



# “We Carry Guns to Stay Safe”

## Perspectives on Guns and Gun Violence from Young Adults Living in Chicago’s West and South Sides

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Homicide is the leading cause of death for black boys and men ages 15 to 34 in Chicago (Jones et al. 2013). The number of shooting victims in Chicago—3,475 in 2017 alone—is staggering.<sup>1</sup> In 2017, Chicago tallied more homicides than New York and Los Angeles combined. The easy availability of guns in Chicago is understood to contribute to the city’s high levels of gun violence (City of Chicago 2017). From January 1 to July 20, 2018, Chicago police recovered more than 5,100 illegal guns.<sup>2</sup> Certain neighborhoods in Chicago have been plagued by gun violence for decades (Papachristos 2013). Chicago’s homicides and shootings are most prevalent in communities that are socially and physically isolated, have high rates of poverty and unemployment, and lack community resources.<sup>3</sup> In Chicago, these communities are concentrated on the West and South Sides.<sup>4</sup>

Violence affects everyone in these communities, but Chicago’s youth are often both the victims and the perpetrators of gun violence, exhibiting the same psychological trauma as children growing up in urban war zones (Garbarino, Kostelny, and Dubrow 1991). From 2008 to 2012, almost half of Chicago’s 2,389 homicide victims were younger than 25.<sup>5</sup> Researchers have long studied where people get firearms and what motivates people to carry them (Cook, Parker, and Pollack 2015; Cook et al. 2007; Harris 1993). To devise policies that reduce gun access and gun violence, policymakers require research on the factors that motivate young adults to acquire, to carry, and to use guns, along with what factors might deter them from doing so. Research that can shed light on these issues can inform how a wide group of stakeholders might partner for safer Chicago neighborhoods.

In response, the Urban Institute, in partnership with and with support from the Joyce Foundation, launched a survey of young adults residing in Chicago neighborhoods experiencing high rates of gun violence. We sought to interview young adults who were likely to have personal or indirect experiences with and knowledge of gun violence in their neighborhoods. The purpose of this research was to learn from young adults firsthand whether and why they decide to carry guns, how they acquire firearms, how they experience gun violence, and what they view as the best strategies to reduce gun carrying and promote safety in their communities. The following describes the key findings across these domains.

## About the Sample

Our purposive sampling strategy, detailed in box 1, resulted in the participation of 345 young adults. All the survey participants resided in four neighborhoods on Chicago's West and South Sides, which have had persistently high rates of gun violence. The young adults surveyed were between 18 and 26 years old at the time we spoke with them, with a median age of 22. The vast majority of participants (96 percent) were Black/African American, and more than half (57 percent) were male. At the time of the survey, the sample had the following key characteristics:

- 94 percent had never been married.
- 46 percent were parents.
- 55 percent were employed.
- 33 percent were in school.
- 75 percent had at least a high school diploma or general education degree equivalent.
- 40 percent lived in a household that earned less than \$10,000 in income from all sources.

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## BOX 1

### Methodology and Limitations of the Survey

#### *Methodology*

Our survey methodology was designed to yield policy-relevant findings that might highlight opportunities for ways community stakeholders can prevent and reduce gun violence perpetrated by young adults at high risk of gun violence. To do so, we sought to survey at-risk young adults in four Chicago communities with persistently high rates of fatal and nonfatal shootings: Austin, Auburn-Gresham, Englewood, and North Lawndale. Within these communities, we sought to recruit young adults at risk of gun violence perpetration and victimization using one of two complementary methods.

The “household sample” involved the identification of residential street segments with the highest concentrations of fatal and nonfatal shootings in two of the four neighborhoods, from which we then selected a random sample of households to recruit to take the survey. The “program sample” was identified by community-based organizations that engage in violence prevention efforts in each of the four neighborhoods. We worked closely with each organization to recruit their participants and members of participants’ social networks to take the survey. For each sampling method, young adults who were between the ages of 18 and 26 and living in the neighborhood were eligible to take the survey, which was designed to take approximately 15 to 20 minutes to complete.

The program sample was recruited with the assistance of the Institute for Nonviolence Chicago in Austin, St. Sabina Church in Auburn-Gresham, Teamwork Englewood in Englewood, and UCAN in North Lawndale. Program sample recruitment in North Lawndale and Auburn-Gresham occurred over four days in November 2017 and in Austin and Englewood over three days in February 2018. The household sample was recruited and surveyed over one week in December 2017 in Austin and Englewood only, in partnership with neighborhood residents who were recruited and hired in collaboration with the Chicago-based Safer Foundation and supervised by Urban researchers. The program sample was surveyed by Urban researchers.

