How Social Policy addresses Black on Black homicide in Chicago and Toronto

SOC 371H1 – Dr. Mai Phan

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Across the entire globe almost every society has major social problems that it would like to eliminate or address through social policy. One social problem that requires immediate attention in North America is the disproportionate rate of Black on Black homicide in cities with a high Black population. For 25 years the leading cause of death for African-American males aged 15 to 34 is murder[1], African American men are 9 times more likely to be victims of homicide than Caucasian American men, 6 times higher than African American women, and 26 times more likely than Caucasian American women (Voisin et al: 2011). African Americans in Chicago were 85% more likely to commit violence than Whites, and the leading cause of death among Blacks is intraracial homicide (Sampson et al: 2005). Social policy is a combination of measures provided by various members and institutions of a community, that address the human condition within that society. Generally social policy is dominated by legislation and the policies of major institutions such as the government, the police, the courts, and the media. Communal organizations and individuals can affect social policy through independent action, awareness campaigns, and public protest, however social policy is generally controlled through access to economic strength and the dissemination of information. Since the Black community in North America experiences high rates of economic, political, and social inequality, the means to be an active participant in addressing the issue on Black on Black violence is hindered and surrounded by obstacles. Social policy in Toronto and Chicago has failed to be effective in addressing the issue because the problem has been defined as a 'gang violence' problem in North America and not identified as a problem that is a result of the socio-economic condition of the African-American community, the systematic racial discrimination in the labour market, education system, political arena,

2

and justice system contribute to the harsh social conditions that harbour violence, and the majority of resources that are allocated to address the problem do not reach the communities that need it the most. Within North America there are two cities that experience high rates of Black on Black violence within the borders of two separate countries, Toronto in Canada, and Chicago in the United States. Taking a look at the social policy of these two cities may provide insight as to what are the effective and ineffective solutions. In Toronto and Chicago, the 4th and 5th largest cities in North America, Black on Black homicide through gun violence is a major crisis that is senselessly ending lives daily. Chicago experiences the highest rates of Black on Black homicide in the United states, and Toronto has the highest Black on Black homicide rate in Canada.

In Chicago 2012, there were 506 homicides, over 423 of them were by firearm, and over 80% of the victims were African-American males[2] in a population of 2.7 million[3]. North of the border in Canada, Toronto experienced 54 homicides in 2012, with 33[4] of them by firearm, and over 80% of the victims were African-Canadian males in a population of 2.8 million[5]. African-Americans are approximately 39% of the population in Chicago, while African-Canadians are 8.4%[6] of the population in Toronto, which translates into a 0.00031 murder rate for Black males in Chicago, and a 0.00018 rate for Black males in Toronto. Two interesting statistics emerge when examining the data; first, Chicago's murder rate is almost 10 times higher than Toronto's, and second, the disproportionate number of Blacks killed by firearms are consistent in both cities with a number above 80%. The social policy approach in both cities must be examined in order to identify what is causing the Black homicide rate in Chicago to be almost twice that in Toronto, and to find out why are over 80% of firearm homicides victims and perpetrators African-American or African-Canadian.

The social condition of African-Americans is slightly different than African-Canadians because

the African slave trade was abolished in the British colonies before it was in the United States. Most African-Americans have histories that span over 400 years in the United States, while the majority of African-Canadians emigrated in to Canada over the past 50 years. In the U.S., political opportunity although very limited and oppressed, still exists in a stronger capacity south of the border compared to Canada. Economically due to the higher population south of the border, more opportunities for economic gain exist there, but the common element of harsh racial oppression of Blacks in both countries create limited opportunities for upward social mobility in both cities and countries. Racial oppression in the U.S., has been upfront and blatant, while racial oppression in Canada, is somewhat sublime and hidden. Overall the socio-economic conditions of Blacks in both countries are similar, but the extended history of the African-American experience compared to the African-Canadian one makes the American situation more intense and pronounced.

To be effective in treating any problem, an accurate description of the issue is necessary to providing the right resources and solutions to address the problem. If a person experiences a severe stomach ache, it would be impractical for a doctor to diagnose the patient without asking them what are their symptoms, furthermore, if the doctor doesn't identify what is causing the stomach ache the patient will be continuously receiving treatment for the stomach ache instead of preventing the stomach ache through the elimination of whatever is being ingested to cause the stomach ache in the first place. Yes, the doctor will remain well paid by treating the problem without addressing the route causes, but the chronic stomach ache could spread to other parts of the body further damaging the patients health, and the unsafe practices of the patient could spread to others causing an epidemic of stomach problems. Through displaced social policy, the analogy referred to previously, is precisely what has happened regarding Black on Black violence in Toronto, most commonly known as 'gang violence'.

