

Prison Gang Boss to Problem-Solver

Voiceover

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Welcome to *The Beat*—a podcast series from the COPS Office at the Department of Justice. Featuring interviews with experts from a varied field of disciplines, *The Beat* provides law enforcement with the latest developments and trending topics in community policing.

Jennifer Donelan

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Hello, and welcome to another episode of *The Beat*. I'm your host, Jennifer Donelan. Today, we have the privilege of introducing you to a remarkable individual, someone whose story is both inspiring and transformational. Joining us today is a man who has defied the odds, changed his life, and is now dedicating to help others change their lives. In this episode, we're going to delve into Andre Norman's incredible journey, from a troubled youth growing up in Boston to his incarceration, and ultimately his transformation into a force for good.

Mr. Norman, Andre, welcome to *The Beat*.

Andre Norman

00:00:55

It is a pleasure to be here. Thank you for having me.

Donelan

00:00:57

Tell me, what is the name of the neighborhood you grew up in Boston?

Norman

00:00:59

I grew up in Mattapan, Massachusetts, yes, inside the city limits.

Donelan

00:01:03

We are so pleased to have you with us because our listeners are the very people who are patrolling and working communities right now. They're dealing with people who've had experiences like yours, and we want to ensure that the voice of someone who has dealt with law enforcement and the criminal justice system from a different angle is part of this discourse, so thank you so much. Your time and your words are going to be invaluable to us, so thank you.

Let's start in Boston. Can you tell us about your background and how it influenced your journey?

Basically, like, who are you?

Norman

00:01:33

Okay. My mom married her high school sweetheart. She had two kids. Her husband went to prison for robbing banks. While he was in prison, she met my dad, a local hustler, and she had four more kids. Life was good except for my dad had a habit of beating my mom. We'd go through the domestic violence stuff. And it's just crazy in my household. Nobody told me life wasn't like this.

And eventually, I got old enough to go to school. I started going to school and I loved playing with all the kids in the building. It was just, like, phenomenal. And then one day coming home from school, kids started throwing rocks at our bus and calling us [beep] because it was a busing crisis of Boston in the '70s.

And I went up to my dad, I said "Who are these people? Why are they throwing rocks at me? And what do these names mean?" He just walked away, and what I didn't understand was my dad grew up in the Virginia in the '50s and kids threw rocks, names at him, and when he went home to my grandfather, his dad, he just said, "That's just the way it is, Son. Run faster." So when it happened to his kids, he was twice traumatized, because he never really dealt with the trauma of what he went through, so what happened to his kids was just all bad.

One day the rocks stopped. One day the beatings stopped. My dad moved out and the kids moved on. Single mom, six kids, living in the hood. You know the story. We bounce around. I go to a new school. They find out I'm illiterate. They put me in a thing called the "dummy class" for the kids who can't read and write. Luckily for me, the teacher pulled me out of there after, like, two and a half months. She said, "You're not a dummy, you just learn differently." And she took the time to teach me my learning style.

Kept moving on. I got to middle school, I find out we're poor because my mom can't buy stuff. She got six kids, it's just a hard way to go, so I start selling weed in the park after school in the sixth grade to make money to buy clean socks, to buy lunch, to take care of my little brother, and stuff like that. And I just got on that track to nowhere.

And I joined the band just by default, because back in the days, everybody was in the band, and that's what I did. And by the time I got to high school, I was really good at being in the band, I loved playing music, and my friends I used to hang out with said, "Man, playing in the band is stupid. Playing the trumpet ain't for Black people." They convinced me to get rid of my trumpet. And when I did that, I gave up the thing that made me happy, my purpose, my way out, my reason for being. Without a purpose, I just drifted, so I ended up in prison. At 18 years old, I got a 7-10, two 9-10s, two 10s, two 15-20s, and a five. And they put me in the bus at 18, drove me to the state prison, and they dropped me off.

Donelan

00:03:49

A lot of trauma. And I know back in the day we weren't talking about trauma, it's just, is what it is, it was what it was. That was your normal, right? You said you didn't know that you were poor until you got to junior high, when you realized that you couldn't have what the other kids have because your mom was

raising six kids by herself. You had the band and then you lost that. You were called the n-word and had rocks thrown at you and you learned about hate just based on the color of your skin. So all of that's happening at pivotal moments in your lifetime as a child and you're forming into an adult. What was it, if you don't mind my asking, that were the reasons, the crimes that landed you with those sentences?

Norman

00:04:24

I robbed drug dealers for a living. So back when I was a kid, every criminality or crime somebody taught you. You didn't walk out the house and just become a criminal. People taught you how to become a criminal, they taught you things, and the people I hung around were stickup kids, so they showed me how to rob people. Then once I learned how to rob people, it only makes sense robbing people with the most money, and back in the days and today, drug dealers are the people with the most money, so that's how I used to rob. So home invasions, armed robberies, armed assaults, all against drug dealers.

Donelan

00:04:53

Got it. Now, this is leading up to your 18 years of age. Prior to you going to prison, there's an experience where you travel to Europe, right?

Norman

00:05:01

Yes. My 11th year in high school, I'm failing three years in a row, I'm on track to dropping out. There's really no reason for me to even go to school. I just went because I was programmed to go. I went to class late one day and the teacher was like, "I don't want to hear it today." She kicked me out. She's like, "I don't want to deal with you."

So I'm walking in the hallways, and we know in public school when the superintendent of the school comes, there's no games. So I'm walking in the hallway. The security guard's like, "Dre, get out of the hallway." And it's one of those, "The boss is coming, we ain't having it today."

So I'm like, "Aight, cool," but I couldn't go to my gym because the local gang ran the gym and I didn't want to get robbed, but I had nowhere to go. I'm like, "Dude, I got nowhere to go." He said, "Go in the auditorium, but sit in the back because I'm not supposed to let you in there. Just sit in the back and be quiet."

So I go in the auditorium, I sit in the back. There's a little guy with a bow tie up front telling all these kids that they can go to Europe, they can go to Italy, they can go to France. I was good at first, then Andre kicked in. I'm like, "Ah, you're BS-ing these kids. Ain't nobody going nowhere. Why are you down here lying?" And instead of kicking me out, he challenged me.

He said, "Don't talk to me from the back. Talk to me to my face." And my buddy laughed at me, so it made me walk down front, and he said, "Have you tried to go?" I said, "No." He said, "Well, never say no for them." He gave me the application. He said, "Fill it out. When they say no, then you got an argument. Before then, you ain't got nothing to say."

Fast forward about four months, I'm sitting at home on a Saturday, and I looked at my desk, and it was the day the papers were due, so I filled them out. I wasn't doing nothing. Grabbed a buddy, we went over to the drop-off center, and I dropped the application off. And when you go in, it's mom, dad, sister, brother, everybody dressed up nice. You know, whole family's out. I'm there with a high school dropout, my man Derek, and we're in a stolen car and we got leather jackets on.

And we went around and we interviewed with all 84 participants. The rule was that you couldn't judge based on grades because they wanted Black kids to go, so to get Black kids, you had to, like, erase grades. It just had to go on potential. So I interviewed with all 84 companies, and when I walked away, I got the first scholarship. Every single agency said they wanted Andre Norman.

Because it was like a draft. Every company would say, "Well, these are the 10 people we want." And based off that, that's how they gave the scholarships out. I was number one on every list in that whole room, and when the news got to the principal of my school, he called me in and he started cussing me out for winning a scholarship. Then the bow tie guy came in. He starts cussing us both out. Something about, "He's not representing the school. He's a failure. He's this." He just started dogging me, and what he was saying was true, and when he finished, the man raised his hand. He said, "Mr. Principal, there's a few things I want to tell you. One, it's not your decision. Two, it's not your money. And three, he's going. Have a nice day." And we walked out of the room. And never before had I had somebody stand up for me like that.

When we got in the hallway, he didn't say it, but he looked at me like, "I told you so. Don't ever say no for them." And that summer, I got a chance to go to Europe. I went to London, to Richmond University. I got a chance to go to Amsterdam, Belgium, and France, and it was like, one of the greatest summers of my life. All the while, flunking out of school.

Donelan

00:08:01

You also met a very close friend who, I think, becomes an important part of your life moving forward.

Norman

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When I got there, it was a bunch of rich White kids, and that's where I started at first. And I'm there, there's like, all these rich White kids, because I got a scholarship. Everybody else paid to go. Their parents paid for them to go to Europe. And I remember when I first got there, the counsel's like, "Hey, at the end of the summer, we're having a recital. Are your parents coming?" I'm like, "Dude, we're in London. What are you talking about?" And it didn't make sense to me that people's parents would fly from America to London for a 30-minute recital.

