

Towards the Development and Implementation of a
Violence Interruption Programme in Halifax Regional Municipality

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(This is a redacted version of this paper intended for academic and discussion
purposes beyond the development of Ceasefire HRM)

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The Purpose of this Paper

In February of 2012 I had a meeting with Ms. Yvonne Atwell, Executive director of the Community Justice Society. During that meeting Ms. Atwell shared with me the plans for the upcoming Knowledge Exchange Conference and inquired about my ability to assist in some way. After some discussion it was agreed that my part would be to provide some analysis of the Ceasefire Model of Violence Interruption, to consider the Nova Scotia context, to present at, and help facilitate a small portion of the portion conference and to draft a plan for moving a “made in Nova Scotia” plan forward.

I initially conceived a rather academic paper that would bring research and local knowledge to the question. After some missteps and after the very powerful exchange that was experienced at the conference, this paper has shifted somewhat from the original plan. I have felt moved to include some personal reflection along the way. This takes the form of weaving some stories from my own life within the report, not because I have a desire for this work to be focused on me, but because I felt it would be inappropriate to share the stories of others. Many of the persons assembled at the Knowledge Exchange Conference would have similar stories to mine. In fact, given that HRM is such a close nit community, many of our stories of violence would intersect. For example, I know that the brother of the young man that stabbed my nephew many years ago was in attendance at the Conference. It is circumstances like this that reflect the urgency and uniqueness of violence in HRM and explain the personal intensity that persons bring to the discussion.

The Author's Story – A Typical Scotian Family

I am an African Nova Scotian (ANS) who has deep roots in several ANS communities. My maternal grandfather's people are Wrights from Beechville, my maternal grandmothers people are Willis's from North Preston. I have a great grandmother who came to HRM from Amherst, Nova Scotia. As a function of this heritage I have cousins in ANS communities all over the province. This is a common experience. Prior to N.S. becoming an integrated society, ANS settled, traded and intermarried between ANS communities.

I consider myself a "North Ender". When my mother moved to Halifax from Beechville as a youth she lived in the North End. When I was born my family lived on Maitland Street and when I was 4 we moved to Cunard Street and 2 years later we moved to public housing in Spryfield. Though my mother continued to live in Spryfield until just 8 years ago (she moved to Bayers Westwood, another housing development) my siblings and I never stopped feeling our North End roots.

My family lived a life that is fairly typical of inner city, poor Black folk. My mother raised her 6 children largely alone. The men in her life were marginal individuals, or at best were victims of their own personal and economic circumstances, and so for various reasons left my mother to largely raise her children alone.

There was a lot of alcohol-fueled-violence among the adults in our world and though my mother's love and care for us children was solid, our upbringing was clouded by these circumstances.

Public housing living at that time was a mixed experience then and very different than it is now. Because families seemed to move en masse from inner city slums to these new developments, many of the families knew each other. For us kids, our parents were longtime

friends or relatives and there was a strong sense of community. At the same time violence seemed to be a way of life: children fought with each other in a way that makes modern concerns about bullying seem almost trivial, adults fought in the home, youth and young adults fought in the street, and the police came in force, when they did come, and suppressed the violence with violence.

Criminal behavior was also common. People sold stolen goods door to door and drug dealing, prostitution, theft and fraud were common enough vocations among neighbors and friends. In my own family of 6 I have a sister who was “in the life” who tragically was murdered here in the city, apparently a random “bad trick” experience that was a tragedy for the families of both victim and perpetrator (Saunders, 1999).

I have a brother who committed robbery and did time as a young man. The first and only time he was involved with the law. Another brother got seriously involved with “working” in various capacities for “big time” drug dealers. Another still has a tragic history of using drugs to cope with mental health issues.

Despite these profiles, my family was considered successful in our neighborhood. My mother was a community matriarch who raised and fostered children both formally and informally, and despite criminal engagement my sister was the most celebrated student athlete of her day and my other siblings were similarly athletic and popular.

I share my story because I believe it is the typical story of families whose children are involved in crime and violence. Whether urban Black or suburban White, from the Preston’s or public housing, many of the parents of those currently involved in crime and violence were church attending, home owning, volunteer fire department serving, upstanding, hardworking citizens.

Though my family is ANS and has roots in a Beechville, we spent decades living in

Spryfield and so grew up with white families who lived similar lives. Oakley's, Melvin's, Marriott's, Boudreau's; we were all childhood friends together. It would seem on the surface that white and black, our experiences are so similar that we could expect that patterns of criminality, violence and incarceration to be the same. Yet we know that they are different, with people of African descent being incarcerated at an increasingly higher rate than white Canadians (Crawford, 2011). This seems to be playing out in the Halifax context.

