Interrupting Gang Violence in Urban Trinidad through Conflict Mediation

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Abstract

Gang violence is an ongoing threat to community safety and citizen security in many communities in Trinidad and Tobago. Known for high violent crime rates in the Caribbean, Trinidad and Tobago has been battling gangs and escalating rates of gang-related violence for more than two decades. To tackle the ongoing issue of gang violence, the Trinidadian government adopted a community-based intervention strategy known as Project REASON (Resolve Enmity, Articulate Solutions, Organize Neighborhoods). Adapted from Cure Violence, an initiative developed in Chicago, Project REASON assigned trained community members to engage in mediation efforts with offenders, victims and other stakeholders. The current study is an exploratory analysis of the specific approaches used by Project REASON staff in their efforts to prevent gang-related violence in high crime communities in Trinidad.

Keywords: gang violence; community-based violence intervention; Trinidad and Tobago; Cure Violence.

Introduction

Trinidad and Tobago is a two-island state in the southeastern Caribbean that has experienced a dramatic increase in homicides over the past

twenty years. In 2019, the murder rate in the nation was 41.5 per 100,000, which places it among the most violent nations in the world.[1] Previous research has shown that approximately 60 per cent of homicides in the nation are gang-related (Maguire et al. 2010). Unfortunately, the criminal justice system has been largely unsuccessful at addressing gang-related violence, including homicides (Katz and Maguire 2015; Maguire et al. 2010). In reflecting on gangs in the Caribbean, Harriott (2015) urged researchers to widen their perspective from looking primarily at *distal* (or "root") causes to learning more about the *proximate* causes of gang-related phenomena, including gang violence. While it may take a generation or more to influence distal causes (such as poverty and unemployment), proximate causes (such as gang rivalries) lend themselves more easily to achieving short-term results (Harriott 2015; Katz and Maguire 2015). One approach to addressing proximate causes is mediation efforts that seek to prevent imminent acts of violence. In this paper, we examine the activities carried out by *violence interveners* (VIs) in Trinidad and Tobago who were employed for just this purpose. These are people with deep connections to the communities they serve who intervene directly with offenders, victims and their associates and loved ones, to prevent violence.

Trinidad and Tobago is a "small island developing state" of about 1.3 million people located approximately 7 miles from the northeastern coast of Venezuela.[2] Although it is one of the wealthiest nations in the Caribbean due to its reserves of oil and natural gas, many of its residents are impoverished (Kedir and Sookram 2013; Moonansingh, Wallace, and Dialsingh 2019). As of 2012, there were 102 criminal gangs in Trinidad and Tobago (Seepersad 2015). Violence, specifically murder, is concentrated in a handful of hot spots, including the urban communities of Port of Spain, which is the capital of Trinidad and Tobago (Felix-John and Williams 2013; Hill 2013; Katz and Maguire 2015; Maguire et al. 2008; Seepersad 2015). Previous research has shown that 28.6 per cent of gang members in the country report having been shot, 66.7 per cent have been threatened with a gun and 52.4 per cent have been injured with a weapon (Katz, Maguire, and Choate 2011). Consistent with findings

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[1] In 2015, the most recent year for which the World Health Organization has released international homicide data, Trinidad and Tobago ranked eighth in the world with a homicide rate of 32.8 per 100,000 people.

[2] Trinidad and Tobago is one of 38 nations in the world designated by the United Nations as Small Island Developing States. For more information, see: https://www.un.org/ohrlls/content/about-small-island-developing-states

from other nations, research in Trinidad and Tobago suggests that there is a strong connection between gang involvement and violent victimization. Gang leaders attain power through violent struggles to control illicit markets[3] and secure lucrative public work contracts from the government (Adams, Morris, and Maguire 2018; Griffin and Persad 2013; Maguire et al. 2008; Seepersad 2015). Rivalries for these contracts have resulted in shootouts within communities and the deaths of gang leaders, gang members, people perceived as threatening by gangs and people who were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. Not surprisingly, a survey of residents in Trinidad and Tobago's capital city, Port of Spain, found that over 50 per cent of residents felt unsafe in that area and that their community had pressing issues with gun violence (QURE Limited 2015).

The sharp increase in gang-related and gun-related violence led local officials to search abroad for viable policy options. One such option was a community-based violence reduction initiative known as Cure Violence (CV), which was developed in Chicago and was later implemented in many other settings (Butts et al. 2015; Ransford and Slutkin 2017). In Trinidad, the local adaptation of CV was named Project REASON (Resolve Enmity, Articulate Solutions, Organize Neighborhoods), and it was implemented in sixteen urban communities in the Port of Spain metropolitan area.[4] A quasi-experimental impact evaluation found that Project REASON was associated with "a significant and substantial drop in violence" in the communities where it was implemented (Maguire, Oakley, and Corsaro 2018: 36). The present study draws on qualitative analysis of data from interviews with a variety of Project REASON stakeholders to understand the roles played by VIs[5] in the communities where they were assigned, including the specific mechanisms they used to reduce violence.

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[3]Our interviews in this and previous projects reveal that gangs in Trinidad and Tobago participate in a variety of illicit markets, including drugs and guns. Some of them also engage in other revenue-generating offenses including kidnaping for ransom and murder for hire.