In Toronto, the police have repeatedly stated that there is a 'guns and gangs' problem in the city usually every time there is a shooting within the African-Canadian community. However, front line youth workers in the African-Canadian community see these shootings as the result of independent reactions to isolated situations instead of gang related activity. The definition of a 'gang' varies from the dictionary to government documents. The Webster's dictionary defines a gang as *"a team of workmen working together, a number of men or boys banding together"*, dictionary.com refers to a gang as, *"a group of youngsters or adolescents that associate closely; often exclusively for social reasons, especially such a group engaging in delinquent behaviour"*, and the Oxford dictionary defines a gang as *"an organized group of criminals"*. The Canadian government department of Justice identifies the problem of an inconsistent definition of 'gangs', *"Definitional issues have also had a negative impact on gang suppression and prevention activities. It is impossible, for example, to determine if a program developed in one region would work in another region if these regions have conflicting gang definitions.[7]"*. The Canadian department of Justice has proposed that the criminal code definition of gang coincide with criminal organization, providing four levels of classification for gangs, with level one being transient friendship groups involving spontaneous criminal activity, and level four being established criminal organizations with a long history of licit and illicit enterprises. South of the border, The National Institute of Justice in the U.S., defines a gang as *"An association of three or more individuals; Whose members collectively identify themselves by adopting a group identity, which they use to create an atmosphere of fear or intimidation, frequently by employing one or more of the following: a common name, slogan, identifying sign, symbol, tattoo or other physical marking, style or colour of clothing, hairstyle, hand sign or graffiti;"[8]*. If the Toronto police and media claim there are gangs, there has been very limited identifying markers associating perpetrators of

homicide with the traditional definition of a gang.

What police refer to as 'gangs' are usually neighbourhood terms for an area or a street that people live on, the names of rap groups and rap artists have also been used interchangeably to define Toronto street gangs. In the shocking public shooting at Toronto's Eaton Centre on June 2, 2012 the reinforced portrayal of gun violence as gang related, undermined police efforts when they stated the shooting was not gang related, although some involved were gang associates[9]. The media jumped all over the police to question how could the shooting involve gang associates and not be gang related. What followed from media speculation was the identification of a Regent Park rap group as an associate gang, and a call from the Mayor of Toronto to capture members of this gang and deport anyone convicted in Toronto of a gun crime. The resources allocated to addressing a problem that was between of a personal nature between two parties[10], spiralled out of control in to a gang hunt for a rap group unconnected with the murder, and a call for the deportation of people blatantly assumed to be immigrants. This is another example of how misguided social policy can result in the allocation of resources to things unrelated to correcting the social problem.

The alleged problem of 'guns and gangs' in Toronto should be more accurately defined as a disproportionate amount of African-Canadian males that have resorted to selling drugs in order to earn an income, this social issue is distinctly different from being a part of organized crime, or a gang. The gun violence identified in African-American communities in the United States, and specifically in Chicago, has been consistently referred to as a gang problem as well. The early establishment of Irish, and Italian gangs that controlled Chicago throughout the early 1900's up through the 1960's, may contribute to the labelling of gang culture in Chicago, however, the major difference between Black gangs, and the Irish and Italian gangs, were that White gangs were able to work their way in to the city

6

administrations power structure, through the police departments, and political organizations. In

contrast to Black gangs that were ostracized, and subject to the police control exerted by the opposing

gangs leaving them highly unorganized, with a lack of political and social power[11]. The traditional

definition of 'gang' con-notates an organized structure working together for a common purpose,

compared to an individual criminal that has decided to pick up a gun and engage in criminal activity.

There are important differences in addressing gang activity versus criminal behaviour, which are

evident in the recommendations of the U.S. Department of Justice *Gang Suppression and Intervention:*

Problem and Response Research Summary. The research summary's first recommendation is in regards

to definition, and it states:

> 1. Definition. The definition of a youth gang should be restricted to youth groups engaged in
>   serious violence and crime, and whose primary purpose for existence is symbolic or communal
>   rather than economic gain. Organizations existing for drug trafficking or criminal gain as such
>   should not be considered youth gangs, although distinctions are not easy to determine.

