



PREVENTING MINORITY YOUTH VIOLENCE

Lessons from Law Enforcement–Public Health Collaborations

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Matthew Watkins



COPS
Community Oriented Policing Services
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Innovation



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Letter from the Director

Colleagues:

Law enforcement and communities are continuing to work diligently together to reduce crime, but unfortunately, despite these efforts, violent crimes remain a serious problem in some minority communities. Notably, violence committed by or against youth is not just an issue of public safety but also a matter of public health. Young people whose energies are taken up by fearing and avoiding involvement in crime can be distracted from focusing on doing well in school, enjoying the comfort and safety of good health, and thriving in the same ways as their peers who live in safer circumstances.

This toolkit accompanies *An Interdisciplinary Approach to Addressing Violence*, a COPS Office publication in which the Center for Court Innovation evaluated programs at nine sites across the United States with the goal of reducing and preventing violence by improving coordination between local and state law enforcement, hospitals and other public health and social service providers, schools, families, and the private sector. The tools in this suite comprise instructions and sample documents that organizations can use when setting up youth violence prevention programs in their own local areas.

Sincerely,



Phil Keith

Director

Office of Community Oriented Policing Services



Introduction

Minority youth violence: What can police do to help?

Even as crime across the country is decreasing, violence remains a serious problem among some minority communities, especially for younger men of color. Homicide is the second-leading cause of death for young Latino men. For young African-American men, the numbers are even starker: Homicide is not only the leading cause of death, it accounts for more deaths than the next nine other leading causes combined.¹

Understanding that this violence has both public health and public safety implications, in 2014 the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ), Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office) and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Office of Minority Health (OMH) created the Minority Youth Violence Prevention (MYVP) initiative. The initiative provided funding and technical assistance to nine projects across the country working to reduce violence among minority at-risk boys and young men, reduce disparities in access to public health, and improve community relationships with police. The Center for Court Innovation was selected to provide technical assistance; conduct a process evaluation of the nine selected sites; and develop guidance to assist law enforcement agencies, service providers, and community service organizations interested in implementing similar programs to reduce youth violence.

The MYVP projects featured collaborations among public health organizations, law enforcement agencies, and community-based groups, with different partners managing the effort in each instance and police often taking on the role of instructors and mentors. To further understand the recommendations and guidance, please see the report *An Interdisciplinary Approach to Addressing Violence*, which provides detailed information about the initiative and the nine project sites.”² In Cincinnati, Ohio, for example, the police department was the lead partner in Children in Trauma Intervention, a program using officers as instructors with the aim of reducing violence and youth involvement in the juvenile justice system. In 10-week sessions, officers taught a gang and violence prevention curriculum to middle school students. In DeKalb County, Georgia, much of the programming for the Building Resources and Awareness for Youth Violence Prevention Education initiative was provided by the Police Athletic League. The goal of the Georgia project was to reduce low-level “gateway” violence and crimes committed by minority youth, with a specific focus on recent immigrants. Programming included in-school and after-school workshops, tutoring, mentoring, job training, and gang prevention.

This guide is intended as a practical road map for police departments interested in establishing their own similar programs to work with minority youth or in contributing to efforts already underway in their communities. The recommendations are drawn from the experiences of the nine MYVP program sites. Throughout, you will also hear directly from the voices of police officers and others collaborating on this work.

1. Thomas Abt, *Bleeding Out: The Devastating Consequences of Urban Violence—and a Bold New Plan for Peace in the Streets* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2019), 2.

2. Jennifer A. Tallon and Rachel Swaner, *An Interdisciplinary Approach to Addressing Violence: A Process Evaluation of the Minority Youth Violence Prevention Initiative* (Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2019), <https://cops.usdoj.gov/RIC/ric.php?page=detail&id=COPS-W0874>.

A major goal of the MYVP initiative was to encourage police departments to deepen their collaborations with community-based nonprofits and institutions such as hospitals, schools, and other social service agencies. The increased integration was in the name of promoting what is known as a “public health approach” to violence prevention.

What is a public health approach to violence prevention?

