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Families at the Center of Results

Back to the Basics:
Community Violence Solutions Require an Asset-Based Approach

The Impact of Narrative

In 2020, following the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor at the hands of the police, the very organization designed to promote public safety, activists across the country responded with campaigns to "Defund the Police". The slogan, "Defund the Police", was quickly interpreted by non-supporters of the movement to functionally shift the narrative away from the organizational accountability of policing to a personal debate about the goodness or badness of all police officers. Additionally, the intention behind the "Defund" campaign, which is actually a proposed reinvestment strategy, got buried, if not in the above narrative, then certainly in the second narrative that suggested calls to defund the institution of policing were intended to reduce criminal accountability. According to *Defund the Police.Org,* what is being proposed is a "reinvestment to Police Services that address public safety; Decriminalization through the repeal of outdated laws, prioritizing instead public health and social support; and Disarmament and Demilitarization that would shift funding away from military-grade weapons and invasive technology to non-violent solutions to solving problems". In other words, "Defund the Police" means to invest in the same programs, policies, and practices in low-wealth Black and Brown Urban communities that are non-negotiable in the middle to upper-class White communities. Though we have not yet seen what is to be the final outcome related to any investment shifts, one takeaway is already abundantly clear. Narrative drives strategy and strategy drives results; good, bad, or indifferent.

With over 40 years of direct experience partnering with Black and Brown families living in low wealth, disinvested urban communities, USI's mission is to ensure that All Children and Families are Stable and Thriving. Just as the revitalization of bricks and mortar takes an intentional multilayered investment strategy, so too does the investment into strategies to effectively address community violence. To begin, we must account for narrative; meaning we must intentionally shift away from viewing Black and Brown communities through the very same deficit frame that resulted in over-policing in the first place. Using an asset frame, we can expand our understanding of how we got where we are and more importantly how we effectively reduce violence and create safe, thriving communities. Beginning with the premise that this is the type of community that all children and families deserve.

Theoretical Framing and Data

In a paper titled, "*A Theory of Human Motivation*" (1943), Abraham Maslow described the now famous **hierarchy of needs** to form the basis for human behavioral motivation; in the form of a pyramid, with the basic needs at the lower-level end of the pyramid and more high-level, intangible needs at the top.

Maslow's notion was that a person can only address the higher-level needs when their basic needs are fittingly fulfilled. Maslow described five distinct layers depicted in the diagram to the right. If the basic needs at the bottom of the pyramid are not met, Maslow posits that the notion of "By any means necessary", becomes more relevant and ideal, despite any consequences.

So how does Maslow's theory relate to violence in disinvested communities? A lack of access to resources to meet the needs at the physiological level, leads to a plethora of social problems, each of which compounds the next. Poverty has been correlated to food deprivation and unstable housing, as well as leading to a person(s) gang involvement (Pyrooz & Sweeten, 2015; Tapia, 2011). Maslow's (1943) theory insinuates a causal relation between these variables in which individuals use gangs as a source of income to meet their physiological needs of food and shelter (Sonterblum). While the actions of gangs give rise to less than advantageous results at a community level, at a personal level gang involvement can be not only a way to address unfulfilled physiological needs but also the apparatus by which the needs for safety as well as love and belonging can be met.

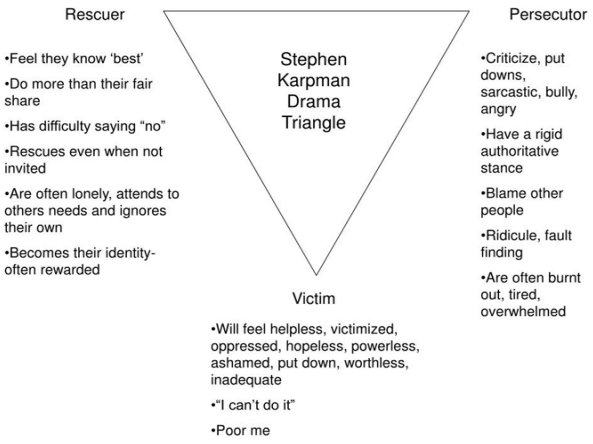
Unlike more pro-social ways of getting these needs met, gang involvement comes at a price to the community as well as the individual. Youth involved with gangs are at risk of experiencing physical violence, incarceration, substance abuse, and unemployment (Gilman, Hill, & Hawkins, 2014). The Brookings Institute, a Washington, D.C.-based research group, published a study, "Work and Opportunity Before and After" (2018), which asserts that extreme poverty leads to increased crime rates and violence and that a criminal record impedes employment despite the tax incentives for businesses that hire the formerly incarcerated. In layman's terms, poverty leads to gang involvement. Gang involvement leads to incarceration. Incarceration leads to unemployment. Unemployment leads to poverty. Poverty leads to more challenges in accomplishing one's own physiological needs and the vicious cycle continues. Unquestionably, this is not a declaration that all people who live in poverty are likely to join a gang; rather an assertion that community-based violence is associated directly with attempts to meet one's very own basic needs when the notion of other options is considered less attainable. This raises the question, how did other resources become less accessible or attainable in Black and Brown low-wealth Urban communities?