[4]The sixteen communities include Beetham Estate, Belmont, Eastern Port of Spain, Eastern Quarry, Gonzales, Laventille, Marie Road, Mon Repos, Morvant, Never Dirty, Picton, Port of Spain Proper, Romain Lands, Sea Lots, St. Barbs and Upper Belmont.

[5]The Cure Violence model distinguishes between two different types of workers: "violence interrupters" and "outreach workers". Violence interrupters are responsible for mediating "impending or ongoing street conflicts before a shooting occurs", whereas outreach workers "serve as case managers to help youth access needed social services and work on longer-term lifestyle objectives, such as leaving a gang" (Whitehill et al. 2014, p. 85). A process evaluation of Project REASON found that although outreach workers were hired, they did not engage in the types of focused interventions that characterized their intended role (Maguire, Oakley, and Corsaro 2018). In the present study, we use the generic term "violence intervener" to refer to employees who were engaged in mediation efforts whether their formal title was outreach worker or violence interrupter.

Review of Relevant Literature

Gang violence in Trinidad's capital

Gang violence continues to circumscribe the lives of non-gang-affiliated persons who reside in gang-infiltrated communities in Trinidad and Tobago. Gang rivalries affect the ability of residents to engage safely in routine activities such as walking to school or work, purchasing groceries, seeking medical attention or taking a taxi (Felix-John and Williams 2013). Young men feel trapped in their neighbourhoods because crossing invisible borderlines and entering another gang's turf can be deadly (Adams, Morris, and Maguire 2018). To avoid being hit by stray bullets, some residents prevent their children from playing in common areas (e.g. community streets and playgrounds), avoid using rooms in their homes that face the street and sleep on the floor (Adams, Morris, and Maguire 2018). Residents in gang-infiltrated communities also report difficulty in finding employment due to the reputation of the area where they live (Adams, Morris, and Maguire 2018; Felix-John and Williams 2013). Some residents have resorted to changing the address listed on their resumes to increase the probability of securing employment. These are just a few of the strategies used by residents to cope with gang violence since the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service (TTPS), and the criminal justice system more broadly, lacks the capacity to control gangs and violence effectively (Katz and Maguire 2015).

Strategies to intervene in gang violence

The criminal justice system in Trinidad and Tobago has experienced significant difficulties in addressing gang violence generally and gang-related homicides more specifically. These difficulties are perhaps most evident in the nation's low homicide clearance rate, which creates an environment of impunity in which offenders are unlikely to be arrested and convicted for committing acts of violence (Clancy, Brookman, and Maguire 2019; Maguire et al. 2010). Previous research has shown that these issues arose, in part, due to infrastructure issues within the criminal justice system. For instance, homicide investigators often lacked the training and experience necessary to conduct these investigations in a thorough and competent manner (Katz and Maguire 2015; Maguire et al. 2010). Similarly, the nation's crime laboratory lacked the capacity to collect, preserve, transport and process physical evidence from crime scenes in a manner that would help move criminal cases forward (King

and Wells 2015). At the same time, some of the reasons for the low homicide clearance rate were external to the criminal justice system. Perhaps one of the most important reasons was the environment of fear created by criminal street gangs. Fear of retaliation from gangs led most eyewitnesses to refuse to cooperate with the police (Clancy, Brookman, and Maguire 2019; Katz and Maguire 2015; Maguire et al. 2010). As a result, arrests in gang homicides are rare, and prosecutions seldom result in convictions (Clancy, Brookman, and Maguire 2019; Katz and Maguire 2015).

Traditional law enforcement strategies that rely primarily on suppression (rather than prevention or intervention) have produced limited success in the fight against gangs, crime and violence in Trinidad and Tobago (Seepersad 2015). Since most of the gang violence is concentrated in certain people and places, researchers suggest that targeted strategies with a strong focus on the right people and places would be more likely to reduce violence than more commonly used generic strategies (Maguire et al. 2008; Katz and Maguire 2015). These findings are consistent with the criminological literature more broadly, which suggests that suppression efforts alone are insufficient to control gangs and gang violence (Klein and Maxson 2006). Research shows that communities must couple their suppression efforts with prevention strategies that keep young people out of gangs and intervention strategies that focus on altering the behaviour of people who are already in gangs (Klein and Maxson 2006; Spergel and Grossman 1997). In Trinidad and Tobago, the government created the Citizen Security Program (CSP) to provide a variety of services to high-risk youth in the nation's most distressed communities. The CSP chose to adopt CV as part of its suite of prevention and intervention efforts.

CV is a community-based public health initiative designed to address the prevalence of gun violence mainly in struggling impoverished communities. CV has been implemented in several cities in the United States and elsewhere, primarily in locations that struggle with firearm violence and high rates of violent crime. The central goal of the CV model is to prevent violence in communities. The objective is to intervene and interrupt potentially violent conflicts before they escalate and result in death or serious injury. To reduce violence effectively, the CV model relies on trained, paid employees recruited from the community. Critical to the success of CV initiatives are two types of program staff: violence interrupters and outreach workers. Violence interrupters are usually individuals who have a history of criminal involvement and or gang affiliation, many of whom have been previously incarcerated. Violence interrupters, who are mainly men, serve as the eyes and ears of their community.

