
Constructing Peace

Helping Youth Cope in the Aftermath of 9/11

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Abstract: The 9/11 terrorist attacks on New York City represented a new strain on already fractured communities with low collective efficacy. Like the majority of citizens in the greater metropolitan area, researchers at the Community Research Group of Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health wanted to “do” something to help in the aftermath of the attacks. The group proposed to promote collective recovery, that is, rebuilding social connections in the city as the foundation for individual and group recovery. After several months of organizing, New York City RECOVERS (NYCR)—a network of organizations formed to promote trauma recovery post 9/11—in conjunction with the New York University’s International Trauma Studies Program, persuaded the New York City Department of Health and Mental Health and the FEMA-funded Project Liberty to sponsor a conference on collective recovery, with a focus on the first anniversary of the tragedy. Utilizing participant observation, the research team documented the outreach and dissemination efforts of NYCR, the partners’ organizational engagement in collective recovery, and the recovery activities they pursued.

This paper describes the work of the conference and the specific efforts for youth violence prevention that followed. In this circumstance, engaging community partners helped shift the research agenda from one driven by funders and researchers to one co-driven by the organizations and populations they aimed to influence.

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Introduction

Violence is a problem of considerable importance in the lives of U.S. youth aged 10–24.¹ In 2003, murder claimed the lives of 5570. In 2004, 750,000 youths were treated in emergency rooms for injuries due to violence. Among high school students responding to a national survey, 33% reported being in a physical fight in the previous 12 months, and 17% reported carrying a weapon in the previous month. This violence costs the nation in terms of injuries, lost days at school, losses in property values, and community disruption.

Studies of youth violence highlight many contributing factors, among them, social disorganization at the neighborhood level. Neighborhood disorganization permits and even encourages youth violence. Sampson and colleagues² in a study of Chicago neighborhoods, for example, noted that rates of violence were highest in neighborhoods with low ratings on a measure of collective efficacy. The inability of the neighborhood to control youth behavior is a factor that permits violence.

Wallace and colleagues³ have used mathematical models to show that violence functions as an effective means of communication under conditions of social disorganization, sending messages that are not expressed in words but are instead expressed in violent deeds that are often ways of communicating deep discontent and alienation from society and the dehumanizing conditions in which they find themselves. As the level of social disorganization is heightened due to new strains on social bonds, it is reasonable to infer that violence will be increased as well.

The 9/11 terrorist attacks on New York City represented such a new strain on already fractured relationships.⁴ Like the majority of citizens in the greater metropolitan area, researchers at the Community Research Group (CRG) of Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health wanted to “do” something to help in the aftermath of the attacks. Well aware that insult had been added to injury, the group proposed to promote collective recovery, that is, rebuilding social connections in the city as the foundation for individual and group recovery. It was an ideal moment for such a project, as New Yorkers were feeling that “we’re all in this together.”^{5,6}

Despite having a propitious moment, CRG was not sure what to do; they decided to ask community leaders for advice. CRG researchers started with the assumption that,

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in a diverse city, many organizations would be required to hear from and for myriad points of view. Second, the CRG assumed that organizations would have ideas about recovery that would be relevant for their own constituencies and that they would be willing to exchange those ideas in conversations with other groups to determine if there were points of common interest. The CRG team founded New York City RECOVERS (NYCR) to create a conversation among leaders. A crucial person guiding the organizing was Dr. Hirofumi Minami, an environmental psychologist from Hiroshima, Japan, who was spending a year in New York as a visiting professor. His intimate knowledge of the recovery of Hiroshima—and that city's deep commitment to world peace—gave consistent philosophical direction to the search for ways and means to accomplish collective recovery.⁷

After several months of organizing, NYCR, in conjunction with the New York University's International Trauma Studies Program, encouraged the NYC Department of Health and Mental Health and FEMA-funded Project Liberty to sponsor a conference on collective recovery, with a focus on the first anniversary of the tragedy (the Healing Anniversary of 9/11). This paper describes the work of the conference and the specific efforts for youth violence prevention that followed from convening community leaders to get advice about reknitting the fractured city.

