Seeking the Peace: Anti-Gun Violence Cadres, Concepts, and Connections in Pittsburgh

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Abstract
In 2015, Pittsburgh had the 21st highest murder rate in the USA at 18.6 murders per 100,000 population. By 2022, its murder rate had declined to 12.32 per 100,000, ranking it number 58 among American cities with greater than 100,000 residents. The article’s principal concern is with identifying factors that may have contributed to mitigations of gun violence in metro-Pittsburgh, and especially with how local anti-violence mobilizations within and between key sectors may have contributed to these violence reductions. Activist cadres of youth, social service organizations, governmental decision-makers, foundation leaders, and faith leaders are examined, with attention to how their respective sectors may have been pushed beyond established scopes of concern to take up the fight against gun violence. Drawing upon original interview data from 30 local leaders and from published formal statements and policy issuances from relevant institutional sectors, the article investigates Pittsburgh gun violence and responses, emphasizing the importance of strategically positioned leaders who possessed commitments and capabilities to leverage Pittsburgh’s ample institutional resources on behalf of anti-gun violence objectives.

Keywords Guns · Violence · Ecosystems · Neighborhoods · Protest · Social capital · Collaboration · Funding · Public policy · Leadership

Introduction
In recent years, Metropolitan Pittsburgh has experienced agonizingly tragic gun violence, including the 27 October 2018 attack at Tree of Life synagogue in which 11 people were killed and six wounded by a gunman during a worship service, and the 9 March 2016 assault by multiple gunmen at a Wilkinsburg-area house party in which six persons including a pregnant mother and her unborn child were killed and another three persons were injured. Metro-Pittsburgh has also had its share of highly contentious and widely criticized police shootings of black men including the 19 June 2018 killing of an unarmed 17-year-old youth, Antwon Rose, who was shot three times in the back while fleeing after being pulled over by police. These egregious and widely publicized incidents may be somewhat misleading, however, with respect to the overall level of violence within Pittsburgh. In Pittsburgh, apart from a recent surge in youth gun violence there has been an overall decline in its murder rate during the last decade (Sheehan 2022). In 2015, Pittsburgh had the 21st highest murder rate in the USA at 18.6 murders per 100,000 population (Stebbins 2016; Dalton 2008: 8). By 2022, its murder rate had declined to 12.32 per 100,000, ranking it number 58 among American cities with greater than 100,000 residents (Fieldstadt 2022). Additionally, Pittsburgh’s combined total of nonfatal shootings and homicides also declined by 38% between 2016 and 2019 (Murray 2021). Pittsburgh’s decline in shootings and homicides coincides with a 75% increase in gun homicides in the USA between 2011 and 2020 (Gramlich 2022).

Placing Pittsburgh’s higher-profile incidences of violence within broader local patterns is part of the present article’s objective. Its principal concern though is with identifying factors that may have contributed to mitigations of gun violence in metro-Pittsburgh, and especially with how local anti-violence mobilizations within and between key sectors may have contributed to these violence reductions within the context.
Collective uprisings are rooted in many factors, but a central premise within much of social movement scholarship is that a willingness to engage in collective actions that portend high social costs tends to rely on a certain threshold of social resource capacities. For example, Aldon Morris’ analysis of the inner workings of the Civil Rights Movement emphasizes the strategic importance of the restive group’s access to a “well-developed” base of operations, including “institutions, organizations, leaders, communication networks, money, and organized masses” (Morris 1984: xii). Similarly, Heidi Swarts’s examination of several local social movement organizations emphasizes a level of organizational capacity critical to producing an essential coordination and ingenuity necessary for securing social change (Swarts 2008: xvii). The capacities for which Morris and Swarts argue are essential for overcoming the sometimes stiff resistance encountered by social change mobilizations, including resistance from within sectors and groups with which activists may be organically aligned.

In charting the course of change in any instance, it must be considered that terrains of opposition to change and of insurgent capacities to bring about change may be particular to a given context. Capabilities for offsetting and overcoming obstacles are localized and operate along the lines of what Morris refers to as an “indigenous base,” or what Ben Jackson and Harriet Lamb identify as “local ecosystems” of collective action (Morris). Emphasizing premises of both community organizing and contextual analysis, Jackson and Lamb state: “part of building the impact of [community and economic alternatives organized by working-class communities] is finding better ways to connect a multitude of positive, but disconnected initiatives into more coherent local ecosystems” (Jackson and Lamb 2021: pp. 178–179).

There is a scale of base to which Morris, Swarts, and Jackson and Lamb allude, one that extends beyond individual subgroups to larger networks of these groups. When applied to a city or metropolitan area, this localized ecosystem may manifest in networks crossing multiple sectors, connecting a cadre of institutional and group actors from multiple sectors that mobilize around a particular issue or cause. In the present case, the cause is anti-gun violence and the interest here is in urban ecosystems that have formed around that advocacy. In mobilizing against urban gun violence, leading anti-gun violence proponents point out that “every city has a unique set of needs and resources [that] can be linked and applied together” (Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund et al). The analysis here of Pittsburgh examines important response sectors within the context and the factors that helped social actors navigate intergroup differences, intragroup resistance, and systemic social opposition and form effective networks of anti-violence collective action. Inventorying the resources mobilized on behalf of anti-gun violence and their intersections within Pittsburgh is important for understanding declines in gun violence within that context, but also for assessing the applicability of this local model for urban contexts beyond Pittsburgh.

Given that more cities are experiencing increases rather than decreases in their incidences of violence (Rosenfeld and Lopez 2022), there clearly is “a need to develop a new model that would bring community stakeholders together in a collaborative, problem-solving mode [and that] would blend several strategies as building blocks to form a workable systemic approach” (Scrivner, Tyan, and Cornell 2013). This issues a challenge to local leaders, institutions, and networks who seek to respond to gun violence, and to scholars concerned with analyzing the problem, to approach the issue from a more comprehensive range of vantage points and strategies.

The present examination of gun violence and responses draws upon original interview data from 30 Pittsburgh leaders and from published formal statements and policies from relevant institutional sectors, emphasizing the importance of strategic leadership positioning that has made possible the leveraging of Pittsburgh’s ample institutional resources on behalf of anti-gun violence objectives. Attention is paid to how activist cadres of youth, social service organizations, governmental decision-makers, foundation leaders, and faith leaders pushed their respective sectors beyond established scopes of concern to chart new directions within and across sectors in the local fight against gun violence.

