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Violence Reduction Center

Addressing the Role of Social Media in Catalyzing Community Gun Violence

Thomas Abt, Grace Magori, Antonio Moore, Desmond Patton,
Joseph Richardson, Anthony Shaw, Sarah Silberman, Torri Sperry

Acknowledgements

Authors

Thomas Abt is the Center for the Study and Practice of Violence Reduction's (VRC) Founding Director. He is also an associate research professor in the Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of Maryland.

Grace Magori is the VRC's Program Manager and a graduate of the University of Maryland's Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice.

Antonio "Tone" Moore is the Co-Founder of Social Media Trust and Safety Labs and an East Baltimore community leader.

Dr. Desmond Patton is the 31st PIK University Professor at the University of Pennsylvania, the founder director of SAFElab and the Penn Center for Inclusive Innovation and Technology, and the Chief Strategy Officer for the School of Social Policy & Practice.

Dr. Joseph Richardson is an MPower Professor of African-American Studies and of Medical Anthropology and Epidemiology at the University of Maryland.

Anthony Shaw is a doctoral student in Social Welfare at the University of Pennsylvania's School of Social Policy and Practice.

Sarah Silberman is a doctoral student at the University of Maryland's Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice.

Dr. Torri Sperry is the Maryland Crime Research and Innovation Center's (MCRIC) Research Director.

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With an emphasis on community violence perpetrated with firearms, the VRC gathers the most rigorous research, synthesizes it, and then makes it available in accessible, easy-to-understand formats. It also provides practical instruction to federal, state, and especially local leaders on how to choose, apply, and align the right combination of anti-violence strategies for their jurisdiction. Finally, the VRC convenes a diverse array of stakeholders to discuss subjects of strategic interest to the violence reduction field. Each year, the VRC holds symposia to advance knowledge and practice in specific policy areas using a multi-disciplinary approach that engages academics, policymakers, and practitioners, as well as individuals and groups with relevant lived experiences.

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Executive Summary

Community violence—violence between unrelated individuals outside the home—accounts for most U.S. homicides each year. It is increasingly well understood that conflicts playing out on social media are an increasingly significant driver of community violence in the real world. While this challenge is widely acknowledged, concrete solutions have been slow to emerge.

In response, the Center for the Study and Practice of Violence Reduction (the VRC) convened a Symposium on Social Media and Community Violence, with the support of the Everytown Community Safety Fund and PROGRESS, bringing together more than 70 youth leaders, community violence intervention workers, law enforcement officials, and researchers.

During the Symposium, one consistent theme emerged: the field has been slow to adapt offline models to online realities. Youth panelists emphasized that while the dynamics driving disputes are longstanding, platforms can exacerbate conflicts by rewarding engagement and prompting competition for attention. CVI teams noted they are increasingly expected to operate with "feet on the ground in both spaces," yet lack standardized training, sustained funding, and reliable partnerships with platforms. Law enforcement participants described how social media monitoring can improve situational awareness and enhance investigations, but also warned about net-widening and the lack of national standards. Researchers reinforced the need to avoid "digital stop-and-frisk" by ensuring that any use of online signals is contextually informed, transparent, and governed by strong ethical guardrails.

Based on lessons learned during the Symposium, this paper concludes with five recommendations: (1) invest in community-led digital expertise as core violence prevention infrastructure, centered on Gen Z/Alpha practitioners with cultural fluency and local knowledge; (2) build ethical, non-punitive digital early warning systems to identify windows for mediation and support; (3) create national practice standards and training to distinguish credible threats from performance, grief, or emotional expression; (4) require meaningful accountability from social media platforms, including sustained collaboration with community experts, resourcing local prevention ecosystems, and aligning trust-and-safety operations with vulnerable users' needs; and (5) treat social media as a site of care, elevating digital wellbeing, creative expression, healing, and opportunity alongside risk reduction.

Introduction

Community violence, defined by the Center for Disease Control (CDC) as violence between unrelated individuals outside the home, accounts for the large majority of homicides in the U.S. each year (Crifasi et al., 2018). The vast majority of this violence is perpetrated with firearms and disproportionately affects low-income Black and Latino youth and adults (Formica, 2021; Grinshteyn & Hemenway, 2019; Ulrich, 2023). Firearm violence has been the leading cause of death for US children and teens since 2020, and for Black children since 2006 (Brady, n.d.), posing a significant threat to the stability and sustainability of Black families and communities (CDC, n.d.).

