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Perspectives on Chicago Gun Violence
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Chicago Gun Violence Research Collaborative

The Chicago Gun Violence Research Collaborative (CGVRC) Graduate Student Fellowship brings together student fellows (graduate students from Chicago-based universities) and faculty fellows (professors and public health professionals) to address gun violence by conducting change-oriented research in partnership with Chicago communities.

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Perspectives on Chicago Gun Violence

Our *Perspectives on Chicago Gun Violence* project allowed CGVRC Graduate Student Fellows and CGVRC Faculty to conduct stakeholder interviews, gaining a diverse perspective on local gun violence and organizational efforts to prevent it. The CGVRC was funded through support from Sinai Urban Health Institute, the Shure Charitable Trust, the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago, and United Way of Metropolitan Chicago.

Biography: This interview is with Christopher Crater; he is a Chicago native and works as social emotional learning specialist at Urban Prep Charter Academy For Young Men - Englewood Campus. This interview was done as part of the Chicago Gun Violence Research Collaborative Graduate Student Fellowship series, *Perspectives on Chicago Gun Violence*. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

CGVRC Faculty: And the first question we have is if you tell us just a little bit about who you are.

Christopher Crater: My name is Christopher Crater. I'm a native of the West Side of Chicago from the East Garfield Park/North Lawndale neighborhood. I'm currently the social emotional learning specialist at Urban Prep Englewood campus.

CGVRC Faculty: So, you grew up in the city, what would you say is your connection with those neighborhoods, Lawndale/East Garfield Park? How would you describe living in those neighborhoods, growing up in those neighborhoods?

Christopher Crater: So, I'm from East Garfield Park thirty-five-ten West Congress. Born and raised, I attended elementary, high school, church in the East Garfield Park area. When I think of East Garfield Park, I think about this tight knit, beautiful community that has really been misidentified, is misconstrued in the media and a lot of times when you turn on the TV, you hear about the violence and a course they call it two-ninety, the interstate, the heroin highway. So, we've gotten a bad name. But the people that come from the area are extraordinary. I would say my North Lawndale experience was a little different. So, kindergarten through eighth grade, I'm pretty much in a sheltered environment. My mother, coming from a single parent household, my mother was so scared about some of the things that were going on so literally I was going to school, going to church, and coming home.

And you know, I follow those practices and I just was an on-point kid, you know, a lot of people had identified me as being a leader in the neighborhood and you know, I was really just pushed forward in that light and a lot of people respected like, "Hey, that's that kid that's going to make it." And August 10, 2003, my mother passed away, like two weeks before I started my freshman year in high school and now she's always told me like, "Hey, you know, you gotta be careful and I'm only sheltering you because there's so many things that are going on that you don't know about." So of course, when she passed away, I wanted to know what she was hiding from. So, I started hanging out in North Lawndale. And through that experience I met a lot of amazing people, a lot of amazing young men, who really had a tight brotherhood, but were just involved with a lot of the wrong things. Still to this day I would say, those connections and bonds I created with my brothers in North Lawndale will take me for the rest of my life. But unfortunately, a lot of them are now, either dead or in jail. So, a tale of two cities.

CGVRC Faculty: Yeah. It sounds like a real turning point, your mother passing away. We'll kind of shift back-could you provide your organization's name and describe your role here at the organization?

Christopher Crater: So, I work at Urban Prep Englewood campus that we are the first all-boys public charter high school in the country, established in 2002 and we opened our doors in 2006.

CGVRC Faculty: And how does your organization help with the neighborhood, the Englewood neighborhood in general, not just with respect to gun violence, but how do they kind of promote wellness and well-being in Englewood?

Christopher Crater: So, through the social emotional learning class we actually have in our curriculum that we do two service-learning projects, one in the fall and the spring in the neighborhood. So again, we are extremely thankful for this platform to be able to provide a high quality college preparatory education for the young men. But in the same token, we're not above the people, we are the people, so being able to go out in the neighborhood and know some peace warriors that are making a difference in significance, in our neighborhood is super important and our young men value that relationship and connection.

