

# Using the Power of Networking and Video To Disrupt the Community Violence Epidemic

By Jeff Frazier, Cisco Internet Business Solutions Group

## Overview

The violence that plagues our world is reaching epidemic levels. In fact, community violence is one of the leading causes of death for 15- to 44-year-olds worldwide, accounting for 14 percent of deaths among males and 7 percent of deaths among females.<sup>1</sup> Violence has a tremendous impact on society. In 2008, approximately US\$5.75 trillion was spent worldwide to mitigate violent crimes. This equates to 9.5 percent of the world's total gross domestic product.<sup>2</sup>

Various organizations—including police, social services, schools, families, healthcare, and many others—have worked for years to eradicate violence. Despite these groups' best efforts, success has been frustratingly limited. This is mainly due to the fragmented and sovereign nature of individual organizations, resource shortages that cause “turf battles,” and a loss of urgency and focus caused by geopolitical influences such as the global financial crisis. Most important, centuries of conflict have caused people to think about violence the wrong way. Today, the majority of people believe community violence cannot be eradicated.

Despite these challenges, Cure Violence, a not-for-profit partnership that fuses technology with public art, health, and safety, is successfully disrupting the epidemic of community violence. It does this by collaborating with local-expert affinity groups to find and train natural leaders who have escaped (or are attempting to escape) the grip of violence and want to help others do the same. Cure Violence also provides opportunities for people who are indirectly affected by violence to take action and become a part of the solution. The program combines a virtual platform and website with personal video technology to help participants change thinking about violent behavior on a global scale.

A critical component of Cure Violence is its application of social modeling.<sup>3</sup> Taken from the public health sector, social modeling identifies and isolates the source of a disease to stop its spread. By reversing social modeling to identify leaders and enable them to promote positive change, this approach has been proven to reduce violence. In fact, a United States Department of Justice evaluation stated, “The methodology [of social modeling] reduced shootings and killing in designated cease fire zones by up to 70 percent.”<sup>4</sup>



Cisco Internet Business Solutions Group (IBSG)

Cisco® is teaming with Cure Violence by providing networking equipment to help scale the Cure Violence platform, and Flip Video™ cameras to empower individuals to tell their stories and convince others to follow. In addition, the Cisco Internet Business Solutions Group (IBSG) is working with Cure Violence to provide strategic consulting expertise to help build the Cure Violence business and technology architectures. Cisco IBSG is also using its influence with policymakers and industry partners such as the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP), Coalition for Community Schools, United States Conference of Mayors (USCM), and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to create an environment where Cure Violence can succeed and flourish.

## Treating Violence as a Public Health Epidemic

Criminology research consistently finds that approximately 6 percent of a given population accounts for up to half of all crime and two-thirds of all violent crime. People who have been arrested at least three times have more than a two-thirds chance of being arrested again. This disproportionate concentration of crime and violence in a relatively small subgroup suggests that changing the behavior of even a small number of the highest-risk youth could generate a notable drop in the overall volume of violence.<sup>5</sup>

Given the ramifications of this research, much attention is being given to an emerging idea that social problems behave like infectious agents. What if violence, which is often casually referred to as an “epidemic,” actually moves through populations the way influenza or other infectious diseases do? Could that explain the sudden, dramatic rise of shootings in Chicago, even though other populous areas seem to have stabilized?<sup>6</sup>

“Once crime reaches a certain level, a lot of the gang violence is reciprocal,” says Robert Sampson, a sociologist at the University of Chicago. “Acts of violence lead to further acts of violence. You get defensive gun ownership. You get retaliation. There is a nonlinear phenomenon. With a gang shooting, you have a particular act, then a counter response. It’s sort of like an arms race. It can blow up very quickly.”<sup>7</sup>

## A Catalyst for Positive Change

Cure Violence creates a “positive epidemic” by working with affinity groups to identify who among their constituents are the most effective catalysts for change. These “Credible Messengers” then communicate in their own voices to share personal experiences and influence their peers to make violence socially unacceptable. The end result is improved social behavior and lower instances of violence.

Credible Messengers communicate through the personal networks they have already established with their mobile phones and social networking sites such as Facebook. Because these networks and technologies already exist, Cure Violence believes it can easily scale worldwide while operating with a very low cost structure. Cure Violence further empowers Credible Messengers with Flip Video cameras from Cisco to harness the powerful influence of personal video in persuading others to change their behavior. In fact, approximately 5,000 Credible Messengers currently are using Flip Video cameras to engage their friends, family, and communities at large.<sup>8</sup>

Armed with their personal networks and video cameras, Credible Messengers are taking the lead as citizen journalists and activists. Working with their Cure Violence instructors, they

are also raising the level of discourse above that of typical online forums and setting a precedent for intelligent, thoughtful, and respectful contributions to the rapidly expanding conversation about stopping violence.

