

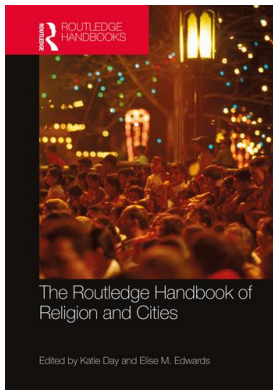
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28

RELIGION AND VIOLENCE
IN THE URBAN CONTEXT*Elfriede Wedam and Ryan SC Wong¹*

Religion and violence are easily linked in the public imagination, yet we know that many faith traditions abjure violence and promote peace, albeit with different degrees of success. Moreover, some justify violence in particular contexts.² Nonetheless, despite its high human cost, violence is part of the human condition. While the potential for violence exists everywhere, actual levels of violence vary by time, location, and conditions,³ hence the usefulness of a sociological perspective. Using an urban lens, we ask in this chapter, in what ways, if any, do various religious practices in the United States act upon or influence potential states of violence? We begin by asking how violence is produced and reproduced over time and across spaces in the city.

Chicago is the laboratory for examining these questions. It is probably not lost on the reader that while the homicide rate has declined somewhat since the peak in 2016, Chicago has displayed persistent problems with violence despite the decades-long overall national decline in some of the strongest indicators such as homicides. First, we define several dimensions of violence.

Violence: Personal, structural, cultural

Violence has both structural and personal sources, direct and indirect causes. Peace researcher Johan Galtung provides the following distinctions: actor or “*direct violence* is defined in personal, social, and world spaces and is intended by individuals acting singly or inside collectivities. Direct violence can be verbal or physical; and violence harming the body, mind, and spirit.”⁴ All combinations leave behind psychological and emotional traumas⁵ that may perpetuate violence over time.

Structural or indirect violence is defined as “built into the person, social, or world spaces and is unintended.” Structural violence divides into “political, repressive and economic, exploitative; supported by structural penetration, segmentation, fragmentation, and marginalization.”⁶ Simply put, “Structural violence ... is differentiated from personal violence ... where there is no actor committing the violence or where it is not practical to search for the actor(s).”⁷ The structural violence approach “provides for a larger framework, not ignoring individual-level analysis but suggesting that that level alone is insufficient to enable us to understand the complex realities of our increasingly globalized world.”⁸ This approach can help us avoid victim-blaming because of its emphasis on the larger social structure that is at play.⁹

Cultural violence is yet another form but is used less frequently in sociological analysis. Cultural violence

serves to legitimize direct or structural violence, motivating actors to commit direct violence or to omit counteracting structural violence; can be intended or unintended. Cultural violence divides by content: “religion, law and ideology, language, art, empirical/formal science, cosmology [deep cultures] and by carriers: schools, universities, media.”¹⁰

Cultural violence is a way to frame and support the default setting within which solutions to everyday life problems are constructed. This resonates with the late sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic violence, which is a form of non-physical violence against a subordinate person or group that has legitimate standing within the attitudes and perceptions of the cultural mainstream and is often unrecognized. For example, cultural or symbolic violence says that responding aggressively to challenges is reasonable and justifiable in the ordinary sense. Taking the step from aggressive to violent behavior is a short one, measured by ambiguous boundaries of acceptability. As we will demonstrate, all three dimensions operate interactively, and they conceptually and practically interpenetrate one another.

To grasp the ubiquitous and persistent nature of violence, it is helpful to move beyond general definitions to an applied notion of direct or personal violence that concretizes acts of violence in the immediate experience of the actors. This has the advantage of shedding light on structural violence as well. Coming from the world of community organizing in Chicago, Phillip Bradley offers a tri-part definition of violence that emerged from grassroots efforts focusing on individual behavior, which, as we will demonstrate below, has immediate implications for structural and cultural violence. The first part of this definition of violence is “the act of serving one’s perversities, privileges, preferences and pleasures rather than the health, interest, rights and needs of all people.”¹¹ Such behavior can be intentional or unintentional. In the individualistic orientation of most Americans, individual violence is implicitly acknowledged (and justified) rather than explicitly stated. An important implication is that while this form of violence does not actively create privileged structures, violence is embedded in the system by the adoption of prevailing norms, values, and rules, i.e., through culture. In this way, violence may not be an intentional act, or not in all cases, but individuals benefit, and individual agents can be identified.

The second dimension of Bradley’s applied definition is that violence “is uttering statements that are not true, thinking, speaking, and acting without being motivated by creative goodwill and compassion.” This dimension is formed on moral grounds, making it intentional behavior, as is the third dimension, namely, that “violence is the intent to destroy or injure the spirit, mind, emotion, body, relationships or properties of others.”¹² In the latter case, an individual is held to account for one’s intent in the action, not merely the action itself.

Hence, violence takes many forms: self-hate, lack of self-respect, suicide, relationship violence, child abuse and neglect, rape and homicide, property crime, corruption and fraud, capital punishment, war, and genocide. At the personal level, violence has psychological and emotional consequences (traumas) that are difficult to overestimate. Capital punishment, war, and genocide are state-sponsored violence, hence, structural forms of violence with psychological and emotional consequences for the victims (and their families).

Structural violence is also a consequence of institutional practices that result in inequality, poverty, and injustice. For example, in 1934 the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) instituted low-interest, low down payment, and long-term mortgages to counter some of the effects of the Great Depression, but initially excluded “low-income families, single women (unless they were war widows), the non-wage-earning elderly, or racial minorities, who for decades were

officially or unofficially prevented from obtaining loans.”¹³ Without some form of wealth equity such as homeownership, families have limited means for advancing economically. Restrictive covenants, a real estate practice sanctioned by the FHA, were not discontinued until after the Supreme Court struck them down in 1948, and bank-redlining practices were not effectively challenged until the Fair Housing Act of 1968.

