

# MIMIC: Tackling the Root Causes of Juvenile Delinquency

Amruta Ghanekar and Sara Taveras 31 January 2010

## Summary

The interconnected issues of violence, poverty, lack of social support, and high school dropout rates have led to an ever-increasing incarceration of young people from inner-city areas with large minority populations. The police, court, and state-run juvenile justice systems' response to social problems is reactive, funneling young people into expensive treatment and reintegration programs. These programs generally have very limited success.

Men in Motion in the Community (MIMIC) is a group of men — most of whom are ex-offenders — whose concerns about the high number of youth entering the juvenile justice system prompted them to provide mentorship and crisis intervention to most-at-risk young males (ages 12-17) in their North Philadelphia community. Many of these youth are very hard to reach via conventional channels (like the state-run programs). Given their personal experiences, MIMIC volunteers are able to connect to the youth quickly, eliminating the

barriers faced by traditional service providers in engaging extremely at-risk youth (Desamour 2009). MIMIC offers a proactive, community-based solution that focuses on root causes to prevent youth from entering the juvenile justice system in the first place. In addition, some of the men who volunteer with MIMIC find that transforming their own past prison experiences into a positive contribution to their communities facilitates a more sustainable re-entry experience for them.

To tackle youth crime, we must address the root causes of crime, not the act itself. MIMIC demonstrates that the best way to “reform” the juvenile justice system is to make sure the juveniles don’t enter the system at all. The authentic relationships, emphasis on male role models rooted in the community, and similarities in background between MIMIC volunteers and at-risk youth all contribute to the volunteers’ success.

**The Problem: Poverty, Violence, Low educational Levels, and Lack of Social Support Lead to Rising Incarceration of Juveniles**

**The Problem: Poverty, Violence, Low educational Levels, and Lack of Social Support Lead to Rising Incarceration of Juveniles**

The industrial boom in the early 20th century made

Philadelphia one of the most thriving cities in the United States. People from all over the world, many of them minority populations, flocked to the city to fill the labor shortage. But by the 1970s, the industry jobs had mostly dried up, and Philadelphia had lost a half million people by 2000 — with those remaining left to struggle with job shortages. By the 1980s, the crack epidemic had struck many poor urban communities, and selling drugs became an alternative job market.

Federal and local policy changes also contributed to the impoverishment of urban communities. “Reaganomics” rerouted the New Deal’s legacy by reducing government spending and regulation. American voters increasingly resisted higher taxes to pay for social services. Presidents Reagan and Bush both aggressively pushed for privatization of social services and devolution of government responsibilities. Further, the minimum wage hasn’t kept pace with inflation since the 1970s (Niskanen 2002). All of these external variables spurred cycles of violence and poverty and factor into an overarching problem of troubled home environments and breakdown in social support systems for youth.

MIMIC works in the 24th, 25th, and 26th Police Districts in North Philadelphia, which have large minority populations and are plagued with some of the highest levels of poverty in the city. Approximately 47 percent of Latino and African-American children aged 17 and younger live below the poverty level in these areas (U.S. Census

Bureau 2005). A total of 55 percent of Latinos citywide are either unemployed or not in the labor force (Bartelt 2001). The median family income in 1998 of a Latino household in the city of Philadelphia was \$12,744, and the median household income for an African-American household was \$23,847 (Bartelt 2001).

Young people not graduating from high school have fewer skills, lower earnings, and reduced opportunities for employment. This area of Philadelphia has the lowest four-year on-time high school graduation rates in the city, between 40 and 50 percent (Children's Commission 2005). The 2004 dropout rate in North Philadelphia where MIMIC works was approximately 42 percent, much higher than the average city rate of 26 percent (ENPYSC 2005).

Poverty, lower education levels, and lack of social support are all closely related to crime. The incidence of Philadelphia Latino youth involved in the juvenile justice system has increased steadily from 1995 to 2000. In 2004, Latino youth were projected to comprise 14.6 percent of the caseload, with over 500 youth involved in the juvenile justice system (Greater Philadelphia Hispanic Chamber of Commerce 2004).

