DATA FOR *PROGRESS*

THE JUSTICE COLLABORATIVE INSTITUTE

THE CASE FOR VIOLENCE INTERRUPTION PROGRAMS AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO POLICING

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Violence interruption programs, used in cities throughout the United States, provide a proven, community-led, and cost-effective solution to reducing gun violence. Whereas police depend on force and violence to do their jobs, often making things worse, these programs use community engagement to stop lethal violence before it occurs, prevent its spread by interrupting ongoing conflicts, and develop community norms toward avoiding violence. In many cases, violence interruption programs include peer-based mentorship, job training, and other community support designed to help people overcome the oppressive socioeconomic inequality that breeds violence in certain communities.

America's exceptionally high rate of gun violence—there are nearly 13,000 gun homicides every year—reflects deep economic, social, and political failures. Homicide rates are highest in economically depressed communities, and the people most impacted as perpetrators and victims are economically isolated, cut off from educational, housing, and employment opportunities because of race discrimination, poverty, and mass incarceration. These forces have led to gaping racial and class disparities in exposure to violence, with Black youth at especially high risk: The homicide rate for Black male youth between the ages of 10 and 25 years old is nearly 20 times higher than for white male youth.

But gun violence is also a public health problem, amenable to public health solutions. Epidemiologists have shown how violence can spread; exposure to violence increases one's likelihood of later committing violence, and one shooting can start a cycle of violent retaliation that turns victims into perpetrators and back again. Policing-first solutions, including more surveillance, more arrests, and more incarceration, further perpetuate the cycle of violence. Instead of a path toward stability, criminalization reduces options and pushes people further to the margins of society, compounding the trauma of racial discrimination and poverty.

Violence interruption programs do the opposite. In cities and neighborhoods across the country, these programs have consistently proven to effectively and efficiently reduce gun violence while also helping people to build healthier, more stable lives. As more communities demand reductions in police spending, and calls for disbanding and defunding entire police departments continue to grow, local officials should reallocate public safety dollars toward non-law enforcement violence interruption.

In a national poll, we found strong bipartisan support for this approach:

- **68% of likely voters, including 62% of Republicans**, support funding community-based programs to train community leaders to de-escalate potentially violent situations;
- **78% of likely voters, including 74% of Republicans**, believe that using research and community interventions to prevent violence before it starts is an effective strategy to stop cycles of violent crime;
- **65% of likely voters, including 60% of Republicans**, believe that interrupting violence in the communities where it is concentrated makes more sense than sending in an armed police force;

- **67% of likely voters, including 61% of Republicans**, believe that by working with communities to identify situations that could turn deadly, interruption can effectively decrease gun violence;
- **71% of likely voters, including 62% of Republicans**, believe that programs designed to interrupt and prevent gun violence have been shown to be more cost effective than increasing the number of police in a community;
- **71% of likely voters, including 64% of Republicans**, believe that by working to change the perspective of people who were thinking about committing violence, prevention and intervention programs can help build stronger communities.

INTRODUCTION: VIOLENCE INTERRUPTION IN RICHMOND, CALIFORNIA

For years, the Bay Area city of Richmond, California, struggled to reduce one of the highest rates of gun violence in the country. In 2005, the city council considered declaring a state of emergency in certain neighborhoods, a move designed to raise money for heavy-handed policing including surveillance cameras, drug-sniffing dogs, and aggressive drug enforcement. Comparing the city to a war zone, City Councilor Maria Viramontes admitted that these were "extreme measures that make those of us worried about civil liberties uncomfortable."

DeVone Boggan, a community activist, had a different idea. It was clear to him that these tried-and-failed police tactics would fail again. Gun violence was a serious problem in Richmond, but it was also a concentrated one, and he wanted to work with those directly affected—the small group of people most likely to shoot and be shot.

"What I continued to hear was folks believed that there were 17 people responsible for 70 percent of the firearm activity in our city. Seventeen people! We can do something about that," Boggan recounted to NPR.

