



**National Network  
For Safe Communities**  
Saving Lives, Saving Communities



# **Proven strategies for reducing violence and strengthening communities**

## The National Network for Safe Communities supports cities to implement and advance proven strategies to

- Reduce violence and improve public safety
- Minimize arrest and incarceration
- Strengthen communities
- Improve relationships between law enforcement and communities

## Who we are

The National Network for Safe Communities, a project of John Jay College of Criminal Justice, was launched in 2009 under the direction of David M. Kennedy and John Jay College President Jeremy Travis. The National Network focuses on supporting cities implementing proven strategic interventions to reduce violence and improve public safety, minimize arrest and incarceration, strengthen communities, and improve relationships between law enforcement and the communities it serves.

Scores of American cities have implemented the National Network's strategies with powerful impact, particularly the Group Violence Intervention (GVI), first implemented as "Operation Ceasefire" in Boston in the mid-1990s, and the Drug Market Intervention (DMI), first implemented in High Point, North Carolina, in 2004.

Substantial research and field experience has proven that these interventions are associated with large reductions in violence and other serious crime.<sup>1</sup> A Campbell Collaboration Systematic Review<sup>2</sup>—the gold standard in assessing the body of evidence in social science interventions—found "strong empirical evidence" for impact. The National Network has also begun to adapt its approach to other contexts, such as strategic prosecution, reconciliation between law enforcement and distressed communities, and problems such as domestic violence and prison violence.

**The National Network is committed to building a community of practice that operates along a set of guiding principles:**

**First do no harm.** Too much incarceration, aggressive, disrespectful policing, and other missteps can damage individuals, families, and communities and undermine relationships between neighborhoods and law enforcement. Law enforcement should do its work in ways that do not cause that harm.

**Strengthen communities' capacity to prevent violence.** Community norms and actions do most of the work of crime control. Community members can establish expectations for nonviolence and intervene directly with the few people at the highest risk for violent victimization or offending through direct communication. Using this approach strengthens neighborhoods and keeps people out of jail.

**Enhance legitimacy.** Most people obey the law because it's the right thing to do, not because they're afraid of being arrested. Communities need to see law enforcement, especially the police, as fair, respectful, and on their side. Police should conduct themselves in ways that model their caring and respect for the communities they serve. Where legitimacy goes up, crime goes down.

**Offer help to those who want it.** Many of the people at highest risk for violent victimization or offending do not like how they are living and want a way out. Communities should meet them where they are and do everything possible to support them.

**Get deterrence right.** When law enforcement needs to act, it's usually best to let offenders know that enforcement is coming, so they can stop their offending, rather than to arrest, prosecute, and incarcerate them. The creative use of existing law, combined with direct communication with high-risk people, can make deterrence work and head off both violence and actual enforcement.

**Use enforcement strategically.** When arrest, prosecution, and incarceration are necessary, law enforcement should use them as sparingly and tactically as possible. Law enforcement should apply the minimum that is compatible with ensuring public safety.

Shown: David Kennedy.



# The problem

**High levels**  
of violence,  
arrest, and  
incarceration  
harm our most  
vulnerable  
communities.

## The levels of violence and serious crime in America are unacceptable.

Violent crime has been declining across the U.S. for some time, but there is still tremendous work to do. It is nothing less than a national shame that communities across America, especially poor black communities, live with unconscionable levels of violence, incarceration, and tensions with the police.

Some 18,000 people die from homicide in America each year, at an average rate of four per 100,000. Among young men of color living in high-crime neighborhoods, the risk of becoming a homicide victim rises to an astonishing annual rate of one per 200.<sup>3</sup> Homicide is the leading cause of death among black men ages 15 to 34.<sup>4</sup> Between 2000 and 2007, the gun homicide rate for black men under the age of 17 increased by 43 percent; the gun homicide rate for black men over the age of 25 increased by 27 percent.<sup>5</sup> Many major American cities continue to have homicide rates greater than 20 per 100,000, with some smaller cities suffering from even higher rates. Overall violent crime rates exceed 1,000 incidents per 100,000 residents for more than a third of all major American cities.<sup>6</sup>

In many cities' most troubled neighborhoods, gangs and drug crews have taken over the streets, creating fear, violence, and disorder that force residents to stay in their homes and undermine community safety and local economic development. Almost invariably located in poor, disadvantaged minority communities, violence and serious crime of this kind causes and facilitates a range of severe harms, both direct and indirect. It spurs gangs and drug crews to feud with each other over turf and other issues; it leads to the acquisition and use of firearms; it encourages robbery, burglary, and other crimes; it eases initiation into drug use and supports addiction; it draws local youth into the drug trade; it leads to the loss of control of public space; it drives down property values, drives out businesses, and leads many residents who can to leave; and it creates pro-violence, pro-drug, anti-school, and anti-work norms among youth.