The costs of community violence extend beyond mortality to include medical and mental health expenses, lost productivity, emergency services, criminal justice resources, and diminished quality of life (Everytown, 2022). Beyond these costs, survivors, families, and communities experience lasting impacts on economic opportunity, social cohesion, and overall quality of life, demonstrating that the consequences of community violence are deeply personal, structural, and long-lasting. Frequently-cited studies estimate the total social cost of a single homicide to be $10 million or more (Cohen et al., 2004; DeLisi et al., 2010).

It is increasingly well understood that social media disputes are a significant driver of violent conflicts in the real world. Today, many if not most rivalries between potentially violent individuals and groups have an online component (Patton et al., 2014), including gang recruitment, threats of specific acts of violence via rap songs or general social media posts, and bragging about committing violent acts (Patton et al., 2016). These violence-generating posts generally concern disrespect to an individual, disrespect to an individual's loved one, or a romantic conflict (Elsaesser et al., 2021). Key features of digital communication (e.g., persistence, visibility, spreadability, and searchability) amplify the consequences of online disputes (Boyd, 2014). That said, most online activity does not lead to violence. Consequently, understanding local context is essential when working to distinguish genuine threats from performance and/or emotional expression.

On November 10, 2025, to address these challenges, the Center for the Study and Practice of Violence Reduction (the VRC) convened a Symposium on Social Media and Community Violence. With support from the Everytown Community Safety Fund and PROGRESS, the VRC brought together nearly 70 attendees, including 18 speakers, to discuss evidence-informed strategies to reduce the influence of social media on community violence.

Youth speakers from Baltimore, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Toledo, OH, provided their insights on social media and community violence. In addition, community violence intervention organizations including the Citizens Crime Commission, Chicago CRED, Peace for DC, and Youth Advocate Partners, Inc. were represented. Academic institutions including the University of Maryland, University of Pennsylvania, University of South Carolina, and Widener University also contributed. The symposium also included the participation of various law enforcement agencies, including the Baltimore Police Department, the New York Police Department, and the Office of the Orleans Parish District Attorney's Office. A full list of participants can be found in Appendix A.

At the symposium, participants discussed research evidence, reviewed current strategies, and brainstormed ideas for improving understanding, prevention, and responses across sectors. This white paper documents those discussions, offering an overview of the current research on social media and its relationship to violence, highlighting youth perspectives on this critical issue, and discussing current and aspirational practices of community violence organizers and law enforcement. The white paper concludes with recommendations for improving prevention and response to online interactions that may turn violent in the real world.

Research Overview

Since the mid-2010s, social media usage has skyrocketed, particularly among Black and Latino youth who live in disadvantaged communities (Faverio & Sidoti, 2024). This is due to the proliferation of smartphones, the growth in quality and quantity of platforms, the development of powerful algorithms designed to keep people online, and the loss of spaces for in-person connection (Narayanan, 2023; Oldenburg, 1997; Pew Research Center, 2025). Consequently, the online world has become central to identity formation, social interaction, and conflict (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009; Moule et al., 2013; Patton et al., 2013).

The online behavior of youth living in disadvantaged communities sometimes reflect Anderson's (1999) *Code of the Streets*, where curating personas, maintaining respect, and navigating real or perceived threats can involve projecting toughness and/or threatening violence. On social media, this can include expressing gang affiliation, boasting about participation in violence (real or fabricated), and making threats against rivals to garner respect or maintain reputations (Patton et al., 2013; Stuart, 2020). In particular, posts that show disrespect, target loved ones, or involve romantic conflicts, especially when combined with tagging, comments, or live-streaming, carry higher risks for offline violence (Elsaesser et al., 2021; Patton et al., 2017; 2020). Context is crucial when determining the seriousness of social media posts. Understanding local norms, customs, and relationships is essential to accurately assess risk, as some posts may be performative or expressive rather than literal threats.

Not all online interactions lead to violence. Just as in-person socializing reflects the full spectrum of human emotion, youth use social media to express grief over the death of a loved one, anger at a particular situation, or cynicism about the criminal justice system (Blevins et al., 2016; Patton et al., 2016). Additionally, they navigate online space to avoid in-person conflict by seeking the support of friends, avoiding known violent peers, and temporarily disengaging from social media altogether (Elsaesser et al., 2021).

Similar patterns have been observed in rap music at the local level. Oftentimes modern-day rap or "drill" songs coming from highly disadvantaged areas portray hyper-localized conflict, violence, and "flex" culture in the name of reputation building. The lyrics and videos of drill music call out specific people, places, and situations in the area and include references to crimes, guns, and illicit substances. In line with patterns seen on social media, these overtly confrontational songs have the potential to escalate into violence, and long-term and deadly rivalries can be started and maintained via music (Johnson & Schell-Busey, 2016). However, not everyone who performs such material is necessarily involved in violence, but rather may use such content as a means of generating viewership in order to launch music careers. Because social media algorithms respond to more provocative and violent material, some performers may discuss violence to portray a lifestyle that is not their own in the pursuit of money and notoriety for both themselves and their neighborhood (Evans, 2020; Kubrin, 2005; Lauger & Densley, 2018).

