, in an almost unconscious manner. This uncanny ability to *feel* or *predict* potential threats, oftentimes spontaneously, was shared by many of the young black men I spent time with. For example, when I asked Chaddy if he ever found himself changing his behavior because of the gun violence, he replied:

Yeah, at times you have to, but it's like...it's like, you see the weatherman? He have this thing he could predict from two weeks ago that there might be shower or a possibility of this or that? Growin' up in this neighbourhood, we got that sixth-sense, man, where we can predict what's gonna happen. Majority the time, people that's getting' killed, like the last two killings around here, innocent people, cause they not in that frame of mind. [...] The guy's walking his dog, he's not thinking it's not safe to be out at 12:00am. But anybody that's bangin', anybody that knows they're a part of somethin', got that radar, that weatherman we have that got you informed that you can't be doing shit like that or you'll get caught slippin' [...], you know what I'm sayin'.

This framework allowed 'hoodwise residents to 'predict', with some degree of certainty, when and where gun violence was likely to occur in the neighbourhood, prompting appropriate lines of action or inaction (e.g., *not* walking one's dog at night) for mitigating their risk of being wounded or killed.⁷⁸

Similarly, when I asked Calvin how he avoided the threat of gun violence, he responded:

Growing up here, it just sharpens your senses. It makes you more aware of your surroundings [...] Like if I hear a car skid off, I'm automatically ready for a drive-by. A tire pops, my mind automatically goes to a gunshot. A car's driving real slow, I'm watching it closely, you know. You really gotta be able to identify what's dangerous and what's not dangerous out here, just cause the stakes are so high.

⁷⁸ Indeed, in interviews, young men from Lawrence Heights drew a positive correlation between lack of neighbourhood wisdom and violent victimization, pointing out that those most likely to be victimized were those with a limited understanding of the socio-spatial realities of the neighbourhood – e.g., new residents, visitors, young children at the cusp of entering the vulnerable 15-35 age range. Still, young men who were considered 'street smart', even by local standards, were victimized over the course of my research, suggesting that neither neighbourhood wisdom nor the code of survival provide unfailing security.

Chaddy and Calvin are aware that growing up in Lawrence Heights has given them a particular perceptive framework – a distinct way of interpreting the world around them, which, in turn, allowed them to ‘predict’ when something was likely to occur and respond accordingly. Chaddy describes this as a ‘sixth-sense’, a ‘frame of mind’, and a ‘radar’ that has him informed about what he should and should not be doing out in the neighbourhood. Calvin describes this framework as an almost ‘automatic’ response to environmental stimuli. Both men posit that this embedded capacity to interpret and respond to potentially dangerous situations, often spontaneously, derives from their upbringing in Lawrence Heights.

In many ways, neighbourhood wisdom can be understood as a ‘habitus of the street’. Wacquant (2005: 318) defines habitus as, “The way that society becomes *deposited in persons* in the form of *lasting dispositions*, or trained capacities and structured propensities to *think, feel, and act* in determined ways, which then guide them in their *creative responses* to the constraints and solicitations of their extant milieu” (emphasis added). “These dispositions,” adds Fraser (2013: 973), “are both intellectual and physical – habits of thought, and habits of behavior – and frequently operate at an unconscious, or preconscious level; giving the feeling of being instinctive (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Bourdieu 2005)”. Though seemingly spontaneous, these creative responses are actually shaped by personal history and biography. Applied to the streets, habitus, which fuses together structural and agentic accounts of human behavior, can help us better understand the decisions and actions of individuals and groups – including responses that are seemingly instinctive (Bourdieu 2005).

For example, one Sunday afternoon, early in my fieldwork, I went to the community centre to play ball hockey with some of the local youth. After the game, the two teams trickled out of the gym and onto the grass outside of the community centre. The men passed around some water and

beer. Everyone was relaxing and enjoying the afternoon sun, tucked behind a concrete divider that came about waist high. Young men were scattered everywhere – some beside me, others sitting on the grass by the gym door, others perched on the concrete divider.

I was speaking with one of the goaltenders with my back to the street when, all of a sudden, I heard a high-pitched screech and scrambling all around me. In the time that it took me to turn around and look at the road, and then look back towards the gym door, most of the young men were back inside – this was within seconds. I found myself standing on the grass with only a handful of others. After slowly filing into the gym to join the rest of the group, I found Wendell, who filled me in on what had transpired. He explained that, in light of the recent string of shootings, young black men in the community were on edge. Like Calvin, they instinctively associated screeching tires with drive-by shootings. Thankfully, it was a false alarm. Still, the situation exemplifies how the perilous socio-spatial environment has deposited itself in young black men from Lawrence Heights, the exclusive targets of gun violence.

Wendell, along with most of the other young black men that day, possessed a particular subjectivity – one that, evidently, I did not (and still do not) have. Indeed, Fraser (2013: 973) notes that, “While each human interaction is different [...], our approach is in fact structured by our habitual range of responses; learned during childhood, and repeated ad infinitum. Bourdieu likens this to a ‘feel for the game’ – an instinctive response to learned rules, like playing a sport that one is proficient at (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 128)”.

The realities of life in Lawrence Heights has structured the thoughts, feelings, and actions of young men in distinct ways. Their ability to distinguish suspicious from non-threatening vehicles, to ‘predict’ gun violence based on a ‘feeling’, and to act and react, consciously and unconsciously, to threats that emerge in the neighbourhood, all suggest that neighbourhood wisdom is a form of

habitus – honed to the realities of the street, shaped by experiences of victimization, and pertinent within a particular socio-spatial milieu.

The case of the screeching tires above also demonstrates that neighbourhood wisdom picks-up precisely where the code of survival drops-off. There were no predetermined rules or techniques for handling the situation that transpired; yet, the young men managed by relying on their neighbourhood wisdom to get themselves out of a potentially dire situation. This shrewd capacity to decipher the dangerous from mundane and respond accordingly, coupled with a set of socially accepted rules and techniques for safely navigating physical space, equip young men with the tools they need to confidently step out into the neighbourhood – to partake in some form of public life, however limited.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

This article demonstrates how young black men in a Toronto social housing development have adapted to the ever-looming threat of gun violence in their community. To avoid violent victimization, some of the most vulnerable residents have come to rely on highly parochial versions of street codes and street knowledge. I discuss the theoretical and practical effects of neighbourhood wisdom elsewhere (see chapter 3); here, I consider the broader implications of the code of survival, including its impact on the individuals and communities that rely upon it.

The code of survival is sensitive to the realities of inner-city violence. The majority of young men I spent time with were non-violent. They did not engage in verbal or physical confrontations with others in their neighbourhood to increase their ‘respect’ or ‘juice’, nor did they display acts of volatility – or ‘act crazy’ – to show that they should not be ‘messed with’ or ‘dissed’ (Anderson 1999: 73). Indeed, the majority of young men in Lawrence Heights went about their daily lives in

the neighbourhood in a non-violent manner, deploying various risk-avoidance strategies to mitigate their likelihood of being shot and killed on the streets.

In this sense, my article provides a much-needed addition to the literature on street codes, with the code of survival standing as a purely *defensive* mechanism for the avoidance of violent victimization in the inner-city – one that does not necessarily supplant or contradict Anderson’s (1999) code of the street, but rather operates parallel to it. Moreover, it infuses a uniquely spatial element to the literature on street codes, illustrating how individuals negotiate the built-environment independent of the presence of an imminent threat; indeed, the nature of drive-by shootings – quick, impersonal, and often without interaction between perpetrator and victim – necessitates this.

Yet, there are serious implications for those who follow the code of survival. On the one hand, those who follow the code make active choices in the sorts of actions that they partake in (or refrain from) while out in public. These choices, though shaped by the code, represent clear and tangible manifestations of individual agency amongst individuals experiencing an otherwise overbearing structure – one that would otherwise paralyze individuals and communities.

Yet, on the other hand, the code of survival also represents another structural layer that further constrains the choices, actions, and mobility of an already marginalized population. Indeed, as the code of survival grows – i.e., as it comes to encompass more ‘bait’ areas, more rules about temporal moments of safety and danger, more prescribed strategies and techniques for mitigate risk – it limits the accepted range of actions available to those who use it, chipping away at individual agency in the process.

Emmett expressed these sentiments in an interview, voicing his frustrations about having to follow informal rules in response to the presence of ongoing threats: “Ain’t nobody gonna make me feel like I have to be runnin’ up and down all day, man. [...] Forget that. Not anymore, man. I’m passed that stage, you know what I mean. [...] So, no, I come outside anytime I want to. I go anywhere I want to. It’s my world too, right?”. Similarly, when I asked Chaddy if knowledge of past shootings – i.e., where, when, why, and how they took place – affected his day-to-day movements in the neighbourhood, he said: “No, no. Not at all. I gotta live, man. I gotta live”. For a variety of reasons, some young men get to a point in their lives where the potential benefits of following the code religiously, like many do, is not worth the cost, i.e., losing the freedom to make uninhibited choices. Yet, ignoring the code does not make it any less pertinent to daily life. As Gresham Sykes (1958: 13) eloquently noted 60-years ago:

To say that man is a social animal is also to say that man never lives in a world completely of his own choosing. He is always confronted with the fact that there are others who attempt to make him conform to rules and procedures and he must somehow come to grips with these external demands. He may accept them in whole or in part, turning them into demands which he places on himself, or he may reject them and try to avoid the consequences; yet, he can never really ignore them.

Finally, in a political and social climate where the urban poor have been depicted as unable (or even unwilling) to care for themselves, the findings found herein portray a different narrative. With the retrenchment of the welfare state (Wacquant 2009) and its protective arm largely ineffectual in providing safety and security to the most severely disadvantaged, inner-city residents have stepped-up to fill the void, developing a code for ensuring the most basic of human needs – individual survival.

CHAPTER FIVE

“YOU WON’T CATCH ME SLIPPING”: HOW STREETWISE YOUNG MEN INTERPRET THE VICTIMIZATION EXPERIENCES OF OTHERS

Abstract: This article draws on five years of ethnographic research in a Toronto social housing project plagued by gun violence. In an environment where any young black male can fall victim to gun violence at any time, streetwise residents have developed an alternative understanding of the victimization experience – one that reinfuses some semblance of order and control into an otherwise unpredictable and paralyzing social environment. Findings suggest that streetwise young men use the terms ‘on point’ and ‘slipping’ to reconstruct cases of violent victimization of others in their neighbourhood. In so doing, they shift blame onto victims themselves, emphasizing the manageability of gun violence (however contrived) while downplaying its unpredictable nature. The implications of this framework on individuals and community are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

There was this one time where Frosty let his guard down. I think it was the only time it ever really happened to him, but it definitely changed the man. What happened was he went outside without his gun. He was walking to the mall and some guy he had beef with from another ‘hood was just waiting for him. [Frosty] fucked up, cause he knows what it’s like out here. And this guy ran up on him, pulled the trigger – had it right up in his face. You know what happened? The gun jammed. *That’s* why Frosty’s alive. That’s the only reason he’s still alive. And I think that’s where he learned his lesson, ‘cause after that one incident, he’s like, “Yo, I’m never gonna get caught slippin’ again” (Monk, 26-years-old).

