

Recruitment through Rule Breaking: Establishing Social Ties with Gang Members

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Many contemporary violence prevention programs direct concentrated law enforcement, social service, or educational attention toward individuals engaged in violence, and yet, this population is often avoiding this precise attention. Drawing on 18 months of ethnographic data, this case study asks: How do street outreach workers form social ties with active gang members? This study identifies three key mechanisms of social tie formation that break organizational rules, but account for how new social relations are formed with street savvy gang youth: (1) *Network Targeting*: identifying, entering, and extending services to the package of preexisting social ties beyond the eligible gang member; (2) *Gift Giving*: navigating those social ties when transferring out of pocket gifts to the target to elicit trust and demonstrate genuine investment; and (3) *Transportation Brokerage*: expanding clients' social networks by literally driving them to prosocial influences and activities. Discussion of the value and limitations of each mechanism offers insights to urban sociologists interested in the origins of social ties in disadvantaged communities, as well as policymakers designing social interventions for hard to reach populations.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary violence prevention programs confront a puzzle: They direct law enforcement, social service, or educational attention toward individuals directly involved in violence, and yet these young men are often “on the run” from precisely such concentrated attention (Goffman 2014). This population of young minority men, especially those involved in street gangs, are highly cynical of law enforcement (Kirk and Papachristos 2011), disengaged from school (Rios 2011), and disinterested in participating in democratic forms of government (Lerman and Weaver 2014). In other words, this population is often extremely hard to reach.

One class of intervention strategies argues that reaching gang-involved youth is best achieved through street outreach workers (SOWs). SOWs are typically local individuals who have desisted from gang activity, received social work training, and are believed to be well positioned to establish affinity with gang members and intervene in violence. But while SOWs can leverage their fluency in the “code of the street” (Anderson 1999) to

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Funding: This study was supported by the American Sociological Association's Sydney S. Spivack Program in Applied Social Research and Social Policy Community Action Research Award.

build relationships, the uncompromisingly practical question of “how” to connect with and serve the target population remains a key question for performing outreach to all hard to reach populations, from homeless youth to undocumented immigrants. This paper explores this issue by asking specifically: How do SOWs form social ties with active gang members?

Drawing on 18 months of ethnographic data on an SOW program in Bridgeport, Connecticut, this study identifies three primary mechanisms of social tie formation that SOWs leverage to target, build relations, and deliver services to youth: (1) *Network Targeting*: identifying, entering, and extending services to the package of preexisting social ties beyond the eligible gang member; (2) *Gift Giving*: navigating those social ties when transferring out of pocket gifts to the target to elicit trust and demonstrate genuine investment; and (3) *Transportation Brokerage*: expanding clients’ social networks by literally driving them to prosocial influences and activities. These mechanisms can at times overlap, and are only distinguished conceptually. Together, these mechanisms reveal a fundamental challenge of outreach: Building relations with gang members and effectively delivering services require a networked-oriented strategy that accounts for youths’ preexisting web of social connections and daily interactions; yet, this approach can only be actualized through rule-breaking practices that transgress organizational policies. While “deviant” because they circumvent program rules, these strategies are viewed as necessary to establishing affinity between SOW and targets. Network Targeting, Gift Giving, and Transportation Brokerage account for the difficulty in building relationships with a resistant target population in both the organizational context of supervisors, policies, and procedures (Cheng 2017), as well as the neighborhood-level context where the code of the street governs daily interactions (Anderson 1999).

THE HISTORY OF GANG STREET OUTREACH WORK

Whether referred to as curbstome counselors (Schlossman et al. 1984), detached workers (Klein 1971), or violence interrupters (Skogan et al. 2008), the use of local residents to intervene in youth violence is not novel. As early as 1930, Clifford Shaw’s Chicago Area Project (CAP) organized neighborhood residents into youth welfare organizations to directly work with youths and groups (Kobrin 1959). As cities searched for solutions to corner group delinquency following World War II (Miller 1957:406), places like Los Angeles (Klein 1971), New York (New York City Youth Board 1960), and Boston (Miller 1957) implemented their own versions of CAP. The promise of gang outreach work, however, was soon undermined: Los Angeles’ program evaluations indicated that outreach workers sustained rather than dissolved groups’ cohesion (Klein 1971); a federally funded Chicago job-training program turned out to be a kick-back scheme for gang leaders (Spergel 2007:12); and police departments across the United States began establishing gang units practicing heavy-handed suppression rather than community empowerment (Coughlin and Venkatesh 2003). While religious figures and neighborhood organizations kept local gang outreach efforts alive, the practice went on a “nearly three-decade hiatus” (Tita and Papachristos 2010:30).

Recently, officials from the Department of Justice and local mayors have reintroduced gang outreach as a core policy solution to urban gun violence and as a comprehensive violence reduction strategy (Arciaga and Gonzalez 2012; U.S. Department of Justice 2010).

While private organizations like the Ford Foundation funded such programs as early as the 1960s, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) began directing resources in 1995 to its Comprehensive Gang Model, which features street outreach as an element of the strategy (Spergel 2007). Yet the popular and political appeal of programs like Cure Violence, which approach gang violence as a public health concern by leveraging “Violence Interrupters” to stop its transmission, have received mixed evaluations of efficacy (see Butts et al. 2015 for a review). And while program evaluations are valuable in measuring bottom-line effectiveness, extant research lacks sustained inquiry into how these programs’ frontline workers actually conduct outreach. Without such understanding, programs risk designing policies that are not only misguided, but antithetical to how social relationships with clients are actually built.

SOCIAL TIE FORMATION IN DISADVANTAGED COMMUNITIES

Social ties—the relationships connecting two or more entities—are the basic building blocks that constitute social networks and facilitate the exchange of resources, information, and other forms of currency. These relationships are foundational to expanding social capital (Burt 2000; Coleman 1990), accessing employment opportunities (Granovetter 1995), gaining socioeconomic status (Lin 1999), and even effectuating good governance (Putnam 2000). Communities with high social capital are often places with high collective efficacy, where residents are animated by their social cohesion and trust to intervene in specific unwanted behaviors (Sampson et al. 1997). In particular, collective efficacy mediates urban violence (Morenoff et al. 2001), and more specifically, gang violence (Papachristos and Kirk 2006).

