# Relational Empowerment Among Public Safety Outreach Workers and Violence Interventionists in U.S. Cities: A Qualitative Inquiry

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## APPROVAL FOR SUCCESSFUL DEFENSE

**Christopher M. Thompson** has successfully defended and made the required modifications to the text of the doctoral dissertation for the **Ph.D.** during this **Fall** Semester.

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## Dedication

This project is dedicated to my grandfather, Travis Thompson, or as I endearingly refer to him: *Grandpa T*. I would also like to dedicate this project to my grandmother, Sharon B. Powers. I have held them both close to my heart throughout this journey. Although they are not here to see this pivotal moment in my life, I know they are with me in spirit and proud of me for where I started and what I accomplished. I am honored and proud to be in their company as a fellow doctor.

This project is also dedicated to all the poor and working-class, BIPOC families and communities who are impacted by structural and community violence around the world, and to all the activists, organizers, and professional street violence outreach workers and interventionists in the trenches who are committed to saving lives every day. They are changing the way that the world imagines public safety and I am deeply inspired, activated, and energized by their love, passion, and dedication to the work.

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**Abstract**

The nation-wide uprisings for racial justice in the Summer of 2020 brought into mainstream awareness the calls to shift resources away from police departments and channel funds to mental health, education, and other social services. However, in the wake of recent post-pandemic surges in community violence, police budgets increased, while public opinion for grassroots, radical initiatives like "defund the police" that many activists, organizers, and abolitionists pushed into public consciousness has faltered. Studies have shown that the implementation of community-led public safety programs significantly reduce incidents of street violence in U.S. cities. Thus, research that informs community-driven violence intervention and prevention is vital to curbing this public health crisis. The current qualitative study builds on the existing literature on relational empowerment, community organizing, and community-led public safety to explore the following: (a) How do community-led public safety outreach workers, violence interventionists, and crisis responders experience relational empowerment in the context of community organizing? (b) How do they utilize relationships to enact community-level change? And (c) What are their perceptions of the barriers to relational empowerment and effective community-led violence prevention? Thematic analysis revealed unique pathways via all components of relational empowerment. *Norms Built on Respect* and *Collective Over the Individual* were identified as important themes within bridging social divides, as participants effectively utilized these principles when navigating internal disputes. The capacity to *Navigate Power Structures* and *Channel Social Ties* were themes within collaborative competence that were vital for strengthening community trust, building interorganizational partnerships, and adapting in interpersonal exchanges with those in positions of power to meet organizational goals. Facilitating others' empowerment consisted of leadership *Balancing Worker Autonomy &*

*Guidance.* Passing on legacy was identified as a relational skill consisting of *Transmitting Self-Efficacy & Commitment* in the form of leadership modeling, but also a competency among membership who carry legacy as they *Learn, Internalize, & Apply* cultural norms, values, principles, knowledge, and skills. This further demarcates earlier conceptual overlap between Passing on Legacy and Facilitating Others' Empowerment (Christens, 2012). Participants described leadership modeling as important for increasing self-efficacy (i.e., emotional empowerment). *Organization as Family,* a theme within mobilizing networks was shown to increase worker motivation and engagement (i.e., behavioral empowerment). Furthermore, a reciprocal relationship was revealed between cognitive and emotional empowerment, and civic engagement. Important relational competencies not included within the construct of relational empowerment were also identified, which involved resident outreach and engagement. Lastly, relational processes tied to resident needs assessment and intervention, as well as violence intervention and mediation were also delineated. This study contributes to existing research on the practice of community-led public safety and the theoretical development of relational empowerment as a construct. A penal abolitionist framework is used to understand structural issues contributing to barriers to relational empowerment.

*Keywords:* relational empowerment, psychological empowerment, community-led public safety, community organizing, community violence

**CHAPTER I**

**INTRODUCTION**

Although rates of community-based violence had been steadily declining since the

1990's, violent crime has begun to climb more recently in the United States (Lopez et al., 2023;

Uniform Crime Report, 2019). Community violence has taken a substantial toll on individuals,

families, and communities (Bacchini & Esposito, 2020; Davis et al., 2020; Gardella et al., 2016;

Kruger et al., 2007), and disproportionately impacts low-income neighborhoods and

communities of color (Morgan & Oudekerk, 2019). Community violence, or street violence, is

characterized by intentional acts of violence in public areas (Cooley-Quille, Turner, & Beidel,

1995). Research has shown that community violence is often linked to poverty, unemployment,

family instability, and other community-level stressors (Centers for Disease Control and

Prevention [CDC], 2020). These complex, systemic factors pose significant challenges for

reducing and preventing community violence.

The use of law enforcement has historically been the primary strategy for reducing crime

and violence (Clear, 2009; Wortley, 2002). However, research suggests that police are often

overburdened, as they are expected to manage the byproducts of complex social problems

typically reserved for social workers and other mental health professionals (Fuller et al., 2015;

Treatment Advocacy Center, 2019). Moreover, the long history of disproportionate police

misconduct, corruption, and violence in communities of color has undermined resident trust

towards law enforcement, particularly in neighborhoods hardest hit by community violence

(Giffords Law Center [GLC], 2020; McCarthy, 2019).

Given the detrimental impact that mass incarceration has had on low-income

communities of color (Alexander, 2010), communities are increasingly reimagining the role of

policing and public safety in the United States. Calls to defund or dismantle police departments increased in the wake of high-profile police killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and other unarmed Black Americans (Andrew, 2020). The movement to shift resources from law enforcement to community organizations and social services has its roots in radical abolitionist traditions (Chazkel et al., 2020; Davis, 2011; Tchoukleva et al., 2020), but during the country-wide uprising for racial justice in the summer of 2020, community-driven alternatives to policing increasingly became a focus within mainstream discourse in the United States (Fernandez, 2020). However, in the years that followed, funding for police departments actually increased (Manthey et al., 2022) and although public opinion regarding community-driven solutions dropped, increases in new police reforms have been implemented within the last two years (Friess, 2022).

## Statement of the Problem

The consequences of street crime are vast. Exposure to violence can lead to fear and mistrust among residents (Kruger et al., 2007) and physically restrict their ability to move freely in their neighborhood (Loukaitou-sideris & Eck, 2007; Stafford et al., 2007). Community violence can also put an economic strain on communities, as many business owners are discouraged from opening in high crime areas, thus decreasing property values (Hipp, 2011) and perpetuating cycles of poverty and subsequent violence.

Another consequence of street violence is the psychological strain it puts on communities. Research has shown that violence exposure increases the likelihood of trauma-related symptoms and other signs of psychological distress (Bacchini & Esposito, 2020; Gaylord-Harden et al., 2020; Margolin et al., 2010; Pierre et al., 2020; Yearwood et al., 2017). Individuals who experience complex trauma, or ongoing traumatic stress, may present with symptoms characterized by anger, aggression, and callousness which may serve an adaptive

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function (Roach, 2013). Given the association between early exposure to community violence and aggression or violence later in life (Davis et al., 2020; Myers et al., 2018; Spano & Bolland, 2013), a consequence of violence exposure is increased likelihood for the perpetuation of violence.

Community violence has been negatively associated with school climate and academic achievement (Gardella et al., 2016; McCoy et al., 2013; Ruiz et al., 2018). Given that eligibility for school funding is often contingent upon standardized test scores and other measures of academic achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2007), high-crime neighborhoods may be at an increased risk of school closures. One research study revealed that low-performing schools were more likely to be closed in communities with larger proportions of Black and Latino/a students. More than half of displaced students were later transferred to school settings that were also low performing (Han et al., 2017).

Violent crime rates rose substantially in the early 1990's (Wintemute, 1999) and although U.S. cities have seen declines in the past 30 years, community violence continues to be a concern, as rates have recently been on the rise (Morgan & Oudekerk, 2019) and surged at a 24% increase in homicides in 2023 compared to the first half of 2019 (Lopez et al., 2023). Between 2015 and 2018, the number of violent-crime victims who were 12 years old or older increased from 2.7 million to 3.3 million. Survey data from 2018 also revealed that less than half (43%) of violent victimizations were reported to police (Morgan & Oudekerk, 2019). Moreover, research has shown that since 1965, the clearance rate of solved homicide cases has declined by almost 20% (Murder Accountability Project, 2020). The challenges that traditional policing have encountered in reducing violence and potentially increasing crime in some instances (Steman,

2017), suggests that alternative, community-led strategies may offer sources of expertise that have largely been ignored in mainstream public-safety discourse.

Community organizations that focus on reducing crime and violence have played an important role throughout cities and neighborhoods across the United States. Longitudinal data suggest that local organizations contributed to the major drop in homicide rates occurring between 1990-2010 (Sharkley et al., 2017). Sharkley and colleagues (2017) estimated that for every 10 community organizations added per 100,000 residents, the murder rate declined by 9 percent, the violent crime rate reduced by 6 percent, and the rate of property crimes declined by 4 percent. Given the integral role that local organizations play in enhancing public safety, evaluations of community-led violence prevention initiatives have become an important area of focus among researchers.

Community-led violence prevention initiatives were developed, in part, to ameliorate community-police tensions by allowing residents greater autonomy to address violence in their neighborhoods (Peterson, 2020). For the past 30 years, community-led public safety has sought to address community violence using the knowledge, skills, and expertise of community members impacted by violence. Many organizations involved in violence prevention work view violence as a public health problem (Cure Violence Global, 2020; Krug et al., 2002). These initiatives are often data-driven and receive state-funding to hire local residents and community organizations to engage in violence prevention work in their neighborhoods. Many program evaluations have shown reductions in crime and violence (Henry et al., 2014; Roman et al., 2017; Skogan et al., 2009; Webster et al., 2012). Despite the promise of community-led public safety, studies that have attempted to replicate previously successful initiatives have shown

mixed results, which are attributed to several challenges to program implementation (Fox et al., 2015; Picard-Fritsche & Cerniglia, 2013; Wilson & Chermak, 2011).

Many of the challenges that community-led public safety initiatives encounter include police-community tensions, divergent interests, lack of strong ties with community partners, lack of an overall presence in the neighborhood, and inconsistent state funding (Berman & Gold, 2011; Fox et al., 2015; Skogan et al., 2009; Wilson & Chermak, 2011). The concept of *relational empowerment* is useful for understanding the ways in which interpersonal relationships within and across community organizations can overcome these challenges and help meet desired goals. Relational empowerment is defined as the important psychological processes that help facilitate relationships within organizations and communities that promote transformative social change (Christens, 2012).

Relational empowerment has been studied across diverse contexts, such as elementary school students participating in a youth participatory action research (yPAR) after school program (Langhout et al., 2014), student leaders of various high school Gay Straight Alliance organizations (Russell et al., 2009), youth of color exposed to community violence (Wray-Lake & Abrams, 2020), and adult residents of Azerbaijan, many of whom were involved in community organizations (Cheryomukhin & Peterson, 2014). This research has suggested that relational empowerment is a flexible construct that can be applied to various settings and organizations across age, race, ethnicity, and class and can look very differently across contexts (Cheryomukhin & Peterson, 2014; Langhout et al., 2014; Russell et al., 2009; Wray-Lake & Abrams, 2020). To date, no studies have examined relational empowerment among activists and community organizers involved in violence prevention. Thus, identifying the various ways in which activists and organizers demonstrate relational empowerment may yield important insights

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that can strengthen community-led violence prevention initiatives and contribute to the knowledge base of relational empowerment and other empowering processes.

Many of the challenges that community-led public safety initiatives encounter underscore the importance of interpersonal relationships (Berman & Gold, 2011; Fox et al., 2015; Skogan et al., 2009; Wilson & Chermak, 2011). Prior research suggested that relationship building may be a vital socialization process necessary for raising critical awareness and sustaining civic engagement and organizing (Russell et al., 2009; Christens et al., 2010; Wray-Lake & Abrams, 2020). Moreover, the dimensions of relational empowerment align with the overarching goals of a well-funded and thoroughly researched strategy for community-led violence prevention known as the *Cure Violence model*, which attempts to shift social norms through community mobilization (Cure Violence, 2020). All five dimensions of relational empowerment, discussed further in Chapter Two (i.e., bridging divides, collaborative competence, mobilizing networks, facilitating others' empowerment, and passing on the legacy), are particularly relevant to building strong social ties, strengthening solidarity, mobilizing resources, and sustaining organizational capacity to address community violence. Thus, examining how relational empowerment manifests within the unique context of antiviolence community organizing may provide important insights that inform grassroots strategies. Moreover, since no studies have examined relational empowerment among grassroots activists and organizers involved in community-led violence prevention, findings may also broaden understandings of relational empowerment as a psychological construct.

**Purpose of the Study**

The present study examined relational empowerment in the context of community organizing and neighborhood-driven public safety. The purpose of this research was to explore

how staff who work in community-led violence prevention experience relational empowerment, the ways they utilize relationships to enact community-level change, and what they perceive to be the barriers to relational empowerment and antiviolence organizing. Identifying how members of these organizations build partnerships, manage tensions across relationships, promote solidarity, mobilize communities, and sustain their organizations over time to address problems of violence and victimization is an important focus of this research.

This study sought to explore the relational processes that contribute to empowered community violence prevention organizations. Staff who work as outreach workers, violence interventionists, and in crisis response within community-led public safety programs in U.S. cities were the focus of this research. Given the breadth of grassroots organizing that focused on preventing community violence (Butts et al., 2015; Cure Violence, 2020), this study provides useful insights into the relational processes that contribute to effective violence prevention among organizations that share similar ecological contexts.

Members of community-based violence prevention organizations have strong roots in the community. Many have been directly impacted or had loved ones who have been exposed to violence. They often have first-hand knowledge of gang life and many live in neighborhoods with the highest rates of gun violence. As violence interventionists, they utilize their credibility in the community and knowledge of street dynamics to interrupt disputes before they become violent (Butts et al., 2015). Moreover, they serve as outreach workers or peer mentors for high-risk youth, provide crises intervention, offer resources, and direct residents to vital services necessary for minimizing risk of violence exposure (Butts et al., 2015). Community-led public safety programs may also engage in protests, demonstrations, vigils, and other outreach initiatives to mobilize the larger community beyond their neighborhood around violence

prevention (Butts et al., 2015; Cure violence, 2021). Lastly, they work to develop partnerships and coalitions with other community organizations and stakeholders to respond more efficiently to the needs of the community (Butts et al., 2015).

This research examined how relational empowerment is enacted among outreach workers, violence interventionists, and crisis responders in U.S. cities. The unique challenges they face in building empowering relationships was also identified. Lastly, this study sought to explore factors that contribute to relational empowerment among individuals involved in violence prevention work and how these processes strengthen their initiatives and sustain their organizations over time.

## Research Questions

The following research questions framed this study: (a) How do community-led public safety outreach workers, violence interventionists, and crisis responders experience relational empowerment in the context of community organizing? (b) How do they utilize relationships to enact community-level change? (c) What are their perceptions of the barriers to relational empowerment and effective community-led violence prevention?

### Definition of Key Terms

#### *Community-led Public Safety*

Community-led public safety programs are nonprofit structures comprised of a diverse range of employees. This study primarily focused on staff who work as outreach workers, violence interventionists, and crisis responders. Outreach workers provide youth outreach and mentorship, provide residents with resources, as well as offer case management services by connecting them with other organizations and service providers in the community. Violence interventionists utilize their credibility, lived experience, social connections, and expertise of

street dynamics and gang life to intervene and mediate tensions before they escalate into violence. Crisis responders respond to the scene immediately following a shooting, homicide, or other violent crime. They work with the hospitals and law enforcement in their city as a resource to quickly intervene and provide emotional support and tangible resources for residents who lost a loved one, have been victimized, or exposed to violence. The names of these three job roles vary depending on the organization. In some cases, the term *outreach worker* encapsulates violence intervention and crisis response. For the purpose of this study, they have been categorized above with their associated activities.

### *Community Violence (Street Violence)*

Community violence, or street violence, is defined as the intentional acts of interpersonal violence in public areas (Cooley-Quille et al., 1995). For the purpose of this study, community violence included gang conflict, shootings, or any physical altercations in the community carried out with or without a firearm.

### *Empowerment*

Woodall et al. (2012) argued that the definition of empowerment has become diluted and less precise because of its widespread use in health promotion. In this study, the term *empowerment* refers to a process in which individuals, organizations, and communities gain mastery over the social problems that impact their lives (Rappaport, 1987; Zimmerman, 1995).

### *Organizer*

An *organizer* is defined as someone who is engaged in long-term strategies and projects, with the aim of bringing atomized people together around common interests to build collective power. Organizing consists of building the infrastructure necessary to sustainably identify points of leverage or vulnerability within the circumstances that organizers seek to transform (Taylor

2016). In the context of this study, an organizer may raise money for community resources, develop mutual aid networks, mobilize residents to join violence prevention initiatives, and identify partnerships with other organizations and service providers to build organizational capacity and support for residents. In addition, the term *antiviolence organizer* or *antiviolence organizing* was used as a qualifier for describing the organizing activities above, as they relate to community violence prevention or community-led public safety.

*Psychological Empowerment*

This study used the definition offered by Christens et al. (2014), in which psychological empowerment "…refers to the processes through which people, organizations, and communities are developing critical awareness of their environment, building social networks and social movements, and gaining greater control over their lives" (p. 1766).

*Relational Empowerment*

Relational empowerment, or the relational component of psychological empowerment, consists of the psychological processes necessary for cultivating interpersonal relationships within organizations and communities that promote transformative social change. There are five distinct components of relational empowerment: Bridging divides, collaborative competency, mobilizing networks, facilitate others' empowerment, and passing on the legacy (Christens, 2012).

### Significance of the Study

The nationwide protests led by Black Lives Matter and other organizations in response to the police killing of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and other unarmed Black Americans have led communities and policy makers to rethink the role of policing in the United States (Andrew, 2020). In Minneapolis, Minnesota public officials had announced their intent to dismantle the

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police department and replace it with a holistic public safety approach that involves community-led violence prevention (Romo, 2020). Although reforms have taken place since the 2020 uprisings (Friess, 2022), calls to reallocate public safety funding have waned. Many of the efforts to shift funds from law enforcement to community-based solutions have faltered due to political pressure to respond to the recent post-pandemic crime surge with more police (Londono, 2023). Given these recent barriers that attempt to discredit community-led public safety initiatives, more research is needed to inform best practices and promote policies that facilitate community empowerment. This research study sought to inform practice within community organizing by identifying the psychological competencies and relational processes necessary for creating transformative community-led change in violence prevention.

Although community activists and organizers have recently pushed the conversation of community-led public safety into mainstream discourse, many in the U. S., including liberal constituencies, are skeptical about residents' and community organizations' ability to police their own neighborhoods (McCaskill, 2020). Thus, community organizations that actively lead public safety initiatives encounter a host of challenges that other organizations may not necessarily contend with. Issues related to housing, healthcare, and employment, for example, are generally accepted by the public as viable initiatives that warrant community engagement. Public safety, however, is typically assumed to fall on law enforcement and the broader criminal justice system. Calls to defund the police, which is a call to reallocate resources to mental health and social services, albeit increasingly becoming mainstream due to increasing awareness of police violence, continue to be met with mixed public support (Crabtree, 2020; Friess, 2022).

Given that the dominant view favors law enforcement and the criminal justice system in addressing public safety concerns, it is important for research to elevate counternarratives by

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centering the knowledge, skills, and expertise of antiviolence activists and their vital role in

maintaining public safety. Moreover, the critical-ideological, abolitionist theoretical framework

of this study (discussed further in chapter two) may offer important critiques of dominant

narratives held by mainstream society. By challenging dominant narratives and identifying

relational processes that promote social change, this study sought to inform local and state

policies aimed at affording residents more autonomy and control over their neighborhoods.

Rather than policies that disempower residents by encouraging their overreliance on policing

(Vitale, 2017), this study sought to influence legislation that frees up and supports community

organizations to further promote public safety.

In addition to critical discourse and policy, this study sought to contribute to theory and

research focusing on community organizing. For example, more research is needed to understand

pathways to effective coalition building and community mobilization that may be specific to

community-based violence prevention. Moreover, identifying how relational empowerment

manifests among individuals involved in antiviolence organizing may lead to important

considerations about how relational empowerment is enacted in other types of organizations. For

instance, prior qualitative inquiry examining relational processes within high school Gay Straight

Alliance organizations (Russell et al., 2009) contributed to the development of relational

empowerment as a theoretical concept (Christens, 2012). Later scholarship identified the various

ways in which diverse populations and organizations promoted relational empowerment based

on their unique ecological context (Cheryomukhin & Peterson, 2014; Langhout et al., 2014;

Wray-Lake & Abrams, 2020). Thus, this research study may expand the theoretical terrain of

relational empowerment in ways that may be broadly applicable to populations outside of

antiviolence community organizing.

In addition to understanding how relational empowerment is enacted differently across organizational contexts, another important aim of community research has been to identify common empowering processes across diverse community organizations (Maton & Salem, 1995; Maton, 2008). The strength of this research lies in the gathering of rich data that reveal common themes across ecological contexts. Empowering processes may present quite differently depending on the community organization, the setting, the social problems the organization is attempting to address, and the diverse make-up of participants (Rappaport, 1981; Zimmerman, 1995). Therefore, insights gained from this research may be more relevant to local community organizations who share similar ecological contexts across member identity, organizational goals, and challenges.

Relational empowerment offers a potential framework for how violence prevention community workers on the frontlines can build relationships that are vital for transformative change. As mentioned above, key aspects of relational empowerment, including collaborative competence, bridging divides, and mobilizing networks are processes that empower communities through building power and gaining agency over the pressing issues affecting their community. Additionally, passing on the legacy and facilitating others' empowerment may also be vital competencies that sustain community-led public safety initiatives overtime, particularly with regard to maintaining funding streams and sustaining organizational capacity. This may be especially important for volunteer-based organizations who face far more challenges sustaining their activities than those in the nonprofit sector.

Lastly, this study sought to contribute to the counseling psychology literature. In similar fashion to community psychologists, critical psychologists (Fox, 2003; Prilleltensky, 2001), and liberation psychologists (Martin-Baro, 1994; Watkins & Shulman, 2008), counseling

psychologists have echoed the call to incorporate social justice frameworks when working with marginalized communities (Goodman et al., 2004; Motulsky et al., 2014; Toporek et al., 2006). This research study aligns with the principles and values outlined in the integration of both multicultural and feminist theories in the field of counseling psychology, which move beyond psychotherapeutic approaches of behavior change and aim to facilitate societal, or structural change (Goodman et al., 2004).

In response to the increased need for social justice and advocacy frameworks in the field of counseling psychology, there has been a growing focus on social justice and advocacy training (Caldwell & Vera, 2010; Goodman et al., 2004; Toporek & Worthington, 2014). However, moving beyond an individualistic lens as a profession, toward addressing macro-level systemic inequalities continues to present challenges (Kozan & Blustein, 2018). This is, in part, due to the professionalization of psychology, which often ignores the important role of psychologists as advocates (Prilleltensky et al., 2009). Alternatively, psychologists can learn from the expertise of those most impacted by systemic inequality to inform ways in which to engage in social justice work (Toporek et al., 2006). Thus, this study sought to contribute to the counseling psychology literature by centering the knowledge, skills, and expertise of workers involved in community-based violence prevention to further understand the systemic factors that contribute to community violence. Moreover, this study aimed to shed light on the vital role that grassroots organizations play in facilitating the empowerment of communities, while increasing psychologists' understanding of what is needed to prevent violence and victimization outside more traditional, micro-level psychological interventions.

# CHAPTER II

# LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter provides a review of the theoretical and empirical literature on community-led violence prevention initiatives. Outcomes of antiviolence community organizing and components of effective community-led public safety initiatives are detailed. In addition, the theoretical literature on community violence and prevention is also discussed. The empirical literature on relational empowerment within community organizing and other settings will be reviewed. This chapter integrates the literature on community-led violence prevention and relational empowerment to highlight how examining relational processes among grassroots violence prevention workers may provide insights into how community organizations sustain their activities over time, promote community mobilization, and influence community change.

## Theories for Understanding and Addressing Violence at the Community-Level

This section highlights theories and concepts that have been used to understand the causes of crime and violence, and how communities collectively address violence in their neighborhoods. Social disorganization and social capital theory are discussed as prominent theories in the field of community-based research. Critiques and limitations of social capital theory are also identified, and empowerment is introduced as a theory that addresses these limitations and therefore guides the present study.

### Social Disorganization as a Cause for Crime and Violence

In the fields of criminology, sociology, and community psychology, several theories and concepts have emerged to help understand the roots of community-based violence (Osgood & Chambers, 2000; Sampson, 1997; Sampson, 2001; Shaw & McKay, 1942) and how communities and organizations can address these problems (Beck & Eichler, 2000; Ohmer, 2016; Ohmer et

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al., 2010). Social disorganization, one of the more prominent theories originally proposed by Shaw and McKay (1942), places emphasis on community member involvement in public safety. Social disorganization theory states that neighborhood structural factors, such as residential instability, single parent households, ethnic and racial heterogeneity, and poverty, undermine social cohesion and trust and contribute to crime (Osgood & Chambers, 2000; Sampson, 2001; Shaw & McKay, 1942).

Research has supported the role of social disorganization in influencing violence, crime, and delinquency. Sampson and Groves (1989) were the first to test the theory of social disorganization. Their national survey data revealed that social ties mediated the relationship between dimensions of social disorganization (i.e., low socioeconomic status, residential instability, ethnic heterogeneity, and family disruption) and rates of crime and violence. In this study, social ties were characterized as friendship networks, supervision of adolescent peer groups, and organizational participation (Sampson & Groves, 1989). More recently, Boggess (2017) found that changes in racial and ethnic demographics and residential instability were associated with increased rates of violence and property crime. Racial heterogeneity and residential instability, in addition to concentrated disadvantage, were significantly linked to rates of auto theft (Lee et al., 2016). Lastly, Osgood and Chambers (2000) found that residential instability, family disruption, and racial and ethnic heterogeneity were associated with violence among juveniles in a rural community, thus demonstrating the generalizability of social disorganization theory beyond inner city neighborhoods. Social disorganization researchers posit that the various pathways to weak social ties are distinct and influence crime in different ways. For instance, Boggess (2017) argued that racial and ethnic heterogeneity may uniquely lead to increased crime by heightening racial tensions and undermining interactions among residents.

**Violence Prevention Via Social Cohesion, Trust, and Shared Norms**

One way that residents address social disorganization and strengthen social ties within their communities is through informal social control, or residents' ability to regulate the behavior of others based on shared principles and values (Janowitz, 1975). Examples of informal social control include residents' active role in preventing illegal activity, antisocial behaviors (Warner, 2007), and crime and violence they may encounter in their neighborhood. By overseeing social gatherings among youth on street corners, intervening to prevent truancy, confronting vandalism, or mediating disputes, residents take ownership of their community and address problems that may lead to further crime (Sampson et al., 1997). Collective efficacy is necessary for asserting informal social control to prevent crime and violence. Sampson et al. (1997) defined collective efficacy as "the linkage of mutual trust and the willingness to intervene for the common good." (p. 919).

In addition to informal social control and collective efficacy, social capital is another construct used to understand how communities prevent social disorganization and, in turn, neighborhood crime and violence. Putnam (1994, 2000) argued that residents who are high in social capital have strong social networks, shared norms, and trust, and that these processes are developed for the mutual benefit of the community. Social capital consists of two components: bonding and bridging social capital (Putnam, 2000). Bonding social capital occurs within groups of people who may share common identities and experiences. Groups of individuals who practice bonding social capital may have similar attitudes, beliefs, identities, and experiences. Bridging social capital involves uniting people and organizations across divides who previously had not known each other. These divides can be based on attitudes, beliefs, identity, and other social factors (Putnam, 2000).

**Social Capital Theory in Community Organizing**

Social organization theories have been used to inform community-led violence

prevention research and practice. Early research focusing on community members' role in

violence prevention suggested that collective efficacy and social capital prevents violence

through building social trust, civic engagement, and a willingness to intervene (Hemenway et al.,

2001; Kennedy et al., 1998; Rosenfeld et al., 2001; Sampson et al., 1997). These findings have

informed the development of community-based interventions and models that effectively

increase collective efficacy, social capital, and social cohesion in disadvantaged communities

(Beck & Eichler, 2000; Ohmer, 2016; Ohmer et al., 2010).

A community organizing framework that draws from social capital theory is known as

consensus organizing. Consensus organizing emphasizes the importance of identifying and

engaging with residents and external stakeholders to address problems in their communities

based on shared mutual interests (Eichler, 2007; Ohmer & Demasi, 2008). Consensus organizing

seeks to identify how the interests of residents and institutions (e.g., housing developers,

financial institutions, law enforcement) overlap in order to draw support, mobilize resources, and

create more access for community members impacted by social problems (Eichler, 1995; Eichler,

2007). As the term consensus suggests, bridging social capital (Putnam, 2000) is a core

theoretical tenet of consensus organizing.