Dangers on social media, though, evolve with the platforms themselves. Of particular concern for participants are sites such as Roblox and Minecraft, where youth are being actively

recruited into and mobilized to act on behalf of extremist organizations (Hamming, 2025; Lamphere-Englund, 2025), and new features such as live-streaming. The development of artificial intelligence (AI) has tremendous potential to promote and/or prevent violence.

Importantly, social media is not inherently violent. Instead, it is another space where individuals express who they are and who they aspire to be, and it serves as a place that both fosters and prevents offline violence, making nuanced understanding essential for practitioners to respond effectively.

Youth perspectives

Because social media platforms are especially popular among youth and young adults, the symposium intentionally centered the perspectives of Gen Z and Gen Alpha youth professionals deeply embedded in the relevant digital and cultural ecosystems.

The symposium's youth panel included Kenyon "Staino" Coates, a Chicago-based drill rapper and violence prevention advocate; Emmanuel "Manny215" Clarke, a former multi-platinum streaming artist turned serial entrepreneur and community leader; and Brysen Davis, a school-based violence interrupter and municipal policy advisor working directly with high-risk youth. Together, these panelists brought firsthand knowledge of how online narratives are formed, how conflicts escalate digitally, and how interventions must evolve to meet these realities.

As Kenyon Coates noted, the dynamics fueling today's violence are not new – only the platforms have changed. He reflected on the cyclical nature of drill culture and online competition, explaining that while the generation and technology evolve, the pressure to escalate for attention remains constant:

"2012 to 2025, it ain't really a difference. I feel like everything been repeating itself the same way drill spiked. Now it's just a new generation doing it. I made a statement where everybody is trying to outdo everybody. People are trying to find new ways to outdo what already happened."

— Kenyon "Staino" Coates.

This competitive escalation, when amplified by algorithmic systems designed to reward engagement without context, has made social media a critical accelerant of conflict. Yet community violence intervention (CVI) strategies have been slow to adapt to this reality, often relying on offline models that fail to account for how disputes originate, evolve, and intensify online.

Other panelists emphasized that Gen Z practitioners are already responding with new approaches rooted in digital fluency and hyperlocal awareness. These youth-led interventions include monitoring emerging conflicts across platforms, interpreting coded language and symbolism, and intervening through peer networks before disputes escalate into offline violence. However, as Emmanuel Clarke warned, these approaches remain underutilized within institutional systems:

"What's happening in a lot of the gun violence spaces, we're not giving Gen Z professionals the proper opportunities and power to have decision-making ability. And when you don't do that, you have a lot of old solutions to new problems."

— Emmanuel "Manny215" Clarke

Even when youth practitioners successfully intervene, their work is often undermined by platform algorithms that prioritize engagement over safety. Posts that signal danger frequently generate the highest visibility, making intervention efforts without cooperation from social media trust and safety teams short-lived and unsustainable.

The panel also highlighted the cumulative psychological impact of constant exposure to violent online content in marginalized communities. As Brysen Davis observed, this exposure shapes how young people internalize conflict and normalize harm:

"If you're exposed to that kind of stuff on a daily, at way higher rates than other communities, then you're going to manifest that. You're going to internalize that in a different way."

— Brysen Davis

Moderator Antonio Moore pointed to a path forward that bridges youth expertise and institutional capacity. His team at Social Media Trust and Safety Labs works to gather, categorize, and normalize hyperlocal social media data activity that could form the basis of ethically governed machine learning and LLM datasets rooted in community context. When integrated into social media trust and safety operations, these tools could help remove social media content as a factor in Gen Z retaliatory shootings – before conflict turns deadly.

Key takeaways for social media companies and government leaders:

- Invest in hyperlocal Gen Z/Alpha community data experts to lead the design and implementation of online safety infrastructure grounded in lived experience and cultural context.
- Mandate collaboration with social media companies, requiring the adoption of youth-informed, hyperlocal data sources within trust and safety systems, recognizing the commercial value of this data.
- Fund the ecosystem by paying for this data to exist and be accessible to local CVI organizations that currently lack the resources to sustain this innovation.