But at the end of the summer, they actually did that, and it was astonishing to me. But along the way, there was just this one girl named Morgan, we just became super cool, and to this day, you know what I'm saying, that's like my best friend. We were the same people, just grew up in different cities. And the entire time I hung out with her, we just became buddies, and when I came home, we stayed in touch.

And when I went to prison in 1985, we're like a year apart, she went to college the year after, she actually went to college probably like 20 minutes from my prison at Brown University, so she can come visit me. And for her whole four years in college, she used to come visit me.

Donelan

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That's a person who's extremely and critically important to you. That's amazing.

Norman

00:09:10

People have shown up for me at different stages. It's just most of the time, people were trying to help me, I couldn't receive the help because my brain was blocked off from the good side of the world.

Donelan

00:09:22

And you didn't know it. I mean, I know that, you know, hindsight's 20/20, and growing up you knew no better, no different, but that's the same for all of us, that, you know, our reality's our reality, right? Until we're exposed to other things. So I can imagine that must have been a life changing moment for you. And 18 months after the experience in Europe, that is when you're on that bus heading to prison.

Norman

00:09:40

Yeah, about 18 months after, I'm right in prison, because it didn't change my life but it changed my perspective, and the one thing that trip did for me, even though I got in a lot of trouble in prison, I got convicted of two attempted murders, I've been shipped around the country to all the federal penitentiaries—Louisburg, Terre Haute, Atlanta, El Reno—I've been in all of them. I've been in riots on the airlifts.

But the thing that stuck with me is I could travel the world because I had done it, and so many of the people I came in contact with had never left their neighborhoods. So we would see something on TV and I'd be like, "Oh, I've been there." Like, "Man, stop lying." "No, I've been there. Yo, I've been to France," or, "I've been to Amsterdam. I've been to London." I never had the belief that I couldn't travel and that things are too far for me. It seems like a small thing until you realize 99 percent of the guys have never left their neighborhood.

Donelan

00:10:24

Yeah, it's not a small thing at all. It opened you to new experiences. It showed you what's possible, just like you said, a lot of the guys never even left the neighborhood, let alone the city, the state, the country. So I can imagine what an impact that had on you.

When you're in prison, looking at 95 years, and I want to talk about a gentleman you met there as well, Dominic. But what I'd like to do is pause right now. This is 1985, you said?

Norman

00:10:50

Yes.

Donelan

00:10:50

Looking back now, because I want to put it in perspective for the listeners, when you talk about, you know, "I robbed drug dealers, I did home invasions, I had two attempted murders in prison," et cetera, you're running through those almost nonchalantly. But I can't imagine that you are nonchalant about them, so put that in perspective for me.

How are you able to sort of put all of what you did and what you've been through and now, looking back on that, at the time, were you cognizant that, "Hey, I'm hurting people. I'm hurting myself," or, "No, this is just the way it is"?

Norman

00:11:20

I mean, that's just life. For me, when I was in the street, they taught us the game, and in my mind, robbing other people in the game, criminals, wasn't a bad thing. I'm not robbing old ladies. I'm not knocking off the corner store. I'm robbing other criminals.

When I got to prison, all of my beefs are with other gang members. I'm not attacking or jumping on staff because I'm bored. These are other people who have signed up for this lifestyle, so I'm not victimizing people. In my mind, I'm victimizing people who signed up for what I signed up for, and may the fittest win. And that was my attitude at the time.

Donelan

00:11:51

You said that was your attitude at the time. What's your attitude now looking back at all of that? Like, what's your perspective on it?

Norman

00:11:57

My perspective now, well, it was wrong. I mean, I learned while I was in prison before I came home what I was doing was wrong. I mean, I knew it was wrong when I was doing it. I just thought it was acceptable. I could justify robbing drug dealers because they were drug dealers. I could justify stabbing gang members because they were gang members. I could justify it because how I classified the people, I took them from being human and made them things. Once I started seeing people as human, I could see things I did were wrong. They weren't mistakes. They were just really bad decisions that I made based on faulty information that I chose to believe. Nobody made me believe what I believed. I chose to believe it because that's how I wanted to see the world.

So it's completely wrong and I use those experiences now when I talk to people about making bad decisions based on bad information, and making bad decisions based out of fear. There all wasn't bad information. At some points, I was just scared of not doing the things that everybody else was doing. I didn't want to go against the grain because I didn't know what that looked like. So hey, we're gang banging? I'm banging. If we robbing, I'm robbing. I don't want to be the oddball out. I want to fit in.

And fitting in got me to prison, so when I realized that fitting in wasn't winning for me, that I had to become the king of nowhere, then I'm like, "This is stupid." You know, it wasn't until I became the boss of bosses that I realized, "This is the dumbest [beep] ever." I wanted to do something different.

Donelan

00:13:17

When you talk about the king of nothing and the boss of bosses, break that down. You became a prison boss.

Norman

00:13:22

I became a prison gang leader. So I represented majority if not all of the Black prisoners in the prisons I was in. Every prison you go to, there's a White boss, a Black boss, a Spanish boss, and they kind of have authority over all the rest. If something happens, that's the go-to person. And I was a go-to person for the Blacks. And in most prisons where you go, Blacks have the biggest numbers, so being the go-to person for the Blacks makes you default king of the prison, because you have the biggest amount of soldiers at your dispense.

Donelan

00:13:51

And that's real. Talk to me about what starts to change, what happens in prison where you start to make a change. Was it a moment in solitary confinement?

Norman

00:14:01

I'm in solitary for two and a half years, and sitting in a cell with no lights, looking at a brick wall all day, and I thought I was winning because they put me in the most super max prison that they had. I'd been kicked out of the federal system. I'd been kicked out of Terre Haute, kicked out of Louisburg, kicked out of Atlanta. I'm like, "Oh, I'm that guy." In my mind, I'm winning.

And it wasn't until I finally came to realize that I was really the king of nothing, that I wasn't winning. It was something I lied to myself about. And I asked myself, "Is this my fate? Is this what I want to do for the rest of my days?" So I came up with a thing. I said, "I want to be free." So I went to all my friends and said, "Yo, man, I want to be free, I want to go home." And they were like, "We don't go home. It's not what we do. And if we do go home, we come right back."

And I looked. The White guys, the Black guys, the Spanish guys, the gang members, the church guys, the Muslims, the Christians, everybody went home and got free and they all came back, so I said, "I don't want to be free because it doesn't work." So I said, "I want to be successful, because successful people don't come here." So I said, "I'm going to be successful. I'll never come here again."

I picked a school called Harvard University, because that's where successful people come from. There was nobody in prison from Harvard, so I said, "I'm going to go home and go to Harvard, be successful, and never come back here again."

Donelan

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What was your association with Harvard? What'd you do there? How'd you get hooked up with that?

Norman

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I'm from Boston, Massachusetts. I used to ride the trains as a kid because I hated going home, and one of the stops on the train was Harvard Square, so I would go to Harvard Square and ride my skateboard and just hang out a lot. So when I decided to go to college, Harvard University's the only school I knew the name of.

Donelan

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So how does that work? I mean, you've got law-abiding, right, no prison record, high achievers who can't get into Harvard, who can't take a class at Harvard. How do you end up with Harvard?

Norman

00:15:39

What happened is I wrote a list of all the things that I needed to do to be the person that Harvard would accept, then I looked in the mirror and I said, "What's inside of me that's stopping this from happening?" Then I started working on my list. I got my GED. I started going to anger management. I started going to counseling. I went to a law library. I reversed my case on appeal. I started going to therapy. I started becoming a better person. I became a mentor. I started doing everything I needed to do to be worthy of getting into Harvard.

It took me eight years to overturn my case, to overturn my attitude, and to get a new lease on life, and to finally get out of prison. And in 1999, I walked out of prison with a goal: to go to Harvard University.

Donelan

00:16:18

So you're out of prison, you've done 14 years?

Norman

00:16:21

14.

Donelan

00:16:22

How old were you at that point?

Norman

00:16:23

32.

Donelan

00:16:24

And you get out, you've done this work in prison. One question I want to ask you about, and I want to dig into this a little bit later, but now seems like a good time, in terms of when you got to prison, where and did rehabilitation exist for you? Were there opportunities offered? Did rehabilitation even exist within the walls of the prison? Was it up to you to take advantage? Or was the opportunity not even there? How did that work, in terms of rehabilitation in prison?

Norman

00:16:51

My first two days in prison, I was called to the unit manager's office, and a caseworker sat me down and she told me about GED, forklift, college degrees, different certifications I can get, good time I can earn, jobs I can hold. She told me everything that the prison offered and how I could better my life. I'm like, "Oh, this is crazy." I didn't never thought they had all this stuff in prison.

