

# Saving Lives: Alternative Approaches to Reducing Gun Violence

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**Abstract**—This paper highlights an innovative and nontraditional violence prevention program that is making a noticeable impact in what was once one of the country's most violent communities. With unique and tailored strategies, the Operation Peacemaker Fellowship, established in Richmond, California, combines components of evidence-based practices with a community-oriented focus on relationships and mentoring to fill a gap in services and increase community safety. In an effort to highlight these unique strategies and provide a blueprint for other communities with violent crime problems, the authors of this paper hope to clearly delineate how one community is moving forward with vanguard approaches to invest in the lives of young men who once were labeled their community's most violent, even most deadly, youth. The impact of this program is evidenced through the fellows' own voices as they illuminate the experience of being in the Fellowship. In interviews, fellows describe how participating in this program has transformed their lives and the lives of those they love. The authors of this article spent more than two years researching this Fellowship program in order to conduct an evaluation of it and, ultimately, to demonstrate how this program is a testament to the power of relationships and love combined with evidence-based practices, consequently enriching the lives of youth and the community that embraces them.

**Keywords**—Community violence, firearm violence, interventions for violent crime, violence prevention.

## I. INTRODUCTION

THE Operation Peacemaker Fellowship (Fellowship) is an intensive mentoring program operated by the Office of Neighborhood Safety (ONS), a non-law enforcement office housed in the city manager's office in Richmond, California. The Fellowship provides intensive services that include case management and tailored interventions for the young men ages 14 to 25 who are most likely to use firearms or be victims of firearm violence.

The city of Richmond is an urban community in the San Francisco Bay Area region of Northern California, about 17 miles northeast of San Francisco. In the years leading up to the ONS's establishment in 2007, Richmond had

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approximately 98,000 residents [12]. According to estimates from the 2005–2007 American Community Survey, the city was home to a diverse population, with the major racial/ethnic groups at the time including White (34%), African American (31%), and Asian (15%). About one-third (34%) of all residents were Hispanic or Latino [14]. For those ages 25 and older, about 21% of the community did not have a high school diploma. While the median household income was \$50,346, about 22% of families earned under \$25,000 annually and unemployment stood at approximately 8% in 2007 [2], [12]. As the impact of the recent recession deepened in the region, Richmond experienced double-digit unemployment rates, peaking in 2010 at 18% [2]. Unemployment tends to disproportionately affect African American and Hispanic/Latino communities [1].

Violent crime also rose during this timeframe. For example, between 2003 and 2006, the number of firearm assault cases rose steadily, reaching a 13-year high in 2006. The number of homicides increased substantially from 2001 to 2007, with 2007 marking the highest number of annual homicides since 1994 [9], [13]. During this time and after, African American youth in Richmond were strongly affected by gun violence and, as a consequence, were in dire need of attention and support from the city and service providers. Richmond homicide data aggregated for 2005 to 2012 show that 88% of homicide victims were male, 73% were African American, and 36% were ages 18 to 24 [14].

While the profile of the population most affected by gun violence in Richmond remains relatively unchanged today, the city's homicide levels have dropped substantially. In 2007, the year the ONS was established, Richmond was considered one of the nation's most dangerous cities, with a homicide rate of 45.9 per 100,000 residents [13]. The 2007 average homicide rate for similarly sized cities in California, excluding Richmond, was 4.7 per 100,000 [13]. However, since 2010, Richmond's annual homicide count and rate have dipped significantly. In 2013, the city recorded 16 homicides—the fewest number it had seen in 33 years and its lowest homicide rate (14.9 per 100,000 residents) in the city's recorded history [7], [13]. While official statistics for 2014 have not yet been released, data indicate that homicides have continued to drop in Richmond, to a reported total of 11 for the year. Similarly, five-year rolling or moving averages for homicides in Richmond for the last two decades indicate an overall downward trend, with some fluctuation. This trend suggests that the recent declines are part of a general pattern of reduction over time and not isolated incidences. At the same time, while these rates and averages do indicate substantial

local improvements, it is important to note that Richmond's homicide rate remains substantially higher than the rate for similarly sized cities. The 2013 average homicide rate for similarly sized cities in California, excluding Richmond, was 2.8 per 100,000 [13].

While it is not possible to isolate any one intervention or initiative causing Richmond's significant drop in gun violence, the Fellowship is certainly one piece of the puzzle in the integral collaborative efforts that have increased community safety. Leading the way with innovative tools and methods for intervention, the ONS and the Fellowship use both community- and individual-level interventions to address gun violence on its front lines, making the community a safer place for families and children to live their lives in peace.

