



WHEN YOUR BEST FRIEND IS MURDERED

Experiences of Grief and Trauma with Crew-Involved Youth

Roberta Liggett & Stephanie Ueberall

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Crew-Involved Youth

By Roberta Liggett & Stephanie Ueberall
Citizens Crime Commission of New York City

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CITIZENS CRIME COMMISSION
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Trauma and grief are two critical drivers of violence, yet these elements are often missing in discussions concerning youth violence, especially how we understand crews – building-based groups of youth whose conflicts revolve around turf and reputation rather than criminal enterprise. Understanding the role of trauma and grief offers critical insights into how and why violence is sustained in crew-involved youth.

Losing someone to murder is uniquely difficult to process and, disturbingly, crew-involved youth face this life experience frequently. Death through murder is especially traumatic because death is sudden, horrific, and caused by another person. Further, youth involved in crews often experience a variety of traumas and stressors throughout their lives. When trauma symptoms and grief combine, it can lead to an experience known as complicated grieving, which is associated with worse health outcomes and prolonged distress.

In order to cope with trauma and complicated grief, crew-membership and violence emerge as ways to receive social support, emotional release, safety, and purpose. Research and anecdotal conversations with community-based anti-violence organizations show that grief and trauma play a critical role in understanding why young people join crews. Further, grief plays a prominent role in crew culture, as youth will often name their crew or elements of their territory after a deceased friend.

Tragically, trauma and complicated grief also play a vital role in maintaining retaliatory violence among warring crews. Presenting as hyper-violent may serve as a mode of protection, as youth have learned that being perceived as weak increases their likelihood for victimization. In addition, revenge is a leading motivator for many crew-related shootings and assaults, and recent New York City indictments show that violence escalates greatly during periods of grief as well as around anniversaries of a member's death years later.

In order to ensure that interventions meet emerging risks and needs of youth, more programs and policies need to address the impact of both trauma and grief in this population. Interventions need to include trauma-informed care and evidence-based practice concerning healthy grieving in order to boost resilience in youth and prevent violence in the long-term. The Crime Commission offers the following recommendations:

- Interventions that work to prevent gun violence need to be trauma-informed and address grief and healthy grieving.
- Additional bereavement services need to be offered to youth who experience loss, especially from murder.
- Since youth are exposed to loss in early childhood, skills around healthy grieving and resilience need to be offered to younger children.
- Grief services need to be offered to NYC Cure Violence staff, as they also lose staff and participants to gun violence.

WHEN YOUR BEST FRIEND IS MURDERED

EXPERIENCES OF GRIEF AND TRAUMA WITH CREW-INVOLVED YOUTH

Youth involved in violence experience an inordinate amount of trauma and grief that have serious consequences on their future success and mental health. Trauma and grief play a critical role in understanding why young people become involved in crews¹, how conflicts become seriously violent, and underlying reasons for engaging in retaliatory violence. In order to delve deeper into the needs and risks that precede youth violence—and thus respond with appropriate and effective interventions—it is important to widen the narrative of violence to include trauma, grief, and their symptoms.

Trauma and Grief Exposure:

Generally, young marginalized adolescents living in inner cities experience, either directly or indirectly, at least one violent incident a day.ⁱ Another dimension of trauma is grief resulting from murder. Tragically, Black youth often disclose an average of three losses of loved ones to murder starting in early childhood and with increasing frequency during the teen and young adult years.ⁱⁱ

Research consistently supports these experiences, yet narratives about youth violence fail to incorporate these findings. For example, research shows that for youth, criminal justice involvement and trauma operate as a cycle, where delinquent youth are often victims of shootings, robberies, assaults, and stabbings before perpetrating violence themselves.^{iii,iv,2}

Further, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) has reported epidemic levels of homicide among young people, intensely experienced by Black youth, dating back to the 1980's.^v Currently, homicide is the third leading cause of death for young people aged 15-24.^{vi} Broken down by race, homicide, particularly gun related homicide, is the leading cause of death for Black males between the ages of 15-34^{vii} and the second leading cause of death in Black females aged 15-24.^{viii}



