

Social media is driving, and in some cases, predicting, gang violence in Chicago. How the gangs are using it to advance their goals, and police are using it to stop them.

Underwire

Taking the Pulse of Pop Culture

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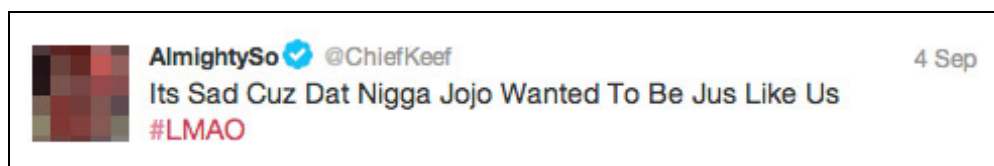
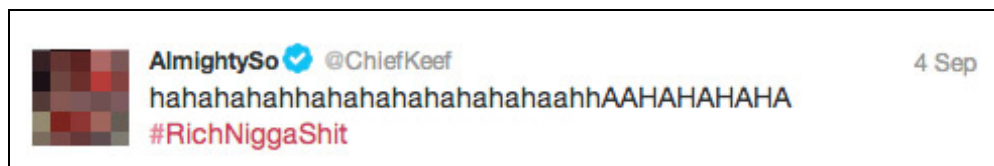
Public Enemies: Social Media Is Fueling Gang Wars in Chicago



Just about any teenager in Chicago today can tell you the story of Chief Keef and Lil JoJo, two rappers from the South Side neighborhood of Englewood whose songs serve as anthems for their rival gangs. Keef, an 18-year-old whose real name is Keith Cozart, is the most successful of the city's emerging "drill" sound rappers (named after a slang term for shooting someone). Last year, while under house arrest for aiming a gun at a police officer, Cozart uploaded some videos to YouTube that eventually landed him an estimated \$6 million deal with Interscope Records. The

title of one of his early hits, “3hunna,” is a nickname for the Black Disciples gang, and in the song he maligns the Tooka gang, a crew affiliated with the enemy Gangster Disciples. “Fucka Tooka gang, bitch, I’m 3hunna,” he chants. Last spring, Joseph Coleman, then a baby-faced 18-year-old calling himself Lil JoJo, responded to Chief Keef’s musical provocations with his own uploaded song that included the hook “Niggas claim 300 but we BDK,” that is, Black Disciples Killers. In his “3HUNNAK,” Coleman also threatened to shoot a member of Chief Keef’s clique, and the video—which quickly captured close to a million views on YouTube—consists mostly of a throng of guys jostling into the frame, pointing an arsenal of firearms at the camera. This touched off an online war between the two rappers that lasted for weeks, and young Chicagoans followed in real time as it escalated.

On September 4, 2012, Lil JoJo drove down Black Disciples’ block, a few streets from his own. He posted video footage to his Twitter account in which he shouts profanities at someone he passes who clearly shouts back, “I’m a kill you.” That same afternoon, amid a flurry of broadside taunts fired off on social media by each side, Coleman tweeted, “lmao im on 069 Stop The Fuckin flexin.” A little while later, while riding on the back pegs of a friend’s bicycle, JoJo was shot and killed on the 6900 block of South Princeton Avenue. Soon thereafter, a pair of comments appeared on Chief Keef’s Twitter account:



Keef, who has a mop top of noodling dreadlocks that hang past his eyes shaggy-dog style, said he didn't write the derisive tweets about JoJo's murder, claiming his account had been hacked. In an unrelated matter, he ended up serving a short stint in juvenile detention for violating his parole—he was filmed handling a rifle in an online video commissioned by Pitchfork.com. But he continues to post Instagram images of himself with guns and drugs, sharing the pictures with his 750,000 Twitter followers, and upon his release from juvie he promptly tweeted, “Fucka TOOKA gang!!! BITCH IM 3Hunna.”

Coleman's murder sparked a round of back-and-forth retaliation killings—a 26-year-old parolee who appeared in a video mocking JoJo's death, an 18-year-old in a JoJo sweatshirt on Christmas Day. #BDK and #GDK (Gangster Disciples Killers) became trending terms on Twitter, showing up in thousands of tweets. At Coleman's funeral, posted to YouTube, hundreds of youths sang in unison the chorus to his online hit: They “claim 300 but we BDK.” The Chicago police fielded calls from departments in four different states, where officers were struggling to understand why people in their jurisdictions were declaring themselves to be warring branches of the Disciples and fighting over some kids from Chicago's South Side. Even a full year later, the two rappers are cited in countless videos, comments, and posts as shorthand for disrespect or a call to arms.



