Navigating the Thin Line Between Education and Incarceration: An Action Research Case Study on Gang-Associated Latino Youth

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This article examines data collected from an ethnographic research project conducted with 56 gang-associated Latino youths ages 15 to 21 from 2007 to 2009. The objectives of the study were to examine how poor Latino gang-associated youths perceived schooling and policing and to find out if the research process could promote educational aspirations among this population. Data from extensive observations, focus groups, interviews, and workshops with gang-associated youths at a continuation high school, a community center, and on the streets are presented. These young people encountered a multitude of negative interactions with authority figures on a daily basis. These adversities impacted their views of future outcomes: Many attributed having dropped out of school to negative treatment. Based on preliminary findings, I collaborated with the community in an attempt to help these young people reintegrate into school and the community. As a group, we implemented a mentoring program, a gender-specific workshop series, a community-college awareness program, and a once-a-week workshop series with “shot-callers” (the influential leaders of the gang). In this article, I specifically focus on the outcomes of this action research with street-oriented youths and the methodological approach involved in undertaking such an endeavor. I find that, what I call, a “public relations” approach facilitated the transformation process in some youth.

Luis is a 17-year-old street-oriented youth who has been labeled a gang member by school officials and police. He lives on the North Side of Riviera, a small town in Southern California that has recently declared itself to have a gang crisis. On June 12, 2009, I found him sitting on the steps of an old house adjacent to the liquor store, Sunrise Liquors, that he and his homies use as their hangout spot. The store is a perfect archetype of the poor urban neighborhood market. It is located on the corner of a central street; it is small and filled with junk food, a handful of old and bruised tomatoes, bananas, and lemons, and one refrigerator full of sodas and sugary drinks.

1I define gang-associated as any youth who either has self-reported or has been labeled by community members to be involved in a gang. My definition of gang is based on Klein and Maxson’s (2008): “any durable, street-oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of its group identity” (p. 3).

2For example, in 2009, the town based most of the city council election debates on the gang crisis.

3Participant names, the name of the city, and the name of institutions have been changed to protect the youth in this study.

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About a fourth of the store is dedicated to liquor. Four old, noisy aluminum and glass refrigerators are filled with tall cans and 40 oz. bottles of malt liquor and American beer. One shelf boasts an array of two-dollar California wine. The outside of the store is painted in different patches of a cream color: The layers of paint are thick—a sign of the constant battle between the boys who tag up the building with their neighborhood name or their nickname and the store owner who paints over the defacement on a weekly basis. On this day there were eight boys (ages 15 to 20) hanging out in the vicinity. Most spent the whole day, despite the fact that it was a school day. Out of the eight boys present, only one was still enrolled in school; the other seven had dropped out or been expelled. Luis was one of these seven.

On this day, I showed up to the street corner during one of my twice-weekly visits to observe the boys and check in with them about their status in school, work, and the criminal justice system. I walked up to Luis and asked him about school. My graduate students and I had worked with him for nearly two years. A few months prior, Luis decided to sign up for a summer program designed to help convicts transition into higher education at the local community college. After a few weeks in the program, Luis had decided to drop out. I asked him, “What happened, man? I thought you were going to make it happen this time?” He said, “Yeah, you know, but I can’t write. They tried to make me write on the computer tu sabes [you know]? And I am not good at that stuff. I only type with these two fingers.” He showed me his index fingers. I had been banking on Luis because he was one of the “shot-callers” in the neighborhood. At about six feet tall and 220 pounds, Luis is charismatic, talks poetically, and is consulted by the other boys whenever they need to make a decision. If he changed, the boys that follow him might change as well. For example, when he decided to return to school, three other boys decided to follow his lead and enroll in the program as well. All three of them completed the summer program. Two are now working and are enrolled in classes at the community college.

Later that night, I thought about Luis. I was disappointed that he had left the community college program and now had to start over. I wrote in my field notes:

Well, at least we got him to go from one frame of thinking to another. We have been working with him for almost two years and when we met him he was completely uninterested in school or work. The first time I met him he told me “Can’t stop, won’t stop, ‘till the casket drop!” when I asked him if he was “putting in work” [active in the gang]. Within a few months of meeting with us once a week he told us that he was ready to go back to school.