## The levels of arrest and incarceration in America are unacceptable.

Traditional enforcement in American neighborhoods has been not only ineffective but often broad, blunt, and intrusive: high levels of street stops, drug arrests, trespassing and other pretext misdemeanor arrests, warrant service, and the like have left many minority communities, especially black communities, angry at and distrustful of authorities.

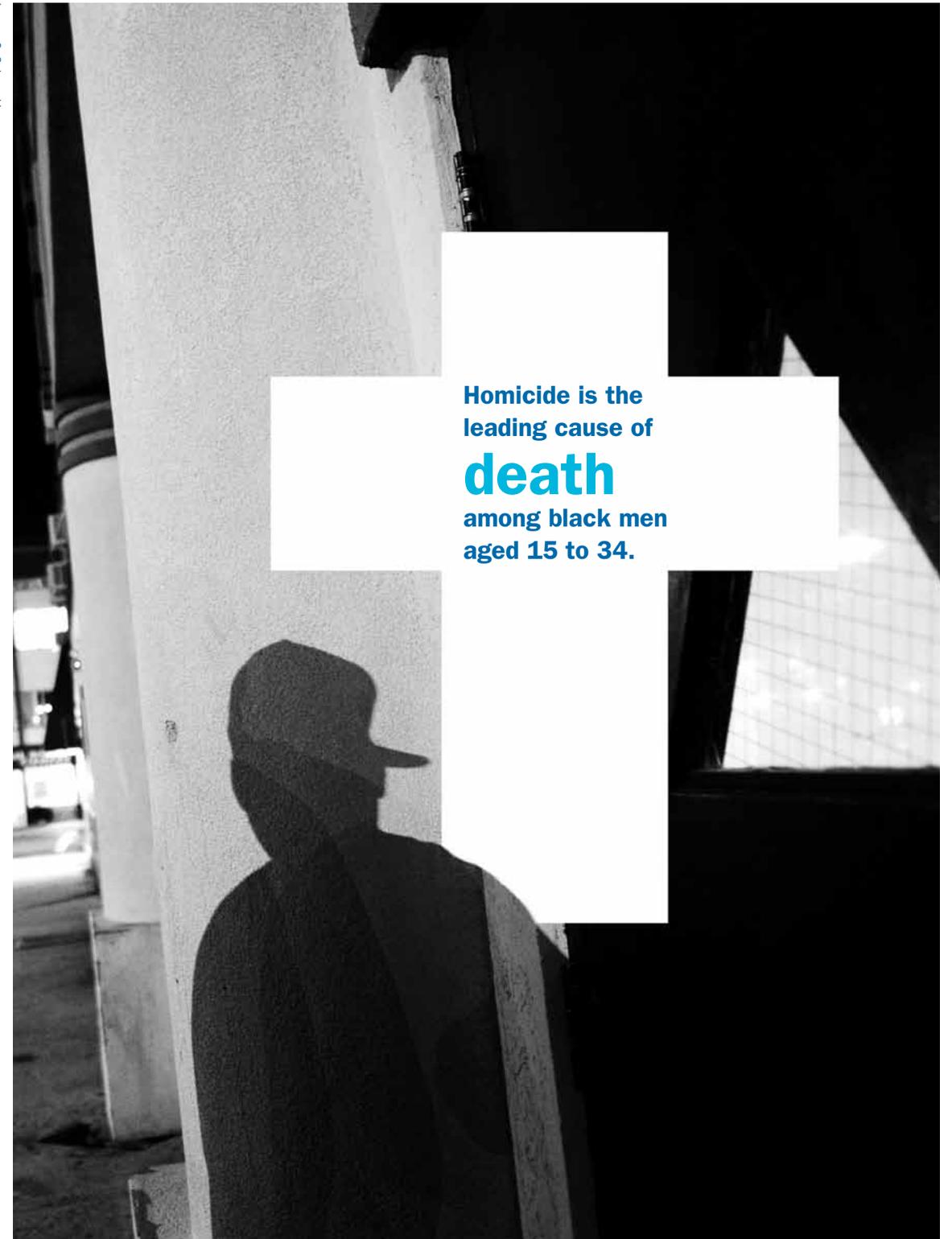
Today, U.S. prisons and jails hold more than 2.3 million people as a result of the nation's enforcement focus.<sup>7</sup> This level of incarceration has had a devastating effect on the same minority communities that are living with excessively high crime rates. African-American men constitute 6 percent of the population but 40 percent of state and federal prison inmates.<sup>8,9</sup> One in three black men will serve a felony prison sentence over the course of his lifetime, and more young black men have served prison time than performed military service or earned college degrees.<sup>10</sup> One in nine black children has a parent in prison, and children with an incarcerated father are six times more likely to be expelled from school than other children.<sup>11</sup> One in eight black men can't vote because of a felony conviction, and much other permanent damage is done to schools, marriage, employment and earnings as a result of our excessive use of incarceration.<sup>12</sup>

