

I have spent the majority of my life behind bars. It is a hard thing for me to say, but it is true. What got me ^{here} ~~hear~~? Violence. That is a bit easier to say. During my time away I have had time to analyze my life. I am trying to understand the forces that came together creating a specific environment; one where violence invades all spaces of life. It's cyclical... and very few people are able to escape.

I grew up in an inner city in Connecticut. It wasn't always the kindest of environments, yet it was filled with young people. I was one of them. We grew up surrounded by poverty, drugs, crime. Poor black kids who felt marginalized, as if they were second class citizens in their own hometown. We were all aware of these issues, but we never felt like we had power to change anything. Nobody listened to people like us. Maybe we weren't saying the right things, or even knew exactly what to say. But we felt like we were left up to our own devices. Violence became social capital. It may have been a misguided expression of our frustration, but it is what we had. For many of us, it was all we knew.

Violence was communicated early in our lives. Fathers, boyfriends dominated their women through force. Mothers would communicate their disapproval by hitting children. Siblings... for siblings what else was there? If mom and dad were hitting each other, then so did we. But it wasn't just at home, it was everywhere we turned. The sports we watched, the music we listened to, even social gatherings had an air of violence to them. It always felt as if we were a stack of wood just waiting for someone to strike the match and set us off. But this is how we were raised. As children we were taught to not just defend ourselves, but to not let anyone take anything from us, to not give anyone the idea that we were weak, soft. Charles Darwin created the theory of evolution, the idea of survival of the fittest. I am not sure he was talking about New Haven, but he may as well have been. The better you could fight, the more capital you had on the streets. If you weren't even willing to get into a scrap, you were ostracized. Violence not only was normalized, it was the foundation of one's identity in the community.

The unrest we see in our communities is simply an extension of our youth. Absent other forms of social capital, we are tied to what we have accumulated on the streets. Any and all gains must be defended. All wants and needs are communicated through force, through bloodshed. Whether it is actual or just implied, the language of the streets is harsh. Young people are simply trying to find their way... looking for respect, status. Unfortunately, where I grew up you didn't find this through education. You didn't earn someone's respect through acts of kindness. Respect was taken. There was a ferocity to it all. If you weren't in a constant state of showing your strength, you lost. And losing wasn't really an option. It isn't like sports where you can learn what went wrong and come back and play the next day.

Well, you could... but when you came back the only score you cared about was who was still standing, and who was on their back.

I used to live this way of life. I used to adhere to this culture... to these rules. I understand the difficulties the youth of the inner city face. I am now a prisoner. The cycle of violence on the streets and the pipeline of city youth in the nation's prisons are inseparable. It is what led me here. The younger generation looked up to me. They saw my status on the streets, the status I had inside prison was based on the violent life I once had. I use the past tense because that is what it is... my past. I have worked to overcome the idea of one's self worth being directly linked to how strong, how tough, how ferocious one is. Anger, unrest, force... violence... this is not what makes a man. Rather, education, working to better one's self... these are traits that we all need to obtain. These are traits that I work for on a daily basis. By combining my past with my present, I know that I can help the younger generation find a path to a smoother future.

Inner cities don't need to be plagued by violence. My hometown doesn't have to be defined by drugs and crime. I am actively working to use my influence to help young people appreciate the good that their lives can represent. My hope is to work with community groups to devalue violence as a means to an end. To create an environment where self-worth, true self-worth is prevalent. I know I can help build strong bridges in the community, to help turn things around.

I appreciate you taking the time to listen to my story.

Respectfully Yours,

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