# What We Get Wrong About Violent Crime

## A Chicago criminologist challenges our assumptions about why most shootings happen—and what really makes a city safe.

By Malcolm Gladwell June 2, 2025

Most violence isn't instrumental and planned around some gain; it's expressive, born of flaring tempers—and unaffected by the calibration of penalties.Illustration by Ben Hickey

Late on a Sunday night in June of 2023, a woman named Carlishia Hood and her fourteen-year-old son, an honor student, pulled into Maxwell Street Express, a fast-food joint in West Pullman, on the far South Side of Chicago. Her son stayed in the car. Hood went inside. Maxwell is a no-frills place—takeout-style, no indoor seating. It's open twenty-four hours a day. Hood asked for a special order—without realizing that at Maxwell, a busy place, special orders are frowned upon. The man behind her in line got upset; she was slowing things down. His name was Jeremy Brown. On the street, they called him the Knock-Out King. Brown began to gesticulate, his arms rising and falling in exasperation. He argued with Hood, growing more agitated. Then he cocked his fist, leaned back to bring the full weight of his body into

the motion, and punched her in the head.

When the argument had started, Hood texted her son, asking him to come inside. Now he was at the door, slight and tentative in a white hoodie. He saw Brown punch his mother a second time. The boy pulled out a revolver and shot Brown in the back. Brown ran from the restaurant. The boy pursued him, still firing. Brown died on the street—one of a dozen men killed by gunfire in Chicago that weekend.

In the remarkable new book "Unforgiving Places" (Chicago), Jens Ludwig breaks down the Brown killing, moment by moment. Ludwig is the director of the University of Chicago Crime Lab, and he uses as a heuristic the psychologist Daniel Kahneman's version of the distinction between System 1 and System 2 thinking. According to Kahneman, these are the two cognitive modes that all human beings toggle between. The first is fast, automatic, and intuitive. The second is slow, effortful, and analytical. Ludwig's innovation is to apply the dichotomy to criminal acts. A System 2 crime might be a carefully planned robbery, in which the assailant stalks and assesses his victims before attacking them. This is what criminologists call instrumental violence: acts, Ludwig writes, "committed in order to achieve some tangible or 'instrumental' goal (getting someone's cash or phone or watch or drug turf), where violence is a means to some other, larger end." A System 1 crime, by

contrast, is an act of what Ludwig calls “expressive violence”—aimed not at gaining something tangible but at hurting someone, often in a sudden burst of frustration or anger.

The central argument of “Unforgiving Places” is that Americans, in their attempts to curb crime, have made a fundamental conceptual error. We’ve assumed that the problem is instrumental violence—and have fashioned our criminal-justice system around that assumption. But the real problem is expressive violence. The ongoing bloodshed in America’s streets is just Maxwell Street Express, over and over again.

For the better part of a generation, the study of American crime has been in a state of confusion. The first destabilizing event came in the nineteen-nineties, with a sudden and sustained drop in urban crime across the United States, most notably in New York City. At the time, the prevailing view was that gun violence was deeply rooted—a product of entrenched racism, poverty, and despair. But, if that were true, how did New York’s homicide rate fall by more than half in the span of a single decade? Deeply rooted problems aren’t supposed to resolve themselves so swiftly.

The conventional wisdom adapted. Attention turned to shifts in policing—specifically, the rise of proactive tactics in the nineties. The N.Y.P.D.’s stop-and-frisk strategy, aimed at getting guns off the street, was credited with driving the

crime decline. But then, in 2013, a federal judge ruled that the police's stop-and-frisk practices violated constitutional rights. And what happened? Crime continued to fall. New York got safer even though the police stopped doing the things that we thought were making the city safer. It made no sense.

Then there were those who argued that violent crime was a matter of individual pathology: stunted development, childhood trauma, antisocial tendencies. Look closely at the criminal, we were told. But research—from criminologists like David Weisburd and Lawrence W. Sherman—showed that, in city after city, crime was hyperconcentrated. A handful of blocks accounted for a disproportionate share of violence, and those blocks stayed violent, year after year. In other words, the problem wasn't people. It was *place*.

Last summer, I was given a tour of a low-income neighborhood in Philadelphia by the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society. Its program Transforming Vacant Lots has led a concerted effort to clean up thousands of vacant lots scattered across the city. The approach is simple: clear the weeds, pick up the trash, plant a lawn, put up a post-and-rail fence. The initiative works on over twelve thousand lots, and the results are striking. What once looked like a struggling neighborhood now resembles, at a glance, a middle-class one.