Our most vulnerable neighborhoods are given a false choice between lower crime rates and fewer arrests. Prison expansion has been driven particularly by violent crime and drug enforcement policies. Convictions for violent crimes accounted for 60 percent of the growth in the size of the U.S. state prison population from 2000 through 2008,<sup>13</sup> and over 50 percent of people currently in federal prison, and 20 percent in state prison, are incarcerated for drug offenses.<sup>14</sup> Since the late 1970s, the number of people incarcerated in state prison on drug offenses more than tripled.<sup>15</sup>

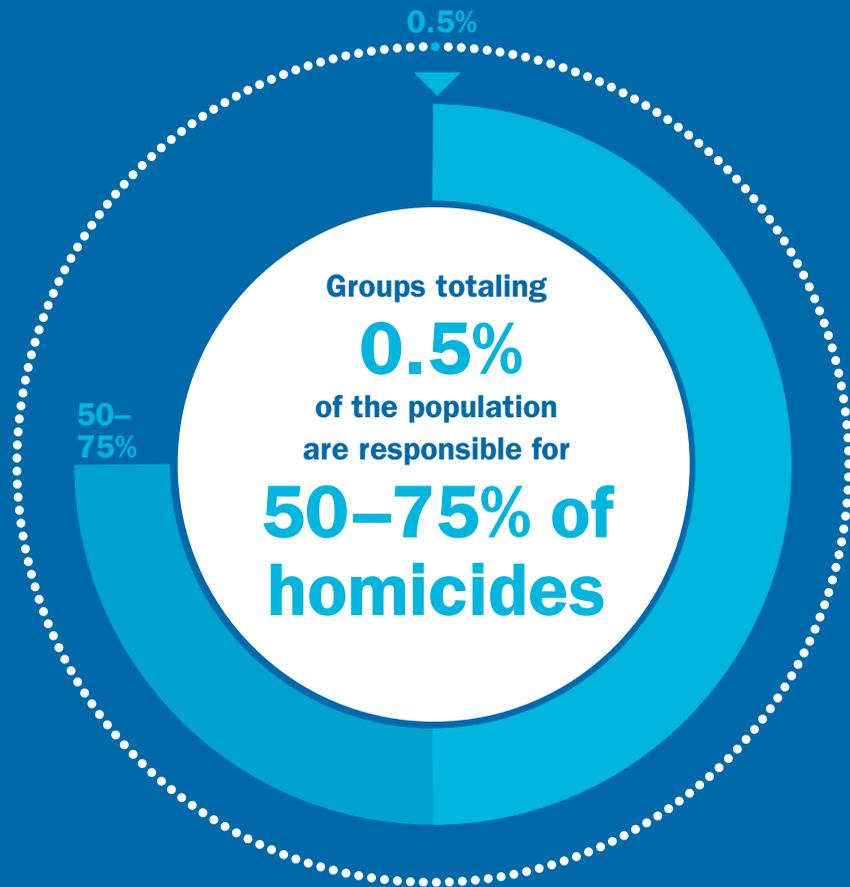
## The fractured relationship between law enforcement and minority communities is unacceptable.

Police and residents of minority neighborhoods too often distrust one another and carry profound misunderstandings about each other. These fraught relationships derive from America's real and appalling racial history but are also the result of the stark but largely unintended consequences of recent criminal justice policy, particularly the War on Drugs. They have led to rich narratives developing within both the African-American and law enforcement communities through which each blames the other for what is happening. Many in African-American communities see police as uninterested in protecting them and even as a deliberate racist oppressor doing intentional harm. Many in law enforcement believe that the community tolerates violent crime and overt drug dealing because it is corrupt or too broken to stand up against it. These narratives are entirely plausible and make sense when viewed from one side or the other—but both are wrong. They undermine community norms against crime and for the law, blame whole communities for the actions of just a few, and prevent any possibility of meaningful partnership. What is true is that both sides deeply desire public safety—but core misunderstandings block each from shifting towards this common goal.