#### *Limitations*

Two limitations of our sampling method are worth noting. First, the sample was not recruited randomly, therefore, the findings should not be viewed as representative of young adults living in these four neighborhoods. We did not intend to recruit a sample that was representative of the neighborhood; rather, we endeavored to recruit young adults likely to have been exposed to gun carrying and gun violence in their neighborhoods. The findings represent the views of the young adults who spoke to the research team, specifically, individuals who were either connected (even if indirectly) to a violence prevention service provider or who were home when the survey was being implemented. Second, because of the sensitivity of many of the survey questions—personal experiences with guns and victimization, for example—our findings may underestimate certain self-reported experiences and behaviors. While the research team assured respondents that their participation in the survey and their individual responses would be confidential, some may have answered questions in what they perceived as socially desirable ways or may have been less than truthful to the research team. Self-reported surveys are generally limited in this way. Nevertheless, the research team regards the information collected from a self-reported survey as being more germane to the research subject than information collected through official reports (e.g., police data).

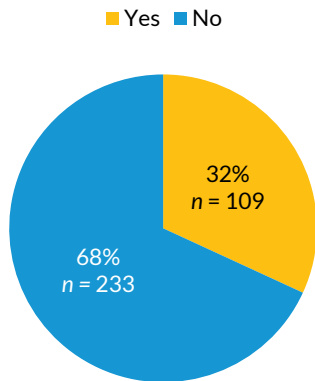
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# Survey Findings

## Many Young Men Have Carried Guns, but Not Routinely

Of the 345 young adults surveyed, one in three ( $n = 109$ ) said they had carried a gun (figure 1)—almost all unlawfully. Indeed, among those who had ever carried a gun, only 7 percent had a firearm owners' identification card and 3 percent had a concealed carry permit as required under Illinois law. Among the 195 surveyed men, fully half reported having carried a gun (figure 2). However, most carried their gun infrequently. Of the 97 men who reported ever carrying a gun, only 7 percent said they carried their gun always while 16 percent said they carried often, 32 percent said they carried sometimes, and 45 percent said they rarely carried.

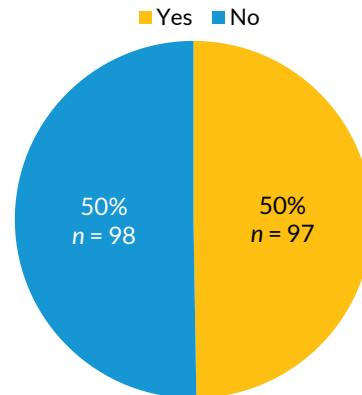
**FIGURE 1**  
Have You Ever Carried a Gun?



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**Source:** Urban analysis of survey of residents in Chicago, Illinois.  
**Note:** Valid  $n = 342$ .

**FIGURE 2**  
Have You Ever Carried a Gun?  
(male respondents only)



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**Source:** Urban analysis of survey of residents in Chicago, Illinois.  
**Note:** Valid  $n = 195$ .

