THE REASON WHY WE HAVEN'T SOLVED THE GANG VIOLENCE PROBLEM

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The Youth Violence Systems Project (YVSP) was initiated to empower the community's perspective on youth violence in Boston by creating a framework for developing intervention strategies that lead to real change. Since 2008, YVSP has been using a community-based approach coupled with systems dynamics modeling to create a virtual laboratory to model youth violence intervention strategies. Our goal is to help develop the capacity for deep and honest dialogue among a wide range of people to collaborate toward a shared goal of reducing youth violence in our neighborhoods.

This article discusses how the YVSP team solicited the input of gang members in the design process, and describes the findings and insights gained. In addition, the story of the YVSP process is further told in three related articles:

- **The Youth Violence Systems Project: A Community-Based Framework of Understanding Youth Violence in Boston** gives an overview of the community-based process that is at the heart of YVSP. It also gives a brief introduction to the content covered in more depth in the other three articles.
- **The YVSP Strategy Lab** describes YVSP's system dynamics model in detail, including an introduction to the key systems concepts for understanding the model.
- **What We Are Learning** describes how the model is being used in various settings, and what different folks are learning from the discourse so far.

What I know about gang violence is wrong

Having worked with high-risk and gang-involved youth for nearly 20 years, I thought I knew a thing or two about gang violence. I have preached, lectured, and written about the reasons Black males are victims and perpetrators of violence, often citing my own personal experiences growing up in one of the most violent cities in America.[1] I have read hundreds of articles, research findings, and opinions about violence from the criminal justice, sociology, and public health fields. More importantly, I have had close personal relationships with gang members and a number of friends and family who have been victims of gang-related violence. Despite all of this, I have come to the sober conclusion that what I know about gang violence[2] is wrong.

I, like most "gang experts," am familiar with the myriad rationales for the existence of gang violence. These range from structural reasons like concentrated poverty and inequality, to cultural reasons like "street codes" and a culture of violence, to social reasons like fatherlessness, family decline, and community tolerance. The clustering of violence in certain neighborhoods where these structural, social, and cultural phenomena occur seems to confirm that somewhere within the mix of these perspectives lies the cause of gang-related violence. For years now, researchers have told us that young people join gangs for

protection, respect, fun, money, and acceptance. And all gang workers know that the way to deal with gangs is a mix of prevention, intervention, and suppression. Yet if we know so much, why isn't there a single example where a U.S. city has definitively ended gang violence, or kept gangs from forming and proliferating?

We continue to fail in solving this problem not because of a lack of commitment, investment, or intelligence. We fail because we have used the wrong tools to try to solve the problem. And as long as we approach this problem incorrectly, we will continue to be wrong about what we know about gang violence. For example, I thought that the higher number of murders occurring in September was a statistical anomaly and that the most dangerous time for gang violence was in the summer. I was wrong. Gang members have told us that they actually prefer to kill in colder months. I thought that most gang violence was sanctioned, vendetta-based killing. I was wrong. Most gang violence is interpersonal violence that is reinforced and escalated by preexisting gang conflicts. I thought that gang members had few personal ties to members of opposing gangs, which enabled their ability to act in callous and violent ways. I was wrong. Most gang members in Boston have close, complicated, interpersonal relationships with opposing gangs—often being childhood friends and relatives of those they are actively trying to kill. Finally, I thought that changing youth attitudes about violence was responsible for the recent increases in violent behavior. I was mostly wrong. While attitudes toward murder have changed, the dominant force driving levels of violence upward is the fact that there are simply more gang members with more opportunities to get involved in violent conflict.

How do I know now that I was wrong? I know because we have found a better way to learn and think about this problem. The tools that helped me challenge and refine my assumptions about gang violence are tools that are available to all of us and must be brought to bear to improve collective understanding about this seemingly intractable problem.

I thought you would have the answers!

A few years ago I was invited to attend a roundtable discussion at the William Monroe Trotter Institute at the University of Massachusetts Boston on violent crime in Black neighborhoods. More than 50 of Boston's most influential individuals participated, including religious leaders, elected officials, educators, academics, law enforcement officials, social service providers, youth workers, youth, and community activists. For a few hours we discussed the reasons for the high rate of crime in Boston's Black neighborhoods, the resources and strategies required to reduce violence, and whether partnerships could be formed to address these issues.

