CONSIDERING THE PLACE OF STREETWORK

IN VIOLENCE INTERVENTIONS

THE VALUE OF STREETWORK

Violent crime in the U.S. currently sits near its lowest rate in decades after a 25-year decline. However, high levels of violence remain concentrated in certain neighborhoods of urban centers, particularly within poor minority communities. While the national homicide rate is about five per 100,000, the rate for young black men in the deadliest neighborhoods can reach 500 per 100,000.¹ Even within this high-risk demographic, gun violence is further concentrated among a very few people involved in street groups, such as gangs or loose neighborhood crews. It is an empirical fact that, in most U.S. cities, as much as 70 percent of homicide is connected to street groups comprising under one half of one percent of the population.²

This reality is unacceptable. It causes deep community trauma, leads to disproportionate criminal justice contact, and perpetuates a host of related harms. Practitioners around the country have devoted enormous energy to reducing group-related gun violence. Integral to this goal is the practice known as *streetwork*. Streetwork employs community outreach workers—known in different contexts as streetworkers, violence interrupters, or interventionists—to meet group members and other high-risk people where they spend time, build relationships with them, disrupt violent conflicts among them, support norms against violence and for peace, and connect them with community resources to help them change their lives.

Often men and women with their own difficult pasts and stories of personal transformation, streetworkers are uniquely positioned to reach high-risk people, many of whom lack connections to traditional institutions such as schools, employers, community centers, or social service agencies.

¹ John Klofas, e-mail message to author, 2017.

² See, e.g., Robin S. Engel, Marie S. Tillyer, and Nicholas Corsaro, "Reducing Gang Violence Using Focused Deterrence: Evaluating the Cincinnati Initiative to Reduce Violence (CIRV)," *Justice Quarterly* 30, no. 3 (2011): 403-439, http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/07418825.2011.619559

Streetworkers have credibility in the street and routinely make sacrifices to help their neighborhoods' most vulnerable residents. They possess inroads to group members that police and others in the community lack. They can help group members to make different immediate choices around violence and manage the difficult long-term transition out of the street life. This role can include challenging the toxic "street code," encouraging prosocial norms, easing access to services, building mentor relationships, and advocating on group members' behalf. Streetworkers can also serve as a conduit between group members and the other participants in a city's violence reduction partnership.

The work of the National Network for Safe Communities (NNSC), a nonprofit located at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York, helps cities coordinate strategic partnerships of law enforcement and community leaders to stop the most serious violence among the people at highest risk. The NNSC's work has routinely produced drastic reductions in homicides and shootings when city partners communicate directly with group members to warn them about the legal consequences of gun violence, give them an anti-violence message from the community, and offer them help.

Streetwork has been a vital component of the NNSC's approach since the beginning. As is well known, the original "Operation Ceasefire" in Boston was designed and implemented in partnership with a dedicated organization of streetworkers.³ Since then, streetwork has been a central element of the NNSC's Group Violence Intervention in many cities nationwide.

Essential to reducing group violence is that communities mobilize what the social science literature calls informal social control, the actions that uphold a community's collective norms and standards of conduct. The NNSC's approach aims to do this through the "community moral voice." People who have experienced the consequences of violence firsthand—such as survivors of violence, mothers of murdered children, and formerly incarcerated people—can speak with moral authority to group members, giving them a message that gun violence will not be tolerated and must stop. In fact, research says that such informal voices are more important than formal legal measures in discouraging violent crime—particularly in neighborhoods where trust in law enforcement is damaged.⁴

³ David M. Kennedy, *Don't Shoot: One Man, A Street Fellowship, and the End of Violence in Inner City America* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2011).

⁴ Robert J. Sampson, "Crime in Cities: The Effects of Formal and Informal Social Control" in *Crime and Justice*, vol. 8 of Communities and Crime (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986): 271-311; Robert J. Sampson and John J. Laub, "Crime and Deviance Over the Life Course: The Salience of Adult Social Bonds," American Sociological Review 55, no. 5 (1990): 609-627.

Streetwork, practiced well, marries the goal of strengthening a community's moral voice against violence with the imperative to offer help to its highest risk population. It also lends itself to concrete violence interventions, such as controlling rumors during moments of conflict, calming people down to defuse potential retaliation, and mentoring people at high risk of hurting someone or being hurt.

