

# Chain Reaction

## A Youth-Driven, Multimedia Storytelling Project Promoting Alternatives to Calling the Police

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**W**HAT'S HAPPENING IS CYCLICAL. And it's not something that can be changed just by writing a report, or by going to the police station and saying this. I think that the whole justice system needs to be reframed.

Erik, Chain Reaction Youth Leader (Chain Reaction, 2012)

In the fall of 2011, Project NIA, a Chicago-based organization working to reduce youth incarceration and promote restorative justice, launched Chain Reaction. Chain Reaction is a participatory action and popular education project with the goal of promoting community-based alternatives to calling the police on young people. The project continues to work to document and disseminate young people's stories about their interactions with police and the criminal legal system.

Chain Reaction is part of a city-wide movement of organizers and community members calling for the development of community-based solutions to crime and violence. After youth centers and community-based organizations started using restorative justice processes to resolve conflict, coalitions of community members successfully fought for Chicago Public Schools to include restorative justice in their policy. Now, schools and youth centers around the city use restorative and transformative justice practices, including peer juries, conflict mediation, and talking circles, to resolve conflict and harm in less punitive ways. Even politicians are catching on; Cook County, Illinois Board President Toni Preckwinkle is outspoken about her desire to close the county's juvenile jail and replace it with small, community-based facilities (Donovan, 2012).

Advocates for new alternatives argue that the money we spend on incarcerating youth—\$224,000 annually per youth, according to Preckwinkle's estimation—would be much better

spent on education and job training. They also argue that spending that money on community-based programs that reduce and respond to violence and crime would be more effective than locking up young people; after all, the rise in incarceration has not yielded a reduction in crime. But what would these community-based solutions look like? This question drives our work with Chain Reaction. Rather than providing a list of alternatives to calling the police on young people to communities around Chicago, we use personal stories to spark conversation about what alternatives could look like, inviting community members to imagine what would work best for their communities.

In the remainder of this article, we will describe Chain Reaction's work with youth and communities in Chicago, particularly our work with a group of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth. To contextualize our work, we will begin by exploring one of Chain Reaction's central questions: what happens when you call the cops? We will describe how our project attempts to address issues of mass incarceration, violence, and oppression. We will also discuss the pedagogical frameworks of our work. Lastly, we will explore the limitations and successes of our project, offering suggestions for anyone who wants to build a similar project in their communities.

#### Overview of the project

Chain Reaction has four phases; during the first phase, we collected stories of young people's interactions with police and the chain reaction set off by those encounters. Chain Reaction volunteers went to youth centers around the city to interview youth in video and audio formats.

In some places, we were able to develop more ongoing partnerships and develop youth leadership of Chain Reaction. At one youth center, a drop-in space for LGBTQ young people, youth acted as both interviewers and interviewees for the project. The authors and two other volunteers lead a five-week workshop for a group of youth, training youth to operate digital audio recorders and come up with interview questions. We bought one audio recorder for the project, and volunteers borrowed or supplied all the rest of the audio and video equipment. We then listened back to the pieces and collectively decided which to post on our website. One of the adult volunteers, a professional radio producer, edited the pieces based on feedback from the youth. We also incorporated popular education about policing and restorative justice into the program to contextualize the project and inform our interviews. Creating these audio and video pieces comprised the second phase of the project.

Listening sessions and workshops also fit into the second phase of the project. During the "listening sessions", we invite community members to gather to listen to an audio piece with the goal of illuminating the negative and unintended consequences of overpolicing and calling the police on young people. During the third and fourth phases of the project, which we will start later this year, we will use the ideas generated from the listening sessions to create interactive workshops and resources that invite community members to discuss what alternatives already exist and imagine what could be built to respond to conflict without the police.