On the one hand, residents leverage social ties for prosocial functions such as sharing daily duties of childrearing (Stack 1974), exposing others to welfare assistance programs (Bertrand et al. 2000), and organizing during times of civic crises (Small 2004). But social ties can also facilitate deviant ends (Browning et al. 2004)—especially gang activity (Papachristos 2009). Social connections thus also provide the channels through which defensive or violent behavioral orientations spread (Anderson 1990), efforts to remove criminal and drug enterprises are impeded (Pattillo-McCoy 1999), and tolerance of deviant behaviors becomes accepted norm (Venkatesh 2006).

While research has made advances on the consequences of social ties, less is known about their origin. Particularly in poor, urban neighborhoods, what are the mechanisms through which durable social ties are formed in the first place? Existing literature provides the following three important, yet limited, insights:

First, geographic boundaries are of limited significance in reliably predicting social tie formation or disruption. Social ties, even among gang members, transcend geographic boundaries. While more or less stable turfs and set spaces remain important, gang violence is often retaliatory, requiring members to travel across spatially adjacent areas to confront specific targets (Rosenfeld et al. 1999; Tita and Radil 2011). With increased mobility, gang members no longer have to live within the spaces where they are active (Decker and Van Winkle 1996). Gangs often admit nonresidents of the neighborhood if, for instance, they are good fighters (Moore et al. 1983). When gang members’ families relocate, many retain their allegiance and remain active in the gang, claiming a “fictive residence” (Moore et al. 1983:193). But while research has consistently found that both gang and nongang

affiliated residents possess cross-neighborhood social ties, there has been minimal attention to how service organizations can identify, target, and form these nongeographically bounded relationships in the first place.

Second, social tie formation can be powerfully facilitated through gift giving and other mediums of exchange. Research on care workers provides key insights into how social connections, especially between strangers, can be forged. England et al. (2002:455) define care work as “occupations in which workers are supposed to provide a face-to-face service that develops the human capabilities of the recipient.” The goal is to form a caring relationship, which “feature[s] sustained and/or intense personal attention that enhances the welfare of its recipients” (Zelizer 2005:162). The “emotional labor” (Hochschild 1983:7) of such work centers around the client. Nurses, physical therapists, and home-care aides purchase groceries for clients on their days off, and exchange gifts such as flowers and baked goods. These gifts possess expressive value, and are “inalienably associated with the giver, the recipient, and the relationship that defines and binds them” (Carrier 1991:121). While gifts possess economic and political dimensions, they are also material manifestations of social relationships (Mauss 1935). Caregivers also provide extra, unapproved assistance, as well as treat clients’ spouses all in the name of care and the relationship they have built (Stone 1999). Rather than typical workplace misbehavior, these transgressions are “prosocial” and intended to better serve clients (see Morrison 2006). Care work also features a sense of self-sacrifice where workers come in early, stay late, visit on days off, and stretch themselves thin to provide care “because we are their family” (Dodson and Zinzavage 2007:916).

In urban ethnography, the role of care in social interactions and forming trustworthy relationships has often been overshadowed by the concept of respect. For example, discussion of Anderson’s (1999) code of the street often centers on the code’s role in perpetuating a hypermasculine, violent subculture in minority neighborhoods (e.g., Stewart et al. 2006; Stewart and Simons 2010), with insufficient attention paid to the code’s caring properties. Anderson (1999) describes how two friends Tyree and Malik promise one another to watch the other’s back. This mutual expectation helps form “powerful bonds of trust” (91) as they become “tight” and use fictive kinship titles like “brother” or “cousin” (88). Thus, in addition to campaigning for respect, the code of the streets involves campaigning for care.

Third, research points to the significant role of organizations in facilitating social tie formation and brokering access to social resources. Street-level bureaucrats such as schoolteachers, welfare counselors, and court clerks are the gatekeepers to key resources (Lipsky 1980). Given that these resources are limited, frontline workers become policymakers empowered with discretion over how to distribute goods (Lipsky 1980). Small (2006, 2009) argues that interorganizationally networked neighborhood institutions directly and indirectly communicate information and provide resources to residents of low-income communities. Childcare centers act as resource brokers, or entities linking otherwise separate social networks (Burt 2000), by connecting mothers not only to other mothers, but also to other organizations.

But whereas mothers eagerly enroll their children in childcare centers, gang members typically view formal services not only with disinterest, but with active resistance. While a key characteristic of Lipsky’s (1980) street-level bureaucracies is that their clients are nonvoluntary (i.e., either because their participation is legally enforced such as prisoners or they must enroll out of need such as welfare recipients), the street-active youths here

are largely uncompelled to voluntarily enter the prosocial services offered. This target population is streetwise (Anderson 1990), hypermasculine, and deemed likely to commit gun violence. Success requires SOWs to occupy two social worlds—one governed by bureaucratic rules and the other organized by the code of the street (Lopez-Aguado 2013).

FORMING SOCIAL TIES AS SOWs

While each jurisdiction and program iteration emphasizes different aspects of the gang outreach model, a fundamental concern is building credibility with targeted youth (Decker et al. 2008). Many past studies involving gang outreach worker programs have used SOWs only as a means to study gangs (e.g., Short and Strodbeck 1965), but examining SOWs' own perspectives on how they build relationships with gang youth is critical for at least three reasons. First, at the individual level, SOWs have wide discretion in the field with almost nonexistent supervision. Spergel (1966:28) states plainly that “the street worker stands alone on the corner.” In fact, SOWs are hired for their very expertise in street norms (Anderson 1999), whereas program supervisors by corollary are often outsiders who are more experienced in nonprofit administration, policymaking, grant writing, or academic research. Unlike teachers who receive class rosters or doctors who receive patients, SOWs must independently search for eligible gang youth. Thus, their perspectives, approaches, and strategies are key to understanding how gang outreach is accomplished.

Second, at the program level, identifying the specific strategies SOWs employ reveals insights into why programs have produced mixed results. Properly comprehending official program evaluations depends on first identifying what exactly is being assessed. Vargas (2016:101) describes how a Chicago SOW program hired people with “a lot of juice” among young gang members and thus, more quickly gained their respect. But neither Chicago's long history of gangs and gang reduction programs, nor the status local SOWs have with neighborhood youth, are policies exportable to other cities. Systematically classifying SOW strategies that have been implemented at varying levels of success will generate insight into why cities have replicated gang outreach programs, but not their results (see Butts et al. 2015).