## II. THE OPERATION PEACEMAKER FELLOWSHIP

### A. *What Is the Operation Peacemaker Fellowship?*

In order to directly affect individual outcomes, the ONS provides individual-level intervention through the Fellowship. The Fellowship, like the ONS itself, was created as a result of using data-driven decision making to respond to a community problem. As reported by ONS director DeVone Boggan, law enforcement data indicated that a small number of individuals—approximately 30—were responsible for approximately 70% of Richmond's firearm violence in 2009, a finding consistent with literature indicating that the overwhelming majority of serious violent crime is committed by a relatively small group of offenders [4], [10], [11]. The ONS Fellowship, launched in 2010, is designed for this population.

The Fellowship is a non-mandated intensive mentoring intervention lasting 18 months and designed for youth who have been identified as the most active firearm offenders in Richmond. Upon enrollment, each fellow develops a customized "life map" outlining goals he would like to achieve while in the Fellowship. As fellows complete these goals and participate in various components of the Fellowship, they may be eligible to receive small incentives. As of 2014, the ONS has had a total of three cohorts and 68 fellows.

### B. *The Fellowship's Approach to Violence Prevention*

The Fellowship draws on research and best practices, including consultations with practitioners around the country about what would work best for the program's population. Key theories underlying the Fellowship are those of viewing violence prevention as a public health issue and operating under a positive youth development perspective. To accomplish its goals, the ONS incorporates cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) components and provides positive reinforcement through stipends.

Using a positive youth development framework, the ONS emphasizes authentic relationship building as an important element of the Fellowship. The ONS takes a strengths-based perspective on youth, viewing them as equal participants in the Fellowship's work. ONS staff describes the importance of relationships in their work, noting that they engage positively

with youth on a daily basis in a variety of ways. "We admonish, engage, and challenge the young men every day," said Boggan. "We plant a seed, we laugh, we hug. That's the relationship."

The Fellowship applies the approach of CBT, which involves skill-building that "enables an individual to be aware of thoughts and emotions; identify how situations, thoughts, and behaviors influence emotions; and improve feelings by changing dysfunctional thoughts and behaviors" [3]. The Fellowship incorporates elements of CBT, including successive approximations toward behavior changes, structured reinforcements, and contingency management. ONS staff and volunteers continuously work with fellows to challenge dysfunctional cognitions and replace those cognitions with healthy, prosocial thought patterns. Contingency management involves anticipating and troubleshooting potential challenges.

Several meta-analyses of CBT's impact on juvenile and adult offenders have identified it as a treatment modality that shows great promise in addressing criminal behavior. These studies indicate reductions in recidivism of 20% to 30% between treatment and control groups [5], [6], [15]. Landenberger and Lipsey [5] also found that the most salient components of CBT treatment are anger management techniques and interpersonal problem-solving skills. Their research also indicated that the highest-risk offenders were more responsive to treatment.

As an extension of the CBT approach, stipends are used to reinforce fellows' positive behaviors and identities. Stipends provide a monetary incentive for young men who may otherwise be reluctant to engage in programming to be regular and active participants in fellowship activities. This approach is consistent with research that points to the importance of stipends for incentivizing the academic achievement of low-income youth of color. As Spencer, Noll, and Cassidy [8] found, stipends validate and reinforce positive identities. The authors also discuss the importance of reinforcing positive identities for youth of color who face discrimination in a multiplicity of ways.

### C. *Who Are the Operation Peacemaker Fellows?*

Youth served by the Fellowship are a unique population. The Fellowship is designed for young men who have been identified as most likely to be involved in gun violence in Richmond. "When we launched the Fellowship, and for subsequent cohorts, we knew who these guys were," said Boggan. "[For each person], we knew that we need to engage this young man, or he's going to die or kill someone on these streets." These young men are deeply immersed in Richmond's street life and are therefore difficult to reach through traditional services and approaches. Due to a lack of community-based organizations (CBO) that have the capacity to support them, these youth are heavily underserved. These youth tend to be resistant to change and indifferent toward services, making them a challenge to work with effectively. They also come from communities that have experienced structural unemployment and poverty, which complicate the

issues the young men face.

Fellows are 14 to 25 years old and are assigned to one of two groups based on age at program entry: junior fellows (ages 14 to 18) and senior fellows (ages 18 to 25). The majority (97%) of fellows are African American. About half of fellows (45%) are fathers. About one fifth (21%) were victims of gun violence prior to participating in the Fellowship. While the Fellowship engages youth at high risk for involvement in gun violence, it is important to note that the Fellowship is not a diversion program. Fellows do not have prosecutable criminal cases.

