

Invest in Governance and Management to Make Violence Reduction Efforts Successful

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Overview:

Violence reduction in the US is benefitting from excellent research (and ongoing research agendas) into specific interventions that can be evaluated and replicated. However, more is needed. The fact that so many cities continue to struggle with serious violence despite record investments in new programs indicates that the field needs a broader approach.

What's Missing? There is a crucial gap holding back the field of violence reduction: an understanding of not just what programs or strategies to adopt, but how to manage and govern on the city level to reduce serious violence. This was the primary conclusion of a 2022 expert convening. Running a rigorous violence intervention program in a particular community is very challenging. Assembling, implementing, and sustaining an effective city-level strategy is an even more complex and difficult task. The challenge of developing successful citywide strategies is enormously important, often ignored, and a large part of why cities are failing to sustainably reduce violence.

The convened group comprised several important perspectives: people who have led city violence reduction offices (Jeremy Biddle, Sasha Cotton, Reygan Cunningham), people who help cities and city partners develop their violence prevention capacity (Vaughn Crandall, Fatimah Loren Drier, David Muhammed) and academic experts (Anthony Braga, Shani Buggs, Rodrigo Canales, Daniel Webster). The group was led by the University of Pennsylvania Crime and Justice Policy Lab (CJP) and the California Partnership for Safe Communities (CPSC), working with key leads from the White House Community Violence Intervention Collaborative and the Ballmer Community Violence Reduction Initiative (CAPS). (See Appendix A for more on the convening.)

This document describes the group's conclusions and exploration of the current gap in research, implementation, governance, and ongoing management that challenges the violence reduction field, including suggestions of three areas where investment and effort could make a near-term impact:

1. **Research:** Ongoing study of how cities structure, manage, and govern violence reduction efforts to establish baselines against which to assess near-term efforts and make long-term progress. Key action research questions, which could be applied to particular cities or systematically across cohorts, include:
 - a. How are cities currently structuring their violence intervention efforts? Where does management and government authority for producing reductions in community violence reside? To what extent are citywide violence intervention efforts informed by basic analyses of community violence?
 - b. What are the shortfalls for the ways in which cities use current analyses of their problems? How can cities build internal capacity for problem analysis and governance structures to ensure these analyses are used?

- c. What role does city government-based infrastructure play in administering and managing violence intervention strategies?
 - d. What role does community-based infrastructure play in administering and managing violence intervention strategies?
 - e. How are these government and community efforts resourced—monetarily, administratively, in terms of personnel, and over time?
 - f. What key management capacities can be identified that correlate with success, or lack thereof, in producing and sustaining city level reductions in community violence?
2. **Technical assistance:** Using action research and existing evidence to help cities develop effective strategies and strengthen political governance, management, and key capacities. At present, technical assistance providers are filling capacity gaps at the local level—while technical assistance will likely always be needed to help cities get started or course-correct as they go, the field needs useful frameworks for *improving city-level systems* aimed at reducing community violence.
 3. **Policy:** Engaging the field on how to sustain and enhance violence reduction efforts through policy development, governance, and management. Mayoral offices or statewide offices of violence prevention, strong community-based intermediaries, and other governing entities may be better able to provide structural support to violence reduction strategies when those offices and entities are supported by strong standards of practice.

Using theory of change on the city level:

The convening quickly confronted a central fact: even where excellent programs exist, many cities struggle to link, support, and scale these programs into an overarching strategy to reduce violence.

Through the discussion of these challenges, the group repeatedly returned to the “theory of change” lens—a framework which is common in both program management and evaluation.¹

An essential shift in the approach the group took was to view the local jurisdictions themselves (i.e. cities) as the subject of violence reduction interventions—that theory of change frameworks should focus on how cities *as systems* can work to understand and respond to community violence, with the outcomes being reductions in shootings, homicides, and related community violence indicators.

City leaders often already know and use ideas from the theory of change lens—but they are applying these ideas to individual programs, not to linked systems that are designed to achieve citywide outcomes.

Exploring this topic, the group discussed three challenge areas where citywide theory of change structures could be developed in order to enable more effective violence reduction:

Challenge 1: City leaders need research-driven frameworks to make informed and effective political commitments to reduce violence.

