Street Organizations: Today's Challenge, Tomorrow's Hope
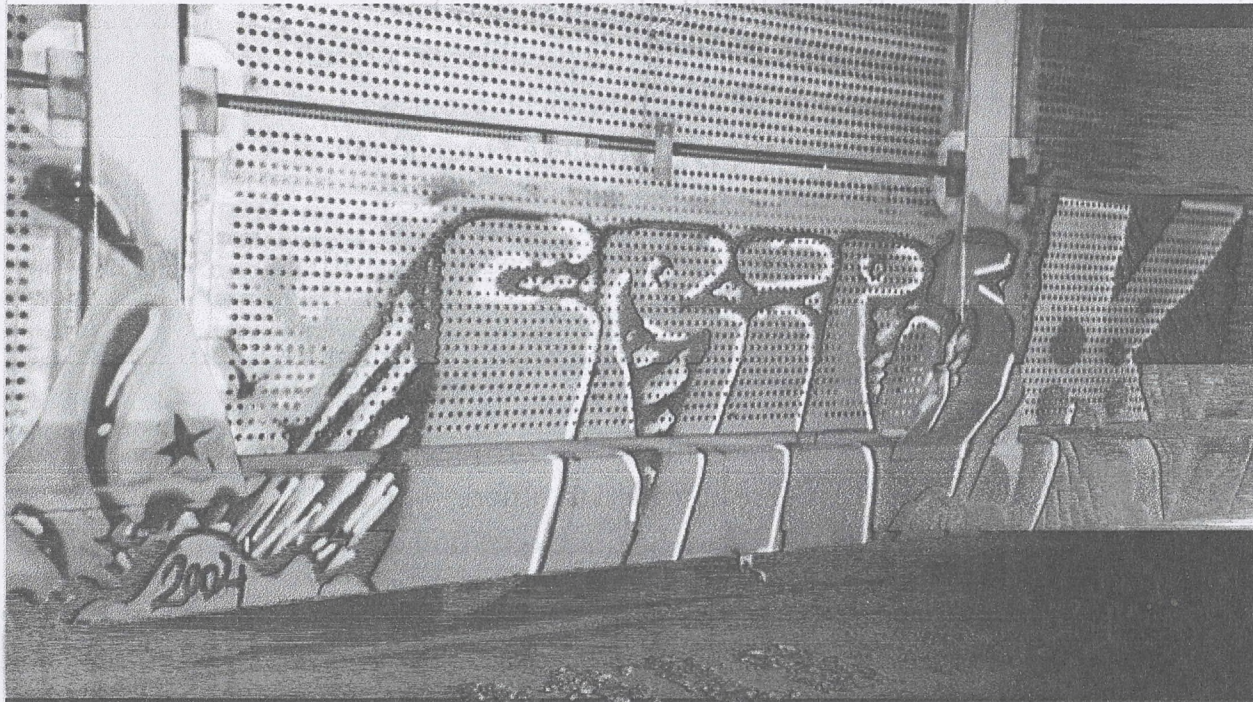
Friday, 03 June 2016 00:00

By Lacino Hamilton (/author/itemlist/user/51058), Truthout (http://truth-out.org) | Op-Ed

Graffiti for the Crips, a street organization, lines train tracks in Birmingham, Alabama, in a photo taken on November 29, 2007. (Photo: Bo Hughins (https://www.flickr.com/photos/bonardhughins /2074720651/in/photolist-4akuaH-6aW7N-eNXULE-5YKDKy-H1jES-5fF8ay-8rWGWc-bFTEyg-mEoxP-bK9ZsD-6qesVY-6gQfUz-6qesSy-494njw-6NMuPw-m4Tpf-oBrqde-dBtv2q-4Akoet-KGow7-6nsqm7-4HnxL2-qCfcF5-pVbrja-pVbrpa-oZ4VNK-oYp6WW-dCsQ8u-5GmcCw-4Xgyqc-qzUK6-2R7RMq-47kkRm-oAEWp2-fc35LK-qDSqNQ-pd65XA-k9pAq-4Z9ZcB-2P5aYg-gnTmxG-6cfc7p-6qesNd-au9Tk-pV1GVB-pVjF9q-AGUiq-94rLBS-qcx59F-eSEpWj); Edited: LW / TO)

"Gangs" are arguably one of the most dominant and effective organizing mechanisms of urban youth today, though virtually no one will acknowledge this.

