

CHAPTER 1

The Beginning

“Until lions write their own history, the tale of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.”

—African proverb

I never intended to write a book, just as I never intended to become an academic. As a clinical social worker in the early 1990s, I worked mostly in cities, counseling clients struggling with mental illness and substance abuse challenges. Their stories were profound, sometimes tragic, with many moments of courage, compassion, sacrifice, and pride—all deeply affecting stories about the resiliency of the human spirit. One in particular changed the path of my life’s work.

In Atlanta during the winter of 1994, I was assigned a 23-year-old Black male client, barely a few years younger than I. He had a slight frame, a warm complexion, and eyes that were bright and alert. His intake form noted a diagnosis of major depression and substance use, with a history of sexual abuse and trauma starting at age 10. He was now hospitalized with AIDS. In 1992, at the height of the epidemic, HIV-infected people had to take first-generation drugs, as many as 20 to 30 pills per day. They were forced to hide their diagnosis to avoid being fired by their employers, ostracized by entire communities, or even killed. An AIDS diagnosis was often associated with increased mortality, especially for those who avoided treatment out of fear or who were in denial about their diagnosis. The time from receiving a late-stage AIDS diagnosis to rapid physical decline was often devastatingly swift.

While I was in Tim’s hospital room, we discussed his lack of family support due to his diagnosis and him being gay. The following week, when I returned for the second session, the nurses informed me that he had been moved to a private room. I entered the dimly lit room and

thought I had mistakenly walked in on the wrong client. Tim was now barely recognizable, a mere shadow of his appearance just seven days before. He had lost about 15 pounds from his already tiny frame, his body swallowed up by the white sheets. His face was gaunt, his eyes protruding and his complexion darkened.

It was the first time I had encountered a hospitalized person facing death from AIDS. I was not afraid of his diagnosis but was startled by the presence of death that seemed to cast a shadow around his bed. I had only experienced death up close once before, and I was taken aback by its brazen claim to someone so young. He was afraid, and I was afraid for him. “I don’t want to die alone,” he said. I sat next to him and held his hand. This violated my training not to touch clients, but at that moment, I followed my instinct to reassure and comfort him. The following week, when I returned for a third session, he had passed away. I made several calls to his mother, but my messages were never returned. The county buried his remains.

Although Tim was my first client hospitalized with AIDS, over the years I came to understand what might lie behind his story and others. I heard hundreds of horrendous stories told by clients who, as children, were physically abused, sexually violated, or both. Many began using alcohol and other drugs to treat their deep emotional pain. For some of them, self-medicating with drugs and/or having unsafe sex resulted in their contracting HIV. After hearing many such stories, I recognized the repeated connections between personal trauma, substance use, and HIV acquisition. As my clinical and intellectual curiosity about these connections grew, I decided to enroll in a doctoral program at Columbia University to study them in more depth.

Along this new academic journey, I realized that the scholarly literature had much to say about the connections between childhood sexual abuse, drug use, and unsafe sexual practices; however, most of this knowledge centered on White females. I stumbled across statistics

documenting that urban youth, especially Blacks and males, had homicide rates that were up to eight times higher than those of their White and Latino peers, respectively. I began wondering whether witnessing neighborhood violence might be related to the higher reported rates of drug use and sexual risk behaviors. This became my dissertation topic.

I planned to return to Atlanta after graduation to pursue counseling focused on trauma and mental health. However, several distinguished universities came knocking, and I was offered six tenure-track positions. I accepted a job offer from the University of Chicago, packed up my life, and moved, thinking that I would try academia for one year.

Now, after 20 years in the academy, I am still researching the psychological and behavioral effects of exposure to neighborhood violence, and how youth and families cope with such trauma. Most of my work has focused on Black youth living in US cities. I have published more than 120 peer-reviewed articles on exposure to neighborhood violence and related topics, but I never intended to write a book.

