

Violence Prevention

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Cure Violence cut shootings by 41%-73% in Chicago—can it go global?

Homicide is preventable, but governments struggle to put policy before politics

In 2015, partisan warring over Illinois state budgets claimed its first round of casualties.

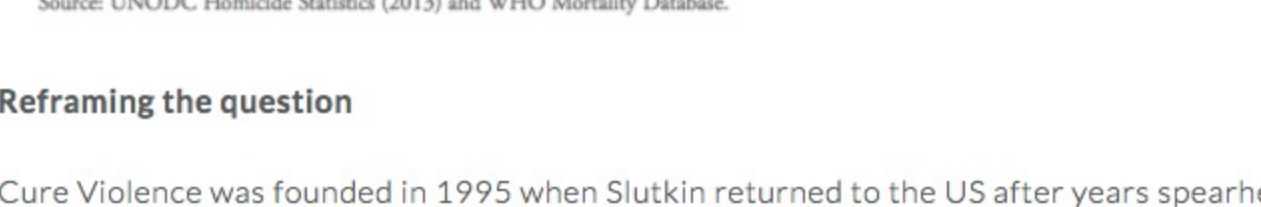
CeaseFire, Cure Violence's flagship violence interruption program using ex-convicts to prevent murders, had its funding slashed. Despite achieving a 41% to 73% reduction in shootings across seven of Chicago's most violent communities, the project was cut to the bone.

In the following year, 266 more Chicago residents lost their lives to homicide than in 2015—a 58% rise, and the highest number of homicides since 1997. Chicago alone was responsible for half the nationwide spike in homicides.

Cure Violence's interrupters work in communities they know—and that they may once have terrorised as gang members. Their intimate knowledge of gang structures, interpersonal feuds, and community hostilities makes them uniquely placed to prevent murder both in the heat of the moment, and by offering conflict resolution support before people reach for their firearms. They do not attempt to dismantle gang structures or inform the police about violent crime. Their ability to reach places law enforcement cannot is predicated on their credibility within criminal communities.

"We know the model works," says Gary Slutkin, Founder and CEO of CeaseFire's mother program, Cure Violence, "and we have the data to prove it." The John Jay College of Criminal Justice Research found that gun injuries were reduced by between a third and a half when the scheme was rolled out in two areas of New York City. In a third, shootings dropped by nearly two-thirds. When the scheme was replicated in Baltimore, the results were similar: in an area evaluated by the CDC and Johns Hopkins, killings dropped by more than half and shootings by around a third.

Now, the model has gone global, even rolling out to war-torn Syria and Iraq. Yet the test of the program's global potential lies in the Latin America and the Caribbean, where homicide has become a trans-continental pandemic. More than one in seven of all homicide victims globally is a male aged 15-29 living in the Americas. Cure Violence is trying to achieve what prisons and policing have not.



Source: UNODC Homicide Statistics (2013) and WHO Mortality Database.

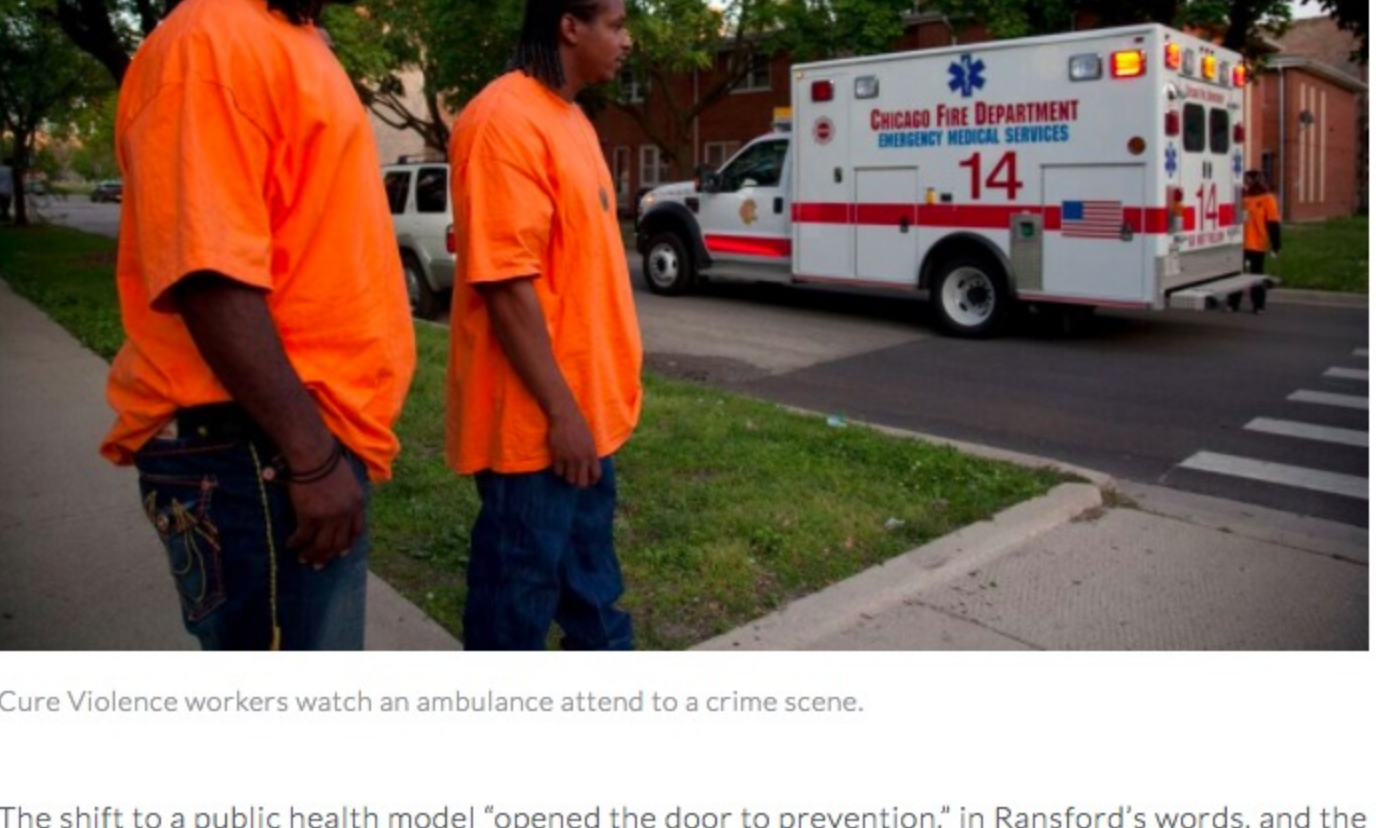
Reframing the question

Cure Violence was founded in 1995 when Slutkin returned to the US after years spearheading World Health Organisation efforts to combat tuberculosis in Somalia and AIDS in Uganda. An epidemiologist by training, Slutkin saw precipitously high levels of youth violence across the US as an opportunity.

"It looked exactly like contagious diseases," Slutkin recalls, "One event led to another, it had epicentres on maps, clustering, and standard epidemic curves."

"I realised that the problem was misdiagnosed and nobody had a strategy for it." Slutkin moved the question of violence from a criminal justice lens to the framework of public health. Rather than treating it as a moral issue of "bad guys" doing "bad things", he recast violence as a disease transmitted through exposure.

Charlie Ransford, Director of Science and Policy at Cure Violence, explains the importance of such a paradigm shift in simple terms: "What the science tells us, is that people are becoming violent because of exposure to violence and they adopt the behaviours and norms around it."



Cure Violence workers watch an ambulance attend to a crime scene.

The shift to a public health model "opened the door to prevention," in Ransford's words, and the removal of traditional criminal justice thinking allowed for an innovative approach to criminality.

Interrupters are trained to intervene in street conflicts, saying the right thing at the right time to prevent murders from taking place. When they are too late to prevent a killing, they reach out to family of the bereaved to offer counsel, and prevent retaliation that fuels the cycle of violence. Community outreach work in the form of flyering and school workshops are also key, as are targeted support offered to individuals at high-risk of perpetrating violence and re-offending after release from prison.

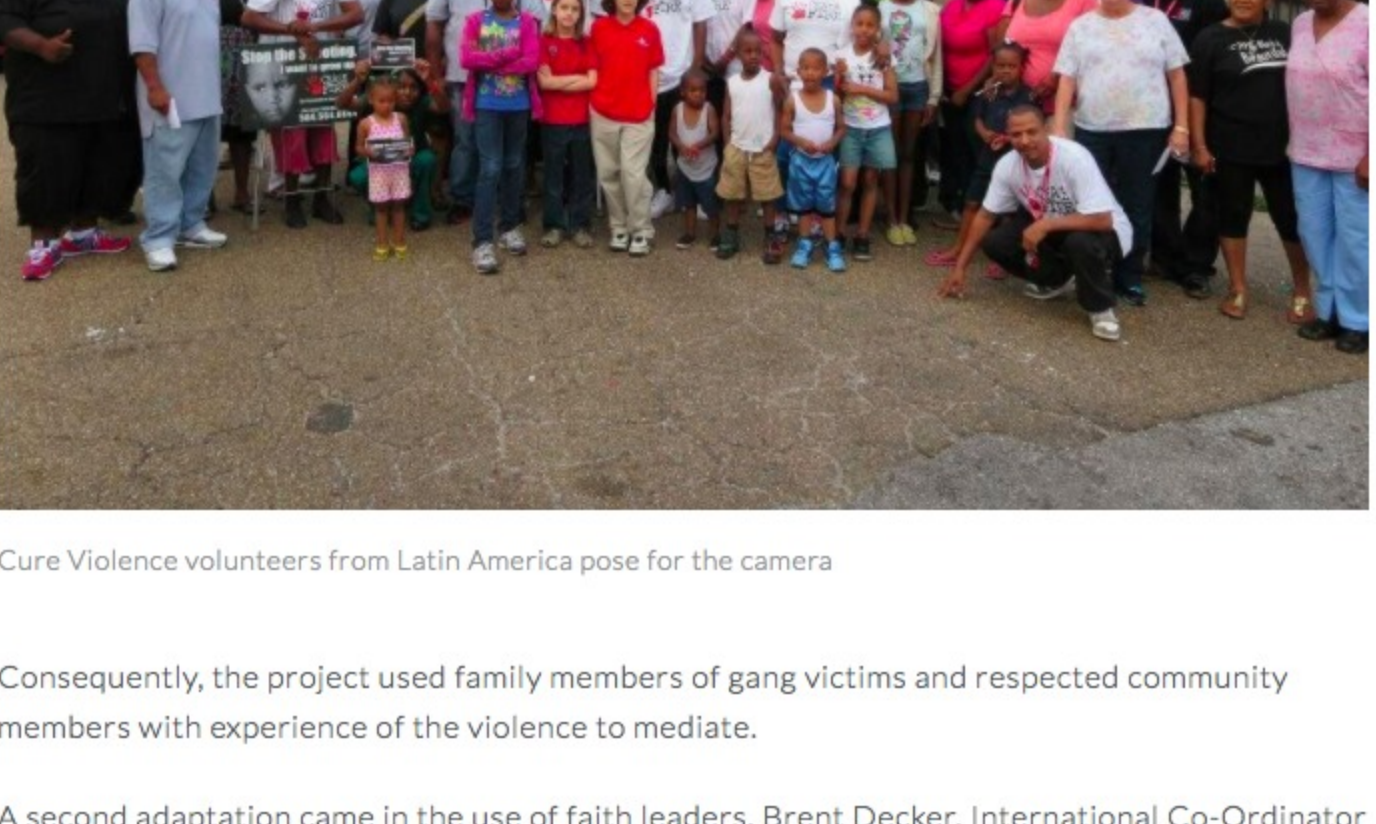
With each replication, the model changes, but its essential tenets remain the same. The model has seen particular success in preventing gang-related murders—a phenomenon spreading throughout Latin America.

Braving the barrios

Gangland rivalry is a key driver of Latin America's refugee crises, displacing tens of thousands every year. In 2016, the UNHCR predicted an estimated 80,000 would flee the "Northern Triangle" of Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala to find safe refuge in Mexico, a 658% increase since 2011. Old insurgencies by leftist guerrillas against US-backed dictatorships may be a thing of the past, but a range of community gangs and international cartels have filled the power vacuum.

Central America posed unique challenges to the model that required context-responsive adaptations. Finding ex-gang members was particularly difficult because of the specific nature of Latin American gang culture.

"In the US, we could find people who had left that life," says Ransford. "But in Honduras, it's impossible to leave. There's only one way out, and that's death."



Cure Violence volunteers from Latin America pose for the camera

Consequently, the project used family members of gang victims and respected community members with experience of the violence to mediate.

A second adaptation came in the use of faith leaders. Brent Decker, International Co-Ordinator of Cure Violence, details how churches were "already doing the work", undertaking mediations and reaching out to people at risk of perpetrating violence. "They were organic institutions that were trusted and had credibility, so we worked with them where we could." Working in tandem with faith leaders to mediate conflicts and community outreach provided legitimacy to the nascent project.

Cure Violence has achieved remarkable results against the kinds of violence that are within its remit. In one site of San Pedro Sula in Honduras, an 88% reduction in shootings and killings was reported, with violence interrupters mediating over 1,000 conflicts. One smaller zone defied all expectations, lasting 17 months without a shooting. Results for San Salvador are pending, but the approach is gaining traction.

But Central America's violence epidemic is not born of gang violence alone. "In South America, we still have a lot of violence being committed by state actors and the military," notes Ransford, phenomena firmly outside the control of violence interrupters on the ground.

"Cartels are definitely a different type of animal than community gangs," he adds, explaining that interventions in cartel disputes were too deadly and complex for street-level interrupters.

Combatting gang culture is only the first stage in transforming violent cultures, however. What comes after the gangs is often harder to isolate and mediate, as Jamaica's fast learning.



A young woman campaigning for an end to gun violence

Killing in Kingston

"Homicide rates in Jamaica are completely off the charts," says Mark Connolly of UNICEF Jamaica. "The only reason we slid down the murder rankings is because El Salvador and Honduras exploded."

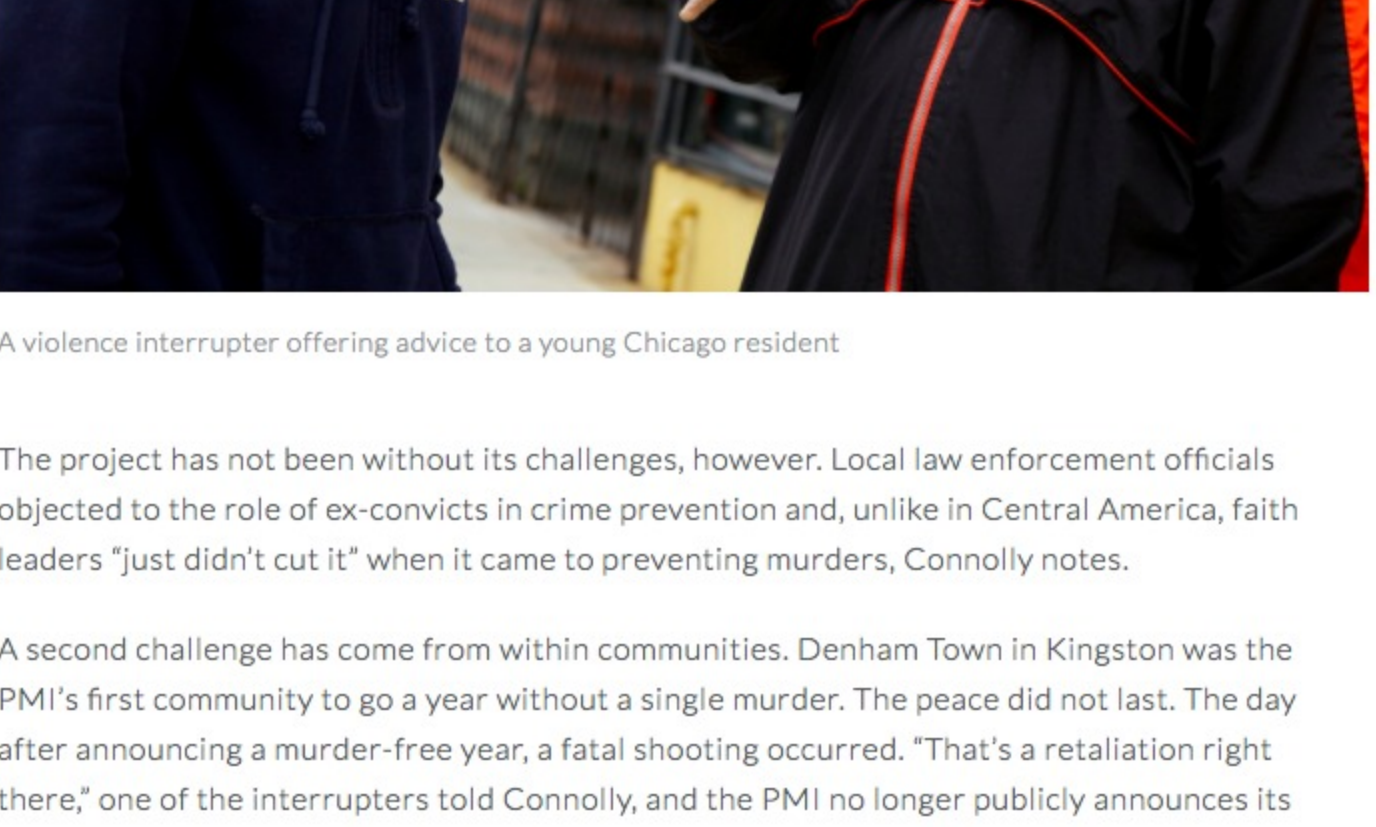
Violence in Jamaica is substantively different from that in Central America. International cartels and gangland wars plagued the nation in the '80s and '90s, but since gang leaders "died, got rich, or got old" in Connolly's terms, violence has spread as a generalised mode of conflict resolution between individuals.

