

Nothing About Us Without Us



By **Stephane D. Andrade**
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Reflections from
Community Researchers
in New Haven

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The Justice Collaboratory recently concluded a Community-based Participatory Action Research (CBPAR) study on gun violence prevention initiatives in New Haven, Connecticut. The study is led by Principal Investigator Tracey Meares and supported by Jania Stewart-James and Stephane Andrade, along with a team of community members. We use a CBPAR approach where community members with lived experiences of gun violence work as paid researchers on the study.

Our initial group of seven Community Co-researchers (CCRs) received training on research methods and ethics, how to conduct qualitative interviews, and how to secure data. CCRs contributed to developing research materials, recruiting potential participants, and conducting qualitative interviews. Interviews focused on how individuals and communities perceive the messages underlying gun violence prevention initiatives and the services provided by them.

Dawn Poindexter and Maurice Keitt are lead CCRs in the study and have played pivotal roles in recruiting and interviewing participants.

As a mother who had recently lost her son to gun violence in New Haven, Dawn Poindexter has a strong and personal commitment to addressing gun violence. Additionally, she has a Bachelor's in Social Work and a Master's in Public Administration along with over 30 years of experience in healthcare administration and 25 years of community engagement experience. Dawn is the founder of Abundant Harvest Community Engagement (AHOM), a community-based youth violence prevention program in the greater New Haven area.

In the words of Maurice Keitt, "It's not where you start, it's where you end up." Maurice's transformational journey as a New Haven native who returned home from incarceration in 2018 and immediately sought to give back to his community, provides firsthand testimony to the power of positive mentorship and guidance. He gained traction on his transition back into society initially as a participant at Emerge CT. Maurice now works as the Recruitment and Outreach Coordinator at Emerge, supporting other formerly incarcerated men on their transition after incarceration, and as a self-employed Licensed Insurance Agent. In addition, Maurice is a dedicated father and passionate about advocating for the social and economic freedoms of citizens. Overall, Maurice is committed to being a student of all of life's experiences.



In this conversation, Jania and Stephane ask Dawn and Maurice to reflect on their experiences with gun violence in New Haven and their role as CCRs in the project. We explore the complexities of their positionalities as they approach the work of gun violence prevention, their perceptions of the root causes of gun violence, and ideas of innovative solutions to engage with individuals at the center of violence.

Interview

Stephane: What brings you to this gun violence prevention work?

Dawn: Honestly, I got a call from another person that had the same experience I had. My son was murdered in the city of New Haven in January 2020. The person who referred me to this work had been further in her journey. One of the things that helped her was that she got involved in an initiative that helped the healing process as she was grieving the loss of her son.

So, once I started working on this project, I realized that I really didn't understand the

depth of this particular project. I thought that it was more of an initiative that was directed to doing something about gun violence. I guess the research part went over most of our heads in the beginning. And so, when we had the dialogue with the larger group, we were able to process the roles associated with the research project.

I understand research because it was a part of my degree in public policy. It took some adjusting to understand the depth of this community-based research because it's a little different. I have enjoyed the process from the beginning to where I'm at now.

Maurice: I'm grateful that I was able to participate in a project like this. Typically, people like me who have been on probation or parole are not able to. But I was able to make it through that time lapse to be eligible. And when I saw the passion behind the group of people that I was working with, I kind of adapted that same passion to it. Then, I realized what better space to be in being the fact that I was a part of the problem at a point in time. Everybody says that people closest to the problem are usually closest to the solution. So, I was testing that theory to realize that I was.

Stephane: And what was that experience like, your journey from the beginning of what you thought it was from your initial interview to now having gone through different iterations of the project, from training to now conducting interviews? What were some of the biggest challenges you experienced throughout the process?

Dawn: In the beginning, it was interesting just listening to everybody's perspective on why they were here and giving their feedback. There was an initial group of seven people, and the common denominator was that people were not experienced in understanding research from a community level. Everyone

assumed that this was a project that would create a direct initiative in the community.

Some people opted out of continuing to do this research because they felt they were devalued based on the compensation. So, their perception was that Yale was coming into our neighborhood and using us for information where the benefits are only one-sided. People don't see benefits. Once you relate that value to time, people feel like they don't have time. They don't see the benefit. That's what it boils down to.