As a discipline, criminology has traditionally been biased towards studying criminals and the offenses they engage in. Historically, the criminological gaze has been less focused on victims of crime, though this is changing (Rock 2002), with the subfield of victimology now ripe with literature on the impact of crime on individuals and society.⁷⁹ Yet, for much of the twentieth century, studies on victims focused “almost exclusively on women’s experiences of physical and

⁷⁹ Rock (2002: 14) defines the term victim as, “...one who is defined voluntarily or involuntarily, directly or indirectly, abruptly or gradually, consequentially or inconsequentially, by the proven or alleged criminal or crime-like actions of another. ‘Victim’, in other words, is an identity, a social artefact dependent, at the outset, on an alleged transgression and transgressor and then, directly or indirectly, on an array of [...] others who [...] shape the larger interpretative environment” in which that victimization is lodged.

sexual assault” (Newburn and Stanko 1994: 160), with the experiences of male victims less pronounced in the literature (Davies 2002). A significant part of criminology’s early reluctance to explore the victimization experiences of men was due to stereotypes about gender, i.e., to men’s perceived reluctance to discuss ‘vulnerability’ and ‘weakness’ (Stanko and Hobdell 1993). Indeed, this proved to be highly problematic, as the near exclusive focus on men’s criminality obscured the realities of male victimization, i.e., that men were (and continue to be) more likely to be victims of crime than women, especially violent crime (Graham 2006; Stanko and Hobdell 1993). It also obscured the fact that men not only victimize women, but also victimize each other with startling frequency and intensity, often resulting in significant long- and short-term trauma (Newburn and Stanko 1994: 161).

Thankfully, feminist scholars have been diligent in identifying the dearth of criminological knowledge in this area. Over the last twenty years, they have successfully deployed gender as a lens through which to better understand how men make sense of their victimization experiences. Indeed, their work has sparked a growing interest in the effects of victimization, including violent victimization, on the lives, actions, and experiences of men, particularly as it relates to hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). These scholars emphasize that what it means to be a victim is largely shaped by gender constructions, which associate “femininity with vulnerability and masculinity with dangerousness” (Hollander 2001: 84). The term ‘victim’, they correctly note, is most often connected to notions of femininity and is thought to clash heavily with traditionally masculine ideals, such as self-reliance, strength, aggression, and control (Ricciardelli et al. 2015).

Yet, Stanko and Hobdell’s research (1993), based on thirty-three in-depth interviews with male victims of assault by other men, found that male victims reported “fear, phobias, disruption to

sleep and social patters, hypervigilance, aggressiveness, personality change, and a considerably heightened sense of vulnerability,” highlighting that the relationship between victimization and masculinity is complex (Newburn and Stanko 1994: 163). Others have come to similar conclusions, stressing the nuances involved in unpacking how men make sense of and cope with violent victimization (Allen 2002; Hoyle and Young 2002; Javaid 2016; Rock 2002; Stanko 1990). To date, however, most of the research on male victims of crime focuses on male victims of sexual assault (Graham 2006; Javaid 2016; Lowe and Richards 2017), including victims of male rape within the carceral setting (O’Donnell 2004; Ricciardelli et al. 2015). Less attention has been paid to other forms of violent victimization, including the experiences of gunshot victims.

Over a decade-and-a-half ago, Paul Rock (2002: 13) concluded that:

There is an ensuing conceptual void that has yet to be filled by an adequate description of the victim as a situated, reflective self in interaction with others... Any such examination must deal with how people cope with the here-and-now experience of crime; what sense they come to make of it; how they account to themselves and others about what has transpired (and, indeed, when and how accounting needs to be done); what materials are available to construct such accounts; what identities are implicated and how, if at all, they are acquired.

This article heeds Rock’s call by situating victimization in the “here-and-now experience of crime,” exploring how streetwise young men in a Toronto social housing project make sense of and cope with the effects of gun violence in their neighbourhood.⁸⁰ Most studies on the victimization of men and women examine how individuals come to understand their own victimization experiences, including what impact, if any, such events have on their attitudes, behaviors, and sense of self. This article takes a step back and examines how a group of individuals

⁸⁰ Leaning on Anderson (1990: 6), I use the term ‘streetwise’ throughout to describe individuals who “neither take the streets for granted nor recoil from them but become alive to dangerous situations, drawing on a developing repertoire of ruses and schemes for travelling the streets safely. In a word, [streetwise individuals] learn street sense, how to behave in a sensible manner. In becoming something more than a passive reactant to public situations, the individual becomes proactive and to some degree the author of public actions”.

living in a violent and disadvantaged community make sense of the victimization experiences of *others* around them.

My research is situated in Lawrence Heights, a Toronto social housing development that has experienced more than a decade of gun violence resulting from inter-neighbourhood conflicts (or ‘neighbourhood beefs’) with other social housing projects scattered around the city – a cycle of retaliatory violence in which a small group of Lawrence Heights residents were also involved in, as perpetrators. Over the last decade, these beefs have manifested themselves in the form of drive-by shootings, with members of rival social housing projects entering Lawrence Heights and shooting at young black men, exclusively and indiscriminately – i.e., irrespective of one’s involvement in these wider conflicts.

Against this backdrop, where any young black male can fall victim to gun violence at any time, an alternative understanding of the victimization experience has emerged, revolving around the concepts of ‘on point’ and ‘slipping’ – the former characterized by a state of perpetual hypervigilance, the latter by a momentary (but potentially lethal) lapse in judgment resulting in loss. In this pocket of concentrated poverty and disadvantage, where individuals are expected to negotiate their own safety and self-preservation in everyday life (Anderson 1999; Cobbina, Miller, and Brunson 2008; Miller 2008; Urbanik and Haggerty 2018), streetwise young men have come to ascribe blame for victimization in a distinct and discerning manner: victims who are deemed streetwise are held responsible for their own victimization because they “should’ve known better,” while non-streetwise residents are absolved of culpability for the suffering they have endured because they “didn’t know any better”.

In the findings section, I unpack the ‘on point - slipping’ dichotomy, defining each term using data obtained through in-depth interviews and participant-observation with streetwise young men

in the neighbourhood. Next, I introduce a case study of a shooting that occurred in Lawrence Heights in the winter of 2008, highlighting precisely how the ‘on point - slipping’ framework is used by streetwise residents in the neighbourhood and outlining the function it serves for a vulnerable population exposed to the ongoing threat of violent victimization.

SETTING, METHODOLOGY, & SAMPLE

Lawrence Heights, situated north of Toronto’s downtown core, is one of Canada’s oldest and largest social housing projects (Paperny 2010). Built in the late-1950s, it sits on 65 hectares of land that is owned and operated by the Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC) – the second largest provider of social housing in North America. The neighbourhood is composed entirely of social housing, with 1208 rent-geared-to-income units housing approximately 3500 residents. There is currently no retail or commercial space within its boundaries; however, this will change with the ongoing neighbourhood revitalization, which formally commenced in August 2015 and is slated for completion in 2035 (TCHC 2017).

While official demographics do not exist,⁸¹ partial figures from 2015 suggest Lawrence Heights is a young community (59% of residents are under the age of 25) characterized by low levels of educational attainment, high unemployment rates, and an average household income of \$15,647 – almost one-fifth below the city average (Carrick, 2015).⁸² Due to its confusing physical layout and the abundance of green spaces in the neighbourhood, Lawrence Heights has been dubbed ‘Jungle’ or ‘Jungle City’.⁸³

⁸¹ Official data from TCHC on resident composition are not publically available.

⁸² These data were obtained through personal communication with the research team at TCHC.

⁸³ The media has racialized this moniker, highlighting that the neighbourhood is majority black. Residents, however, did not support this explanation. Regardless, many local residents and stakeholders have embraced the moniker and use it in everyday parlance.

Neighbourhood-level data on homicides and firearm-related offences are difficult to obtain in the Canadian context (Thompson, 2009). Although Toronto police release yearly statistics on homicide, these figures are not broken-down by precinct or by neighbourhoods within those precincts year-over-year⁸⁴ (Toronto Police Service, personal email communication in 2017). Yet, *The Globe and Mail* found that for social housing residents, “the likelihood of falling victim to violent crime in general, and murder in particular, far exceeds that of the rest of the city’s population” with this group “at least four times as likely to be murdered as someone living elsewhere in the [city]” (Davis and Appleby 2011).

Like other social housing projects across the City of Toronto, Lawrence Heights experiences bouts of gun violence (CBC News 2017; Global News 2013; Toronto Star 2017), with many cases remaining unsolved by police (Toronto Sun 2015). Over a specific thirty-month period of fieldwork, which was described by residents and police as ‘relatively calm,’ I attended three funerals for young men shot and killed on the streets of Lawrence Heights; another four men were wounded by gunfire in the neighbourhood during that same time.⁸⁵

The data presented herein are part of a larger ethnographic research project, most aptly described as a ‘neighbourhood study’ (see Gans, 1962; Stack, 1974), which examines the daily lives and experiences of Toronto social housing residents. In total, I spent close to five years conducting ethnographic research in the community, entering in December 2009 and exiting in August 2014. Since then, I returned on four occasions, each time for two-week blocks, to conduct

⁸⁴ This was confirmed through personal email and telephone communication with the Toronto Police Service, Headquarters, in 2017.

⁸⁵ Other research shows that most shooting victims are not fatally wounded (Lee 2013). Of those who survive, some treat their own wounds and do not report the incident to police (Goffman 2014). Thus, my count likely under-estimates the actual number of cases where somebody was struck by gunfire, and does not include cases where perpetrators fired into homes, vehicles, and into the air without striking anyone.

follow-up interviews with key participants. During my fieldwork, I typically spent between four to six days a week in the neighbourhood, usually for six to eight hours a day. To build rapport, I engaged in ‘deep hanging out’ (Geertz, 1998) and also used the ‘go-along’ method (Kusenbach, 2003) to shadow key participants as they went about daily life both inside and outside of the neighbourhood.

The sample for my broader project consists primarily of community residents between the ages of 16 and 87. Most were first- and second-generation Jamaicans and Somalis, though many were white and identified as second- or third-generation Canadians. In total, I conducted seventy-five formal interviews: fifty with residents and twenty-five with key stakeholders, including local police officers, city councillors, social workers, welfare officers, recreation centre staff, urban planners, members of neighboring communities, and representatives of the landlord, as well as harm-reduction, crisis-response, and youth workers. Interviews were open-ended and semi-structured (Brewer, 2000). Most formal interviews lasted around two hours – the longest was four hours, the shortest was one hour.

Formal interviews were supplemented by hundreds of informal interviews. The locations of these interviews varied: the local community centre, health centre, shopping mall, and a number of coffee shops around the area, as well as community park benches, Toronto city hall, local police departments, the homes of participants, and my car. All of the interviews were audio-recorded, with the consent of participants, and later transcribed and coded. I also audio-recorded some casual conversations, though most were documented through field jottings and took the form of ethnographic fieldnotes (Emerson et al. 1995). I analysed all of the data using NVivo10.

The analysis presented herein focuses on the lived experiences of a group of twelve streetwise young men from the community – all of them black, of Jamaican and Somali descent, between the

ages of 18 and 38. Though all of the men know of each other from the neighbourhood, they were not part of a cohesive group but part of different friendship networks.⁸⁶ Although the majority of excerpts are taken from interviews with this particular group of residents, my analysis is supported by interviews, conversations, and participant-observation with other residents (including women, children, and seniors) and local stakeholders (e.g., teachers, community police officers, MPs, etc.).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The gun violence makes young guys grow up faster around here. It kind of robs them of their innocence, you know, and makes them more grimy. It gets them in that mentality like, “That’s not gonna happen to me. I’m not gonna be walkin’ ‘round here and somebody’s gonna kill me. This is my neighbourhood. I’m not lettin’ that shit happen to me,” you know, “You won’t catch me slippin’” (Alex, 29-years-old).

