

# Addressing Trauma in Violence Interrupter Programs

Programs focused on reducing gun violence, particularly public health initiatives like the Cure Violence model, are in a unique position to address the trauma that many young men of color experience.

Violence interrupter programs, such as Save Our Streets Crown Heights (S.O.S.), have a strong connection to local communities and focus on both outreach and conflict mediation for those likely to engage in gun violence.<sup>1</sup> In Crown Heights, a Brooklyn neighborhood with a history of violence, the S.O.S. program expanded its focus to address the tangible effects of witnessing or directly experiencing violence on young men of color in the community. This expansion involved examining current resources in the community and building new trauma-informed responses within the existing S.O.S. program.

Traditional victim services, which are often located in a prosecutor's office or in community-based agencies and shelters, often focus on the victimization experienced by women and children. Recognizing the cultural stigma around young men of color identifying as 'victimized' – and the lack of services that target their specific needs – S.O.S. Crown Heights added a trauma-informed component to its programming with the help of a grant from the Office for Victims of Crime.

Participants in the trauma-informed programming are referred from S.O.S. and from other community contacts. Participants live in Crown Heights or surrounding communities, and range in age from sixteen to twenty-four. Referrals are shepherded by a licensed master social worker, who also provides direct services to participants. Two components make up the trauma-informed

programming: (1) individual counseling and case management, and (2) a group curriculum, developed with the assistance of a local agency with a specialization in violence prevention and domestic violence. Individual work with participants can address immediate needs, such as employment and housing, along with assessing trauma symptoms and appropriateness for group participation. Groups of three to fifteen young men, divided based on age, explore topics such as masculinity, naming violence and abuse, the effects of trauma, improving help-seeking behaviors, healthy relationships, and resilience.

Building on this programming, several additional initiatives increased the ability of all staff to recognize and respond to trauma. S.O.S. staff are trained in motivational interviewing so that they are able to respond to victimization in a non-judgmental way. Individual counseling for staff is also offered to address vicarious trauma, along with possible "triggers" from past traumatic experiences. Further, through staff meetings, professional development opportunities, and other non-stigmatizing environments, staff discuss exposure to violence and trauma. Integrating these components into the S.O.S. program presented challenges. In Brooklyn, as in many communities, few victim service agencies offer specific services for young men of color, making referrals for clinical or longer-term services difficult. Additionally, general victim services are often not easily accessible or neighborhood-based. To address

this, S.O.S. partnered with Common Justice, a local restorative justice agency, to build a coalition between agencies serving young men of color and victim service agencies in Brooklyn. Through an initial roundtable, these agencies with distinct areas of expertise will learn more from others' approaches and begin to respond more comprehensively to young men who have experienced violence.

Violence interrupter programs can play a critical role in de-stigmatizing trauma-informed services and counseling for young men of color. Since the goal of S.O.S. is to change community norms around violence, trauma training for S.O.S. staff, as well as partnerships with victim service agencies in the local community, can play an important role in addressing trauma among these young men.

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### **References**

1. For further information, see the "Testing a Public Health Approach to Gun Violence" fact sheet at [www.courtinnovation.org](http://www.courtinnovation.org).

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