This definition is not what is being used by the Toronto and Chicago media, and it is clear that the definition is

part of the process of finding a solution. The misrepresentation of Black males involved in firearms offences as

gang members is further distorted by the removal of organized crime factions as contributors to the problem of

street gangs and gun violence. In the 2007 Canadian federal report "The Strategies for Reducing Gun Violence:

The Role of Gangs, Drugs, and Firearms Accessibility"[12] one of the recommendations explicitly excludes "biker

gangs" as one of the factors contributing to gun violence trends[13]. This definition starts to racialize the

perception of street gangs versus organized crime and negates the implicit involvement of organized

crime in the acquisition of illegal firearms for use in criminal offences.

Until the definition of homicides within the Black community are more accurately described,

the solutions that are proposed via social policy will be those that address the perception of organized

crime as opposed to the social deficiencies in the Black community such as lack of employment,

systematic discrimination, and the inequality of criminal justice practices that lead to Black on Black

violence. More police and tougher penalties for people allegedly involved in gang activity will be the sought out solution because of the current definition, when equal access to education, employment, and justice is what is needed to prevent 'gang' violence from occurring.

One major factor that has been constantly overlooked in the implementation of social policy is racial segregation in North America. A major study outlining the role of segregation within the African-American community in Chicago is the 1996 study on *"Segregation and Crime: The Effect of Black Social Isolation on the rates of Black Urban Violence"* by Shihadeh and Flynn. This study reveals the effects of the social policy of racial segregation in United States on economic, cultural, and political factors in the African-American community.

Racial segregation qualifies as social policy in North America because it has been practiced as a part of law in the history of the United States and Canada. After the southern states lost the civil war they enacted Jim Crow laws,[14] separating Whites from Blacks in everyday social activities such as public transportation, use of public restrooms, and seating in theatres. The Jim Crow era ended legally with the civil rights movement in the 1960's, by overturning many of the laws that were in place upholding this practice, however, the effects of racial segregation still remain throughout the entire United States, and is expanding for the African-Canadian community in Canada.

In Chicago, African-Americans were forced to settle in the south side of Chicago where the social, economic and political disadvantages that the African-American community experienced were concentrated. Whites held access to employment and upward social mobility, and the lack of interaction between Blacks and Whites meant that Blacks were unable to forge those important relationships that may give them an opportunity for advancement (Massey and Denton 1993; Wilson, 1987, 1993), this falls in line with classical Marxist theories regarding the ones with power control the

8

means of production. Black segregation leads to Black social isolation which combines the weight of poverty, joblessness, welfare dependency, teenage childbearing, and other indicators of social malaise and concentrates them geographically in black neighbourhoods (Wilson: 1993). This social policy contributed to the social isolation of Blacks, and those communal conditions may be a contributing factor to the increased levels of violence within the Black community (Shihadeh and Flynn: 1996).

When the aspects of impoverished neighbourhoods bring the property value of homes in Black areas down, the housing stock deteriorates, and the banks and insurance companies make it difficult to get reasonable mortgages and insurance, this social policy is termed "redlining" (Bradford and Rubinowitz; Urban-Suburban Investment Study Group 1975). What results is a decline in home equity, and because equity creates opportunities for loans and financing, African-Americans are further removed from the mainstream standard of living (Shihadeh and Flynn: 1996). Since economic gain is the primary way in which North American society shows success, African-American males are left with an alternative method of displaying or proving their worth. Mainstream media and hollywood reinforce images displaying African-American men as high school drop outs, drug dealers, or gangsters. In the real world, examples of African-American success in the mainstream are mostly limited to an athlete, or someone in the entertainment industry, and in Black neighbourhoods the closest example of a successful Black man are the neighbourhood drug dealers.

Within the context of segregation and social isolation, the stigma of economic and social failure disappears due to the homogeneity of similar conditions in the neighbourhood. There is an absence of pressure to achieve in the classroom because most of the classmates are not doing well, and many young Black men face pressure not to achieve in school to avoid being classified as "too white" (Fordham and Ogbu: 1986). It is not taboo for a young man to say his father is absent, dead, or

9

in jail and Brown (1984) suggests that African-American males in these environments may consider going to prison as part of a rites of passage in to manhood and belonging. Max Weber's identification that communities can access non-economic sources of power through organization are severely hampered by the destitute conditions of the African-American community. These conditions deplete the will and mental clarity necessary to organize effectively.