Finally, at the community level, focusing on SOW relationship building strategies reveals how collective efficacy can be activated and social ties formed in disadvantaged communities in general. Residents living in communities high in collective efficacy have perceptions of high social cohesion and mutual trust, and therefore, are together more willing to intervene in specific unwanted behaviors (Sampson et al. 1997). SOWs, as part of their job qualifications, are typically long-time residents of the target community. Thus, as long-time residents now hired as agents to increase collective efficacy, SOW methods are generalizable to how social ties can be developed in communities with antisocial practices at large.

The remainder of this paper proceeds in four parts. After describing the field site and data sources that inform this study's findings, the subsequent section argues that client eligibility policies from this case study conceive gang members in a desocialized context. The main section of the paper then advances three ways in which SOWs form social ties with targeted gang members. The last section discusses these findings, especially their generalizability to social tie formation in disadvantaged communities, and concludes.

DATA SOURCES AND FIELD SITE

Bridgeport, Connecticut, is an unassuming postindustrial American city that offers a different perspective from our Chicago-based understanding of urban life and violence (Small 2007). With a population 146,000 residents, Bridgeport is one of the poorest, most violent cities in a county boasting the highest median family income in the wealthiest state in the United States. Bridgeport has a Gini index of 0.539, which puts its income inequality on par with Bangkok, Thailand (Moran 2013). According to the FBI's Uniform Crime Report data, Bridgeport's 2012 violent crime rate—the rate the year before the program here was implemented and studied—was approximately 1,205 per 100,000 people—outpacing Boston and Chicago's violent crime rate, and doubling New York City's. Bridgeport's 2012 homicide rate (15 per 100,000) was three times the national average.

BULLET-FREE BRIDGEPORT (BFB)

My field site was located in a Bridgeport community center. An array of social service organizations, programs, and activities operate within offices on building's three floors. Layers of newspaper clippings, posters, and award ceremony pictures compete for space on each door. The newest tenant of the building is BFB.¹ Though BFB's parent organization—Fairfield County Youth Project (FCYP)—has been around since 1985, new space was carved out for BFB when it began operations in September 2013. BFB is a subcontractor of the city of Bridgeport, which receives funding from state legislation aimed at reducing youth violence. My contact with BFB began in October 2013 when I began attending roll call meetings, or team gatherings between the four SOWs and the SOW supervisor. SOWs discuss strategy, review protocol, ask questions, and give status updates on the inroads made with community organizations and clients. The findings below are based, in part, on field notes from 68 roll call meetings over the course of 18 months (see Table 1 for summary of data sources). After I began attending roll calls regularly, SOWs began offering me rides to the train station. I took these opportunities to conduct informal interviews with the SOWs, which also inform these findings.²

SOWs document their activities in Daily Reports, which consist of two components: (1) a contact log with prepopulated categories that SOWs mark off if applicable to the interaction (i.e., type of contact, venue, duration) and (2) a daily notes section where SOWs describe the interaction in free-response format. The Case Manager and SOW Supervisor forwarded these reports to me. In total, 1,260 daily reports inform the analysis below.³

Finally, two sets of semistructured interviews were conducted with each of the four SOWs, the SOW Supervisor, and each of the administrators: the Program Director, Case

TABLE 1. Sources of Data

Data Source	Quantity
Roll Call Field Notes	68
SOW Daily Reports	1,260
Semistructured Interviews	8

Other Sources: Unstructured interviews; internal documents such as reimbursement forms, grant proposals, and quarterly updates; and SOW training materials.

Manager, and FCYP Director. The first part was a life history interview and the second focused on specific encounters, stories, and challenges SOWs had with various clients. Descriptions of the interactions were verified and triangulated with roll call discussions and Daily Reports. The three African American and one Latino SOWs collectively spent 52 years in prison. The African American SOW Supervisor was incarcerated for 14 years and the Latino Case Manager for 5 years (the remaining two White administrators were never imprisoned). Whereas each administrator held a Master's Degree, SOWs had Associates or high school level educations.

Analysis of these data sources began with coding all the interactions, activities, and communications between SOWs and clients. Attending several rolls calls where SOWs described their recruitment strategies and recent exchanges with clients keyed the study to focus on codes such as picking up and dropping off clients; giving advice; interrupting violence; coming out of pocket; and assisting family member. Roll call field notes and SOW Daily Reports were analyzed using these codes, and themes emerged about how SOWs targeted and interacted with clients. These themes were triangulated with the semistructured and unstructured interviews in which SOWs were asked to describe step-by-step how they identified targets and interacted with them over time. To highlight the benefits and shortcomings of these recruitment strategies, cases were selected to maximize variation in SOWs' application and success in applying various relationship building strategies. The insights generated were ultimately generalized into the three mechanisms of social tie formation described below.

DESOCIALIZED CONSTRUCTION OF THE CLIENT

A promotional postcard-sized flyer that SOWs distribute to potential clients and leave at community centers across the city asks on the back: "Do you want to change the game? Are you: (1) Between the ages of 14 and 24, and living in Bridgeport? (2) Impacted by a life of violence and crime? (3) Ready to learn new life and parenting skills?" These hint at some of the minimum qualifications that clients must meet to receive BFB's services. The

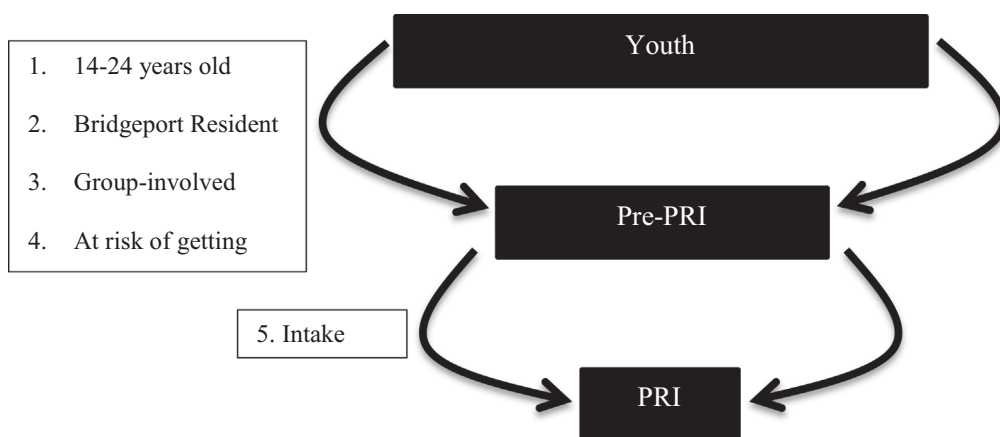


FIG. 1. Process of becoming a PRI.

process of becoming an official BFB client, who SOWs refer to as Proven-Risk Individuals (PRIs), is illustrated in Figure 1.