The first and most basic challenge is that cities attempt to reduce violence by *making assumptions about the nature of the problem that are not informed by facts, data, and research*. Problem analyses of gun violence in dozens of cities across the US repeatedly confirm the basic principle of crime concentration:

that a remarkably small number of people commit and are the victims of the vast majority of violent crime, including shootings and homicides, in any city.ⁱⁱ Contrary to popular belief, the very highest risk population are primarily adult (often older adult) men of color, with extensive justice system histories, using violence to resolve a variety of disputes, and who are often drawn into cycles of retaliation.ⁱⁱⁱ That dynamic is what community violence intervention work should address. A city strategy that misses this core strategic focus will not be successful.

Lacking clear research-based frameworks, city leaders are often attracted to well-motivated but ineffective alternative plans. One common goal that cities pursue is to simultaneously reduce all types of violence—and all potential contributing factors to violence—at all times in all places. Cities should unquestionably spend time thinking, learning, and talking about any type of violence that touches citizens who are affected. However, developing a theory of change requires anchoring to a well-defined goal. It is clear to see why “all risks for all violence in all places” is the opposite of this notion. In management terms, if everything is a priority then nothing is a priority.

Another approach from city leaders is to attempt to solve serious violence by solving another related problem instead. Primary prevention programs, education programs, and generally expanded social services tend to be popular and less likely to cause controversy than designing new CVI or police strategies. Indeed, the reason many communities are suffering to begin with is directly tied to decades of underinvestment in basic resources and services.^{iv} However, unless cities have a near-term violence intervention strategy to reduce shootings and homicides, the primary prevention and community transformation goals and investments they make cannot be realized. Primary prevention investments are definitionally not going to solve near-term violence or help people impacted by violence now; a growing body of research shows that intense near-term violence works against the long-term impact of many basic prevention investments.^v

These challenges in conceptualizing theory of change frameworks arise from some of the ways in which city leaders naturally tend to think and behave (discussed more in the next section). City leaders *can* make more informed and effective political commitments with the right support and frameworks to draw from. Baltimore (for example) has been remarkably aware of these dynamics—past city leaders have described their engagement with outside experts as “building structures so we avoid our own worst instincts.”

Challenge 2: Cities need help developing political authorization and accountability structures (governance), in order to make clear problem identification, goal setting, and effective management possible.

Throughout this process, the convened experts repeatedly identified both political will and effective political management as essential ingredients to launch and sustain *any* effective violence reduction effort. Unfortunately, few elected officials have experience with (or content knowledge about) violence reduction policy—or specific practices and approaches. Few leaders begin their roles with well-developed public management skillsets (many mayors come from legislative functions such as city council positions; others come from outside government). New mayors also lack experience in how to confront the challenges of directing large city agencies to do new and difficult work.

Elected officials are also very vulnerable to simple, shiny ideas for addressing violence in the near term that constituents will advocate for, yet that research clearly indicates will not work (midnight basketball,

gun buybacks, just hiring more police). **Managing the *external* political landscape to gain and maintain authorization to *do things that will work* and managing the *internal* city agency and/or city funding landscape to effectively implement evidence-informed strategies are essential but largely non-existent skillsets for most public officials.** Elected officials and high-level city appointees (mayors, city managers, city council members) need education and support to play their essential roles more effectively.

The experience of many of the convened experts is that cities in crisis can develop the political authorization to address this challenge, at least temporarily. There needs to be more work done to address three related questions, which are discussed in the recommendations:

- a) When a city does find the political will and mandate to act, what are the needed resources, strategies and infrastructure to meet the moment?
- b) What can the field do to help cities that are *not* naturally finding a political mandate to develop one? What role, and over what timeline, does community organizing and advocacy play in developing political will to address community violence effectively?
- c) How can authorization be sustained beyond the initial impetus to act, even into subsequent city administrations? What policy frameworks are needed to cement commitments to evidence-informed approaches?

Challenge 3: Cities need to develop management and data infrastructure to implement effective citywide violence reduction strategies.

Tying together and underlining the other challenges mentioned above are major challenges in management infrastructure. Developing a theory of change or publicly articulating problems and goals is not sufficient without management teams and structures that can do the work. In short, any entity committed to city level reductions in community violence—city agency/office or community-based organization—must organize their activities and manage those activities well.

Solving complex public problems requires disciplined and rigorous management. In the context of reducing violence, this requires cross-sector collaboration within and between government, law enforcement, community-based violence prevention organizations, and individual community actors. Reducing retaliatory shootings requires these actors to work closely together, under time pressure, with little margin for error, and in the face of a constantly evolving problem. Few cities have cross-sector management teams and systems in place that are designed and fielded specifically for this purpose.

