

Philadelphia’s Group Violence Intervention (GVI) Strategy – A Policy Brief

In February 2023, the University of Pennsylvania Criminal Justice Police Lab (CJP) released an [evaluation](#) of the City of Philadelphia’s Group Violence Intervention (GVI) strategy. The purpose of this brief is to explain the GVI strategy, highlight and contextualize the results, and provide guidance on expanding and sustaining the city’s violence reduction efforts.

Summary:

- In August 2020, Philadelphia initiated a Group Violence Intervention (GVI) strategy—first in the city’s Southwest police division, then rapidly expanding to three additional divisions in early 2021. The GVI strategy is a multi-pronged approach involving community leadership, social services, and focused enforcement against repeat violent offenders, with a goal of reducing group-related violence at the community and city level.
- The Strategy is led by the City’s Managing Director’s Office with guidance from the National Network for Safe Communities.
- GVI is based on decades of research and implementation experience from cities across the country, including Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Oakland. Philadelphia previously implemented GVI in South Philadelphia from 2012 to 2016. An evaluation of that past effort led by Dr. Caterina Roman of Temple University found that the program successfully reduced gun violence at the community level.
- Dr. Ruth Moyer of the University of Pennsylvania’s Crime and Justice Policy Lab conducted an independent evaluation of Philadelphia’s GVI strategy, released February 2023. Moyer’s evaluation found that GVI was successful in reducing violence among the groups who were reached by the intervention.
- At the same time, Philadelphia saw an overall increase in gun violence over the study period. The evaluation findings show that the city succeeded in launching the GVI strategy, but that it has not yet achieved scale that can change the overall trajectory of violence in the city.

The latest evaluation of GVI in Philadelphia (along with an evaluation of the city’s last attempt at GVI) provides a clear “proof of concept” that GVI can work in Philadelphia. In order to achieve impact at scale, city government will need to tightly focus, coordinate, and manage its violence reduction strategies.

Key Recommendations:

- *Elevate gun violence.* The city should commit to a clear homicide and shooting reduction goal.
- *Develop a coordinated city-wide strategy.* Coordinating GVI and the current suite of initiatives into an overall framework offers Philadelphia its best chance of seeing citywide impact. Forming a tight link between enforcement and non-enforcement violence prevention efforts is crucial.
- *Build a tight management infrastructure at the level above GVI.* A management structure that follows the strategy’s theory of change will allow the city to pay attention to the quality, intensity and efficacy of its intervention work.
- *Improve intelligence collection and information sharing on groups.* Expanded intelligence gathering and information sharing will allow the city to better understand and respond to the dynamics of violent groups that are driving neighborhood violence.

What is GVI?

GVI is a group-centered version of a focused deterrence strategy. Focused deterrence has a three-decade track record of scientific evaluations (link to Braga, Weisburd and Turchan 2018). GVI is one of the only citywide strategies which has consistent evidence for bringing down crime and violence without creating negative community consequences through widespread law enforcement activity.

The most important thing to understand about GVI is that it is a complex, multi-partner *strategy*, not an individual *program*. This means it is not one thing, but instead several coordinated efforts that all must work together to produce an impact. Necessary features of the GVI strategy include:

- Strong commitment from city leadership to focus on bringing down serious violence and using the resources of government (and non-profit partners) to pursue this goal.
- The community takes a leadership role in strategic activities, including setting priorities and messaging to groups involved in violence.
- Before and during strategy implementation, careful descriptive and analytical work is undertaken to understand the nature of group violence in the city, including which groups are especially violent and how groups relate to one another.
- Groups are approached with offers of social services and supports that can reconnect them to opportunities and community structures, and provide pathways out of violence.¹
- Groups that remain heavily involved in violence become the focus of sustained law enforcement activity, aiming to stop the violence on the group level.
- Following any enforcement, city and community messengers emphasize that police and justice system activity is in response to violence, and further violence will receive a similar response.²

According to its theory, one key benefit of a successful GVI strategy is that it will reduce violent behavior by changing the expectations and norms of groups in the city.³ Without a strategy that focuses on groups that are committing shootings, these groups have little incentive to specifically disengage from violence, as police enforcement feels like an “unlucky” event, and not the likely consequence of violent behavior. A successful GVI strategy will reduce violence even beyond the groups it touches directly—the changed interaction with one group could affect the behavior of neighbor groups.