They not only attempt to interrupt violence but also build relationships with the youth who pose a danger to the community. They work with outreach workers who are mainly responsible for connecting the high-risk youth to employment opportunities and resources such as skills training and educational programmes.

The local adaptation of CV became known as Project REASON. It was launched in 2016 across sixteen distressed urban communities in and around the Port of Spain metropolitan area. Project REASON is predicated on the notion that certain acts of violence can be prevented when properly trained community members engage in mediation efforts with offenders, victims and other stakeholders (Maguire, Oakley, and Corsaro 2018). Project REASON adopted the CV strategy for "interrupting" imminent acts of violence. Consistent with the CV approach, Project REASON hired twelve people to engage in violence intervention efforts who had deep connections to their communities and who knew many of the people in criminal street gangs. Many members of the staff had been gang members themselves and had spent time in prison for a variety of criminal offenses. VIs were trained, from 8 to 18 June in 2015, on the guiding principles of the CV model and the methods and strategies for violence intervention (Maguire et al. 2018). Topics covered in the training included, but were not limited to: identifying situations that are likely to result in violence, responding to shooting victims and peacefully mediating conflicts. In this paper, we explore in detail the specific approaches used by Project REASON staff to prevent gang-related violence in high crime communities in Trinidad. Our analysis also helps illuminate some of the challenging interpersonal and social dynamics of high crime neighbourhoods rife with gang problems.

Methodology

The qualitative data analysed in this paper were collected as part of an evaluation of Project REASON. The evaluation contained three components: an impact evaluation to determine whether the initiative reduced violence, a process evaluation that documented the implementation of Project REASON and a cost-effectiveness analysis. The current paper draws on data collected as part of the process evaluation. The research team gathered detailed field notes during their interviews with project stakeholders and during their observations in the communities where Project REASON was implemented. These field notes serve as the qualitative data that we analyse in this paper. The guiding research questions

for the paper are: (1) what strategies do Project REASON staff use to inter-vene in gang violence, and (2) what situational dynamics enable Project REASON staff to intervene successfully in a potentially violent situation?

Research strategy

The authors of this paper were members of a nine-person research team. Eight of the nine researchers resided in the United States at the time of this study. However, most of the researchers had extensive experience conducting research in the Caribbean. Four researchers were from the Caribbean, including two from Trinidad and Tobago and two from Jamaica. Three of the five researchers from the United States have con-ducted research in Trinidad and Tobago for more than a decade and have long-standing relationships with the communities under investigation. Individual members of the research team were insiders or outsiders at dif-ferent points of the study with respect to their nationality, culture, place of residence, experience with the communities under investigation, race, class, gender and level of education (Merriam et al. 2001; Zinn 1979). The research team was aware of our insider/outsider status throughout the investigation and the impact it had on our perceptions of the experi-ences of our research participants. The research team met daily during data collection to compare notes, identify common themes and clarify potential misinterpretations. We spoke to community residents about our initial findings to ensure that our interpretations were consistent with their lived experience.

Data collection for the larger evaluation occurred from 2015 to 2018 using both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews were the primary data collection techniques employed for the research reported here. The research team triangulated the data across multiple sources and methods with the hope of cross-validating our observations and inferences (Bailey 2007; O'Connell Davidson and Layder 1994). Data collection occurred in the sixteen Project REASON communities, all of which had high rates of gang activity and violence.

Semi-structured and focus group interviews were conducted with Project REASON staff. The Project REASON staff introduced the research team to residents and police officers assigned to the target communities; semi-structured interviews were conducted with this population. A total of thirty-seven semi-structured interviews and two focus groups were conducted. Eighteen of the thirty-seven semi-structured interviews con-ducted were with VIs and four interviews were with Project REASON's

supervisors and office managers. Of the fifteen remaining interviews, our respondent sample was diverse and included young males who had current or former gang affiliations, influential and respected local community residents, community residents impacted by gang violence, police officers assigned to the target communities and government officials. Interviews were conducted in locations where respondents spent time including their homes, neighbourhood shops, street corners, yards and local community organizations. Both focus group interviews were conducted with VIs at Project REASON's office. In 2015, ten of the twelve VIs participated in the focus group while in 2018, all twelve VIs were present for this interview. Interviewers took extensive notes during each interview and spent time recreating the interview and filling in their notes after each interview to ensure that all pertinent information was recorded. Semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews lasted between 30 minutes and 2 hours. Respondents did not receive monetary compensation for participation in this study. All participants were over the age of 18 and provided informed consent. All names and identifying information were removed from transcripts and notes. This study was approved by the institutional review board at [universities redacted for external review].

