

The Resolve to Stop the Violence Project: Reducing Violence through a Jail-Based Initiative

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Abstract

The Resolve to Stop the Violence Project (RSVP), implemented through the San Francisco Sheriff's Department (SFSFSD), was designed to test a hypothesis concerning the causes and prevention of violence through a jail-based violence-prevention experiment. The hypothesis was that exposing men with a history of serious, recent, and often multiple violent crimes to a certain specifiable set of environmental and social conditions would reduce the frequency and severity of their violent behavior. These conditions were designed to reduce their exposure and vulnerability to the emotions (the motive, or emotive, forces) that stimulate violent impulses, such as feelings of shame and humiliation; and to increase their capacity for the emotions that inhibit violence toward others, such as empathy with the suffering of others and feelings of guilt and remorse over impulses to harm others. The means for reaching these goals has centered on facilitating change in both the culture of the jail, which can best be described as a "subculture of violence" (a mutually reinforcing set of values, assumptions, and social relationships that gives respect and honor to violent behavior and shames nonviolent behavior by categorizing it as nonmasculine and "wimpish"), and change in the corresponding, violence-prone character structure of the violent criminals in the jail (their habitual, mutually reinforcing patterns of cognition, emotion, and action, central to which is hypersensitivity to feelings and perceptions of being insulted, disrespected, dishonored, slighted, ridiculed, rejected, treated as inferior, inadequate, or unimportant, or other forms of "narcissistic injury"). The point of the program has been to break the positive-feedback loop, or vicious cycle, between the violence-causing patterns of *culture* and of *personality* that reinforce each other, by enlisting the entire inmate population in the program, and by exposing the inmates to the program for virtually every waking hour, twelve hours a day, six days a week. One assumption guiding the design of this program has been that many of the past attempts at reducing recidivism among violent criminals have failed because they involved only some members of the prison or jailhouse culture (and thus did not change the culture as a whole), and involved even them

for only very brief periods of time each week. The program is devoted to making available to these violent men the kinds of tools they need in order to develop the skills and accomplishments that can serve as nonviolent, internalized and reality-based sources of self-respect and self-esteem, as well as of respect and esteem from others; and that increase their capacity to experience feelings of empathy and concern for victims of violence, of guilt and remorse over injuring others, and of responsibility to undo, where possible, the injuries they and others have inflicted on individuals and the whole community in the past, and to prevent future injuries. Evaluation of the program showed dramatic reductions in both in-house and post-release levels of violence, showing that multilevel, comprehensive prevention approaches may play an important role in reducing the cycle of violent crime.

Introduction

The United States has by far the highest criminal homicide rate of any economically developed nation, averaging in most years ten times the rates experienced in the British Isles, the rest of western Europe, and Japan, and five times the rates of the other English-speaking democracies (Canada, Australia and New Zealand). The death rate from violent crime in this country, almost eleven per 100,000 citizens at its peak (compared with rates of one to two, or less, in the other developed nations), has prompted many governmental and non-governmental officials to declare it a national epidemic—a public health emergency—and to advocate for approaching it with the tools of preventive medicine, including social, community, forensic, and preventive psychiatry and psychology, especially given the failure of the approaches used by the penal and criminal justice systems to bring our rates of lethal violence down to anywhere near those suffered by any comparable nation. Bulging prisons have not correlated with any demonstrable dampening of crime,¹ and Linsky and Strauss² found that states with the highest incarceration rates had the highest crime rates—consistent with the observation that persons who have experienced incarceration exhibit greater criminality once released into the community.^{3,4}

Decreasing recidivism through preventive efforts, however, contributes to reducing the financial burden that crime places on the community, which in direct costs alone has been estimated at \$17.6 billion nationally.⁵ In San Francisco alone, over 46,000 crimes were committed in the city between January and October 1996, and direct costs to local victims estimated at \$24.4 million. The costs of incarceration of San Francisco county's 2000+ inmates, on the other hand, was nearly \$51 million annually, with the incarceration costs for violent offenders exceeding \$19 million yearly.⁶ This did not include the additional costs of

arresting, prosecuting and judging violent offenders, and other criminal justice expenditures, not to mention the unquantifiable amount of the pain and suffering that results from violent crime. In response, the San Francisco County Sheriff's Department established the Resolve to Stop the Violence Project (RSVP) in September 1997, aiming to support offenders through the reentry process, focusing on restoration and prevention of further violence rather than on retribution for the past.