Qualitative Study Methods

The data reported in this paper were collected as part of a qualitative study of the work of NYCR, examining work done between April and October 2002, as part of the 2002 Year of Recovery, which extended from October 2001 to December 2002. Participant observation was used to document the outreach and dissemination efforts of NYCR, the partners' organizational engagement in collective recovery, and the recovery activities they pursued. The analysis was carried out from June 2005 to July 2006. Other NYCR initiatives have been reported elsewhere.^{4,8}

Participant observation was carried out following the "membership role" as defined by Adler and Adler.⁹ Over 20 hours a week of field observations were collected during the 60 weeks in the Year of Recovery. Fieldwork included observation and participation at meetings, including those convened by NYCR, partner organizations, and the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH). Field notes recorded in research journals, 10 hours of video footage, over 5 hours of audio recordings, and 200 photographs of public events were collected.^{10,11} Data from various sources were compiled and a précis prepared for all observed events. These were analyzed using ATLAS.ti. Emerging themes were obtained by utilizing triangulation methods.¹²

The creation of NYCR provided for an unprecedented opportunity to learn about the process of recovery in an organic manner, but bias is an inherent threat in such a process. As part of the core brainstorming team, the identified researcher was involved in the day-to-day work of the organization. While the researcher supported the mission of NYCR, once ideas were generated and shared with the network, the member organizations had to choose to incorporate the idea into the agenda or not. The researcher was then, as a participant observer, in a position to see if theoretical speculations were useful in vivo. The rubber-meets-the-road test helped to balance insider bias.

Confirmation of exempt status was obtained from the IRB of the Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons. Participant observations of public events and meetings, as well as publicly available archival data, were covered under this exemption.

Notes from the Field

The work of NYCR with youth began with a citywide conference, Together We Heal, which was organized to widen and deepen the recovery conversation. The conference was planned by NYCR; the NYC Department of Mental Health, Mental Retardation, and Alcoholism Services; the NYC Department of Health (later that year, re-named Department of Health and Mental Health); and the FEMA-funded Project Liberty. The goals of the conference were to:

1. engage community leaders on the recovery process by presenting a community-based approach to healing;
2. create a forum to share experiences with recovery across distinct communities; and
3. offer an opportunity for community leaders to brainstorm about recovery initiatives they could incorporate in their agendas.

The conference took place on April 16, 2002. Over 200 participants from all 5 boroughs, New Jersey, and Long Island attended the conference. From the conference, three themes emerged that organizational representatives wanted to address during the anniversary: tolerance for diversity and the promotion of multiculturalism, peace, and the celebration of life.

Given these broad objectives, conference participants developed specific ideas that created a highly structured plan. The first idea was to ease the weight of the anniversary by creating a period—rather than a day—for remembrance. Second was the need for wellness activities; New Yorkers were weary from the stress of the attacks and the work of recovery, which had been compounded by an anthrax scare, budget shortfalls, and the commencement of war in Afghanistan. And third, the observance of the anniversary had to assume that many people would organize their activities between Labor Day and September 11. These principles were

translated into the concept of a month of wellness, which came to be called Take a Deep Breath/September Wellness Month.

Partners then chose many strategies for their peri-anniversary events. The wish for peace and respect for the city of Hiroshima were among the themes chosen. As part of the anniversary of 9/11, paper cranes were folded and shared by a number of organizations and some were exchanged with the city of Hiroshima. The 60 years of Hiroshima's recovery from the atomic blast helped NYCR have a long perspective on the work of building a peaceful and well-integrated society.

Outreach to Youth

A new partner, the Columbia Center for Youth Violence Prevention (CCYVP), joined NYCR to tailor Take a Deep Breath/September Wellness Month to the needs of youth. With the Center's help, NYCR convened a group of experts to accomplish three tasks: identify stakeholders, refine NYCR's message so that it would be pertinent to youth and youth providers, and develop a strategy for dissemination.