Roots of Local Conflict

Pittsburgh is a city whose stature includes having been ranked by The Economist Magazine in 2009 and Forbes Magazine in 2010 as “the most livable city” in the continental USA. The rankings were based primarily upon criteria such as stability, infrastructure, healthcare, environment, culture, and education (visitpittsburgh.com). Pittsburgh also has received high praise for its professional sports culture and its evolution from early-twentieth century industrial stronghold to an early-twenty-first century high-tech medical and communications economy. Distinctive as well is that approximately 1400 charitable foundations, a dozen institutions of higher education, and one of the largest populations of Presbyterians and Catholics in the USA are located there (Zajac 2012; Voice of America 2015). There is also a cultural particularity that traces to its sustained grounding in European ethnicities, its widely celebrated black cultural heritage (tied especially to its historic Hill District), and its status as a Democratic Party stronghold with a succession of Democratic mayors dating back to the mid-1930s.

In a 1986 book, historian Franklin Toker describes Pittsburgh as a “cohesive town” with a rich social fabric of ethnic neighborhoods, and with a population bound together
by hundreds of bridges, “the gift of synergism,” and a “fierce and passionate” tie “between the city and its citizens” (Toker 1986: pp. 2–4). In contrast to his highly debatable characterizations of Pittsburgh as a tightly knit community, however, Toker also touches on aspects of Pittsburgh’s history inconsistent with his cohesiveness thesis, including the glaring dispossessions and marginalization black and Native American populations have experienced in Pittsburgh (Toker: pp. 2, 9, 17, and 234–235). These sharply contradictory tendencies and trajectories are central to the Pittsburgh story, as are the ways they may have been negotiated from one historical moment to another.

Broad-based efforts to overcome structured and systematized racial antagonisms within Pittsburgh have been episodic, evidencing many of the same fits and starts seen elsewhere in the USA, but with its own local color. Pittsburgh’s entrenched ethnic enclaves, its relatively small percentage of middle-class blacks and other persons of color, and its strong embrace of what Toker refers to as a “conservative work ethic and a still more conservative family life” (Toker, 2) are factors that have contributed to low cross-sector collaboration and boundary crossing (especially race-based) and sluggish progress on black empowerment fronts.

Racial progress initiatives in Pittsburgh have met with many systemic roadblocks and setbacks over the years, within a city dominated first by an urban development coalition of industrial magnates and their political allies, and later by urban redevelopment coalitions of high-tech and knowledge sector business and political interests. Along the way, rank-and-file laborers have struggled against labor practices and conditions, as expressed for example in an 1892 steel workers riot and in more recent twenty-first century worker protests and strikes against Pittsburgh’s largest nongovernmental employer, University of Pittsburgh Medical Center. Throughout, black workers have fought against the same injustices faced by other laborers but have also had to contend with prejudicial treatment and marginalization at the hands of their fellow white laborers. Blacks drawn to Pittsburgh’s late-1800’s industrial boom met with blatant discrimination within these industries, viewed by those controlling the industries as “inefficient, unsuitable, and unstable” workers, and initially excluded from organized labor supports and solidarities because of a whites-only labor union membership policy. As Pittsburgh’s industrial economy transitioned by the mid- to late-1900s toward jobs with higher educational thresholds, black Pittsburghers, disproportionately disadvantaged by lack of access to requisite levels of education, were further marginalized within the local economy—and within social and political decision-making processes (Trotter and Day 2010: pp. 2, 4, 147).

Black racial isolation lessened somewhat by the 1960s, as evidenced by selective black admission into segregated labor unions, notable black electoral gains at the City Council and Board of Education levels, and the emergence of quite a few local interracial social organizations (Trotter and Day: pp. 98, 108, 138). These institutional enlargements of black social advocacy capacities provided strategic reinforcements for mid-twentieth century racial justice mobilizations taking place on the ground in local black Pittsburgh communities, mobilizing in pursuit of fair employment practices, school desegregation, and improved black residential options and conditions. Despite an expanding local racial justice infrastructure, inclusive of highly motivated cadres of local black church leaders and leaders from organizations such as the NAACP, social change in Pittsburgh was slow-paced, relying upon federal policy interventions for some of the more important gains (Trotter and Day: pp. 90–103, and 128).

A similar configuration of local social change hesitancies and structural possibilities were the setting during the 1990s for preliminary efforts in Pittsburgh to mobilize against gun violence. Improved and enhanced local racial justice capacities throughout the early-twenty-first century established conditions for more effective and far-reaching Pittsburgh-area mobilizations.

### Local Gun Violence Environment and Contagions

Although US gun homicides peaked at 7.2 per 100,000 persons in 1975 and about seven per 100,000 in the early-1990s, their rate declined to roughly four or less per 100,000 from 2000 through 2012 before swinging upward again to 6.2 in 2020 (Gramlich). Moreover, fatal shootings by police, while not comparable to gun homicides in numbers (nor intent in most instances), have been troublingly high at approximately 1000 fatal shootings in the USA per year from 2015 through 2018 (Sullivan et al. 2019). Fifty-four percent of those killed in these instances were armed with guns; 4% were unarmed.1 Also, blacks were shot at a disproportionate rate, and unarmed black men were four times more likely to be killed by police than unarmed white men (Fox 2019).

Pittsburgh has had high-profile incidents of violence that have served as poignant realizations and reminders of this national crisis. In addition to the Tree of Life and Wilkinsburg mass casualty tragedies, the 4 April 2009 killings of three Pittsburgh police officers by a heavily armed gunman ranked as the third largest loss of life by police officers in the line of duty since 9/11. The assailant, armed with multiple assault rifles, handguns, and a shotgun, ambushed officers called to the assailant’s home after his mother placed an emergency call to have the son removed following a dispute. He

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1 These data refer only to shooting deaths and do not include persons killed by other means by police nor persons who survived being shot by police. See VerBruggen.
ambushed police upon their arrival, and after a 4-h shootout and standoff, three officers had been killed and two critically injured (Associated Press, 2009a, b). A memorial service on behalf of the three fallen officers Eric Kelly, Paul Sciullo II, and Stephen Mayhle has taken place in Pittsburgh on April 4 every year since their 2009 killing (WXPI News 2021). In August 2009, a few months after the police mass casualty tragedy, a gunman walked into a women’s aerobics class at a Pittsburgh-area LA Fitness gym and fired more than 50 rounds from semi-automatic handguns, killing three women and wounding nine others (including a pregnant woman) before killing himself (Fox News, 2015; WXPI News 2019). In the shootings of the officers, the women at the gym, and the worshippers at Tree of Life, the shooters in each instance were heavily armed white men and all of the victims except for Officer Eric Kelly were white.

