



**Overview** A key principle of the National Network for Safe Communities is to offer help to the core population of high-risk people on the street. The National Network has typically framed this component of its strategies as “social services.” However, despite the best efforts of all concerned, it has shown little impact on violence reduction or improving the lives of group members. Working with its national partners, the National Network has begun to frame a new “support and outreach” structure carefully tailored to the core street population, its situation, and its needs.

### A new structure

The National Network’s approach reduces violent crime when a partnership of community members, law enforcement, and social service providers communicates directly with core offenders, giving them a community moral message against violence, prior notice of the legal consequences for further violence, and an offer of help. However, the direct contribution from the social service component has been negligible.<sup>1</sup> The core street population the National Network engages is both the most active and the most vulnerable to be found. Addressing homicide and serious violence means addressing them, but existing social service practices simply do not work for this population.

The National Network and its partners have developed and begun to implement a new support and outreach structure with the following characteristics:

- ▶ **Keeping people alive and out of prison.** A comprehensive partnership of providers works with an explicit new goal of keeping offenders alive, unhurt, and out of prison, and formal tracking and metrics commensurate with that goal.
- ▶ **Providing affirmative outreach.** Leaving the streets is for most an iterative process and special attention is given to “failing” participants. This means deliberate outreach to offenders to foster new relationships and community, mentorship to help transition out of the street life, and peer “recovery groups” to share experiences and build bridges to legitimate participation in the community. Law enforcement can incorporate “we’re trying to keep you alive and free” norms into their routine contacts with street offenders, and broker service opportunities.
- ▶ **Offering protection from risk.** Law enforcement and outreach workers can identify individuals’ enemies and communicate with them to head off violence and retaliation, provide temporary housing, and the like.





Community gathering of Kansas City No Violence Alliance. Image: Nisha Stephen

The harsh reality is that this is a tough group of guys to work with because their daily lives are so unstable and volatile...Because of our strong community partners we are able to reach out to group members and their families to limit retaliations and make our streets safer. We also work to ensure that the police deliver on their promise to keep them safe, thereby improving the legitimacy of the police in these communities...The support and outreach structure we have developed allows us to meet these guys where they are and serve their most pressing needs.<sup>2</sup>

Paul Smith, Project Manager, Chattanooga Violence Reduction Initiative

- ▶ **Addressing trauma.** Focused measures are taken to recognize, honor, and address trauma and develop treatment resources, post-homicide support, and peer “recovery group” settings for sharing and debriefing. Providers can offer help to offenders, who often have internalized the idea that they are bad and worthless, to understand their worth and articulate their needs.
- ▶ **Providing the “big small stuff.”** Providers make a priority of addressing emergency needs and offering low-level but critical resources not commonly taken seriously and budgeted for (e.g., clearing outstanding warrants, licensing and ID assistance, phone and mail service, child care, transportation, emergency housing and food assistance, funeral costs, navigating bureaucracy, and the like).
- ▶ **Traditional services.** Close linkages to traditional services—education, work, life skills, family support, and the like—will allow moving offenders into those services as they stabilize and become ready.

## The way forward

The National Network is enormously encouraged by this new direction for support and outreach. First and foremost, it makes sense to those who do this work most intensively. Dropping a still-active gang member into a job training program is a prescription for failure, but wrapping him up in the web of offerings and relationships envisioned in this structure holds great promise. Outstanding examples include Chattanooga’s Community Police Response to Victims of Violence, a unit within Chattanooga Police Department that delivers “custom notifications” and offers victim support; Long Island’s Council of Thought and Action, a peer “recovery group” for core offenders; Cincinnati Initiative to Reduce Violence, which gives questionnaires to group members at call-ins to assess their needs; and New Orleans’ Violence Reduction Strategy, which has reprogrammed grants to include resources for the “big small stuff.” With support from the Jacob & Valeria Langeloth Foundation, the National Network is now working with cities to implement this new structure within the greater strategic framework.

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**The National Network for Safe Communities supports cities advancing proven strategies to reduce violence, minimize arrest and incarceration, and strengthen relationships between law enforcement and distressed communities.**

<sup>1</sup> Engel, R. S., Tillyer, M. S., & Corsaro, N. (2011, November). Reducing Gang Violence Using Focused Deterrence: Evaluating the Cincinnati Initiative to Reduce Violence (CIRV). *Justice Quarterly*.

<sup>2</sup> Smith, P. (2015, June). A Harsh Reality. *National Network for Safe Communities Chronicle*.