THE BACKGROUND OF STREETWORK

The practice of streetwork dates from the 19th century, when religious or philanthropic organizations in American inner cities relied on neighborhood workers to offer guidance to local gang members. Those early efforts directed their energies primarily at white ethnic youth, with a focus on connecting them to existing social structures and providing recreational activities.⁵

By the mid-20th century, accompanying demographic shifts and the rise of violent crime, the federal government and private foundations began to underwrite streetwork in major American cities like New York, Boston, Chicago, and Los Angeles. During this time, what scholars of streetwork sometimes call its "classical era," programs offered gang members counseling, employment, and education, and tried to prevent further delinquency among lower risk youth.⁶

Streetwork gained renewed interest in public policy circles during the 1990s, as the nation reached its apex of inner-city homicide. In the "modern era," as the field calls it, streetwork is sometimes part of an integrated, citywide approach to reducing violence. But more often it is a stand-alone intervention, in which streetworkers operate largely on their own in urban neighborhoods where violence is intensely concentrated. This newer process emphasizes "preventing retaliatory shootings, mediating ongoing conflicts, and continuing to follow up to keep the conflicts 'cool.'" Under this model, streetworkers aim to identify and engage with high-risk people to "change their behaviors" and promote positive social activity. This is the model best known to the public today, and the one that has seen the most vigorous public funding.

⁵ National Council on Crime and Delinquency, *Developing a Successful Street Outreach Program: Recommendations and Lessons Learned* (Oakland, CA: National Council on Crime and Delinquency, 2009), http://www.ci.richmond.ca.us/DocumentCenter/Home/View/8054.

⁶ NCCD, Developing a Successful Street Outreach Program.

⁷ Jeffrey A. Butts, Catarina G. Roman, Lindsay Bostwick, and Jeremy R. Porter, "Cure Violence: A Public Health Model to Reduce Gun Violence," *Annual Review of Public Health*, 36 (2015): 39-53, http://www.annualreviews.org/doi/pdf/10.1146/annurev-publhealth-031914-122509.

⁸ Butts et al, "Cure Violence."

THE RECORD OF IMPACT

According to a report from the National Council on Crime and Delinquency, streetwork has a "long and uneven history as a social intervention to address gang violence." The research record shows that streetwork interventions have produced some isolated successes. A large body of research also shows that this approach can have no impact or the perverse result of increasing violence. This is particularly true of its stand-alone incarnations.

Outcomes

A selection of implementations have shown strong program success. An evaluation of a streetwork program in Chicago, Illinois, that was active in 25 small geographic sites during the early 2000s showed "significant shifts in gang homicide patterns in most of these areas due to the program, including declines in gang involvement in homicide and retaliatory killings." "Safe Streets," a program using the same approach in several small program sites of Baltimore, Maryland, found that "All four intervention neighborhoods showed statistically significant reductions in nonfatal shootings after program implementation, and two neighborhoods showed statistically significant reductions in homicides." These results are promising.

A variety of other studies have "reported a negligible impact, no differential impact, led to a significant increase in gang delinquency, or had indeterminable results." Evaluations showing null or negligible effects include a study of the Roxbury Project in Boston. The group included in the intervention, which operated through the mid-1950s, "did not show improvements compared to the control group" on measures of gang delinquency. Similarly, a program in four boroughs of Chicago in the early 1960s

⁹ Claudia G. Shader and David G. Jones, *The City of Seattle Could Reduce Violent Crime and Victimization by Strengthening Its Approach to Street Outreach* (Seattle, WA: Office of City Auditor, 2015), https://www.seattle.gov/Documents/Departments/CityAuditor/auditreports/StreetOutreachFinalReport100615.

pdf; NCCD, Developing a Successful Street Outreach Program.

¹⁰ Wesley G. Skogan, et al, *Evaluation of Ceasefire-Chicago* (Chicago: Northwestern University, 2008), https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/227181.pdf.