Over the past 20 years, the upsurge in violent juvenile crime has been cause for serious alarm. In response to this increase, the 1990s produced many state laws that allowed more youths to be tried as adults and allowed courts to institute stronger sanctions. The role of mental

health issues in juvenile delinquency was given little or no consideration. Disproportionate minority contact between youth offenders and the juvenile justice system became a troubling and little-addressed problem.

Research has suggested that overlooking some factors and implementing harsher sanctions such as trying juveniles as adults have increased recidivism (a relapse in delinquent behavior resulting in re-entering the system) and reduced educational and employment opportunities (Models for Change 2007). To date, state-run programs in Pennsylvania have an average 33 percent recidivism rate among urban teenage males (Kalist and Lee 2009). Teens who enter the juvenile justice system have a lower chance than others of graduating from high school. In turn, these factors have increased racial and economic disparities in low-income communities (Models for Change 2007).

In the past few years, Pennsylvania's investment in research on juvenile justice has resulted in a re-evaluation of crime prevention and aftercare programs that recognize juvenile-adult differences, take into account mental health issues, address disproportionate minority contact including language and cultural considerations, utilize early-warning risk factors, and recognize individual differences in program development. The past two governors of Pennsylvania have set aside more money in the state budgets than ever before for prevention and comprehensive re-integration, which is an encouraging sign.

The most promising new programs addressing these issues are Blueprints for Violence Prevention programs. These include Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care, an “alternative to group or residential treatment, incarceration, or hospitalization for adolescents who have problems with chronic antisocial behavior, emotional disturbance and delinquency”; Multisystemic Therapy, an “intensive family- and community-based treatment that addresses the multiple reasons behind the serious antisocial behavior of juvenile offenders”; and Functional Family Therapy, an “outcome driven prevention/intervention program for youth who have demonstrated the entire range of maladaptive, acting out behaviors and related syndromes” (Models for Change 2005: 28-30). However, implementing change at the state level is slow, and even these more progressive programs still show significant gaps in addressing root problems after full implementation.

Examination of current juvenile justice documents, policy statements, and program guidelines addressing prevention issues shows no mention of the lack of safe, supportive, and loving relationships with adults in the youths' communities of origin. The communities are included in the solution as passive participants, but the latent potential of community involvement and responsibility for re-integrating youth are not fully recognized. State-run programs rely largely on institutional models utilizing state employees such as

probation officers, social workers, counselors, and teachers.

In addition, there are few provisions for crisis intervention and prevention. Usually by the time police or other authorities are contacted, risky situations have progressed into crisis. Recent literature does not stress the importance of the simplest prevention and intervention elements such as consistent, reliable social support systems. There is little reliance on any effort outside of system-bound solutions, and certainly no inclusion of ex-offenders or other males from the community built into prevention or aftercare programs.

Institutional juvenile programs are not client-centric. The prevention programs that target "at-risk" youth are usually decided upon with little if any input from the youth themselves. Typically, the preventive services have a prescribed service strategy that tries to fit young people into one model. In addition, there are simply not enough caseworkers to deal with the volume of youth. As a result, youth become a number and their stories are relegated to the pages of a standardized report.

## **The Solution: Prevention and Intervention from Outside the System**

## **The Solution: Prevention and Intervention from Outside the System**

MIMIC is focused on helping young men to engage/re-engage in education and strengthen the social networks needed to live a life free of crime and violence. The MIMIC volunteers who grew up in the same locality realize that their lives could have been much different if somebody had shown them options beyond the violence and poverty all around them. They want the young men in Philadelphia's 24th, 25th, and 26th Police Districts to understand that they can have a bright future if they really want it. MIMIC's ultimate goal is to reduce the number of young males of color entering gangs and/or the criminal justice system.

The most innovative components of MIMIC's model include:

- *Relationship*: MIMIC is composed of men with similar backgrounds and cultures who can connect with kids on a personal level.
- *Volunteer model*: The volunteer-driven model conveys MIMIC's authenticity to the kids.
- *Client-centric*: Kids select their own level of involvement with MIMIC and get very personalized attention; MIMIC meets the kids where they are — in school or on the corner — and provides a 24-hour hotline for around-the-clock support.
- *Redemption*: Many MIMIC volunteers have gone through the justice system and are uniquely prepared to work on prevention; MIMIC provides ex-offenders with a sustainable re-entry/re-integration program.

