



THE PEARSON INSTITUTE

FOR THE STUDY AND RESOLUTION OF GLOBAL CONFLICTS

**The Pearson Global Forum
Part I. The Breakdown of Social Order
Stopping Street Violence by:**

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CHRIS BLATTMAN: These men are called wheelbarrow boys. They ferry your goods around the market in Monrovia, the capital of Liberia, which until 2003 was a country in war for at least a decade. And when I started working there not long after that, the government and the UN peacekeeping mission considered men like these to be the greatest threat, not just to the city or the country, but actually to the entire region. And why was that? What's so dangerous about wheelbarrow boys?

This is a picture from Cote d'Ivoire in 2011. A short war broke out and generals and recruiters from both sides jumped on planes, landed in Monrovia, and gave young men like those wheelbarrow boys \$500 or \$1,000 to jump on a truck and join the fight for one side or the other. And it wasn't just mercenary recruitment that was a danger for these young men. They were the primary people participating in armed robbery, in home invasions, pickpocketing, and so on. So these are in some sense the greatest danger to the city as well. And what do you do with young men like that?

Now, Johnson [Bohr's 01:14:57] in the audience. Johnson, where are you? Johnson. Okay, so in 2010 I decided I wanted to actually try to answer this question, how do men enter life like this? Why do they do this business, and how does this business work? Because I'm an economist, I wanted to understand how does the mobile phone fencing market work? How does the drug dealing market work? So when you go to a drug den like this, how does it operate? Why do they keep doing this? And you may not have guessed this, but I stand out a little bit in a Liberian drug den (laughs).

So I need Johnson [Bohr 01:15:33], it turns out. Johnson, at the time, had been spending maybe 15 years working with young men like this, trying to get them out of this life. And I'd heard of him, we met a little bit. I phoned him up, I needed a guide. I said, "Johnson, can you show me around?" And so for the next few months, we talked to dozens of young men like the wheelbarrow boys, like the drug dealers, and mobile phone fencers, figuring out how they got there, where they might be going, why we're there, how the business worked. And a funny thing happened. Every time we went to one of those drug dens, there'd be a man across the street selling shoes on an old tarp or shining shoes or some other crummy little business. And he'd come over and he'd greet Johnson, give him a big hug. They'd known each other a long time. And this happened again, and again, and again. And I started to think, "How does Johnson know all these people? Everywhere, all over the city?"

And every time I would hear the exact same story. This young man would say, "I used to be like that guy over there," and he'd point to the drug dealer, or he'd point to the wheelbarrow boy who was a



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notorious pickpocket or something. He said, "I used to be like him, and then I went through Johnson's program."

And after the fifth time this happened, I said, "Johnson, tell me about this program."

Here's Johnson, you can tell which photo I took out of all of these in the slide deck (laughs). Group of 20 men, can't tell it's a third floor of a burned out skyscraper. We put up wicker so people don't fall off the side. In the middle of their neighborhood. And for a few times a week, for a few hours at a time, for just a couple months Johnson would meet with these young men, usually with a colleague, and they'd talk through their lives and it sounded like motivational speaking to me. Nothing that had any business working. And I said, "Okay, let's start writing this down. What do you do on day one? Tell me exactly what you say. And what do you do?" And, "Okay, now day two." And we wrote it up, wrote it up, wrote it up, and I'm married to a psychologist and I gave this to her and I said, "Look at this thing. Remember Johnson [Bohr 01:18:00]? What does this look like to you?"

And she said, "Oh, that's interesting. It's a little different than anything I've seen before. It's applied in different ways, the behaviors are targeting a bit different. But this basically looks like cognitive behavior therapy, or CBT."

Now, maybe like me you didn't know a lot about CBT. I knew that if you had symptoms of anxiety, or depression, or post-traumatic stress, or maybe you're just afraid of dogs, your therapist here in the United States would use CBT as a method to target those specific problematic thoughts and behaviors. And maybe your problematic thought and behavior is aggression. It's uncontrollable rage. It's an inability in this threatening situation or even if someone just looks sideways at you to just fly into a rage, to be violent. And if that's your problem, well, what can you do? Well, CBT is gonna say, "Recognize your problematic thought. There's a two-way street from thoughts to behaviors." So, you have to change your thinking to change your behavior, of course. You have to recognize this is a problem, "I wanna change it. This is destroying my life and I'm a danger to others around me. I'm a danger to the ones I love." But then, the key thing is behaviors change thoughts. It's that other street back. It's practicing a different way of living, and you eventually change your thoughts. And it starts very simple.