So I went back to the unit. I called my mom, I said, "Yo, Mom, I can get a GED, I can get a college degree, I can get certified in forklift and certified in this and certified electrician, I can be a certified HVAC." I'm like, "This is crazy." It's like, I never thought this was really real in prison. I thought it was just like, all craziness.

So I got to the gate at 1:00 to go back to school, and my homies walked up and said, "Dre, where you going?" I said, "I'm going to school." They're like, "Oh, he got the caseworker's speech." I said, "Huh?" They said, "Yeah, the lady told you you can get a GED, you can get a forklift degree, you can go to college, you can do this, you can do this, but what she didn't tell you is when the people in this prison find out that you ain't got no backing, they going to beat you down, they going to take your stuff, you might get robbed or raped. That's going to happen every single day, and that caseworker's not going to come help, so you got a choice. You can try to go to school and fight off 500 gang members, or you can hang with us and be safe."

That was my choice. So the school was there, everything was there except for protection. The guards don't protect you, they just take count. Nothing against the guards, but they weren't going to protect

me from being robbed, raped, or beat. My guys were. So I joined a gang and I never went to school, so the school is there but it's not really accessible if you want to survive.

Donelan

00:18:21

And it's that time you're in solitary confinement for two years, that's when you start having those conversations with yourself saying, "I want something different," and then you start taking advantage of those programs. How did you get around with no protection at that point?

Norman

00:18:34

By the time I decided I want to go to school, I'm the third ranking gang member in the state. I have more violent attacks on people in a little bit, so people know my reputation, and they're like, "Yo, Dre crazy. He going to school." But I was somebody then. That first day, I was nobody, so people were like, "Man, we can rob him. We can rape him. We can take his stuff. He ain't nobody." By the time I decided to go to school, I had a reputation of being dangerous.

And I remember one time, I'm walking back to the unit, and a guy said, "Dre, where you going?" Said, "I'm going to get my books. I'm going to the program." They're like, "Why you going to programs?" I said, "Man, I'm trying to get my life together. Man, I'm working hard. I got all these plans. I'm going to Harvard." They're like, "Man, you're the smartest dude in the penitentiary. You don't need to go to school." I said, "Man, listen, this is what's happening. I need to go."

They were like, "Man, what's really happening up there?" They trying to challenge me. I said, "Listen, I'm going to counseling today, and I can talk about one of two things: I can either talk about me and my dad's relationship and how it got me off track, or I can go to unit and get my knife and come back and stab you in the face and go talk about that, but either way, I'm going to counseling." And they were like, "Nah, Dre, man, go to counseling." I'm like, "You sure? Because we can do this thing right here, right now. It ain't no big deal to me."

And I was willing to die for what I believed in, on the front end, I was willing to die for it on the way out. You can't switch up your stance as far as who you are because you're going to get challenged, you're going to get tried, and if you're weak, they're going to run you over. And it's that simple. There's not a lot to that. Maximum security prison's not built for weak.

Donelan

00:19:53

What's frustrating to me, Andre, is that those programs are there, right? You're there, the programs are there. You had to get to a point where people were afraid of you to go to those programs. At least that was the reality, I'm assuming. It's not just in your head. For you, that was reality.

Norman

00:20:07

Oh, that's reality. I've watched people be stabbed. I've watched people be murdered. I've known of people countless times who've been raped, been robbed, so it's not a make believe thing. What they said to me in that first two days wasn't make believe. I'm in a maximum security prison with people who aren't going home, and this is it. They've been here 10, 20, 30 years.

They don't care about your GED. They don't care about your dreams and aspirations. You know what I'm saying? You're a rookie. You're fish bait. They're going to try to eat you. This is survival of the fittest, not who can get the closest to GED. Nobody cares about a GED score. So at one level, in the beginning, that's just life, and until you get to a certain stage, you can't call your own shots, and definitely not as a new guy. New guys don't call no shots.

Donelan

00:20:46

Listen, I know you're telling it like it is, but that's disheartening for me. It makes me sad, because to have to live that way inside, and when you talk about recidivism and people coming back out and the revolving door of justice of people heading right back in because they don't make those changes, and this cycle of violence, this cycle of trauma just continues until, for you, you stopped it. You stopped it.

But these mechanisms, you know, when you've got the rest of the world, or not the entire world, but when you have people who are like, "We've got to do something to make this better," what you're presenting seems almost insurmountable.

Norman

00:21:22

The school building is in most prisons. Therapy, mental health, is in most prisons. But being able to access it safely is not in most prisons. And then I got to the point where my reputation gave me leeway, but it also stopped me from getting into certain programs because people didn't want to deal with me just in case.

There was a CO at MCI Norfolk named Henderson who saw me one day. He said, "Yo, Norman, you need to be in this anger management program." But I didn't qualify because I was a gang leader. I said, "Man, they ain't going to let me in there." He said, "I'll get you in." And he said, "Just don't mess it up." And he said, "I'm going to get you in. Don't make me look bad." And he got me in the program.

And when I got in the program, I stayed in there for three years. This guy did not have to let me in. He did not. He went out of his way to say, "I'm going to give you a chance because I see you trying. I'm going to give you a shot." He could of just skipped over me and said nothing, but he took a chance and said, "I'm going to let you in this program because I see you working hard."

And people called him the biggest [beep] in the whole prison as far as guards. But the just did the book. He was one of them "by the rule" guys, and that's it. He did it by the book, bar nothing. But he gave me

a shot when I didn't deserve it. I, maybe I did deserve it, but he just said, "I'm going to give you a chance." And a few people gave me a chance. And when I got those chances, I'd make the most of them.

Donelan

00:22:35

Andre, people hear your story and they see a convicted felon, they see someone who was sentenced to 95 years in prison. They see someone who was a prison boss, well respected in prison circles. What would you say to law enforcement officers who are listening to us saying, "What is this guy doing on *The Beat*?" Why is it so important that they hear what you have to say?

Norman

00:23:01

The same way they became police officers, they were trained by other police officers. Lawyers were trained by lawyers, doctors by doctors. Prisoners and criminals need to be taught by people that they know, like, and respect as well, so I've lived the life, and for the last 24 years on this side and eight years on the inside, so 32 years of my life, it's clear that I've actually done the work, walked the walk, talked the talk, and I've helped police stay alive. I've helped corrections stay alive. I've helped people in Montana to Miami stay alive. I don't pick favorites.

And so a police officer should listen to me because I want you to make it home at the end of your shift. That's it. I want you to make it home to your wife and kids, the same way I want the other guy to make it home to his wife and kids. It's important that you have people who are credible at the table who are trying to get these men to put down their weapons and pick up a pen or something else.

So you can't really get that done with people that you just want to prop up, so it has to be somebody that they know, trust, and love, not somebody you know, trust, and love, and can manage. And we go inside. I've been in prisons for the last 24 years. I just did a 13 prison tour in New York. I went to 13 prisons in New York in 13 days. I was just at a Louisiana prison. Last week I was in Florida in prison. The week before I was in Michigan in prison.

I mean, I still go inside as often as I can and I talk to people in real time and I bring the message that harming people is not what we want to be about, and I challenge them to do and be better. And we have a program now called Aventiv Securus tablets, where they have tablets in prison, and we put positive messaging on the tablets and we send it inside, and 650,000 prisoners are watching positive messages every day through Aventiv tablets.

And I'm not putting on trap music. I'm not putting on "kill your ops", I'm putting on, "Man, get a career. Get a GED. Get counseling. Come home and be law-abiding citizens." And why a police officer should care about me is every person I convince to change his ways is one less person to have to deal with in a negative sense, and I'm working on people who commit murders and really violent offenses. I'm not trying to convince the shoplifter not to steal meat, I'm trying to convince someone who carries a gun not to pull the trigger. That's better for everybody included.

And it's a partnership. And I understand from day one that the police are the lead in this space, and we come alongside to do the things that we do, because we shouldn't be working with everybody. We should be targeting a certain population, and through collaboration we can decrease death and increase public safety.

Donelan

00:25:32

Andre, I want to move into what you're doing now, and then ask you a couple questions from your perspective, your opinion, because to me, it's vital. You've lived through a lot. You've had a lot of experience, both positive and negative. That's a life that has a lot of knowledge. And so I'd like to hear your opinions on some other things, too. So let's talk about what you're doing now. What are you doing now?

Norman

00:25:56

What I'm doing now is I'm living my life in a way that my OG gave me before I left out. There's a guy named MT. He was one of the most dangerous guys you could say in the prison system. And the day before I went home, he pulled me to the side. He said, "Yo, Dre, you're the best of us. You represent us. You need to go out there and show them what we can be and who we are."