How does a gang member proceed from receiving a postcard to becoming a client? To become a pre-PRI—someone who SOWs are recruiting—the individual must fall within a ten-year age range, have an official residence in Bridgeport, be group or gang-involved, and be at risk of being a shooter or getting shot. SOWs walk around different neighborhoods each day to both establish their continued presence in the community and seek qualifying youths interested in BFB’s services. Personal judgment based on youths’ appearances guides SOWs in determining who meets PRI criteria. SOWs cannot simply approach people with a series of questions to vet eligibility. Instead, SOWs engage potential clients as though each is eligible—a search that costs both time and other resources. Seasonal changes exacerbate existing difficulties when, for instance, cold weather drives individuals in the target age range indoors. During the winter, many youths are “cuffed up”—they find a romantic partner and stay indoors. But by appearing each day, SOWs expect people to sooner or later approach them and ask: “Who ya’ll? I see you coming around everyday, what ya’ll doing here?” (Field Notes, 16 June 2014). Additional strategies SOWs deploy to identify potential recruits include soliciting youth around the juvenile court since they are guaranteed to have a criminal case, and even covertly monitoring social media status updates and photo posts to explore recent activity and interactions. But while these initial interactions position SOWs to identify potential recruits, SOWs devote most of their time to their key challenge: building relationships with gang members.

After the SOW has built a relationship with the pre-PRI through early mentoring and interactions such as trips to the mall, the SOW encourages the pre-PRI to meet the Case Manager for an official intake. The intake signifies that the youth has enough trust to provide personally identifiable information such as their “government name” (as opposed to nicknames), date of birth, family background, and criminal history. The Case Manager also evaluates the youth’s skillset, strengths, needs, preferences, and provides his clinical impression of the potential client’s circumstances. In exchange, the youth becomes an official client who is directly recommended to additional services and programs.

While Lipsky (1980) refers to the person-to-client transformation as the “social construction of the client,” the empirical evidence here indicates that the process ironically desocializes the client by ignoring the social context in which gang members, like anyone else, operate. BFB’s client policies detach the individual from the social relationships in which (s)he is embedded. Each step in the client transformation process ignores the social setting in which youths exist—exacerbating prevailing difficulties in building relationships with the already hard to reach. But rather than adhering to all program policies, SOWs rule break to account for clients’ preexisting, socially meaningful relations. By targeting the entire social network in which an individual is enmeshed, SOWs are better positioned to enter, navigate, and expand gang youths’ networks.

THREE MECHANISMS OF SOCIAL TIE FORMATION

BFB policies circumscribe the boundaries of SOW and client interactions. First, SOWs can only assist youths who meet specific edibility criteria. Second, BFB will not reimburse costs for frivolous purchases accumulated during client interactions, defined primarily as nonfood costs. And third, BFB will not provide a vehicle or cover transportation costs

associated with client travel to and from services. These policies fail to consider the social context in which gang members operate and how social tie formation proceeds with this target population. Thus, SOWs have developed a series of relationship building strategies to enter, navigate, and expand targets' networks and promote prosocial influences: (1) Network Targeting, (2) Gift Giving, and (3) Transportation Brokerage.

Each of the sections below begins with a description of how an organizational rule hinders relationship building and how SOWs rule break in response. These broken rules delineate the boundaries BFB has set on SOW and client interactions. Some are formalized in documentation, but most are established ad hoc as circumstances arise that require SOWs to test the limits of program support for clients. No formal punishments are attached to transgressing these rules since it is the SOWs' discretion to assist the client beyond program limits. However, while SOWs employ these rule-breaking strategies to facilitate social tie formation with gang members, each strategy has limitations circumscribing, and sometimes directly challenging, its effectiveness.

NETWORK TARGETING: ENTERING THE CLIENT'S PACKAGE OF PREEXISTING RELATIONS

BFB's strict eligibility criteria do not account for clients' social and familial networks and thus, SOWs rule break. SOWs must account for the social reality that PRIs have brothers, sisters, friends, or other acquaintances or family members who fail to meet PRI criteria, especially age, but require assistance nonetheless. While an SOW can explain to a mother why BFB can help her younger son but not her oldest one, such limitations can place the relationship with the entire family and family's network at risk. As a result, SOWs target and assist not only the qualified gang member, but also his or her wider familial network. This relational approach transgresses BFB's policy of directing resources solely toward qualified youth, but positions SOWs to build stronger relations by more comprehensively providing social services.

At age 26, Wesley was two years above the age maximum and therefore ineligible to become a client. But his younger brother Brandon qualified, and so SOW Rahim extended services to Wesley nonetheless. SOW Rahim took "rejected PRI Wesley to sign up for General Education Development (G.E.D.) classes, then to a drug program to sign him up, then to Connecticut Works center to look for jobs" (Field Notes, 13 November 2013). Though Wesley's wife had a history of drug use, she "expressed a desire to leave the street life scene" (Field Notes, 13 November 2013). SOW Rahim connected her to Bridgeport Employment Services to explore job opportunities. PRI Brandon also requested SOW Rahim's help in dealing with his disabled mother. SOW Rahim complied: "These extra efforts helped in establishing truth with the PRI and supports my efforts with his family" (Field Notes, 18 February 2014). SOW Rahim viewed the extra assistance as part of "the package" in helping improve a PRI's situation: "It's not about choosing who to help, we're here to help the community. . . . We're in a position to help and so that's what I'm going to do." While the PRI criteria desocializes clients by prohibiting services to ineligible family members, SOWs provide a holistic intervention accounting for a PRI's preexisting, socially meaningful relations.