Analytical strategy

Members of the research team took detailed field notes during the data collection period and prepared the interview transcripts. Documenting field notes enabled us to organize our thoughts pertaining to interviewees' responses, identify areas where additional information was needed and keep track of how we laid claim to what we discovered (Lofland et al. 2006; Richardson and St. Pierre 2000). Initial coding of interview transcripts and field notes began during data collection (Lofland et al. 2006). Focused coding was completed by one researcher via NVivo (Version 11.4.3). Nodes were developed and grouped into themes. Reference counts were used to select the most important nodes for data analysis. Focused coding continued as the authors started writing this paper and comparing our findings to the existing literature.

Results

This section explores the factors that enable respondents to intervene in neighbourhood problems, including gang-related violence within their communities. In articulating the strategies Project REASON's VIs use

to mediate neighbourhood problems, one intervener said: "Everybody can be approached, is just when and where." For this VI, "[k]nowing who to talk to, how to talk to them, when to talk, and when not to talk" is key to successful intervention. This section explores the notion that "everybody can be approached" and unpacks how VIs' positionality, and their attempts to assist fellow residents with non-crime-related problems, situated them to intervene in gang-related homicides. The results are divided into four sections that explore (1) the characteristics of VIs, (2) VIs' intervention in neighbourhood problems, (3) VIs' intervention in community violence and (4) the role of the police.

Characteristics of violence interveners

VIs in this study were all Afro-Trinidadian men ($n = 9$) and women ($n = 3$) of various ages (20s–60s) who had strong ties in the high crime neighbourhoods where they worked. These interviewees were not only respected and well-known, but they also had experience with outreach work in their communities. Most had dedicated years (5–20 years, depending on the violence intervener) to addressing neighbourhood problems. Having lived in their communities for decades, VIs had personal experience with the struggles many residents experience. For example, most of the VIs had prior involvement in gangs, the criminal justice system or loved ones with criminal involvement. They were recruited to be VIs based on their community ties and involvement in outreach work. The next three subsections detail the characteristics that enable VIs to intervene successfully in neighbourhood problems and gang-related violence.

Street crime adjacent

At the time of this investigation, VIs self-reported no involvement in the street economy, but many shared experiences about their former involvement or contact with the criminal justice system. We refer to this positionality as *street crime adjacent*. In speaking about their former involvement in street crime, some VIs explained:

I started at the age of 12 years: robbing, shooting was my life of crime. I got shot by the police 7 times in my life. ... I was the leader of a gang.

    From age 13 I was in gang, started smoking weed then stealing. I got locked up at age 22 for a month. Bank seized my car, I start making money through drugs. We planned to kill a man. He found out and send a man to try to kill me. Then I got shot.

    I was incarcerated for robbery, shooting, murders. I spent 20 years in prison. It was really rough but I learn. ... I know the youth in my area very well.

Everybody knows my past life. They see I turn around my life and they give me that respect.

Here we see that some VIs were intimately involved in street crime. They reported being involved with gangs, engaging in crimes and being arrested and incarcerated for various offenses. Other VIs self-reported vicarious involvement in the street economy. For example, one male interviewee explained that his cousin "was an underworld boss who drafted in countless number of men into his underworld activities since 2000. He was killed in 2003." VIs' firsthand involvement and vicarious experiences with street crime and the criminal justice system situated them to connect with young people currently involved in street crime and empathize with youths' struggles.

Community trusted insiders

In conjunction with having prior involvement in the street economy, VIs live in the areas where they engage in intervention activities, and they face (or previously faced) many of the same social and economic struggles as other residents in these communities. Having intimate knowledge of these struggles is an important factor that distinguishes VIs from other well-intentioned citizens who attempt to intervene in gang violence. Interviewees said:

A lot guys who are running programs geared towards working with gang members cannot talk to these guys on the street. They cannot reach them.

Within these communities, you have people with degrees, people who are supposed to help community members with social services, but they cannot walk and talk with the people like we could. They might have state programs to do what we are doing but they are not hiring people who could reach community members. So although people talk behind closed doors, nothing is getting done.

Here, respondents articulate their belief that community outsiders with genuine intentions to help residents in the communities under investigation, or those that hold qualifications (e.g. degrees, jobs in non-profit or governmental organizations) that validate their capacity to intervene, may be unable to connect with gang members. This connection may provide a sense of trust and understanding that makes it easier for VIs to intervene in neighbourhood problems relative to other well-intentioned outsiders. In contrast, respondents believe that VIs' ability to identify with the struggles faced by gang members enables them to establish a connection more easily, thereby setting the stage for intervention. One resident explained:

Young men in the community don't want to talk with advocates, they don't. They say that they don't know what they are going through. VIs [are] people from the area who have rapport to deal with the heads of gangs.

In conjunction with sharing gang members' experiences, this respondent believes that VIs have the rapport to connect with gang members. Similarly, a VI explained that they spoke the same language as the gang members in their area which enabled them to reason with the gang leader. The VI said:

How I approach situations, I could challenge some of these guys. For example, I understand the Islamic standpoint so I could use that to talk to some of these guys. I have a gate at the back of my yard and the gang leader in the area told me not to lock the gate on two separate occasions. When I found him by himself, I used Islamic teachings to ask him: "Can I tell you how to tie your camel?" He said no and so I asked him then how could he tell me how to tie my camel. Since I am Muslim, I used insider knowledge to reason with him.