While only a few young men from the community were perpetrators of gun violence in other social housing projects across the city, their actions had serious ramifications for the community at-large. Indeed, the randomness and frequency of gun violence in Lawrence Heights has created a precarious situation for all residents. Mothers are afraid to let their children walk to and from school, seniors are concerned about being struck by stray bullets while out in the neighbourhood or sitting in their homes, and children are exposed to recurring trauma in the aftermath of gun violence. Not surprisingly, community-life suffers too: youth programs are forced indoors, community BBQs are organized in conjunction with the local police division, and block-parties tend to be reserved for the winter months, when the threat of drive-by shootings is ostensibly lower. Gun violence, in other words, has had serious and long-lasting implications on the Lawrence Heights community and its residents.

⁸⁶ This meant that, during data collection, I had to purposefully schedule meetings with individual participants and distinct groupings of young men – i.e., I could not meet with one individual and hope to bump into members of other social groups. While this was time consuming during the data collection phase, it gave me confidence during data analysis, as my findings were consistent across individuals embedded in disparate friendship networks.

And yet, despite its far-reaching effects, one group in particular suffers most acutely – young black men. The wider community is aware of this. Irene, the coordinator at the community centre for the last 30-years, made this abundantly clear. Speaking about the impact of gun violence on children in the community, she said, “A couple of years ago there was a shooting over on Cather [Crescent], where two guys were shot. And, um, yeah, the kids here [at the community center] were really traumatized. We did an exercise with them – a written thing. We asked, ‘Where do you feel safe?’ and ‘What makes you afraid?’. It was just to get a sense of where these kids were at. And almost all of them expressed the fear that, you know, their dad might be shot and killed. And it’s like, yeah, they connect [the gun violence] to young black men being shot. They don’t fear for their own safety. It’s their... They related it back to the men in their lives, right”.

Chris, a Jamaican-Canadian resident and father of two little girls, poignantly confirmed this as we sat down early one morning for a coffee at the local mall. “My kids worry about my safety. They’re young, but they understand what’s goin’ on,” he said. “Do they worry about getting shot?” I asked. He replied, “My kids are scared, Luca, but they’re not scared for themselves, seen? They’re worried about me. When I leave home for a coffee, to meet a friend, they run up and say, ‘Be safe daddy. Love you’. Be *safe*. That kills me”.

Community members, including young children, are highly attuned to the realities of gun violence in their neighbourhood. This, of course, places an incredible burden on young black men, who not only worry about their own personal safety and security, but ruminate about the collateral consequences of victimization on family members, friends, and loved ones. The wider community sympathizes with the plight of young black men. There is a communal understanding that gun violence, and the victimization that follows, is largely beyond the control of those being shot and killed on the streets of Lawrence Heights.

Yet, my findings suggest that despite being the exclusive targets of gun violence, young black men are also the most critical of those who fall victim – be it a family member, acquaintance, or friend. Indeed, amongst streetwise members of this population, gun violence is understood as manageable and victimization the result of individual failure and incompetence. The following section will unpack the concepts of ‘on point’ and ‘slipping’ – two terms that streetwise residents use to analyze the victimization experiences of others in their neighbourhood – and demonstrate the protective function it serves, emotionally, for the community’s most vulnerable population.

‘On Point’ and ‘Slipping’: Definitions and Usage of the Terms

When a streetwise young man is shot or killed on the streets of Lawrence Heights, other streetwise residents discuss the event in great detail. Unfortunately, over the course of my five years of ethnographic research, I was privy to far too many of these informal analyses, where streetwise young men would painstakingly dissect the decisions and actions of victim(s), *ex post facto*, in the moments before, during, and after a shooting. The main purpose of this exercise was to determine whether the victim was ‘on point’ or ‘slipping’. The answer to this question had far reaching implications for how other streetwise young men made sense of the event – consequently shaping how they interpreted their own vulnerability and masculinity in the neighbourhood.

When I asked Emmett, a 34-year-old resident, if he could explain what being ‘on point’ meant, he responded:

It means you’re always on your P’s and Q’s. When someone says they’re ‘on point’, it means they’re focused, their eyes are open, they’re ready for whatever. It’s not like, “On your mark. Get set. Go!” No. When you’re ‘on point,’ you’re always on “Go!” There’s no, “On your mark”. There’s no, “Get Set,” you’re just always on “Go!” Always focused. Always ready to take on whatever’s comin’ your way.

For Emmett, being ‘on point’ is characterized by a state of perpetual hypervigilance, where an individual is prepared to respond to potential danger at a moment’s notice. In Lawrence Heights,

streetwise young men believed that operating at this idyllic state of existence – of constantly being on “Go!” and “ready for whatever” – would mitigate (if not outright eliminate) the likelihood of being victimized. Getting shot or killed on the streets of Lawrence Heights could be avoided, they argued, so long as one was prepared and ready to counteract it.

I asked Alex, a 29-year-old Jamaican-Canadian, the same question, “What does being on point mean?” He replied:

It basically means you’re not in la-la land, you know. You don’t live in Rosedale [one of Toronto’s most affluent neighbourhoods]. And the sooner you realize you don’t live in Rosedale and understand that you don’t live in Rosedale, then you’ll be alright. [...] It’s just that awareness, like, “I live in Lawrence Heights, so no matter what good we have here, there is bad happening here too”. So, I’m not just gonna be outside smokin’ a cigarette, right under a streetlight, at like 12:30 at night, you know. Or I’m not gonna be out too late or leavin’ too late. I’m not sayin’ you can’t, it’s just you never really know. You could be the guy that gets shot, that day, you know. If you’re not ‘on point’ and you’re just walkin’ along, you know, it’s late [at] night, you’re comin’ outside, you didn’t observe the parkin’ lot before you left the buildin’, you know, it could happen. Just like that. So, it’s like, you gotta be more ‘on point’. You don’t wanna be off point, you know, cause then you might get caught slippin’.

Alex offers a more nuanced description of being ‘on point’ and provides some examples of what it looks like in practice. Like Emmett, he asserts that hypervigilance – of always paying attention to one’s surroundings (or not being in “la la land”) – is a defining feature of being ‘on point’. Yet, he also emphasizes the importance of place – of having an awareness of where one lives and what that means for one’s safety and security. He suggests that those who are ‘on point’ know the difference between Lawrence Heights and Rosedale, and thus act accordingly – i.e., with a certain reverence for their surroundings and the dangers found there. They have an awareness, as he describes it, that subsequently guides decisions and actions in ways that reduce one’s likelihood of getting shot or killed on the streets – e.g., not smoking under a streetlight or carefully observing the parking lot before leaving a building. Alex emphasizes the necessity of hypervigilance while out in the neighbourhood; regardless of the banality of the task, young black men must remain ‘on

point', lest they slip. Finally, both Alex and Emmett implicitly underscore that the onus of being 'on point' falls squarely on the shoulders of the streetwise individual, who is *expected* to take on responsibility for his own safety and self-preservation while navigating the streets of Lawrence Heights.

To get a better sense of the concept, I asked Alex if he could provide a more detailed example of what being 'on point' looks like in action. He replied:

Okay. Say you're smokin' a cigarette outside, you're not makin' yourself too visual, you know. You're not gonna be out in the open. You'll kinda be tucked in a corner so if a car drives by [looking to shoot someone], you're not gonna be too exposed, you know. Or if I gotta go see my girlfriend, I need to call her ahead of time to let her know I'm comin'. She need to have that door open, you know what I'm sayin', and I need her to be checkin' the parkin' lot to make sure there's no unusual cars waitin' for me. So you gotta be on point. You gotta be aware. Cause if you're not on your game, you'll get caught slippin'.

Streetwise young men in Lawrence Heights treated even the most mundane activities with the utmost attention and respect, as failing to do so could potentially be life-threatening. Thus, while navigating the neighbourhood, young men strived for the ideal state of perpetual hypervigilance, which they believed would mitigate their risk of being shot or killed on the streets.⁸⁷

Yet, maintaining such a heightened and prolonged sense of awareness, as Alex's examples illustrate, was incredibly cumbersome for the young men I spent time with. Routine activities like having a cigarette outside or visiting one's girlfriend in the area were transformed into delicate performances – phone calls needed to be made, doors needed to be opened, cover needed to be found. This severely complicated the otherwise ordinary tasks of daily life; however, for streetwise young men, there was no other way, for the consequences of not being aware, of not respecting

⁸⁷ In Lawrence Heights, being 'on point' is intimately connected to the code of survival and neighbourhood wisdom. In essence, being on point means that a young man is meticulously following the code and effectively reading and responding to potential threats in his immediate environment.

one's surroundings, were unsurprisingly much too severe to ignore. Thus, streetwise residents took it upon themselves to always be 'on point' and never let their guard down.

Interestingly, in a study of posttraumatic stress symptoms amongst black males in Baltimore, Smith and Patton (2016) uncovered similar findings. Participants in their sample also used the term 'on point' to describe the "traumatic stress symptom of hypervigilance," with the researchers conceptualizing the strategy of being 'on point' as, "...an intentional state of alertness and heightened awareness in which young men keenly and constantly observe their physical and social environment to anticipate and/or quickly react to danger, specifically the threat of violence" (Smith and Patton 2016: 219).

Further, excerpts about being 'on point' from young men in their sample resonated with the words and descriptions of young men in Lawrence Heights, e.g., "I'm always, like, with it. I'm always on point... I have to be aware of every situation" and "I just be mindful of my surroundings, I don't ever be loafing, for real. I stay on point. I never let my guard down. Anywhere you go. Have to stay alert at all times" (Smith and Patton 2016: 219, 220). This suggests that individuals exposed to ongoing danger and risk come to strikingly similar conclusions about how it should be conceptualized and managed, even across international settings. This may be especially true for young black males exposed to community violence (Harding 2009; Rich and Grey 2005; Rios 2011).

Interestingly, without prompting and without fail, each of the 12 young men I spoke with followed their description of 'on point' with a discussion about 'slipping'. In an interview, Emmett explained what the term meant and in what circumstances it was used. He said:

Emmett: You don't wanna get caught slippin', you know what I mean. Nobody wants to get caught slippin'. Slippin' means you're not on your guard. You let your guard

down. You're vulnerable, you know what I mean. That's to break it down for you. And when you say that, you're just telling yourself... just givin' yourself an extra beat up, that's all. [...] "I shoulda known better, I shoulda been ready. I was ready, I told myself I was ready all day, and what happened?" Stuff like that, that's all.

Luca: That's interesting, so...

Emmett: Same with me. Something could happen to me and I'll be like, "Yeah man, I got caught slippin', man. He got me with a good one," you know what I mean. "I got caught slippin'. Shoulda been on my [game]," you know, "bobbin' and weavin'".

According to Emmett, 'slipping' means to let one's guard down in a way that makes them vulnerable or exposed to potential threats. In other words, 'slipping' is the antithesis of being 'on point'. Indeed, the two terms are mutually exclusive, as an individual cannot simultaneously be both 'on point' and 'slipping'. Unlike being 'on point', which is state of perpetual hypervigilance, a default position towards which streetwise individuals strive, the term 'slipping' refers to an *event*, a momentary (yet potentially lethal) lapse in judgment that causes one to fall from the ideal state of continuous awareness.