## **Relationship**

The *who* of the MIMIC relationship is what makes such a profound difference. The MIMIC volunteers identify with the young people and earn their trust because they share similarities in culture, language, and background. MIMIC volunteers also have respect in the streets of their communities, which allows for greater mutual respect between the kids and their mentors. Hence, they are equipped to offer the youth what they lack most — a meaningful relationship with a supportive male role model.

Crime committed by juveniles in Philadelphia is partly due to dysfunctional family situations. Most young men do not have a male mentor to look up to and talk to at their most vulnerable and impressionable age. MIMIC volunteers try to solve this problem by offering an intense mentoring relationship. The similar backgrounds, culture, class, and geography help the boys feel comfortable in opening up, and this leads to the formation of an authentic relationship.

## **Volunteer Model**

MIMIC acts as a transformative force leveraging volunteers to effect positive change in their communities. The volunteer force is important because the young people understand that their mentors are driven by internal motives, not financial motives. All the MIMIC volunteers have jobs; they find time for MIMIC before and

after work, during holidays, or by using vacation or sick leave time. When the young men see that these mentors are working voluntarily for their betterment, it becomes easier for them to trust MIMIC.

MIMIC was not designed by a group of people outside of the community with a larger agenda. Rather, it evolved naturally as a result of the efforts of a group of responsible men trying to improve the lives of young men in their community. Edwin Desamour, MIMIC's founder, says, "These kids are smart and when they realize that we function without any resources other than our passion towards this cause, they develop respect for MIMIC." It is this trust and respect that helps MIMIC touch the hardest-to-reach young males and win their confidence.

## **Client-Centric**

Typically in existing preventive services, a prescribed service strategy tries to fit young people into one model. However, the relationship that is formed between MIMIC volunteers and the youth is one that responds in a timely fashion to the needs of the young person and is client-centric.

MIMIC can also be distinguished from the state-run juvenile correction programs based on its approach towards the connection. By distributing their hotline numbers, MIMIC volunteers give the kids an option to take the first step; the relationship is initiated by the youth who

call. This initiative can play an important role in making them feel responsible for maintaining the relationship, as it is something they have done of their own choice rather than obligation.

## **Redemption**

In the Alcoholics Anonymous model, the best way to stay sober is to help another alcoholic. In this same way, MIMIC reinforces its mission on two fronts: preventing youth from entering the justice system helps MIMIC volunteers from re-entering the system.

MIMIC volunteers struggle with their own histories of abusive childhoods, addiction, violence, or poverty. The name MIMIC is an intentional play on words — the men ask the kids to mimic them and not the drug dealers running the streets. Through the opportunity to turn their lives around, MIMIC is helping its volunteers stay focused and giving them a reason to act responsibly: they love these kids, and these kids look up to them. Oftentimes after making a presentation, a MIMIC volunteer will say, “I really needed that.” This response reinforces the authenticity of the mentoring relationships; they need the kids just as much as the kids need them.

In addition, the structure of MIMIC provides the adult male volunteers with a social support network among themselves. The men work out together as a way to vent their stress, and check in with each other regularly.

Occasionally, after meetings, which are routinely held in churches and community centers, the men end with a prayer, and some help out with ministries at the churches. Some volunteers cite MIMIC as a way to work through the guilt they carry. For many of them, preventing other youth from entering the system is the path to confession, forgiveness, and redemption.

## **How MIMIC Works**

MIMIC has developed various strategies for outreach in the areas of prevention, crisis intervention, and community building.

### **Hollar at Me**

This is a unique technique used by MIMIC to engage youth by having two to four speakers give testimonies about their past tribulations and poor personal choices. Each speaker has a different history that ranges from prison experiences to violence, gangs, drugs, poverty, trouble with school, and homelessness. These stories make a deep impact on the listeners, as most of them are facing the same problems in their own lives. Each speaker explains what it took and still takes to overcome obstacles and live a healthy, productive life. Youth are encouraged to ask questions and discuss decision making with presenters. The MIMIC volunteers distribute business cards during these sessions to enable the youth to call them and discuss problems one-on-one. MIMIC has also

done presentations on youth re-entry at juvenile facilities and drug and alcohol treatment centers.

