

## THE RHETORIC OF READINESS: STREET WORKER DECISION-MAKING INSIDE A GANG VIOLENCE INTERVENTION PROGRAM

Given that you can recruit from a pool of *many*, with which *one(s)* do you start? This fundamental question of selection spans multiple contexts. Used car salesmen, for instance, minimize time spent with non-recruited, unreferral drop-ins (Miller 1964), while taxi drivers “screen” potential passengers based on age and race (Gambetta and Hamill 2005). In the social movements literature, Snow et al. (1980) asked, “Why are some people rather than others recruited into a particular social movement?” (787), and found that recruitment depends on pre-existing ties with movement members and the absence of countervailing networks.

This project approaches this question through an ethnographic study of a gang violence reduction program in Bridgeport, Connecticut. How do street workers decide which gang members to recruit? How do they understand cases of “failed” intervention? What mechanisms reinforce this understanding, and how does it shape the selection of future clients? First, this project recasts the theoretical framework around frontline workers in public and community-based organizations in terms of an excess and heterogeneity of demands from funders, supervisors, clients, and personal interests that they must satisfy, rather than a scarcity of resources that must be allocated. Second, it finds that within the pool of eligible clients, workers direct program resources towards gang members deemed “ready” to change their lives. This unwritten but spoken binary classification scheme of readiness is reaffirmed through external pressures to document program effectiveness, organizational-level concerns for efficient resource allocation, the minority sub-population of clients who actually demand resources, and individual-level fears of “getting played” by non-ready clients—losing face from free-riding clients only interested in the perks of a street worker connection, but not formal services.

What are the policy implications? A theme across Butts et al.’s (2015) meta-analysis of the Cure Violence model’s program evaluations is the problem of implementation. In other words, the model itself cannot be properly assessed because most programs veer too far from the theoretical model when operationalized. Thus the current challenge is not to search for alternative approaches, but rather to improve the fit between reality and research. One possibility is to further specify the geographic focus of interventions involving hard-to-reach, resistant populations. Rather than an entire city, an organization can focus on servicing a neighborhood or even smaller geographic unit. By restricting the pool of potential clients from which SOWs can choose, programs would be encouraged to focus on each and every client. Another line of policy should focus on ways organizations can be differentially rewarded for recruiting and providing services to more difficult-to-reach individuals. One way of documenting who is hard-to-reach—and therefore should translate into more positive evaluation from funders if recruited—is to compare people’s centrality within social networks. Law enforcement efforts against gang violence in Boston and elsewhere have already implemented such strategies with success (Braga et al. 2001; Kennedy et al. 1997).

By asking who receives services in the first place, this study offers critical insights into not only program efficacy of outreach to marginalized populations from HIV/AIDS patients to undocumented workers, but also differential access to our society’s most fundamental resources.