However, after years of work in which I came to be considered an “expert” on the topic of neighborhood violence, I have grown increasingly tired of giving countless interviews when gun violence, mass murders, or senseless killings take place in Chicago or elsewhere. While many conversations with reporters last more than an hour, the final print or television interviews are whittled down to two-sentence sound bites to fit the rapid American news format. I am frustrated that the complexities driving such uneven exposure to violence and its developmental consequences are diluted to pithy news bites.

These stories often refer to “the plight of Black youth, especially males, with their high unemployment, poor high school graduation rates, rap sheets by age 18, gang involvement, teen parenthood,” and so forth. These accounts, while pointing to real disparities, are grievously

incomplete and often stigmatizing, especially because they are not scripted by these youth, their families, or their communities. Nor do these stories explicate the structural factors and uneven policies that uphold and fuel these disparities, although Black public intellectuals, activists, and thought leaders have long attempted to broaden public awareness of these issues. Violent neighborhood enclaves grew out of decades of societal disinvestment, structural and economic violence, and inequality in U.S. social policy—including systematic residential segregation on explicitly racial grounds. Furthermore, many of these news stories do not tell the countless narratives of resiliency and fortitude: stories of personal triumph, family support, neighborhood activism, and social movements, such as the globally influential Movement for Black Lives.

I have often heard the quote, attributed simply as an African proverb, that says: “Until lions write their own history, the tale of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.” The maxim has been quoted by author Chinua Achebe, abolitionist Wendell Phillips, and many others who have referenced it to point to problems with colonial knowledge production. Youth and their communities lament the woefully incomplete and pathologizing narratives that often mark discourse about neighborhood violence and race. This book represents my attempt to elevate marginalized voices and to help understand public-space violence, often called “neighborhood violence,” within the complex social context of marginalization, poverty, criminalization, institutionalized racism and sexism, commodification, invisibility/hypervisibility, and other forces that contribute to the precariousness of Black life in the United States. These concepts will be discussed in fuller detail in the pages that follow.

One of the first steps in decolonizing knowledge production and bias is interrogating its terms. Therefore, while this book takes on the topic of “violence,” specifically “neighborhood violence,” I must acknowledge the assumptions embedded in those words. As many scholars and

activists have reminded us, violence is a “slippery concept.”¹ While the answer to the question “What do we mean by violence?” may at first seem obvious, our notions of what constitutes violence are often governed more by linguistic convention than by conceptual rigor. The editors of one book on violence wrote in their introduction: “Violence can never be understood in terms of its physicality—force, assault, or the infliction of pain—alone. Violence also includes assaults on the personhood, dignity, sense of worth or value of the victim. The social and cultural dimensions of violence are what gives violence its power and meaning.”² While most of us may agree that violence is defined in part as an assault on the bodily integrity or psychosocial well-being of a person or neighborhood of people, some such assaults are more likely to be classified as “violence” than others. Few would hesitate to call a mugging violent. However, we might find more dissent over whether welfare state cutbacks, incarceration, underfunding of schools in Black neighborhoods, economic restructuring, or overpolicing and excessive arrests constitute violent acts. These are all dimensions of structural violence that erode America’s progress toward a more equitable and just society.

The World Health Organization’s *World Report on Violence and Health* defines violence as “the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or neighborhood that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation.”³ This definition raises the complicated question of whether having “intent to harm” is necessary for violence to occur. For instance, in a 2009 essay on structural violence, Paul Farmer shares stories of “some of the mechanisms through which large-scale social forces crystallize into the sharp, hard surfaces of individual suffering. Such suffering is structured by historically given (and often economically driven) processes and forces that conspire . . . to constrain agency. For many . . .