Families' pleas for assistance, however, can also place SOWs in a moral bind. One SOW wrote in his Daily Report how he received telephone calls from a mother "requesting

that I help her by buying some food items for her children.” The SOW admitted that the appeal “left me disturbed, as I would never leave children without food,” but it still required discussion with supervisors about whether his actions are appropriate (Field Notes, 12 April 2014). Both administrators and SOWs acknowledge that helping members of clients’ networks can lead to increasingly larger asks. While program policies proscribe SOWs from extending services to ineligible clients, this exclusion can create a sense of distrust and distance between the PRI and SOW, especially as SOWs attempt to establish themselves within clients’ social network. Taking younger or older clients onto an unofficial caseload thus represents one way SOWs reintroduce social complexity into an otherwise rigid set of qualification criteria.

Out-of-Neighborhood Networks

Spending hours at a time in neighboring towns, SOWs come into contact with non-Bridgeport youths. For one, many existing PRIs have ongoing cases in adjacent cities. SOWs accompany youth to each of their hearings and, in the process, meet new potential clients at the courthouse. Second, some PRIs have moved from Bridgeport to contiguous towns halfway into the relationship building process with SOWs. For instance, PRI James moved in with his girlfriend outside of Bridgeport after being evicted. An SOW described in one roll call how several Bridgeport residents had received vouchers and subsidies to move into surrounding cities. When parents move, youth have to follow. Yet youths maintain their preexisting group ties and return to Bridgeport to “do their dirty work” and “get it poppin” (Field Notes, 3 June 2014).

During one roll call, SOWs Joy and Phil asked permission to assist a young man who was part of Bridgeport’s network of gang members but lives in a neighboring town. The pre-PRI was arrested for a few nonviolent charges, but his violent history earned him a \$200,000 bail. The SOWs considered pre-PRI Tyson a “high profile case with ties in Bridgeport.” Years before, Tyson agreed to reconcile with a feuding rival gang in exchange for studio time to record music, but the Case Manager retorted: “We can’t just go out and start doing Norwalk gangs like that. We all know that Norwalk has gangs, but—.” The Program Director interrupted and cautioned: “And our funders will be like hold on, we’re not funding this program to do Norwalk.” The SOW Supervisor believed the program should defer to what his team of SOWs agreed on as the proper strategy, but the Program Director replied plainly: “Well no, it’s not what we agree on, it’s what our funders say” (Field Notes, 30 May 2014). While BFB administrators hesitated to extend services to pre-PRI Tyson given his residence, this was the last roll call discussion involving Tyson anyway, since SOWs decided to help him navigate his indictment outside of official program protocol.

Limitations of Network Targeting

SOWs’ rule-breaking strategy of extending services to ineligible individuals comes with costs. Expanding services to youths’ out-of-neighborhood networks risks both losing city-provided funding as referenced by the Program Director, as well as overlooking Bridgeport youth who does qualify. During a roll call, the Case Manager reasoned that SOWs must carefully choose with whom to work “especially when there’s another one that’s on deck, who’s ready and willing, because then that’s not fair to him” (Field Notes, 21 November 2014). When SOWs decide to work with any given youth, but especially one who is ineligible for services, a tradeoff is made with a youth who is in need and does

qualify. The Case Manager went on to remind the SOWs: “We can’t be a savior to everyone” (Field Notes, 21 November 2014).

While BFB included a Bridgeport residential requirement to focus on violence within the city, group-based activity and networks traverse geopolitical city boundaries. By directing services solely to Bridgeport residents, BFB systematically overlooks individuals whose ongoing social relations and illicit activity transcend city boundaries. Thus, approaching residence as a dichotomous variable—as either living within or outside of city lines—ignores how people on the ground engage within, and especially across, spaces. But like their approach to family networks, SOWs often extend services to PRIs’ out-of-neighborhood networks anyway. While they fail to meet the residence requirement, they are part of PRIs’ groups and are socially active in Bridgeport. One SOW, a former night club bouncer, decided to mentor a particular out-of-town “heavy hitter” (Field Notes, 3 June 2014)—someone the SOW described as short-tempered, carried a firearm, and used it several times before.

In response to eligibility criteria that governs *who* SOWs should recruit, SOWs decided to rule break. SOWs compensate for the incongruity between eligibility criteria and social practice by extending services to gang members’ larger networks—including siblings and out-of-neighborhood associates. But physically locating the target only represents the first challenge to establishing social ties. Program policies structuring *how* SOWs can interact with clients call for additional relationally oriented strategies sensitive to group dynamics as SOWs begin to navigate clients’ networks and build social ties.

GIFT GIVING: “COMING OUT OF POCKET” TO BUILD RELATIONSHIPS

BFB’s reimbursement policy for client costs overlooks an important way genuine care is demonstrated and thus, SOWs rule break. In BFB nomenclature, pre-PRIs are individuals who appear to meet PRI criteria, but with whom SOWs are still building relationships to (1) confirm qualifications, and (2) form a foundation of trust so the pre-PRI agrees to a formal intake and greater services. Yet pre-PRIs lack access to the services and resources the Case Manager gatekeeps—at least until they participate in an intake and become official clients. Because pre-PRIs may or may not become official PRIs (for instance, they can become disinterested in the SOW relationship or have to spend time in jail), BFB does not reimburse costs for activities with pre-PRIs other than meals. Though the distinction between PRIs and pre-PRIs is a program-based categorization that is meaningless outside of BFB, it determines which members of the target population receive services. These rules structuring pre-PRI interactions thus directly shape recruitment and which youth enter the program in the first place.

For official PRIs, in contrast, administrators distribute a preloaded gift card to SOWs with fifty dollars to cover costs that arise during PRI interactions. Upon spending the fifty dollars, SOWs then alert administrators, who will reload the card. Yet in over a year and half of fieldwork, even the SOW with the most PRIs estimates having been reimbursed only \$500 by BFB to cover gas costs, multiple meals a day with various PRIs, and other expenses such as parking fees or movie tickets. Each PRI-related expense must be submitted to supervisors for approval. But rather than waiting for approval from BFB administrators about what they can and cannot reimburse, SOWs often have to make judgment calls

immediately while in the field. Even if BFB deems certain activities not reimbursable under program policies, clients expect SOWs to perform nonetheless.