¹¹ Daniel W. Webster, et al, "Effects of Baltimore's Safe Streets Program on gun violence: A replication of Chicago's CeaseFire Program," *Journal of Urban Health* 90, no. 1 (2013): 27-40,

http://www.rwjf.org/content/dam/web-assets/2012/01/evaluation-of-baltimore-s-safe-streets-program.

¹² NCCD, Developing a Successful Street Outreach Program.

¹³ NCCD, Developing a Successful Street Outreach Program.

showed no impact and found that "youths who said they were closest to their workers continued to be most often in trouble with the police." ¹⁴

Still other studies have shown increases in violence and delinquency among the treatment groups or groups immediately proximate to them. One of the best known streetwork programs, the "Little Village" project in Chicago, showed positive outcomes for gang-involved youth in the program, but increases in the neighborhood's overall levels of gang violence. The evaluation of a 1960s project in Los Angeles reported increases in delinquency, and these were "highest among participants who received the most services." An evaluation of a recent program in one New York City neighborhood "found that gun violence decreased in the program neighborhood while increasing in proximate comparison neighborhoods, although the size of the reduction itself was not statistically significant." An iteration of the same approach in Phoenix, Arizona, produced mixed evaluation results. While that "intervention was associated with an overall decrease in violent events" in the form of assaults, it "was actually associated with an increase in shootings" in the treatment area. Another evaluation of a stand-alone streetwork initiative in Pittsburgh found that the implementation did not reduce homicide, but produced an increase in aggravated and gun assaults in its target neighborhoods. The results "suggest that the program had no effect on homicides and other measures of violence; it may even have had a deleterious effect," according to the study.

Researchers submit a range of reasons for null and negative results. Working with gangs *as gangs*—that is, recognizing the group and convening them as part of the streetwork process—may actually reify the group identity. This can strengthen gang cohesion, attract new membership, and encourage violence and other serious crime—the exact opposite of the intended effect. In some cases, the program design is simply not relevant to the primary goal of reducing citywide violence. For example, program activities that emphasize job placement or remedial education, while important and sometimes even successful, may not have an impact on homicides and shootings. Another issue, and a definitional one in the case of stand-alone streetwork, is a lack of cooperation, and sometimes outright conflict, with other entities that share

¹⁴ Irving A. Spergel, *The Youth Gang Problem* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1995).

¹⁵ Irving A. Spergel and Susan F. Grossman, "The Little Village Project: A Community Approach to the Gang Problem." *Social Work* 42 (1997): 456-470.

¹⁶ NCCD, Developing a Successful Street Outreach Program.

¹⁷ Butts et al, "Cure Violence."

¹⁸ Butts et al, "Cure Violence."

¹⁹ Butts et al, "Cure Violence."

violence reduction goals. Many streetwork programs simply do not collaborate with other community organizations and social service providers, let alone law enforcement. While they may have understandable reasons for this stance, it undermines the interagency partnership that decades of research have now shown to be a hallmark of effective violence interventions.

Discussion

Taken together, the findings on streetwork are mixed and tend toward the discouraging. While certain interventions have shown violence reductions, many have shown no effect, promoted gang cohesion, or even increased homicides and nonfatal shootings. And indeed the evaluations that use the strongest research designs across time tend to show effects that harmful trend toward results. Furthermore, even where modern streetwork has been the most successful, it has been limited in scope and impact. By and large, the programs demonstrating positive effects have touched very small geographic areas and have not approached the citywide impact necessary to shift overall

CASE STUDY: OPERATION PEACEKEEPER STOCKTON, CALIFORNIA

Stockton, California, a city that is implementing the Group Violence Intervention, is a powerful example of how streetworkers and police can navigate the challenges of working together to produce public safety in practice. "Peacekeepers are out there on the streets, but a lot of the incidents that occur—we don't have all the information," says Keiland Henderson, a supervisor for Stockton's streetwork group, Operation Peacekeeper. "So having that partnership, of course, gives Peacekeepers an idea of the people we really need to work with." In other words, their relationship with the Stockton Police Department gives them more insight about the citizens who need the most help.

Henderson is forthright about the kinds of challenges the partnership has faced. "At one time, we used to go out with the police." Together, he says, they would walk a neighborhood after a homicide and offer care and services. However, this could arouse community suspicion about the nature of their relationship with law enforcement. "When we were doing that, it started connecting us with the police," says Henderson. "It was almost like we were trying to get information, which we were not." Recognizing that this compromised their capital with the community, the Peacekeepers ended that practice, and the police department has supported that decision.

