

VIOLENCE REDUCTION RESEARCH AND PRACTICE NETWORK

NOVEMBER 2024
CONVENING SUMMARY



CONTENTS

Background	2
Inaugural VRRP Network Convening	3
Overview of Presentations and Discussions	4
Themes Across Presentations and Discussions	11
Conclusion: Emerging Research Questions	13
Next Steps for the VRRP Network	16
Appendix	17

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BACKGROUND

In recent years, the field of violence reduction has experienced significant growth and transformation. When the COVID-19 pandemic sparked increases in gun violence across the US, the federal government announced historic investments in community violence intervention (CVI) programs. Many local governments and private philanthropy also significantly increased funding for violence intervention, allowing for new innovations, programs, and initiatives.

Four years later, [preliminary FBI and local data](#) show a decline in violent crime across the country, and [growing evidence](#) supports the effectiveness of CVI and certain policing initiatives. However, several major challenges remain. Gaps in violence reduction research persist, and critical disconnects between researchers, practitioners, and policymakers hinder the field's ability to translate knowledge into effective, sustainable solutions. The Violence Reduction Research and Practice (VRRP) Network seeks to address these challenges, responding to current needs of the field and creating an understanding of what works, what does not work, and how to build evidence around effective practices to sustain their future implementation.

The VRRP Network was launched in November 2024 by David Muhammad, Executive Director of the National Institute for Criminal Justice Reform (NICJR), and Patrick Sharkey, William S. Todd Professor of Sociology and Public Affairs at Princeton University, with support from the Public Welfare Foundation. The partnership between these two organizations embodies the VRRP Network's commitment to bringing together practitioners and researchers to tackle challenges and identify opportunities in the violence reduction field. The VRRP Network's mission is to gather leaders in the violence reduction field who will identify the most pressing needs of the field, evaluate the effectiveness of existing and emerging strategies, and conceptualize a forward-looking research agenda to inform both policy and practice.

INAUGURAL VRRP NETWORK CONVENING

The inaugural VRRP Network convening gathered a group of leading experts in violence reduction, representing community-based organizations, nonprofits, law enforcement, government agencies, and academic institutions. See appendix A for the full list of presenters and participants. Designed as a space for deliberative dialogue, the convening fostered an exchange of experience-driven and research-based insights to advance policy and practice solutions to gun violence. With an intentional focus on diverse perspectives and cross-sector collaboration, the convening purposefully included individuals with a wide range of experiences—community leaders with firsthand knowledge of violence intervention, researchers studying long-term trends and impacts, and practitioners implementing solutions on the ground. This mix of expertise and lived experience ensured a rich dialogue that bridged gaps between theory, policy, and practice. Following the convening, interviews were conducted with convening participants to solicit additional feedback on (1) the current state and challenges of violence reduction work; (2) future directions for the field; and (3) what role the VRRP Network may play in this work.

The day-long session, preceded by a dinner the evening prior, was organized into four thematic areas, progressing logically from understanding the root causes of gun violence to exploring and implementing solutions. Each session featured an expert-led presentation, followed by an extended, participant-driven discussion that allowed for critical engagement and collective problem-solving:

1. *The Root Causes of Ingrained Community Violence*, presented by Dr. Patrick Sharkey
2. *Research and Data-Driven Discussion on the Drivers of Gun Violence*, presented by Dr. Andrew Papachristos
3. *Long-Term, Transformative Solutions to Violence*, presented by Dr. Shani Buggs
4. *Effective Near-Term Interventions to Reduce Gun Violence*, presented by David Muhammad



OVERVIEW OF PRESENTATIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

1. The Root Causes of Ingrained Community Violence

Dr. Patrick Sharkey's presentation explored how violence in the US is both understood and addressed, highlighting two competing narratives that largely influence policy responses. One perspective views community violence as a product of inequality and injustice, calling for investment in social infrastructure and institutional reform. The other sees violence as a matter of lawlessness, demanding punitive deterrence measures.

Dr. Sharkey's research traces patterns of violence over time, beginning with the urban crisis and increased violence of the 1960s through the early 1990s. Subsequent declines in violence during the late 1990s, argues Dr. Sharkey, resulted largely from public space transformations and community-based interventions, though they were accompanied by mass incarceration. Lastly, the spike in violence during the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent decline by 2022 further illustrate the notion that violence trends are influenced by institutional stability and federal investment.