Traditionally, the role of law enforcement has been to react only *after* violence occurs, ensuring help for victims and accountability for perpetrators. A public health approach to violence focuses on also working to *prevent* violence, anticipating outbreaks and stopping their spread.

From this perspective, violence, like a disease, is not just an individual problem but can spread through a community and can be “treated” using the same kinds of strategies developed to combat epidemics.³ Data gathering and crime mapping, for example, can be employed to pinpoint the source of outbreaks of violence. At that point, the factors most liable to lead to contagions—violence begetting further violence—can be more easily identified, allowing police, in concert with other community-based actors, to work to disrupt transmission by focusing on social, behavioral, and environmental factors including those related to mental health.

To take on this expanded role, police need new skills and partnerships, particularly with community groups and other government agencies more familiar with the public health approach to violence prevention, who in turn can benefit from the experience and perspective of law enforcement.⁴ Perhaps most urgently, to adopt this more prevention-focused role police will need the cooperation of the communities most affected by violence—communities often historically distrustful of law enforcement.

The recommendations that follow are grouped according to the phases of program development: Preparing the Ground, Recruiting and Training Officers, Implementing Your Program, and Keeping Your Program Going. Throughout this document are references to various worksheets that make up the rest of the toolkit.

3. For further information on the public-health approach to combating violence, please see Tallon and Swaner, *An Interdisciplinary Approach to Addressing Violence* (see note 2).

4. For information on studies and the empirical literature on the link between officer involvement in communities, see Tallon and Swaner, *An Interdisciplinary Approach to Addressing Violence* (see note 2).

Preparing the Ground

Educate yourself on the problem-solving process. The SARA (scanning, analysis, response, and assessment) problem-solving model has been in existence since the 1980s and has a proven track record as a successful means by which to organize problem reduction efforts. There are a wide variety of publications and resources available that summarize the model and the most effective ways to implement it. Educating yourself on this model at an early stage is worth the investment of your time.⁵ (See the SARA problem solving worksheet in the toolkit.)

Narrow your focus. Define the problems you want to help solve and search for data that illustrate them. If you want to counter high dropout rates, for example, identify where the greatest need is by examining district-level data. Also look for data suggesting the effectiveness of the approaches you're proposing.

Identify your population. Define as clearly as possible who you want to work with. For example, programs looking to work with at-risk youth should describe characteristics of this group or develop criteria for eligibility. These could include triggering events (youth with behavioral incidents in schools), place-based approaches (running programming in neighborhoods with high rates of violence), or the results of specific assessments (such as risk assessments designed for juveniles).

Lieutenant Jay Johnstone worked with Cincinnati's Children in Trauma Intervention, an officer-led program for 11- to 14-year-old boys. "What we're looking for are kids who are kind of on the borderline of having discipline problems or attendance problems or struggling with their grades at school. It starts off with an interview process where we interview the youth. We also interview the parents of the youth because the parents are a large component of our program."

Make a plan. Create a logic model (see the toolkit for an example). Map out proposed activities and goals and lay out how you think each activity will lead to one of your goals. At this early stage, it's important to have a clear plan, but you also have to be prepared for that plan to evolve as you learn new information after implementation. A plan helps you explain your program convincingly to outside audiences (funders, most prominently).

Sheryl Sams, the director of Youth Intercept in Chatham County, Georgia, explains how once in operation, her hospital-based program expanded to also work directly in schools. "With the data we collected with the hospital-based portion of the program, we saw that there was a lot of the victims that had the same truancy issues and the same reasons for why they dropped out of school. We felt there was a need to reach out to the schools and say 'Hey, let's get this program started so that we can prevent other youth from coming into the hospital.'"

5. A wide variety of resources on problem solving can be found at the COPS Office website (<https://cops.usdoj.gov/problemsolving>) and at the Center for Problem Oriented Policing (www.popcenter.org). Most notably, see Karin Schmerler et al., *Problem Solving Tips: A Guide to Reducing Crime and Disorder* (Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2011), <https://cops.usdoj.gov/RIC/ric.php?page=detail&id=COPS-P019>, and Rick Brown and Michael S. Scott, *Implementing Responses to Problems* (Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2007), <https://cops.usdoj.gov/RIC/ric.php?page=detail+id=COPS-P131>.