In every community where USI works across this nation, economic deprivation has resulted from the impact of structurally racist policies and practices that have prevented the same access to opportunities and wealth creation that are available in White communities. The systematic oppression and practice of redlining and blockbusting on African-Americans (and others), by and large (but not only) contributed to the displacement and poverty of neighborhoods of color across America. An examination of the impact of economic deprivation solely on education shows the far-reaching consequences of underfunded schools. In the United States, most cities and states rely heavily on property taxes to fund public education. This means that property values directly contribute to funding availability within the public school systems that serve neighborhoods. Andre Perry, an African-American Brookings Institution research fellow, published a study in

2018 which found "homes in majority-Black neighborhoods were undervalued by $48,000 on average compared with those in neighborhoods where fewer than 1% of the residents are Black".

In circumstances where undervaluing occurs, lower property values contribute directly to under-funded public education. When the value of homes drops, so does property tax revenue which equates to a lack of and/or no resources for after-school programs, books, technology, and so on. When you examine the impact of poor education on students from low-wealth Black and Brown communities, the school-to-prison pipeline is elucidated right before your very eyes. "Only 60% of children who attend urban schools graduate. Only 40% of those who graduate read at a 4th-grade level (Hernandez, 2011). "Statistically, two-thirds of students who cannot read proficiently by the end of fourth grade will end up in jail or on welfare. Students who don't read proficiently by third grade are four times more likely to drop out of school. Nearly 85% of the juveniles who face trial in the juvenile court system are functionally illiterate, demonstrating that there is a close relationship between illiteracy and crime. More than 60% of all inmates are functionally illiterate." (https://literacyinc.com/about-us/).

Just as we do with discourse about community violence, discourse about poor educational outcomes end up in a blame cycle that keeps us frozen in time. We are not capable of holistically addressing the full scope of the problem until we interrupt cycles in which we are caught. Stephen Karpman, M.D. introduced a theoretical framework that is useful for exploring not only what is happening currently, but also for offering solutions to more effectively address underlying issues that lead to community-based violence. The Karpman drama triangle is a social model of human interaction-the triangle maps a type of destructive interaction that can occur between people in conflict.



If we consider community violence as a "conflict", it is easy to understand how the victims of violence may have a range of feelings which may include those identified in the triangle to the right. In Black and Brown low wealth communities, however, resources have traditionally been poured into providing more policing (Rescuer) and passing harsher laws (Persecutor). This drama cycle plays on repeat feeding itself in perpetuity; regardless of the fact that, these solutions have yielded limited efficacy. Karpman hypothesized that the drama cycle could only be interrupted, when participants make shifts in the roles that they are playing in it; Persecutors to Challengers, Rescuers to Coach, and Victims to Creators/Thrivers. Making these adjustments creates the type psychological safety that restores agency and empowers community members to be part of solutions. The narrative that people are committing acts of violence out of deficit of character rather than attempting to meet a need, has kept solutions limited to

punishment and policing. The change in perspective from character-based to need-based would invite us to look for solutions that target the real factors in community violence; economic deprivation, a lack of access to resources to meet basic needs and a lack of power in creating effective community response. It is not enough to shift the narrative, USI believes it is imperative to partner directly with the community to create new roles that break the cycle of drama.