Image: Q. Sakamaki



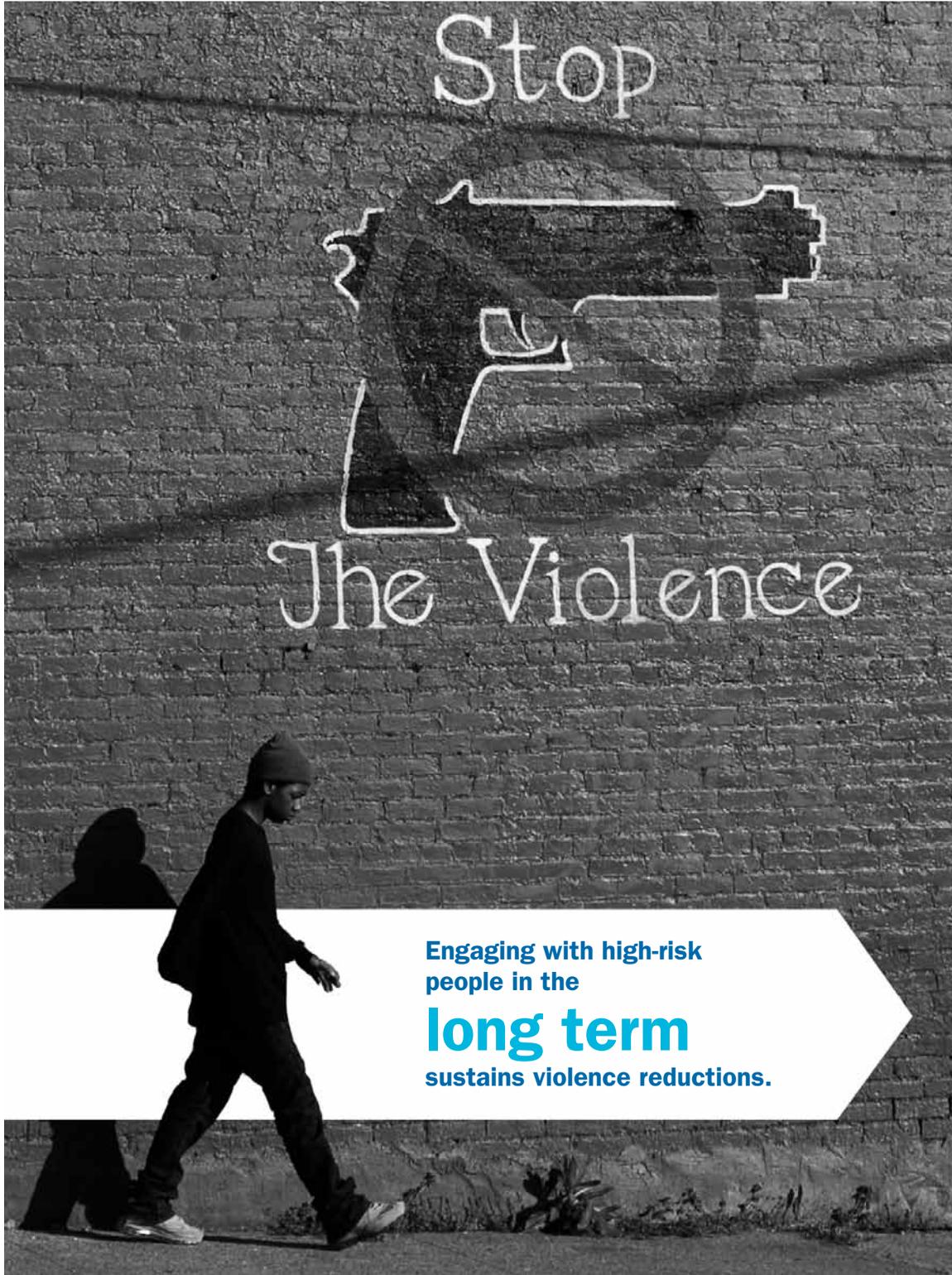
# Strategies for change



A growing body of criminological evidence shows that serious violence and much other crime is concentrated among a remarkably small number of people. Urban homicide and gun violence is driven by a small population of highly active offenders operating in groups. The National Network’s city research invariably finds that members of groups—gangs, drug crews, and the like—representing under half a percent of a city’s population, commit half to three-quarters of all murders.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, destructive overt drug markets in a neighborhood are often driven by an unexpectedly small number of dealers.<sup>17</sup> Recent interventions have found that other major crime problems, like robbery and the most serious domestic violence, are also committed by a small number of high-risk people. Many of such individuals are locked in dynamics not of their own making that promote violence and other serious crime. Nearly everybody living in “dangerous” neighborhoods is not driving, and does not tolerate, the violence; most of even the high-risk population is more trapped and frightened than predatory.

The National Network’s intervention process addresses this by working in cities to identify a particular serious crime problem; conducting analysis to identify the core group driving it; and assembling a partnership of law enforcement, community leaders, and social service providers to engage with those high-risk people in a focused way. The partnership then communicates directly and repeatedly with the core group, giving them a moral message from the community against offending, prior notice of the legal consequences for further offending, and an offer of help.