Program Description

RSVP evolved from a variety of educational and substance abuse treatment programs already in place, which on their own seemed no more than "Band-Aid approaches" to a systemic, social problem. Thus, a launch was made to use the jail system as a setting for working with a wide spectrum of violent offenders, and various community organizations and agencies aimed at preventing violence were recruited to form a comprehensive and intensive intervention program as a whole. By attempting to change both the "subculture" of the jail as well as the violence-prone character structure of the inmates, violent offenders with broadly defined violent charges such as assault, domestic violence, armed robbery, and rape have been mandated to the program by the San Francisco Sheriff's Department, the courts, or the Probation Department at the time of booking, while awaiting trial, or after sentencing. Most sentences entail a probationary period following release from jail.

RSVP begins with an in-house jail program that is located in an all-male, 62-bed direct supervision open dormitory. The duration of any inmate's participation in the program depends on the length of time he remains in jail, which can vary from a few days to more than a year. Within the RSVP unit there are no locked doors, as it is organized as a large central activity space surrounded by smaller classrooms and conference rooms. A treatment milieu is created through an intensive, twelve hours a day, six days a week program consisting of group discussions, academic classes (including art and creative writing), theatrical enactments and role-playing, counseling sessions, and discussions with victims/survivors of violence. The main components of the program can be described as follows:

MANALIVE

This is a group discussion program that lasts about two and a half hours at a time and is repeated (with different members) three times a day. It typically involves twelve to fifteen men at a time (though with a focus in each group meeting on one of the men) in a structured, systematic, step-by-step deconstruction

and reconstruction of two areas that are essentially aspects of the same thing: (a) the violent behavior that brought them into the jail; and (b) the “male-role belief system”—the entire set of learned attitudes, values, expectations, and norms relating to definitions of masculinity and femininity, to which these men have been exposed and into which they have been socialized and indoctrinated throughout their lives, concerning how they are entitled to behave toward women and toward other men. The essential characteristic of this belief system is its division of people into two groups: the superior and the inferior. It defines males as superior and females as inferior, but it also defines the “real” man as one who is superior to other men—physically, sexually, racially, socially, financially—by virtue of possessing greater power or wealth, having sexual access to more women, etc. Since most people tend to resist being cast into the inferior role, this belief in hierarchical social relations is a recipe for violence. By engaging in a detailed, second-by-second “slow motion” reconstruction of the beliefs and assumptions, and the associated feelings, that they were having during the entire process culminating in the violent act that led to their being sent to jail, they become aware of the degree to which this largely unquestioned and unconscious set of assumptions has been shaping their feelings and actions in ways that have been extremely destructive both to others and to themselves.

The MANALIVE program focuses on helping each man to see the crucial difference between his *real* self and the male “*role*” that he has been taught to play. To the degree that they have confused the former with the latter, they react to any behavior that questions or challenges the validity of their male role as if it would destroy their real self. This moment, which occurs regularly among these men, is identified as a moment of “fatal peril”—for that is exactly how they perceive it (as if there were no difference between their real self and their male role, so that destruction of the latter would cause the death of the former). They are also introduced to the idea that the way they typically try to defend themselves against their fatal peril is by calling on an inner “hit man” (also different from their real self), who will protect their male self-image by behaving toward others with a degree of violence that actually is potentially fatal.

MANALIVE has adopted a number of practices found in “twelve step” programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). For example, denial is challenged by the expectation that each of the inmates (all of whom have been sent to jail for a violent crime, and almost all of whom have rationalized their violence as justified retribution or a form of self-defense) will introduce himself to the group with the self-description, “I am a violent man.” Another feature common to AA is the expectation that “graduates” of the program—those who have learned to stop their own violence—will become group leaders or facilitators themselves, to help other groups of men achieve the same result (there is an extensive program of training

that involves role-playing and peer supervision, to train these men to lead groups themselves).