Reach out to potential collaborators now! Identify potential partners in the community. Who are the people, agencies, and community groups already working on these issues? Trying to bring in partners once a program has already started can be difficult, so start early. Once some partners are in place, begin ensuring responsibilities and expectations are clearly defined, and, if relevant, begin drawing up protocols to define your referral process to social service and public health partners. Many of these decisions will require some revisiting as your program takes shape—meaning flexibility is a must—but the conversations should start early.

Ralphalla Richardson was with a hospital-based violence prevention initiative in Binghamton, New York, that partnered with police and local schools. “I would say don’t be afraid to think of unique ways of doing [partnerships] and it’s people you might be hesitant to think would want to partner with you who are more than willing to. [Other agencies] were so supportive, and they’re all like, ‘What can we do?’ Once you actually tell people what you’re doing, you’d be surprised how many people actually want to help you and want to be involved in the process.”

Build bridges. Start developing relationships with community leaders as part of the earliest stages of your planning process. This can help in addressing tensions related to police-community relations, a distrust of law enforcement, and cultural differences. Engaging community members early communicates that their voices are being heard and that you’re interested in pursuing collaborative, proactive solutions to the problems you all want to see solved.

Captain Lenny Gunther with the Savannah (Georgia) Police Department worked with Youth Intercept, the city’s minority youth violence initiative, a partnership with a local medical center and school board, among others. “You have to be aggressive, and you really have to explain why we’re doing this. And when I say aggressive, I mean positive aggressive in terms of making these phone calls, establishing a rapport with these agencies. And it takes the department. The agencies have to know why we’re doing this and why it’s important, not only to us as a department, but also to the community: we really want to do this because we want to help our community and we want to help these children.”

Take your time. Don’t rush your planning period. A longer planning period (ideally three to six months) gives you more time to form lasting partnerships, finalize your programming, and focus on making strong, not rushed, staff hires.

Roman Murietta is an executive lieutenant with the Sacramento (California) Police Department and was part of the Sacramento youth violence initiative. He recalls that overcoming issues of trust with potential partners took time. “They didn’t know me and they didn’t know my intentions and they thought that we were just out-to-arrest-people type attitude. So you have to be completely sincere in your efforts, and you have to be completely honest. And you have to create opportunities to get to know each other outside of work. Whether it’s having lunch, having a cup of coffee. A lot of that is mutual understanding. People don’t necessarily understand the law, so taking them on a ride-along, and also you can put the shoe on the other foot—going out with them and seeing what they deal with as well.”

Make the most of what's already out there. Given scarce funding, see what resources already exist in the community for working with your target population. There may be a local group working with the young people you're interested in. In that case, you could propose simply adding a violence prevention component to their programming. Or you could invite other community institutions like food banks or recreation centers to help provide the secondary services your programming might need (meals for participants, child care when working with their participants' parents, etc.).



Recruiting and Training Officers

Prepare officers to work with young people. If possible, offer training to officers on interacting with young people and the specific needs of the population your program is targeting, introducing officers to the perspectives of different fields. Many young people who have experienced violence have also experienced trauma, and the failure to recognize the symptoms of trauma will make engagement and effective programming impossible. Staff facilitating programming and officers working with them need to have training on trauma-informed practices⁶ and developing culturally appropriate programming.

Roman Murietta of Sacramento: “I would say in law enforcement in general, we don’t necessarily promote or value these type of programs. I mean, historically when we look at being a good police officer, it’s ‘how many arrests did you make?’ The things we count aren’t necessarily geared towards measuring these types of interactions. You have to have the right officer.”

Spark (and support) interest from officers. Police departments that make community engagement an institutional priority will encourage individual officers’ participation in this type of programming. Departments can consider strategies such as requiring officers to dedicate a set number of hours per week to community outreach, creating specialized units or divisions, and finding ways to publicly celebrate or reward officers who embrace such work.

Lenny Gunther of Savannah: “Your command staff has to have the buy-in. Without the command staff having the buy-in over an initiative like this, it falls to the wayside.”