When I asked Oak, a former gang member and long-time resident, if he could define the term 'slipping', he replied:

Oak: Slippin', in a scenario, would be like this. Okay, say you know better than to do somethin', but you still went along with it and then you got caught off guard. So you fall into a situation that you *know* better not to be in. So you have to be *aware*. It's like being aware.

Luca: Okay, because when I think of slipping... [cuts me off]

Oak: Okay, look, you know there's a lot of shootin' out here, right? And you know it's not smart to be out here, but you decide to come outside and you're standin' around with a bunch of guys, knowin' that it's hot and knowin' that you don't got protection for your own self [i.e., a firearm], and then you end up getting' killed. That's you bein' careless. That's you slippin'.

Luca: So that's different from an outsider, with no knowledge, coming into the area and getting shot?

Oak: That's different. Slippin' is when you know what not to do, but yet you still do it. Slippin' is another word for mistake. It's your mistake. It's nobody else's mistake. That's what slipping is. Slipping is your own doing. You have to accept that

responsibility within yourself, ‘cause you slipped. [...] That’s it. Yeah, so don’t get caught slippin’, Luca [laughs].

Oak makes a number of important points about the concept of slipping. He notes that the term is used to describe a scenario where an individual is caught off guard and, as a result, finds him or herself in a situation that they know they should not have been in. As Oak points out, for someone to ‘slip’, they must have had some prior knowledge or understanding that a particular line of action or inaction was unsafe, foolish, or might result in victimization. It is, in short, a “mistake” – an event, a moment in time, that resulted in harm or loss.

Yet, it is a mistake that falls squarely on the shoulders of the individual: “It’s your mistake... your own doing. You have to accept that responsibility within yourself...”. In this interpretation, streetwise individuals shift the culpability and blame from perpetrator to victim, resulting in a *mea culpa*-type understanding of the victimization experience. When a streetwise resident ‘slips’, other streetwise young men hold him culpable for his own victimization. When streetwise young men unpack the victimization experiences of their streetwise peers, they focus their analyses on the mistakes of the victim, i.e., on errors of commission or omission.

The reversal of traditional understandings of culpability and blame in the victimization experience is not, in and of itself, a unique finding. Research on victims of crime, including violent crime, notes that some victims do engage in self-blaming behavior after a traumatic incident (Cahill 2000). This is particularly true of male victims, especially those who have experienced violent sexual assault (Davies 2002). The distinguishing factor in the current analysis, however, is that culpability and blame in response to victimization is imposed from the outside – i.e., streetwise residents in the community assign fault onto streetwise victims of gun violence, who, more often than not, are also long-time friends or even family members.

Yet, streetwise residents were discerning about how they deployed the concept of ‘slipping’ and thus the blame attached to it. Indeed, not everyone shot within the boundaries of Lawrence Heights was deemed fully responsible for their own victimization. This distinction was exclusively reserved for other streetwise young men – i.e., those who were aware of the need to be ‘on point’ in the first place. This nuance came to light when I asked about cases of gun violence where non-streetwise residents were shot or killed in the community – e.g., a 15-year-old boy who was shot walking home from an afterschool program, a high school teacher who was murdered while moving his car in the parking lot, a young man who was killed while visiting his girlfriend in the area.⁸⁸

When I asked Oak about how the concept of ‘slipping’ applied to these cases, he responded: “That ain’t slippin’, man. It’s not on them, ‘cause they don’t know any better. They don’t understand the game”. When I asked Dwayne, a 28-year old Somali resident, the same question, he went on to describe the nuances of the term, outlining in what cases it could and could not be applied. He said:

Dwayne: You can’t call it slippin’ if you don’t know nothin’, right? You gotta have that knowledge from before. If you *aware* of somethin’, you know what I mean, and somethin’ happens, that’s what comes out. Slippin’. But how you gonna be aware of something if you don’t know what’s goin’ on around here? How you gonna use that? You can’t say that’s slippin’. I mean, people still use the term, but it doesn’t make no sense, ‘cause if that person don’t know not to walk there, how you gonna say the man’s slippin’, you know what I mean? He doesn’t know.

Luca: So he can’t be blamed for that?

⁸⁸ Findings from Chapter 3 suggest that young black men who were least familiar with the socio-spatial realities of Lawrence Heights were more likely to be the victims of gun violence in the area – e.g., those who had just moved into the neighbourhood, who were visiting a friend or family member, who were just entering the vulnerable 15-35 age bracket. These victims were not held responsible for their own victimization by streetwise young men in Lawrence Heights.

Dwayne: How? How, Luca? It's gonna be hard to blame that person. But if somebody knew not to walk there and still walked there and got shot, he got caught slippin', 'cause he wasn't thinking that day.

Luca: But even if a guy 'slips', someone did shoot him, right? So who's to blame for that?

Dwayne: Whose fault you think it is? You're not supposed to cross the road on a red light and you still do it and you get hit, who you gonna blame? The person who hit you or the person who crossed on the red light?

When discussing the victimization experiences of others in the neighbourhood, streetwise young men like Oak and Dwayne drew sharp (and uncompromising) distinctions between streetwise and non-streetwise residents – between those who were aware of where they live and what that meant, and those who were not. Others' perceived level of awareness, therefore, was a crucial factor that streetwise residents used to make sense of victimization in their neighbourhood. It served as a way to sort victims into two opposing categories: those who “didn't know any better” (i.e., individuals who were not ‘on point’ because they were unaware of the need to be so, and thus could not be held responsible for their own victimization) and those who “should've known better” (i.e., individuals who were aware of the need to be alert, ‘slipped’ from the default state of perpetual hypervigilance, and were thus held fully responsible for their own misfortune). According to streetwise young men, the culpability associated with being shot or killed was positively correlated to the victim's knowledge of street life. As one's understanding of the streets increased, so too did his perceived level of responsibility for his own safety and self-preservation in the eyes of his streetwise peers.

Despite the repeated loss of family members and friends in the neighbourhood, streetwise young men actively resisted using the term ‘victim’ to describe the suffering and loss of other residents at the hands of outsiders (Graham 2006). Indeed, the term ‘victim’ was not part of their street lexicon, nor did it play a role in how they made sense of the tragic aftermath of gun violence in

their community. Yet, streetwise residents were not delusional; they acknowledged that young black men in their neighbourhood, themselves included, were being shot and killed on an ongoing basis. In response, they supplanted the notion of victimization with that of slipping. This allowed them to reframe the gun violence and their vulnerability to it in ways that were more compatible with the hyper-masculine norms governing their daily lives in the inner-city (Smith and Patton 2016).

Streetwise young men engaged in what Michèle Lamont (2000) calls ‘boundary work’, drawing sharp distinctions between themselves (as someone who was constantly ‘on point’) and those who ‘slipped’ (be it a streetwise resident who got “caught off guard” or an ‘innocent individual’ who simply “didn’t know any better”). By distinguishing themselves from those who had been shot in the neighbourhood, streetwise residents managed to maintain a positive self-image as someone who could competently negotiate the dangers of everyday life. Moreover, it allowed them to establish some semblance of order and control in an environment that was otherwise entirely unpredictable, where any young black male could fall victim to gun violence at any time.

Deploying the ‘on point - slipping’ framework downplayed this social reality. It allowed streetwise residents to frame gun violence as entirely manageable, so long as one remained ‘on point’ and in a state of perpetual hypervigilance. Streetwise young men shrouded their vulnerability and the realities of their extant milieu, i.e., that they actually had little control over their safety and security given the random and indiscriminate nature of gun violence, by emphasizing the mistakes and shortcomings of individuals who ‘slipped’ and ‘should’ve known better’. Relying on these two concepts, while avoiding the term victim, facilitated the continuation of public life in a space where violence would otherwise paralyze it. Below, I provide a detailed

case study to highlight how streetwise young men in Lawrence Heights make sense of the victimization experiences of other streetwise residents in their community.

“It happened at the back of the building on Amaranth”: A Case Study of ‘Slipping’

One night I was hanging out with GG in his apartment with two of his close friends. It was about 1:00am when the young men decided it was time for a cigarette. I followed them out of the apartment and into the hallway, where we continued our conversation about GG’s most recent business idea. The men passed around a pack of cigarettes and lit up. I was surprised by their decision to smoke in the hallway of the building. There were signs posted everywhere warning tenants that smoking inside was strictly prohibited and would result in a fine. I also knew, from spending time with GG, that he hated the smell of smoke on his clothing, let alone in the hallway of his building. After Frosty took the first drag of his cigarette and exhaled, I asked him why they were smoking indoors rather than on the stoop just outside the building. GG turned to me and launched into a story about one of the most notorious shootings in Lawrence Heights’ history – a 2008 incident where six of their good friends were shot, one of them killed, on the stoop of a building on Amaranth Court. In fact, the victims had been smoking when they were ambushed by a gunman from a rival neighbourhood, who emptied a full magazine of ammunition on them from approximately five feet away.

The dialogue below serves as a vivid example of how streetwise young men make sense of the victimization experiences of other streetwise young men in their neighbourhood. Notice that, in describing the incident, GG ultimately places blame on his friends who were ‘careless’, got ‘caught off-guard’, and consequently ‘slipped’, as opposed to the shooter who targeted them because of where they lived, their age, sex, and the colour of their skin. He said:

GG: Even the guys dem that got shot up. The six of them? They slipped. It happened at the back of the building on Amaranth. One day I'll show you the spot. It's really secluded. It's the same thing, though, they got caught slippin', cause all six of those guys that got shot, they're all shooters.

Luca: Meaning what?

GG: They're shooters, they all have guns. Meaning 99% of the time they have a gun on them. [...] So, what happened that day was they got caught off-guard. They were at the back of the building, chillin' on the steps of the porch. They had the door kind of like... We always have somethin' jammed in the door so it stays [propped] open, so we can get in and out fast in case some shit goes down, right. And the mistake they made that night was they got careless. They went outside to smoke and didn't bring a gun. So, imagine, they're standing on the stairs outside the buildin', the door's open like 3-inches, jammed open with a lighter, and this guy walks up to them and catches them all off guard and starts shooting. And everybody turns around to try and grab the door, and the lighter falls out and the door closes shut. So, they all stood there and just took the bullets.

For the next 30-minutes, the young men discussed the details of the shooting. I was struck with the nuance with which they dissected the event, highlighting all of the things that their friends had done wrong that evening – e.g., smoking outside instead of in the hallway, not bringing their firearms outside with them, failing to make sure that the door was securely propped open, not assessing the true intentions of the would-be perpetrator (Figure 7) until he pulled a gun on them, trapping themselves in a confined, three-by-three-foot staircase (Figure 8) without an escape route in the event of a frontal assault.



Figure 7: Perpetrator of Amaranth Shooting



Figure 8: Back of Building on Amaranth, Post-Shooting: Note the patched bullet holes on the door handle, below the handle, and to the far right. TCHC was forced to replace the glass.

At the time, the way the young men harped on the “mistakes” of their streetwise peers and the manner in which they ascribed blame seemed incredibly insensitive to me. Indeed, my fieldnotes were peppered with an undercurrent of frustration and confusion about the young men’s reading of such a tragic situation. Yet, through more interviews and conversations about gun violence, I learned that holding streetwise residents accountable for their own safety and self-preservation (and, thus, their victimization if it were to occur) was common practice amongst other streetwise residents in the neighbourhood.