Through this analysis, Dr. Sharkey demonstrates that reductions in violence have historically followed efforts to mitigate structural inequality and increase community investment by government and nongovernment entities, and spikes in violence have followed increases in urban blight. Dr. Sharkey orients his historical analysis in routine activities theory¹, demonstrating how a reduction in motivated offenders and an increase in capable guardians can lead to reductions in violence.

The discussion that followed this presentation surfaced two key themes. The first related to opposing perceptions on violence between those in the violence reduction field and the public. In recent years, violent crime has decreased almost consistently across the US; however, this is not the perspective of most citizens. Participants agreed that media coverage—particularly on social media—plays a big role in this discrepancy, amplifying awareness and fear of heightened crime even when actual data suggest otherwise.

¹ Routine activity theory, developed by Cohen and Felson in 1979, establishes three elements that are present when crime occurs: 1. a motivated offender, 2. a target, and 3. the absence of a capable guardian. According to this theory, a capable guardian can be any ordinary person within the community with the ability to intervene, but it can also be the police or security personnel. More information: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/social-sciences/routine-activity-theory>

Therefore, declines in violence will need to be both substantial and sustained for the general public to notice. Similarly, participants addressed the disconnect that exists between many in the violence reduction field and the general public in how they differentiate and understand disorder and violence. This leads to several important questions: How can we ensure that people feel safe? How can we better understand and address the lived experience of people in high-violence areas? And how can we interpret the ways in which those experiences influence public perception of safety?



The second theme that emerged concerned the role of community guardianship. Participants agreed that providing sustained investment in affected communities is key, not just in terms of economic capacity, but also in establishing social infrastructure that strengthens local leadership and agency. Although many have traditionally viewed law enforcement as the primary guardian of safety within a community, this is not proven true for communities where law enforcement has historically participated in excessive use of force and over-policing of vulnerable populations.

As part of this discussion, participants noted conflicting views on who can and should serve as a capable guardian within a given community. Different individuals can serve as “cultural authorities” within a community, and communities must address conflicting perspectives on who holds what responsibility. Different types of guardians, including community members and law enforcement, can collaborate effectively to reduce violence.

2. Research and Data-Driven Discussion on the Drivers of Gun Violence

Dr. Andrew Papachristos's research aims to identify how violence concentrates within social networks and understand how these networks can drive effective intervention strategies. His work emphasizes that violence is not random but instead follows predictable patterns within social structures. Identifying key individuals, locations, and specific behaviors is key to disrupting cycles of harm and can drive real impact in violence reduction. This information is essential for capable guardians, who can then identify individuals who need help and what help they may need.

Dr. Papachristos noted a critical gap in current research and practice: while most data-driven strategies successfully identify individuals involved in gun violence, they often fail to capture their broader needs or their circumstances beyond their involvement in these networks. These analyses, he argued, should be paired with efforts to understand and support the people involved. A more holistic approach that extends beyond simply mapping connections could help ensure that high-risk individuals are connected to the specific resources, services, and opportunities they need.

While CVI and violence reduction efforts regularly use network mapping, such as in focused deterrence programs, Dr. Papachristos argues for expanding the scope of CVI research to explore how violence spreads between network clusters, suggesting that effective violence prevention requires understanding both individual risk factors and broader interpersonal network dynamics that contribute to violence transmission across communities.

After the presentation, participants discussed how researchers and practitioners can better understand the needs of high-risk individuals embedded in high-violence networks. Multiple researchers and practitioners noted that network analysis primarily uses law enforcement data, which does not address people's lives or circumstances beyond their involvement in the criminal justice system. Other public agencies' data sets, such as public health or education, can also provide valuable insights. However, they acknowledged that practitioners and researchers often encounter bureaucratic and legal barriers to accessing such data. As such, community partnerships with academic institutions and other public agencies have proven helpful for overcoming these obstacles.