CGVRC Faculty: And when you think about the different service-learning projects that you've done, can you give us a couple of examples?

Christopher Crater: So, we've had several, we've really connected with R.A.G.E and R.A.G.E. is in our neighborhood. They're over pretty much all of the initial Englewood violence stuff that goes into the violence prevention group for our neighborhood. We've done some homeless shelter drives. We have had some situations where we get to go to food banks and soup kitchens and just, you know, having those connections to be able to do it. And actually, with the Peacemaker Program that we have at Urban Prep, Englewood, they've funded some of our projects. So, when you know, I was talking about a summer showcases that we've done, they provide that extra money that we needed to be able to get stuff done and we're trying to do.

CGVRC Faculty: And could you describe the project you were talking about, the summer showcase, what the youth came up?

Christopher Crater: I'm also an instructor for After School Matters. And last summer we started, a pilot program which was called After-School Matters Peacemakers Program and they put them in 50 different locations in the city, but mostly in the high crime areas, and they really want to see if a peacemaking curriculum could change some things in the neighborhood. I was able to get fifty young men from my school, and we were able to talk about non-violent tactics and peacemaking solutions, and my young men were chosen to do the summer showcase and they decided that we wanted to do a play on sixteen shots. So, sixteen shots of course in Chicago is a scary situation because it describes Laquan McDonald who was shot and killed by a Chicago Police Officer. He was shot sixteen times. And that sixteen is a scary phrase. It has a lot of darkness and the eerie feeling. And a lot of our young men have similar experiences. So, it's a dark moment. So, they say, you know what, we're going to take sixteen and we want to turn it around. We want to take sixteen shots, sixteen different images of peace in the

Englewood Neighborhood and we want to hang them in an art gallery and have people come see our Peace Gallery and it was a powerful experience. We also had a former Secretary of Education, Arnie Duncan, come to the program, to the showcase, and he was literally blown away. He was like, "You know what, we want to make sure that you guys get to go all year round." And he helped us get the funding.

CGVRC Faculty: You were saying it was such a great vision, but the budget was fairly small. How did you make that work with such a small budget?

Christopher Crater: Between R.A.G.E giving us a scholarship, some funds and of course, but some of the connections we had in the neighborhood, we were able to get a photographer who does some stuff for Nike. He heard about what we were doing so he was like, "You know what man, I got you. I'll just do it." And we also partner with NYCH Art Gallery in the Pilsen neighborhood. They were more than willing to help. So, we just took what we had and we just had to get creative with it. We went to Michael's, we told them what we were doing, they gave us the frames for half price. So, everybody, I mean it really was a community effort to get it going.

CGVRC Faculty: That's great! What a great story. What a great project. Is there a way to take a look at? Do you guys have a Facebook page set up or anything?

Christopher Crater: We don't have a Facebook for it, but After School Matters did take some particular pictures and I also have some as well. I definitely would love to share those with you. These are just a few from the art gallery right here. We had somebody in the neighborhood make the Urban Prep quilt, purple for After School Matters and orange for the violence prevention and in the quilt they have the names of all the students that had been shot and killed from our school. These are some of the portraits. This is attorney Dunkin Andre and also we had the pictures on the wall but we also have print outs too. So we could actually give the description of what every picture meant. Also, if you came in to visit the actual workshop, we also made you write a Peace Pledge, so a pledge that you wanted to do with peace in your own neighborhood and the community and it was a powerful event.

CGVRC Faculty: Nice. Well, that's such a great story. I want to move a little bit more towards talking about gun violence itself. Can you describe your personal perception of gun violence in the Englewood neighborhood?