Pittsburgh’s most recent mass casualty incident took place during an April 2022 gathering of young people in Pittsburgh’s Deutschtown area and resulted in the deaths of two 17-year-old black males and injuries to nine additional shooting victims and to several persons who jumped from windows at the venue trying to escape. The incident gained wide public attention, commentary, and condemnation, including from Pittsburgh’s newly elected mayor Ed Gainey who stressed passing “meaningful legislation to lessen the amount of guns in our streets or provide the much-needed resources to communities desperately in need” (Adams 2022). In a “Pittsburgh’s Plan for Peace” statement issued by the mayor’s office on 3 June 2022, Gainey emphasized that “public safety is [his office’s] number one priority” (Stop the Violence 2022).

The degree of current Pittsburgh city government success in increasing public safety and confidence is yet to be determined. Nevertheless, these pursuits take place against a backdrop of distinctive black vulnerabilities to violence, with the sense of vulnerability by current generations of black Pittsburghers compounded with each instance of bewildering civilian or police violence inflicted upon persons in their communities. There are the distressing cumulative totals of black homicides (525 of the 636 Pittsburgh homicides between 2010 and March 2022), but there also have been several angering police killings of unarmed blacks dating back at least to the 1995 police killing of Jonny Gammage (Allegheny County, 2022a, b).

Gammage, a 31-year-old cousin of former Pittsburgh Steeler player Ray Seals, was pulled over by police in a Pittsburgh suburb on 12 October 1995 at 2:00 a.m. while driving Seals’ Jaguar XJ6. Gammage died of positional asphyxia when five white police officers pinned him to the ground during the stop (Pitz 1998). Other publicized cases of Pittsburgh police violence against blacks included the 12 January 2010 beating and unlawful arrest of Jordan Miles at the hands of three white policemen who presumed him to be a drug dealer because he was walking down the street at night; and the 11 November 2012 police shooting and paralyzing of Leon Ford as officers drug him from his car during a traffic stop (WTAE News 2018; CBS News 2014). Although charges were filed against Miles and Ford, they were later dropped in both instances and both received settlements from the City of Pittsburgh. Miles received $119,000 and Ford received $5.5 million. Gammage’s parents received a settlement of $1.5 million from the suburban Pittsburgh municipalities implicated in Ford’s death. No officers however were convicted of any charges in the incidents involving Gammage, Miles, and Ford—or, more recently, Antwon Rose.

These incidents generated significant local protests, including a November 1995 rally where hundreds gathered on the streets of Pittsburgh to protest Gammage’s killing, including Jesse Jackson who called Gammage’s killing “a lynching” (Cutter 1995). A year later, approximately 1000 high school students engaged in a December 1996 protest in response to the acquittal of one of the officers involved in Gammage’s killing (Fruit 1996). Protests of Gammage’s killing took place as recently as 2020 when dozens of activists commemorating what would have been Gammage’s 56th birthday organized a 20 July 2020 marched through the suburb in which he had been killed 25 years earlier (Deto and Wickerham 2020).

There also were extensive protests in the months following the brutal 2010 police beating of Jordan Miles. After the Justice Department announced on 4 May 2010 it would not pursue federal charges against the three officers involved in Miles’ beating, more than 100 people rallied on May 6 in front of Pittsburgh City Hall criticizing the lack of charges against the three officers involved in the beating and demanding release of the 2010 police report compiled on the incident (Brother Ash Productions 2011). Additional protests drawing approximately 150 persons each time were held on May 14 in front of Pittsburgh Police Headquarters, on May 21 at the Pittsburgh Office of Municipal Investigations, and on May 28 in front of the Courthouse (Smolarek 2011). These protests and then a December 2014 protest in support of Leon Ford after his shooting by police were organized by the Pittsburgh organization Alliance for Police Accountability. The 2014 Ford rally took place in Pittsburgh’s East Liberty neighborhood where activists blocked streets and heard presentations from speakers such as Ed Gainey (who was a state representative at the time) (Murray 2014).

In the 12 days following the 19 June 2018 killing of Antwon Rose, there were a dozen protests spread across eight of those days. Protests during that period included blocking streets and bridges in downtown Pittsburgh and in other Pittsburgh neighborhoods, picketing outside the home of the officer involved in the shooting, and staging a rally at the police station in the East Pittsburgh suburb in which the police officer worked (McCann 2018). A protest rally on June 23
featured several governmental officials who spoke in support of Rose, including US Rep. Mike Doyle (D-Forest Hills) and US Rep. Conor Lamb (D-Mount Lebanon). State Rep. Gainey also spoke at the rally, as did State Representative-elect Summer Lee (D-Swissvale) who later became the first African American female from western Pennsylvania elected to the state House of Representative. When the 4-day trial of officer Michael Rosfeld who was charged with murdering Rose ended in an acquittal on 22 March 2019, protests took to the streets. The protests began outside the Allegheny County Courthouse downtown and then moved to a commercial center in the East Liberty neighborhood where hundreds of protesters blocked streets, entered several businesses en masse, and heard from speakers including Brandi Fisher of Alliance for Police Accountability, Pittsburgh City Councilor Daniel Lavelle (D-Hill District), and Representatives Gainey and Lee. Additional protests took place the following day in the Hill District neighborhood (Deto 2019).