Despite the wealth of knowledge and insight in the room, the conversation devolved into the same predictable patterns: prevention specialists decried the lack of sufficient attention and funding to keep young people from joining gangs; gang workers called for more resources to help current gang members leave the gang lifestyle; and law enforcement professionals advocated that suppression was the only proven strategy to quickly and consistently reduce violence. Just when I was prepared to chalk this up to another typical gang violence discussion, the unexpected happened. An unassuming woman spoke up. She announced that she was a community resident and then, nearly sobbing, she blurted out, "I

came to this meeting because of all of the violence happening in my community. I thought you would have the answers! But as I listen to you all, you don't have any answers! If you all don't have the answers, who does?"

This uncomfortable outburst cut through our façade of knowledge and expertise, exposing an ugly truth. We were speaking as if we had answers, but in truth we had only cobbled together a morass of assumptions and shared narratives. As the discussion resumed, I wondered silently to myself, "If we already know what is going on with gang violence, why hasn't *anyone* solved this problem?" In that moment I came to the conclusion that what I know is wrong and that none of us had the answer to gang violence. It would take me some years to figure out why.

Wicked problems, reductionism, and the search for truth

Part of the problem that we faced at the roundtable was that we were approaching the problem from different perspectives, disciplines, and assumptions. What did we mean when we used the word "gang"? We all had a strong sense of what the word meant, but just as strong were the differences in meaning. In fact, researchers tell us that there is no uniformly accepted definition of a gang. Add to this ambiguity the lack of shared definition around gang violence (are we talking about interpersonal violence committed by gang members, or general vendetta-based gang violence, or targeted gang-authorized violence?), and we begin to see how hard it is to even define the problem.

A further challenge is revealed by the number of disciplines that have attempted to evaluate and address gang violence from their professional perspective. Gang violence is a highly complex social phenomenon that impinges upon a wide range of social sectors, including health, education, crime, employment, and the list goes on. According to social planning theorists, gang violence would be considered a "wicked problem." It fits that class of problems that are difficult to solve because of incomplete, contradictory, and changing requirements, and furthermore, the complex interdependencies mean that solving one part of the problem may create other problems.[3]

The failure to understand what it means for gang violence to be a wicked problem explains why so many of the solution approaches[4] have led to less-than-satisfactory solutions. Anyone who would be considered an expert in the field understands that gang violence is not a simple problem where you apply knowledge in your field or another field to fix a problem. However, most tend to see it as a complex problem where the system responds the same way to repeated stimuli (i.e. we know what worked in the past, so we should just do it again). The solution approach for complex problems involves uncovering the recurring patterns and designing a solution around those patterns. This approach also lends itself to reductionism where you break the problem down into component parts and solve each piece. These local solutions can then be aggregated to solve the entire problem.[5]

Name	Category	Characteristics	Action
Simple Problems	I	Solution knowledge exists in your own domain.	Redirect attention.
	II	Solution knowledge exists in another domain.	Find an expert. Become an expert and design own solution.
Complex Problems	III	No solution exists in any domain; system is very complex but responds the same way to repeated stimuli.	Explore for recurrent patterns by probes and experiments. Design resolution around recurrences discovered.
Wicked (Messy) Problems	IV	No solution exists in any domain; system is chaotic and adaptive, does not repeat patterns under the same probes.	Organize collaboration in a local part of system, and then spread the new organization to the whole.

Gang violence on the other hand is not just a complex problem but a messy or wicked one. The system in this case is chaotic and adaptive, so just when you find something that works the system changes unexpectedly, and repeating past success becomes impossible. Additionally, gang violence is non-linear in that behavior taken in one part of the system triggers feedback in another. For example, increasing the rate of incarceration of older gang members is countered by increased recruitment and faster apprenticeship of younger gang members, which creates a new set of unexpected problems over time. Therefore attempts to replicate past success and best practices from other places will most likely meet with worse than expected results.

This resistance to reduction and linear analysis presents direct challenges to traditional research approaches. The accumulation of information around sample sets of gang members and gang violence may at best give snapshots of a particular system at the point in time of analysis. But this work tends to fail at predicting the dynamic behavior of gang violence over time not just because of the complexity of the system but also because of the inherent chaotic non-linearity. In other words, the target is always shifting, just when you seem to have a sense of how it behaves. Furthermore, the division of disciplines leaves us with disparate approaches evaluating different parts of the system such that even our snapshot of the system is at best a jigsaw puzzle, and at worst can lead us down the path of the blind men and the elephant with no one stepping back to see the whole system.