Christopher Crater: I think there is a cry for help. A lot of our young people, a lot of our young men are dealing with a lot of trauma from seeing different things, from experiencing different things. And a lot of them don't know how to process those issues, how to process those emotions. And now there's no middle ground. So it is as if I feel disrespected, if I feel anger, if I feel frustrated and I can't get that emotion out, the easier road for me is to go pick up a gun and use it. Like that's my backup. I know for a fact that will work and a lot of our young people have decided to hide behind that, they have said "I will do it," and that's been the experience. So

it's one of those situations where a lot of our young people are scared and are dealing with trauma, but they don't know how to work through it. They have just literally decided to say, "I'm going to use this, this is my power, this is my moment and I'm okay with it."

CGVRC Faculty: So the trauma is kind of the fuel to be a perpetrator of violence. How does it affect victims of violence?

Christopher Crater: I think it affects them a lot, because it's a situation where you'll never forget a moment like that. And if it's not processed in the right way, it can of course become aggression, it can become retaliation and it can just also be a sense of hurt. It's an everlasting process, you know, we have a Senior who got shot Freshman year and he's just now working through some of those things, you know, because he just never, he didn't want to talk about it, but it happens and I just think that needs to be more conversations around why it happens and how can we fix it. So, yeah, that was his freshman year.

CGVRC Faculty: So, the trauma and things of that nature are really important factors. Anything else? Is there anything else that also generates violence that happens in the community that you've seen?

Christopher Crater: Misunderstandings. A lot of times now there isn't a middle person to be able to say, "Okay, well somebody said this about you, you said this about them and let's get some clarity." There isn't that moment of clarity anymore or this is the second I take a moment to kind of figure out what I'm going to do with. It's more about action, it's action right now. Like you know, what, I need to fix this right now and I don't know what happened with it, but I'll deal with the consequences later. So it's like we were willing to take whatever consequences, but right now we want to deal with the issue. And not having that middle man has been destructive here in our neighborhood because so many people are after the fact finding out like "Oh man, you know, it wasn't even him or it wasn't that serious." I would say over half of the young people in our neighborhood being shot and killed, are shot and killed off of either a mistake or a misunderstanding.

CGVRC Faculty: What would that middleman look like? I mean, cause I, I'm thinking of like the interrupters. You've got the interrupters who serve as a middle man, but it sounds like this is a different group of people.

Christopher Crater: It is.

CGVRC Faculty: So who would the middle man and being for the people in Englewood?

Christopher Crater: So, I think for us that was one of the big loads that the Peacemakers at After School Matters wanted to try to figure out. I think from working with the Peacemaker Program, I've found that it's, everybody plays a role in it. I've encouraged my young men to, you know what, you guys are the Peacemakers in

the neighborhood within your area where we got fights that are about to occur or happen, and somebody that you know in your family, you can intervene. You can say something. You might be that voice of clarity that might say somebody's life.

CGVRC Faculty: It's kind of the bystanders, not people that are designated as interrupters or anything but just everyday people.

Christopher Crater: Yes, because I think we've been waiting on...the interrupters are amazing, that was a great program, Cease Fire, that's some amazing works. But it's more than just having a credible messenger. It has to be on the level, everybody has to be responsible, you know? And I think, it's kinda like, "Oh that's not my issue, that's not my problem." And it's like, no, it's all of our problems. And if we start viewing it like that, things began to happen because I put that on my young man, like, hey, if there's an issue, we have an obligation, this is our neighborhood. And if we want it back, we have to start being accountable for what we're doing and if you know, somebody is in the wrong, you should be able to feel okay to tell them that.

CGVRC Faculty: So the Peacemaker Program, sixteen shots, a number of different service learning projects that happen, is there anything else being done in the neighborhood to address gun violence that you haven't shared?

Christopher Crater: I think so many of our elders in the neighborhood are wanting to see a change and a lot of them might be out of the loop per say, with the genres of music or things like that. But a lot of our older beacons of hope and our neighborhood, they really try to love on our young people. You know, if they see somebody that might look a little rough, they always try to bring them in and say, "Hey, how you doing today? How are you doing young man? Pull your pants up and come here, I might need you to shovel some of my snow or I might need you to work on my lawn," or something just to give our young people the feeling of not only want but importance. Everybody wants to feel like they are a person. And I really love the fact that our elders are at the point where they're just so tired of outliving a lot of these young people that they want to see a difference. So many older people are just trying to reach out and love on our young people a lot more. And I think that's the only thing that I think made this process and this school's success was that the amount of love that has poured onto them. Because a lot of our young people, if they don't have it, they're subjected to what goes on.