The police killing of George Floyd by asphyxiation in Minneapolis, Minnesota, on 25 May 2020 sent shock waves around the world and sparked unprecedented levels of outrage and protest targeting American policing practices. In Pittsburgh, thousands took to the streets the weekend after Floyd’s killing, mostly in the downtown area where what started as peaceful protests turned violent. Pittsburgh police and Pennsylvania state police were deployed in force to reign-in the violence and destruction, which included the destruction of two police vehicles, vandalism of quite a few downtown commercial establishments, and the injuring of three journalists. Forty-three adults and one juvenile were arrested and overnight curfews were imposed that weekend. Pittsburgh police chief Scott Shubert announced however that “there was no doubt” many of the persons responsible for the violence and destruction were “white male anarchists” who came from places outside Pittsburgh intent upon hijacking the protests (Martines et al. 2020).

Pittsburgh faith leaders made efforts to align with moral outrage over Floyd’s killing and to stave off potential for further violence within Pittsburgh. Catholic bishop David Zubic issued the following public statement: “I ask all believers to pray and act for peace, unity and that perfect balance of justice and mercy that is the hallmark of God’s work in our world.” Zubic stated further:

I mourn with the family of George Floyd and all who have lost loved ones to inexcusable violence. I especially pray with and for the members of the African American community. Racism is a sin. We must all work to overcome the injustice with which this sin infects our society (Ibid).

In addition, a prayer vigil organized by pastors of several major Protestant congregations in the East Liberty neighborhood was held on Sunday 31 May 2020 at Eastminster Presbyterian church, where its pastor Paul Roberts urged the hundreds in attendance to take stronger actions in response to 400 years ofatrocity and injustice endured by black Americans. “We’re the problem, white America’s the problem!” said Roberts. “We’re the one’s sick, our churches are sick . . . and we need to repent.” The vigil was also attended by Pittsburgh Mayor Bill Peduto and police chief Shubert who reiterated that the violence during the downtown protests was perpetrated by outside anarchists (Waltz 2020).

From Gammage’s 1995 killing through Antwon Rose’s 2018 killing (and George Floyd’s killing in 2020), anti-gun violence mobilizations within Pittsburgh became solidified among local cadres of activists and their demands pointed toward increasingly specific instrumental objectives (as outlined below). Not surprisingly, protests were not always met with empathy or tolerance within the Pittsburgh region, including by public officials. In response to 2018 protests related to Rose’s killing, Karen Peconi, mayor of the Pittsburgh-vicinity town of Arnold, created a Facebook post urging police to “bring the hoses.” Her posting included a picture of police training water cannons on Civil Rights Movement protesters in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963. Although she later apologized, the message being sent was that her sympathies, and presumably those of the governing institutions being appealed to in her posting, align with the brutalities of mid-twentieth century racists such as Birmingham’s Chief of Police at the time, Bull Connor (Karimi and Kaufman 2018).

Attempts to brand Pittsburgh’s community-based activists as agitating outliers engaged in unwarranted attacks on the legitimacy of Pittsburgh-area pursuits of law and order were not aligned with the facts. Actually, these activists were not unprecedented in their criticisms of Pittsburgh police conduct, nor were they the most empowered source of these criticisms in recent decades. A late-1990s ACLU study of police practices in Pittsburgh outlined patterns of police misconduct enabled by “complete indifference by elected officials and the senior management of the Pittsburgh Police Department.” The ACLU report formed the basis for a US Justice Department lawsuit against the City of Pittsburgh “for civil rights violations by members of Pittsburgh’s Bureau of Police” (Trotter and Day; p. 152). Moreover, Pittsburgh voters approved a May 1997 referendum that created the Pittsburgh Citizen Police Review Board, amassing sufficient support for the measure to override city council rejection of the proposed board (Trotter and Day; pp. 194–195).

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2 In Pennsylvania’s May 2022 primary elections, Lee won the Democratic race for the US 12th Congressional district, making her a favorite to win the election for that US Congressional seat during the November elections.
Although most anti-gun violence activists have understood that use of force, including lethal force, can be a necessary part of policing given existing dangers within societies, what generally has been criticized is the use of lethal force where there seems to be no plausible danger to either the officer or the public. What largely has been the basis of protests and condemnations of police conduct within Pittsburgh and beyond has been what many have believed to be unnecessary, immoral, and discriminatory deployments of force.

Pittsburgh law professor David Harris points to the problematic presumptions of malefaveance out of which police often regard and approach blacks and persons of color that exacerbate mutual distrust and the possibilities for tragic outcomes. Harris suggests this racial profiling “has destructive consequences across any number of law enforcement and social dimensions. It does not help law enforcement, it breaks down relationships, it breaks down trust and it fundamentally injures people and the idea of justice” (Harris 2019).

Public trust is hard to gain but easy to lose and, according to “social capital” theorists such as Robert Putnam, this key requirement for well-functioning societies is in short supply. Putnam defines social capital as “features of social organizations, such as networks, norms and trust that facilitate action and cooperation for mutual benefit” (Putnam 1993: p. 35).

This capital is particularly hard to come by, Putnam says, in socially heterogenous contexts, especially where there are entrenched racial and ethnic distinctions and divisions (Putnam 2001). Within the USA, including in Pittsburgh, these social group distinctives and divisions are pronounced and formalized in social institutions and practices as well as in law enforcement.

Social disconnections and dissonances that have contributed to violent overreach by police also have fueled extremely high levels of civilian violence. In shootings by civilians and by police, gun use too often has been a first resort. Though assessments of the problem have generated fierce debate, levels of societal violence have been strongly correlated with levels of ownership and availability of guns, including at city levels (Kleck and Kovandzik 2009; Miller et al. 2015), state levels (Siegel et al. 2014; Chavez et al. 2022), and national levels (Hemenway 2004). Overall, as stated by Council of Foreign Relations research, the metrics of US gun ownership are stark, with the USA possessing “46 percent of the world’s civilian-owned guns” despite accounting for only 5% of the world’s population. Its per capita rate of firearms is highest in the world and its homicide-by-firearm rate is highest among the world’s most developed nations (Masters 2022).

With respect to gun availability, the average number of guns manufactured per year in the USA from 2009 to 2019 was 8,298,130, which represented a dramatic increase from the 4,013,082 between 1986 and 2008 (Statist 2022).