Roman Murietta of Sacramento: “You have to be able to support your officers because these are some non-traditional methods that are being employed, and the last thing we want is for an officer to be ostracized internally because of the work that they are doing in minority youth violence. Everyone in the department needs to understand that this is a department initiative, not this officer’s initiative.”

Encourage officers to have an open mind. For officers, engaging in this kind of community-based work means encountering perspectives that differ—at times greatly—from their own. Forming meaningful partnerships may mean working with community representatives who are openly critical of law enforcement, formerly incarcerated individuals, and treatment providers similarly wary of partnering with police. Keep an open mind. While there need to be agreed-upon boundaries for how law enforcement engages, the engagement itself should be one of the guiding priorities of your program.

Special Agent James Lewis of the West Palm Beach (Florida) Police Department worked on the violence prevention program as part of a partnership with the city. He recalls the early days were challenging for the officers involved. “We basically did not understand where the health part and the police came into play, but after we realized that the health part includes mental health, we saw

6. The International Association of Chiefs of Police has partnered with the Yale School of Medicine and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention to increase the capacity of law enforcement to identify and respond to children exposed to violence and childhood trauma. “Enhancing Law Enforcement Response to Children Exposed to Violence and Childhood Trauma,” International Association of Chiefs of Police, accessed June 7, 2019, <https://www.theiacp.org/projects/enhancing-law-enforcement-response-to-children-exposed-to-violence-and-childhood-trauma>.

a true connection between the police department and the [anti-violence programming]. Before, we would say to kids, 'We can get you a job. We can get you a GED,' but we didn't realize there was a lot more they were going through. Mental health folks that we have as partners have really been instrumental in helping these kids with some of the things that they need."

Find the officers who are the best fit for the program. A common goal for these programs is to provide opportunities for positive interactions between young people and police. School resource officers (SRO) often work for the local police department and are good place to find officers for the project. It is most important that the officers engaged in the project be good at interacting with the youth and able to build trust with them and the community. Seek to engage officers across departments. (This can be in addition to working with SROs.)

Implementing Your Program

Organize your team. Now that your team is together and finalized you should work together to further refine your plan and to develop a structure for how your group will operate. This should include such things as agreeing on the regular schedule of meetings, how meetings will be run and meeting agendas decided on, and how action items are to be documented and followed up on. As an initial activity the group may want to complete a document such as the Preventing Minority Youth Violence: Target population, eligibility, screens, and assessments worksheet that can be found in the toolkit.

Create programming and protocols. Memorialize your program concept by drafting a program description that includes the objectives and goals of the program. Establish program protocols that solidify your program operations and define staff roles and responsibilities on the project that were decided on with your team.

Recruit creatively. Now that your programming and protocols are in place, you need to find your participants. A key to recruiting is understanding what strategies work with different types of youth. For example, building relationships with teachers and coaches can be more effective than relying on sign-up sheets. In other situations, word of mouth from parents and program graduates is the best form of advertising. Strategies should be creative and designed to grab young people's attention.

Savannah's Lenny Gunther says to identify participants and begin the difficult work of winning trust, officers have to stretch beyond their "enforcement-minded" comfort zone: "Speaking with [young people], getting out of the car, making that contact. Not focusing on the minor issues, but looking at the big picture. And trying to just bridge that gap with personal conversation, 'Hey, what's going on in the house? How you doing? How's everything going in school?' A lot of times, police officers get bogged down by everyday work, and they let their police car become an obstacle between them and the community. So it takes an open-minded officer to get out of that vehicle, to walk the neighborhoods, develop that community contact with the juveniles, and really start to build that foundation."

Offer incentives. Offering rewards as a bonus for participating is a good way to bring young people into your program. A points system where participants earn rewards—such as gift cards or electronics or field trips—can help to generate excitement. If funding permits, finding ways to award stipends can help young people build a history of employment and teach them about professionalism.

Cincinnati's Lieutenant Jay Johnstone: "We have weekly incentives where we recognize the top students, the top leaders, ones who do well on the weekly spelling test, ones that do well on the physical fitness test. And then if the kid shows perfect attendance and shows good progress they eventually can earn a tablet. That's something that you'll see where they strive and work very hard because they realize that it's very attainable."