As part of their group strategy, for instance, SOWs build relationships with key individuals and leverage the connections to meet other youths within the network. But because these new individuals are not PRIs, BFB will not reimburse these activity costs. One SOW described this hypothetical: If SOWs want to bring five youths to the movies, they not only lack sufficient funds on their cards to pay for all the tickets, but usually three are pre-PRIs. On one hand, they cannot use program funds to cover pre-PRIs' costs. Yet on the other, "we need to bring them out as a group so the three can look at the two and say, 'okay it's cool to go with these guys [SOWs] to the movies'" (Field Notes, 2 June 2014). Thus, in response to BFB reimbursement policies that do not account for how social ties are formed, SOWs in most cases rule break and opt to "come out of pocket."

"Coming out of Pocket," Gift Giving, and Fictive Kin

SOW Fred began one roll call session explaining his logic for what he calls "coming out of pocket": "We meeting people over the weekend, be in the studio. Like if we pick up a kid on Saturday at 11:00. Hang out 'til 3:00. Obviously we gonna get hungry, naturally we gonna eat. Buy some food and drinks, it's nothing. . . . We just put a few dollars, it shows that we care." SOWs routinely "come out of pocket," or use personal funds to pay for nonreimbursable expenses that accumulate over the course of interactions. SOW Rahim echoed SOW Fred's generalities with a specific incident: "Just the other day, I went to the DMV with [the SOW supervisor] and with a PRI, got him an ID so he can sign up for Job Corps. He can't do Job Corps without one. He *needed* it for Job Corps. And yeah, we paid for it on our own [credit] card." SOW Phil summed up the constraints of program policies: "Basically, this thing that we doing, we have to do the unofficial to make the official work." Nodding cathartically, the other SOWs agreed with the adage, leaned back in their chairs, and said: "There you go." The SOW Supervisor, who usually waits until the end of a discussion to get the last say, spoke early and in agreement:

You can't work a program like this that has certain criteria, certain age, certain requirements because for funding reasons. Okay? We can't wait for no debit clearance. You gotta have to come out of pocket. You have to be personal with this. Caring costs money. And we care. (Field Notes, 12 February 2014)

The practice of coming out of pocket is patently economic, but latently symbolic. SOW Phil explained that if SOWs literally invested personal money into clients, then it would signal SOWs' devotion to supervisors, funders, and the community.

For instance, SOW Rahim sees the gym as an ideal spot to take his clients. Besides a place to productively release aggression, the gym also offers a swimming pool and sauna. But SOW Rahim soon realized that most pre-PRIs "can't take advantage of none of the stuff they got there because they ain't got swim trunks, shower shoes, nothing. Just their one pair of sneakers and the pants they came with" (Interview Transcript, 19 June 2014). SOW Rahim not only drove the youths to Modell's to purchase the swim trunks and shower shoes, but he keeps their new equipment in his trunk—to safeguard it from the pre-PRIs' brothers who would likely take them. Yet SOW Rahim does not blame administrators for not reimbursing these purchases. He asks rhetorically: "How can you justify buying swim trunks?"

To build socially meaningful relations with clients, SOWs engage in gift giving, which necessarily occurs outside the program's formal structure. The Program Director explained how if an SOW "wants to buy a kid sneakers, it breaks my heart that he's spending his own money on it, and I tell him not to, but that's not something the program can put their money toward. Pretty soon, every kid in Bridgeport will be lining up for sneakers" (Field Notes, 2 July 2014). As an externally funded organization, the program can only allocate money toward purchases that are "sustainable" and "make sense" because they will ultimately have to "justify" them in expense reports (Field Notes, 2 July 2014).

Yet SOWs choose to come out of pocket to purchase nonreimbursable gifts for clients to demonstrate care and develop trust. An act such as paying for a client's meal can represent what Goffman (1971) calls a "tie-sign" and signal confirmation to the client, especially in a public setting, that the relationship with the caregiver is anchored. One SOW explains in his Daily Report how he went to the Goodwill store with his PRI to purchase a nonreimbursable alarm clock in preparation for the PRI's upcoming job interview (SOW Daily Report, 3 July 2014). The PRI then asked for acne soap because he felt self-conscious for the interview. While frivolous from a program perspective, the purchase represented the SOW's acknowledgement of the youth's feelings and indicates his willingness to spend personal resources to help the client cope with a personal problem. SOWs have also come out of pocket to purchase eyeglasses, clothes, prom suits, sports equipment, sneakers, and other goods to unofficially reward their client for remaining connected to the program, and also to show clients they care.

Limitations of Gift Giving

In one roll call session, an SOW articulated the extent SOWs were assisting targeted youth: "We pick them up, feed them, I literally just took my car to service. You know how many miles we put in that? I tell you, [SOW] Fred be feeding the kids so much that they call him Uncle Fred" (Field Notes, 13 August 2014). Like the predominantly female caregivers in other professions, these male SOWs similarly form fictive kinship relations with their clients. I asked SOW Fred about youth calling him "uncle":

I mean I've bought jackets, sneakers for clients. I didn't do it to get reimbursed, I did it because at that point in time, they needed it. I don't know if BFB would reimburse me for a \$70-\$80 pair of sneakers.... But at the end of the day, he knows that I care. So that's something from right there, if nothing else, something small like that, open up the door to me and him. And he started speaking to other people. He told me like, "Oh you know, I think this other guy over there might need some help." (Interview Transcript, 11 September 2014)

Fictive kin relationships form by virtue of the gifts given. The naming of the SOW as "uncle" is emblematic of the paternal-like connection that SOWs form with clients. Expending personal funds on behalf of clients can also prevent negative outcomes. In one instance, an SOW gave ten dollars out of pocket to settle a dispute between a PRI and his mother over missing money—a mother who had called the police on her son multiple times, declaring that she prefers him in prison (SOW Daily Report, 20 June 2014). Coming out of pocket can also prove to families that SOWs are committed to the relationship: "If they see, 'Damn, they using their own money, buying them clothes and stuff,' then they might think we're for real" (Field Notes, 29 January 2014). By investing

personal rather than program resources, SOWs believe they demonstrate commitment and care toward PRIs.

But while SOWs choose to come out of pocket to demonstrate care, costs accumulate in unsustainable ways. SOWs explain how their “resources are dilapidating” (SOW Daily Report, 21 May 2014). They regularly devise and share strategies to stretch their limited resources. One SOW boasted how he forces all his PRIs to order from the McDonalds Dollar Menu and that “everybody gets a sweet tea”—which also costs one dollar. Another SOW one-upped the McDonalds scheme by explaining how he orders a large pizza pie for groups to share—a cheaper option overall (Field Notes, 27 August 2014).

