A Deeper Look at Historical Trauma Among Street Intervention Workers

# Historical Trauma at the Street Level

Individuals who have been subjected to long-term, collective trauma are more likely to experience the effects of trauma – including physical disease and mental illness – even several generations after the original trauma occurred. Community disinvestment, racism, the prison industrial complex and mass incarceration are all forms of historical trauma that show up again and again in the work of street intervention and form the backdrop of personal and professional traumas.

Community Disinvestment

Street intervention workers observe community disinvestment in the forms of major public systems – including education, health, and law enforcement – failing to deliver quality and rightful services to the community.  Basic services are hard to access for both street intervention workers and their clients, adding to the sense of demoralization and hopelessness.

Racism

Chicago’s street intervention is largely taking place on the south and west sides, neighborhoods predominantly populated with Black and Latinx residents. Street intervention workers reflect the populations they serve and share in the harassment, lack of resources, and discrimination of their clients. Yet, while Black and LatinX Chicagoans have common experiences of marginalization, they have distinct histories and identities, and there can be a threat of racial unrest between the two groups and street intervention workers sometimes find themselves caught in the middle. Street intervention workers have also commented on racism *within* their organizations in the form of microaggressions by supervisors or administrators of a different race, or in the rates of promotion.

The Prison Industrial Complex and Mass Incarceration

The Prison Industrial Complex (PIC) is understood as a racialized system of control that uses incarceration and other forms of carceral control (such as surveillance and supervision) to marginalize Black and Latinx communities, LGBTQIA+ communities, immigrants, and other criminalized groups. Street intervention workers described manifestations of the PIC in their personal narratives of systems contact in addition to their advocacy efforts on behalf of clients who are systems-involved. Below are some common ways street intervention workers have encountered the PIC personally and through the lives of their clients:

* Erroneously added to Chicago’s gang database
* Stopped or searched by police on false pretenses
* Verbally or physically harassed by police
* Falsely arrested by police
* Pre-trial detention in police custody or in the Cook County Jail

Street intervention workers also described social service providers and government agencies as reproducing the harmful dynamics of the PIC as well. They described instances where they or their clients were denied services due to their criminal histories or supervision status. They also described receiving differential treatment from social service providers due to the perception that they were “gang-bangers” or “thugs”.

*I think most of the impact that happens is related to this, to like systems, having to deal with the frustration of uncooperative parole agents, and dealing with the Social Security administration, dealing with the people at the Secretary of State … some of them people can be very rude, man. Something as simple as employment [while] on electronic monitoring. Like that whole process of having to call the 1-800 number, being on the line for two hours, and then the phone call getting cut off, and you having to call back. And I just don’t get all these different barriers that are put in place, and in the back of my mind I know exactly why. But the system is supposed to be working in ‘our way’, it’s not meant to work for people that are formerly incarcerated.*

Many study participants described their work as a coping mechanism for dealing with historical trauma and systemic harm. They viewed the profession of street intervention as the counterforce to punitive systems that have undermined their communities.

# Food for Thought

* + The content of this worksheet can provide a foundation for a team discussion on how they view criminal legal interventions within the neighborhoods they work in. This reflection provides a ‘big picture’ orientation to their street-level work and engagement with clients.
  + How do street intervention workers conceptualize their violence reduction work within their city’s public safety strategies (including law enforcement and the use of incarceration)?
  + How do street intervention workers conceptualize “justice”? Based on their experiences with the criminal legal system, do they believe that the system provides justice when harm occurs?
  + What recommendations do street intervention workers have for “system actors” to end cycles of violence in the communities they work in? System actors include law enforcement, courts, and penal institutions. Are there opportunities for street intervention workers to contribute to local/ city/ county/ state coalitions on criminal legal reform? Are organizations supporting the involvement of street intervention workers in these forums?