The ONS strives to provide support to these youth to reduce gun violence and to keep the young men alive, with the ultimate goal of eliminating gun violence in Richmond. As a secondary goal, the ONS seeks to fill a gap in services and facilitate young men's successful functioning in the community. Another auxiliary reason for the Fellowship is one of cost—it is expensive to fund increased policing of violent young people's communities, their points of contact with the criminal justice system, and related use of hospitals and social services. The ONS operates with the assumption that successful intervention will allow public funds to be directed elsewhere.

#### *D. What Is the Identification and Recruitment Process?*

##### 1. Identifying Potential Fellows

The ONS is strategic when identifying youth most likely to use a firearm. Potential fellows are identified by ONS staff through their own observations and experiences facilitating street outreach work, as well as information obtained from a variety of community stakeholders, including law enforcement. Because their target population is so specific and small in number, ONS is careful to ensure that only those considered or suspected to be the most lethal or most likely to use a firearm are offered a Fellowship opportunity. ONS cannot accept every at-risk youth interested in the Fellowship.

##### 2. Making First Contact With Potential Fellows

Neighborhood change agents (NCA) use a variety of approaches to introduce themselves to prospective Fellowship participants and inform them about the Fellowship's services. They talk and spend time with potential fellows in their neighborhoods, as well as interrupt and mediate conflicts, all of which helps to develop trust and rapport between the young men and the NCAs. While most prospective fellows have heard about the ONS, these initial conversations involve educating youth in more detail about the benefits of the Fellowship program and emphasizing the potential consequences of continued violent behavior. NCAs tell prospective fellows that participating in the Fellowship provides an opportunity to change their lives for the better.

##### 3. Inviting New Fellows

After an ONS staff member establishes rapport with a potential fellow, the youth is invited to be part of the Fellowship. Some potential fellows are eager to join, while others are reluctant and wary due to distrust and fear of joining

an unknown program. To overcome these prospective fellows' resistance to joining, NCAs use both consistency and persistence as part of their engagement efforts. The turning point for a youth deciding to join often occurs when a youth sees his friends or others around him participating in the Fellowship and beginning to make changes in their lives; as a result, youth often decide to give it a try themselves.

#### 4. Orientation and Intake of New Fellows

During the orientation to the Fellowship, which takes place at City Hall, the NCA formally introduces the fellow to the program. If the fellow has an important adult in his life, this person can be included as well. Subsequent to the orientation, an individual intake is completed by the fellow and his assigned NCA. At intake, a life map is developed and written agreements are signed. Unlike the orientation, the intake typically occurs in the field in order to meet the fellow in surroundings where he is most comfortable.

#### *E. What Happens During the Fellowship?*

ONS staff describes the Fellowship as consisting of several primary components, which are designed to provide fellows with tools, skills, and resources to lead healthy, productive lives. These components may include:

- Multiple daily contacts with staff;
- Life map/developing goals;
- Case management/social services navigation support and referrals;
- Excursions;
- Internship opportunities;
- Elders Circle/intergenerational mentoring; and
- Stipend privileges.

##### 1. Multiple Daily Contacts With Staff

The Fellowship offers fellows daily contact with ONS outreach staff in order to facilitate ongoing relationship development and trust building. NCAs check in individually with each fellow multiple times a day. Daily interaction between staff members and Fellows provides support, guidance, encouragement, and mentorship, which are often otherwise absent from fellows' lives. In interviews conducted with fellows for this evaluation, many described relationship building with staff members as one of the most valuable elements for their continued Fellowship participation and growth.

##### 2. Life Map/Developing Goals

Completed by an NCA and the incoming fellow during intake, the life map (or management action plan) provides an individual comprehensive assessment of a fellow's circumstances in key areas, including housing, education, employment, transportation, finances, safety, family/relationships, physical health, mental health, spiritual, and recreational/social. For each of these areas, the life map outlines the fellow's short- and long-term goals and specific steps for achieving them. For example, short-term goals may include participating in substance abuse treatment or individual counseling, attending parenting classes, or paying

outstanding municipal fines. Long-term goals may focus on objectives such as rebuilding family relationships or completing a GED program. Each goal has a timeline associated with it, allowing for close monitoring and evaluation of progress.