He said, "To make it better for us, you're going to have to work with law enforcement, probation, judges, DAs, police, school teachers. Go out there, keep your head up, keep your integrity, and show them that we have value, because the word is we don't count, we're throwaways. Show them that we have value and that we have integrity and that we can actually make a difference in the world." And he said, "Don't turn away from it. Walk into it." And for the last 24 years, based on what I've learned and MT's advice and Dominic's advice, I've been walking representing what ex-felons and ex-gang leaders can be, and I've been doing that for 24 plus years around the world. I've worked in over 25 countries.

When the UN called me a few years ago, they said, "Andre, we have a small problem called terrorism. Can you help us get kids not to join Al Qaeda? Because we understand you're one of the best at doing interventions." When there was a riot in South Carolina and seven people were killed in the prison, the commissioner called me. He said, "Andre, can you come here and help us fix this program and fix this prison system?" And I went there and I created a program.

It wasn't that long ago, the state that I came from, our old commissioner who was a wonderful lady, Carol, she called me and she hired me to come back and run a program in the same prison I used to live in and caught cases in and ran up and down the hallways like a lunatic. She hired me and had me come back to the same prison and work inside as a vendor. And I've been doing work on interventions in prisons, around gang leaders.

I've been working with White kids in the suburbs in Montana and Scottsdale, with Black kids in the cities, in Chicago and LA. I work with Spanish kids. I've worked in Guatemala, Honduras. I've been going around the world teaching and training people how to stay alive and do better, and that's been my 24 years. In

2016, I made it to Harvard. Harvard Law School called me and said, “We’ve been watching you. We appreciate your work. We admire your work, and we want to partner with you.” And I got a fellowship to Harvard Law School under Dr. Charles Ogletree.

And I’ve been just doing the work. I wake up every morning, I got a simple policy: Who can I help today? And I walk out my door with the full intent of helping somebody, and there’s not a day over these last 24 years that I haven’t found somebody that I could help in some capacity.

And the thing is, they’re like, “Andre, you’re not humble enough. Andre, you’re not passive enough. You’re not...” Dude, I didn’t come up like that. You know what I’m saying? [Laughs] I didn’t come up like that and I wasn’t raised to be passive or any of these other stuff. I know why I’m here and I know what I’m here to do, and I’m clear on my purpose, and I’m clear on my mission. Just show me who needs to be helped. I’m saying, and that’s what I do.

I go to school districts, I go to prisons, I go to countries. We went to Liberia post-civil war. We went to Honduras that has the highest murder rate in the world and we show up and we help people, and that’s what I’ve been doing for the last 24 years, and I want to set the example and the bar on what it looks like for ex-offenders and ex-gang leaders who were extremely violent at one time what we can do on this side.

Donelan

00:29:13

Give me an example of an intervention. Like, what does that look like? What are you doing? What are you saying? I know it depends on the situation, but could you kind of take me through that?

Norman

00:29:21

South Carolina Department of Corrections in 2018 had a riot. In that riot, seven people were murdered and 30 people were wounded. The entire prison system went on lockdown because they didn’t want retaliations. For five months, the entire prison system was locking their cells 24 hours a day, and they had no idea on how to resolve this issue because high-end gang members were killed in this process.

Somebody reached out to me and asked me to come to South Carolina, so I went to South Carolina. I took Dominic and one other brother with me. We went down there, we went into the prison where they had the murders, and we start talking to the men in the prison, and we convinced them that killing each other wasn’t the way. We convinced them that attack and stab wasn’t the way. We convinced them selling drugs wasn’t the way.

And we stayed in that prison from 7:00 a.m. to 11:00 p.m. for like, four months straight, every day. Just talking to these men in person, right there in their cells, in the housing units, on the rec yard, and we were able to turn the situation from seven murders to one fistfight in a calendar year, because these men, as bad as they might be, they’re looking for something they can believe in, and when they don’t

see it, you get the other side of it. When they saw me and they saw Dominic, they saw someone that they could trust, someone that was telling them straight ahead what it was, no cut, no sideways, no passive aggression. This is what it is, bro, let's rock. And we can do better.

And we challenged them to do better, and it was probably in 2020, one of the guards that was getting attacked, and he was getting stabbed by another inmate, and one of our guys from our program ran over and saved the guard's life. We were there for two years. There was a lot of guards, "Oh, these guys are criminals. We can't trust them. Ah, why are we doing this?" Then one of our guys in our program, one of the inmates who's doing life, he had nothing to lose, put his life on the line to save a CO.

And they said, "Why did you do it?" He said, "That's what they taught me. We stand on what's right." And that's what we teach. COs aren't our enemies. Gang members aren't our enemies. Our old thoughts are our enemies. The belief that we can't be great is our enemy. And that man believed he could be great, and that being great in that moment meant something to him. And if he was going to die doing the right thing, then he was willing to die.

He didn't say, "Well, that's a CO, he don't count. Pump him." He said, "No, that's a man, and what's happening to him is wrong. He didn't deserve that. And I'm going to step in and help him." And that's what we teach. I mean, there's no us/them. It's us. And so often, we go with the us/them and it doesn't work. We have to say, "It's just us." There's no us/them. It's we.

Donelan

00:31:52

Can we talk a little bit, just because you've brought up Dominic, and I can't recall if I honed in and set up who Dominic is for the audience. Dominic is someone you met when you were in prison. Who is he, and how did that relationship form?

Norman

00:32:06

No, no, when I was 12 years old I lived in Mattapan, we have neighborhoods in Boston like they have neighborhoods everywhere. It was our neighborhood and a couple other neighborhoods. Dominic was the coolest guy from our neighborhood. He had the biggest name. He was a brand-name guy. If you said Mattapan, Dominic was the guy. If you say Chicago Bulls, you say Michael Jordan. If you say Orlando, you say Shaquille O'Neal. You say Lakers, you say Kobe. You say Mattapan, you say Dominic. He was our guy. And he was older than me by five years, but he was still our guy. He represented our neighborhood.

And he went to prison in 1979, 1980, on a murder, and he was just gone, and we used to sit at the mailbox and like, "I wonder what Dominic's doing." So from the age of 12, I started talking about Dominic and being in prison. And at 18, I was there in prison with Dominic. And when I got there, he met me at the front door, and he was doing an actual life sentence for the murder, he got me at the front door. He's the one that showed me how to stay alive and the rest of that stuff.

And when I overturned my case and went home, Dominic was in a place called Florence ADX because he too got kicked out of Massachusetts and he got caught up in a lot of stuff in the federal system, but he

ended up in Florence and he was just in the side of a mountain. Well, you know all the guys out there. And when I went home, I got my money together, I got my life together, we got some legal money together, and we reached out to a lawyer, and we got Dominic's case overturned.

And Dominic came home about 10 years ago, and he started doing this work with me, so when I went into South Carolina, Dominic's standing next to me. When I go into schools, Dominic's standing next to me. When I go into communities, Dominic's standing next to me, because he represents the really impossible thing that can be possible, from an actual life sentence in Florence ADX to being an intervention specialist.

And when he walks into a prison or to a detention center or to a neighborhood, he's authentic, he's real, he's battle tested, and there ain't no BS.

Donelan

00:33:54

So when you look at our picture right now, and I know it varies from region, wherever you live, a lot of the major cities were seeing the issue of juvenile crime, it's sort of a top priority right now, and if anything, it's certainly the thing that people are talking about most, because we have 12 year olds committing car jackings, and it's this battle on how to address this crisis of juvenile crime, right?

You're someone who, the story you describe, your life as you describe as a child growing up, you knew no different, but looking back at it now, I'm sure you can see all of the roadblocks that were presented in your life that you had to overcome. What is your opinion about juvenile crime in the United States right now? And what's your opinion about what's the potential answer? I know it's not a one size fits all, it's probably not one solution, but what are your thoughts on the topic?

Norman

00:34:50

Step one, any time a juvenile does something, it's called parenting. We cannot blame the parents, but understand it's the parents' influence, good, bad, or indifferent, is where it starts at. And it starts with the parents, but it ends with the victim, so sometimes the parents just aren't able to come back and do what we need them to do, so instead of waiting for Dad or Mom to come off addiction or come out of prison or come out of whatever funk they in, we just got to understand that parenting is where it starts, but it's not always where it ends.

So we might need a mentor to step in, a teacher to step in, an advisor to step in, a violence interrupter to step in. So when I came home from prison in 1999, I started a program called Violence Interrupters. We had the first violence interrupter program in the country, and I got 15 other guys from around the city to team up with me, all gang leaders, and we got together and we started doing outreach in our community around the city, and we started this program and we were doing it. We were successful, and it was working extremely well.

Then, as everything else, people started copying what we were doing, and they started coming up with wonderful names and this name and that name, they changed it up, but what they didn't understand is

who we were. It wasn't as simple as, "Go get five guys who've been to prison and put them out here on the street and tell them to go fix it." I had the leaders of the leaders on my team, and I had people amongst us who are respecting each other, did time together, and we all understood each other.

We were battle tested and proven to ourselves and to the community, which gave us the leeway to go in not just a neighborhood, but any neighborhood and speak to the kids. The kids knew who we were. They looked up to us, and we could go back and actually redirect them. And since then, the programs have gotten watered down, the police and the DAs started picking who the people would be in the program because, "Oh, we don't like Andre. He was a real gang member. We're going to pick somebody that we feel comfortable with."

Well, the people that usually that they feel comfortable are the government witnesses, and the only problem with the government witnesses—I'm not knocking them—they're just not respected in the street. You can't walk up on a bona fide gang member today, you can't walk up on this guy doing 20 years in prison today and have testified and get respect. It doesn't go together.

So I'm not saying those guys shouldn't have a life, but you can't put those guys in charge of or the influence between them and life and death of other people, because it's not going to work. A, they don't have the courage or the standing to make the change that you want, but it... You pick people you feel comfortable with that's going to agree with you, nod their head, and tap dance, it's not going to work.

I've said no to the police chief. I've said no to the mayor. I've said no to my boss. That ain't going to work. We can't do that. But it's like, "Oh, come on, Dre, let's go." I don't go along to get along. We're trying to save lives, and what is needed is the original concept of the violence interrupters were leaders amongst leaders, not just anybody who had a criminal record, is, which what it turned into. If you have a criminal record, come on, and you can be down.

And then what made our program different was we had a former gang leader, myself, in charge. We didn't have a caseworker. We didn't have a pastor. We didn't have an executive director. I was the boss. So my guys looked to me and I could manage to train and hire them to do what they needed to do, but once you insert somebody who doesn't have the lived experience to manage this population, it's never going to work, because you don't understand them.

Donelan

00:38:11

Andre, you're talking about leaders of criminal organizations. You didn't have that realization til you were in solitary confinement that you wanted to change your life, and you have found your meaning, and you are changing lives every day. There's no 1-800 number you can call up and say, "Hey, I need the leader of the Latin Kings to possibly come talk." Like, how do you explain to folks how to access the quote "right" people that you're describing to get them engaged to even participate in this, to change their own ways?

Norman

00:38:49

Primera vez, si quiere hablar para mi amigo latino, tienes que hablar lo mismo. Tu no entiendes eso, tu no hablas para mi hermano. I work with the Latin Kings. I work with the Aryans. I work with the Blacks. I work with the Asians. We know who we are. We know who we are, and we know who you pick.

Donelan

00:38:59

How does someone engage with the type of people that you're talking about? Because there's only one of you, how do they even begin that?

Norman

00:39:05

The process begins if you want the next Andre, they have a bunch in California, a bunch in Chicago, New York, you just have to go out and say, "Andre, go get them." They know, trust, and love me, so when I say to them, "Yo, this is what it is," they're like, "Aight, Dre. You solid. We'll rock with you." And they'll get down. They can't follow somebody just because they're a caseworker with a PhD. They're going to follow somebody they know, trust, and love, been through the trenches.

And oftentimes, what I've seen is you'll approach the guy, you might even get the right guy, but then you try to turn him into a city worker. Here's a city job. Here's your city employment. Here's your city benefits. Here's your timecard. You get Monday through Friday, 9:00 to 5:00, every other Thursday you're off. You don't have to work weekends unless you're called in after 5:00. That's not what this is. This is 24 hours seven days a week. If my phone rings, let's go.

But what happens is you turn gangsters who are doing this work into city employees, that's not what they are. You can't send them to HR when they have a bad day. You know what I'm saying? You can't talk to them about mediation. You have the wrong people managing the wrong people. So if you want to actually get this population, you need somebody from that population to go get them.

There are tons of people in this country who are locked up and out who have the standing to create impact, and when I go to a city, those brothers respond. There was a brother in Chicago named Willy Lloyd. He was the head of the Vice Lords. When he started turning his life around, he reached out to me. "Yo, Dre, how do I do this? I know you, I heard of you, I know you can get this done." And he reached out, and I was trying to help him, and unfortunately, he didn't make it that far. I mean, he had a bad turn. He ended up dying.

There's some brothers in California from Compton. When they came home, "Yo, how do I do this?" "Yo, call, there's a dude in Boston." And with the Internet, we're all network, so brothers in Chicago, brothers in Dallas, brothers in New York. My man just came home not that long ago. He was a king of Rikers Island. He came home. He's trying to find a way to get in the door to do this work, and they're like, "Yo, talk to Dre."

So I flew to New York and I sat with him for a day, and I explained to him, how do you go about these steps? Not just talking to inmates, not just talking to gang members, but how do you talk to the police chief? How do you talk to a school superintendent? How do you talk to the U.S. Attorney? These are conversations that they have to be taught to have, because they're going in apprehensive the same way the other side's apprehensive. And it's what's best for the city, what's best for the population.

I sat with the chief of police in Detroit, and we're sitting in his office, and he said to me just what you asked me. "Andre, we got all this crime and all these kids in trouble. What do we do to make it better?" He expected me to say, "Hire 10 more Andres." What I said to him, which was the truth, I said, "You need to put the police back out front, because right now, ex-offenders and all these violence interrupters and credible messengers, they're leading the way in most cities. Every city has a violence interrupter or credible messenger program, and they're leading the way."

And I designed this thing, and it wasn't designed to be like that, so you have police officers right now not policing because you got this guy who works for the city, if he runs up on him, the mayor's going to be on his neck, and if he doesn't run up on him, who knows what's going to happen. So he's kind of in limbo. You've taken the police force and you've put them in limbo because the violence interrupters are the key thing now, and they're going to be at the press conferences.

We weren't designed to be in front of the police. We were designed to be to the left of them and go places they can't go. I've seen violence interrupters doing parade control. You know what I'm saying? They're doing crowd control at parades. That's not what this is. They've turned them into city employees. Somebody's running for election in your city? Get out there and hold a sign. That's not who we are, but that's what they've turned them into. In a lot of cities, it became political versus just, "These dudes do this."

These dudes do this. That's it. Let them do they thing. We have conversations. We have communication. We share knowledge. But to make this better nationwide, the first thing you do, and this is as a person who created violence interrupters, you need to put the police back out front and empower them to be police, and then let the violence interrupters and credible messengers play the support role, not the lead role, because it's not designed like that.

Donelan

00:43:05

I'mma tell you right now, Andre, if there were going to be a lot of police who are going to say to you, "That's not what society wants us doing right now."

Norman

00:43:13

Because people doing politics. People doing politics. You want to save kids' lives or you want to look good? I could have said to the mayor, I could have said to the police chief, "Give me a contract. Hire me to do all this stuff, and I can do this and this and," he just said, "That fits the narrative." I'm not with the narrative. That's the difference between a real leader and somebody playing a role. It's not about me.

They offered me a contract in a city not that long ago, offered me \$5 million a year for two years, so it would've been \$10 million. And I looked at the contract, it was mine to have, I just had to apply for it, and I turned it down. He said, "Why did you turn it down?" I said, "Because what you need me to do, I can't do under the circumstances the way it's lined up. I won't be able to get it done."

I could of just took the grant, took the \$10 million, and just kept skating. I said, "No. I can't deliver what you want the way you want it, and I know, I can look at the front end and see this, but I'm not taking your money." They hired three other agencies to replace me, and I volunteer for free with that same city, because it's not about the money. I've volunteered for free where they offered me \$10 million. It's integrity.

MT told me, "Go save our people, not just line your pockets." This is about integrity, standing up, and doing the right thing.

Donelan

00:44:22

Young Black lives are on the line, for sure.

Norman

00:44:24

There's a lot of people on the line. There's victims. There's not just young Black lives. They killing people. They carjack somebody, you said. They carjacking each other. They carjacking regular citizens.

Donelan

00:44:33

When you look at the prison populations, right? They tend to be disproportionately Black. When you look at the victims of crimes, they're disproportionately Black. So in terms of the Black community, they're suffering along the whole spectrum.

Norman

00:44:46

They're robbing Black people, but not Black criminals.

Donelan

00:44:49

Mm-hmm.

Norman

00:44:50

See, there's a difference. I mean, I robbed Black criminals, not that it's right or wrong. Right now, they're carjacking my aunt, they're carjacking my mom, they're carjacking my uncle. They're not carjacking me, because they probably is like, if I'm out here in these streets, I got a pistol, too. [Laughs] So you ain't running up on my car. They ain't carjacking drug dealers. They're carjacking citizens.

Donelan

00:45:10

Yes, they are.