High frequencies of citizen gun violence and default deployments of force by police are symptomatic of a rampant inhumaneness within American society, nurtured by the spirit of division that infuses much of American social life. Several Pittsburgh religious leaders indeed see the problem in these terms. Cynthia Moore-Koikoi, bishop of the Pittsburgh episcopal area of the United Methodist Church, states:

“We have lost a sense of connection to one another and in that loss, we have lost the value of life. We have so objectified people and others that it becomes okay for us to treat others disrespectfully, with that leading to thinking their lives are not precious (Moore-Koikoi 2019).

Where there is a failure to perceive a common humanity, it is a short step toward employment of violence.

Pittsburgh Catholic priest David Taylor views the frequent resort to gun use as “a moral problem” and a failure to appreciate that “life is given to us by God” and that it comes with an obligation “to protect all life, and not just our own” (Taylor 2019). Instead, American reasoning on these matters has become distorted and as former Pittsburgh Episcopal bishop Dorsey McConnell suggests, because all life is sacred, our commonplace justifications of violence represent a profound human failing. “The human being’s right to take the life of another … is submitted to the Judgment of the cross,” says McConnell. “It’s not just the question of whether such an act is defensible in a court of law; it’s a question of whether it’s defensible before the Throne of Grace” (McConnell 2019).

For many on the frontlines of Pittsburgh’s anti-gun violence activism, addressing the grim cultural nexus of low behavioral thresholds to engagement in violence and ready accessibility and utilization of guns is where efforts are deemed most important. Jay Gilmer, the “Stop the Violence” coordinator for the City of Pittsburgh, traces Pittsburgh’s gun violence to multiple causes, including disputes that could have been handled differently, a sense of threat or danger, or a lack of resources that might help socialize more constructive responses to conflict. Nevertheless, says Gilmer, “the reason a person involved in an act of violence chose to pick up a gun that day has to do with access to the weapon” (Gilmer 2021).

Similarly, when asked what should be done to address the problem of gun violence, Pittsburgh’s Catholic bishop David Zubik suggested more attention needs to be given to “gun control that will help to curb people having quick access to weapons” (Zubik 2019). The speed with which persons can turn to guns, says Pittsburgh pastor Daryl Canady, can transform a relatively insignificant clash into a deadly encounter, and that is related to being able to “get a gun as quickly as you can buy a piece of candy” (Canady 2019).

Moreover, as Harris suggests, the short step toward violence results as well from “the warrior culture that trains so
many into believing evil violence is everywhere and the only solution is to be willing and able to use righteous violence to counter it.” This perspective is discernible in law enforcement approaches that emphasize responding to violence primarily through greater displays of force. As an alternative to this emphasis which some believe only furthers levels of violence and dehumanization, more attention is being paid to violence as an illness, an individual and collective ailment constituting a public health emergency and requiring treatment. Researchers writing for the *American Medical Association Journal of Ethics* categorize violence as a disease requiring physician intervention and “preventive care,” including responses on “an interpersonal and ecological level” (Freire-Vargas 2018). So, a public health approach to violence, according to public health scholar David Hemenway, “is the attainment for all peoples . . . a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being. That includes preventive measures that reduce the spread of the contagion and responsiveness to “the accompanying dread and fear of firearm violence”” (Hemenway 2004).

In any event, within contexts of both police and civilian violence, the combined effect of mindsets that justify and normalize violence and the mechanics of ready gun access make for a lethal mixture. How that interrelation is perceived and acted upon can shape responses to gun violence in important ways and this is certainly a matter requiring close attention. Pittsburgh anti-gun violence efforts have focused on these mindsets and mechanics of local gun violence and despite encountering national and local environmental obstacles undermining prospects for reform, Pittsburgh activists have found ways to build upon opportunities for reform afforded them by Pittsburgh’s local context. Those opportunities have included an evolving capacity and reach during the past 30 years by Pittsburgh’s anti-gun violence activists, as evidenced by their expanded community-based activist infrastructures and by their increased influence and alliances within strategic governmental, ecclesial, and philanthropic leadership structures.

While challenges remain and continue to evolve, there are more resources and coordination in this space than ever before. At the state, regional, city, and neighborhood levels, there are efforts underway that make a difference in real-time and deepen impact, expand services and build on successes (Ibid, 4).

The “Plan for Peace” serves as an important indicator of the belief among key local elites in Pittsburgh’s currently favorable positioning for achieving progress on difficult problems. But the idea that Pittsburgh has distinctive accumulations of social change capital on which it can draw is shared by popular grassroots leaders as well. Pittsburgh artist and activist Jasiri X commented:

> I think because Pittsburgh is small, I feel like in the black community so many of us have relationships with one another and know persons in-common. Not only do we have social capital, but it’s like, Oh, I know that dude, or I know your mom. It’s just a tighter knit community. So, during protests, we could meet prior to and really make sure we are acting together (Jasiri X 2019).

The extent to which these claims of social change favorabilities derive from cumulative social capital requires further assessment. In exploring this, anti-gun violence activism is examined here along two trajectories: efforts at public policy redirection and ground-level reorientation. The examples of Pittsburgh anti-gun violence mobilizations and activities compiled here are windows on local anti-gun violence methods and mindsets and also on the systems, structures, and social capital by which that activism has been fortified.

**Public Policy Redirection**

During the latter decades of the twentieth century, many major cities in the USA were known for notably heavy-handed law enforcement approaches toward blacks in particular that resulted in significant tensions between city officials and black communities. While black mistreatment within the Pittsburgh context also generated strong black animosity toward government across many generations, Pittsburgh mayors and legislators as early as the 1990s were taking stances and actions on police violence that aligned them more with aggrieved black Pittsburghers than with the law enforcement sector.