**Critiques and Limitations of Social Capital Theory**

Consensus organizing has become a prominent method to organize individuals around

social issues. Many scholars, however, offered important critiques of social capital theory, which

inform the praxis of consensus organizing. DeFilippis (2001) argued that social capital theory

fails to take the role of power into account. He posited that power differentials routinely shape

interactions between residents and powerful institutions: patients vs. health insurance company; tenant vs. housing developer; civilian vs. police. As such, interests are never consistently mutual between marginalized groups and those in positions of power. Although some shared interests can be found, inherent tensions rooted in power are often irreconcilable, thereby limiting the scope with which consensus organizing alone can create structural, or transformative change. Defilippis (2001) asserted that "[w]hat needs to change are those power relations, not the level of connection" (p. 790). Thus, relying on consensus alone may reinforce and maintain existing power hierarchies.

Another important critique of social capital theory is the implicit assumption that residents who occupy high crime areas are socially disconnected and that this leads to more crime. Ginwright and Cammarota (2007) argued that this deterministic cause and effect framework ignores the social networks and civic engagement that exist among youth of color in poor communities. Moreover, social disorganization theory that informs current formulations of social capital is deficit-based, leading many researchers to focus solely on problems such as substance abuse, violence, drop-out rates, sexual activity, and other behaviors that undermine well-being, while ignoring strengths and resiliency factors (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007).

An additional criticism of social capital theory is the tendency to ignore other systemic factors that contribute to the adverse social conditions that produce crime and violence. Akom (2006) referred to social capital as a *post-racial formulation* in that it obscures the role that racism and racial discrimination play in maintaining the social and economic disparities present in low-income communities. Moreover, social capital theory places the onus on people of color to combat the complex, multilayered sociological problems created by the long history of White supremacy. Akom (2006) additionally argued that social capital theory, as it is currently

conceptualized, pathologizes communities of color by its implicit assumption that crime and violence is due to the social disorganization of people of color, and if they were more organized, crime and violence would cease to exist.

Given the limitations of social capital theory, Ginwright (2007) theoretically expanded the concept of social capital to be more culturally relevant to Black youth. The concept of critical social capital shifts the focus away from developing networks, norms, and trust for more access to resources, and places greater emphasis on community change. Critical social capital focuses on racial identity and political awareness as vital resources for youth. In his qualitative work with African American youth involved in a community organization, Ginwright (2007) observed that critical social capital is enacted by increasing racial and cultural identity development, challenging negative stereotypes about Black youth at the policy level, and is sustained through mentorship with adult activists in community organizations. This formulation of social capital begins to address some of the critiques posited by Akom (2006) and Deflippis (2001). Critical social capital attends to the role of power differentials in community organizing, while also shifting focus from a deficit orientation towards identifying resiliency factors within marginalized communities.

It is important to consider theoretical approaches that attend to these critiques in understanding how community organizations effectively prevent crime and violence in their neighborhoods. When considering racial disparities in police violence, poverty, and other social factors that contribute to community violence, it is important to draw from theories that incorporate power differentials while also identifying the sources of resiliency that exist within community organizations.

## Theoretical Framework for the Study

### Empowerment Theory

One theory that attends to power differentials and community resiliency is empowerment theory (Rappaport, 1981; Zimmerman, 2000), which has been widely used as a theoretical lens to examine processes within community organizing (Christens et al., 2011; Christens & Speer, 2011; Christens & Lin, 2014; Maton & Salem, 1995; Speer et al., 2013). Given its relevance to the current study, empowerment theory was used to guide this research. Empowerment theory is influenced by Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems theory and is a multilevel framework for understanding the relationship between empowerment processes at the individual, organizational, and community level. Empowerment is defined as the processes by which individuals gain mastery over the issues that impact their lives (Rappaport, 1987; Zimmerman, 2000). Empowerment theory aligns with the goals of the current study, as it positions local communities and organizations as the experts in resolving social problems that impact them (Rappaport 1981, 1987). Community members involved in antiviolence work may have greater insider knowledge into the ecological contexts in which they are situated than law enforcement, professionals in the social service sector, and outside researchers. Thus, empowerment theory offers a lens to conceptualize the relational work carried out by activists and organizers that promote community-level change.

Within empowerment theory, psychological empowerment is assessed at the individual level of analysis. Christens et al. (2014) defined psychological empowerment as "…the psychological aspects of processes through which people, organizations, and communities are developing critical awareness of their environments, building social networks and social movements, and gaining greater control over their lives" (p. 1766). There are four constructs

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within psychological empowerment: emotional, cognitive, behavioral (Zimmerman, 1995) and relational components (Christens, 2012).

The emotional, or intrapersonal component of psychological empowerment refers to the ways in which people perceive themselves. It includes perceptions of control and self-efficacy, motivation to control life circumstances, perceptions of competence, and self-beliefs about mastery (Zimmerman, 1995). Perceived social isolation, powerlessness, normlessness (Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988) and perceived helplessness (Rappaport, 1984) are considered opposite constructs to the emotional component of psychological empowerment.

The cognitive, or interactional component involves developing critical awareness or insight into one's sociopolitical environment (Zimmerman, 2000). Critical awareness consists of recognizing the causes of social problems (Sue & Zane, 1980), how to identify, cultivate, and manage needed resources to address the issue, and when to engage and avoid conflict (Kieffer, 1984). Cognitive empowerment is theoretically related to critical reflection, one of several constructs that make up critical consciousness (Watts et al., 2011). Critical reflection, however, places greater emphasis on the cognitive shifts that take place when a person develops an increased sociopolitical awareness. Cognitive empowerment focuses more on competencies necessary for taking action and working toward social change (Christens et al., 2016).

The behavioral component of psychological empowerment refers to a wide range of actions that can directly influence outcomes. When introducing behavioral empowerment, Zimmerman (1995) posited examples such as participation in self-help groups, playing on an athletic team, joining an organization, and managing stress or adapting to changes in one's environment. In terms of community organizing, behavioral empowerment has been described as participation in democratic decision-making processes (Christens, 2012) and has been measured

using community participation scales (e.g., Speer & Peterson, 2000; Zimmerman & Zahniser, 1991).

Christens (2012) later added the relational, or interpersonal component of psychological empowerment based on prior research underscoring the importance of socialization processes and interpersonal relationships in promoting psychological empowerment (Cargo et al., 2003; Christens, 2010; Fedi et al., 2009; Kieffer, 1984; Kim et al., 1998; Kirshner, 2008; Pigg, 2002; Speer & Hughey, 1995;  Zeldin et al., 2005), as well as relational constructs from community research (Borgatti et al., 2009; Coleman, 1988; Foster-Fishman et al., 2007; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Putnam, 1994; Sarason, 1974).

Relational empowerment is defined as the psychological processes necessary for cultivating interpersonal relationships that promote transformative social change (Christens 2012). Since its development, relational empowerment has been validated as distinct from cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components of psychological empowerment (Cheryomukhin & Peterson, 2014; Rodrigues et al., 2018).

At the organizational level of analysis, community organizations can be empowering, empowered, or both. Empowering organizations are concerned with processes that provide opportunities for members to gain mastery over their lives, as they are settings that promote psychological empowerment among participants. Empowering organizations provide opportunities for participants to assume decision-making roles, share responsibilities, access positions of leadership, and other forms of power sharing within the organization. Empowered organizations are concerned with outcomes such as effectively competing for resources, networking, building partnerships with other organizations, and creating positive change in the community by influencing policy. Thus, empowered organizations facilitate social change, while

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empowering organizations promote settings that empower individual members. Within a single organization, both empowerment processes can be present (Zimmerman, 2000). The present study yields insights into socialization processes that promote both empowered and empowering organizations, as well as how the organizational settings themselves may facilitate or hinder relational empowerment.

At the community level of analysis, an empowered community is one that is comprised of well-connected organizations or coalitions, access to resources that are necessary for residents to engage in activities that improve quality of life, and equal opportunities for all citizens to participate in producing social change. Moreover, empowered communities work collaboratively to identify, strategize, and address needs within the community. Similarly, empowering communities include resources equally accessible to citizens such as recreational facilities, protection by public services such as firefighting and police, healthcare, and other services. In terms of community organizing, empowering communities include local and state governments that are open and give credence to residents' concerns (Zimmerman, 2000).

**Penal Abolitionist Theory**

Given that this study sought to identify the challenges that community-based violence prevention organizations face when developing relationships that promote transformative change, penal abolitionist theory will also be used to provide a contextual understanding of the social mechanisms that may produce challenges to relational work. Penal abolitionist theory is a form of radical criminology rooted in Marx and Engel's capitalist critique (Saleh-Hanna, 2008). In this view, capitalist economies rely heavily on the accumulation of surplus labor and therefore, require exploited populations to extract the value of their labor. The penal system, which includes prisons, probation, parole, courts, and other forms of correctional control, are

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viewed as the mechanisms of these capitalist structures (Saleh-Hannah, 2008). Penal abolitionist theory views the concept of *crime* as a social construct that is used as a tool to criminalize the exploited class so that their surplus labor can be extracted (Steinert, 1986). Saleh-Hannah (2008) pointed out that criminalization is reserved for those that capitalist structures exploit, often based on a group's race and class position. She argued that the term "crime" limits the scope of what forms of harm committed in society are sanctioned and which are not. She argued that not all harmful acts are considered crimes, as harmful acts committed against society by corporations and nation-states are often not considered punishable crimes.

Within abolitionist theory, the focus of analysis is not on the individual act of crime or violence, but on the social structures that criminalize marginalized communities (Saleh-Hanna, 2008). Institutional or prison abolitionists call for the abolishment of prisons. Penal abolitionists argue that banning one institution is insufficient within racist and classist, advanced capitalist societies that benefit from oppression (Saleh-Hannah, 2008). Thus, penal abolitionism consists of a more comprehensive analysis of "…social structures, the concept of penalty, criminalization processes, and the assumptions made about human nature and society within these processes" (Saleh-Hanna, 2008, p. 437).

An abolitionist perspective acknowledges the deeply rooted power differentials between marginalized communities and the broader criminal justice system. Given the tensions between law enforcement and residents involved in antiviolence work (Berman & Gold, 2011; Wilson & Chermak, 2011), a penal abolitionist lens may explain power dynamics that undermine efforts to collaborate and find consensus between law enforcement and the communities they police. Moreover, the construct of relational empowerment may shed light on pathways to building power from the bottom-up and overcoming irreconcilable, diverging interests. Indeed, an

important competency within relational empowerment involves using a critical awareness of asymmetrical power dynamics to determine when to engage in conflict, bridge divides, or collaborate to effect social change (Christens, 2012).

The abolitionist tradition is theoretically linked to the broader concept of critical theory. Critical consciousness, which is informed by the criticalist tradition (Freire, 1972, 1973; Watts et al., 2011), offers an important supplement to empowerment theory by offering a rich and contextually-driven account of how oppression functions from the vantage point of marginalized communities (Christens et al., 2016). Penal abolitionist theory is particularly relevant to this study given the abolitionist origins of community-led public safety (Chazkel et al., 2020; Davis, 2011; Tchoukleva et al., 2020). In attempting to understand the experiences of organizers involved in community violence prevention work, penal abolitionist theory highlights, exposes, and holds accountable, the oppressive systems that may undermine relational empowerment, while empowerment theory informs how individuals and organizations may overcome these obstacles to prevent or reduce violence in their communities.

<div align="center">

**Community-Led Public Safety**

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**Violence as a Public Health Crisis**

In 1996, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared violence a "major and growing problem across the world" (Krug et al., 2002, Introduction). Since then, greater attention has been paid to the role of the public health sector in preventing the spread of violence. Researchers argued that the public health sector offers a multidisciplinary and preventative approach to violence by shifting the behavioral, social, and environmental factors that contribute to violence (Krug et al., 2002; Mercy et al., 1993). Addressing violence through a public health lens

contrasts with traditional law enforcement strategies, which often utilize more reactive approaches to crime control (Weisburd & Majmunder, 2018).

One of the more well-known violence prevention frameworks that uses a public health approach is known as the Cure Violence model (Cure Violence Global, 2020). The Cure Violence model views violence as a communicable disease and therefore, attempts to address the spread of violence similarly (Cure Violence Global, 2020). Three core strategies are used when combatting the infectious epidemic process: 1) identifying, interrupting, and preventing the spread of new cases, 2) identifying those most at risk of exposure and reducing their chances of contamination and further spread, and 3) shifting the societal and behavioral norms and circumstances that contribute to the spread (Heymann, 2008; Nelson & Williams, 2007; Slutkin, 2013). Gary Slutkin, the founder of Cure Violence, sought to apply these three strategies to violence prevention (Slutkin, 2013). Thus, Cure Violence operates on three core principles: 1) to detect and interrupt conflicts that are potentially violent; 2) to offer personal support to those considered highest risk, and 3) to mobilize the community to change social norms (Cure Violence Global, 2020).

### *The Cure Violence Model: Community-led Violence Prevention*

The Cure Violence model was first implemented under its original name, Chicago-Ceasefire (Butts et al., 2015), in the late 1990s and built approximately 27 sites throughout Illinois (Skogan et al., 2009). Other programs began to emerge following the success of Chicago-Ceasefire, such as Safe Streets in Baltimore (Webster et al., 2012), One Vision (Wilson & Chermak, 2011), Ceasefire Philadelphia (Roman et al., 2017), Phoenix TRUCE (Fox et al., 2015), Save Our Streets (Berman & Gold, 2011) and other programs based on the Cure Violence model (Butts & Delgado, 2017; Ransford et al., 2017).

State-funded Cure Violence programs rely heavily on local community organizations and residents, as they are on the frontlines of program implementation (Slutkin, 2013). Although community organizations are following the standard principles and philosophy of the Cure Violence model, they draw from their own knowledge and experience of the neighborhood to inform their approach. For instance, community organizations must have intimate knowledge about a specific community's local gang infrastructure and must understand and adapt to the local street culture in a given neighborhood. Moreover, decisions about the extent of collaboration with law enforcement may also differ depending on the nature of community-police relations (Berman & Gold, 2011; Wilson & Chermak, 2011).

A central priority of the Cure Violence approach is for site hosts responsible for program implementation to develop diverse partnerships with community organizations, faith-based communities, schools, law enforcement, the healthcare sector, and other service providers. These coalitions are viewed as central to changing social norms around violence (Skogan et al., 2009) and align with the multidisciplinary approach of other public health initiatives (Krug et al., 2002). Through these partnerships, community-based violence prevention programs seek to find employment opportunities and access to other vital resources for those considered at high risk of perpetrating violence or being victimized (Skogan et al., 2009)

In practice, the Cure Violence model identifies, interrupts, and prevents the spread of new cases of violence with the use of violence interrupters, outreach workers, and community coordinators (Slutkin, 2013). Violence interrupters are trained in methods of persuasion, as their primary focus is to intervene in disputes that are at risk of escalating into further violence. Interrupters are carefully chosen based on their own past experiences with violence and crime, and many are former high-level gang members who have made positive changes in their lives

following extended prison time. Butts et al. (2015) argued that violence interrupters' credibility and expertise as members of the in-group position them to build vital relationships with youth most at risk of violence exposure. Their insider knowledge of street culture allows them to identify potential disputes and retaliatory violence before it occurs; they attempt to deescalate disputes between rival gangs or parties and persuade them to negotiate the conflict in a way that does not result in the loss of life (Butts et al., 2015).

The use of outreach workers is another way Cure Violence prevents the spread of violence. Like violence interrupters, outreach workers may also have past criminal justice involvement and credibility among youth at high risk of violence exposure. Outreach workers do not focus on intervening in disputes, but rather serve a case management role by directing those considered at-risk of violence or victimization to employment and educational opportunities, recreational activities, and housing. By offering positive community resources and alternatives, outreach workers attempt to promote positive behavioral change by encouraging individuals to shift their thinking about violence (Butts et al., 2015).

Another main principle of the Cure Violence model is to change social norms around street violence (Butts et al., 2015). This approach consists of violence interrupters, outreach workers, and other Cure Violence staff gaining more widespread support by developing partnerships and collaborations with faith-based organizations, neighborhood associations, tenant councils, and other community organizations. These activities include anti-violence marches, public vigils following the shooting death of someone in the community, media campaigns, and posting signs and billboards in the neighborhood. Partnerships are also developed with law enforcement, as they have played a vital role in providing access to data on neighborhood crime

patterns, in addition to the hiring of outreach workers and violence interrupters (Butts et al., 2015).

Each of the three core principles of Cure Violence mentioned earlier necessitates the development of interpersonal relationships. The ability to effectively intervene in conflicts before they become violent, provide outreach to those considered at risk, and mobilize communities to shift social norms all require a set of competencies. Relational empowerment is a construct that may explain some of the psychological processes and competencies necessary for cultivating vital relationships to prevent community violence.

## Relational Empowerment in Community Organizing

An important contribution of social capital theory and related concepts is the emphasis placed on the role of relationship-building in community organizing and violence prevention (Ginwright, 2007; Ohmer, 2016; Ohmer & Demasi, 2009). Relational empowerment is a concept that incorporates social capital theory in its formulation, but also offers a framework for understanding the role of interpersonal relationships in building power and promoting transformative change. More precisely, relational empowerment is comprised of the "…psychological aspects of interpersonal transactions and processes that undergird the effective exercise of transformative power in the sociopolitical domain" (Christens, 2012, p.121).

Relational empowerment draws from prior empowerment research that underscores the significance of relationship building (Cargo et al., 2003; Christens, 2010; Fedi et al., 2009; Kieffer, 1984; Kim et al., 1998; Kirshner, 2008; Pigg, 2002; Speer & Hughey, 1995; Speer et al., 1995; Zeldin et al., 2005) and concepts from community research that incorporate a relational lens, including social capital (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 1994), social networks (Borgatti et al., 2009), citizen participation (Foster-Fishman et al., 2007), and psychological sense of community

(McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Sarason, 1974). Relational empowerment is comprised of five elements: bridging social divisions, collaborative competence, mobilizing networks, facilitating others' empowerment, and passing on the legacy (Christens, 2012).

Bridging social divisions consists of competencies necessary for building trust and norms or reciprocity across different groups (Christens, 2012). Those who possess the ability to bridge social divides are immersed in relational networks with individuals different from themselves. Christens (2012) pointed out that this set of competencies are requisites for bridging social capital (Warren et al., 2001).

Collaborative competence is conceptualized as the ability to develop interpersonal relationships that strengthen group membership and solidarity (Christens, 2012). It also consists of the ability to exercise collective agency with the goal of producing social change. Individuals within an organization who exercise collaborative competence are expected to recognize when to form weak or strong social ties with other organizations or individuals. Weak ties with external organizations are useful for delineating vital information to large groups of people and can promote political mobilization (Granovetter, 1973). Christens (2012) drew from the concept of structural holes in social network theory to inform the concept of collaborative competence. Individuals who exercise collaborative competence have interpersonal ties across gaps or "holes" with those outside their own dense social networks (Burt, 2002). These individual actors have more power because they learn from the knowledge and experiences of those outside the echo chamber of their own organization (Burt, 2004). This can lead to new innovations and strategies, thus strengthening organizational activities that promote social change (Christens, 2012).

Collaborative competence differs from bridging divides in that people who possess collaborative competence recognize that engaging in conflict is necessary to building power.

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Christens (2012) argues that where relational empowerment departs from social capital and psychological sense of community is the emphasis placed on transformational change. While cooperating and consensus-making are considered vital processes to organizational empowerment, empowerment researchers, activists, and organizers recognize that efforts to challenge oppression are inevitably met with strong opposition (Speer, 2008). Thus, challenging or countervailing oppressive power structures with organizational power are important processes for promoting social change at the community level (Alinsky, 1972).

Mobilizing networks involves both expressive and instrumental aspects of interpersonal relationships (Christens, 2012). The expressive aspect of mobilizing networks consists of creating an inviting atmosphere for people to participate in organizational activities, and bolstering commitments to creating change on issues that directly impact participants (Christens, 2010). The instrumental aspect of mobilizing networks involves the importance of motivating and sustaining community mobilization through relationships. For example, Christens and Dolan's (2011) case study on antiviolence youth organizing found that youth gained support from other peers and adults by focusing on a tangible issue of common concern: gun violence. Youths' ability to galvanize others led to participant recruitment and the development of relationships that sustained organizational processes and led to community and policy-level change. The passing down and expression of cultural and religious influences on collective action also constitutes an important aspect of mobilizing networks (Mattis & Jagers, 2001). For instance, the practice of Christianity within some Black communities is founded on relationships that often inform various forms of collective resistance and social action (Mattis & Jagers, 2001).

Facilitating others' empowerment consists of a community organizers' ability to be thoughtful and intentional regarding group processes and identifying others' potential (Christens,

2012. Individuals who possess competencies in this area facilitate new opportunities, avenues of support, and the insights of others. In practice, community leaders delegate tasks or relinquish control and decision-making powers for the greater well-being of the organization. Thus, leadership development is an important component to facilitating others' empowerment by allowing others to grow within the organization and take on new challenges (Christens, 2012).

Passing down the legacy involves the commitment of mentors and leaders to sustain the progress they made over time (Christens, 2012). Community leaders develop relationships with those who have less experience in community organizing. Transmitting knowledge and experience to those who will eventually assume leadership roles also promotes the growth and development of those more experienced, and builds greater solidarity and citizen participation (Zeldin, 2004, as cited in Christens, 2012).

Given the challenges community organizations and community-led public safety initiatives face in preventing neighborhood violence, identifying how outreach workers, violence interventionists, and crisis responders bridge divides, collaborate effectively within and across organizations, mobilize communities, facilitate others' empowerment, and pass down their legacy may provide new directions for how to strengthen and sustain antiviolence community-based initiatives. Since interpersonal relationships are often shaped by power differentials, it is important for community violence prevention workers, organizers, residents, and community-based researchers to attend to these dynamics by identifying processes and organizational settings that foster relational empowerment.

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<center>**Empirical Literature Review**</center>

**Community-led Violence Prevention Using the Cure Violence Model**

Outcome research examining the impact of community-led public safety programs based on the Cure Violence model on violence and crime has yielded positive results. Chicago-Ceasefire was the subject of the first thorough study of the Cure Violence model (Skogan et al., 2009). At the time, there were a total of 27 Chicago-Ceasefire sites fully operating in the city of Chicago. However, seven of the sites were included in the analysis because they had been operating long enough to collect comparable and post-implementation data. There was an average of 68 months of post-implementation data across the seven sites, in addition to the overall duration of the time-series, which amounted to data spanning 188 to 210 months. This gave the study sufficient statistical power to identify program effects. Comparison areas, where the program was not operational, were analyzed as well. This method was particularly important because although shootings declined in six out of the seven target areas where Chicago-Ceasefire was operating, shootings also significantly declined in designated comparison areas. Thus, the authors sought to identify whether crime was down *more* in target areas to accurately identify program effects. (Skogan et al., 2009)

Results showed consistent evidence of program effects related to declines in gun-related batteries and murders in West Garfield Park, Southwest, and Auburn-Gresham, three of the areas where Chicago-Ceasefire was implemented (Skogan et al., 2009). Declines in these areas ranged between 21-28% and no significant declines were observed in their comparison areas. Although there was an 18% decline observed in West Humboldt Park, comparison areas saw similar declines. This was also the case for Logan Square which saw a 19% decline in gun-related batteries and murders. Lastly, a Poisson regression analysis was used to identify overall trends in

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solely gun-related homicides. Results revealed that murders declined in Auburn Gresham, Rogers Park, and West Garfield Park. Although declines in the comparison areas for Rogers Park and West Garfield saw a parallel drop, the decrease in the gun homicide rate in Auburn Gresham was approximately twice the comparison area. Hot spot mapping revealed that in four of the seven areas involved in the analysis, declines in size and density of shootings were associated with the implementation of Chicago-Ceasefire. Lastly, social network analysis showed that Chicago-Ceasefire had a positive impact on gang homicide networks in two areas, whereas findings in the other remaining areas were either mixed or inconclusive (Skogan et al., 2009). Overall, this comprehensive study revealed that Chicago-Ceasefire played a role in declines in crime and community violence. Based on the success of Ceasefire in Chicago, other community-led public safety initiatives were developed and evaluated.

Safe Streets is another program under the umbrella of Cure Violence that was developed in Baltimore (Webster et al., 2012). From July 2007 to December 2010, outreach workers mediated 276 incidents. Based on outreach workers' survey data, 59.5% of the incidents in which they intervened would have "very likely" led to a shooting incident, while 24.6% were "likely" to have occurred. Additionally, outreach workers considered 69% of the incidents to have been successfully resolved, in which serious injury was avoided, while 23% were reported to be temporarily resolved (Webster et al., 2012).

Within the four areas of Baltimore involved in the analysis, Webster and colleagues (2012) found that in Cherry Hill, Safe Streets was linked to statistically significant declines in overall shootings, a 56% drop in homicide and 34% drop in nonfatal shootings. No homicides were reported in McElderry Park for the first 22 months that Safe Streets was implemented. This is in contrast to what would have been expected based on prior homicide levels and city trends,

which projected five homicides without the intervention. When supervisors and staff focused on a new Safe Streets program site in Madison-Eastend, close to McElderry Park, homicides in McElderry Park actually increased, due to a surge in shooting incidents. During this time, there were no significant program effects in McElderry Park. However, McElderry Park saw a statistically significant drop of 53% in homicides in the months prior to Safe Streets extending themselves to Madison-Eastend. The Safe Street program saw statistically significant declines in nonfatal shootings in Elmwood Park and Madison-Eastend, 34% and 44% respectively. Of note, however, the surge in homicides in Madison-Eastend was three times higher than anticipated during the 18-month program implementation in Madison-Eastend. Additionally, the authors found some evidence that the effects of other positive programs may have extended into areas where Safe Streets was operating. Overall, the authors estimated that Safe Streets was associated with a decline of 5.4 incidents of homicide and a drop of 34.6 nonfatal shootings throughout the 112 months of program implementation and observation. Furthermore, they estimated that 10 additional homicides would have been prevented if there had not been a substantial increase in Madison-Eastend that coincided with the implementation of Safe Streets (Webster et al., 2012).

As mentioned earlier, an important aspect of the Cure Violence model is to change social norms about violence. Thus, Webster and colleagues (2012) were interested in whether Safe Streets shifted attitudes, particularly among youth, regarding gun violence. Survey data revealed that Safe Streets had an impact on attitudes about gun violence in young men aged 18-25. Results indicated that McElderry Park youth were 4 times more likely to display the least amount of support for the use of violence than in a nonprogram comparison area. The surveys were administered in two waves. Regression models revealed that Wave 1 participants in McElderry Park were less likely to endorse the use of firearms to resolve disputes ($p < .001$) when

controlling for other confounding variables. Participants in Wave 2 were less likely to be in the category of "strong" support for gun violence ($p < .001$). No significant neighborhood difference was observed for the category of "moderate" support (Webster et al., 2012). These results suggested that community-led public safety measures may be effective at shifting norms. Although causation cannot be determined, positive shifts in how youth perceive gun violence may partially explain declines in crime and violence.

Participants' experience of the Safe Streets program was also assessed (Webster et al., 2012). Community members who were in need of additional services indicated that outreach workers helped them with job searches (88%), job interviewing skills (75%); job-related training (63%), enrolling in school or GED programs (95%), and resolving family conflicts (100%). Eighty percent of participants indicated that their lives were "better" since they became involved in the Safe Streets program (Webster, et al. 2012). Given the systemic factors that can lead to community violence, such as poverty and unemployment, this data suggested that outreach workers may serve a vital role in indirectly preventing violence in high-crime neighborhoods.

Many other evaluative studies replicating Chicago-Ceasefire and the broader Cure Violence model showed positive results. Ceasefire in Philadelphia showed a statistically significant decline in shootings, amounting to a monthly 2.4 reduction per 10,000 residents (Roman et al., 2017). The authors compared data from 24 months prior to program implementation with that from 24 months following implementation. The results showed that Ceasefire was likely associated with a 30% decline in the rate of shootings within the areas involved in the analysis. Additionally, Ceasefire was also associated with statistically significant declines in total shootings, which included victims of all ages between 10 and 35 years old. More specifically, this amounted to a reduction of approximately one shooting per month for every

10,000 people, and a reduction of 0.8 shootings involving young victims per 10,000 residents (Roman et al., 2017).

Another evaluation of Ceasefire in Chicago examined two years of publicly available, violent crime data in two districts targeted by Chicago Police (Henry et al., 2014). Raw data revealed a 31% decrease in homicide, a 7% decrease in total violent crime, and a 19% decrease in occurrences of shootings in police targeting districts. When compared to citywide declining trends, these decreases were found to be statistically significant. Moreover, program effects on violent crime, shootings, and homicides were immediate and maintained throughout the year of program implementation. The authors indicated that although it is unlikely that effects were the result of police interventions, this cannot be confirmed as there was ongoing cooperation between law enforcement and Ceasefire staff (Henry et al., 2014).

These quantitative and mixed-methods evaluations of the Cure Violence model suggested that when given the opportunity, community members are well-equipped to address issues of crime and violence in their neighborhoods. As insider experts, residents operate from a ground-level vantage point that law enforcement and city officials are not always able to perceive. Thus, as the Cure Violence model posits, community-led organizations in general have vital knowledge and skills that, when implemented, can play a critical role in the reduction and prevention of street violence.