Getting to the roots—what's happening beneath the surface

One of the challenges to conventional wisdom about gang violence is that it is more than just a series of violent events. It is a complex tangle of interconnected phenomena that changes its behavior—often unpredictably. One important reason that what I know about gang violence is wrong is that gang violence has fundamentally changed. Growing up in Michigan, much of gang violence was territorial and connected to drug trafficking. Police tell us that this is no longer the case.[6] Back then relatively few people had access to guns, and automatic weapons were hard to come by. Now they are cheap, available, and extraordinarily lethal. Finally, the sheer number of gang members and gangs has changed. In Boston alone, there has been an order of magnitude increase in the number of police-identified gangs skyrocketing from approximately 15 in the '80s to over 115 in 2010. In some places gangs have become entrenched community institutions.

Another challenge to conventional wisdom about gang violence is that popular attitudes toward gangs have changed. The increased number of gang members has also meant that there has been an explosion of non-gang members that have close relationships with gang members. Gangs moved from small groups of kids to community entities where nearly all of the young people in certain neighborhoods identify themselves as having a conspicuous relationship with a gang member. This shift then challenges the conventional wisdom that the problem of violence is limited to a small number of gang-involved youth. Not only has this group grown in size but in certain high-violence neighborhoods gang culture and gang acceptance has spread rapidly. The proliferation of "no snitching" merchandising a few years ago was an early indicator of increasing tolerance for vendetta-based violence. This growing culture of lawlessness is influenced by the increasing association of community residents with peers and family members who have been incarcerated. The preeminence of gangster rap and its cultural impact has also created an alternate career path in the minds of many youth of the gangster/drug dealer turned rapper. Most disturbing is the transition from wanting to join a gang and become a member to wanting to become a shooter and build a reputation as a killer.

As these changes to the nature of gang violence were happening beneath the surface, gang research was expanding. While excellent research has documented many trends over the years, this work has existed in institutional and professional silos. Moreover, key insights were missed because of the limitations of the tools often used to evaluate gang behavior. Much of the published research with gang members employs surveys and interviews of individuals, which are techniques that don't typically allow for the development of deep trust with the subject. The limitations of these techniques create a basic barrier to understanding the inner workings of gangs, which behave as a closed subculture. Additionally, initial conversations with gang members produce well-worn and generally accepted narratives regarding why they joined a gang, how they feel about being in a gang, why they engage in violence, and what would cause them leave. Over time, however, gang members can be encouraged to spend time in introspection to provide more authentic and accurate answers.

The tools employed by the different disciplines that study gang violence also lack a single overarching framework and language. A simple question "How do we reduce gang violence?" may be interpreted differently by police, gang workers, youth workers, and community activists. These differing interpretations may lead to distinctly different and sometimes contradictory solutions.

The Wisdom of Systems

In addition to the challenge of establishing a shared language about gang violence, there is also an overwhelming sense of interconnection that may lead to frustration and paralysis. One community resident described it at as "everything is connected to everything." The sense of threat, lack of progress, social paralysis, active resistance, and negative moods associated with gang violence is described by Denning[7] as the signs of a social mess or wicked problem. As I stated earlier, this type of problem requires a different type of approach.

Wicked problems, in addition to being chaotic and adaptive, cannot be solved by the normal approach of defining the problem, analyzing the system, and solving the problem in sequential steps. Roberts describes three approaches to solving wicked problems: authoritative, competitive, and collaborative.[8]

The **authoritative approach** vests power to solve the problem in the hands of a few. This approach is best reflected in the way that the public sector tends to address the problem by convening action groups and committees. This approach, however, often misses important parts of the system that are unfamiliar to the authorized group.

The **competitive approach** considers opposing views which vie to demonstrate better results and gain acceptance as the superior solution. The competitive nature of interdisciplinary discourse among academics exemplifies this approach. An adversarial approach can create an environment where the winner takes all that can disincentivize communication and idea sharing.

The **collaborative approach** seeks to incorporate many stakeholders who are engaged in finding a solution often by meeting to discuss issues and develop an accepted approach. This approach requires time, effort, and skill in facilitating collaborative work. Typically those affected by the problem are part of the design process.