Keep your programming dynamic. Ensuring your programming contains multiple components—group discussions, scenario-based learning, service learning activities, etc.—will reduce the risk of boredom for both participants and staff. Gathering regular feedback from young people, their parents, and the community can help staff to understand exactly what participants want to get out of the program and the range of activities that are most effective.

Consider families' transportation needs. Just getting young people to your program site will be a challenge for some families. Try to pick an accessible location and explore the possibility of acquiring discounted mass transit fare cards. Renting or even buying a vehicle for program staff to use to transport participants is also worth considering.

Help to educate the community. An important part of working with young people is the opportunity to educate them and the community about the criminal justice system and law enforcement's role. This can involve correcting misconceptions, teaching youth about the collateral consequences of involvement with the criminal justice system, and helping them understand their rights.

Be consistent with youth. Young people in your program will only develop trust in officers through regular, predictable interactions. This applies as much to officers regularly attending programming as to the consistency of their approach when working with young people.

Reed Daniel was part of the City of West Palm Beach's violence-prevention partnership with the police department: "We have officers who become like a surrogate parent in a way. Many of our kids come from low-income, at-risk homes—single-parent homes, where the mom is working, most likely. These kids come here and we provide to them that community culture of safety, first of all, but we also, through these officers, are able to provide mentoring and really those relationships start to grow beyond the [programming] and into the community. It's a tremendous way of impacting a child's life when you see these officers and these kids engage in different activities and conversations. I think that's one of the greatest opportunities we provide."

Leave the uniforms at work (sometimes). Young people have an easier time interacting with officers and seeing them as "normal people" when officers aren't in uniform. Plan some programming where officers can engage with young people out of uniform such as pick-up basketball games or "coffee with a cop" meetings where officers are in plain clothes.

Keeping Your Program Going

Have a clear story to tell. Work with your partners to develop an in-depth fact sheet about the program clearly defining its goals and activities and showing progress to date. This is a useful tool when looking for funding opportunities. Think strategically about how best to illustrate your program's accomplishments when pitching the work to prospective funders and local media.

Make the most of your data. Engage a local research partner as early as you can in the process of implementing your program. They can help establish systems for tracking program activities and develop performance metrics based on the outcomes mapped out in your logic model. Credible, compelling data can be key to keeping your program viable and well-resourced.

Keep all the partners on the same page. Hold regularly scheduled partner meetings. This can help keep everyone up to date on the initiative's progress and challenges and creates opportunities to brainstorm, problem-solve, and share ideas for new resources and sources of funding.

Find ways to keep your alumni engaged. Without overburdening staff working with a fresh cohort of participants, plan for ways to keep your alumni involved. They are valuable ambassadors for your program, especially when it comes to recruitment. Strategies can involve maintaining a presence on social media (a Facebook group for alumni can prove very effective), asking alumni to act as peer mentors, and scheduling alumni events.



A Final Thought

Sacramento's Roman Murietta on the long-term benefits to engaging in this work: "There simply is no replacement for building relationships, and once you establish relationships, it affects you. Officers who initially were kind of apprehensive about this work, now as the work continues to grow, we'll see those kids, and it changes the officers' perspective, because they have built those relationships with the youth. And you can put the shoe on the other foot with the youth. I think there still is that initial, 'Hey, who's that? What's that patrol car doing in my neighborhood? Who's that officer?' And then you see their entire facial expression change when they're like, 'Oh, that's Officer Johnson. He came to my school.'"



Appendix. Resources

- [Preventing Minority Youth Violence: CDC model worksheet](#)

This worksheet exercise tracks the key elements of the CDC's model for a public health approach to violence prevention. The worksheet can help aid in planning a minority youth violence prevention program.

- [Preventing Minority Youth Violence: Fact sheet template](#)

This resource provides guidance in preparation of fact sheets for the benefit of stakeholders.

- [Preventing Minority Youth Violence: Sample project logic model](#)

This basic sample logic model lays out what resources are available at the beginning of a project, what activities can be undertaken with those resources, and what outcomes can be expected from those activities.