The explicit aim of this process is to strengthen community norms against offending, communicate directly with high-risk people to deter violence, use a minimum of actual enforcement, help them succeed in their lives, and enhance the legitimacy of law enforcement, especially police, to make communities safer.



Engaging with high-risk people in the **long term** sustains violence reductions.

### Group Violence Intervention

The Group Violence Intervention (GVI) is designed to reduce street group-involved homicide and gun violence. Pioneered by National Network Director David Kennedy and colleagues as “Operation Ceasefire” in Boston during the 1990s, it has been implemented widely nationally, including currently in the very challenging cities of Chicago, New Orleans, Oakland, and Baltimore, and has acquired a strong formal evaluation record, as presented in the gold-standard Campbell Collaboration Systematic Review.<sup>18</sup>

GVI has repeatedly demonstrated that violence can be dramatically reduced when a partnership of community members, law enforcement, and social service providers directly engages with the small and active number of people involved in street groups and clearly communicates a credible moral message against violence, prior notice about the consequences of further violence, and a genuine offer of help for those who want it. A central method of communication is the call-in, a face-to-face meeting between group members and the strategy’s partners.

The aim of the GVI strategy is to reduce peer dynamics in the group that promote violence by creating collective accountability, to foster internal social pressure that deters violence, to establish clear community standards against violence, to offer group members an “honorable exit” from committing acts of violence, and to provide a supported path for those who want to change.<sup>19</sup>

### Drug Market Intervention

The Drug Market Intervention (DMI) effectively eliminates overt drug markets and improves life for residents of the surrounding communities. Overt drug markets operate in public, causing chaos, violence, and enormous damage to communities. DMI was first piloted in 2004 in High Point, NC. The strategy identifies particular drug markets, identifies street-level dealers, and arrests violent offenders. Law enforcement develops prosecutable drug cases for nonviolent dealers but suspends these unless a dealer continues dealing. This allows law enforcement to put dealers on notice that any future dealing will result in certain, immediate sanctions. The DMI partnership brings together dealers, their families, law enforcement, social service providers, and community leaders for a call-in meeting that makes clear that selling drugs openly must stop and the market is closed. The partnership tells dealers clearly and directly that the community cares about them but rejects their behavior, that help is available, and that continued dealing will result in immediate sanctions through the activation of existing cases. Dozens of cities have implemented DMI with reductions in violent and drug-related crime, minimized use of law enforcement, strong endorsement from the community, and improved relationships between law enforcement and residents.<sup>20</sup>

## Domestic Violence Intervention

The Domestic Violence Intervention (DVI) employs the National Network's approach to identify and deter the most serious domestic violence offenders, reduce domestic violence, and reduce harm to victims. Through a partnership between law enforcement, community members, social service providers, and domestic violence victims' advocates, the DVI strategy intervenes early with low-level domestic violence offenders, puts them on notice of community intolerance for domestic violence and that further and more serious offending will be met with a meaningful legal response, and takes special steps to remove the most dangerous domestic violence offenders from the community. The strategy includes close partnership with domestic violence victims' advocates to ensure that victims have access to safety and support structures and are not exposed to unintended harm. Tracking data for a pilot implementation of DVI in High Point, NC, show very encouraging reductions in domestic homicide, reoffending among notified domestic violence offenders, calls for service, and victim injuries.<sup>21</sup>

## Prison Violence Intervention

The Prison Violence Intervention (PVI) aims to enhance safety and security in prisons for both staff and inmates, and create the conditions necessary for treatment, rehabilitation, and effective reentry. PVI relies on direct communication with inmates through call-ins, as well as briefings during intake and documents distributed to cells, to deliver an antiviolence message from community members, information about consequences for further violence, and an offer of help for those who want it. The strategy uses the National Network's process to identify the institution's key players and target serious prison offenses such as assaults against staff, multi-inmate fights, and assaults with weapons. In call-in meetings, prison staff informs inmates that further violence by any member of a group will result in swift, certain consequences for its members—things meaningful to inmates, like limits on telephone privileges, personal radio use, television access, or time in the yard. The prison also invites family, influential community members, and ex-offenders to speak to inmates, sharing their experiences with the damage caused by group-related violence. Finally, prison staff explains the help they can offer—opportunities like substance abuse counseling and GED and vocational classes aimed at making good use of their time and helping them come out prepared. Initial reports from the Washington State Department of Corrections, where the strategy was piloted, suggest that it has resulted in significant decreases in violent acts against staff and other inmates.<sup>22</sup>