THE VICTIM-IMPACT PROGRAM

A second major component of RSVP—which inmates often cite as the decisive component that has finally persuaded them they had to change their way of life—consists of visits to the jail by volunteers from the community who are victims or survivors of some extreme form of violence, from rape to murder. These sessions typically occur once a week, and during them the entire population of the RSVP unit listens to a member of the community describe the pain and suffering caused by the violence inflicted upon them or their closest loved ones (e.g., a woman describing the brutal murders of her daughter, grandson, and son-in-law by an intruder). It would be difficult to find a more direct way to elicit feelings of empathy from men who are noteworthy for their lack of capacity for such feelings. The stories the victims tell appear to reach the inmates on several different levels. First, almost all of the inmates have themselves been victims or witnesses of violence, so there is a basis for empathy in their own personal knowledge of the suffering violence can bring. Second, they come to realize how much suffering they have caused or (except for good fortune) could have caused, to the people they have victimized, or to those they would victimize in the future unless they learn to stop being violent. What we have been astonished by is how little awareness most of these men had had as to how much *power* they had to hurt others, until they listened to these victims describe their own reactions to being victimized by others. And third, they appear to be genuinely moved by the actual suffering of the individual who is standing in front of them, which for many of them is a new feeling.

THE DRAMA PROGRAM

A third major component of the RSVP program consists of an exercise, led by trained, professional theater people, in which each inmate writes a one-act play dramatizing an actual event in his own life, one that represented a major turning point in his becoming a violent man, or a “loss of innocence” moment that was often extremely traumatic. They then cast themselves and their fellows (and occasionally a volunteer from the community) into the roles they have written, and perform them for each other and, on occasion, for the general public (the first evening devoted to a public performance of these plays, in Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, was sold out, as have been the subsequent ones). One of the main psychological effects of this program, as it is of the others already described, is the effect it has in facilitating the ability of the individual to gain some distance and perspective on his own life and feelings and actions and those of others, to gain

some detachment from himself and others, so as to develop what psychoanalysts call an “observing (or self-observing) ego.” For men who have gone through life up to that point almost like sleep-walkers, with astonishingly little self-reflection or self-awareness as to what they were actually doing to themselves and to others and why they were doing it, and who customarily substituted actions (or “acting out”) for both feelings and thoughts, this exercise enables them to observe and reflect on themselves and others with a degree of objectivity they had not had before. They literally write themselves into a play that they can see could have had a different ending, if only they had had enough awareness at the time that alternatives did exist. This can enable them to transform an overwhelmingly traumatic and destructive event in their lives that was unbearable and inexpressible, into something on which they can impose form, creativity, choice, and hence control (*self-control*).

POST-RELEASE PROGRAMS

Following their discharge back into the community, the inmates are required as a condition of probation to continue participating in MANALIVE discussion groups and in the drama program, for at least the first year, in a special PREP (Post-Release Education Program) office run by the Sheriff’s Department. This program also includes a Life-Skills component, which offers counseling about obtaining and retaining housing, employment, job training, money management, legal services, health care, etc. As the men progress through all these programs, they are encouraged and trained to take an increasingly active role in becoming agents for violence prevention in their communities—through leading MANALIVE groups themselves, performing in dramatic programs for the public, counseling youth groups, engaging in victim-restitution programs, etc. This helps to consolidate both a new identity, as a peacemaker rather than a troublemaker, and a new incentive: whereas their major source of pride had previously been to win fights, they can now gain pride from succeeding at preventing fights.

Evaluation

Evaluation of the program’s effectiveness was undertaken independently by invitation, and the methods and results are outlined elsewhere^{7,8} but can be summarized as follows:

Methods.

The evaluation included comparing the frequency of violent acts committed in a dormitory containing a group of 62 male inmates (the “experimental group”), all of whom had been convicted of violent crimes, during the first year after the

initiation of an intensive violence-prevention program, with the frequency of such acts in the same dormitory during the year prior to the new program, as well as with the frequency of violent acts in another dormitory containing a comparable group of violent offenders who were not exposed to the program, during the same year in which the new experimental program was in progress. Then, records of new arrests for violent crimes during the first year after their release from jail were obtained for inmates who had spent at least 8 weeks, 12 weeks, or 16 weeks or more in either the violence-prevention program (the “experimental” group) or in regular custody (the “control” group), respectively.

Results.

