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SP Cease fire



WHAT CAN ATLANTA LEARN FROM CINCINNATI ABOUT STOPPING GANG VIOLENCE?

By STEPHANIE RAMAGE

The chart glowing on the overhead projection inside Georgia State University's Speaker's Auditorium looks exactly like a seventh-grader's string art. There are hexagons here and there, connected to each other by blue, red and green lines.

APD Major Chris Leighty, left, talks with Gwen Sands and former gang members Craig Tew (center) and Tim Dash (right).

The hexagons are marked with the names of Cincinnati's gangs, circa 2007.

STEPHANIE RAMAGE

The blue lines represent alliances between the gangs, the red show violent conflicts or vendettas, and the green stand for neutral relationships. The same string-art slide reappears, but this time with almost no red. The conflicts have virtually vanished. The slides show the progress of Cincinnati's innovative anti-gang violence program, the Cincinnati Initiative to Reduce Violence (CIRV), which cut gang-related homicides there by 35 percent between 2004 and 2009.

The chart was made by Robin S. Engel, a criminal justice professor at the University of Cincinnati, who has worked with the Cincinnati Police Department on the initiative since its inception in 2007.

The Oct. 6 presentation is hosted by GSU's criminal justice department, but in the audience are members of the Atlanta Police Department's command staff, including Deputy Chief Ernest Findley, Deputy Chief Calvin Moss, Major Tim Quiller, and Major Chris Leighty.

They are here because the presentation marks a potential change in the way the APD will address gang violence. That change may be dramatic, but audience members don't have to dig deep in their memories for reasons why it's needed: In the last two weeks of September, the city saw 14 shootings and four confirmed homicides.

If they dug just a little deeper, they would find that, according to the APD, there were 34 shootings and 10 homicides for all of September.

And while the department hasn't said so, the neighborhoods are suspicious that at least some of those were gang-related. Which would make sense; in mid-2009, the APD acknowledged that gang crimes were on the upswing.

THE NEXT BODY THAT FALLS

Surprisingly for someone who comes from Atlanta's old guard and has been with the APD for nearly 30 years, Chief George Turner has actively inquired into Cincinnati's trailblazing program. He's so interested in seeing if some form of it could be adapted to address Atlanta's gang problem that he sent Moss, who oversees the department's criminal investigations, and Leighty, who presides over its gang unit, to Cincinnati last month to observe firsthand how CIRV works.

They were impressed by what they saw, and Turner himself is here at GSU long enough to take the podium.

"I'd like to thank our partners in Cincinnati," he says. "We would not have utilized the funds to go to Cincinnati unless we thought they were doing something worthwhile."

According to Greg Baker, public relations manager for the Cincinnati PD and executive director of CIRV, the seed for Cincinnati's program was planted in 2006, when the city saw a record 89 murders. A closer look revealed gangs to be major instigators of the violence.

The city itself wasn't terribly happy about being made to admit it had a gang problem. Lt. Col. James Whalen, who heads CPD's patrol division, recalls that no one even said "gang" around the department.

"We weren't allowed to have gangs," he says, sharing a laugh with Baker, who explains that one reason the community was slow to admit gang involvement was because gangs in Cincinnati weren't like the gangs people see on TV; they were more like Atlanta's.

"We didn't have Crips and Bloods, but we certainly had gangs of individuals who'd gone to school together, hung out with each other, and committed crimes together," Baker says.

Cincinnati looked to Boston's anti-gun violence project—an initiative that brought violent crime in that city down by 63 percent in the 1990s—and found David Kennedy, a former Harvard researcher who is now a criminologist at John Jay College in New York. Kennedy came to Cincinnati and coaxed an at-first reluctant police department into adopting the approach that underpins CIRV. Kennedy calls it "Ceasefire."

Its core policing principle is one that any second-grader would recognize: If Johnny acts up in class, everybody stays in for recess. It's an old but effective trick for putting peer pressure on troublemakers to stop making trouble. Put another way, if one gang member kills someone, everyone involved, no matter how distantly, will be arrested.

But locking up people is not the goal. In fact, one happy side effect of CIRV is that it actually reduces incarcerations.

Instead, the focus is on preventing at-risk individuals from choosing violence. The Cincinnati visitors emphasize that the same people who commit violent crimes tend to be the ones who are most harmed by them. Their research shows that shooters are usually black men with an average age of 27, and their victims are also black men of about the same age.

Cincinnati's initiative aims specifically to reduce homicides. CIRV gives gangs the option of either continuing as they are or agreeing with the cops that they will stop engaging in gun violence. If the gangs work with police, they are plugged into a network of social services and get assistance finding jobs. And if they don't?

"They self-select for police scrutiny," says Whalen.

If a gang member kills someone, the CPD comes down on them and their associates like a ton of lead.

"The next body that falls, we will go out on the street and arrest not only the shooter, but all the individuals involved. We are not bending the law: They are all involved in some way," says Baker. "The idea is that these individuals help to police themselves."

Violent gang members soon find themselves abandoned by their former sidekicks. The CPD isn't trying to destroy the gangs—Engel explains that the reason gangs attract kids is because they are filling some role for them, perhaps satisfying the need to belong to a group, since their families, in many cases, are not intact.

Instead, the CPD is trying only to decrease their violence.

One member of the GSU audience remarks that if these are bad people who are killing each other, a lot of citizens just won't care. But the Cincinnati presenters explain that killings between gangs, which contributed to that record-breaking string of killings in 2006, have a broader effect. Not only do the homicides eat up public resources, they cast a shadow of fear over neighborhoods and foster an atmosphere of violence.

