

A proven plan for violence reduction in Minneapolis

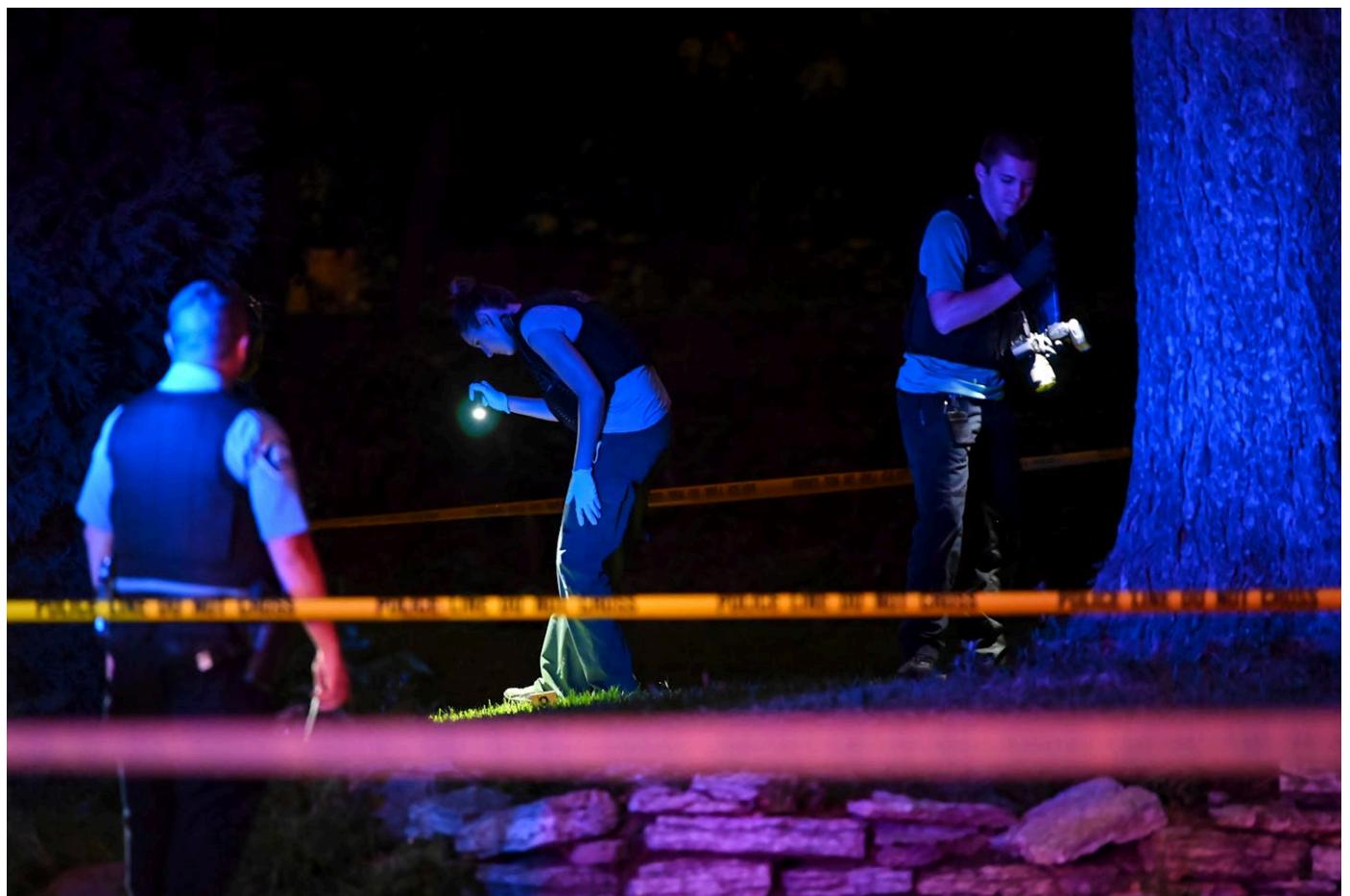
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Commentaries

Opinion | Stop the Bleeding: A proven plan for violence reduction in Minneapolis

Any deterrence plan must be focused, balanced and fair. The consent decree won't suffice. But cities like Boston and Oakland offer templates.

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"Just as an emergency room doctor must first stabilize a gunshot victim before addressing underlying health issues, Minneapolis must prioritize targeted, immediate violence reduction before any other reform can truly take hold," Francis X. Shen writes. (Aaron Lavinsky/The Minnesota Star Tribune)

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This year's mayoral and City Council races in Minneapolis made clear that residents desperately want safer neighborhoods. But how can we achieve improved safety?

First, it's time to acknowledge how bad the situation is and immediately adopt a strategy of triage: We must Stop the Bleeding. This phrase, popularized by leading violence-reduction expert Thomas Abt, refers to a focused-deterrence, community-centered approach to reducing urban violence. Just as an emergency room doctor must first stabilize a gunshot victim before addressing underlying health issues, Minneapolis must prioritize targeted, immediate violence reduction before any other reform can truly take hold.

I first learned of Abt's research when we shared the TED-MED stage in Washington, D.C., in 2020. This was my last in-person talk before the pandemic, and when I flew back to Minneapolis I never thought our city would need to implement his solutions.

But this city has changed since 2020. We need proven approaches that work, and the track record of this strategy is strong. The Operation Ceasefire initiative in Boston was implemented to address youth gun violence that had run amok, and the policy produced a sharp drop in youth homicides. Oakland also adopted a ceasefire initiative, which led to seven consecutive years of declines in shootings and homicides.

These cities and others like them followed three fundamental, evidence-based principles: focus, balance and fairness.

First, we must focus.

In most major cities, less than 1% of the population is responsible for a disproportionate amount of gun violence. We don't need to blanket the entire city with police or prevention programs; we need surgical precision to identify and engage the handful of highest-risk individuals and the specific city blocks where violence proliferates.

Second, we need balance.

Effective violence reduction requires both the "carrot" and the "stick." Carrots, such as mental health treatment, are immediately offered to help individuals change their lives. The carrot message, which can be delivered by community leaders, is: We value your lives, and we want to give you an off-ramp from violence.

But those who do not take these carrots will be met with the stick: swift and certain legal consequences via enhanced prosecution. In Boston's Operation Ceasefire, the legal consequences were aimed not just at the individual but at the street gangs that were causing the violence. The message: Stop the violence yourself or we will pull every lever to stop it for you.

Finally, the strategy must be fair

Collaboration is required between community leaders, law enforcement, service providers and politicians. Religious leaders can play an important role, too. As violence slows, and when residents and law enforcement show each other mutual respect, community trust can be rebuilt. Residents become more willing to cooperate with the system, further reducing the cycle of retaliation and violence.

Why consent decrees miss the mark

Stop the Bleeding can work in Minneapolis, but only if it is the primary focus of civic leadership. Unfortunately, our leadership seems more interested in focusing its energy on the Minneapolis Police Department consent decree.

Maintaining high levels of law enforcement professionalism is paramount, but a consent decree is not a violence reduction strategy. As multiple analyses confirm, the success of a consent decree is measured by a department's execution of the contract's terms and policies, not by the outcome of lowering the violence rate. We risk spending a decade and millions of dollars on bureaucratic compliance, only to find our streets are no safer.

In the process of creating the consent decree, 15 focus groups with Minneapolis Police Department personnel were held. The top theme emerging from these focus groups was "that they receive too little guidance and training on policies that are overly long and convoluted." Yet the consent decree ended up being 144 pages long, and intelligible only to lawyers. So much for keeping things simple.

Without clear metrics tied to safety outcomes, the only clear winners from the consent decree will be the external consultants and overseers.

A focused deterrence model like Stop the Bleeding offers Minneapolis a proven, nonpartisan approach to improve safety. The only question is: Will our elected leaders have the vision to implement it?

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about the writer

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