# Innovations

## Custom notifications

Custom notifications are an innovative way to communicate quickly, tactically, and directly with particular high-risk people. Custom notifications typically take place during home or street visits conducted by a team of law enforcement and community representatives to articulate to high-risk people that they are valued members of the community, give individualized information about their legal risk, and offer opportunities for help. As part of custom notifications, law enforcement partners can perform custom legal assessments, the process of reviewing offenders' legal histories and vulnerabilities to produce information specific to them and deter further violence. Effective custom notifications can also address an offender's personal circumstances, family history, and the like to offer possibilities for individualized support.<sup>23</sup>

Within the Group Violence Intervention, custom notifications can be used to interrupt group "beefs," avoid retaliation after incidents, calm outbreaks of violence, and reinforce the overall antiviolence message. They are also used to communicate with high-risk people in other intervention contexts. In Chicago, the city's Violence Reduction Strategy partners have used hundreds of custom notifications, and the U.S. Department of Justice is supporting the process there.

## Police-community reconciliation

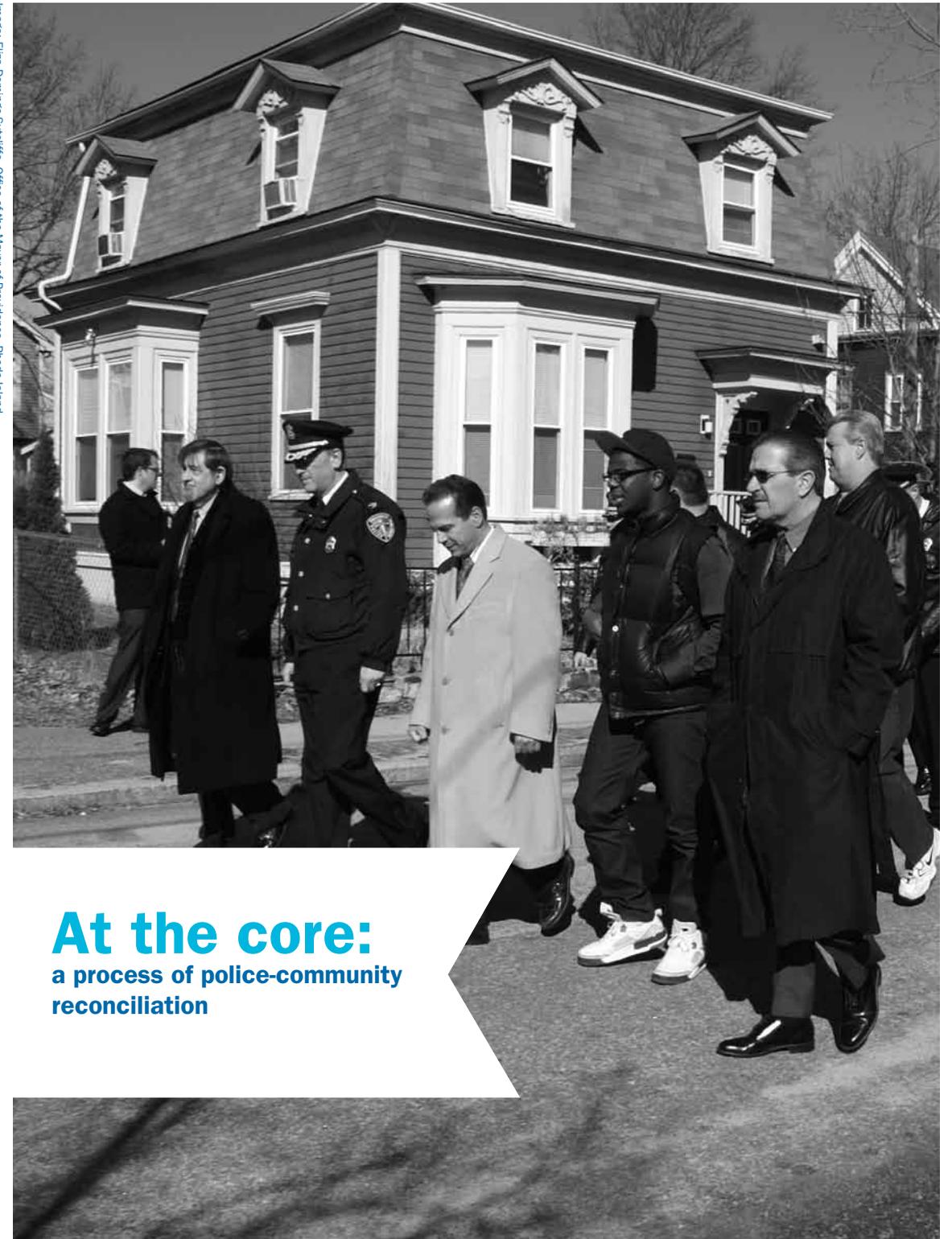
Beginning with its work in bringing communities and police together to shut down drug markets, the National Network has been both exploring and applying processes of police-community reconciliation. This work involves law enforcement partners and communities directly engaging with one another in order to address past and present harms, air grievances, and address narratives that keep both sides from moving toward their shared goal of improving public safety. The reconciliation process typically includes frank discussions between law enforcement and community stakeholders about how traditional law enforcement has been both ineffective and damaging, about how communities can do more to communicate clear norms against violence and other serious crime, and about how to work together to develop a safer community. This process has proven powerful. It can be an uncomfortable step, but it is often necessary for forming a true partnership and rebuilding trust.