Stockton Police Department shows similar thought and care about maintaining the safety and credibility of the agency and its streetwork partners. This allows them both to play their roles effectively. "We don't share information of a criminal nature. If we're dealing with a group member that we think just committed a shooting, we don't share information like that," says Scott Meadors, the Stockton Police captain who coordinates with the Peacekeepers. "And we do not expect, nor want, intelligence information

violence dynamics in a way that meets the needs of communities suffering from high rates of homicides and shootings.

However, we must not take the body of evidence on streetwork to mean that the approach is unimportant or should be discontinued—only that it is not being used in the ways that maximize its ability to reduce violence. Our national experience at the NNSC has shown that streetwork can have profound effects when cities situate it within broader, partnership-based violence reduction strategies.²⁰

THE IMPORTANCE OF PARTNERSHIP IN VIOLENCE PREVENTION

The most promising outcomes result when streetwork programs focus their efforts on the small networks of people at highest risk for violent victimization and offending—rather than on narrow geographic areas, such as the neighborhoods with high rates of violence. Where streetworkers and law enforcement support each other on

coming from Peacekeepers. Information that they have with their client and their conversations...need to be protected."

In Stockton, the city's Office of Violence Prevention (OVP), which houses the Peacekeepers, has helped put a protocol in place. "We're in constant communication," Meadors says. "When we have a shooting that occurs, no matter what time of day it is, the watch commander that's on duty is responsible for evaluating that shooting to see whether it is related to group violence, and then making the decision to call out our Peacekeepers."

When Henderson gets the call—from OVP or the police department—he dispatches Peacekeepers to the scene immediately. "We won't go behind the tape," he says, referring to the Peacekeepers agreement with police that they do not step into active crime scenes. Instead, the Peacekeepers assist at the scene and "offer our services, reach out to the family in the days following just to make sure that they're aware of the some of the resources they have, like victim-witness services." Sometimes Peacekeepers will even deliver food to families in need.

Apart from providing these services, the Peacekeepers' central priority is heading off further shootings. "So they'll respond immediately," Meadors says, "and they're separate from the law enforcement response, and they're there solely to start trying to deal with any potential victim retaliation."

Working in close partnership in this way not only improves emergency responses; it has also created crucial tactical possibilities. As part of the local Group Violence Intervention, the Peacekeepers collaborate with police on routine "shooting reviews" to track recent violence and prevent likely new violence—almost in real time. "The sharing of information is generally one direction—from us to them," Meadors explains. "All those conversations are geared to helping peacekeepers stay focused on the right

²⁰ National Network for Safe Communities, *Group Violence Intervention: An Implementation Guide*, (Washington, D.C.: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, Department of Justice, 2013).

this single focus, the synergy can be potent.

In Boston, for example, streetwork was one of the core responses to the peak of violence in the early 1990s. Boston's program was city-funded, professional, and had working relationships with social workers and the police department. However, it had nothing like the desired impact on homicides and nonfatal shootings. Not until Boston's streetworkers joined the city's "Operation Ceasefire" partnership did violence drop in the dramatic fashion that has since become legend—a 63 percent decline among the city's

men that are at risk, and the right groups." Carefully shared information from police to streetworkers has been vital to the city's goal of disrupting cycles of shooting while minimizing the use of arrest.

With this process in place, Stockton has established a high level of trust. "I think the biggest thing also is communication," says Henderson. "We say that often, but as busy as Captain Meadors is...he still, however, finds time to meet with us." And Meadors shows deep commitment to the department's relationship with the Peacekeepers, the conversations they share, and the communities they serve together: "Those conversations have to be protected," Meadors says, "and that's for the integrity of Peacekeepers, and it's for the protection of the clients as well."

youth.²¹ (And when the city abandoned "Operation Ceasefire" in 2000, violence spiked again, even while the streetworkers remained active.) Streetwork in Cincinnati, Ohio, followed a similar pattern. After launching a dedicated, but largely ineffective, stand-alone streetwork program, the city folded it into the focused partnership of its Group Violence Intervention (GVI) and saw group-involved homicide reductions of 41 percent.²²