You ... Johnson in his class is saying, "Let's practice how you're going to react in this situation." And it's a joke and everybody's laughing. "How are you gonna react in this situation". But it's not a joke because these guys go home after their time with Johnson and they lead very violent lives. Someone [swipes 01:19:57] them. Someone threatens them. And everyday they have a chance to practice, practice, practice, practice, practice counting to 10, practice distracting themselves, practice talking people down, practice the social skills they learn to get out of violent situations. All the skills that my kindergartner learns in the laboratory school right over there. They're learning remedially from Johnson. And after two or three months, at least these five guys we met seem to have changed their lives. But, is it just these five guys, or is it something more?



Johnson wanted to do something incredible. He wanted to take young men like this. Young men who every aspect of their presentation, how they walk, how they dress, how they act, how they treat you is tough. They're outcasts, they're dangerous, and he wanted them to practice trying on this. Not just their aggression. He wanted them to try on a different lifestyle and practice, practice, practice for a few months and to see if it stuck.

So to see if this mattered for more than just these five young men, we developed essentially a grand social experiment. We went out to recruit the thousand most violent, most dangerous young men in Monrovia that we could find. And we found them. And a quarter of them didn't receive any assistance from us. This was our control group. A quarter were offered Johnson's program. A quarter were offered essentially a kind of employment, a startup grant to start up a crummy little business, not unlike that man selling shoes on a tarp, right? This is not a job, this is just a crummy little business, but something different than what they were doing. Something legitimate. And a quarter got both. And we followed them for a month, and several months, and over a year to see what happened.

And what we found just a month after they'd completed Johnson's program was a real change. There was about a third less violence in their lives. They were committing about a third less crimes if they'd gone through Johnson's program. And the same was true if they'd receive the startup grant. And if they'd receive both, it was down by half. And you can basically think of this as for every two violent and criminal young men who came into the program, one changed their life. That's a pretty good hit rate.

Now, what about after a year? Well, after a year the men who had only gone through Johnson's program, well on average, they didn't look any different than the control group. In some ways a lot of them had receded back to their lives after just these two months of talk and practice. And the men who started the little businesses, well all of those businesses failed. Liberia is a tough place to go into any kind of business. Maybe the police confiscated their goods, maybe someone stole them, maybe the rain washed them away, any number of things. Or maybe they just didn't turn a profit. And so they were back to where they started. But the men who got both the CBT and the failed business still had that huge reduction in crime and violence. Essentially one in two left that life. And the common denominator there was practice. Because the business didn't succeed, they weren't making more money. It wasn't like we gave them an alternative to their criminal lifestyle, but after their eight weeks with Johnson, they got to practice again and again and again everyday, for maybe three or six or nine or hopefully 12 months before that crummy little business failed. And that practice really helped them cement this new better behaviors, this new self image.

Now, people are now replicating this and trying this out all over the world, in El Salvador, in Nairobi, and we're trying to see maybe it worked for more than those five guys. It worked for these Liberians. Can it work for more people still? And we're finding out.



And in Chicago, you may have heard we have a violence problem as well. And in some sense the most ambitious test of this yet is happening right now. The READI program in Chicago. About a thousand, maybe a thousand, 500 to 1,000 young men in the city are probably going to be responsible for most of the homicides that happen in the next 12 months. Turns out, it's not very hard to go through those guys are. We're working with street intelligence organizations, we're working with gang outreach organizations, we're working with some of the best NGOs in the city, something like a dozen of them, a group of academics, the crime lab here at the University of Chicago. And we have ... We're offering half of these young men, we're finding them which is the hard part, and then we're offering them something that looks a lot like this. We're offering them an 18-month transitional job, and 18 months around that cognitive behavior therapy alongside other social services. And the hope, we don't know if this is going to happen, the hope is if this is successful, we can bring the homicide rate down by as much as half in this city. But what's also amazing to me is usually we think about innovations coming from America and going to a place like Liberia. And this is a case of innovations from Liberia coming to a place like America. Because at a conference on global conflict, it's important to remember violence is not only a problem that happens in faraway places. Thank you.