### *Challenges in Program Implementation*

Although community-led public safety initiatives have proven to be an effective approach to violence reduction, other programs have shown more mixed results. In Pittsburgh, the Cure Violence model was implemented through a program known as One Vision One Life (or One Vision). Violent trends were compared before and after program implementation in specific

target areas (Wilson & Chermak, 2011). Data from these target areas were also compared to trends in non-program areas using propensity-score analysis and compared with non-target areas that were considered most similar to program areas. Lastly, researchers also made attempts to identify "spillover effects", or the extent to which suppressing violence leads to increased violence in neighboring areas (Wilson & Chermak, 2011).

Results of this One Vision study indicated that there was no association between program implementation and changes in homicide rates in target and nontarget areas (Wilson & Chermak, 2011). Post program-implementation rates of aggravated assault and gun-related assaults increased in target areas compared to comparison areas. Regarding comparisons between target neighborhoods and those non-targeted neighborhoods deemed similar based on intimate familiarity, no program effects on homicide were observed. In fact, One Vision was associated with an approximate 27% increase in aggravated assaults in the Northside and an approximate 25% increase in the Southside. Increases in gun assault rates were observed in target areas, relative to non-target areas. Lastly, no spillover effects were observed with regard to homicides, but spillover was observed in aggravated and gun-related assaults. Although decreases in aggravated assaults were identified in adjacent neighborhoods to the Hill District, no statistically significant change in gun assaults were observed when compared to other neighborhoods (Wilson & Chermak, 2011).

The Cure Violence model was also implemented in Brooklyn, New York with a program called Save Our Streets (SOS) between January 2010 to May 2012. The quasi-experimental design used to evaluate SOS found that gun violence decreased in the target area but that decrease was not statistically significant, and gun violence increased in nearby comparison neighborhoods (Picard-Fritsche & Cerniglia, 2013). Additionally, the authors sought to

determine the program's effect on awareness and attitude change among residents. Surveys were administered in two waves. Results revealed an increased awareness of SOS' engagement in the community among residents, as 27% in Wave 1 and 73% in Wave 2 endorsed increased awareness. Results also indicated increased confidence in the efficacy of SOS' activities, evidenced by an increase from 29% in Wave 1 to 55% in Wave 2. However, survey results revealed that residents did not feel any safer as a result of SOS' presence, and continued to support the right to carry a firearm if they were exposed to a prior gun-related crime (Picard-Fritsche & Cerniglia, 2013).

A replication of Ceasefire's approach, known as the Phoenix Truce Project also showed mixed results (Fox et al., 2015). Findings indicated that there were no significant program effects based on pre- and post-program implementation assessments in number of shootings or overall incidents of violence. Due to the lack of statistically significant within-area differences in both target and nontarget areas, the authors did not examine between-area differences. A significant change was observed in one comparison, non-target area. In this area, the average number of assaults rose from 59 per month prior to implementation to 67 per month post-implementation. Overall, the implementation of the Phoenix Truce Project was associated with an increase of 3.2 shootings and a decline of more than 16 assaults per month. Researchers found a reduction of more than 16 incidents of violence per month, which was driven largely by measures of assault (Fox et al., 2015).

The evaluators of Cure Violence programs cited several barriers to community-led violence prevention (Berman & Gold, 2011; Fox et al., 2015; Wilson & Chermak, 2011) that could have hindered program efficacy. This includes a lack of developing strong ties with the community (Fox et al., 2015) and community-police tensions (Berman & Gold, 2011; Wilson &

Chermak, 2011). Unpredictable state-funding issues were also a major concern to program implementation (Skogan et al., 2009). Identifying these challenges faced by community-led public safety programs can strengthen program implementation in ways that may make them more responsive to communities' immediate needs. Research in the field of community psychology offers important insights into the organizational processes that may address these challenges.

Given the rigorous evaluative studies that demonstrated the Cure Violence model's effectiveness in reducing violent crime, and the vital role community partnerships play in upholding the model, research exploring the mechanisms through which communities develop and sustain partnerships, mobilize resources, and ultimately shift norms is crucial. Understanding the relational processes within antiviolence community organizing and how relational empowerment can be fostered may yield important insights that can strengthen community-led public safety initiatives. One of the ways researchers have sought to understand how community organizations become empowered is by examining the settings in which they are situated.

**Empirical Studies of Relational Work in Community Organizing**

Relational approaches to community organizing are vital, not only for building power through expanding one's organization, but also for fostering systems level change. At present, however, there are only a handful of studies examining the applicability of Christens' (2012) relational empowerment model which are described further below (Cheryomukhin & Peterson, 2014; Langhout et al., 2014; Wray-Lake & Abrams, 2020). Literature on interpersonal relationships in community organizing, however, offers some theoretical insights into how relational empowerment may apply to successful community organizing.

A case study by Christens (2010) sought to study relational work as a process or model for community intervention. The author's observations were based on 7 years of participatory action research and collaborations with nine local community organizations in seven states. Most of the local groups were affiliates of the PICO National Network, which focuses on improving neighborhoods, education, housing, healthcare, and other local issues. For this research study, quotes focusing on public relationship building were taken from 56 in-depth interviews within six PICO organizations. Three distinct themes emerged from discussions that focused specifically on relationships in the process of organizing: 1) broadening participants' relationship networks, 2) developing new understandings of the social world, and 3) strengthening commitments to civic engagement. Regarding broadening relationships, the PICO model is intentional about building wider circles of relationships among participants and representatives of institutions. Christens (2010) observed that these public relationships are not exempt from moments of conflict in order to achieve desired goals. As public relationships expand, participants gain new understandings of the social systems in which they are embedded and become more aware of these dynamics as they engage with local officials, institutions, organizations, and other systems of power. Lastly, commitments to sustain civic participation are strengthened as relationships are built through the process of community organizing. Christens (2010) pointed out that effective organizing efforts often display increased volunteer participation (Speer et al., 2010). This study suggested a possible causal link between relational empowerment and the cognitive component of psychological empowerment. Moreover, the role that public relationships play in sustaining organizational commitments over time further highlighted the vital role relationships play.

Russell et al. (2009) examined empowerment processes among student leaders of high school Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) organizations. Focus groups were conducted in three communities in California. Many of the students identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Other participants identified themselves as straight allies, and one student indicated that they were transgender (female to male). Approximately half of the students involved in the study were White; three identified as Latino or Latina, three reported they identified as Black, and one stated that they were Asian. Results indicated that GSA activists discussed three distinct empowerment processes. The first was empowerment through having and utilizing knowledge. The second was personal empowerment and the third was relational empowerment or interpersonal empowerment. With regard to relational empowerment, students discussed feeling empowered as GSA leaders based on their group membership. Students indicated that being part of a larger community offered the social support that was vital for pursuing liberation.

Another aspect of relational empowerment was an investment in passing the legacy of GSA on to future students in order to sustain the organization and so that students can benefit from GSA after they leave. The last component to relational empowerment was the desire for GSA leaders to empower other GSA students or prospective members (Russell, et al., 2009).

As part of their analysis, Russell et al. (2009) examined interactions across dimensions of empowerment. The authors found that relational and personal aspects of empowerment were interconnected. One observed pattern was how students would describe the personal empowerment that occurs through feeling affirmed, which is, in part, a result of being part of a collective of students with shared experiences. This study suggested that relational empowerment may promote emotional empowerment. As individuals within an organizational context are supported and feel a sense of belonging, they may gain more confidence in their abilities to gain

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agency over their life circumstances. In this study, the concept of relational empowerment was conceptualized as part of interpersonal or cognitive empowerment. Christens (2012) later identified it as a distinct component of psychological empowerment, separate from emotional, cognitive, and behavioral components.

Christens et al. (2014) conducted a case study examining social regularities, or the relational and temporal patterns that promote empowerment and the development and enactment of social power. The focus of this case study was on a grassroots organizing model carried out by WISDOM, a statewide federation that supports local community organizing. Listening-focused one-to-one meetings, reflection, and social analysis were identified as social regularities that were found to strengthen empowerment and the ability to exercise social power across ecological systems (Christens et al., 2014).

Listening one-to-ones were utilized to foster self-interest among participants and other individuals in the community (Christens et al., 2014). Listening to compelling narratives of individuals impacted by oppressive systems situated them as the experts in the room, strengthened connections between participants, and also generated mutual self-interest as others might have identified with personal accounts of oppression. Moreover, listening provided opportunities to expand social ties and build power (Christens et al., 2014). Thus, listening provided a concrete avenue to bridging divisions, which is an aspect of relational empowerment.

Christens et al. (2014) also identified reflection as a social regularity. The authors defined reflection as the ongoing evaluation at both the individual and collective level. Reflection is used as a purposeful attempt to assess whether various actions contribute to the goal of organizational growth. In the case of WISDOM, this may come in the form of assigning participants to specific trainings based on shared awareness of what their capacities are, or providing opportunity role

structures that allow participants to engage in a diversity of responsibilities in the organization. Given that diverse opportunity role structures promote member engagement (Christens & Speer, 2011), this is an example of ways organizations can be intentional in their decision-making for the purpose of building their organization. Reflection is embedded in the culture of WISDOM. This allows the organization members to not only trust and care for one another but continue to hold each other accountable for the greater good of the organization (Christens et al., 2014). This is an example of collaborative competency in relational empowerment. Within WISDOM, conflict and confrontation is recognized as a necessary process for working through divergent perspectives to achieve social change that is responsive to community member needs (Christens et al., 2014).

Social analysis is the last social regularity that was identified by Christens et al. (2014) and involves the critical analysis of social conditions. Through the process of listening to individuals' personal accounts of oppressive systems, participants gain awareness, but also develop a more concise understanding of the concrete mechanisms in society that produce unjust systems. Thus, experienced organizers translate abstract social problems into concrete issues that can be addressed locally. Through social analysis, a shared belief system, shared language, and norms are developed. The process of community organizing is also normalized with the goal of building power and changing unjust systems. Through this process, members come to recognize that their self-interests (e.g., access to education, employment, financial security) are issues the whole community faces, and the process of understanding the systemic mechanisms that produce inequality informs actionable approaches (Christens et al, 2014). These findings suggested that cognitive empowerment is fostered within the context of relationships. Facilitating the empowerment of others and passing on the legacy appear to be important relational

empowerment processes that facilitate increased critical awareness and solidarity among community members.

Research has also focused on how relationships promote community participation and engagement. Christens and Lin (2014) examined the link between organizational participation, organizational social support, psychological sense of community, and components of empowerment. In this study, social support was defined as not only a component of organizational empowerment that involves emotional support but also forms of assistance with navigating the obstacles associated with effecting social change (Peterson & Zimmerman, 2004). Psychological sense of community, another distinct component of organizational empowerment, was defined in this study as encompassing feelings of belonging, mattering to others, being part of an organization that can make an impact on the community, and a belief group members will meet each other's needs (Long & Perkins, 2007; McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Participants ($n =$ 1,322) in this study were all adults and 63% identified as female. Ninety-four percent identified as White. Participants were diverse in terms of socioeconomic status (Christens & Lin, 2014).

Self-report survey data revealed that among low-income individuals, organizational participation was a strong predictor of sense of community and organizational social support (Christens & Lin, 2014). Additionally, social support was a strong predictor of sense of community. Although sense of community and social support were not predictive of sociopolitical control (emotional empowerment), organizational participation was a strong positive predictor. Of note, among low-income individuals, the positive relationship between participation and sociopolitical control was less pronounced than among participants in higher-income groups. Among the middle-income group, organizational participation predicted social support and sense of community. Social support and sense of community positively predicted

sociopolitical control to a greater extent for the middle-income group than for low-income individuals and a lower extent compared to higher-income individuals. In addition, participation among middle-income individuals predicted sociopolitical control more profoundly than for low-income participants. Similar to low- and middle-income participants, organizational participation was a strong positive predictor of social support and sense of community among the high-income group. Social support significantly predicted sense of community, but to a lesser degree than for those of other income levels. Sense of community positively predicted sociopolitical control. The association between social support and sociopolitical control was strongest among higher income individuals. Lastly, community participation was a strong positive predictor of sociopolitical control among the higher income group, more so than among other income groups (Christens & Lin, 2014). This research showed that organizational social support and sense of community mediate the relationship between participation and psychological empowerment. Thus, aspects of relational empowerment (i.e., collaborative competency, bridging divides, facilitating others' empowerment) may be vital to fostering organizational settings that promote social support and sense of community, and by extension, sociopolitical control.

**Empirical Studies of Relational Empowerment**

To date, there have been very few studies examining contextual factors or pathways to relational empowerment (Cheryomukhin & Peterson, 2014; Christens, 2010; Langhout et al., 2014; Russell et al., 2009; Wray-Lake & Abrams, 2020). However, instruments assessing relational empowerment have been validated on different populations across age, race, ethnicity, religion, and geographical location (Cheryomukhin & Peterson, 2014; Rodrigues et al., 2018), highlighting the broad applicability of relational empowerment as a construct. Although the scant literature on relational empowerment has established the link between relational empowerment

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and organizational settings, more research is needed to understand how relational empowerment is enacted in diverse contexts.

Cheryomukhin and Peterson (2014) used factor analysis and structural equation modeling to determine the relationships among emotional empowerment (i.e., leadership competence and policy control), relational empowerment (i.e., facilitating others' empowerment), sense of community, alienation, and community participation. The participants in this study were 350 adults living in Azebaijanis, a predominantly Muslim country in a former Soviet county. The authors found no direct link between facilitating others' empowerment and sense of community. However, those who participated in community organizing were more likely to score higher on measures of emotional and relational empowerment. Since sense of community was also associated with involvement in community organizations, sense of community was found to have an indirect relationship with emotional and relational empowerment. Relational empowerment was the only construct that negatively predicted alienation. This study suggested that organizations that foster a sense of community—characterized by a sense of belonging, needs fulfillment, emotional connectedness, and perceived influence in the community—are more likely to be comprised of individuals who display characteristics of relational empowerment. Moreover, those who are more alienated are less likely to participate in activities that facilitate others' empowerment. Lastly, this study supported Christens' (2012) hypothesis that community participation in various activities across organizations may facilitate the development of the relational component of psychological empowerment.

Langhout and colleagues (2014) examined aspects of relational empowerment among 12 elementary school students participating in a youth participatory action research after-school program (yPAR ASP). In the mixed-methods study, 75% of the students were Latina/o, 15%

were white, 2% were African American, and .5% were Asian. Approximately two thirds were considered designated English language learners and three fourths qualified for free or reduced lunch. The program's focus was to facilitate students' identification of problems they encounter at school and to take action to address them. As part of the yPAR ASP, children collaborated on a project to address perceptions that the school was not welcoming to students or their families.

Interviews with the students after graduation revealed that participants experienced all five aspects of relational empowerment (Langhout et al., 2014). The children often described collaborative competence as teamwork, emotional support, and a positive school climate. Collaborative competence was the second most common factor of relational empowerment mentioned, making up 27.5% of relational empowerment codes. Bridging social divisions was mentioned and comprised 18.3% of codes. Activities associated with bridging divisions included conducting focus groups with other groups of children. Children viewed their ability to acknowledge differences and communicate common themes as bridging social divisions. Moreover, children engaged in activities that helped them bridge divisions among parents, teachers, teens, and peers. The authors concluded that these processes enhanced trust among students across differences (Langhout et al., 2014). Langhout and colleagues (2014) pointed out that children do not hold power relative to adults in western society. Thus, the authors adapted facilitating of others' empowerment to mean adults facilitating empowerment and how children share power with one another. Students mentioned facilitating others' empowerment based on how it was operationalized in this study, which comprised 11.1% of the codes. Children discussed experiences of sharing power with peers, as well as being provided with opportunities to be the experts in the room. Mobilizing networks was mentioned the least with 1.8% of codes. The two students who had discussed mobilizing networks organized focus groups, and another

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student negotiated symbols on the mural which led to broadening social networks, as this required the yPAR program to contact central administration at the school. Passing on the legacy was the most frequently mentioned factor of relational empowerment, making up 41.3% of all codes. Due to children's social position, it is rare for them to be mentors to adults or other children. Thus, to be more in line with youth development literature, the criteria was expanded to include instances when children gained skills relevant to making social change, which is a form of passing on the legacy (Kohfeldt & Langhout, 2012; Langhout, 2014, as cited in Langhout et al., 2014). Examples of passing on the legacy included building communication skills, learning new research skills, and engaging in systemic-level thought processes (Langhout et al., 2014).

More recently, one study sought to identify how youth of color in high-poverty neighborhoods experience and define problems in their community, civic engagement, and empowerment processes (Wray-Lake & Abrams, 2020). Face-to-face interviews and brief self-report surveys were administered to 87 youth of color between the ages of 12-19 who were recruited from five youth centers in Rochester, New York. Ninety percent identified as Black and Black multiracial and 59.8% were males. This study found that 31% of the sample expressed examples of relational empowerment in their own lives. Youth viewed effective collaboration and shared decision-making as necessary to address community problems. Moreover, youth expressed the belief that getting large groups of people involved was vital to improving neighborhood conditions, such as addressing community violence. Thus, youth viewed mobilizing networks to be an important component of effective organizing. Additionally, analysis of transcripts revealed substantial overlap between cognitive and relational empowerment. Out of the 13 cases in which cognitive and relational empowerment overlapped, 10 illustrated instances in which youth expressed plans for community change (i.e., cognitive

empowerment) and various strategies, such as building collective capacity and mobilization (i.e.,

relational empowerment). Based on these findings, the authors suggested that both relational and

cognitive empowerment are naturally linked. Although youth expressed that civic engagement

and community change were only possible when community members work together, relational

empowerment was not linked to collective action. The authors asserted that this is likely because

most of the participants never participated in social action (Wray-Lake & Abrams, 2020).

Wray-Lake and Abrams (2020) also sought to develop a conceptual model that identifies

how empowerment and other processes are associated with aspects of civic engagement. The

authors identified what they referred to as pathways to civic engagement: safely engaged ($n =$

42; 48.3%), disengaged ($n = 22$; 25.3%), personally responsible ($n = 10$; 11.5%), and broadly

engaged ($n = 10$; 11.5%). The remaining participants were considered unclassified. Youth who

presented as civically disengaged tended to have high cognitive empowerment and low

emotional and relational empowerment. Youth who tended to attribute community violence and

other societal problems to personal responsibility or the bad choices of others presented with low

civic empowerment across cognitive, emotional, and relational components. Youth considered

safely engaged were emotionally empowered, as they believed they can make a positive impact

in their community by helping others. Some safely engaged youth expressed notions of relational

empowerment, in that they believed that working together was the only way to create

community-level change. Many of the safely engaged youth felt comfortable helping others in

the youth center to which they belonged, but unsafe in the larger high-crime neighborhood. Thus,

youth considered safely engaged tended to be more emotionally empowered than relationally

empowered depending on the context. Youth who were broadly engaged tended to present with

high emotional empowerment. They spoke out on various issues across different settings, not

only the youth centers. Some of these participants also expressed both cognitive and relational empowerment. These findings showed that although emotional empowerment clearly distinguishes pathways to civic engagement, cognitive and relational empowerment do not. While it was evident that relational empowerment was implicated among some safely and broadly engaged youth, most of the participants in this study had never been involved in protests, rallies, or other forms of social action. The authors posited that youth in this study likely had less opportunities to develop these competencies (Wray-Lake & Abrams, 2020).

Findings from these studies suggested that relational empowerment is a broad and flexible construct that can be applied to different populations across race, ethnicity, age, and ecological context. However, more research is needed to link the construct of relational empowerment with social action and change. Despite the lack of research in this area, the studies described earlier examined many of the relational processes that reflect components of relational empowerment and how they facilitate collective agency and empowerment within and across organizations (Christens, 2010; Christens & Lin, 2014; Christens et al., 2014; Russel et al., 2009). Furthermore, organizational empowerment research has shed light on relational processes for building group capacity (Evans et al., 2014), processes that contribute to interorganizational empowerment (Neal, 2014), and organizational contexts that facilitate psychological empowerment (Wilke & Speer, 2011). At the psychological and organizational level, the empowering relationship may be bidirectional. Thus, relational empowerment may encompass some of the key individual and collective competencies necessary for organizational and community empowerment.

To date, there have been no studies exploring what relational empowerment looks like among experienced antiviolence community organizers and workers involved in community-led

public safety. In conceptualizing empowerment, Rappaport (1981) argued that empowerment presents itself differently not only with regard to the different problems that organizations confront, but also in the various settings in which they operate. Similarly, the Cure Violence model must be adapted to meet the specific context of the neighborhood in order to appropriately address community-based violence (Berman & Gold, 2011). Given that there have been no studies exploring relational empowerment among community-led public safety workers, understanding these relational processes may shed light on ways to overcome identified barriers.

**Relational Empowerment in Community-led Violence Prevention**

As described earlier, the lack of strong community ties, divergent interests, and police-community tensions likely posed significant challenges to community-led violence prevention programs (Berman & Gold, 2011; Fox et al., 2015; Skogan et al., 2009; Wilson and Chermak, 2011). Many of these challenges highlight the important role relational empowerment can play in fostering strong ties across stakeholders, building solidarity, and mobilizing resources when necessary. The components of relational empowerment seem particularly relevant to the goals and challenges faced by community-led public safety initiatives. Applying the components of relational empowerment to community-led violence prevention sheds light on the active and effective ingredients of antiviolence community organizing.

*Challenges to Bridging Divides*

Those who implemented community-based violence prevention strategies often cited issues related to effectively building community partnerships (Berman & Gold, 2011; Fox et al., 2015). They attributed this, among other challenges (i.e., lack of funding and resources), as reasons for nonsignificant outcomes. Fox and colleagues (2015) argued that the Phoenix TRUCE project's lack of community embeddedness, inability to develop partnerships with the faith-based

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community, and the lack of community member awareness of the program may have undermined their efforts. In particular, shifting social norms and values away from violence toward conflict resolution may have been difficult, as strong ties in the community may play a central role in effectively preventing violence. Save our Streets (SOS), a Cure Violence program in Brooklyn, did not have difficulty creating partnerships with community entities (Berman & Gold, 2011). However, they did report challenges with keeping their community partners' message consistent with the efforts of the Cure Violence. For instance, one community organizer cited examples of community partners standing up at meetings calling for anti-gun policies and demanding that those who have information about shootings should come forward. The authors posited that although these are worthy tactics, they are not part of the Cure Violence model (Berman & Gold, 2011). Thus, one of the primary lessons learned was the importance of cultivating local allies to ensure that participants have a shared understanding of the specific violence prevention principles and goals. Berman and Gold (2011) argued that developing these community networks is vital to hiring staff, identifying key social service providers, and other important resources. With regard to building trust as outsiders, having "[a] local track record on the ground is just as, if not more, important than solid research results established somewhere else" (Berman & Gold, 2011, p. 7).

As mentioned earlier, bridging divides is an aspect of relational empowerment that involves developing trusting relationships and norms of reciprocity across lines of difference. Community organizers who demonstrate competency in bridging social divisions recognize how isolation and fragmented community initiatives maintain asymmetrical power dynamics (Christens, 2012). Phoenix Truce's inability to immerse themselves in the community and build strong ties with faith-based organizations demonstrates the importance of bridging divides to

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promote social change. Fox and colleagues (2015) pointed out that faith-based groups were important fixtures in the neighborhoods in which Phoenix Truce was operating. Thus, bridging social divisions provides opportunities for coalition building around shared interests that can challenge systems that maintain community violence.

### *Challenges to Collaborative Competence*

Wilson and Chermak (2011) posited that one explanation for One Vision's lack of program effects in community violence was due to community-police tensions. The authors noted that although Chicago-Ceasefire had a strong partnership with the police (Skogan et al., 2009), tension and overt hostility were observed between One Vision staff and Pittsburgh police. Since law enforcement played a central role in increasing the perceived risk and cost of illegal firearm possessions in Chicago's Ceasefire program, One Vision staff suggested that they may have inadvertently pushed at-risk youth toward being more isolated in the community, thus contributing to further gun violence (Wilson & Chermak, 2011).

Tensions between law enforcement and program staff were also evident in the SOS program (Berman & Gold, 2011). This was particularly detrimental to SOS' goals, as program staff were dependent on law enforcement for crime data and conducting background checks for new staff. The authors observed that trust erodes if community members perceive that any information they disclosed would be reported to police, which in turn undermined the impact of SOS. Thus, SOS staff often had to distance themselves from meetings with law enforcement (Berman & Gold, 2011).

This tension between antiviolence organizations working directly with community members and police underscores the inherent challenge of collaborative competence. An important aspect of collaborative competence consists of identifying when and how to form

strong or weak social ties. Moreover, community leaders and organizations who exercise

collaborative competence recognize that engaging in conflict may be necessary in order to gain

agency over their affairs (Christens, 2012; Speer, 2008) while also possessing the capacity to

forge relationships and build solidarity (Christens, 2012). Collaborative competence may serve

as an important framework for navigating challenging relationships among law enforcement and

residents that, at times, may be irreconcilable.

*Challenges to Mobilizing Networks*

Fox and colleagues (2015) asserted that lack of community member awareness of

Phoenix TRUCE project may have played a crucial role in not being able to shift social norms

about gun violence in the community. Additionally, Chicago-Ceasefire programs cited state-

funding issues, indicating that their ability to keep program sites afloat was contingent on the

local political zeitgeist of the day (Skogan et al., 2009). Community mobilization efforts focus

on creating a welcoming environment that encourages others to participate while strengthening

their commitments toward making meaningful change on issues that impact them (Christens,

2010, 2012). Using interpersonal relationships to motivate and sustain community mobilization,

in part, raises community awareness and places pressure on those in positions of power to meet

their demands. Thus, community mobilization may be one way community-led public safety

workers can build power through expanding community support and ensuring allocation of

resources.

**Ecological Commonality vs Ecological Specificity in Relational Empowerment**

Although existing formulations of relational empowerment can be applied to community-

led violence prevention, it is important to consider how antiviolence organizations may perceive

or experience relational empowerment in unique ways. Early research examining organizational

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settings provided support for how empowerment processes may be consistent across settings

(Maton & Salem, 1995) and also differ in significant ways (Peterson & Speer, 2000). Maton and

Salem (1995) conducted the first study that examined common characteristics across different

organizations that foster psychological empowerment. The authors examined prior research

focusing on three separate community organizations in which semi-structured interviews were

conducted (Maton & Rappaport, 1984; Hrabowski & Maton, 1995; Rappaport et al., 1985; Salem

et al., 1988).

Three common features across the organizations were identified that promote

psychological empowerment (Maton & Salem, 1995). The first was a shared belief among

participants that inspires growth, was strength based, and extended beyond the self to the larger

mission of the organization. The second theme consisted of an opportunity role structure. Each of

the community organizations offered a large number of easily accessible and meaningful

opportunities for participants to be involved. These roles were also multifunctional in that they

offered opportunities for skill development, learning, and utilization, as well as the exercise of

responsibility. Lastly, social support was identified as a common theme across organizational

contexts. Social support was comprised of a wide range of types of support, was peer-based, and

provided members with a psychological sense of community (Maton & Salem, 1995). This early

research underscored the importance of leadership competencies related to relational

empowerment. Facilitating others' empowerment and mobilizing networks may be important

relational processes that foster empowering settings across various organizational contexts.

Later research acknowledged that although there may be common factors across different

organizations that are associated with psychological empowerment, diverse organizations may

not all have the same characteristics or pathways that promote empowerment (Peterson & Speer,

2000). Ecological commonality refers to characteristics that are shared across different organizations (Maton & Salem, 1995). Ecological specificity refers to the unique characteristics of an organization based on the specific setting or context from which they emerged (Maton & Salem, 1995; Peterson & Speer, 2000).

Peterson and Speer (2000) conducted the first study examining the perceived organizational characteristics that differed across three different community organizations and their relationship to psychological empowerment. The authors administered self-report measures to 289 organizational members of a service-agency collaborative, an electoral association, and a multi-issue pressure group. Statistically significant differences in organizational characteristics were observed across all three community organizations. Service agency collaborative members endorsed significantly greater opportunity role structure, higher internal locus of control, lower political efficacy, and lower perceived competence (i.e., emotional empowerment) than the electoral group. Furthermore, lower desire for control (i.e., emotional empowerment) was linked to higher perceptions of leadership and social support. Thus, perceived organizational characteristics were not associated with measures of psychological empowerment consistently across organizations. This study lent support for ecological specificity in researching the organizational processes that contribute to psychological empowerment.

In addition to studying different types of community organizations, studies have also shown how routes to psychological empowerment present differently based on individual characteristics or identity. For instance, research has shed light on how pathways to psychological empowerment may differ across age (Christens et al., 2013), race and ethnicity (Christens et al., 2018), class (Christens, et al., 2013; Christens & Lin, 2014; Christens et al., 2011), and gender (Speer et al., 2013). These divergent pathways underscore the importance of

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examining how the specific characteristics or individual experiences of community-based violence prevention workers shape empowerment processes.