The seemingly disproportionate participation in crime and violence among ANS is likely caused by a collection of factors:

Community Displacement

Though it is true that all communities in Nova Scotia have been affected by shifts in population caused by economic and urbanizing forces, this is particularly true of ANS communities. There are places around the province where ANS lived in very large numbers in cohesive communities, yet today those communities barely exist. Beechville and Amherst are large examples of this, though Africville would be the most dramatic example in Metro.

The gentrification of the North End of Halifax and the creation of public housing in Bayers Westwood and Greystone are other examples. With the expansion of the city into districts in East Dartmouth, the largely ANS communities of Lake Loon, Cherry Brook, East and North Preston are also being encroached on by suburbanization which threatens their traditional fabric.

Another, seldom spoken of, and possibly controversial aspect of this description of community displacement is the increasing presence of bi-racial (white/black) children being raised largely by their white families, and in particular by their white, single mothers. Historically, because of racism and the near segregation that existed between black and white peoples in the intimate details of their lives, bi-racial children were largely reared and nurtured within the ANS

community. In fact, though they may have been referred to in derogatory or at least differentiating terms (yellow, high yellow) the fact that they were “of the Black Community” was rarely questioned. In cases where the relationship that bore these children failed, most often these bi-racial children would have been raised by ANS aunts or grandparents and would have benefited from the socialization into ANS identity and gained experience about how to live in a racist society, a skill of coping that has been passed down through ANS folk teaching. Today, the large proliferation of bi-racial children raised without this firm grounding in ANS identity and coping skills is an emerging social problem. These children; youth, young adults, now young parents are living in a racist society as racialized individuals without a clear racial identity and coping strategies.

Economic Collapse

Many ANS were significantly employed in labor and domestic work throughout HRM: Stevedores at the dock yards, laborers on road crews, stone masons and sought after craftsman. There was also a significant amount of subsistence husbandry that supported rural Blacks in Metro. Most families kept a cow and a couple of pigs, dozens of chickens or turkeys; others were crafts people who sold their wares in downtown markets. These economic opportunities are now relics of a not too distant past.

Increased Demand for Education

Over the last generation the demand for education in order to enter the economy has grown dramatically. In the mid 80’s the need was recognized and gave rise to a national effort to encourage students to stay in school. Prior to this, Nova Scotians of all ethnic groups from the working classes had low educational attainment rates. The pressures and needs to remain in school gave rise to the recognition that schools were less welcoming places for ANS than others (Black

Learners Advisory Committee, 1994). ANS were faced with the same increased demand for education as White students but were less well integrated and supported into the education system. This increasing demand for education but differential success in integrating ANS students into the education system may go a long way to explaining some of the racial differences in criminal and violence patterns we see.

Strategic Recruitment of ANS into the Criminal Subculture

I have written elsewhere about the phenomenon of ANS substance use and trafficking patterns (Wright & Leader, 1997). Suffice it to say here that the history of organized crime responsible for the large scale import of drugs in NS is the history of largely white ethnic criminals such as biker gangs/groups. In other jurisdictions, the systematic recruitment of African American “drug crews” to market and distribute drugs in inner city settings has been suggested (James & Johnson, 1996). It is not unreasonable to assume that similar patterns exist here.

Particular Patterns of ANS Violence

I have written earlier about the cohesive and extensive relational bond that exists between ANS communities. It is a commonly held belief that ANS hold these kinship bonds as a more substantial part of their culture than do their NS neighbors of European heritage (Nichols, n.d.). This may be due to the culture being more high-context and relational (Kuykendal, 1992; Nichols, n.d.) or it may be that the racialization process causes ANS to form a deeper racial alliance than those of other racial groups. Regardless, this recognition of the large extended family bond means that each tragic loss of an ANS life to violence is felt as a deep personal loss throughout a wide network of extended families. When the violence is "Black on Black" it inevitably involves overlapping social and/or family ties between victim and perpetrator. This results in many consequences but two of them are quite dramatic.

First the ANS community senses each loss as tragic and deep and the losses mobilize a sentiment of outrage that could arguably be suggested to be out step with the actual number of such losses. Secondly, among those ANS who are engaged in criminal activities the loss is not simply about business but it is personal and family. Such losses are more likely to result in violent reprisal than simply be seen as the cost of doing business. Some writers have described this phenomenon of close overlapping social and familial networks among African Americans as a reason for the high sensitivity to personal affront in dealings within these networks. Some have suggested that this is the reason why disrespecting (or "dissing") someone is a violation often requiring violent response (Jones, 2002; Morris, 2012). This is not just an experience among people of African descent. This similar phenomenon could be used to explain the existence of multigenerational family feuds among rural and isolated white Americans, such as is held in the imagining of Hatfield/McCoy-like blood feuds.

Regardless of the origins and causes we are left today with a growing problem in Halifax. Gun violence that is connected with criminal enterprise is a large problem. It seems to be intensifying, even if not in a numerical sense, certainly in terms of the nature of these shootings (occurring in mid town, during the day time, involving bystanders and visitors). The three day knowledge exchange was an excellent opportunity to learn about the ceasefire mode of Violence Interruption.

