

# CRIMINOLOGY MIXOLOGY: THOUGHTS FROM CAMP REALITY

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*Dedicated to Jane and Betty from Fortune Society for their generosity and advocacy on behalf of my shadow community.*

I was raised in Chi-raq. My school had metal detectors and armed security. My parents were Mexican immigrants with a third-grade education. They didn't speak a lick of English and for the first twelve years of my life, I lived in constant dread of the “*Migra*.”<sup>1</sup> As a small child, I legitimately believed the *Migra* was the boogey man come to life: “Don't stay out after dark or the *Migra* can get you.”

When I was six, I was awakened by a shotgun blast as my father was caught unprepared by a burglar. Jump ahead two years, I am walking home with my mother and sister when we are violently assaulted at knifepoint—I am still haunted by my mother's high-pitched scream and can still feel how tightly she squeezed my tiny hand.

Then at ten years old, while playing at the park with my best friend Pancho, a low-rider pulls up as a tattooed, bandana-wearing teenager leans out the window, throws up a gang sign, and yells, “King Love!” Pancho and I are all kneecaps and nerves—we take off as gun shots ring over our heads. My grades are dismal, no one attends my parent-teacher conferences (the *Migra*), my mom ignorantly signs off on my bad grades, because who cares about grades when you are living third-world poor in the world's richest country.

By junior high, gladiator school, you're either hooked-up or a human pinata. I was constantly getting my brains beat in by the local gang my mother refused to let me join. My freshman year in high school, I watched my cousin's head split open in a carjacking gone wrong. I never speak about any of it to anyone...and no one asks.

In my world, my history is considered tame.

Spoiler Alert: I didn't do well in school...or life. Are you surprised?

Me neither.

We now know that trauma can rewire a young child's mind. Humans are built to store painful memories as a survival mechanism, like the hard lessons our ancestors learned on the savannah. It is why I remember each of those gut-wrenching slices of life with crystal clarity, but not one birthday cake. It is also why I have been

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<sup>1</sup> *La migra* is Spanish for Immigration (I.C.E.)

diagnosed with PTSD and disassociation, like countless other children who have experienced trauma.

Those of us in Camp Reality, Camp Humanity, have long known the root causes of violence, criminal behavior, and underachievement in classrooms—and now we have the proof. A collection of studies has found that youth who witness or are direct victims of violence, are raised without parental support, or do not have access to quality education are at much higher risk for justice system involvement later in life.<sup>2</sup> And the opposite is also true. But I don't need a body of research to tell me what I see every day.

Prison is a den of fatherless boys raised by their mothers. In my experience, most inmates are raised in volatile environments. Single mothers, even those with the best intentions, have no other recourse but to leave their children unsupervised and at the mercy of the streets to put food on the table. (Spoiler Alert: the streets have no mercy.) Studies have shown the importance of a stable living environment and a strong two-parent upbringing as protective factors against the likelihood of future violent offenses.<sup>3</sup> Do all single parents living in the hood raise future delinquents? Of course not, but far too many do. The worst part, the inevitable irony, is that prisons perpetuate the issue of more children being raised in a broken home.

Education (or lack thereof) is also a key factor in the success of American youth.<sup>4</sup> There is a direct link between the level of education someone attains and the risk of offending behavior. You don't meet a lot of college grads in the Joint. Education is critical during a young person's development to avoid future court involvement. Education also plays a part in developing safe, healthy psychological habits. A quality education has been shown to drastically improve the odds of youth who have witnessed or been subject to violence or raised in a broken home to avoid future criminal justice involvement, regardless of race or social status. Interestingly, prison recidivism rates have been shown to decrease as the level of education attained while incarcerated increases; those who obtained master's degrees while in prison had a zero percent recidivism rate.<sup>5</sup>

Ideally, every child in America (the world really) would be raised in a stable, loving home, in a safe neighborhood, and receive a quality education. Ideally.

So, how do we fix it?

Do we force parents to stay together and be good, loving stewards to their children? Do we convert gang-controlled, drug-infested war zones in the inner cities into a utopia where young people are encouraged and supported?

Sweeping prison reform, maybe?

Defund the police?

Abolition?

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<sup>2</sup> See Phelan Wyrick & Kadee Atkinson, *Examining the Relationship Between Childhood Trauma and Involvement in the Justice System*, 283 NAT'L INST. OF JUST. J. 29 (2021).