Luis’s story illustrates some of the successes and dilemmas that I encountered in my attempt to conduct action research with street-life-oriented youths.4 As my research team and I endeavored to promote educational and labor force opportunities for these young men, we encountered various obstacles, including community fear, exclusion, resistance, and conflicting expectations. Action research has allowed young men like Luis to be exposed to opportunities they did not have available in the past. In Luis’ case, such opportunities have allowed him to stay out of jail and continue to strive for change. In other words, although he did not complete his summer school program, the fact that he now saw himself as someone who could potentially return to

4I borrow from Payne’s (2008) notion of street-life-oriented youth. He contended that young people who end up on the street learn to utilize the various resources within it as forms of resilience. The term street-life-oriented is a more appropriate term then gang member because it captures the specific context in which young people are engaged in action—the street. In this article I use both terms interchangeably.
school led him to believe that crime might not be the only way for him to express his agency. 
“I used to think that I could never go back to school. Even though I flunked out of the summer program, I know I could go back soon—like in two or three months—and do something with myself,’’ Luis explained. To date, Luis and many of the other youths we worked with have expressed a sense of belief that one day they can acquire a high school diploma or college degree. This belief drastically differs from the sense of pessimism we encountered when we began to interview these young people in 2007.

As I observed the qualitative change in the attitudes and behaviors of the youths in this study, I analyzed how young people framed their experiences with marginalization. In this article, I highlight the process of conducting action research in a working-class Latino community with street-oriented youths and report on outcomes of this action research and the methodological challenges involved in undertaking it. This approach may be helpful in educational and community settings in which researchers, universities, and community institutions collaborate to serve as change agents in the lives of marginalized students, in this case, truant, street-oriented youths labeled as gang members.

**ACTION RESEARCH IN EDUCATION**

One of the first proponents of using action research was the social psychologist Kurt Lewin (1946), who emphasized connecting the research process with the action needed to solve the problem. One of the uses of action research in education has been to train teachers and administrators in conducting research to learn about the efficient and inefficient practices and policies in which they engage (Nofke & Stevenson, 1995). Other educational researchers have become personally involved in creating change by becoming advocates for students, proposing policy and program interventions, or developing curricula for teachers. In this vein, researchers have called for a process of planning, action, observation, and reflection (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). Epstein (2002) provides one such model for creating action partnerships between schools, families, and communities. This approach places the teacher at the center of conducting research and developing action; the teacher is in charge of the process. However, what happens when young people leave the school setting? How can communities become involved in action research when young people have left school and are on the streets? Griffiths (2003) recently developed a social justice action research framework that includes the participation of youth and community in the process of developing change. However, although this new research is promising, it continues to be conducted inside a school context. The question remains: How does one conduct action research with students who have abandoned, or been abandoned by, school?

**ACTION RESEARCH WITH GANG-ASSOCIATED YOUTH**

A handful of action research projects have been conducted with gang-associated youths. When I refer to the term action research, I distinguish between research that has evaluated gang programs: a bountiful research base that has often involved the community in the process (Klein & Maxson, 2008; Spergel, 1965). The action research to which I am referring not only actively involves the community in the research process, but also involves the community and the researcher in the action process. In many cases of action research, researchers have left
themselves out and instead trained community members to become engaged in action, the assumption being that the researcher has less to offer and that he or she must remain objective. However, researchers do have much to offer—they stand in a unique position to use their privilege and social capital to amass resources. I argue that the researcher must become as fully engaged in action research as other community members. If conducted with reflexivity and strong ethical consideration, this type of action research—in which the researcher becomes the nexus for redistributing symbolic and material resources—may be the key to working with street-oriented youths.