I believe that the failure to use a structured collaborative approach effectively explains some of the limitations to addressing the messy, wicked gang violence problem. The process described below demonstrates the methods and benefit of using what Senge[9] calls a "pilot group model of change" to "organize collaboration in a local part of system, then spread the new organization to the whole."[10]

A Different Approach

In 2008 the Youth Violence Systems Project (YVSP) was launched to explore the root causes of youth violence in Boston. Early on we adopted the view that youth violence was a big, messy, systems problem where there was no consensus for defining the problem or for developing a solution. We also concluded that the perspective of those most affected by youth violence was essential to developing a framework that would be useful. Our hope was that a better understanding of the mechanisms and dynamic behavior that drive youth violence would help the community change the output behavior of the system, leading to a sustained reduction in youth violence.

At the outset we knew two basic facts. First, our literature review and secondary research showed that gang violence in Boston occurred in hotspot areas. It had been known for some time that gang violence occurred in certain high-violence neighborhoods and along a few key corridors like Blue Hill Avenue. Second, our conversations with Boston police officers and the research conducted by local analysts showed that most acts of violence were conducted by a small number of gang members.

Ask a different question

At the suggestion of Steve Peterson, our model builder and systems expert, we began our

work by asking a different question than usual. Most research around youth violence tends to ask one of two different questions: either what was happening with gang violence or why it was occurring. In our case, great research had already been conducted in Boston addressing *what* was happening. Steve wisely counseled us *not to ask why* because that typically only elicited the assumptions, false familiarity, and anecdotal narratives of those being asked. So we asked *how*. *"How precisely is gang violence occurring in high-violence neighborhoods?"* Understanding how gang violence was occurring in the real world would tell us much more about the problem than gathering a list of people's thoughts. "Besides," Steve said, "if you understand how, then it will help you to understand why."

I was particularly concerned about the false familiarity of people like me, who had grown up with the gang problem but hadn't realized how much had changed in the past 20 years. I also was wary of the plethora of popular narratives floating around that were either inaccurate or outdated. One "research finding" I heard over and over from gang workers was that the majority of gang violence was attributed to a few very violent extended families in Boston. After asking researchers for hard data to support this popular claim, it was discovered that this supposed finding originated as a hypothesis in a PowerPoint presentation made to gang workers.

Ask different people

It was always important to ground the Project in the reality of people experiencing and perpetrating gang violence. We therefore decided to spend the majority of our time asking questions and learning from residents of high-violence neighborhoods. In addition to the practical benefits of going closer to the source, we knew that community residents have local knowledge and expertise about neighborhood dynamics and the success of violence prevention initiatives. So we held in-depth interviews and private briefings with community residents, community-based agencies, and academic and institutional stakeholders.

We discovered that there was a large disconnect between what was actually happening in high-violence neighborhoods and what was understood by researchers. It became clear that a tremendous cultural divide exists between community residents, academicians, policymakers, and social service professionals. This cultural divide was further complicated by race and class issues. Residents also described a history of patronizing behavior and the failure to listen by researchers and policymakers, leading them to believe that "outsiders" did not understand the basic realities faced by people living in their neighborhood.

Ask a different way

We understood that the residents of high-violence neighborhoods in Boston had participated in numerous research initiatives, and many described feeling research fatigue from being overanalyzed. We therefore developed an exploratory inquiry process in which community residents participated with researchers in designing a solution approach to engage the problem of youth violence using a systems perspective. The key idea was that the team would explore how to think about the problem together.

This exploratory inquiry process involved four key steps:

- **First**, community residents were educated about the topic and the methods we would use to approach the problem. This initial training was done to ensure that there was shared understanding around what we meant when we asked and answered questions together.
- **Second**, we committed ourselves to work over a longer time frame than usual. This commitment was made to ensure that a sufficient amount of time was allowed to build trusting relationships among the partners.
- **Third**, we intentionally challenged the false familiarity and accepted anecdotal narratives held by practitioners and community residents. These challenges were made to ensure that our work proceeded from the basis of observable phenomena in the real world instead of theoretical suppositions.
- **Fourth**, we committed to comparing the implications of all expert conclusions with community realities and vice versa. This commitment was made to further ground our work together in objective reality.

The Youth Violence Systems Project as a Case Study

At the heart of the YVSP approach was the use of a community learning process which was employed to build a system dynamics model of youth violence. The Project approach consisted of 10 key steps:

1. Conducting a multidisciplinary literature review.
2. Convening large-scale discussions with local and national experts, practitioners, and stakeholders.
3. Identifying and challenging the dominant assumptions about the violence.
4. Establishing an integrated framework based on socio-ecological theory.
5. Conducting a force analysis to determine how key social forces came to bear on the system of youth violence in Boston.
6. Defining the boundary of inquiry for the problem.
7. Engaging the community in an exploratory inquiry process.
8. Capturing these findings in a system dynamics model.
9. Refining model assumptions with feedback from multiple stakeholders.
10. Helping community residents use the model to address the problem of gang violence.