Such partnerships are not always easy to develop and maintain. A primary obstacle is distrust. Streetwork programs can be wary of working with police, since the appearance of cooperation with the law can threaten streetworkers' credibility with the population they most intently want to protect and need access to. Furthermore, streetworkers often receive sensitive information from the people they work with and are careful not to compromise it. For police, building relationships with streetworkers requires that they collaborate with people whose pasts may include gang involvement and criminal activity; some may,

²¹ David M. Kennedy, "Whither streetwork? The place of outreach workers in community violence prevention," *Criminology & Public Policy* 10, no. 4 (2011): 1045-1051, https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/j.1745-9133.2011.00770.x.

²² Robin S. Engel, Marie S. Tillyer, and Nicholas Corsaro, "Reducing Gang Violence Using Focused Deterrence: Evaluating the Cincinnati Initiative to Reduce Violence," *Justice Quarterly* (2011).

at times, "relapse" and again commit street crime. This can contribute to tenuous bonds of trust. Working together requires compromise and a leap of faith on both sides. Cities have addressed these concerns by establishing clear understandings between streetworkers and police, in advance of their work together, about how and under what conditions they will collaborate, what information they will share, and how they will address the inevitable public concerns about their work together. Training on these protocols for both streetworkers and police helps immensely toward maintaining accountability and partnership.

This arrangement is typical of successful collaborations. Streetworkers and police establish boundaries they can both agree on. Streetworkers protect the names of the people they work with, and they do not help the police to build and solve cases. Police and streetworkers establish a process for responding to crime scenes and shooting victims, with police gaining priority access.

Some cities have developed special processes for sharing highly sensitive information. Streetworkers may alert police about what to look for when someone is in danger or when a particular conflict heats up. At times, they help people surrender to the police when there is a warrant for their arrest, since arrests on warrants can be especially dangerous for both police and arrestees. Police may also ask streetworkers to mediate and calm people down when intelligence shows that a shooting is likely.

There are many powerful examples nationally of partnerships between streetworkers and police. Stockton, California, as part of the city's GVI, has established a strong working relationship between streetworkers and police that includes collaborating on shooting reviews (see sidebar for more details). At times, Stockton's streetworkers go with police to deliver in-person messages to the people at highest risk for victimization. In cases where there has been a shooting, for example, streetworkers and police may work deliver "custom notifications," a process the NNSC has developed to warn high-risk people about the consequences of gun violence and offer community resources to support them and keep them safe.²³ Oakland, California, has used a similar process of collaboration as part of its GVI work, a strategy that has contributed to a 50 percent reduction in shootings and a 42 percent reduction in homicides citywide over the past five years.²⁴

https://www.eastbaytimes.com/2018/01/09/decline-in-oakland-violent-crime-sparks-hope/

²³ David M. Kennedy and Michael Friedrich, *Custom Notifications Individualized Communication in the Group Violence Intervention* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, Department of Justice, 2014).
²⁴ Harry Harris, "Violent crime in Oakland down 23 percent since 2012," *East Bay Times* (January 9, 2018),

Los Angeles, California, has funded an especially developed structure, the Gang Reduction and Youth Development (GRYD) initiative, which operates streetwork programs in 23 zones throughout the city. A collaboration between the mayor's office and the nonprofit Urban Peace Institute under the direction of Fernando Rejón, GRYD provides a rigorous, 12-week certification course to all streetwork organizations that contract with the city. This contributes to professionalizing the practice of streetwork in the city and creating a standard for what streetwork is and does. Crucially, it also helps set goals and expectations for how the Los Angeles Police Department and streetworkers will and will not work together. "We train intervention and LAPD on their mutually exclusive roles within the violence reduction strategy," says Rejón. "We ask intervention [streetworkers] to develop a 'professional understanding' with law enforcement that follows the standards of practice and conduct for intervention, such as 'never cross the yellow tape,' 'do not tell or provide incriminating information on individuals or groups." In particular, GYRD has developed what it calls the "triangle protocol" to guide responses to critical incidents, such as shootings that may be gang related and result in retaliation. A partnership between three entities streetwork programs, GRYD regional coordinators employed by the city, and the Los Angeles Police Department—the triangle protocol provides a framework for gathering information about conflicts, mediating between streetwork agencies, linking victims and families with services, brokering peace, and communicating with police about incidents.²⁵ A recent evaluation report suggests this structure is key to preventing retaliatory shootings.²⁶ Beyond this, partners in Los Angeles note that longstanding efforts at coordination between streetworkers and police, such as the Watts Gang Task Force, have helped to develop important spaces for dialogue and reconciliation between police and communities, healing deep rifts that had previously hindered cooperation.²⁷