There is important work to do in educating, supporting, and coaching the managers charged with leading violence-reduction initiatives in cities to guide this work, as well as helping them tailor management systems (meetings, key performance indicators, reporting relationships, etc.) specifically to violence reduction strategies. While some initiatives are grappling with the great but unrealized potential of municipal violence prevention offices (OVPs) as “holders” of this work, none to our knowledge focus specifically on developing and supporting the people who must play the key coordination, management, and accountability function of running and maintaining a city’s violence reduction strategy. This is both about a lack of essential content knowledge and about the need to apply well-developed management skills and practices to a uniquely complex and dynamic problem (community violence) that requires a multi-agency and -stakeholder approach.

Lack of public management infrastructure and capacity explains why so many cities rely on extensive technical assistance engagements. For example, Baltimore is currently benefiting from TA support primarily led by CJP and CPSC, with additional help from the National Institute of Criminal Justice Reform (NICJR) and the National Network for Safe Communities (NNSC). Almost every nationally-recognized city-level violence reduction effort in the US in the last 30 years has involved a similarly intense engagement by outside technical experts.

One serious question the convening grappled with is whether these extensive engagements could be done differently, and if support from the federal government could enable these efforts to achieve more scale.

Recommendations:

Based on the group’s discussion of the management, strategy, and implementation gap in violence reduction, the following recommendations are intended to move the field forward in the short term:

1. Research: Support systematic study of how cities structure, govern, and manage violence reduction efforts at present.

To better analyze and define more effective and tailored management structures for the purposes of violence reduction, funders should support a short-term effort to apply **management surveys** to a range of US cities, and use the results of the survey to inform the selection of **case studies** that capture important dynamics. This could build directly on existing management surveys (the world management survey)—leveraging the National OVP network supported by NICJR and the Center for American Progress—and would illuminate and provide rigorous support to define factors which are already well understood by experts but poorly articulated in the field.

Beyond just documenting descriptive information, this effort would seek to develop a diagnostic tool that could be applied to cities with different political configurations and challenges, in order to clearly articulate what structures are most helpful to support effective violence reduction.

Beyond this baseline research, there are many particular aspects of violence reduction management and infrastructure that would benefit from closer examination. Examples of areas of study include:

- How can cities analyze problems and integrate analyses into decision-making? When do political considerations (e.g. the desire to spread programs widely) conflict with analytical insights? How can cities better navigate around this tension?
- How are city government and state government offices of violence prevention (OVPs) being set up, and how can the strengths of these offices best be leveraged given the resources and political authorization they may or may not have?
- How can we make sure major process insights are being developed from impact evaluations of programs? Without process evaluations, we are missing key insights behind many program evaluations that are only understood by managers who were involved—who inevitably cycle out to other organizations or efforts.
- How can different leadership structures in different types of jurisdictions (e.g. counties vs. cities) be used to set goals and develop structures for reducing violence?

This effort would also connect to the next recommendation:

2. Technical assistance: Using action research and existing evidence, help cities develop effective strategies and strengthen political governance, management, and key capacities.

To address the unrealized potential of the growing number of OVPs and other local policy offices that are focused on violence reduction, philanthropy and government should support local policymakers to develop and follow clear “theory of change” processes. Investing in a focused community of practice with a selection of major cities that have made a hard political commitment to reducing community violence would be a novel way to address a longstanding problem. This type of effort could link with and support existing collaborations, such as the CAPS initiative.

Although there are several other organizations and networks focused on “educating the field” types of activities, many of these are associated with particular interventions or violence reduction approaches. This effort would differ in that it would be focused on strategy building activities with a *gap analysis* emphasis, and on applied work with violence reduction managers and their political authorizers.

The most common current type of technical assistance engagement for violence reduction is intensive—requiring hundreds of hours of work from an experienced team per year. For this work to scale to more places, new models of providing technical assistance could focus on identifying what management and administrative structures are missing and figuring out how to fill those gaps with internal capacity, rather than serving as “temporary” bridges in capacity that cities somehow never find a way to fill. This type of effort would seek to strengthen the chosen jurisdictions’ public political commitment to violence reduction, then to translate those commitments to authorize and hold accountable devoted managers and management teams.