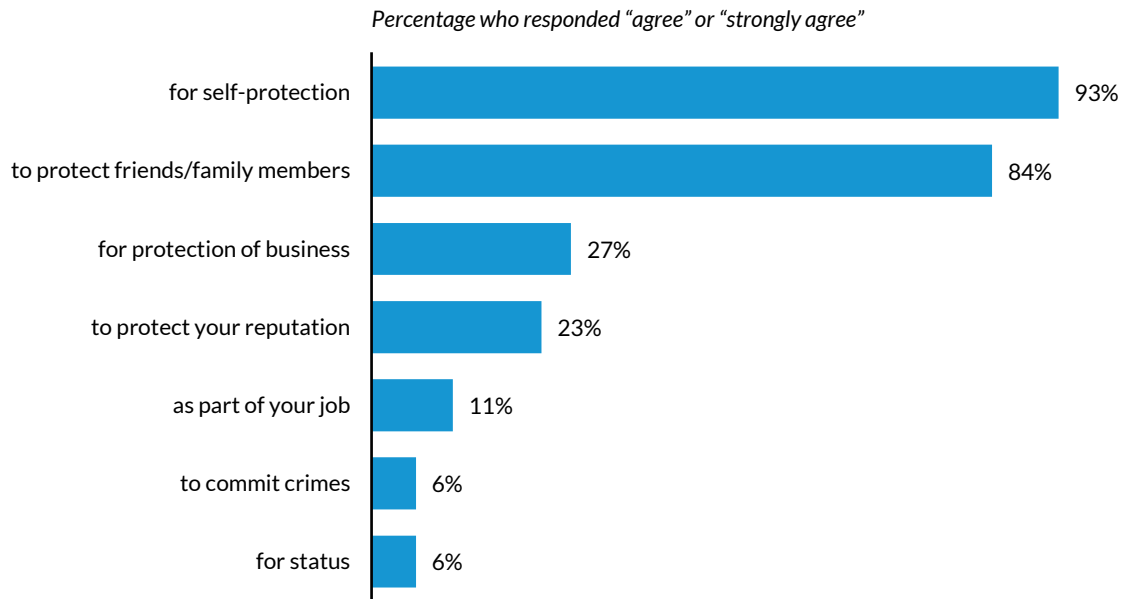
## Men Carry Guns for Protection

Safety concerns—both for themselves and for their family members and friends—were among the top reasons cited for gun carrying among male respondents (figure 3). Nearly all the men who self-reported having carried said they did so to protect themselves (93 percent), while relatively few reported carrying to commit crimes (6 percent) or for status (6 percent).

FIGURE 3

### Reasons for Carrying a Gun among Male Respondents

You carry a gun...



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Source: Urban analysis of survey of residents in Chicago, Illinois.

Notes: Valid n = 97. Responses ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

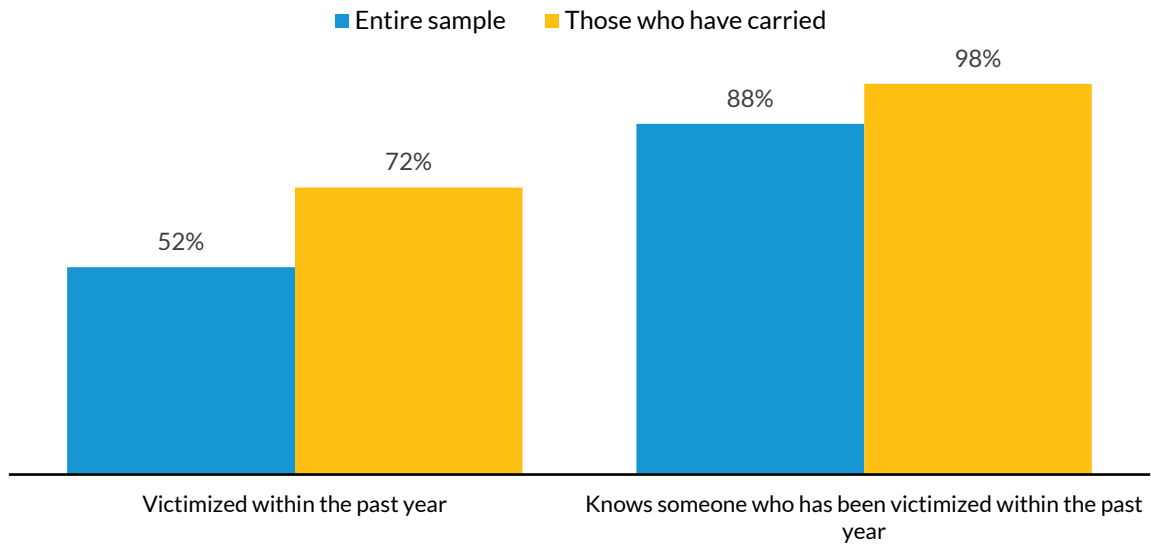
### Victimization Is a Common Experience

The justification of carrying because of safety concerns is well supported by respondents' self-reported victimization experiences, as shown in figures 4 and 5. Young adults who reported having carried a gun had more victimization experiences than those who reported never having carried a gun. Across the entire sample, 52 percent reported having been victimized in the past year and the overwhelming majority reported knowing someone who has been recently victimized. Nearly all of those who have carried a gun know someone who has been victimized in the past year (figure 4).