Qualitative inquiry into how antiviolence organizations experience relational empowerment aligns with quantitative findings on the importance of identifying ecological specificity (Peterson & Speer, 2000). Outreach workers, violence interventionists, and crisis responders in U.S. cities who engage in community-led violence prevention face challenges that may be unique to the specific community organization (e.g., tense or strained relationships with law enforcement, heightened sense of danger, addressing issues of structural poverty). Alternatively, understanding relational empowerment within community-led public safety programs in U.S. cities may also offer insights regarding ecological commonality (Maton & Salem, 1995), as empowerment processes may converge across various settings and experiences. Given the diversity of various organizational settings and participants, it is important to consider how experiences of relational empowerment may converge among those involved in antiviolence work across the U.S. while concurrently diverging from other types of community organizations.

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**Summary and Conclusion**

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Evaluations of community-led violence prevention programs have shown promise. However, many attempts to replicate successful programs such as Chicago-Ceasefire have shown mixed results (Fox et al., 2015; Picard-Fritsche & Cerniglia, 2013; Wilson and Chermak, 2011). These programs encountered several barriers to effective community organizing. Overcoming these hurdles necessarily involved the cultivating of strong ties in the community and the ability to navigate complex relationships, often characterized by divergent interests and inherent tensions. Thus, it is important for researchers, organizers, and community violence-prevention

workers to understand the specific relational processes and competencies that lead to decisive gains and successes in their work.

Relational empowerment is a relatively new construct that was developed based on prior research studies examining the role of social capital, sense of community, and social networks in community contexts (Christens, 2012). Unlike the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components of psychological empowerment, relational empowerment has not been as extensively researched in organizational settings. Prior studies across various settings have suggested that relational empowerment is a flexible construct that can manifest differently based on organizational setting, social issues, and participant demographics (Cheryomukhin & Peterson, 2014; Langhout et al., 2014; Russell et al., 2009; Wray-Lake & Abrams, 2020). Currently, no studies have explored relational empowerment in the context of community-led violence prevention. Thus, understanding how relational empowerment is experienced within these organizations may offer important considerations that strengthen violence prevention initiatives, while also further articulating how relational empowerment is defined in the literature.

# CHAPTER III

## METHOD

Given the efficacy of community-led public safety, as well as the relationship-based challenges and barriers violence prevention workers encounter, the purpose of this study was to identify the relational processes and competencies that may strengthen their initiatives. Relational empowerment is a construct that consists of important psychological processes and competencies necessary for effectively navigating complex relationships to meet organizational goals. This study sought to identify how outreach workers, violence interventionists, and crisis responders within these organizations experience relational empowerment and how workers utilize relationships to enact community-level change. In addition, the perceived challenges associated with promoting relational empowerment and effective community organizing within the context of worker-driven public safety were explored.

### Study Design

This research study was situated within a critical-ideological paradigm. From this perspective, all thought and expression are mediated by power relations that are rooted in a sociohistorical context (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994). What constitutes reality is also shaped by power. In the context of research, critical theorists acknowledge that mainstream research practices often reproduce oppression for marginalized communities (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994). Within the critical-ideological paradigm, the researcher-participant relationship is collaborative and dialectic. This contrasts with traditional hierarchical research methods, which view the researcher as an unbiased observer of participants (Tolman & Brydon-Miller, 2001). The research-participant relationship in critical research is collaborative in that the goal is for researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of interest but also to empower

participants to strive toward egalitarian and transformative change (Ponterotto, 2005; Tolman & Brydon-Miller, 2001). An important aim of this study is to identify the relational processes that occur within community organizations involved in street violence prevention to further strengthen their social justice goals and initiatives.

This research consisted of qualitative interviews with individual members of community-led public safety programs in U.S. cities whose primary goal is to prevent violence. Focusing on workers and organizers across various community organizations offered an opportunity to identify ecological commonalities regarding how relational empowerment shapes grassroots violence prevention initiatives.

Even though qualitative differences offered some insights into the diversity and complexity of organizations involved in violence prevention, the primary thrust of this research was to identify common experiences and challenges tied to relational empowerment. Many neighborhood-based antiviolence programs, initiatives, and organizations draw from the Cure Violence model and similar frameworks. Moreover, research has identified certain empowerment processes that consistently manifest across different types of organizational and ecological contexts (Maton & Salem, 1995). Thus, examining diverse community-led violence prevention initiatives illuminated universal relational processes.

The data for this study consisted of individual interviews. Data was analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006). Staff comprised of outreach workers, violence interventionists, and crisis responders within community-led public safety programs in various cities across the United States were asked to participate.

**Participants**

The only inclusion criteria for this research were that participants must be members of a community organization involved in preventing street violence in an urban center within the United States. The age range of participants was 18 years of age and older. There were no exclusion criteria based on race, ethnicity, gender, religion, SES, or any other demographics. The purpose of this study was to identify the perceived relational processes and competencies necessary for creating transformative, community-level change across ecological contexts. Thus, participant diversity of experience, identities, and organizational characteristics were anticipated to yield research results that offered more utility and applicability.

There were a total of eight participants who were interviewed in this study: One from Organization A, one from Organization B, and six from Organization C. Pseudonyms were used in place of real names to protect participants' anonymity. Moreover, names of geographic locations, landmarks, organizations, and other individuals were redacted in transcripts. All three organizations operated in a different city within the United States but engaged in similar community-based initiatives. These activities included outreach to high-risk youth, families, and residents in their community, which involved risk-assessment, youth outreach and mentorship, and connecting residents and families to vital social services. Moreover, all organizations engaged in violence intervention, or conflict mediation with high-risk residents and gang-involved individuals to prevent further escalation. In addition, each organization consisted of a crisis intervention component, which comprised of support and case management for residents and families who are immediately exposed to violence. The organizations that participated in this study serve anyone in their respective neighborhoods who has been impacted by violence or is at a higher risk of violence exposure.  Table 1 details the demographic information, including years

involved in community organizing activities, how long each participant has worked in their

current organization, as well as their job responsibilities. Data were gathered from the

demographic surveys each participant completed, as well as their verbal reports during

interviews.

**Table 1**

*Participant Demographics Across Three Organizations (n = 8)*

| Participants | Organization | Age | Gender | Race/Ethnicity | Occupation | Org Responsibilities |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Caroline | Org A | 37 | Female | White/Non-Hispanic | Violence Prevention Specialist | Youth outreach, plan events, case management |
| Calvin | Org B | 45 | Male | Black/African American | 1) Own's trucking co. 2) Founder of nonprofit | Participate in strategy calls, case management, community education |
| Michael | Org C | 32 | Male | Black/African American | Manager of Street Outreach | Manage Outreach Navigators to prevent violence |
| Martin | Org C | 63 | Male | Hispanic/Latino | Intervention Navigator | Youth outreach/Mentorship, case management |
| Alex | Org C | 49 | Male | Black/African American | Intervention Navigator | Youth outreach/Mentorship, case management |
| Janice | Org C | 44 | Female | Hispanic/Latino | Crisis Response Coordinator | Crisis management, (e.g., loss of loved one, violence exposure) |
| Rodrigo | Org C | 60 | Male | Black, Hispanic, Native, White (Multiracial) | Intervention Navigator | Youth outreach/Mentorship, case management, conflict mediation |
| Cameron | Org C | 33 | Male | Black/African American | Street Outreach | Case management, conflict mediation |

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**Table 1**

*(continued)*

| Participants | Education | Employment Status | Yealy Income | Years In Current Org | Years of Community Organizing Experience (Overall) | Years Lived in City they Organize In |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Caroline | Bachelor's degree | Full-time | $40,001 -$50,000 | 1 | 2 | 1 |
| Calvin | Some college/2-year degree | Self-Employed | +$50,000 | 1 | 2 | 2 |
| Michael | Some college/2-year degree | Full-time | $40,001 - $50,000 | 5 | 7 | Lifetime |
| Martin | Some college/2-year degree | Full-time | $40,001 - $50,000 | 7 | 30 | 55 |
| Alex | Bachelor's degree | Full-time | $40,001 - $50,000 | 1 | 8 | Lifetime |
| Janice | High school/GED | Full-time | $40,001 - $50,000 | 2 | 20 | Lifetime |
| Rodrigo | Some college/2-year degree | Full-time | $40,001 - $50,000 | 8 | 25 | Lifetime |
| Cameron | High School/GED | Full-time | $30,001 - $40,000 | 3 | 2 | Lifetime |

*Note.* ©Christopher M. Thompson

**Procedure**

This study first obtained approval from the Seton Hall University Institutional Review Board (Appendix A). Upon approval, purposeful sampling was used to recruit participants. I emailed the letter of solicitation (Appendix B) and recruitment flyer to nonprofit directors and staff, organizational chairs, community leaders, professional listservs, and social media platforms. With regard to chairs, directors and staff of various community organizations, I requested their participation and asked that they forward the solicitation letter and flyer to their membership. In the solicitation letter and email I sent to potential participants, I instructed them to contact me via email if they were interested in participating. I sent an email to all individuals who responded, expressed interest, and met inclusion criteria, with the following attachments: the informed consent form (Appendix C) and the demographic questionnaire (Appendix D). In this email, potential participants were instructed to complete the forms and send the completed attachments to my email address.

The letter of solicitation included my professional affiliation, the purpose of the study, information on how to sign up for the study, the duration of individual interviews, and details about compensation for participating. The individual interviews were video recorded and transcribed; field notes were typed immediately following each interview. I had access to the transcripts, field notes, and recorded video. My faculty advisor, Minsun Lee, only had access to the transcripts and demographic questionnaires. All demographic questionnaires, transcripts, and memos were de-identified and stored on my password-protected Seton Hall OneDrive folder. This password-protected OneDrive Folder was shared with my faculty advisor, Minsun Lee. The demographic questionnaires, transcripts, and field notes were assigned random codes so that I can know which demographic questionnaire, transcript excerpt, and field note corresponded to

the same participant. A master key was created on a separate document that included each

participant's name with their corresponding random code. The master key, informed consents,

and recorded videos, which consist of all the identifiable data, was stored on a separate

password-protected Seton Hall OneDrive folder to protect anonymity. I was the only one who

has access to this folder and its contents. Each participant received a $30 gift card for

participating in this study. Participants were reminded that participation in this study is voluntary

and that they could leave the study at any time.

All participants were emailed a copy of the transcript for their individual interview

following transcription. That allowed each participant the time to contact me and request that

certain excerpts be removed from the analysis, results, or any publications or presentations. Once

the analysis was complete, the principal researcher emailed each participant to notify them of

what will be in the final analysis, and they were asked again what they did or did not feel

comfortable being included. An additional purpose for emailing participants the transcript was to

offer them the opportunity to check for accuracy and expand on their responses if they had

additional thoughts.

**Data Collection**

*Demographic questionnaire*

The demographic questionnaire consisted of 15 items that ask about participants'

involvement in their organization, experiences with activism and organizing, race and ethnicity,

income, age, and other information relevant to their experience. Given the potential diversity

among community-based antiviolence staff and organizers in the United States regarding cultural

norms, identity, and neighborhood context, it was important to understand how these differences

shape their experiences and perspectives.

*Individual interviews*

Each participant met with me for an individual interview lasting approximately 90 minutes and was conducted via Microsoft Teams. I used a semi-structured interview protocol (See Appendix E) with follow-up questions and prompts designed to elicit in-depth data on how participants experience relational empowerment, how relationships are utilized to promote community-level change, and barriers and challenges to relational empowerment.

Although this study sought to explore the commonalities in experiences of relational empowerment across various community-based violence prevention organizations, it was also important to understand each participant's individual perspective and opinion. Individual interviews were chosen, as they allow for in-depth information gathering that can capture detailed and specific themes, both common and divergent, among relationally empowered workers involved in community-led public safety, as well as the shared and varied challenges they may encounter.

*Data Analysis*

This study utilized thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to conceptualize how outreach workers, violence interventionists, and crisis responders experience relational empowerment and the challenges associated with relational empowerment. Latent thematic analysis is a research method that utilizes existing theory and literature to analyze data. Given that this research sought to explore relational empowerment based on the lived experiences of workers who engage in community-led public safety initiatives, thematic analysis was an appropriate method for this study. As indicated in Chapters One and Two, very few studies have examined relational empowerment in organizational contexts (Cheryomukhin & Peterson, 2014; Christens, 2010; Langhout et al., 2014; Russell et al., 2009; Wray-Lake & Abrams, 2020). Thus,

this study offers opportunities to expand the theoretical terrain of relational empowerment by gaining a deeper understanding of how it presents itself within grassroots, relationship-based community violence prevention.

According to Braun and Clark (2006), thematic analysis "…is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (p. 79). Thematic analysis is a flexible approach to analysis because it is not bound by any one pre-existing theoretical framework. Thus, it can be utilized within many different approaches. Themes or patterns in the data can be identified in two ways when using thematic analysis, either inductively or deductively. Since this study sought to understand how a pre-existing construct (i.e., relational empowerment) operates among community-based violence prevention staff and organizers, the deductive or theoretical approach was used. This contrasts inductive analytic methods such as grounded theory, which solely identifies themes that are closely linked to participant responses themselves, instead of using pre-existing preconceptions or constructs to understand or interpret the data (Charmaz, 2014).

Braun and Clark (2006) outlined six non-linear phases of thematic analysis which were implemented in this study. At the first phase, I transcribed the data, read, and re-read the transcripts, while jotting down initial ideas. The second phase consisted of me generating initial codes across all transcripts. Codes were identified based on their relevance to the research questions and prevalence across data sets. The third phase involved searching for themes. In this phase, I organized the codes and grouped them into potential themes that answer the research questions. In the fourth phase, I reviewed and checked the themes to ensure they relate to the generated codes. The goal of this phase was to generate thematic 'maps' of analysis. The thematic map is a visual representation of different themes and the collated codes that are tied to

them. The fifth phase consisted of defining and naming the themes which involved refining each theme and identifying the narrative that the analysis revealed. Lastly, the final phase involved the selection of compelling excerpts that capture the research findings and tie the final analysis to the research questions and prior literature in a scholarly report (Braun & Clark, 2006). My faculty mentor, Minsun Lee, served as the internal auditor and reviewed codes, themes and chosen excerpts throughout each phase of the analysis.

**Enhancing Credibility and Trustworthiness**

The criteria for credibility and trustworthiness depend on the research paradigm (Morrow, 2005). This study used a critical-ideological paradigm, which focuses on the cultural-historical context of the research. Moreover, critical-ideological paradigms place emphasis on raising consciousness about how power and oppression function in our society and identify ways that research can create transformative social change (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). One criterion of trustworthiness within the critical-ideological paradigm is referred to as transgressive validity. Transgressive validity occurs when the research is able to provoke discourse and add to a more critical social science (Lather, 1994). This study sought to identify how workers involved in relationship-based violence prevention initiatives perceive challenges to effective community organizing and relational empowerment. The penal abolitionist lens incorporated in this study offered a deeper understanding of how the criminal justice system and other structural forms of racism and classism subvert efforts to mobilize and empower communities. Furthermore, understanding the ways in which community-based public safety workers and organizers interrogate traditional ideals of public safety (e.g., law enforcement, probation, parole) offered new ways to reimagine community-led approaches to violence prevention.

There are several criteria for trustworthiness within the constructivist or interpretivist paradigm that overlap with critical-ideological perspectives. The authenticity criteria proposed by Guba and Lincoln (1989) parallels trustworthiness and is relevant to both paradigms. The authenticity criteria that are relevant to this study include fairness, ontological authenticity, catalytic authenticity, and educative authenticity.

Fairness occurs when different perspectives or constructions among participants are explored and honored by the researcher (Morrow, 2005). By facilitating 90-minute individual interviews in this study, participants may have had a platform to articulate their differing experiences. Despite my best efforts to recruit from various organizations, Organization C was overrepresented within the sample. Despite this, participants might have had divergent perspectives from those within their own respective organizations as well. Thus, this study offered participants an opportunity to identify challenges to relational empowerment based on intraorganizational differences. However, since overrepresentation did occur, I attended to the ways this influenced the analysis and findings in the limitations section in Chapter Five. An important limitation in this case, which is explicated further in the limitations section, was that themes generated from the final analysis largely represent one organization involved in the study. Although participants among organizations less represented contributed substantially to the identified themes, they were not necessarily captured to the same extent as the experiences of members within the organization that were more represented. Thus, when they adequately answered the research questions, every effort was made to assure equitable representation of excerpts by Organizations A and B, over Organization C in the final report.

Ontological authenticity is enhanced when each participant is given the opportunity to improve, mature, expand, and elaborate on their construction (Marrow, 2005). Similarly to

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fairness, this research design lent itself to gaining in depth, rich data because it made use of purposeful sampling, which is often used to produce information-rich data (Patton, 2001) and consists of identifying specific groups of people who are experienced or knowledgeable about a particular phenomenon (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The in-depth nature of individual interviews also offered participants the opportunity to articulate pathways and challenges to relational empowerment that in their specificity, generated themes across organizational contexts. Lastly, each participant was given the opportunity to review their transcript and include anything that they did not have the opportunity to share during the interview. Thus, participants had some time to process what was discussed in their individual interview so that they could build upon previously expressed ideas.

Catalytic authenticity is the extent to which research brings about action among participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). By identifying the organizational and psychological processes that promote relational empowerment, as well as the current challenges found in community-driven violence prevention work, participants involved in this study may gain further insights into organizational strategies to meet their goals. Moreover, I will be disseminating the results to all organizations who participated. The dissemination of results will be in the form of presentations at organizational meetings, as well as one interorganizational meeting that involves members of community-led public safety initiatives across the U.S. Participants involved in this research are planned to attend these organizational meetings, as well as administrative departments, and staff involved in research and development. Thus, these research findings may contribute to or reinforce the knowledge base of participants and their organizations which, in turn, can inform their praxis.

Educative authenticity occurs when participants gain an increased understanding and appreciation for the constructions of others (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). In this study, participants may learn from one another's experiences when given the final report upon completion of this research project. In this context, it may be more difficult to assess whether this research led to increased awareness and perspective-taking in this regard. However, each participant will have the opportunity to read divergent perspectives among those who engage in similar work. Presenting findings in organizational meetings may also offer insights of divergent perspectives across organizational contexts and within an organization.

The adequacy of the data is another important criterion for trustworthiness and credibility (Morrow, 2005). An important aspect of adequacy is called adequate amounts of data (Erickson, 1986). Morrow (2005) pointed out that the richness and depth of data are more important than the number of participants. Individual interviews in this study provide opportunities for depth of interview data.

Lastly, my faculty mentor also served as internal auditor. This additional perspective was meant to not only counteract any idiosyncratic biases that I might have had, but to assist in clarifying analyses as they related to constructs of relational empowerment and adequately demarcate themes that emerge from the transcripts.

**Reflexivity Statement**

I am a 41-year-old, White male doctoral student. I was raised by a single mother for the first 10 years of my life. Throughout my childhood and adolescence, my family fluctuated in and out of poverty. These past experiences, which largely shaped my worldview, are part of what drew me to conducting this study. Throughout my upbringing, I lived in neighborhoods that were heavily policed, and I had multiple run-ins with law enforcement as an adolescent and young

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adult. I have been repeatedly harassed and threatened physically by police, usually over minor, misdemeanor drug offenses. I can recall moments in my life when I was afraid to be outside for any extended period, fearful that I would be harassed or physically harmed by police.

The neighborhood I lived in was predominantly Black and constantly under police surveillance. The town was heavily segregated by race and socioeconomic status. Although the police routinely violated my civil liberties, Black, low-income residents experienced the brunt of aggressive policing. These adverse experiences shaped my perceptions of law enforcement and influenced my own sociopolitical development. As I became more radicalized politically, I gained more of a critical awareness about the systemic factors that contributed to racism, poverty, and policing in the United States. I began to view the police and broader penal system as mechanisms that enforce and maintain capitalist interests to the detriment of working-class people. Moreover, I became increasingly interested in societies and organizing principles that offer alternatives to policing.

In my early years as a graduate student in professional counseling, I interned at a private detention center facilitating groups and conducting individual, couples, and family therapy for the adult men who were housed there. I also coordinated a visitation program where I facilitated groups for family members, mostly mothers, girlfriends, and wives. I was inspired by how the families with whom I worked provided support for one another and worked collaboratively to address the immediate problems they and their imprisoned loved ones were experiencing. At this time, I increasingly became interested in how communities tap into their own informal supports or relationships, despite few resources, to address problems within their communities. As a service provider, I saw how the justice system, the social service sector, child welfare, and other institutions sanctioned by the State routinely failed poor and working-class communities. I felt

that they were insufficient in addressing the multilayered, systemic problems that communities face and sometimes made their lives more difficult. My personal and professional experiences have informed my research focus, which is to better understand how communities are empowered by relying on each other to collectively gain greater agency over their lives.

For this study, I used reflexivity as social critique (Finlay, 2002) to identify and manage participant-researcher power dynamics. Reflexivity as social critique involves openly acknowledging tensions that are produced in the researcher-participant relationship based on differences in race, class, gender, and other social positions (Finlay, 2002). Wasserfall (1997) pointed out that reflexivity can "…mute the distance and alienation built into conventional notions of 'objectivity' or objectifying those who are studied" (p. 152). By breaking down this power hierarchy, a mutual research process can unfold that "deconstruct[s] the author's authority" (Wasserfall, 1997, p. 152). In this study, my social identities based on race, gender, faith, and class were very different from all of the participants' in one way or another. Thus, reflexivity as social critique provided insights into how these power differentials may shape my own experience, as well as participants' during recruitment, individual interviews, and data analysis. Given that these imbalances can impact participant responses, it was important for me to strive to breach the psychological distance found in the observer-observed research relationship.

Prior to initiating recruitment, interviewing participants, and analyzing the data, I anticipated that my position as a White researcher who grew up in a different neighborhood than participants would impact this research in several ways. Although I was not certain, I had anticipated that most antiviolence organizations that operate in U.S. cities were led by working-class communities of color. Thus, I knew there was a high likelihood that I would be

interviewing predominantly BIPOC participants. Moreover, I reflected on how my presence as a White academic may reproduce asymmetrical power dynamics present in society. This could have potentially led to distrust or skepticism among participants, thereby discouraging disclosure and undermining the process of gathering rich data. Attempts were made on my part to promote trust and credibility, first by attending to my own biases and assumptions. Moreover, it was important to disclose to my participants, aspects of my personal background that help explain my motivations and intentions for pursuing this research topic, mainly my exposure to the criminal justice system, how I was impacted and overcame those barriers, and how the meaning I derived from those experiences informed my interest in participants' work. Doing so hopefully was an effective way to break the isolation and alienation associated with the observer-observed, researcher-participant relationship.

Given the differing social locations between myself and participants, attending to my own biases was of vital importance throughout the research process. This was especially important as I was the only researcher analyzing data with the assistance of an internal auditor. The privileges I am afforded as a White researcher could have potentially shaped the directions I took in each interview, how transcripts are coded and analyzed, and how the study is written or published. In addition to race, differences in religiosity also could have potentially contributed to blind spots. Residents involved in community organizing are often people of faith, and religiosity itself can be a positive influence within inner-city life (Pargament & Maton, 2000; Swarts, 2008). Although I was raised Protestant during parts of my childhood, I mostly grew up in an areligious, liberal household. My grandfather was an atheist, and my mother was very critical of conservative ideological tendencies that were born out of White ethnocentric, Christian nationalism. It was not until I became an adult that I developed an appreciation and respect for

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spirituality and religious practice as an avenue for personal growth, and how it had been applied

to liberatory and transformative social change throughout history. Even though I gained a deeper

understanding of religion through personal relationships, research, and in my clinical work with

clients, it is not an integral part of my worldview. Thus, it was important for me to be

consciously aware of the potential impact of faith-based differences between myself and

participants to avoid neglecting the role of religiosity in relational empowerment or making

assumptions about respondents.

Prior to beginning this research project, I reflected on how participants may experience

relational empowerment and the challenges associated with exercising these interpersonal

competencies and skills. I anticipated that a common theme across organizational contexts would

be participants' ability to bridge divides or build trust across differences and identify mutual

interests with other organizations and those in positions of power. Some organizations may differ

regarding the degree of credibility they have in the neighborhoods in which they work. Thus, I

expected that their ability to bridge divides would also vary, but that the efforts will be apparent,

nonetheless. Consensus organizing, or the ability to identify mutual interests across organizations

and with powerful institutions to get material needs met, has become a nationwide organizational

tactic evolving out of the civil unrest and nationwide labor strikes of the 1960's (Eichler, 1995,

2007). Thus, I anticipated that relationship building across difference is likely a fundamental

aspect of any grassroots antiviolence project and would at the very least, be a core initiative

among different organizations with which I came into contact.

I expected that there would be substantial differences with regard to collaborative

competence, particularly the competencies involved in knowing when to engage in open conflict

with institutions and apply pressure to meet organizational goals. I presumed that this would be

contingent on several factors, including organizational capacity, funding, and their ability to mobilize community networks around a common cause. In addition, I anticipated there potentially being significant barriers to working with law enforcement, schools, and other institutions who may be ideologically opposed to organizations with a more radical, liberatory approach or who have divergent interests from those institutions. However, I considered that other aspects of collaborative competence may consistently emerge across participants, mainly, their ability to confront one another within and across organizations on resonant issues as a means for effectively navigating power dynamics.

I presumed that the ability to mobilize networks and promote community solidarity might differ based on organizational capacity and immersion in the community. For some organizations, logistical challenges associated with lack of funding for instance, may create uphill battles in achieving many of their goals. Given these documented constraints on organizational capacity, I posited that facilitating others' empowerment and passing down of legacy were vital components of relational empowerment that are critical to sustaining those organizations over time. Since many workers involved in community-led public safety have been exposed to violence either personally or indirectly, I anticipated that their shared experiences foster inclusive and supportive environments where new members feel welcome and can thrive within the organization.

As I conducted individual interviews, it was important for me to write memos on an ongoing basis as the data unfolded. This helped me keep track of my assumptions and whether they align with what is really emerging from the data. Additionally, documenting any ongoing assumption provided a record of my thought processes in response to the data, thereby giving more credibility to the analysis.

## CHAPTER IV

## RESULTS

Results from participant interviews revealed unique competencies that define relational empowerment within community-led public safety programs. In addition, themes were identified that outline relational competencies tied to youth outreach, a specific service provided by outreach workers in the community. These themes involve key competencies tied to relational empowerment but may be less related to community organizing and more closely linked to service delivery. Given the highly complex relational skills involved in these processes, they are detailed in this chapter, as they can be particularly useful for informing community work and relational empowerment in other organizational contexts.

Regarding relational empowerment in community organizing, themes that were identified under Passing on Legacy consisted of *Transmitting Self-Efficacy & Commitment* and *Learn, Internalize, & Apply*. These themes involve competencies related to modeling passion and dedication to the work for new members, as well as members' openness to learn, assume new roles, and apply principles, values, and skills. Facilitating Others' Empowerment was comprised of *Balancing Worker Autonomy & Guidance*. This theme captured leadership's willingness to engage in power-sharing, channel workers' strength and expertise, as well as provide guidance and training when necessary. Themes that were consolidated under Bridging Social Divides were *Collective Over the Individual* and *Group Norms Built on Respect*. These relational competencies involved prioritizing the best interests of the organization and community to inform lines of difference and disagreements, as well as norms of discourse rooted in openness and honesty and the capacity to facilitate empathy and understanding. Mobilizing Networks consisted of *Organization as Family* and *Worker-Organization Reciprocity*. Lastly, relational

competencies within Collaborative Competence consisted of *Navigating Power Structures* and *Channeling Social Ties.*

Barriers to relational empowerment were also identified in participant interviews and consolidated into themes. Key themes that were of particular significance were *Community Distrust due to Organization-Police Partnership, Caregi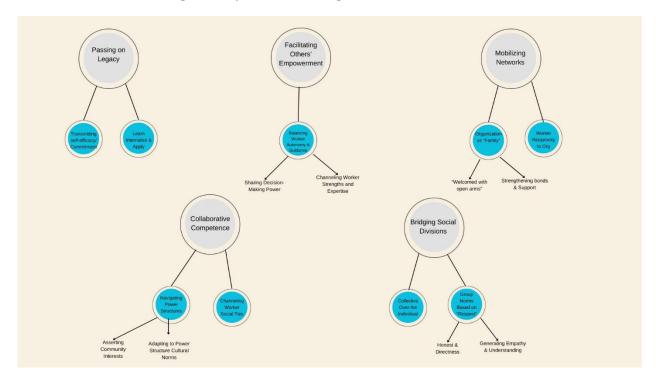ver Adversities Undermine Youth Outreach, Conflict of Interest Among Organizations, Organization Unable to Meet Demand for Violence Prevention,* and *Pervasiveness of Gang Influence*. Despite major achievements in all of the above domains, these challenges that participants outlined had a direct impact on their ability to build trust in the community, engage and detach high-risk youth, and collaborate with other organizations.

## Relational Empowerment in Community-Led Public Safety

Participant narratives across all three organizations demonstrated key components of relational empowerment, as they relate to their specific ecological context. Passing on Legacy, Facilitating Others' Empowerment, Mobilizing Networks, Bridging Social Divides, and Collaborative Competence were all key components that were detailed. Not only did participants' experience of relational empowerment align with current research on organizational contexts, but results expand these constructs in a way that allows researchers and practitioners to further define relational empowerment. The thematic map in Figure 1, illustrates the components of relational empowerment and the themes that define them.