Because the youth at the LGBTQ youth center were so engaged in the workshops, we continued working with a core group of four youth leaders for almost a year. This work culminated in a workshop the youth presented for their peers and staff at the center. We shared the audio stories, invited youth in attendance to share their own stories, and facilitated a conversation about what alternatives youth would like to see to dealing with violence and crime in their communities and how adults can help.

In addition to the four of us who worked with youth at this center, another 20 volunteers supported the project through editing and conducting interviews, planning the listening sessions, fundraising, and building the website. We continue to host listening sessions and will begin developing more workshops and a toolkit this year. The adult volunteers also use the audio pieces in workshops and presentations, including a workshop at a national LGBTQ conference, to spark dialogue around community-based alternatives to calling the police.<sup>1</sup>

#### LGBTQ youth in the prison nation

Chain Reaction is an attempt to address what we view as a crisis of mass incarceration in the U.S., a nation that locks up more people per capita than any other nation. Prisons have grown exponentially in the last few decades, fueled by the war on drugs and other legislation that disproportionately targets people of color, poor people, people with mental illness, and LGBTQ people (Alexander, 2010; Mogul, Ritchie, & Whitlock, 2011). Beth Richie uses the term “prison nation” to explain why this is, stating that “a prison nation depends on tactics such as the development of new laws and aggressive enforcement of social norms; tactics that are reinforced by ideology that suggests that deviations from normative behavior or violations from conservative expectations should be punished by the state” (Richie, 2012, p. 17). Every stage of the criminal legal system, from legislation, policing, surveillance, conviction rates, sentencing disparities, or re-entry is designed to funnel disproportionate numbers of people from marginalized communities into our prisons and jails.

Organizers and academics also draw direct connections from mass incarceration to Jim Crow segregation and slavery as methods of enacting racism and white supremacy (Alexander, 2010). The sudden growth of the prison nation in the 1980s was not sudden at all; it was a response to the gains of the Civil Rights Movement and other human rights and political movements that flourished in the 1960s and 1970s. Targeting people from marginalized communities and squashing movements by locking up leaders reinforces the existing power structure to the benefit of the economic elite. With the trend towards prison privatization, corporations make tons of money off of this system, and it is in their best interest to fill every bed in every prison. Many activists use the term “prison industrial complex” to describe the overlapping interests of government and industry fueling the growth of the prison nation.

Those of us resisting this growth are interested in what the national prison abolition organization Critical Resistance describes as “the creation of genuinely safe, healthy communities that respond to harm without relying on prisons and punishment” (Critical Resistance, n.d.). Rather than reforming a system we know is broken, we are focusing our attention on developing alternatives to that system. In an audio interview on our website, Mariame Kaba, the founder and director of our parent organization Project NIA, states in an audio piece available on Chain Reaction’s website that this is not a project to change the way individual police officers interact with youth. We believe other projects exist to address that, but often what is lacking in police reform and know-your-rights efforts is a discussion of structural oppression and conversations about alternatives to policing. Kaba summarizes the goal of Chain Reaction:

[We are] just saying radically ‘what if there were no police’? How would we solve our problems? Really we want to start from there. What if there were not cops at all? What would you do? How would you address conflict? What would happen with violence?...Forcing people into that though experiment (Wallace, 2012b).

Instead of reforming the system, Chain Reaction has a different focus; we want to prevent youth from being swept up into the criminal legal system to begin with by encouraging people to not call the police or to demand a greater police presence in our neighborhoods. By sharing young people's stories about the chain reactions set off in their lives by over-policing, we hope to inspire community members to imagine alternatives we can implement instead of calling the police or advocating for increased police presence on our streets.