- [Preventing Minority Youth Violence: SARA model worksheet](#)

This worksheet exercise tracks the key elements of the SARA (scanning, analysis, response, and assessment) model problem solving method. This is a framework used by community policing agencies to identify and solve repeat crime and community problems. The worksheet can help aid in planning a minority youth violence prevention program.

- [Preventing Minority Youth Violence: Target population, eligibility, screens, and assessments worksheet](#)

This worksheet exercise is to help you prepare to identify your program's target population, eligibility requirements, and assessment processes.



About the Center for Court Innovation

The **Center for Court Innovation** seeks to help create a more effective and humane justice system by designing and implementing operating programs, performing original research, and providing reformers around the world with the tools they need to launch new strategies.

Founded as a public/private partnership between the New York State Unified Court System and the Fund for the City of New York, the center creates operating programs to test new ideas and solve problems. The center's projects include community-based violence prevention projects, alternatives to incarceration, re-entry initiatives, court-based programs that seek to promote positive individual and family change, and many others.

The center disseminates the lessons learned from innovative programs, helping justice reformers around the world launch new initiatives. The center also performs original research evaluating innovative programs to determine what works (and what doesn't).

The Center for Court Innovation grew out of a single experiment; the Midtown Community Court was created in 1993 to address low-level offending around Times Square. The project's success in reducing both crime and incarceration led the court's planners, with the support of New York State's chief judge, to establish the Center for Court Innovation to serve as an ongoing engine for justice reform in New York.

The center has received numerous awards for its efforts, including the Peter F. Drucker Award for Non-Profit Innovation, the Innovations in American Government Award from Harvard University and the Ford Foundation, and the Prize for Public Sector Innovation from the Citizens Budget Commission.

For more information, please visit www.courtinnovation.org.

About the COPS Office

The **Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office)** is the component of the U.S. Department of Justice responsible for advancing the practice of community policing by the nation's state, local, territorial, and tribal law enforcement agencies through information and grant resources.

Community policing begins with a commitment to building trust and mutual respect between police and communities. It supports public safety by encouraging all stakeholders to work together to address our nation's crime challenges. When police and communities collaborate, they more effectively address underlying issues, change negative behavioral patterns, and allocate resources.

Rather than simply responding to crime, community policing focuses on preventing it through strategic problem-solving approaches based on collaboration. The COPS Office awards grants to hire community policing officers and support the development and testing of innovative policing strategies. COPS Office funding also provides training and technical assistance to community members and local government leaders, as well as all levels of law enforcement.

Since 1994, the COPS Office has invested more than \$14 billion to add community policing officers to the nation's streets, enhance crime fighting technology, support crime prevention initiatives, and provide training and technical assistance to help advance community policing. Other achievements include the following:

- To date, the COPS Office has funded the hiring of approximately 130,000 additional officers by more than 13,000 of the nation's 18,000 law enforcement agencies in both small and large jurisdictions.
- Nearly 700,000 law enforcement personnel, community members, and government leaders have been trained through COPS Office-funded training organizations.
- To date, the COPS Office has distributed more than eight million topic-specific publications, training curricula, white papers, and resource CDs and flash drives.
- The COPS Office also sponsors conferences, round tables, and other forums focused on issues critical to law enforcement.

COPS Office information resources, covering a wide range of community policing topics such as school and campus safety, violent crime, and officer safety and wellness, can be downloaded via the COPS Office's home page, www.cops.usdoj.gov. This website is also the grant application portal, providing access to online application forms.

The Minority Youth Violence Prevention Initiative seeks to engage public health organizations, law enforcement agencies, schools, juvenile justice agencies, and community-based groups to curb violence in minority communities across the United States and reduce disparities in access to public health. In conjunction with a COPS Office–funded report that identified challenges and lessons learned at nine sites funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the Center for Court Innovation has prepared this toolkit to help organizations design and implement youth violence prevention programs of their own.



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To obtain details about COPS Office programs, call the COPS Office Response Center at 800-421-6770.

Visit the COPS Office online at www.cops.usdoj.gov.



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