Norman

00:45:11

So my thing is, that citizen needs to be able to go home and be safe, and what has to happen, in my opinion, is the honest discussion between law enforcement, criminal justice to say, "How do we get the right people in the room, have the real dialogue, and make this thing move?" They're going to be a lot of people like, "Oh, who is he?" I'm the dude who created this [beep]. That's who I am.

I'm the dude that walked the yard. That's who I am. I'm the dude who walked in the penitentiary when they had seven dead bodies. That's who I am. I'm the dude who flew to Liberia in the middle of a civil war. That's who I am. I'm the dude who flew to Honduras when they had the highest murder rate in the world. I'm not talking about going to a high school. I'm talking about walking up on real people dying with real guns and knives and stopping that.

There's room for everybody. It's not us versus them. It's not just me versus them. It's play your role. Everybody got a role. Stop pretending that you can go into a maximum security prison and do something when you can't, because when it comes time to go, you're going to hem and haw and you ain't going to go, and certain neighborhoods ain't getting services because you ain't going to go. They gave you the contract. They gave you the access, but you know you can't do that work. You know them boys ain't rocking with you like that. You know you got dirt on your name. You can't come through there. You might be a victim. So you going to do everything but what you're supposed to do. That guy needs to go to a middle school and talk to them kids.

But those guys down on the corner with them guns, they need to see the real ones, so stop playing with it and be serious with it. We want to partner with the police, not work for the police. And what you got now is people working for the city versus partnering with the city, because once I work for the city, I'm co-opted.

Donelan

00:46:40

I was going to ask you, what are your tips, for instance, like, social workers, or the police community advocates, et cetera. Like, what's your best advice? I feel like we just heard it.

Norman

00:46:49

What happens—I remember we had a program in Boston we created called Home Visits, where the police, the clergy, and probation would go visit a family and talk to the mom before the kid got in trouble. Then when we came along, the violence interrupters, they're like, "Yo, we should have them come, too." So they had a couple of my guys show up to go on the home visit.

The way they always did the home visit was they would get in the police car, the police, the clergy, and the caseworker, they'd ride to the kid's house and they'd go talk to him. So if my guys show up, they're like, "Hey, get in the police car." They're like, "Nah, we can't get in that car." They say, "That's just how we do it. This is the way we do it. Get in the car." They called me, like, "Yo, Dre, they want us to get in the police car." I said, "If any one of you get in that police car, A) we're going to have a problem, and B) you're fired. That's it. We don't get in police cars."

And the police are screaming mad, because this is the way they do it and the way they've always done it, they're not taking into consideration that, as a former criminal, I can't ride around a neighborhood in a police car. It just [laughs] there's not, nobody's saying, "Oh, Dre's doing a home visit." They're like, "Dre's telling on everybody." You know what I'm saying? You can't do that.

But we refuse to get in the car. There's other agencies, they call their bosses. I was the boss at our part, and they called my agency. I said, "My guys ain't getting in the car. They'll get in a car behind, they'll drive their car behind you, but they can't get in." Other guys were forced to get in the car because their bosses were civilians and they were like, "Oh, just go along with the program. Why are you pushing back? Just go along." And I'm like, "Hell, no."

Then you had another situation: grant came out, city takes over, and there was six nonprofits and the police department all on part of this grant, and the deal was every week we have a meeting, so my guys would go to the meeting once a week. One week it's at our place, one week it's at your place. We'd rotate all six weeks. Then the lady from the police department, not being mean, she just got tired of driving around the neighborhood every Friday, so she started making the meeting every Friday at police headquarters, so after two weeks in a row, I told my guys, "Don't go." So they all at the meeting, they're like, "Where's Andre's guys?" It was like, they called them, they said, "Andre told us don't come."

And when they called me, like, "Andre, why you tell your guys don't come to the meeting?" I said, "The deal was we would rotate this meeting and we'd come to police headquarters every six weeks and we go to everybody's place, you've turned it into a convenience thing for you. I can't explain to the streets why my guys are walking into police headquarters once a week. That's too much. They're not police employees. We're walking in the police headquarters every Friday. That's too much. We'll see you every six meetings."

Now, the other guys went every Friday. My guys went to every six meetings, because I'm not trying to buck the system, but I'm not trying to put my guys' lives in danger, either.

Donelan

00:49:13

Well, you can't buck the other system, is what you're saying. I mean, it's—

Norman

00:49:17

Yeah.

Donelan

00:49:17

There sounds like there are a lot of good programs that look great on paper, but the reality of it, and correct me if I'm wrong, reality is reality, it seems to be what you're advocating, right? And that you got to work within the confines of reality, meaning who's got credibility, et cetera. Go ahead.

Norman

00:49:35

I went to a city once, I met deputy chief of police who oversaw a gang outreach program, and he was talking, he was like, "Okay, Dre, I'm going to take you and put you in front of my guys. We're the best guys in the country." I said, "Cool." I went over there. I shattered the room in 35 minutes, and I told them before I started, I said, "I'm going to tell you every problem you have, everything that doesn't work, everything that goes wrong, everything that's upside down, and every issue that you come up with."

At the end of the training, they said, "Dre, how did you know?" I said, "That's everything I didn't write down." When I created this program, everything I didn't write down is what you're having problems with, because they didn't know how to substitute that. I know what I didn't write down, I know what I did write down. They got what I wrote down, but not what I didn't write down. So you don't know what you don't know, so let me show you."

And I spent the last three years training that city and helping them be better, helping them fill in the gaps.

Donelan

00:50:19

Andre, I understand you have become known as the second chance mentor. What is that?

Norman

00:50:25

The second chance mentor is what I call myself because when people come home from prison, they need a second chance. I believe sometimes it's a first chance, but getting a job, getting housing, getting your footing, getting your life together, and since I've done it, I've become a mentor to those who are trying to do it right now and getting ready to do it. So we go inside the prisons, we catch them at the gate, we try to influence people through mentorship to being better people.

Donelan

00:50:51

Talk to me about Violence Interrupters. That's a program that you started. What is it? What's a violence interrupter?

Norman

00:50:58

The original Violence Interrupters program were gang leaders who had done prison time who had come together, and they patrolled and reached out to the streets. So in Boston, we had eight or 10 major neighborhoods, we had the gang leader from each neighborhood or representative that he picked on our team, so if there was a problem in one part of town, they'd call the police and the police would call us, like, "Yo, Andre, they shooting over there on Main Street." So I would call over, like, "Yo, yo, Jim, what y'all doing shooting at 2:00 in the morning?" "Man, we just got some new guns." "Man, stop that, the old people can't sleep." I can call you direct and cut that down.

We had a situation with kids were getting robbed coming out of a middle school, so they had the police cars out there to stop for a week, the police cars went away, police cars come back. They called us, we went down, we talked to the kids, and we find out who was from the neighborhood, their brothers were locked up. We called their brother in lockup and had him call his little brother, make it stop. Let the kids go home, let them keep their little radios and Walkmans and the little \$10 in their pocket.

We can actually speak directly to the people. No medium, no third party. They know us, they trust us, they love us, and we can mediate many, many things. And that's what the violence interrupters were, it was leaders from the neighborhoods all coming together who represented their neighborhoods. So I didn't come into your neighborhood and give rules. I got somebody from your neighborhood on our team and he become the spokesperson.

And when the hood sees all of us together, by default, it diminishes problems, because like, "Yo, man, our bosses are hanging out, so how much beef can we have?" If your two dudes who run gangs are hanging out, it diminishes the beef between the two, and everything doesn't have to be a murder, but if there's no relationship, it turns into murder.

Donelan

00:52:36

And if there's no credibility, there's no relationship.

Norman

00:52:38

There's no credibility, there's no rela..., "Yeah, yeah, yeah, thanks a lot. Yeah, it's nice to see you. Yeah, thanks for the popcorn and the bus pass. Get him out of here. Get him out of here."

Donelan

00:52:46

That's what you are trying to lift the veil on, is that you've got to have credible people. You've got to have people that the neighborhood trusts.

Norman

00:52:55

The violence interrupters, if you've never served a state or federal prison sentence, you technically aren't a violence interrupter. If you've never been a gang leader or a shot caller in your neighborhood, or behind the wall, you can't really be a violence interrupter. You can be a credible messenger, you can be a mentor, but the violence interrupters are the Dominic Williams of the world, they're the Big U of the world. You know what I'm saying? They're people who've done time and were highly respected in that space, and we know who they are, and we know what they're made of.

There's tons of guys. Pistol P from New York. Super respected. He's been there. We had another brother just came home from Brooklyn, Big Lou, super respected. We're not trying to glorify. You can go on anything I do on social media, will not see me glorifying, hyping, talking about anything positive about prison. I have probably, like, 75 million views online, and none of them are for shooting, carrying guns, smoking weed, or smacking chicks. It's all about positivity. There's a couple funny prison stories, but nobody's getting hurt. There's no blood.