The life map is updated every six months, taking into account the fellow's accomplishments and areas with which he may be struggling. In addition to being an assessment tool, the life map also represents a contract between the fellow and ONS: it is a pact on the fellow's part to commit to ONS' mission and make positive changes in his life, and it represents a commitment by ONS to support the fellow in achieving his goals, setting the foundation for an ongoing, committed alliance between ONS and the fellow.

### 3. Case Management/Social Services Navigation Support and Referrals

ONS operates under a framework of case management based on best practices and the State Mental Health Code. The ONS has also developed protocols for making referrals. The office maintains a referral list of organizations with which they have developed relationships. When making a referral for the client, ONS staff assesses the client to connect him with the appropriate services that fit his needs and provide information about the specific program (e.g., GED preparation or anger management) to which he is being referred. ONS staff also participates in the referral process by accompanying the young man to the referral agency and providing specific modeling or directions on navigating the service. For example, the NCA will attend the first few meetings of the class or services with the fellow in order to provide onsite support, such as helping the fellow to complete enrollment paperwork and become comfortable in the setting. As importantly, the NCA will observe the class content, the instructor or facilitator's interaction with the fellow, and the fellow's participation in the programming. Prior to enrolling in the Fellowship, fellows typically have not attended community-based services other than school on their own, so this navigation process can help increase their comfort level; it also allows the NCA and fellow to determine together whether the programming and the provider are a good fit for the fellow.

The ONS provides fellows with an array of services, both as a result of referrals and as provided by ONS staff. These include development of life maps (received by 100% of fellows), life skills training (83%), anger management services (77%), financial management (77%), and employment services (61%).

Fellows also received health care (46%), mental health (41%), educational (40%), recreational (34%), transportation (32%), parenting (31%), substance abuse counseling (16%), and housing services (14%).

### 4. Excursions

Excursions provide an opportunity for fellows to experience life outside the city of Richmond and to safely interact with other fellows from rival neighborhoods. Fellows may go on

several trips each year. Since the Fellowship's inception, there have been 35 excursions to a variety of locations, including San Francisco; Washington, DC; New York City, and international destinations such as Mexico City, South Africa, and Dubai, with an average of eight trips per year. In order to qualify for an excursion, fellows must be active participants in the program, agree to stop shooting, have completed a life map, and have a relationship with ONS. For out-of-state travel, fellows must meet all of the above criteria and also be willing to travel with fellows from rival neighborhoods. On excursions, fellows participate in one or more activities, including completing community service projects, taking college tours, attending or presenting at conferences, and meeting with government officials. In addition to engaging fellows in a range of new activities, excursions serve as a time for fellows to connect and even bond with each other—especially with their rivals, an experience that is often transformative. "It just changes the entire way they view one another," an NCA said.

### 5. Internship Opportunities

Some fellows have the opportunity to gain job skills through a paid internship. Placement in an internship generally occurs after a fellow has been part of the Fellowship for at least 18 months. This timing allows ONS staff to help a fellow stabilize and address basic needs such as housing or substance use treatment prior to internship placement. To guide placement, ONS staff work individually with a fellow to determine the types of occupations that interest him and skills he would like to gain or improve, then facilitate a match with an interested employer. Most intern positions are 20 hours a week for six months in city departments or agencies and CBOs. ONS subsidizes 100% of the fellow's internship salary through private funding sources. Providing a wage subsidy encourages a potential employer to take on a fellow without incurring financial risk.

NCAs regularly visit fellows on the job to promote job retention. A total of 13 fellows have had the opportunity to take advantage of the internship program and 100% of those who participated have landed long-term employment (lasting more than nine months) as a result of this opportunity. Fellows have obtained positions including warehouse worker, restaurant worker, and office clerk. They have also worked in fields including construction, maintenance, retail, and youth development.

### 6. Elders Circle/Intergenerational Mentoring

The Elders Circle, facilitated by the Brotherhood of Elders Network (Network), represents a powerful addition to the daily mentoring that NCAs provide. Formally established in 2011, the Network is a group of male volunteers, ranging in age from 20 to 55 or older, that provides intergenerational mentorship to boys and men of color in Richmond and Oakland. The Network is a volunteer coalition that functions independently of the ONS. Elders bring a wide range of expertise and knowledge in areas including finance, psychology, public health, and philanthropy—as well as life

experience—to the Network.

Within the Fellowship structure, the elders meet with fellows and ONS staff twice a month for a two-hour meeting called the Elders Circle. After developing trust with participants, elders provide fellows with guidance on topics such as impacts of violence, family dynamics, and family relationships. Elders also offer individualized job search assistance to fellows. Additionally, through the Elders Circle, ONS staffs such as NCAs have an opportunity to establish mentoring relationships with the elders, which in turn can provide staff with tools to deal with stress and maintain work/life balance.