In Toronto, segregation exists through social policy rooted in economic factors rather than racial ones like in Chicago. There are numerous subsidized housing projects in the northwest end of the city, and due to economic conditions, African-Canadian populations are most dense in these areas compared to the rest of the city, and data shows that these are the same areas where death by firearm is the highest. Therefore a new adoption of social policy must be undertaken to prevent the negative aspects of living in a racialized, and underserved community from manifesting itself in to violent behaviour. A focus on getting at the root causes of violence would reduce the amount of alleged 'gangs' from being formed, and provide alternatives to a life of crime as a way to earn economic sustainability for young Black men in their communities.

The root causes of violence have been the subject of many studies and debates regarding the plight of young Black men, and in a social context youth violence. After the unprecedented amount of killings by firearm within the African-Canadian community in 2005 labelled the "Summer of the Gun", the *Roots of Youth Violence Report* (McMurtry and Curling: 2008) was commissioned by Roy McMurtry and Dr. Alvin Curling, and released in 2008. The report took a different approach from previous social policy as it was recognized that without addressing the root causes of youth violence the killing would continue (McMurtry and Curling: 2008). The report analyzed a lot of studies on the effects of injustice on the Black and Aboriginal communities in Canada, and did consultations with

10

agencies that serve those in need within Ontario. This report was hailed as a success, and was designed to be the guide for social policy on this issue, it laid out a plan for implementation by 2009, however, many of the recommendations of the report have not been implemented, or seriously reviewed by the three levels of government, institutions, and Ministries.

While the Roots of Youth Violence Report is a sensible alternative social policy that would address youth violence, 'gang' violence, and Black on Black violence at its core, the Chicago Crime Commission has an approach that falls in line with conventional social policy. On September 25, 2012 the Chicago Crime Commission through a press release strongly urged as they call, two practical responses to the deadly gang violence that plagues the city of Chicago, which are to increase the number of sworn police officers by 1,400, and to prosecute armed gang members to the fullest extent of the law[15]. The increased police numbers allows for a 400 member gang strike team deployed for service in Chicago's south side, and west side. Art Bilek, the executive vice president of the Chicago Crime Commission states that *"local law enforcement is simply understaffed, and overwhelmed."*[16] What must be considered is that the majority of the African-American community in Chicago is, underemployed, underpaid, overstressed, and undereducated, but without social capital, or political influence, there will be no legitimate demand for help to increase the amount of employed African Americans in Chicago by 1,400. Bilek goes on to demonstrate the inability to conceive what the mental state or social conditions are for African Americans in Chicago with the statement, *"If consequences include hard time in federal prison without the possibility of parole, and away from family and friends, gang members are going to think differently about carrying guns"*[17] What Bilek fails to consider in this case is, will someone choose to take the risk of being killed, and never seeing their family again in any possible way, or will they decide to take the risk in defending their lives when

11

they live in an environment where there is a high probability they can be shot. Bilek's method is an expression of Emile Durkheim's theory that purports modern society requires a mechanism that unites and maintains large groups. When society sees there is a 'gang' problem, the majority of the citizens want to prevent innocent people from being hurt, and they rally around whatever means necessary are employed in order to keep their community safe. As a result of a heightened urgency, the Chicago police department has employed a new approach to dealing with "gang violence", which is to remove the focus from "hot spots", and now put the focus on "hot people". Reports state they have seen gang raids arrest a lot of people, but not get any gang members. This new approach was sparked by the death of 7 year old Heaven Sutton who was caught in a cross fire while selling lemonade, and shot in the back[18]. When looking for solutions CBS news reporter Walter Jacobson interviewed young men from Chicago's ghettoes and quoted one as saying "There is no solution to the violence, Killing is the solution"[19]