Furthermore, economic inequality is supported by educational inequality. After World War II, all veterans, including African American soldiers, were eligible for the benefits of the G.I. Bill. However, historically white colleges and universities only admitted a token number of blacks and women, and, historically, black colleges only had space for about half the number of applicants.¹⁴ For example, Harold Washington (first black mayor of Chicago) and Dawn Clark Netsch (Illinois state senator) each obtained the one open seat in Northwestern University’s School of Law class of 1948 for those categories.

In each case we can ask, is there a particular individual that can be blamed for unjust outcomes? No, but it took the collective agreement among the members of the institutions to implement the (culturally) dominant prejudices of the time. Hence, structural violence is foregrounded, but it could not exist without the reciprocal causal path between individuals and cultural practices.¹⁵

What produces violence?

Violence has multiple causes. The debate between the ecological view of the relationship between crime and race¹⁶ and the individualist view¹⁷ is still relevant (while the mentioned authors were measuring for crime, in certain cases, they used crime and violence interchangeably). The ecological view theorizes a community-level relationship between crime and violence, thus helping examine the intersectionality of race, place, inequalities, and violence. The ecological approach posits crime and violence in relation to structural differences like the “concentration of ghetto poverty, racial segregation, residential mobility and population turnover, family disruption, and the dimensions of local social organization (e.g., density of friendship/acquaintanceship, social resources, intergenerational links).”¹⁸

The individualist view explains engagement in criminal behavior with biological and/or genetic factors, which include family—the idea that “bad families produce bad children.”¹⁹ As a biosocial theory, it holds that individuals’ biological differences affect their social learning and how they understand and “are affected by rewards and punishments that shape their behavior.”²⁰ This view focuses on control, containment, and punishing offenders rather than eliminating the underlying causes of their offending or rehabilitating them.

However, while we (Wedam and Wong) acknowledge the contextual elements without suggesting they are determinative, we do not accept the rational choice assumptions underlying the deterrence theory of the individualist viewpoint. Our argument is that both social structures and individual circumstances and choices contribute to the social problem of violence.²¹ We would add the taken-for-granted standards of judgment by which individuals are evaluated and through which cultural processes operate. In the following sections, we describe the structural conditions and individual circumstances that produce and condition violence, simultaneously shaped by the cultural assumptions operating in those circumstances.

Social structures and institutions provide conditions that influence and feed back into violent acts. When studying the persistence of concentrated poverty and underclass among African Americans,²² sociologists of race and poverty illuminated the effects that structures have on producing disadvantageous settings for a population. Similarly, these structures can also provide breeding grounds for violence. We will discuss six structural conditions that produce violence:

1) socially disadvantaged neighborhoods; 2) poor family functioning; 3) inadequate education; 4) lack of employment; 5) mistrust of law enforcement; and 6) easy availability of guns. These conditions, although listed separately, can operate simultaneously and work recursively. Thus, these conditions generate an environment that allows violence to thrive, which then reinforces them, creating a feedback loop and making violence a deceptively endless cycle.

Neighborhoods provide grounding for human development and contribute to identity formation. They are geographical mappings of localized communities with continuous social interactions. A socially isolated neighborhood, however, is typically separated by social class, race, and reputation (e.g., “sketchy,” “public housing,” “Section 8”).²³ A socially isolated neighborhood is not one that is necessarily physically isolated, although sometimes expressways, railroad tracks, or even parks and industrial districts can create concrete barriers against surrounding neighborhoods, but one where its populations are isolated by social boundaries. The classic work of the Chicago school of urban sociology posited that the city consisted of a “mosaic of little worlds that touch but do not interpenetrate.”²⁴

Sociologists Andrew Papachristos and Sara Bastomski, however, analyzed linkages and networks between similar neighborhoods and, following recent research, demonstrated interdependency among them. “[W]hat occurs in one neighborhood affects what happens in neighboring communities.”²⁵ Crime and violence in one neighborhood can transcend spatial boundaries and influence other neighborhoods through what these authors define as “co-offending.” Most youth and young adult crimes and delinquent behaviors occur in groups, which expose individuals to different types of criminal skills, deviant values, opportunities to engage in crime and delinquency, and potential pools of co-offenders from other neighborhoods. If repeated, such patterns create a durable network, one that produces meaningful structures that link neighborhoods. “These structures can facilitate the flow of ideas, social norms, and even instrumental support that enable criminal activity, beyond the individual offenders we observe in our data.”²⁶ This is based in the durability of “neighborhood effects,” as Robert Sampson and his colleagues proposed beginning in 1997 with their groundbreaking publication in *Science*.²⁷

In other words, crime and other conditions of disadvantage are reproduced over time as well as space by connecting a network of neighborhoods. Socially and economically disadvantaged neighborhoods are exceptionally vulnerable to violence because their populations are detached from resources that can alleviate the causes of violence. For example, neighborhoods “[u]nder conditions of severe and persistent concentrated poverty, high crime, and ineffective policing, residents come to expect crime, disorder, and the illegal economy to be a part of their daily lives.”²⁸ In the same article, Sampson and his colleagues commented on the strength of “poverty, female family headship, low education and skill, [and] joblessness”²⁹ as indicators of structural disadvantage. Pratt and Cullen’s research in 2005 tested the strength of several macro-level predictors of crime; they found that the connections among non-economic institutions, unemployment, firearms ownership, family disruption, and violence are robust.³⁰ These tested predictors match well with the conditions we listed—single families, inadequate education, high unemployment rates, mistrust of law enforcement, and gun accessibility.

