Brandeis University

The Artist Approach to Gang Violence

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**Problem Description and Background:**

East Boston and surrounding neighborhoods near the Maverick T station have suffered from a spike of violent crime in recent months. The growing tensions between two Latin American gangs, MS-13 and MS-18, have been linked to a number of homicides of young men in the last six months. These gangs are extensions of highly recognized criminal organizations in El Salvador and Mexico. The M-18 was formed in the 1960s by Mexican immigrants, while MS-13 was created in the 1980s by El Salvadorian immigrants escaping civil war. These gangs target middle and high schoolers for initiation, especially in Chelsea and East Boston high schools. To reach membership or “homeboy status”, members must engage in “significant criminal activity,” that includes the murder of a rival gang member. The September 2015 murder of a 15 year old, Irvin de Paz, led to the initiation of one MS-13 member. About 3 other young men under 20 years of age have been found dead in East Boston as a result of feuds between these two gangs in the last 6 months. The rise in homicides has alarmed the East Boston community who recently had a vigil for the victims and called for the end of violence in their community.

**Gangs in the U.S.**

Gangs have been part of the human experience since the beginning of time. Humans have always grouped together for “protection and support- and to better dominate others”. Gangs have created a structure that allows members to get what they want by the use of force. Gangs can often be a source of protection to those who feel that are not protected by or isolated from official institutions. The word “thug” originated in India in 1200 CE as a way to describe a group of criminals robbed towns and had their own slang, rituals and to identify themselves from

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Gang members today use sub-language, symbols, tattoos as identifiers. In the U.S. street first appeared in New York in the 1930s when Italian immigrants related to the Sicilian Mafia and others began to use criminal activity as a means to get what they wanted. In 1950s, other immigrants and poor youth began to join together to form gangs. They began moving out of Los Angeles and New York and spreading across the country.

Through historical literature, it was found that the process of joining gangs in Boston with the formation of neighborhood friendships. There is little evidence that there is coercion for youth to join gangs but rather that it is an outcome of growing up in a specific neighborhood, family structure and economic conditions. These are usually neighborhood friends who adopt a specific identity and form delinquent practices as part of their identity.

**Boston Operation Ceasefire**

Operation Ceasefire is a multi-agency policing agency aimed at tackling “large scale serious crime problem involving (predominantly) young people.” It began in 1996 as a partnership between researchers and practitioners brought together to assess “the City’s youth homicide problem and implement an intervention designed to have a substantial near-term impact on the problem.” This policy is typically referred as the ‘Boston Miracle’, reducing youth violence by about two-thirds after 4 years of its implementation. The initiative was created directed by David Kennedy, Anthony Braga and Anne Piehl scholars from Harvard University’s

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2 Ibid.
Kennedy School of Government. The project included assembling a working group of largely criminal justice and other practitioners, applying quantitative and qualitative research techniques to understand the nature of youth violence in Boston and evaluating the impact and its intervention. The operation consists of three main techniques to address gang violence. The first, is the collaboration of the police with community members to evaluate tactics that will be used in their town. This includes meeting with gang members to lay out the police attention they will experience if violence doesn’t stop. Secondly, the program focuses on targeting the most dangerous offenders to be prosecuted in the federal system. Third, the program uses research conducted on victims and offenders in youth homicides as a foundation to its strategy.

One of the key factors that led to the immediate success of this policy was the collaboration of different sectors to end this issue, in particular, the participation of gang members as members of the community to speak about their needs and join the effort for less violence in their community. One of the founding leaders of this program, Rev. Jeffrey Brown, explained in his TED talk about the success of the initiative, “[we] came together and found ways to work with youth out on the streets, that the solution is not more cops, but the solution is mining the assets that are there in the community, to have a strong community component in the collaboration around violence reduction.” He also highlighted that in the process it was important to shift how they saw youth in gangs “We stopped looking at them as the problem to be solved, and we started looking at them as partners, as assets, as co-laborers in the struggle to reduce violence in the community.” Including the gang members as part of the solution proved to be one of the key factors for the reduction of youth violence in Boston.
The Artist Approach to Gang Violence:

A gang is another word for community. Communities are very important part of the human experience. Every human belongs to one or more communities and it is a very natural human condition to shift to a community for support and acceptance. The arts have contributed to the revival and strengthening of communities that have suffered from situations of necessity and instability. Through artistic proposals such as community choruses, festivals, spaces for community engagement and dialogue, and opportunities for youth, these can alleviate root sources of youth violence. Through the exploration of the root causes for gang violence in East Boston, this essay seeks to highlight how the arts can contribute to this issue.

There are seven steps identified by a local nonprofit in East Boston Teens Against Gang Violence as the needs for the prevention of gang violence in this area. This study will go through each of these preventive needs and provide suggestions based on theory and artistic experience to alleviate these needs. The first is the need to identify the needs of the youth, interest and concern. Youth who are vulnerable to violence are primarily composed of “youth who are not succeeding in school and have no healthy interests or activities outside of school”, this creates a group of children “who have nothing to look forward to, who do not feel good about themselves and do not have a positive outlook in the future.” This issue is linked directly with step two which is the need develop a sense of worth and purpose. When someone has nothing to look forward to, jail is not something they might fear because their life is not going to change if they go to jail. Jane Sapp, a musician and cultural worker, who has worked in schools and community centers, provides a specific lense on how the arts can built the self worth and value

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6 “Seven Steps to Gang Violence Prevention” Teens Advocating Against Gang Violence, web. 02 May 2016.
within the youth. She explores the potential for music and song to have transformative effect on how one sees who they are within a community. Her approach is supported by the work of Cynthia Cohen where she states that “Art and cultural programs can help facilitate the learning about self and other that is required.” This can also allow for the exploration of activities such as a community chorus, local festivals, and museums with the participation of all members of the community. These may include community stories that bring the value of those whose stories are being told and that can serve as a tool to break stereotypes or misrepresentations. This approach focuses in the resources present in the community rather than in those who are absent. In the same way, it is important to enable such participation of all youth but especially of youth at risk of engaging in criminal behavior. The arts can engage the youth at a young age regardless of their nationality and economic stability to contribute to their communities.

