

Street Outreach Conflict Mediation Strategies: What the Research Suggests (So Far)

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Introduction

Community violence refers to interpersonal or intergroup violence between nonfamily members, typically in public spaces. It accounts for a substantial share of intentional violent injuries and deaths every year in the United States. This violence predominantly involves economically disadvantaged and disenfranchised young men and often occurs in marginalized urban neighborhoods. While it can occur with or without weapons, community violence in the United States is often firearm related. One of its principal drivers is disputes, often involving rivalries between loosely organized groups or gangs. Due to its cyclical and retaliatory nature, victims and offenders often overlap.¹

Policy responses to community violence are traditionally law-enforcement-based, but there is a growing movement towards non-punitive, community-led alternatives known as community violence interventions (CVIs). One key CVI strategy is street outreach conflict mediation, in which outreach workers or violence interrupters—individuals with credibility in the communities they work in—engage directly with high-risk individuals. By leveraging their credibility, they aim to influence the decisions of potential offenders and victims and intervene in conflicts before they turn violent. These workers prevent violence by talking people out of imminent violent acts, arranging interventions by influential individuals (such as loved ones or members of the faith community), keeping people at risk of carrying out or being victimized by violence apart, and/or negotiating truces. These efforts typically exclude law enforcement, though some programs collaborate with police. Street outreach conflict mediation strategies may also include other elements, including intensive case management, mentoring, subsidized employment, various types of treatments, therapies, and other support mechanisms, as well as public awareness campaigns to change community norms regarding violence.



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This article examines the scientific evidence on the implementation and impact of street outreach conflict mediation strategies. A close reading of the research reveals widely varying findings—with some initiatives reducing violence, some increasing violence, and others having no effect. Given this inconsistency in the scientific evidence, we conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis. With support from Arnold Ventures, we undertook the study through the Campbell Collaboration, an international research network that provides rigorous systematic review protocols to synthesize research evidence on social and policy interventions.

Background and Research Evidence

One of the first rigorous studies of street outreach conflict mediation programs took place in Chicago, where evaluators compared the effects of Ceasefire Chicago (later renamed Cure Violence) on three measures of violence in seven neighborhoods relative to matched comparison neighborhoods.² This study found statistically significant reductions in violence for 17 of the 21 outcomes (three measures across seven neighborhoods) in the Ceasefire neighborhoods. However, due to a broader decline in violence in Chicago at the time, 19 of the 21 outcomes in the matched comparison neighborhoods also decreased significantly, with 11 showing larger declines than

those in the Ceasefire neighborhoods. Time series analyses revealed that Ceasefire was associated with significant reductions in violence for only 9 of the 21 outcomes. Despite these mixed results, advocates frequently cite this study as evidence in favor of street outreach conflict mediation strategies.³

However, some studies have found these strategies highly effective in reducing violence. For example, two of this article's authors (Maguire and Adams) evaluated Project REASON, an adaptation of Cure Violence, in Trinidad and Tobago.^{4,5} This Caribbean nation has experienced a significant outbreak of gun violence, much of it gang related.⁶ Using multiple methodologies and data sources, the evaluation found "a significant and substantial drop in violence" (p.36). The evaluators' best available estimate showed that the intervention produced a 44.9% reduction in violent incidents relative to the comparison area after two years. Notably, this significant effect occurred despite serious issues with program administration and challenges in implementing the "outreach worker" component. However, the authors concluded that the "violence interruption" component was successfully implemented.

Two authoritative reviews of the literature on street outreach conflict mediation strategies, published eight years apart, yielded equivocal findings. Butts et al.⁷ conclude that evidence on the effectiveness of the Cure Violence model, arguably the most well-known street outreach conflict mediation strategy, "is mixed at best" (p. 47). Hureau et al.⁸ also conclude that the evidence on street outreach worker approaches is mixed and call for research to clarify "this apparent haze of disconnected and conflicting empirical results" (p. 760).

The research does not only suggest that street outreach conflict mediation is effective in some cases and ineffective in others. Some studies indicate that these strategies can be counterproductive, producing an *increase* in violence.^{9,10} The idea that these strategies may be effective, ineffective, or counterproductive creates confusion for policymakers trying to make sense of the evidence on preventing and reducing violence. To address this, our team undertook this review to clarify the evidence base and inform more effective decision-making.