The "common wisdom" about gangs (hereafter referred to as street organizations) is simply a repackaging of the stereotypes that Blacks and other minorities have spent centuries resisting. As a result, members of street organizations have borne the brunt of numerous punitive, and sometimes deadly, theories and social policies.

The ministers, activists, scholars and elected officials who are often cast as "community leaders" by the media tend to deem members of street organizations as ignorant, illiterate and unimaginative. However, these "respectable" entities are short on both social analysis and understanding when it comes to these organizations.

I see no need to shame, jail and destroy these youth -- and I especially see no need to stop them from organizing. The failure to grasp the nature of street organizations has left society far too unconscious and passive in addressing the realities that give birth to them. The broader society is also ignorant of how these organizations create their

aesthetic of survival, generated from the raw material of their immediate reality.

The Roots of Street Organizations

The roots of street organizations are not easily isolated. It is a misconception among many people that the creation of street organizations lies primarily in so-called "broken homes" or the pathology of poverty, as most literature on the subject might suggest. However, the origins actually lie in the fact that the larger society has rejected members of these groups, attempting to render them disposable. As a result, members often feel they cannot hope to realize personal growth, social progress, or self-worth through the avenues ordinarily available to more privileged individuals. Street organizations are sometimes viewed as a way to fill the gap.

Seen as nothing but self-destructive by most of society, street organizations are nevertheless creative in the sense that they are not passive targets of the destructive forces which act upon them.

Human beings who are forced to live with exclusion, rejection and a stigmatized status, whose daily experiences tell them that almost nowhere in society are they respected and granted the ordinary dignity and courtesy accorded to others, will, as a matter of course, begin to question and doubt whether they have a place in the larger society. These questions and doubts become the seeds of street organizations.

US street organizations gained prominence in the early- to mid-19th century, particularly in the poor ghettoes of Boston, New York, Chicago, Philadelphia and a myriad of other US municipalities large and small, where Irish and Polish immigrants arrived in the US en masse under dire circumstances. They developed street organizations to bolster social solidarity and express a collective identity based on common ethnic roots. In the process, they created alternative social systems that allowed them to advance, even though US society at large was determined to keep them "in their place." Since then, youth of every ethnic and racial group have formed street organizations for similar reasons. In fact, if all members of street organizations were the product of two-parent homes and earned a living wage, that still would not eliminate the need for many youth to organize themselves around their social marginalization and exclusion.

Some historians have made the argument that Black street organizations date back even further than the 19th century, and actually have their genesis in bands of runaway slaves. These included the fighting Maroons -- a generic name that came to be an accepted as a way to describe fugitive, enslaved people throughout the Western Hemisphere, who not only offered the possibility of freedom and self-determination to enslaved Blacks, but also a basis on which to unite against white supremacy.

liberation struggle, as the momentum shifted to the cities of the North and West.

The Crips, Black P. Stone Rangers, Sons of Watts, Young Lords Party, Brown Berets and the Vice Lords, to name a few, formed to challenge severe macrostructural constraints that compelled them to live and to act in ways that sometimes negatively impacted their communities. Members of these groups were overwhelmingly working class and poor, and saw no effective channel through which grievances, like poverty and racist police brutality, were being met. So, they sought extralegal and extrajudicial means of solving their problems.

There is no question that the process of forming street organizations very often begins in response to long histories of discrimination, social exclusion, disenfranchisement, frustration with being denied the right to express oneself through sanctioned channels, the denial of economic opportunities, and threats to one's physical safety and survival. It is also true that many members have found

> **Social change-minded people who seek to "help" members of street organizations must also recognize that there is much they can learn from them.**

"legitimate" structures (such as unions and some civil rights organizations) for dealing with these grievances to be completely unsatisfying -- partially because many of these "legitimate" groups ultimately adopted a middle-class orientation, and failed to attend to the immediate needs of poor youth of color.

In the wake of the civil rights and Black liberation struggles of the 1960s and '70s, some members of the younger generation concluded that there had been an excess of theory and too much reliance on judicial and municipal structures. Picking up on some aspects of the Black liberation movement, some of these new youth political formations generally veered away from elaborate theories and political education.