Multiple participants also noted that frontline CVI workers (e.g., outreach workers and violence interrupters) often have valuable insight into the relationships and dynamics of neighborhoods, but they frequently do not document or structure that information. Moving forward, finding ways to capture and incorporate this qualitative, community-based knowledge into violence prevention efforts would prove valuable. Organizations should structure data-sharing agreements to ensure a one-way flow of information from law enforcement to CVI, not the other way around. Overall, building trust between CVI organizations and law enforcement, and establishing effective structures for collaboration, could improve the sustained implementation of CVI strategies.



Relatedly, participants discussed ethical considerations of network mapping. Researchers must be cognizant of how others can misuse data and develop appropriate guardrails to identify and mitigate these risks. Without proper safeguards, network mapping could reinforce harmful stereotypes, fuel punitive surveillance tactics, or lead to unintended consequences for individuals and communities. Building these social networks will require framing them within a broader narrative that recognizes structural conditions contributing to violence, rather than reducing individuals to risk factors or statistics.

3. Long-Term, Transformative Solutions to Violence

Dr. Shani Buggs's research focuses on identifying deep-rooted causes of violence to inform long-term intervention efforts. Her work emphasizes the connections between interpersonal violence and broader forms of structural violence that perpetuate inequality through criminalization, mass incarceration, state-sanctioned surveillance, and disinvestment in Black communities.

Accordingly, she argues, developing sustainable solutions to violence requires a comprehensive approach that advances equity, ensures economic security, provides quality education, invests in youth futures, and improves the built environment. Central to this approach is amplifying the voices of impacted communities, not only to challenge harmful narratives around gun violence but also to ensure that those most affected by violence play an active role in research, practice, and policymaking. Participants suggested aligning practice and research toward this goal, emphasizing the need to redirect the field's efforts into a coordinated strategy of long-term, dedicated investment in the most impacted communities.

While the field currently focuses heavily on developing and strengthening violence reduction initiatives—particularly through prevention and intervention programs and strategies—there is a pressing need to address broader systemic issues that contribute to the long-term eradication of structural violence. Participants acknowledged that balancing immediate (near-term) violence response initiatives and long-term structural solutions presents a significant challenge for the field. Addressing these challenges requires a sustained, coordinated approach and long-term effort among governmental agencies, academic institutions, and philanthropy.

A deep understanding of the complex mechanisms underlying violence patterns requires recognizing historical context, acknowledging the impact of generational trauma, and identifying the role of structural violence. This poses challenges for experts seeking to communicate how certain communities have experienced impacts from these issues for decades, and how generational poverty and trauma lead to concentrated community violence in particular neighborhoods. Participants also highlighted an important paradox that is difficult to convey to the general public: even in neighborhoods that experience high levels of violence, the majority of residents generally do not engage in violence. As a result, participants agreed that those working in CVI must develop stronger messaging strategies to shift public perceptions and build support for community-driven solutions.

An additional challenge identified by participants is intrinsic to all long-term strategies: time. Policymakers and the public often expect immediate, measurable results when public funds are allocated. However, meaningful reductions in gun violence—particularly through structural interventions—require years, if not decades, of sustained investment.

Furthermore, long-term strategies must endure political and administrative changes that often disrupt their progress, as well as risk losing funding or shutting down before they can achieve the intended impact.

The violence reduction field needs to fundamentally reimagine both its communication strategies and its approach to supporting long-term investments. This requires forging meaningful cross-sector partnerships among practitioners, researchers, government agencies, and law enforcement to develop a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of public safety. Such collaboration must strike a delicate balance of addressing urgent violence reduction needs while avoiding community stigmatization and the perpetuation of trauma. At its core, this new approach should focus on creating conditions that promote sustained community well-being and reduce or eliminate the need for crisis intervention.

4. Effective Near-Term Interventions to Reduce Gun Violence

David Muhammad shared a practitioner's perspective in his presentation on near-term violence intervention and its impact. He began by emphasizing the difference between violence prevention, intervention, and community transformation as distinct components of the violence reduction continuum with varying timelines for impact. If a community wants to see immediate reductions in violence, it must focus on violence intervention. Muhammad also differentiated between "near-term" (occurring soon) and "short-term" (enduring for a short while). Notably, near-term violence intervention can have both immediate impacts and long-term effects. Given these distinctions, he stressed the importance of strategic planning by practitioners, who should carefully consider desired outcomes to ensure that interventions align with a community's needs and address violence in the corresponding context.