Social structures contribute to the conditioning of violence but, to recall our earlier discussion, there is another key element in the production of violence—individuals. An act cannot be executed without an actor, and personal decisions matter. Indeed, while structural constraints exist, so do cultural constraints, and both limit the power of agency. However, we agree that individuals can resist being “structural or cultural dopes.”³¹ As David Rubinstein explains,

[T]he components of action [culture, structure, agency] are indeterminate and mediated by the others ... The privileging of the elements of action can be allowed in

concrete situations. But the reductive view that ‘in the final analysis’ a preferred factor is determinative [economic opportunities is frequently presumed] and the others [culture, agency] are epiphenomenal should be resisted.³²

Hence, we will explore individual circumstances that shape violence: 1) family dysfunctions; 2) low level of resources to abet violent behavior; 3) poor individual health; and 4) lack of prosocial behavioral skills. As some readers might have noticed already, these individual circumstances closely mirror structural conditions. Structural conditions often translate to individual circumstances [i.e., conduct]; each has partial autonomy, as Rubinstein explains, but is also subject to the interactive pull of the other. As shown in Figure 28.1, individuals heavily influence and are influenced by social structures and institutions.

The micro-influences on violence are well documented in McCrea et al.³³ Family dysfunctions like norms of interpersonal violence contribute to the persistence of violence. “A minority of families in high-poverty, high-crime US communities are heavily involved in violence and begin forcing their children to adopt street values and criminal activities at early ages.”³⁴ This dysfunction of family also contributes to poor mental health and the lack of prosocial behavioral skills like anger management, parenting skills, reasonable self-assessments, and maturity. While this dysfunction of family conduct is found in the minority of families in high-poverty and crime communities, the structural context of the neighborhood matters as well. Families with

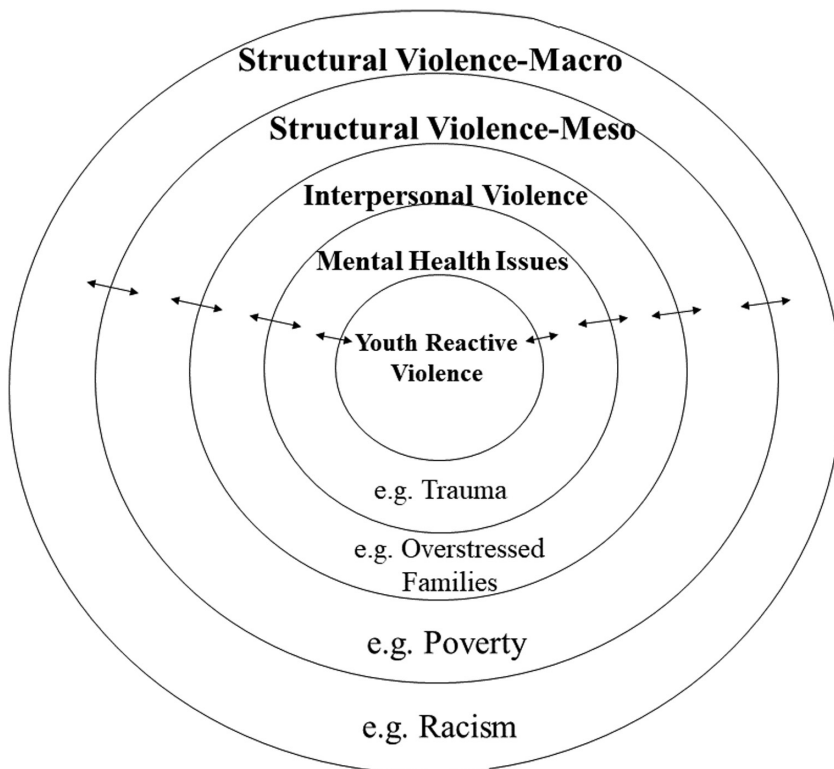


Figure 28.1 Structural violence, interpersonal violence, mental health issues, reactive violence. Source: McCrea, Richards, Quimby, Scott, Davis, Hart, Thomas, and Hopson 2019

good parenting that value family support face challenges of poverty and neighborhood danger, which can be overwhelming and override the positive effect of good parenting. An example provided in McCrea et al.'s study is that "some parents in under-resourced communities may be forced into long daily separations from their children to pursue multiple low-wage jobs, are exposed to the same community violence that afflicts their children and are unable to access services."³⁵ Neighborhoods with low levels of resources, such as support systems to abet violent behaviors and disadvantages mentioned above, contribute to the social and public health problem of violence.

A variety of studies performed by a team based in the Loyola University Chicago Psychology Department point repeatedly to community and family roles in reducing adolescents' trauma when exposed to public violence. External public exposure and exposure to older peers increase risk for violent outcomes for teens.³⁶ Conversely, when parents monitor their adolescents while also providing them personal warmth, family cohesion, and support, these teens are at lower risk for destructive behaviors.³⁷ Following their model graphed in Figure 28.1, structural violence has macro- and meso-level properties. Racism is often identified as a structural variable, but clearly difficult to measure except by meso-level indicators such as organizations, hence, "under-resourced schools" in this model. Alternatively, government or other institutional policies (e.g., historic discrimination by the FHA, colleges, and universities) that exclude groups from obtaining resources can also be considered macro structures.