If a centralized TA effort could get cities strategically aligned to violence reduction and had more interested cities than available capacity (a likely case, if this is a well-supported effort) then this would also present a unique *evaluation* opportunity for citywide violence reduction strategies in general. Cities could be paired and then randomized to receive centralized TA, providing an opportunity to evaluate the impact of citywide strategy as a concept. The violence reduction field has struggled to produce randomized evaluations of strategic approaches due to the scale on which these strategies operate, and this could provide the first opportunity to do so.

There are already several existing networks that could be leveraged or partnered with—this work could be very effective in coordination with the US Conference of Mayors, International Association of Chiefs of Police, and similar groups.

3. Policy: Engage the field on how to sustain and enhance violence reduction efforts through governance and management.

To borrow language from Mark Moore’s *Recognizing Public Value*,^{vi} the landscape of local political efforts at violence reduction is lacking a clear political value proposition—a set of ideas for city managers to translate violence reduction ideas into work that is clearly valuable to the public, supported by communities, and within the government’s capacity to achieve. Work on the research and technical assistance recommendations would go a long way to identifying the range and types of effective management structures for city managers, and this work could be disseminated through influential channels such as the US Conference of Mayors or the Association of City Managers. Public value

structures have been well-explored in many areas of government, but they have not been developed in violence reduction management.

A related effort, which is probably the area where we have the least existing evidence: how can cities be encouraged and enabled to maintain their focus on violence reduction strategy beyond the short term? Having set standards could make it easier for cities to stick with violence reduction strategy, but also important is how outside structures (federal funders, local institutions, and city or community foundations) can keep local governments focused on violence reduction goals.

Conclusion:

In discussing the challenge of community violence, the convening attendees agreed that the field of violence reduction already had many positive assets in place. All of the convening participants were firm proponents of evidence-based policy, and all agreed that continued investments in research and evidence were providing enormous value to the violence reduction field.

The relative gap in our understand of public management, infrastructure, and political governance is clear. However, the convening also revealed that there was already a large amount of knowledge and field experience that was readily available (but which had not yet been gathered and synthesized) on these topics. The field is in a good position to fill some of the crucial, overlooked areas of research and practice by supplying the right combination of resources, effort, and experience.

APPENDIX A: CONVENING PARTICIPANTS AND CONTRIBUTORS

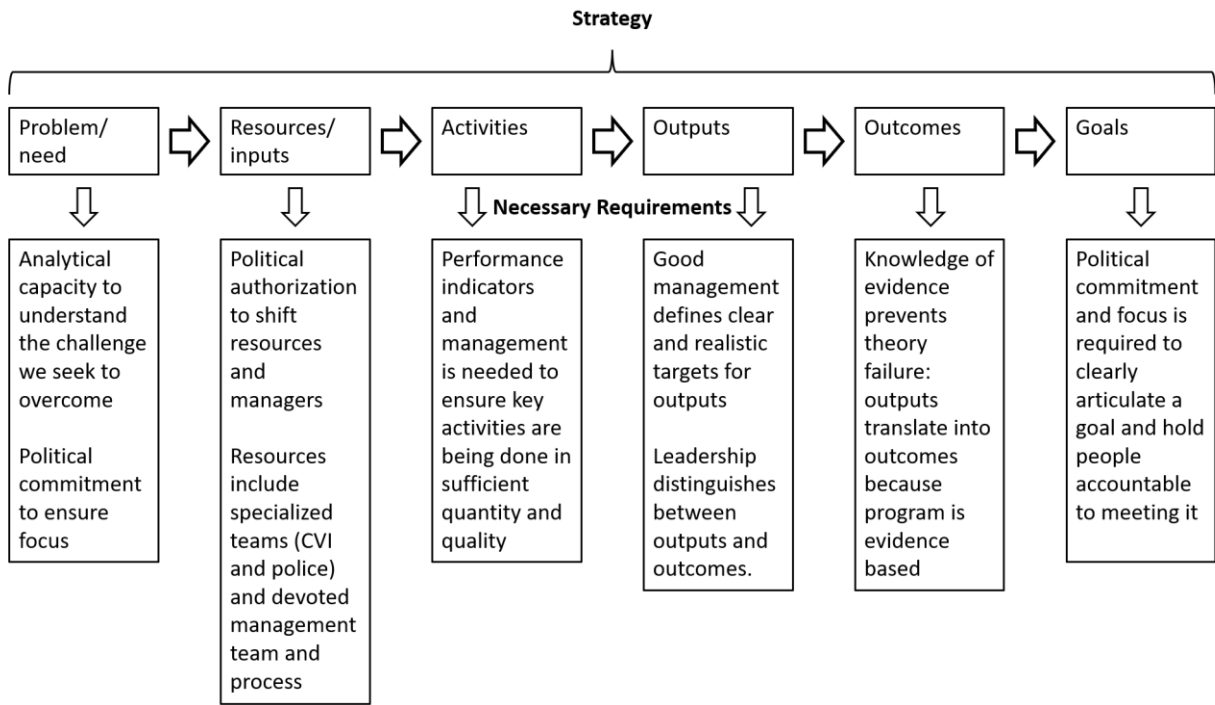
In developing the list of invited experts, CJP and CPSC sought to represent (1) different experiences in government, nonprofit groups tied to violence reduction and intervention practice, and the research community, (2) a range of different states and cities from across the country, and (3) diverse perspectives and experiences with individual programs and interventions. The final group consisted of:

- Louisa Aviles: Senior Program Officer at the Joyce Foundation; formerly with the National Network of Safe Communities where she worked on violence reduction projects across 15 states; former policy advisor to the Mayor of New York City on the Young Men’s Initiative.
- Anthony Braga: Jerry Lee Professor of Criminology and Director of the Crime and Justice Policy Lab at the University of Pennsylvania; key member of the working group that led the Boston Ceasefire strategy; former Chief Policy Advisor to Boston Police Commissioner
- Jeremy Biddle: Senior Advisor on Gun Violence Prevention to the Mayor’s Office of Criminal Justice in Baltimore where he serves as a key leader in the city’s new violence reduction strategy; former USAID violence prevention lead for Central America
- Shani Buggs: Assistant Professor with the Violence Prevention Research Program at UC Davis; researcher on community-level gun violence prevention programs and policies, firearm access, and comprehensive approaches to reducing violence at local, state, and federal levels.
- Rodrigo Canales: Kelli Questrom Associate Professor of Management and Faculty Director of the Social Impact Program at the Questrom School of Business at Boston University; studied management practices of hundreds of governments and police departments across Mexico.
- Sasha Cotton: Senior Strategy Director of the National Network for Safe Communities; former Director of the Minneapolis Office of Violence Prevention (Minneapolis OVP) in the Minneapolis Health Department which she led for three years.
- Fatimah Loren Drier: Executive Director of the Health Alliance for Violence Intervention; former Deputy Director of Equal Justice USA; Pozen-Commonwealth Fund Fellow in Health Equity Leadership at the Yale School of Management
- David Muhammed: Executive Director of the National Institute for Criminal Justice Reform (NICJR); helped lead Oakland Ceasefire Strategy; has also provided technical and management assistance in Stockton, California; Portland, Oregon; and Indianapolis, Indiana.
- Daniel Webster: Leading expert on firearm policy and gun violence prevention; Professor of health policy and management at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health; evaluator of Baltimore’s Safe Streets Program.

The convening was organized and facilitated by:

- Vaughn Crandall: Executive Director of the California Partnership for Safe Communities; supports violence-reduction efforts in Mexico City, San Francisco, and Baltimore; former Deputy Director of the Center for Crime Prevention and Control at John Jay College of Criminal Justice
- Reygan Cunningham: Co-Director of California Partnership for Safe Communities; formerly Director of the Oakland Ceasefire strategy from 2012-2018; works with numerous jurisdictions across the US supporting violence prevention strategies.
- Ben Struhl: Executive Director of University of Pennsylvania Crime and Justice Policy Lab; leads violence prevention projects in Baltimore, Boston, Philadelphia, and several other US and international cities; former Policy Advisor to Mayor of Boston

APPENDIX B: FULL THEORY OF CHANGE EXAMPLE



ⁱ See the Annie E Casey Foundation for more <https://www.aecf.org/resources/theory-of-change>

ⁱⁱ Braga and Kennedy 2021. A Framework for Addressing Violence and Serious Crime

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7705591/>

^v Sharkey, Patrick, Amy Ellen Schwartz, Ingrid Gould Ellen, and Johanna Laco. 2014. "High stakes in the classroom, high stakes on the street: The effects of community violence on students' standardized test performance." *Sociological Science* 1: 199-220. DOI: 10.15195/v1.a14

^{vi} <https://ash.harvard.edu/publications/recognizing-public-value>