When the researcher becomes involved in the action research process, he or she develops credibility with youths. This method resembles Dawley’s work (1973) with the Chicago Vice Lords gang in the 1970s. Dawley, a researcher, went into the city to survey the community and ended up living there for two years. During this time, according to many of the Vice Lords themselves, he helped to transform the gang into a community-based organization dedicated to the empowerment of neighborhood residents. More recently, Northeastern University’s Community Safety Initiative (NUCSI) conducted action research with gang members. It found that “given the complexity and continually changing nature of gang violence, action research is a particularly useful tool with which to engage in comprehensive gang reduction strategies” (NUCSI, 2009, p. 2). Yasser Payne (2008) has conducted cutting-edge participatory action research with street life-oriented Black youths, finding that street life is “a space of resistance, comfort, and fortitude developed by Black men to move and negotiate through the throes of inadequate educational and economic opportunity” (p. 26). He has argued that in participatory action research, the youth themselves “are the ‘expert’—that they in fact know best about how to reduce crime in the Black community—and if we are to successfully reduce crime, this can only be done through and with the men, not in spite of them” (p. 28). My project begins to involve young men in a more formal research process; thus far, I have conducted formal and informal interviews and focus groups in which I ask young men to present their ideas about how to create change. In addition, two of the young men are currently being trained to conduct interview and photovoice projects with their peers.5

Action research, as I conceive it, is a process through which the researcher utilizes the resources available in an attempt to generate positive change in the lives of marginalized youth. This process may begin with a traditional qualitative design in which the researcher seeks to uncover the actions, culture, perceptions, worldviews, and meaning-making generated by young people. The researcher then analyzes preliminary data to begin to gain insight into what resources are needed to generate change. He or she then creates partnerships with different institutions and central figures in the community including local colleges and universities, school districts and schools, community centers, shot-callers, and others. Another phase of research may be conducted after young people begin to receive services and support to account for changes in their needs.

Building on this tradition of action research and tapping into my expertise in urban ethnography, I developed an action plan that bridged both approaches, allowing my research team to help improve the detrimental conditions uncovered by the research process and to analyze the experiences and perceptions of street-oriented youths. This approach began as a traditional

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5Photovoice is a research method by which young people take pictures of their environment, significant others, and community members, and analyze the photographs to map the everyday life of their communities.
ethnographic project through the conduct of observations, interviews, and focus groups that assessed the conditions in which young people found themselves and the meanings they generated from these conditions. After analyzing these preliminary data and outlining the dilemmas and needs from the perspective of the young people, we sought to create collaborations with local institutions. For example, we contacted the local community college and found out that they had programs for ex-convicts and a high school outreach program; we then helped some of the youths apply to these programs and tracked the progress of those who enrolled. We also developed a mentoring program and a once-a-week workshop. An analysis of how these young people fared after being linked to such programs formed the next phase of the research process.6

**METHODOLOGY**

Two central questions guided this research project: What meanings do street-oriented Latino youth make from their negative interactions with school and police? Can the research process help create positive change in the lives of these young people? To answer these questions, I conducted (a) extensive observations at a continuation high school, on a street corner, and at a community center; (b) 56 in-depth, semistructured interviews; and (c) 18 focus group sessions. I recruited young people through a purposive snowball sample in which I made contact with a small group and asked this group to introduce and network me with other young people from the neighborhood. Although my students also conducted observations, this article reports solely on my own observations and on the interviews and focus we collectively conducted. I used a grounded theory approach to uncover common themes and patterns that developed and to search for deviant cases (Strauss, 1987). Following the insight of Small (2004, 2009), I framed the action research component in case study format. Small argued that unique cases are often the most compelling phenomena to study:

An alternative is to search for unique cases (Small, 2004; van Velsen, 1967/1978). Suppose that Bill had chosen a neighborhood with a 40 percent poverty rate but little garbage or graffiti and a unique architectural design due to the influence of a mayor interested in promoting architecture in the city. . . . Suppose the mayor in the second case also had instituted a radical and unique policy whereby mothers received significantly higher rent subsidies plus $1,000 per child for a college fund if they married before the birth of their second child. This rare case would suddenly present Bill an exceptional opportunity to examine the relationship among high poverty, policy, and out-of-wedlock births in ways that cases that happen to be at the mean might not. In case studies, rare situations are often precisely what the researcher wants. (Small, 2009, p. 182)

The action research process, by default, becomes a unique case because of the changes in social action that it will, presumably, make. If a specific intervention, created through the research process, has a positive impact on a young person, the researcher is there to observe and document this process and learn first-hand, in-depth, and through deeper insight, how young people respond to specific programs. Whyte, Greenwood, and Lazes (1989) argued that