Violence is a public health problem, not a policing problem

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) strongly endorse a public health approach to understanding and addressing violence, and provide extensive technical assistance to groups willing to adopt their recommendations.³⁸ Indeed, the CDC acknowledges that much of the difficulty in finding long-term solutions stems from a lack of coherent, comprehensive, and preventative strategies at the local level, focusing on long-term and widespread changes in a community that are likely to have lasting effects.

To overcome some past weaknesses in finding effective solutions, the CDC recommends that multi-tiered and multi-institutional sectors become involved. While they suggest public health can play a leadership role, other sectors are vital,

including but not limited to, education, health care (mental, behavioral, medical), justice, government (local, state, and federal), social services, business, housing, media, and organizations that comprise the civil society sector, such as *faith-based organizations*, youth-serving organizations, foundation, and other non-governmental organizations.

*[emphasis added]*³⁹

Violence prevention activities that combine different strategies and approaches begin with early childhood interventions such as head start and child-parent centers and continue into elementary school programming that expands youths' skills, including problem-solving and self-efficacy.⁴⁰ Another approach is to lessen the harm of violence exposure through therapeutic treatment for youths' behavioral and emotional issues and hospital-community partnerships for intervention and prevention services. The CDC recommends family therapeutic services to reduce family conflict, improve communication, and enhance parenting skills in managing and

supervising their youth.⁴¹ The CDC’s solution is less to choose from the above menu than to organize an “all of the above” institutional remedy.

However, in reviewing the recommendations in all six arenas of violence they have investigated (youth violence, intimate partner violence, suicide, sexual violence, child abuse and neglect, and adverse childhood experiences), the CDC recommends most prominently four solutions: teaching skills of problem-solving for children and parents, which include promoting prosocial and positive parenting norms of behavior; providing support services for victims; creating protective environments including interventions; and economic support. We note that, of these four, only one addresses structural causes in terms of material opportunities and benefits, i.e., economic support. The other three address the individual agent, creating a variety of supportive environments (which, arguably, could be a meso-level structural change), and behavioral changes. Hence, the data analyzed by the CDC show that structure and agency are connected in terms of potential solutions, although they emphasize personal agency more.

Chicago and violence

Chicago’s reputation is heavily shaped by the notoriety of organized crime headed by one of its kingpins, Al Capone, and “The Untouchables” who pursued them.⁴² Nonetheless, in the post-World War II era, Chicago followed the same general patterns of crime as the nation as a whole. Chicago hit two “singular peaks” of homicides in 1974 (N=970) and 1992 (N=943), followed by a steep decline, which was followed by a recent but lower peak in 2016 (N=781)⁴³ (see Figure 28.2). Since then, much national attention has focused on Chicago because, while Chicago has also witnessed decline—in 2018 the number of homicides was 563⁴⁴—it has been considerably less than in our peer cities of New York (N=290) and Los Angeles (N=286) in 2017.⁴⁵ In 2017, Chicago’s homicide rate (per 100,000) was 24.13, Los Angeles’s was 7.01, and New York City’s was 3.39. Despite its reputation, Chicago ranks 12th in homicide rates among large American cities.⁴⁶

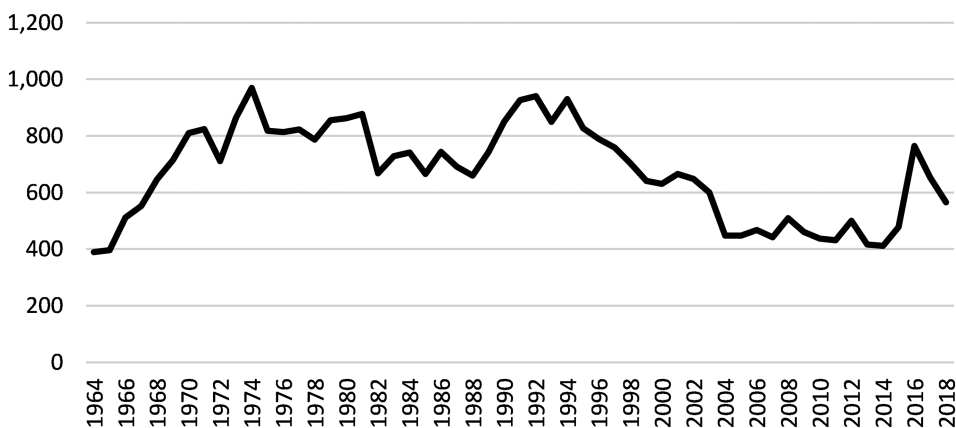


Figure 28.2 Yearly murder trend in Chicago, 1964–2018.
Source: Loyola University, Chicago, Center for Criminal Justice Research, Policy and Practice, 2020

Young African American males (over 80% of victims/assailants) are statistically most at risk in this city. Murder is concentrated in districts that also suffer from intergenerational poverty, gang-infestation, social disorder, and economic blight.⁴⁷ However, murder is just one type of violence, albeit the most visible and fear-inducing. This has broad implications for the negative reputations of several South and West Side Chicago neighborhoods.⁴⁸

Nonetheless, it is necessary to put these forms of violence into context. The gun homicide rate in the US is 3.5 per 100,000 people. However, the rate for African American males between 10 and 24 years of age is 48.4 per 100,000. The overall rate of crimes with a gun is 2.3%.⁴⁹ When compared to suicides, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in 2017 reported that there were more than twice as many suicides (47,173) in the United States as there were homicides (19,510).⁵⁰ Less visible but more insidious are the many forms of personal violence that we discussed above.