Muhammad also emphasized the importance of data-driven performance management to guide interventions, focus resources, and ensure effective dosages. To achieve measurable outcomes, violence intervention must occur with specificity and intensity, serving those who are at the highest risk of being involved in violence soon, and engaging those individuals intensively and frequently. Data-driven performance management ensures continued alignment in all these areas.

Muhammad described gun violence reduction strategies (GVRS) as an example of an intervention model that embodies this approach. Within GVRS, a weekly Shooting Review meeting serves as a venue for law enforcement to identify people who are most likely to be involved in gun violence in the immediate future. This information is then shared with CVI workers, who relentlessly engage those individuals to avoid further violent incidents. The results include a reduced law enforcement footprint in the community and a clear focus on the small number of people involved in violence and serious crime. The outcomes of these efforts are then measured through data-driven performance management.

Participants agreed that the field needs greater support for the development of data-driven and performance-focused strategies. They noted that the complexity of scaling up violence reduction initiatives, as well as the lack of sustained funding, present significant challenges to implementation. In addition, participants discussed the challenge of carrying out what is considered “rigorous evaluation” of violence reduction strategies, as traditional academic emphasis on randomized controlled trials can be unethical and methodologically inappropriate given the nature of CVI work. Participants also acknowledged a need for more standardized best practices for near-term interventions, as well as a need for a greater understanding of non-negotiable principles for conducting effective work on the ground.



THEMES ACROSS PRESENTATIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

Across all four sessions, several common issues emerged as the main challenges and opportunities in violence reduction work. These themes highlight areas where current practice and research strategies can be better aligned to foster more effective, sustainable solutions.

Data Sharing: Historically, researchers have relied heavily on police data to evaluate violence reduction efforts and to assess the effectiveness of policy implementation and its impact on violence. While CVI practitioners also collect valuable, on-the-ground data, they often lack the processes and systems to properly document and analyze these insights. Even when practitioners do gather data, there are complex challenges related to the flow of information within the public safety sphere. More specifically, CVI workers often express serious concerns that data shared with law enforcement could be used to criminalize the communities they serve. In addition, many participants identified a disconnect between the data infrastructure needs of community-based organizations and the data collection priorities of academic researchers.

Matching Research Priorities vs. Needs in the Field: Although place-based interventions show success when evaluated, practitioners often report limited effectiveness in real implementation.² This is likely because the length of the investment is not usually sustained over time or is concentrated in a limited geographical area. In addition, place-based interventions may have the risk of criminalizing communities or perpetuating specific notions. This highlights a critical tension: traditional rigorous research methods may sometimes fail to capture when an intervention causes more harm than good. As a result, many practitioners argue that nontraditional and qualitative methods are often better suited for evaluating these types of interventions. Although these methods can be rigorous, there is still pressure to prove effectiveness through traditional academic standards, such as randomized controlled trials. Finally, practitioners identified incompatibilities when trying to align immediate community needs for intervention with longer research timeframes.

² See, e.g., "Preventing Youth Violence: An Evaluation of Youth Guidance's Becoming a Man Program (https://americorps.gov/evidence-exchange/Preventing-Youth-Violence%3A-An-Evaluation-of-Youth-Guidance%E2%80%99s-Becoming-A-Man-Program#:~:text=BAM_SIF_Final_Report_Revision_20181005_508.pdf).

Researchers and practitioners should work together to structure collaboration models that benefit both groups. There is an urgent need for the research field to reassess what "rigorous" evaluation looks like for CVI efforts, and to shape methodologies that both generate useful information for practitioners and are valid within the academic community. This will require a series of conversations within academic institutions to shape the future of violence reduction research. In addition, researchers should incorporate community-centered impacts and perceptions into their work, as there is a noticeable gap between how researchers measure violence reduction and how communities experience safety.³

Funding and Resource Allocation: While long-term investment is crucial for sustained impact in communities implementing CVI, the current funding landscape is largely fragmented, relying on short-term, grant-based mechanisms that remain largely vulnerable to political shifts. While researchers and practitioners may have different immediate priorities, strategic collaboration between these groups can work to strengthen the evidence base for CVI's effectiveness. This evidence, particularly given the newness of the field, is crucial for advocating for stable, long-term funding mechanisms that match the scope and scale of community needs.



