

Implementing Support and Outreach in Community Violence Prevention

Background

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

First do no harm. Criminal justice is strong medicine: it can help, but applied too heavily or in the wrong way, it can hurt. It's now clear that 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 – not law enforcement – 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. Direct communication through “call-ins,” “custom notifications,” and other practical steps can focus and amplify community crime control. 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. Even criminals follow the law most of the time. 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 don't like how they're 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 someone know that enforcement is coming, so they can step aside, rather than to arrest, prosecute, and incarcerate. 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. Profligate enforcement can have terrible collateral consequences, alienate communities, and undermine legitimacy. Law enforcement should apply the minimum that is compatible with ensuring public safety.

These principles have informed a variety of evidence-based interventions, of which the Group Violence Intervention (GVI) is the most seasoned. GVI produces rapid and substantial reductions in homicide and serious violence in America's most troubled communities. A long and growing record of impact makes it the most powerful response developed to date to address this core problem.¹ The approach is spreading nationally and recent implementations produced violence reductions in major cities in 2013, including an 18 percent reduction in homicide in Chicago, a nearly 20 percent reduction in New Orleans, a 29 percent reduction in Oakland, and a 55 percent reduction in Stockton, California, among other cities. Cities such as Detroit, Philadelphia, and Kansas City have begun to use the approach; Baltimore launched in 2014; the state of Connecticut is supporting the approach in New Haven, Bridgeport, and Hartford; and smaller cities like Peoria, Chattanooga, and South Bend have begun or are beginning.²

In addition to reducing violence, GVI is designed to reduce arrest and incarceration, foster racial reconciliation, enhance police legitimacy, and reset police-community relations. The strategy focuses on the very small population of extremely active street groups—gangs, drug crews, and the like—most at risk for violent victimization and offending. It creates a sustained relationship with these groups through which community members assert community standards supporting them but rejecting violence, providers offer a wide range of help, and law enforcement puts them on prior notice of concrete legal consequences for violence.

Executive summary

The offer of help is a key element of the GVI strategy. NNSC has typically framed the help component of GVI as “social services.” It has involved bringing together program offerings such as remedial education, employment training, substance abuse treatment, and the like; establishing one access point to those services; and organizing case management and follow-through with group members. The goal has been to help group members leave the street scene and, in the nearly universal catch-phrase, “turn their lives around.” This aspiration is the most important goal for many GVI partners; has received serious attention in cities across the country; and has taken up substantial amounts of implementation time and funding support. However, despite the best efforts of all concerned, it has shown little impact on violence reduction or improving the lives of group members.

While the overall results for GVI have been consistently positive, the direct contribution to violence reduction from the social service component has been negligible. Most group members do not even try to access services – only about 10 percent in a typical GVI city over a period of several years. Those who access services do not maintain engagement, and only a handful end up with GEDs, more advanced degrees, or sustained employment. One formal evaluation found “no discernible relationship between social services provided to offenders and specific changes in targeted violent crime outcomes.”³ The overall violence prevention strategy has been effective through enhancing deterrence and community standards, and

¹ Braga, A., Weisburd, D. L. (2012). *The Effects of “Pulling Levers” Focused Deterrence Strategies on Crime*. Campbell Systematic Reviews. DOI: 10.4073/csr.2012.6.

² Kennedy, David M (Jan 21, 2014). “The Story Behind the Nation’s Falling Body Count.” *The Huffington Post*. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-m-kennedy/the-story-behind-the-nati_b_4634755.html.

³ Engel, Robin S., Marie Skubak Tillyer, Nicholas Corsaro (November 2011). Reducing Gang Violence Using Focused Deterrence: Evaluating the Cincinnati Initiative to Reduce Violence (CIRV). *Justice Quarterly*, DOI:10.1080/07418825.2011.619559.

the fact that the strategy is serious about offering help both brings partners together and takes excuses away from the core offender population, but the social services component has not been meaningful on its own terms.

The traditional conversation around services centers on a presumed lack of resources, but the hard fact is that resources are not the issue. The very best reentry initiatives produce nearly no impact.⁴ Beyond that, the core street population the NNSC addresses is extreme even within the reentry category – they are both the most active and the most vulnerable to be found (our research shows that at a time when the national homicide rate is about 4:100,000, their homicide victimization rate can reach 3,000:100,000). Addressing homicide and serious violent crime means addressing them, but existing social service practices simply do not work.

Over the last two years, the NNSC has made it a priority to face this reality.⁵ We have worked with a high-level group of national experts with deep experience with the most serious street offenders; reentry; and GVI and other focused antiviolence initiatives. That process has been extremely productive and has produced a clear assessment of the reasons traditional approaches have failed and how we can do better. We have framed a more realistic approach, replacing the original “social services” framework with a broader conception carefully tailored to the special, core street population, its situation, and its needs. The NNSC and our group of experts have begun to call this approach “support and outreach.” The objective of the proposed project is to bring this conception to fruition in several demonstration cities. Upon analysis, the problems of the traditional approach are obvious:

- Traditional social service goals and metrics do not account for antiviolence goals, such as avoiding violent victimization and offending, and avoiding arrest and imprisonment.
- The core street population and their communities have often had negative and discouraging experiences with providers.
- Providers often prefer to work with those who are “ready to change,” and core offenders often are not.
- Providers often base services on the misunderstanding that the core population is desperate to get off the street.
- Service offerings – such as education, training, and job placement – are a poor fit with offenders’ real-world situation, which is frequently extraordinarily dangerous and chaotic.