One SOW learned that the amount of money spent is not directly proportional to the strength of the caring relationship. Administrators oftentimes remind SOWs of the danger of coming out of pocket too much by referencing a particular worst-case scenario. One SOW spent \$2,300 of personal money to fund several pre-PRIs’ recording studio time—pre-PRIs who have yet to agree to an intake after over a year of relationship building. In other words, these individuals are not official PRIs and thus any time, resources, or progress with them do not “count” toward program evaluation statistics. Pre-PRIs do not count the same as official, post-intake PRIs because without government names, birth dates, addresses, and other information recorded during intakes, funding agencies cannot verify the identities of clients in the event of an audit. The SOW Supervisor routinely uses this incident to instruct SOWs on the limitations of gift giving: “You can’t buy them out, can’t suck them in by just buying them things. They’re just gonna play you” (Field Notes, 20 June 2014). While purchasing certain gifts for specific PRIs may facilitate relationship building, others may not. According to the SOW supervisor, some PRIs are not interested in building the relationship with SOWs. Instead, they are just using the SOW to get the gifts.

Coming out of pocket is thus viewed as a strategy to deepen social relations with potential clients and their families. By first engaging in Network Targeting, SOWs assist ineligible clients within PRIs’ networks in response to rules dictating *who* they can target. SOWs then Gift Give, or come out of pocket to help navigate clients’ social networks as a coping mechanism against rules structuring *how* they are permitted to interact with clients. After entering and navigating client network, SOWs then seek to expand, extend, and perhaps shift PRIs’ networks by transporting them around the city.

TRANSPORTATION BROKERAGE: EXPANDING GANG MEMBERS’ NETWORKS

BFB’s client transportation policy prevents the relationship building opportunities and practical necessity of driving youth directly to services and thus, SOWs rule break. For insurance, liability, and security reasons, BFB does not provide a company vehicle for SOWs to transport youth, but instead, has secured a limited number of free bus passes for clients to travel to services. However, SOWs have deviated in response by driving strategic groupings of certain clients to various activities, services, and programs on all sides of town. SOWs view automobiles as necessary to facilitate interactions with clients, and without a company vehicle, SOWs use their own cars. BFB’s policy both forbids the use of personal vehicles and requires a signed waiver of BFB liability should SOWs use personal vehicles anyway. Thus, SOWs assume *all* risks when driving with the active gang youth in personal vehicles, even for job-related duties.

While Transportation Brokerage may conceptually overlap with Gift Giving since clients often see rides as symbolic gifts, Gift Giving is primarily aimed at relationship building while Transportation Brokerage seeks to enlarge the client's prosocial network by literally transporting him to services. Convincing a PRI to comply with a drug program may represent the first challenge, but the second involves logistics. Driving not only guarantees that the client arrives, but also that he arrives on schedule. SOWs routinely drive clients to substance rehabilitation programs, job training workshops, G.E.D. classes in the local community college, church and mosques, the Los Angeles Fitness in the neighboring town, and even to jobs. Many of these activities require high-level coordination: Clients must retrieve documents necessary to re-enroll in school or in G.E.D. programs, apply for identification cards needed to participate in Job Corps, or simply purchase a suit to attend prom. When one client was interested in boxing lessons, SOW Phil negotiated for open spots with the gym club director, coordinated with the youth's probation officer, and collected donated boxing gear and purchased some himself so the PRI could start immediately upon approval. These activities position youth to participate in prosocial institutions and expand their networks to include positive influences, but all require vehicles for the multiple in-person meetings, trips to purchase required supplies, and ultimately, to actually get to the activity.

Beyond expanding clients' networks by driving them to prosocial services, Transportation Brokerage enables SOWs to strategically mix and purposively mingle different groups of clients to expand networks in positive directions. First, SOWs invite longer time clients whose example may be beneficial for those more newly recruited. Careful not to combine youths from feuding groups, an SOW may plan a trip to the gym and invite a client who he helped obtain a job so that pre-PRIs can see the positive contact (Field Notes, 29 March 2014). Second, SOWs have invited members of two different groups to broker communication over a shared activity. After receiving free tickets to a local basketball game, SOWs negotiated contact between the Young Guns and NLKs—two groups from opposite sides of town. They explored the arena's skybox together, and by the end of the trip, members from both groups started "mingling" (Field Notes, 2 May 2014). The SOW Supervisor explained to me the motivation behind these outings: "Something I often ask the young kids is what city are you from? They'd say Bridgeport. And I'd say no you ain't—not if you're repping a set from West End and you can't go to the East. If you can't go around your own city, that's a problem" (Field Notes, 21 November 2014). Harding (2010:50) refers to this restrained free movement as endemic to the "system of neighborhood rivalries." But by transporting groups to places outside of their hangout areas and loosely defined turfs, SOWs broker positive expansion and shifting of social networks.

Limitations of Transportation Brokerage

BFB's vehicle policy does not account for the social context in which SOWs and clients interact, and in doing so, shifts the burden onto SOWs to expend personal resources. While SOWs elect to use their personal vehicles (they could just distribute bus passes instead), the decision is illusory if the program is to succeed. After roll call one day, SOW Rahim explained why SOWs need cars for PRI interactions: "What we gonna tell them? You guys wanna walk? What if it rains? We're not gonna wait 30 minutes for the bus. We can't be doing that" (Field Notes, 4 June 2014). While BFB has limited bus tokens available to distribute, one SOW described how clients view rides inside SOWs' vehicles

as representing a sign of trust. Or perhaps more important, *not* offering a ride can be interpreted as a sign of *distrust*: “We’re not gonna tell them to meet me at this restaurant and then when we leave, I say bye and I head to my car and send them on the bus. They’re gonna be like, ‘What I can’t get a ride?’” (Field Notes, 13 June 2014).