### 7. Stipend Privileges

Some fellows have the opportunity to receive monthly stipends for their participation in the program. Of the 68 fellows who have participated, about 60% have been provided with monetary incentives. Not all fellows are provided with stipends for several reasons, including their not needing financial support, not meeting their life map goals, and/or a determination by staff that stipends may not be appropriate for them (e.g., due to challenges with substance abuse). Eligible fellows are given stipends only if they show a true desire to improve their behavior in the initial six months of participation as evidenced by their time, work, participation levels, life map goal achievements, and peace-building contributions. For those with stipend privileges, stipends are only offered for nine months of the 18-month minimum Fellowship duration. Fellows can receive stipends of up to \$1,000 per month, but the majority of fellows who are eligible receive approximately \$300 to \$700 monthly. All stipends are provided through private funding sources.

The stipend serves several purposes. First, it provides an incentive for young men who may otherwise be reluctant to engage in programming to be regular, active participants in Fellowship activities. Second, while the stipend payment is not large, it serves as an alternative to participating in illegal activities. Finally, the stipend sends a powerful message to fellows about their worth. Through the stipends, fellows receive validation about changes they are making in their lives, acting as a form of positive reinforcement. Stipends are used both as incentives and to let the fellows know that they are valuable and important.

### 8. Assessing Progress to Completion

The ONS draws on a variety of tools and approaches to assess fellows throughout their time in the Fellowship. Assessment instruments and techniques include observations from street outreach conducted by NCAs, the life map, an online academic assessment (California High School Exit Examination), a career assessment, and a life skills assessment.

A fellow must meet several criteria in order to complete the Fellowship. The first requirement is to no longer be involved in gun violence. The second is to participate in the Fellowship for a minimum of 18 months. The third is to complete the goals listed in the life map. These life map goals are

associated with personal safety, emotional/mental health, improved family relationships, transportation, financial literacy, and improved recreational/social opportunities.

If a young man stops participating in the program and its services, ONS staff members work to support this youth in returning to the Fellowship. ONS staff does not remove a fellow from the program for any reason. If a fellow disappears temporarily, as may happen due to the nature of the work, ONS staff attempts to connect the returning fellow to appropriate resources and services. NCAs seek to work with each participant for at least 18 months.

## III. VOICES OF FELLOWS

To highlight the impact of the ONS's work in the Richmond community and on the lives of fellows, NCCD conducted interviews with 14 current or former fellows to collect information about their experiences in the Fellowship and how their involvement in the program has affected their lives. Interviews focused on exploring the fellows' motivations for joining, service experiences, successes, and challenges. Young men also discussed the fellowship's impact on the lives of their families and members of the community. It is important to note that the interviews were arranged by the ONS based on convenience. Results are likely biased to include fellows who were available to meet with NCCD and had trusting relationships with the ONS.

### *A. Broadening Fellows' Worldview Through Excursions*

Excursions have emerged as a catalyst for broadening fellows' worldview and shifting their perspectives on rival group members. Fellows described ONS excursions as an opportunity to travel that they had never experienced prior to their participation in the program. To many of these young men, the trips seem to symbolize the ONS's emotional and monetary investment in them personally. One of the fellows described his best days in the Fellowship as: "The days I was getting ready to go to DC, graduating and moving on to better things and quit living the life. I am putting plans together now. They helped me learn to tie a tie, got me suits. They spent a lot of money on me. I ran up a bill for ONS. I was important to them. And they got what they paid for—success."

Trips with the Fellowship have also enabled young men to temporarily leave the Richmond community and the fear of gun violence. One fellow said, "I have been to Mexico City, New York, LA, DC, Florida, and Dallas. Trips are important because it's the only time I have been out of harm's way. It's hard to be around someone that is trying to harm you. But now we've made peace and better[ed] the community."

Excursions were an integral factor in the young men's ability to form positive relationships with men from rival groups. One young man described how he had traveled with a person from a rival group in the community, and they had dinner together: "He had shot at me and my people. I didn't think I could do it at first, but now we had to go out together and it can be cool. The program helped me do it." Young men were able to put their differences aside and relate to each other as youth with similar interests and challenges, rather than

enemies with intent to kill. One youth said, “They were cool. We are all basically alike. When you take people out of state, you forget about everything and just want to have fun.” Another fellow stated, “In New York City, I had a good time. It was real fun, even people from both sides. We acted like we were brothers that night.”