Paul D'Amato

Lil Jojo's last tweet



Last year more than 500 people were murdered in Chicago, a greater number than in far more populous cities such as New York and Los Angeles. The prevalence of gun crimes in Chicago is due in large part to a fragmentation of the gangs on its streets: There are now an estimated 70,000 members in the city, spread out among a mind-boggling 850 cliques, with many of these groupings formed around a couple of street corners or a specific school or park. Young people in these areas are like young people everywhere, using technology to coordinate with their friends and chronicle their every move. But in neighborhoods where shootings are common, the use of online tools has turned hazardous, as gang violence is now openly advertised and instigated online.

We naturally associate criminal activity with secrecy, with conspiracies hatched in alleyways or back rooms. Today, though, foolish as it may be in practice, street gangs have adopted a level of transparency that might impress even the most fervent Silicon Valley futurist. Every day on Facebook and Twitter, on Instagram and YouTube, you can find unabashed teens flashing hand signs, brandishing guns, splaying out drugs and wads of cash. If we live in an era of openness, no segment of the population is more surprisingly open than 21st-century gang members, as they simultaneously document and roil the streets of America's toughest neighborhoods.

There's a term sometimes used for a gangbanger who stirs up trouble online: Facebook driller. He rolls out of bed in the morning, rubs his eyes, picks up his phone. Then he gets on Facebook and starts insulting some person he barely knows, someone in a rival crew. It's so much easier to do online than face-to-face. Soon someone else takes a screenshot of the post and starts passing it around. It's one thing to get cursed out in front of four or five guys, but online the whole neighborhood can see it—the whole city, even. So the target has to retaliate just to save face. And at that point, the quarrel might be with not just the Facebook driller a few blocks away but also haters 10 miles north or west who responded to the post. What started as a provocation online winds up with someone getting drilled in real life.

A Rapper's Provocation

The video for Chief Keef's hit song "3hunna" celebrates the exploits of the Black Disciples gang.



In the middle of a weekday this spring, I visit Hal Baskin, a former gang member turned community leader who operates an after-school program called the Peace Center out of a decommissioned church building in Englewood. At the brick two-flat house where he was raised and his mother still lives, two of Baskin's younger relatives and a couple of their lifelong friends tell me all about Facebook drillers. All in their early twenties, they are hanging out in an adjoining lot, the four of them circled around a stone table with a chessboard painted on it. The house is on

Morgan Street, and that's how they identify themselves, as Morgan Street guys. They grew up together playing in this very yard, throwing rocks and footballs, building a clubhouse at the far end behind the vegetable garden. Like just about everyone in this part of town, they followed each twist of the Chief Keef and Lil JoJo saga. Morgan Street is Gangster Disciple territory, JoJo's turf, and it becomes clear that these guys' loyalties follow suit—at least when it comes to music.

“Chief Keef is an ABC rapper, saying little bitty words,” says Deandre, one of the young men. “got a 30,” he goes on, his deep, raspy voice turned into a mocking drawl. “got a cobra.’ That’s all he can do. He out there just gangbangin’.” (A “cobra” is a .357 Magnum, and a “30,” or “30-poppa,” is an easily concealed handgun with a 30-round clip.)

“Every song’s like,” “We out here drilling! Aughhh! Aughhh!” one of Baskin’s relatives says dismissively.

“JoJo was saying things that make you think,” a friend named Novell cuts in.

Their vague association with a centralized gang is in keeping with a fundamental shift in how gangs operate, both here in Chicago and around the country. Harold Pollack, codirector of the University of Chicago Crime Lab, says that in every talk he gives about gangs, someone inevitably asks him about *The Wire*—wanting to know who is, say, the Stringer Bell of Chicago. But *The Wire*, based in part on David Simon’s Baltimore crime reporting in the 1980s and ’90s, is now very dated in its depiction of gangs as organized crime syndicates. For one thing, Stringer Bell would never let his underlings advertise their criminal activities, as a Central Florida crew did this spring when it

posted on its public Facebook page that two of its members had violated their parole and been arrested for posing with guns on their personal Facebook pages. Even a few years ago, a member of, say, the Disciples would have been “violated”—physically punished—for talking about killings or publicly outing a fellow member. But today most “gangs” are without much hierarchical structure, and many of the cliques are only nominally tied to larger organizations.