For example, when I asked Wendell about the shooting on Amaranth Court, he replied:

Look, Rasikh would have probably never died if even *one* of those guys had something to defend themselves with. Six guys that usually carry guns all got caught slippin’. And you know what it is? They weren’t even planning on staying out late that night. It was just spur of the moment, so they weren’t prepared. So they were just all chillin’ [on the steps] and this guy just happened to know they [were] all back there. After the first shot, he knew they didn’t have anything on them [i.e., a firearm]. And *that’s* the only reason he was able to go up and continue to shoot them like that. Like each of them got shot *at least* twice, but Rasikh was the only one who didn’t make it. They slipped that night, you know, and they’ll regret that till the day they die.

Like GG, Wendell also placed responsibility and blame for what happened at Amaranth onto the victims themselves, Rasikh included. He emphasized that all six of the young men usually carried firearms while out in the neighbourhood – an indication that they were, in fact, streetwise individuals. Their lack of preparedness, as Wendell put it, caused them to ‘slip’; it allowed the perpetrator to shoot at them, close-range, until the entire magazine was spent. Interestingly, even while describing the heinous actions of the shooter, Wendell still placed the emphasis of blame on his streetwise peers, noting that the only reason the perpetrator was able to continue firing was because the young men did not have a firearm on them to shoot back.

The shooting on Amaranth highlights the function and value of the ‘on point - slipping’ framework for streetwise young men in the neighbourhood. By placing responsibility for one’s own safety and security onto the shoulders of the individual, and thus framing victimization as a

personal misstep, streetwise young men managed to willfully obscure the true extent of their own vulnerability. This reframing of victimization served to shift attention away from the unpredictability and danger of their extant milieu, over which they had little control, and towards an understanding that emphasized personal responsibility via micro-level decision-making and action – factors that they could, perceivably, manage and control.

In short, framing victimization in this way allowed streetwise young men to cope with their own intrinsic vulnerability (as individuals and as a group), which resurfaced each and every time one of their streetwise peers were shot or killed in the neighbourhood. Interestingly, the death of a streetwise resident did not shatter this delicate framework. It reinforced it. Labeling their streetwise peers, be it dead or wounded, as culpable for their own victimization actually strengthened the conviction of other streetwise young men in the neighbourhood that violence, victimization, and death could be avoided – so long as one remained ‘on point’ and did not ‘slip’.

The social exercise that streetwise young men engaged in, and the way they reframed victimization, is not evident in the literature on victimization. Interestingly, however, literature on occupational risk (Desmond 2007; Lois 2005) and voluntary risk taking (Lyng 1990, 2005; Mitchell 1983) is ripe with similar understandings. Indeed, groups that engage in dangerous behaviors and/or operate in perilous settings come to understand death, injury, and loss in remarkably similar ways. In his ethnographic study of how wildland firefighters come to understand risk and death on the fireline, for example, Desmond (2007: 233) found that the crewmembers in his sample perceived “all dead firefighters, in one way or another, [as] incompetent firefighters [that were] ultimately responsible for their own burns”. There was a reason for this: “If they did not believe that fire was controllable, that harm was preventable, that

the dead were ineffectual, then crewmembers found themselves staring into an abyss of disorder” (Desmond 2007: 262).

For the firefighters in Desmond’s (2007) study, the interpretation of risk and death in this way was primarily cultivated by organizational forces, i.e., through indoctrination into the U.S. Forrest Service. He notes that, “By framing the death of a firefighter as the result of that firefighter’s individual mistakes, an approach that diverts responsibility from the organization and places it squarely on the shoulders of the dead themselves, the Forrest Service makes death seem palatable, fire manageable, and firefighters invincible” (Desmond 2007: 263). In Lawrence Heights, no such organization exists to shape residents’ understanding of risk, injury, and death in their community. Streetwise young have created their own framework out of the basic need for some semblance of control, be it real or perceived, over one’s fate and social world.

Similarly, in her study of how mountain rescue workers deal with failure, risk, and death, Lois (2005) notes that crewmembers often denied responsibility for failed rescue missions by blaming the victims and labeling them incompetent. Excerpts from crewmembers illustrate this point succinctly: “If they’re dead, they might have done something stupid to get there; that’s not our fault” and “It’s just easier to rationalize it when [you know that] he was doing something where he knew the risks” (Lois 2005: 145).

Lois (2005: 145) correctly posits that these rationalizations not only allowed crewmembers to dodge guilt, but sidestep vulnerability as well: “The victim’s stupidity was the cause of death, and rescuers, who considered themselves much smarter, could avoid such a fate”. Similar to streetwise young men in Lawrence Heights, “...rescuers were able to temper their feelings of [...] vulnerability, which, in turn, helped them to maintain a positive self-image as well as to maintain the illusion of control, to reassure themselves about their own ability [...]” (Lois 2005: 145).

Lyng's (1990) concept of "edgework" is also relevant for understanding how individuals who engage in risky behavior make sense of the death, injury, and loss of others engaged in similar behavior. He states that:

Activities that can be subsumed under the edgework concept have one central feature in common: they all involve a clearly observable threat to one's physical or mental well-being or one's sense of an ordered existence. The archetypical edgework experience is one in which the individual's failure to meet the challenge at hand will result in death or, at the very least, debilitating injury. This type of edgework is best illustrated by such dangerous sports as skydiving, hang gliding, rock climbing, motorcycle racing/car racing, and downhill ski racing or by such dangerous occupations as firefighting, test piloting, combat soldiering, movie stunt work, and police work. The threat of death or injury is ever-present in such activities, although participants often claim that only those "who don't know what they're doing" are at risk (Lyng 1990: 857).

The common feature in all of the activities that Lyng (1990; 2005) and others describe is that they are, at their core, *voluntary*. Individuals choose to become wildland firefighters, mountain rescue workers, soldiers, and police officers; they choose to engage in rock climbing, skydiving, and hand gliding. In Lawrence Heights, the random and ever-looming threat of gun violence, which poses a serious "... threat to one's physical or mental well-being or one's sense of ordered existence" (Lyng 1990: 857), is not voluntarily undertaken at all.

Indeed, young black men in Lawrence Heights are subjected to a form of *involuntary* edgework every time they step out into the neighbourhood – a form of risk taking that is embedded into the very fabric of daily life in the place that they call home. Yet, what is most striking is that irrespective of the voluntary or involuntary nature of risk taking, individuals exposed to overwhelming (and seemingly uncontrollable) risk cope with death and loss in remarkably similar ways – emphasizing the incompetence of the injured or deceased, thereby shifting responsibility onto the "victim" while downplaying the dangers and uncertainties inherent in their environment.

The 'on point - slipping' framework, however, served another function in the lives of streetwise young men in Lawrence Heights. It allowed them to reframe victimization in ways that made it

more compatible with the hyper-masculine norms that governed their daily lives in the inner-city. Scholars have documented that term “victim” is often associated with femininity and stigmatised meanings of vulnerability, uncertainty, weakness, powerlessness, and loss (Javaid 2016; Newburn and Stanko 1994; Rock 2002). These characteristics clash heavily with masculine ideals, such as stoicism, courage, invulnerability, and control (Ricciardelli et al. 2015: 3) – a point that may be particularly true for “...Black males in urban contexts [who] are socialized to the code of the street [...] and expected to present a persona of toughness to be respected” (Smith and Patton 2016: 218).

Cases of violent victimization in Lawrence Heights, therefore, “...strike at the heart of stereotypical ‘hegemonic masculinity’ (Connell 1987) in which men are in control [and] are invulnerable...” (Newburn and Stanko 1994: 161). And in disadvantaged communities, “where other avenues for masculinity construction are less available” (Cobbina et al. 2008: 677, see also Anderson 1999; Bourgois 1995, 1996), the effects of victimization can be exaggerated, leaving young men with a greater sense of loss of self.

In light of this, streetwise young men actively avoided using “victim” and “victimization” to describe the experiences of friends and family that had been shot or killed in the neighbourhood. Given the stigmatized and gendered meanings associated with these terms, most young men were, understandably, not eager to build an identity around them (Rock 2002). Thus, in their stead, streetwise residents used the concepts of ‘on point’ and ‘slipping’. The former, celebrating traditional male attributes of composure, control, shrewdness, and hypervigilance (the standard position that all streetwise young men are expected to exist in and operate from). The latter, moderating stereotypically feminine traits, such as vulnerability and powerlessness (re-framing tragic experiences as momentary deviations that should not have occurred).

As a result, when a streetwise young man is shot in the neighbourhood, much of the stigma typically associated with victimization does not engulf him, as the event does not come to define him as a man or a person. It is understood by both the victim and his streetwise peers as a temporary regression from a position to which he will eventually return – that of being ‘on point’. Indeed, 26-year-old Jocelyn, the girlfriend of one of the young men I spent time with, made this clear to me as we hung out and discussed the Amaranth shooting. She said:

After something like that happens, these guys are more on point than they were before. This was 5-6 years ago now, so maybe they’re in a different mentality, but if they were still in Lawrence Heights, those guys would have a gun in their pants as soon as they stepped out their house. You know why? “It happened to me once, it ain’t ever gonna happen to me again”. You’re not gonna catch them slipping. That’s what they say, “You’re not gonna catch us slipping”. They’ve been there, they’ve been hurt, and it hasn’t happened again, you know what I mean.

By reframing victimization in this way, streetwise young men are able to transition from being ‘on point’ to ‘slipping’ and back again, while evading much of the stigma associated with being a ‘male victim’.

CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the limited literature on male victims of violent assault by examining how streetwise residents in a social housing project plagued by gun violence have deployed an alternative framework for understanding the victimization experiences of friends, family members, and acquaintances in their neighbourhood. Findings suggest that this delicate framework, epitomized by the terms ‘on point’ and ‘slipping’, not only served to mitigate feelings of vulnerability, allowing streetwise young men to uphold traditional notions of masculinity, but also facilitated discussion of these traumatic events. It allowed them, in short, to make sense of and cope with suffering and loss in language that did not disrupt their careful construction of danger, vulnerability, and masculinity in this space. The ‘on point - slipping’ framework permitted

streetwise young men to discuss victimization without discussing victimization – to dissect the victimization experiences of others without exposing their own vulnerability in the process.

The long- and short-term effects of interpreting victimization in this way are unclear. Goodey (1997: 401), in examining the relationship between masculinity, crime, and victimization, for example, warns about the “emotional illiteracy” of young men, “which damages them as individuals, as a group, and as part of society”. He argues that, “It triggers a form of masculine bravado or fearlessness which can, in turn, display itself as aggression against the self (the denial of one’s own vulnerability),” amongst other things (Goodey 1997: 401). Whether streetwise young men are causing themselves harm by interpreting victimization in this way or, alternatively, are preserving their own psychological well-being by assuaging an otherwise intolerable social reality is beyond the scope of this analysis. It is, however, an important avenue for future research, as the impact of continuous exposure to violence and victimization in the inner-city has serious implications for a host of physical and mental health outcomes (Karandinos et al. 2014; Rich and Grey 2005; Smith and Patton 2016).

