

The Opinion Pages

Building Trust Cuts Violence. Cash Also Helps.

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Richmond, Calif. — DeVone Boggan could teach a class on the art of making a statement. In 2010, he invited a group of the most dangerous gun offenders in Richmond, a Bay Area city of about 100,000 residents, to a conference room at City Hall. At each seat was a name card starting with “Mr.” and an information folder labeled “Operation Peacemaker.” Wearing a suit and his signature fedora, Boggan began the meeting by apologizing on behalf of the city for not reaching out to the men sooner. Peace in Richmond, he told them, must come through them. When the meeting was over and everyone got up to leave, Boggan called them back. The men, already wary, assumed they would be arrested. Instead, Boggan handed each an envelope containing \$1,000. “We wanted to send sound waves through the community,” Boggan said. “Facebook blew up.”

The previous year, Richmond police department officials had told Boggan, the director of the city’s Office of Neighborhood Safety, that they thought 17 men were responsible for 70 percent of the city’s gun crime. At the time, Richmond was among the most dangerous cities in the country. Its homicide rate had reached 46 per 100,000 residents — triple Chicago’s rate. At one point, the City Council had even considered declaring a state of emergency. Boggan asked each official to

independently send him the names of the 17 men, an exercise that yielded 28 unduplicated names. In the three months it took to make contact with all of them, three died of gun related injuries. He invited the remaining 25 to City Hall, and 21 showed up.

Boggan is the architect of Operation Peacemaker Fellowship, a controversial program initiated in 2010 that shares features with Cure Violence and Ceasefire, two other programs that, over the last two decades, have become models for reducing gun violence. Like the others, Boggan's method uses data and intelligence to identify people highly likely to commit or become victims of gun violence; it then connects them with job training, mentorship and social services while deploying outreach teams to intervene in conflicts.

But it also does something else. After six months, its subjects — most are African-American males between 14 and 27 years old — are eligible for a monthly cash stipend of up to \$1,000 for up to nine months (Boggan's meeting in 2010 with the first cohort was played out in a way designed to turn heads and attract more fellows into the program). The city's average homicide rate in the five years that preceded the arrival of Operation Peacemaker was 40 per 100,000 residents. In the next five years, it dropped by nearly 60 percent.

Modeled after Cure Violence, the Richmond program treats gun violence as an epidemic disease that spreads by exposure to it. What's notable about the approach is that, unlike Ceasefire and other focused deterrence strategies administered by police, the Office of Neighborhood Safety does not threaten punishment if fellows don't comply. "There are only three ways out," Boggan said. "They choose to leave, they're arrested, or they're killed." The office also maintains a firewall between it and law enforcement and doesn't share with the police intelligence it has gathered about fellows — including reports of continued firearm activity.

For one 29-year-old former fellow, LaVon Carter Jr., that element was critical. "When I knew they weren't the police, that's when they gained my trust," he said. "I can't be talking to you about stuff that I did and exposing this and that and you're the police. That don't work." Carter became a fellow soon after his release from a

five-year prison term. He had heard about the program while incarcerated. Like all fellows, he was recruited because the neighborhood safety agency's outreach team, which is composed largely of streetwise former felons turned "neighborhood change agents," had determined that, once out of prison, there was a high likelihood of Carter shooting someone, or being shot himself, within the next six to 12 months.

At a time when algorithms are increasingly being used to predict the likelihood of future criminality, Richmond's Office of Neighborhood Safety selects fellows based almost entirely on old-fashioned street intelligence. Its "change agents" regularly engage with young people from the city's toughest neighborhoods. They get to know where prospective fellows live and work, whom they spend their time with, who their enemies are, what their family life is like, and what interactions they've had with rival gangs and with law enforcement.

That timely on-the-ground knowledge enables the change agents to build a psychology-based profile of each prospective fellow and assess who are most likely to be involved in gun violence. There have been four Peacemaker cohorts to date, and a total of 93 people have been invited into the program. Of those, 84 have accepted. As of January, the program had a dropout rate of zero. "The money is the bait," Carter said. "It all starts off about the money, and then once you get involved with it and start being around these people, meeting all these people that you would have never been exposed to, it opens your eyes to a bigger picture." Fellows have traveled to Washington, D.C., South Africa, Mexico and Disneyland. Boggan describes seeing "one of the baddest dudes around" wearing Mickey Mouse ears.

Fellows are also invited to meet with prominent members of the community, including top corporate executives and members of Congress. "I'd never been around people like that before," Carter said. "Through my whole stint in prison, everything that I was thinking about was illegal; how I was gonna get out and get money ... now I work ten hours a day. I'm a heavy equipment operator. I never thought I'd be out here driving Tonka toys for real."

Fellows are also connected to a "council of elders" — older African-American

men who serve as mentors and role models — and attend weekly classes to help them develop social and emotional skills like conflict negotiation and anger management.

The stipends are funded through private grants, but that has not shielded the program from significant criticism as a method that rewards criminality. But social programs that use cash incentives have been used for decades as a way to alleviate poverty. In 2007, for example, Michael Bloomberg, then the mayor of New York, launched Opportunity NYC, which linked cash incentives to educational outcomes, preventive health care and employment. That program wound down in 2010 and had mixed results, but two years later, “problem behavior” like aggression among teenagers was reported to have diminished.

While Operation Peacemaker does attach conditions to fellowship stipends, fellows are never explicitly asked to put down their guns. Instead, fellows must make steady progress toward certain life goals, which can include finding safer housing, kicking substance abuse, getting a driver’s license or paying off a parking ticket. The size of the stipend each month depends on how well fellows progress toward these goals. Boggan said he has written checks for as little as a dollar.

For all of the buzz it has generated, it’s hard to assess how much of Richmond’s progress in reducing gun homicide is a result of Operation Peacemaker. Simultaneously, the Richmond police have implemented other reforms, including expanding the police force and conducting more community-based policing. In addition, the city has been gentrifying, which typically leads to less crime. But some of these same reforms and trends have been happening elsewhere, including neighboring Oakland, and the declines there have been much more modest.

In 2009, Richmond’s homicide rate was by far the highest when compared to Oakland, Stockton, San Bernardino and Inglewood, four cities with populations over 100,000 with crime rates among the state’s highest. By 2014, Richmond’s rate was the lowest in that group, though the next year it nearly doubled and stayed that high through 2016. But even with the uptick, the city is now at a seven-year

decrease of more than 50 percent, and officials in many cities, including Los Angeles, Chicago, Baltimore and Philadelphia, are watching Richmond closely.

Perhaps the most remarkable outcome of Operation Peacemaker are the fellows themselves. Of the 84 who have participated since the program's inception, 69 haven't had a firearm-related injury, and 64 have not been suspects in a firearm-related crime. And then there's this: 79 of the 84 are still alive.

It's tempting to attribute Operation Peacemaker's success to its most controversial feature: cash. But that's almost certainly an oversimplification. Data from the Bloomberg School of Public Health show that one in five children in Richmond has had at least two adverse childhood experiences — traumatic events that can have lasting effects on health and contribute to the perpetuation of violence by the affected individuals later on. Stipends, while a powerful financial incentive, are just one piece of a broader offensive to rehabilitate perpetrators of violence. Positive, caring relationships and exposure to people and places beyond their own conflict-prone communities often matter more.

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