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Centering Youth in Community Violence Interventions as Part of a Comprehensive Approach to Countering Gun Violence

Community violence intervention programs are a critical part of a comprehensive approach to reduce the impact of rising gun violence on youth and in U.S. communities.

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Summer Night Lights, a CVI youth program, lights up Ross Snyder Park until midnight to provide Los Angeles youth with green spaces. (Getty/*Los Angeles Times*/Michael Robinson Chavez)

Violent crime has been rising nationally since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic,[1] and many elected officials, policymakers, and media outlets have mistakenly placed the blame on young people.[2] For far too long, youth have been an easy scapegoat for the rising violence in America.[3] Although the real drivers of this devastating trend are complex and far-reaching,[4] the political motivation to point to a single reason for violent crime has spawned public discourse and policy developments that have harmed generations of youth, and particularly youth of color, for a problem they did not cause.[5]

According to a recent Sentencing Project analysis, only 7 percent of the people arrested in the United States in 2019 were younger than 18, a much smaller share than in years past. This trend continued across offense categories in 2020, with the share of crime committed by youth continuing to decline. In fact, from 2017 to 2020, the total number of youth arrested fell by 50 percent, the number of youth arrested for serious crimes fell by 38 percent, and the number of youth arrested for homicides fell by 8 percent.[6] The overall number of homicides committed by youth did rise slightly from 2019 to 2020 along with the national trend, but the share of youth arrested for homicide was only 7.5 percent in 2020 and remains lower than in the preceding years.[7]

Although the trends in youth arrests are going in the right direction, the data on youth victims of gun violence tell a different story. Gun violence was the leading cause of death among children and teenagers in 2020.[8] Black youth are 14 times more likely and Hispanic youth are three times more likely than white youth to die as a result of gun violence.[9] Violent crime is the consequence of historic underinvestment in communities of color. A comprehensive approach to address crime and violence should direct resources back into communities of color that have been disproportionately affected and where historic divestment has resulted in a lack of proven public health and community safety infrastructure.

This issue brief highlights the importance of taking a comprehensive approach to gun violence to meet the needs of young people. It discusses how community violence intervention (CVI) programs are an important part of that approach to stop the current cycle of violence and spotlights two programs that are working to meet youth where they are.

A comprehensive approach to gun violence would save young lives

The impact of increased gun violence, particularly on young people of color, must not be overlooked.[10] Efforts to reduce gun violence need to address the underlying societal conditions that are causing violence—such as concentrated poverty,[11] gaps in available public health resources,[12] and community trauma[13] —many of which have only been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.[14]

Reducing the number of youth who are likely to engage in or become victims of gun violence requires an interdisciplinary approach. As part of a comprehensive approach to prevent youth violence and associated risk behaviors, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recognized the need to focus on evidence-based strategies that both prevent violence before it happens and intervene to address immediate and future harms.[15] Prevention strategies that promote healthy families, improve early education, provide skills-building opportunities, connect youth to supportive adults, and improve community environments have long been recognized as key to combating youth violence in the long term.[16] However, a comprehensive approach also requires programs to intervene in

breaking the cycle of violence by meeting the needs of at-risk youth and helping them change their lives.

These more immediate interventions, known as community violence interventions, have shown success at engaging individuals most likely to participate in gun violence and addressing its root causes. However, local, state, and federal government as well as private philanthropy must provide greater resources to support CVI models specifically dedicated to serving young people.

CVI programs meet community members, particularly youth, where they are

CVI refers to a range of program models that all work to reduce homicides and shootings through established partnerships between government stakeholders, community leaders, trusted service providers, and people most likely to be affected by gun violence.[17] CVI programs are staffed by people rooted in the communities they serve, with the local knowledge necessary to mediate conflicts and identify supportive services for participants. CVIs also help individuals cope with the trauma associated with living in neighborhoods beset by routine gun violence: Such programs have been shown to curb violence by up to 60 percent in areas where they are implemented.[18]

Various evidence-based CVI programs have been or are being implemented in communities nationwide:

- **Hospital-based violence intervention programs** work with people who have been admitted to the hospital for intentional injuries, as well as their families, in an effort to prevent retaliation and connect patients and families to community-based care.[19]
- **Community-driven crime prevention by environmental design programs** focus on neighborhoods' physical environment, addressing issues such as blight and vacant lots to create safe public spaces and reduce the number of areas where activity that leads to gun violence can occur.[20]
- **Violence interruption programs, also known as street outreach programs,** employ staff who are closely related to the dynamics of neighborhood gun violence and can thus build close relationships with participants. Such relationships mean that participants trust staff to de-escalate or resolve conflicts, provide resources to prevent and disrupt cycles of violence, and halt retaliation.[21]
- In **group violence intervention programs,** community leaders and law enforcement programs work together to engage with individuals most connected to group violence. To deter violence, these programs rely on both enforcement measures and supportive services delivered by messengers with credibility in the community.[22]

Youth CVI initiatives built on these evidence-based models are most effective when they take a public health approach to gun violence that looks at population-level factors that influence access to firearms and the root causes of gun violence.[23] The decades of lessons learned from existing evidence-based prevention strategies can also inform the delivery of supportive services to produce results and save young lives.

Components of youth-focused CVI programs

Youth-focused CVI programs take a combination of the following approaches:

- Engage and offer support directly to those young people most likely to engage in or be victims of gun violence.
- Employ trusted and respected members of the community to work directly with youth who may be skeptical of government or law enforcement.
- Provide school-based services to ensure participants attain their educational goals.[24]
- Prioritize community needs by engaging participants, program staff, and residents in efforts to improve their neighborhoods through blight remediation, addressing abandoned property, beautification efforts, and more.[25]
- Provide workforce development, job training, and employment opportunities for youth.[26]
- Increase access to recreation and community centers, parks, and other prosocial development opportunities.[27]
- Improve relationships between participants and their families, friends, and larger communities.
- Include youth directly affected by community violence in program design and implementation.
- Ensure that implementation is outcomes-driven and that a performance management and evaluation plan has been established that assesses violence reduction and neighborhood improvement metrics.

Case studies of youth-serving CVI programs

Two youth-serving CVI programs, one in Los Angeles and one in Chicago, are illustrative examples ofprograms that take a comprehensive approach to working with youth in need, providing a range of services and supports to address the root causes of violence. This section considers both these programs in turn.

Los Angeles: The gang reduction and youth development strategy

The city of Los Angeles' Gang Reduction and Youth Development (GYRD) Office was established in 2007 and began funding community-based services in 2009 "to improve the overall health and well-being of youth, young adults, families, and communities and provide positive alternatives to promote prosocial decisions."[28] GYRD implements a comprehensive strategy focused on community engagement, gang prevention, gang intervention, and violence-interruption activities. The program grew to cover 23 service areas in 2020, and the city currently contracts with 25 community-based providers to deliver services, such as family case management, proactive peacemaking, and crisis intervention, to program participants. The city also hosts a range of community engagement activities and coordinates a robust research and evaluation effort.

Location

Los Angeles, CA

Years active

2007–2022 (ongoing)

Target demographic

Interventions with gang-involved youth ages 15–25 in 23 service zones across the city

Program design

In addition to its robust community engagement and violence prevention programming, GRYD provides the following community and individual-level intervention and interruption activities:

- **Community-level interventions**: During the summer and fall seasons, when rates of violence are at their highest, GRYD coordinates a range of activities through government and community partnerships. These activities are focused on creating safe public spaces, building trust between community members and law enforcement, and creating opportunities for youth employment and career development.
- **Intervention family case management program**: Family case management services are offered to youth who are active gang members to help them increase their engagement in prosocial relationships and cease involvement with gang activities.
- **Proactive peacemaking**: Community intervention workers—who have previously been involved in a gang or who have credibility in the community—monitor local gang activity and conduct impact sessions and outreach events in key geographic areas. They also proactively work to negotiate peace treaties among rival groups.
- **Incident response program**: Program coordinators, community intervention workers, and law enforcement collaborate to respond immediately after a violent incident and prevent retaliation. Efforts include short-term interventions such as responding to the scene and quelling rumors, as well as long-term interventions such as assisting with funeral arrangements and connecting families to services.