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6 Although I attempted to study gang-associated young women as well, it was difficult to find them, as relatively few young women participated in the gang; those that I attempted to interview were difficult to track down. We were only able to collect interviews with eight women. As a result, this article is primarily focused on analyzing the experiences and perceptions of young men.
participatory action research ‘‘advances substantive knowledge and theory that would have been unlikely to emerge out of more orthodox sociological research’’ (p. 2). It creates unique cases for the researcher that can teach us about specific interventions that may not have been found through a more traditional ethnographic approach. Further, these cases bring crucial insights to developing analyses and theories that would have been overlooked by traditional research and representative, unobtrusive sampling procedures (Small, 2009). In this case, I ultimately find that youths placed at risk in a particular marginal neighborhood do not require intensive intervention or suppression to reform. Instead, the action research process shows that street-oriented youths find motivation to return to school and seek employment by establishing meaningful positive connections with community institutions. The research process helped to reestablish these meaningful positive connections.

Some may argue that action research changes the natural course of events that would have taken place without an intervention. However, a large body of gang research has already identified the problem and documented the natural process. Often what researchers and journalists have chosen to emphasize in their gang narratives have been violence, incarceration, school and labor market failure, or death. Further, the knowledge produced by action research is different from that produced by nonaction research. Action research seeks to produce interventions from the data collected. As such, analyzing these interventions becomes a central source of knowledge production. Action research asks: Can a certain action produce change in the meanings and actions that young people living on the margins of society create?

GAINING ENTRÉE

The issue of entrée needs highlighting because it may be the action researcher’s biggest obstacle. I began looking for gang-associated youth by contacting the principal at one of the local continuation high schools, La Mirada, an institution dedicated to teaching students who have been expelled from the regular high school. I told the principal that I wanted to work with a group of students who she or the community believed were at-risk and gang-associated. I told her I had the intention of starting a mentoring program with the University of California Santa Barbara undergraduates and a series of workshops focused on higher education and careers. The principal, Ms. Juarez, was intrigued by the idea that my students may help hers. Eventually, 12 of my undergraduate students became mentors for her students; my graduate students assisted in developing and running a once-a-week community college workshop that enrolled 18 students in the local community college. These students reported that they would never have considered going to the community college if it hadn’t been for the program. The principal told me that in the past five years, only two or three of her students enrolled in the community college each year.

Ms. Juarez introduced me to a group of 20 students. I presented my study to them and asked for volunteers; four young men showed interest. These students met me after school at the local community center, located a few blocks away. I paid each $10 for each interview. I then asked them to refer me to other youth. After a handful of interviews and repeated contacts, my students and I gained enough trust from this group to get invited to ‘‘the hangout spot.’’ ‘‘If you want the homies, you gotta’ go to them,’’ Mario, one of our key informants, told us. The spot was the sidewalk in front of Sunrise Liquors, which I visited with four of my students. Twelve young men were in the vicinity; a few of them we knew, but many of them we didn’t. We were
regarded with suspicion. One of the strangers—perhaps 20 years old, chubby, and bald—drove up to us on a shiny, stainless-steel beach cruiser with extra long handlebars. He perched next to us but didn’t say anything. I introduced myself: ‘‘Hey man, my name is Victor Rios. I am a professor over at the university. We are here because we want to ask you some questions about what it’s been like to grow up in Santa Barbara… What’s your name?’’ I realized I had committed my first mistake: asking this young man his name when he didn’t know whether he could trust me. He replied ‘‘Franklin; my name is Franklin.’’ I later learned that Franklin made up this name because he didn’t trust me. He later revealed his true name, but for the purposes of this project, we decided to keep the pseudonym he created for the naive researcher.

