

Applying “What Works” to Stop Violence and Save Lives

BY THOMAS ABT AND GRACE MAGORI

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Gun violence is now the leading cause of death for young people under age 28, overtaking motor vehicle accidents and drug overdoses.¹ While the majority of gun deaths are suicides, most gun homicides can be attributed to violence perpetrated with firearms in community settings. The costs of this violence to impacted individuals, families, and communities are staggering. Studies estimate the average total social cost of a single homicide to be \$10 million or more.² The human costs of such violence are, of course, unquantifiable.

Evaluation studies have identified strategies to combat gun violence that produce positive outcomes when implemented with fidelity. Evidence-informed strategies like focused deterrence, hot spots policing, and cognitive behavioral therapy are supported by dozens of studies employing multiple methods, many of which are summarized in systematic reviews.³ Nevertheless, these strategies remain sporadically adopted and rarely sustained.

The Center for the Study and Practice of Violence Reduction (VRC) was established in November 2022 to support and improve the translation and use of this research, especially in the area of community gun violence. The VRC reviews research, summarizes it, and then makes it available in accessible formats, with two Campbell Collaboration systematic reviews of anti-violence strategies underway and nearing completion.⁴ The VRC also provides practical instruction to local jurisdictions (currently including Knoxville, Boston, and the St. Louis region, but adding more) on how to choose the right combination of anti-violence strategies to match their circumstances. Here, we describe some of those translational efforts.

Synthesizing and Translating Evidence to Address Community Gun Violence

How does the VRC synthesize and translate evidence concerning community gun violence for the benefit of its local partners? To help us answer this question, we interviewed senior representatives from each jurisdiction we currently work with: LaKenya Middlebrook, director of community safety for the City of Knoxville; Isaac Yablo, senior advisor for community safety to Boston Mayor Michelle Wu;



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and Jim Wild, executive director of the East-West Gateway Council of Governments for the St. Louis region.

To start, the VRC engages with mayors from prospective jurisdictions

and their senior staff to ensure their alignment in terms of goals, values, and expectations for reducing community gun violence. The relationship is entirely voluntary—the VRC provides its services for free, and local officials are under no obligation to accept or follow VRC recommendations. Only when all parties believe that engagement is in their own interest does the effort move forward. The VRC’s financial and political independence enables us to communicate directly and freely in a manner that might not otherwise be possible.

Once agreement is reached, planning begins for a Practicum for Partnership-Based Violence Reduction. In each city, the mayor’s office and the VRC bring together local community leaders, law enforcement officials, and service providers, among others. We pair these leaders with nationally recognized anti-violence experts who train them in the collaborative selection, implementation, and coordination of evidence-informed anti-violence strategies.

The practicum begins with data. Research consistently demonstrates that community gun violence clusters around small groups of people, places, and behaviors. Fatal and nonfatal shootings concentrate in and among small networks of individuals and groups, leading to cascading effects of retaliatory violence.⁵ Crime and violence also converge in and around small numbers of locations.⁶ Finally, certain risky behaviors, such as illegal gun carrying, are closely associated with violence.⁷ City leaders often need to learn this for themselves, from their own data.

For this reason, we conduct *community violence problem analyses* for each jurisdiction. These analyses identify the people and places disproportionately involved in violence, as well as the motivations for such violence. Many local leaders are surprised to learn how concentrated their violence is, both in terms of demography and geography (see Figure 1 for an example of our analysis in Knoxville). They often find that the typical violent offender (and victim) is older than they may have expected, with an average age of over 25, and with a long

history of criminal justice involvement. Finally, they learn that many violent incidents are not directly connected to organized criminal behavior but instead arise from more everyday disputes.

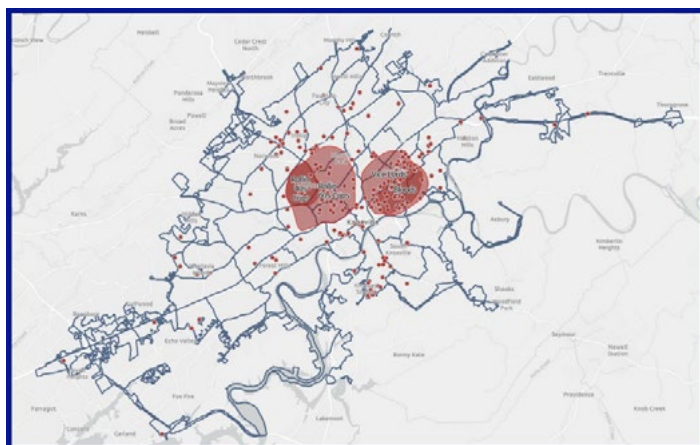


Figure 1: Gun violence incidents and group areas in Knoxville

All three interviewees found the problem analysis to be integral in distinguishing preconceived notions about community violence in their communities from reality. “The problem analysis helped me justify the inclusion of people and the allocation of resources,” said Boston’s Isaac Yablo. “Funding, people, power, bandwidth for the populations at most risk for violence... The analysis is the basis.”