CGVRC Faculty: When you think about policies, it could be policies here at the school, could be policies in the neighborhood of Englewood, could be policy at the state level or federal policies, do those affect gun violence in any way, do you think? Or is it not something that you see as much?

Christopher Crater: I mean, you know, obviously we know on the state level that the gun violence laws are important. But honestly it's more to it than that here because it's so easy to get your hands on these automatic weapons and everyone has one, you

know. Our kids can get their hands on one if need be. So, for us on the outside looking in, on those legal conversations and all that stuff, I mean, we're so far past that because they are already here and we have the resources to be able to get them. So, I think that we still need to address those issues about how they here in our neighborhood, why they're here, why this is so easy for us, a higher crime area to get them. Until we start talking about those issues, I don't think we could even attack the state level and the federal level.

CGVRC Faculty: For folks that are outside looking in, do you have any other suggestions for them and how to address gun violence effectively, in addition to the great stuff that you're doing through the programs and service learning and all that?

Christopher Crater: I think more than anything sometimes, we come in with our ideas and sometimes we think we bring all the great ideas with us but sometimes the great ideas are already there, and I think we need to be more open to seeing that there are people in Englewood already working, they're already putting in the work. Like R.A.G.E., Asiaha Butler, I don't know if you've heard about her but she's Miss Englewood and she's doing some great things, R.A.G.E is doing some great things. There are some billboards, there's one across the street at the gas station and it says "I am Englewood" and they're all over and it's just pictures of people in Englewood, smiling, the grocer or the Pastor, or the regular woman who works nine to five. There are already great things moving here. I just think there's more, more people have to be open to receiving that work because a lot of people feel like they could come in with their little bag of stuff and fix what's going on and it's not that simple. So, a little more love. I think, you know, the small things. Obviously a great love can make the mountains move and we need a lot more of those things going on. That's one of the biggest things to me, a lot of times people try to come in and so called "fix things" and it's like, it's those relationships, that personal touch. You have to come in and know what's going on to be able to affect change.

CGVRC Faculty: When you think about the city, the city of Chicago not just Englewood, I'm wondering how we can prevent gun violence on a city level? Any ideas about that?

Christopher Crater: What I will say this, I sometimes feel like this city, of course, you know, 77 different neighborhoods. I would always say Chicago is an amazing place and we have something literally for everybody. But the only thing is depending on what neighborhood you're in, you just don't leave where you're from. And we have an amazing city, but this is also one of the most segregated cities and I think we have to acknowledge that. First of all, we'll be talking about our gangs being able to sell so much of the narcotics and the, you know, millions of dollars. Why are they allowed to sell that much for so long and then they can't sell it now because of course the neighborhood is changing now. The gentrification situation of course, which is going on here now is interesting as well. Of course we have a lot of boarded up buildings and we have a lot of people that are scared because they don't know where they're going to live at. And some people have been told to hate this certain group of people for so long and now

they're living next door to the people they've been told hate. So, when we talk about why crime is such a big deal these last few years, I think we've just got to ask the right questions and yeah, it's been avoided for a long time. Obviously, like Englewood has done a great job, crime has definitely been down here the last two years. I think a great deal of that is not only the work that they've been putting in, you know, with R.A.G.E. and just everybody in the community coming together, but also the fact that we don't have a lot of people here anymore, you know, you go down some of the streets in Englewood and it looks like a ghost town. And it's very important that we know that if we want to make a difference, we have to submerge these 77 different neighborhoods. Like literally those 77 different neighborhoods are like 77 different cities. And depending on which one you're in, I mean it's totally, it's night and day and it shouldn't be like that. River North shouldn't be just night and day from Auburn Gresham, or Wrigleyville be different than North Lawndale.