What resources do religious people, ideas, and institutions bring to this problem?

Religion can be usefully defined in functional terms. *Religion* fulfills certain human needs: it provides community and belonging based in affective relationships, an array of tasks and activities that require personal investment, an identity grounded in beliefs, practices, and rituals that engage the believer in a relationship to the sacred or the divine, and codes of conduct that constrain individual behavior (ethical norms). For the believer, religion is expressed organizationally, in congregations with specific organizational structures, sometimes rooted in historic systems but other times decidedly contemporary. Congregations will develop a variety of religious cultures based on their traditions and local histories, but also informed by social and political orientations. Many religious groups are inward-looking, caring primarily for the needs of their members. Some groups focus outwardly, strongly influenced by their commitment to mission. Taken together and perhaps most importantly, these activities and characteristics provide *meaning* for the participants. Our next task is to highlight the outward actions of several faith-based groups and congregations who make addressing the problem of violence part of their religious mission.

Where can we see the impact of religion in Chicago's violence-prone areas?

"It was only because of God that we got justice," said William Calloway. "We did a lot of praying, a lot of work. We were peaceful," Calloway, a community activist, said after the court rendered a verdict in a case of police misconduct in Chicago in 2014. A 17-year-old African American, Laquan McDonald, was fatally shot by Chicago Police Officer Jason Van Dyke, a 14-year veteran. McDonald was shot 16 times. On October 5, 2018, 4 years after the death of McDonald, Van Dyke was found guilty of second-degree murder, as well as 16 counts of aggravated battery with a firearm. Three Chicago police officers were tried for allegedly attempting to cover up for the shooting; however, they were found not guilty. Van Dyke was sentenced to 81 months in prison.⁵¹ In this case of police wrongdoing, the Christian orientation of the activists was invoked as a resource in their efforts to bring public attention to the unjustified shooting in light of the resistance of civil authorities to acknowledge it.⁵² Calloway explained that his faith required him to act in certain ways while pursuing his goals. He stated that he wanted the world to know "it is only because of God that we got justice. We did a lot of praying, we did a lot of work. We were peaceful when we didn't want to be peaceful." In response to a reporter's question about accountability, Calloway replied,

You can never have healing or reconciliation without accountability. It's time to forgive now ... I'm not going to lie ... That's hard for me to say. But I'm a believer in Jesus Christ and we have to release forgiveness in order for us to heal.

While religious individuals can be motivated by faith to engage in nonviolent activism to achieve justice goals, can religious organizations be agents for constructive resolution to the destructive outcomes that violence produces? It is useful to discuss first the national congregational context for outreach work that addresses social problems. The National Congregational Study by Mark Chaves and colleagues has examined this question over three waves beginning in 1998. In the most recently reported 2012 wave, 83% indicated some involvement in “social or human services, community development, or other projects and activities intended to help people outside the congregation.”⁵³ This is higher than the 58% who reported thusly in 1998 and 2006.⁵⁴ However, Chaves explains this is due to the slightly altered form of the question in 2012 so that “more congregations who do minor sorts of social services say ‘yes’ to the initial ‘do you do any?’ question.”⁵⁵ Food assistance remains the most common form of activity (52% of all congregations). It is still the case that few congregations engage in long-term and more intensive interaction with the needy.

Programs aimed at helping prisoners, victims of domestic violence, the unemployed, substance abusers, and immigrants, for example, each are listed by fewer than 5% of congregations as one of their most important four programs, and only 11% of congregations place any one of these activities on their top-four list.⁵⁶

While there may be a presumption by the American public that religious groups are at the front line of social services, these researchers report that as institutional actors, “the vast majority of congregations are involved in social services only with low intensity.”⁵⁷

To be clear, other religious institutions such as Catholic Charities, Lutheran Social Services, Jewish Family Services, and the Salvation Army are among the largest agencies that provide extensive support services. While receiving public funds prohibits any form of religious discrimination on the part of these agencies, our only claim is that the organizations are founded on and motivated by a religious perspective to engage in this form of charitable work. They would plainly not be included in a “congregational” survey. We present a limited amount of data below, as illustrative of notable religious involvement and accessible to the “person-in-the pew.” The Chicago setting provides examples from among those 10% of congregations Chaves found that are engaged in intensive service delivery.

However, our question is not only whether congregations participate in violence prevention or intervention work, but are they effective? And if so, how? In many cases, organizations, including congregations, claim success by their own measures. Our approach will be to attribute effectiveness or some level of success (admittedly ambiguous) by connecting the religious work of our sample congregations to the outcomes identified by the CDC as effective programs against violence.

Sociologists Rhys H. Williams and R. Stephen Warner shed some light on this question with data from their Youth and Religion Project on urban evangelical youth programs in Chicago.⁵⁸ The authors identify several program commonalities in what they judge to be “successful in attracting and keeping youth” and link those programs to youths’ “healthy personal identities and public selves.”⁵⁹ The first common element among successful youth programs is their provision of autonomous space for youth to share candidly their experiences. Youth revealed past “drug use, sexual activity, harrowing encounters with gangs or crime, intensely painful relation-

ships with parents.”⁶⁰ These youth concluded that the solution was to “‘get right with God’ and act in a morally responsible manner.”⁶¹ This autonomous space inside a church with dedicated leaders acted as a “protected environment” that permitted the youth a measure of independence within a supportive atmosphere.

