

Beef: Explaining the Micro-Dynamics of Gun Violence in Philadelphia

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This paper relies on six years of fieldwork with young men in Philadelphia and asks: how do shootings happen? First I discuss how young men involved in shootings understand violence through the ideal of “riding” (violence to protect or avenge the honor or physical person of close kin or friends). Although these men give verbal support to “riding,” they do not in fact fulfill most of their obligations to “ride.” Much of what goes on around violence involves erecting barriers to “ride” such that men can save face without taking action, and explaining the violence in which they do engage (largely for reasons of self-defense or economic interest) as “riding.” Though a poor explanation for most violence that occurs, “riding” nonetheless shapes action. Because men promise to ride, expect others to ride, and understand past action as “riding,” this belief in riding can create the context for real violence through the mechanism of self defense: one man injures or insults a man from another group, this first man and his group expect that the other group will “ride,” and so decide to shoot first so as not to get shot; the second group expects them to expect that they will ride and so in anticipation of their reaction also decides that they had better shoot. In this way, ongoing conflicts between young men come to look like and get discussed in terms of retaliation or honor when in fact members of both groups are simply trying not to be killed.