*Men who had been shot or shot at in the past year were 300% more likely to report that they had carried a gun.*

Of those who carry guns, more than one-third (37 percent) reported having recently been shot or shot at. Further, the overwhelming majority of them know someone who has been shot or shot at (figure 5). An analysis predicting the likelihood of gun carrying among the male respondents showed that men who had been shot or shot at in the past year were 300 percent more likely to report that they had carried a gun than those who had not been shot or shot at recently (analysis available upon request).<sup>6</sup>

**FIGURE 4**  
**Recent Victimization**

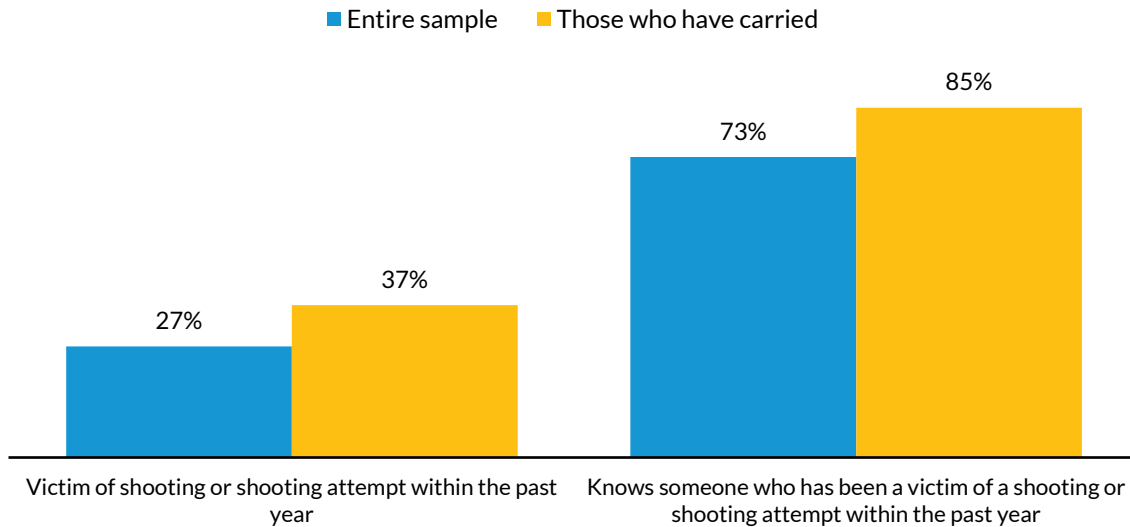


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**Source:** Urban analysis of survey of residents in Chicago, Illinois.

**Notes:** Valid  $n = 343$  (entire sample); 109 (gun carriers). “Victimization” includes the following: violent fight, mugging or robbery, home burglary, car theft, assault, rape or sexual assault, shooting or shooting attempt, and stabbing or stabbing attempt.

**FIGURE 5**  
**Recent Gun Victimization among Men**



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**Source:** Urban analysis of residents in Chicago, Illinois.

**Note:** Valid  $n = 195$  (entire sample); 97 (gun carriers).

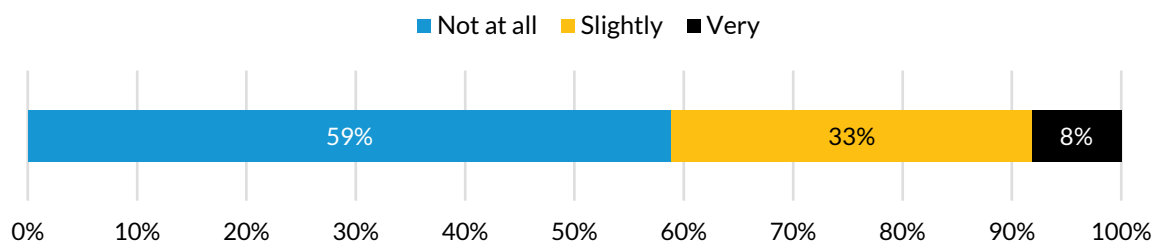
## Guns Are Accessible through Informal Channels

As shown in figure 6, the young adults reported that getting a gun is not at all difficult. Only 8 percent said it is very difficult for someone to obtain a gun, while 69 percent said guns can be acquired within hours. When asked how young adults in their community get their guns, respondents reported that guns are acquired through informal channels (figure 7). A vast majority indicated that young people are likely to obtain guns through street dealers (86 percent), to borrow or buy guns from friends or family (78 percent), or to steal them (76 percent). A much smaller share said young adults purchase guns from gun shows (8 percent) or from stores (8 percent). Notably, almost 30 percent of respondents suggested that young people have their friends or family members buy their guns for them, which are known as straw purchases. The percentages among those who carry follow a similar pattern, with higher percentages agreeing that acquisition is most likely through street dealers, theft, or borrowing or buying from friends and family, rather than buying from a gun show or a store. A sizable percentage of those who have ever carried said young people acquire guns through some other means, with the most common response being that young adults are likely to get guns by simply finding them on the street, in the garbage, in abandoned lots, or railroad trains.