Similarly, the majority of the violence isn’t strategic but results instead from petty personal exchanges. Young people in embattled Chicago neighborhoods are scared and heavily armed—police seize more guns than the NYPD and LAPD combined, an average of 130 illegal firearms each week. “A couple of young guys, plus a disagreement, plus guns equals dead body,” Pollack says bluntly. “These are stupid 17-year-old homicides. That’s the extent of it today.”

Increasingly, disagreements that end in bloodshed have their origins online. The Chicago police department, which now patrols social media along with the streets, estimates that an astonishing 80 percent of all school disturbances result from online exchanges. At one point on Morgan Street, a 15-year-old joins us at the stone table. He calls himself Boss Nick, and he says he regularly posts pictures to Instagram of himself with guns. He doesn’t care if the police or his teachers or really anyone sees it. He feels he has to let rivals know he is out there “with these poles.” Boss Nick had been friends with Shondale Gregory, known as Tooka, a 15-year-old killed in 2011. Gregory was shot in the head, and rivals soon posted pictures of his corpse to Facebook, doctoring the image with horns and splattered brains. The Chicago police said that within

minutes of the images' appearing on the site, 81 kids at Gregory's high school were suspended for fighting and an additional 200 students walked out. Gregory's clique of Gangster Disciples, which had called itself the St. Lawrence Boys for their block on the South Side, started referring to their turf as Tookaville and to themselves as the Tooka Gang.

"All that 'cause of Facebook," Baskin's 20-year-old grandson says. "That's why Tooka blew up."

Firing Back on YouTube

In his rap video, Lil JoJo threatened to shoot a member of Chief Keef's crew.



Unlike Boss Nick, the other Morgan Street guys are past the age where they're most at risk of falling prey to the violence in the neighborhood. Deandre says he's training to be an auto mechanic, another friend hopes to land a job with the Chicago Transit Authority, and Novell expects he'll soon start work at a McDonald's. Most of them sport a preppy look, Polo and Izod caps worn frontward, short-sleeved collared shirts.

Ronald, the quietest of the bunch, is enrolled in barber college. He's more sparing with his words, though every few minutes he points at my scribbled notes to correct something I've gotten wrong—the name of yet another nearby gang faction, the spelling of the next street over.

“If Facebook and all that wasn’t here,” Ronald finally says,
“JoJo and them would still have their lives.”

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Ambygj • 5 months ago

No one is blaming social media for people getting killed. This article speaks of the power social media lends to conflict, especially gang fights. How about we stop closing schools, limiting public resources in these violence-prone neighborhoods, and stop painting places like Englewood as organically violent instead of a product of systemic discrimination and generational poverty.

158 | 8 • Share



Arthur Bearing Ambygj • 5 months ago

You'd think discrimination would give the people of Englewood common cause and a reason to band together. You're making a poorly-thought-out excuse for foolish, self-defeating and anti-social behavior, implicitly blaming it on outsiders (i.e. white people) because blaming it on the violent thugs themselves would require you to reevaluate your entire worldview.

118 | 5 • Share



Ambygj → ArthorBearing • 5 months ago

My argument is that the violence is born out of a process, a process in which white people play a part, but I never said it was all the fault of "outsiders." People are not born thugs, they learn the violent and anti-social behavior whether for survival reasons or because their only role models exhibit that type of behavior. But many of the reasons gang life exists as a lifestyle boil down to a lack of access to resources. And just to let you know, many of the people of Englewood do band together against discrimination and have many organizations dedicated to stopping the violence, expressing the importance of education, and introducing children to life outside of gangs.

84 ^ | 4 v • Share ›



MustBeSaid → Ambygj
• 5 months ago

White people play a part? What part is that?

I've lived in countries where people live on basically nothing. The simple fact that these pieces of crap in Chicago have access to a computer and internet to put this stuff online makes them 100 times richer than the people I've seen in other countries who don't act this way.

It's culture, plain and simple. Other cultures do far more with far less. Both in America and outside of America. Stop blaming access to resources, white people, etc.

If other races, nationalities and ethnic groups can come to America with just their clothes and \$100 and make a decent life for themselves, these people have no excuse. They choose their path.

Just because you're around negative influences doesn't make you non-accountable for what you do. We're all surrounded by negative influence. Man up.