VIs' insider status in the communities under investigation provides a foundation of shared experiences with community members; it is upon this foundation that they could approach gang members and intervene in violence. However, VIs' insider status in the communities where they work means that they are aware of, and need to abide by, informal community rules that outsiders may find difficult to navigate.

Cannot work as informants

As a rule, VIs understand that they cannot serve as informants to law enforcement. They believe that if they provide information to the police, the police may share their name with offenders who are associated with this information. This would then trigger retaliation against the VI by the offender or his associates. As such, VIs (and residents of these neighbourhoods more broadly) perceive that they would be killed if they reported information about planned or completed crimes to the police (see Maguire et al. 2010). In speaking about community members' willingness to report the victimization they experience to the police, one VI noted:

Many innocent people have been shot because of the war. However, these innocent victims will not help the police because they fear for their lives. If the victims retaliate against the gang members (and report their victimization to the police), they may end up dying.

This quote exemplifies community members' inability to demand justice for their victimization through the legal system. Working with law enforcement to prosecute offenders would trigger additional

victimization for residents, thus many victims remain silent about the harm they experienced.

Studies conducted in other parts of Trinidad support the belief that reporting crimes to the police puts residents in danger of retaliation from offenders (Adams 2012; Maguire et al. 2010; Townsend 2009). Being very knowledgeable about the dynamics within their communities, VIs understand that reporting crimes to the police places them at risk of victimization. As such, VIs abided by community rules and uniformly avoided informing the police about crimes they learned about. VIs explained:

Our ears on the ground (people who inform us what is going on in the community) are more intense than the police. People trust us. If they suspect we are bringing information to the police we could be killed and so we do not report to the police. It boils down to trust.

We also have to be careful of how we disclose information. … For example, if we were seen as giving the police information, all of us would lose credibility. Even if we know who did a shooting we have to keep that confidential.

Here we see that if VIs report their knowledge of completed or planned crimes to the police, they will face two threats: first, risk of victimization and second, loss of credibility. With interviewees viewing their informants as more "intense" or dangerous than the police, reporting offenses to law enforcement is very unlikely. However, when VIs do not report their knowledge of planned or completed crime to the police, they effectively enable criminal offenders to go unpunished. In contemplating the dilemma of reporting offenses to the police or abiding by informal community rules (i.e. against serving as informants), one VI noted:

My commitment is not to law enforcement, my commitment [is] to the families. When someone is shot, and they go to the hospital that is an expense on the state. When someone is arrested that is also an expense on the state. So yes, I might not be calling the police, but I am saving the state money and preventing a killing. If the person never got shot in the first place, we have one less Black person going to jail, one less Black person going to the hospital or to cemetery.

Here, the VI justifies not sharing information about potential offenses with the police stating that even though they are not working with law enforcement officials, they are creating change and impacting society in a positive way.

Intervening in neighbourhood problems

VIs have dedicated years to helping fellow community members with a variety of social and economic issues, many of which are not directly related to crime and violence. Where possible, they help community

members access social services and provide comfort during difficult times (e.g. the death of a loved one). VIs are well known in their community and, through community dialogue, become aware of the difficulties neighbourhood residents encounter. Upon learning of residents' hardships, VIs offer various forms of support. As explained by two VIs:

There was an incident where a young lady was being abused. She had three children for one man and one child for another guy and they had a matter in family court. From speaking to her over the phone, she mentioned she had court and I went with her so I could take care of the baby while she was attending court.

One [young man] stayed with me for two weeks because his mother got kicked out. He was 15 years. … He stayed with me and he mother got back on her feet and he's back with her.

Here we see VIs serving as a support system for community members experiencing non-crime-related problems. These actions build trust and strengthen the bond between community residents.

A second area where VIs provide support to community members is after the death of a loved one. The homicide of a loved one is a deeply traumatic event associated with severe physical and mental health outcomes (Hinkson, Huggins, and Modeste-James 2020). Recognizing this, VIs aim to provide chief mourners with emotional support. One VI noted, "Last month, I brought a shooting victim's mother … to see her son who was dead. That was one of the hardest things I've ever done." Here, the VI supports the mother of the deceased through an emotionally challenging experience – seeing the body of her deceased son. VIs also visit the homes of those mourning the death of a loved one to express their condolences to the family and provide small tokens of support (e.g. candles for the wake). They explained:

We pay a lot of attention to the victims of violence, the people who have lost family members. The violence shatters a home and when a person loses a family member, we usually refer them to victims support.

With the killing in the community, we try to help out in any way we could. We might offer them candles for the wake. We try to provide support systems to the families in the community.

There was a lady in Palmville[6] whose husband was killed and about a year after her husband was killed, they killed her son. … [We] were able to organize counseling. Through the help she got from counseling, she was able to go back to work and earn an income to help out her daughter with her grandchild.

Believing that "violence shatters the home", VIs are part of the community fabric that envelops those in mourning in a blanket of care. In

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[6]Pseudonyms were assigned to each community to protect the identity of the research site and respondents.

supporting community members through the bereavement process, VIs show their commitment to community members' well-being. Further, VIs provide community members with information about publicly available support services that could help them navigate their bereavement. These support services (e.g. counseling) provide bereaved family members with the tools to process the death of their loved one and work through their grief.