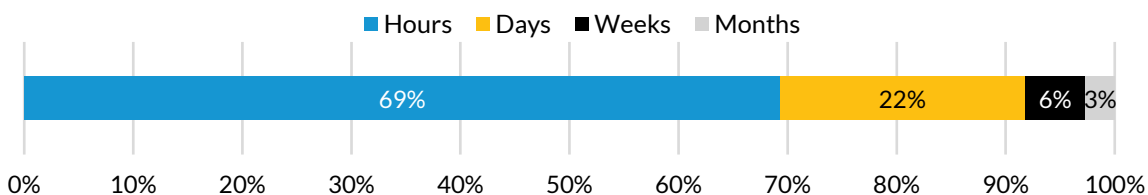
*“You become a different person when you have a gun. Situation gets out of hand—you have control... Somebody look at you wrong and because you have this gun, you have the power to flash it or shoot them.”*

**FIGURE 6**  
**Ease of Gun Acquisition**

*How difficult is it for someone to get a gun?*



*How long do you think it would take for someone to get a gun if they needed one?*



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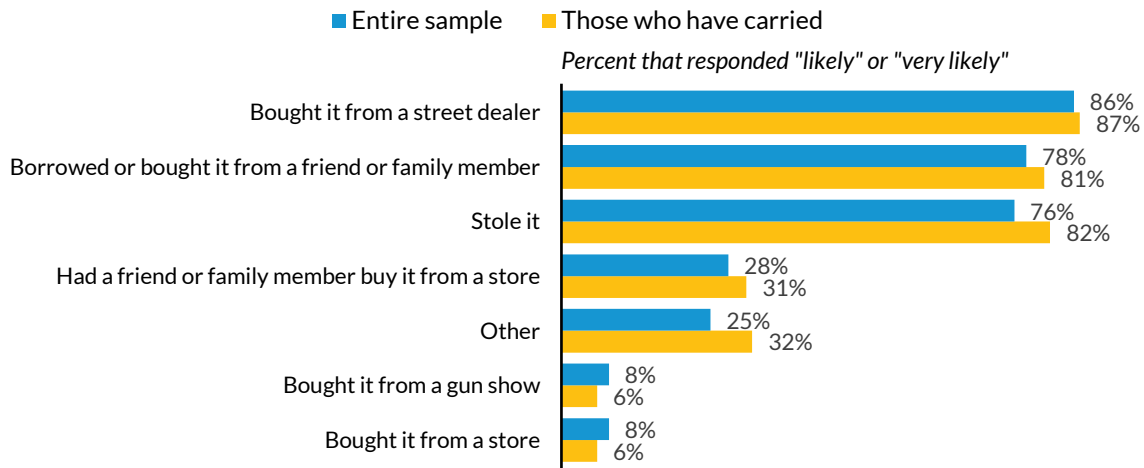
Source: Urban analysis of survey of residents in Chicago, Illinois.

Note: Valid n = 343 (difficulty getting a gun); 339 (time to get a gun).

FIGURE 7

### Methods of Gun Acquisition

How likely is it that young people get guns in the following way?



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Source: Urban analysis of survey of residents in Chicago, Illinois.

Notes: Valid n = 339 (entire sample); 109 (gun carriers). Responses ranged from 1 (very unlikely) to 5 (very likely).