Ksoo/Lil Buck incident

Attendees worked through a real-life case study drawn from court filings in Jacksonville, FL. Hakeem "Ksoo" Robinson fatally shot Charles "Lil Buck" McCormick because of a diss track referencing Ksoo's deceased brother. Participants discussed the incident and explored potential strategies for prevention, intervention, and response.
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Community-based organization perspectives

Community-based organizations (CBOs) play an important role in preventing, intervening in, and responding to community violence. Although academics and practitioners agree that social media is a significant driver of such violence, little has been written on how CBOs monitor, prevent and intervene in conflicts on social media among high-risk individuals and groups (Patton et al., 2013 2015; Stuart, 2021; Lane, 2018). Over the past decade the landscape of community violence has shifted, with conflict now moving between physical spaces—particularly streets, blocks and neighborhoods—and digital and social media platforms like Instagram and YouTube (Lane, 2018). To address this evolving context, the symposium convened four CVI leaders and frontline practitioners from Chicago, Washington DC, New York City, and New Orleans to discuss their challenges and best practices for preventing and intervening in virtual conflict.

Identifying High Risk Places, Persons and Patterns
Cedric Hawkins, Strategic Initiatives Manager, Chicago CRED, discussed the "2020 Vision Campaign," an Instagram-based initiative that produces positive, culturally resonant content

to counter harmful trends such as "backdooring," a phrase used to describe a person(s) using deceit to steal, rob and/or physically harm family, friends and associates within their intimate social network. Credible messengers—including rappers and community figures—record short messages explaining why harmful behaviors are destructive, and participants receive incentives for positive engagement. Identifying the highest risk individuals and groups and monitoring their social media behavior is critical to violence reduction.

Lorenzo Sanders, a CVI practitioner for Peace for DC and a former Site Director for Cure the Streets in Washington DC, described how he recently shifted from working with an emerging adult population (18-24 years of age), to an older cohort of men ranging from their mid 20s to early 40s. According to Sanders, the older cohort of men, many of whom recently returned from prison, have significant influence and control over the emerging adults. Lorenzo monitors daily the social media pages of the two most active and high-risk men in his catchment area known for "terrorizing the community." Sanders employs an approach that moves between the physical space of the neighborhood and the digital space on social media, emphasizing the need for "feet on the ground in both spaces."

Virtual Violence Interventionists: E-Responders and Peace Guards
Jai Thomas, Director of Violence Prevention and Strategic Programming at the Citizens Crime Commission of New York, discussed the importance of E-Responders and virtual intervention hubs (Javdani & Sichel, 2017). E-Responders are violence prevention professionals trained to identify, examine, and address threats of risky behavior online. E-responders are also trained to respond to grief. Thomas emphasized the need to train more E-responders. Patrick Young (YAP) uplifted the concept of Peace Guards. Like E-responders, Peace Guards are trained to identify conflict on digital metaverse gaming platforms such as Roblox, Minecraft, Fortnite and Gorilla Tag.

Digital Epidemiology and Digital Early Warning Systems
CBOs are using public health approaches to better understand the digital ecosystem for violence prevention. Digital epidemiology (the study of how diseases and health conditions are distributed, patterned, and influenced by various factors) can be used to identify, prevent and intervene in violence. Digital early warning systems can use AI as a predictive technology by identifying potential conflict in the digital space and bring attention to conflict before it spreads, without involving law enforcement.

Standardization and Training
Identifying the most high-risk participants and monitoring their behavior on social media is an approach used by many interventionists; however, there are no standardized approaches, which makes the work challenging. Standardization could be achieved by requiring CVI organizations to have a virtual VI or a digital VI department focused solely on building the strengths of people who have tangible digital skills that can make the work less labor intensive. This approach will require accreditation and delegation. There is currently little to no training on how to intervene in social media conflicts in real time—a major practice gap.

AI Literacy

Violence interrupters are required to operate in both physical and digital spaces. In the digital space there are multiple social media and metaverse platforms, which raises the question: How do interventionists monitor conflict on a myriad of platforms among multiple actors and groups? One recommendation is the use of artificial intelligence (AI). However, monitoring and using data without permission may raise ethical concerns. AI literacy—which starts with transparency, fairness and ethics—is beneficial for CVI workers because AI can be false, biased, and susceptible to producing misinformation.

Law enforcement perspectives

The symposium also brought together police and prosecutors to explore how they understand and respond to community violence catalyzed by online conflicts.

Kevin O'Connor, Assistant Commissioner (retired) for Youth Strategies at the New York Police Department, opened by describing how, years before social media became mainstream, online posts were already driving community violence in New York City. He provided real-word examples that showcased social media posts acting as accelerants of violence, including livestreamed displays of weapons, taunting videos that triggered retaliatory shootings, and online posts revealing multi-group conflicts that traversed precinct boundaries.

