

Expansion of Community Violence Intervention

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Key Takeaways

- + Community Violence Intervention (CVI) is one of the few approaches specifically designed to reach those most likely to be the victim or perpetrator in gun-involved homicides through non-enforcement means before an act of imminent violence.
- + Since 2020, the scale, semi-permanence, and professionalization of CVI programs has expanded rapidly across the United States, driven by unprecedented investments from private philanthropy and local, state, and federal governments.
- + At the individual level, the evidence is promising but not definitive: Across several programs and cities, CVI participants show declines in gunshot victimization and gun-related offending following enrollment.
- + At the neighborhood level, effects are more mixed: Cities and neighborhoods with significant CVI investment can see subsequent declines in homicide and shootings, but this is not always the case. Effects vary across sites, with implementation quality a key differentiator.
- + Whether these patterns are causally connected to the national decline cannot yet be established, largely because the data infrastructure to answer this question rigorously has not yet been built.

Theoretical Mechanism

Gun violence concentrates in space—not just in a small number of neighborhoods within cities, but within specific blocks and street segments.^{1,2} And it concentrates even further inside those communities, within small social networks that make up just a fraction of the city's population and contain members who are disproportionately young Black and Latino men.^{3,4,5} These are the individuals most likely to shoot someone else or be shot at themselves.

For homicide to fall at the speed and scale observed since 2022, something had to change within those small spaces and networks—not just citywide, not just nationally, but in those specific networks, in those specific places. Those men could have been arrested, incarcerated, become employed, or simply decided to put down their guns. Understanding which of those things happened and why is central to understanding the most recent homicide decline in U.S. cities.

The massive expansion and professionalization of CVI—which explicitly focuses on this population through non-enforcement means—offers one compelling hypothesis, particularly given that the homicide decline occurred even as arrest rates fell, incarceration reached historic lows,⁶ and gun ownership rose.⁷

CVI programs deploy trusted, “credible messengers”—often people with their own histories of street involvement and justice system contact—to reach the small, high-risk networks where gun violence concentrates.^{8,9} By mediating conflicts before they escalate, connecting high-risk individuals to services, and building neighborhood trust, CVI operates through both direct mechanisms (e.g., interrupting specific disputes) and indirect ones (e.g., mitigating the social conditions that make violence more likely).

Established Evidence

The accumulated evidence base is real but uneven. Individual-level studies show some promising effects: Across multiple cities and program models, CVI participants show declines in gun-related offending and victimization, although these results are not always statistically significant.¹⁰⁻¹² In Denver, for instance, a randomized controlled trial found that CVI participants committed 44% fewer types of violent offenses and were 69% less likely to perpetrate any violent offense.¹² Neighborhood-level effects are harder to establish and produce more mixed results of both positive and null findings and, in some cases, instances when violence escalated after a program’s start.¹³⁻¹⁷ In Baltimore, for example, rigorous evaluations of Safe Streets found an overall 42% reduction in youth homicides and 21% reduction in nonfatal shootings; site-level results ranged from large reductions in some neighborhoods to increases in others.^{14,17} In sum, the research as a whole suggests that CVI sometimes works, sometimes doesn’t, and that we are only beginning to understand the conditions that distinguish one outcome from the other.⁹

Increased Investment and Policy Change

The post-2020 period brought an unprecedented cascade of federal and state commitment to CVI. The 2021 American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) made CVI an eligible

use of State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds for the first time, unlocking billions in potential local investment. The Biden Administration's Community Based Violence Intervention and Prevention Initiative directed \$150 million through the Department of Justice to CVI programs nationwide; the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act added \$250 million more. At the state level, California established a \$75 million annual appropriation; Illinois, New York, and other states created dedicated violence prevention line items. By 2024, cities in at least 15 states established or expanded offices of violence prevention, coordinating bodies that often did not exist at scale before 2020. The cumulative effect was the rapid formalization of a field that had previously operated on the margins of public safety budgets.

Recent Evidence and Relevance to Current Trends

The CVI programs that re-emerged and expanded in the years surrounding the pandemic did not simply replicate earlier models. Building on the credible messenger approach, many incorporated new behavioral interventions, trauma-informed care, and expanded service pathways, moving the field from almost purely crisis response toward wraparound supports and longer-term engagement with those most likely to be involved in gun violence. These programmatic innovations were coupled with something less visible but equally important: the deliberate construction of a field. National convenings brought together practitioners and researchers. Leadership academies and training institutes began professionalizing a workforce that had long operated without formal support or infrastructure. Coalitions like CP4P in Chicago formalized coordination among organizations that had previously worked in parallel.¹⁸ Outreach workers in many cities transitioned from seasonal, grant-dependent contracts to stable professional employment. What was emerging, unevenly and imperfectly, was the connective tissue of a new civilian public safety infrastructure.