Rather than planning mass peaceful demonstrations seeking to acquire court victories and civil rights, street organizations embarked on a new phase of struggle: widespread rebellion that did not necessarily coalesce around a defined objective. Operating in neighborhoods isolated from larger national networks, and ill-prepared for the campaign of terror that state and local governments would level at them, many members were eventually absorbed into dropping out of school and often turning to petty criminal activity. Thus, militancy and widespread rebellion emerged, in part, as a response to the perceived failures of unions and civil rights movements.

Self-Destructiveness, Violence, Creativity and Survival

Seen as nothing but self-destructive by most of society, street organizations are nevertheless creative in the sense that they are not passive targets of the destructive forces which act upon them. Members of these groups realize that there is strength in

numbers and force in unity. They realize that waiting on problems to solve themselves is not usually the best strategy. Therefore, when traditional avenues for self-actualization, social progress and self-worth are blocked, they react adaptively by making use of the human resources available -- themselves -- to work out strategies of survival, and develop ways of coping with despair.

Street organizations are also creative in the sense that they can unite hundreds and sometimes thousands of young people labeled as incorrigible. For example, in 1993, the Chicago-based Gangster Disciples began a fundamental partial transition from the Gangster Disciple street "gang" to the Growth and Development street organization. Along with starting a clothing line and other businesses that employed many of its reported around 30,000 members, the group also formed 21st Century VOTE to politically educate its members and create a voting block to influence local elections. 21st Century VOTE enjoyed some electoral successes -- not surprising, given Chicago's large street organization population.

However, this narrative is difficult to communicate to the general public and policymakers because it does not resonate with the basic belief system in the US about the causes and nature of youth subcultures: a belief system that accounts for social outcomes strictly in individual terms. That is, members of these organizations are individuals whose lifestyles bear the chief responsibility for their outside status.

The negative aspects of street organizations can easily be overemphasized, such as self-abnegation, the distribution of narcotics and violence, while the creative and generative potential -- the potential of a unified mass of people developing into a community power base that could become a major force in US society if better organized and in possession of a socially validated sense of growing power -- are overlooked.

Consider the efforts of the Conservative Vice Lords in the late 1960s: They founded a teen community center, a GED program, a tenants' rights organization, a business-training institute and other community-building efforts. In 1970, the Vice Lords were actually given $275,000 by the Rockefeller Foundation for their organizing work, and the Ford Foundation granted them $130,000, part of which was used for the Vice Lords' community-based small business development, including the African Lion, an Afro-centric boutique.

None of this is to say that there should not be criticism of the tangle of antisocial behavior associated with street organizations. This deeply ingrained and culturally reinforced self-loathing and self-destructive behavior should not be ignored or explained away. No one can deny the devastation that the actions of some street organizations are having on many US cities. Beyond having become entrenched in the daily life of the urban US, street organizations are exacerbating existing crises. No matter how desperate the social-economic situation, neglected communities do

manifest as destructive forces, it is because they are embodying the worldview, cultural structures and violence of the larger oppressive society that makes their existence necessary.

To Engage With Street Organizations, Outsiders Must Accept Their Legitimacy

The fact that street organizations might often be agents of their own pain -- and violent in the remedy which they may suggest -- is not particularly relevant to the understanding of the psychological reality which they reflect: oppression not only resides in external institutions and norms, but lodges internally, in the human psyche, too. Lacking a sense of identity, money and direction, many marginalized youth clearly chart their future in a manner that is truly as American as apple pie: with guns in hand, smashing any and all who impede their path.

Hence, the psychological meaning and value of street organizations cannot be divorced from why street organizations are arguably one of the most dominant and effective organizing mechanisms of inner-city youth today. It is crucial to comprehend how the experiences and the patterns of conduct of members of these organizations are shaped by powerful structural constraints like inadequate education, job discrimination, crowded and poor living spaces, and a system of social and political power not responsive to their needs. It is also crucial to assist these youths in understanding the systems of oppression within which they live -- and which, often, drive the violence they may experience and engage in -- and encourage them to redirect their energies into more personally and socially constructive challenges.

Of course, no prescription should be handed down from above, or from afar. It is tempting for people who are not members of street organizations to try to select the particular organizational model members of these groups should assume, and the mores and the manners which members should, if they wish to gain influence, adopt. But to succumb to these temptations to "recommend" models inevitably plays into the fantasy that policy makers and "experts" who are working "with" street organizations should decide their future for them -- the idea that someone other than members of these groups should make decisions about organizing around their problems.

Only by accepting these youth on their own terms will today's challenge become tomorrow's hope.