Boggan pitched his idea to the city, and in 2007 he was hired to run the new Office of Neighborhood Safety (ONS), a private-public partnership that operates independently of law enforcement. ONS employs community members, known as "neighborhood change agents," who conduct direct outreach to identify and track the young people most at-risk of gun violence. They respond to shootings and intervene before retaliation, working to break the cycle of violence before it starts.

One component, the Operation Peacemaker Fellowship, is designed to promote long-term stability through substantive assistance that makes a difference. The fellowship provides job training, substance abuse treatment, mentorship, and a stipend of up to $1,000 per month if participants refrain from violence and meet other program requirements.

More than a decade later, the program has a proven track record of success. Last year, a study published in the American Journal of Public Health found that gunshot wounds and killings in Richmond have fallen by 55% since the program began, and now other cities are working to adopt the ONS model.

PUBLIC HEALTH & COMMUNITY-BASED SOLUTIONS ARE EFFECTIVE

ONS is one of many successful "violence interruption" programs across the country—programs that break cycles of violence through targeted community engagement, interrupting ongoing conflicts and helping communities to collectively reject violence as an answer to conflict.

These programs focus on the neighborhoods and social networks where gun violence is most concentrated. In 2015, over a quarter of gun homicides occurred in neighborhoods containing less than 2 percent of the country's population. In Chicago, 70 percent of all nonfatal gunshots and 46 percent of gun homicides occurred in social networks containing less than six percent of the city's population. Programs that engage with and support these communities are far more effective at addressing violence than sending armed police forces to occupy them. Researchers have shown how flooding communities with law enforcement sows distrust, renders the police even less effective, and can lead to spikes in violence.

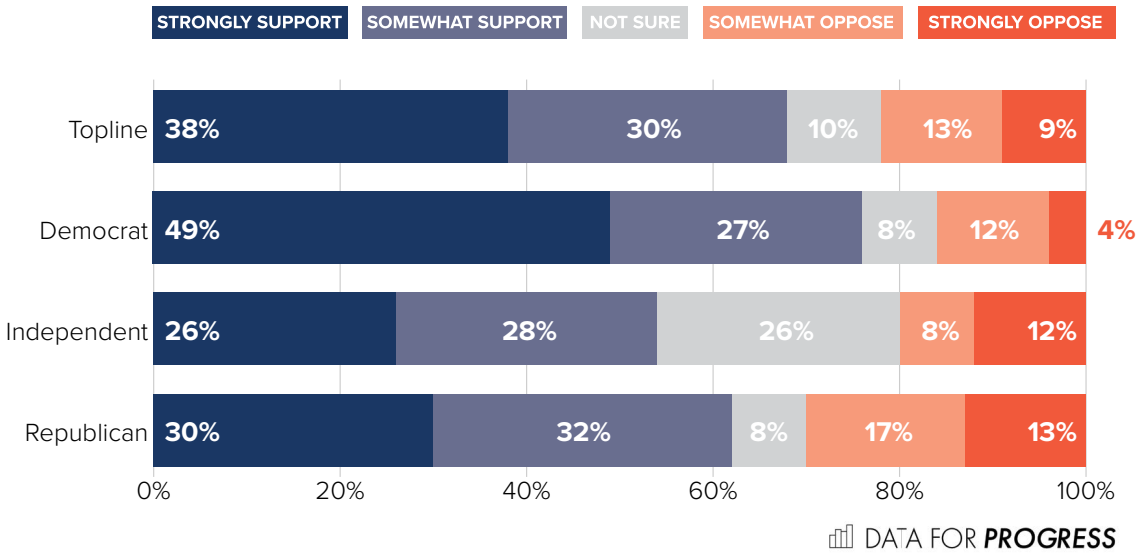
Some of the programs, such as the Cure Violence model that has been used in cities across the United States and around the world, approach violence through an epidemiological and public health lens. This approach recognizes how violence spreads like disease—exposure to violence increases a person's risk of adopting violent behavior themselves—and works to stop transmission through targeted community engagement. The Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC) has taken this view for decades. In the mid-1980s, the CDC showed that epidemiologic research methods could be applied to incidents of violence, and soon after Congress began appropriating CDC funding to reduce youth homicide rates. In 1993, the CDC established the Division of Violence Prevention, housed within the newly created National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, to design and evaluate violence prevention strategies using public health techniques.