After the 1995 acquittal of the officer charged with Johnny Gammage’s killing, Pittsburgh’s mayor Thomas Murphy supported calls from aggrieved black Pittsburghers for a US Justice Department investigation into the killing. After the officer’s county court acquittal, Murphy conceded, “I don’t think that this is Pittsburgh’s finest day;” and acknowledged further, “I think justice could have been done better” (Fruit 1996; Meredith 1996). Murphy also was aligned with a1990s

### Pittsburgh’s Anti-Violence Systems and Responses

The City of Pittsburgh’s recently issued “Plan for Peace” outlined commitments to a public health model, community partnerships, trauma-informed community services, community policing, community development, and improved learning environments (City of Pittsburgh 2022: p. 2). In response to skepticism expressed about its ambitious plan, the published version makes a very instructive observation about possibilities particular to the Pittsburgh context:

> “I think justice could have been done better” (Fruit 1996; Meredith 1996). Murphy also was aligned with a1990s
Pittsburgh legislative initiative designed to “ban certain semi-automatic firearms and accessories within city limits.” Twenty years later on the heels of the massacre at Pittsburgh’s Tree of Life congregation, Pittsburgh mayor Bill Peduto promoted similar legislation (Bauder, 2019a, b). These initiatives proved unsuccessful in Pittsburgh, but the efforts in both decades showed a local political commitment to proceeding against stiff headwinds within a state that has maintained an “open carry” policy. In fact, Pennsylvania law prohibits local government from creating gun laws stricter than the state’s—which is a legal obstacle current mayor Gainey is taking steps to appeal at the State Supreme Court (KDKA News 2022). As a state representative, Gainey (since his 2012 election) and state representative Summer Lee (since the 2019 term) were on the forefront of Pittsburgh-area efforts to bring about state-level gun reforms. Both were leading advocates of five separate anti-gun violence bills introduced in 2019 by the Pennsylvania Legislative Black Caucus, and Gainey in 2020 became co-chair of the Caucus’s anti-gun violence subcommittee (Micek 2020).

Within the Pittsburgh City Council, two black councilors, Ricky Burgess and R. Danielle Lavelle, have pushed hard on anti-gun violence measures. Burgess (who also pastors a church in Pittsburgh’s Homewood neighborhood) and Lavelle (who served as the Council’s Public Safety Chair beginning in 2016) introduced a bill in 2018 increasing city funding for a police bureau “Group Violence Intervention Unit” from $150,000 per year to $500,000 per year for 5 years. Burgess and Lavelle also committed to seeking an additional $500,000 per year for the program from private sources. The legislation by Burgess and Lavelle also proposed a new “Stop the Violence” initiative operated from the mayor’s office, City Council, and the Allegheny County Health Department (Lavelle 2019; Bauder, 2019a, b). That initiative places importance on grassroots strategies and has allocated $1 million during 2022 in grants to local anti-violence organizations in collaboration with Pittsburgh’s POISE Foundation (a black run, black-oriented charity) (Rosenfeld 2022).

These several anti-violence undertakings provide strategic intersections within local government, but also between local and state government. Not only has Pittsburgh had strong legislative representation on these issues in the State Legislature, but Pittsburgh has had a supportive state governor, with Governor Tom Wolf’s office issuing $3.45 million in grants to Allegheny County anti-violence programs in December 2021 and another $2.25 million to such programs in January 2022 (Wolf 2021; Wolf 2022). What is also clearly intersectional about Pittsburgh-area public policy approaches to gun violence is a commitment to systematic collaborations with private sector and community-based entities. A statement by Councilman Burgess is reflective of the mindset: “In order to reduce gun violence we must do it comprehensively” (CBS Pittsburgh 2018). Similarly, Mayor Gainey stated: “It’s not just government, it’s not just community. It’s media, it’s foundations, it’s corporations. It’s everybody understanding that if we are going to defeat this cycle of violence we can only do it together” (Koscinski 2022).

One of the important private sphere resource sectors integral to Pittsburgh’s public sector violence reduction initiatives has been its foundation sector. Ranked in 2010 by Charity Navigator as the nation’s “most generous” city, Pittsburgh’s 1400-plus foundations with combined assets as of 2011 of more than $10.3 billion immeasurably enrich the city’s capacities (O’Toole 2011). It has been a select number of these foundations however that have been on the front lines of anti-violence work in Pittsburgh. The city government’s partnership with the POISE Foundation in administering its Stop the Violence grants has been mentioned. Grants from Pittsburgh’s William Talbott Hillman Foundation have channeled $850,000 since 2019 toward gun violence prevention projects in several states, including $100,000 to Pennsylvania CeaseFire (W.T. Hillman Foundation 2022). Pittsburgh’s philanthropic engagement of gun violence concerns is evidenced as well in 2022 launches of two community-based foundations: the Hear Foundation, co-founded by 2012 shooting victim Leon Ford and outgoing Pittsburgh Bureau of Police chief Scott Schubert and focusing on gun violence trauma (Koscinski); and the Karli Short Better Tomorrow Foundation, founded by former Penn State and NFL football player Brandon Short in honor of his murdered 26-year-old daughter and unborn child, will provide support for students impacted by violence.

Also, the Heinz Endowments, one of the city’s largest foundations, has been strategic to Pittsburgh’s anti-violence work through substantial funding allocations and as a leadership voice on these issues. Heinz Endowments provided $500,000 in 2016 to Allegheny County Public Health to establish the Office of Violence Prevention which created trauma response teams, street outreach teams, and a community advisory board (Pittsburgh Post-Gazette 2016; Allegheny County 2022b). It also provided tens of millions of dollars since 2020 toward criminal justice reform and other community-based and creative arts-related programs with potential for mitigating violence and racial inequities (Felton 2020).

Moreover, Heinz Endowments president Grant Oliphant has been outspoken on the importance of systematic deployments of leadership capital and institutional capital on racial equity issues and anti-gun violence work, including from within the philanthropic sector. Oliphant points out foundation leaders tend not to speak out on grave injustices publicly “because they’d rather their work more than their words speak to their commitments.” He references a 2017 speech he gave before 800 members of the foundation arena where many of the persons seemed “shocked” by his call for stronger
foundation advocacy on these issues. As an advocate of intersectional thinking and approaches by foundations on these challenging issues, he points out:

We cannot think about any of these issues in isolation of one another as in ‘oh I’m an environmentalist, so I don’t have to care about racial equity,’ or ‘I don’t have to care about violence.’ You absolutely do have to care because violence for example has become a driver. So we really need to be thoughtful about the connections. But my point is that for foundations, some will just not see themselves in this space so they would look at you and say well that’s an important issue, it’s just not what we do. But for those of us who are working in this space, we have an obligation to be speaking about it and then devoting resources to it (Oliphant 2019).