CGVRC Faculty: It feels so different. I'm wondering what you think we need to better understand to address gun violence? And another way to think about this is if I gave you a crystal ball and you can ask it anything about gun violence or neighborhood safety, what would you ask?

Christopher Crater: I think I would ask "What resources can we bring to our neighborhood that can take the desire away from our young people abusing our weapons?" Because a lot of the young people now have just accepted that that's how we deal with issues and that's what we're going to do. And I just want to know... I would ask, "Why or what can we put in place to give people hope that they feel like they wouldn't have to do that?"

CGVRC Faculty: Hope is a word that really jumps out to me there, as well as resources to change how young people think. My last question here is, are you optimistic or pessimistic that things will get better and then Chicago is on the right track?

Christopher Crater: I definitely am optimistic. I mean, that's why in my class, we might say, "Hey, well, you might have to go away to college, but we want you to know that we're giving you these service learning projects because we want you to know the rich history about your neighborhood. And then once you get the knowledge that you need to get that, you can feel free to want to come back and bring some of that knowledge back." Because that's my story, literally my Auntie who raised me as my mother passed, she was like, "You know, Chris, you got to go away to school. So, I went to Mississippi Valley State and then after I went to Grad school at Arkansas State and I had an opportunity for an internship. And I remember I was a week away from graduating from Grad school. I'm in the classroom, we had plasma on the wall and the TV turned on just like a regular day in class. The TV just turned on and I'll never forget, it was violence in Chicago and everybody in the class turned around and looked at me and they were like, "Man, explain that, you talk so highly about this city, but what's that?" And at that moment I knew I had to come back in some capacity. I have degrees in communication, I never thought about teaching in my life. I came back to Chicago and this opportunity presented itself and I'm so grateful

because we have young men are going through graduating through college and are coming back to be the change that they wish to see. And I don't know what I'll do with the rest of my life, you know, one day I might say, well I want to go into this communication degree that I have, but I know that I needed this.

Our young man needed to see this. Somebody who, you know, made it out, come back because a lot of us that make it out, don't come back. And of course it's tough to get out. But man, we have to start creating a culture where it's okay to come back because you're the ones that now can build up in your community. You can share the stories about how college changed in life, or seen something different because a lot of our young people in Chicago think that everybody in the country goes to seven and eight funerals before the age of 15. You know, they think everybody in the country is, you know, getting beat up by the police, or everybody in the country been shot before.

And I'm like, that's not the reality for everybody. Everybody isn't experiencing that. You know, we think about Parkland and you know, how significant that was, how those young people rose up. And when you look at the Parkland neighborhood, you know, a very safe, a beautiful neighborhood. This was life-shattering for those young people because they never experienced this, our young people experience this every day. This is their reality, you know, seventeen getting killed. I mean, that happens on a weekend and half of the people that are killed they know, so, it means something else for us. I was able to attend the march on Washington and After School Matters sent some of our young men out there, so three of my students got to go, and it was a beautiful, beautiful situation, to see our young people get to be charged up about protesting but not just protesting but about really, putting their foot on the neck of some of these legislations that they have to pass to get things to change.

So, I saw a lot of doctors and future lawyers and future judges, it was a different aura in the air. So, I'm very hopeful for the city of Chicago. I will always say, I have no shame in being from North Lawndale or East Garfield Park, because whatever I accomplish, I never would have made it if it wasn't for that situation.

CGVRC Faculty: You serve as an example for the young men in the school and people in Englewood, how else do you think we can spread that feeling of optimism that you have?

Christopher Crater: I think we have to be open, open to receive it. A lot of people if they can't see it or relate to it, they want no parts of it. I think we have to be open to listening to what's going on. Because even before Parkland happened a lot of people I've been talking about, young African American, males and women being gunned down due to several different reasons, gun violence or police brutality. You know, when I came to school Monday, the first day, my younger one to talk about was Stefan Clark. They said, "they shot him eight times, six in the back. What does that mean? What does that look like?" And a lot of people weren't willing to unpack that stuff. You know, how people are like, "Oh, let's talk about something else."