The emotional support that VIs provide to grieving community members sometimes involves providing outlets for residents to express their grief. In relaying an incident where a young man was killed due to mistaken identity, one VI explained:

> One of the [interventions] we did for the young people was that we brought cardboard and had the young man's picture on the cardboard. We put these in all the buildings and the young people write how the felt about the young man and how they felt about the war and the killing.

Here, VIs provide community members with an outlet to express their pain and frustration after the accidental killing of a young man. VIs provide various types of support to community members depending on each community member's specific needs. In general, VIs appear to have invested heavily in being present to care for members of their community who are enduring difficult experiences. In supporting community members with non-crime-related needs, VIs do the important work of forging relationships that may be helpful for intervening in future violent situations. At the same time, as we explore in more detail in the discussion section, these efforts may detract from the intense degree of focus on violence that is essential for effective violence interruption.

Intervening in community violence

In the previous sections, we discussed why VIs are well positioned to intervene in violent situations in the communities under investigation. Here, we explore the two intervention strategies that are implemented most often by VIs. These include talking potential offenders out of engaging in crime and engaging with potential victims and their loved ones to ensure that they take the necessary precautions to prevent imminent victimization.

Talking them down

VIs often focus their efforts on gang members or others who are planning to kill someone. Upon learning of a planned homicide, VIs go to potential

offenders to dissuade them from carrying out the offense. These conversations occur soon after VIs learn of the plan to commit a crime, often at various hours of the day or night, and they last many hours and sometimes several days. Speaking about this strategy, VIs said:

There was a case with Brent (pseudonym) in Humming Bird Road. He was into music, working, and a very respectable young man in his community. A person who was not so upstanding was spotted in front of Brent's building. Someone made the call to have that person killed. By the time the gunman came, the person he was supposed to shoot was gone and Brent was standing in front of the building. The gunman accidently killed Brent. … We had to sit on [stay with] the older brother for 4 days straight because he was very disturbed. We cooked food for him and made sure no one went to do any reprisals.

A taxi man was seen driving his car with a Muslim gang member in the front seat. They [gang 1] were about to kill the taxi-driver because they felt he was in solidarity with [gang 2]. [The VI] was trying desperately to save the taxi man's life. Of course, the taxi driver didn't even know his life was on the line. [The VI] begged the gang boss in his area to just give him a few minutes to see who the taxi man really was. In the end, when he talked to the taxi man, he wasn't even aware that his passenger was a member of any gang. He was simply offering his usual taxi service, and the gang member happens to be the one that stopped him, the taxi man explained that he was just trying to get his coins; he had no idea who the guy was. [The VI] was able to relay this back to the gang leader and the taxi operator was spared.

VIs have their "ears to the ground" in the communities under investigation. They are trusted insiders who leverage their status to talk potential criminal offenders out of killing someone. When successful, their efforts save lives. However, talking community members out of perpetrating a planned criminal offense is not always successful.

In some situations, VIs were unable to talk community members out of engaging in violence. This is evidenced through the conversations below:

A gang member called [the VI] to tell him that he was instructed to kill someone. The gang member was struggling with this instruction. … As [the VIs] was talking to the gang member, [they] could see the tears rolling down his cheeks. He [gang member] quickly wiped them away, so that [the VI] and his colleague would not see it. They stayed with the gang member for hours, trying to dissuade him from carrying out this grisly act. However, as the hours waned, the gang member weepingly admitted that he just had to do it, he said "it was either that guy's life, or his. Because if he did not carry out the instructions that he was given, he would face consequences from the gang leader who ordered the hit." [The VI] admits he listened with bated breath to hear of the murder. Soon enough news came that the hit was carried out.

Five weeks ago a guy got shot during the day. [VIs] went to talk to the gang the victim was from. The gang members were very upset and actually noted "VI, vouch

for yourself. We killing someone today." Seeing that the gang members were very upset and were not listening to reason, we left. An important part of this [work] is knowing when to walk away.

Here we see two examples in which the VIs' efforts to intervene in two planned homicides were unsuccessful. In the first example, the gang member felt he had no choice but to carry out this murder – he believed it was either his life or the life of the victim. In the second situation, gang members were too upset about the death of one of their comrades to listen to reason; they were intent on retaliating.

Keeping them safe

In some cases, rather than engaging directly with would-be offenders, VIs engaged with potential victims or their loved ones and encouraged them to take precautionary measures, such as leaving the area. For example, in one incident, a VI explained:

Sometimes they tell you there is nothing you can do to stop them and then you just have to respect that and let them be. But if I cannot talk a guy out of killing someone, I might be able to talk the potential victim out of the area. We talk to their family and try to get them to help out with the situation.

It is well known in criminology that a crime requires an offender and a victim/target (with the exception of so-called "victimless crimes") (Cohen and Felson 1979). If the VI is unable to influence the would-be offender, then it may be a viable alternative to influence the intended victim. Below is another example in which a VI was able to encourage a potential victim's family to take precautionary measures to save their loved one's life:

There was an incident where a guy who is rocking with the Muslims went up in an area and told the guys that they is soft. These guys wanted to get him. So I called his sisters, who lived foreign, and they put him on a plane and they carry him out. Right now he is in Canada.