From the same dataset, Williams and Warner reported that youth night in African American churches combined parental support with similar goals for youth ministry; however, adult members provided more monitoring and considerably less autonomy for the youth. The authors concluded that

[i]n a community where growing up is a risky business, lack of supervision and monitoring can be dangerous, even deadly, and African-Americans may well feel that they do not want the church to serve as another autonomous space for youth.⁶²

It is worth noting that many of the black youth and college students in this study were not only enveloped by their adult leaders but enveloped themselves in the language of family and community to a greater degree than the white youth and college students did, who tended to use more individualistic language. The authors concluded that, for black respondents, church commitments “served to keep individuals on the right path, a path that was understood as benefiting the collective as well as the individual.”⁶³ Parental support, in addition to supervision, a protective environment, and sense of belonging, are indeed protective factors cited in the psychological research above.⁶⁴ Other research has provided some evidence of the role of fathers in reducing their children’s negative behaviors. For example, having a black Protestant Christian father is associated with fewer externalizing problem behaviors in young children.⁶⁵

Another protective factor for urban evangelical youth is finding alternative communities in which they can live differently from the “code of the streets.” Youth see much problematic and destructive behavior in other parts of their lives; these effective youth programs instead “inculcate values and ideals that urge them away from substance abuse, crime, and other risky behavior” through contact with peers who do not engage in such behavior, often through conservative morality that imposes limits and constraints.⁶⁶ The CDC recommends creating protective environments for youth as an effective solution, because, as Chicago-based research by Goldner et al. found, exposure to older peers in public settings increases the risk for violent outcomes for teens.⁶⁷

Williams and Warner noted that these urban evangelical programs are decidedly “urban” and contemporary, despite some history within American Evangelicalism that eschews this form of public involvement.⁶⁸ They assert that

Rather than shunning the city as a site of corruption and moral decay, the churches we have observed deliberately choose it as a place for mission, a place to reform, a society in need. They are not merely ‘stuck’ in the city, unable to respond to demographic changes.⁶⁹

Another intense outreach to, and re-structuring of, the environment for urban youth is found in the Urban Life Skills Program of New Life Community Church. This church began in the 1980s on the Southwest Side and, while it is now interracial, its special mission has been to Latinos and specifically Latino youth. As the urban youth programs reported by Williams and Warner, New Life discovered that at-risk youth can be reached by small group mentoring that provides belonging, parenting, and an alternative moral lifestyle in a consistent way. As the pastor stated, “Youth workers find themselves doing parental things, asking about school and things. Youth need a place to belong. Sometimes they end up in gangs to belong.”⁷⁰

Their Gang Intervention Program located in the Little Village community on Chicago's Southwest Side, which is predominately Latino, provides a violence prevention and intervention model for youth on probation and parole. This includes skills development through mentoring, gang intervention counseling, substance abuse classes, art therapy, job readiness training, tutoring and GED classes, court advocacy, social activities, and family support. The CDC recommends all these techniques. Urban Life reports that their "Christ-centered" mentoring program has produced significant results: youth are 46% less likely to use drugs; 27% less likely to use alcohol; 52% less likely to skip a class; and 37% less likely to skip a day of school. They claim that 60% of their youth come through the program without reoffending or picking up a new case. They attribute these gains to the intensive focus on prevention and intervention as well as their ability to provide personalized approaches. Youth can obtain individual as well as group-based mentoring. "Building character" is one of their goals. Like the evangelical youth groups studied by Williams and Warner, Urban Life advocates for "positive life changes" through developing networks of peers that do not engage in such risky behaviors and mentors who model a different life. Their introductory video ends with the statement, "Help us transform Little Village and Chicago with the hope of Jesus Christ."

Of course, we rely on self-reported data about their degree of success. It is worth noting, however, that this program dates to the mid-1990s when Wedam first interviewed church leaders and has expanded since then. A further point is the program's use of the language of neighborhood "transformation." In our view, transformation should never be mistaken for reformation or conflict resolution, whether it is used in a political or theological sense. Peace researcher, John Paul Lederach, suggests that transformation is a deeper orientation to social change that involves "changing or expanding our guiding ideas."⁷¹ Furthermore, one needs also to distinguish between a change that addresses the person or the context of that person's life. The Urban Life Skills Program appears committed to a cumulative model of changing "hearts and minds" one person at a time in the expectation that the community will experience overall "transformation." This model of change is consistent with the theological orientation that stresses individual salvation.

As we saw, the populations most vulnerable to violence are socially disadvantaged African American and Latino youth in urban areas. In research on two Chicago-based organizations addressing the variety of personal and civic needs of formerly incarcerated men, Edward Flores and Jennifer Cossyleon investigated how and to what extent religious-based community organizing achieved its goal of "social change."⁷² The authors support the findings of others that "religion is a resource for drug users and gang members attempting to reform"⁷³ and outline a process by which religion becomes inserted into and helps achieve the reform goals. They further assert, "not only can religion enable social reform—but that it does so precisely by providing opportunities for personal reform."⁷⁴ While not an exact parallel, we are reminded of Paul Lichter's concept of "personalism" as a vehicle for enacting public commitment in his study of environmental organizations.⁷⁵ Lichter noted, for example, "personalized commitment meant linking individual responsibility to society and the natural environment in general, not to separate persons or separate issues divorced from a social context."⁷⁶ The larger point that is central to our argument is that personal reform and social reform are not necessarily at odds; instead, private choices can have public consequences.