Towards a Violence interruption Programme

The Issue

Though, statistically, overall crime is down in our society, there seems to be an increase in a particular type of urban, drug related violent crime. A disproportionate amount of this crime involves members of the African Nova Scotian (ANS) community and this intersection of race and

crime has proven to be particularly challenging for law enforcement to police. Though local policing agencies (HRP & RCMP) have made gains in their recruitment of ANS police professionals, this has not translated into an increase in effective policing and crime prevention in the ANS community.

The Knowledge Exchange Conference/CeaseFire

As part of the 2012-2013 crime prevention initiative, The Minister of Justice announced his intention to work with community partners to host a 3 day knowledge exchange conference during which participants could study the local issue of the drug related gun violence and learn about the Ceasefire Model, developed out of Chicago, which has had some dramatic success in reducing this sort of violence in other jurisdictions. A program that has been replicated in hundreds of centers worldwide, it is described as a Violence Interruption program that focuses much of its attention and owes much of its success to its ability to respond immediately when violence occurs, and by working with the perpetrators of the incident, the victim and their respective families and associates. This immediate intervention is designed to pour cold water on the urgent felt need for reprisal. This Violence Interruption work creates relationships with high risk persons. These relationships can then be the vehicle for providing ongoing services through outreach and referral. Services designed to lead persons further away from the violent lives they are living.

The question, then before the participants of this knowledge exchange is fundamentally this; how can we in HRM respond to reduce gun violence? Does a Violence Interruption program similar to Ceasefire make sense in the HRM context? How do we move forward from here to respond effectively to gun violence?

The Proposal

[redacted]

Considerations, Reflections and Resources: There have been incidents and efforts in recent history in HRM that identify this intersection of race and crime. Though not formally acknowledged the Pimping and Prostitution Task Force established in HRM in 1992 was a policing action largely colored by social factors. The pimps arrested were largely ANS males, the prostitutes “rescued”, largely white young women (Smith, 2000)(Smith, 2000).

The Nia Centre, a federally funded Africentric Substance Abuse Prevention Programme ran for 3 years in Halifax. Funded by Health Canada, the programme acknowledged particular patterns of substance use and trafficking among ANS and addressed this issue in a uniquely Africentric manner (Wright & Leader, 1997).

Diversity, and in particular ANS overrepresentation in crime and custody statistics in Nova Scotia and HRM was noted in the report prepared for the Mayor’s Roundtable on Crime (Clairmont, 2008). Clairmont noted that ANS accounted for a grossly disproportionate amount of youth offenders, repeat offenders, and persons incarcerated. He also noted that minority individuals were similarly dramatically overrepresented among victimizations statistics as well.

The Community Justice Society has been a local leader in developing culturally specific responses and interventions for youth crime in HRM. Though not an ANS organization it has recognized this need and developed a number of programmes specifically for ANS’s and has begun integrating that knowledge generally into its operations.

Towards an HRM Response to Gun and Drug Related Violence

[redacted]

Barriers to Successful Programme Development

[redacted] There are some challenges to programme development that cannot be overlooked however. They include:

1. Scale: When attempting to replicate a programme that has demonstrated success in one location the question of scale must be addressed. Chicago is a large urban centre with approximately 9 times the population of HRM, finding the expert resources to implement a violence interruption programme in HRM may require significant partnering from exiting agencies to ensure that all the critical elements are in place to ensure success.
2. Culture of Risk Aversion. To be effective, employees of the violence interrupter programme will be deployed to have direct contact with the most dangerous individuals in our city. Though the culture of crime, drugs and guns would not be unfamiliar to "credible messengers" who may be engaged, it will be essential that supporters and funders adopt an understanding of the nature of this work early on. The Youth Advocate Programme, Wood Street Centre, the provincial ISAY Programme and Dayspring area all programmes that were implemented to serve the most challenging population of youth within their scope. Each has experienced challenges in their mandates that may be related to what may be related to a provincial culture of Risk Aversion.
3. Law and Order Agenda. Implementing a programme which analyzes crime from a public health perspective may be challenging within the context of a national deepening of the law and order agenda in response to crime. Supporting this approach may require both a concerted public education programme as well as policy, programme and political analysis to ensure that the method will be supported on all fronts.
4. Cultural Competence/Race Analysis: As noted throughout this report, it is my view that a successful programme must be created within such an analysis.
5. Community Consultation towards Implementing a Violence Interruption: It has been a stroke of genius on the part of government and the organizers of the Knowledge Exchange

Conference to initiate this work through a broad community meeting. To be credible and successful the work must continue following this model. Creating "programmes and services" through a transparent, community consultative practice is challenging to government and formal agencies. As it has been said, no one wants to see how sausages and government policy and legislation are created. However, given the nature, challenges and risks of this work; a community consultative model for moving forward will likely result in a much more successful and credible programme.

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