Partnering with Community to Impact Violence

There are community-based programs and grassroots organization solutions to curbing the violence that takes these factors into account. Some programs aim to remove guns from communities in an effort to reduce violence. One popular program is a "Gun buyback" program utilized in cities like Chicago, San Francisco, Philadelphia, and others; These allow gun owners to trade their firearms (From Victim to Creator/Thriver) to government entities-usually law enforcement-no questions asked. (From Persecutor to Challenger) In other words, people who turn in a firearm are typically subject to background checks or criminal inquiries and in most cases, do not have to provide identification. The incentives for people who do turn in a gun are vouchers that can be redeemed for cash or other items of value, such as tickets to professional sporting events. (From Rescuer to Coach) Similarly, The San Francisco Police Department (SFPD) and *United Playaz* whose mission statement reads, "It takes the hood, to save the hood", (a violence prevention and youth development organization) have hosted gun buyback events twice per year since 2014. Following the collection of firearms, they are melted down and the parts are recycled to create jewelry and goods that are sold to finance future gun buy-back events. The general notion behind gun buyback policies is that gun violence can be lessened by reducing the number of guns on the streets. However, the other factor that is addressed through buy-back programs is access to financial resources, even if only temporarily.

In the neighboring Bay Area city of Richmond, California, a program called, "Office of Neighborhood Safety (ONS)", which is an 18-month fellowship that hires persons convicted of felony offenses to "court" risk youth—who have avoided arrest due to lack of evidence – with offers of cash and out-of-town experiences if they agree to participate. What is galvanizing and unique about ONS's approach is offering the youth and men participants a monthly cash stipend and supervising trips outside of Richmond. Critics have dubbed this as "cash for criminals or paying kids not to kill" – both deficit-based analyses. The idea is to pay youth to be involved because involvement opens the door to opportunities that do not currently exist for them. This is partly financial, but larger than that being involved allows them to see their potential outside of the untreated trauma of violence that they are experiencing by providing access to resources, mentorship, and opportunities to build their self-esteem. ONS is addressing belonging, psychological needs, desire to grow, to be appreciated, as well as a sense of belonging, progress towards a purpose, being cared for, and flexibility in choices. After all, not only are low-wealth Black communities economically deprived, but they are also power, and opportunity deprived. This type of program has its foundation in that recognition.

Cure Violence is a national program whose headquarters is in Chicago. Cure Violence's approach is to stop the spread of violence by using the methods and strategies associated with disease control by: (1) Detecting and interrupting potential violent conflicts, (2) Identifying and treating the highest risk individuals, and (3) Mobilizing the community to change social norms. According to their website, The Cure Violence Approach has the strongest evidence of effectiveness for violence prevention. Their model interrupts the drama cycle by supporting people in the community to move from Victim to Survivor/Thriver and program responses from Rescuer to Coach.