What emerged from this consultation was the concept of creating simple, attractive "tip sheets" that could be easily used by parents, teachers, and youth workers interested in creating a healing anniversary. These tip sheets were posted on the web and distributed through schools, boards of education, and other educational and family-centered organizations. One set of tip sheets offered options of healing activities, and was titled Remembering the Anniversary: Things you can do with children to promote a healing anniversary of September 11. A second type of tip sheet offered instructions for a project called Decorate the City. A third was a curriculum for cooking, called Recipe for Diversity.

Decorate the City

Decorate the City was an initiative that took inspiration from the many kinds of visuals that were posted around the city after 9/11, most especially the missing persons posters. The idea was that, for the anniversary, the city could be decorated with posters made by young people reflecting on the recovery that had been experienced since 9/11. This initiative was launched with a news spot on NY1 (an NYC source for local news) featuring youth gathered at Fresh Youth Initiatives (FYI)—a youth community service organization—creating posters. Some of those FYI posters later traveled to Merrill-Lynch, one of the downtown businesses deeply affected by 9/11, to be part of that organization's anniversary observations.

A number of other organizations in the Washington Heights/Inwood neighborhoods of northern Manhattan—an area where many of the World Trade Center's unskilled workers lived there—held Decorate the City

events during the summer. That grief had been compounded by the November 2001 crash of Flight 587, on its way to the Dominican Republic.¹³ It was commonly said that one Dominican family in three had lost someone in that crash. Managing sorrow and loss had occupied many local organizations, among them a multi-service agency in Inwood. That group had been the hub of an interfaith committee that had hosted events to remember the lost, show respect for diversity in religious beliefs, learn about the various faith groups that were blamed for the attacks, and connect with neighbors. These activities set the context in this neighborhood for a hopeful and highly developed (instead of a narrow-minded and vengeful) construction of the attack.

In preparation for the anniversary, the Inwood multi-services group decided to include Decorate the City in its annual block party. The instructions were simple: We remember how sad we were to see the "missing" posters last year, and we would like to decorate the city with how we feel now. Youth and adults worked side-by-side, chatting and sharing ideas, but with a certain solemnity about the work that was leavened by the joyous shouts from the nearby waterslide. Posters were hung on a school fence for passers-by to see and comment. Remarkably hopeful words and images emerged. One street scene was captioned "A city standing strong," while a scene of buildings captioned "Escape your thoughts" was directed at mastery of the events of the past year. (See Figure 1.)

The second event was held a few days later as part of a health fair given by a community development agency that worked in an area of Washington Heights that had been controlled by violent drug gangs and was the site of many murders and other violent crimes. To break the grip of violence, the local precinct had closed one of the blocks to traffic and set up an intense community policing intervention. An outdoor health fair was possible because of the newly-won peace.

The event organizers had come across NYCR while looking for groups that might want to have a table at their event. While the organizers acknowledged the 9/11 tragedy and the loss of lives of area residents in the crash of Flight 587, they had not had any organized initiatives or events addressing the impact of the disaster for their constituents. Between tables for blood pressure readings and healthy diet recommendations, NYCR set up a table for making Decorate the City posters. The children were drawn to the activity, but the drawings that emerged were quite different from those produced at the Inwood block party. One child drew a poster of the first airplane striking the World Trade Center. This theme was picked up in several other posters. Other themes that emerged were equally sad and frightening depictions of fire and destruction. (See Figure 2.)



Figure 1. Decorate the City posters from events at organizations engaged in collective recovery work.

Evaluation of NYC’s Healing Anniversary for Youth

The concepts and materials created for the Healing Anniversary of 9/11 found their way into many hands. One NYC staff person found a tip sheet posted in a taxi because the driver wanted to help riders manage the anniversary. A number of NYC partners were in the spotlight on radio and television for their special efforts around the anniversary. One partner, a social worker at a youth service organization, shared:

[What was m]ost clear approaching 9/11/02 was the tremendous amount of anxiety that everyone had about the impending anniversary . . . no one wanted to have anyone suffer the way we had last year. [We obtained the c]ollective pulse from how our children were doing. The approach was getting young people to talk about, articulate through art, how they were feeling to adults. Using kids as vehicles to communicate about how we are all doing, using kids as pulse for larger community, we asked: “What do you want to tell the world?” Kids were therapists for the world, especially adults.