Perhaps the most surprising outcome of this study was that the literature most pertinent for the analysis was not grounded in criminological research on victimization, but in sociological work on voluntary risk-taking and edgework. This, in part, is due to the fact that streetwise young men in Lawrence Heights treat the threat of victimization, and thus victimization itself, as a social artefact – an inherent and expected reality of daily life in a dangerous, inner-city neighbourhood plagued by gun violence. Indeed, for the streetwise young men I spent time with, the question was never “if” gun violence and victimization would occur, but “when”. Consequently, their interpretations of death, injury, and loss were more aligned with professional and voluntary risk-takers (e.g., firefighters, soldiers, mountain rescue workers, skydivers, racecar drivers, etc.) –

collectives of individuals who are acutely aware of the intrinsic dangers of their occupation and/or environment. Criminology would be well-served to not only expand its gamut to account for the various ways in which victimization is collectively (re)constructed, but to do so with a particular focus on context – in this case, against the backdrop of urban poverty and the ever-looming threat of gun violence.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

[FIELDNOTE: JULY 2014]

I received a text message from Steve at around 6:30am, informing me that there was a shooting in Lawrence Heights in the early hours of the morning. He didn't have many details, but noted that there were three victims. The night before, I made a conscious decision to spend two days out of the field, as I was battling my second chest-cold of the summer – fever, phlegm, aches and pains. When I woke up from a coughing fit at around 7:30am, I noticed the text message. I got out of bed, got dressed, and let Steve know that I was on the way and would meet him at the Lawrence Square Mall. As I was getting dressed, I turned on the local news station, CP24, to see if the media had picked up on anything yet. They were running a “Breaking News” story, as they often do after a shooting, describing the crime and panning over the crime scene. The live news feed showed the front of a Toronto Community Housing building, clearly (to me) in Lawrence Heights, with a gathering of residents, a bloody porch, and dozens of yellow police markers numbering the spent shell casings. I have seen the aftermath of shootings in Lawrence Heights. I have seen young black men from the community on the pavement, in body bags, limbs sticking out because rigor mortis had set in. But there was something about this particular scene – the blood on the porch, the lack of bodies, the lack of details, and the uncertainty around who the victims were – that gave me a sudden bout of anxiety. My stomach started churning, my breathing deepened, I immediately got on the phone to call Jocelyn, hoping (selfishly) that she would confirm that I didn't know any of the victims personally, as I had for the last two shootings. Of course, she didn't pick up. This just added to my anxiety. “What if Monk got hit? What if it was GG or Jay or Calvin?” I stopped thinking and just collected my stuff – black notebook, pen, tape recorder, car keys – and hopped into the car. I arrived at the local mall and Steve was already waiting for me out front.

He did not have any further details about the shooting, but suggested that we walk from the mall into the neighbourhood. This turned out to be a good idea because Flemington Road and Varna Drive were both blocked-off with police tape and cruisers. We cut through the parking lot of the mall and entered Lawrence Heights via a set of concrete steps. There was police tape everywhere, but we managed to make our way through.

There were a lot of residents out and about, even young black men, walking to and from the scene, chatting in small groups by the picnic benches and under the shade of trees. I always find that in the 24-hour period after a shooting, the neighbourhood is buzzing with activity – more so than usual. People are outside, connecting, working those social networks, setting up emergency support (food, child care, safe spaces) for those most directly affected by the violence. I've heard from multiple residents that

they feel safest in their neighbourhood in the hours immediately after a shooting. It gives them a “free pass,” of sorts, to roam around the area and reconnect with others because the threat of another shooting is extremely low – “nobody’s stupid enough to try another drive-by with that much police and media around”. Ironically, it’s out of the chaos, death, and suffering, post-shooting, that residents get to experience some sense of “normalcy” – to experience what it would be like to live in a regular neighbourhood, to be able to walk around freely without fear and without the threat of being victimized. There is something beautiful and therapeutic in that, despite being rooted in something so terrible. But it doesn’t take long for the fear and anxiety set in again and for things to return to how they once were – back to “normal”.

The impact of concentrated poverty on the lives of inner-city residents is well-documented in the US literature. Indeed, urban ethnographers have been committed to studying urban poverty, ghettoization, and its effects for nearly a century (see Wirth 1928, Drake and Cayton 1945, Whyte 1969, Gans 1962, Clark 1965, Liebow 1967, Suttles 1968, Stack 1974), with the Chicago School continuing to inspire subsequent generations of scholars to “go get the seat of [their] pants dirty in real research”⁸⁹ (see Anderson 1976, Duneier 1999, Goffman 2014, Stuart 2016b, Venkatesh 2000). Unfortunately, this fervour for in-depth, ethnographic research on urban poverty has not been embraced by Canadian sociology and criminology in quite the same way. This is troubling in its own right, as we lack crucial knowledge about the lived experiences of vulnerable populations in Canada, including how they manage crime, violence, and disorder at the neighbourhood level. However, it is troubling on a broader level as well, as governments continue to implement drastic policies and practices that directly affect populations and places that we know

⁸⁹ This is an unpublished quote from the 1920s from Robert E. Park (cited in Prus 1996: 119). The full quotation reads: “You have been told to go grubbing in the library, thereby accumulating a mass of notes and a liberal coating of grime. You have been told to choose problems wherever you can find musty stacks of routine records based on trivial schedules prepared by tired bureaucrats and filled out by reluctant applicants for fussy do-gooders or indifferent clerks. This is called “getting your hands dirty in real research.” Those who counsel you are wise and honorable; the reasons they offer are of great value. But one more thing is needful: first hand observation. Go and sit in the lounges of the luxury hotels and on the doorsteps of flophouses; sit on the Gold Coast settees and the slum shakedown; sit in Orchestra Hall and in the Star and Garter burlesque. In short, gentlemen, go get the seat of your pants dirty in real research”.

little about – e.g., large-scale revitalization projects of social housing projects, aggressive police tactics aimed at disadvantaged neighbourhoods, and the implementation of the social-mix model to de-concentrate poverty (Bucerius, Thompson, and Berardi 2017; Urbanik, Thompson, and Bucerius 2017).

My ethnographic research in Lawrence Heights, a Toronto social housing development plagued by recurring gun violence, highlights the need for more granular analyses of urban poverty and crime in Canada – a topic that has been largely overlooked. In this thesis, I have outlined some of the real and negative consequences that come along with living in a space that is perceived, treated, and embodied as “ghetto”. For young black men in Lawrence Heights, the realities are stark – they are exposed to the threat of gun violence each and every time they step out of their homes and into their neighbourhood. Not surprisingly, this has greatly affected their quality of life, including their ability to perform the everyday activities that many of us take for granted. Yet, even against the backdrop of concentrated poverty, ghettoization, and unfettered gun violence, the young black men in my study found ways to press on, allowing some semblance of social and public life to continue. The findings in this dissertation, at their core, illustrate the mechanisms through which young black men adapt to this overbearing socio-spatial milieu, highlighting the power of individual and communal agency in overcoming seemingly insurmountable structural disadvantage.

In Chapter 3, I re-examined the concept of street knowledge, which serves as a crucial tool that vulnerable populations use to negotiate dangerous public spaces – to order the otherwise disordered. Street knowledge has been described as an interpretive framework that exists within the individual, allowing users to assess and respond to potential threats across a wide range of socio-spatial settings. Based on the experiences of young men in Lawrence Heights, I demonstrate

that street knowledge is actually more parochial than current scholarly works suggest. Bringing together discussions of risk, violence, and physical space, I illustrate the need to bind the scope of street knowledge, coining the term “neighbourhood wisdom” to account for its localized nature. Indeed, I articulate how this lens for mitigating risk is derived directly from “the local” – i.e., from the social and spatial particularities of a given locale. This has implications for its protective utility, which is largely confined to the particular geographic location from which it emerges, exists, and operates.

Chapter 4 examined how young black men in Lawrence Heights have come to lean on a set of street codes and corresponding techniques for safely navigating the built form of their neighbourhood. I not only illustrate how these mechanisms operate in action, but argue that they form an integral part of the street habitus of young black men in the community – allowing them to act and react, instinctively and often unconsciously, to potential threats in their local environment. Findings in this chapter suggest that despite how precarious their social milieu may seem, street codes (and the techniques for action that they engender) provide undercurrents of order and predictability essential for the functioning of everyday life. This chapter adds to the literature on street codes by showing they can exist as purely defensive entities, allowing users to manage the threats associated with urban ghetto living without having to rely on the use of violence.

In Chapter 5, I shifted the focus of analysis from risk-avoidance strategies to constructions of victimization. I analyse what happens when street knowledge and street codes fail to protect residents and someone is shot or killed within the boundaries of Lawrence Heights. Findings suggest that streetwise young men bend the victimization experiences of others in ways that either shift culpability and blame from perpetrator to victim or completely absolve the victim of any

responsibility for the incident. In doing this, streetwise young men draw boundaries (and thus create distance) between themselves and those who ‘slipped’ (applied to streetwise victims) and those who ‘didn’t know any better’ (applied to non-streetwise victims) – in the process, re-establishing order and predictability by emphasizing that victimization is manageable through perpetual hyper-vigilance (or what participants call being ‘on point’). This research adds to literature on victimization, and male victimization in particular, by unpacking how streetwise young men make sense of the victimization experiences of others.

In this final chapter, I re-emphasize the importance of embedding my findings in theoretical literature on the ghetto, which serves as the foundation necessary for understanding the adaptive strategies that young black men use to avoid and make sense of victimization. I then introduce some overarching themes that connect the substantive chapters presented in the dissertation. These are: 1) the need to situate crime and victimization in ‘the local’, and; 2) perceived police ineffectiveness and its consequences on Toronto’s urban poor. Finally, I articulate the limitations of my research study and provide guidelines for future areas of research.

THE GHETTO: INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL PROCESSES OF CONTROL

Literature on the ghetto acts as an important theoretical backdrop for understanding the lived experiences of Lawrence Heights residents. The work of Wacquant (2004, 2011), who conceptualizes the ghetto as an institution of closure and control, is particularly relevant for making sense of the actions and perceptions of young black men in Lawrence Heights. According to Wacquant (2004), the ghetto is best described as a “Janus-faced institution” or a “double-edged, socio-spatial formation” (2011). By this he means that, “For the dominant category, its rationale is to confine and control. For the [oppressed], however, it is an integrative and protective device insofar as it relieves its members from constant contact with the dominant and fosters consociation

and community building within the constricted sphere of intercourse it creates” (Wacquant 2004: 5). In short, “Enforced isolation from the outside leads to the intensification of social exchange and cultural sharing inside” (Wacquant 2004).

A number of *external* forces bring individuals together in Toronto social housing, predominantly on the basis of class – e.g., changes in the economy, immigration status, determinants of health, the availability of affordable housing, and growing levels of poverty, to name a few. Yet, once social housing becomes home, another set of *internal* processes and practices begin to materialize from within. Indeed, neighbourhood wisdom, the code of survival, and the ‘on point - slipping’ framework are examples of these internal processes and practices, which develop in response to the harsh realities of life in a poor and segregated neighbourhood. Each of these mechanisms serve to increase the safety and security of young black men, be it physically or emotionally, as they negotiate the threat of gun violence in their daily lives.

