

Case Study: Communicating the Connection between Trust Building and Violence Reduction

Throughout 2018, the Gary Police Department began using new messaging to community members to reinforce connections between its police-community trust-building efforts and violence reduction.

Key Takeaways

Goals:

- Improve positive community perceptions of police legitimacy
- Increase communities' compliance with the law, acceptance of legal outcomes, and cooperation with legal authorities
- Reduce violent crime

Actions:

- Explicitly connect GVI, reconciliation, and procedural justice in the department's messaging to community members
- Use GVI call-ins as an opportunity to deliver this message to the most invested audience
- Ways to make the connection:
 - Acknowledge that the failure of previous violence reduction efforts has damaged both safety and trust
 - State a commitment to progress, with examples
 - Call-ins are examples of respect and trustworthiness: group members are treated with respect and law enforcement representatives are clear about what actions they intend to take
 - When police explain an enforcement action to the community they demonstrate respect and trustworthiness
 - GVI is a partnership between law enforcement and affected communities. Community participation is necessary and encouraged
 - Hold listening sessions specific to GVI implementation to give community members voice
 - Make this connection clear within the department
 - Explain that community trust is necessary for effective GVI implementation
 - Include training on using procedural justice during GVI patrol activities

Trust Building and Violence Prevention

When outlining the three pillars of the [National Initiative for Building Community Trust and Justice](#) (National Initiative)—fostering police-community reconciliation, promoting procedural justice in law enforcement, and addressing implicit biases—the project's leadership recognized the pillars' intrinsic value. But more importantly, they hoped that through implementation of these pillars, police departments could better achieve the goal of improving positive community perceptions of police legitimacy—which are the demonstrably essential foundation for strengthening communities' compliance with the law, acceptance of legal outcomes, and cooperation with legal authorities. Indeed, community perceptions of legitimacy, as shaped by efforts like reconciliation and procedural justice, can have a direct and significant impact on how cities address serious violent crime.

Although law enforcement at all National Initiative pilot sites intuitively grasp this connection, the Gary Police Department (GPD) has been uniquely positioned to embrace it—both in theory and implementation. As one of three National Initiative cities currently implementing the [Group Violence Intervention](#) (GVI), a multi-agency strategy developed by the National Network for Safe Communities, in partnership with community leaders to curb serious gang violence, the GPD has recently begun to take clear and concerted steps to reinforce the

connection between National Initiative trust-building efforts and violence intervention. Under the leadership of Chief Richard Allen, who assumed the top post in January 2018 from former Chief Larry McKinley, this effort has centered around innovative messaging to the community.

Community Messaging in Gary

2nd District community meetings

Barely a month into his new role, Chief Allen hit the ground running with this effort in February 2018, at a public safety-focused meeting with community members in the 2nd District. This district encompasses neighborhoods most severely impacted by violent crime, and as a result, was the site of one of Gary's first National Initiative listening sessions in 2017. The February 2018 community meeting was especially timely considering that the GPD had just begun a GVI enforcement action, where members of the city's most violent group, which had previously been put on notice for its connection to a high number of shootings, were subjected to a targeted law enforcement sweep. Considering the impact that any such large enforcement action can have on residents of a community, as well as a history of high levels of crime and low levels of police-community trust, Gary's 2nd District was a critical part of the city for the GPD to make meaningful outreach.

To that end, Chief Allen joined Jack Hamady, GPD's Commander of Investigations overseeing GVI, as he outlined to residents the purpose and general framework of the strategy and explained for the first time how GVI was a core part of the city's broader efforts to strengthen trust between communities and law enforcement. He expressed the GPD's commitment to the principles of procedurally just policing, and encouraged residents to share their questions and concerns about the most recent enforcement action. Although GVI, known locally as "Gary for Life," had been launched in Gary three years prior, this was the first time that GVI, reconciliation, and procedural justice had been explicitly connected in the department's messaging to community members, with the goal of strengthening community support for both efforts.

As Chief Allen later described it to National Initiative field staff, the connection simply "made sense." That said, he was perhaps privileged with unique insight as the only National Initiative city police chief who had formerly served as a procedural justice trainer. The experience of sustained engagement with National Initiative pillars served him well in his transition to leading the department's violence reduction efforts. Encouraged by how readily Chief Allen and his team embraced the link between the city's National Initiative and GVI work, National Initiative field staff urged him to continue this messaging at subsequent community meetings in the 2nd District.