There were different dynamics and feedback from the group as we developed the questionnaire. Some people were more focused on why gun violence is happening in our community. It was a challenge just trying to come up with the questions that we needed in order to get the results for this particular research. Sometimes, the group would have heated discussions because there was a wide variety of experiences in the room from the community level. About seven out of the ten had personal perpetrator experiences. I was coming from the perspective of the victim side, so it was interesting to hear their thought process.

After we completed training and developed the questionnaire, the picture became very clear and more focused on the task at hand. When we got to the interviewing phase, it seemed nice and simple. I didn't anticipate all of the challenges that it brought once we actually started doing the work.

Maurice: I think a bigger challenge for all of us was trying to stay on the same page. We were so busy trying to see what your intentions were instead of getting to the work. I think we were so worried about Yale as an organization because Yale's name is kind of slaughtered in the city. I don't really, truly know why to be honest with you.

I think some days, our sessions got dragged out because somebody asked a question and they just refused to believe the answer. It was

more based on their assumptions, based on previous situations. I think that's a dangerous mindset to have. You don't allow light in and you're staying in that same dark space with the information that you're getting. So, I think that was one of the bigger setbacks.

Another challenging part was trying to find a way to ask the right questions to a group of people who don't want to answer questions about guns. It's really a touchy subject, and it's being recorded. And people really don't trust themselves, let alone somebody else. I think it showed in our own group, we were kind of torn, and then we came and got together. When it was time to hit the ground running, I think everybody was faced with not wanting to be that person asking the tough questions to a group of people, without knowing how it may be perceived, how it may feel, or what it may trigger for somebody.

Jania: You mentioned some of the challenges throughout the process going through development of the questions, the research instrument, and even the training. What do you think were your expectations coming into this study and how have they changed since you started interviewing?

Dawn: For myself, being a victim of having a son that was murdered, the biggest challenge was listening to reasons why people committed gun crimes. So, that's probably more on the personal level for me that, at times, it did get kind of emotional, especially when I interviewed people who committed murders.

The second thing that I felt that was challenging was getting people to commit to sharing their stories. I always feel like some people are holding back. For some people, I think it's because they have matured, and they feel remorse about what they did. When we ask questions about the actual charges, you could tell that they just generalize and don't give specific details. I realized that participants aged 30+ and people who have served a

significant amount of time in jail, are more willing to talk openly about their experience. So, I've learned from each interview how to be more engaging in the process for the next time just from conversation.

Another challenge was choosing interview locations. It's good that we now have a set of safe locations for us as the researcher, as well as the person that's coming to do the research. Also, the time commitment was challenging. I guess we're busy and people don't see this as a priority.

The biggest challenge when you make the connection is that nobody wants to talk about something that they did wrong, let alone schedule a time to talk about it.

In order to overcome those challenges, especially with new referrals, I ask people to share a brief explanation of the study so that person can understand the conversation that we're about to have.

Stephane: How has your positionality impacted you in carrying out this work?

Dawn: As a female, I always consider safety first but it's still uncomfortable. So, I'll give an example with one person I interviewed. It was in a very safe location, a private room in the library. After the interview, that person felt really comfortable oversharing personal information with me. That person didn't understand that it was just a one-time interview, and you get paid. They continued to contact me. From there, we talked about changing our strategy. So, we started using Google Voice instead of our personal phone numbers as a result of that incident. I felt that was more like a female/male dynamic. If a male interviewer conducted it, they wouldn't have probably shared that kind of information.

Stephane: So, one thing I was thinking about as well was in the conversations that you had, and we're talking about gun violence more broadly in New Haven, we're talking about experiences people have had as participants but as residents, more generally. In your conversations, what have you identified as something that maybe stood out to you as a trend in terms of the violence in the city or their experiences as residents, or perpetrators, or victims?

Dawn: Well, I was amazed at the fact that some people were exposed to guns as early as 13 years old. There was a trend of participants turning towards the streets and selling drugs in an effort to provide for themselves or their family financially. There's a competitive aspect to selling drugs that involves territory and association to a group or gang. That competition causes some type of rivalry or conflict that, ultimately, leads to somebody getting hurt. So, the participant was either the perpetrator or the victim. A few participants were involved in gun violence due to their family's prior involvement, so they inherited behaviors or beefs that exposed them to gun violence.