#### *B. Desire for a Different Life Path*

Fellows described that they were driven to join the Fellowship by a desire for a different life. Decisions centered on making positive changes in their lives and “bettering themselves.” One fellow revealed that he wanted to “do something—make a positive change in my life.” They discussed that joining the Fellowship signified an ability to move their lives into a more positive direction. One fellow stated, “I decided to join [for the] opportunity to do something. It was an opportunity to leave the streets.”

Fellows also described how a willingness to provide a better life for their children pushed them to join this program. Interviews revealed that fellows wanted to make life changes because they *had* children or family members to care for and to live for. “I’ve seen the path I was on. They [ONS] pulled me from a lot of things. They saved my life. They are committed to me even when I am not. To think about how I was ... almost brings a tear to my eye. Now I have a better relationship with family.”

#### *C. Opportunities Gained*

The fellows described many positive goals they set and the opportunities they were provided through active participation in the program. Obtaining a driver’s license, getting a job, going back to school, or earning a GED were some of the goals that young men recorded in their life maps. “I’m on the verge of trying to get a job. I am going back to school ... I want to go to school for real estate, I am in the process of doing these things.”

Fellows emphasized that the Fellowship taught them responsibility and accountability. Young men completed life maps that allowed them to keep track of their goals and the achievements as well as the setbacks they encountered in the program. As one fellow said, “My grades are getting better. I am on the best track I can be on right now.”

Current and former fellows also described being connected to services and given opportunities for growth and change. They talked about ONS staff assisting them with job placement, taking them to college prep courses, helping with resumes, or even picking them up from county jail. Fellows described their relationships with outreach workers as opening doors and making success a “new normal” for them. One said, “I have a career instead of a regular job ... it’s amazing what you can do with skills ... can be part of something, rebuilding something. It feels amazing to build something. It’s a great sense of accomplishment.”

#### *D. Living a Life Without Fear*

Fellows said that participating in the Fellowship had allowed them to “live a life without fear.” By forging bonds with rival group members during excursions and benefiting

from the consistent support and mentorship provided by ONS staff, elders, and other positive role models, these young men transformed their lives. A majority of the fellows interviewed discussed how the Fellowship had equipped them with the skills and tools to go through their daily lives without fear of being shot and killed.

“Life is totally different now. I ride around with no fear of police or enemies. Before ONS I had to stay strapped [carry a gun]. I was going to end up behind bars or in a casket, and you can’t take that back. Being incarcerated saved my life. I didn’t want to be a statistic. Now I work hard, am productive, no incidents, not even a traffic ticket. I don’t want to hurt no one, and I don’t want to be hurt.”

#### *E. Challenges and Next Steps for the Fellowship: In Fellows’ Voices*

During individual interviews, fellows identified two of the biggest challenges of being in the Fellowship as (1) their personal fears of returning to a violent lifestyle and (2) interacting with young men from rival groups. Many felt that associating with youth from other neighborhoods—for example, during excursions—was often both an obstacle and an advantage. “The biggest challenge for me is going on trips with other people from the other side [rivals],” said one fellow. Similarly, another fellow observed, “Getting more people to associate with someone you don’t think you should be [associating with is a challenge], but you can’t spend your whole life being a coward.” One young man also stated that youth who are unwilling or not ready to change might present a challenge to the work that the ONS does in Richmond. “The biggest challenge at ONS is getting people that are refusing help or not willing to help to do things. For me, it is not easy. I try my hardest to do it. Some fellows relapse, even I have. I don’t want to relapse. There are people who give up on what they are doing.”

In terms of next steps, fellows identified expanding the Fellowship as a priority for the work in Richmond. The majority of fellows interviewed stated that their desires for the program’s future centered on increased funding to serve more youth who engage in gun violence: “I wish they were around when I was younger. I would like them to let me do what they do and be part of the outreach team and get paid for it.”

Young men also stated a desire to see the ONS in other communities across the country. One fellow reiterated the theme of expanding the ONS program to reach more youth: “Fellows need to be in the ‘hood talking to kids in the neighborhood now. It’s up to ONS to take that fear away. We were influenced by the OGs back then; we can be influenced by them [fellows] now. I have really positive things to tell the kids. Fellows need to be leaders in control. Some of them are really influential in their neighborhood.”

#### *F. Transforming Youths’ Perspectives on Life*

The ONS’s ability to change how young men saw their lives, specifically the opportunities available to them, emerged as a theme in the interviews. Fellows described how they were able to reframe their worldview. They also discussed that their

participation in the Fellowship empowered them to have a more positive frame of mind in determining the trajectory of their life. “It works if you want it to work. If you don’t want to change, no one will change for you.”

