



“The gist of it is if you’re going to encounter a youth on the corner with a gun at 2am, it won’t be a stranger who convinces them to put the gun down,” said David Caba, BRAG’s senior programme director, explaining the limits of the police.

BRAG is one of dozens of similar groups spawned by Chicago’s Cure Violence programme, which treats shootings less as a criminal justice matter than a public health one. Its proponents believe that shootings spread through poor neighbourhoods much like disease outbreaks, and so should be contained with the same sorts of interventions.



A group chat at BRAG headquarters © Pascal Perich/FT

As violent crime spirals in the US — murders rose almost 30 per cent last year, according to the FBI, the biggest one-year increase on record — violence interrupters are gaining new attention. President Joe Biden has endorsed such programmes and offered funding.

In New York City, the issue is particularly urgent. Murders this week surpassed their total for all of 2020 — itself an [elevated year](#). Eric Adams, a former police captain who is likely to be the [next mayor](#), won the Democratic primary on promises to improve public safety, which business leaders agree is essential to bring workers and tourists back to Manhattan.

BRAG would seem to be part of the solution. Two of its territories have now gone more than five years without a homicide. The appeal of its approach is even more evident at a time when the police murder of George Floyd and other abuses have turned public sentiment against aggressive law enforcement and prompted a search for alternatives.

“In some ways they have been at the front of the charge involving the community in reducing violence,” said Richard Aborn, a lawyer who is president of New York’s Citizens Crime Commission. Aborn praised BRAG but also said he wanted to see more rigorous studies confirming its impact.



BRAG signs urging young people to steer clear of gun crime © Pascal Perich/FT

Kelly Welch, a criminologist at Villanova University, said programmes that treated violence as a public health issue had “the potential” to be more effective than traditional law enforcement techniques.

But, Welch added: “The violence interrupters need to have the confidence and trust of the target audience — frequently gang members, but also have the support and trust of the local criminal justice community. This is no easy feat, and may not work everywhere.”

Violence interrupters inhabit an uneasy niche in public safety, lodged somewhere between the police and a stricken neighbourhood. While they will sometimes take information from the police, it can never flow in the other direction if they are to gain the trust of communities where the prevailing wisdom is that “snitches get stitches”.

Even Caba, 58, better known as “Indio”, admits that his group cannot do the job on its own, and that violence prevented in one of his territories may re-emerge elsewhere.

“The number one factor is the credibility of the messengers. They have to be individuals from those neighbourhoods,” he explained, sitting in an office with the words “No shooting days!” scrawled across the whiteboard.

A child of Puerto Rican and Dominican immigrants, Caba has plenty of street credibility. He grew up in the South Bronx in an era when abandoned buildings were torched for insurance money or taken over by drug addicts. He described his younger self as “extremely violent”.

“Growing up, I would either have to join a gang or fight a gang member. Every day,” he recalled.

Caba lost his older brother and niece in gang shootings, and was incarcerated at 31. He had a son and then a reckoning. Eventually, he made his way back to school and studied addiction, and came to understand how violence breeds trauma, which can fuel substance abuse.

Fernando Cabrera, a local council member, found city funds for a cure violence programme, and Caba and colleagues from the Good Shepherd Services non-profit where he was then working were recruited to launch BRAG in 2014. They were trying to determine where BRAG’s first outpost should be. “I said, ‘That’s easy: the Third’,” Caba recalled, using the local jargon for 183rd Street. Sure enough, the data crunched by the experts confirmed his hunch.



'Violence interrupters' such as Julio Ramirez, pictured, try to persuade youngsters to abandon conflicts before they result in gunshots © Pascal Perich/FT