As Oliphant has leveraged his foundation sector influence on behalf of Pittsburgh’s anti-gun violence efforts, religious leaders likewise have leveraged faith sector capital in support of anti-violence initiatives. In discussing this intersection, Bishop McConnell observes: “we have in the Episcopal House of Bishops a network called Bishops Against Gun Violence, and we are involved in a lot of public witness to move the ball down the field on gun control and legislation” (McConnell 2019). Although referring to an entity within the Episcopal Church’s national body, the fact that McConnell is one of the leaders within that network lends value to Pittsburgh’s local fight against gun violence.

It is also significant that Pittsburgh’s United Methodist Church (one of the largest Protestant denominations in the metropolitan area) gained its first African American and female bishop in the history of Pittsburgh’s Episcopal area when Cynthia Moore-Koikoi was elected bishop and assigned to Western Pennsylvania in 2016. She came to Pittsburgh after serving as United Methodist district superintendent in Baltimore during a time when Baltimore was embroiled in conflict over 25-year-old Freddie Gray’s death under suspicious circumstances while in police custody. Drawing on insights gained from the Baltimore context and their applications to Pittsburgh, Bishop Koikoi pointed to church leaders’ potential as mediators between police and communities and addressed the need more broadly for greater church involvement “in the communities around us and in politics so that we assert our influence in the police department, in City Hall, in our local governments, and in our state and National governments.” Although acknowledging “differing views” in Pittsburgh on matters related to policing and guns, she believes churches can inject a humanizing voice into the objectifications characterizing debates on these contested issues (Moore-Koikoi 2019).

Pittsburgh’s Catholic Bishop David Zubik also occupies a strategic position as the leader since 2007 of Pittsburgh’s 630,000-member Catholic Diocese (a number equal to 33% of Pittsburgh’s entire adult population). Zubik has embodied Catholic Church concerns in Pittsburgh at many levels, including through his presence with local communities experiencing great tragedies. He was present with families and friends of the slain police officers and women at the gym immediately after the shootings, including at the Pittsburgh police station as news was unfolding about the shootings of the officers. With respect to policy matters, Zubik’s positions on matters such as guns in American society underscore Catholic Church teachings on protecting life, an emphasis he hopes will “trickle-down” among Pittsburgh’s Catholic families, congregations, and communities. He refers to this as “helping the soil to become fertile for doing the good things that we should be doing.” He also has been committed to local collaborations with Protestant, Muslim, and Jewish faith groups on violence-related issues, with an eye toward “broadening capacities.” Zubik identified collaborations with the largely Protestant ecumenical organization Christian Associates and the Pennsylvania Interfaith Impact Network as having been especially fruitful, particularly because of their well-established advocacy infrastructures on racial justice and equity matters, including on gun violence.

Clearly, conceptual and infrastructural support for anti-gun violence activism on the part of Pittsburgh elites has been robust. The organizational, financial, and conceptual capital elites have brought to Pittsburgh’s struggle against gun violence has been crucial in bringing about local changes in policies, practices, and public opinion bearing upon local gun violence. But what also contributed to reforms has been the pressures applied by protesters who took to the streets, and the anti-violence programmatic capacities and direct community engagement on the part of innovators and implementors operating on the ground in local communities.

Ground-Level Reorientation

Pittsburgh clergyman Cornell Jones, who served for 10 years as the Protestant chaplain at SCI Pittsburgh Prison (a.k.a. Western Penitentiary) and currently as City of Pittsburgh Group Violence Intervention Coordinator, recounts a meeting several years ago between himself, Pittsburgh’s 1Hood co-founder Jasiri X, and renowned artist and Civil Rights Movement activist Harry Belafonte. Jones says Belafonte upon learning he was a minister said: “You know Martin once told me ‘I’d rather have 12 street guys than a hundred pastors working for me.’” Jones recalls being offended at first by Belafonte’s comment but then accepting Belafonte was not

3 For statistics on Pittsburgh religious demographics, see for example Pew Research Center 2022 and Best Places 2022.
4 For data, see Religious Landscapes Study, op cit. Catholic membership number is from Zubik interview, op cit.
suggesting “clergy were inauthentic” but, rather, “that there’s something special about people from the street who are hungry for freedom, hungry to get out of bondage” (Jones 2019). Jones, who himself has maintained close ties and affinities with persons immersed in urban street life, exemplifies a method and mindset of community engagement that has informed his work and that of a cadre of other Pittsburgh community leaders concerned with social challenges facing many black Pittsburghers. Mainly, they are aware that the fuel and frontlines for confronting social injustices in Pittsburgh are its community-based programs, activists, and service providers.

The methods utilized have been often unconventional, at times disruptive, and frequently criticized by persons operating within more formalized and elite structures. But since at least the time of the Gammage killing, protesters have been out in force in response to controversial police killings of blacks in Pittsburgh, with their outsider pressure pushing the system at points toward greater responsiveness. Understandably, the protests did not always achieve the desired systems changes. According to Pittsburgh Black Lives Matter founder Tanisha Long, what Pittsburgh protests after the George Floyd produced was more funding for the Pittsburgh public safety division rather than more resources for counseling programs, rehab programs, and other community building programs in communities disproportionately affected by violence. Nevertheless, she celebrates the ongoing social change work and Pittsburgh Black Lives Matter’s alignments with ground-level local organizations such as 1Hood, Alliance for Police Accountability, Take Action Mon Valley, and Trans United—each of which is deeply embedded in their local communities. Long says about these organizations: “They show up in spaces and do the work. They are family” (Long 2022).

Effective linkages by these organizations to local communities in pursuit of law enforcement sector reforms were evident for example in 2021 community mobilizations by Alliance for Police Accountability in support of bail initiatives that would limit solitary confinement in the county jail and that would prohibit the use of no-knock warrants by Pittsburgh police. With the support of other local organizations such as the Pennsylvania Interfaith Impact Network, New Voices Pittsburgh, and Pittsburgh United, this organizational collaborative facilitated 100 signing stations operated by volunteers across the county where they collected 65,000 signatures. The measures were placed on the May 2021 primary election ballot where they received overwhelming voter approval.