life choices are structured by racism, sexism, political violence, *and* grinding poverty.”⁴ Farmer shares harrowing accounts from his fieldwork in Haiti of young women and girls who were driven by poverty into precarious employment, risky nonvoluntary sexual relationships, and deadly disease and stories of men—disproportionately poor—who were blacklisted, tormented, and tortured by military forces after the 1991 coup. Reflecting on intent, Farmer writes that “these afflictions were not the result of accident or of force majeure; they were the consequence, direct or indirect, of human agency.”⁵ Nevertheless, the human agency that produces this violence is spread among many people and institutions, and those who may seem most directly involved in inflicting bodily injury on another often have highly constrained individual agency—themselves caught up in powerful political, economic, and historical processes and forces. Indeed, these so-called “perpetrators of interpersonal violence” often have far less power to produce or prevent structural violence than others—foreign investors, say, or members of international political institutions—who, paradoxically, may not even know about particular incidents of harm. Some have described these processes or forces of structural violence, which often produce more intimate, proximate incidents of harm, as cycles, chains, or a “continuum of violence.”⁶

It is therefore essential that this book’s treatment of violence not elide the structural processes within which individual incidents of interpersonal violence are embedded. As sociologist Sudhir Venkatesh states, “good [research] is always a mixture of close focus and long shot.”⁷ At the same time, I wish to be as clear as possible when defining neighborhood violence within the scope of this book. Like violence, the terms “Black violence” and “neighborhood violence” are complicated. As many—such as gender and race theorist Linda Alcoff⁸—have noted, writing or speaking about a “neighborhood” often involves the speaker taking an outside

position, resulting in an us/them dichotomy. This raises the question: Who is the “neighborhood” referred to in the phrase “neighborhood violence”? How are the neighborhood being delimited and the violence measured? How do we define what neighborhood violence is, and how does this present bias? All assumptions are value laden, never neutral or value free.

The aforementioned World Health Organization report defines neighborhood violence as violence between individuals who are unrelated, and who may or may not know each other, generally taking place outside the home.⁹ In other words, the report defines neighborhood violence as interpersonal and proximate. It includes, but is not limited to, incidents of public-space violence. Yet while by definition, “neighborhood violence” could apply to a broad range of behaviors and contexts, it is most frequently used in practice to describe perceived patterns of violence in particular locations. Usually, analysts describe neighborhood violence as taking place in lower-income urban (and, increasingly, suburban) neighborhoods, often highly racially segregated ones. Acts that are often categorized as neighborhood violence include hearing about, witnessing, or being a victim of gang- and gun-related incidents, muggings, robberies, and rapes.

I aim to draw attention to the ways that systemic factors and forces conspire to concentrate the burden of violence on marginalized communities—after all, that is the topic of this book. I also acknowledge the sociology and political construction of neighborhood violence, which is sometimes accompanied by biased and charged public rhetoric. I offer two timely examples, both related to my hometown of Chicago.

First, whenever the Blackhawks (the city’s professional hockey team) or the pro baseball Cubs celebrate a big victory, many of the city’s wealthy, predominately White neighborhoods (especially Wrigleyville, home of the Cubs) erupt in violence, including fights, destruction of property, arson, and other disorderly conduct, these behaviors are not considered violent acts but

are seen as a celebration or revelatory. While arrests do occur, many residents speculate that the public rhetoric and the media and police responses surrounding the violence would be markedly different if the disorderly conduct happened in a predominately poor and non-White neighborhood. For example, if similar celebratory expressions occurred among Black youth in Chicago's impoverished Englewood neighborhood on the South Side, the police response would likely be more muscular, the media rhetoric more marginalizing.

The second example pertains to the “dog-whistle politics” of President Donald Trump, specifically his frequent invocations of Chicago gun violence during the 2016 presidential election and in his first year in office. He even tweeted, four days after his inauguration, that “if Chicago doesn't fix the horrible ‘carnage’ going on, 228 shootings in 2017 with 42 killings (up 24% from 2016), I will send in the Feds!”¹⁰ Many commentators remarked on his decision to highlight Chicago specifically—the hometown of former president Barack Obama, a frequent target of Trump's rhetoric. As author and journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates articulated in a 2017 visit to the city, conservative politicians like Trump frequently “use Chicago as a tool—‘Chicago’ has become code for ‘Black people.’”¹¹ This racially coded language appeals to the anti-Black attitudes and law-and-order politics of many in their voting base. And as many have noted, although gun deaths in Chicago are a serious public health concern, data collected over 2011–2016 reveal that Chicago is not even among the top 10 most dangerous large cities in terms of homicide rates, adjusted for population, as I discuss further in chapter 2. Later in the book, I discuss gun violence specifically, as well as the problems with analyzing gun violence at the city level and with looking at short-term trends. For now, I wish simply to highlight that public rhetoric about violence is often political on a multitude of levels, frequently resulting in the detriment and further marginalization of those most burdened by neighborhood violence and the