After the analysis, the VRC starts with *overarching principles* to guide local efforts before jumping into specific strategies. *Anti-violence efforts should be focused on the highest risk people, places, and behaviors, balanced between enforcement, services and supports, and perceived as legitimate by those most impacted.*⁸ “Those principles are drilled in from the beginning,” said Knoxville’s LaKenya Middlebrook. “Having those principles guiding the work at each stage



Boston Practicum

ensures that the work is naturally embedded with these values.” After that, the VRC introduces specific strategies. Leading academics like Phillip Cook from Duke University and Daniel Webster from the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health provide virtual lectures followed by Q&A. Nationally recognized practitioners including David Muhammad from the National Institute of Criminal Justice Reform and James Timpson of Roca, Inc., do the same. Through these sessions, participants are introduced to a select set of anti-violence strategies that are either promising or proven to work.

“The curriculum was good and thought out. It helped to have some of the different presenters and speakers, even if they were virtual,” noted St. Louis’ Jim Wild. “There’s skepticism from some people, but most agreed that if we weren’t changing anything, we weren’t going to get different results.”

The practicum concludes with *guided planning sessions* to help participants select the strategies they believe will work best for their particular jurisdiction. Once agreement is reached, it is memorialized in a “plan-to-plan”—a short document that offers a summary of the agreement and outlines the next steps stakeholders will take to save lives. “You consume a lot of information in a short amount of time and go through that experience individually and as a group,” said Middlebrook. “Recognizing that it is a collaboration... there will be push and pull, but we worked through what strategies we thought would be most effective.” Some jurisdictions already have anti-violence plans that the VRC can update and augment; if no plan exists, the VRC helps build one from scratch.



St. Louis Practicum

After the practicum is over, *implementation* begins immediately. Locally-led implementation teams and advisory groups are formed, additional staff are hired, and funds are raised or made available. The VRC continues to assist jurisdictions remotely, regularly meeting virtually with mayoral staff and others, reviewing plans, and offering feedback. Another critical step in the process is the identification of high-quality training and technical assistance providers to guide the implementation of specific strategies. Most evidence-informed strategies are complex, and additional expertise from outside the jurisdiction is often needed, at least temporarily, to guide initial efforts. “I think how the VRC stands out is that they stay with you all through the process,” stated Wild. “Every city and region is a little different, and they accommodate for that—they’re not giving you a generic answer.”

For example, in Knoxville, local leaders are implementing a three-pronged approach: a group violence initiative, localized police-community partnerships, and community outreach. These efforts are underway as centerpieces of Mayor Indya Kincannon’s violence reduction plan. Boston’s strategy includes regular incident review meetings, engaging high-risk individuals with services and supports, and increasing police presence and investment in high-risk micro-locations, all of which are currently being implemented in Mayor

Wu's gun violence reduction strategy. St. Louis elected officials decided on a regional plan featuring focused deterrence, cognitive behavioral therapy, and street outreach, which is being implemented by a new regional effort known as SaveLivesNow!⁹ In all three cities, implementation teams meet weekly or biweekly, and advisory groups—chaired by the mayors and/or county executives—meet monthly or quarterly.

The VRC's approach clearly works from a process standpoint. We have engaged three jurisdictions and held three practica that produced three “plan-to-plans,” all of which are being actively implemented by local leaders. But from an impact standpoint, is the VRC's approach actually helping to stop violence and save lives?

Evaluating complex efforts like these is notoriously difficult, as there are similarities and differences between each jurisdiction's approach, and the work has just started. Regardless, the initial numbers are encouraging. In Knoxville, where the VRC has been working since December 2022, homicides plummeted 33% in 2023 compared to the year before. In Boston, where we have been working since April 2023, homicides are down 78% so far this year. In St. Louis, the regional effort began less than a year ago in December 2023 and is poised for success with a goal of a 20% reduction in homicides and shootings over the next three years. We hope to more rigorously assess our performance soon using a mixed-method evaluation approach, possibly using synthetic controls to create comparison groups.