[There was an o]utpouring of love for humanity, community, love. People output. People didn’t want to leave until their picture was done. [The youth’s involvement was a]kin to Martin Luther King, changing system through love for humanity. Young people believed in it: who can demonstrate love for humanity, willing to put themselves out there to help humanity. Can you put yourself out there? The simple act of sharing puts feelings out there. Kids believed, they were willing to sacrifice. That was symbolic in that day. Draw a corny picture, change the world!

By the time of the anniversary, however, peace and healing were being pushed off the dominant agenda by war in Afghanistan and the growing hostility toward Iraq. NYC did not succeed in achieving the broad mass mobilization needed for full social and emotional recovery. NYC did, however, help the researchers gain an insight into how to engage organizations in community mobilization efforts.

Lessons Learned

In the aftermath of 9/11, the Community Research Group (CRG) organized NYC, which asked groups, What should we do? How can your organization contribute? This opened up a joint construction of a path

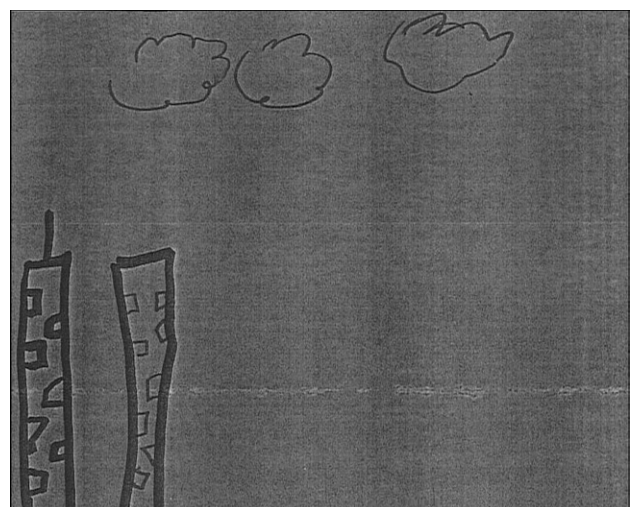


Figure 2. Decorate the City poster from an event not engaged in collective recovery.

toward recovery. At the heart of the work of NYCR was a commitment to peace, and a great admiration for the city of Hiroshima.

The most practical lesson learned through this process was that asking stakeholders what to do produced powerful and unexpected answers. The actual actions of organizations tended to follow the actions of other organizations, rather than more theoretical ideas proposed by the conveners. Thus, the observation that people-follow-other-people offered an important path for continuing efforts to reknit urban fractures and decrease youth violence.

Impressed by the utility of this approach, the researchers applied these lessons to the community mobilization efforts of the CCYVP, which had been funded for the 3-year period before 9/11. The community mobilization efforts had been led by one-on-one partnerships with individual organizations. Center researchers' new understanding of how to engage multiple organizations toward the same goal informed the remainder of the Center's interaction with community partners and the process of engaging these partners in the renewal of the Center's funding. This was done by bringing people together, making research and local data available, discussing the implications in the context of the work of partner organizations, and posing the questions: Where do we go next? What is your role? and How can the Center contribute to your engagement in this process?

As in the example of NYCR recovery work, this new way of engaging with community partners shifted the researchers' agenda from one that was driven by funders or researchers to one that was driven by the organizations that had access to the populations they aimed to influence. This has facilitated the integration of multi-level, multidisciplinary approaches to youth violence prevention at the community level that are informed by scholarly work. In turn, it has also brought an important community-based context to the academic enterprise. The paradigm shift was

neither easy to make nor to articulate to funders. Despite those difficulties, the clear benefit is that a group of organizations is engaged with building collective efficacy, which is already a step in the right direction.

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