While community residents served an essential role in the Project design and execution, they expressed concern that they knew very little about the behavior and motivations of gang members. It was therefore decided that active and former gang members needed to participate in addressing the problem of violence.

Approach

We held two focus groups with gang violence experts to help us determine a way to safely and effectively engage gang members in the Project. We enjoyed the benefit of having a

number of consultants with experience with previous gang violence initiatives in Boston. One encouraged us to go deeper with gang members and ask them to provide detailed information about their personal experiences instead of providing us with general information about gang violence. Another advised us to avoid standard one-on-one interviews, adopt a more anthropological approach, and spend large amounts of time interacting with gang members as a group. His perspective was that this approach would help build trust with gang members as well as provide more opportunity to observe and understand the meaning behind their responses.

We therefore developed a very direct, interpersonal approach to our inquiry process. Over the course of the Project, our gang violence experts helped us develop stock/flow diagrams to describe the movement of young people in their involvement in gang violence. These diagrams served as a mechanism for sharing insight and understanding among Project participants. They also provided a value-neutral focal point for discussion, helping people from different backgrounds come to a common understanding of the interrelationships that impact violence within the community.

We decided to ask gang members to correct and refine our assumptions that undergirded these diagrams. Our rationale was that gang members, while part of a semi-isolated subculture, are still people who care about reducing violence in their neighborhoods. Our approach was to respectfully invite them to participate in a community-wide response to reducing violence as expert consultants who were sharing their personal experiences for the positive benefit of the community.

Methodology

We began with the assumption that there are at least two types of gang members: those who were younger and actively involved in producing violence, and those who were older and responsible for leadership and managing the organization of the gang. It was then decided to engage these two groups separately using different methodologies.

We decided to partner with agencies that were deeply engaged and experienced with gang members and noted for having long-term, trusting relationships with key violent individuals. The partner agencies were hired to work in conjunction with the Project staff to design and co-facilitate the focus group sessions, create appropriate questions, and recruit key gang members to participate in the Project. The partner agencies leveraged their existing relationships with violence-producing individuals to form two focus groups: the first group consisted of active gang members aged 18-23; and the second group consisted of older men aged 22-40 who either had a history of gang involvement or violent offending (in some cases founders of gangs were included). The participants in the focus groups were hired as consultants and tasked with providing information about the methods and rationale for gang violence as marked by their own personal experiences as victims and perpetrators of violence.

The first group consisted of "shooters/enforcers" from two allied gangs. They met four times for two-hour focus sessions once a week for a month. Each participant was identified using an alias and paid by the partner agency in cash for their time. During the course

of each two-hour session, participants were asked a series of open-ended questions designed to elicit increasingly in-depth responses about their experiences, perceptions, opinions, feelings, and knowledge of methods and motives for gang violence.

In keeping with the Project's dynamic framework, a narrowly defined line of questioning was used which focused on the physical methods and direct causes of violent behavior. A scaffolding approach was used to move the discussion from less personal questions to more personal questions as trust was built over the course of the sessions. I began by describing my own personal experiences with gang violence to bridge the gap between us and to establish a reference point for violent behavior. We then had a baseline to assess the difference between gang member responses and what a "normal" response would be to a particular question.

Below are a few examples of how the process worked. To establish initial rapport, I described in detail my personal experience being recruited by two national gangs as a youth growing up in Michigan. I then asked them to describe their experiences with being recruited into a gang. To assess the limits of the brutality typically displayed in their violent behavior, I described in detail an extremely gruesome murder of a friend[11] and asked them if they knew of any murders like that. They described how there were limits to how violent their actions were in part due to the limited time they had to commit a murder and leave the scene before police arrival (which they regularly timed). To provoke introspection regarding leaving the gang lifestyle, I discussed my desire to keep my newborn son away from the violence that I grew up with. I asked them if they had children and if they ever thought of things like this. They went on to describe their hopes and dreams about getting out of violence and keeping their children away from their violent lifestyle.