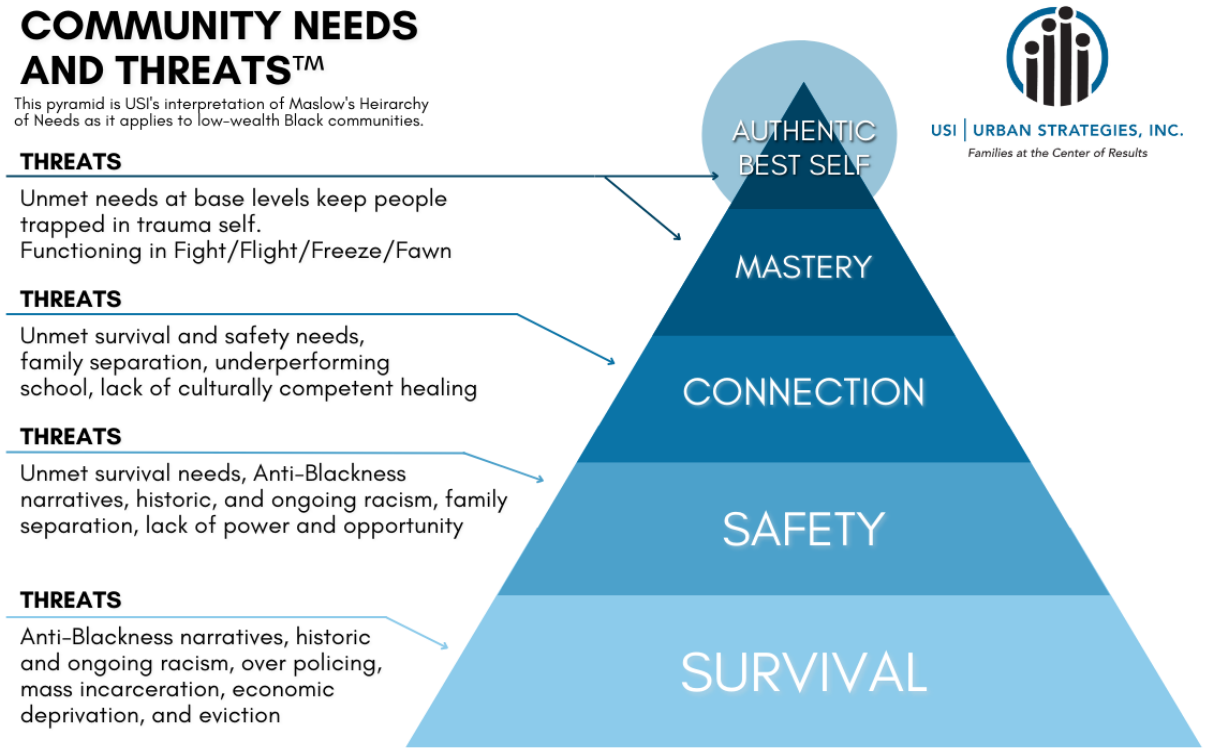
Across our portfolio, USI utilizes a *Results-Based Accountability* (RBA), framework in partnering with communities. This framework supports moving with intention in the development of strategies to address the core underlying factors that are contributing to inequitable outcomes. By partnering with communities, we understand that opportunities for healing as well as a lack of resources overall are critical factors to target in order to effectively reduce violence. *Green Garden Bakery* (GGB) is a social entrepreneurship that has healing components built into its operation. Green Garden Bakery was begun by USI through a partnership with community programming in the Heritage Park community in Minneapolis. Green Garden Bakery is a youth-run, green business selling vegetable-based desserts. In 2014, after participating in gardening and cooking classes through USI, the youth decided they wanted to turn their new skills into a business; a business where they grew the product, developed the recipe, developed the branding, and managed the retail aspect for distribution and sales. If that wasn't enough, the youth developed environmentally friendly packaging to support their responsibility for taking care of Mother Earth. The youth of GGB also have an awesome financial model; one-third paid to themselves, another one-third reinvested back into their business, and one-third into their community through charitable contributions. GGB has 100+ youth from the local community enrolled in a youth development program that supports the business. This program provides out-of-school time activities and teaches gardening, baking, and the integral parts of developing and operating a business. GGB youth leaders identify opportunity, networking, and skill development as key contributors to their success. This is what community collective purchasing power looks like. It is the community making a profit from the community. Further, it illustrates the impact of power-sharing, community developing community; a model that will yield profits for generations to come.

As mentioned previously, narrative drives strategy, and strategy drives results. In unpacking Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Physiological, Safety, Love and Belonging, Esteem, and Self-Actualization) we see, through the example of GGB, that the opportunity and resources (with support) to invest in social entrepreneurship can yield not only a solution to reducing violence but also a way to reach each of the needs detailed in Maslow's hierarchy. The youth of GGB are able to address physiological needs by providing healthy food and nourishment to the community. Each youth who is a part of GGB has lowered their chances of being a victim (or suspect) of gun violence by occupying their time productively, reducing the idle time that can lead to potential trouble, and providing a safe space for the youth in the community (Safety needs). The bond and friendship that has manifested between the youth of GGB gives them a

sense of love and belonging. They feel valued and gain self-respect for shifting the paradigm in their community. The cooking and baking skills they developed along with the education they receive have empowered them to become self-actualized in believing that their potential in life is far greater than their current circumstances.

Examining Need Hierarchy with a Race Equity Lens

The programs identified above are not all-inclusive. There are many others that are partnering with communities in ways that address needs within Maslow's hierarchy and/or are operating with intentionality to shift roles to Survivor/Thriver, Challenger, and Coach. When partnering with low-wealth Black communities as USI has done for the last 40+ years, it is critical to center race equity. This requires practitioners, stakeholders, lawmakers, to understand and work directly with the community in addressing threats at every level of the hierarchy. Below is USI's adaptation of Maslow's hierarchy with those threats in mind.



In 2020, the ripples of three public health calamities were felt across the United States; the COVID-19 pandemic, social unrest in response to police brutality following the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, and a historic rise in gun violence; 2020 was the deadliest year for gun violence in at least two decades, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). There were more than 19,400 homicides involving a gun and accidental fatal

shootings-a 25% increase from 2019, according to data from Gun Violence Archive. It is clear from the data that no one organization can tackle this alone. It will take a collaborative approach. As delineated throughout, this includes an intentional shift in narrative, investment, roles that programs and systems play, and in the power low-wealth Black and Brown communities have in defining all of the above. Perhaps we begin by shifting our view to "with" and not "for" and work our way forward from there.

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