

Book Review

Kennedy, D.M. (2011). *Don't shoot: One man, a street fellowship, and the end of violence in inner-city America*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury USA.

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In the book, *Don't Shoot: One Man, A Street Fellowship, and the End of Violence in Inner-City America*, author David Kennedy describes his intimate experience with gang violence through work with law enforcement, neighborhood residents, and gang members in cities across the United States. He highlights that although crime in America is down, the violence in America's inner-cities has steadily increased; and it is devastating to the predominantly poor, black neighborhoods serving as the battlegrounds for drug and gang wars. Kennedy (2011) details the devastation through homicide rates: "Whites far outnumber blacks in the population, but the black homicide rate is so high that there are, in absolute numbers, more bodies: over 2,200 black men eighteen to twenty-four in 2005, against the 1,400 whites. Almost another four hundred between fourteen and seventeen. It's just about the death toll for the World Trade Center attack, every year" (p. 12).

The astronomically high numbers reveal the brokenness of a system; the failure of informal social control to dissuade offenders from violence, and the inability of law enforcement to get a handle on the crime (Kennedy, 2011). Between 2010 and 2012, America's murder rate was 5.2 deaths per 100,000 people; it's murder rate among black Americans was 19.4 per 100,000 (McCarthy, 2015). These numbers are accentuated when compared to other industrialized nations: Canada

had 1.5; United Kingdom had 1.1; and France also had 1.1 per 100,000 (McCarthy, 2015). Violence in America's inner-cities, specifically gun violence, is massive and can seem too complicated to resolve, but Kennedy brilliantly reduces the problem to digestible pieces leaving readers, and communities, hopeful for a solution.

Kennedy identifies a critical paradigm early on in the book and continually revisits it throughout the book: the fracture between communities, law enforcement, the neighborhood (residents), and the streets, contribute to the persistent nature of gun violence in inner-cities. His theory is that the misunderstanding, mistrust, and the lack of communication between these three communities is at the heart of the problem. The problem is the disproportionate rate of gun violence deaths among black men in America, and despite the overall decline in crime, specifically homicide in America, black men are dying from gun violence at a terrifying rate (Kennedy, 2011).

Kennedy details how the fracture in this paradigm helps to perpetuate the violence. He explains that the police see the gang members as monsters for the terrible acts they have

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committed, and the neighborhood as corrupt – believing that the residents condone the crime due to the lack of cooperation with law enforcement. The “streets” on the other hand, see police as racist predators, similar in nature to the overseers of slave plantations. Kennedy vehemently protests that these perceptions are all wrong and proposes that if we can change how these three communities relate to one another, we can drive down the violence.

However, changing how communities relate to one another still seems like an enormous and long-term resolution. In this book, Kennedy and his team from Harvard outline a violence prevention strategy, Operation Ceasefire, in which changing relationships and attitudes toward the different communities is born out of the collaborative work. Operation Ceasefire started in Boston in the mid 1990’s to address the high rate of youth gun violence in the city, predominantly committed by a small group of individuals who were connected through a gang affiliation or a drug network. Kennedy famously exposed this dynamic and postulated that it exists in most cities plagued with high rates of gun violence. In his plan for Boston, Kennedy proposed that community resources and the attention of the law enforcement authorities should be focused on this small group of active offenders.

The Operation Ceasefire team consisted of researchers from Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government and the Boston Police Department, specifically, its Youth Violence Strike Force. This team eventually grew to include the District Attorney’s Office, the U.S. Attorney’s Office, community service agencies, social workers, community members, ministers, federal agents, probation, and parole. The team, according to Kennedy, could only effectively accomplish its mission with interagency and community collaboration.

In Boston, implementation of this plan required the intimate knowledge of the Youth Strike Force officers, which helped researchers identify and map youth gang activity responsible for a majority of shootings in the city. The officers provided information on gang affiliation,

and current rivalries between gangs, as well as other aspects of gang activity – a comprehensive understanding of which, Kennedy argues, is key to the success of such operations. This information allowed the team to strategically select the “hottest” gang, and pressurize gang members by putting them under surveillance, increasing arrests for petty crime, working with probation officers on home visits, and re-arresting gang members for violations. The purpose of this strategy was to get the attention of individuals in the most high-risk street crews and motivate them to participate in a meeting with law enforcement agencies and community residents (Kennedy, 2011).

A meeting was then hosted by law enforcement, social service agencies, and neighborhood residents - with each group advancing their own agendas. Gang members were informed by the law enforcement officers that they are being put on notice, and that the violence must stop, otherwise strict enforcement for all other criminal activity will continue. Social service agencies were present to offer employment and educational opportunities, housing services, and other resources. Lastly, community residents informed gang members of their strong stance against the presence of violent gang activity in their neighborhood. The gang members in the room adopted the role of messengers – who were expected to inform the rest of “the street” of the new plan.

In 1995, before the implementation of Ceasefire, forty-six young people ages twenty-four and under had been killed. In Ceasefire’s first full calendar year starting in May 1996, there were 15 killed. In November 1996, no young person was killed in the city (Kennedy, 2011). A formal evaluation showed that there had been a 63 percent reduction in homicide victimization among those twenty-four and under, and homicide among all age groups was down 50 percent (Kennedy, 2011). The reduction of shootings in Boston was not a fluke, as the book detailed, they would experience similar results in future implementations in Minneapolis, Minnesota; Baltimore, Maryland; Indianapolis, Indiana; High Point, North Carolina; Winston-

Salem, North Carolina; Providence, Rhode Island; Cincinnati, Ohio and other cities across the United States (Kennedy, 2011).

The style of Kennedy's writing is informal, authentic, direct, and easy to digest. He takes incredibly complicated, value-laden issues, and simplifies them into solvable problems. However, this style also highlights a weakness in Kennedy's work; there is an oversimplification of the ability for interagency collaboration, and a shallow conversation on the racial implications of the gang activity and gun violence. He notes the challenges of politics, and that it can be hard to get the "good guys" working together, yet for the most part his efforts yield resolution and success. Furthermore, Kennedy's work disregards the difficulty associated with getting local, state, and federal agencies, as well as community organizations to work together. The text also fails to present a comprehensive discussion on how to cultivate interagency collaboration – even though the presence of such a collaborative framework is cited as essential to the operation's success. Additionally, Kennedy's work does not reflect recognition of that fact that sentiments related to racial injustices dated back to the era of slavery cannot be resolved within the span of one meeting with neighborhood members. The book would have benefited from acknowledging healing from structurally embedded racial oppression as a process instead of a direct product of the work.

Although the text could benefit from a more in-depth discussion on the racial dynamics of gang violence, Kennedy is not afraid to discuss the ugly truths underlying violence in America's inner-cities. For example, he is unreserved in expressing how he perceives law enforcement officials view the community and gang members, and the reciprocated mistrust that the community holds toward law enforcement. This is an incredible strength of Kennedy's work. Kennedy makes the case that no one wins when America's inner-cities are war zones ridden with guns and street shrines for those murdered. However, when stereotypes are changed through open communication, mistrust turns to trust through teamwork; and stakeholders can

acknowledge that they all have the same goal of safe, and healthy neighborhoods.

The book's significant contribution to the field of criminology and urban studies is in emphasizing that the old way of policing is not only ineffective in decreasing violence, but it harms the neighborhood and fuels the vicious cycle of mistrust between the three communities. Kennedy's book would be a beneficial text for practitioners and researchers alike. His honest accounts of the mistrust between communities is an important discussion to inform the work of practitioners, engaged in this work today. Furthermore, the book shines a spotlight on the flaws in our nation's traditional policing policies and highlights a new path forward. Kennedy suggests a targeted deterrence strategy has been found to have promising results in reducing crime (Braga & Weisburd, 2011). These strategies warrant the attention of policymakers and researchers in order to thoughtfully address the issue of gun violence in our nation's inner-cities.

References

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