As I conversed with Wilson, a group of about six boys gathered around us. I began to tell them about my previous research project focused on the criminalization of youth. They seemed intrigued. I didn’t want to tell them too much because I didn’t want to influence their answers later on if I interviewed them. I told them some of my findings: ‘‘You know, I have found that young people try really hard and that sometimes it takes some help to get places… How about police? How do the police treat you here?’’ I asked. Cynically, they all lit up. Wilson replied, ‘‘They’re fucked up out here, ay. They search us, grab on us, take us to jail for nothing, handcuff us, and sit us on the ground for days.’’ This was what we wanted to know about. Could we keep talking to them? ‘‘Yea, we could do that,’’ he replied. From this point, I showed up twice a week to observe and interview the boys. Later, my students and I started a weekly workshop at a local community center in which we invited these boys to participate in focus groups about the issues they faced. At these meetings, we provided food and invited different community workers and community members to discuss culture, politics, employment, and higher education.

Establishing trusting relationships with these young people presented many challenges. The first was to prove to these young men that we were not going to ‘‘rat them out’’ with the police. They lived in constant fear and apprehension of arrest. Later, we would find that this fear grew from police harassment, brutality, and false charges that we observed first-hand. We reassured the boys that we would keep what they said confidential and would not even require them to give us their true names, so that if the police somehow got our data, we would not be able to connect a name to a voice. We also avoided conversations or relationships with the police, with the exception of the police chief, with whom we later met and whom we interviewed in an effort to inform him the rampant police misconduct about which we had heard and personally observed.

Another issue that arose in our attempt to establish genuine relationships with these young people was that they faced a myriad of issues that surfaced during our contacts with them. These included turning up to the interviews high on drugs or alcohol or angry about something that happened on the street and showing up to our meeting with this frustration in hand. In the beginning, on many occasions, the young men often made disrespectful remarks to the research team members. On one occasion, one of the young men, Johnny, a 20-year-old who had recently been released from prison, showed up drunk to a focus group and attempted to pick a fight with me. On this day, I had asked them about masculinity: ‘‘Just be down, just hold your ground, don’t do bitch shit like what we talked about; don’t be fake, don’t talk about it, be about it. If you want something, go get it. Don’t just be yipping and yapping, ‘cuz then that’s all you are, talk.’’’ I interrupted him after he repeated the same phrase for the third time and instructed the group about taking turns speaking without interrupting others. ‘‘Man, I am not done talking, fool,’’
Johnny told me. Another guy, Roger, told him, “He’s a doctor, fool!” Johnny responded, “And I’m a convicted felon, I don’t give a fuck! You know my respect comes from where his respect came from.” “Yeah but he’s smart though, fool,” Roger replied. “Let that fool get 10 years to 25 years to life. Who’s smart then? . . . Yea, I started talking first! And he’s just like, oh, let’s go to the next guy. . . . Let’s not listen to the bald guy; let’s listen to the guy with hair!” At this point, Johnny stood up, looked at me in the eyes, and said, “I’m a pretty short-tempered guy.” I remained in my place and asked what we could do to make the situation cool. Referring to one of the research team members, he replied, “I want the guy with the braids [one of my research assistants]; he would be easier on me. . . . That fool’s like chill.” At this point I asked Tony, one of the research team members who had an established relationship with Johnny, to take Johnny to another room. An hour later, I checked up on them: They were telling jokes and talking about life.

At this pivotal moment, I realized the importance of conducting action research with a team that can establish solid relationships with the youth they serve. In this case, as an individual researcher, I would not have been able to establish solid relationships with every young man in the study. However, my team of six researchers—all experienced with working with or conducting research with youth placed at risk—were able to establish solid relationships with some of the young men who I was not able to reach. In this case, Johnny may not have trusted or liked me, but he could rely on someone on my team to help him through his frustration. Action researchers must build into their planning approaches to developing trust and gaining entrée.

**FINDINGS**

**Perceptions of School**

Sixteen year-old Julio attended the continuation school, La Mirada. The school is located inside a small, dilapidated industrial building with no signs indicating its function. At the entrance of the school, a security guard and an office administrator greet students. Students sign in, pull all of their belongings from their pockets, and hand them over to the security guard, who places each student’s belongings in a large Ziploc bag. The guard then uses a handheld metal detector to search students for weapons. For those students wearing what the school considers gang-related or revealing clothing, the school provides an ugly orange t-shirt that students wear over their clothes. This is especially humiliating for students as they take their daily physical education walk through the business neighborhood in which the school is located. As Julio passed through this routine, I had a feeling of déjà vu, having been in such a position myself. The school’s daily process is almost exactly the same as when I got booked into a juvenile justice facility at the age of 15.