**Figure 1**

*Themes Within Each Component of Relational Empowerment*



*Note.* ©Christopher M. Thompson

## Passing On Legacy

Two sub-themes were identified that make up the construct of Passing on Legacy: (a) *Transmitting Self-Efficacy & Commitment*, and (b) *Learn, Internalize, & Apply.* These components of Passing on Legacy foster a sense of confidence, strengthen dedication to community work, and instill the capacity and willingness to apply organizing principles and skills among new members.

### Transmitting Self-Efficacy & Commitment

Participants often discussed feeling "inspired" and "motivated" by witnessing the passion that seasoned co-workers and leaders in the organization demonstrated for the work they did. This not only motivated and strengthened worker commitment to the project of youth

engagement and violence prevention, but instilled confidence and activated their initial engagement in this meaningful work.

The two ways in which transmitting self-efficacy and commitment was articulated were in the way relational processes instilled confidence and motivation among members. Both of these components manifested through leadership modeling their passion for the work and members engaging in the work itself. This experiential process inspired confidence among members and allowed them to experience themselves as competent. One participant, Cameron, a 33-year-old, Black male who had been engaged in community organizing for two years and involved with Organization C for three months talked about this. Working in Street Outreach, which involves connecting high-risk residents to vital resources and services, described how strong commitments, hard work, and sincere dedication to youth demonstrated by leadership inspire him:

> So, it's just being around those people. It's just, I know I can be great like them; I know I can. I'm destined for it […] And that's just only five [leaders]. It's way more. Way more so, you can just imagine. You know (laughs). So yeah, man that's a great group of people […] with hearts that really care, that wanna make a change in the community and in the youth. They *want* to, so I'm glad to be a part of this.

Cameron is not only describing this exposure to leadership as a site of inspiration, but also expressing gratitude for being part of the organization *because* of the sincerity he sees among leadership. He also suggests that this modeling by leadership instills a desire and confidence that he will one day embody these characteristics when he says, "I know I can be great like them." Cameron expresses being glad to be part of an organization that sincerely cares about the community and views the leadership qualities as something to aspire to and embody.

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Reinforcing member commitment is an important aspect of Passing on Legacy. Janice is a 44-year-old Latina woman, who had been involved with organization C for approximately two years as Crisis Response Coordinator. She has been involved in antiviolence community organizing in the city where she was born and raised for 20 years. Janice discussed how motivating it is to see a leader who shares her own identity and that is knowledgeable and dedicated to the work:

> Gabriela is very intuitive, very informative, very soft spoken. At which I get on her about all this time (laughs). She's definitely the opposite of me, but just her dedication […] is very heartwarming to see and also motivating. And another young Puerto Rican woman you know, out there in her role and doing what she does and you know, it, it's-excuse me- (clears throat) it's motivating.

For Janice, the strengths that her manager brings to the organization, coupled with their shared identity as Puerto Rican women, is a quality that she looks up to in her manager and thus, reinforces her commitment to the work. A vital component that defines Passing on Legacy that is seen here involves the investment of leadership in new members for the sustainability of the organization (Christens, 2012).

### *Learn, Internalize, & Apply*

A common theme demonstrated by outreach workers and violence interventionists was the willingness and capacity to learn, adopt the attitudes, principles, and values of the organization, and apply those principles, values, and learned skills. This is an important component of Passing on Legacy that has not been previously identified in the literature. In its current definition, the focus of Passing on Legacy is on the individual who demonstrates leadership skills and acts in ways that align with their commitment to sustaining the organization

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upon their departure. However, the participants of this study highlighted the important role of the receiver in the process of passing on the legacy.

For example, Michael, a 32-year-old, Black male, who works as Manager of Street Outreach and has been with organization C for five years reflected on his earlier days at the organization and stated, "I always had the mindset, 'I'm never too good to learn.'[…] even though I was in a dark place, I wanted to learn everything I needed to know to be good at the work I do." Now as a manager, Michael looks back to his early years attending faith-based meetings, stating, "I was already preparing myself to be able to sit in that room and talk about all the good stuff we do and events we got coming up." The capacity and willingness to learn and the pride members take within that learning process were prerequisites for Michael to eventually mentor new members coming into the organization. Michael goes on to demonstrate these qualities when describing his experience with a mentor early on and how quickly he imagined himself in this role:

> […] I look at him as a father figure cause he took me under his ropes cause we came in at the same time. But he had been doing the work for 27 years. So when I start soaking up the knowledge from him, I always looked at it like, 'I wanna give back to somebody younger than me.' So like when our [former clients] just became 21, old enough to get a job or 20, I know the things that I know, they only knew of from the program aspect, but they didn't know from being a worker […]

Participants also discussed how seeing the organization's sincere desire in wanting to help high-risk youth and how seriously they took that role was something that they needed to embody for themselves in order to thrive in the organization. Alex, a 41-year-old, Black male who works for Organization C as an Intervention Navigator, which consists of connecting with

judicially-involved youth and providing mentoring, court-advocacy, and relevant resources that are important for detaching youth from gang influence reported:

> […] we have employees who are dedicated to this. They very passionate, seriously. They care about the youth. You know, that's one thing that stands out about [Org C]. You know, the people that they hired, they really want to make a difference. You know? So I saw that and I had to become that in order to coexist with the staff. You got to become that. And it was good for me because it was a learning experience.

In this excerpt, Alex's openness to learn allowed him to be receptive to the culture within the organization. Due to his own motivation for thriving in the group, he took on the qualities of that culture and in that process, his resolve was strengthened as a violence navigator.

**Facilitating Others' Empowerment**

An important aspect of Facilitating Others' Empowerment is knowing when to provide guidance to newer members and when to step back and foster their autonomy (Christens, 2012). In this study, worker autonomy appeared to be predicated on the idea that all members have unique expertise, based on lived experience, shared identity, and insider cultural knowledge of residents and their families, gangs, and the neighborhoods with which they function. These worker strengths are channeled in ways that are in the best interests of the residents they serve and the organization itself, coupled with guidance and willingness to allow workers to make mistakes. Thus, providing experiential learning opportunities and guidance fosters members' psychological empowerment and through their growth process, leads to organizational empowerment and community change.

*Balancing Worker Autonomy & Guidance*

Valuing newer members as cultural insiders with credible knowledge and expertise was shown to be fundamental for facilitating empowerment processes through worker autonomy. When describing the autonomy he was offered in youth outreach, Rodrigo, a 60-year-old, multiracial male who has worked in Organization C for 8 years, stated, "I felt appreciated. I felt that my knowledge was being utilized in a righteous manner to try to help a lot of these kids and…they gave me the leeway to be able to speak to masses of kids." In this context, worker autonomy consists of the experiential application of strengths. Later in the interview, Rodrigo discusses how having open access to leadership guidance and feedback when he needed it, as well as exposure to training and professional development opportunities instill motivation, encouragement, and assist him in navigating uncertainty:

> […Org C] has encouraged me to continue doing the great work that I do. It continues to
> motivate me and it gives me trainings […] they continue to give me education to train
> myself and keep me polished as far as to do the work [with youth] that I'm doing […].
> And if I need opinions or assist, […] I feel I could take it all the way to the top if I need
> to and the door's always open for an honest opinion because you know, this is so real.
> You know what I mean? That I don't need like 'well, maybe and maybe-' No. I take it to
> the top because I need decisions sometimes[…]

In addition to open access to leadership, the process of experiential growth is also coupled with opportunities to learn from mistakes and constructive and supportive feedback from the higher-ups. When asked what organizational support looked like, Alex indicated that "they teach you as you go," "you're not crucified" for making errors, and that "they help you to learn from that particular mistake." This illustrated the reciprocal relationship between fieldwork and

feedback to facilitate empowerment processes among membership. Later in the interview, Alex expounds on this premise further when describing his supervisors' approach to guidance:

> You can fall down. He'll pick you up and show you how you could have done this better and not only just acknowledge, you know, the mistake, but he gonna show you how you can avoid making the same mistake again. And when he's done, you know, with you one-on-one, talking to you, you feel so much stronger. And so, you know, you feel so much equipped.

Among members, valuing and channeling worker expertise is balanced with constructive and supportive guidance from leadership. This has been demonstrated by open access to leadership whenever members need feedback on a key issue and opportunities to learn from mistakes that are made in the field. Moreover, as part of promoting autonomy, sharing decision-making processes unfold as part of promoting worker autonomy, which strengthens psychological and organizational empowerment.

**Bridging Social Divisions**

The process of effectively navigating intraorganizational tensions across race, ethnicity, gender, social class, age, faith, and other identities and social locations involves recognizing that group division and isolation maintain power differentials and can be detrimental to the functioning of an organization (Christens, 2012). Participants identified two predominant competencies that comprise bridging social divisions within organizational contexts. The first is one of mindset: Collective interests and support over individual interests and ambitions. Thus, what is best for the organization and the community takes precedent, in addition to valuing the importance of group solidarity. The second competency involves the facilitation of group norms built on respect, particularly during organizational meetings.

## *Collective Over the Individual*

The theme of favoring the collective over the individual interests consists of prioritizing what is best for the organization and community. As Rodrigo stated in his interview, despite group differences, "we're all in the same gang" when disputes arise. This mindset of prioritizing the group over the individual was articulated throughout many of the interviews. Alex stated, "no matter how much I feel this should be done this way, […] we got to think of what's best for the organization, for coworkers, for the youth, whatever it may be, you know. I've learned so much, man."

In addition to prioritization of the organization and the community, collective support was also revealed to be an important factor in navigating conflict. This was illustrated by Rodrigo, when discussing ways he navigated a race-based issue that occurred within the organization. The dispute was centered on a member disagreeing with the organization's decision to promote a Latino member to oversee operations in a predominantly Black neighborhood. Rodrigo's stance was that in this particular instance, the promoted members' experience and knowledge of street dynamics were far more sophisticated and thus, warranted promotion, despite ethnic and racial differences between the worker and the neighborhood they would serve. When asked what contributed to effectively navigating this disagreement, Rodrigo stated:

> […] I had to let him know that, 'does it really matter?' 'When you bleed, is it different color than mines?' You know, when you get your ass kicked, do you feel like, you don't feel nothing?' Or you know, because I know that me, I'm here for all of us. And everybody was in agreement with whatever I was saying. Because, you know […] I just try to keep us unified and when someone comes and if they have conflict, we try to get it

right […] I think letting them know the fact that if he gets surrounded all he has to do is

make a phone call and we're gonna be there. You know um, you know it's one of the big

factors.

Rodrigo asserted that reminding co-worker with whom he disagreed that he is supported by him,

as well as the collective, despite this executive decision, was an important factor in resolving this

dispute. Moreover, the guiding principle in navigating this dispute was identifying who would be

the most effective at connecting with high-risk youth in that neighborhood, which was a primary

organization goal. Prioritizing what was in the best interest of the organization and the youth

they serve guided Rodrigo's discourse. Although participants heralded shared identity as vital to

youth outreach in general, experience appeared to be more of an important factor in this case.

### *Group Norms Built on Respect*

Group norms built on respect was an important theme that contributes to the bridging of

social divides. Two important aspects of building group norms based on respect were being open

and honest, or "keeping it real", and generating empathy and understanding among members.

With regard to being open and honest, participants recognized the detriment that talking behind

others' backs can have on group cohesion, their community work, and their safety. Rodrigo

expressed prioritizing protecting that group cohesion and what is at stake when there are

divisions:

> […] I believe (laughs) that honesty is the best policy […] And I'm very boisterous about
>
> it. I don't appreciate when people talk behind other people's backs. I think that's some
>
> punk shit. Um and I let it be known, if there is something to say about anything that y'all
>
> see wrong here, I think that whoever it is needs to speak up, because if you don't, we're
>
> gonna frown if we catch you talking about it later on […] So let's bring it out because we

are one family, we are taking our chances on the streets. So I like bringing the reality of

the risk that we take there just to solidify and they could know, man, if there is a problem,

we need to you know, clean it up so that we can become even stronger because, you

know, the safety that we need on the streets.

In navigating disagreements in organizational meetings, group members and leadership

also facilitated empathy and understanding for one another. The process of generating empathy

and understanding consists of not allowing others to speak over each other and practicing

patience in listening to others with whom they disagree. Alex stated, "I've seen leadership do a

good job of coming in and listening to everybody's opinion, even those who weren't involved and

getting suggestions." Michael described a disagreement between himself and executive staff

about how to engage high-risk residents following a gang shooting. The disagreement was based

on differences in social class, as Michael had real-world experience as a former high-ranking

gang chief, whereas the staff whom he disagreed with had "book" smarts. He stated the

following:

> […] they was against it at first. But when they saw it was a success, we put it in our
>
> calendar for this summer coming up 'cause that's how it really is […] and I challenged
>
> them cause I say, "come on and take a stroll through my land with me before you can
>
> really see what's going on in this community […]. So before you can tell me what look
>
> good on paper, let me take you through the community before you can see why [your
>
> idea] ain't gonna work […]." I invite them to just take a day with me out in the field.

## Mobilizing Networks

Those who demonstrate competencies in mobilizing networks facilitate inviting and

welcoming spaces through various relational processes, sustain member engagement (Christens,

2012). Results of participant interviews revealed two separate themes that make up mobilizing networks: *Organization as family* and *worker reciprocity to organization*. Both themes activate and sustain member engagement.

### *Organization as Family*

Many participants discussed the importance of individual and organizational support and how this motivated them to join their organizations. They often described this support as akin to family. Michael discussed being in a "dark place" after his brother died from gun violence and how Organization C was there for him during a pivotal moment in his life. He describes being at a crossroads about his gang-involvement when he made contact with Organization C:

> […] missing the parents at that time, played a toll on me so I really got attracted with [Org C] when they moved to the [neighborhood] area right before my brother died. My brother died two blocks over from the [Org C building]. And when they gave me opportunity and then I saw the people, how they was like family […] they come for me and they open their doors with open arms and I've been there since.

Among participants, the support that they received was experienced as personal, transcending support from typical work, corporate, or nonprofit structures. This deeply personal form of support is often what was at the heart of how participants described this family environment. For Janice, the emotional support she received from members and leadership after her niece was shot and killed, as well as the ongoing tangible support (e.g. disability paperwork post-surgery), served as a corrective emotional experience. She stated on two occasions during her interview that she's "blessed" and "grateful" that "it's okay to *not* be okay" and receive unconditional support, as someone who has had to overcome many struggles on her own. She goes on to describe organization C as a surrogate family:

[…] it just never ceases to amaze me how everybody is so willing to be there for one

another when they're going through something good, bad, or indifferent. So the impact of

that, [Org C] to me is a family. I unfortunately didn't have a family growing up […]. But

to be able to walk into an organization at that and feel like family immediately, is a good

feeling for somebody like me. Can't speak on anybody else. For sure, it's definitely been a

good feeling.

For Janice, the support she receives from other members and leadership makes her work

more than just a job, but rather a way of being that she integrates into her personal life.

### Worker-Organization Reciprocity

Engaging the community in ways that foster an inviting and welcoming environment was

shown to be key to initially activating residents to overcome personal challenges and become

involved in organizational activities. With regard to sustaining activities and increasing worker

engagement, participants often spoke about a sense of responsibility for giving back to the

organization and leadership that not only demonstrated a welcoming space for them, but ongoing

support as they thrived within the organization. This worker-organization feedback loop was

expressed as a key factor for ongoing community mobilization and commitment.

Calvin, a 45-year-old, Black male who participated in two separate organizations over the

course of two years, described the current organization (Organization B) he has been involved in

as a "family environment" where "my story has always been heard".  He articulates this further,

stating, "I got real family members that I know that I couldn't call at 2:00 o'clock in the morning.

And [Org B] answering the phone? (pause) Come on, man […] listen they're putting 100% back

on your life!" He went on to describe how when he was a client, the organization's unconditional

commitment and loyalty to providing him with emotional and tangible supports upon his release

from prison and challenging him in supportive ways, increased his self-confidence and strengthened his commitments to the organization:

> So that's what they give me. And I'm happy with it and that's what makes me wanna partner up with them and be about that. Because I know it's real […] I'm out here and I feel like no matter how good I get or whatever, if I was in a situation where I needed help again, I can come right back to 'em. So it wouldn't be like "oh, you're not on our caseload anymore (laughs)." But if I needed some help, I think that these are the people cause they help me before […]. [T]he help they gave me man, put me on a roller coaster. Man, I've been moving ever since.

For Janice, the supportive, family environment of the organization was one of both emotional support at a time of tragedy when her niece was shot and killed, and one of guidance and mentorship. As someone who grew up with instability in her life, she describes her own incentive for wanting to learn how to adapt in professional environments and when engaging with key, powerful players in the community. This personal growth process is something that was facilitated by organizational leadership and in turn, she strives to give back to the organization through her commitment to the work in crisis response, but also to her personal growth.

> I knew that I had to change for a long time, but really didn't have the drive or the motivation to do it. But with [Org C], that's different because I know I represent [Org C] wherever I go and I wanna make sure that I'm doing that properly, because that's what they deserve […]. [T]hey have done nothing but been great to me from the moment, since before I walked into the door […]. So the very least I can do is work on the things that I knew I had to work on anyway […]. I guess it's kind of like a parent-kid relationship,

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where you wanna make sure dad's happy about what's going on. So you gotta watch how

you talk and watch how you act. But I love it. […] It's cool to be around those types of

people for once.

Janice cultivated her own intrinsic motivation for personal growth, but there's also a sense of

giving back to the organization, as someone who has been a fixture in her community prior to

joining Organization C, but who now represents Organization C even when she is not on the

clock.

**Collaborative Competence**

An important component of collaborative competence is knowing when to identify shared

interests and goals with various institutions and engage in collaborative organizing, and when to

adapt to power structures in ways that assert the organization's best interests (Christens, 2012).

An important prerequisite to navigating these spaces effectively is having a sociopolitical, or

critical awareness of the root of social problems and an understanding of how power functions in

society. Participants shared their own experiences of effectively navigating tensions with law

enforcement, politicians, and harmful media narratives. An additional aspect of collaborative

competency, that was also revealed among participants, involves the capacity to channel existing

social ties within the organization to build trust in the community and strengthen

interorganizational collaboration.

*Navigating Power Structures*

With regard to asserting community interests with those in positions of power, Janice,

Michael, and Martin, who all occupy varying roles in Organization C, effectively demonstrate

ways to push back to create positive change in their community. For example, Michael discussed

the importance of maintaining street credibility and how being associated with the police during

canvassing activities can undermine his efforts to connect with residents and assess escalating

tensions in the neighborhood. He goes on to describe interactions he has with law enforcement in

the following excerpt:

> We can't be seen just walking with y'all in the neighborhood […] because they gonna
>
> look at us like "you working with the police." You can't stop how [residents] make their
>
> money. But if they see you with the police, the first thing they think is "you telling on us
>
> cause you know what we do." […] So you always want your street credibility to be there,
>
> but you also need the police to understand like, "no, we all here for the same cause, to
>
> help the community. But at the same time, I can't really tell this man how to live his daily
>
> livelihood. What he gotta do to survive." And once they start understanding that […] we
>
> was able to canvas the neighborhood and talk to the players ourselves, who was doing the
>
> gang banging at the time, and it was like they listened to us and it calmed down.

Effective boundary-setting with the police requires an awareness of the historical and legitimate

distrust that Black and Brown communities have toward the police and the imperative of

maintaining strong ties and credibility with the community. Moreover, Michael balances his

pushback by underscoring shared goals of violence prevention with police. Walking this delicate

tightrope between strengthening collaboration through identifying shared goals and boundary-

setting with law enforcement was articulated by several participants and was a vital component

to effective violence prevention.

Power can be exercised also in asserting influence at the micro-level. Martin, a 63-year-

old Latino Male, who works as an Intervention Navigator for Org C, described ways that he and

Org C created positive change for a specific youth:

[The youth] robbed a dope addict […] of $40. He told the dope-"I got you, I'm gonna get you." Give me the $40.00 and took the man's $40. Right. So they came to the school, you know, they wanted to arrest him. We stopped him from being arrested. We gave the guy back his $40.00 and they wanted to expel him from school. Because of that, right. And so, you know, I didn't stop working with him […]. Let me find him a school. Right. So we find them a different school. And then I had him working with the education staff […]. Then I got him into clinical. I got him to talk to the therapist […] he had a lot of trauma in his life […]. And I saw that and through that network of people from the Education Department, the clinical services and the sports activities, right. I got him to get his mind right.

An important component of collaborative competence is being able to effectively navigate interstitial spaces as a way to accumulate power or influence. This was exemplified in Janice, when she shared her experience with navigating dominant narratives in the media following the murder of her niece:

You know, we're already being stereotyped and "oh typical gang bangers" and "it's always the Puerto Rican parade", and all these things that were not true. And I said the only way I can do this and get my point across was *I* did the press conference, *I* held the press conference, and I spoke on behalf of my family and I spoke on behalf of my niece and [her] family […]. So I just made it a point to know that if we're already being stereotyped, I'm never gonna put myself in a position to act like the stereotype that you're portraying upon me.

In his interview, Michael elaborated on ways he adapts to various cultural norms when brokering shared interests between politicians and the community of which he is a part:

[…] once you listen to what their dire needs are, and if you in the position to help them in

that time, they respect you and trust you more […]. Like, I can't go in the room with the

Alderman, the Mayor (smiles), and talk like I talk to the people at the block. Gotta be

able to adapt, be flexible […]. So you gotta be able to know […] the *hood* terminology

[…] and then when you talking to the Alderman, they ask you "How would this grant

help your organization" and stuff like this.

Janice also discussed ways that she has challenged herself to engage with politicians

during meetings and how she has had to adapt to maintain those vital relationships:

…Let it be noted, I am not a fan of our elected officials (laughs), but I know that there's

gonna be times where I have to work side-by-side with somebody that I may not

necessarily agree with their politics, but the work has to get done so I can put my pride to

the side and my personal feelings to the side, you know, for the greater good to get

through, whatever the situation may be. But I think definitely you have to learn how to

bite your tongue a lot in [participant-city] around certain people and kind of just

remember why you're here and stay grounded.

### *Channeling Worker Social Ties*

Another aspect of collaborative competence is the ability for leadership to maintain weak

ties with other organizations, groups, and institutions. *Weak ties* refer to instances when

individuals who are part of a group have infrequent or distant connections with those in an

outside group but can be influential and build trust with those groups (Granovetter, 1973). Weak

ties can also be present when connections are made outside the closed circle or organization

through an intermediary within the group who can span structural holes across organizations.

*Structural holes* refer to the gap, or absence of interaction or information flow between groups

(Burt, 2001). Members of a group who have ties to both organizations or groups can broker an opening that allows for new information to flow in from outside the organization and set agendas for collaboration (Burt, 2001; Granovetter, 1973). Identifying intermediaries who have these important connections with people outside a closed social circle, organization, or institution can also harness those networks to promote social change (Christens, 2012). In this study, participants demonstrated awareness regarding the importance of recruiting members who have strong ties in neighborhoods where street violence is prevalent, especially when leadership seeks to maintain their weak ties with that community. This principle was also applied to building coalitions with other organizations, as well as strengthening relationships with individual police officers.

The capacity to coordinate connections based on pre-existing social ties is not only a skill reserved for managers within organizational contexts, but also those who are engaged in direct intervention. Martin, who is a 63-year-old Latino male who works as an Intervention Navigator at Organization C, shared his experience soon after he was released from prison. He drew from his own connections in prison and referred one of his contacts to Organization C, so that they could be engaged in a specific neighborhood this person had credibility in:

And then when I got out, he asked me for people: "I need good people to work", you know, this and that. So I sent them...one guy. His name is Diego. He still works with [Org C] now. And I sent him and he was working in [neighborhood] where there was a [street gang name] problem up there…and they needed somebody to have familiarity with [that street gang], you know. And so he had it. So I sent him, you know? And so he started working with [Org C] and he was very effective working with members of [street gang name].

From the managerial perspective, deploying violence interventionists based on their existing social ties is a central part of Michael's work. He is tasked with building a team of outreach workers who can effectively engage with residents, street gangs, and gang chiefs across neighborhood contexts. He describes this process in the following excerpt:

[…] Knowing I don't speak Spanish. I need somebody who can relate to [residents in specific neighborhood], who know them, that have a strong voice in the neighborhood, that changed they life, or if they always has been a pillar for the neighborhood, to let them know what we're trying to bring to they neighborhood. So you always want to get welcomed in before you go. So like the team I handpicked right now, we got [neighborhood1], we got [neighborhood2], we got [neighborhood3] […] is about we have somebody that come from that neighborhood and be that pillar for us to let them know […] we coming with open arms to try to help y'all with resources or provide anything we can for the youth *and* for the elders.

This process of facilitating connections based on existing social ties also applies to connecting with other organizations. Michael also shared the ease with which Org C develops coalitions with other organizations due to their shared goals and by identifying workers who have a pre-existing relationship with them to reach out:
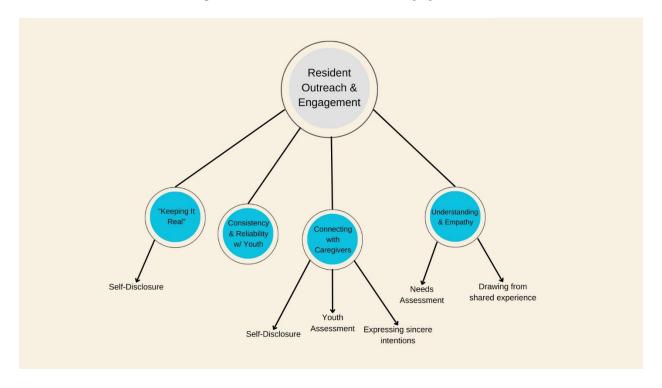
We actually good at cross functioning with other organizations. Cause all of us have the same common goals […] it's like somebody in our organization […] got that connection with somebody from that other organization and we try to support each other as a whole. So that […] really been the easy part.

**The Utilization of Relationships to Promote Community-Level Change**

Participants in all three organizations discussed the relational processes by which community change occurs by preventing street violence in the neighborhoods in which they operate. These relational processes, particularly regarding youth outreach, are not captured by the model of relational empowerment. Relational empowerment is centered on the psychological processes involved in interpersonal exchanges that lead to transformational change in the sociopolitical domain (Christens, 2012). However, the bulk of activities disclosed by participants, working on the ground across organizational contexts, were focused on micro-level change sanctioned by local and state governments, rather than macro-level initiatives that challenged State power (e.g., policy or structural change).

Although these relational interventions tied to service delivery are not captured in the model of relational empowerment, they were identified as vital to individual change processes among youth, their families, and in effect, the community. Moreover, participants reported substantial reductions in violent incidents in part, due to relationship-based interventions with individual, high-risk youth and their families. By intervening, client-by-client, positive change appears to be widespread throughout participants' cities. The thematic map in Figure 2 illustrates the identified relational themes underlying resident outreach and engagement.

**Figure 2**

*Relational Themes That Comprise Resident Outreach and Engagement*



*Note.* ©Christopher M. Thompson

**Relational Competencies for Resident Outreach and Engagement**

Several themes were identified among participants that comprise interpersonal skills and competencies that are important for youth outreach. Participants outlined considerations for building trust and bonding with young people, utilizing relationships with caregivers as an entry point to connecting with youth, exercising empathy and understanding, as well as the importance of "keeping it real," or authentic with youth in their attempts to intervene. These relational competencies were identified by participants as being contributing factors for positive youth development, as well as diversion from substance use and gang-involvement.

### *Consistency & Reliability to Build Trust*

Building trust was described as the single most important component when initially

making contact with youth and their families. Michael, who works for Organization C as

Manager of Street Outreach stated, "If you don't have they trust, you don't have anything."

Participants outlined several approaches to building trust among youth and high-risk residents.

The most predominant consideration that was echoed among all participants was the importance

of being consistent and reliable in youth's lives. Calvin, who owns his own trucking company

and owns his own community violence prevention non-profit, describes why it is important to be

a consistent and reliable presence in youths' lives during outreach:

> …if you're a case worker and you got your clients and they call, you gotta be there […]
>
> this stuff that's detrimental to people's livelihoods so it's not only, you know me telling
>
> the truth and keeping my word. It's about me showing up and being vital and visual. You
>
> know, a lot of them conversations don't just happen like […] we're having a conversation
>
> right now. Ain't nobody gonna open up just on the first time […] you gotta understand
>
> like even somebody that went to school, a lot of the questions may come off as probing.
>
> So you gotta let somebody bring that to you if they wanna talk […] I don't wanna force
>
> myself into it […] you gotta be supportive from the outside if that's what it is.

Calvin outlines the way that being a steady presence promotes trust and that no matter

how much training or education an outreach worker has in their interventions, respecting youths'

self-determination and agency may be integral to fostering the relationship. He also describes the

urgency of being consistent given what may be at stake for residents and their families. In

conjunction with being a consistent presence, participants emphasized being reliable by fulfilling

promises as another building-block of trust among residents and their families. Michael describes

how being dependable reverberates throughout the community and contributes to a reputation that also fosters trust:

> […] the community always was used to people making promises. But if you can come through on what you promised them, they open up to you […]. When they see you with your [Org C] shirt on or your [Org C] gear, they know who you is. They gonna show respect. If you can help somebody and their family member, they gonna connect you to 'em, cause you done helped them.

