Child Soldiers, Gang Members:
Reconceptualizing Urban Violence in America

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Reconceptualizing Urban Violence in America

Abstract: In Sub-Saharan Africa, efforts to stop the use of child soldiers have been championed by America for decades. According to UNICEF’s definition of a child solider, however, child soldiers exist in America’s own urban centers through the form of gangs. A recent episode of “This American Life” highlighted the new face of urban gangs by providing qualitative data from one urban Chicago high school that reveals mandatory gang involvement, bloody conflicts that have existed for decades, and a new anarchy of gang structure. This paper will explore the roles of child soldiers and African American male adolescent gang members, calling for a reconceptualization of gang members as urban child soldiers. While there are many congruencies between the roles of child soldier and gang member, the civil war in which these urban child soldiers are engaged contains an even grimmer prognosis.

From Mozambique to Sierra Leone, the use of child soldiers in armed conflicts across the globe has been held in ubiquitous contempt. The United States has championed efforts to end the use of child soldiers, granting more money in 2010 to the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) than any other country in the world (UNICEF, 2010). While America’s goodwill efforts have significantly impacted the health and safety of children across international borders, America’s own children have been suffering.

According to a 2013 episode of “This American Life,” Public Radio International’s radio program hosted by Ira Glass (2013) gang violence in urban America is becoming a pandemic. “This American Life” reporters were sent to Harper High School in Chicago’s southwest Englewood neighborhood for five months to investigate and report on the issues of community and gang violence surrounding this school, as a staggering twenty-eight students from Harper were shot in the 2011-2012 school year alone (Glass, 2013). While research on gang involvement has long revealed a dichotomy of gang/non-gang members (Craig, Vitaro, Gagnon, & Tremblay, 2002), the Harper High School episode revealed a new face of gangs: the students in the Englewood community are involuntarily involved in gangs simply based on the blocks on which they lived (Glass, 2013).
Students continued to convey how former gang structures – with a stalwart and respected leadership chain – have disintegrated, as Chicago police have incarcerated most of the former leadership. Today, an anarchistic gang structure is described, wherein gangs crop up for each block of the neighborhood, with impulsive retaliations spawning further gang activity (Glass, 2013). Harper students listed fifteen different gangs within a few square miles in Englewood, with each gang having access to multiple guns (Glass, 2013). According to the testimony of these students, every student is affiliated with a gang – whether they want to be or not. There are no “neutral” students. Throughout this paper, therefore, the term “gang members” will be used to refer to both active and passive gang members – adolescents who are actively perpetrating violence, as well as adolescents who are simply following the rules of the street in order to stay alive.

Throughout the course of this writer’s graduate studies in trauma-centered clinical social work, this writer was alarmed by the analogous themes in the literature from two different courses on two distinctive populations: the treatment of adolescent male child soldiers in Sub-Saharan Africa and the treatment of adolescent African American males living in gang-riddled neighborhoods in urban America.

Even further alarming, UNICEF defines “child soldiers” as, “Any person under 18 years of age who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force or armed group in any capacity including, but not limited to, combatants, cooks, porters, messengers and anyone accompanying such groups” (UNICEF, 2011). According to UNICEF’s definition, adolescent urban gang members qualify as formal “child soldiers” due to their participation in irregular armed forces or armed groups. However, no such formal conceptualization of gang members as child soldiers exists in America.
CHILD SOLDIERS, GANG MEMBERS:  Ignacio Martín-Baró Selection

This paper seeks to draw on the congruencies between Sub-Saharan African male adolescent child soldiers and African American male adolescent gang members in urban centers. Expectations of the two roles will be explored, including incentive for participation, duties, and role termination. Using a developmental stage model, adolescence will be surveyed, including the cognitive functioning, the psychosocial needs, and the core pathologies particular to this stage of development. Next, we will delve into the demographic particularities of each population, including age, social capital, and the effects of race. While there are substantial parallels between child soldiers and gang members, differences also exist between the two populations, and implications given these differences will be explored. These implications will include clinical treatment, policy, and research. In conclusion, this paper will emphasize the urgent need to reconceptualize gang members as child soldiers, especially with no clear end in sight of the unrest in which these urban child soldiers are trapped and in which they fight to stay alive.