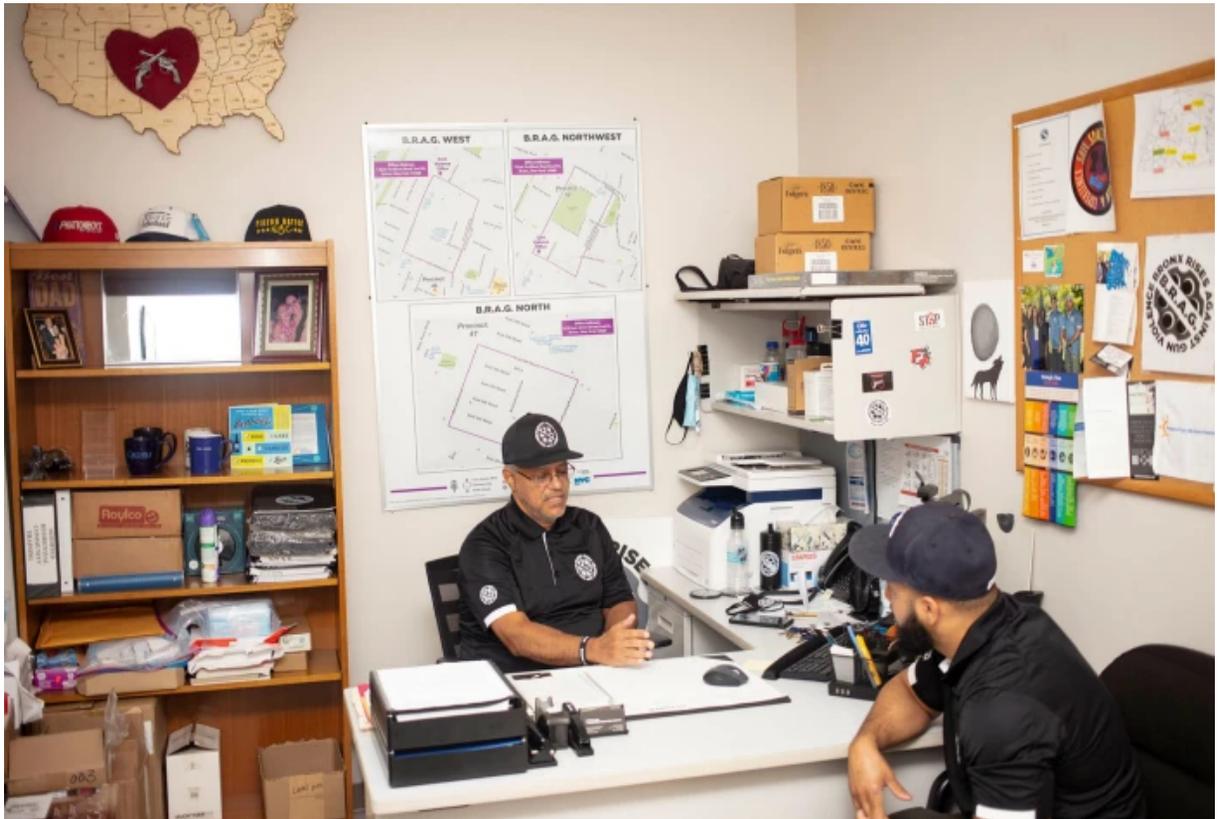
BRAG now has three “hot” zones in the Bronx, each in a different police precinct. On a map, they appear small — about 12 square blocks apiece. Yet the complexity within those cramped spaces is immense, as was evident on a recent tour of 183rd Street that featured a ramshackle collection of bodegas, pawnshops and liquor stores and young men resting on motorcycles, listening to music and smoking blunts. One corner of an intersection was commanded by Puerto Rican and Dominican dealers. The opposite was the Jamaicans’ turf. Two rival gang factions were about a block away on either side.

“Every two blocks is like a different world,” Ramirez explained, standing across from an apartment building where a man had been shot dead a few weeks earlier. He and his crew had set up a folding table and were handing out free school backpacks to passers-by.

Seven staff — including violence interrupters, outreach workers and others — are assigned to each zone. The interrupters are the operation’s boots on the ground, trying to make inroads in a suspicious community through perseverance and small gestures.

A good interrupter should know, for example, when someone is returning from prison and may be eager to reclaim a drug-dealing location from a usurper. They rush to the hospital after a shooting because that is where friends and family gather, and the talk of retaliation quickens.

Recruits like Ramirez are not easy to find. They must still command respect in the neighbourhood — but also prove that they have left “the life” behind. “We do our due diligence,” Caba said.



BRAG programme members at their headquarters in the Bronx © Pascal Perich/FT

A bit of guile can also be useful. Jeremy Molina, 31, BRAG’s programme manager, recalled once fibbing to a young man waving a gun and bent on revenge that he should hold off because the police were nearby. “He’s heated, he’s ready to put a hot one in this dude,” Molina said. “I just bought him some time.”

Molina is a diplomat by training. He grew up with nine foster children in a three-bedroom apartment in the area. Some ended up joining rival gangs. After starting at BRAG as an interrupter, Molina is now its programme manager, helping to arrange apprenticeships, job training and other services. BRAG also has a music recording studio, which is both a lure and an outlet for kids. Its goal is not only to prevent violence but to eventually steer its participants towards more productive lives.

These days, the neighbourhood felt more frayed than when he was growing up, Molina said. Social media fuels material desire. “They can see everything on Instagram, and they want stuff, too,” he said of the kids in the neighbourhood. It also enabled youths who might never previously have encountered one another to launch online feuds that sometimes carried over into real-life confrontations.

Meanwhile, the “defund” movement has caused the police to step back, many believe. Then there is the pandemic, which is widely blamed for the rise in homicides in US cities — but not always with clear explanations.

Caba called it “a tsunami”. To Molina, Covid-19 took whatever equilibrium existed in the neighbourhood and among its illicit trades and shattered it. Even drug dealers, he noted, would prefer stability.

“I think we’re part of the solution,” he said. “But there’s a lot more to it than us.”

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