Even if the VRC is ultimately able to establish a positive impact, most of the credit in these three jurisdictions go to the local leaders and stakeholders working hard to make a difference on the ground. Knoxville Mayor Kincannon, Boston Mayor Wu, St. Louis Mayor Tishaura Jones, and St. Louis County Executive Sam Page, as key convenors and implementers, deserve special mentions for their critically needed leadership.

Key Takeaways from the VRC's Experience

- **Local leadership is essential.** Mayors, city managers, and/or county executives must take an active and ongoing role in order to ensure success.
- **Have the right people in the room.** Stakeholders with diverse backgrounds must come together and be willing to work with one another. Go with problem-solvers, not bomb-throwers.
- **Begin with analysis.** If local stakeholders do not adequately understand their problem, they cannot create appropriate solutions.
- Introduce principles before programs. It is helpful to orient local stakeholders first around key principles before jumping into discussions about specific programs.
- **Keep it simple.** Local stakeholders cannot implement more than 3 to 4 programs simultaneously. Include only the most important strategies in your plan.
- **Don't do it alone.** For each specific component of the plan, seek

high-quality training and technical assistance from reputable providers with demonstrated experience.

- **Build capacity for implementation.** Build internal capacity for management and oversight in mayor's offices and elsewhere.

According to Yablo, “Being a nonpartisan entity delivering cold, raw truth is a perfect niche that cities need. The VRC steps in to clear the nonsense, leaving only what matters.” To date, the VRC's approach appears to be working, but there is more to be done and learned. As our approach is grounded in science, the work itself is an experiment and one that we hope will deliver positive outcomes and learning experiences along the way.

- 1 See Goldstick, J. E., Cunningham, R. M., & Carter, P. M. (2022). Current causes of death in children and adolescents in the United States. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 386(20), 1955–1956.
- 2 See Cohen, M. A., Rust, R. T., Steen, S. and Tidd, S. T. (2004). Willingness-to-pay for crime control programs. *Criminology*, 42(1), 89-110; See DeLisi, M., Kosloski, A., Sween, M., Hachmeister, E., Moore, M. & Drury, A. (2010). Murder by numbers: Monetary costs imposed by a sample of homicide offenders. *The Journal of Forensic Psychiatry & Psychology*, 21(4), 501-513.
- 3 See Braga, A. A., Turchan, B., Papachristos, A. V., & Hureau, D. M. (2019). Hot spots policing of small geographic areas effects on crime. *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, 15(3), e1046. Braga, A. A., Welsh, B. C., & Schnell, C. (2019); Disorder policing to reduce crime: A systematic review. *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, 15(3), e1050. Lipsey, M. W., Landenberger, N. A., & Wilson, S. J. (2007). Effects of cognitive-behavioral programs for criminal offenders. *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, 3(1), 1-27
- 4 Maguire, E. R., Telep, C. W., Abt, T., & Adams, E. (2024). Protocol: Street outreach conflict mediation programs for reducing violence. *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, 20(2), e1388; Wilson, D. B., Abt, T., Kimbrell, C. S., & Johnson, W. (2024). Protocol: Reducing community violence: A systematic meta-review of what works. *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, 20, e1409.
- 5 See Papachristos, A. V., Wildeman, C., & Roberto, E. (2015). Tragic, but not random: The social contagion of nonfatal gunshot injuries. *Social Science & Medicine*, 125, 139-150.
- 6 See Herold, T. D. (2023). A Place Management Approach to Promote Evidence-Based Crime Prevention. In Brandon C. Welsh, Steven N. Zane, and Daniel P. Mears (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Evidence-Based Crime and Justice Policy* (pp. 486-483). Oxford University Press.
- 7 See Hureau, D. & Wilson, T. (2021). The co-occurrence of illegal gun carrying and gun violence exposure: Evidence for practitioners from young people adjudicated for serious involvement in crime. *American Journal of Epidemiology*, 190(12), 2544–2551.
- 8 See Abt, T. (2019). Bleeding out: The devastating consequences of urban violence—and a bold new plan for peace in the Streets. Basic Books.
- 9 See <https://www.ewgateway.org/save-lives-now/>