Not all of the youth we interviewed for Chain Reaction identify as LGBTQ, but because volunteers spent such a significant amount of time with the youth leaders at the LGBTQ youth center, their stories feature prominently in our work. Centering the experiences and voices of LGBTQ youth in this project is significant for several reasons. Firstly, while youth of color in general experience disproportionate contact with police, LGBTQ youth of color are especially targeted. Many organizations and reports document the negative consequences for LGBTQ youth of color who are arrested (Mogul et al., 2011; Ware, n.d.). The youth center we worked with is located in Lakeview, a neighborhood that is now mostly white and known for being a very gay-friendly area and home to "Boystown", a strip of gay bars and other gay-friendly stores. The youth that come to this center for a meal or to access case management, GED, or health services are mostly youth of color from other parts of the city, and many are experiencing homelessness. Many also routinely experience harassment and violence at home, school, and in their communities because of their sexual orientation or gender identity and they flock to Lakeview looking for acceptance and safety. The presence of youth of color in this neighborhood, hanging out outside of the youth center or the city's other large LGBTQ organization a few blocks away, makes many of the residents—mostly gay, white men—nervous. While crime rates typically increase every summer, in the summer of 2011 a couple of violent incidents in the neighborhood received a flurry of media attention. People who lived in the neighborhood attributed the violence and crime to the group of youth accessing services in the area, and complained about youth being loud and disorderly at public meetings about violence and crime. Some residents created a campaign to "Take Back Boystown"; group members gathered in parking lots and then patrolled the streets. They demanded that the city put more police on the streets and argued that centers providing social services for LGBTQ youth should relocate or close down. Residents and some media coverage portrayed the youth accessing services in the neighborhood as criminals who come to the neighborhood simply to make trouble. In his article about the criminalization of youth in Lakeview, Owen Daniel-McCarter (2012) argues that, to the extent that LGBTQ youth of color are responsible for any crime in Lakeview, it tends to be limited to crimes of poverty like trespassing and retail theft, criminalized activities youth commit in order to survive. Regardless of their involvement in "criminal activity", youth of color in Lakeview experience more police surveillance as they go about their activities in the neighborhood. Daniel-McCarter (2012) writes that youth of color "are charged with 'acting like criminals' due in large part to racialized stigma attached to proper etiquette." The racialized stigma that Daniel-McCarter refers to creates an environment where youth who come to the neighborhood for services, safety, and acceptance experience harassment from business owners, stigmatization by residents, and increased surveillance by police.

The overpolicing of young people in this and other neighborhoods was a common theme in the stories Chain Reaction collected; many youth had been harassed or unfairly targeted by police. Several young transgender women talked about police assuming they were prostitutes simply because they were standing on the sidewalk; police called them "whores" or "hookers" and conducted illegal searches of them and their bags. Crimes of poverty committed by homeless

youth just trying to survive were also common. One youth told a story about being arrested and spending three days in lock up simply for sitting on a stoop, trying to get some rest after staying up all night because she had no where to sleep. Other youth talked about being arrested and charged with trespassing for squatting in abandoned buildings.

Youth discussed the negative consequences of police harassment, targeting, and arrest on their lives; they experience violence in jail and prison, they have a harder time finding employment with a criminal record, and they feel like they can't trust police to help them if they become the targets of violence or crime themselves. One young person talked about the psychological impact of being constantly targeted by police, stating "usually how I feel in the moment after being targeted... I feel less. I feel much less. I feel I'm not good enough to just walk down the street and do regular things that regular people do... without being attacked just for fitting a description" (Chain Reaction, 2012). We share these stories with community members to demonstrate that calling the police or calling for increased police presence in our neighborhoods has a different impact than some might expect. Our group of adult volunteers also identify as LGBTQ, which is another reason working with LGBTQ youth was significant for us. We hoped to be able to use these stories within our own circles of friends, neighbors, and co-workers to discuss how LGBTQ adults, particularly those of us with race, class, and education privilege, can be allies to youth, and how we can make it easier for them to access the necessary services and welcome them into this community. We will explore this and other pedagogical contexts for our work in the next section.