The next steps three, four and five involve the need for youth to identify with something besides gang life, ensuring opportunities to be successful, and addressing any behavioral challenges that get in the way of education. The arts can contribute spaces for community engagement and participation. These spaces, if created with the collaboration of youth, can be a source for other sources of community and identity. These may include joining a club, church group, sports team, musical instruments, camping and art projects. Although most public schools have programs like these, it is important for these type of community opportunities to be available outside of a school environment. This is because teens who are engaged in gang violence might not always attend school or find a sense of community within the school system.

Through an artistic approach rooted in the needs and particularities of communities, these spaces can become really useful and significant tools for youth to find a sense of belonging within their community. These can also provide opportunity for skill building and alternative means to gain an income. Theaster Gates, a social practice installation artist, added to the needs of participation and opportunity by using his work as a potter to renovate old homes in his neighborhood for community building. His work was deeply rooted with the collaboration of people in the community who helped in the development in the programming for these spaces. Through Theaster artistic lense, the community was engaged in the act of imagining the opportunity and possibility for their own neighborhood. In the same way, this can be a resource for youth to imagine the potential to shape their lives and their communities.

The Sixth and Seventh need for prevention of gang violence is the need of collaboration between different sectors to formulate inclusive solutions to gang violence. This includes the collaboration of different sectors but also the need for collaboration within schools partners. The organization explains “the biggest obstacle with gang youth is that they usually have a school principal, guidance counselor, probation officer, social worker, school psychologist and teachers who have never met in one room.” There is a need for more communication within schools to allow well informed policies for supporting vulnerable teens. Although the Boston initiative to end gang violence (Operation CeaseFire) included various sources for collaboration, it did not include schools within their partnerships. Mayan a streetworker working closely with Gangs in Boston explains that youth who join gangs in South Boston do so as a way finding “a sense of belonging.” These youth may be feel isolated or indifferent from their peers in school. They

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8 “Seven Steps to Gang Violence Prevention” Teens Advocating Against Gang Violence, web. 02 May 2016.
might struggle in school and feel the usual path is to join a gang. Another aspect of collaboration is engaging youth to participate to develop methods for the inclusion of gang youth in the school system. In the same way, these partnerships can push for agreements between youth members of gangs who are not engaging in violence to have access to education and other opportunities in the future. One aspect that is essential for collaboration is the ability to communicate between different sectors in the community. Each member/institution speaks in a different form according to the values and identity of its institution. Sometimes collaboration is not likely due to misunderstanding of a specific group or message. The arts could be a source of language to convey feelings and situations that may not always be easily conveyed or understood by the use of words. It has the potential for one to understand the humanity in the other and provoke a sense of unity even within difference.\(^9\) The use of creative forms of expression such as visual components, diagrams, presentations can contribute to the creation of inclusive collaborations. The seventh step for prevention explores the realities of gang violence prevention “most teenagers involved usually resist activities even though these are rewarding.” Teens do not usually engage in new activities on their own and may take time to fully feel comfortable and accepted in their communities, especially when they have been part of a gang culture.

The artist approach to gang violence uses creative acts to support efforts of collaboration and conflict resolution. The four elements of Moral Imagination by John Paul Lederach mirror the needs for gang violence prevention: “the capacity of individuals to imagine themselves in a web of relationships even with their enemies, the inclusion of spaces for creative engagement

and expression, the attentive and continuous inquiry about things and their meaning, and willingness to take risks into the unknown.” These four elements translate to the needs of gang violence in East Boston as the need for inclusion of gangs within community dialogue, creation of more spaces for teens to find other groups they can belong to besides gangs, continues search and inquiry into the particularities in each community and within gangs, and willingness to take risks and engage with the unknown realities of others in our communities. There are cases where the youth have utilized the arts as form to end gang violence. In the 1970s, a group of Bronx youth came together and created a gang truce. The next year the gangs came together during a peace summit and decided that instead of fighting each other, they would compete through dance, graffiti and fashion.\textsuperscript{10} This is known to have been crucial step for the creation of Hip Hop. Similarly, two Mardi Gras African American Indian “gangs” who had a history of violent began a movement to “stop fighting with the gun and knife and start fighting with the needle and thread.” There was a call for gangs to shift to the elaboration of masks and costumes, which they would during an annual cultural celebration during Mardi Gras season. Both of these show examples of how transformation of gangs have produced cultural phenomenons that benefitted their regions.\textsuperscript{11} In the same way, they have contributed to a decrease in violence within their respective communities. These are two examples of the contribution of the arts to cultural expression and understanding. These may, perhaps once only imagined outcomes, present real life examples of the contribution of the artist approach to ending gang violence.

\textsuperscript{10} Brentin Mock, “Disrupting the Cycle of Urban Violence With Arts and Culture”, The Atlantic, 2015, web.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
Works Cited:

  https://www.ted.com/talks/jeffrey_brown_how_we_cut_youth_violence_in_boston_by_79_percent