The strategy of the Youth Strategies Division was simple: monitor high-risk individuals and groups using fake profiles, often with female identities. These tactics were not secret – O'Connor used the information gained not just for investigatory purposes but also to educate individuals, families, and the public about what was happening in local communities. This no-frills approach enabled O'Connor and his colleagues to map hundreds of gangs and "beefs" all over the city.

O'Connor emphasized that the information he gained from these investigations was better understood and used in the context of relationship-building. The Division's work depended on proactive outreach to community partners and even to potential offenders to deter crime and disrupt cycles of violence.

"Law enforcement has to be at the table, we see and have intimate knowledge of investigations, but there's no reason we can't share certain parts of that investigation and let the street experts deal with this rather than law enforcement."

— Kevin O'Connor

Keynote: Opportunities and Challenges of Using Social Media For Gun Violence Prevention

Dr. Desmond Patton offered a keynote address that synthesized more than a decade of research on one child, Gakirah Barnes of Chicago, which he framed through his forthcoming research memoir, *Facing Gakirah: Life and Death on the Digital Streets of Chicago*. Drawing on Gakirah's publicly available Twitter archive, Dr. Patton developed a new program of research that integrates computational tools (including machine learning, natural language processing, and computer vision) with in-depth qualitative methods to examine the engagement, language, and communication patterns of Gakirah and her Twitter network beginning in 2014.

Understanding social media as a "digital neighborhood," Dr. Patton argued that contextually informed, mixed-method approaches are essential for creating a responsible social media strategy for gun violence prevention that avoids "digital stop-and-frisk." He underscored the need for interdisciplinary teams that collectively interpret signals of harm and distress and actively look for strengths and opportunities to support wellbeing. He called for deepening conversations and developing trainings that advocate for strong guardrails on data governance, transparency about how social media posts are used in decision making, and investments in community-based alternatives that give young people opportunities to rewrite their digital stories toward healing, joy, and long-term safety and dignity.
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Amanda Eagan, Open Source Unit Supervisor for the Baltimore City Police Department, described how Baltimore's Open Source Unit monitors publicly available information to produce situational awareness reports and support investigations. Eagan discussed the aftermath of the 2023 Brooklyn Day mass shooting, where failures in social media monitoring led to a lack of police presence at a large event that could have prevented the violence that happened that day. Given these failures, a key responsibility of the unit is to develop and disseminate reports on unpermitted city events to enhance police preparedness and protect the public. Another key function is supporting investigations by identifying high-risk individuals, groups, and patterns of conflicts using open-source techniques, including the use of social media. Much of this work is done in support of Baltimore's Gun Violence Reduction Strategy, an initiative that is credited with significantly driving down violence in the city.

Eagan stressed that Baltimore's work is highly regulated. It does not use undercover or fake accounts, does not employ generative artificial intelligence strategies, and maintains strict limits on data retention. Instead, the emphasis is on ethical boundaries and partnership with community-based violence reduction teams. Like O'Connor, Eagan stressed transparency:

"I'm not giving away any secrets here. I'm just telling you that whatever you post publicly, it's fair game."

— Amanda Eagan

Daniel Shanks, Director of Strategic Initiatives for the Office of the Orleans Parish District Attorney's Office, explained how modern prosecutors often rely on digital evidence – social media posts, videos, messages, geotags, metadata, even deleted voice memos – to build their cases. This evidence can establish motive, opportunity, intent, group associations, and more. It also helps provide narrative context for juries: "What social media has done is colored in the story and the context of what is occurring," Shanks said.

Shanks noted that while some evidence is gained from open sources, much more is gathered from the execution of search warrants for electronic data kept by communications and social media companies. The warrants can often return terabytes of unstructured data, prompting new reliance on AI large language models to filter and search for relevant data under tightly defined parameters.

While such evidence is unquestionably powerful, Shanks cautioned that collecting digital data from social media companies and elsewhere carries the risk of overreach, particularly when rap videos or performative content are misinterpreted as literal confessions or gang admissions. He warned of dangers including the expansion of "risk networks" that can widen surveillance beyond appropriate bounds and the absence of national best practices guiding how social media and artificial intelligence can be used by law enforcement.

"We start building a network that gets bigger and bigger and bigger and further away from the risk. I think really understanding and having some definitive parameters... is an important conversation so we have an understanding of what's useful and what is just."

— Daniel Shanks

Research perspectives

The symposium also engaged leading academics whose work concerns the nexus of social media and community violence, including Jabari Evans, Assistant Professor at the University of South Carolina; Joseph Richardson, Co-Director of PROGRESS and Professor of African American and Africana Studies at the University of Maryland; and Michelle Lyttle Storrod, Assistant Professor at Widener University. Desmond Patton, 31st PIK University Professor at the University of Pennsylvania, moderated the discussion.