Our Study

We are conducting a systematic review to synthesize the available research evidence on street outreach conflict mediation programs, the full results of which will be available soon. As noted in our protocol, the primary question is whether these programs are effective at reducing violence.¹¹ The study also explores two secondary questions: (1) Do certain program elements make these strategies more or less effective? (2) Are there conditions under which these strategies are more or less effective?

This systematic review examines studies providing quantitative estimates of the impact of community-based street outreach conflict mediation strategies on violence. Eligible studies included

randomized controlled trials and quasi-experimental designs with comparison groups that produced estimates of the effects of these initiatives on one or more measures of violence. The interventions of interest are community-based street outreach worker programs using conflict mediation or violence interruption strategies. Primary outcomes included measures of violent offending or victimization at either the area or individual level.

We used a multifaceted search strategy that began with keyword searches of 23 databases and 8 trial registries across multiple disciplines. We also conducted manual searches on the websites of 22 organizations involved in work related to the review. Additionally, we contacted 27 experts to ask about studies that should be included. Our search process resulted in 113,288 records. After eliminating duplicates and conducting progressively more detailed screening procedures, we arrived at a final list of 25 eligible studies. Because not all of the quantities reported in these studies were suitable for inclusion in the meta-analysis, the preliminary results reported here are based on only 20 of those studies. These studies are based on data from 10 cities (in some cities, e.g., Baltimore, multiple studies cover the expansion of the program over time); nine in the United States and one in Port of Spain, the capital of Trinidad and Tobago.

We used meta-analysis to convert study results into a common metric, called an effect size, for comparison. We focused in particular on area-based counts of violent crime, homicides, and nonfatal shootings, which were the outcomes used by most of the studies included in our analysis.¹²

What Did We Learn?

Using random effects methods, the overall meta-analysis, including all estimates, resulted in a negative, statistically significant effect size, suggesting that street outreach worker programs were associated with a small but significant reduction in violent offenses. For homicides, we found a positive, statistically nonsignificant effect size, suggesting that the effect of these programs on homicides was not significantly different from zero. In contrast, for nonfatal shootings, we found a negative and statistically significant effect size, indicating that these programs were associated with a statistically significant reduction in shootings. These findings were robust in testing procedures relying on different analytical methods. Overall, the weight of the evidence suggests that street outreach conflict mediation interventions can have a beneficial impact on violent crime reduction. Based on a review of author conclusions, a majority of the studies included in the meta-analysis (13 out of 20, or 65%) found that the intervention was effective at reducing violent crime, while four of the studies found that evidence of effectiveness was inconsistent or uncertain, two found that the intervention had no effect, and one found that the intervention was possibly associated with an increase in violent crime. We want to emphasize that these are preliminary results based on the first phase of our study and that they may change as we continue to incorporate new estimates into the model.

Our preliminary findings indicate that street-outreach conflict mediation strategies are associated with small but statistically significant reductions in violent offenses in general and in nonfatal shootings in particular, but not in homicides. This finding makes sense; homicides are rare events at the neighborhood level, and studies may be underpowered to detect such changes in neighborhoods where nonfatal shootings are often much more frequent. For instance, an analysis of crime data from Chicago's open data portal reveals about 5.6 aggravated assaults with a gun for every homicide there.¹³ Again, it is important to note that these findings are preliminary and may be subject to change as we complete our research. Nonetheless, the initial results suggest that street outreach conflict mediation strategies *may* reduce violence *under certain conditions*.

One key challenge is identifying those conditions under which such strategies are more or less effective. Many of the studies included in the systematic review reported implementation problems. For example, some community organizations lack the capacity to administer these interventions, including staffing, financial management, and administration. These challenges often lead to fidelity issues, with staff in some sites failing to follow intervention protocols.⁷ These factors and others may serve as moderators of program effectiveness, which we will further explore in our final report for the Campbell Collaboration.

Conclusion

Evidence on street outreach conflict mediation strategies is mixed, making it difficult for policymakers to assess their effectiveness. This challenge is compounded by the fact that the research often relies on complex statistical methods that are difficult for nonspecialists to understand. Our systematic review is ongoing, but the preliminary results presented here are promising, suggesting that street outreach conflict mediation strategies can reduce violence. We encourage those adopting these strategies to engage community-based organizations with sufficient administrative and managerial capacity to implement them with fidelity. In addition, careful evaluation will help to provide a stronger and clearer body of research evidence on the conditions under which they are most effective.

Endnotes

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