The aim of the process is that communities and law enforcement come to see that 1) they misunderstand each other in important ways, 2) both have been contributing to harms neither desires, 3) in crucial areas, both want fundamentally the same things, and 4) there is an immediate opportunity for partnership that can concretely benefit both the community and the authorities that serve it. The process allows strong community standards to emerge and law enforcement to step back. These conversations begin to uncover common ground, and disaffected communities usually feel strengthened to articulate norms against crime and violence, in part because they are less angry with law enforcement and are eager to try a new approach.<sup>24</sup> As a result of this process, law enforcement gains legitimacy in the eyes of the community, the community is freed to set its own public safety standards, and enforcement actions can be kept to a minimum.<sup>25</sup> So far applied mainly at the neighborhood level, the National Network is actively exploring ways that reconciliation can be expanded.

## Strategic prosecution

The National Network's evolving model for strategic prosecution aims to reimagine the prosecutor's office as not only an important partner to other criminal justice agencies but an independent and effective actor in reducing crime, enhancing the legitimacy of the criminal justice system, strengthening the capacity of communities to prevent and reduce crime, and reducing the unintended consequences of existing criminal justice practices. The National Network is framing approaches and working with prosecutors to reduce prosecution and incarceration by mobilizing direct communication with high-risk groups and individuals; mobilizing community informal social control; enhancing the legitimacy of the prosecutor's office and the criminal justice system; employing deterrence before actual enforcement; and where enforcement is required, applying the minimum level necessary. Under this model, the prosecutor's office will forge working partnerships with police and other criminal justice agencies, communities and key actors within communities, social service providers, outreach workers, and academics.

Image: Eliza Domingo-Sucliffe, Office of the Mayor of Providence, Rhode Island



**At the core:**  
a process of police-community  
reconciliation

# Related Strategies

Swift, certain and fair responses have the greatest impact on **reducing crime**

## Swift, Certain & Fair

The Swift, Certain, and Fair (SCF) approach shares the National Network's guiding principles in its approach to community supervision. SCF reduces reoffending, arrest, and incarceration by replacing unpredictable and high-level sanctions for probation violations with swift, certain, but small penalties. Research has shown that the transparent, consistent, and immediate response is a vital tool in shaping behavior and improving the perception that sanctions are fair. Using community supervision is much more cost effective than a prison sentence or jail term, allowing offenders to work, care for their families, and pay taxes. After a successful pilot in Hawaii known as Hawaii HOPE, similar probation programs are now operating in numerous other states across the U.S., and the U.K. is starting to adapt SCF principles to sobriety pilots in London and Glasgow.<sup>26,27</sup>

## Individual Gun Violence Intervention

The Individual Gun Violence Intervention (IGVI) shares the National Network's guiding principles in its approach to reducing gun violence by individual offenders. Pioneered as "Project Safe Neighborhoods" in Chicago, the IGVI strategy brings parolees with histories of violence and/or gun offending into a call-in; informs them of the legal risks of, especially, the federal felon-in-possession gun laws to which they are now subject; conveys clear antiviolence messages from community members and ex-offenders, and spells out social service opportunities. Careful evaluation has found substantial reductions in gun violence as a result.<sup>28</sup> The approach is now being replicated in several sites across New York State and elsewhere.

# Results

The National Network's strategies have been deployed in more than 60 cities—from Chicago to Oakland, New Orleans to Providence—over nearly 20 years. A Campbell Collaboration Systematic Review of the strategies, and others related to them, concluded that there is now “strong empirical evidence” for their effectiveness in reducing violence and serious crime. Individual impacts are significant:

## Group Violence Intervention

**63%**

reduction in youth homicide<sup>29</sup>  
*Boston, Operation Ceasefire*

**42%**

reduction in gun homicide<sup>30</sup>  
*Stockton, Operation Peacekeeper*

**44%**

reduction in gun assaults<sup>31</sup>  
*Lowell, Project Safe Neighborhoods*

**34%**

reduction in homicide<sup>32</sup>  
*Indianapolis Violence Reduction Partnership*

**41%**

reduction in group member involved homicide<sup>33</sup>  
*Cincinnati Initiative to Reduce Violence*

**27%**

reduction in shootings among notified violent groups<sup>34</sup>  
*Boston, Operation Ceasefire*