“Barely Could Sleep Cold Sweats, Nightmares & Dreams
From A Bad Book”

Facebook Status of crew-involved youth describing trauma symptoms

¹ *Informal groups of adolescents who are organized geographically, often around a housing development, and whose crimes rarely involve criminal enterprise (such as drug selling) but are fueled predominately over reputation and turf.*

² *Read more about how youth are more likely than adults to be exposed to crime and violence in the Crime Commission report titled [Sustaining Crime Reductions in New York City: Priorities for Preventing Youth Crime](#)*

Grief's Specific Impacts on Crew Structure:

While the impact of trauma exposure and grief are often overlooked when discussing the risks and needs for crew-involved youth, grief is a prominent feature of crew culture. In NYC, crews will often rename their crew or certain territorial blocks in remembrance of deceased members, and wear specially made badges and clothing to commemorate fallen friends. In this way, a crew structure can surround a single act of trauma, and be a coping mechanism for peers experiencing grief.

Staff from NYC Cure Violence — a public health program that conducts street outreach and violence interruption with known shooters— often state that their participants report grief and trauma from seeing their best friends murdered by gun violence, and that they too believe they will die young. To highlight the seriousness of their exposure, nearly 50% of shootings in NYC are a result of crew violence.^{ix}

The Crime Commission and our NYC Cure Violence partners have seen this behavior showcased on social media, where youth often express their grief for lost friends. On these platforms, “about me” sections are filled with RIP messages, usually to more than one deceased friend. Young crew members continually post memorial messages, grief, and emotional distress related to the loss online, sometimes discussing intentions for retaliation, and desires to free incarcerated friends. After the pilot study of E-Responder—a program that seeks to intervene with youth on social media in order to de-escalate conflicts and build life-skills—the Crime Commission found that 43% of the posts Cure Violence staff intervened with on social media were concerned with grief and emotional distress.



“My [****] ain’t make it to see 25 I could careless about my birthday!”

Facebook Status of crew-involved youth displaying how normal it is for him to experience grief and lose friends



“I Wish I Could Take A Pill To Make Me Forget Everything”

Facebook Status of crew-involved youth describing distress



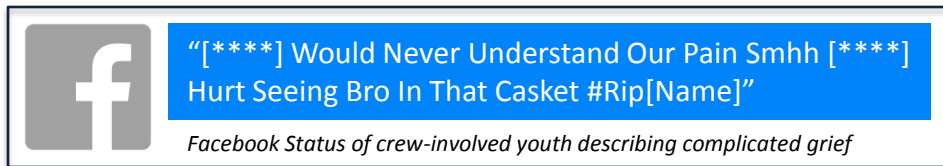
“Yoooo [****] died in the set i aint even Cry Today I d.a Cried for my son [Name] i just met a year ago. Going to school I knew he was on my type of timing One of those hood [****] with a Big Heart trying to change but to deep in ..I was just thinking like God Really Gave me mad chances & he showing me that its but so much you could get R. I.P bro [#restup](#)”

Facebook Status of crew-involved youth describing grief over a friend

Compounding Stressors Lead to Worse Outcomes:

Losing someone to murder is uniquely difficult to process. Family and friends need to both confront the sudden and horrific loss of someone they care about as well as grapple with the fact that their loved one was killed by another person. Further compounding the grieving process are police activities and feelings of disenfranchisement when news, police, and community members blame or vilify the victim for their involvement in criminal activity.^x Further interactions with the legal system through investigation and court appearances also prolong re-exposure to the grief and trauma of the loss.^{xi} When trauma symptoms and grief combine, it can lead to an experience known as *complicated grieving*, which is associated with poor health outcomes and prolonged distress.