Yet, despite the increased safety, security, and predictability that these mechanisms might provide, this comes at a heavy price. Chapter 4 highlights this point succinctly: following the code of survival and relying on neighbourhood wisdom requires streetwise young men to relinquish at least some of their individual agency. Seemingly mundane decisions about where it is safe to walk or when it is safe to do so are not taken lightly or made impulsively; they are socially prescribed and grounded in the code of survival. Thus, while these internal processes and practices potentially mitigate one’s chances of being victimized, they also serve to restrict, control, and confine the decisions, actions, and behaviors of residents – operating as yet *another* structural layer or barrier that streetwise young men must negotiate on an ongoing basis.

NOTES ON SOME OVERARCHING THEMES

The substantive chapters presented in this dissertation stand alone as individual contributions to our theoretical and empirical understanding of street knowledge (chapter 3), street codes (chapter 4), and victimization narratives (chapter 5). Yet, some common threads run through the substantive chapters, connecting them in ways that provide a more holistic understanding of the lived experiences and actions of young black men in Lawrence Heights. In the following section, I address two of these: 1) the need to situate crime and victimization in ‘the local’, and; 2) perceived police ineffectiveness and its consequences on the urban poor.

Situating Crime and Victimization in ‘The Local’

All three chapters highlight the role of local context in shaping the actions, perceptions, and behaviours of Toronto social housing residents. Indeed, the streetwise young men in my study were hypersensitive to the realities of their socio-spatial milieu. They had a strong sense of what ‘the local’ looked and felt like. This allowed them to confidently identify and respond to situations that proved to be out of the ordinary, while avoiding behaviour that might reasonably lead to their victimization.

This is most apparent in Chapter 3, where I introduce the concept of ‘neighbourhood wisdom’ – a locally-oriented, place-based form of street knowledge. I demonstrate that this version of street knowledge is intimately related to *local* understandings about crime, violence, and victimization. In Lawrence Heights, many residents were aware of the nature of gun violence in their community – the who, what, where, when, why, and how. This knowledge of who was a target (young black men), what was a threat (suspicious-looking vehicles), where shootings were likely to take place (historical hotspots and points of vulnerability), when they were likely to happen (nighttime and in the summer months), why they happened (neighbourhood beefs), and how they occurred

(through drive-by shootings) were integral components of residents' neighbourhood wisdom. This local knowledge, in other words, played a pivotal role in their ability to interpret and respond to threats in their immediate environment – allowing them to decipher safe from dangerous, harmless from hostile, at a moment's notice. Indeed, the very concept of neighbourhood wisdom is defined by this focus on the local – i.e., it will take on different forms in different settings, depending on the realities of danger and risk found there and the sorts of local knowledge available to individuals.

The importance of the local for understanding crime, victimization, and response strategies is also evident in Chapter 4. The code of survival, like neighbourhood wisdom, is grounded in parochial definitions of danger and risk, as well as a localized understanding of physical space. Indeed, young men in my sample often commented that those most likely to be shot and killed in the neighbourhood were either “not from the area” or “not living in the area that long” – suggesting that the victims lacked competence in negotiating the physical features of Lawrence Heights.

Chapter 5 also brings forth the importance of the local in understanding how young men make sense of the victimization experiences of others in their neighbourhood. The rejection of the victim label and its replacement with the ‘on point - slipping’ framework is directly related to the context in which these young men exist and operate – one where they possess little control over their safety and security, and where being a ‘victim’ clashes heavily with the hyper-masculine norms and expectations that come along with living in a rugged and urban housing project.

The Ineffectual State and its Impact on the Urban Poor

Concentrated poverty and disadvantage have real and long-lasting effects on individuals and communities. The residents I spent time with were living examples of this common trope. Many of them were energized, involved in the community and active in trying to make it a better place.

Others were motivated by the prospect of moving up and out, leaving Lawrence Heights behind at the first available opportunity. Others, still, retreated into the recesses of their homes, avoiding interaction with the people and places of Lawrence Heights. Yet, regardless of one's level of involvement in or reclusion from community life, all residents shared the immediacy of their situation – i.e., that Lawrence Heights was susceptible to gun violence at levels above and beyond what living in the city had to offer.

Gun violence in Lawrence Heights is problematic precisely because it is systemic and unsystematic. It is the result of inter-neighbourhood conflicts that have been raging between Lawrence Heights and other social housing projects for years, even decades, surfacing spontaneously and with lethal impact. These 'beefs', as residents call them, thrive off of the death of individuals and the suffering of communities. Like any feud, they wax and wane, intensifying through acts of retaliation and cooling off in periods of inaction. Yet, the persistence of these neighbourhood beefs, and the violence that characterises them, cannot be simply attributed to individual and communal needs for retribution. These beefs persist and flourish, in large part, because residents of Toronto social housing do not feel adequately protected by the state – neither by the police, who have been unable to thwart the gun violence, nor the courts, who have failed to prosecute seemingly open-and-shut cases. Thus, for some (and it only takes a handful of individuals to perpetuate this type of violence and to implicate entire communities), retaliation and street justice become the primary mechanisms for conflict resolution.

At their very core, neighbourhood wisdom, the code of survival, and the 'on point - slipping' framework are adaptations to this lived reality. In an environment where the state has been unable to protect its citizens from lethal violence, some young black men have taken this responsibility

upon themselves – brokering their own safety and self-preservation, both physical and emotional, in response to the dangers and peculiarities of their extant milieu.

LIMITATIONS

As with all studies, there are some important limitations to my research, which must be addressed. First, is the issue of generalizability. This is something that all qualitative researchers, including ethnographers, must face (Small 2009). This is less of a ‘limitation’ as it is an internal characteristic of qualitative research in general, so I will only touch on it briefly. Ethnographic inquiry calls for long-term commitment to a particular group, culture, and/or place. It trades the generalizability of findings, achieved through representative sampling, for in-depth knowledge on a particular subject, which can serve as the foundation for theory building. I spent nearly 5 years conducting ethnographic research in Lawrence Heights. I formally interviewed 75 people and informally interviewed hundreds more. However, my data are grounded in the experiences of residents and stakeholders in *one* particular housing project in *one* Canadian city.

As such, the findings presented herein cannot provide a universal account of the effects of gun violence on social housing residents. Moreover, I cannot claim, with any scientific certainty, that the adaptation strategies of young black men in Lawrence Heights exist in other social housing developments or operate in a similar fashion. Yet, my intuition, based on extensive research with disadvantaged populations, leads me to believe that localized versions of neighbourhood wisdom, the code of survival, and the ‘on point - slipping’ framework do exist outside of the boundaries of Lawrence Heights. Ultimately, however, this is a question that begs future investigation.

There is another issue worth mentioning. While I collected data on the impact of gun violence on various groups in the community (e.g., women, children, seniors, stakeholders), this study is predominantly focused on the experiences of one particular group of residents – young black men. This was a conscious decision that I made in the field, after recognizing that this group was the exclusive target of gun violence and most directly affected by its consequences. However, as the substantive chapters illustrate, my analyses are supplemented by data from others, including the partners and children of these young men, as well as city councillors, police officers, and community workers.

For a variety of reasons, I focused my analysis on those being shot and killed as opposed to those doing the shooting and killing, with a firm understanding that, in some cases, there was an overlap between these two groups. Indeed, some young men in my sample were both victims and perpetrators of gun violence. However, I made a conscious decision, shortly after entering the field, that I would not collect data on the involvement of young men in my sample in violent behaviour in other neighbourhoods. A large part of this decision was based on legal considerations. As a Canadian researcher, my data are not entirely protected and could be subpoenaed at any time. This potentiality pushed me away from collecting incriminating evidence on the young men in my sample, as I could not guarantee their safety, from a legal standpoint. Interestingly, the young men found my lack of interest in their criminal endeavours intriguing, with some admitting that it was one of the reasons why they opened up to me so quickly. This actually encouraged me to continue studying gun violence from the perspective of those being targeted and victimized, as opposed to those doing the shooting and killing. From an academic standpoint, more knowledge is needed on victims of violent crime, as criminology continues to be heavily biased towards studying offenders – a point that is particularly true in the study of young

men in disadvantaged settings. Other limitations of my research, particularly those related to methodology, are outlined in Chapter 2.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The findings of this research demand further investigation into the role of street knowledge, street codes, and alternative constructions of victimization in the lives of individuals and groups residing in disadvantaged communities. In this subsection, I outline a few avenues for future research that may contribute to our sociological understanding of urban poverty, violence, and victimization.

In Chapter 3, I introduced the concept of ‘neighbourhood wisdom’, a localized form of street knowledge that young men use to mitigate the risk of gun violence within the boundaries of Lawrence Heights. As noted in the conclusion of Chapter 3, I encourage future scholars (particularly international scholars) to identify and empirically test the protective value of neighbourhood wisdom in other localities, moving beyond the North American ghetto to the favelas of Brazil, the shantytowns of Argentina, the slums of India, and the banlieues of France. Whether neighbourhood wisdom exists in other localities, and the form it takes in those spaces, is ultimately an empirical question that demands further investigation.

Sociologists might also be interested in studying whether this place-based framework for assessing and responding to risk actually exists in non-neighbourhood settings – e.g., among inmates in a particular prison, police officers in a bounded precinct, rescue workers on a specific mountain range, firefighters in a given catchment area, or bullied children in a particular school. My intuition is that the presence of ongoing risk and vulnerability within a well-delineated area will likely spawn locally oriented interpretations and responses, tailored to the unique features of that space and honed to increase safety within it.

In Chapter 4, I introduced the ‘code of survival’, a purely *defensive* street code that vulnerable young men in Lawrence Heights use to safely navigate the physical contours of their neighbourhood. It encompasses a set of general rules and corresponding techniques for interacting with the built form of Lawrence Heights. Unlike neighbourhood wisdom, which exists at the individual level, the code of survival is shared, socially, through informal conversations and observation of other neighbourhood youth. I implore scholars, particularly urban ethnographers, to be receptive to the possibility that the code of survival exists in other communities across North America and abroad – invariably distinct in its form, depending on the particularities of the locality. Identifying the code of survival elsewhere, however, requires that we overcome two significant challenges.

First, researchers must be willing to differentiate between the code of survival and Anderson’s (1999) code of the street – the former purely defensive, the latter hinging on the use (or credible threat) of violence. I realize this is not an easy task, as Anderson’s code of the street has been largely accepted as the preeminent – if not the *only* – street code governing daily life in the inner city for the last 20-years. Hopefully, Chapter 4 of this dissertation was compelling enough to encourage future scholars to look more closely at: a) the rules and techniques that vulnerable individuals adopt to negotiate daily life; b) how those ruses and schemes are performed (i.e., offensively or defensively), and; c) for what end (i.e., social status or safety).⁹⁰

Second, and related to the point above, is that identifying the code of survival in other localities necessitates scholars shifting their sociological gaze from criminals to victims – from gang

⁹⁰ I am not suggesting that Anderson’s code of the street does not exist, but that inner city residents rely on more than just the use of violence (or its credible threat) to negotiate the dangers of daily life. I am arguing that multiple street codes exist and operate in the inner city, with residents selectively drawing on them to make it through daily life unscathed.

members, drug dealers, extortionists, and con artists, to those who are gravely affected by their actions. I recognize that for crime ethnographers, in particular, this may be an unpopular request, as we have historically been more fascinated by criminal offenders than victims. However, shifting our attention to those *affected* by crime provides us with new insights into important theoretical constructs and even into criminality itself. Indeed, in Lawrence Heights, the vast majority of those relying on the code of survival were not criminally involved at all, but lived in a community affected by the criminal activities of a few. Being sensitive to these nuances is necessary for uncovering the various rules and techniques that individuals and groups rely on to stay safe in the places and spaces they call home.