Process evaluations of past GVI efforts suggest that failure to fully support and integrate all GVI components will lead to the strategy having limited effectiveness.

What did the latest GVI evaluation find?

The latest GVI evaluation was commissioned by the City of Philadelphia, independently funded by a Pennsylvania state grant, and led by Dr. Ruth Moyer of the University of Pennsylvania’s Crime and Justice Policy Lab. Implementation of the strategy was led by the City of Philadelphia’s Managing Director’s Office, with guidance and technical assistance from the National Network for Safe Communities (NNSC)—a national organization with decades of experience in implementing GVI strategies. Other primary governmental entities involved included the Philadelphia Police Department (PPD), the Delaware Valley Intelligence Center (DVIC), Philadelphia Adult Probation and Parole Department (APPD),

¹ Philadelphia GVI pioneered an innovative “mobile call-in teams (MCIT)” model—home visits conducted by full teams that included mothers of murdered children, credible messengers from the community, and a representative from OVP, PPD, and DAO. These teams delivered the full GVI message, replicating the “call-in” communication model to place multiple groups on notice in a short period of time, while trying to build improved community police relationships through frequent and respectful interactions.

² For more on features of GVI, see [Braga and Kennedy 2021](#)

³ The term “group” refers both to traditional gangs as well as more informal associates who are tied together through violent activity.

Juvenile Probation, the Philadelphia District Attorney’s Office (DAO), the US Attorney’s Office and other federal agency partners, and the State Attorney General’s Office.

GVI is difficult to evaluate because it involves community-level interventions that are explicitly focused on groups and the individuals that comprise them, are rarely compatible with randomized evaluations, and involve the possibility of complex diffusion of benefits. Under these limitations, Dr. Moyer used a quasi-experimental evaluation that found:

1. The GVI strategy in Philadelphia was associated with reduced average weekly shootings for the groups it engaged with

Groups that received communication from GVI were associated with a 38.6% reduction in shootings, comparing the time before and after the GVI strategy. Groups that received two contacts were associated with a larger 50.3% drop in shootings.

2. Enforcement actions connected to GVI also were associated with a reduction in shootings

During the course of the evaluation, 26 groups received enforcement actions from the law enforcement partnership, which “occurred in response to triggering incidents such as a shooting by a group member or a group member’s arrest for committing a robbery with a firearm.” Comparing the time before and after the GVI strategy, enforcement actions were associated with a 42.8% reduction in shootings per week.

What were the district-wide and city-wide outcomes?

During most of the evaluation, GVI was operating in four divisions of the city—it expanded to the 26th police district the month before the evaluation concluded, and to the Northeast division later in 2022. During the course of evaluation, shootings remained fairly consistent in the four divisions which had GVI activity. Philadelphia as a whole had a record number of homicides (562) in 2021, and had another very violent year in 2022 (with 516 homicides).

		Average monthly shootings after division launch until January 1, 2023		
	Average monthly shootings from January 1, 2020 to division launch*	Starting in division launch month	Lagged start by six months	Lagged by one year
Southwest	38.86	47.66	44.04	41.41
Central	24.00	27.25	28.83	26.75
South	10.54	9.74	10.88	11.09
Northwest	38.36	39.32	37.13	37.20

* Launch months: Southwest - August 2020; Central - January 2021; South - February 2021; Northwest - March 2021

Looking at the average number of monthly shootings one year after GVI launched in each division, three districts had slightly higher shootings per month, and one was slightly lower. The evaluation also examined the specific 123 census tracts where GVI had contact with group members or with influential family of group members, and found no significant reduction in group member involved shootings in those census tracts, with suggestive evidence there may have been a reduction in shootings in the places where GVI made contact four or more times.

What explains the GVI results if Philadelphia saw rising or flat violence rates?

How could GVI be having a strong impact on the group level, but not on a larger level?

The short answer is that the GVI did exactly what it was expected to do, given the limited initial resources devoted to the strategy, the enormous scope of the effort, and the fact that the city has not yet fully coordinated its efforts to support a unified strategy.