In some instances these questions were informed by responses to previous session discussions. This method was used initially to reinforce the fact that we were listening carefully to their responses and processing them in between sessions. It also was designed to prompt a running dialogue where they would engage in personal reflection between sessions. It was particularly helpful as we noticed that some answers changed between sessions as they took the time to think more deeply about the question. For example, they initially described the reason they wanted to "fall back" from being key shooters in their gangs was because they were tired and thought it wasn't fair that the younger gang members hadn't "put in enough work." But over time they began to describe other reasons for wanting to reduce their violent role, stating that as they got older and made more money "they had more to live for." Interestingly, this reasoning indicated an inverse between life satisfaction and the willingness to take primary responsibility for committing violence on behalf of a gang.

Answers also changed as follow-up questions were presented to test the veracity of the initial answer. During the first meeting the allied gang members spoke highly of their commitment to each other's gang and their personal closeness. During the second session, however, a younger gang member joined the session, and it was revealed that the younger members of the two gangs had recently shot at each other. An older gang member from the first gang challenged a younger gang member of the second gang, asking him why he shot at members of the first gang. His answer was that they shot first, and this was consid-

ered an acceptable reason to shoot back. (We were informed later by the gang workers that we had been allowed to witness an important reconciliation conversation between the two gangs.) After the situation appeared to be resolved, I asked the gang members what would have happened if someone had been killed in the shooting exchanged by the younger gang members. They somewhat sadly replied that if someone had died then they would no longer be friends. It would be war. And so, despite their repeated expressions of friendship earlier, it was clear that this alliance had limits and an inherent instability in which the person who was your friend could quickly become your enemy because of the dynamic nature of gang violence.

The second group of "founders/leaders" met one time for a four-hour focus session. Each participant was paid by the partner agency in cash for their time. During the course of the session, participants were asked a predefined set of questions that had been developed jointly by the partner agency and YVSP staff. A question was read by the gang worker to the group, and each gang member provided an initial response. I then initiated follow-up questions and/or discussion to elicit deeper, more personal responses.

Concepts raised with the first group of younger "shooter/enforcers" were revisited with the "founders/leaders" group to test for reproducible answers and to gain more insight into the context of the earlier group's responses. For example, the first group said that it was essentially impossible to get out of the gang once in. The "founder/leaders" stated, however, that this impossibility was true for active shooters, but there were a number of ways to move out of the forefront for older members or for those who had different roles in the gang. Shooters also described the permanence of gang affiliation during and after jail. The leaders stated, however, that affiliation could change if the gang member was in jail for an extended time or if they were sent into the prison system (most shooters spent time in the county jail system).

The "founders/leaders" also provided a longer-term perspective regarding the formation, adaptation, and ending of gangs. They described the process that gang members go through moving from rookie, to shooter, to leader. They also described an alternate pathway in which a gang member may become an earner by making money for the gang through drug trafficking and eventually become a leader. They discussed advancement in the gang in terms of respect and productivity. They discussed the adaptive nature of their recruiting strategies to ensure the growth and survival of the gang. They also outlined the intricate interactions between gangs and law enforcement over time. For example they described how gangs that begin to make money may find themselves having more trouble because of dealing with growing jealousy of rival gangs and increasing scrutiny from federal law enforcement.

Interestingly, none of the "founders/leaders" recommended the gang lifestyle for younger people. They specifically wanted to remove the glamour of gang life and show the reality that gang life is a "hustle" that you can't do forever. One leader put it this way, "When I was young, I believed there was a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, but I found out that it was a pot of sh*t." Despite their strong feelings, however, most felt limited in their ability to impact younger members because of their role as leader to preserve the gang and because of their aversion to appearing hypocritical.

Data gathering and evaluation consisted of verbatim quotations and observation notes, reflective listening, along with individual and group observations. In addition to co-facilitating the sessions, partner agency staff also assisted in evaluating and interpreting the data. Consultants experienced in working with proven-risk and gang-involved youth were hired to provide additional evaluation of session data. Care was given to corroborate focus group data with other data sources and the perspective of experienced youth workers.

What we know now, and why we know it

I attribute much of our ability to generate a significant body of primary data about the rules, norms, behaviors, and motivations of gang members to the unique nature of our solution approach and interview methodology. There are five key findings that we have learned that are worth noting.

Increasing violence is driven by dramatic increases in gang members

We noted earlier that there has been an unprecedented increase in the number of gangs and gang members in Boston since the 1980s. What this increase means for gang violence is not as clear as it seems. While more gangs would suggest more violence, the relationship between the two appears to be far from linear, and the impact seems far broader than some may expect.