Fellows described the Fellowship as having a monumental impact on changing how they thought and related to others. “Yes, it changed me, I don’t carry guns, and I don’t hang with guys with guns. I push myself away from that.” Participation in the Fellowship allowed the young men to broaden their view of what they could accomplish in their lives. “I am open to new things because I have been to a different place. I have seen I could do better. I see people trying to help me. I have realized that life is bigger than North Richmond and street life. I don’t have to limit myself.”

Fellows also discussed the reduction of gun violence in the community and how the Fellowship has impacted their firearm usage as well as their perspective on gun violence. One fellow stated, “My mind frame was changed. They told me about what could happen. The best thing they have done for me is told me that if I don’t go looking for things to happen, things won’t happen. I think about this a lot.”

#### *G. The Fellowship as a Family*

The most common theme that emerged from interviews with fellows was the identification of outreach workers and ONS staff as family. Fellows used words that included family, father-figure, and the brothers they never had to describe how they viewed program staff and outreach workers. One young man stated, “What I love about the Fellowship is that it can help anybody help themselves. It is there for individuals who want to open their eyes. It is a family that cares about each other and the community.” Young men talked about the Fellowship providing the only family that they had – the only one they could count on to be supportive and influential in a positive manner. “Feeling like I was never helped before, they care about us.”

Fellows stated that ONS outreach workers and staff treated them with respect and provided the much-needed support to change their lives. One fellow stated, “[ONS staff] are cool, nice people; when you get around them it’s love. People set their problems aside to guide you and check in on me and see how I am doing. Now I have known them for years, they are my family.”

### IV. MAJOR FELLOWSHIP ACHIEVEMENTS

#### *A. Contributing to Substantial Reductions in Gun Violence*

The ONS has developed several core measures of its primary goal of reducing gun violence and associated homicides. On an annual basis, regarding Fellowship outcomes, the ONS reports on the number of fellows who are alive; have no new gun charges since becoming a fellow; have no gun violence-related arrests since becoming a fellow; and have incurred no gun-related injuries or hospitalization since becoming a fellow. Additionally, the ONS collects data on fellows’ achievement of goals outlined in life maps, including the number of fellows who have obtained jobs, are studying

for or have earned their GED, and have received a driver’s license. Conclusions about the effectiveness of a program cannot be decisively drawn without resources to design and implement an experimental or quasi-experimental evaluation. However, the data highlighted in this report provide important evidence about the ONS’s impact on the community and on program participants.

In the last several years, gun violence in Richmond has dropped substantially, marking significant progress toward the ONS’ goal of reducing this violence. Since 2010, the annual number of firearm assaults and homicides has trended downward, with homicides reaching an all-time per-capita low in 2013. While a number of factors—including policy changes, policing efforts, an improving economic climate, and an overall decline in crime—may have helped to facilitate this shift, many individuals interviewed for this evaluation cite ONS’s work, which began in late 2007, as a strong contributing factor in a collaborative effort to decrease violence in Richmond. Lowered gun violence rates and community perception of safety also suggest that ONS strategies are having an impact, but it is impossible to disentangle the ONS approach from other concurrent citywide violence reduction interventions and strategies.

#### *B. Developing Relationships with ONS’s Target Population*

The ONS has demonstrated substantial success in building strong relationships with its target population. Through its street outreach strategy, ONS has effectively developed a rapport with Richmond community members affected or at risk of being affected by gun violence. From 2010 to 2013, NCAs annually facilitated an average of 2,994 outreach contacts, provided attention-intensive support and mentoring for an average of 150 individuals, and provided an average of 319 referrals to services. Through the fellowship, ONS outreach staff have successfully engaged many of the young men identified as most likely to be involved in gun violence. Whereas other interventions tend to rely on more traditional methods of service provision, ONS has succeeded in building trust and credibility with a difficult-to-reach population through its outreach techniques. Data collected for this evaluation, including interviews with fellows, suggest this achievement is due in part to the unique identities of ONS outreach staff and their commitment to the work, providing a consistent, healthy community presence and building credibility with fellows. One fellow said, “[ONS staff] understands what we go through. They actually react and try to help. ... I look at them as family. They make me comfortable.”