larger forces that sustain it.

In Chicago and many other large American cities, the narratives around violence are primarily crafted and owned by law enforcement officers. The perspectives of public health, mental health, and education scholars and community providers and activists are largely absent. Unsurprisingly, these narratives often glorify the politics, policies, and practices of law enforcement. Look at who appears on the evening news after a tragic public shooting in a lower-income neighborhood, and note how the story begins to be framed. Public rhetoric that accompanies incidents of neighborhood violence often includes words such as *gang bangers*, *monsters*, *unintended victims*, *civilian casualties*, *war zone*, *criminals*, *illegal guns*, *perpetrators*, *violated probation*, *communities lacking morality or a respect for life*, and *criminal record*. Commentators often call for stiffer sentences, increased policing, more law enforcement funding, and more heavily militarized forces. All too often, the narratives foreground race, drawing violent caricatures of the accused and frequently assuming guilt before due process. In short, these storytellers dehumanize the suspects—and often the victims—of neighborhood violence, and they voice the need to “arrest” or “police” the problem away. While I decidedly disagree with the myopic perspective that social problems are best fixed through the criminal justice system, it is said that “to a hammer, everything looks like a nail.” I understand how police training, professional culture, and other socialization processes (including the militarization of American policing, entrenching the “us-versus-them” mentality) have led many law enforcement officials to conceptualize and narrate neighborhood violence in these ways.

The parochial nature of these messages, which often demonize the communities besieged by tragedy and dole out simplistic labels of “perpetrators” or “victims,” was driven home when a Chicago reporter contacted me after a three-year-old child became a bystander victim of gun

violence in 2017. The journalist's first question was "As an expert on neighborhood violence, do you have any insights into the psyche of gang members who would kill a three-year-old child?" A veteran of such interviews, I could tell that the reporter was angling for a catchy two-minute sound bite. For almost 45 minutes, I engaged him in a complex conversation about the structural drivers and policy inequalities underlying that particular shooting and thousands of others. I shared my view that both "victims" and "perpetrators," broadly speaking, are casualties of well-documented historical processes and public policy decisions that have resulted in failing schools, scant job opportunities, racial and neighborhood segregation, and the hopelessness and anger prevailing among many youth growing up in an unequal America. Our nation is, quite literally, killing and incarcerating marginalized citizens at staggering rates, with a dangerous toll for all America. I also reminded the reporter that while large-scale social forces affect youth who find themselves entangled in violence, the tendency to generalize about the "psyche of gang members" occurs far more often when the accused and the victims are non-White. As many commentators and social media activists have highlighted in recent years, too often non-White shooters' actions are described as symptoms of cultural pathology (e.g., racist "Black-on-Black crime" rhetoric and mischaracterizations of Islamic doctrine), while White shooters, including Dylann Roof, Stephen Paddock, and countless others, are referred to as mentally deranged "lone wolves." This time, when my thorough interview was reduced to shallow, two-minute news clips, I realized the topic merited a book-length discussion.

