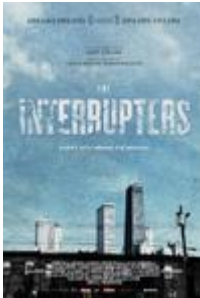


Urban Peace Warriors: An Ethnography of Madness Interrupted

A review of the film



The Interrupters

(2011)

Steve James (Director)



Reviewed by

[Michael B. Greene](#)

The Interrupters is a documentary film that spans the course of a single year in Chicago, Illinois, illustrating and illuminating the work of three “Violence Interrupters,” a key component of a program designed with the sole purpose of reducing killings and shootings in high crime, urban neighborhoods. The program is CeaseFire, headquartered in Chicago and operated by the Chicago Project for Violence Prevention (CPVP) at the School of Public Health of the University of Illinois. CeaseFire is the brainchild of Gary Slutkin, an infectious disease physician who cut his teeth in San Francisco, Somalia, Congo, and other hot spots of infectious disease throughout Africa, establishing innovative ways to stop the spread of virulent infectious diseases such as tuberculosis, AIDS, and cholera.

Slutkin recognizes three important principles in his work with infectious diseases: They are spread by specific behaviors, local social norms fuel such behaviors, and these

norms and the disease-spreading behaviors supported by the norms can be changed through the urgings of local and credible outreach workers. He also holds, particularly in the case of tuberculosis, that a small number of individuals are disproportionately responsible for the spread of the disease. When he returned from his international work to his hometown of Chicago in the mid 1990s, he reasoned that the same principles could be applied to the epidemic of violence. Thus the CeaseFire program was born.

The term *CeaseFire* was borrowed from David Kennedy, a criminologist who created a violence prevention program in Boston, Massachusetts, and dubbed it “CeaseFire” (Kennedy, 2008). Both programs share the single-minded goal of reducing shootings and homicides (other forms of crime are not addressed), both direct their interventions to individuals at very high risk of violence perpetration, and both programs are based on the principle that social norms drive and inhibit violence.

The programs differ, fundamentally, in that the Boston version is based on a deterrence model in which the knowledge of swift, sure, and serious sanctions, in combination with peer pressure, is considered the primary mechanism through which violence-related norms can be changed. In contrast, the Chicago model is based on a public health approach in which iatrogenic norms are viewed as changeable through the multilayered urgings of credible local outreach workers.

Violence Interrupters were incorporated into the CeaseFire program model in 2004 through the urgings of Tio Hardiman, a former gang member and CeaseFire outreach worker who endorsed Slutkin’s notion that urban violence is fueled by a norm of retaliation. Hardiman recognized that only individuals who had previously embraced this norm in their lives and who were recognized by even the toughest members of the neighborhood as having street credibility and being trustworthy could gain access and respond effectively to information about brewing tensions and injury that were likely to precipitate violent reactions. Their task is to convince those bent on retaliation to refrain from such behavior, but to do so in ways that allow the individual to save face.

The Interrupters appeal to any and all nonviolent alternatives to violent retaliation. Whereas the Interrupters receive training in how to do their work and meet weekly under the leadership of Hardiman, their credibility and success derive from their experience on and knowledge of the streets: Virtually all of the Interrupters were gang bangers themselves, all of them served significant time in prison, and all were attracted to this work by a felt need to give back to their home communities as a form of repentance.

The retaliation norm that Hardiman describes and the film illustrates dictates that if a friend or relative is hurt or killed, it is the friend or relative’s obligation to retaliate by killing or at least injuring the perpetrator. Hardiman succinctly describes the norm in the film: “You got to stand up to protect your honor.” Those who don’t embrace this norm are termed *suckers* or *punks* (Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003; Rich & Grey, 2005). This film illuminates through stark and poignant case studies—and occasional commentary—several important realities of the program and of the nature of violence in the “hood.”

Reality 1: Violence Is Painful

Many commentators, beginning with the academic literature with the work of Oscar Lewis, have embraced the notion that violence is a fundamental value in the inner city (Cohen, 2010). Others have argued that widespread violence numbs or inures individuals to its terrible consequences (Funk, Baldacci, Pasold, & Baumgardner, 2004). Perhaps what this film does best is to illustrate the falseness of these notions. Film clips of mothers, sisters, brothers, girlfriends, and friends of homicide victims show that these individuals, like all of us, are devastated by the senseless killings of loved ones. As one mother of a murdered child states, “I don’t think people ever get over it.”

What is different in these high-crime and economically crushed neighborhoods—places where the American dream is an unrealistic fantasy and hopelessness a common sensibility—is not that individuals are not deeply pained by the senseless killings of friends and relatives. Rather, what is different is that most individuals feel they must retaliate. For these individuals, violence is not a core value but rather, in the vast majority of instances, is a neighborhood-sanctioned means to secure respect and honor for themselves and the victim. Nevertheless, only a small fraction of individuals from any neighborhood give in to homicidal urges, and nearly all of those who do had experienced chronic and severe childhood traumas. Usually this norm is expressed in old-fashioned fisticuffs in response to slights or perceived disrespect by others.