It is also worth mentioning the context in which GVI launched—during the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic and in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd. Shortly after the launch, the city saw significant civil unrest as the result of the police killing of Walter Wallace Jr. All of this made the implementation of the strategy extremely challenging. GVI also had to contend with a nationwide rising tide of violence that affected parts of the city acutely.⁴ In addition, the pandemic forced GVI to adapt to additional implementation challenges—for example, most GVI models bring together group members with community members, services, and law-enforcement in “call-in” meetings. This was impossible during the peak of pandemic, so GVI relied heavily on in-person “custom notifications” or “mobile call-in teams (MCIT)”-- where community messengers and law enforcement visited members of groups involved in violence. The evaluation suggests this approach to GVI was successful.

Digging deeper into the GVI evaluation reveals a few key data points:

- The data used in the evaluation suggested that about 21% of Philadelphia shootings are “group involved.” Available data suggest the percentage of group-involved shootings is much higher in reality.

“Group involved” means that available information suggests that the shooting was somehow connected to a member of a group of people who are engaged in violence in the city. Understanding if a shooting is group involved is important, because GVI relies on using group ties and relationships to reach individuals, communicate anti-violence messaging, and apply pressure to desist from violence.

In nearly every large city, large shares of shootings are group involved—usually 50-75%. For example, both Baltimore, MD, and Chester, PA (a small city 10 miles from Philadelphia) have information suggesting about 75% of their shootings are group involved.

Previous analyses by Dr. Caterina Roman confronted this topic in Philadelphia. In 2014, Roman’s team conducted a research-based audit of group violence in all of the city’s police divisions. Before the audit work, the city reported roughly 18-20% of shootings in the city were group-involved. After the audit, the number of shootings identified as group-involved greatly increased. For instance, in the divisions that were first to conduct the research audit and translate those findings directly into their daily crime analyses (Southwest and Central), the identified percentage of group-involved shootings increased by over three times, putting those districts in line with the 50-75% rate seen in other cities.

Judging from Roman’s internal analysis, what we know about the nature of urban violence, and the data we have in similar cities, it looks like Philadelphia’s official data sources may be undercounting Philadelphia’s group violence problem.

More work needs to be done to figure out why the PPD data doesn’t seem to match the reality of the city’s group dynamics. One possible problem is that Philadelphia is using too rigid a definition of “group” in its data. (The DVIC is

⁴ For more on this, see, “Community correlates of change: A mixed-effects assessment of shooting dynamics during COVID-19” by Johnson and Roman 2022

limited by state and federal rules in how it counts group involvement—a challenge common to many cities.) Another likely explanation is that Philadelphia is not undertaking enough of the type of work done in Roman’s audit—gathering knowledgeable frontline officers together to discuss individual crimes and draw conclusions about the group-involved dynamics related to the events. This type of careful, consensus process that incorporates numerous voices and levels of law enforcement across agencies is imperative for rigorously defining a group-involved incident. In turn, a consensus process to determine group-involvement will yield data most helpful to identifying those who are appropriate GVI participants. And, at a foundational level, determining group involvement needs to be a priority intelligence requirement across the city’s law enforcement agencies.

The good news is that Philadelphia could address this problem with some changes to the way it runs meetings and sets up communications between city agencies. Additional funding to the DVIC could also be helpful.

However, it is worth emphasizing what a serious problem this lack of data represents. If the pattern found in Roman’s audit of group violence holds for the city today, Philadelphia’s GVI strategy may have been ignoring *two-thirds* of the group-involved violence in its geographic focus area, simply because the GVI team did not have the information it needed to do its job fully. The GVI strategy does not need to understand all group-involved violence, but does need to reach a critical mass of groups.

- GVI was quickly expanded to cover a large part of the city but only had two case managers supporting that expansion during the evaluation period.

By one measure in Moyer’s evaluation, GVI was covering 31% of the city, or approximately 500,000 residents. Any new city program takes time to ramp up its efforts, hire and train new staff, and refine its operations. However, this challenge is compounded when a program is very rapidly expanded while it is still starting up.

Interviews with GVI staff conducted in November 2022 reported that the Office of Violence Prevention’s case managers (tasked with engaging GVI participants) often had very high caseloads—as high as 50 to 1. (Some research reports suggest capping the caseload of those at highest risk at 15.)⁵

Given that Philadelphia has as many as eight separate strategies⁶ for reducing violence, it is not surprising that GVI did not receive all of the support needed to cover such a large, complex city. However, the fact that GVI was associated with reductions on the group level is not trivial—it is a necessary first step for creating a city-wide impact.