"Gangs, crime and homicide are not as linked as they were ten years ago, or as they are in Central America," argues Connolly. "Most homicide in Jamaica is conflict resolution between a couple of people who know each other."

Violence has become a diffuse principle across Jamaican society, Connolly argues, and children have not been immune to its spread, either as victims or perpetrators. "We've had cases of six-year-olds shooting dead two-year-olds because the two-year-old crawled on his foot while watching TV."

Because violence is predominantly interpersonal rather than gang-related, interrupters perform more outreach work than conflict mediation between armed groups. "These guys are out on the street corners at every hour of the night," explains Connolly. They require microscopic understandings of community tensions, and the influence to be able to mediate any level of interpersonal conflict.

Preliminary results show promise: while no large-scale evaluation has taken place in Chicago or Baltimore, the Peace Management Initiative (PMI) reduced fatal shootings to zero in communities such as August Town in St. Andrew in 2016.



A violence interrupter offering advice to a young Chicago resident

The project has not been without its challenges, however. Local law enforcement officials objected to the role of ex-convicts in crime prevention and, unlike in Central America, faith leaders "just didn't cut it" when it came to preventing murders, Connolly notes.

A second challenge has come from within communities. Denham Town in Kingston was the PMI's first community to go a year without a single murder. The peace did not last. The day after announcing a murder-free year, a fatal shooting occurred. "That's a retaliation right there," one of the interrupters told Connolly, and the PMI no longer publicly announces its successes.

The third – and most intractable – challenge has been funding.

Cure Violence's work in Jamaica has been conducted through the PMI, a project which is part-NGO and part government-led through the Ministry of National Security. While Connolly describes the collaboration as "the best of both worlds", bridging the NGO and government divide, a lack of funding has limited the rollout of the PMI's work: Kingston and Montego Bay are covered, but Western Jamaica parishes, where homicide is highest, is without any Cure Violence involvement. The financial future of the project, which is largely supported by UNICEF, also poses worries.

"We, UNICEF, picked up after the World Bank money ended, but I don't know who'd be behind us to pick up the pieces if we leave. I don't think it can be just another NGO. It has to be government."

Putting policy before politics

Governmental involvement has been vital to Cure Violence's success wherever it operates, but the project still struggles with the often competing priorities of good politics and good policy.

Gary Slutkin's 22 years of working on Cure Violence reverberate with one consistent problem. "Our major obstacle is the way the general public sees this problem: the worldview is that this is caused by "bad" people, and politicians don't want to be involved with "bad" people."

CeaseFire Chicago was not defunded primarily because of a hostile public—those concerns tend to surface in the initial stages of roll out, before the project bears fruit. But in partisan feuds over government funding, violence prevention too often becomes collateral damage.

"Policing would not have gone through that because that model of punishment is still dominant," Slutkin argues.

"Rather than focus on prevention, we have developed overblown punitive systems larger than anything in history."

In the funding wars between prevention and punishment, governments still opt for the known embrace of the prison system. Cure Violence's global ambition is to shift that model.

Charlie Ransford is clear on the project globally: "We don't need more replications and more trials. We've already had enough to see that the approach works. Now, we need the health approach to be standard practice, worldwide." Only time will tell if governments are ready to take the leap.

(Picture credit: Cure Violence)

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