Response to the Documentary *The Interrupters*: Addressing the Issue of Violence in Cleveland Neighborhoods

Hanna Yoshida

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Addressing violence in a neighborhood where violence and crime are the norm is always a sensitive topic. From the outside, it is difficult for us to understand what drives these young adults to become so invested in violence, while from the inside, these people have no other choice but to fight. The respect and hierarchy of the gangs, as well as the language on the streets, are impossible to fully understand if you've never even stepped foot inside these neighborhoods. Therefore, implementing an intervention program made up of individuals that are from "the streets," like in the documentary *The Interrupters*, can be very effective in addressing violent crime in the most violent neighborhoods in Cleveland.

The violence interrupters are not trying to dismantle gangs; they are risking their lives to stop violence and to save as many lives as they can. The majority of the members are from different gangs, ex-gang members, and even former street criminals that have been negatively impacted by violence. These violence interrupters can get into parts of the neighborhood that nobody else from the outside can and are able to calm down fights with just a few words. They can spot the soft spots, not the weak spots, of these teens because they can relate to the culture and mindset that these kids have. The police and the government treat the issue of violence and the people in these neighborhoods inhumanely, thinking that these problems are caused simply by family and gang issues. They try to stay away from these neighborhoods as much as they can. However, these violence interrupters take the extra step to not just settle disputes but to care for these individuals mentally, because they are all part of one large community.

Violence is like a disease, and for the young people in these neighborhoods, their disease is violence; they expect to die from it. From the day that they are born in "the streets", they are taught violence and how to fight in order to protect themselves. They don't care about their future or even tomorrow because they are so focused on living through today. They don't expect

themselves to live past 30, and when they see their friends in the caskets, they think they will be next. Though homes, churches, and schools are supposed to be “safe zones," in these neighborhoods, nowhere is really a safe zone. While kids in affluent white neighborhoods have role models consisting of their own parents and the people around them, the kids on “the streets” are surrounded by criminals, drug dealers, and gang members. Many of these children may not even have a stable relationship with their parents or a family that they can safely live with. By implementing violence interrupters in communities, the children will be able to see that there are options other than violence and that it only takes a mindset to change who they are for the better.

If there is at least one person who can be there and be a guiding light for these children, it may also motivate them to take education and knowledge seriously. Violence and crime strongly correlate with income deprivation, and though it may be tough to get completely out of poverty, it still provides these teens with a sense of hope that had been nonexistent growing up for them. The children join the gangs because of security, identity, and even because they may not have any other choice but to. Their only option is to fight and kill, because if they don’t do it, someone else will attack them at any minute. They know that it is not correct, but they do not have any other medium to voice their thoughts through. Though the police may instill laws and regulations in an attempt to neutrally show what is “right and wrong,” the identity of government officials does not scare the gang or the violent young adults because they just see the law as words and the police as outsiders that don’t understand them. Therefore, it will only be the words and actions of the interrupters that can truly catch the heart of these young individuals. Examples such as the art programs that were mentioned in the film can also help encourage children to talk about the violence that occurs in their neighborhoods in a safe environment and through a different medium than hurting others.

However, implementing violence interrupters also means that there will be some associated risks. For one, though some of these interrupters are not living the street life anymore, many of them are still very active in their gangs. Therefore, even though they will be advocates for no violence and for a ceasefire, if something does happen to one of their own gang members, there is the possibility that they may act upon the situation very violently. Another thing is that because of the code of the streets, it is difficult for the violence interrupters to sometimes turn in their own members into law enforcement, even if they know it is for the better. They know the responsibilities that come with being a violence interrupter, and they strongly live in the streets, mediating violence. Yet, violence in these crime-infested neighborhoods is also caused by institutions, structures, and race-making practices that are rooted in our society. Violence interrupters can help these communities and can decrease the issues significantly. However, as Eddie mentioned in the film, the implementation of violence interrupters cannot completely get rid of violence. The real problems lie in lack of jobs, homelessness, and poor schooling, and it is extremely difficult to fix the issue of violence if we cannot even provide the people in these neighborhoods with even the bare minimum.

Therefore, implementing violence interrupters in the most violent neighborhoods in Cleveland is a crucial first step, but it is merely a first step in addressing the complicated issue of violence in our communities. Violence interrupters can only do so much until we actually attempt to tackle the root causes of violence and poverty in these neighborhoods.