### Perceived Risk of Apprehension Is Low

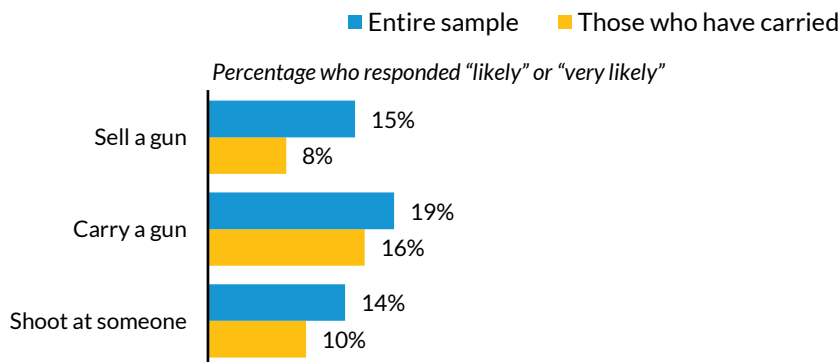
In the interest of identifying mechanisms to deter gun carrying, we asked young adults about the perceived likelihood of someone being caught if they shot at someone, carried a gun, or sold a gun. A small percentage of those surveyed indicated that getting caught is likely or very likely, and those shares were even smaller among the subset of those who reported ever having carried a gun (figure 8).

Notably, the entire sample and those who have ever carried a gun perceive the risk of apprehension for shooting at someone to be *lower* than the risk of apprehension for carrying a gun.

FIGURE 8

### Perceived Risk of Apprehension

How likely is someone to get caught if they...



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Source: Urban analysis of survey of residents in Chicago, Illinois.

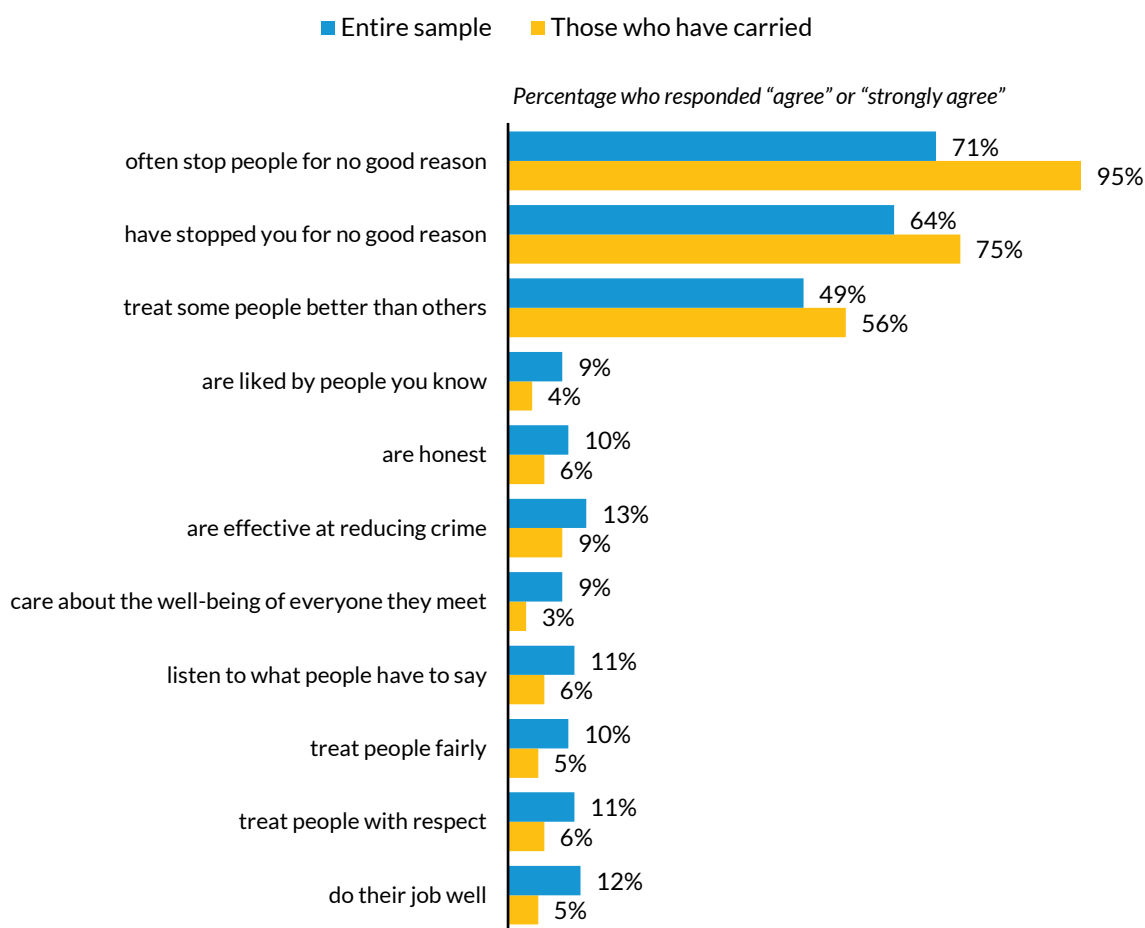
Notes: Valid n = 344 (entire sample); 109 (gun carriers). Responses ranged from 1 (very unlikely) to 5 (very likely).



