Focus groups and interviews repeatedly returned to the impacts of gangs and gang violence on Puerto Rican individuals and families, as well as on the larger community. The gang issue is of broad Latino concern, since gangs seem not to divide themselves by Latino origin.

From 2009 to 2010, the two Chicago Police Districts most identified with Humboldt Park and the Puerto Rican community (14th and 25th) saw a decline in juvenile arrests.¹

In 2010, District 25 had the second-highest number of total Latino juvenile arrests in the City of Chicago and the highest number of Latina juvenile arrests.¹

Latinas made up a quarter of all Latino juvenile arrests in 2010 in the 25th District. They were arrested almost two times as often as African American female youth.¹

Despite challenges, the PRIA has experienced an overall decline in crimes over the past 10 years.

1. PROJECT NIA: ARRESTING JUSTICE JUVENILE CRIMES COUNTS 2009 AND 2010
2. CITY OF CHICAGO DATA PORTAL 311 CRIME INCIDENTS (2001 TO 2011)
3. CHICAGO POLICE DEPARTMENT MURDER ANALYSIS (2011)
A major historical concern of almost all Puerto Ricans in the Chicago metro area has been the well-being of its young people. Issues surrounding Puerto Rican youth cannot be addressed without a discussion and strategy to effectively deal with one of the most serious issues of our time: gang violence. During interviews and focus group discussions, the longevity of gang violence was one of the major topics. Almost everyone we talked to had a personal story regarding some sort of experience with gangs. Sometimes the story concerned the loss of someone close to them. At other times the story concerned a family member who joined a gang. These stories are important because they give a face to a gang member—a brother, sister, son, daughter, friend, even oneself. Collectively these stories counter other narratives that see gang members more abstractly as social deviants or the consequences of disadvantaged communities.

Chicago has a long and notorious history regarding street gangs and murder rates. During the summer of 2012, for instance, as we were writing this report, the media kept itself busy by talking about the sudden spike in homicides. A portion of these murders, but not all, were due to street gangs. A special Sun-Times report, “Chicago Under Fire,” stated that from June 2011 to June 2012 there was a 9% jump in shootings and a 37% jump in murders across the city. And yet the same report explicitly acknowledged long-term declines in murder rates since the 1990s:

Note: This section is concerned with youth crime. However, crime data does not disaggregate Puerto Ricans from the broader term “Latino.” This is one section in which that problem may not matter, for street gangs do not structure themselves according to national groups either. Our perspective then is wholistic in two ways: we are interested in all Latino youth and in community-wide solutions.
Indeed, the early 1990s in Humboldt Park had a serious number of gang-related crimes as the map below indicates. Another report documenting gang-motivated offenses between 1987-1990 claimed that Humboldt Park (Area 23) was one of the “two most dangerous communities” in Chicago, having “a mean annual rate of street gang-motivated crimes (381.5) that was 76 times the mean annual rate (5.0) in the two least dangerous neighborhoods” (NIJ / Block and Block, 1993).

It is this sort of history that worries the leaders of Puerto Rican Chicago. Even though crime rates are down, as indicated in some of the other data, there is a lingering stigma attached to Humboldt Park. Its neighborhoods continue to be known as dangerous parts of the city. Leaders claim that this image of Humboldt Park keeps some Puerto Ricans who have moved away from returning and enjoying the local retail. So, concerns about the well being of youth leaks into other areas as well.

“Everybody says, ‘What are you doing here? Your brother was murdered here, why don’t you go somewhere else?’ and I say, “I think the community needs a voice, I think it needs strong people, and I think we need to educate the youth for the future regardless if they’re Puerto Rican or not— at least band together not to hate each other. ‘Oh, somebody is Mexican and who’s Puerto Rican? And who’s Cuban and who’s Dominican and this and that’ we just, you know we need to work together.”

(Community Focus Group)

Turning to the last decade, Humboldt Park, along with the rest of Chicago, has seen significant drops in juvenile arrests (Juvenile Justice, 1). The above table confirms that this drop continued in Chicago Police Districts 25 and 14 during 2009 and 2010. These two districts take up the areas that we have been examining throughout this report, though it should be said that district 14 contains a very large section east of Western Avenue that has undergone significant gentrification over the last few decades.

However, what is notable in this table is that the 25th is ranked quite high in terms of the number of juvenile arrests city wide. The 25th district was ranked #7 in 2009 and #9 in 2010, while the 14th District ranked #17 and #20 respectively. The rate of decline in both districts is roughly comparable to Chicago wide declines.
There were 27,554 juvenile arrests in Chicago in 2010. These were arrests of persons 17 or younger not being treated as adults. 76% of the children and youth arrested were African American. 20% were Latino. The remaining 4% were primarily white.