I later interviewed Julio and asked him how he had ended up here. He told me, “I wasn’t always bad. . . . When I got to junior high, there [was] honors and all this crap, and I was in those classes, too, and there were all these White kids and shit; I didn’t really fit in, you know. It didn’t really catch my attention as much, you know, like most classes and shit. So you know, I guess it was like just like, from right there, I was like, ‘fuck school.’” I asked why he didn’t fit in. “My teachers,” he replied. “My teachers never gave a shit for me. They knew I didn’t belong there ‘cause of what I looked like [referring, in this case, to his race].”
Another Mexican American youth, Steven, a 19-year-old who had dropped out of school, pinpointed the day he believed he lost faith in school and decided to drop out: “The teacher chose... me, and the White guy [a fellow student], he said, ‘Oh, he won’t know the answer. He’s Mexican.’ The teacher didn’t say anything.” When asked how he felt about this, he said, “I felt like shit, so I just skip school. Go to a friend’s house, help my parents with work, do drugs, fucking just go look for fights, go to State Street. Just anything rather than school. I hate school.”

Seventeen-year-old William, another Mexican American young man who had left school, told me his story about shutting down from school.

One time, I was in sixth grade, and I got in a fight with some White kid. I was the only one who got suspended, and that guy, they didn’t even suspend him at all. I mean, he was right there fucking biting my leg and everything. Like seriously, that guy fucking dropped on the floor and started biting the shit out of my leg. I don’t know what the hell, but that kid didn’t get suspended at all and I did. After that I said, ‘Fuck school.’

Although these accounts should not be taken at face value to fully account for the reason why these young men left school, they do inform us about the common perceptions that these young men have about school: They believe that they were racially targeted and attacked from a young age. Further, they believe that these attacks were strong enough to suppress their desires to continue in school. A majority of the 36 dropouts we interviewed or observed reported similar trajectories and felt stigmatized in school at an early age. By the time they reached middle school, they had been perennially punished to the point where they shut down in school. Such negative school experiences shaped the ways in which these young men understood school as a dangerous institution and the street as a learning institution. Julio explained, “On the street... at least I know that the homies will be there to teach me about life, to show me the ropes, and back me up if I need support... At school, its like I don’t know who to trust. I walk into class and the teacher gets all nutty and shit and then the fucking principals try to make me look stupid.” Consistent negative interactions with school officials led many of the young men in this study to understand school as an unsafe space in which, at any given moment, their subjectivity could be under attack and their bodies become stigmatized objects.

Interactions with Police

Mono is a 19-year-old chubby, dark-complexioned Mexican American with a thick moustache and bald head. The research team witnessed Mono being harassed by police three times over the course of a year-and-a-half and made two different sets of pictures of these occurrences. In one incident, my research assistants were walking with Mono on the street. He pulled out a cigarette from his pocket. A police officer drove up and asked Mono, “You got ID?” Mono nodded with a yes, and the officer said, “Pull it out then!” The officer then handcuffed Mono and sat him on the ground for over 40 minutes while he supposedly checked Mono’s record. Afterward, he released him. When my research assistants asked the officer why he stopped him, he replied, “He just looked suspicious.” Interactions like this with the police were rampant in the neighborhood we studied. Even the 15-year-old boys we interviewed spoke of similar treatment from a very young age. These kinds of interactions with the police were a primary area of concern
for many of the young people in this study. According to the youth, and substantiated by our observations, police often harass, mock, and humiliate young Latinos in Riviera. Miguel, 15 years old, elaborated, “Police, sometimes, when we are chilling, they come to us and like, make fun of us... If someone is drinking something, they will take it away from them and pour out the drink to the ground and say something like, ‘This is for your dead homies.’... Just making fun of us.” Police also play a role in street politics. In Ramon’s account, they also attempt to incite gang fights: “Cops also try to provoke us sometimes... like if someone from the [South] Side did something to our people... They will say something like, ‘Aren’t you going to go do something about it?’”