What's particularly unfair about that is that most people in those neighborhoods aren't committing crimes.

"In 2006, we had less than 0.3 percent of the population committing 73.5 percent of the violent crime," says Whalen. "Of that 0.3 percent, who really has the guts to pull the trigger? It's an even smaller number."

"IT'S DRACONIAN!"

The cops get the gangs to agree to a "cease-fire" by asking them to come in and talk.

"There are 1,700 individuals whom we know are involved in gang activities and, of those, about 20 percent are on probation or parole, so we use that to require them to attend call-in sessions," says Baker. These "call-ins" are made possible by judges who support the program. They compel the parolees or probationers to meet with police.

Since first getting the program off the ground, CPD's gang intelligence has gone gangbusters. Cincinnati police are able to find out when something is going to go down and head it off because, for example, they know when a victim belongs to a gang that might be seeking revenge.

"An officer goes and knocks on the door and says, 'I know you're mad about this, but don't even think about going over there tonight to get even, because it's not going to happen,'" explains Whalen, adding that CPD officers will be there waiting for them. The department has been able to run some gangs right out of neighborhoods.

They've gotten plenty of help: The community is crucial to the initiative. Mothers of those killed in gang violence come to the call-ins and force gang members to see the damage they've done, showing photos of their now-dead children and talking about their lives with them. Ministers in Cincinnati have formed Pastors for Peace, a faith-based arm of CIRV. The program hires "street advocates"—former gang members—to warn young people away from gangs and help them channel their energy toward goals like having a good job, owning a home and having a family. The city also hosts events to empower neighborhoods, including what Baker calls "positive loitering," where neighbors set up lawn chairs and grills in gang hangouts and reclaim the area for law-abiding citizens.

"The offenders feel a little uncomfortable being there," he says.

University of Cincinnati Professor Engel explains that CIRV wasn't designed to address issues like housing or education, although criminologists know these factors play a part in crime. Despite that, she says, CIRV does offer young people an alternative to gang violence. It also doesn't deal with crime in general, only "gang member-involved" crime.

Engel outlines the program's three-pronged "hammer, help and hope" structure.

"We want to increase the perceived risk associated with violence. That is the hammer," she says. The CPD has gotten support in that area from the county courts and the federal prosecutor, who, according to Whalen, are not above making an example of a gang member.

"We want to provide alternatives. That is the help," she adds, explaining that CIRV assists people in navigating the social services system or finding resources they might not even know about, as well as jobs.

"We want to challenge community norms about violence," she concludes. "That is the hope."

The CPD's Baker explains that not only is going to jail accepted as normal in some Cincinnati neighborhoods, it's seen as a badge of honor. That is a particularly stubborn "community norm" that CIRV has attacked.

"It is not OK to go to jail," he says.

Baker recalls one former gang member who talked about the agony of being in jail when he got a letter from his daughter detailing how her mother had found a new boyfriend who was molesting the little girl.

"She wanted to know when he was coming home," he says. "And he was in jail and could do nothing."

Cincinnati also has a place called Talbert House, Baker says, which "serves individuals with serious issues" like paranoid schizophrenia.

Baker acknowledges the support CIRV has received from black and white business leaders—Proctor and Gamble helped out with consulting on team-building, and one of Cincinnati's most prominent black businessmen serves alongside Police Chief Tom Streicher at the head of CIRV's strategy implementation team.

Before Baker can finish, he's interrupted by a loud protest from the audience. It's Rev. Joe Beasley, regional director of Rainbow PUSH, who wants to know when he can talk. Baker reminds him that 10 minutes remain on the clock (it's 10:50 a.m.) before the question and answer segment of the program opens up.

After the presentation, Beasley, with audible anger, takes the nearest microphone and says he came from Cincinnati 21 years ago—a full 18 years before CIRV was formed, although he doesn't acknowledge that—and Atlanta doesn't want this program.

"It's racial profiling!" he shouts. "It's Draconian!"

The real need is for community involvement and social services, Beasley insists, ignoring that these components do exist in CIRV. He adds that his church has put together a similar program and Atlanta doesn't need Cincinnati's model.

Shortly after Beasley's tirade, James Griffin, a professor at Morehouse School of Medicine, stands. "We do not have a plan for addressing gang violence at all, so anybody who wants to step forward has my support," he says. "We've seen gang shootings for years and years and nothing has been done about it, so I am behind anybody who is bringing a solution to the table."

Griffin wants to know how Cincinnati avoids the political and neighborhood in-fighting, squabbling over funding, the "filibustering" and power plays that weaken such initiatives. Baker answers that the most intensive part of the program is coordinating and managing such relationships. "We try to keep the goal of saving lives in front of us," he says.

Whalen offers: "You need a tie-breaker and our tie-breaker is our mayor. He's been able to use his influence to overcome obstacles." Cincinnati's mayor heads CIRV's governing board alongside a council member and the city manager.

Gwen Sands of anti-gang group Visions Unlimited takes a microphone.

"We embrace this method," she says, pointing to the back of the room. "We have some, well, I call them ex-customers of the justice system, with us today."

Timothy Dash, a former Gangster Disciple, and Craig Tew, another former gang member, stand to a round of applause, as do about two dozen young people who are enrolled in Sands' program.

After the Q&A session, Dash and Tew are deep in conversation with the APD's Leighty and Quiller. Dash explains that he's already working with the APD to identify and prevent gang growth.

Asked how he feels about Beasley's negative comments, he replies with a shrug. "Some people can't believe a program like this really works," he says. "They think it's a fake. But it does really work." **SP**