## **Life Line**

At its inception, MIMIC volunteers handed out their personal cell phone numbers. Now that the number of calls has increased dramatically, they have designated a 24-hour hotline number for calls. The MIMIC volunteers take turns being on call for Life Line through rotating shifts each week.

Under MIMIC's Life Line program, the volunteers distribute business cards with the hotline number on street corners, in parks, at schools, and even in abandoned buildings where young people hang out. It provides a great support to the youth, as they know that they can approach MIMIC in their time of need — day or night. The ability to respond immediately at any time of the day is one of the methodologies that most distinguishes MIMIC from other prevention/intervention programs and has proven quite successful. Past phone calls have included issues of abuse at home, questions about sex and sexuality, situations involving gun violence, and requests for general help in turning their lives around.

## **Mentorship**

The mentoring relationship is born out of *Hollar at Me* events with at-risk youth in the schools and continues via face-to-face meetings, telephone calls, and activities

in neutral community spaces (churches, parks, and other meeting places). During the development of the relationship, the mentor helps the youth identify the various social and systemic obstacles to success and determines how each one will be addressed. The mentors often become staunch advocates supporting the kids at meetings with schools or other state service providers, accompanying them to court visits, or attending school or community events with them when family support is not present.

The mentoring services provide immediate crisis intervention and defuse conflicts or potentially violent situations. Also, they increase independent survival skills and decrease the need for gang involvement among at-risk males by providing access to educational opportunities, job training, life skills training, and leadership skills development. Lastly, they decrease gang-related activity by redirecting violent behavior into productive activities in the community.

For youth currently enrolled in schools, MIMIC expects to see the following additional outcomes as a result of mentoring relationships: increased school attendance, improved relationships and attitudes towards school and school officials, decrease in behavioral problems at school, and increased effort and interest in academic subjects.

## **The Hook Up**

By collaborating with community-based organizations, recreational centers, and faith-based organizations, MIMIC becomes a bridge for at-risk youth who want to be reconnected with school, family, and society. For out-of-school youth, MIMIC provides engagement in educational or job training opportunities, identification of career goals, and development of social skills needed for good self-presentation in interviews and for successful relationships with peers and/or coworkers. In this way, MIMIC serves as an intermediary agent that connects at-risk youth with community resources they may have never known about. They have connected youth with needed resources such as mental health services, safe and adequate housing, addiction counseling, etc.

## **Building Bridges**

Perhaps no other program shows how much trust MIMIC has gained within the community than Building Bridges. Attendance increased 250 percent (from 200 to 500 people) between the first and second years of the program.

Building Bridges is an annual event that brings together principals, teachers, community residents, and local business owners to celebrate and promote education with the youth. The day is filled with music, games, and food. In collaboration with schools, businesses, and community organizations, MIMIC provides school bags and school supplies for students during the event. Parents are

provided the opportunity to communicate with school personnel and various community organizations.

## **Junior MIMIC**

Junior MIMIC is a group of kids that the volunteers have been working with since its inception. This group has the highest level of involvement, with the kids often helping out with MIMIC community outreach programs, like neighborhood clean-ups. Samuel Rodriguez (a pseudonym) is one of the Junior MIMIC members with an inspiring story.

## **The Solution (continued)**

### **Samuel's Story**

Samuel Rodriguez, a 15-year-old in North Philadelphia, has known Edwin Desamour for just over one year. They met during a Hollar at Me presentation at Samuel's middle school. Samuel says that when he met Edwin he was "the worst person in my class," and if it weren't for MIMIC he'd "be locked up right now." Edwin's message reached Samuel unlike any other intervention program up to that point because "everything he said was true and honest. MIMIC — they're different, they keep it real with you."

Samuel doesn't know his father. His mother was addicted to drugs when he was born, so he was placed in foster care as a young child. He has been abused, both

physically and verbally, by his foster mother his whole life. He has used the 24-hour Life Line in the middle of the night to reach out for help with the physical violence in his home. A social worker is assigned to Samuel's case, but she must refamiliarize herself with his file every time he comes in because she has so many clients. In addition, the red tape in the foster care system has prevented Samuel from being moved from his foster home, and the system has been slow to act when there are reports of abuse.