This policy arena engagement is critical, but so too are direct alignments and affinities with communities heavily affected by violence. St. Louis artist and activist Brittini Gray talks about a conceptual shift in her thinking on activism and organizing, noting “policy activism is only going to go so far.” On difficult problems such as community violence, says Gray, increasingly “the work of transformations is being in relationship with the actual folk engaged in conflict, whether with police or with each other” (Gray 2019). That reasoning has been reflected well in several frontline initiatives in Pittsburgh that have innovatively engaged persons at the center of community violence.

Pittsburgh was strongly connected to gang mediation work taking place nationally during the 1990s. Carl Upchurch and Khalid Raheem, both formerly incarcerated at Western Penitentiary, respectively pursued commitments to prison reform and community organizing upon their release. Their commitments intersected in the 1992 formation of an anti-violence organization called the National Council for Urban Peace and Justice (NCUPJ), headquartered in Pittsburgh. The organization was instrumental in the facilitation of a 1993 national gang peace summit held in Kansas City, Missouri, and in a follow-up summit in Pittsburgh in 1994 (Raheem 2022; McKinnon 2003).

Another person active with NCUPJ was Richard Garland who, like Raheem, was active in Philadelphia street gangs before spending long years in prison, including at Western Penitentiary. Garland developed a commitment to anti-violence work and became actively involved in that work in Pittsburgh after his 1991 release from prison, with one of his initial involvements being through NCUPJ. Garland remained deeply immersed in anti-violence work with Pittsburgh youths throughout the 1990s and 2000s via NCUPJ, several other organizations, and the Pittsburgh Public Schools before founding an organization called One Vision, One Life. Garland’s organization helped negotiate a months-long cease fire between 11 gangs in early-2008, including facilitating dialog between gang members and Pittsburgh’s chief of police Nate Harper and Allegheny County’s district attorney Stephen Zappala (Greenwood 2008). In the early-2010s, Garland became an assistant professor of public health and director of the Violence Prevention Initiative in the Center for Health Equity at University of Pittsburgh and has become recognized as an anti-violence expert (Hamilton 2018).

Pittsburgher Taili Thompson was one of the young men impacted by Garland’s work at NCUPJ and beyond. Thompson’s brother, a gang member in Pittsburgh, was a NCUPJ representative at gang summit dialogues in various cities during the 1990s. Thompson, a former contract worker with Allegheny County Health Department Office of Violence Prevention, was mentored by Garland in anti-violence work and credits Garland with developing many of the methodologies associated with the widely known work of Chicago-based group Ceasefire (a.k.a. Cure Violence). Thompson was involved in Garland’s negotiations with Pittsburgh gangs and attributes the success of those negotiations to the degree of
trust Garland invoked and nurtured among the various parties (Thompson 2019).

Those negotiations took place at Wesley A.M.E. Zion church in the Hill District, whose pastor Glenn Grayson has featured prominently in Pittsburgh’s anti-violence efforts. Grayson, who lost his son to violence in 2010, established the Center that CARES (Children/Adults Recreational & Educational Services) in the early-2000s and later purchased and refurbished a former Hill District community center renamed the Jeron X Grayson Community Center in honor of his deceased son. The CARES Center has operated a very successful education and leadership preparatory program that tracks student needs and progress from pre-K through 12th grade. The program collaborates with 20 public and private schools in metro-Pittsburgh and has supported more than 2800 students and their families (Center that CARES 2022). CARES also actively facilitates anti-violence strategies as part of its work, most systematically through its Reach program which it launched in 2017. The Reach program has a violence intervention team that is deployed to schools and public housing complexes across the city in response to incidents of violence. As Grayson states, “each of the persons that are deployed bring relationships and street respect” (Grayson 2020). Pittsburgh public officials have attributed Pittsburgh’s recent declines in violence to these kinds of violence intervention strategies and in 2021 increased its support of Grayson’s programs to $9 million over a 4-year period. The money channels through the City of Pittsburgh’s Stop the Violence initiative (Murray 2021; Grayson 2020).

Another effective violence intervention initiative has been the Neighborhood Resilience Project (NRP), founded by Paul Abernathy who pastors St. Moses the Black Orthodox Church in the Hill District. NRP focuses on traumas endured in urban poor neighborhoods due to violence and various forms of social injury and on responding through community development strategies alert to the realities of trauma within these contexts. NRP has responded to neighborhoods by facilitating more than 2500 COVID-19 vaccinations, contributing more than 14,000 items of food and 5000 clothing items, providing clinicians who volunteered 200 h of care to the un-insured in the region, and deploying more than 60 times to gun-related homicides. NRP also has collaborated with Duquesne University and University of Pittsburgh in providing training in trauma-informed community development for local cohorts in Pittsburgh and around the country (Neighborhood Resilience Project 2022). NRP has received funding from a variety of sources, including state funding from the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency which awarded NRP $500,000 in 2021; generous funding from Pittsburgh-area foundations such as Heinz Endowments, Pittsburgh Foundation, and Hillman Foundation; and funding from local businesses and corporations such as the Pittsburgh Pirates (Neighborhood Resilience Project 2020; Ford 2021).

**Concluding Thoughts**

The examples of anti-violence work outlined here are representative of a few key organizations that have built upon, expanded, and reinforced a broad landscape of Pittsburgh anti-violence work. These providers have often collaborated with each other and with philanthropic, governmental, and community-based partners. As Heinz Endowments Grant Oliphant remarked: “foundations depend on relationships to do absolutely everything we do” (Oliphant 2019). The relational capacities and commitments embodied and exercised by strategically positioned leaders in Pittsburgh’s civil society and governmental sectors and by local activists and community leaders on the ground have configured an anti-violence ecosystem that has produced results worthy of close attention.

Similar cross-sector ecosystems have contributed to notable gun violence reductions in cities such as Oakland, where law enforcement and citizens’ groups such as Ceasefire have closely collaborated on anti-gun violence efforts (Thomas, McBride, Ford 2019); Buffalo, where a county-wide task force deploys cross-sector resources against gun violence (Tan 2022); and Trenton, where city government deploys recreational, mental health, and public health resources in an integrated approach to “public safety and neighborhood wellness” (trentonnj.org 2022).

Local cross-sector anti-gun violence collaborations such as these, and certainly those of the scale evidenced within Pittsburgh, deserve significant expansion and much wider replication.

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