Repeated evaluations of Cure Violence have shown that it significantly reduces violence. In West Chicago's West Garfield Park, the program reduced shootings by 67% in its first year. A NIJ/Northwestern University evaluation found that Cure Violence reduced shootings across Chicago by 41% to 73%. Other studies have also found that Cure Violence reduced shootings in cities like New York and Philadelphia.

In Baltimore, outreach workers from the violence interruption program Safe Streets reduced serious violence by 69%. In the neighborhood of Cherry Hills, the program was associated with statistically significant reductions: a 56% reduction in homicide incidents and a 34% reduction in nonfatal shootings.

POLICIES & POLLING

Do you support funding community-based programs to train community leaders to de-escalate potentially violent situations?



Violence interruption programs take different forms depending on the needs and resources of particular communities. In some cases, local governments fund and create partnerships with community organizations to implement the program; in other places, as in Richmond, California, violence interruption is a government or quasi-government program run through a non-law enforcement agency. But key components of a successful program include:

1. **Community outreach.** Street outreach workers—"interrupters" in the Cure Violence model, "Neighborhood Change Agents" in Richmond—actively work to mediate conflicts and prevent retaliatory violence within a community. They locate ongoing conflicts and respond with conflict mediation techniques. Interrupters have credibility as members of the community, and they are trained in mediating conflicts and understanding what people in their community need.

2. **Changing norms.** Outreach workers change community norms and behavior by serving as mentors, seeing each client multiple times per week, conveying a message of rejecting the use of violence, and assisting with locating services such as job training and drug abuse counseling. Intervention models may also include public education campaigns and community events.

3. **Provide comprehensive support.** Violence interruption programs provide comprehensive support to all participants. Many programs provide paid transitional jobs, cognitive behavioral therapy, and support services to help participants create a viable path and

opportunities for a different future, and to help reduce violence in the city's most impacted neighborhoods.

4. **Operate outside of law enforcement**. Violence interruption programs build and strengthen community, while a heavy police presence sows fear and distrust. A national survey conducted in low-income, high-crime communities found critically low trust of law enforcement, rendering police especially ineffective at addressing violence.

5. **Hospital-based violence intervention.** Reducing violence is not just about reducing crime rates—it's about saving lives. In some cities, the outreach work of violence interruption is paired with Hospital-Based Violence Intervention Programs (HVIPs) located in trauma centers and emergency departments. As the organization Everytown for Gun Safety explains, these programs are based on "the premise that there is a unique window of opportunity to engage victims of violence in the immediate aftermath of a traumatic injury." They immediately notify community outreach workers when gunshot wound victims are admitted to the emergency room so workers can intervene to prevent retaliation. Participants are connected to a case manager, who helps the victim access mental health counseling, education, employment counseling, and other services.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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POLLING METHODOLOGY

From 6/4/2020 to 6/6/2020 Data for Progress conducted a survey of 1,352 likely voters nationally using web panel respondents. The sample was weighted to be representative of likely voters by age, gender, education, race, and voting history. The survey was conducted in English. The margin of error is ± 2.7 percent.

From 6/7/2020 to 6/8/2020 Data for Progress conducted a survey of 1,301 likely voters nationally using web panel respondents. The sample was weighted to be representative of likely voters by age, gender, education, urbanicity, race, and voting history. The survey was conducted in English. The margin of error is ± 2.7 percent.

COVER PHOTO
Getty Images