In contrast to the Chicago's Crime Commission's institutional ignorance of the plight of African-American males, the University of Chicago Crime Lab launched the Chicago Youth Gun Violence Initiative. In the spring of 2009 a city-wide competition was launched to provide government agencies, non-profit corporations, and faith-based organizations an opportunity to design a community initiative that would receive one million dollars in funding to reduce gun violence among Chicago youth. The B.A.M. (Becoming a Man) program provided by Youth Guidance, and World Sport Chicago were the winners of the one million dollar contest. Youth Guidance has been providing support to the Chicago area for 82 years and serves 16,000 children annually. The B.A.M. Program presents 5 core values, integrity, accountability, self-determination, positive anger expression, and visionary goal setting. The program targets 12-16 year olds, and teens with behavioural issues and lack of faith in the education

system.[20] Ceasefire is another non-conventional program that can be viewed as part of social policy

and was founded by Gary Slutkin. It focuses solely on preventing violent act from occurring, and is

staffed with a majority of African-American and Hispanic members that come from gangs and have

lived the street life. Slutkin started Ceasefire in 1995 after returning from addressing disease outbreaks

in Somalia, and realized after a series of horrific murders in Chicago he was convinced longer

sentences and more police made little difference, and stated "Punishment doesn't drive

behaviour...copying and modelling and the social expectation of your peers is what drives your

behaviour"[21] After applying the conventional practices of providing education and employment

programs, Hardiman an associate of Slutkin pointed out they were not reaching the ones most likely to

pull the trigger, and an alternative approach was developed. In addition to youth outreach workers,

they also hired men and women that had been deep into street life and started recruiting workers while

they were still in prison. These 'violence interrupters' were able to keep their ear to the street and

intervene in conflicts before they took place. The success of an approach like this is evident in its logic

by using the most influential people in the equation becoming part of the solution to create a culture

that looks at the use of violence differently. Daniel Webster of Johns Hopkins University makes a

profound statement regarding the potential for the Ceasefire approach to become a significant part of

the solution to Black on Black violence, he states *"The guys out there doing the interruption have some*

prestige and reputation, and I think the hope is that they start to change a culture so that you can retain

your status, retain your manliness and be able to walk away from events where all expectations were

that you were supposed to respond with lethal force."[22]

Constitutional and legislative approaches to addressing the problem of Black on Black violence

is entirely encompassed in the anti-gang strategy. Senator Feinstein has proposed a bill that treads on

violating American constitutional rights, by using a broad definition of a "criminal street gang"[23], which can include members of a rotary club, or a business organization, if one member is convicted of committing a total of three crimes including one violent offence. The criticism of these constitutional approaches is that it duplicates efforts already being made at the local level by state departments and results in a duplication of resources. The social policy of funding failed programs is evident with the G.R.E.A.T. (Gang Resistance Education and Training) program, and the D.A.R.E. (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) programs which uses uniformed officers as instructors in middle school classrooms to teach the negative consequences of joining a gang. Despite study results that show that these programs have little or no effect on reducing gang involvement or criminal activity which is the main purpose of the programs.[24]

In Toronto a similar reaction took place when innocent people got caught in the crossfire of the Danzig shootings that left 2 dead, and 23 wounded. The Ontario government after pressure from the African Canadian Coalition of Community Organizations (ACCO), unveiled the Youth Action Plan. The Youth Action Plan was basically an extension of already existing community programs, and a statement of permanent funding for TAVIS, which is the Toronto Anti-Violence Intervention Strategy. These standard reactions are the same non-effective social policies that keep being reintroduced to remedy a problem that has not been accurately defined. The Youth Action Plan failed to address the disproportionate rate of African-Canadian men that are victims of gun violence, and instead of allocating resources to the central area of the G.T.A. where it is most needed and the source of most of the gun violence, the resources get spread all over Ontario addressing remote areas that are not experiencing the crisis of Black on Black violence in the G.T.A.

Toronto is on the heels of becoming a city with a Black on Black murder rate similar to

Chicago. The fact that Toronto is culturally diverse, and African-Canadian communities are not all

concentrated in one or two areas is most likely the reason why the homicide rate has not matched that

of Chicago. The social policies that established segregation are a major factor as to why the cycle of

violence perpetuates itself, and seems to be increasing. The social policies proposed by government

institutions need to improve drastically in both cities. The millions of dollars spent on hiring more

police to apply a short term solution would be better spent on community investment that could

eliminate the problem at its root. The social policy of all institutions must be honest with what the true

problem is, and apply all successful methods in reducing the factors that cause it. When the two cities

are compared what comes to light is that regardless of population, gun control, or the countries

histories, Toronto and Chicago have a serious problem facing young men of African descent, and these

problems are directly related to systematic racism, and the conditions that arise out of it. It will be

great to see the social policy turn to the Ceasefire method that engages those that have been through the

hard times and violence, to be the actual agents of change that set an example for the rest of the

African-American and African-Canadian community. It is through this social policy that this social

problem will be finally effectively addressed.

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