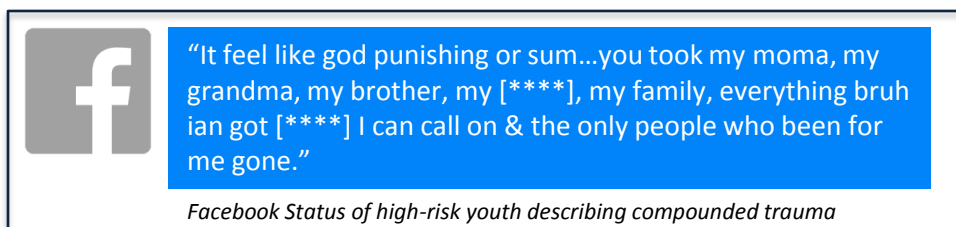
Complicated grief often acts a precursor for poor mental health outcomes, often foreshadowing post-traumatic stress disorder or major depressive episodes.^{xii} As seen in research, those experiencing complicated grief have been shown to have symptoms that differ from those grieving the loss of someone from natural causes. People experiencing complicated grief may experience a shattered world view, feel as if life is meaningless, become emotionally numb, and experience feelings of anger, bitterness, and guilt.^{xiii}



Further, a lesser understood concept is disenfranchised grief of those who have lost someone to incarceration. In these instances, the friend group is disrupted, communication is more difficult, and the absence of support is clearly felt by the un-incarcerated peers.

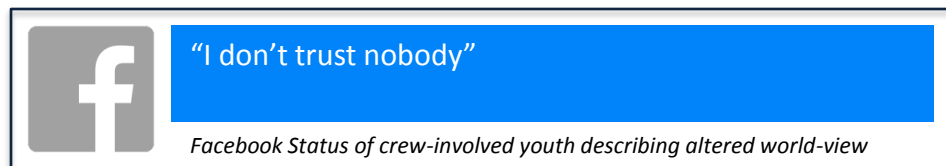
Crews generally form in the most disadvantaged areas of the city, and their activity is reflected in the data: almost 20% of shootings in New York City occur in public housing,^{xiv} and nearly half of all shootings are concentrated in only 15 police precincts.^{xv}

Trauma and grief exposure are compounded with additional stressors related to living in poverty, such as food insecurity, homelessness, and reduced access to quality education and employment. Communities experiencing the most gun violence overlap with areas of concentrated disadvantage, showing that poverty, inequality, and violence all go hand in hand.^{xvi} Such conditions lead to poorer health outcomes for its residents; including increases in heart disease, stress related illness, and obesity as well as poorer prognoses for a variety of health issues. Further, research has shown that women living in impoverished communities experience higher rates of miscarriages and infant mortality, which can be incredibly traumatizing. In this way, residents are exposed to trauma and grief in the forms of disenfranchisement, physical danger, and loss associated with illness.^{xvii}



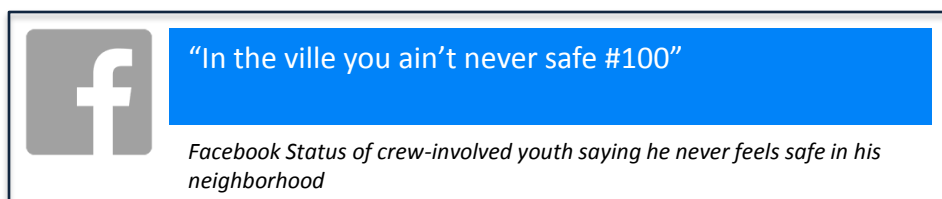
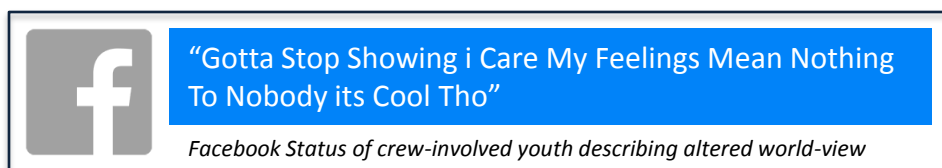
Experiencing Grief and Trauma Leads to Particular Challenges for Youth