108 ^ | 2 v • Share >



Luis de la Vega → MustBeSaid
• 5 months ago

As someone who came to this country after having lived across the world, I completely agree. That being said, the social situation you're born into can be extremely difficult to escape. For kids on the block, there's often no choice BUT to be in a gang, as gangs are formed based on the street you live on. If you then don't join said gang, you won't necessarily be harmed, but you will have no protection from anyone else, so it's often sheer self-preservation that dictates you roll with a set.

33 ^ | 1 v • Share >



Chuckiechan → Luis de la Vega
• 5 months ago

As they say, "There aren't any nigg*ers in Africa".

25 ^ | 3 v • Share >



Aurispector → Ambygj
• 5 months ago

It has nothing to do with "access to resources". There are plenty of dirt poor places in the world that have nothing like the violence described here. Perhaps it has more to do with an utter and complete breakdown of families caused by generation living on the welfare plantation? Families are irrelevant when there are no consequences to your actions.

You can not GIVE people dignity.

58 ^ | 9 v • Share >



mikey → Aurispector · 5 months ago

in Romania people are much more poor, but we don't have guns... so we try to study and work for money... instead of killing each other.. :| how come in a country like mine, that has the reputation of a primitive country, there are less gangs? i think it's because we aren't allowed to have guns, like in america. Also drugs are not related to gangs, gangs in my country usually deal with beggars, prostitution or human trafficking. drug dealers are peaceful people.

it's just an idea, I'm willing to debate on this

I have never, ever seen a weapon shop in my country. If you have a hunting license you can buy a gun online or from Germany

And the gangs in my country don't even use guns, usually they have knives, swords, axes or baseball bats...

Oh, and rappers usually rap about politics and social issues, about philosophy, humour... never about gangs and guns and cars and bitches and chains.. okay maybe sometimes they rap about bitches...

53 ^ | 7 v · Share ›



ObiterDictum00 → mikey
· 5 months ago

One reason, Mikey, is in America, a lot of people/corporations are making lots of money off of the gang culture . Interscope records, mentioned in the article, is a prime example, and they are not the only ones.

33 ^ | v · Share ›



Luis de la Vega → mikey
· 5 months ago

holy shit... you tussle with swords and axes? That's some medieval shit right there.

17 ^ | v • Share ›



mikey → Luis de la Vega
• 5 months ago

it is medieval, but you don't see people killed on a daily basis like in the us. for example: there has never been a high school shoot-out in my country. and if someone is violent they use their fists, they don't hide behind a weapon. you could say it's medieval, or you could say that there's more honour in it.. but there is no honour in violence.. also another example that i'd like to hear opinions about is that 10 year olds play gta or other bloody games in my country, because nobody cares about age restrictions... and none of them become psychopaths... or bring guns to schools.

I learned something horrifying a few days ago, in some schools in the us you have security checks. that just seemed unbelievable to me

6 ^ | v • Share ›



Luis de la Vega → mikey
• 5 months ago

Nah nah for real I agree, these fuckers know no honour. The truly sad thing is that it's never been about honour anyway.

3 ^ | v • Share ›



alexandrek → Luis de la Vega
• 5 months ago

you think that shooting each others for nothing, that owning big guns is progress?

^ | v • Share ›



Luis de la Vega → alexandrek
• 5 months ago

I'm just pointing out the hilarity of it from a western point of view, not making a value judgement. Relax.

^ | v • Share ›



Bob Dobalina → mikey
• 5 months ago

you have no guns, no drug wars- what is the one other thing in this equation that you also don't have?

13 ^ | v • Share ›



mikey → Bob Dobalina
• 5 months ago

why don't you tell me?

1 ^ | v • Share ›



Bob Dobalina → mikey
• 5 months ago

"african americans"

they commit 94% of the gun violence in this country

take them out of the equation, and our per capita death rates due to shootings ranks below belgium's

18 ^ | 2 v • Share ›



Joey → mikey • 5 months ago

The fault of your argument is that these guns are all acquired illegally. According to the laws of Chicago, it's very hard to own a gun legally. But yet... these kids are still getting them.

7 ^ | v • Share ›



sv → Joey • 5 months ago

True, but there is an enormous supply of guns in this country which in turn feeds the black market. i cannot think of any obvious solution that is feasible.

3 ^ | v • Share ›



mikey → sv • 5 months ago

that's the point.. i didn't say there isn't a black market in my country... but it's a very poor black market when it comes to weapons. because the supply is low. i guess the question here is: where does the black market get the guns?