Because Trinidad and Tobago are small islands, it can be difficult for people to hide, therefore the intended victim's relatives moved him to a different country in an effort to save his life.

In some instances, VIs may seek to influence both the offender and the victim. For instance, VIs intervened with both the offender and victim in a case in which a baby was shot:

There was a situation where a man was going to shoot someone. I tried to stop him but by that time he had already bus the shots. He accidentally shot a child. So we worked with the child's mother and now the gunman is paying her compensation. The child did not die. The child was 1 year and 7 months old. The compensation

helped us settle this situation without retaliation. The police were called in but the person who shot the child did not get arrested. It is a set amount that the shooter will be paying to the mother.... If she said she wanted the shooter to be locked up instead of taking the money, she and the child would probably be dead right now. The state would not have moved them out of the community fast enough before the young man came to kill them.

This case illustrates how VIs operate outside the purview of the state, especially the formal criminal justice system. Here the VIs engineered an informal solution that excluded the state and its agents from any involvement. This example reinforces the idea that in communities without effective institutions, including criminal justice systems, informal social control can begin to take the place of formal social control. It is not reasonable to expect that a handful of VIs alone can control violence. Their role is to mediate in those situations where it is most likely to be effective in forestalling impending acts of violence. However, the VIs recognize that police still have a crucial role, as noted in the next section.

The role of the police

When a homicide occurs, police officers respond to the scene of the crime to investigate the incident. Heavy police presence sometimes deters the family and friends of the deceased from engaging in immediate acts of retaliation. In one of the situations described above, when VIs left gang members when they were told "vouch for yourself", the VIs returned to the group later that evening and realized that police officers' presence in the community had deterred the gang's planned attempt at retaliation. VIs said:

We went back [to the home of the deceased gang member] in the evening to talk with the gang and we stayed there until 3:30 the next morning ... Luckily, police were present in the community otherwise the gang members may have been more inclined to seek retaliation.

This was not a singular occurrence. Rather, other VIs provided examples where the presence of the police deterred other planned offenses. They explained:

We had another incident on Peeco Street where a Buccooville man was shot in his foot twice. Some of us went and took the guy to hospital. Then when I was in the hospital I got a call that some guys from Buccooville came up to retaliate and I had to go back down the road. I tried to talk to them but they didn't want to hear me. The police arrived and so nothing happened.

Then there was another incident on Ibis Street when some guys came down from Hibiscus Hill shooting at a youth man. The men from Ibis Street wanted to

go back for a reprisal, but we end up working with the youth man and calmed him down. We let them know that there were police on the other side to avoid that reprisal. There were no reprisals in that incident.

Noticing that the presence of police officers deterred community members from engaging in criminal offenses, VIs began relaying information about the presence of officers in adjacent communities to talk community members out of retaliation. Immediately following violent victimization or the death of the loved one, community members are not always ready to renounce their plans for retribution. In these instances, the presence of police officers investigating the initial offense may provide a cooling off period during which time VIs could talk potential offenders out of planned retaliation. Our focus on community-based violence initiatives is not meant to suggest that police do not have a role. The two efforts can co-exist in parallel with one another.

Discussion

Although much of the public discourse about preventing and reducing violent crime focuses on the formal criminal justice process (police, courts and corrections), community-based alternatives for controlling violence have also shown great promise (Abt 2019; Corvo 1997). In this paper, we examined the violence prevention efforts used by community-based VIs to reduce shootings and homicides in Trinidad and Tobago. These VIs were part of an effort known as Project REASON, a local adaptation of CV implemented in and around Port of Spain, the capital city of Trinidad and Tobago. A quasi-experimental impact evaluation showed that Project REASON resulted in "significant and substantial reductions in violence" over two years (Maguire et al. 2018, xiv). The current paper explored the work of these VIs, including the specific tactics they used to "interrupt" violence as part of Project REASON. These tactics are consistent in many ways with the CV model from which they were derived. In other instances, they deviated from the model in ways that raise interesting questions about implementing a US-based model in a developing nation with a weak social safety net.

Much of the debate around reducing crime and violence revolves around the "root causes" of crime such as poverty, inequality, unemployment, racial and ethnic tension and other dynamics that tend to change slowly. However, outbreaks of violence often erupt rapidly, particularly when cycles of retaliation are involved. In such instances, one shooting can lead to many *tit-for-tat* retaliation shootings. Retaliatory shootings

tend to be more predictable than other types of shootings, and their predictability provides a potential lever that can be used to interrupt the cycle. Mediation efforts, when carried out by people with the appropriate credibility and street knowledge, can help prevent imminent acts of violence. This is the foundation of the CV approach and was the basis for Project REASON in Trinidad.