A "light bulb moment": the GVI Call-in

Throughout 2018, steps to advance this community messaging were somewhat hampered by GPD capacity constraints. The department was severely understaffed, down over 50 sworn officers from 2017, and the city's National Initiative Site Liaison Joy Holliday was doing double duty as the GVI Project Manager. Although the two large projects placed difficult demands on Joy's time, this capacity curse showed itself to be a blessing in one way by providing her with unique insight into cross-collaboration opportunities between the National Initiative and GVI. In particular, conversations between Joy and National Initiative field staff revealed a striking new opportunity to advance the community messaging about trust building and violence reduction: an address to community members during a GVI call-in.

Call-ins are a GVI innovation to deter groups from committing further violence while offering them resources to help them make this change. Various group-involved community members, most of whom are currently serving probation or parole, are called into a meeting with leadership from the police department, state prosecutor's office, U.S. Attorney's Office, and local social service providers, as well as members of the community who have lost loved ones to group violence ("Voices of Pain"), and others who have since

left gangs or groups and have changed their lives for the better (“Voices of Redemption”). Together with explanations of the GVI approach, the community’s desire for change, the legal consequences of continued violence, and available services for those who want end their association with gangs or groups, these representatives deliver the message to group-involved persons that “We’ll help you if you let us, but we’ll stop you if you make us,” and encourage participants to disseminate this message amongst their groups, in a citywide effort to interrupt the violence.

In the traditional GVI framework, call-ins do not engage general community members. Residents, largely friends and family of the group-involved participants, are seated in the back and are expected to observe quietly. But by the fall of 2018, as Gary geared up for its next call-in and its first since February, the city was still searching for stronger ways to engage with community members and strengthen support for its violence reduction work.

It was therefore a “light bulb moment” for Joy on a phone call in September when the idea arose for direct community messaging at the next call-in. Such a setting would have several advantages over the previous community meetings: the audience was a self-selecting group of people passionate about and committed specifically to reducing group violence in their neighborhoods, as opposed to just general community residents, and seeing the call-in itself would illustrate the goals and impact of GVI to the community far better than the general presentations at community meetings.

In preparation for the new messaging, GPD Deputy Chief Brian Evans worked closely with National Initiative field staff over several weeks to outline goals and talking points. He decided to explicitly connect GVI to both procedural justice and reconciliation under the National Initiative—by pointing out that call-ins themselves were a procedurally just example of respect and trustworthiness in action, and by acknowledging that the failure of previous violence reduction efforts had damaged both community safety and police-community trust, and that the department had resolved to do better. In addition, Joy agreed to circulate a sign-in sheet among community members, for those interested in further conversations about GVI and potentially even getting involved in the support effort.

On the evening of the November 28 call-in, before the group members were invited to enter, Deputy Chief Evans approached the front of the room armed only with his notes on paper and a smile. Calmly, he thanked community members for attending and then delivered his talking points. He stressed that GVI and the National Initiative must be collaborative efforts between the police and community, and encouraged residents to enter their information in the sign-in sheet if they were interested in having further conversations and potentially working together. Although community members did not share direct feedback about the speech, it spoke volumes that by the end of the call-in, Joy’s sign-in sheet was full.

Considerations and next steps

The GPD recognizes that community messaging comprises only one piece of the work necessary to reinforce connections between trust building and violence intervention. Chief Allen and Joy have discussed the potential to build on their work in 2018 by launching a GVI-specific reconciliation process, in which residents from neighborhoods experiencing high levels of violence are invited to listening sessions to share their feedback on GVI implementation, specifically with regard to enforcement actions. Moreover, Chief Allen and Joy are engaged in ongoing discussions about community feedback that could be meaningfully incorporated into changes in GVI implementation and broader department policy and practice.

Sergeant Anthony Titus, who leads both procedural justice training and all training for the department, has expressed a desire to work with Commander Hamady on designing a procedural justice module that incorporates elements of the city's GVI patrol training, which launched in February 2018. This would help both seasoned members of the department and new recruits more concretely apply the procedural justice concepts of voice, neutrality, respect, and trustworthiness to their implementation of GVI.

The Gary Police Department appreciates trust building as a critical element of violence reduction, and has expressed its commitment to continuing to communicate that message at community meetings and call-ins. They are also working to complement those efforts with GVI-focused listening sessions and internal training that strengthens the link between GVI and trust for the department. As Chief Allen said, building community trust in order to reduce violence simply "makes sense".

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