

# One Of A Kind Children

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## How to Turn Around a Gang Member

By Madison Gray

If the majority of gang-related street crime isn't directed by a gang boss, what is the best way to prevent the often deadly violence that accompanies it? If there is no criminal mastermind to apprehend, how does one reduce the incidence of what some experts believe is a culture of violence and vendetta?

Chicago and Cincinnati appear to have programs that are working. "It's a science-based approach that works with the community," says Dr. Gary Slutkin, executive director of Ceasefire Chicago. "We don't even use the word 'gang.' We see this as an issue of behavior."

The Cincinnati Initiative to Reduce Violence (CIRV) began in April 2007, with funding from the U.S. Department of Justice, after the city recorded a record 89 killings the year before. The result has been an overall 20% homicide drop from 2007 to 2008 and a 38% reduction in group member-involved homicides in the first six months of 2009. Project director S. Gregory Baker says Cincinnati's approach is one in which known violent felons, including those in gangs or under court supervision, are actively counseled by law enforcement representatives with strong anti-violence messages and encouraged to spread the word among their peers in the streets. Afterward, they are put in contact with "street advocates" who counsel them on turning a new leaf. They are also exposed and made to socialize with people who have been victims of violence. ([See "Combating Crime"](#))

"We tell them, 'We know about you, we know about what you're doing. Don't do it,'" says Baker. "We also tell the individuals in the room this is not just about you; we want you to tell the individuals you hang with what we're communicating." The failure to comply not only will bring about swift prosecution but also additional and tougher scrutiny on their friends and associates.

One inspiration for both Cincinnati and Chicago's programs was Boston's Operation Scrap Iron, which began 15 years ago. Now called Ceasefire, Scrap Iron shifted gang intervention from police work to a more elaborate behavioral approach that has two prongs: using law enforcement to aggressively get the message of zero-tolerance for homicide to individuals known to be violent or believed to have the potential for violence; and using trusted people in the community, who know the streets and the personalities in them, to convince potential felons to put down their guns. "One of the things we recognized is that you can't arrest your way out of gang type situations," says Police Superintendent Paul Joyce, who ran Boston's program into the mid-'90s. "We implemented the strategy of emphasizing to kids that we didn't want to toss them in jail, but that violence would not be tolerated." The city had a record 152 homicides in 1990, just before it implemented Scrap Iron in a targeted area rife with killings. The next year the city-wide figure plummeted to 32, a record low.

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Baker said it is important to give potential felons a place to go and be counseled by street workers, a neutral place where they can talk without feeling they are violating the unwritten "stop snitching" street code. That approach involves putting social workers in the street to directly confront the violence. "There are credible messengers who can go in and influence change in behaviors," says Tio Hardiman, director of the gang mediation arm of Chicago's program, also called CeaseFire. "Some of these guys used to run the streets and they have backbone and fortitude and they let them know they should be putting the shooting behind them, and the data we have is backing up our claims."

"The FBI has found this is a documented best practice for reducing shootings and killings," says Ceasefire's Slutkin. But the Chicago program recently suffered from a huge budget cut, part of Illinois' overall cutbacks. The state used to account for \$6 million of Ceasefire's \$8 million budget. That state funding completely vanished when then Gov. Rod Blagojevich slashed spending, resulting in a loss of 150 staff jobs and a surge in violence in the South Side of Chicago, where Ceasefire does a lot of its work. After Blagojevich's successor, Pat Quinn, saw the increase in crime, the funding was fully reinstated this year and Ceasefire is trying to put its workers back into the street.

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