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MURDER, INTERRUPTED?

Searching for violence-reduction strategies other than hard-nosed policing

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. “[The Interrupters](#),” one of the season’s most acclaimed documentaries, follows three [Chicago Ceasefire](#) street workers as they seek to disrupt the cycle of violence and retaliation that infuse the everyday lives of poor youth with fear and uncertainty.

Launched in 1999 by the University of Illinois School of Public Health, Chicago Ceasefire deployed former gang members in inner city areas to identify and counsel high-risk youth, mediate disputes and defuse potentially violent situations. This approach distinguishes Chicago from [Boston Ceasefire](#) (aka Boston Gun Project,) a 1996 initiative that tackled the problem of youth homicide by staging meetings (“call-ins”) with parolees and probationers to scare them straight and offer options. (Click [here](#) and [here](#) for full descriptions and evaluations of both projects.)

Chicago and Boston have been modeled by other initiatives. In 2003, a 49 percent one-year increase in Pittsburgh’s homicide rate led a coalition of community organizations to develop “[One Vision One Life](#),” a violence-reduction program whose protocol follows Chicago Ceasefire’s street-worker approach.

One Vision staff selected three areas for intervention. Two, “Northside” and “Hill District” were best by exceptionally high homicide rates, 31 and 44 per 100,000 respectively. A third, “Southside,” had a relatively low rate of 4/100,000 but was considered problematic for other reasons. It was intended that outcomes would be compared with non-targeted areas within Pittsburgh.

One Vision hired forty street workers who lived in the target districts and had street credibility. They identified and interacted with at-risk individuals, referring them to a variety of programs and furnishing employment, housing and social assistance. Workers (aka “interrupters”) conveyed a “no shooting” message, interceding in disputes and applying mediation techniques to help settle things nonviolently. They also responded to homicides and shootings and tried to prevent retaliation. Although street workers occasionally exchanged information with police, there was no regular interaction, which seems understandable given their unique role.

One Vision was in effect during 2004-05. Evaluators concede that assessing its effectiveness was complicated by the fact that like the Chicago and Boston programs, One Vision’s protocol was only “quasi” experimental. Treatment areas had been purposively selected by One Vision staff, making it impossible to rule out the possibility that factors extrinsic to the intervention could be responsible for any post-intervention differences between experimental and control groups. In the end, after considering eleven variables, including violent crime rates, educational level and transiency, evaluators decided it was appropriate to compare Northside, Hill and Southside to the aggregate of non-target areas. One Vision staff also identified seventeen areas that they thought similar to the three treatment sites for use as a secondary control. In addition, efforts were made to measure spillover effects for Hill and Southside (Northside is isolated by rivers, making spillover unlikely.)

What were the results? In a word, unexpected. Before-after comparisons revealed that aggravated and gun assaults increased substantially more in the intervention than control areas. The one exception was Northside, where gun assaults increased less than in the secondary control area. It was One Vision’s sole “success” story.

Area	Homicide			Aggravated Assault			Gun Assault		
	Pre	Post	Change	Pre	Post	Change	Pre	Post	Change
Northside	0.04	0.06	0.02	1.10	1.59	0.48	0.33	0.89	0.56
Hill District	0.09	0.09	0.00	1.72	2.02	0.30	0.55	1.28	0.73
Northside and Hill District comparison, all	0.04	0.05	0.01	1.35	1.50	0.16	0.36	0.76	0.40
Northside and Hill District comparison, One Vision	0.08	0.11	0.03	2.35	2.55	0.20	0.84	1.43	0.59
Southside ^a	0.02	0.02	0.00	1.12	1.66	0.55	0.29	0.96	0.68
Southside comparison, all	0.04	0.05	0.01	1.38	1.43	0.04	0.38	0.84	0.45
Southside comparison, One Vision	0.08	0.12	0.04	2.41	2.42	0.00	0.88	1.52	0.64

Researchers also evaluated the differences in the before-after change between experimental and non-experimental (control) areas. (The table on the right is for the secondary control area. A probability of .05 or less denotes that the differences are statistically significant.)

Outcome	Predicted Monthly Rate Change	P-Value	Outcome	Predicted Monthly Rate Change	P-Value
Northside			Northside		
Homicide	0.0219	0.7432	Homicide	0.2845	0.7588
Aggravated assault	25.2095	0.0000	Aggravated assault	26.7970	0.0000
Gun assault	13.1244	0.0000	Gun assault	20.0605	0.0000
Hill District			Hill District		
Homicide	-0.6710	0.3374	Homicide	-0.9174	0.2681
Aggravated assault	7.7365	0.0255	Aggravated assault	6.4579	0.1922
Gun assault	6.6038	0.0008	Gun assault	11.1381	0.0003
Southside			Southside		
Homicide	-0.2540	0.6976	Homicide	-0.6288	0.7438
Aggravated assault	25.3953	0.0000	Aggravated assault	25.0327	0.0000
Gun assault	14.6630	0.0000	Gun assault	15.5951	0.0000

For homicide the difference is not statistically significant. But with one exception (the Hill District, when compared to the secondary control area) aggravated and gun assaults increased significantly more in treatment areas. Spillover effects (not pictured) generally followed the same trends, the one exception being that spillover from Hill was inexplicably linked to a significant *decrease* in aggravated assaults.

In summary, One Vision proved a near-fiasco. Not only did it fail to reduce homicide, it seemed to worsen the problem of assaults. Evaluators rejected the only theoretical explanation at hand – that street workers may have inadvertently increased gang cohesion – as there was little interaction between street workers and gangs. They attributed One Vision’s poor showing to insufficient dosage and inaccurate

targeting. According to evaluators, the program emphasized “persons in need” over hardcore criminals, such as those served by Chicago Ceasefire. Neither did One Vision partner with law enforcement, a key component of reportedly successful “[Pulling Levers](#)” approaches including Boston Ceasefire, SACSI and Project Safe Neighborhoods.

But holding other efforts up as models of what One Vision could have been is unsatisfying. For example, while advocates of Chicago Ceasefire cite its supposedly resounding success, [evaluators were skeptical](#). While Ceasefire was in effect Chicago also played host to Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN), a major gun-violence reduction initiative that features harsh Federal prosecution. Like One Vision, Ceasefire was a quasi-experiment, with a design that may have been insufficiently robust to assure that it, rather than PSN, was the driving force behind any benefits that may have accrued. (Incidentally, it’s the same issue that beset the evaluation of [Boston Ceasefire](#).)

Back to One Vision. How can we account for its wrong-way effects on crime? The simplest explanation is that at a time when crime and violence were on the upswing throughout Pittsburgh, local experts – One Vision staff members – accurately targeted areas *where the problem was most acute*. One Vision probably had little or no effect, leaving violence to rise at a faster rate on its own.

Really, once we brush rhetoric and false hopes aside, [there’s precious little proof](#) that “soft” interventions such as Ceasefire and One Vision can be effective without the coercive presence of the police. Unlike Chicago and Boston, Pittsburgh lacked a hardcore law enforcement program on which to piggyback. It had to do it all by itself. And predictably, it failed.

In 2003-2004 another quasi-experiment, [Project Greenlight](#), applied a “cognitive-behavioral” approach to help put inmates on the right track before release. It too seemingly made things worse. [We concluded that it didn’t](#), and that the only reason it looked that way was because, as Greenlight’s own data revealed, those assigned to the program had more severe criminal propensities to begin with than controls.

That’s not to say that street workers and the like can’t be useful. To make a convincing case for such approaches, though, would call for a research design that uses random selection and assignment to control for extraneous factors. Indeed, one is available. It’s called a *real* experiment.