But we had to unpack it because this is their reality, every day. A lot of them are scared of the police. So, one thing we've tried to do is have some African American police come up here and I think that's a big part of the Chicago situation too. A lot of African American led communities are not policed by the people that look like them. In North Lawndale, we've got a lot of rookies that are very scared to be over there. They have a perception, and they ride off the perception. Now fortunately, I know a lot of great African American cops that are doing some-and just not even just African-just great cops in general. But a lot of our young people don't know them. They don't know their names. They can't call and say, "Hey, is this right?" They don't know the law. A lot of times they're subject themselves to being victims.

So, we had some police officers of color come in and just talk to them and they say, "Hey, this is my number. You can call me. If you have a question or you want to talk about something." And I mean, it makes all the difference in the world because I didn't grow up with that in North Lawndale. My first time being pulled over, I was walking from church, I was 13 and I'll never forget the police officers, two Caucasians, they pull me over. And then of course two other squad cars came. So, it was six police in total. And of course, doing so strong, they put me in handcuffs and you know, my heart's beating out everybody. I'm a bigger kid but I'm still 13, and they and they say, "Where you from?" And I'm like I'm from East Garfield Park, I'm a block away from here, you know, I'm, I'm nervous, you know, my heartbeat, beating out the front, and they're like "Why are you so nervous?"

And I said, "Well, I haven't been pulled over before," and they're like "You from over here and you've never been pulled over?" And you saw the disgust on his face, like you are from over here, you've been over here for 13 years and you don't know the a procedure? I haven't done my job yet because you should know. And it's like why should I know if I haven't done anything, but that's the mentality, and on the receiving end, you can take that two ways. Like, man, I should know to just get in handcuffs and assume the position. And I think back on that moment, that was a pivotal moment that I'll never forget, being just scared out of my mind. And of course, you know, I fit the description and of course, you know, I'll always fit the description, I never know what the description is, but it tells me I look like the guy right?

So, I understand the hurt and the issues they have going on. But, I think until we able to unpack them and to acknowledge them, that they do exist because it's like our biggest issue. We don't want to acknowledge the real issues. I mean, we do have some significant ones and it's okay. We just have to work toward fixing them. So, you know, I'm Chicago through and through and I believe like Englewood gives me so much hope that these young people will come back and take it back and build it up because before Dr. King got killed, this was a thriving, happening place. North Lawndale was beautiful. East Garfield Park not only was beautiful, but it's beautiful now, but I think it's just a situation where we have to, we gotta do it. We can't wait for a specific person standing on the corner and be the one to do it.

Each individual person has to do [it]. And for me, coming from out west, from North Lawndale to come into Englewood, it just lets me know how we have to be open to doing things like this. You know, I'm a grown man and saying I don't want to work at Englewood because of what I've heard from it, not knowing that, you know, some of the most amazing, beautiful, bright black and brown men come from this neighborhood. I would have missed out on that if I didn't, you know, jump off the cliff and say, "You know what? I owe it to myself to see what this is."

CGVRC Faculty: And how many years have you been here?

Christopher Crater: This is my fourth year, so this is my first graduating class. You know, like I said, it'll be a super exciting to get through it. Definitely emotional, you know, thinking about Christopher Fields, my senior who obviously will have his cap and gown draped over, but will not get to attend graduation. And his father, who I'm in close contact, who was actually in court today. So, even though, you know, we are hopeful with all the things we go through, we do know that outside of these doors things do happen. So every day that we're here we try to bring it because literally, you know, we don't know. So like I said, Christmas, summer, spring break any long distance of time, we just always hold our breath and hope all our young men come back to us safe.

CGVRC Faculty: Well, this has been really helpful interview, thank you.

Christopher Crater: Thank you so much.