



**National Network  
For Safe Communities  
at JOHN JAY COLLEGE**

## **SUPPORT AND OUTREACH WHITE PAPER**

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### **CHANGING TRADITIONAL SOCIAL SERVICE FRAMEWORK TO ADDRESS THE UNIQUE GVI POPULATION**

In the Group Violence Intervention (GVI), the traditional “social services” framework is replaced with a broader structure tailored to members of the special core street population, their situation, and their needs. Traditional social services were not necessarily designed to reduce violence, and people closest to group violence are not the average people seeking social services. They are at extremely high risk for violent victimization and live with past and ongoing trauma. Because of these factors, many GVI clients are not ready for traditional social services like remedial education and employment training. In the GVI framework, these clients instead receive “support and outreach.” We define support as providing centralized and accessible services for people at high risk of violence. Outreach in this framework is defined as making deliberate, persistent, and consistent connections to people involved in violence to foster new relationships and build community.

### **NNSC AND GVI BACKGROUND**

The National Network for Safe Communities at John Jay College (NNSC), focuses on supporting the implementation of strategic interventions to reduce violence and improve public safety. NNSC’s Group Violence Intervention produces rapid and substantial reductions in homicide and serious violence in communities with the highest levels of gun violence. A long and growing record of impact evaluation makes GVI the most powerful response known to date to address serious violence.<sup>1</sup> The strategy has been implemented in over 60 cities since 2009.

In addition to reducing violence, GVI is designed to reduce arrest and incarceration, enhance police legitimacy, and improve 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. The GVI partnership communicates directly with group members. Partners convey a powerful community message about disapproval of violence and in support of community aspirations, concrete opportunities for immediate and long-term assistance and support, and clear prior notice of the legal risks associated with continued violence.

## **TRADITIONAL SOCIAL SERVICES ARE NOT ADEQUATE FOR THE GVI POPULATION**

For people involved in group violence, the problem is not only that there is frequently a lack of social service resources in their communities. The core street population that GVI addresses is extreme even compared to most of the prison reentry population—this core street population is both the most criminally active and the most vulnerable (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 these people, and existing social service practices are simply not enough. For people involved in group violence, the problems of traditional approaches to social services are:

- Traditional social service goals and metrics do not account for anti-violence goals, such as avoiding violent victimization and offending and avoiding arrest and imprisonment.
- Some social services have restrictive conditions for participation.
- The core street population and their communities have often had negative and discouraging experiences with service providers.
- Providers often prefer to work with those who are “ready to change,” and people directly involved with gun violence often are not.
- Service offerings—such as education, training, and job placement—are frequently a poor fit with the GVI population’s real-world situation, which is frequently extraordinarily dangerous and chaotic.

## **BEST PRACTICES**

Over the years that NNSC partners have implemented this theory of support and outreach, we have determined the best practices:

- **Staying alive and out of prison.** The support and outreach structure creates a comprehensive partnership of providers with the explicit goal of keeping clients alive, unhurt, and out of prison, and formal tracking and metrics commensurate with that goal (rather than, for example, job placement and retention alone). Support and outreach will include an overall recognition that movement in that direction is progress and positive (rather than, for instance, 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, change people’s behavior 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 ongoing process and give special attention to those that have been failed previously by service systems. This will mean deliberate, persistent, and consistent outreach to people involved in violence to foster new relationships and community, mentorship from people with similar pasts to help transition out of the street life, and removing obstacles that have prohibited these individuals from receiving help and building legitimate community relationships.
- **Centralized and accessible.** When having direct communication with people closest to group violence, whether at call-in or on a custom notification, support and outreach workers should be able to provide a business card that has a single phone number, ideally answered 24/7. Benefit programs and government agencies are difficult and sometimes impossible for everyday people to navigate. Having a centralized and streamlined support system will cut down on time and anxiety of dealing with social service bureaucracies that frequently leave people behind.<sup>2</sup>
- **Protection from risk.** 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 on both sides of conflicts, and the system overall will provide unbiased relief and services to both victims and perpetrators of violent crime. Many GVI sites have explicit protocols to prevent retaliatory violence after homicides and shootings, such as short hotel stays or relocating people to different cities to get them off the streets in moments of high risk.
- **Addressing trauma.** The structure will recognize, honor and address trauma, developing treatment resources, cognitive behavior therapy, post-homicide support, and peer recovery group settings