Unlike case managers or even parents, Edwin keeps tabs on Samuel, and the relationship is intensely personalized. He drives to Edwin's school and pops his head into his classes. Since the teachers know him, he can pull Samuel out of class for a few minutes to check in. If Samuel isn't at school, Edwin drives to his house. Brief conversations are sometimes all that's needed, but these check-ins keep the lines of communication clear, open, and — most importantly to kids like Samuel — authentic. Personalized support like this can make the difference between a kid graduating or not.

When asked to describe how his relationship with Edwin has affected his performance at school, Samuel said, "Mr. Desamour is keeping me outta trouble. The guys at MIMIC don't wait and they don't say no. Mr. Desamour was always there for me. I graduated 8th grade last year, which is pretty good. I woulda never graduated if not for Mr. Desamour."

This first step — simply graduating 8th grade — puts Samuel statistically ahead of other at-risk youth in his neighborhood. Each grade that Samuel can finish brings him closer to graduating high school and staying out of the justice system altogether. When kids have to live one day at a time, a relationship with a supportive adult who understands where they're coming from may be the only thing that can help them through.

Over the course of this year-long mentorship, Edwin has made many expectations clear to Samuel: keep focused and do what you need to do to get through school, dress in a clean way, always introduce yourself the first thing when you see someone new (to clear the air upfront and avoid trouble in the streets), check in with Edwin as often as needed, respect your teachers and the people around you. Samuel used to just go home and "get into trouble" after school. Now, he "participates in more activities after school, like helping MIMIC with their events."

Samuel says that in five years, he sees himself helping others the way MIMIC helped him. What Samuel may not know is just how much he and the other boys in Junior MIMIC help the volunteers each day as well.

## **Social Return on Investment**

MIMIC has shown enormous potential taxpayer savings: for every 50 youth that are prevented from entering the juvenile justice system, the state will save \$3,341,000 per

year.

To date, MIMIC has been functioning rather informally. Only recently did MIMIC's founder, Edwin, start working full-time as the organization's president. Through alignment of the Latino Juvenile Justice Network, MacArthur Foundation initiative, and MIMIC's goals Edwin is able to dedicate himself full time to this work. He is working on putting in place a more solid institutional infrastructure. MIMIC also has an advisory board of six members from the local nonprofit community. MIMIC supports 11 volunteers who each mentor a few youth and handle only a small number of phone calls, due to time, organizational, and financial constraints. It has had little to no capacity to measure outcomes and as a result operates with only anecdotal evidence of its success.

However, with a full-time president, volunteer coordinator, data specialist, and receptionist, MIMIC estimates that it can manage about 50 volunteers — each of whom could provide comprehensive mentoring for two youth. If MIMIC could serve 100 at-risk youth each year, operating with a 50 percent success rate, it could prevent 50 youth from entering the juvenile justice system. Including the costs for arrests and court hearings, and taking into account the recidivism rate, the average cost to incarcerate one youth for one year in Philadelphia is \$71,820. In contrast, the annual operating costs for MIMIC are approximately \$250,000. This means that spending \$250,000 to prevent 50 youth from entering the system today will save the

state \$3,341,000 in taxpayer money tomorrow. If the state spent the amount of money for 3.5 placements on MIMIC's model, it could save the amount of money needed for 46.5 placements. (Costs are based on Philadelphia police estimates and on projected MIMIC budgets.) In addition, MIMIC greatly improves the lives of at-risk youth and eases re-entry for ex-offenders. MIMIC has an undeniably huge social and financial return on investment.

Studies show that personalized counseling programs cost less than confinement and are often more effective. MIMIC saves just as much or more taxpayer money when compared to the cost benefits of the previously mentioned state-run Blueprints for Violence Prevention programs. A study conducted by the Washington State Institute of Public Policy showed that for each dollar spent on Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care, Multisystemic Therapy, and Functional Family Therapy the estimated benefits to taxpayers and crime victims were \$22.58, \$13.45, and \$11, respectively (Models for Change 2005, 30). In comparison, MIMIC saves \$14.36 for every dollar spent.