Research on social media and gun violence shows that online performance can both support young people and place them at risk for firearm injury and serious mental health consequences. Drill music, a subgenre of hip-hop that narrates neighborhood violence and survival, is one space where this tension is visible. Clout chasing–the strategic pursuit of attention online through signifying, cross-referencing, calling bluffs, and "capping" (i.e., exaggerating for effect)– can help youth craft identity and build status. Yet when audiences read performative threats as literal, these posts can travel offline, fueling disputes, retaliation, and exposure to gunfire. Evans showed how these dynamics shape the digital lives of young artists, and argues for prevention strategies that pair media literacy with culturally grounded programs that redirect creative expression toward safety and collective care.

A second strand of research demonstrates that social media is not only expressive but also instrumental in how violence is organized and experienced. Studies of gangs in Europe reveal that young people use social media platforms to seek attention, support, and outlets for grief, while also relying on them as infrastructure for drug trafficking and other crimes that intensify community harm. Lyttle-Storrod introduced the concept of "digital collateral" to describe how images, videos, and voice notes can be weaponized as blackmail, coercing youth into carrying weapons or committing violence under threat of humiliation or exposure. Her work centers girls, documenting how posts labeled as "terroristic threats" have led to federal charges and new pathways into the justice system, and how social media bans can cut girls off from peer support and potential digital interventions. This research pushes community violence intervention and prevention efforts to treat girls and young women as central actors, posters, viewers, and amplifiers whose online engagement can escalate or de-escalate conflict.

A third perspective highlights the need for design frameworks that are transparent and accountable to communities. Design Justice, an approach that centers people most affected by structural violence in the creation of technologies and interventions, guides Joseph Richardson's work with hospital-based violence intervention programs and young survivors of firearm injury. Through workshops and digital storytelling projects such as Life After the Gunshot, his team showed how social media timelines can be read alongside clinical encounters to understand recovery, PTSD, and depression. Richardson argues that equity and ethics are critical for building methods that do not flatten context, that deepen understanding of the root causes of gun violence, and that elevate voices and experiences often left out of policy debates. Together, they reveal key gaps, including limited evidence on mental health outcomes, few evaluations of AI-supported interventions, and insufficient involvement of youth, families, and community-based practitioners as co-researchers and co-designers of solutions.

Perspectives on the Social Media Industry

Representatives from Alphabet, Meta, Tik Tok, and other social media companies were invited to participate, but only one attended and all declined to speak on the record. Still, their importance in this area cannot be overstated. Participants expressed a range of opinions and experiences with social media and tech companies' roles in violence reduction. Some argued that social media companies have failed to protect young users, particularly those from Black and Brown communities. Others noted that dangerous content frequently bypasses online safety tools and protocols despite violating platform community guidelines. Many expressed difficulty with creating meaningful collaborations with social media companies. Patrick Young, National Vice President of Workforce and Economic Development for Youth Advocate Partners, Inc. has partnered with Meta to host multiple trainings with law enforcement agencies and community organizations to identify and intervene in situations that may become violent. Nevertheless, Young called for social media companies to take accountability. "No one is really calling out those service providers the same way the Truth campaign called out Big Tobacco."—

Workshop

To end the day, symposium attendees participated in a workshop aimed towards thinking of creative programs to address this issue. In these conversations, a few common themes emerged.

First is the need for sustained cross-sector collaboration in a variety of ways, including fundraising, program building, and intervention. Groups discussed the need for culturally competent interventions and advocated for collaboration among CVI professionals, law enforcement, schools, faith leaders, and residents to ensure that the local culture of an area is taken into consideration in program building and implementation.

Next, groups discussed the need for a high-quality, routinely updated datasets that include breakdowns of various slang, emojis, and imagery, with one goal of this being to aid law enforcement and CVI professionals in more accurately tailoring their interventions. In Baltimore, the Social Media Trust and Safety Lab is beginning some of this work, documenting patterns to see how violence repeats itself in order to build peace-promoting interventions.

Multiple groups also emphasized the need to change social media itself, whether by advocating for new algorithms on already existing platforms or creating a new platform altogether.

Finally, one group focused on youth violence and sought to address unsupervised, unstructured free time. One proposal was a workforce diversion program for youth, while another endeavored to address truancy via partnerships with rideshare companies to help students who want to attend school but feel unsafe in transit.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Participants in the symposium underscored a new and powerful reality: social media has become a consequential extension of communities impacted by violence, shaping how conflict, identity, grief, and retaliation are expressed, amplified, and occasionally resolved. Across impacted youth, community-based workers, law enforcement officials, and researchers, a consistent message emerged—social media is not inherently violent, but that does not make it harmless. Rather, social media is a powerful tool whose design, governance, and use can either accelerate harm or support its prevention and care. Violence catalyzed online is best understood as a product of local social dynamics, structural inequalities, and platform incentives that reward sensationalism.