Stakeholders

The Los Angeles Mayor's Office of Gang Reduction and Youth Development, 25 community-based service providers contracted to provide service delivery, California State University, Los Angeles, and community engagement partners

Outcomes

GYRD's success has been well documented in a series of evaluation reports conducted by California State University, Los Angeles and funded by the city.[29] Specific successes include:

- From 2011 to 2016, people receiving GRYD family case management services were 22 percent less likely to engage in nonviolent criminal behavior and 17 percent less likely to engage in violent criminal behavior after participating in the program for six months.[30]
- From 2014 to 2017, involving the incident response team in responding to violent incidents in the service area reduced retaliatory violence by 41 percent. It also reduced retaliatory violence by 18 percent immediately around the event (within a single block) and by 22 percent in areas at least one block away from the violent incident.[31]
- From 2010 to 2019, calls for service in response to violent crimes and incidents of violent crime were reduced 4 percent in the areas where Summer Night Lights (SNL) programming was offered.[32] SNL started in 2008 at eight Los Angeles parks and grew to 32 sites in 2013. SNL provides a wide array of summer activities for youth and other neighborhood residents that take place during the hours when most gang violence takes place. The program helps build meaningful prosocial connections. Community intervention workers intervene in gang quarrels and mitigate violent activity in the parks where the programs are offered.[33]
- From 2011 to 2016, 58 percent of prevention program participants saw such a significant reduction in risk level that they were no longer eligible for services.[34]

Chicago: Choose to Change program

The Choose to Change (C2C) program serves youth impacted by violence and trauma in their communities, providing "intensive advocate and wraparound supports along with trauma-informed therapy" to break the cycle of violence, increase connections to educational opportunities, and help young people succeed.[35] C2C is a partnership between Youth Advocate Programs, which provides wraparound services, and Children's Home & Aid, which provides trauma-informed therapy. C2C was established in 2015 as part of a citywide design competition held by the University of Chicago, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, and Get IN Chicago; it was selected as the competition winner from among 200 applicants. Since being established, C2C has served more than 800 youth ages 13–18 in a six-month program. It focuses heavily on peer engagement and support for both youth and their families.[36]

Location

Chicago, IL

Years active

2015–2022 (ongoing)

Targeted demographic

Youth ages 13–18 in the Englewood, West Side, and South Side neighborhoods of Chicago who face a variety of challenges, including trauma, involvement with the legal system, and disconnection from school

Program design

C2C works with youth from high-need neighborhoods who have experienced significant trauma, educational hardship, juvenile justice system involvement, or other barriers in their communities. It engages

with young people through a range of approaches, including advocacy and self-empowerment, relentless engagement, opportunities for peer support among participants, and basic needs assistance for youth and families. C2C staff also develop individualized service plans with participants and provide trauma-informed group therapy. The program employs staff to be advocates and coaches; the fact that they are from the same neighborhoods as participants—and have similar life experiences—enables them to build trust and provide mentorship. Staff are also available on a 24-hour basis to help youth in crisis develop new ways of responding.

Stakeholders

Children's Home & Aid, Youth Advocate Programs, University of Chicago Crime Lab, the City of Chicago Office of the Mayor, Chicago Police Department, Chicago Public Schools, MacArthur Foundation, and Get IN Chicago

Outcomes

To evaluate the program's impact, Choose to Change partnered with the University of Chicago Crime Lab.[37] Preliminary findings show that:

- During the course of the program, youth have 48 percent fewer arrests for violent crimes than their nonparticipant peers. One and a half years after program completion, they have 38 percent fewer arrests for violent crime.
- Participants are 39 percent less likely than other youth in the area to experience arrest during the course of program participation, as well as 33 percent less likely to experience arrest two and a half years after completing the program.
- C2C increases school attendance by 6 percent, and participants have 32 percent fewer school-related disciplinary incidents.

Conclusion

As communities work to stem gun violence and the devastating impact that it has on young people across the country, community violence intervention programs, coupled with more comprehensive public health and prevention efforts, have demonstrated success. While data show that youth are not to blame for the recent surge in gun violence nationwide, a comprehensive approach to prevention and intervention is critical to address its root causes. At a critical moment in young people's lives, CVI programs can meet people where they are and make a significant difference in the lives of both individual participants and entire communities.

Endnotes

Expand

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