

GROUP VIOLENCE INTERVENTION

ISSUE BRIEF

OVERVIEW

Serious violence in the United States is concentrated in historically disadvantaged communities of color, and particularly among young men in those communities. The Group Violence Intervention (GVI)—known by various names, including “Operation Ceasefire”—has the strongest record of preventing such violence. The strategy is based on a set of core facts: Most people in those communities are not at high risk for either victimization or offending. A very small number of identifiable street groups drive the violence, and the people in them face extraordinary risk and trauma. However, the most common law enforcement approaches to violence prevention can actually cause communities harm and make violence dynamics worse. Community distrust of law enforcement—based on historical harms, over-enforcement, and disrespect—stands in the way of violence prevention efforts.

GVI focuses on the groups at highest risk for violent victimization and offending, with the intention to keep those in them alive, safe, and out of prison. The GVI partnership communicates directly with group members, conveying a powerful community message about disapproval for violence and in support of community aspirations; concrete opportunities for both immediate and longer-term assistance and support; and clear prior notice of the legal risks associated with continued violence. The partnership then delivers swiftly on these commitments.¹

The strategy arises from a desire to build communities’ capacity to prevent violence, use enforcement narrowly and strategically, help the most vulnerable people, and improve the legitimacy of police in the eyes of the community. Over 20 years of implementation in dozens of cities, this approach has consistently reduced serious violence.²

BACKGROUND

Even in communities with high rates of violence, very few people are actually involved in homicides and shootings. Violent victimization and offending are extremely concentrated among groups. Group members typically constitute less than half a percent of a city's population but contribute to as much as 70 percent of its homicide and gun violence.³ Despite this fact, law enforcement has traditionally used overly broad and intrusive tactics that have harmed entire communities and reduced trust.

WHAT ARE GROUPS?

The term “group” refers to any social network whose members commit violent crimes together. This can include anything from chapters of organized national gangs with recognized symbols (such as the Gangster Disciples) to loose neighborhood crews with no hierarchy or business (such as a set that claims a particular block). All “gangs,” “posses,” “sets,” “crews,” “bloccs,” and other associations are names for groups.

In communities where violence is high and trust in law enforcement is low, groups can appear to provide protection. However, they often promote violence to settle disputes. While personal slights and disrespect largely initiate violence, peer pressure and the “street code” among groups drive cycles of retaliation, damage communities, and discourage cooperation with law enforcement. Young men in those communities face extraordinary homicide rates—about 100 times the

national average.⁴ In this context, many group members are scared, traumatized, and in search of a way out.

STRUCTURE

GVI brings together a partnership of law enforcement, community members, and social service providers with a common goal but distinct roles. Together, they guide the intervention based on frontline knowledge and real-time data on violence and the people who face the greatest risk.

The Law Enforcement Role

Law enforcement demonstrates to groups that reducing violence is their top priority. Police, federal agents, prosecutors, and other partners coordinate on data, tracking, and enforcement responsibilities. The law enforcement partnership identifies the groups driving the most violence and concentrates its efforts on them. They tell group members up front about the partnership's focus on gun violence, their desire that group members be safe and successful in their communities, the specific consequences for continuing the violence, and exactly how groups will be held accountable for homicides and shootings perpetrated by their members.

Since a central aim of the approach is to prioritize voluntary compliance and deterrence over actual enforcement, GVI communicates directly to group members before violence occurs and reserves special enforcement measures for when a group commits violence. When enforcement is necessary, GVI capitalizes on the fact that groups are involved in a variety of criminal offenses. That means that the law enforcement partnership has a

wide menu of options for delivering sanctions to the entire group—in addition to pursuing individual perpetrators of violence. This focused enforcement holds groups accountable and demonstrates to other groups the consequences for violence. Strong community norms against violence form the foundation of public safety. GVI centers the community’s moral voice on violence prevention efforts.

The Community Moral Voice Role

During call-ins, custom notifications, and other gatherings, respected community figures present their message to group members from three main perspectives. Surviving family members of homicide victims describe the pain of losing a loved one. Former group members attest to the limits and risks of the “street code” as well as the possibility of personal transformation. And community leaders outline group members’ part in a safer, more stable community life, and express the community’s love and hope for them.