Participants agreed that current responses are fragmented, under-resourced, and often misaligned with how people actually use digital spaces. CVI organizations are increasingly expected to operate simultaneously on and offline, yet lack standardized training, sustainable funding, ethical AI tools, and meaningful access to platform partners. Meanwhile, law enforcement possesses valuable tools for mining social media but face legitimate concerns about net-widening, misinterpretation of cultural expression, and an absence of clear national standards.

Moving forward, the field requires coordinated action across sectors. Based on symposium discussions, this paper offers the following recommendations:

1. Invest in local, community-led digital expertise.
Federal, state, local, and nongovernmental funders should support the development of digitally native CVI roles—including e-responders, peace guards, and virtual intervention units—staffed by Gen Z and Alpha practitioners with lived and cultural expertise. These roles should be treated as core violence prevention infrastructure, not pilot projects.

2. Establish ethical, non-punitive digital early warning systems.
AI-assisted tools should be co-designed with communities to identify windows for de-escalation and support, not surveillance or enforcement. Clear guardrails—transparency, consent, limited data retention, and separation from law enforcement—are essential to prevent digital stop-and-frisk practices.

3. Develop national best practices and training standards.
Cross-sector model policies should guide how CVI organizations, researchers, law enforcement, and prosecutors interpret and respond to social media content. Training must emphasize context, cultural humility, and the distinction between performative expression, grief, and credible threats.

**4. Require meaningful accountability from social media platforms.**
Policymakers should mandate that platforms engage with community-based experts, share resources with local violence prevention efforts, and align Trust and Safety operations with the

needs of vulnerable users—not solely advertisers. Building local data and expertise should be compensated, not extracted.

5. Treat social media as a site of care.
Prevention strategies should elevate joy, healing, creativity, and digital wellbeing alongside risk reduction. Youth must be partners in designing online environments that reduce harm while preserving expression, dignity, and opportunity.

Addressing community gun violence in the digital age demands neither technological determinism nor a retreat from innovation. It requires disciplined, ethical collaboration grounded in trust, evidence, and the lived realities of those most affected.
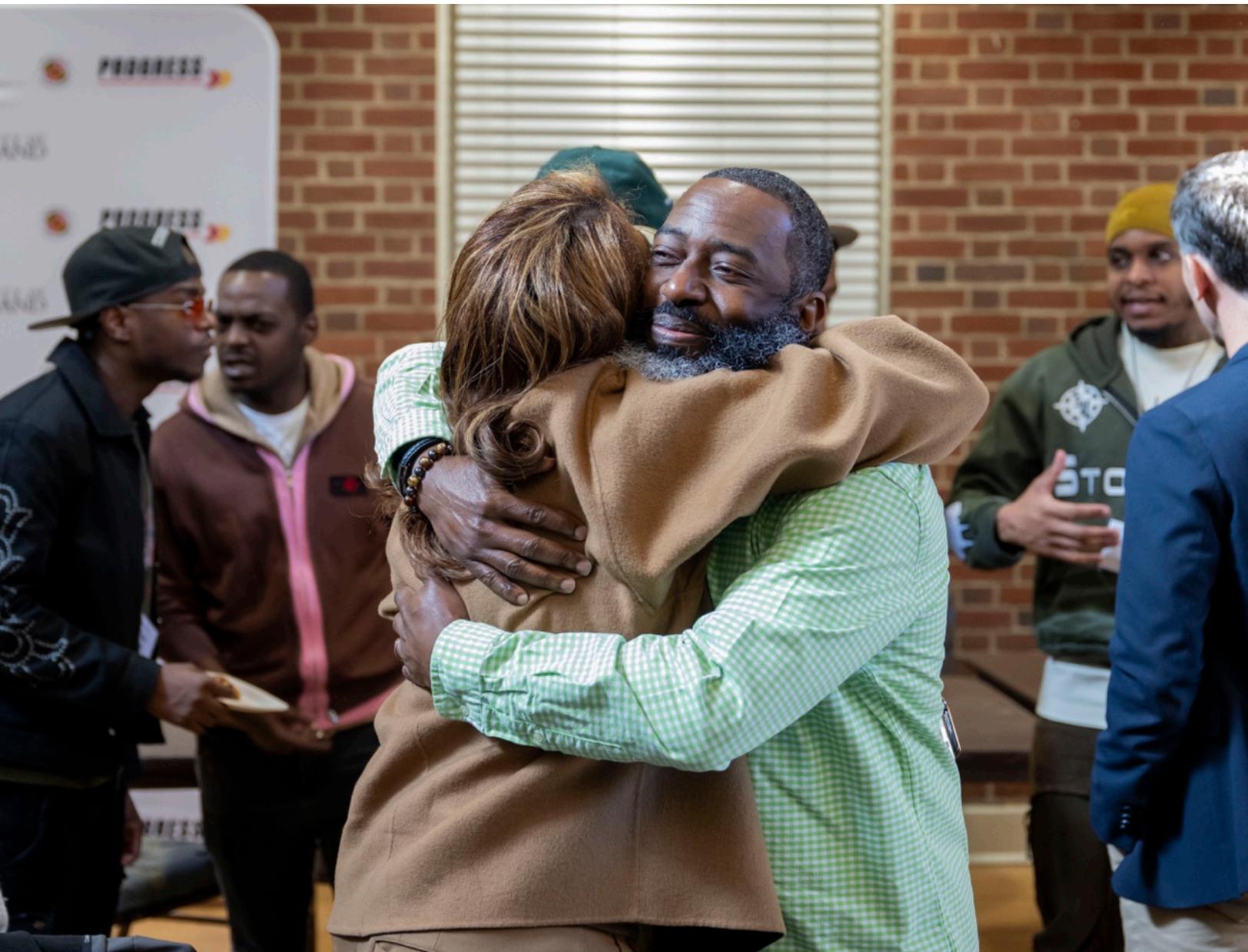
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Appendix A