Eight young women we interviewed also reported negative experiences with police. Shorty, a 17-year-old Mexican American girl told us why she was wearing a cast: “The cops tackled me down because they thought I was going to run after a fight that I had with some girl... I messed up my arm and had to go to the hospital because of the tackle.” Other young women reported being searched and groped by police officers and spoke about being called “bitches” and “gang whores” by police. The police data we collected from our participants led us to uncover a need for more positive police–youth relations. We set up meetings with the chief of police, who agreed to work on this issue with his officers. However, the research team decided to hold off on working with the police directly after hearing from the boys that they had once had a police–youth forum through which the police attempted to befriend them. However, the police would later drive up to the boys who attended the event and attempt to use them as snitches in front of their friends. In other words, the police used this event to attempt to gather crime information from boys whom they had befriended. Instead of building trust and genuine relationships, the police, in the eyes of the boys, had used the meeting as a reconnaissance mission—a tool for further labeling and managing them as criminal risks.

Preliminary Outcomes

In response to finding that youths believed that their detachment from school was a direct result of the negative treatment they received from school personnel and police, we decided to take action that might help a few of them change their perspectives of school and help create positive meaningful relationships with community members. Some of the youths we worked with became success stories. For example, when we first met 16-year-old Chata, she had little hope of making it to college:

I would like to go to college, but it’s not going to happen. Just because I say it, doesn’t mean it will happen. Who’s going to help me? No one is going to help me go to college. Also, no one who graduates from [my school] ever goes to college.

After hearing Chata’s interview, we decided to invite her to be one of the participants in a twice-a-week college prep program that we initiated at the local continuation school. A few months later, Chata applied to the college, signed up for financial aid, and completed an intensive college prep program. As of Fall 2009, Chata is still a college student. What we learned from Chata’s case is that it is important to focus on the structural obstacles that these young people face: a precarious labor market, a dilapidated and exclusionary education system, and a hyper-policed and asset-stripped neighborhood. In addition, although these structural obstacles
may be difficult to change in the short term, how young people perceive these obstacles might be a short-term problem. In other words, when we helped young people build positive interactions and relationships with local institutions, like the continuation school or the community college, they changed their self-perceptions, they now believe they can make it because their was someone in the institution who cared for them, and established a connection. “Before meeting Ana [the community college staff member], I thought that I wasn’t going to make it. Now I use my challenges as my strength.” When we advocate for youth placed at risk for them to establish positive interactions and relationships with social capital building institutions, like education and the labor market, we find that a very crucial step is taken in building young people’s capacity to utilize their resilience and begin the process of transforming their lives.

In this study, I found that at least one-fourth of participating youths who had given up on themselves, often as a result of perceiving that the system had given up on them, needed only a minimal amount of resources to empower them to overcome the obstacles they faced. These resources often involved helping them establish positive relationships with school officials and community member who had criminalized them. It is crucial to understand that this endeavor of helping young people establish positive relationships is not a “change of attitude” project where we assume that young people are the ones who need to change their negative attitudes. Rather, this project entails holding institutions and community members accountable for providing youth placed at risk opportunities to perceive that they are treated positively by the system. This method, which I refer to as a “public relations” approach, attempts to convince organizations that it is in their best interest to gain legitimacy from youth placed at risk by constantly working at promoting positive interactions and relationships. In addition, young people are also taught the skills necessary for taking advantage of the opportunities once schools, programs, and the labor market are willing to provide them.

Communities and institutions often focus on those youth that appear to be most salvageable and divert resources in their direction. One example is community youth programs and university academic preparation programs for students placed at risk. Many of these programs have a GPA requirement for participation and target those students who have a chance of making it to college and who will not act up, tag up community center walls, or bring gang activity to the center. However, diverting some resources to those students placed most at risk may prove beneficial to the community by reducing violence, crime, and truancy among those most in danger of engaging in these activities.