The NNSC and our group of experts defined an alternative structure with the following characteristics:

- *Staying alive and out of prison.* The new structure will create a comprehensive partnership of providers with an explicit new goal of keeping offenders alive, unhurt, and out of prison, and formal tracking and metrics commensurate with that goal (rather than, for example, job placement and retention alone). This will include an

⁴ Clear, T.R. (2008). “The effects of high imprisonment rates on communities.” *Crime and Justice* 37(1), 97 – 132.

⁵ NNSC has received limited funding support for the initial research and design process for a new social service structure from MacArthur Foundation, the Office of Community-Oriented Policing Services, and the Bureau of Justice Assistance.

overall recognition that movement in that direction is progress, and positive (rather than, for example, that not getting or keeping a job is “failure”). The partnership will recognize and address street culture, trauma, and objective risk - not unemployment - as the primary drivers of violence. We will mobilize known approaches - and work to develop new ones - to challenge the “street code” that drives violence; identify and address “beefs” and retaliatory cycles; deal with offenders in ways that do not require arrest and incarceration; and treat trauma.

- *Affirmative outreach.* The structure will include explicit recognition that leaving the streets is for most an iterative process and give special attention to “failing” participants. This will mean deliberate outreach to offenders to foster new relationships and community; mentorship from ex-offenders to help transition out of the street life (e.g., the street outreach work of Providence’s Institute for the Study and Practice of Non-Violence); and peer “recovery groups” to share experiences and build bridges to legitimate participation in the community (e.g., Long Island’s Council of Thought and Action). Law enforcement can incorporate “we’re trying to keep you alive and free” norms into their routine contacts with street offenders, and market and broker service opportunities.
- *Protection from risk.* A great deal has been learned in our existing work. The overall GVI is designed to, and does, greatly reduce this violence. Law enforcement and outreach workers will be able to identify individuals’ enemies and communicate with them to head off violence and retaliation. Outreach workers will work both sides of conflicts, and the system overall will provide unbiased relief and services to both victims and perpetrators of violent crime. We have examples nationally of explicit protocols to prevent retaliatory violence after homicides and shootings. One of our partner cities has the capacity to deploy in-kind short hotel stays to get people off the streets in moments of high risk. This is a strong and rapidly evolving area.
- *Addressing trauma.* The structure will recognize, honor and address trauma, developing treatment resources, post-homicide support, and peer “recovery group” settings for sharing and debriefing. Providers will 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.”* The structure will include the ability to address emergency needs and provide low-level but critical resources not commonly taken seriously and budgeted for - what we have started to call “the big small stuff.” This includes such capacities as 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. An explicit goal will be to include “big small stuff” services in contractual agreements.
- *Traditional services.* Close linkages to traditional services - education, work, life skills, family support, etc. - will allow moving offenders into those services as they stabilize and become ready.

The NNSC is enormously encouraged by this new direction for support and outreach. First and foremost, it makes sense to us and those who do this work most intensively. We know that 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. Having conceptualized the elements of support and outreach, we must now design and implement a process to operationalize this structure within the greater GVI framework.

The NNSC wishes to pilot the approach, assemble the portfolio of resources identified, and offer a menu of possibilities for cities to draw from when doing violence reduction work. It will create a national audit of good practice wherever it exists in these core categories and allow jurisdictions to scale their efforts to meet the needs of the core street population as they experience it. By developing a knowledge base about practical means to build support and outreach, we will take concrete steps toward creating the actual infrastructure to serve the street population in each city.

For example, there are medical protocols for addressing trauma, as well as lay processes. We know, from our broader antiviolence work, ways to identify offenders' enemies, reach out to them, and get them to stand down.⁶ We know how to work with our law enforcement partners to substitute direct notification for arrest and prosecution.⁷ Well-developed outreach worker models make affirmative contact with street group members, begin to provide new relationships, and can provide bridges to other resources and services. As a result of the process described here, our partners in New Orleans rewrote their city contracts to provide for the accountable provision of "big small stuff" resources and services. We know of two well-developed models – the Institute for the Study and Practice of Non-Violence in Providence, RI, and the Council of Thought and Action on Long Island, NY – that combine outreach, an affirmative culture to counter the street culture, peer support, individual-level problem solving, links to social service programming, and the like. These successful examples provide a map of how these elements can be combined and coordinated to form an integrated new whole.

Driving and modeling that larger design and integration is the next step in this area. GVI has always proceeded on the premise that existing resources should be assessed and redirected before any consideration is given to new resources. Most GVI operations have in fact proceeded without new resources, save those necessary for designing and initially managing the new strategic intervention. We believe that cities can proceed in that fashion in support and outreach as well. As an initial position, we believe that many of the resources to perform this reframed support and outreach function for the small number of core street offenders in a city are likely available from existing federal, state, and local funding, and from formal and informal sources. This project will allow us to identify, coordinate, refocus and reinforce those resources into a new structure. Where genuine resource deficits exist, cities can attempt to address them with local fundraising and initiatives.

An additional value of piloting support and outreach will be the larger benefit to cities nationally, whether they are implementing a GVI strategy or not. Every city with a violence problem has an active core street population; tailoring support and outreach toward this population – those that are most likely to be the victims or perpetrators of violence – can help prevent harm to the individuals themselves and communities at large.

⁶ The NNSC uses a process known as "custom notifications" to deliver individualized antiviolence messages quickly and tactically to those at high risk of violent victimization or offense, which is invaluable in interrupting "beefs" and preventing retaliatory violence on short notice. For more on how Chicago PD is using custom notifications.

⁷ Law enforcement can accomplish deterrence without arrest in various ways. Custom notifications, for example, deter violence by giving offenders information about risk in advance of legal action. The NNSC's Drug Market Intervention deters overt dealing by creating "banked" cases – i.e., notifying non-violent dealers of prosecutable drug cases against them that law enforcement is "holding," to be prosecuted only if the individual continues dealing.