You read my book, autobiography, you know what I'm saying? Ambassador of Hope. There's nobody getting stabbed. There's no drug dealing. There's no pimping. There's no craziness. It's a message of you can do better despite where you started from.

Donelan

00:54:05

You know, Andre, keeping it real, if I was in the world of assumptions, you would be someone I would assume would not be in support of police doing their jobs, that you would be in the Defund the Police movement. But as you're talking, you're talking about we need the police to be out front and do what they do, and then let us do what we do.

Norman

00:54:22

This is what happened. Defunding the police, that's not my cosign. When somebody says defund the police, who your mama going to call when something wrong at her house? That's what my mother going to dial, 911. I'm saying, that's what my sister going to call, 911. So my thought on the defunding the police is the police do what the police do, but if you want to work in a city and help a 15-year-old gang member, you don't go for gang funds because that goes to police and they do it their way, power league outreach or whatever.

The health department will give you money to go out and do mental health with these kids. Jobs programs through economic development will hire you, give you money to go out and help this kid get trained to get a job. Public works will help you train this kid to come get a city job. You understand there's education money wanting to get him or her in school. You don't need the gang money.

People keep chasing gang money, I want the public works money. I want the economic development money. I want the mental health money. I want the healthcare money to help the same kid. There's

seven different ways and funding sources inside of a city government that you can use to help a child, but if you don't understand the city budget and the city process, then all you want is gang money, which puts you in the box with the police.

No, go for the mental health money, go for the health and wellness money, go for the job force development money. This all targeting the same kid, but people don't understand politics, political science, city systems, budgets, and that's what we do on our end, so violence interrupters ain't a bunch of guys just walking around just dragging our knuckles. We've actually been trained and studied on how to actually be effective in a city or state setting and work within the rules and alongside partnerships.

I understand a mayor's budget, a city councilman's preview, what a government can do, what a government can't do. So what you ask for and how do you move forward inside of a city government, if you don't understand city politics, the guys I work with, we study these things because it's imperative that we understand it, we can partner with, and there's 10,000 ways. Let the police have the police money. Give us the mental health money. It's the same kid.

Donelan

00:56:17

Well, the mental health piece, you think that that's been lifted up the way it needs to be lifted up, especially when we're talking about the children, because what is making children vulnerable to falling into the criminal justice system in the first place? When you see young children who have family members who have been killed, whose parents, you know, one may be around, the other may not be, they may have fallen victims to addiction, et cetera.

The trauma that a child has been through in the very short amount of time on Earth is incomprehensible in many ways, and I want to know your opinion. Do you think the mental health of supporting children is at the level it needs to be in order to have real impact?

Norman

00:57:01

It's the same situation in prison: programs exist but they're not really accessible or being made accessible at the right times. If you want to help somebody who's been traumatized and been through a lot of stuff, don't get them at the 10th grade when he's 15, carrying a gun, and smoking a blunt. That same person once upon a time was in the first grade and kindergarten. Every next gang member, every next rapist, every next drug dealer is sitting in kindergarten right now in the inner city being neglected. He wants a sandwich, he wants a hug, he wants a mentor.

We won't talk to him in kindergarten one. We won't talk to him in first grade. We won't talk to him in third grade. We're going to wait until he's 17 and has two robbery cases, now we're going to do wraparound services, when all we had to do was go down to the first grade or kindergarten, give the kid a sandwich, and a hug, and a mentor. We know his house is messed up. We know his family unit isn't what it's supposed to be. The time to support him or her is K1, K2, first grade, third grade.

Help them not become criminals. Help them not go to jail. There's a director in South Carolina, Brian Sterling. He brought me to South Carolina to work in a prison. He said, "Andre, can we stop them from coming? I know you can help them not come back, how about stopping them from coming?" And that was a progressive move. He said, "Man, go to the elementary schools. Go to the middle schools. Go to the alternative schools. Stop them from coming. I don't need you to convince them to be good while they're here."

And that's what it takes. Stop trying to get them at 19, 20, 25. Let's go down to five, six, seven, when they're innocent, before they've gone off the cliff, and they're suffering the same trauma at four, five and six and seven at 16 and 17, while we're ignoring the kids when they're most vulnerable and most open to support.

So I tell this to any prison I go to. I look a grown man in his face doing 40 to life. I said, "If it's you or an eight year old, eight year old wins. You just got to stay here, because we got to save the babies." We're not trying to save the babies. We're trying to save adult men. I'm cool with helping my brothers, but if it's a grown man or a baby, the baby gets the pass. It's that simple. That's what it has to be. Let's save the babies.

Let's cut the system off at the knees, which is K1. You can't cut it off at reentry. You can't cut it off at reform and probation reform. You have to cut it off with the babies. Go save the babies, and then you'll change the dynamics of the system, so the mental health needs to be at K1, K2, because from K1 to second grade, mom has to bring the kid to school in person, drop him off, and pick him up. So while that mom's in that engagement space is when we get wraparound services for her, so she doesn't disconnect at the third grade, which is a standard line when she walks away because the kid can now get to school on his own.

So get wraparound services for mom for second grade, not when the kid's smoking weed and getting kicked out of school at 15. So we have to back the clock up and save the babies, and then start saving the teenagers, and then start saving the adult men. But we're just ignoring the babies and just like, watching them go off the cliff, one after the other. That's just a bad move.

Donelan

01:00:01

Well, not appreciating the trauma that those young children are already dealing with, so getting real about that sounds like, to me, to be a very good first step.

Norman

01:00:11

On that, if it makes so much sense to save the babies, why don't we do it? Because political cycles don't run 10 years. They run four years or maybe two years, so you trying to save a first grader? He ain't going to vote for you in the fifth grade. [Laughs] So the politicians or the people in play don't really have the bandwidth or the latitude to run a eight year, 10-year program to save the babies.

So it has to be something. It can't go, well, Democrats are running it, we'll save the babies. Republicans kill it. Republicans are running it, the Democrats get it back and they kill it, because it's not their program. If we can just get a consistent agreement to save the babies from both sides of the aisle, then we'd be better off.

Donelan

01:00:47

In terms of violence interrupters, are they paid? Is it a volunteer thing? How do you get to them? Like, how do you start a violence interrupter program in your area? What's the real information there that people can take back?

Norman

01:01:01

The Charles Hayden Foundation out of New York, there was a guy named Ken Marin, who was the president of the Hayden Foundation at the time, saw us and believed in us, and his foundation funded us. He said, "These are the people that can make the difference." And Ken said, "These are the people," and he funded the nonprofit and said, "Let them do what they do. I'm not going to put all these criteria on them and all these stipulations. We believe in what they can get done. Let's just give them the leeway."

So initially, the Charles Hayden Foundation out of New York City and the president Ken Marin, and Sonya Holland, and they all came on board and they said, "We're not going to take a chance. This is the best bet going." I'm glad, they don't have PhDs and doctorals, they don't have bachelor's degrees, but they're the guys to get this done, so we will fund it through nonprofits. Then we had the city come on board. Then you have different people come on board.

Ideally, you say, "Dre, what's your dream?" That I could get two guys from every major city and bring them to whatever central city and train them. I'm 56 now, so I'm moving on and I'm doing other things. I would love to... Give me two guys from LA, two guys from Oakland, two guys from Detroit, Chicago, Dallas, Houston, Miami, Charlotte, Atlanta, Birmingham, give me two guys, one or two guys from every major city, let us come together, and let me teach and get the other brothers to teach what we know so you can have a real unit of men who can actually lead the charge.

And then there's space for power professionals, there's space for law enforcement, there's space, you know what I'm saying, for other people to come in and teach. It's not just us, but it needs to be us in the front, so we need the mayors. We need trauma-informed care specialists. We need people to come in.

But if I could have one thing, I need a governor or mayor to say, "You know something? I'm going to take the lead. We're going to bring Andre in, and we're going to go get the two or three guys from each major city and bring them here, and we're going to train them on how to do and be at that next level and how to actually do the politics, do the outreach, do the paperwork, do the measurables, do the collaborations, maintain your integrity, and get it done."

So I need a mayor, I need a governor, I need somebody in the White House to say, "We want to make this happen." They got a czar for drugs. They got a czar for this. I mean, make me the gang czar and I'll go out and get them for you. And these brothers want to make a difference. That's the thing. Look at my history. Nothing in my history says I'm going to be at Harvard. Nothing in my history says I'm going to help White kids in Montana. Nothing in my history says I'm going to turn down \$10 million, but it's real, and all my stuff is verifiable.

Let me go get the brothers that I know and the sisters that I know that are about this work. When I say brothers, I got White guys who are in this game too, I got Spanish dudes that I rock with who are in this game too. It's not a Black thing. It's us. And let me get the right guys, and let them take the lead in the space that they're in. And we can change this city. We can change this state. We can definitely change the nation.