Maurice: The younger kids are not really seeing the path that they're on until they're held responsible for their actions, and typically they aren't held responsible. If you get juvenile kids on their 17th stolen car coming back home and the only point to steal a car is to go do something stupid in it.

And then, you get the kid that's stealing cars chilling with the kid that got the gun, now you got a shooting.

Somebody is going to jail, somebody's telling, and now their friends are beefing over both of them doing stupid stuff. So, I saw that type of pattern talking to some of the young kids.

Jania: Given that a lot of our participants are over the age of 30 and they're from a specific era, did you find that they've been responding with comparisons between how they grew up in their generation versus the generation now? Did participants specify any differences in how gun violence was addressed in their era versus how it's being addressed now?

Dawn: The generational part that you see with the 30+ age group is that they feel like the street rules of carrying a gun were cleaner and more thought out in their era. And if there was beef between two people, they made sure that the gun violence stopped between them. Whereas now, the gun violence is more random, and the 30+ participants feel like the younger generation is more careless and dangerous.

Stephane: Thinking about that generational divide, what role do you see, if any, social media playing into a lot of what's happening now?

Dawn: I think social media platforms play a big role in expanding the exposure to violence. It's almost like TV back in the day. When I watched TV, you didn't even hear cussing. You didn't see clothes being exposed. You didn't do all of those things because you didn't see them do them. Whereas now, so many platforms, you can be exposed to so many things. So, I think that plays a major part even in sharing information right on social media about violence.

Maurice: Social media definitely plays a critical factor in the way everybody expresses themselves now. Before, people were trying to get money or protect themselves. Now, it's about getting attention for something.

There's a suicidal mentality going on now because of school shootings and all of this stuff. It's like every time you turn around, it's a feed of somebody with a gun. You don't know if it's legal or not legal. Back in the day, there were tests and studies about the video games, it's got to be even more exacerbated now with social media because you're actually seeing real people do these things.

Stephane: So, are you finding that there are a



lot of people who are attending these programs who don't have gun charges, and the programs are counting those people for that particular program as eligible participants?

Maurice: Exactly, I noticed that with the older population, a lot of them that were really growing up in a time where you literally had to eat or be eaten, kill or be killed. A lot of them weren't instructed to go to none of these gun programs at all. Why are the older dudes, the ones that need a program because they actually hurt somebody with a firearm, not going to some of these programs? We just



had a big release of inmates in Connecticut after changes were made to sentencing and commutations.

I'm in a unique position where it's harder to get people who actually have gun charges to go to these programs. I'm around people that stabbed or shot somebody, but none of these people were mandated to go to these programs. They should have went through a gun violence prevention program in jail then, came home, and went through it again. In reality, they were just told to get a job. It's kind of like setting them up for failure. Then, I got the kid that's in a stolen car with the other guy having a gun and took the gun charge and now he's in this program. I just couldn't understand the correlation between it.

What's the real purpose of these gun programs? What are you really trying to do? Is it really just a warning? Is it, literally, just getting all of these people in one spot while they're coming home from jail, and then seeing them all before they go tucking back in until you can't find them again? I don't think that the people that need to be in the programs are actually going to these programs. And then, the programs are trying to solve this shooting issue in a day. Not even a day, an hour.

Stephane: You're referring to the length of the meeting, right?

Maurice: Yeah, the length of the program. It's a meeting but it's classified as a program. So, the length of the meeting is an hour. Each meeting is the same message that resonates differently with different people. One of the big things that participants are bringing up is that we're asking the wrong questions. People want to know more about the access to firearms. Where are these guns coming from? Everybody is not driving on I-95 going to get some guns back. And they're asking about the type of guns that people are getting. We have weapons of mass destruction out here, kids running around, gun bigger than their whole body, shooting until the streetlights come on because they got 40, 50, 60 shots. It wasn't like that when we were growing up. I'm trying to figure out how much these guns cost. So, where are these firearms coming from?

Dawn: I had one interview with a person who trafficked guns. He wasn't involved in gun violence in the sense that he directly hurt somebody.