Through the process of consistency and reliability among individual youth and their families, organizations build social ties and extend their reputation with the community at large. This fosters social capital among organizations and their members, thereby facilitating trust and respect. By being known throughout the community, there are fewer barriers to overcome in youth outreach.

### *Connecting with Caregiver as Entry Point to Youth Outreach*

Participants described the important role that caregivers play in making contact with and bonding with youth. This was described as challenging at times, as many caregivers of high-risk youth struggle with their own adversities and may have tumultuous and reactive relationships with their child. In similar fashion as trust-building with youth, participants highlighted consistency and follow-through as significant contributing factors to bonding with caregivers. In addition, self-disclosure and expressing sincere intentions to support the family, coupled with consistency, were shown as another important method for building trust among caregivers. Rodrigo, whose job responsibility is, in part, youth outreach, describes ways he overcomes challenges when faced with parental distrust:

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…that's when I have to work harder. I'm in it to win it. "So you're gonna see me, you know. I'm sorry. You gonna see me. And I'm only here for you, you know, not only for you, but for, you know, of course for your baby. But I'm here for you. I need you to know that you can trust me." And then once they see that consistency […] they open up a little bit and I open up because I let them know about myself also. You know, I tell them about my past. I tell them, "Man. I've been there."[…]. My life is dedicated so that kids don't have to go into the system like I did because I didn't have somebody guiding me […]. But yeah. And then sometimes they will open up. The majority do.

Once trust has been built with families, they can become a vital resource for connecting with youth. Cameron, who works in Street Outreach for Organization C reports having a strong relationship with caregivers, much of which is based on his reputation for effectively supporting families and their children in the community. He described one way he utilized his relationship with a mother to bond with a particular youth who had been avoiding him:

But the Mamas was just so adamant about me getting connected with her son. So every time I come, he gone, I call, he gone. I catch him. He don't wanna talk. I see him. I said, "Let's go here." He don't wanna go. So it was like, damn, what could I do? [...]. So I ask, Mama, like, "what do he really like to do?" Like "what's in his room?" like, "what he got?" "Send me a picture of his room […]" So I'm like, OK. "You like skating? You like basketball." Alright, cool. "Tell him to be ready…at this time, skating and basketball and see if he wanna go." She called me back and said, "yeah, he wanna go." I said so now I know how to get him (laughs) […] every weekend, we'll go like skating and to the gym to play basketball. We was doing every Sunday. Every Sunday we was doing this, so now I

got him too where sometimes I might not even call him. He'll call me. "What's up? You

cool?" (laughs)

Making contact and building trust with caregivers was described as a vital way to intervene by

finding points of interest for youth, thereby promoting buy-in for youth engagement. Once

outreach workers make contact with youth, empathy and understanding of their experiences were

shown to be a major factor in building trust in order to effectively reach them.

### *Understanding & Empathy*

Understanding the depth and complexity of the predicament that youth and families

encounter allows for more relevant referral sources and the capacity to meet residents where

they're out emotionally. Moreover, empathy allows workers to connect with youth on a deeper

level, thereby strengthening youth engagement and buy-in. Regarding the youth that Cameron

was making attempts to connect with based on their interest, he also described the important role

that empathy and curiosity play in identifying what the underlying emotional needs are for the

youth. He described the child's caregiver and their lack of understanding, which contributes to

conflict in the home:

[…] kids just don't act like this for no reason. It's something the kid want or you have to

take your time or get him help. You have to or it's gonna spiral out of control and it

might be too late! So you have to get them right when they start. You have to get them.

So luckily I caught it in the beginning-middle, but luckily I caught it.

When following up with Cameron on how he manages his own emotions when he

encounters brick walls when trying to build trust with youth, he elaborated further:

It's not about me […] I could put myself in *his* shoes. And I can see what he going

through that I been through already […] that's how I channel myself because how can I

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react to you at this point in time when I was just there, so I know what you're going through. That'll be wrong for me to say, "Ohh yeah, this and this. Everything OK? And this and that-" "No, it's not. You need help, just like I did. And nobody gave it to me" […] I had a lot of my grandmas and her peoples so I stayed around old people a lot cause, I know y'all gonna make me feel some type of way. So it's just that. That's just what it is, Chris.

Cameron makes a conscious effort to not center his own potential reactions to rejection by youth, but rather draws from his own personal, shared experience to cultivate empathy and further curiosity from within. He acknowledges that things are in fact, not okay, a potential point of validation for youth whose struggles may feel unseen or unheard. Moreover, his capacity toward empathy allows him to identify and be responsive to youth's underlying emotional needs.

Empathy was also described as vital for meeting residents' tangible needs, in the form of relevant resources. Janice, who works as the Crisis Response Coordinator for Organization C, described the importance of empathy and understanding in the wake of tragedy. She shared her experience with a woman whom she had a pre-existing relationship with. A shooting occurred at her daughter's birthday party which resulted in the woman's daughter incurring severe brain damage and her child's father being killed, along with two friends who were like family to Janice. She describes how empathy can be a driving force to meet this families' emotional and material needs:

[…] I know the mom and I told her I said, you know, "I need to have a very difficult conversation with you and you probably gonna hate me or wanna kick, punch, and scream after this. But nobody knows your daughter better than you. This is a circumstance where you have to decide quality of life versus quantity […]. There's a lot

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of tragedy with it. But you gotta be able to put yourself in a mindset where you can have not sympathy, but empathy, kind of step back and analyze and think to yourself, what information would you wanna have right now? You know, what resources would be viable for you to have and for you to know right now.

As crisis response coordinator, Janice makes attempts to put herself in her clients' shoes without succumbing to her own emotional reactions and becoming overwhelmed. Earlier in the interview, Janice asserted the following:

…trauma, unfortunately brought me to [Org C] to do this work. And trauma definitely keeps me in [Org C] to do this work. I had somebody recently asked me, 'How do I do it? How do I deal with all the death, with all the shootings, with all the heartache?' And my answer was real simple. 'I didn't have a "me" when I was going through it.

Janice's lived experience with tragedy and capacity for empathy allows her to have clarity in understanding her clients and in being responsive to their needs amid tragedy.

### *"Keeping it Real"*

Worker authenticity and honesty appeared to go a long way in promoting resident trust and engagement. Participants shared that by disclosing their past involvement in gangs and other street activity, youth often expressed enthusiasm in wanting to learn more and engage with workers further. Martin discussed how lack of lived experience can often be a barrier to trust, he stated that "[The adults] will never get it […] they're not gonna bond with the youth because the youth is gonna find out that you're full of shit." Lived experience offers outreach workers an advantage in connecting with youth, and disclosing that lived experience is essential. Martin described how he overcomes challenges as a Latino male, instilling trust with African American youth and the role that self-disclosure and honesty played in making a connection:

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I work with both Latinos *and* African American kids, you know? And I know both sides

of the fence because I've been there with, you know, the African American gangs. I've

talked to the leaders, I've hung up with their leaders, you know, I mean, from the from

the [streetgang1], to the [streetgang2], to [streetgang3], to [streetgang4]-[streetgang5]

[…]. And so when they hear me talk, right, the African American kids hear me talk about

that, it's "aw man. He know my chief. Whoa." And this and that. And so then it becomes

a barrier shuts down…

For those whose lived experience is less extensive, self-disclosure and honesty continue

to play an important role in connecting with youth. Alex shared that he "hadn't been in the

streets for a long time" when he was younger and prior to working with Organization C as an

Intervention Navigator, he worked in the mental health field at another nonprofit. He discussed

some of the challenges he initially faced in not only cultivating bonds with the youth, but fears

associated with the high-risk nature of the job:

At first I'm gonna tell you, I was scared. I was fearful […]. And so when I got a sneak

peek of some of the work I'll be doing, I'm like "ohh man, I'm finna be working with at-

risk gang members." "I gotta interact with these guys." "I gotta try to build a relationship

with them where they can trust me and I can provide these services" […] but then I was

inspired from a coworker at [Org C] […]. He says, "share some of the things that you've

been through with them so you can connect with them. They can identify with those

things." And I did that and the more I did that and the more I came down to their level

and let them know I'm not here, I'm nonjudgmental […]. Man, my relationships have

been outstanding with the youth.

Although Alex hadn't been involved in street life for an extended period, the process of transparency positioned him in a way that is nonjudgmental. This allowed him to connect more effectively with the youth.

**Relational Interventions for Reducing Violence and Victimization**

In addition to resident and youth outreach and engagement, there are many other ways participants interface with the community and prevent violence and victimization. Participants are positioned as practitioners, providing mentorship once they have successfully built trust and engaged with youth, as well as professional community organizers, utilizing their relational competencies to garner vital resources for residents, which is an important skill related to collaborative competence (Christens, 2012).

*Resident Needs Assessment and Intervention*

As community organizers, many participants shared how important it was to be cognizant of and make connections with other organizations and nonprofits in their community. They discussed various ways they collaborate and build coalitions for the purposes of immediate "wrap-around services" for youth and their families. In addition to service providers and nonprofits, collaborations with teachers, parents, law enforcement, and others involved in the child's life, and assessing families' needs to connect them with tangible resources were described as important components for refocusing youth away from street organizations, substance use, or other high-risk involvement. As crisis response coordinator for Organization C, Janice underscored the importance of gathering collateral information from those who come into contact with the youth, but to also identify the vital resources with which she can direct youth and their families:

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[…] I think it's always important to make those relationships with the guidance counselors, if you're working in a school environment, and the school faculty and the teachers, so that they can kind of tell you what's going on with the kid. On the flip side of that, […] not only their peers, but you know, their classmates and the people that they frequently hang with like, talk to them, ok. "Do you see something out of character with, you know, with John Smith?" Like, just "do you notice something?" […]. And pay attention cause you can't address the issue if you don't know what the issue is […]. So I think it's important to have relationships with those closest to the people that we're servicing so that we can better serve them, you know and then outside of that […] just in general, having that presence and being known through the different police stations and the different people that are out there doing the type of work that we do. The hospitals when we respond there. […] [A]sset mapping to me is so important. You wanna know who's out there and who's offering what and have those relationships with those people so that they can reach out to you and you can in turn, reach out to them.

The social ties that Janice has cultivated, as a resident, born and raised in her city, as well as the efforts she makes to cultivate new connections and wrap-around services for youth on her caseload is important for assessing the nature of the problem and level of risk, in addition to channeling resources to meet the needs of youth and families.

Catherine, who works in Organization A, described a different intervention strategy that her organization uses to make contact with youth, assess, and intervene:

So a [violence-intervention-method] is, it's community, social services, and law enforcement as a group. And so in our community, law enforcement […], they have a system, a numbering system basically on who we go talk to and that's based on charges,

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you know, if they're gun charges, how recent, how often and the age of the person. And

that's kind of their scale on who we need to go to speak with.

Catherine goes on to detail one example of this approach and how it can be an effective

intervention for addressing basic needs:

> […] [W]e were sitting at a table with this young man and everyone else was kind of
>
> standing over by the door more and, you know, we just kind of started talking to him. We
>
> started asking about his kids and all that stuff and, you know, just seeing kind of the light
>
> bulb go off almost of like, "yeah, I need to do different things" and you know, then that's
>
> when we offer the support of, "you can be with one of our outreach workers. Law
>
> enforcement will not be involved from here on out, like we'll never come with law
>
> enforcement again. Like, that's not what this program is about and if you need a job, if
>
> you need housing, if you need rides to your probation like whatever it may be like, we
>
> can help you, um, overcome those boundaries just so it's like one less thing maybe that
>
> you have to worry about," you know.

Catherine's organization optimizes their relationship with police, such that they are

utilized as an efficient referral system, but minimizes resident contact with law enforcement

when promoting client buy-in. This network of resources allows Catherine to intervene and

readily provide relevant supports.

### *Violence Intervention & Mediation*

Participants with lived experience of prior gang and justice-involvement utilized their

relational skills and pre-existing social ties to connect with and mediate disputes among rival

street organizations. Key relational skills in this domain involve utilizing social ties to connect

with members of street organizations, maintaining and building alliances with gang chiefs,

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assessing the basis for the conflict, identifying mutual or individual interests among rivals, and facilitating their awareness of how violent retaliation undermines those interests. Those involved in this delicate work described successes in de-escalation and prevention of violent retaliation.

Cameron, who works with Organization C, discusses how he uses pre-existing social ties in his community to bring rivals together and cultivates alliances for the purpose of providing supports and mediating disputes:

> […] [S]o it's like we use our connections and our resources. So if I'm from the [neighborhood1] community and you know somebody from [neighborhood2] community. You know, if I got, somebody got a problem over here that I know and *you* know the person that they into it with. That's how we come together. You talk to him […] I talk to him. […] We get a mediation going. Prevention, team prevention. So it's like, you get him going, you get him to agree to meet up with us. No guns. You pat him down, you search him, you do all, everything the police do, but we not the police.

Cameron's capacity to utilize connections in the community, a key relational skill involved with collaborative competence, allows for opportunities for face-to-face mediation among rivals. Once all parties are in the same room, Cameron positions himself as a source of support for both parties while assessing the bases for the dispute, stating "What resources do y'all need to stay away from each other? What is it that y'all want? What can we help y'all with? What is the violence really about?" When asked how he builds alliances with gang chiefs, Rodrigo stated, "…getting to know the leadership of the gangs in the community. Boots on the ground. Um, being able to talk to them and help them out, sometimes financially with food. Um we take them out on field trips." Later on in the interview, he elaborated further:

Of course I choose a location, kind of populated, but that I can have a little private area and then I get them there: "Man, eat whatever you want; order whatever you want. I got you." And then, you know, I let them meet. I want them to feel like I'm there for them, which I am, but I want them to feel it…

Similarly to Cameron, Rodrigo makes attempts to effectively mediate brewing conflicts by aligning with rival parties and taking a nonjudgmental, supportive stance.

Regarding the process of mediation itself, participants predominantly reported that facilitating rival gang members' awareness of how violent retaliation may undermine their own interests was an important tactic in cognitively shifting their perspective. Participants provided multiple examples of this, including appealing to gang members' aversion to police as a way to de-escalate, how they can back down from retaliation without "losing face" or tarnishing their reputation, and reminding youth of deadly retaliation against them if they engage in a particular conflict. Cameron provides examples of how he appeals to their interests in mediation with rival gang members.

Y'all gonna get killed or you gonna go to jail? Or you gonna kill somebody that's innocent, or you're gonna have somebody that don't deserve this, have something happen to them. Because why, y'all beefing? All y'all parents and people staying in the hood. They don't stay out of town no where, so it's easy for anybody to touch any one of your people. So it's like, what y'all beefing for, so it's like once we do all that and we still can't get them to come to terms, which is frustrating, but even if we could just get them to agree, even if they change their mind afterwards, you know, we did our plan. Our plan was to come here, get them to agree to some type of movement.

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For Cameron, the process of mediation involves reminding and reinforcing gang members' awareness of the consequences of engaging in violence. Rodrigo provides examples of how he employs a similar tactic when mediation between rival parties begins to escalate:

> if I see one of them starting to get loud, and then I intervene. "Wait a minute, bro. It's not even about that here. We're talking like [gang] chiefs. You're the leader and you're the leadership. We're gonna talk like men, like chiefs, with respect to each other, because that's why I'm bringing you here. Y'all know me, you know. And I'm not on that bullshit. You know, we're gonna talk. We're gonna come up to a solution tonight because honestly, y'all guys are responsible for the youth in your neighborhood. So what are we gonna do? We're gonna let them kill each other or what? And that's up to y'all guys." And then they're like, "Whoa." You know, so I like putting them on the spot. And so that's one of the strategies, you know, that I use.

By appealing to a part of their identity as men and gang chiefs, as well as heightening their awareness regarding the weight of the responsibility they bear, Rodrigo shifts rivals' value system away from retaliation or violence.

There are a multitude of additional services that participants reportedly provide to residents, including facilitating mediations between the police and residents to build trust and promote social inclusion. Another participant shared his experience working in the school systems, facilitating mediations between school staff and students with profound success, thereby positively impacting school climate. These services offer emotional and tangible support to residents and were described as central to promoting stability for families and to show youth and other higher-risk residents viable alternatives to selling drugs or gang involvement.

In this study, participants detailed relational interventions that were necessary for successfully engaging with youth and their families, fostering positive growth and change among residents, de-escalating disputes, and staying connected with the resources and organizations in the community. Participants described all of these activities as fundamental in preventing community violence and victimization.

**Psychological Empowerment as Meaning-Making in Community-Led Public Safety**

In addition to interpersonal competencies within relational empowerment, individual-level, rather than organizational-level, processes that capture the other components of psychological empowerment were also identified in participant interviews. Participants described various ways they made meaning in the process of engaging in the work. This meaning illustrated the three other components of psychological empowerment. Emotional empowerment, one component of psychological empowerment, is defined as an intrapsychic process characterized by increased self-efficacy, motivation, and hopefulness for creating change in social and political domain (Christens, 2012, 2013). For participants, the meaning that generates emotional empowerment was one that brought personal fulfillment to the work, thus reinforcing motivation and commitment. Making a positive impact on the lives of youth and their families and what that meant to workers were described as pivotal moments that further solidified their place in the organization and in the work they did. In addition to making an impact, the personal growth they experienced in the process of working directly with high-risk youth and their families was also a reinforcing mechanism that strengthened mobilization and commitment.

Catherine is a 37-year-old, White female who works with Organization A as a violence prevention specialist. She talked about the work she does, specifically with the youth, and how

making a difference in their lives brings fulfillment. When asked what led her to do community violence prevention work, she stated the following:

> I grew up pretty White, middle class […]. So I get that like, I don't have that type of experience [that youth have]. So that's something I've kind of, like had to look within on […] understanding my privilege […] and being able to use that in a good way […] I went through cancer (voice shutters) right so. I think that experience kind of helped me because I had so many people around me that like, helped me and, like people I didn't even know (tearful) maybe cared, right? So it's like, if I could be that person for someone, for someone that's going through some stuff in their life, then that's kind of where that comes from, I think.

Catherine identified how she could give back in light of her privilege. Moreover, her own personal experiences of receiving an outpouring of support during a cancer diagnosis became a motivating factor for her to offer those same experiences to residents in the community with whom she works. She goes on to describe an interaction she had with a youth that was pivotal to reinforcing her role as a violence prevention specialist. She describes youth distrust toward outreach workers, which can be a barrier to intervention, and a moment when she was actually able to connect and build trust. She states, "I feel like I'm actually making a difference in people's lives […] I can support people and help make their lives better, like, that's kind of what keeps me going and fills my cup up." Catherine makes meaning through the experiential process of positively impacting others in her community work, which reinforces her commitment.

The process of engaging with youth as a White woman who has a different lived experience led to personal growth as well. She stated that "it's made me understand that there's like these root causes […] to [street violence] and circumstances […] that has led to where

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they're at […]. I can empathize with and understand that they have this huge story that has led to this point." This increase in her own critical awareness led to strengthening her empathy for and understanding of the community with whom she works. Moreover, increased critical awareness is an important aspect of cognitive empowerment (Christens, 2012). Through the action of engaging with youth and the community, which is an aspect of behavioral empowerment (Christens, 2012), Catherine experiences emotional and cognitive empowerment, which in turn, further reinforces community involvement.

Similarly, Rodrigo described his own relationship with the work and how this experience reinforces his engagement with youth. When asked what the most rewarding aspects of antiviolence work was, he stated, "Man all of my detachments. The detachments, because I feel that [the youth] get their life back". Rodrigo uses the word *detachments* to mean the effective negotiation with gang leaders to safely detach youth from their obligations to street organizations. As a former, high-ranking gang chief, Rodrigo has credibility and influence among gangs in his city and gains fulfillment by impacting youth in positive ways. He also disclosed his own personal growth in the process of working with youth in a school-setting and how in his attempts to effect positive change, he recognized he needed to look inward and make change from within:

> So when […] I seen the effect that I was having on these kids, I said to myself and excuse my language, man, "fuck that gang shit." You know I said, man, "it's time to be real about this, because what am I gonna do, fake these kids out?" You know, so I got real about it. You know, I felt the love at [Org C] from these people that they help me like (pause) change a little bit, you know, like they helped me make the decision, leave this stuff alone and stay on this positive note.

Rodrigo's desire to maintain his integrity, coupled with organizational support, was a driving force that led him to make substantial life changes that further solidified his role in the organization.
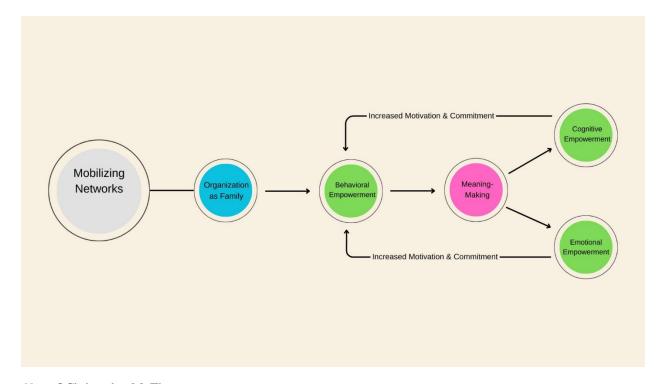
Meaning-making led to emotional empowerment through personal growth after Rodrigo came to terms with the significance of the impact he is making, coupled with organizational support. Increased motivation to engage in the work was demonstrated through his commitment to change his own life. For Rodrigo, meaning-making generated a reciprocal feedback loop between youth engagement and organizational involvement (i.e., behavioral empowerment) and increased motivation to make a positive impact on the community (i.e., emotional empowerment).

Based on themes identified from participant interviews, the capacity to mobilize networks by cultivating a welcoming and inviting, family environment promotes member engagement. This initial engagement in the organization and the community, or behavioral empowerment, creates conditions for meaning-making, thereby facilitating emotional and cognitive empowerment among members that in turn, strengthened commitment and engagement in the work. This self-sustaining feedback loop is illustrated in Figure 3.

**Figure 3**

*Mobilizing Networks and Feedback Loop Among Components of Psychological Empowerment*

## Barriers To Relational Empowerment

Participants described a multitude of factors that pose direct challenges to the cultivation of relational empowerment among those involved in community-led public safety. Despite the development of relational skills, expertise, and credibility necessary for building trust with residents, participants reported that promoting resident trust is an ongoing challenge due to resident skepticism of their partnerships with police. Participants also discussed that connecting with residents' families can be challenging due to their own struggles. Further, participants cited conflicts of interest among organizations with which they would otherwise collaborate. Moreover, participants described a lack of organizational capacity to meet the demand of violence in their communities. Lastly, the pervasiveness of gang culture and influence create

challenges for interventionists, even those who are skilled at detaching youth from gang involvement.

**Distrust Toward Organization Due to Police Partnership**

Participants in this study discussed the ongoing challenges of cultivating trust with youth. The primary impetus for this divide was the partnership between law enforcement and the community organizations to which the outreach worker belonged. Catherine, who works in Org A, talked about her attempts to engage with youth and the hesitation she feels due to her association with law enforcement:

> […] [S]ometimes I am kind of like, I don't know, I feel a little hesitant to be like walking up with a bunch of cops cause I don't want people to be like "oh she works with the cops." You know what I mean? Like because there is that mistrust, right? So I think it's kind of a fine line. I would say I have that good rapport with a lot of the officers that we work with, but (pause; laughs) I don't necessarily want to be like, associated with that? Which is kind of harsh to say I guess. And I don't know. I don't know. It's kind of complicated (smiles). I suppose.

Catherine's hesitation as she reported, comes from a legitimate place, given community distrust in law enforcement that she described. Martin, who serves as a violence navigator in Organization C, elaborates on the distrust among many residents in the neighborhoods in which he works. When asked how it felt to be involved in Org C when he got out of prison, he reported the following:

> You know it's scary, man…now your members are looking at you like, "what you flip? You turn the snitch?" You know what I mean, they look at you differently, right? And so you have to, you know, walk, you know, with caution, man, because when you go into a

neighborhood and they see you, "oh man, what the fuck you talking about? Peace and all this bullshit". You know, they don't wanna hear it because all they're doing is, you know, selling drugs on the block or, you know, selling weight, whatever they doing, they're doing it.

Martin articulates an added layer of danger inherent among workers who have been formally gang-affiliated and are now engaged in antiviolence work. Although Martin has since gained credibility in his networks since returning to his community from prison, for many workers, resident distrust becomes an additional barrier as a result of their association with the police.

**Intergenerational Adversities Undermine Youth Outreach**

Another challenge several participants reported was lack of caregiver involvement in the process of connecting youth with the outreach worker and challenges with facilitating caregiver involvement in the youth's development. Janice, who works for Organization C discussed attempts she made to involve a parent in the work she was doing to support the caregiver's child, following the death of the child's father:

> […] [U]nfortunately it didn't happen, establish[ing] relationships with the parents. Unfortunately, with these specific kids, the parents weren't there in the way that they could have been. I don't wanna say *should* have been. I'm nobody to judge, but it was difficult. A lot of them, you know, were young parents and they're kind of raising their kids as siblings versus their child. You know what I mean? And I get it. Parenting doesn't come with a handbook. I was a young mom myself. I was eighteen when I had my oldest.

Janice draws from her own experiences when expressing empathy for this young mother who just experienced a painful tragedy. She recognizes that this woman's adversities undermine her

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attempts at garnering as much support for her children as she can. Alex, who works for

Organization C as an Intervention Navigator, described how adversities that caregivers undergo

not only become a barrier to youth support, but a detriment. When asked what the most

challenging aspects of the work are, he reported the following:

> Getting youth to believe in themselves. (Pause)…Just getting them to believe that they're
>
> more than what they've been told they are…some of the parents tell them how "you ain't
>
> gonna never be nothing" and/or "you gonna be just like your father" or "you gonna keep
>
> going around the circle-you go to jail again. I'm not coming to get you" or "get out of my
>
> house." You know, whatever negative things they've been told, just trying to get them to
>
> believe there's something better outside of they community, something better waiting for
>
> them, getting them to just become more um, independent and self-motivated.

**Conflicts of Interest Among Organizations**

Participants discussed challenges with successful interorganizational collaboration due to

an incentivization structure that pits non-profits against one another. This was described as a

problem that not only impacts coalition-building but fosters distrust among residents toward

organizations who claim to support the community. Michael, who works for Organization C as

Manager for Street Outreach, shared how he and other members were thrust into a 6-month long

conflict with another organization due to a dispute regarding turf. There was confusion over

which organization would take a client depending on what street the given incident occurred. He

stated, "it was a disagreement like, 'oh, this my client.' 'No this my client.'…they didn't want us

to come past [streetname1]. And we telling them, "well, if that's the case, if y'all come past

[streetname2], *we* have a problem." Michael later elaborated on the underlying cause of the

dispute, stating the following:

A lot of people don't know…but it's a number game. If you not meeting your numbers or your quotas, you gonna do everything in your power to meet your quota….they felt that we was taking numbers out they mouth and we like, 'no, we all here for the same one. Whoever gets here first, that's who client it is.' So that's the same scenario like basically with the tow truck company, 'whoever gets to the tow first. If it's an accident, it become they car.'

Michael stated that they since resolved the conflict, indicating that they decided whoever has the strongest social ties with the resident, gets the client. Nonetheless, a focus on quotas to get funding can be a detriment to interorganizational collaboration. Martin described a similar challenge to interorganizational collaboration due to the same incentivization structure. He talked about referring clients to other organizations that claim to provide specific services, but fail to meet clients' needs:

There's agencies out here that claim that they can get young people jobs, right? And I sent young people to them and *none* of them have gotten jobs. Right?...So there's a lot of what I call 'poverty pimps', right? Those organizations are poverty pimps, man…They're just there to just get money, you know, from foundations or grants from wherever they're getting it from. Right? And they're not doing nothing. And that hurts society, man. That hurts society when you got these little agencies sucking up this money, right? When it could be, you know, sent somewhere else to an organization that is effectively dealing with the issue, you know what I mean? Then you're hurting the system, man. You're hurting us…

The lack of follow-through among agencies can create distrust among residents, thereby hindering outreach. The incentive that nonprofits have, to claim they provide services to the

community in their grant applications, is counterproductive when they fall short. That also poses an additional challenge to identifying adequate referral sources that organizations can trust, that will not undermine their clients' upward trajectory.

**Organizations Unable to Meet Violence Prevention Demand**

Many participants shared the challenges they encounter with meeting the demands of residents' needs in their neighborhoods. Participants asserted that the spread of violence across their city, as well as the pervasiveness of gang culture have made it difficult to connect with residents who would otherwise greatly benefit from their services. Calvin described the need for more resources to manage the influx of violence he is seeing in his city:

> It's a lot of murders and you know…it's not the average violence. Now they got all these hybrid gangs and they got, you know, it's just different. It's not the big entities like, you know, the Crips or the Bloods…there's little cliques and crews that's within…It's a lot…it's senseless, and then there's a lot of these dudes that I grew up with, these are they kids. These *are* kids that's out here doing this…it's just different now…we need more resources. We need more people on the ground.