**Role Expectations**

In Sub-Saharan Africa, specifically Mozambique and Sierra Leone, child soldiers were most often abducted from their homes to fight on various sides of civil war conflicts that lasted decades. In the cases of abduction, incentive to participate as child soldiers was simply based on wanting to stay alive, as the rebel forces would often kill children who attempted escape once they had been abducted. In Mozambique, according to Boothby (2006), many of the children who were in early adolescence or adolescence were taken from their families and immediately indoctrinated to violence. Indoctrination occurred through physical abuse and humiliation, punishing those who displayed feelings of empathy for others, including forcing the children to kill animals and become familiar with using guns. Duties included serving as porters or cargo
carriers, and approximately twenty-eight percent of the child soldiers were trained for combat (Boothby, 2006). Drugs and alcohol were used regularly, and the child soldiers were given these substances daily. Termination occurred if the child soldiers successfully escaped, or when outside forces liberated them (Boothby, 2006).

In urban centers, role expectations for gang members look similar. While generally not abducted, many adolescents do not have a choice whether to be involved in gang activity or not, as Harper students reported (Glass, 2013). As Johnson, Pate, and Givens (2010) describe, adolescents like Derrion Albert can become caught in the intersection of community violence while innocently walking to a bus stop. Deigo Vigil and Conchas (2010) posit that gang involvement in American urban centers is motivated by both physical and social conditions. Physical conditions include incredibly cramped housing and run-down neighborhood buildings, so adolescents often spend long periods of time outside. Social conditions include a lack of income due to joblessness, limited interaction with larger positive institutions, and family issues. These social conditions incentivize adolescents to look for social compatibility and support outside their families of origin or community institutions.

In the Harper context, gang members are expected to represent their blocks, retaliate in case of the injury of a fellow gang member, hold guns for members who have been incarcerated, and keep the rules of the street. Rules include knowing which gang is associated with your block, never walk by yourself (but also avoid walking with someone else who could be targeted), avoid running if shot at, walk in the middle of the street to create more space to escape, and be prepared to be shot at for, literally, any reason (Glass, 2013).

According to Diego Vigil and Conchas (2010), “Experimentation with alcohol and drugs occurs, weapons are accepted as a power equalizer when needed, deviant actions are taken on a
dare, and bonds with similarly street-active peers who are also school classmates are intensified” (p. 194). These authors continue to explain the process of “street socialization,” similar to the child soldiers’ indoctrination, in which youth are socialized to street life by the resident gang (Diego Vigil & Conchas, 2010). Entire gangs view threats to one member collectively, turf is defended, and oral histories are passed down from gang members to new members regarding conflicts, or wars, that have been ongoing for decades (Diego Vigil & Conchas, 2010). The role of gang member is terminated upon death of an individual, incarceration (which, only somewhat breaks the identity), or physical removal from the entire region (in the case of adolescents being sent to relatives’ homes in other states) (Glass, 2013 & Vigil & Conchas, 2010).