He had an official relationship where he traveled to one of the southern states and picked up these guns by the hundreds and imported them into the city of New Haven. He actually got a lot of time just from trafficking guns state to state.

Stephane: I'm also thinking about the folks that you've interviewed who had gun charges and lived experiences with gun violence in New Haven. Have you all found any potential solutions that people have offered or anything that's been really innovative or interesting to you?

Dawn: Well, I found that a lot of participants felt like the whole engagement process in New Haven got lost. They felt like when they were younger, there was more of a sense of community than what it is now. Now, there's a lack of being able to socialize on a humanistic level. There's less events and concerts. When those community events went away, it left a void in the city that created these silos where now, people are hanging on a corner and making up their own things that evolve to gangs and things like that.

When participants respond to the question about curbing gun violence, they always offer up preventative events and activities that would get teenagers more involved. Some participants think of the program as more of a scare tactic. That's one word they use. Or they might say that it's information that's good to direct you.

Maurice: I'm thinking about how you better not have no parade or no Freddy Fixer or none of them events nowadays. It's only a matter of time if you get two or three text messages and the opps there and now, you got innocent bystanders getting hit. I think that a lot of people don't really understand business when it comes to liability and insurance. Sometimes, bringing a whole bunch of people that can't

cooperate together is not that good of an idea. So, maybe it should start in little hubs in the community. Start there, build that trust with something like a basketball neighborhood league. You get the problem solving, the working as a team, constructive criticism, self-talk, and self-motivation.

If I were to summarize what everybody said, I would say more neighborhood events led by people who are trusted by the community. The intent behind that is to lead people to maybe a ball game where there's other incentives and things to win. It helps people look forward to events and want to be good. We're dealing with a lot of minors in adult bodies. So, we have to be patient, great listeners to give feedback, and hold them accountable to what they're striving to do.

I think that starts on the individual level first. You can't bring people together and think it's going to be kumbaya, not in a city with constant reminders of unresolved traumas and childhood issues. We need to start trying to find different creative activities to bring community together and raising awareness to engage the youth. Maybe it is a movie night or book club followed by a discussion, breaking down the messages in it. We got to plan for these events and anticipate incidents that could happen to be prepared for it ahead of time. We can't keep allowing these events to be cut from the budget when people don't want to pay for them anymore.

Community Disinvestment

Jania: I think disinvestment has been a huge underlying theme. You both kind of touched on that and how throughout the years, the ways that the state and the city used to invest in community centers and youth programming doesn't exist in the same way that it did before. People who had gun charges as a youth years ago felt like they had access to more

opportunities and that there were more engaging activities for the youth opposed to gun violence.

Dawn: Years ago, the city had a lot more neighborhood cooperation. Each neighborhood had a community center. There was someone overseeing the neighborhood center in a role similar to the alderman role. That person advocated for activities to get funding from the city.

So, if there was a lot of activities in one area, it was because that person in that neighborhood was more active.

Jania: Within the re-entry space and gun violence prevention field, it's been difficult to engage with the younger participants, in the 20s age range. What do you feel like would be the most effective strategy to engage younger participants in this work? What can be done to support them and get their perspectives on curbing gun violence?

Maurice: You engage them by giving them something else to engage in. That's the most critical part. It's going to be sitting them down trying to get a group of people sitting down and asking them what you do y'all want. Like let's make a deal. I remember a time when I was in custody. At that time, there were so many thorough dudes in prison that knew stuff. The older generation knew how to take the lead. And the CO's used to put us all in the gym and have a conversation with us. How can we get this thing back to order, man? Clearly, there's more of you out there than there is us. Let's build treaties. If you violate the treaties, it's going to be full-on police presence. I think anything other than what they're doing right now is worth an attempt.

I know if somebody would have broken things down to me at an earlier age, I might have got in trouble once instead of six times. I would have heard the message and did

what I needed to do. But now, I'm sitting in that cell thinking about everything that I was just told and realizing I did have a choice.

We need credible people coming in telling the message to the ones that are still engaged.

We need an active approach from the people in the community that do have that lived experience as credible messengers to show the youth or even the elders.