## The Cure Violence Participatory Environment

Because the process of changing behavior is labor-intensive, it is difficult to scale. The Cure Violence online forum addresses this issue by acting as a digital platform for Credible Messengers and interested groups to share their work (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. The Cure Violence Website Aggregates Information, Expands Awareness, and Unifies Efforts



Source: Cure Violence, 2010

Specifically, the Cure Violence digital platform:

- Aggregates Credible Messenger videos and social media sites such as Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter
- Expands awareness among organizations working for a cure
- Creates a point of congregation and action
- Unifies efforts with a common voice and direction

To encourage participation among educators and community groups, the Cure Violence platform will also host a space for collaboration on project ideas and curriculum develop-

ment. These educational resources, created by both Cure Violence partners and the community, will be available to anyone to promote shifting social norms and to empower students to speak out for change in their own words. Employing video, SMS, cell phone cameras, or discussion-based forums, these projects can be realized in the classroom or by individuals, and then aggregated into the Cure Violence program.

Because Cure Violence builds on an existing infrastructure—both online and in local communities—there are endless possibilities to screen media, discuss ideas, and learn from the site. As networks continue to broaden, real change becomes possible, fueled by productive ideas, strategies, and voices that previously went unnoticed.

## Gaining Momentum

Cure Violence already is having a positive impact. In just five months, a local affinity group has added more than 40,000 followers on Facebook. Cisco IBSG and Cure Violence also expect to shape public policy through new funding mechanisms, improve education by using social media to change behavior, increase public safety by developing new forms of community cooperation, and facilitate economic development and better quality of life through reduced violence.

While these outcomes are important, Cure Violence is really about individuals making a difference. The following excerpt from *Investor's Business Daily* relates the story of Cure Violence participant Dexavier Langham.

*Dexavier Langham credits boxing with keeping him out of trouble in his tough Chicago west side neighborhood. It's the subject of a video the 16-year-old made in January at his public school, North Lawndale College Prep. "I basically told my story of how boxing made me who I am, how it helps me respect myself and others," said Langham.*

*Langham didn't want to make a video about his life, but he was inspired by the process and the result—the film being shown at school and posted on YouTube. "To tell my story like that and see myself on camera was amazing," he said.*

*Violence and drugs are an everyday part of life for North Lawndale students, says Elizabeth Czekner, Langham's teacher. "There's so much going on that is negative," Czekner said. "Channeling creativity into video is one way to keep students from those influences." And there's an even more profound effect. "Knowing that their voices matter is really critical for change," Czekner said.<sup>9, 10</sup>*

## Expanding Cure Violence Worldwide

Cure Violence is a *movement*. The power of the network and high-definition, personal video cameras such as the Flip gives a new voice to youth, families, and anti-violence supporters. Cure Violence can benefit every community affected by violence and stymied by the traditional way of attacking the problem.

Cisco, in conjunction with political, public safety, public health, and education leaders, is working with Cure Violence to expand the program worldwide. As an initial step, Cure Violence will launch a pilot in the Chicago area in 2010. The program will expand to connect a total of five cities in the United States over a unified platform. A longer-term goal is to extend Cure Violence to 12 major cities worldwide.

## How To Get Involved

Throughout history, every meaningful change started with a small group of trusted, highly connected people. History is being made again. Cure Violence has proven an effective way to change antisocial behavior and expand the conversation so others can experience success in eliminating the violence epidemic. To get involved, become an advocate for Cure Violence by visiting the program's website at [www.cureviolence.com](http://www.cureviolence.com).

You may also contact Jeff Frazier at Cisco IBSG ([jefrazie@cisco.com](mailto:jefrazie@cisco.com)) or Lincoln Schatz, founder of Cure Violence ([lincoln@cureviolence.com](mailto:lincoln@cureviolence.com)), for more information.

## Endnotes

1. Source: World Health Organization, 2010.
2. Source: Cisco IBSG Economics Practice, 2010.
3. Cure Violence learned about this approach from Project Cease Fire, another successful violence-reduction initiative based in Chicago.
4. In addition, there was a 16 percent to 35 percent drop in shootings directly attributable to Cease Fire. Source: U.S. Department of Justice, 2009.
5. Source: "Gun Violence Among School-Age Youth in Chicago," The University of Chicago Crime Lab, March 2009.
6. Source: "Gun Violence Among School-Age Youth in Chicago," The University of Chicago Crime Lab, March 2009.
7. Source: "The Tipping Point," *The New Yorker*, Malcolm Gladwell, June 1996.
8. Source: Cisco IBSG, 2010.
9. Source: "Digital Storytelling Gives Voice to Youths," Sheila Riley, *Investor's Business Daily*, March 12, 2010.
10. Using a Flip Video camera, Dexavier Langham's video was created in two weeks by a fellow North Lawndale College Prep student. The video has been used in the Free Spirit Media curriculum, a Chicago-based youth media program.

*Michael Adams of Cisco IBSG provided writing and editing assistance for this paper.*

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#### More Information

Cisco Internet Business Solutions Group (IBSG), the company's global consultancy, helps CXOs from the world's largest public and private organizations solve critical business challenges. By connecting strategy, process, and technology, Cisco IBSG industry experts enable customers to turn visionary ideas into value.

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