<sup>3</sup> See CHARLES PUZZANCHERA, SARAH HOCKENBERRY, & MELISSA SICKMUND, YOUTH AND THE JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM: 2022 NATIONAL REPORT (National Center for Juvenile Justice 2022), <https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/publications/2022-national-report.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> See Rodney Walker, *My Experiences in Urban Education*, 673 ANNALS OF THE AMERICAN ACAD. OF POL. AND SOC. SCI. 126 (2017).

<sup>5</sup> See Gregory Magee, *Education Reduces Recidivism*, 16 TECHNIUM SOC. SCI. J. 175 (2021).

How do we erase centuries of American cultural, political, social, and racial disparities and repression? Well, I don't know. If it were easy, I'd like to believe we would already be doing it. Is all lost? I don't think so. There are avenues worth exploring.

Mentorship!

Mentor what? Mentorship. Yes, mentorship. Mentorship has clear potential as a large-scale strategic approach to stop kids from falling into the criminal legal system. I know it is not as sexy as other reform movements with their made-for-social-media catch phrases and Twitter tags, but various studies conclude that mentorship can prevent adverse outcomes and promote resilience among at-risk youth.

Mentorship programs vary from those staffed by paid employees to adult volunteers to peers at higher grade levels. Programs also vary in focus. Some promote mental health, physical health, and safety, and still others may promote academic achievement or a combination thereof. Still others simply offer kids an opportunity to stay off the streets. All of them have shown some positive results as a viable approach for preventing and reducing delinquent behavior across races, genders, and ages.<sup>6</sup>

There are an array of mentorship programs nationwide going well beyond the traditional Big Brothers or Boys and Girls Clubs of America model. Reading For Life, a group mentoring program that uses works of literature to facilitate moral development and character education has found a statistically significant decline in re-arrests for program participants. (The program was offered in high-risk neighborhoods.)

The Eisenhower Foundation's Quantum Opportunities Program is an intensive year-round, multicomponent intervention program for high-risk minority high school students from inner-city neighborhoods. Youth receive both individual and group mentoring from the paid staff. Participants have had significantly higher GPAs, high school graduation rates, and college acceptance rates. For example, 76% of program youth graduated from high school compared to 40% of the control group. Program developers believe their success is due, in part, to the extensive interpersonal mentoring that goes beyond the focus on education. The mentors are trained to serve as advocates for the youth, including visiting their homes to discuss problems and find solutions, attending parent-teacher conferences, and standing in for parents when needed.

On the whole, the findings provide intriguing preliminary evidence that mentoring received through a program during childhood or adolescence can indeed foster improved functioning into and through adulthood.

In recent years, similar programs have been implemented in prison settings—their early results show promise.<sup>7</sup>

America's inner-city neighborhoods and schools are broken, and we are at a critical juncture where we can either push towards creating a better, more humane,

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<sup>6</sup> See David L. Dubois, *Mentoring Programs for Youth: A Promising Intervention for Delinquency Prevention*, 283 NAT'L INST. OF JUST. J. 39 (2021).

<sup>7</sup> See Jana Cook, Scott McClure, Igor Koutsenok, & Scot Lord, *Implementation of Inmate Mentor Programs in the Correctional Treatment System as an Innovative Approach*, 7 J. OF TEACHING IN THE ADDICTIONS 123 (2008).

fair system or lower our sights, continue to compromise our humanity, and fall deeper into the darkness. For all of America's faults, I do not believe we as a nation should ever compromise or settle for anything less than our full potential. Investing in these types of large-scale mentorship programs may not be the most expected path, nor will it be the easiest or cheapest—some pain is to be expected. But not all pain is bad; freedom can often be found through pain.

Had I had a mentor helping me with my homework, walking me home from school, attending parent-teacher conferences in my parent's stead, or even just someone to talk to about the pressures in my life, would my life have turned out differently? Could I have avoided this fate worse than death? In my dreams, I like to think so.

Author's note: The many reasons I ended up in prison are too personal and sad to share here. Much of it has to do with my addictions, but a good portion of trouble is related to inexcusable actions. I don't think it is necessary or appropriate for me to discuss those issues here out of respect for my victim, their family, or my own. Nor would I ask anyone to believe that I am capable of reporting an unbiased version of the story, and therefore, the chronicle of my imprisonment will remain untold here.