Our first indication that something significant was happening in high-violence neighborhoods around increased gang presence came from our discussion with non-gang involved youth. We initially assumed that most youth, even those in high-violence neighborhoods, did not have close or conspicuous relationships with the small number of violent, gang-involved youth. Discussion with non-gang youth revealed, however, that nearly all of them reported having close associations of some sort with gang members. One youth stated, "I don't know anyone in my neighborhood who doesn't have an association with a gang member. I think it's impossible to not associate with them where I live."

The seemingly ubiquitous presence of gang members in a few small, geographically contiguous areas in Boston suggests that there is a high likelihood that these individuals will have more interactions with other gang members. The higher number of interactions means that there is the likelihood of a corresponding increase in potentially violent incidents—especially since gang members report that most gang violence is interpersonal violence driven by personal disagreements that are sanctioned and reinforced by the gang.

Increasing numbers of gangs also means that there are increasing orders of complexity to gang conflicts and alliances. These circumstances create an environment for shifting gang behavior where violence moves from targeted killing (as is the current norm as described by gang members) to more opportunistic shooting.

Traumatic stress is changing the way nonviolent youth behave

As nonviolent youth experience more and denser social networks which include gang members, they experience increased levels of traumatic stress associated with the community violence that is happening in close proximity to where they live and go to school.

This stress is possibly increased because of their personal relationships with the victims and perpetrators of this violence. Others have already discussed how traumatic stress may lead to recurrent interpersonal violence for non-gang involved youth because it is both a result of and catalyst for violent behavior. This expanding impact of violence may not only help to explain the localized or "hotspot" nature of gang violence, but it also may explain why other forms of interpersonal violence trend in correlation to gang violence in a community. In the simplest sense, these non-gang involved youth have become the collateral damage of ongoing gang violence as their normal behavior and response to stimuli are changed by the stress they encounter living in high-violence communities.

Gang violence is addictive

An unexpected finding was that gang members described violence as intensely addictive and reported using violence as a way to manage their emotions. They discussed how they used violence to: "release tension" associated with grief; abate generalized anger; and manage arousal through thrill-seeking behavior like "forcing" conflict with others for personal reasons. They described experiencing extreme fear and recurrent "flashbacks" from the first time they shot or killed. They also recounted a sense of time slowing down, physical shaking, and in some cases blacking out associated with their going into "killing mode." They relate this hypersensitivity to the fact that their bodies are just reacting because "when you see someone pulling out a gun, you don't have time to think you just react..." They all agreed that killing is like a drug, and they feel a "rush" associated with violence. This sense of rush and excitement seems to diminish as they continue to engage in repetitive violent behavior over time.

Taken together, these descriptions suggest a demonstration of salience, relief, tolerance, and conflict associated with violent behavior for certain gang members. These experiences correspond with Hodge's suggestion that reinforcing cycles of traumatic stress and violence exist where individuals, traumatized by their own violent actions, may become addicted to violence as demonstrated by the use of violence as an active strategy to manipulate emotional well-being.[12] The presence of such an intensely violent subculture, where the use of violence as a dominant mechanism for managing well-being is normalized, may explain why some initiatives have results that differ from expectations when attempting to modify violent behavior.

There are significant unintended consequences of suppression strategies

The practice of suppressing gang violence by arresting large numbers of violent offenders to stamp out violence is a proven way to reduce gang violence in the short term. Gang members acknowledge that these arrests are an effective way to shut down the spiral of retaliatory violence once a key gang murder occurs. There are, however, a number of unintended consequences associated with the suppression strategy that gang members relay.

This strategy typically involves arresting known shooters on non-violent charges to quickly get them off of the street, to cool down retaliation cycles. The average incarceration rate for these arrests is about two years, and often jail terms are served in the local county jail system. The long-term impact of this strategy is dramatic.

First, it means that many more gang members have criminal records and have spent time in jail than ever before. This reality has fundamentally changed the way they and those in close relationship to them view jail. Most shooters say that they are used to jail, but they report becoming "tired of jail" by the time the approach their third incarceration. Older gang members who have been threatened with or actually spent 10 or more years in prison describe how the threat of going to jail for such a long time has significantly changed their outlook. The widespread use of shorter jail terms for younger "shooters" has meant that the widespread familiarity with shorter jail terms has undermined its use as a deterrent to violent behavior.