## Perceptions of Police Are Poor

Perceptions of low risk of apprehension are mirrored by low opinions of the police. Young adults' views of police in their neighborhood are particularly poor across the entire sample, but notably worse among young adults who reported ever carrying a gun (figure 9). Additionally, a large majority of respondents (71 percent) said that police often stop them for no good reason, and 95 percent of people who have carried reported that they have been stopped by police for no good reason. Only 12 percent of the entire sample—and just 5 percent of people who said they have carried—feel that the police do their job well, and even smaller shares feel that police treat people fairly and with respect.

**FIGURE 9**  
**Perceptions of Police Legitimacy**  
*Police in your neighborhood...*



URBAN INSTITUTE

**Source:** Urban analysis of survey of residents in Chicago, Illinois.

**Notes:** Valid N = 345 (entire sample); 109 (gun carriers). Responses ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

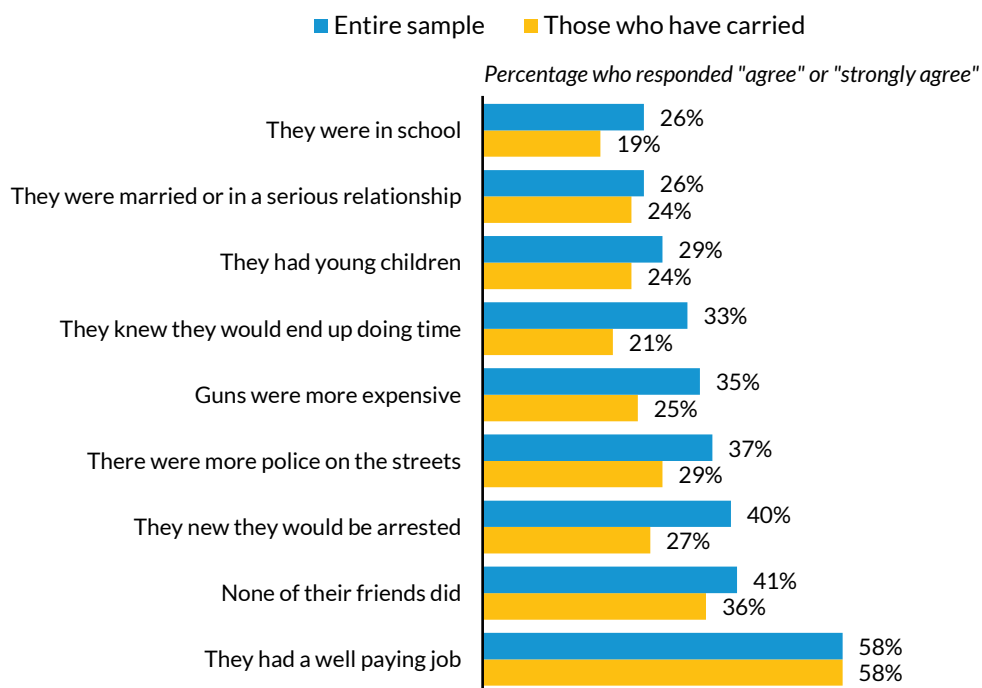
## Employment Is Viewed as a Key Preventive Factor

When presented with a list of different factors that might keep young adults from carrying guns, having more well-paying jobs was the response that most respondents agree with (58 percent). Approximately 40 percent of the entire sample agreed that young adults would be less likely to carry guns if none of their friends did and if they knew they would be arrested. By contrast, smaller shares thought that more police on the street would reduce the likelihood of youth carrying guns (37 percent) or that gun carrying would be lower if people knew they would do time in jail or prison (33 percent). Even fewer participants thought family and personal factors (such as having a child or being married) deterred gun carrying behaviors among young adults in their neighborhood. Of those who have carried guns, only 21 percent said they would be less likely to carry a gun if they know they would go to jail, while 29 percent said they would be less likely to carry if there were more police on the streets. And as with the entire sample, those who have carried a gun expressed greater support for employment as a preventive factor as compared with personal and family factors. Overall, there was less support for the preventive factors among those who had ever carried a gun.