The chances for any major cooperation between the broader society and youth involved in street organizations is slim, until we accept the legitimacy of street organizations to be their own example. It is they who have stepped into the vacuum created by failed social institutions and

taken up the work of organizing those who suffer the most because of it -- and it is they who are in the best position to know what is going on. Organization is not, ultimately, an intellectual process. It is a process of being involved, and that they are.

Michelle Alexander writes of today's youth in *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*:

> Those of us who hope to be their allies should not be surprised if and when this day comes, that when those who have been locked out and finally have the chance to speak and truly be heard, what we hear is rage. The rage may frighten us; it may remind us of riots, uprisings, and buildings aflame. We may be tempted to control it or douse it with buckets of doubt, dismay and disbelief. But we should do no such thing.

I'm aware of the widely held belief among many in this society that history has already spoken, but there is a very real debate to be held about the legitimacy of street organizations. I think we should grant many of them the respect of placing them in the same tradition as the Monroe NAACP under the leadership of Robert Williams, the Black Panthers, SNCC and the militias of freed slaves a century before that, instead of fearfully dismissing them as animals and monsters in need of heavy-handed policing.

It is easy to forget the rather obvious fact that street organizations are one of the dominant means of organizing youth who are fundamentally alienated from mainstream society, and that these organizations are not going anywhere anytime soon. These youth should not have to prove themselves "worthy" in order to come out of the shadows of society. They should not be forced to conform to white, middle-class organizational structures.

Moreover, members of these groups should not be asked to prove they deserve to have their needs adequately satisfied by society. They should not be told that they must persuade the larger society to accept them, by fitting their lives and organizations into a certain mold. This notion of "acceptance" is itself elitist, dehumanizing and often racist.

A Process of Mutual Education

Education is central to the task of ending youth marginalization in this country. But the educational mandate should not make two conventional mistakes: 1.) education must not be limited to information that supports and preserves the status quo and 2.) education, whether formal or informal, tacit or expressed, should not make the mistake of failing to encourage the larger society to put aside its preconceptions and actively think about how the larger society can learn from street organizations, and not necessarily the other way around.

No matter how imaginative, elaborately or thoroughly planned, if street

salvation in defiant, aggressive and in the end self-destructive forms.

For education to be relevant to the pressing problems of these youth, those who are in control of this part of society must have the courage to re-examine present assumptions, methods and programs, and dismantle those environments and efforts which reflect only traditional and bureaucratic models. Education cannot be relevant to the problems of street organizations, except to reinforce them, if it encourages, even subtly, the dependency of the street organizations, because to encourage dependency is to rob the members of these organizations of their sense of dignity.

In a broader sense, though, education cannot proceed painlessly. The struggle over what information and ideas are primary, over crucial differences in philosophical approaches to educating, over which worldview is legitimate and which is not, and over who gets to decide, is unmistakably a struggle of power -- the combination of energies required to determine and translate goals into desired social outcomes.

Education must dare to run the risk of being part of a real and comprehensive program of social action and social change. It cannot be a superficial education that reformers think will channel social discontent into existing institutions. It has to be an education that political leaders and prominent members of social organizations are recipients of. There cannot simply be nonprofit-driven programs to educate members of street organizations. Social change-minded people who seek to "help" members of street organizations must also recognize that there is much they can learn from *them*.

The only way this process of mutual education can be accomplished is to begin by listening to those whose voices have been delegitimized through social stigma. Only by accepting these youth on their own terms will today's challenge become tomorrow's hope.

Copyright, Truthout. May not be reprinted without permission (mailto:editor@truthout.org).

LACINO HAMILTON (/AUTHOR/ITEMLIST/USER/51058)

Lacino Hamilton has been incarcerated since July 1994. *(For more information about his case, see "Ring of Snitches: How Detroit Police Slapped False Murder Convictions on Young Black Men (http://www.truth-out.org/news/item/29950-ring-of-snitches-how-detroit-police-slapped-false-murder-convictions-on-young-black-men).")* After being sent to prison, he spent four of his first six years in solitary confinement. It was there that he began to read, think critically and distinguish between expressing a desire to change and demonstrating the ability to achieve it. Write him at: Lacino Hamilton #247310, KCF, 16770 S. Water Tower Dr., Kincheloe, MI. Send electronic message via: www.jpay.com.

RELATED STORIES

Show Comments