These credible voices exist in every community. GVI creates a framework to identify them, support them, and focus their powerful moral authority on the very small number of high-risk people driving violence and at highest risk for victimization.

The Support & Outreach Role

An unconditional offer of help is a moral imperative and a practical consideration of GVI. Group members typically have specific, immediate needs, and experience extraordinarily high rates of violent victimization. In GVI, a special support and outreach structure is tailored particularly for

this population. This includes measures to address trauma, methods to protect group members from harm (such as preventing retaliation, intervening with enemies, relocation, and emergency housing), and ways to provide the “big small stuff”—low-cost but pressing needs such as transportation, grocer-

LAW ENFORCEMENT PARTNERS

- Police agencies
- Sheriffs’ offices
- Prosecutors’ offices
- Probation and parole agencies
- Federal agencies (ATF, DEA, FBI)
- Corrections departments

COMMUNITY MORAL VOICES

- Mothers and family members of murdered children
- Ex-offenders and former group members
- Faith leaders
- Survivors of violence
- Street outreach workers

SUPPORT & OUTREACH PARTNERS

- Mentoring programs
- Trauma care providers
- Reentry programs
- Street outreach workers
- City social service agencies
- Traditional services (education, employment, mental health, substance abuse programs)

ies, clearing warrants, getting state ID, etc. It also offers priority access to traditional services such as job training, housing, education, peer support groups, and substance abuse counseling.

The support and outreach structure gives group members a path away from risky behavior and toward new and positive relationships. It also demonstrates, beyond the immediate goals of preventing violence, a commitment to the lives of group members.⁵

EMPHASIZING LEGITIMACY

Bringing police and communities together through GVI can help build law enforcement legitimacy. The strategy is designed to put law enforcement in situations where they can demonstrate their intention to depart from harmful practices, show that they respect and support even those with criminal backgrounds, engage openly and honestly about how they work, and support the community's desire for public safety. Enhanced legitimacy promotes voluntary compliance with the law and reduces violence.

COMMUNICATION

Direct, strategic communication with group members is central to the strategy. GVI communication methods are designed to convey strong community norms against violence, disrupt pro-violence social dynamics among groups, deter violence before it happens, ensure that group members understand the legal risks they face, and convey respect and a desire for a new relationship between law enforcement and communities. The GVI part-

nership engages with group members to connect them to opportunities for support and services, update them on the promises the partnership has kept, and share its powerful desire to keep group members alive and free. Communication about the GVI strategy can occur anywhere. However, a number of formal approaches help structure communication.

The call-in is a face-to-face meeting between the GVI partnership and group members representing all groups in the GVI area. Law enforcement identifies members of violent groups who can be compelled to attend the call-in via the terms of their probation or parole. The GVI partners present their message and ask the attendees to take what they have heard back to their groups.

Custom notifications are home or street visits that communicate the GVI message to specific people. A small group of representatives from the partnership delivers individualized information to those at highest risk. Custom notifications can also include people close to those being notified in order to amplify and personalize the message. These flexible visits can be deployed quickly to help interrupt cycles of violence, address retaliation and active disputes, calm hot spots, and address “impact players”—including those who are not on supervision and difficult to reach.⁶

RESULTS

GVI has a strong evidence base of effectively reducing serious violence:

- **Boston, MA:** 63% reduction in youth homicide⁷

- Stockton, CA: 42% reduction in gun homicide⁸
- New Orleans, LA: 32% decrease in group member-involved homicides⁹
- Cincinnati, OH: 41% reduction in group member-involved homicides¹⁰
- New Haven, CT: 73% monthly average reduction in shootings¹¹

Systematic reviews of community violence interventions have recognized that GVI has a consis-

tent track record. A USAID study (2016) reviewing over 30 violence reduction strategies concluded that GVI “has the largest direct impact on crime and violence, by far, of any intervention,” and a report from the Campbell Collaboration (2012) showed “strong empirical evidence” for its effectiveness.¹²

For additional information and background material, visit the National Network for Safe Communities website at nnscommunities.org.

ENDNOTES

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The **National Network for Safe Communities at John Jay College** supports cities to implement and advance proven strategies to reduce violence and improve public safety, minimize arrest and incarceration, strengthen communities, and improve relationships between law enforcement and communities.