Calvin also discussed the lack of "accountability" among residents to care for one another's kids, communicate with their caregivers when they see them acting out, and take ownership of the conditions in their neighborhood. Based on Calvin's experience, this lack of social capital, coupled with the increasingly young age of perpetrators of violence puts a strain on community-led violence prevention. This sentiment is mirrored by Janice, who attributes the spread of violence in her city, to increased gentrification and the city-wide displacement of residents:

Well, now guess what? Now you need another resource. You need a resource of violence

prevention because now it's creeping into your blocks, which you'd think would have

been common sense because of the amount of gentrification we deal with in the city.

She goes on to point out the lack of organizational capacity to deal with the spread of violence:

Like we always fight that we don't have the same rights for education and for

employment as those that are well-off. And that's the sad truth. But on the flip side of

that, they don't have accesses to the resources if violence sits there and hits them because

we don't have organizations like ours in those type of areas.

Participants' account of the escalation and spread of street violence, attributed to structural

conditions such as gentrification and diminished social capital within impoverished

neighborhoods, creates precarious circumstances for residents that community organizations

themselves are unable to fundamentally address. This suggests that as long as the systemic

problems that maintain and exacerbate street violence exist, community-led public safety

initiatives will continue to face capacity issues in meeting residents' needs.

**Pervasiveness of Gang Influence**

Another significant challenge reported by participants was the difficulty in detaching

youth from gangs. Although participants highlighted major successes negotiating youth to leave

their affiliated gang, the influence they often have on young people is pervasive and an ongoing

hurdle for violence interventionists and outreach workers. Rodrigo spoke to the strong influence

that gangs have over some youth. He shared his own experience of a youth dropping him as a

mentor and cutting him completely due to gang influence:

[…] [M]aybe a month ago, I lost one of my participants because he found out about my

past [gang] affiliation. And I was dealing with him for like, two to three years! Man the

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kid, I've been to court for him, I've taken him out to dinner. I've taken him out to [sports-team1] games. I've taken up to [sports-team2] game. I've you know, I did a lot of things with this kid until he just found out…I was from a certain gang, and that's his rival. So man, he cut me off. First time ever.

In addition to the power of gang influence, Martin shared his own experiences with losing youth to gang violence and detailed the difficulty young people have in detaching from gangs even when they decide to leave:

[…] [T]here's always gonna be a time that [youth] are gonna go back. Cause I've had kids, man, that, you know, they were doing great, right. And all of a sudden their house got shot up and they went back to that lifestyle. Because you know that life, that gang life is gonna follow you, always…they're not gonna let you go. You know, and that's unfortunate, because that's what happens when you work with these young men. For the last 3-4 years, I've had at least two or three kids each year die that I've worked with, get killed from gun violence, you know…And that hurts, man, that hurts. That hurts my heart.

Violence interventionists described several successful attempts at mediation and detachment of youth from gangs. They detailed ways in which they implemented their relational skills, based on lived experience and expertise. Nonetheless, gang culture and the obligations that gang leaders impose on youth continue to be a powerful influence on youth that pose challenges for community-led violence prevention organizations.

# CHAPTER V

# DISCUSSION

Relational empowerment was experienced among all participants interviewed in this study. The themes generated by participants that comprised aspects of relational empowerment revealed important interpersonal processes and skills specific to community-led public safety. Moreover, important competencies connected to youth outreach and engagement offer additional insights and considerations into how the construct of relational empowerment could be extended to apply not only to community organizing activities that harness power through collaboration and challenging oppressive social systems, but service delivery as well.

Based on the findings of this study, organizations mobilize networks by creating a welcoming and inviting space that cultivates personal bonds that transcend co-worker relationships. For new members with shared identities and experiences, this family environment promotes a sense of belonging. To further solidify their place in the organization, the family spirit of their organizations come in the form of tangible and ongoing emotional support offered to members who many have they themselves been impacted by gun violence. This strengthens their commitment and engagement within the organization.

One aspect of this strengthened engagement is workers' sense of responsibility to "give back" to the organization, particularly those participants who were supported by their organization during pivotal and difficult times in their lives. This reciprocity between and among members and their broader organization, in addition to the meaning that members derive from their organizational involvement and community impact, maintains their engagement over time. This meaning-making, whether it was the result of making an impact or personal growth, further mobilized participants to give back to their organizations and the community they serve.

As participants described ways that their organization further mobilized their involvement through various forms of support, they also described feeling inspired and motivated by leadership. In this study, passing on legacy came in the form of the capacity of leadership to instill self-efficacy and commitment to the organization and the work that members do. Through leadership passion, sincerity, and dedication to the work, members look up to seasoned members and expressed increased confidence in following in their footsteps. Moreover, passing on legacy also consisted of memberships' ability and openness to learn, internalize the values and principles of the organization, and practice those skills in their personal and professional lives.

The opportunity to learn, embody the organizational culture, and apply skills were, in some cases, important in being able to effectively navigate power structures (e.g., law enforcement, politicians, media), which was a theme of collaborative competence identified in this study. As participants described their own growth process within the organization, they also outlined the balance of autonomy and guidance from leadership that was appreciated by staff. This balance of promoting autonomy and guidance was shown to be a theme of facilitating others' empowerment, consisting of including members in the decision-making process and channeling their existing strengths and expertise. An additional theme that comprised collaborative competence in this study, was the ability to channel members' pre-existing social ties by deploying them to neighborhoods where they have more credibility and are more likely to engage in effective work. This process allows workers to continue to engage in experiential learning and for leaders to continue to facilitate empowering processes by deferring to their expertise and the strengths they bring to the organization.

Lastly, bridging social divisions was found to consist of asserting the importance of what is in the best interest of the organization and the community they serve, over individual interests. Competencies necessary for developing group norms predicated on respect among members was another theme that was subsumed by bridging social divides. Both of these themes informed the group process when navigating disagreements or conflicts. The ability for members to be honest and direct, as well as empathize with and understand differing perspectives was described as vital for working through and resolving group tensions. The themes that comprise mobilizing networks - *family as organization* and *worker reciprocity to organization & leadership* – may be important for laying the foundation for group cohesiveness and the trust necessary to implement norms of respect, empathy, and understanding.

## General Discussion

As previously mentioned, there have been very few studies that have examined or identified relational empowerment processes in organizational or group contexts (Cheryomukhin & Peterson, 2014; Christens, 2010; Langhout et al., 2014; Russell et al., 2009; Wray-Lake & Abrams, 2020). Given these theoretical, conceptual, and empirical gaps in the literature, this study sought to clarify and broaden current conceptualizations of relational empowerment.

The current study revealed that effective navigation of power necessitates members' critical consciousness to inform ways to engage with residents, law enforcement, politicians, the media, and other powerful networks. Moreover, increased self-efficacy reinforced community engagement among participants. The link between critical consciousness and relational competencies and their relationship to social change processes found in the current study is contrary to the study by Wray-Lake and Adams (2020), who found that youth who were high in cognitive empowerment (i.e., critical awareness) alone, were low in relational empowerment

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(i.e., facilitating others' empowerment) and were civically disengaged. Alternatively, emotional empowerment, characterized by high self-efficacy and motivation, delineated a clear pathway to relational empowerment and civic engagement among youth (Wray-Lake & Abrams, 2020). Of note, youth in this study did not have experience with community organizing, whereas participants in the current study were comprised of adults, many of whom had extensive community organizing experience and exposure to street violence. The findings of the current study align with Keiffer's (1984) concept of *participatory competence,* which consists of individuals' increased self-efficacy, sociopolitical awareness, and the capacity to cultivate individual and collective resources for social action. Thus, self-efficacy, or emotional empowerment, in conjunction with cognitive empowerment, play an important role in processes related to community engagement.

Participants in the current study revealed that increased self-efficacy around engaging youth, effective coping with work-related stressors (i.e., perseverance), and capacity to remain dedicated to community work, was in part, due to modeling from leadership in the form of passing on legacy. Moreover, participants derived their motivation from co-workers and leadership who treated them like family and were welcoming and supportive, a theme related to mobilizing networks. This suggests that organizations who are comprised of members who possess these competencies of relational empowerment - collaborative competence, mobilizing networks, and passing on legacy – can create the conditions to activate civic engagement through these simultaneous pathways.

Sustaining member engagement through fostering a welcoming and inviting space was defined as an important aspect of mobilizing networks (Christens, 2012). As discussed, participants described the family support they felt when joining the organization and how this

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motivated and strengthened their engagement in the organization and with the community they serve. This also contributed to a sense of responsibility and reciprocity to leadership and the mission of the organization. Russell and colleagues (2009) found that a sense of belonging and affirming experiences as part of a collective increase engagement, but also participants' confidence in their abilities to overcome their life circumstances. In the current study, member self-efficacy was transmitted from leadership via modeling passion, sincerity, and dedication to the community, as participants felt inspired and sought to embody that confidence. This suggests that multiple pathways of relational empowerment can produce increased confidence and a sense of agency through the capacity to foster a supportive and welcoming culture and the display of what one participant referred to as "heart," which they defined as "going the extra mile."

In the literature, there are conceptual overlaps between passing on legacy and facilitating others' empowerment. Christens (2012) defines passing on legacy as consisting of leaders who invest in the sustainability of organizations by utilizing strategies of mentorship and guided participation, training, and intergenerational collaboration. Although facilitating others' empowerment also consists of relinquishing or delineating control, Christens (2012) includes leadership guidance and various forms of mentorship from previous literature (Kirshner, 2008; Preskill & Brookfield, 2009) to conceptualize the construct. Therefore, the only demarcating factor between the constructs appeared to be the intention of the mentor or leader within a given organization. This study extends the construct of passing on legacy to include the contributions of those who *carry* on the legacy, as participants expressed a willingness to learn, internalize, and apply the principles, values, perspectives, cultural markers, skills and competencies of leadership and the organization. Thus, interviews with those on the receiving end of passing on

legacy offered unique insights that delineated this component of relational empowerment from facilitating others' empowerment.

Conceptually, passing on legacy, like all components of relational empowerment, is contingent upon not only the leader who facilitates empowering relational processes, but the members themselves. As mentioned above, participants in this study described their own competencies, which consisted of a willingness and openness to learn, a desire to embody leadership qualities and the culture of the organization, as well as carry out relational processes that reflect the organization. Thus, legacy was not only a tradition to be passed on by the higher-ups, but one to be received and carried out. Given that to receive and carry out legacy consists of relational competencies, this expands how passing on legacy can be defined. Future studies should examine more closely those on the receiving end of passing on legacy to further identify competencies within this domain. Moreover, further research should explore bidirectional relational empowerment competencies, especially those that are necessary for facilitating empowered organization engagement in transformative social justice work.

Research exploring the relationship between those who pass down legacy and those who receive and apply legacy may lead to more in-depth understandings of intergenerational processes within organizations. Cultural norms, principles, values, and knowledge that is passed down from generation to generation by leadership, over time, may be interpreted differently by those on the receiving end. This misinterpretation, or adaptation, could lead to organizational attitudes, beliefs, activities, and other processes that are not intended by leadership to pass down. Thus, future research can examine how intergenerational tensions manifest within organization, as well as how intergenerational adaptation of legacy may in fact, contribute to organizational longevity and empowerment within shifting sociopolitical and economic contexts.

Themes that made up bridging social divides consisted of *norms built on respect* and *collective over the individual*. This corroborated prior research on the important role of practicing intentionality when cultivating face-to-face relationships based on respect, civility, and shared mutual interests in community organizing (Christens, 2010). Participants in this study prioritize meetings to iron out differences and to avoid sub-grouping and division. They also prioritize the interests of the organization and the community in guiding their decision-making. Of note, norms that prioritize the collective over individual interests and the consistent practice of honesty and openness to differing opinions, may also be a way participants transmit legacy within the organization. Participants often described their learning curves when adapting in staff meetings where bridging social divides took place, and how members eventually took ownership and enacted these processes with one another. Further studies should explore how passing on legacy manifests through the transmission of group or cultural norms, values, and principles that guide intraorganizational conflict resolution over time. This may be an important relational process involved in organizational sustainability across generations.

Langhout and colleagues' (2014) study on elementary school students involved in a yPAR after-school program concluded that bridging social divides promoted trust among the students. The current study further supports the important role that bridging social divides has on cultivating trust, as some participants either disclosed their initial trepidation toward having authentic discourse and confronting group members face-to-face, or eventually recognized the value in others' perspectives. Many participants articulated how invested they eventually became in these conversations and, in fact, valued staff meetings for the purpose of maintaining and protecting group cohesion and a sharpening their focus on their stated organizational goals for

the community. Thus, bridging social divides appears to be an important component to fostering

trust and a necessary precondition for maintaining group cohesion.

The current study lends support to the notion that the process of bridging social divides

can be applied to a variety of organizational contexts and lines of difference. Christens (2012)

defines bridging social divides as the ability to facilitate norms of trust and reciprocity across

lines of difference (Christens, 2012). Research on bridging social divides identified the capacity

to strategize to bring others together based on differences in culture, identity, and social location

(Cargo et al., 2003; Watkins et al., 2007), whereas other studies were based on disagreements

and other forms of division that were not as clearly explicated (Christens, 2010; Langhout et al.,

2014). In the current study, the two themes that consist of bridging social divides were

articulated among participants across a variety of issues. Interorganizational conflicts and

disagreements were based on differences in race and ethnicity and social class, as well as

ideological differences around strategy. In all cases, the two themes in this study were important

components that assisted members in trusting the process of openness and honesty with one

another and broadened member awareness of others' perspectives regarding ways to effectively

prevent violence in their community. Thus, research should continue to focus on common group

processes across various issues that arise both within and between organizational contexts.

In addition to contributions in empowerment theory, the current study offers important

considerations for practitioners involved in community-based violence prevention. Since the

high-profile murders of Brianna Taylor, George Floyd, and others by the hand of law

enforcement, nationwide calls to dismantle or defund the police have since faltered (Londono,

2023). Nonetheless, these tragic incidents sparked the public's imagination regarding the role of

law enforcement in public safety and ways that communities can hold more decision-making

power over their affairs. This led to an increase in community-led violence prevention programs across the United States. Given the increased attention and demand on community organizations tasked with violence prevention, there is a need for more research into the factors that contribute to effective community organizing centered on violence intervention and prevention.

Prior research showed challenges with cultivating partnerships with other organizations and residents, which the authors asserted as contributing factors to outcomes that lacked significance (Berman & Gold, 2011; Fox et al., 2015). The current study highlights the central role that collaborative competence plays in community embeddedness and interorganizational collaboration. In this study, collaborative competence involved, in part, *channeling worker social ties*. Leaders identified prospective and current members who had pre-existing relationships with residents and organizations in other neighborhoods. These social ties are not only effective at building trust with higher-risk youth but also create linkages to other organizations to foster the exchange of information, resources, and trust-building. Moreover, identifying and underscoring shared goals with other organizations was reported as another factor contributing to coalition-building.

Berman and Gold (2011) argued that within community violence prevention, developing networks within communities is important not only to identify resources and social service providers in the community, but also for hiring staff. Participants in this study often describe their introduction to the organization through someone they knew who was already part of the organization. Thus, community leaders, organizers, and practitioners involved in community-led public safety can focus with intention, on assessing the social networks of their staff to identify interorganizational linkages, as well as prospective staff.

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This study suggests that multiple themes within the construct of relational empowerment can be useful for staff hiring and retention. Regarding key competencies for mobilizing networks, participants viewed co-workers and supervisors as "family" and often felt a sense of belonging due to the staff's welcoming, inviting, and supportive approach. Moreover, striking a balance between worker autonomy and guidance, an aspect of facilitating others' empowerment, was shown to provide reinforcement to workers who felt like their expertise was being utilized for the greater good. *Worker reciprocity* to the organization and leadership, as well as the *meaning-making from the work* may partially explain the longevity among some staff, particularly in Organization C. Thus, those involved in community-led violence prevention organizations who cultivate a welcoming, inviting, and supportive space for new staff, organize trainings to increase relevant competencies, channel their expertise and strengths in positive ways, and include them in decision-making processes based on their expertise, help offer important enrichment opportunities for staff retention.

Community-based public safety programs have faced challenges navigating relationships with law enforcement in the past (Berman & Gold, 2011; Wilson & Chermak, 2011). One program noted a loss of trust with the community due to their partnership with law enforcement. Thus, the delicate dance that community organizers, outreach workers, and violence interventionists must play in order to maintain bonds with law-enforcement and the community can be challenging. This study identified the important role of *navigating power structures* as a key relational skill important for collaborative competencies that are useful for balancing these otherwise opposing tensions. Maintaining street credibility by educating law enforcement regarding the rationale behind pulling back on certain collaborations is important, in addition to not revealing client information and how doing so would undermine their goals. Practitioners can

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prioritize the cultivation and maintenance of street credibility in their boundary-setting with law enforcement. Moreover, to build trust, workers can continue to identify and underscore the shared goals they have with law enforcement for reducing and preventing street violence. Lastly, employing staff who have a critical awareness of the sociohistorical tensions between law enforcement and residents is important for facilitating this balance. Another component of *navigating power structures* in this study was about tailoring language and interactions to the cultural sphere. Identifying staff who are flexible in their communication and nimble in their capacity to adapt to the community and in spaces with law enforcement may be important in managing these tensions.

## Penal Abolitionist Considerations

A penal abolitionist framework was used to gain a deeper understanding of existing challenges to relational empowerment and community violence prevention. This framework is useful for understanding some of the barriers to relational empowerment addressed in Chapter 4. In addition, there were other adversities that participants disclosed that were not included in the results, addressed here. Additionally, the penal abolitionist framework was used to understand the ways that participants and their organizations successfully subvert oppressive systems and ideologies in their assertion of relational empowerment.

### The Symbiotic Relationship Between the Penal System & Community-Led Public Safety

Participants shared the challenges they faced building trust with the community due to participants' organizational partnerships with law enforcement. Due to the long history of police corruption, unwarranted surveillance, brutality, and mass incarceration in low-income, working-class communities of color (Alexander, 2012; Vitale, 2017), many residents are rightfully skeptical of law enforcement. Participants in this study discussed the important role that law

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enforcement and the courts play in referring high-risk youth as a deterrent to further penal involvement, in addition to assisting with organizing interorganizational events and keeping residents safe during marches following a shooting. Law enforcement also benefits from this partnership with community-based violence prevention. As interventionists are de-escalating tensions among residents before they escalate, police officers potentially spend less time responding to incidents in the neighborhood and completing paperwork. However, the partnership between community-led public safety programs and law enforcement continues to pose persistent barriers to youth outreach and violence mediation.

Participants in this study underscored their reliance on law enforcement and viewed the inherent tensions in their partnership as something to be necessarily worked through in order to maintain these partnerships. When describing Organization C's partnership with law enforcement, Cameron provided a compelling account of the necessity for law enforcement in his community during antiviolence marches:

> We be out there almost 100 strong with police officers and everything…But you know, we try not to involve the police as much but you know, when there's shootings and we're doing these walks, we got to include the police because that's our safety. You know, we try to be the youth and the community's safety by not involving the police, by trying to get ahead of [shootings] ourselves, but what more can we do? We […] ain't gonna finna a pull out no guns and Batman and Robin […] we're not finna do none of that. So it's like, that's our security.

Cameron's earnest account of why police are necessary in antiviolence work aligns with his reality on the ground, as an intervention navigator engaging with residents every day. For good reason, the notion of prison abolition, or removing police involvement from their activities

entirely, was not broached by participants. In the court of public opinion, working toward or imagining a society without police, probation or parole officers, courts, or other punitive mechanisms of the State often seem out of touch or naive to the realities with which working-class communities of color contend (Davis, 2003). As long as the conditions that produce and exacerbate violence are present, police may always be a practical and, in some cases, vital option for residents at risk of victimization.

Research has shown that poverty, residential instability, and traumatic stress are among a few of the contributing factors associated with violent crime (Shaw & McKay, 1942; Osgood & Chambers, 2000; Rawles, 2010; Sampson, 2001). Moreover, qualitative and spatial analysis research has identified causal links between structural forms of racism and community violence (Burrell et al., 2021; Jacoby et al., 2018). Given the pervasiveness of violence in communities impacted by racial and class disparities, pulling law enforcement out of those neighborhoods without addressing the underlying social conditions may cause unintended harm. Rodrigo, a participant from Organization C, gave an example of this when describing his experience working in the public schools in his city:

> We do the conflict mediations within the schools, which is something that's really needed because in [city], they decided to defund the police in schools. So when they did that, um it's like-to me it […] created a little bit of a problem, because sometimes a lot of kids, you know, they just get away with a lot more stuff now. They disrespect teachers; they bring drugs, now that vape is on […] and then our job is to go up in the schools and get up with some of these kids, especially some of the main ones that are like the main perpetrators […]

Based on Rodrigo's experience, defunding the police and removing school resource officers (SROs) created a vacuum that led to increased behavioral problems and an additional burden placed on violence mediators. This on-the-ground account suggests that the problems young people face in the schools in his city are so pervasive, that they necessitate police presence.

Although the presence of SROs may maintain a layer of behavioral control, research shows juvenile detention referrals do not reduce delinquent behavior, impede educational and employment success, may lead to severe detriments to physical and mental health, and expose youth to abuse and maltreatment (Mendel, 2023). Moreover, research shows that incarceration in general has little to no impact on reducing violent crime and may increase crime in states and communities with higher concentration of incarceration (Steman, 2017). Therefore, law enforcements' presence in impoverished communities may provide a degree of order and control that may also entrench vulnerable residents further into the penal system. However, the criminal justice system itself fails to address the underlying conditions that produce violence and exacerbates racial and class disparities in neighborhoods impacted by structural violence (Alexander, 2012; Davis, 2008).

If community-led public safety programs are unable to work independently from law enforcement to address these deeply entrenched, macro-level social problems, in collaboration with other nonprofits and organizations, it is important to ask why. Understanding the limitations of community violence prevention initiatives and the reasons why they were never designed to fundamentally address broader social problems deepens our understanding of the problem, thereby offering insight into solutions for strengthening the role of community-driven antiviolence work.

**The Nonprofit-Industrial Complex & The Limits or Community-Led Public Safety**

The goal of anti-capitalist, abolitionist projects are to transform the very societal conditions that make law enforcement, probation, parole, drug court, and all other arms of the carceral state unnecessary (Davis, 2003). In similar fashion to the penal system, the nonprofit sector was also never built to structurally transform systemic problems rooted in exploitative and racist policies that contribute to community violence. They are concerned with service delivery. The rise of the nonprofit sector came out of the neoliberal era of the 1960's (Dunning, 2023). The project of government to outsource the provision of public goods for marginalized communities to the private sector was meant to offset the increasing inequality of capitalist accumulation (Dunning, 2023). As a result, nonprofits became the avenue through which Black and Brown, poor and working-class communities gained access to public services and social welfare that they were previously denied. This marked a compelling shift that was generally viewed as a sign of progress (Dunning, 2023). However, shifting the conversation of basic rights (e.g., healthcare, housing, sustenance) to a provision to be doled out by nonprofits backed by philanthropist donors and discretionary government spending, fundamentally undermined those rights and concealed the pernicious nature of the outsourcing as well (Dunning, 2023).

Lack of capacity for nonprofits to address structural issues that lead to community violence is exacerbated by their dependency on state and local funding just to keep their doors open. In the nonprofit world, programs can be defunded on a whim, due to dips in performance or what happens to be in vogue based on the political climate. Despite increases in homicides, community-based violence prevention programs that were empirically proven to reduce gun violence, like Operation Ceasefire in Chicago, for instance, received cuts in their funding due to city budget deficits (Crime Report, 2015). Two years prior, the mayor cut funding entirely due to

outreach workers not collaborating with police (Childress, 2013). This had been an ongoing

trend with Ceasefire programs, including in Baltimore and other cities since their inception in

1996 (Constantino, 2015). Calvin, who works in Organization B, highlighted the sporadic and

unpredictable nature of funding streams and the challenges that arise as a result:

> […] [A] lot of times, man, we lose a lot of funding. We lose, you know, momentum […]
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> it's hard to come back to the people and say, "you know, I mean, they cut our budget for
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> that man." […] one person will tell you one thing and be like, "yeah, you know, man, we
>
> all good. It's a go. You know, we gonna make sure that this is a project that we're gonna
>
> tackle", and then it never happens. So, and then there's somebody slashed it or it could be
>
> even somebody in the company, you know? So, things happen man […]

As Calvin suggests, budget cuts can impact the relationship that community organizations

have with residents and perhaps more notably, prevent them from saving lives. The problem of

violence prevention should not fall solely on the nonprofit sector. Low-income communities of

color's safety and security should not depend on whether a program will be funded for another

fiscal year. As indicated in this study, participant accounts of their work are evident; they change

lives and residents rely heavily on them. Thus, when nonprofits who are fixtures in any

community are shut down due to funding issues, that creates a vacuum (similarly to police), and

local and state governments are not necessarily there to fill the gap. Calvin articulated the

precarity of many residents either coming home from prison or struggling with economic

hardship:

> […] I feel like from the outside looking in, [other programs] was just doing it for the
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> signatures to say, "yeah, look we got all these signatures. Let us get our funding."
>
> Nobody really went there and it wasn't a one-stop-shop to where it's like, really help. You

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understand what I'm saying? So, like, not only my situation, but other people's situation, that could have been a catalyst right there to me committing the crime or saying, "you know what", giving up right there […] These are the pivotal times that if that door would have got slammed, you know, I probably-it could have been a-a-a downward spiral effect to where I could lost my housing […] my employment. And then […] you turn back to whatever […] you trust […] whatever is easy for you. So whether that's going way back to the streets, the connections is always there. They're always there. You know, it's never hard to get back into a negative reality.

Calvin describes a system where the social safety net is precarious and uncertain, while social problems and lawbreaking alternatives to gain reprieve, remain a steady presence and are easily accessible options in his community, as treacherous as they may be.

Given that the root of these problems is structural in nature, and nonprofit operations are contingent on discretionary funding, they naturally lack the organizational capacity to address everyone's basic needs. Results of this study supported this, as Janice, who works for Organization C, articulated when she discussed the spread of street violence throughout her city, which she attributed to ongoing displacement of residents from gentrification. She asserted, "Now guess what. Now you need another resource." She captures what Dunning (2023) refers to as the "patchwork" nature of attempting to address a much larger social problem with nonprofits. Both Janice and Calvin, who works at Org B, stressed the dire need for "more boots on the ground" due to escalations in violence they see in their respective cities.

There is a symbiotic relationship between the non-profit industrial complex and the prison-industrial complex. The precarious, non-profitization and outsourcing of basic services that should otherwise be basic rights (Dunning, 2023), maintain the necessity for police, prisons,

drug courts, and other systems of control and punishment, as this patchwork method leaves gaps

for vulnerable citizens to slip through and be fed back into the penal system. Thus, reaffirming

the necessity for police and prisons. Moreover, participants in the current study described how

their organizations work closely with the courts, SROs, and law enforcement, a partnership that

extends beyond organizations in this study (Ervin et al., 2022; National Network for Safe

Communities, 2023; McCampbell, 2014), thereby reinforcing this symbiotic relationship.

**Marxist Critique & Considerations for Strengthening Community-led Public Safety**

The Marxian concept of dialectical materialism has been used to inform penal abolitionist

thought and respond to arguments among some abolitionist scholars that offering a solution, or

alternative to prisons, only results in compromise and reaffirmation of the carceral state

(Lamusse, 2021). Dialectical materialism is the theory that historical, social, and political events

are fraught with tensions based on conflicts between opposing material needs and wants, and that

these tensions can be interpreted as a series of contradictions. Examining these contradictions

reveals solutions to otherwise intractable social phenomena (Marx, 2006). This framework offers

a guide to identifying the inherent contradictions in the role of community-led public safety

within market-driven and carceral-dependent economies.

There is a dialectical, or seemingly contradictory relationship between community-led

public safety initiatives and the criminal justice system. On the one hand, community-led public

safety reaffirms the criminal justice system as a predominantly non-profit structure that (a) is not

intended to address the underlying structural conditions that lead to street violence and (b)

affirms the necessity of law enforcement and other penal institutions in their collaborative, co-

dependent relationship. Alternatively, community-led public safety has successfully diverted

high-risk youth and other residents from penal involvement on a case-by-case basis. Moreover,

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they are broadening the public's imagination regarding alternatives to incarceration. Davis (2003) argues that the fight for prison abolition is, in part, an ideological one. She states, "The creation of new institutions that lay claim to the space now occupied by the prison can eventually start to crowd out the prison so that it would inhabit increasingly smaller areas of our social and psychic landscape." (p. 108).

Angela Davis, in her book, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (2003), argued that an abolitionist position is one that identifies viable alternatives that fundamentally address the underlying conditions that generate prisons and other mechanisms of punishment and retribution. Addressing these systemic issues requires a perceptual shift away from viewing basic rights as services and more like public necessities. Therefore, as an alternative to nonprofit service delivery, institutionalizing access to basic needs, codified by law are necessary preventative measures (Rahman, 2018). Laws that ensure equitable access to healthcare (e.g., physical and mental), education, and housing, for instance, coupled with decriminalization laws and alternatives to punishment and retribution, that focus on reconciliation and reparation can prevent further entrenchment and dependence on prisons and other punitive measures (Davis, 2003). Enacting these rights into law, frees up community-based violence prevention programs to focus their existing skills to meet demands in their neighborhoods.