## **Is MIMIC a Replicable Model?**

MIMIC has powerful implications for both re-entries of ex-offenders and for shifting juvenile prevention to a more client-centered approach. Any attempt at replicating the MIMIC model must keep the *who* of the relationship

central to the implementation. Each volunteer holds strong personal convictions about giving back to his own community, and each has experienced the same challenges that the youth are facing. Another unique strength is that all the youth are involved because they want to be, not because they have to be. Personal choice must be kept central to participation levels for replicability to succeed. Lastly, the group has a tremendous amount of support from people and organizations in the community who believe in what they do and want to ensure their success. As a result, MIMIC's unique innovation is the ability to reach the most extreme at-risk youth who are not responding well to traditional prevention programs.

MIMIC is not intended to replace state-run programs; rather, it can augment institutional services very effectively. Addressing large societal problems like rising incarceration rates requires that a variety of methodologies be employed. Currently, not enough programs provide the full range of prevention and intervention strategies needed to effectively tackle the problem of juvenile justice. MIMIC cheaply and effectively reaches youth who do not respond to traditional institutional prevention programs. In addition, there is anecdotal evidence that MIMIC's methodologies may have better long-term outcomes than other institutional models because of the program's comprehensive approach.

The MIMIC model is a truly transformational force and is a great option for addressing rising incarceration rates of

juvenile offenders. MIMIC is showing the world that ex-offenders hold vast potential to effect future positive change in our communities.

**Amruta Ghanekar is a Chartered Accountant from India. She worked as a tax consultant with Ernst & Young for three years. She is currently pursuing the M.Sc. in Nonprofit/NGO Leadership at the University of Pennsylvania. Sara Taveras is a community activist from northeast Ohio. She spent three years lobbying on economic justice issues in Washington, D.C., and has worked with various economic development projects in Central America. She will graduate with an M.Sc. in Nonprofit/NGO Leadership from the University of Pennsylvania in 2010.**

**Recipients of Goldring Fellowships and candidates for the degree of Master of Science in Non-profit/NGO Leadership, School of Social Policy and Practice, University of Pennsylvania.**

## **References**

## **References**

Bartelt, D. (2001). *Latino Workforce Development Taskforce: Report on Latino Philadelphia*. Available at <http://www.lwdt.org/filelibrary/LWDT.pdf>.

Children's Commission [City of Philadelphia].

(2005). *Upper North Philadelphia Community Report Card 2005*. Available at [http://www90.homepage.villanova.edu/lowell.gustafson/Rhodes/CRC\\_Upper\\_North.pdf](http://www90.homepage.villanova.edu/lowell.gustafson/Rhodes/CRC_Upper_North.pdf).

Desamour, E. (2009). MIMIC Mission Statement. Available from Edwin Desamour.

ENPYSC (Eastern North Philadelphia Youth Services Coalition). (2005). Metropolitan Philadelphia Indicators Project, *Philadelphia Safe and Sound Community Report*.

Greater Philadelphia Hispanic Chamber of Commerce. (2004). *Latino Youth in Philadelphia Fact Sheet*. Available at [http://www.philahispanicchamber.org/downloads/Latino\\_Youth\\_PHL\\_Fact.pdf](http://www.philahispanicchamber.org/downloads/Latino_Youth_PHL_Fact.pdf)

Kalist, D. E., and D. Y. Lee. (2009, January). *Measuring and Analyzing Juvenile Recidivism in Rural and Urban Pennsylvania*. Sponsored by The Center for Rural Pennsylvania. Available at [http://www.rural.palegislature.us/Juvenile\\_Recidivism09.pdf](http://www.rural.palegislature.us/Juvenile_Recidivism09.pdf).

Models for Change. (2005, October). *Keystones for Reform: Promising Juvenile Justice Policies and Practices in Pennsylvania*, supported by the MacArthur Foundation. Available at <http://www.modelsforchange.net/publications/151>.

Models for Change. (2007, November). *Overview:*

*Systems Reform in Juvenile Justice*, supported by the MacArthur Foundation.

Niskanen, W. (2002). Reaganomics. *The Concise Encyclopedia of Economics. Library of Economics and Liberty*. Available at <http://www.econlib.org/library/Enc1/Reaganomics.html>.

U.S. Census Bureau. (2005). American Community Survey, Income, Earnings, and Poverty Data. Available at <http://www.census.gov/prod/2006pubs/acs-02.pdf>.