A Chicago faith-based philanthropy, Community Renewal Society (CRS), financially supported a civic community organization, FORCE (Fighting to Overcome Records and Create Equality), through "faith in action." CRS organizers held trainings for FORCE members in which they drew from the theologies of faith-based community organizing to rearticulate the meaning of "power," "self-interest," and "relationships" as life-affirming, collective, and public.

In sessions with the former prisoners, they then called them to put their “faith into action” by supporting the legislative campaign for a record sealing bill in the State of Illinois legislature.⁷⁷

“Redemption scripts” was the technique CRS used to demonstrate self-change in the face of barriers to “re-integrate” in conventional ways—including getting a job, a college degree, rebuilding family lives. FORCE participants made public declarations of their wrong life choices without accepting blame but rationalizing their past behavior due to dysfunctional and isolated social environments (criminologists explain this through social learning and differential association theory). A repeated theme among the men is that gang membership escalates without involved parenting practices or youth mentoring. The scripts provide a “way forward” by motivating these men to “pass on their self-knowledge” that might discourage others (principally youth) from modeling themselves after such discredited behaviors.⁷⁸

The authors noted the interactive nature of personal and social, i.e., structural reform, demonstrating the false dichotomization too often found in sociological literature, as we have attempted to make the case here. For example, citing the lack of good jobs as evidence for continuing anti-social behavior among young men (the school-to-prison pipeline) rings hollow for many who know that the crucial missing variable is these men’s inability to keep the job. In the case of FORCE, members resorted to volunteering opportunities such as coaching basketball and mentoring youth because they were unable to secure good jobs. Their rationale was simply that this was an avenue to re-enter the public sphere. It is not clear whether FORCE provided the necessary training to obtain and retain the “good jobs,” but they guided members to double down on their efforts to reclaim prosocial identities through “redemption scripts.” The emphasis of the program was to recognize the stigma attached to formerly incarcerated people in the job market.

Once this is acknowledged, the door opens to the cascading, interpolating, and interlocking causal factors the CDC has concluded requires multi-institutional and comprehensive reform efforts.⁷⁹ The social experiment in harsh drug sentencing laws of the 1990s (three strikes, zero tolerance, mandatory minimum sentencing, etc.) has been deemed to be a failure by policy experts and the public alike. Four years ago in Illinois, expungement of felony convictions for nonviolent drug offenses (and more) began. This movement will be intensified by a new law scheduled to be in effect in January 2020.⁸⁰ In the case of FORCE and the Community Renewal Society, formerly incarcerated men were able to demonstrate personal reform while engaging in political action to expand the rights of the formerly incarcerated.

Can religion likewise be used for violent ends?

The misuse of religion should not be avoided in a story about religion and violence in the urban setting. Street gangs are major drivers behind violence in Chicago, so they warrant some attention. The formation of the notorious street gang, the El Rukns and their use of Islam, as well as the use of the Star of David by the Gangster Disciples are instructive cases.

The connection between the Blackstone Rangers and Islam can be traced to Jeff Fort, the co-founder of the gang who is also responsible for changing their name to El Rukn. Described as a charismatic individual, Fort led several Chicago job-training programs with federal funds in the 1960s. The programs were designed to mediate gang disputes and gang violence but were unsuccessful.⁸¹

The El Rukns claimed, “they are peace-loving adherents of Islam and their intent is to spread Allah’s word to the incarcerated. They follow the Qur’an’s teachings and have adopted Sunni Islamic belief structures and prayer regulations.”⁸² However, the El Rukn’s religious status was denied by the court. Their demand to be recognized as a religion and given the right to freely

practice their Islamic faith⁸³ were rejected on the basis that they were a street gang and there already were Islamic services in Illinois prisons.⁸⁴

The usage of the Star of David by the Gangster Disciples is, allegedly, to honor one of their founding figures, David Barksdale (1947–1974).⁸⁵ It is not clear why this symbol appealed to the founders, but the claim is that it represents the virtues of love, life, loyalty, wisdom, knowledge, and understanding.⁸⁶ In addition to the Jewish symbol, the use of “disciples” originated in the founders looking through the bible for ideas. However, the original group added “Devil’s” to give the name an “intimidating edge.”⁸⁷

When on the street, the tightly organized gangs appeared to fulfill several of the functions of organized religion: community and a sense of belonging, a code of conduct that constrained street and (to some extent) personal behavior, a personal commitment to the array of tasks required by the gang, and a focus on meeting members’ needs. An example of the latter is reflected in the description of Jeff Fort who behaved “like a godfather, giving shoes to kids who needed them, finding homes for families who were evicted.”⁸⁸ It could also be argued that charismatic and controlling figures such as the Gangster Disciples’ leader, Larry Hoover (who merged with the Devil’s Disciples in an early truce between the two warring groups and is currently serving a life sentence) and Fort are not unlike powerful clergy leaders whose authority is not challenged. To the extent that faith-based outreach efforts to youth caught up in gangs recognize the source of the power of gang life, their own ability to reach them may be enhanced. For example, a former gang member is currently advocating for a pardon for Hoover, as is Kanye West (“Kanye West is ‘working through God’ to free Hoover,”) because Hoover claimed “I can reach your kids. Let me out of jail.” Hoover’s advocate claims he could bring the “fear of God” back to the street, adding, “I am not saying Larry Hoover is God, but when they took the leaders off the street, they took the street disciplinarian away.”⁸⁹

Research on another Chicago gang, the Conservative Vice Lords during the 1960s and 1970s by criminologist John Hagedorn, suggests that fruitful gang intervention could be accomplished by guiding members to form a social movement.