The CeaseFire program, which is exclusively housed in very high crime neighborhoods and exclusively targets individuals who are at highest risk of resorting to extreme violence, is dedicated to changing this fundamental need of “honoring” those lost to violence by retaliating with the gun. The program is fueled not by castigating the behavior but by using methods designed to change the norm underlying the behavior.

Reality 2: Norm Changing Is Hard and Dangerous Work

To say that the Interrupters need to be tenacious is an understatement. The situations into which the Interrupters enter are highly volatile and very dangerous. The Interrupters must be and are culturally competent in their knowledge of what to say, what not to say, and when to walk away. They have a broad arsenal of arguments they can invoke, learned primarily from their own experience. They are direct and honest in their message, and they directly acknowledge the feelings of their clients. As Hardiman states: “You got to immerse yourself in the bullshit, empathize. I been there; I know what you’re feeling.”

They know that these individuals are hurting inside and boiling on the outside. They know that their pleadings will be initially rejected but hope and believe that a seed has been

planted. They know intuitively that these seeds need to be slowly nourished to grow, and they know that this can only be accomplished by developing a strong interpersonal relationship with the clients with whom they work.

They also know that they may fail. Indeed, Hardiman reveals that he has lost at least 20 of the guys his team has tried to help. In one of the most poignant scenes of the film, Hardiman visits one of his Interrupters, Joel Sanchez, in the hospital. Sanchez is the only Interrupter to have been shot while doing his work. Hardiman is moved to tears in acknowledging the reality of how dangerous this work is and the courage it takes to continue. The Interrupters are truly warriors in the best sense of the term.

Reality 3: Neighborhoods Need To Be Revitalized

The neighborhoods depicted in the film embody the structural factors that are associated with high rates of violence: concentrated poverty, extremely limited job opportunities, low levels of educational attainment, social fragmentation, and the absence of collective efficacy (McCall, Land, & Parker, 2010; Morenoff, Sampson, & Raudenbush, 2001). Without neighborhood revitalization, it is clear that nothing will change in these communities. Slutkin expresses in the film his belief that the Number One priority in revitalization efforts must be focused first on reducing the high levels of violence in these communities. His argument is that investment and revitalization efforts will either not occur or will fail unless these neighborhoods are made safer.

Eddie Bocanegra, one of the Violence Interrupters profiled in the film, thinks otherwise. He views his efforts as a “Band-Aid.” He hears pleas every day from clients who need and want jobs, individuals who are stuck with nothing to fall back on, individuals who know they will sink back into despair and hopelessness if nothing changes. Of course, this is a chicken-and-egg dilemma. Still, to the extent that the CeaseFire program focuses exclusively on norm change, without concurrent efforts to revitalize neighborhoods, the credibility and persuasiveness of the Violence Interrupters are likely to weaken significantly over time.

Concluding Comments and a Note About CeaseFire’s Success

Although Slutkin and his colleagues have not published articles about their program in peer-reviewed journals, the Department of Justice commissioned and published an evaluation of the program. With qualitative and quantitative statistical methods, the report reveals significant and positive effects of the program in reducing levels of violence in the seven

neighborhoods in which sufficient data were available to evaluate program impact (Skogan, Hartnett, Bump, & Dubois, 2008). Although the authors do cite limitations in the research design and in the statistical analyses utilized, they conclude that the program appears to be effective in reducing violence. Nevertheless, more rigorous evaluations are needed before the program can be designated as a model or exemplary program.

In the context of the film under review, it is important to note that the program includes several required components in addition to the work of the Violence Interrupters: community mobilization, antiviolence media campaigns, case management and outreach, work with the faith-based community, and some coordination with law enforcement. For example, clips from a Peace Summit—a convening of community members by the Interrupters in a high-violence neighborhood that is designed to provide an open forum and structured small-group discussions about ways the community members can bring peace to their neighborhoods—reveal how the program attempts to work with and influence neighborhood leaders in a community. The summit includes a speech by a Violence Interrupter: a speech that is direct, honest, and given in language (street lingo) that reflects the realities of life on the street. The summit also includes small group exercises that probe the reality of difficult conflicts and feelings that emerge around violence. Marches with signs of simple messages—Stop Shooting—are also shown in the film.

Whether CeaseFire works and how effectively it works has been only partially answered. Nevertheless, *The Interrupters* beautifully and poignantly illustrates the harsh realities of life in urban high-crime neighborhoods. The film also illustrates the power of redemption and the courage of a band of peace warriors, warriors whose early life went terribly astray but who were able to come back after prison to the neighborhoods where they grew up to devote their lives to trying to save others from repeating their horrible mistakes. Finally, the film illuminates the universal need for status and respect, needs that can fuel violence in the face of constant exposure to violence and extremely limited opportunities for success.

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