Pedagogical frameworks guiding our work

Chain Reaction is a participatory action research (PAR) project, meaning that rather than outsiders conducting research on participants, the research is centralized around gathering participants' experiences and using that information to inform action. According to Incite! Women of Color Against Violence, "PAR is not so much a set of procedures to follow to gather information as it is a philosophy and approach to gathering and using information. It is also a way to build and strengthen communities and our understandings of ourselves, each other, and our relationships" (Incite!, n.d.). Unlike most research methodologies, PAR politicizes the research process, breaking down the barrier between researchers and research subjects. Researchers are not viewed as the sole producers of knowledge; instead, people from marginalized communities are considered the experts.

PAR is a cyclical process of reflection and action, mobilizing research participants and drawing upon the information collected to inspire and inform community organizing. In practice, PAR can take many forms and draw upon many methodologies and organizing frameworks. Our work with Chain Reaction was influenced by the work of another Chicago-based organization, the Young Women's Empowerment Project (YWEP). YWEP is a youth-led organization for girls involved in the sex trade. In 2009, YWEP released a report documenting the experiences of young women in the sex trade and street economy and their survival methods (Young Women's Empowerment Project, 2009). The report was a culmination of a PAR process that involved training young women who were already leaders in the organization to develop research questions, conduct focus groups, create and administer surveys, and analyze the results. The final report is written in language accessible to young people, and fully explains their process, findings, and suggestions. Other models of PAR that guided Chain Reaction included work done by Incite! which has created numerous resources and toolkits for people wanting to do PAR, specifically around police violence.

Built upon the PAR model of building understanding and community-building, Chain Reaction is focused on collecting and telling our stories. Instead of thinking of our audio pieces as qualitative research, we think of them as tools for sparking dialogue and creating change. Storytelling helped the youth we worked with contextualize their own experiences within the broader contexts of the prison industrial complex. After telling and listening to each other's stories, youth discussed how to best use these stories to educate their peers about policing. In his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire (2000) calls this process "conscientization", which he describes as a combination of reflection on one's social reality that informs action. During the workshop youth presented to their peers at the center, we played some of the audio pieces created by the youth. The other youth in attendance at the workshop then shared their own stories about policing, drawing connections to the audio stories and leading into a broader discussion of police harassment and community members' attitudes towards youth. We asked youth what they needed from the adults in their communities; they talked about wanting adults in the neighborhood around the youth center to get to know them better and to understand more about their experiences. They asked the youth center staff in attendance at the workshop to continue to support them to deescalate and resolve conflicts before they become violent, so that police never need to be called upon to break up a fight between youth.

We, the adult volunteers, learned a great deal from the project as well. As members of LGBTQ communities in Chicago, it was illuminating to hear what other members of our communities experience and to reflect on how our race, class, and age privilege protects us from those experiences. As adult allies in this project, we do not view our role as researchers responsible for collecting and disseminating information about the lives of young queer people. Rather, our experiences as volunteers in this PAR project also motivated us to continued action, using the audio stories to talk to our peers about alternatives to calling the police on youth.

We now have the tools to use when our peers express a desire to see more police on the streets or say something disparaging about youth in our community. We believe young people's stories told in their own voices can affect listeners in a way that statistics generally do not. Hopefully the stories motivate listeners to imagine and work for alternatives to policing. At our workshops and community listening sessions, we avoided providing people with our own proposals or alternatives to policing. We believe that people possess the knowledge and experience to create their own solutions and ideas and that providing them with answers would limit this process of creative dialogue. Mariame Kaba, explains this in an audio interview, stating "we think that we all need to get together in community and think together about what the solutions are....it's a community responsibility to figure out what else" (Wallace, 2012a). We presented some of the stories at a workshop at a national LGBTQ workshop in Baltimore for an audience of mostly adults from all over the country, and invited them to discuss what they could do besides calling the police in their communities. Participants talked about getting to know youth in their neighborhoods better and advocating for youth centers and programs that meet the needs of youth in their communities. As we continue to host listening sessions in Chicago, we will keep building our list of alternatives to calling the police.