Second, shorter gang sentences have meant that gang members are able to maintain their gang affiliations in jail. Their relationship to the gang may change during incarceration but they typically return to society with similar affiliations with their gang. Gang members who have been sentenced for longer terms or who have entered the larger state or federal prison system report that gang affiliations necessarily change during incarceration to fit into the powerful prison network of gangs. This change causes prisoners to choose affiliations based upon trust and respect and may mean that they may find themselves in gangs with former adversaries. This long-term affiliation and collaboration with former enemies seems to produce an ability to discuss conflict and talk through issues. A number of instances were relayed where founder/leaders described coming to a place of forgiveness and resolution with former adversaries. This sort of introspection and skill development was not reported by shooters who typically served less time.

Third, gang members described how the breakup of gangs targeted by the police had changed the way they as leaders managed how violent things become to avoid crackdowns. When crackdowns do occur, however, they related how this shift created the environment for "side street" gangs to emerge. After the initial dismantling of a major gang, youth in the neighborhoods of the gangs seek to join other existing gangs for security and belonging. Over time these youth often decide to form their own neighborhood gangs. This behavior suggests the suppression of a large gang may lead to the spawning of new smaller gangs over time. Gang members point to this phenomenon as the biggest reason there are so many gangs currently in Boston.

Gangs represent a significant alternative social system

It is not surprising that our initial findings suggest that a violent subculture exists among gang members, with its own rules and norms which are shared, understood, and reinforced by members of the subculture. Gang members describe a system in which belonging is reinforced with violence, making it extremely difficult for certain youth to leave gang membership.

Further analysis reveals, however, that this phenomenon may be more than the formation of a violent subculture. Gang members have actually formed a clan-based alternate social system where gang affiliation supersedes normal familial and cultural associations, and membership is associated with a radical shift in identity. They describe in detail the breakdown of the typical nuclear family and extended family system. A number of cases

were given where gang members had relatives in rival gangs. They described having no sense of remorse with engaging in violent conflict or killing a biological relative.

In the absence of father figures or respected older men, gang-involved youth have created *tribes without elders*. These groups take on a shared worldview and the responsibility to provide financial stability and personal security for gang members. Membership is meant to be life-long and expected to supersede or replace normal familial affiliations.

The increasing failure of the traditional family social order in vulnerable communities may explain the attractiveness of joining an alternate social system that promises stability and safety. Viewing gangs as a social system instead of simply a criminal problem may expand the scope of inquiry broadly enough to allow for an appropriate solution approach to be implemented in addressing this problem.

Conclusion

I have come to the conclusion that the results that we experienced in the Youth Violence Systems Project in engaging gang members and community residents in problem solving is attributed to the process we employed. Deeper insights were possible because deeper relationships were formed with those who know the most about the problem. In fact, the only way to understand the phenomenon of gang violence is to understand the internal logic and behavior of gang members. To gain this understanding, you must have deep trusting relationships with gang members that have been built over years. The success of YVSP in engaging gang members rests entirely upon the decades of work laid by the Boston TenPoint Coalition and our other gang consultants. It would have been impossible to gather so much information in so short a time if not for the extension of trust we were afforded because of our gang worker partners.

Finally, the establishment of a collaborative, exploratory inquiry process which respected the unique contribution of as many stakeholders as possible, allowed us to make significant progress toward creating a systems view of gang violence in Boston. Without these methods and key relationships, none of these results would have been possible.

I am convinced now more than ever, that the problem of gang violence hasn't been solved because all too often we have failed to acknowledge what we don't know. Furthermore, we have continued to use the wrong approach, wrong tools, and wrong people to solve this problem. But there is hope. The success experienced by the Youth Violence Systems Project in developing a shared framework that many people are finding useful suggests that there is another way to approach the problem that uses collaborative methods to solve a messy problem using an exploratory inquiry process.

It is now time to develop, test, and refine these tools and approaches for broader use. For each day gang violence is allowed to continue: hope is lost; criminal institutions grow in strength; and our young people perish. Together we must decide that the gang problem can be solved and that we will prioritize working together until it is eradicated from our most vulnerable communities. Equipped with the right tools, the right approach, and the right people we can solve the problem of gang violence in time to save this generation of young people.

1   FBI statistics show that since 2003, Saginaw, MI, has remained the most violent city per capita in the U.S., for cities with populations greater than 50,000.

2   I use the term "gang violence" to refer to violence committed by street gangs as well as small crews whose members are not gang members but they do collectively participate in criminal activity. This is distinctly different than general, interpersonal violence committed by individuals.

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11 He was shot in the face in front of his grandmother's house and had a car repeatedly driven over his chest, caving it in, to prevent an open-casket funeral.

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