Trauma and grief can cause particular stressors for youth. The teenage years are a developmentally complex time in which social relationships and identity are explored.^{xviii} During this period, youth are exploring their independence and making key assumptions about the world around them. For young people living in neighborhoods suffering from violence, constant confrontations with loss can disrupt their ability to process trauma and grief and lead to additional trauma symptoms.^{xix} Further, losing a loved one places additional burdens on young people as it disrupts important social networks and changes their developing worldview.^{xx} As such, after a murder, youth come to see the world as unpredictable, less trustworthy, unjust, and unsafe.^{xxi,xxii} Youth who are able to overcome grief and trauma are able to become resilient, however others may feel lost, fearful, and distrustful.^{xxiii}



In general, trauma and grief exposure can have negative psychological and behavioral impacts, many of which manifest later in life during adolescence. Oftentimes, youth exposed to or victimized by gun violence report more symptoms related to posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)^{xxiv,xxv} and depression^{xxvi} than their unvictimized peers.^{xxvii} Furthermore, exposure to community violence has serious impacts on youths' impulse control^{xxviii}, concentration^{xxix}, empathy, and emotional regulation.^{xxx} These behavioral impacts can lead to additional dysfunction such as lower education performance^{xxxi}, further involvement in crews, and criminal justice involvement^{xxxii}, which all have serious consequences for youths' future success.

Another common trauma reaction is hyper vigilance, or a hyper awareness of threat.^{xxxiii} When victims of violence leave hospitals, and return to communities where violence is all around them, hyper vigilance escalates into a generalized sense of danger and anxiety.^{xxxiv} As such, the variety of symptoms related to trauma and complicated grieving place additional burdens on youth, who then need to build strategies to cope and survive.



Crew Involvement as a Coping Mechanism:

A disrupted sense of safety creates a need in youth to find new ways to deal with perceived danger and emotions. Research has found that youth often report a need for protection as a reason for joining a crew, and report feeling less fear once part of a crew.^{xxxv} However, this new sense of safety is false, as once part of a crew youth tend to experience more victimization.^{xxxvi} The discrepancy between feeling less fear in a crew yet experiencing more victimization reframes crew membership as something that offers emotional protection against the distress of living within fear. Thus, finding ways to cope with hyper vigilance, fear, and anxiety may drive youth into joining crews.^{xxxvii}

The idea of crew-membership as a form of coping is supported by additional research which found that crew-involved youth have much higher levels of depression and suicidal thinking than a comparison group of none crew-involved youth.^{xxxviii} Joining a crew may serve as a coping mechanism that fills important psychological gaps stemming from trauma as well as healthy teen desires such as a sense of purpose, close friend group, emotional stability, independence, and emotional outlet.^{xxxix}



“Not in da mood to live someone put me to rest.”

Facebook Status of crew-involved youth describing depression and suicidal thoughts

An additional way people cope with anxiety is to “act tough” as a way to reduce the likelihood that they will be victimized again. It is understood that people who have the reputation of being weak are vulnerable to repeated victimization because potential assailants believe they will not defend themselves. Through the social processes and behavior modeling that takes place in communities that normalize violence^{xl} and within crews^{xli}, individuals come to believe that violence is critical for the maintenance of an intimidating image – which they believe keeps them safe from victimization.

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Unfortunately, the need to relieve themselves from a weak image puts them at further risk for conflict, either because they are trying to project an image of strength or because they are actively seeking to retaliate. The Crime Commission has also shown that youth use social media as a way to promote a tough and masculine image online, which sometimes puts them at risk for targeting by rivals, police monitoring, and arrest.



“Im Good Every Where Sumner, Tompkins, Albany, Weeksville, Brownville, The 90z, The Flossy, Cooper, Fulton...Everybody [*] With Me I Got Killaz For Days S.O To All My Guys”**

Facebook Status of youth giving a shout out to his friends and posturing online

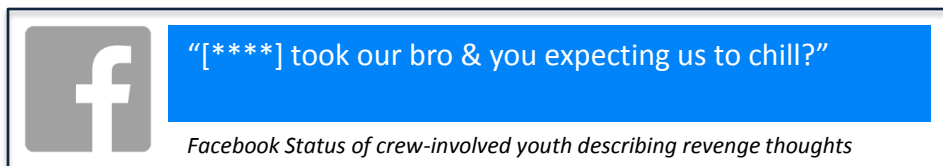
Grief and Trauma in the Cycle of Violence

For young crew members who lose their friends to gun violence, grief and trauma may operate to solidify bonds within the crew, lead to acting out, and heightened violence as a way to cope.^{xliiv} In addition, trauma and grief may play into the dynamic of sustained retaliatory violence as a form of perceived justice.