My main point is this: I believe it is crucial for social movements to reach out and ‘include in the mobilizations the millions who are still left out, including the very large number of young people who inhabit the world of gangs ... Dim prospects for success are not a reason to stop trying.’⁹⁰

Hagedorn discusses how the meaning system of hip-hop culture provides and expresses values for members of gangs. He sees a glimmer of hope in mobilizing these groups for pro-community contributions, while he also appears to avoid considering the potential of faith-based community-organizing groups such as Industrial Areas Foundation and Gamaliel Foundation that are active in Chicago.

These brief local examples of the misuse of religion and awkward attempts at reform may suggest the depth of the problem facing those dedicated to re-building communities of people and spaces most damaged by violence.

An unnamed solution to violent conflict: Peace and nonviolence

While nonviolent practices as solutions to various forms of violence are compatible with the research cited in this chapter, none of the religious groups we used as illustrations explicitly implemented such strategies. Nonviolent strategies are more often found in the work of “civil resistance” or “nonviolent struggle” for political change. Yet leading scholars in the field of

nonviolence have pointed to the fact that “ordinary people use nonviolent resistance to pursue a wide variety of goals, from challenging entrenched autocrats to seeking territorial self-determination to contesting widespread discriminatory practices.”⁹¹ Indeed, the American Civil Rights Movement owes its successes to the nonviolent civil disobedience and direct action strategies taught by Mohandas Gandhi, Rev. James Lawson, and led by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. While the work of these leaders is ultimately grounded in religious principles, their work’s preferred classification by academics and the public alike seems to be political social change.

An unexpected source of support for nonviolence as a way of life and not merely as a tactic for problem-solving comes from literary theorist and public intellectual, Judith Butler, in a recently published online interview with *The New Yorker*.⁹² Butler argues in a forthcoming book, *The Force of Nonviolence*, that people must imagine an “entirely new way for humans to live together in the world” which is a world of “radical equality.” Butler states,

In my experience, the most powerful argument against violence has been grounded in the notion that, when I do violence to another human being, I also do violence to myself, because my life is bound up with this other life.

Her argument originates in a critique of Western individualism, which also echoes the sociological insights of George Herbert Mead when he articulated the fundamentally social process of “taking the role of the other” as the basis of human morality, the ability to imagine the situation of other people.⁹³ This leads Butler to assert, “interdependency serves as the basis of our ethical obligations to one another. When we strike at one another, we strike at that very bond.”

There are many active social service agencies in Chicago that advance personal and community needs for disadvantaged families and youth. Yet few include nonviolence as an explicit solution to the distress and trauma caused by violent upbringings, neighborhoods, and experiences that have been documented in our programmatic review above. Notwithstanding, Chicago is home to several organizations that teach nonviolence principles and practices, with and without explicit religious foundations, including Precious Blood Ministry of Reconciliation, the Institute for Nonviolence, and NonviolenceWorks. The national organization, *Pace e Bene* (Peace and All Good) with an active chapter in Chicago, has formed Campaign Nonviolence, which includes the project of creating nonviolent cities. While the principle of nonviolence is rooted in Christian theology, adapted by Gandhi, this principle is not widely understood or practiced, hence Butler’s use of the phrase “radical” equality.

Summary and conclusion

This chapter is tasked with explaining the relationship between religion and violence in the urban environment. It is useful first to situate violence in the broader category of conflict. Studies of deviance demonstrate that societies without conflict are dead societies.⁹⁴ So also with relationships, families, organizations, and cities. Social conflict is a form of sociation, in Simmel’s terms, creating a social order out of attractive and repulsive forms.⁹⁵ Conflict has the function of clarifying boundaries, solidifying identities, increasing social cohesion against outsiders, strengthening ideological solidarities, and augmenting resource mobilization.⁹⁶ While conflict can be either constructive or destructive—often both—and is often different for different groups, conflict is a major source of cultural innovation.⁹⁷ Similarly, religion can be a source of societal conflict, often invoked by both sides in a civic dispute. While we may wish to hold religion to a higher standard, let us recall that, as an institution, religion is created and molded by

the human actors that shape all societal institutions, none of which are exempt from the tensions that constitute human affairs.

However, violence is a problem to be solved. Acknowledging its multiple dimensions, causes, and interconnected nature affecting the lives of all people, not only those most socially and economically disadvantaged, helps us grasp its deep-rooted foundations. The structural, individual, and cultural sources of violence are interpenetrating components of action, none to be theoretically privileged. Due to this complexity, effective solutions can be hard to measure. The meta-analyses by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention document this difficulty.

This chapter has only been able to discuss indirectly the hidden forms of violence that are not well documented or underreported in crime statistics: child abuse and neglect, partner and family maltreatment through verbal and emotional abuse, and irresponsible parenting. Furthermore, structural poverty, ill health, and discrimination are the preconditions for various forms of personal maltreatment. These conditions are often the circumstances that lead to physical violence, which gets the attention of law enforcement, clearly the post-hoc response. The cyclical and interinstitutional nature of violence has mental health consequences that require a societal wide response.

Based on our review, the effectiveness of faith-based programs may appear to hinge on their ability to create new social structures for at-risk youth that incorporate new cultural norms and values. As the principle institutional arena for creating and legitimating meaning systems, religion has the potential for effective intervention. Yet explicit religious messages are generally unwelcome in the public square; faith-based groups may need to adapt new strategies or become educational liaisons that challenge their preferred language and methods of communication.

Notes

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