## Drug Market Intervention

**44–56%**

reduction in Part 1 UCR crime in 3 out of 4 DMI neighborhoods<sup>35</sup>  
*High Point DMI*

**55%**

reduction in drug offenses<sup>36</sup>  
*Nashville DMI*

**22%**

reduction in non-violent offenses<sup>37</sup>  
*Rockford DMI*

## Swift, Certain & Fair

**26%**

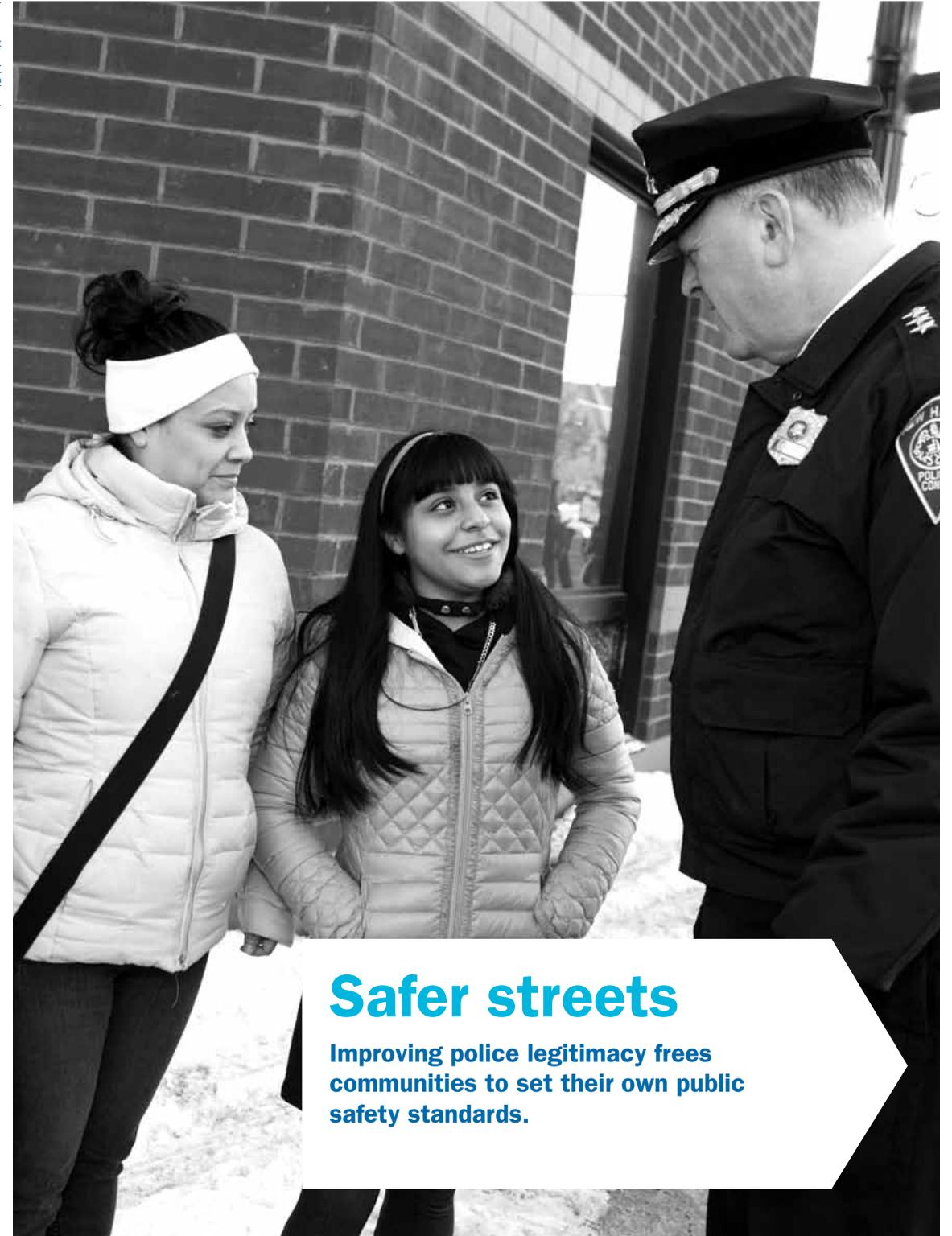
reduction in recidivism rate among probationers *Hawaii HOPE*<sup>38</sup>

## Individual Gun Violence Intervention

**37%**

reduction in homicide *Chicago, Project Safe Neighborhoods*<sup>39</sup>

Image: Harold Shapiro



## Safer streets

Improving police legitimacy frees communities to set their own public safety standards.



## Sources

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# Contact us

Please contact the staff at the National Network for Safe Communities to speak further about its work.

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