

Violence Interrupters: A Key Element of Justice Reform

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Communities that have been neglected and suffer from low economic mobility often turn to the informal sector for gainful employment. Interpersonal conflicts and the enforcement of drug transactions can sometimes result in violence. This instability is compounded by generations of trauma that have made violence a norm for resolving conflict.

Traditionally, cities have responded to community-level violence by increasing the presence of a militarized police force. This solution has repeatedly failed with sometimes fatal consequences; compounding trauma and leading to more violence. A new solution, one that comes from within the community itself, offers a new way forward: violence interrupters.

Addressing a Need and Filling in Gaps

Violence interrupters directly disrupt cycles of violence by mediating conflicts in communities. Using a case management structure, the work of interrupters involves building a rapport and engaging with high-risk individuals daily. They also connect at-risk individuals to services such as recreation, job training, financial literacy, entrepreneurship, and more to mitigate and prevent violence before it takes place.

In one such example, a group built a playground in Washington, D.C. Children are sometimes targeted early and violence thrives in the vacuum where there are no alternatives. The playground provided a safe space for recreation and for kids to be kids.

By creating these spaces and building relationships where people have been ignored for so long, programs like this offer an opportunity for healing. One D.C. government agency, the Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement, has been called a blessing because they are asking what the community needs and offering those services.

How are Violence Interrupter Programs Funded and Structured?

Usually, mayors' offices direct funding for violence interrupters to nonprofit providers that run programs in communities. These nonprofits employ violence interrupters who know the neighborhoods well. Importantly, they have no direct connection to law enforcement. This gives them credibility in Black and brown communities where trust of law enforcement may be low.

Recruitment

There is a formula to hiring violence interrupters. They must know the problem of violence in the community well to be able to effectively solve the problem.

Violence interrupters always come from the community in which they serve. They typically have been incarcerated or involved with the criminal legal system. They may have been deemed high-risk for violence in the past or have connections to people who are. This formula yields credibility and makes them effective violence interrupters in the communities where they work.

One provider in D.C. for example, hires local young people to be violence interrupters because they have the language necessary to build relationships and be effective. They experience the same trauma as the people they serve and carry that with them into the school and the community. The act of serving as a violence interrupter, and the process of working with them, can help address that trauma for all involved.

Violence interrupters and the people they connect with live in community together. They go to school grounds and visit hotspots. They build relationships through consistent presence, giving out juice and muffins to students for example, while talking about the importance of going to school and not letting anyone entice you to do something that could lead to violence.

Success Story: Washington, D.C.

In one neighborhood, Brentwood in Washington, D.C., there were interrupters on site for five months building trust in their community. They connected with youth who had been let down so often that they didn't know where to turn for support and guidance. The interrupters took them on trips and offered programming. This had a profound impact and reversed the problem of violence in that community.

In Washington, D.C., where it was found that a small number of people were committing the majority of the violence, these interventions are one powerful way to intercept and prevent conflict before it takes root.

Methodology

In Baltimore, violence interrupters canvas communities. They are assigned high-risk individuals in a case management model. In the event of an incident, they respond to the scene.

On a typical day each violence interrupter will canvas 5-10 people. Daily strategic plans are created to engage and build relationships with high-risk individuals (those who carry a gun, are likely to shoot someone, or be shot themselves). If conflicts that could result in gun violence arise in specific neighborhoods, they respond. Violence interrupters and site staff work together to address hotspots in the neighborhood and use their established relationships to shift the trajectory of violence.

Interrupters coach and assist people in accessing services. This process can take six months to two years. The interrupters connect participants to essential resources such as a state ID, a birth certificate, or a social security card. They sometimes ask the question, “do you need mental health resources?” They connect individuals to services and then coach them to success. They change behavioral norms in the community by modeling how to react to stress. In areas where many people are hurting, they shift that hurt forward.

In practice, interrupters play a key role in offering alternatives that stop violence. They organize community events to spread the message of nonviolence. They do a lot of work with youth.

In one community, local interrupters organized family days and took groups of youth out of the neighborhood for trips. The simple act of removing someone from their environment can help to mitigate violent behavior.

Because violence interrupters are always from the neighborhoods in which they work, they have unique insights to the needs and concerns of the people they serve. They can vet the available programs and resources to ensure that they are stable and meet the needs of their community.

Effectiveness and Challenges

This work is complex and comes with many challenges. One is proving the effectiveness of an interrupter’s interventions. It’s difficult to demonstrate that a shooting didn’t happen because of the work of interpreters, and easy to pick out discreet failures of the program.

There are potential flaws in this model that cannot be avoided. For example, part of what enables many interrupters to successfully build relationships is that they themselves have been involved in the informal sector or experienced incarceration. Some of them lack the skills necessary to work in a professional setting. And there is a risk of relapse and a return to their former lives. When these instances come to light, they can reflect badly on violence interruption as a model.

Another real concern is burnout. Violence interruption is not a job that a person can do for more than five years at a time. It’s grueling and traumatizing to be surrounded by and mitigating

violence every day. Not only is it key to provide services like group therapy to violence interrupters, but it is important to help with them transition out of the work. There must be a pipeline out of violence interruption work, as well as a new slate of violence interrupters coming into the organization.

A final challenge is sustained support for long-term work. Right now, violence interruption is a popular concept. Program administrators worry about what could happen to the funding for these programs in the future when the buzz about them dies down. The work will be no less important, communities will still be faced with ongoing trauma, and therefore violence will be present.

Success Story: Safe Streets Baltimore

Sandtown in Baltimore has seen consistent reductions in shootings and homicides over a period of six years thanks to violence interrupters.

In that time, a participant came into the program to receive services. After two years, they become a violence interrupter. In three years, he was promoted to supervisor. This is a man who was previously known to carry firearms and engage in unlawful activities in the community. Today he is a stellar contributor to Safe Streets Baltimore. He hasn't experienced any relapse and is well respected in the community. We have not named him here, because he is apprehensive about media coverage and attention.

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