What's remarkable, though, isn't just the aesthetics. It's that the neighborhoods where these lots have been turned into green spaces have seen a twenty-nine-per-cent drop in gun violence. Twenty-nine per cent! The people haven't changed. The pathologies haven't changed. The same police force still patrols the neighborhood. The only new variable is that someone comes by to mow the lawn once or twice a month. As economists like to say: How do you model that?

This is the puzzle that Ludwig sets out to solve in "Unforgiving Places." His answer is that these episodes confound us only because we haven't appreciated how utterly different System 1 criminality is from that of System 2. System 1 thinking is egocentric: it involves, Ludwig writes, interpreting "everything through the lens of 'What does this have to do with me?' " It depends on stark binaries—reducing a range of possibilities to a simple yes or no—and, as he notes, it "focuses more on negative over positive information." In short, it's wired for threats. System 1 catastrophizes. It imagines the worst.

Brown's encounter with Carlishia Hood pushed him into System 1 mode. He made an immediate egocentric assumption: if he knew that special orders were a norm violation, then Hood must know, too. "Given that System 1 assumption," Ludwig explains, "from there it is natural that Brown believed the person in front of him was deliberately

holding things up."

Hood, meanwhile, didn't know about the special-order taboo, so she was operating under her own egocentric assumptions. She "knew she wasn't being disrespectful and deliberately trying to hold up everyone else in line, so the curse of knowledge led her System 1 to assume that Brown surely also knew that," Ludwig writes. "So why was he getting so bent out of shape? She didn't mean to be inconsiderate to the people behind her in line; she just wanted the Maxwell Street Express people to change whatever it was that she wanted changed on the burger." Neither had the cognitive space to consider that they were caught in a misunderstanding. They were in binary mode: *I'm right, so you must be wrong*. From there, things escalated:

> Hood says to her son, who's standing behind Brown, "Get in the car."
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> Brown seems to think that comment is directed at him—another misreading of the situation." *WHO*?!?" he says. "Get in the *CAR*?!?"
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> Hood says something that's hard to make out from the video.
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> Brown says, "Hey lady, lady, lady, lady. *GET YOUR FOOD. GET YOUR FOOD*. If you say one more thing, I'm going to

> *KNOCK YOU OUT*." You can see his right fist, clenching and unclenching, over and over.
>
> She says something that is again hard to make out on the video.
>
> He says, "Oh my God I *SAID* if you say one more thing, I'm going to knock you out."

At which point he punches her—*hard*.

Hood's son is standing in the doorway, watching the assault of his mother. Had he been in System 2 mode, he might have paused. He might have asked for help. He might have called 911. He could have weighed the trade-offs and thought, *Yes, it's unbearable to watch my mother being beaten. But, if I kill this man, I could spend years in prison*. But he's filled with adrenaline. He shifts into catastrophizing mode: *There is nothing worse than seeing my mother get pummelled by a stranger.* Brown punches her again—and again. The boy shoots him in the back. Brown runs. Hood tells her son to follow him. *There is nothing worse than letting him get away*. Still in System 1, the boy fires again. Brown collapses in the street.

Ludwig argues that this is what most homicide looks like. Much of what gets labelled gang violence, he says, is really just conflict between individuals who happen to be in gangs.

We misread these events because we insist on naming the affiliations of the combatants. Imagine, he suggests, if we did this for everyone: " 'This morning by Buckingham Fountain, a financial analyst at Morningstar killed a mechanic for United Airlines.' Naturally you'd think the place of employment must be relevant to understanding the shooting, otherwise why mention it at all?"

The "super-predator"—the remorseless psychopath of television dramas—turns out to be rare. The mass shooter, meticulously assembling his arsenal, is a statistical anomaly. The professional hit man is mostly a literary invention. "A careful look at twenty years of U.S. murder data collected by the F.B.I.," Ludwig writes, "concluded that only 23 percent of all murders were instrumental; 77 percent of murders—nearly four of every five—were some form of expressive violence."

The Chicago Police Department estimates that arguments lie behind seventy to eighty per cent of homicides. The numbers for Philadelphia and Milwaukee are similar. And that proportion has held remarkably steady over time. Drawing on data from Houston in 1969, the sociologist Donald Black concluded that barely more than a tenth of homicides occurred during predatory crimes like burglary or robbery. The rest, he found, arose from emotionally charged disputes—over infidelity, household finances, drinking, child custody.

Not calculated acts of gain, in other words, but eruptions rooted in contested ideas of right and wrong.

