 Print edition | United States

May 4th 2019 | CHICAGO

“I SEE A van, suspicious as hell. I keep walking. They just pull up, get to shooting. I was just trying to get to my man’s crib, four houses away. My mother say I died. I still got a bullet lodged in my liver right now. That shit was painful; worst feeling ever. I died and they brought me back.”

Damien, a slender man in sports clothes and red running shoes, knows dangers lurk in some neighbourhoods. In the basement of a YMCA on Chicago's South Side, he tells of being thrown out of home when he was 14. He has since been shot, pistol-whipped and imprisoned. Several friends have been killed, including two in a span of just eight days. "I know it's time to do something different, I just want to see my daughter grow up", he says.

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Another man, Devon, nods and agrees. He describes living amid, and participating in, frequent gun violence. "I been shaking. I'm shaking now," he says, a few days after a friend was killed, in December. He also recalls being present when a stray round killed a young girl. Released from prison not long before, after serving a juvenile "life" term for murder, he sheds tears and talks of his anguish over whether to seek violent revenge.

He also describes exhausting efforts to evade the rivals who hunt him. He rises at 3am, walks long and circuitous routes, avoids public transport (many targeted killings occur at bus stops), or remains locked indoors. Devon, a physically imposing man with close-cropped hair and a blue hoodie, says he is changing. "I came too far, I did too much. You want to wake up in peace, but you going to sleep with it [a gun] on you. What the fuck, two guns. You went to bed. Now you going to wake up."

Devon mentions behaviour today unthinkable for him a few years ago. He says he showed restraint shortly before another interview, in February, when unknown men robbed him as he cashed a cheque—"everything went too fast; there's a gun over here, gun over here." Rather than react violently, he says he use a method called "control, alt, delete" (CAD) to control his rage. "It saved my life. It probably saved theirs too." He is proud of walking away. "I'm just saving lives".

Both men talk of growing into different people. Damien, having said, "It ain't nothing to do it", after describing his readiness to shoot people before, adds, "I've been controlling myself lately". The two are among 700 participants in an 18-month, \$25m experimental programme, called READI, which tries to change individuals' behaviour in the most violent districts of Chicago. It is one response—funded by Heartland Alliance, a big non-profit group, and philanthropists—to a surge in violence in 2016, when Chicago saw 762 murders. Since big, hierarchical gangs fragmented into hundreds of tiny "cliques" of hot-headed and heavily armed youngsters, the city's murder rate has been stubbornly high. The police force is unable to solve 80% of murders and 95% of all shootings.

READI might make a difference. It mixes job training with months of intense efforts to teach habits of restraint. The men are supposed to become more employable and better able to control tempers. It is also led by a figure, Eddie Bocanegra, who has credibility among participants, having himself served 14 years in prison for a gang killing.

Unusually, the scheme applies lessons from a study in Liberia, in west Africa, after years of civil war left young, homeless men involved in crime, especially in Monrovia, the capital. Researchers there recruited 999 "hard-core street youth", picking individuals deeply involved in crime. Some get grants to start a business, others a few weeks of therapy


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READI will be judged on whether it cuts, not ends, such violence. So far the anecdotes are encouraging, but at least five of its participants have been killed, including one man on April 28th. Mr Blattman says the first measure of success will be whether more participants survive than members who are monitored in a control group in the same neighbourhoods. He and Mr Bocanegra are cautious but hopeful. Devon is already convinced, because of the robbery that did not end in murder. "CAD worked. It worked. I was happy as hell."

This article appeared in the United States section of the print edition under the headline "Monrovia on Lake Michigan"

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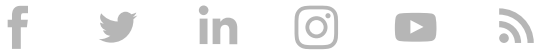
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