Prohibiting clients from SOWs’ vehicles means that SOWs cannot be reimbursed for the gas and mileage, car maintenance, or any parking passes and expenses incurred while driving. SOWs fear being taken advantage of as “taxis” (Field Notes, 2 June 2014) or “babysitters” (Field Notes, 8 October 2014). Driving also presents real safety concerns. While one SOW drove a PRI to church, a car pulled up alongside them:

My PRI seemed very uneasy and the young man kept looking her way. He handed his music CD through the window and my PRI snatched it from his hand. He looked as though he wanted to say something but did not. After I briefly spoke with him from the traffic light in the car, we drove off. I asked my PRI about the tension and she said it stems from him pulling a gun out on her because of her being involved with a different group. (SOW Daily Report, 28 April 2014)

Even if SOWs are careful to remain unassociated with any particular group, they can nonetheless be caught in the crosshairs of ongoing feuds. By driving clients and transporting clients to different sides of town, SOWs expose themselves to potentially dangerous situations.

A more fundamental concern is that short-term driving trips only represent temporary reprieves from the conditions that made youth eligible for services in the first place. At some point during the day, SOWs have to drop their clients off: “When we leave them, we leave them. They’re back to reality. We’re just trying to keep them interested with these crumbs. And it’s like, sooner or later, they’re gonna get hungry and we ain’t gonna be able to feed them” (Field Notes, 16 June 2014). Klein (1971:153) spoke to a similar concern decades ago when he explained: “We place an adult in the gang setting, arrange matters in such a way that he has an average of only a few minutes of contact per week with each boy, and expect him to perform miracles.” Thus, while viewed as necessary and beneficial, the account above also describes the limitations of using personal vehicles to expand clients’ social networks.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Building relationships is a social process. Through continued, network-oriented interaction, SOWs seek to build trust and demonstrate care. This study explores one case of intervention where forming such social ties is key. With their keen understanding of street knowledge and their strategies for forming caregiving relations, this group of predominantly male SOWs is able to form relational ties with a violent, hypermasculine target population through three mechanisms: (1) *Network Targeting*: identifying, entering, and extending services to the package of preexisting social ties beyond the eligible gang member; (2) *Gift Giving*: navigating those social ties when transferring out of pocket gifts to the target to elicit trust and demonstrate genuine investment; and (3) *Transportation Brokerage*: expanding clients’ social networks by literally driving them to prosocial influences and activities. While these rule-breaking strategies are “deviant” under organizational policies, they account for the challenges in building relationships with already socially vulnerable

populations. As one SOW described the task: “We’re trying to get kids who are already suspicious, rebellious, by nature to come in and commit” (Interview Transcript, 19 June 2014).⁴

This case study extends beyond social workers, and provides insight into how other prosocial agents build relationships with law breakers and norm breakers of all sorts. Because hard to reach populations are prone to caution and cynicism, the question of how to demonstrate sincerity is key. By practicing Network Targeting, SOWs seek to show clients they are personally committed to helping family members and friends beyond the eligible client—an important strategy to successful recruitment of the targeted individual who does qualify. SOWs further believe that Gift Giving and Transportation Brokerage represent and communicate voluntary contributions of personal time and money. While time and money are typically thought of as the fundamental trade-off between leisure and work, SOWs put forth both commodities to demonstrate personal commitment to their workplace targets. These insights are generalizable to social tie formation in disadvantaged communities in general, which Small (2009:8) calls the “missing question.” For instance, many SOWs described how they did the same things prior to joining BFB—including giving small gifts (a few dollars, can of soda, small snacks, clothing, a ride) to neighborhood youth for continued relationship building. Thus, these transfers are earmarked as voluntary contributions and used to signal genuine care.

By studying mechanisms of social tie formation, urban sociologists can better understand how various ties are formed, broken, and sometimes, re-established. This approach captures the fluidity and fragility of social networks, moving beyond binary questions about their mere (in)existence. This positions urban sociologists to answer questions, for instance, about why individuals, neighborhoods, and communities have differential and fluctuating access to resources over time. And by examining the role of organizations, especially nonprofits, future studies can better account for how and when communities activate collective efficacy in response to local issues like gang violence.

While the data presented above cannot distinguish whether SOW and client ties were strong featuring care or simply disposable motivated by interest in material benefits (see Desmond 2012), the data do establish that clients regularly returned and participated in program activities—a necessary first step toward forming strong social ties. Future studies should thus investigate how gang members view the relationship and the strength of social ties with SOWs. In other words, subsequent research on gang intervention programs should account for the relational perspectives of both program workers and service recipients (see Desmond 2014). This study, which focused explicitly on SOW perspectives, represents an important first step (see Decker and Smith 2015; Wright et al. 2006).

This study calls attention to a basic challenge for community-based organizations: Rigid program structures are not conducive to the social exchanges, fluid context, and informal decision-making associated with forming social ties with clients and their networked existences. These findings highlight the importance of a network-oriented approach to social interventions involving hard to reach groups whose preexisting social networks are critical to inducing behavioral change. Unless community programs design organizational policies around such network-oriented approaches, frontline staff genuinely interested in achieving program goals are simultaneously incentivized to rule break and stretched thin by depending on personal, rather than organizational, resources. Only through sustained inquiry into *how* social ties are formed on the ground can we begin to design

policies sensitive to clients' social realities and implement the mechanisms necessary for neighborhood-level change.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Andrew Papachristos, Frederick Wherry, and most of all, Bullet-Free Bridgeport.

Notes

¹The names of research participants, the organization, SOWs, and clients are pseudonyms.

²Quotations are used either when I wrote down what people said as they spoke (as with roll call field notes), copied written statements from SOWs' Daily Report, or transcribed conversations from audio-recorded interviews.

³While I was in the field for a total of 18 months, the 1,260 Daily Reports cover approximately 12 continuous months. This time frame represented the most consistent period of Daily Reports since BFB experimented with several systems of report writing and submission (i.e., if they should be handwritten, how can they be securely submitted electronically, whether each interaction should be under a single Daily Report or separated, etc.). Changes in reporting systems translated into inconsistent SOW submissions. For instance, there were only a total of 66 Daily Reports among all the SOWs for February 2014. I also did not begin receiving all the field notes until approximately three months of consistent presence in the field.

⁴This task is salient regardless of whether SOWs are incentivized to "cream" (Lipsky 1980:107) for those gang members already most likely to desist from violence. Among the creamed population, SOWs still seek to build meaningful care relationships with clients, especially since the decision to desist does not often translate into a desire to take up formal services. Moreover, SOWs may not be able to determine which clients are likely to desist until after beginning the relationship building process.

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