I know older people that are stuck in their ways more than anything. I lost some friends this year because they just couldn't remove their mindset from the lifestyle. Typically, we don't care about a situation until it hits home. And it's about to start hitting home soon. So, I hope we do come up with a valid solution that we could see some type of results-based accountability.

Dawn: I'm still dealing with my grandchildren that are kind of transitioning to that age. And it's always a challenge trying to figure out activities or things to keep them involved in. I agree that you have to engage them in other activities that are positive. Most of my grandkids are engaged in AAU [Amateur Athletic Union]. With this travel team, they're getting exposure outside of the city. It occupies a lot of their time and attention between going to school and AAU. So, I definitely agree with Maurice that the engagement process is the key to these children.

Surviving vs. Thriving

Maurice: It's about giving kids something to live for. You got to have a dream, but before you have a dream, you got to have somewhere to sleep. That's a big thing that I think people keep overlooking is that a lot of these kids are homeless. I wish I had the space to let some of them just come and rest. And I wish I could offer them some type of bed. I think a lot of



these kids are doing their best to express their frustration around people that's frustrated with them until they're frustrated with each other. That's where these crucial connections come into play. I realize that there are more friendships built on a common enemy than an actual friend.

Dawn: Well, most of the time, when you hear about participants' background, the family dynamics is broken down. A lot of times, the father is not there. It's the grandmothers in the household, not even the mother no more that's involved. The absence of the male is a whole other story in itself. Men produce men. And people's basic needs are not being met. So, you know food, clothing, and shelter are your basic needs. If you don't have shelter, you're going to do things to get shelter.

Maurice: I didn't know I was in survival mode until probably about four years ago. I actually tried to strive to put myself back in survival mode because I get the most done. And then, I started attracting all of these situations to

me. That state of peace or complacency that I'm not creating for myself starts to feel like I'm disconnected. And these kids have the ability to do that sooner. They're just unaware of it. They just don't know how to process it yet.

We're so stripped from our culture just as a melanated people, dealing with the stress of our ancestors. That trauma is still impacting us today. I don't care how new your clothes or sneakers are, you are still you. There are so many underlying conditions that have been exacerbated for so long that the resources don't even line up.

Jania: I've got one more question just to wrap it up. What do you both feel like is the value in doing this specific research project and also community-based research with people who have been impacted by the issue working on this research project?

Dawn: With community-based research, I think a benefit is that people closest to the problem are closest to the solution. You can analyze issues from a more humanistic perspective.

I feel like that has a greater value than a person that never had any of those experiences just coming in and making an assessment. I think that moving forward, community-based research will supersede the research that we have had in the past. And in this particular project, I think the value is in seeing those trends and understanding where the problem started.

There are many different roots to this problem, but it all really started in the homes with the household dynamics. The research tells us the symptoms of the problem. We're really trying to understand whether or not the programs' intervention strategies are working. And so far, the research is telling us that they're not working because they're not the right type of intervention strategies. I'm not saying that the programs don't have good intentions or that they're just doing it with the wrong motivation because I don't know. But the type of intervention strategies don't really fit the problems that are occurring. We need a lot more than those strategies and programs that are just duplicating services.

Maurice: I think it's important for credible messengers and people from the community to do this work instead of somebody coming in, and then fudging it based on whoever is paying or sponsoring them, or trying to keep that job instead of actually doing this to get results. The only way that I found to go against those type of forces and energies is to be persistent in your work and messaging to the point where people start to adapt that school of thought. They start to move in that way.

Concluding Thoughts

In the conversation above, Dawn and Maurice reflected on their experiences with gun violence both as residents of the Greater New Haven community and as community researchers working to address its prevalence and impact on young men, adults, and their families. Their role in this work grew out of their personal experiences with gun violence which then catapulted their commitment to be closest to the solution. Dawn and Maurice outlined the challenges in pursuing these efforts, from building trust and contending with history of Yale and its relationship to the community, to discussing the delicate nature of individuals' experiences with gun violence, and how current prevention efforts fall short of understanding these complex dynamics. Collectively, Dawn and Maurice offered critical insights into some of the underlying issues surrounding gun violence in New Haven and point to the importance around sustained investments in community, taking a more humanistic approach to these issues, while centering the voices of those most impacted.

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