The Criminal Justice Conversations Podcast with David Onek

Episode #19: Rev. Jeffrey Brown, Executive Director, Boston Ten Point Coalition (November 9, 2010)

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DAVID ONEK: Welcome to the Criminal Justice Conversations podcast, a coproduction of the Berkeley Center for Criminal Justice and the Berkeley School of Journalism. I'm your host David Onek. The podcast, recorded in the Berkeley School of Journalism studios, features in depth interviews with a wide range of criminal justice leaders: law enforcement officials, policy makers, advocates, service providers, academics, and others. The podcast gets behind the sound bites that far too often dominate the public dialogue about criminal justice to have detailed nuanced conversations about criminal justice policy.

Today's guest is Reverend Jeffrey Brown, executive director of the Boston Ten Point Coalition. Rev. Brown is one of the leading voices in the faith community for engaging with high risk youth to prevent violence in our communities. Brown's Ten Point Coalition is an ecumenical group of clergy and lay leaders working to mobilize the community around issues affecting
African-American and Latino youth, especially those at risk of violence.

Brown helped found the coalition in 1992 and became executive director last year. Previously he served as the pastor of Union Baptist Church in Cambridge for 22 years. Brown is a columnist for the Cambridge Chronicle and a contributor to the Boston Globe's op-ed page. He joins us from a Boston studio this morning. Jeff Brown, welcome to the program.

JEFFREY BROWN: Glad to be here. Good to hear your voice, David.

ONEK: Jeff, how did you first get involved in violence prevention issues?

BROWN: Well, it came out of my pastoral duties. I began to do funerals of the matriarchs and patriarchs that a pastor would usually do where the family sort of gathers together and remembers the individual. But I started to do funerals of teenagers and once done a funeral of a young person that was 14 years old. And it was so difficult to stand in front of the family and in front of the friends to try to say something about the person and to try to say something positive that would be
helpful to the family during this difficult time.

And then it came home for me in a particular way in around 1990 where a kid by the name of Jesse McKey was killed in a housing project. Or he was mortally wounded at the housing project down the street from my church. And when I had gotten there the evening that he died, the police told me that when he had been mortally wounded he was running down Main Street, which is the street that my church was on, and was running in the direction of the church. And he died some 50 to 100 yards away from the church. And if he would have gotten to the church, it wouldn't have made a difference. The lights were out and no one was home.

But the imagery of that just bothered me. Of a young man, a young teenager being accosted by a group of youth and was running for his life. Dying. And if he would have gotten to the church, the church wouldn't have been there to help him. So the imagery of that just sort of brought home to me the urgent need for somebody to do something about the violence.

And I realized at that point that I had been preaching a lot about community, but there was a population of the community, these young people who were perpetrating this violence, that I
wasn't including in my definition of community. And so I made a
decision after much prayer to get involved.

ONEK: So shortly thereafter you helped found the Ten Point
Coalition. Can you talk about exactly what the Ten Point
Coalition is and what was the basis it was founded on?

BROWN: The Boston Ten Point Coalition is an ecumenical group of
clergy that came together after a tragedy in 1992 to directly
address the issues of violence among the youth in our community.
In May of 1992 there was a horrific event that occurred at a
funeral at the Morning Star Baptist Church in the Mattapan
section of Boston. A group of youth came in after a young man
during the wake of a funeral, shot up the church, and nearly
stabbed the young man to death in front of the altar. And for
many clergy in the area, that was a wake-up call for action. And
there was a particular smaller group of clergy, myself included,
that had been doing a lot of work out in the streets in trying
to reach youth in our ways and our own places.

My church was in Cambridge, for example. But that event brought
us together in a series of meetings in which we made the
decision to come together and talk together in the most violent
neighborhoods in the city of Boston to see what the church could do to help the youth that were in these dire situations. And so the coalition grew from there and the name, Ten Point Coalition, actually comes from a plan that was put together in literally conversation between clergy and gang members in which we asked the simple question, how do you see the church helping this situation and your situation? And 10 areas were identified and we built a plan around those 10 areas and we called it Ten Point Plan and we built the coalition and we called it inventively enough the Ten Point Coalition. But the name wasn't important. The emphasis was.

ONEK: And the Ten Point Coalition is credited working collaboratively with many others to dramatically youth violence in the 1990s in what was dubbed the Boston Miracle. What was the approach used in the '90s and why was it successful?