#### *C. Low Levels of Violence for Fellowship Participants*

Since the start of the Fellowship, fellows have experienced low levels of violence and law enforcement contact due to gun activity. As of April 2015, the vast majority (94%, or 64 of 68) of all fellows have remained alive, 84% have not sustained a gun-related injury or been hospitalized for one, and most (79%) have not been arrested or charged for gun-related activity. While most social service programs do not count

outcomes such as mortality or injury, using these measures is paramount for an effort designed to reduce lethal violence. The fact that the large majority of these young men who are at high risk of involvement in gun violence are alive and have not sustained injuries due to gun violence suggests that the Fellowship's focus on providing intensive services for this population is working as intended. .

#### *D.Improvements in Fellows' Personal Outcomes*

In addition to low levels of death and injury among fellows, the Fellowship has also helped fellows make progress in other key personal areas. For example, since enrolling in the fellowship, 20% have received their GED or high school diploma, 10% have enrolled in college or vocational training, and 50% have obtained employment at some point during the Fellowship. Fellows interviewed for this evaluation also report having had beneficial experiences through the Fellowship, including setting and meeting goals, developing a sense of responsibility and accountability, and transforming their perspective and worldview, as well as tangible outcomes such as obtaining a driver's license and becoming employed. These improvements contribute to fellows' overall ability to transform their lives; improve their self-esteem; and continue on a healthy, productive path.

#### V. CHALLENGES FOR THE FELLOWSHIP IN THE FUTURE

While this paper highlights the innovation of the Fellowship and its impact on the community, it is also important for the authors to point out any obstacles or barriers facing this program and the agency that operates it. One of the most significant challenges associated with the ONS and its establishment of the Fellowship as a promising program lies in the ability to replicate this model in other communities facing problems with gun violence.

According to Boggan, there are several obstacles to consider regarding replication in other communities. The first obstacle involves program subsistence. Before a program can be replicated in another community, the program must prove to be relevant for successive generations of youth who enter it, even in its own community. Boggan stated that it is imperative for ONS to be an organization that can adapt and evolve to suit the needs of the younger men who are in need of services. He emphasizes the need to have a flexible model that serves the changing needs of younger youth. It is important to understand that gang and gun culture constantly evolve, so staff must continually ask Boggan's question: "Is what we are doing with these men still relevant?"

Another obstacle to replicating this programming in another jurisdiction is the unique contextual situation that allows for this type of unorthodox programming to even exist. For example, Boggan stated that other cities have shown interest in the type of deep-end violence prevention work of the ONS; however, these cities are often concerned that local politics and/or funding will not allow for such innovative intervention strategies. "We have a lot of latitude, especially as things seem to be working," said Boggan. The close ties and trust established between city government and ONS leadership

have supported the ONS's unconventional strategies. Boggan credited some of the ONS's success to the supportive yet "hands-off" approach to intervention.

A third barrier for replication is the high turnover rate of outreach staff that often plagues violence prevention organizations. Boggan stated that the longevity of ONS outreach staff was instrumental to program success and dramatic reduction in gun violence incidents in Richmond. He states that most of the ONS' outreach workers have been with the agency since its inception in 2007. No longer gang-involved, these young men work long hours and demonstrate their commitment to the community.

The inclination to widen the focus of this prevention work is Boggan's final concern regarding replication. He highlighted the fact that the mission and aim of the ONS and the Fellowship is neither to reduce the amount of gang activity in the city nor to serve as an umbrella organization for violence prevention. It is strictly concerned with the reduction of gun violence incidents in the Richmond community. In replicating this model of violence deterrence, it is imperative that organizations remain focused on that singular goal.

Boggan also described which elements of the Fellowship program are amenable to replication. These components include relationship building and ongoing team communication about contacts with fellows, use of life maps, referral linkages that pair outreach workers to fellows in order to walk them through processes, excursions, stipends, use of elders, and internships. Boggan stated that he feels that these components can be replicated but also discussed the funding piece connected to these wraparound services. He emphasized the importance of incorporating the acquisition of private funds to subsidize the program's inherent travel and excursions. He believes these types of philanthropic relationships are replicable in other cities.

#### VI. CONCLUSION

While crafting a comprehensive plan for subsistence and replication of this unique Fellowship program is a priority for ONS staff, the successes that have been achieved more than make up for any barriers that the Fellowship faces. Lives saved and a community that no longer lives in fear are two achievements that cannot be quantified. Reducing violence in a community and empowering youth to transform their lives are the cornerstones that guide and motivate ONS outreach workers and other staff of this groundbreaking agency. A nontraditional collaboration of promising interventions serves the Richmond community in an unlikely manner, yet the outcomes are extraordinary, placing this program in the spotlight.

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