In New York City, the Mayor's Office to Prevent Gun Violence, under the direction of Eric Cumberbatch, works in 17 police precincts to facilitate after-incident communication from the New York City Police Department to streetworkers. Streetworkers then use that information to answer questions within the

Reduction-and-Youth-Development-Program-Year-4-Evaluation-Report.pdf.

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²⁵ Meagan Cahill, et al., *Evaluation of the Los Angeles Gang Reduction and Youth Development: Program Year 4 Evaluation Report* (Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute, Justice Policy Center, 2015), https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/77956/2000622-Evaluation-of-the-Los-Angeles-Gang-

²⁶ P. Jeffrey Brantingham, et al., *GRYD Intervention Incident Response & Gang Crime: 2017 Evaluation Report*, (Los Angeles, CA: The City of Los Angeles Mayor's Office of Gang Reduction and Youth Development (GRYD) Research and Evaluation Team, 2017), http://juvenilejusticeresearch.com/sites/default/files/2017-06/GRYD%20IR%20and%20Gang%20Crime%20Report_2017_FINALv2_0.pdf.

²⁷ Nina Revoyr, "How Watts and the LAPD make peace," *Los Angeles Times* (June 6, 2015), http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-revoyr-lessons-from-watts-gang-task-force-20150607-story.html.

community and mediate to avoid further cycles of violence.²⁸ The NYPD's juvenile justice division also collaborates with streetworkers in several Brooklyn neighborhoods to build relationships with at-risk high school students, warn them about the legal risks that gang affiliations and threats invite (particularly those posted on social media), and link them with neighborhood resources. This approach gives youth the information they need to avoid unnecessary criminal justice contact and helps them to build stronger institutional connections.

STREETWORK AS A PART OF THE NNSC'S APPROACH

This NNSC's partnership-oriented approach can foster conditions that improve public safety, drive law enforcement reform that reduces harm to communities, build police legitimacy and, more broadly, build the legitimacy of the state. This is particularly important in the areas where streetworkers focus their efforts. One reason for the prevalence of shootings in such neighborhoods is that their residents do not trust the state to protect them and treat them justly when they find themselves in danger. This distrust owes as much to the toxic history of communities of color with police²⁹ as to recent high-profile incidents of police brutality.³⁰ It is legal cynicism in action.

The NNSC's national experience shows that when streetworkers and police collaborate, it improves violence reduction work. With the Group Violence Intervention in place, all partners involved shift their practice and work together toward a common goal. This allows both streetworkers and police to do the jobs to which they are best suited. Streetworkers operate in careful, good-faith engagement with police to reach the people and places that law enforcement cannot. Law enforcement demonstrates its strong intention to serve a fair and judicious role in the neighborhood, back the community up when violence is imminent, and keep the highest risk people safe while reducing the use of arrest and incarceration. This arrangement points away from a model of streetwork that is often ineffective and toward a model that is both tenable and more likely to work. Most important, it helps to build trust and make a city's most vulnerable communities stronger.

http://scholar.harvard.edu/files/mdesmond/files/american_sociological_review-2016-desmond-857-76.pdf.

²⁸ Ann Givens, "New York City Embraces a Gun Violence Outreach Program Left on Life Support in Chicago," *The Trace*(February 9, 2017), https://www.thetrace.org/2017/02/new-york-city-gun-violence-prevention-program-chicago/

²⁹ Elizabeth Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America* (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

³⁰ Matthew Desmond, Andrew V. Papachristos, and David S. Kirk, "Police Violence and Citizen Crime Reporting in the Black Community," *American Sociological Review* 81, no. 5 (2016): 857–876,

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