At its core, this book is designed to be an alternative to the sound bites, ahistorical "common sense" narratives, and detached scholarly analyses that fail to get to the heart of the matter. In it, I share the powerful stories and insights of Black youth and elevate their voices, weaving their narratives around data, research findings, and historical accounts that provide

further context for their experiences. In each chapter, I aim to celebrate their survival and, through their experiences, illuminate the lives of many others who have grown up in communities where neighborhood violence is woven into the fabric of daily life. At times, I draw the lens back to highlight the broad historical, political, economic and racial factors that shape the construction, concentration, and narrative of violence in Black neighborhoods. I invite readers to embrace these young people's stories and the lessons they teach us within the important context of the larger social violent structures that influence the day-to-day experiences of these Black youth, their families and neighborhoods.

In the first section of the book, I place neighborhood violence in the United States in context relative to other high-income countries. In chapter 4, coauthored with my longtime collaborator Dr. Jason Bird, we highlight historical trends that have led to racially segregated urban neighborhoods and concentrations of poverty and violence. In chapter 5, I examine the psychological and behavioral health characteristics that researchers and practitioners have found to be associated with exposure to neighborhood violence. In the following chapters, I offer a possible conceptual model to explain how child and adolescent development may be influenced by exposure to neighborhood violence. Throughout the discussion, I draw on my interviews with Black youth to illustrate the broader themes.

In the second part of the book, I use interview and survey data to show how violence influences risky sexual behaviors among Black youth in low-resourced neighborhoods. I devote some attention to this connection because higher rates of neighborhood violence as well as higher HIV rates are concentrated in poorer communities. However, the existing literatures have not sufficiently highlighted possible reasons for such a connection. Equally true, living in poverty and experiencing neighborhood violence are associated with lower academic

achievement. I also devote some attention to this connection to illustrate that several youth problems, such as low academic achievement, involvement with “gang peers,” and risky sex and illicit drug use can be linked to neighborhood trauma. I look in particular at Woodlawn, a historic neighborhood on Chicago’s South Side. Illustrations of the ongoing threat of violence in impoverished communities are balanced with interviews showing caregivers’ resiliency and the variety of strategies they use to protect their youth. I expand the scope of discussion of neighborhood violence to examine how positive factors, such as parental monitoring, high self-esteem, and hopes for the future, can help protect youth living in impoverished neighborhoods.

In the final part of the book, I lay out sensible practice and policy recommendations based on the insights from the first two parts. Building on the argument that neighborhood violence results from complex and multiple forces, I make the case for an integrated, multisystem approach to addressing violence in low-resourced urban communities. To illustrate this type of approach, I introduce the reader to several community and university partnerships working to curtail neighborhood violence exposure and its damaging effects on youth.

When I was in the early stages of conceptualizing this book, I talked about it with 26-year-old Jamal at a Starbucks in Chicago’s Hyde Park neighborhood. I told him I was interested in telling the stories of young people exposed to neighborhood violence. He asked me many questions: “Why do you want to write this book?” “Will I, and the others, be identified in it by name?” “Who are you writing it for, and will people read it or actually care?” I could tell he was wondering whether to trust me. Would I accurately convey his story and those of other people to whom he might introduce me, thereby entrusting them to my care? Would I misrepresent their stories, decontextualize them, or reduce them to stereotypes or statistics? “You know,” he stated, “with social media we tell and control our own stories. Mainstream media...well, they tell you

their version of our story.”

I have invited these young persons, their families, and their communities to share their own version of their stories here. Yet ultimately, I am aware that I control how their stories are summarized, contextualized, transcribed, arranged, and interpreted. My own summaries of their accounts are not value free or neutral. I choose which parts to share or not, which details are relevant, which other texts to add to the conversation. And, admittedly, to a large extent, I do not have the power to choose at all, because of the limitations of my own perspective and my own conceptual frameworks and biases. How do I come to observe what I observe about a participant? Why do I fail to see some things while noticing others? What are my assumptions, my values, my frameworks for knowing or believing? Without question, I will misinterpret some of the meaning of my informants’ messages, simply because we are different people, with different relationships to words, gestures, and ideas; different histories and experiences to draw upon; different bodies of expertise. What is more, we are dynamic: our own insights into our experiences are ever shifting, ever incomplete. We must narrate our own pasts, which grow increasingly distant from us in time—though with passing time, we gain new insights that help us see our experiences in new ways. History is never stationary; we recast our histories by retelling them. In other words, while I aspire to convey the participants’ stories in ways that they would find respectful, accurate, and satisfying, this book is not “objective,” nor could it ever be. It is shaped by many of the same processes and forces underlying neighborhood violence: inequality, racism, patriarchy, heteronormativity, capitalism, and many others that so powerfully pattern our society.