FIGURE 10

### Preventive Factors

Young people would be less likely to carry guns if...



URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: Urban analysis of survey of residents in Chicago, IL.

Notes: Valid N = 345 (entire sample); 109 (gun carriers); Responses ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

## Key Takeaways and Insights

This survey found that gun carrying is a way of life for many young adults at risk for gun violence in four Chicago neighborhoods with persistently high rates of violence, with half of young men reporting they carry guns—almost all unlawfully. From the perspectives of these at-risk young adults, guns are easy to get and are most often acquired through informal channels. People who carry guns typically do so to protect themselves and their family and friends. Exposure to violent victimization among all respondents is extremely high, particularly so for those who reported ever having carried a gun.

Fewer than one in eight young adults we spoke with believe police are doing their job well; these negative perceptions of police are notably worse among young people who have ever carried a gun. Young people who have carried guns are less likely to believe that those who carry and use guns will be caught and more likely to believe that police often stop them for no good reason. This suggests that a vicious cycle is occurring: a significant number of young people who have personal and vicarious victimization experiences do not trust the police to keep their neighborhoods safe, believe they need to carry guns to protect themselves and their friends and family, and perceive the risk for getting caught for carrying or shooting as low.

Perhaps not surprisingly, when young adults were asked “What would reduce gun violence in your neighborhood?” “more law enforcement” was not the most common response. Instead, the survey respondents mentioned the need to address peer influences around gun carrying and use. Following discussions with our community partners on the key findings, they similarly highlighted the importance of addressing the social norms and perceptions that encourage gun carrying among young adults. For this reason, community partners suggested that reasons for gun carrying among young adults should be

understood as an interplay between their *perceptions* of threat to self and family/friends and their *perceptions* that they need to carry because everyone else is carrying. While our survey found few young adults agreeing that gun carrying is because of “status” or “reputation,” the reflections from our community partners suggest a need for more research that can better unpack the complex reasons for decisions to carry guns.

The community partners also underscored the need for police and community-based service providers to be cognizant of—and responsive to—the frequent exposure to victimization among the respondents and the acute need for trauma-informed care. While data collected through the survey cannot determine whether gun carrying leads to victimization or vice versa, victimization among young adults demands focused attention.

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*“Need to have more jobs, job training, get people back to work, investment in the neighborhood throughout, new businesses, rec centers, grocery stores... [and] police officers working in partnership with the community.”*

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Chicago officials and stakeholders should consider the recommendations offered by the young adults and underscored by the community partners to ensure that approaches to reducing gun violence are holistic and include responses outside the criminal justice system.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> “CompStat, City Wide: Week 52, Geocoded for District Consolidation—Report Covering the Week of 25-Dec-17 through 31-Dec-17,” Chicago Police Department, accessed July 2018, [https://home.chicagopolice.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/1\\_PDFsam\\_CompStat-Public-2017-Week-52.pdf](https://home.chicagopolice.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/1_PDFsam_CompStat-Public-2017-Week-52.pdf).
- <sup>2</sup> Diane Pathieu, “Chicago Police Recover Nearly 5,200 Illegal Guns So Far in 2018,” *WLS-TV Chicago (ABC)*, July 20, 2018, <https://abc7chicago.com/cpd-recovers-nearly-5200-illegal-guns-so-far-in-2018/3793263/>.
- <sup>3</sup> See Acs et al. (2017) and Papachristos (2013), as well as Jen Christensen, “Tackling Chicago’s Crime Gap,” *CNN*, March 14, 2014, <https://www.cnn.com/2014/03/13/us/chicago-crime-gap/index.html>.
- <sup>4</sup> “Chicago Health Atlas,” Chicago Department of Public Health, accessed May 2018, <http://www.chicagohealthatlas.org/>.
- <sup>5</sup> Alden Loury, “Youths Are the No. 1 Target in Chicago’s Homicide Epidemic,” *Chicago Reporter*, January 30, 2013, <http://chicagoreporter.com/youths-are-the-no-1-target-in-chicagos-homicide-epidemic/>.
- <sup>6</sup> The data cannot be used to determine whether someone’s decision to carry a gun leads to future experiences with violent victimization or whether the experience of violent victimization prompts someone to carry a gun.

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