In Chapter 5, I examined how streetwise young men make sense of the victimization experiences of others – be it their streetwise peers or ‘innocent’ individuals in their neighbourhood. Although I searched extensively through the criminological literature on victimization, I found little to help frame how these young men came to understand the recurring violence and victimization they experienced vicariously. Ultimately, I turned to literature on occupational risk, which explores how groups engaged in dangerous professions (e.g., soldiering, policing, firefighting, and search and rescue, to name a few) come to understand death, injury, and loss – be it their own or that of their colleagues. My chapter outlining the ‘on point – slipping framework’, therefore, is an example of the value of looking beyond the criminological literature for answers, even on topics that are entirely criminological. Moving forward, drawing stronger connections between criminology, sociology, and psychology can help us round-out studies of victims and offenders.

Moreover, future research should more directly tackle how victimization is socially constructed, not only by victims themselves, but by the host of individuals and institutions that surround them

(e.g., police, courts, family, friends, community, agencies, and the media). Indeed, I was surprised by the dearth of literature on how victims, and those around them, conceptualize victimization, make sense of the victimization experience, and come to terms (or not) with the stigma that often accompanies it. These questions beg further investigation.

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APPENDIX A: INTRODUCTION & CONSENT

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY

Introduction and Consent Form for Interviews

Gangs & Crime: Narratives Driving Revitalization in Toronto's Lawrence Heights Community	
Investigator: Luca Berardi, Sociology	Supervisor: Sandra Bucerius, Sociology
Address: HM Tory Building, University of Alberta Edmonton, Alberta, T6G 2H4	Address: HM Tory Building, University of Alberta Edmonton, Alberta, T6G 2H4
Email:	Email:
Phone:	Phone:

Hello, my name is Luca. I'm a researcher from the University of Alberta and I'm doing a study on the revitalization of Lawrence Heights. The findings of this study will be used in support of my thesis, which is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. The purpose of the study is to gain a greater understanding of the revitalization and how local residents and other stakeholders (like police, local politicians, gang members, business owners, Toronto Community Housing, and neighboring areas) feel about it. I hope that the information collected from this study will help us better understand how decisions about revitalization are made and how they impact residents and communities. I believe that you may have some important knowledge about the topic and I'd love to hear about your experiences and perceptions.

First of all, I want to thank you for talking to me. If you agree to participate, we will conduct an open-ended interview where I ask you general questions and you tell me as much or as little about the topic as you like. The interview may last anywhere from 20 minutes to a couple of hours, depending on how much you have to say and how quickly we get through it. Please do not feel rushed or pressured to answer the questions. I have lots of time and I will sit and talk to you for as long as you'd like. For your participation in the interview, I will offer you \$10, which you are welcome to collect or refuse at your own discretion.

Before you decide about participation in my study, I want to tell you some very important points.

- 1) Your participation in this interview today is **completely voluntary**. You don't have to participate if you don't want to and you can stop the interview at any time without penalty. If you don't want to participate in the interview or want to stop at any time, there is no penalty to the person that may have informed you about the study, so I don't want you to feel pressured to participate because of that. Also, you can refuse to answer certain questions that you don't want to answer. You can stop the interview at any time to ask me questions, to take a washroom or drink break, or for any other reason. My goal is to have the interview feel more like a natural conversation rather than a formal discussion.
- 2) Even if you agree to be in the study today but change your mind later on, you can withdraw your information from my study. Of course, if I've already published some of my findings, I cannot withdraw that information. If I haven't published anything, you can call or email me

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at any time and I will delete your interview and not use it in my thesis research. My contact information will be provided on a separate sheet.

- 3) The information that you give me will be kept **completely confidential** and will be handled in compliance to the standards set out by the University of Alberta.
 - a. Your name will not be put on any of the material that I collect. Instead, I will give you a code name, or pseudonym, that only I will know. This way, nobody will ever be able to tell who you are except me.
 - b. If I decide to publish anything from our interview today, or use the information in a presentation, only your code name will appear. In other words, even if I know (or you tell me) your real name, I will never use it in anything that I publish or present.
 - c. The information that you provide is completely confidential. I will not give this information to other people like the police or the courts. I will be the only person who has access to your information.
 - d. Data will be kept in a secure location for a minimum of 5 years following the completion of the research project. When appropriate, the information will be destroyed in a way that ensures privacy and confidentiality.
- 4) In a minute, I'm going to ask you if I can tape-record the interview. If you agree, the information that is collected on tape will be written down after the interview is over and then the tape will be erased. The purpose of tape recording the interview is to make the process go a bit faster because I won't have to physically write down your answers. It will also help me record exactly what you say and how you say it, word for word. If we tape record this interview, to protect your privacy, I will ask you not to say your name while you are being recorded. Even if you don't want to be tape-recorded, I still want to interview you.
- 5) I must inform you that I have to contact the police if you tell me about a plan that you have to cause serious harm to yourself or to somebody else. So don't tell me about any crimes that you plan to do in the future. I don't want to know. Besides these instances, I will never talk to the police or anybody else about what you tell me unless the courts force me to. That is my promise.

Do you have any questions about what I've said?

Now, I'd like to keep a record that we talked about the research process and that you agree to participate in it. I will circle 'yes' or 'no' for the following questions and then sign my own name on this document. I won't write down your name or ask you to sign anything.

Do you understand that you have been asked to be in a research study?	Yes	No
Have you read and received a copy of the attached Information Sheet?	Yes	No
Do you understand the benefits and risks involved in taking part in this research study?	Yes	No
Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study?	Yes	No
Do you understand that you are free to refuse to participate, or to withdraw from the study at any time, without consequence, and that your information will be withdrawn at your request?	Yes	No
Has the issue of confidentiality been explained to you? Do you understand who will have access to your information?	Yes	No
Do you agree to participate in the interview today?	Yes	No
May I tape-record the interview?	Yes	No

I, Luca Berardi, have read the participant this form, offered him/her the opportunity to ask questions, and have answered any questions that he/she has asked.

Dated this _____ day of _____ 20_____.

Signed: _____.

Thanks for agreeing to participate in my study. Now, I'll give you an information sheet about the things we just talked about. As you can see, it describes how your participation in the study is completely voluntary and that I will keep all of the information I collect completely confidential. At the top of the page, you will see my contact information. If you have any questions about this study, please contact me at any time.

Let's begin today's interview.

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROMPTS

SELECTED INTERVIEW PROMPTS FOR RESIDENTS OF LAWRENCE HEIGHTS

- Are you involved in the community? In what ways? Why do you get involved?
- When did you move into / out of LH?
- Thinking back, what were your first impressions of LH? Has anything changed in the community since then?
- What are some of the biggest strengths of the LH community?
- What are some of the biggest challenges for people living in LH? What about for young people, in particular?
- Does the physical layout of LH have any impact on your daily life?
- In your opinion, is LH a ghetto? Why or why not?
- How do you feel about the revitalization of LH?
- How did the LH community initially react to the idea of revitalization?
- What do you see as some potential benefits of the revitalization of LH?
- What are some of your fears or concerns about the revitalization?
- Is your community safe? Why or why not?
- What does violence look like in LH? What form does it take?
- What do you think are some of the causes of violence in LH?
 - Where does the violence in LH come from / what is it a response to?
- What impact does violence have on the community?
 - What does the community feel like after a shooting?
- What impact does gun violence have on young people?
 - How does violence impact their day-to-day lives?
 - How do they cope, emotionally and psychologically?
- Does gun violence have an impact on your daily life?
- Do you think that the revitalization will have an impact on safety and security in LH?
- Historically, what's the relationship been like between the police and the community?
 - Has that relationship changed over time? How? Why?
- Do you trust the police? Why or why not?
 - Do you feel any differently about community police officers, TPS officers in general, and TAVIS?

SELECTED INTERVIEW PROMPTS FOR POLICE OFFICERS

- Can you tell me a little bit about yourself? How did you get into policing?
 - How long have you been an officer? How long with your current division?
- Thinking back, what were your initial perceptions of LH and the people there?
 - Was the area different then than it is now? If so, how?
 - Have the types of crimes changed over the years? Has the level of crime changed?
- What are some of the biggest challenges for residents living in LH?
 - How much does poverty have an impact on the community and crime?
- What are some of the strengths of the LH community?
 - Is the LH community different than other communities in your division? If so, how?
- From a policing standpoint, what are some of the biggest challenges when policing LH?
 - What type of things do you deal with on a day-to-day as a police officer in LH?
 - Are there gangs in LH? What are they involved in?
- Does the *physical* layout of the community present you with any challenges?
- What can be done, from a policing standpoint, to try and reduce gun violence in LH?
 - Where does the gun violence come from?
- How engaged are the police with young men from LH?
 - Are there any challenges in dealing with young people from LH?
 - What sort of risks do young men in LH face, if any?
 - Does age/race/sex play a role in potential violent victimization?
 - What can be done to improve the relationship between young people and police?
- Have you heard of any ‘risky areas’ in LH that young men try to avoid or where they feel vulnerable?

SELECTED INTERVIEW PROMPTS FOR KEY STAKEHOLDERS

City Planners

- Can you tell me a little bit about yourself?
- From your perspective, what are some of the challenges of living in LH?
- What is revitalization and what are some of the principles it's based on?
- What is your role in the revitalization of LH and how did you first get involved?
- Why was LH chosen as a site for revitalization?
- When did discussions about revitalization in LH first begin?
 - Who started the discussions?
 - What were some of the reasons for revitalization? Did crime/violence play a role?
- How did the LH community initially react to the idea of revitalization?
 - Did the community's stance change over time?
- What are residents' main demands with respect to the physical design of the new neighborhood?
 - Have these been incorporated into the planning of the new neighborhood? Why or why not?
- How important has community-involvement been in the revitalization process? Why?
- How much do safety, crime prevention, and violence reduction play into the new revitalization plans?
 - What specific things can be done to reduce violence and improve safety in the community?
- Was there opposition to the revitalization from *outside* of the community?
 - Who opposed the revitalization and why?
 - Has this changed over time or is there still tension?
- Can you talk to me about the difference between 'mixed-income' and 'social-mix'?
 - How do you think both of those concepts will play out in LH?
 - Have you incorporated these themes into the planning and design of the new neighborhood? How?
- What's it been like working with both TCHC and residents?
 - Have there been conflicting demands with regards to the plans? How have you reconciled them?

Local Agency Staff (LHION, UNISON, Pathways to Education)

- What is LHION?? When was it created? Where did the idea come from? What is its function?
- What is the 'Residents First Initiative' and why is it so important?
- What is the *current* state of LHION (re: funding, staffing, etc.) and of your position?
 - Without your position, what are some of the challenges that LHION will face?
 - How will this impact residents and the community?

- In your opinion, how important are the services provided by the various agencies in the area?
- What is Pathways to Education? When was it created?
- What function does Pathways serve in LH?
- What are some of the major successes of Pathways in LH? Major failures or areas of improvement?
- What is the relationship like between the police and the community?
 - What is the relationship like between the police and local agencies and staff members?
- What are some of the things that Toronto police are doing well in LH?
- What are some of the things that you'd like to see police improve on in LH?