And if you want to stop gun violence, I'm going to give you just one thing, because gun violence is the biggest thing in 2023 going into 2024. Gun violence is stopped behind prison walls. It's not stopped on the street level. If you want to decrease gun violence, you have to go into maximum security prisons and talk to gang leaders who are actively locked up, and have them reach out to tell their nephews, their little homies, "Put down the guns," because there ain't no caseworker, ain't no outreach worker, going to come through no hood and make guns just go down.

Big homie will make the guns go down faster than 20 outreach workers, but you have to go back into the prison and talk to that man who's doing 40 to life, and get him to buy into saving his community. Stop jumping over people who can actually make it happen. And you have all the leaders of the leaders that were out in the street sitting in a prison someplace, and they're willing, if confronted and given the opportunity, to make a difference, because nobody wants to see their nephew die or come to prison, see their mother's house get shot up. But you're not giving the people who have the voice a chance to voice it.

"Well, Dre, they're criminals. Oh, Dre, they're this." Ah, yeah, it is what it is. But do you want less deaths, or do you want to just persecute these people? I'm not saying let them all out of jail, but give them the ability to make the phone call to make a difference.

Donelan

01:05:02

Really glad you addressed gun violence, because I wanted to ask you about that, so thank you so, so much for that, because that is such a valid and important point. I'm going to drill down just a little bit more on the violence interrupters. We try to give people news they can use, so if a locale was interested in starting a violence interrupter program in their area, are they basically started through a third party like someone like you but they're locally based? If they have the wherewithal in their local community and they can have people who can make that reach for them locally, is that what they need to be doing?

Norman

01:05:34

If a city or a state wants to start a violence interrupter program, they can reach out to us or reach out to me, and I can come in, and the first thing I need to do is explain to the municipality how it works, because when you want to do this program, you can't corrupt the people. So oftentimes, you're going to bring in five or six gang leaders from the neighborhood, and there's a shooting on Main Street in their projects, and this guy's the leader of Main Street projects, so you going to be tempted to say, "Yo, what happened?"

You can't do that. That's not permissible. You can't go to him, because once he tells you or you confront him with the "what happened," and you press him, then the whole program's trash. You going to solve that one case if he flips, and he shouldn't, and then you can't help anybody else for the rest of the time. The program's now defunct because it has a bad name. You can't try to corrupt people, which is, I understand your job is to solve cases, but we're trying to save lives long term, not trying to solve a case, and that's a differential.

So we would come in and do a training with the municipality to explain to them how it truly works, and then how do you actually go out and find the right people who are currently in the street and you have to go behind the walls. DOC, not the county jail. You have to go to the DOCs and reach out and find those people who have the voice on the ground. The federal penitentiaries, the people who have the voice in the communities.

And these are going to be the people you least trust, you least like, and you least want to deal with. But you know something? That's who the street loves, that's who the street likes, and that's who they listen to. I'm sorry, but it's just, is what it is.

So we would come in, train the city, then help them set up their own program, and teach both sides how to be functional, and then we need to leave. I don't need to move to Memphis or to Chattanooga, or a city like Dallas. We come in, train up, and then we leave, and then the city can have its program. That's why ideally, if a governor or somebody from DOJ said, "Listen, let's just get the top 50 people, put them in a room, and we train them all up, then every state has their own." I don't want to be the plug. I just want to be the guy that gets your state or your city in motion.

And then that person needs a support system. Police have support systems. Doctors have support systems. Lawyers have support systems. Corrections has support systems. Violence interrupters—there's no support system. So we want to build not just the interrupter, but a support system for him or her, ideally, because if not, they get burnt out.

Donelan

01:07:51

So if people would like to reach out to you for help, which I think they will, how could our listeners get in touch with you? If they're interested in learning more about how they can support you or contacting you, is there a way they can reach you?

Norman

01:08:03

My website is andrenorman.com, A-N-D-R-E-N-O-R-M-A-N-dot-com. My email, you can send an email to admin@andrenorman.com, A-D-M-I-N-at-andrenorman-dot-com. And my thing is, if you're going to reach out, I don't need any praise. "I'm glad that you're doing good work, Andre. Happy for you." Call me if you want to make impact. Call me if you want to make change. Call me if you need support or direction in making a difference. I don't need any praise. I don't need a pat on my back. Call me if you have a problem in your city or problem in your school, a problem in your prison, a problem in your office, and you want actual change, because so many people are committing to doing it their way versus the right way. And the right way is the way that works.

So I always ask everybody, because if you go to any city or state in America, they will all tell you they're number one in recidivism. "Oh, we have the number one recidivism rates." Every state. It's like, 20 states are the number one in recidivism, because they can juggle the numbers. So my question is not are you first, but do you really want to be number one? Because there's a difference. I help people become number one. If you just want to be first, come up with a clever name and you're number one.

But you have to say, "These kids are dying, whether it's from drugs, addiction, neglect, or guns, our people are suffering, and sitting at a table with a bunch of people you feel comfortable with ain't going to get it done. If you're not sitting in the room with somebody that you feel uncomfortable with, there's a good chance there's nothing happening because you're all friends.

Well, I just want to help you win the battle. I go into cities, Ferguson, Missouri. When they had the protest in Ferguson for, like, 18 months, they called me in. I came into Ferguson, we went out at 2:00 in the morning, not 2:00 in the afternoon. We talked to the people on the ground. Then I went to the other side of town. I got the police chief, the mayor, and the gentleman who ran for governor, I got three of the top leaders from the protest because I was in the street, I was able to identify who was a leader, and we flew them all to Harvard University because I had an office at Harvard at the time.

And we all went to Harvard and we were able to sit down and have a conversation around peace, around communication, around making things better. The initial meeting, the seminar, went horrible, because all these people came in with these secondary agendas of trying to get Instagram clicks and, "Oh, you're a racist, and you're this." I'm like, I brought the mayor and the police chief and the guy who ran for governor to talk about peace. I got the three protest leaders to come ready to talk about peace."

But then when people heard we were coming, there was a girl from Saint Louis who didn't get invited, so she felt slighted, so she forced her way onto the panel, she forced another person on the panel, and they came with the Shaka Zulu versus talking about peace, and they turned the whole thing upside down. They got some Instagram clips. They look good on Facebook. They can tell their friends, "I told them while he's looking, I told him then." But you, you killing people. You're killing people now. It's making it worse.

But Dr. Ogletree said, "Andre, don't give up." And he coordinated a dinner where I got all those people, the key people, to sit down and have conversations, and through those conversations, relationships

were built. And when they went back to Ferguson, the police chief knows the two lead protesters. The mayor knows the lead protesters. And it stopped the rubber bullets, it stopped the throwing rocks, and they were able to peacefully protest and speak their mind without the calamity and the drama.

That's what happens when you say, "What's the end result?" And you've never seen me on CNN talking about "I helped fix Ferguson or wrote a book." None of that. I went, we did the damn thing, and we left. Anybody else has pictures on Normandy and pictures on this street. I ain't go for no fan, you have to go look look for it. And you can find it, it's online. Harvard University, Ferguson, Andre Norman, it's there. But I'm not online writing books about it. It's what's next. It's what's next.

Donelan

01:11:35

It's what's next because lives are on the line. That is about as real as it can get.

Norman

01:11:40

We just want to help people be better, stay alive. Faith comes into play, mentorship comes into play, but our job at our level is to get them to buy in, because they say you can't help somebody who doesn't want help. "Andre, they don't want help. They're too far gone. They're over the edge." And that's saying that you can't help people who doesn't want help is a lie and is wrong. There's just a step before it: getting them ready to want help.

And that's where we come in, because I can talk to that man who has 50 to life. I can talk to that man who's a gang leader. I can talk to that man, you know what I'm saying, who's in the cartel or whatever gang he's in. We can have that conversation. He needs to look across the table at somebody that he can know, trust, and love. "Yo, these dudes talking to me straight." And we can have those conversations.

Donelan

01:12:22

Well, Andre, thank you so much. Thank you so much for sharing your story, your journey, your experiences, and your knowledge. I just wish you the greatest success in your continued journey and applaud all of the quiet success that you have had, and thank you so much for joining us, and thank you for being available for people to reach out to so they can have a real conversation with you, because that's what this all boils down to, are real conversations for real change, so appreciate you and thank you so much for joining us here on *The Beat*.

Norman

01:12:54

All my success came through collaboration. I'm not a one-man show.

Donelan

01:12:58

And thank you, everyone, for joining us here on *The Beat*.

Voiceover: *The Beat* Exit

01:13:01

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Voiceover: Disclaimer

01:14:00

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