for sharing and debriefing. Providers will offer help to people involved in group violence, 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 or budgeted for—what we 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.
- **Supporting the whole family.** Support and outreach services in GVI should be available not only for people directly involved in violence but also for their family members. Whether that be diapers for children or CBT (Cognitive Behavioral Therapy) for a mother, creating a more secure home and family life is vital for supporting GVI clients.
- **Connection to traditional services.** Close links to traditional services—education, work, life skills, family support, etc.—will make it easier to move people into those services as they stabilize and become ready.

Well-developed outreach worker models make affirmative contact with group members, provide new relationships, and provide bridges to other resources and services. These outreach workers need to be credible messengers to the community they are serving. These outreach workers should bring to bear the unique experiences of people who have previously been involved in street violence. As a result of the process described here, partners in Detroit created a robust street outreach program that includes case managers, social workers, and violence interrupters. Similarly, New York State's SNUG program has also created a model guided by rigorous communication and follow-up with the individuals who need to be kept safe. These programs have developed extensive training and guidebooks for their staffs. These successful examples provide a map of how these elements can be combined and coordinated to form an integrated whole.

Not all communities have sufficient investment in basic social services, and even when they do, it is not as simple as creating a path to connect group members to a community's traditional social services. While most cities have at least some access to traditional social services, it's often severely under-resourced—

e.g., outreach workers do it on a volunteer basis, or the “big small stuff” is provided, but it is paid for out of people's pockets instead of formally funded. For sustainability reasons, we acknowledge that new support and outreach frameworks may be needed. Depending on the local social service landscape in a city, it might be necessary to hire a support and outreach coordinator and establish subcontract agreements with service agencies to make sure GVI clients can be prioritized. That isn't necessary for places that can coordinate through an existing personnel line.

Many of the resources to perform this reframed support and outreach function for the small number of people in a city involved in violence are likely available from existing federal, state, and local funding, and from formal and informal sources. New federal funding has recently been made available in support of this work. Where genuine resource deficits exist, cities can attempt to address them with local fundraising and initiatives.

## **IMPORTANCE OF LEGITIMACY IN SUPPORT AND OUTREACH**

Many people who are offered services through GVI will not choose to access them. This does not make the offer of legitimate, helpful, and accessible services any less important. Though there currently is no research to indicate that engaging with services reduces violence, services are changing and improving rapidly, and more research on their effectiveness is needed. Furthermore, research does show a causal reduction in violent crime created by nonprofits focused on reducing violence and building stronger communities.<sup>3</sup> The presence of service organizations—not even necessarily anti-violence organizations—does have an impact on violent crime.

Similar to the importance of law enforcement's promise of consequences for continued violence and clear, direct communication about legal exposure, it is also vital that an offer of legitimate assistance is given. People involved in group violence have been failed by social services before and will likely be distrustful. Follow through and honesty about what support and outreach can (and can't) be provided are imperative for increasing the likelihood of people closest to group violence taking up services. Word spreads quickly among group members about whether or not law enforcement has kept their promise in sanctioning; the same goes for promises and offers of help from support and outreach. Tailoring legitimate support and outreach toward a city's GVI population—those most likely to be the victims or perpetrators of violence—can and will help prevent harm to individuals and their communities at large.

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.

John Jay College of Criminal Justice | 524 W. 59th St., Ste. 1140B, New York, NY 10019 | Learn more at [nnscommunities.org](https://nnscommunities.org)

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- <sup>1</sup> 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.
  - <sup>2</sup> Annie Lowry, "THE TIME TAX: Why Is so Much American Bureaucracy Left to Average Citizens?," *The Atlantic*, July 27, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2021/07/how-government-learned-waste-your-time-tax/619568/>.
  - <sup>3</sup> Sharkey, Patrick, Gerard Torrats-Espinosa, and Delaram Takyar. "Community and the crime decline: The causal effect of local nonprofits on violent crime." *American Sociological Review* 82, no. 6 (2017): 1214-1240.