The 14th and 25th Chicago Police Districts serve the bulk of the Puerto Rican Influence Area. The juveniles arrested in these districts comprised about 7% of the total juvenile arrests in 2010. However, the 14th and 25th Districts were also the site of about 20% of the Latino juvenile arrests overall.

In general, in the 14th and 25th Districts, Latino and African American youth were arrested in similar numbers in 2010. In the 14th District, Latino juveniles were arrested about a third more often than African Americans. In the 25th District, on the other hand, Latino males were only arrested 11% more often than African Americans males, whereas Latinas were arrested almost twice as often as African American females. Latinas also made up nearly a quarter of all juvenile arrests in the 25th District in 2010.
How do the number of Latino youth arrests in districts 25 and 14 compare to other districts in Chicago? District 25 ranks rather high. If we juxtapose these rankings to the earlier maps of Latino density, a claim could be made—with admittedly more analysis—that the 25th district has an unusual amount of youth arrest. The north side simply does not have the density of Latinos that some areas of the south side have and, therefore, Latino youth arrest rates should not be as high either. Clearly, there are some puzzles here such as the nature of youth crimes in the different areas, the stability of gang structures, and so on. This report does not have the resources for this sort of deeper inquiry, and frankly the availability of data is its own distinctive challenge. What is indeed disturbing, however, is that Humboldt Park’s struggles with gang-related violence during the 1990s seriously marked the community. The 2000s, despite general decreases in arrest rates, still represent numbers that are too high.

Those who work with youth in what we have been calling the Puerto Rican Influence Area feel that a long-standing tragedy has been unfolding for decades. Puerto Rican children, like other young people living in communities with high levels of poverty and crime, have had to overcome not only the daily challenges of growing up, but also the potential harms associated with high-crime areas. Drive-by shootings and gang boundary lines are frightening. They isolate children, preventing them from walking to school safely or playing outside.
In keeping with other aspirations of the Agenda that emphasize locally based solutions to endemic problems, we wish to shift some of the authority over crime, justice, and punishment from the state to the community. For instance, traditional models of state-based punishment that rely on police officers, courts, and finally incarceration serve to reify the debilitating labels and personas that we prefer to alter. If through the help of the state model a person increasingly isolates himself or herself into the gang-member persona, we wish, instead, to retrieve, remember, and reinforce the persona that has been temporarily forgotten. Inside any gang-member there still resides the original community member.

Our solution is to integrate the principles of restorative justice into the fabric of the community. Traditional models of punishment introduce unknown professionals into the lives of victims and offenders. Although these professionals are good-willed, a number of new harms appear beyond the original harm of the crime itself: 1) victims are unable to choose to confront offenders (and any results that may come from the opportunity); 2) offenders are removed from the community, making it difficult for them to admit guilt and remedy the depth of the harm they have caused; and 3) the communities are unable to clarify and, therefore, solidify their norms and values. There are two institutions where restorative justice principles might be best utilized: the schools via the Campus as Community initiative and the Chicago Police Department.

**OCCUPATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION:**

1. Both public and private funders should work in partnership with youth development organizations to identify and address the pressing needs of our youth. We must move from a crisis-oriented, single issue approach to a more comprehensive approach in order to promote more healthy youth development. Perhaps one example of a successful program is the Stay in School Initiative, which has been a partnership between Exelon, ComEd, and the United Way of Chicago. Using Batey Urbano as one site for its programming, the initiative has encouraged corporate internships and has seen high school graduation rates of 93% compared to the Chicago Public School average of 58.3%.

2. We must provide Puerto Rican youth alternatives to incarceration and the associated debilitating labels that often come with incarceration. It is often the case that such labels prevent these youth from rejoining society and the community, further causing more harm to communities. In creating a restorative community justice framework—consisting of Puerto Rican community leaders, stakeholders, and local law enforcement—issues of crime can be addressed while also providing opportunities for reconciliation and community development.

3. The best approach to the gang problem in Chicago must consist of comprehensive street outreach and counseling/case management. Utilizing one while excluding the other does not work. Employment is one cornerstone of a successful gang prevention/intervention program. Youth who cannot find work will more likely turn to criminal activity for financial support. A successful model has been the YMCA’s Street Intervention Program, which works with other community agencies to prepare youth for referrals for job readiness, vocational training, job development, placement, and follow-up.