On top of all this is the violent, ongoing history of colonial representation: the ways that knowledge production, in the hands of powerful actors, has been used to marginalize, stereotype,

silence, pathologize, commodify and kill. As an academician, social science researcher, psychotherapist, and social worker, I take seriously my responsibility to reflect on the histories of colonial knowledge production in my own fields of expertise and to interrogate my own role in reproducing oppressive systems and structures. No matter how sincerely I wish for the lions' histories to be in the lions' hands, rather than hunters', the histories of the young men and women in this book are not ultimately in their hands, but in mine, which themselves have been shaped by the systems of which I am a part.

Therefore, this book is personal. It collects the insights and lessons I have learned over the past 20 years, in conversing with and reflecting deeply on the testimonies of youth and parents I have encountered in my research and practice, including hundreds of survey interviews and dozens of focus groups. The book is especially informed by the many hours I spent with young Black youth and their guardians, who generously shared their stories with me to pass along to you. All participant names and some identifying information have been changed to protect their identities. These are actual and not fictional people and places. Dialogue has been reconstructed from transcripts, field notes and in some cases their memories and mine. I have tried to reproduce the conversations as accurately as possible. I am indebted to the youth and their families for taking the time, having the courage to tell their stories, sharing their wisdom, and being willing to recall and relive the pain associated with their experiences. Moreover, I am struck by their insight and resiliency. But these stories do not start or end with me, nor with these young "lions" and their families. Their stories are a part of our larger story—of America, the Beautiful and Violent.

¹ Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Philippe Bourgois, eds., *Violence in War and Peace* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 1.

-
- ² Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois, *Violence in War and Peace*.
- ³ Etienne G. Krug, James A. Mercy, Linda L. Dahlberg, and Anthony B. Zwi, “The World Report on Violence and Health,” *The Lancet* 360, no. 9339 (2002): 1083–88, quote at 1084.
- ⁴ Paul Farmer, “On Suffering and Structural Violence: A View from Below,” *Race/Ethnicity: Multidisciplinary Global Contexts* 3, no. 1 (2009): 12–13.
- ⁵ Farmer, “On Suffering,” 19.
- ⁶ Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois, *Violence in War and Peace*.
- ⁷ Sudhir Venkatesh, *Floating City: A Rogue Sociologist Lost and Found in New York’s Underground Economy* (New York: Penguin, 2013), 73.
- ⁸ Linda Alcoff, “The Problem of Speaking for Others,” *Cultural Critique*, no. 20 (Winter 1991–1992): 5–32; Linda Alcoff, “The Problem of Speaking for Others,” in *Voice in Qualitative Inquiry: Challenging Conventional, Interpretive, and Critical Conceptions in Qualitative Research*, ed. Alecia Y. Jackson and Lisa A. Mazzei (New York: Routledge, 2009), 129–48.
- ⁹ Krug et al., “World Report on Violence and Health.”
- ¹⁰ Quoted in John Wagner and Mark Berman, “Trump Threatens to ‘Send in the Feds’ to Address Chicago ‘Carnage,’” *Washington Post*, January 25, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2017/01/24/trump-threatens-to-send-in-the-feds-to-address-chicago-carnage/?utm_term=.e84689ca542a.
- ¹¹ Kim Janssen, “Ta-Nehisi Coates: ‘Chicago’ Is ‘Code for Black People,’” *Chicago Tribune*, October 18, 2017, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/chicago-inc/ct-met-ta-nehisi-coates-1018-chicago-inc-20171017-story.html>.