For returning child soldiers, the communities to which they returned expected deviant behavior from the boys. In Mozambique, the generation of child soldiers involved in the civil war was labeled “future barbarians” (Boothby, 2006, p. 245). Reintegration efforts were carefully crafted and implemented by highly trained staff, but even the staff members were afraid of the boys and expected deviant behavior. Boothby (2006) describes how staff members expressed fear that the boys would hurt them, and the staff expressed reluctance to work with this population. The boys who spent less than six months as a child soldier were able to integrate back into the community and see themselves as victims of the trauma. However, the boys who spent longer than one year as child soldiers continued to exhibit “disobedient and uncooperative behaviors,” used aggression to obtain control, and continued to see themselves as “members” of the rebel group (Boothby, 2006). Once reintegration interventions and treatments were completed, most of the boys were reunified with their families. Community members initially viewed the boys solely as perpetrators, but agencies used carefully selected cultural rituals to help change the initial prejudice towards the returning boys.
For African American male adolescent gang members, deviant behavior is also expected of the adolescents from community members. According to discussions within the literature over the chicken-or-egg complexities of gang membership, some theorists suggest that deviant or antisocial behavior is a key predictor of future gang activity, thereby enhancing the community expectations that gang members will continue in deviancy (Bendixen, Endresen, & Olweus, 2006). Communities often expect substance use, violence, and antisocial norms from these adolescents (Diego Vigil & Conchas, 2010).

Demographics and Developmental Preparedness

According to a developmental stage model, adolescence encompasses ages twelve to eighteen and is generally marked by the onset of puberty (Newman & Newman, 2008). The majority of both child soldiers in Sub-Saharan Africa and African American gang members fall within this developmental category, but a culturally competent understanding of adolescence across cultures is necessary. In Sub-Saharan Africa, adolescent males are expected to go to school, and many adolescents take significant part in communal duties in various countries. In Mozambique, adolescents are expected to farm, eat communal/familial meals, and communally build structures like water systems (Boothby, 2006). In Sierra Leone, activities like chores and singing constitute culturally appropriate behavior (Williamson, 2006).

African American male adolescents are expected to attend school, although this particular cohort of the population are not expected to finish high school at the same rate as their Anglo counterparts (Johnson, 2010). African American male adolescents are expected to begin socializing independently through school, extra-curricular activities, or friend groups. However, Johnson (2010) uses the phrase “bleeding of boys into men” (p. 9) to describe the unclear role
differentiation between African American adolescence and manhood that is affected by substantial racial inequalities in America.

Cognitively, African American male adolescents begin to develop abstract reasoning skills during this stage, as well as long-term planning skills (Newman & Newman, 2008). The primary psychosocial need for adolescents is the need for socialization in the form of group identity. During adolescence, loyalties are pledged that sustain relationship with others and correspond to values and burgeoning ideologies. These loyalties begin to detach from familial loyalties, as the adolescent begins the process of individuation to begin building normative distance from his nuclear family. Within the need for group identity, the need for a strong individual identity exists, with many adolescents “trying on” various identities and attempting to find which identities serve the purpose of the most successful group membership. The primary crisis of adolescence, therefore, is alienation. Alienation is the antithesis of strong group identity, and many adolescents err on the side of identity in a group in which they do not always feel they belong rather than being alienated from all groups (Newman & Newman, 2008). For the adolescents in Englewood, the only way to avoid most gang dangers was, literally, to stay inside. One Harper student discussed feelings of depression that he experienced by being forced to be inside closed doors because he did not want to participate in the “defining social structure” of gang involvement (Glass, 2013).

From a trauma-informed developmental perspective, adolescence is when the pre-frontal cortex of the brain develops, forming delayed gratification skills, long-term planning skills, and abstract reasoning. When trauma occurs before adolescence or during adolescence, the brain’s reaction to the trauma is to operate out of the limbic part of the brain, the most “animal”/instinctual brain, and the advanced operations of the pre-frontal cortex are interrupted.
During developmental trauma, these pre-frontal activities may be significantly interrupted and may not even develop to the same capacity as a non-interrupted brain (van der Kolk, 2005). For both child soldiers and gang members, the developmental trauma of decades of war and community violence – in addition to the acute trauma of perpetrating, being a victim, or witnessing violence – has significant and long-term effects on social functioning. Male adolescents tend to utilize acting out behavior in response to trauma, and these behaviors are often categorized as “antisocial” or deviant behaviors (Craig, Vitaro, & Tremblay, 2002).

As strong group membership is vital to successful adolescent identity, the use of social capital is necessary for adolescents to explore these identities in a safe context. Relatives, school staff, religious mentors, or other kin connections can be valuable sources of capital for the adolescent, especially as he begins to form independent social networks. These sources of connection know the child, and they can help guide the child toward a healthy adolescent identity. For child soldiers and gang members alike, by actively participating in their respective roles, they jeopardize the ability to utilize social capital. The human capital investments surrounding child soldiers were often wary of immediate reintegration for adolescents who had committed violent acts against community members. For gang members, social capital in many low-income urban settings is not prevalent due to the nature of poverty and inequality that is pervasive in many neighborhoods. Additionally, when adolescents are forced to choose safety over socialization by never leaving one’s house, for instance, the patterns of building social capital are not developed.
Child Soldiers and Gang Members: Exploring Congruencies

The congruencies between the roles of child soldier and gang member are prevalent and will be explored, but the two roles cannot be equally compared. As previously mentioned, most child soldiers were abducted, in contrast to gang members who primarily live with their families of origin. Additionally, child soldiers were generally employed in rural communities. Many of the civil wars in Sub-Saharan African countries that used child soldiers were fought against standing government forces, and these wars often occurred on both political and communal levels. In Mozambique, years of civil warring gave way to international border disputes, and guerrilla fighters were trained to undermine government efforts, destroy infrastructure, and keep the country in chaos. In contrast to today’s gang structure that lacks strong leadership, child soldier wars were carefully calculated and planned by subversive groups (Boothby, 2006). Finally, most of the conflicts in which child soldiers were involved ended in cease-fire agreements, and significant reintegration efforts were employed to help child soldiers become re-integrated into their communal homes once fighting had ceased and peace was restored.

While these incongruencies are significant, the contexts surrounding child soldiers and gang members are shockingly congruent. Williamson (2006) highlights macro-level forces in Sierra Leone that laid the groundwork for civil war. “Underlying the conflict in Sierra Leone was a pattern of control of resources by a few leaders, and the social and economic subservience of youth, as well as their marginalization and alienation from mainstream society and political structures” (p. 187). This statement could easily be used to paint a poignant portrait of life within urban, low-income African American neighborhoods as well. Johnson (2010) describes a current highly racialized society in which the thriving of African American males is disproportionately underrepresented in education, health services, employment opportunities,
and other roles expected for political, familial, and social contribution to society. African American males face prejudice at nearly every turn, are disproportionately represented within the criminal justice system, and operate within the margins of society through pervasively lower status jobs than Anglo counterparts (Johnson, 2010).

Conflicts marked by impulsive violence are also similar across both the child soldier and gang member horizons. Harper High School students described shootings that occurred over girls, over fights in the hallway, over minor issues that would crop up between friend groups (Glass, 2013). Child soldiers in Mozambique described how their survival was dependent upon “leaders who were impulsive, unpredictable, suspicious, and quick to react to the slightest provocation” (Boothby, 2006, p. 248).

Further, the clinical presentation of child soldiers and gang members is congruent, beginning first with the dire need for clinicians and workers to establish some semblance of safety. In Sub-Saharan Africa, child soldiers were physically separated from movement leaders in order to break the bonds of control (Williamson, 2006). In urban centers, however, removing the children from danger is more nuanced, as the children’s homes themselves are the danger zones. Safe spaces might be found in schools or other community centers. Child soldiers and gang members experienced symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Depressive Disorders, and Anxiety Disorders. Symptoms included nightmares, hyper arousal, avoidance, feelings of hopelessness, and acting out behaviors (Boothby, 2006 and Johnson, 2010).

**Urban Child Soldiers: A Grim Prognosis**

While there are congruencies, in many ways, urban, low-income African American communities are in a more perilous position than the communities of Sub-Saharan Africa. No end is in sight to this bloody civil war in American urban centers. In Mozambique and Sierra
Leone, the conflicts lasted two or three decades, but cease-fire agreements were signed, the government established safety and control, and reintegration was possible for child soldiers. Reintegration is not possible when bullets fly on porches, sidewalks, outside high schools, and church steps (Glass, 2013).

First, common knowledge teaches that the primary step in resolving a problem is recognition of the problem. Many Americans would readily admit to a problem with gang violence existing in urban centers. Pieces like the Harper High School episode, however, were met with such shock that one wonders if the general American public (and in this case, even highly educated American public due to the radio program’s listener demographic) is blissfully unaware of the severity of the diagnosis.

Second, Williamson (2006) argues that, “the future stability of Sierra Leone may likely depend on whether the large majority of youth will find access into the nexus of education, skills training, and employment” (p. 187). Given that African American males experience racialized access to work, appalling incarceration rates, and the lack of access to basic needs like housing and healthcare, reintegration is utterly paradoxical.

Additionally, Harper students reported a leader-less anarchy where nearly all adolescents have access to guns and operate impulsively out of retaliation or in response to patterns of adolescent socialization, which, in other contexts are considered normative. Students described how star athletes and students who achieved high grades were once considered “off limits” by gangs; these students describe that today, anyone and everyone is a target (Glass, 2013). Cease-fires were the first step in resolving conflicts in Sub-Saharan Africa, and once a cease-fire was established, disarmament occurred, in which rebel forces’ guns were taken away (Mkutu, 2008). Without an acknowledged war, ceasing fire or disarmament practices will not occur.
Clinically, child soldiers were able to reintegrate into their old communities, through the use of cleansing rituals and community sensitization efforts. Child soldiers had the ability to let their guards down and make plans/dreams about future (Williamson, 2006, p. 194). Therapeutic intervention research revealed that, in general, child soldiers who had served in the guerrilla army for less than two years were able to continue on their developmental paths after the war. Many former child soldiers were married, had children, were active in religious communities, and were able to maintain steady flow of work. However in Boothby’s (2006) study on child soldiers in Mozambique, child soldiers who served more than two years in the guerrilla army were deemed “trouble children” and were not able to “curb their violent behavior or live peacefully among others in their communities” (p. 252). African American male adolescents, who are born into civil-war-like communities with community violence at their doorsteps, do not have the luxury of walking away from the violence within the crucial two-year time frame. These urban child soldiers are trapped in a war zone during their prime developmental years, with no recollection of a peaceful community to which they can return.

Conclusion and Implications for Future Research

First, in conceptualizing gang members as child soldiers, deserved urgency can be drawn to this issue. American non-government organizations sprang up upon hearing of the trauma child soldiers experienced in Sub-Saharan Africa, and these agencies have garnered millions of dollars of funding to help stop the violence, treat the children, and re-integrate the communities. It is disheartening to think that Americans fail to recognize the child soldiering that is occurring within their own urban centers.

Second, significant attention must to be drawn to the need for cease-fires and disarmament procedures within urban centers. Without taking action to stop bullets from flying,
safety – the first goal of therapeutic interventions – cannot be established. In order to draft cease-fire accords, the enemy must be defined, and in the case of urban child soldiers, the enemy is not always clear. Americans need to take an honest look at their own political systems and social structures that have served as enemies in and of themselves, by propagating stereotypes, prejudices, and creating systems that disproportionately and negatively affect African American males.

Finally, the Harper High School piece was a form of qualitative research that reached a widespread public radio audience. Further qualitative studies could be funded to better understand how the face of community violence has changed. Quantitative studies can be helpful at garnering funding and supporting qualitative data, and intervention strategies like cease-fire and demobilization interventions can be explored in order to begin the therapeutic work of orienting these urban child soldiers to a world where walking down a sidewalk safely and dreaming of the future are possible.


References


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