PAR also prioritizes presenting information in ways that are accessible and useful to a broad audience. Critical race theory scholars like bell hooks also emphasize the importance of prioritizing voices of people from marginalized communities and of producing research that is accessible to those communities. She writes "there is power in having a public audience for one's work that may not be particularly academic, power that comes from writing in ways that enable people to think critically about everyday life" (hooks, 1990, p. 129). In addition to sharing audio

stories in workshops, we also made them available on our website along with tools and resources so people can use the pieces to spark dialogue in their own communities. In this way, we hope to share the stories with a broad audience who can use them to inform their own action.

#### Successes and limitations

Chain Reaction did not receive any grant funding; all the money for the project came through grassroots fundraising and donations. We sponsored a garage party and put together an online fundraising campaign to raise funds to pay stipends to youth leaders and to put on the listening sessions. We also received a grant awarded by a queer dance party to Chicago arts projects. While working with a small amount of funding limited the number of youth who could be involved in the project, grassroots funding worked well for us. The grassroots funding approach allowed us to respond organically to feedback rather than being bound to the various commitments and bureaucratic processes that come with 501(c)3 grant funding. A project asking difficult questions about police harassment and community responsibility can be difficult to fund with traditional grant sources, but our grassroots funding allowed us to shape and change the project without restrictions from funders. That flexibility meant that we could adapt based on the needs of youth we worked with; originally, our collaboration with the youth center was to last five weeks, but because youth were interested in staying involved, we kept it going for ten months.

We were able to keep overhead costs low by collaborating with community organizations that provided meeting space, food for workshops, and loaned recording equipment. We also kept program costs down by relying entirely on volunteers, but relying on volunteers was beneficial in other ways. Volunteers ourselves, we were both motivated by an interest in reducing youth incarceration and building alternatives to policing in our communities. We did not come to the project with answers about what we could do instead of calling police on youth; we hoped to explore that issue for ourselves as volunteers. A strong network of volunteer youth workers, activists, researchers, radio producers and videographers contributed a unique array of expertise and resources to creatively overcome obstacles and support the youth in their goals.

Working with youth leaders was our favorite, and in many ways the most successful part of the project. Guided by the participatory action framework, we were intentional about the process of recording and curating the stories; we worked to create a safe space for youth to share their personal stories and engage in dialogue with each other about the impact of policing on their lives. The youth leaders expressed often that they enjoyed the project and their level of commitment and attendance reflected their enjoyment. Using the audio equipment and interviewing their peers increased their level of engagement and made the process fun and exciting. Many of the youth we worked with were also involved with performance and theatre and used these skills in combination with the audio pieces to create a dynamic and engaging workshop for their peers.

Chain Reaction volunteers sponsored a few listening sessions and workshops using the audio stories, and we plan to hold more over the next year. Community members were generally receptive to discussing alternatives to policing, but often expected us to present our own solutions or alternatives to policing. Sometimes it was difficult for people to conceptualize that we were not conducting the project to advocate for one particular solution, but rather were creating the tools for people to engage in these conversations in their own communities. These conversations allowed us engage in difficult and rewarding dialogue about how policing affects our communities, how we participate in these systems, and how to bring this dialogue back to individual communities to being discussing alternatives. Overall, we were continuously amazed

at the amount of community support Chain Reaction received. Our supporters not only provided financial support to the project, but they also offered up their homes for fundraising events, shared our recorded stories with friends and allies, and invited us to present the project at their work places and community events.

We think that Chain Reaction is doing something that no one else is doing by creating a flexible tool to help people asking challenging and sometimes unpopular questions about alternatives to policing. By combining research, organizing and activism, we continue to ask communities to fundamentally change how they feel and think about safety, security and community.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> More information about how we structured the project is available in our “How To” guide on our website: [www.alternativestopolicing.com](http://www.alternativestopolicing.com).

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