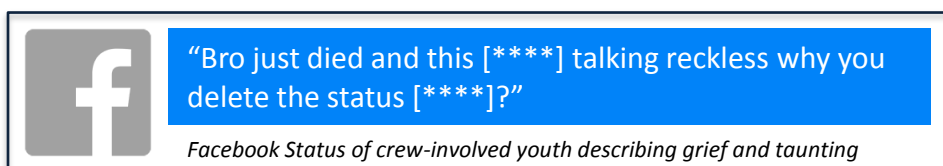
Research and indictments show that violence spikes around grieving; often increasing around memorial services and anniversaries of the death.^{xliv} As seen in one indictment of young people, talks of revenge and physical violence increased around the anniversaries of murders years later, and these specific days were often named after the deceased.^{xlvi} For these reasons it is important to understand how grief and trauma have the potential to fuel the cycle of retaliatory violence.

Since crew-related violence is often retaliatory, it is important to understand revenge as a motivator for murder. Crew-involved youth often live in a community that is surrounded by a code of honor, known by others as a “street code,”^{xlvii} which paints retaliatory violence as a normal response to disrespect and conflict. Research has found that those who hold norms around revenge are more likely to experience strong feelings of revenge after losing someone to murder.^{xlviii} This is particularly true for teenagers^{xlix}, who are generally more likely to feel revenge after losing someone to murder than adults, because of their emotional development and greater tendency to engage in rumination as well as act impulsively. Therefore, when youth involved in crews respond to homicidal loss with ideas of revenge it acts as a way of emotional coping and matches the preconceived acceptance of retaliatory justice.

This dynamic is played out with clarity through social media, where youth post promises to live life in the deceased’s honor—protecting them from disrespect, particularly around anniversaries. Social media also offers rivals a platform to taunt and disrespect the memory of a friend, which escalates and amplifies violence during a time of extreme emotional distress. Further, social media can allow for youth to mobilize around their grief and feelings for revenge.



Unfortunately, research has shown that youth who hold thoughts and feelings for revenge experience symptoms related to complicated grief and PTSD more than those who do not¹, illustrating that grief, violence norms, and retaliatory violence create a cycle that invariably leads to additional trauma, conflicts, grief, and emotional distress.



Conclusion

The elements of trauma and grief are often missing in discussions concerning youth violence. However, trauma and grief offer important psychological and behavioral insights to how and why violence is sustained in young people engaging in crew-violence. Grief and trauma are prominent in the lives of youth and serve as additional entry points that propel youth towards crew involvement and victimization.

In order to ensure that interventions meet emerging risks and needs of youth, more programs and policies need to address the impact of trauma and grief in this population. The ability to navigate through healthy grieving should be considered an important life skill that can boost resilience and prevent violence in the long-term. Therefore, the Crime Commission recommends the following:

Recommendations

- Interventions that work to prevent gun violence need to be trauma informed and address grief and healthy grieving.
- Additional bereavement services need to be offered to youth who experience loss, especially from murder.
- Since youth are exposed to loss in early childhood, skills around healthy grieving and resilience need to be offered to younger children.
- Resources around grief and trauma need to be accessible in the space where young people are actively expressing grief, which is social media.
 - Service providers should investigate ways to use social media as an opportunity for intervention.
- Grief and trauma services need to be offered to NYC Cure Violence staff, as they also lose staff and participants to gun violence.
- Continue to support NYC Cure Violence staff in responding to grief and emotional distress in their participants in person and on social media.
 - Continually invest in skills and training that enhance the work of Cure Violence and provide them more tools to address grief and trauma.

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For more information about the Crime Commission's Youth Gun Violence Prevention initiative, please contact Stephanie Ueberall at
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