The older shot-caller boys also showed change. With the exception of two, most did not enroll in the community college; however, they began to show change in other ways. A few of them developed resumes with our help, applied for work, and became employed. Others became interested in conducting research with us. We are currently working with two of them on a research project in which they photograph and interview their peers. Many have talked about how the program has made a difference in their lives. They often reported that their teachers, and even police officers, treated them better because they found out they were participating in a community program. Two of the shot-callers have completely abandoned the gang,

7As alternatives to the minimum grade point averages (GPAs) required by many at-risk youth programs, policymakers and program personnel should implement a noncognitive assessment approach that tests other forms of abilities and resilience. Sedlacek (2004) has been at the forefront of developing alternatives to tests like the SAT or the ACT and GPA requirements by examining factors such as how students deal with a wide range of problems in different contexts.
are now working, and avoid hanging out with their old homies. When asked why he left the gang, Chavo replied, “Man, those fools is just Mexicans fighting Mexicans. They all look the same and fighting each other. I need to work and help my family.” As a result of our program, Chavo told us that he had graduated from the continuation school, enrolled in community college, and is now working at an upscale restaurant making a decent wage. Organizations like schools, law enforcement, and community centers interested in helping youths placed at risk transform their lives, may want to take a public relations approach. When teachers, police, and community members bestow unconditional positive treatment, respect, and genuine interactions to youths placed at risk, these young people, I find, often respond with a feeling of self-empowerment, that it is now possible to turn their obstacles into strengths and return to school or desist from crime.

Limitations and Ethical Concerns

One month after the episode I described in the introduction of this article, Luis stood on the same street corner in front of Sunshine Liquors. This time he was drunk, talking on his cell phone, slurring and cursing. He walked near the middle of the busy intersection as semi-trucks and cars going 35 miles per hour swerved around him. He had not been in school; nor had he been working. He was mourning, having just recently lost his best friend, Flaco, to suicide. Flaco had also been part of our research project. The last time I saw Flaco, I had helped him develop his resume. He told me that he wanted to get a job to help his “lady” with her two kids. A few weeks later, he decided to take his own life. When I went to interview his family, his mother, Flor, shared her thoughts about the event. The family had recently experienced two job losses because of the depressed economy: Flaco’s stepfather and older brother, who had been paying the mortgage on their four-bedroom house, were laid off from work. They foreclosed on the home and the family rented a studio apartment in which Flaco, his sister, and brother slept on the floor next to their mother and stepfather’s bed. Flaco’s stepfather asked him to move out. Given that he could not afford to live in Riviera, Flaco moved to Los Angeles to live with relatives. A few days later, he hung himself.

Luis and Flaco’s experiences remind me of the limitations of this endeavor. Although a researcher may have high hopes of reaching as many promising youths as possible, the reality is that structural and personal barriers affect the lives of these young people. Luis lost his best friend and did not have any other means of coping but to get drunk and quit going to school. Flaco lost his shelter, his family, his community, and his life.

Although this action research project reconnected some street-life-oriented youths with school and the community, we encountered some limitations. First, about three-fourths of the young men in the study still live in dire conditions and practice many dangerous, health-compromising behaviors. Despite our offer to help them apply for work or return to school, many have chosen to remain idle. This leaves the researchers in a quandary about how to support youngsters who choose not to accept help. The best approach we found was to wait it out in the hope that these youths will reach a point at which they will be ready to change and reach out to us. This is why maintaining a long-term commitment is important in this type of research. Students placed at risk are like oysters: They only open up when they are ready to receive what the ocean has to offer. In the meantime, they keep their shells closed tightly to protect
themselves from many predators. Educators, community workers, and researchers have to be willing to create an ongoing stream of support and resources, and a solid public relations approach, that will be there when a young person opens up and is ready to change.

One important ethical consideration is for the action researcher to avoid implementing programming that will increase risk factors for street-life-oriented youths. In this case, collaborating with police in the city in which we were located would have placed the youths further at risk. Another factor is the issue of representation. I cannot claim to represent the youth we studied in the project. I can only report their own perspectives and actions in the environment in which they navigate. Their voices and perspectives should be taken seriously when developing collaborations for change.

Although some of the youths in this study are incarcerated, on the street, or dead, a critical mass—about one-fourth of them—continue to persist and use their experiences as a form of resilience. Connecting a few dots through action research has proven promising for a group of students who had been left behind. The action research process can be a powerful tool for both creating knowledge and enacting change in collaboration with marginalized youth.

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