The first fire brigades weren't city departments, just neighbors with buckets, until they were organized, funded, and professionalized. CVI still stands early in this arc, but post-2020 investment moved it meaningfully in that direction.

This field building process is evident on the ground in Chicago. The CP4P coalition grew from eight organizations serving nine neighborhoods in 2017 to 15 covering 28 community areas by 2023, with the workforce expanding substantially at the pandemic's onset.¹⁸ More than 20 additional organizations provided similar services citywide, while programs like READI Chicago and Chicago CRED began innovating with more intensive models of intervention and service provision.^{10,11}

The Chicago evidence on CVI's impact is encouraging but not definitive. Individual-level results across multiple programs show promising reductions in gun violence

involvement.^{10,11} Quasi-experimental analyses at the neighborhood-level are still emerging but suggest large declines in gun violence victimization and offending, with statistical significance varying by start date, organization, and community area.^{19,20} Descriptive analyses of state CVI funding show a strong correlation between investment levels and subsequent shooting declines.²¹ The Peacekeepers Program, which places stipended violence prevention trainees at micro-level hotspots, saw a 41% overall reduction in hotspot victimizations in 2023–2024 compared to the prior two-year period; 13 of 14 program community areas saw an increase in the average time between violent incidents, a net gain of 136 days without a shooting across intervention hotspots.²²

This is not a Chicago story alone, though Chicago invested more densely than most and started investing about four years prior to the pandemic's onset. A 2023 Brookings analysis found that only 28% of large city and county governments invested ARPA dollars in community-based violence intervention.²³ Nearly 70% of those investments concentrated in just five jurisdictions: Chicago, Cook County, Washington D.C., Baltimore, and Indianapolis. The geographic pattern suggests that cities that invested most heavily saw the most dramatic subsequent homicide declines. The Deep South, where large local governments made little to no CVI investment, saw comparatively smaller reductions. In Baltimore, an evaluation of Safe Streets—one of the country's longest-running violence interruption programs—found a 42% reduction in youth homicides and a 21% reduction in nonfatal shootings among youth aged 15 to 24, though neither estimate reached statistical significance, and large variation occurred across sites.¹⁷ In Los Angeles, violence interrupters operated continuously through the pandemic and were associated with sustained reductions during a period of national increase.²⁴ Washington, D.C. is a notable exception; evaluations of CVI programs found no protective effect and elevated gun homicides in one neighborhood.¹⁶

Emerging Questions and Future Directions

Whether the field-level changes described here are causally connected to the national homicide decline is a hard but answerable question. Program sites are placed in the highest-violence areas rather than chosen randomly. Participants are recruited based on risk rather than random assignment. And because gun violence spreads through social networks, treatment effects spill across neighborhood boundaries in ways that confound most standard evaluation designs. These are not failures of research; they are features of the phenomenon, and they place real limits on what even well-executed studies can establish.^{9,13,17} Answering the causal question rigorously requires data that do not yet exist: standardized, longitudinal measures of CVI investment, program coverage, and

participant dosage across cities, linked to administrative records on homicides and shootings.

But these evidentiary challenges should not be mistaken for an evidentiary failure. The more productive questions are the ones the evidence is only beginning to answer: Why do effects vary so dramatically across sites and cities? What distinguishes a Chicago neighborhood that saw sustained declines from a Washington D.C. neighborhood where violence increased? Which program components—workforce stability, organizational infrastructure, dosage, community relationships, etc.—are essential, and which are incidental? Nor should the causal question crowd out equally important descriptive ones. Without systematic data on who is being served, at what dosage, and by workers with what characteristics, even the best-designed causal study estimates the effect of a black box. Understanding what makes CVI work, where, and for whom requires sustained investment in programs and in the research infrastructure to study them rigorously. That is the agenda the field is ready to pursue, if the investment to pursue it holds.

Prepared for CCJ Homicide Decline Research Summit

The United States has experienced a sharp decline in homicide since the middle of 2022. This dramatic and largely unexpected shift has sparked a high-stakes debate about what is driving it. To examine the plausibility of dozens of potential factors, CCJ convened a two-day summit in September 2026 with about 50 researchers from criminology, economics, public health, psychology, sociology, and related disciplines. This brief was prepared to inform discussions during the convening.

Endnotes

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