BROWN: I think when you look back on those years, what was really miraculous was not so much the youth deciding not to kill one another and to shoot another and we had this dramatic reduction in our homicide rate and gun-shooting rate. But it was the adults deciding to come together and to check their egos at the door, if you will, from our various silos and begin
talking and collaborating with one another. What was miraculous about the coalition's efforts is that the partnerships that we began to acquire were members of the Boston Police Department and members of the Boston Probation Department. It was actually a natural extension because as we were out there walking the streets at nights and we would go out Friday and Saturday nights at 10 pm and we'd walk the streets of the Four Corners area of Dorchester until about 2, 3 in the morning.

We were an anomaly out there. I mean people would see us and they knew that weren't the police, that we weren't drug dealers, we weren't drug customers, and we had collars on, some of us. And so people were like what in the world is this? But what we also got the attention of were members of the Boston Police Department's gang unit. Because they would drive past us in those unmarked Crown Victoria cars that everybody knows who they are. But they also had the advantage of grabbing us at community meetings during the day or in the evening and saying you know we saw you on Algonquin Street at 1 am. What are you guys trying to do? And as a result of those candid conversations, we realized that there was some police officers on that side that, you know, actually grew up in the neighborhood and they just wanted to see the neighborhood get safer.
And then what they recognized in us is that they had a number
of clergy and community leaders who understood what they had
to deal on a nightly basis. So as a result of the conversation
and dialogue, we started to work together in order to reduce
violence. Probation department in the same way. A lot of the
kids that we were working with and talking directly with were
court involved, if you will. So they would have hearings and we
would go to their courts and we would stand with them as they
stood before the judges and probation officers. And the judges
would pull us aside and say is this some kind of program that
you all are trying to put together? And then we started to have
conversations with them. And that culminated in a series of
weekly meetings that we would have. Police officers, probation
officers, some youth, and the clergy talking not, you know,
about the large issue of violence in the city, but we talked
about Four Corners in Dorchester.

We talked about the neighborhoods there and Codman Square and
what we needed to do in order to make a difference in that area.
And from there it expanded into a city-wide effort.

ONEK: Now how did you maintain credibility with the community
when you started working with law enforcement? Were some community members suspicious at first of the relationships you were developing?

BROWN: Yeah. I think what we did with the youth was that we sort of positioned ourselves as honest brokers in the effort. We said, you know I mean, one of the things that the kids hate is they hate hypocrisy. They hate people who are being duplicitous. We were always very honest and up front with our relationship with the police department. We also said to them that we are trying to maintain a level of integrity with the police department, so you know, on the one hand they were looking to us to, you know, to work with the youth out on the street and on the other hands, we're looking for them to do their enforcement, but we also wanted them to do their community policing in the correct way. So we sort of positioned ourselves as the kind of honest brokers sort of monitoring the relationships, if you will, between police and the youth.

But in addition to that, I think what made it so interesting to folks is that somehow you had these African-American clergy working with these gang unit officers, many of them white and Irish-Catholic, if you will. And it just seemed to be such
an unusual combination and yeah, there was some suspicion. Particularly from a lot of the establishment leadership, but I think a lot of it was around the fact that as a result of our relationships and then the work that we were doing, we were actually achieving some measurable results. And so people, you know, if you have invested yourself in a system, if you will, that you know continues to perpetuate the norm and you see the norm changing, then you know, you have some tension. And we did have that tension with a lot of the leaders.

ONEK: So you talked about collaborating with law enforcement. You've collaborated with many other important groups as well, from secular community-based organizations to academics to political leaders. Collaboration has really been a recurring theme on this program and is a defining part of both of our careers. So I'd like to delve into some of those other collaborations first. Let's talk about the secular groups as well. How much collaboration had there previously been before the Ten Point Coalition came between the faith community and the secular community in terms of working with kids?

BROWN: There wasn't a whole lot of collaboration. There might have been some individual work with individual pastors. But
when we started doing our work, the faith factor in this whole idea of violence reduction collaboration as a tool for violence reduction was really a unique thing. People were just beginning to talk about the importance of faith communities in this kind of work. So there wasn't a whole lot before them, but afterwards, you know, the work that we did with the YMCA, for example, and the Boys and Girls Clubs, a lot of the local community groups we would be working with and collaborating with on some issues. A lot of these community groups would have programs within their ranks that would deal with at-risk youth, but they weren't quite getting at those youth who were at risk or at high risk. [00:12:48] And so were able to funnel youth, you know, into their programs. And so it was really a fruitful kind of collaboration and we continue to enjoy it to this day.

ONEK: Now, the Ten Point coalition recently received a significant grant from the Boston Foundation to hire street outreach workers. Was there any resentment from the local secular organizations that in other cities, maybe, would have been the groups to receive that funding, that they did not get the funding for that?

BROWN: Well, I think that the Boston Foundation was really on
the vanguard with this particular effort that you're describing, the StreetSafe Program. It was and still is a program of a major foundation in the city, where they made a very clear and very large commitment to put forward the value of street work, you know, in cities and municipalities. And so when they were looking to have individuals help them with the hiring and the training of those individuals, they came to the Boston Ten Point coalition. We have street workers that are actually gang mediators in our ranks, and so, you know, most of us worked the streets for significant period of time. And so we came together with Chris Byner, who runs the street worker program for the City of Boston. And we went through the hiring process, and helped to hire the 20-something street workers that the Boston Foundation eventually hired. And then we also put them through the training that we thought was necessary for them, and helped to mold, to shape, and shape the program for its first year. And you know, in my opinion, it's been a very successful collaboration. The fact that this city now has almost double the street workers that it had before, through the benefit of the Boston Foundation, just speaks volumes to the commitment that we have in this city to seeing the end of the era of violence in the City of Boston.
ONEK: Now, you also work very closely with researchers at Harvard, which is also pretty unique about what's happening in Boston. What do researchers bring to the table that help you in your day-to-day work?

BROWN: Yeah. I really believe in data-driven strategies, and data-driven results. Anthony Braga, who is formerly of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, is now at Rutgers, has been our evaluator and our researcher of the many collaborative efforts that we have been an equal part of at the Boston Ten Point Coalition. You know, it was through the efforts of Anthony Braga that we discovered that it was 1% of the youth population in the city drove over 50% of the violence in the city, and that if we concentrated our efforts on that 1-1.5% of youth in the city, that we would make a significant dent in the youth violence population. And also, there was a lot of data that sort of revealed how to measure hotspots in the city, and hotspots are those areas in which, you know, there are a lot of back-and-forth retaliations between groups. And so for Anthony to come in and to give us that data helped to, helped us to try to shape the community policing, for example, that would be geared towards hot-spot policing. And then for our efforts on Ten Point, to target our mediation and our cease-fire and
truce strategies around those groups that are having emerging conflicts between them. And even help us to get to them before the conflicts get too bad. So I'm a huge fan of data-driven strategies. And also with evaluations, we really have to achieve measurable results. The communities in our cities are looking not just for services, but they're looking for measureable results. Measureable reductions in violence. And so I'm an advocate for our academics.

ONEK: Well, data-driven decision making is really another theme that has consistently been seen on this program, and as you know from your work in San Francisco, Anthony has done similar studies, Anthony Braga, in San Francisco, which led to some strategies that have led to a dramatic reduction in violence in San Francisco in the last couple of years. Last question, quickly, about collaborations is with political leaders. You are close with political leaders on both sides of the aisle. Current Governor, Deval Patrick, a Democrat, former governor, Mitt Romney, a Republican. How have you managed to operate in that environment, staying above the political fray, and kind of, how do you respond to criticism from faith leaders that you should be steering away from political leaders all together or they'll co-opt you?
BROWN: Yeah, you learn how to dance very well, that's how you do it, David. But seriously, one of the commitments that we made as a coalition is that we would work with anybody who would be willing to work with us. That we wouldn't be politically partisan. But we also know and understand how policy helps drive, you know, what we do all the way down at the street level. And so if we don't become advocates in order to deal with some of the political issues and policy issues that get developed not only within the city but within the state as well, then you know, we could essentially be just spinning our wheels. If we're looking for change, and change has to come also from the state house, as well as from the streets. And so, working with political leaders who understand our message and understand our emphasis is what we did. And with Governor Romney, he was a big advocate of what we were striving to do, and we worked closely with him in order to maintain the Shannon Grant and some of the other large grants that we were able to get through the executive office of public safety here in the state. And the same thing with Governor Patrick. The continuation of those grants, even in the midst of our economy and the budget cuts. You know, we worked with coalitions of groups across the state, coalition of faith groups across the state. Lou Finfer is one
of our lobbyists that worked tirelessly in order to help us to maintain the funding that we had so that we could continue our social programming. And then other kinds of advocacy such as CORI Reform, which is a big, big, was a big, big issue in our city and in our state, where reforming the CORI system and putting caps on, you know, time limits on when a person's criminal record would be sealed, was a really important piece, and particularly, when you're working with young, getting out of the gang life, and redeeming themselves and going back to school, and getting an education. And they need that second chance. So CORI reform was very important.

ONEK: Can you explain what that is, for the non-local listeners here, what CORI is?

BROWN: Sure. So the CORI is the Criminal Offender Record, I believe it's Inventory. I think it's C-O-R-I. And so it's basically a person's criminal record. A record of arrests, a record of prosecution through the system, and dismissals or convictions. And so when you're working with youth who are involved in gangs, you usually have a CORI record. The problem comes when you work with them and you're able to get them out of the life of violence. You know, they find themselves with
records, and they find themselves in very difficult situations trying to get a job. And what we've found in the State of Massachusetts is that our CORI system was a very broken and antiquated system, so it was really being unfair to a lot of people who maybe found themselves, you know, in trouble when they were younger, and you know, sort of paid their debt to society, but now looking for ways to become productive members of society. And so what we did was we advocated for changes in the CORI law that would be reflective of a fair appraisal of a person's record as they go on in life. And Governor Patrick was a huge, huge advocate of CORI reform, and it was due to a lot of the relationships we were able to build with the Governor and his staff, and we were able to get CORI reform passed in this state. It had been 20 years in advocacy, but because of the relationship we had with Governor Patrick, we were able to get it through.

ONEK: Now, let me turn back to the work you did in the 1990's. You had those dramatic drops. But then homicides and violence began to creep up again. Why were those gains not able to be sustained?

BROWN: Yeah. I think that there was some missteps that occurred
on our part, and not intentional, but something that happened as a result of the evolution of what we were doing. For example, on Ten Point side, we didn't do a good job in succession planning. Once we were able to realize the success of the coalition, and once we were able to professionalize it by getting an Executive Director and putting people in place to run the organization, myself and Ray Hammond, and Eugene Rivers, we found ourselves all flying across the country, and in my case across the world, presenting the work of Ten Point to whoever wanted to hear it. But the leadership at home wasn't the kind of leadership that we should have had moving forward. So I think that was a piece of it. I think another piece of it was that there was an emphasis shift away from youth, gang violence, and more toward reentry issues, because we had a lot of youth, a lot of men who were coming back into the city in large numbers, and they had 20 dollars and bus pass. So reentry became a critical piece. And then I think around 2001, September 11th, an event occurred that dried up much of the Federal money that we were using in order to drive some of the work that we were doing in the City. And so I think the combination of those things sort of built into a rise in violence, and we always know that the Baby Boomerang population, you know, the youth population was going to mature around 2006, and so the rise started around 2003 according to
Anthony Braga. And reached its zenith, you know, predictably, around 2006. But it was at that point that the band got back together, if you will, and all the works that we did around collaboration, we started to reinstitute that again, went back out onto the streets and measured what needed to be done for this cycle. Started to apply some of those principles, and we started to see some reductions again.

ONEK: And that's what I wanted to talk about, where you are now. I know that you're going back to kind of some of the core principles from the '90s, but also expanding on those in new ways, and one of the things you're doing in embarking on a city-wide gang mediation effort. I was wondering if you can tell us a little bit about that.

BROWN: Yeah. We've had a bit of a surge in our violence and homicide rate in our city. We've had some really horrendous homicides. There was an incident that happened on Wilson Street in Dorchester where four people were killed and one person was very critically injured. And among those people killed was a two-year-old child, and it was the first time that we had a child who was killed who was actually targeted for death. It wasn't an accident, as some of these unfortunate
child homicides have occurred. But it was actually somebody intentionally killing the child because the word is that they thought that the child might identify the person. And then we had another horrific homicide where a woman was killed at a convenience store, a guy came in with an AK47, just sort of sprayed the place and cut her down, she was just there to buy some groceries. And so as a result of that, you had the whole city sort of take pause. And rather than be reactive, we decided as a coalition to be proactive, and so we went into planning to put together a city-wide mediation effort, which we will reveal and unveil to the city in a couple of weeks. And the goal of it is that by the fall of 2011, that we will settle all of the major disputes between the major gangs of the City of Boston. So it's a very large, and a very ambitious --

ONEK: So how are you going to do that, is the question our listeners must be wondering.

BROWN: Right. So it'll be using the resources of the Coalition, number one, and that is the number of churches that we've had doing all the work of the coalition, which is the community walks we've been doing. The work around the memorials, and a lot of the work with families who have been the victims of
homicides. Using our gang mediators to connect with the gang young. We pretty much know all the gangs in the city and we also know who's in conflict with whom. We also are going to be leveraging law enforcement and putting together a series of meetings and cease-fire meetings, etc. And utilizing our community resources, and working with our partners in order to find avenues by which we can have meetings and have what we call gang summits. And to be able to do the aftercare pieces, which we will work with the youth in terms of their needs, around education, around job training, and prayerfully around job creation, even though things are tough these days. But I think it's something that the, not only the community is crying for, but the youth of the city are also crying for it. And it's a part of an overall effort, of kind of a wakeup call that has happened in the City of Boston. You've got groups all over the place who are becoming more activist now. And so we think that this will really enhance and add greatly to the peace of the city, once it's all said and done.

ONEK: Well, we'll be watching closely. Let me turn now to some of your national work. You are frequently asked to come to different communities around the country and help support the faith community's involvement in local violence prevention
efforts. We've worked together in San Francisco and Oakland, in Richmond in that capacity here in the Bay Area, and you are now involved in an effort in California to replicate and enhance the Boston approach in multiple California cities. Coming from Boston, how do you begin to go into a new community and engage the faith community? How do you have a sense of which faith leaders are out there walking the walk, as you're doing in Boston, and which ones are just talking about violence?

BROWN: What I've found, in all the work that I've done over the past 18, 19 years, with the Coalition, is that in every community, in every city, there are groups of clergy that have faced the same dilemmas that I've faced in Boston, and many of them doing it by themselves have begun to engage directly with the youth, which is a key component when you're looking for clergy who are willing to do this kind of work. And then there's certain characteristics that I look for when I'm talking with various officials about what kind of groups they want to form in their city. And with clergy, it's, you want to look for those individuals who are committed to this kind of work beyond, that they integrate the message of street outreach and work with gangs and drug dealers and whoever's out on the street. They integrate that into their church's mission. And you're looking
for people who are committed to doing the work, and not so much for press clippings, if you will, but they're doing it for the greater good, and the greater spiritual purpose, by which they are already connected as faith leaders. And I often say to people, you know, I'm looking for the folks that, if you look at their church signs, that you know, if their name is larger than Jesus' name, then that's not the person I'm looking for. But I'm looking for those individuals who are really committed to the mission of the church, and tie the work of antiviolence into their mission of the church, and they see it as integral to that. Those are the folks that you want to work with.

ONEK: Now, you've been firm in your belief that there are a small number of serious and violent offenders that need to be locked up for the protection of society and themselves. What do you say to faith leaders who accuse you of giving up on those kids?

BROWN: Yeah. I get this often when I'm speaking in various places, and I'll never forget a minister, I won't mention, it was a major city in the United States, just got up and really got upset with me when I said to them, look, there are some youth who are so out of control, that the only way that you're
going to be able to get their attention is if they're in prison. And he's like, that's nonsense, you know, he just got upset, and he said, every child, you know, can be saved. You have to look at it in that way. And I responded to him by saying, well, I'm not saying that every child can't be saved, I just said that some of them need a prison ministry. I mean, listen, when you are dealing with violence in the community, and you've got a kid who's already killed two or three people, that's, a line has been crossed. You can't, you know, just sort of continue to try to work on him as he continues to try to plan murders. You've got to be able to ensure the safety of the community. And part of that is getting those kids, who've gone to that extreme, and putting them in a place where they can do no more harm. One of the things that we did in working with the police in our community is that we helped them to do the community policing better, and as a result of that, they were able to target some of the hardcore youth that were in a particular gang, and they would leave the rest of them to us, to the ministries that we had formed and put together. And the partnership around that really works. But when it comes to violence, there are some youth that you're not going to be able to reach outside of prison walls, they're going to have to be in jail.
ONEK: Final question, Jeff. You left Union Baptist over a year ago after 22 years. Do you miss it?

BROWN: You know, if, I'd be lying if I said that I didn't. I mean, there, when you're a pastor for 22 years and you have relationships and you have people that you have been around, and you've seen folks grow, and kids go to school and graduate and go to college and all of that, I miss the people. But, and I miss the relationships. But I also have to say that the church, I really feel like I haven't left the church. I had someone say to me, you know, when they asked me a similar question, their response after I told them about what I just told you, was that, well, you know, honestly, your church is no longer a building that sits in Cambridge. Your church is the courtrooms of the city. Your church is the streets of the city. Your church are the jailhouses of the city. And they're absolutely right. So I haven't really left the pastorate, if you will. I just left the building and changed the venue, but I'm still doing the work.

ONEK: Jeff Brown, thanks so much for joining us.

BROWN: Thanks, David. Good to hear from you.
ONEK: Please tune in next week when we’ll be joined by Bernard Melekian, Director of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) Office of the U.S. Department of Justice. Thank you for listening to the Criminal Justice Conversations Podcast. You can find this episode of the program, and all prior episodes, on our website at www.law.berkeley.edu/cjconversations, on NPR KALW’s website, and on iTunes. You can also become a fan of Criminal Justice Conversations on Facebook, and you can follow us on Twitter on CJ Conversations. The podcast is engineered by Milt Wallace, our editor is Nancy Lopez, and our program intern is Sheridan Bloch. I'm David Onek, thanks for listening.