Ludwig's point is that the criminal-justice system, as we've built it, fails to reckon with this reality. We've focussed on the signalling function of punishment—on getting the deterrents right, offering the proper mixture of carrots and sticks to influence rational actors. Mass incarceration, which swept the country in the late twentieth century, rested on the assumption that a person spoiling for a fight with another person was weighing costs: that the difference between ten years and twenty-five would matter. But was Jeremy Brown calculating odds when he punched Carlishia Hood? Was her son performing a Bayesian analysis as he ran from the restaurant, gun in hand?

This misapprehension, he argues, is why the American experience of crime so often seems baffling. Murders are volatile—a city really can go from dangerous to safe overnight—because the behavior driving most homicides is volatile.

Why did crime in New York continue to fall after the N.Y.P.D. ended stop-and-frisk? Because what makes police officers effective isn't how many people they stop or arrest—it's how many arguments they interrupt or defuse, ideally without resorting to handcuffs or charges.

Why does crime seem more related to places than to people? Because some places are simply better at de-escalation than others. Imagine Maxwell Street Express in a more stable neighborhood, with a core of regulars—people connected to one another, who know something about Jeremy Brown and his temper. Another customer might have stepped in and said, “Hey, wait a minute, Jeremy. Cool it. I don’t think the lady knows how this restaurant works.”

And why did Philadelphia’s vacant-lot program work so well? Because, when an empty lot becomes a well-kept lawn, people come outside. They have barbecues and picnics. Kids play. And suddenly, as Jane Jacobs famously put it, the block has “eyes on the street.”

“Jane Jacobs claimed that informal social control contributed vitally to public safety by interrupting criminal and violent acts in the moment,” Ludwig writes. It’s an idea that doesn’t make much sense if you assume that violence is instrumental. The rational criminal, after all, will just move a block over—set up shop where the odds tilt in his favor. But that’s not how most offenders operate. They’ve lost their temper. For a few volatile minutes, they’re not thinking straight. And, in that state, violence interrupted is violence prevented.

One subject that Ludwig all but ignores in “Unforgiving Places” is guns. It’s a notable omission, since what turns the

confrontation at Maxwell Street Express from a fight into a homicide is the peculiarly American fact that Carlishia Hood had a handgun in her car. In any other developed country, a fistfight between Jeremy Brown and Carlishia Hood would in all likelihood have remained a fistfight.

But Ludwig is weary of gun-control arguments. He simply doesn't believe that the United States is ever going to enact serious restrictions. "Over the last 243 years of U.S. history, the number of major, restrictive federal gun laws has been (depending on how you count) something like five or six." That's what economists call the base rate—and Ludwig's position is that the energy devoted to that lost cause might be better directed elsewhere.

He wants us, instead, to take System 1 behavior seriously. First, stop talking about criminals as if they occupy some distinct moral category. Neither Jeremy Brown nor Hood's son was evil. They were caught in an unforgiving moment. Second, stop locking up so many people for long prison terms. The best way to keep arguments among teen-agers from turning violent is for adults to step in and tell them to cool down—and mass incarceration drains adults from troubled neighborhoods.

Third, spend more time thinking about what makes one neighborhood safe and another unsafe. Ludwig cites a randomized trial in New York City's public-housing projects,

which found that developments given upgraded outdoor lighting experienced a thirty-five-per-cent reduction in serious crimes compared with those left as is. A well-lit space makes it easier for bystanders to see a confrontation unfold—and makes those involved a little more self-conscious.

But the biggest opportunity, Ludwig argues, lies in behavioral modification. He writes about a program in Chicago called *BAM*—Becoming a Man—which teaches teen-agers how to navigate potentially volatile encounters. In a large randomized trial, Ludwig compared students on Chicago's West Side and South Side who had participated in *BAM* with those who hadn't, and found that participation reduced arrests for violent crime by fifty per cent.

He describes one of the program's exercises, in which students are paired off. One is given a ball; the other is told he has thirty seconds to take it.

> Almost all of them rely on force to try to complete the assignment; they try to pry the other person's hand open, or wrestle or even pummel the other person. During the debrief that follows, a BAM counselor asks why no one asked for the ball. Most youths respond by saying their partner would have thought they were a punk (or something worse—you can imagine). The counselor then asks the partner what he would have done if asked. The

> usual answer: “I would have given it, it’s just a stupid ball.”

Exactly. It’s almost always a stupid ball. Or someone asking to hold the pickle. No one walked into Maxwell Street Express that night expecting to die, or to kill. But that’s the nature of expressive violence: no plan, no purpose—just a match struck in passing. As Ludwig reminds us, we have been trying to stop violent offenders without understanding what goes on in the mind of the violent offender. ♦