Community-based intervention efforts may be especially suitable policy options in developing nations. In many developing nations, public trust and confidence in the formal criminal justice system – including the police – are low. Deficits in the perceived legitimacy of the police are often the result of the police being unresponsive to the needs of the populace. In some instances, legitimacy deficits may stem from overt forms of lawlessness such as corruption, brutality and criminal behaviour by the police (Goldsmith 2005; Haugen and Boutros 2014). In either case, when the population does not view the police as a legitimate institution, the police are likely to face significant difficulties in controlling violence. For example, witnesses who do not trust the police are less likely to provide police with information or to testify during criminal proceedings (Clancy, Brookman, and Maguire 2019). These legitimacy deficits are endemic in the developing world, where impoverished populations do not view police as an institution that they can trust or turn to for help or protection (Haugen and Boutros, 2014). In such circumstances, the most obvious policy solution is to reform the police, but decades of research have shown that police reform of this nature is both challenging and time-consuming (Ellison 2007; Goldsmith 2005; Prado Trebilcock and Hartford 2012). Another alternative in communities struggling with high rates of violence is to rely on community-based strategies to help control violence. CV, a public health approach to violence prevention, is one such strategy (Butts et al. 2015; Ransford and Slutkin 2017).

While research evidence on the effectiveness of CV and related strategies is mixed (Butts et al. 2015), quantitative findings from the evaluation of Project REASON in Trinidad and Tobago showed that it was clearly effective in reducing violence (Maguire et al. 2018). Our findings here suggest that VIs were deeply enmeshed in their communities, were aware of ongoing and emerging conflicts that may become violent and often became aware of imminent acts of violence, particularly in cases of retaliatory violence. This deep connection to the communities under study places VIs in a good position to influence would-be offenders and victims to forestall imminent acts of violence. Our findings in Trinidad and Tobago are consistent with findings from the United States, where researchers found that

"proactive efforts to learn about gang conflicts, retaliation, and minor incidents that could potentially lead to future violence are needed for this type of intervention to succeed" (Whitehill et al. 2014, 93).

However, VIs in Project REASON often found themselves engaging in activities that fell outside of the CV framework, including providing desperate residents with groceries, diapers for their babies or small cash handouts. Although VIs were not compensated for these expenditures, they viewed themselves as having little choice while navigating impoverished communities with no real social safety net. This adaptation is one that deserves further exploration as CV is adopted in other developing nations. On the one hand, it helps to cement personal relationships with residents in these communities. The trust that accrues from those relationships may prove invaluable for helping VIs in their efforts to prevent violence. On the other hand, engaging in these types of social welfare functions may distract VIs from having the high degree of focus on violence that is the hallmark of CV. Future research in other developing nations would be useful for clarifying the benefits and drawbacks of having VIs engage in these types of social welfare activities, particularly in disadvantaged communities.

The findings presented here are useful for understanding the potential role of community members in addressing problems, including violent crime, in their communities. Formal social control institutions such as the police are essential for safeguarding communities. However, these institutions are often underfunded, understaffed or otherwise dysfunctional, particularly in developing nations where they lack trust and perceived legitimacy (Haugen and Boutros 2014). In such settings, community-based initiatives may be able to contribute to the social safety net, offering prevention and intervention initiatives and helping to stimulate informal social control. Many such initiatives exist in the developing world, often administered by well-intentioned people seeking to better their communities. However, most of these initiatives have either not been rigorously evaluated or conflict with existing research evidence on what works. There is a strong need, particularly in the developing world, to build a rigorous body of empirical research on what works to reduce violence, fear and related outcomes. Project REASON is one of the few initiatives in Latin America and the Caribbean for which there is now solid research evidence supporting its effectiveness. It should be tested and evaluated in a variety of other settings with an eye towards building up this body of knowledge.

While this study has many strengths, it is not without limitations. It examines one community-based violence reduction initiative in one

nation. It is based on a handful of interviews and observations carried out by researchers who visited the study site from another nation. Deeper ethnographic research involving more intensive observations and interviews would likely generate richer data and stronger inferences. Such research is not without risks in the settings where this research was carried out. During our fieldwork, gunfire erupted near the research team on two different occasions. Assuming such risks can be managed, rigorous ethnographic research in these communities could provide powerful lessons for how to reduce violence and reform the institutions that can play a role in achieving this important goal.

Conclusion

The research reported here is useful for thinking about the role of community-based violence intervention efforts in distressed communities facing serious gang violence issues. Project REASON is a community-based initiative that significantly reduced violence in Trinidad and Tobago. Project REASON staff embedded themselves in communities with high rates of violence, particularly gang violence. They paid close attention to the dynamics driving violence in these communities and took action to prevent imminent acts of violence. Their mediation efforts focused primarily on the would-be offenders who were expected to carry out imminent acts of violence as well as the intended victims. In some cases, their mediation efforts involved the loved ones of would-be offenders and victims. Using these methods, Project REASON was able to achieve dramatic reductions in violence in communities where gang violence was endemic.

Further research is needed to examine the role of such initiatives in developing nations, particularly in Latin America and the Caribbean where homicide rates are among the highest in the world. Further research is also needed to improve our understanding of how interventions like these can be best adapted in developing nation settings facing a variety of socio-economic challenges. As the research on community violence reduction initiatives grows, it will result in a body of research evidence that can provide a solid foundation for policymakers seeking to improve health, safety and quality of life outcomes in disadvantaged violent communities.

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