Evaluation results demonstrate a 79.7% decrease in re-arrests for violent crimes during the first post-release year among participants who spend four months in the RSVP program. Even for those who spend less than four months in the program, re-arrests for violent crime still decrease by more than 42%.

a) *Post-Release Recidivism Rates for Violent Crimes in the Community.* 101 inmates who had participated in RSVP for at least 8 weeks had a rate of arrests for violent crimes per day in the community during their first year after release from jail that were 46.3% lower than those of the 101 members of the control group ($p < 0.05$). For those in RSVP for 12 weeks or more, the violent crime rearrest rate was 53.1% lower ($p < 0.05$); and those in for at least 16 weeks had a violent rearrest rate 82.6% lower ($p < 0.05$). In each of the three pairs of group comparisons, the members of the experimental group who were rearrested spent significantly less time in custody, and significantly more days in the community before their first arrest (for either a violent or nonviolent crime), than did those in the control group.

b) *In-House Violence.* During the year before RSVP began, there were 24 violent incidents serious enough that they would have constituted felonies if they had occurred in the community (roughly three per month) in the 62-man dormitory. During the first month RSVP was in effect there was one such incident, and for the following twelve months there were none. During that same year, a comparable dormitory that still followed traditional jail practices had 28 violent incidents.

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Discussion

RSVP was intended to be a comprehensive and intensive intervention to decrease violence, and the evaluation of the program generated some optimistic conclusions on approaches to prevention that are multidimensional and that emphasize restorative over purely retributive goals. There are limitations and suggestions to be made for further study,^{7,8} but the overall the program results show that initiatives taken at the jail level and continuing into the community can play an important role in reducing the escalating cycle of violent crime.

RSVP requires extra staffing and thus additional expenses, especially in the initial stages, to cover trainers, consultants, and supervisors for both in-house and post-release programs. However, the built-in costs of building, maintaining, and operating jails and incarcerating human beings in them 24 hours a day, seven days a week, are already so high that the Sheriff's Department estimates that RSVP adds only about five percent to its gross operating expenses. Nevertheless, a startup endowment of approximately 35 dollars per inmate-day (as has initiated RSVP) seems advisable, although assets such as creativity and flexibility are more valuable in an innovative project than funds alone. For RSVP, the reduction in in-house violence—from 24 serious incidents in the year before the program opened, to zero in the twelve months following its first month of operation—has saved the Department (and thus the taxpayers) the money that would otherwise have been spent on medical and surgical care for both inmates and guards injured by the violence. On an even larger scale, the reduction in rearrests for violent crimes among RSVP participants (83% lower than for the control group, for those who spent at least 16 weeks in either group) and in overall time spent re-incarcerated (66% below the control group) during the first year following release means that the RSVP program can be calculated to have *saved* the community a net amount of about \$4 for every \$1 spent on the program. Thus, after the initial investment, the project has the potential to become nearly self-sustaining.

Strictly speaking, from the perspective of public health, the program described here represents only tertiary prevention (i.e., intervention only with those individuals who have already become sick, or in the case of violence, have already injured others). It may be a worthy challenge and goal to adapt it for primary and secondary prevention—i.e., preventing violence before it occurs in the first place,

as opposed to merely reducing the incidence of reoccurrence—and plans are underway for RSVP in schools and in other community institutions.

* RSVP won the Innovations in American Government Award from the Ash Foundation and Harvard's Kennedy School of Government in 2004.

**A more detailed description of RSVP or consultation on how to initiate a similar program is available through the authors or contact RSVP Founder SunnySchwartz: sunnyschwartz@mac.com.

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Table 1. Key Findings

- The U.S. has become the leading incarcerator of the world—placing nearly 700 per 100,000 population behind bars—with no observable effect on the murder rate. In fact, higher incarceration rates are associated with higher crime rates, consistent with the observation that persons who experience incarceration exhibit greater criminality once released into the community.
 - RSVP, a jail-based program that focuses on restoration and prevention of further violence rather than on retribution, showed a reduction in the in-house incident rates by 100% and in the recidivism rates for violent offenders by up to 82.6% ($p < 0.05$) compared to the control groups, indicating promise for multilevel, comprehensive approaches that consider psychological and sociocultural factors that can contribute to violence.
 - Utilizing the tools of public health and preventive medicine may be more effective in curbing the cycle of violent crime than relying on the penal and criminal justice systems alone. We might learn from the successes of the public health approach that have prevented health problems before they occur and have extended better care and safety to entire populations.
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