³ See "Citywide cluster randomized trial to restore blighted vacant land and its effect on violence, crime, and fear" for one example of how researchers used mixed methods to examine a program's impact on both measures of violence and community perceptions of crime and safety (<https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.1718503115>).

CONCLUSION: EMERGING RESEARCH QUESTIONS

VRRP Network participants identified a series of research priorities that could shape and expand the future of violence reduction work. These priorities, which emerged from participant discussions and follow-up interviews, highlight gaps and opportunities for advancing the field. By focusing future efforts on addressing these themes, the VRRP Network aims to strengthen the evidence base for violence reduction and support more effective, sustainable interventions. We have split these priorities into two groups: one set focusing on the broad challenge of confronting violence and building stronger neighborhoods, and another focusing on the set of challenges in CVI work.

New Approaches to Confronting Violence

1. Addressing vulnerability to gun violence

- a. Most research and intervention work related to violence focuses on confronting violence in particular places at particular times. This is crucial, but often does not address the larger question of why US towns and cities consistently become vulnerable to new surges of violence.
- b. A research and policy agenda to make US communities less vulnerable to rising violence would address the unique form of concentrated poverty in the US, which comes with declining institutions, disinvestment and punishment, and the circulation of guns through US neighborhoods.

2. Institutionalizing collective efficacy

- a. The concept of collective efficacy, which points toward community social cohesion and informal social control as central to regulating violence, has become perhaps the most influential theoretical advance of the past few decades. But it has not translated into a policy approach.
- b. Moving toward an institutional model of collective efficacy recognizes that communities have tremendous capacity to reduce violence, but relying on residents to come together voluntarily is not a sustainable approach. A research agenda examining the institutions that can bring people together to confront violence is essential to turning the concept of collective efficacy into an agenda to reduce violence.

3. Building a new institution to look out over public space

- a. New efforts to scale back the role of police have focused on calls for service and violations, but give less attention to other parts of law enforcement.
- b. A great deal of evidence suggests that when professionals with cultural or legal authority appear in public spaces, they are effective in reducing crime. A new approach to confronting violence begins with the challenge of building new institutions that have central responsibility for looking out over public spaces to ensure residents feel both safe and welcomed.

4. Public funding and violence

- a. Unprecedented federal funding for CVI and local government is sunsetting, leaving many organizations without a sustainable stream of funding to continue their work.
- b. To build a stronger case for state and federal investment, a research agenda examining the effect of public funding on gun violence is needed to assess whether ARPA funding contributed to the decline in violence beginning in 2023, or more generally whether state and federal funding is effective in reducing violence.

Improving the Field of CVI

1. What works (and doesn't work) in CVI?

- a. The field requires more sophisticated evaluation frameworks that account for contextual factors and measure their broader impacts beyond violence reduction. Moreover, academics commonly focus on randomization and experimentation as the most rigorous research method and need to reexamine its applicability in CVI.
- b. CVI has come to stand for or describe a large swath of activities and programs. We need greater clarity and standardization to better define what CVI encompasses and to clarify what programs, services, and strategies lead to which outcomes.

2. What role do data and research play in CVI?

- a. CVI faces significant data collection challenges, including limited access to law enforcement data, inherent limitations with the comprehensiveness of existing data, and concerns about confidentiality and potential misuse.
- b. Improving data collection systems and processes can better enable rigorous evaluation of CVI strategies.
- c. The field would benefit from a more explicit commitment to and appreciation of diverse data collection and methodologies, including qualitative methodologies and descriptive quantitative data analysis.

3. How can CVI direct service workers' careers be developed?

- a. Organizations have underdeveloped staffing, professional development, and performance management structures for direct service workers. Relatedly, the field needs standardized quality measures across interventions to support performance management.
- b. Direct service workers lack formal career paths.
- c. The field critically needs comprehensive training for frontline CVI workers. This could include the creation of additional training academies to professionalize and standardize best practices.
- d. Research can play a key role in defining the needs of CVI workers, documenting the workplace hazards they face, and serve as the basis for formalizing CVI workers' careers and workplace benefits.