1 ^ | 1 v • Share ›



mikey → mikey • 5 months ago

there is a question going around in political debates throughout europe: One guy tried to get on an airplane with a shoe bomb so now you have to take off your shoes at the airport security checks.

But there's high school shoot-outs almost every year in usa, and still, guns remain legal.

From a foreign perspective, usa still looks like a gun-slinger country.

3 ^ | 2 v • Share ›



sv → mikey • 5 months ago

Yes; we are making the same point. Obviously with tens or hundreds of millions of guns legally in circulation, of course criminals and gangs are able to get guns without much difficulty. Perhaps it's possible to restrict all transfers of gun ownership to a legally monitored market, but I doubt it.

^ | v • Share ›



mikey → Joey • 5 months ago

I actually considered this when I was writing my comment but where does the black market get the guns?

1 ^ | v • Share ›



rauloid → Joey • 5 months ago

"According to the laws of Chicago, it's very hard to own a gun legally. "

LOL all they have to do is drive for 20mins to Indiana and get a gun there; or a trunkload

1 ^ | 1 v • Share ›



Prag → mikey • 5 months ago

Mikey, purely out of curiosity. Are there a lot of social support options in Romania for the 'poor'? Such as welfare, food stamps, etc to rely on?

I could be completely off base, but if there isn't I'm guessing that people are working and studying because if they don't they essentially starve or are stuck being extremely poor? In the US there is pretty substantial support from the government that they can rely on, so maybe individuals can exert a lot more effort into all the crap we just read about.

Again, that's taking a lot of assumptions but it's a thought I had.

p.s. That'd would be awesome if more artists here were socially conscious. There are a good handful but not a lot mainstream.

1 ^ | v • Share ›



Chrigid → Aurispector • 5 months ago

A study was released a couple of weeks ago about which countries were the most optimistic, and the poorest countries won hands down. Places like the U.S., where disparities in wealth and access are so vivid, didn't do so well.

17 ^ | 1 v • Share ›



Bob Dobalina → Chrigid • 5 months ago

disparities caused by handing people free money and giving them no

motivation to work and better their lot in life

25 ^ | 9 v • Share ›



Coyote Prophet → Bob Dabalina
• 5 months ago

Not even the issue. Stay on topic!

5 ^ | v • Share ›



Bob Dabalina → Coyote Prophet
• 5 months ago

no, hitler lost because he was stupid enough to let his personal hatred of stalin make him fight on two fronts

4 ^ | v • Share ›



rauloid → Bob Dabalina
• 5 months ago

Countries with the highest living standards in the world (Western Europe, Scandinavia) are all governed by the far-left, with social programs that would make the TeaParty foam at the mouth and light themselves on fire, yet they also have very low gun violence. Also no guns. :)

5 ^ | 2 v • Share ›



K-Swizz → rauloid • 5 months ago

Gee apparently you missed the mass shooting in Oslo a year or two ago. Also although it pales in comparison to the US, the Scandinavians actually have pretty-high amounts of gun ownership.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/N...>

2 ^ | v • Share ›



wyclif → rauloid • 5 months ago

Wait, Scandinavians have no guns? Who told you this, child?

^ | v • Share ›



rauloid → wyclif • 5 months ago

Not the ones who live in urban areas.

1 ^ | 1 v • Share ›



wyclif → rauloid • 5 months ago

I think Scandinavians have plenty of guns, actually. Citation, please.

^ | v • Share ›



Michael → Bob Dobalina
• 5 months ago

"How to enslave the population".

2 ^ | v • Share ›



Bob Dobalina → Michael
• 5 months ago

exactly what dr king warned them about

but what black person knows what he really said?

1 ^ | v • Share ›



Chrigid → Bob Dobalina
• 5 months ago

How does this make the rich richer? Or more optimistic? How would withholding assistance motivate people to work and better their lot in life if there are no jobs?

4 ^ | 2 v • Share ›



Bob Dobalina → Chrigid
• 5 months ago

hunger is a great motivator

you take any famous rich person- Sam Walton, Andrew Carnegie, Arnold Schwarzenegger- and you will find they all started out with nothing

if someone had simply handed them everything they needed, they would not have been motivated to excel. and they would have turned out as an arkansas farmer scratching out a living, a penniless immigrant stocking shelves in a store and a poor man living in austria without any shoes

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