- The latest Philadelphia results are consistent with GVI evaluations in other cities.

The Philadelphia GVI story is not unique to the city. Chicago’s version of GVI also found strong effects on the groups treated—a 23 percent reduction in shootings and shooting victimization for group members. However, the Chicago evaluation also found that during the strategy’s implementation, “the larger network of group members may not have heard about or understood there were enhanced consequences for violence in their district and may not have changed their behavior in response to those consequences.”⁷ In either Chicago or Philadelphia, this dynamic could explain why the program had an impact on individual groups but did not have impacts on the neighborhood or community level.

⁵ <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/a-research-based-practice-guide-to-reduce-youth-gun-and-gang-group-violence.pdf>

⁶ Eight might be conservative, but was the number cited in one city presentation. Another list had eleven: Operation Pinpoint, GVI, Public Safety Partnership, CCIP, 54 Block Initiative, READI, HVIPs, Cure Violence, Street Outreach (Philadelphia Ceasefire), City Grant programs: CEG & TCIG, Kensington Initiative. To learn more about Philadelphia’s various initiatives and see the city’s current efforts to connect them, visit: <https://www.phila.gov/documents/the-philadelphia-roadmap-to-safer-communities/>

⁷ Put the Guns Down: Outcomes and Impacts of the Chicago Violence Reduction Strategy (Urban Institute Evaluation, 2017) <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/put-guns-down>

By contrast, there are some cities such as Oakland and Boston which saw sustained drops in citywide violence after implementing their GVI strategies. The experience from these other cities provides guidance on how Philadelphia could accomplish the same with sustained focus on strategy and management of GVI.

It is important to note that GVI expanded considerably since the evaluation period—both in terms of its capacity and scale. During the evaluation months, GVI reached 276 candidates, but expanded to over 800 in the next six months. It also expanded from 2 case managers to 10, and continues to grow.

What would the city have to do to take GVI's impact citywide?

The following recommendations are meant to reflect broad principles to help current and future leaders ensure that GVI or similar strategies are being given the resources and support necessary to drive citywide reduction in gun violence.

- **Elevate gun violence.** Shootings and homicides should be publicly identified as an accountable city-wide outcome of interest, and Philadelphia should devote leadership and management to pursuing this goal.
- **Develop a coordinated city-wide strategy.** GVI cannot succeed as a project that *only* belongs to the Mayor's office—it needs to be supported by the community, integrated into PPD mission and ethos, and also be connected to and coordinated with the city's CVI infrastructure. It is critical for the city to form a tight link between both its enforcement and non-enforcement violence prevention efforts. GVI strategies historically fail to create city-wide impact where one or the other of these dimensions is neglected, or where these two approaches are not working together. Philadelphia has an excellent suite of initiatives, but very low levels of coordination and connection between efforts. Putting these strong efforts into a coherent framework would allow the city to support GVI and its other key strategies to create citywide impact.
- **Build a tight management infrastructure at the level above GVI.** A coordinated citywide strategy will need to be accompanied by a management structure that follows the strategy's theory of change and pays attention to the quality, intensity and efficacy of intervention work supporting the overall framework. The managing director's office is currently undertaking a process to link its disparate programs into a full strategy based on a theory to reduce violence in the city. This type of effort needs to be supported and continued across city government.
- **Improve intelligence collection and information sharing on groups.** Philadelphia can take immediate steps to revamp its shooting reviews and start sharing the information it needs to better understand its group violence problem—some of these changes are already being discussed by city leadership. This is a necessary first step to having the city's strategy have impact on a larger scale. Detailed recommendations in intelligence sharing are also available in Temple University's brief on the Kensington Initiative.⁸

This policy brief is from the University of Pennsylvania Crime and Justice Policy Lab, with contributions from Ben Struhl, Alyssa Mendlein and Anthony Braga

Special thanks go to Professor Caterina Roman of Temple University, Meaghan McDonald from the National Network of Safe Communities, and Deion Sumpter, Philadelphia GVI Director, for providing comments and additions.

⁸ https://liberalarts.temple.edu/sites/liberalarts/files/EvaluationFindings_Brief2_updatedNov2022.pdf