4. How should CVI relate to law enforcement?

- a. The relationship between law enforcement and CVI is complex, as both usually operate in silos. However, we should structure paths for collaboration, as both institutions play fundamental roles in achieving sustainable violence reductions.
- b. Researchers could potentially develop and evaluate coordination models that clearly define boundaries and roles for law enforcement and CVI practitioners.
- c. We need additional research to better understand how law enforcement contributes to gun violence reductions. How do policing strategies beyond making arrests reduce gun violence?

5. How can we improve public awareness of CVI and generate policy influence?

- a. The general public remains very unaware of what CVI is and how it works. The field greatly needs narrative change, communications strategies, and public awareness raising campaigns on effective violence reduction.
- b. The violence reduction field needs a strategic agenda that builds on partnerships with allies, including law enforcement, who can advocate for resources.

NEXT STEPS FOR THE VRRP NETWORK

Building on momentum from its inaugural convening, the Violence Reduction Research and Practice Network will continue to advance the violence reduction field by bridging research and practice. Efforts to reduce violence have often been fragmented, with research and frontline practice operating in silos. Further, many existing interventions focus on short-term crisis response without addressing the deeper conditions that fuel violence, and many promising strategies lack coordination, long-term investment, or the ability to scale. At the same time, researchers often conduct research without meaningful engagement from those most affected. By addressing these concerns, the Network not only works to improve upon existing efforts to reduce violence but also ensures that knowledge leads to meaningful, sustained change in communities. The Network aims to align immediate action with long-term transformation, ensuring that investments in public safety are community-driven, evidence-informed, and built to last. In doing so, the VRRP Network seeks to create the infrastructure needed for lasting, effective violence prevention—not only reducing harm today, but building safer, more resilient communities for the future. As such, the next phase of work will focus on the following key objectives:

1. The Network aims to facilitate further convenings that dive deeper into the emerging research questions presented in the previous section, creating opportunities for researchers and practitioners to develop collaborative solutions.
2. The Network will establish a platform to amplify innovative violence reduction work and continue to generate “Big Ideas” to be explored in the field.
3. The Network will slightly expand the number of participants by inviting additional experts who can contribute diverse perspectives to future convenings.
4. The next Network forum will be held in the early Fall of 2025.

As the VRRP Network navigates the field's evolving landscape and inherent challenges, it recognizes the need for adaptability, resilience, and ongoing collaboration. The Network will actively seek input from current and potential partners on ways to enhance its collective impact. Through these efforts, the VRRP Network will not only foster meaningful and deliberative discussion but also drive action that advances the shared goal of reducing violence and building safer communities.

Appendix A

The inaugural VRRP Network Convening in November 2024 included the participation of 15 experts from the gun violence reduction field:

1. David Muhammad, Executive Director, National Institute for Criminal Justice Reform
2. Patrick Sharkey, William S. Tod Professor of Sociology and Public Affairs, Princeton University
3. Candice C. Jones, President and CEO, Public Welfare Foundation
4. Andrew Papachristos, Director and John G. Searle Professor, Institute of Policy Research, Center for Neighborhood Engaged Research and Science at Northwestern University
5. Arnold Chandler, President and CEO, Forward Change
6. Daniel Hickson, Retired Commander of the Washington, DC, Metropolitan Police Department
7. DeVone Boggan, Founder and CEO, Advance Peace
8. Fatimah Dreier, Executive Director, The Health Alliance for Violence Intervention
9. Jacquell Clemons, Director, IVVY (Interrupting Violence in Youth and Young Adults) Atlanta
10. Jocelyn Fontaine, Executive Director, Black & Brown Collective for Community Solutions for Gun Violence
11. Paul Figueroa, Retired Assistant Chief, Oakland Police Department
12. Robin Engel, Senior Research Scientist, Ohio State University
13. Roseanna Ander, Executive Director, University of Chicago Crime Lab
14. Shani Buggs, Assistant Professor, University of California, Davis
15. Thomas Abt, Founder and Associate Research Professor, Center for the Study and Practice of Violence Reduction at the University of Maryland