Lastly, institutionalizing the existence of community-led public safety outside the nonprofit sector as a basic need, with all the resources of the federal government, would strengthen organizational capacity and allow outreach workers, violence interventionists, and crisis responders to be consistently responsive to community needs. Workers who engage directly with this work are highly skilled and specialized professionals who deserve to be

compensated commensurate with their work and to have job security that is not contingent on donors and grant funding.

Penal abolitionism has been described as a process (Berlatsky, 2021). The process of decriminalization laws, the institutionalization of equitable policy that insures everyone's basic needs are met, and redirecting monies from law enforcement to mental health resources, schools, and healthcare (Berlatsky, 2021; Deaderick, 2020), allows for opportunities to expand mainstream public opinion around what is possible in the domain of keeping communities safe.

## Limitations of the Study

This study sought to understand how relational empowerment is experienced among workers and organizers in community-led violence prevention programs in U.S. cities. To that end, the purpose of this research was to identify ecological commonalities, or similar characteristics across organizational contexts, rather than their differences. This is an important limitation, as antiviolence organizations can differ considerably neighborhood-to-neighborhood based on several factors. These factors include whether they receive state funding, whether they are volunteer-based, a non-profit, their degree of credibility in the community, hierarchical versus horizontal structure, the capacity and self-sustainability of the organization, and various cultural norms and identities of membership. The specific characteristics of an organization, the setting in which the organization operates, and the context or challenges its members may face reveal different pathways to empowerment (Peterson & Speer, 2000). As important as ecological specificity is in understanding empowerment processes, identifying these divergent pathways was not a focus of this research, and as such, is a limitation of this study.

Although identifying common themes across organizational contexts was the focus of this study, low participant size and disproportionate representation of one organization over

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others was an additional limitation. There were a total of six participants in this study that worked for Organization C. The other two participants worked for individually separate organizations, located in different cities (Organization A and Organization B). Thus, the majority of codes that made up important themes in this study were generated by participants from Organization C. The degree of Organization C's involvement in this study was likely due to larger funding streams and greater organizational capacity, in addition to having a separate department dedicated to research involvement. Moreover, participants expressed enthusiasm about their research participation. This enthusiasm may be indicative of a culture within the organization around member-leadership reciprocity, as many participants described an ongoing desire to give back to the organization.  All three organizations in this study share common structural characteristics. Each of them utilizes similar methods to interface with the community, including youth outreach and mentorship, connecting residents with material supports (e.g., employment, housing, food vouchers), conflict mediation, and crisis intervention. In addition, all three organizations have similar philosophies that inform their efforts to prevent violence in their communities. Despite these similarities, there may be notable variations in the way that relational empowerment is experienced *within* their respective organizations and among members themselves. Given the small sample size and disproportionality of organizational representation, variations in the identified themes could not be delineated. Moreover, it is possible that having greater representation from Organization A and B could have offered nuances to the identified themes that are not captured in this study.

In addition to disproportionality and small sampling, participants in this study varied in their job role and as a result, worked in different departments within Organization C. For instance, Michael and Janice are in more of an overseeing role in their departments, Street

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Outreach and Crisis Response, respectively. All other participants worked on the ground as either intervention navigators or in street outreach. This broad array of worker representation can be a strength to this study, as many of Michael and Janice's experiences were often corroborated by others' experiences, both within and across organizational contexts. However, focusing on one specific role within given organizations that share similar structures and philosophies may be an opportunity to sharpen our understanding of empowerment processes within community-led public safety programs.

Another limitation of this study is that the data from individual interviews may have been influenced by the researcher's presence and the power dynamics in the researcher-participant relationship. As mentioned under methodology, reflexive practice was used to attend to researcher bias throughout the research process and attempts were made to breach power hierarchies during individual interviews. This was carried out via researcher self-disclosure, as I stated to participants that my intentions to pursue this research were due to my own justice-involvement and having vital supports in my life at a pivotal time. By sharing my experience and intentions, my aim was to encourage participant openness. Although this may have facilitated sincere participant disclosure, given my positionality as a White researcher and academic, these efforts likely did not eradicate power dynamics or researcher influence entirely.

In addition to research-participant power dynamics, intraorganizational influence may have also been present in the current study. The intervention and outreach teams in Organization C are small departments, relative to others within the organization. It is likely that those among Organization C who participated knew of and worked with each other. Moreover, they may have been aware of one another's participation in this study, and some may have been supervisors of other participants. Therefore, it is possible that responses from participants could have been

influenced by others within the organization or among those who participated. Alternatively, converging responses among participants could be more indicative of group cohesion and the culture within Organization C.

The research that was used to define relational empowerment and its application within organizational contexts is limited (Cheryomukhin & Peterson, 2014; Christens, 2010; Langhout et al., 2014; Russell et al., 2009; Wray-Lake & Abrams, 2020). To date, there have been no studies conducted with experienced community organizations whose primary focus is on preventing and reducing street violence in their community. This points to a significant gap in the literature that notwithstanding this study, still needs to be addressed. In addition, the limited number of empirical studies on relational empowerment means that more research is needed to strengthen its theoretical foundation. There have only been two studies that have used a validated relational empowerment scale (Cheryomukhin & Peterson, 2014; Rodrigues et al., 2018). Although this study makes a contribution to the theoretical development of relational empowerment, an important limitation of this research is its use of relational empowerment as a starting framework that is still in need of further validation.

**Implications for Theory, Research, Practice, Training, Education, and Advocacy**

Despite its limitations, this study has several implications for theory, research, practice, training and education, and advocacy. First, this study contributes to existing theory on relational empowerment and community organizing more broadly. In particular, by adding to the body of literature that examines relational empowerment in specific ecological contexts (Cherymukhin & Peterson, 2014; Langhout et al., 2014; Wray-Lake & Abrams, 2020), additional pathways to relational empowerment were identified. Additionally, other relationship-based competencies within community-led public safety that were outlined in this study, increases our understanding

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of how relational empowerment is potentially enacted within and across ecological contexts. Moreover, given the complexity of organizational activities and the variety of services that community-led public safety programs provide, expanding the construct of relational empowerment to include service provision in the community (i.e., resident outreach; violence mediation) may be an important consideration. In addition, this study revealed that, in order for some relational empowerment processes to unfold, these processes appear to be bidirectional or reciprocal among members.

This study informs research in a variety of areas. The organizational activities among community-led public safety programs are varied, from collaborating with other organizations, to providing services for the community, directing residents to resources, as well as mediating and de-escalating conflicts. Thus, future research should examine empowering processes within specific activities or job roles in order to build on understanding the linkages between relational empowerment and psychological empowerment. Moreover, new sub-themes, or relational competencies, that were identified in this study may be applicable within other organizational contexts as well. Thus, studies that focus on how relationally empowered settings foster meaning-making and worker reciprocity to mobilize networks or how norms of respect and the prioritization of the collective to bridge social divides in other ecological contexts may be useful in clarifying or broadening our understanding of these interactional processes.

Despite recent increases in funding for law enforcement (Manthey et al., 2022), violent crime trends continue to remain high (Lopez et al., 2023; Uniform Crime Report, 2019). Thus, the expansion of evidence-based, community-driven alternatives is urgently needed to address the public health crisis of violence impacting low-income, working-class Black and Brown youth, families, and communities. This study highlights many of the important relationship-

based processes and competencies involved in effective community-led public safety initiatives, including building organizational capacity, sustaining staff engagement and commitment, effective resolution of intraorganizational conflict, building lasting partnerships for the allocation and coordination of resources, promoting worker autonomy and channeling strengths, and navigating tensions with law enforcement and other institutions with divergent interests or expectations. Practitioners and community organizers involved in this vital work can use this research to inform staff hiring and training, strengthen collaborations within their organizations, in addition to informing outreach initiatives, service delivery, and conflict mediation in the communities with which they work.

Calls for integrated social justice and advocacy competencies in training and practice within the field of counseling psychology have increased (Goodman et al., 2004; Motulsky et al., 2014; Toporek et al., 2006). This study informs education and training in these domains by facilitating student and professional awareness alike, to consider the sociohistorical and structural, macro-level determinants of community violence within racially segregated and under resourced, poor and working-class Black and Brown neighborhoods. Consciousness-raising around systemic inequality is needed, particularly with regard to education, training and advocacy competencies, as counseling psychologists in practice, continue to remain largely oriented toward individualistic appraisals and interventions (Kozan & Blustein, 2018).

Moreover, counseling psychologists and trainees can defer to the expertise of outreach workers, violence interventionists, and crisis response workers highlighted in this study to inform intervention and practice. Specialists who work in community-based public safety possess the street credibility to connect with high-risk residents on first contact or soon thereafter. Most counseling psychologists and trainees do not have the lived experience to make immediate

positive connections with those entrenched in gang culture or street life in the same way. However, self-disclosure and authenticity in the relationship-building phase with youth and families, highlighted by public safety professionals, are important considerations that counseling psychologists and trainees can learn from to strengthen their practice. In addition, participants' emphasis on being a consistent and reliable presence for youth and families cannot be overstated. Therapists working in community mental health are routinely overburdened with high caseloads (Kim et al., 2018), which may have a significant impact on client outcomes (Russel et al., 2021). Psychologists tasked with managing systems of service delivery in their respective agencies and institutions can utilize this research to strengthen partnerships with local organizations and agencies to assist in building organizational capacity in order to strengthen referral streams and meet clients' basic needs.

Calls for federal funding, local government support for infrastructure and institutionalized support, and other initiatives to support community-driven public safety have increased since the uprisings for racial justice and police accountability in the summer of 2020 (Denver Task Force, 2021; Jannetta et al., 2020; Sakala & Doyle, 2021). This study supports these funding initiatives by highlighting the specialized skills that community organizers and community-driven public safety experts bring to their work. Outcome evaluations show that public safety initiatives led by communities most impacted are effective at reducing neighborhood violence. Thus, consistent federal funding and institutionalizing of policies that provide more autonomy and allow for more local innovation for community-based organizations involved in violence intervention and street outreach is recommended.

Lastly, creating new incentivization structures that allow community organizations to engage in violence prevention work without leading to conflict of interests is recommended.

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When it comes to violence prevention and mediation, providing vital resources for low-income residents, or supporting youth and families in crisis, there is too much at stake to rely on the precarious nature of marketized and politically driven, non-profit funding revenues. If or when state or local funding dries up, low-income, working-class communities are left to depend on the whim of philanthropy. Therefore, policies should be put in place that shift community-driven public safety, as well as other vital social services (e.g., housing, healthcare), away from the nonprofit sector. Policy should focus on solidifying consistent funding to these programs as part of vulnerable communities' basic rights.

In addition, policymakers must acknowledge outreach workers, violence interventionists, and crisis responders who carry out this important work, as professionals who are experts in the field of violence prevention and intervention. All participants in this study reported a yearly income between $30,000 - $50,000, yet they are among the few professionals with the knowledge, credibility, and expertise to reach and connect with high-risk youth and their families, quickly facilitate powerful change in culturally responsive ways, as well as maintain consistent and dependable service delivery and allocation of resources for clients, given their social ties in the community. They can meet high-risk residents where they are at, not only mentally and emotionally, but geographically, in the locales within their neighborhoods that law enforcement and other social services providers cannot go without evoking reasonable suspicion. Thus, the institutionalization and non-contingent, stable federal funding of community-led public safety should be informed by these considerations. The results of this study demonstrate that community-based violence prevention is a highly skilled profession and as such, those engaged in this important work should be compensated in a similar fashion to physicians in state

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hospitals, psychologists, law enforcement, and other professionals who are deemed essential to securing society's basic needs.

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# Appendix A

## Institutional Review Board Approval Letter

**SETON HALL** ▓▓▓ **UNIVERSITY**
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03/23/2022

Christopher Thompson
Seton Hall University

Re: 2021-210

Dear Christopher,

The Research Ethics Committee of the Seton Hall University Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved the amendment to your research proposal entitled, "Relational Empowerment Among Antiviolence Activists and Community Organizers in U.S. Cities: A Qualitative Inquiry" as submitted. This memo serves as official notice of the aforementioned study's approval.

Approval of this amendment does not change the previous expiration date from your one-year approval period. You will receive a communication from the Institutional Review Board at least 1 month prior to the original expiration date requesting that you submit an Annual Progress Report to keep the study active, or a Final Review of Human Subjects Research to close the study.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

*Mara Podvey*

Mara C. Podvey, PhD, OTR
Associate Professor
Co-Chair, Institutional Review Board

*Phyllis Hansell*

Phyllis Hansell, EdD, RN, DNAP, FAAN
Professor
Co-Chair, Institutional Review Board

Office of the Institutional Review Board
Presidents Hall · 400 South Orange Avenue · South Orange, New Jersey 07079 · Tel: 973.275.4654 · Fax 973.275.2978 ·
www.shu.edu
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**Appendix B**

**Letter of Solicitation**

Hello,

I am inviting activists and organizers involved in community violence prevention to participate in a research study.

I am a student at Seton Hall University's Counseling Psychology Ph.D. program. The program is in the Department of Professional Psychology and Family Therapy (PPFT). It is located in the College of Education and Human Services.

This study seeks to learn how activists and organizers successfully meets their goals for preventing street violence. Members will be asked about the challenges to engaging in antiviolence work. Lastly, members will be asked how they build the relationships necessary for creating social change.

If you want to be in this study, please contact me via email at christopher.thompson1@student.shu.edu. When I receive your email, I will send you a survey and consent form. The survey asks facts about you (e.g., race, gender, level of education, income). After the two forms are completed, you will send the forms to my email. I will contact you to schedule an individual interview. The interview will be about 60-90 minutes.

The individual interview will be held online. I will send you a link to Microsoft Teams for the interview. The interview will be video recorded. Everything you say will also be typed on a transcript.

You will receive a $30 gift card after you complete the individual interview. Your involvement in this study is voluntary. You are not required at any time to participate. If you wish to leave the study after filling out the consent form and survey, you are free to do so. You are not required to stay for the whole interview.

I am the only one who will have access to the video of the interview. My research advisor, Dr. Minsun Lee, will be involved in this research. She is an Assistant Professor at Seton Hall University. There will also be two doctoral students in Seton Hall's Counseling Psychology program who will assist with the research. Dr. Lee and the two doctoral students will only see the transcripts and survey you complete. The transcripts and survey will not have your name on them.

Findings from this study will be made public in conference presentations and in academic journals. Your name and the name of your organization will not be made public. A pseudonym will be used to protect your anonymity. I will send you the transcript following your interview. Any statements that you do not feel comfortable with me including, I will remove from the final publication and any presentations. Any statement that is unrelated to the purpose of this study will not be included in any publications or presentations. Please note that the risk of being

identified in any publication or presentation may be higher if multiple members of your organization participate in this study. For example, the members of your organization who participate and read the final write-up, are more likely to know you also participated if they were part of a conversation or initiative you disclosed in the study.

All data will be safely stored to protect your privacy. Transcripts, surveys, and notes I take will be stored on a secure OneDrive folder.  The interview video and the consent form will be stored on a different OneDrive folder that only I have access to. Both folders require a password to access them. Your identity will only be known to me, the interviewer.

Thank you for your consideration in signing up for this research study. If you have any questions, please email me at the contact information provided below. You can also contact my research advisor, Dr. Minsun Lee, at minsun.lee@shu.edu. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a participant, please contact the Seton Hall University Institutional Review Board (IRB) at (973) 761-9334 or irb@shu.edu.

Sincerely,

Christopher M. Thompson, M.A., Ed.S
Seton Hall University
400 South Orange Ave.
South Orange, NJ 07079
Email: christopher.thompson1@student.shu.edu
Phone: ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮

**Appendix C**

**Informed Consent**

**Title of Research Study:** Relational Empowerment Among Antiviolence Activists and Community Organizers in U.S. Cities: A Qualitative Inquiry

**Principal Investigator:** Christopher Thompson, doctoral student, Counseling Psychology PHD Program

**Department Affiliation:** Department of Professional Psychology and Family Therapy, Seton Hall University

**Sponsor:** This research is supported by the Department of Professional Psychology and Family Therapy, Seton Hall University

**Brief summary about this research study:**
The following summary of this research study is to help you decide whether or not you want to participate in the study. You have the right to ask questions at any time. The purpose of this study is to learn how activists and organizers in U.S. cities successfully meet their goals for preventing community violence. This study also seeks to understand how activists and organizers build vital relationships for creating community change. Another aim is to identify challenges to engaging in antiviolence work and to strengthen organizational processes.
You will be asked to complete a survey and interview. We expect that you will be in this research study for approximately 1 to 1.5 hours in total.

The primary risk of participation is that your confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.

The main benefit of participation is to potentially increase your awareness of the reasons for any challenges you might face relating to organizational strategy and how to address them to better meet your goals.

**Purpose of the research study:**
You are being asked to take part in this research study because you are an activist or organizer involved in community violence prevention at an urban center and are 18 years of age or older.

Your participation in this research study is expected to be for 1-1.5 hours. That includes the time it takes to complete the survey and interview.

You will be one of approximately 10-12 people who are expected to participate in this research study.

**What you will be asked to do:**
Your participation in this research study will include:

1. Indicating consent to participate in this study by signing and dating this informed consent form.

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2. Completing a survey (about 3-5 minutes). The survey asks facts about you (e.g., race, gender, level of education, income, community organizing experience).

3. Participating in one individual interview (about 60-90 minutes) conducted by the principal investigator. The individual interview will be held online using Microsoft Teams. The interview will be video and audio recorded. You can participate in the individual interview from the convenience of your own home or any other place you prefer. Examples of questions that will be asked in the individual interview will include:

   - What have been some major achievements you have had as an organization?
   - What led you to decide to be a part of your organization?
   - Was there a specific person or group of people that inspired you to become involved in this work?
   - Can you recall a time when your organization was in conflict with an outside institution?
   - Were there ever moments where you were hesitant to speak your mind in your organization?

4. After the interview is complete, you will receive a $30 Visa gift card.

5. After your individual interview is transcribed, the principal investigator will send the transcript to you for feedback on whether what was transcribed was accurate.

6. When the principal investigator begins analyzing the transcript, they will contact you via email to ask you what you do or do not feel comfortable with being included in the results of the study. The principal investigator may also ask your permission to include specific things you shared in the results of the study. You can request that those statements not be written down in any publications or presentations when the principal investigator contacts you. You can also email the principal investigator and request that certain statements you made not be included in any publications or presentations after you read the transcript.

As stated above, all of the research will be done virtually. Therefore, you can participate in this research in the comfort of your own home or preferred location. The interview will be scheduled at a date and time that is mutually convenient for you and the principal researcher.

**Your rights to participate, say no or withdraw:**
Participation in research is voluntary. You can decide to participate or not to participate.  You can choose to participate in the research study now and then decide to leave the research at any time. Your choice will not be held against you.
The person in charge of the research study can remove you from the research study without your approval. Possible reasons for removal include missing study visits or non-compliance with the study procedures. For example, if you do not submit the completed survey, you will not be permitted to participate in the rest of the study. If you repeatedly miss scheduled individual interviews, you will be unable to participate in the remainder of the study.

**Potential benefits:**

There may be no direct benefit to you from this study. However, possible benefits may include having the opportunity to express new thoughts and ideas that you have not had the chance to share. You  may benefit by gaining more awareness of the reasons for certain challenges that impede goals-if any exist-and how to potentially overcome them. This is the primary aim of this study.

**Potential risks:**

The risks associated with this study are minimal in nature. Your participation in this research may include the potential to feel uneasy during the individual interview. Although all the appropriate steps will be made to protect your privacy, confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.

**Confidentiality and privacy:**

Efforts will be made to limit the use or disclosure of your personal information. This information may include the research study documents or other source documents used for the purpose of conducting the study. The documents may include the demographic survey and interview transcripts. We cannot promise complete secrecy. Organizations that oversee research safety may inspect and copy your information.  This includes the Seton Hall University Institutional Review Board who oversees the safe and ethical conduct of research at this institution.

In the transcript, final publication, or any presentation, I will use pseudonyms to replace all real names and omit any organization names. The real names of organizations, institutions, and people who you disclose who are not part of your organization will not be transcribed, published, or included in any presentations either. I will also omit the names of cities, towns, and other geographical locations, as well as recognizable landmarks you disclose. The purpose of taking these measures is to decrease the likelihood that a reader will figure out you or your organization's identity based on their existing familiarity with you, your organization, and/or your locale. Please note that the risk of being identified in any publication or presentation may be higher if multiple members of your organization participate in this study. For example, the members of your organization who participate and read the final write-up, are more likely to know you also participated if they were part of a conversation or initiative you disclosed in the study.

I will email you after your participation to ask you what excerpts you do or do not feel comfortable sharing with the general public. Any statements that you do not feel comfortable with me including, I will remove. I will also ask your permission to include specific excerpts if I am unsure that they would reveal you or your organization's identity but still relate to the study's purpose. These excerpts may consist of personal conflicts you have, differences in opinion you have with others regarding organizational strategy, ideological differences, or divergent interests. Other excerpts I would share because they relate to the purpose of this study would be statements that explain how you or your organization successfully form relationships within and outside the organization and how those relational processes meet goals related to violence prevention. Any statement that is unrelated to the purpose of this study will not be included in any publications or presentations. You can also email me to request that any statement you share be excluded from the study at any time.

The individual interviews will be conducted via Microsoft Teams and involves a secure connection. Terms of service, addressing confidentiality, may be viewed at https://privacy.microsoft.com/en-US/privacystatement and https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/servicesagreement. After each interview, all possible identifiers (informed consent form, video recording of individual interview, master key) will be electronically stored on a password-protected OneDrive folder. All de-identified data (demographic survey, transcripts, notes I write) will be stored on a different password-protected OneDrive folder. I will be the only one who has access to the folder containing identifiable data. The master key is a document that will have your name and a unique subject number that your name is assigned to. The purpose of the master key is to ensure that the correct individual interview transcript is paired with the demographic survey from the same participant. On the transcript and demographic survey, you will only be identified by that unique subject number. Your email address, which may be used to contact you to schedule the interview will be stored separately from your data. The results of the research study may be published. A pseudonym will be used in place of your real name and the name of your organization will be omitted. All of your identifiable data will be deleted 5 years after the completion of this study.

**Data sharing:**
Data collected from this study will not be shared with anyone outside of the study team.

**Cost and compensation:**
You will not be responsible for any of the costs or expenses associated with your participation in this study.

If you agree to take part in this research study, you will be mailed a $30 Visa gift card for your time and effort. You will receive the payment after you complete the individual interview.

**Conflict of interest disclosure:**
The principal investigator and members of the study team have no financial conflicts of interest to report.

**Contact information:**
If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about this research project, you can contact the principal investigator, Christopher Thompson, at christopher.thompson1@student.shu.edu, his research advisor, Minsun Lee, Ph.D., at minsun.lee@shu.edu or the Seton Hall University Institutional Review Board ("IRB") at (973) 761-9334 or irb@shu.edu.

**Optional Elements:**
Video recordings will be performed as part of the research study. Please indicate your permission to participate in these activities by placing your initials next to each activity.

  I agree      I disagree

    _____    _____    The researcher may record my video interview.  I understand this is done to help with data collection and analysis. The researcher will not share these recordings with anyone outside of the study team.

I hereby consent to participate in this research study.

_____          _____
Signature of participant                                                      Date

_____
Printed name of participant

_____          _____
Signature of person obtaining consent                              Date

_____
Printed name of person obtaining consent

**Appendix D**

**Demographic Questionnaire**

*Please answer all questions to the best of your knowledge. All information you provide will be kept confidential and no answer you provide will exclude you from participating in the focus group or individual interview. Thank you for your time in completing our questionnaire.*

1.  **What community organization(s) are you a part of that focuses on preventing street violence?**

    _____

    _____

    _____

2.  **For how many years have you been a member of your organization (please list the organizations from question 1 and the number of years for each)?**

    _____

    _____

    _____

3.  **What responsibilities or duties do you currently perform as a member?**

    _____

    _____

    _____

4.  **How many years have you been involved in antiviolence activism and other types of community organizing in total?. _____**

5. **What city do you engage in as an activist and/or organizer?**_____

6. **Do you live in the same  city that you serve in as an activist/organizer?   YES _____**

   **NO_____**

7. **If you answered YES , how many years have you lived in that city? _____**

8. **If you you answered NO, in what city/town do you live? _____**

9. **How old are you?_____**

10. **Please indicate your gender.**

   _____

11. **Please indicate your race/ethnicity. Please check all that apply.**

o   Arab/Middle Eastern

o   Asian/Pacific Islander

o   Black/African American

o   Hispanic/Latino

o   Native American/American Indian

o   White/Non-Hispanic

o   Other _____

## 12. Level of Education

o   Elementary/Middle School

o   Some high school

o   High school/GED

o   Some college/2-year degree

o   Bachelor's degree

o   Graduate degree

## 13. Employment Status

o   Employed full-time

o   Employed part-time

o   Homemaker

o   On Disability

o   Retired

o   Unemployed

## 14. What is your occupation? If you are not employed, please indicate your last occupation.

_____

## 15. What is your approximate yearly income?

o   $10,000 or less

o   $10,001 to $20,000

o   $20,001 to $30,001

- o $30,001 to $40,000

- o $40,001 to $50,000

- o Over $50,001

# Appendix E

## Semi-Structured Individual Interview Protocol

What led you to decide to be a part of [Org Name]? *(Mobilizing networks; facilitating others' empowerment; passing on the legacy)*
>[ If Founder] What led you to form [Org Name] with other activists and organizers?
>Were there people in your life who influenced you to develop this organization?
>What were you feeling during this time in your life?


Was there someone in [Org Name] that influenced your decision to join?
>If so, what was it about them that influenced you?
>What was it like to be part of [Org Name] once you joined?
>>PROMPT: How did it feel to be part of [Org Name]?


How have past experiences led you to do this work?


As [Org Name] developed, what became your most pressing concerns as an organization and what goals you wanted to achieve?
>PROMPT: Current Goals


What have been some major achievements you have had as an organization?
>How were you all able to achieve these successes?


What were some vital relationships that were necessary to form to achieve these or other initiatives? *(collaborative competency; bridging divides)*
>How were you able to develop these relationships?
>What did that process look like?
>What was it like for you to collaborate with these organizations/groups/institutions?
>>PROMPT: thoughts, feelings?


What have been your most successful attempts at getting others involved to support your initiatives? (*Mobilizing networks; collaborative competency*)
>Can you provide some examples?
>What did you do specifically to get community members involved?
>What was it about this situation that activated the community around this initiative?


What have been some of the biggest challenges you faced in attempting to achieve your goals?

How have you managed these challenges?
        PROMPT: Examples, Thoughts, Feelings


How have you  managed to sustain your activities overtime? *(Passing on the legacy)*
    What is it about the organization itself, that has kept you involved?


When there are several projects or initiatives going on at once, how do you manage the workload as an organization? *(Facilitating others' empowerment)*
    How do you feel about this process?


Can you provide an example of a time you did not agree as an organization? (*Bridging divides; collaborative competency*)
    Can you say more about the specifics of the disagreement?
    Where did you stand on the issue?
    How did you work through this conflict, if at all?
    Can you provide a current example of a disagreement within the organization?
    How do you imagine working through this disagreement?


Can you recall a time when [Org Name] was in conflict with an outside institution? *(Bridging divides; collaborative competency)*
    Can you walk me through what happened?
    What was this conflict like for you?
        PROMPT: Thoughts, Feelings
    What was the outcome of this conflict?
        PROMPT: How do you feel about where things are now?


Were there ever moments in which it was impossible to come to a consensus with a powerful institution? (*Collaborative competency*)
    Can you say more about what happened?
    How do you feel about how that process unfolded?
    How did that impact your ability to carry out the initiative?
    How did you all move forward on this initiative, despite this impediment?
        PROMPT: I'm wondering if you could say more about that
    What was the outcome of this project?
        How do you feel about that?
Were there ever moments where you were hesitant to speak your mind in[Org Name]? *(Collaborative competency; Bridging divides)*
    [Yes] What is it that may have led to that hesitation?
    What is that like for you in those moment[s]?
    PROMPTS: Thoughts, feelings
    [No] What is it about [Org Name] that has you feeling free to speak your mind?

Can you tell me about a moment you recall feeling that way when working with [Org Name]?
PROMPTS: Thoughts, Feelings


. Were there ever moments you disagreed with other  members? *(collaborative competency; bridging divides)*
How was that for you?
PROMPTS: thoughts, feelings
How did you handle the situation?
What was the outcome?
PROMPTS: thoughts, feelings
[If desired outcome not met] How would you have preferred that situation to go differently?


How has being a part of [Org Name] impacted you, if at all? (*Facilitating others' empowerment; Passing on the legacy*)
How has your experience in [Org Name] influenced you as a person?
What has been the most rewarding aspect of engaging in antiviolence community work?
What has been the most challenging aspect of engaging in antiviolence community work?
How do you help each other to manage these challenges?


What valuable things have you learned during your time in [Org Name]? (*Facilitating others' empowerment; passing on the legacy*)
What experiences have led to this learning process?
Who would you say you learned the most from in [Org Name]?
PROMPT: Why?
In what ways have you grown?


Is there anything we have not covered that you would like to share before we finish today?