Symposium Speakers

Thomas Abt, Violence Reduction Center

Rod Brunson, Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice, University of Maryland

Manny Clark, What I Wish I Knew Foundation

Kenyon Coates, Morgan State University

Brysen Davis, City of Toledo MONSE

Amanda Eagan, Baltimore Police Department

Jabari Evans, University of South Carolina

Cedric Hawkins, Chicago CRED

Michelle Lyttle Storrod, Widener University

Antonio Moore, Social Media Trust and Safety Labs LLC

Kevin O'Connor Jr., NYPD

Desmond Patton, University of Pennsylvania

Joseph Richardson, University of Maryland

Susan Rivera, College of Behavioral and Social Sciences, University of Maryland

Lorenzo Sanders, Peace for DC

Daniel Shanks, Orleans Parish District Attorney's Office

Tony Shaw, University of Pennsylvania

Sarah Silberman, University of Maryland

Michael-Sean Spence, Everytown for Gun Safety

Torri Sperry, Maryland Crime Research and Innovation Center

Jai Thomas, Citizens Crime Commission of New York City

Marcus Walker, Atlanta Mayor's Office of Violence Reduction

Patrick Young, Youth Advocates Inc

Symposium Attendees

Kristin Adams, Peace for DC

Louisa Aviles, The Joyce Foundation

Aman Ball, DC Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement

Rabiatu Barrie, University of Maryland

J. Sandy Bartlett, Maryland House of Delegates

Tuma Basa, Youtube

Melissa Bitting, Maryland Governor's Office of Crime Prevention and Policy

Hannah Bolotin, Council on Criminal Justice

David Brown, Civic Coalition to Save Lives

Samuel Castro, Institute of Nonviolence Chicago

Shawn Coleman, DC Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement

Zach Domsch, MD GOCPP

Michael Dravis, PROGRESS, University of Maryland

Antwan Gillis, DC Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement

Jeffrey Hill, Baltimore Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement

Joanee Dias, Violence Reduction Center

Brooklynn Hitchens, University of Maryland

Paris Inman, Social Media Trust and Safety Labs LLC

Julia Irving, Baltimore Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement

Akande Johnson, DC Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement

Teivon Johnson, DC Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement

Freedom Jones, Street Pause

Woodie Kessel, PROGRESS, University of Maryland

Rahaman Kilpatrick, Horton's Kids

Ted Knight, University of Maryland

Kristy Love, DC Criminal Justice Coordinating Council

Leah Luben, UPenn Crime and Justice Policy Lab

Grace Magori, Violence Reduction Center

David Marimon, DC Criminal Justice Coordinating Council

Mark Mills, Violence Reduction Center

Curtis "Coach Peety" Monroe, Alliance of Concerned Men

Elson Nash, Blue Meridian Partners

Chris Patterson, Crown Family Philanthropy

Jen Paulliukonis, Center for Firearm Violence Prevention and Intervention, Maryland Department of Health

Alvin Pringle, DC Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement

Rachel Reese, Criminal Justice Reform at Stand Together

April Shepherd, DC Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement

Kwelli Sneed, DC Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement