

# Investing in the Frontlines: Why Trusting and Supporting Communities of Color Will Help Address Gun Violence

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## Introduction

Day-to-day interpersonal gun violence in communities of color constitutes a disproportionate number of shootings across the country. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), more than 70 percent of America's 13,958 gun homicide victims in 2018 were either Black or Latinx.<sup>1</sup> Black men make up 6 percent of the US population, yet account for more than half of all gun homicide victims each year; gun violence is disproportionately dangerous for Black women, who are nearly three times as likely to be murdered with a gun than white women;<sup>2</sup> worse yet, transgender women are four times more likely to experience gun violence than cisgender women, and nearly 85 percent of transgender victims are women of color.<sup>3</sup> Incidents of gun violence like these cost the United States at least \$229 billion every year<sup>4</sup> — with research indicating a single gun homicide can cost more than \$10 million in medical, criminal legal, and other expenses.<sup>5</sup> Still, the physical, economic,<sup>6</sup> and social<sup>7</sup> consequences of this violence do not end there.

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approaches to the problem.<sup>9</sup> But there are solutions we can implement today if we adopt one simple approach: trusting and empowering those directly impacted by exposure to gun violence to decide what the response should look like. In this article, we argue that the United States' focus on policing first strategies to address gun violence has contributed to the persistence of gun violence in communities of color. We critique the over reliance on law enforcement as the solution to gun violence in these communities and instead advocate for evidence-based and community-endorsed violence prevention programs that are already being implemented by people of color throughout the nation. To avoid the severe consequences associated with a policing-centered approach, law enforcement solutions to gun violence should be avoided and ultimately defunded. Instead, those directly impacted by gun violence must get sustained resources to take on this problem and address the negative repercussions of our current response.<sup>10</sup>

## How Gun Violence Is Currently Addressed in Communities of Color

### *Criminal Legal Approaches to Gun Violence*

Responses to gun violence in communities of color are commonly addressed through a criminal legal approach centered around policing at the local, state, and national levels.<sup>11</sup>

We have to bring back law and order. Now, whether or not in a place like Chicago you do stop and frisk, which worked very well ... It brought the crime rate way down. But you take the gun away from criminals that shouldn't be having it ... We have to protect our inner cities,

because African-American communities are being decimated by crime, decimated.

- Donald Trump, President of the United States<sup>12</sup>

Ninety percent of all people killed in our city — and 90 percent of all those who commit the murders and other violent crimes — are black and Hispanic. It is shameful that so many elected officials and editorial writers have been

Black people are three times more likely to be killed by police than white people.<sup>18</sup> Eight of the largest city police departments kill Black men at rates higher than the United States murder rate.<sup>19</sup> Police may jeopardize the safety of women of color facing disproportionate rates of gun related domestic violence.<sup>20</sup> In a 2015 survey by the National Domestic Violence Hotline analyzing survivor experiences with law enforcement, over half of the participants said calling the police would make their situation worse; one in four said

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largely silent on these facts ... Instead, they have argued that police stops are discriminatory because they do not reflect the city's overall census numbers. By that flawed logic, our police officers would stop women as often as men, and senior citizens as often as young people ... The absurd result of such a strategy would be far more crimes committed against black and Latino New Yorkers. When it comes to policing, political correctness is deadly.

- Michael Bloomberg, former Mayor, City of New York<sup>13</sup>

These comments are emblematic of our over reliance on law enforcement as the primary solution for gun violence in communities of color. Yet, the experiences<sup>14</sup> of these communities<sup>15</sup> and evaluations of evidence-based violence prevention programs<sup>16</sup> indicate that relying on policing centered measures will not stop the violence. Instead, they expose communities of color to violence stemming from policing itself.<sup>17</sup>

they would never call the police again; two-thirds said that they were afraid of not being believed and not getting the help they need as a result; and one in four reported that they were arrested or threatened with arrest during a partner abuse incident.<sup>21</sup> Similar problems have been identified for transgender people of color who face staggering rates of gun violence<sup>22</sup> and report experiencing high rates of police harassment and discrimination.<sup>23</sup>

In addition to the violence of everyday police encounters and harmful responses to domestic violence, these factors negatively impact the relationship between communities of color<sup>24</sup> and the state.<sup>25</sup> For example, children of color are forced to endure physical or verbal police violence which can lead them to distrust and despise police and the laws they enforce.<sup>26</sup> And the recent clashes between protestors and police following the police killings of Tony McDade, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd provide an example of exactly how fraught the relationship between communities of color and police have become.<sup>27</sup>

The benefits experienced by communities of color in exchange for violent police intervention may be minimal at best. For example, when a Black or Latinx person is fatally shot, the likelihood that local detectives will catch the culprit is only 35 percent — 18 percentage points fewer than when the victim is white. For gun assaults, the arrest rate is 21 percent if the victim is Black or Latinx, versus 37 percent for white victims.<sup>28</sup> With respect to gun violence prevention, some studies have found that police patrols focused on illegal gun carrying can prevent gun violence.<sup>29</sup> Yet, these studies note that a small amount of research supports these findings,<sup>30</sup> while the impacts of police violence on communities of color — Black and Latinx communities specifically — cannot be denied. And although policing may result in gun violence reduction when officers dedicate their time to this specific issue, the reality is that police devote approximately 4 percent of their time to handling violent crime.<sup>31</sup>

#### *Perspectives of Those Impacted by Criminal Legal Approaches*

In some instances, communities are too familiar with the harmful effects of policing centered responses to gun violence.<sup>32</sup> Informed in large part by personal experiences with this issue, some members of these heavily policed neighborhoods have pursued violence reduction strategies that center positive interventions rather than criminal punishment.

Having measurable success in reducing violent crime is contingent on the approach used. A successful approach must see violence in inner cities as a symptom of underlying issues and incorporate solutions geared towards reforming the perpetrator, interrupting violent acts before they occur, and directing resources toward eliminating the conditions that breed violence.<sup>33</sup>

- Craig Muhammad, co-founder of Project Emancipation Now.<sup>34</sup>

The approaches Muhammad references stand in stark contrast to the policing centered strategies discussed above. These approaches center intentional investments in the wellbeing of perpetrators, victims, and the communities they come from;<sup>35</sup> policing approaches seek to punish those involved in violence and leave communities to deal with the repercussions of this violence<sup>36</sup> on their own. In addition to these investments, violence prevention programs and police can maintain contrasting goals. In response to the deaths of Tony McDade, Breonna Taylor, and George

Floyd and Ahmed Arbery in 2020, Javier Lopez, a violence interventionist and public health expert with the Red Hook Initiative<sup>37</sup> recently commented on this very distinction: “The brothers and sisters doing violence interruption work have an aversion to holding a firearm. That’s because it’s not war for us. It’s peacekeeping.”<sup>38</sup>

Several organizations implementing models centered on positive interventions like those supported by Muhammad are led by people of color — Black and Latinx individuals in particular — using a public health approach. The central tenants of a public health approach can roughly be described as those that treat violence as an epidemic similar to communicable diseases recognizing that both the victim and the perpetrator are impacted by violence because of their direct experiences with harm and attempts to provide resources to both groups to prevent future violence.<sup>39</sup>

People of color across the country have created organizations focused on addressing gun violence through this lens. The Cure Violence model represents one example. Mostly led by Black and Latinx people from directly impacted communities, all Cure Violence organizations incorporate the same three core goals: “(1) to “detect and interrupt potentially violent conflicts”; (2) to provide personal support to the highest-risk individuals; and (3) to “[m]obilize the community to change norms.”<sup>40</sup> Chico Tillman, a current Ph.D. Candidate in criminology at the University of Illinois at Chicago, works with Cure Violence in Chicago. Tillman argues that the success of the program is grounded in the fact that it is led and implemented by directly impacted people of color like him.

I was incarcerated for 16 years and when I came home, I went straight to school and started working on violence prevention. I’m doing this work and doing it well because I can directly reach people that white-led organizations like Giffords or Everytown can’t because of my access to this community. When we are interrupting violence and working with the community, people are going to be honest with us. They’re going to act like they’re talking to a friend or a family member because often that’s exactly what they’re doing ... But we don’t get the same amount of funding as these other organizations because the narrative of gun violence works against us. We want to focus more on changing community norms so that the decades of violence can stop. But for now, we have to work with what we have and focus on interrupting and detecting violence.<sup>41</sup>

Research has shown that in cities with 100,000 residents, the addition of every 10 organizations focusing on crime and community vitality results in a 9 percent reduction in the murder rate, a 6 percent reduction in the violent crime rate, and a 4 percent reduction in the property crime rate.<sup>42</sup> And when the Chicago branch of Cure Violence — formerly known as Cease-Fire<sup>43</sup> — first began its operations in the West Garfield Park neighborhood in 2000, it experienced a 67 percent reduction in shootings.<sup>44</sup>

Despite this success, the support given to these programs is inconsistent and under frequent attack. Some of the obstacles to implementing these strategies stem directly from our overreliance on police. For example, regional Safe Streets Baltimore offices — another violence prevention program that relies on community intervenors to help prevent gun violence — have been repeatedly suspended, often the result of an office's refusal to give confidential information gained through violence-interruption work to the police.<sup>45</sup> And while the program has yielded short-term reductions in violence, recent evaluations present mixed findings regarding its long-term success.<sup>46</sup> Researchers note, however, that cities like Chicago, Philadelphia, and New York — a city where local officials and foundations have provided significant support financially with services for high risk individuals engaged by outreach staff — have experienced positive long-term reductions in gun violence.<sup>47</sup> The experiences of these cities, and New York in particular, suggests that increased investment in programs like Safe Streets — resulting in changes such as higher and consistent salaries for community intervenors, more staff dedicated to a given region, and better collaboration with other community-based organizations — may produce meaningful reductions in gun violence in their communities.<sup>48</sup>

Cities, states, and local governments continue to invest billions of dollars in policing while successful programs like these continuously fight to sustain their funding.<sup>49</sup> In some cities, per capita police spending ranges from \$318 to as high as \$772, with cities like Oakland dedicating as much as 41.2 percent of their general fund expenditures to police.<sup>50</sup>

This reliance on police, however, is beginning to lose its stronghold. Fatimah Loren Muhammad, Executive Director of the Health Alliance for Violence Intervention, an organization focused on fostering hospital and community collaborations to advance equitable, trauma-informed care for violence intervention and prevention programs,<sup>51</sup> noted exactly this.

The problem of community violence is one that cities and states think about regularly, particularly where there are large concentrations of community violence. But you have a paradigmatic frame for the problem: they are either exclusively policing problems and talking about the value of our work is challenging, or they believe in our model. But what we have seen in the country over time is that the climate is shifting, and law makers are seeing that there are more approaches to addressing violence.<sup>52</sup>

Calls for new approaches to violence in communities throughout the country continue to gain support. In response to the weeks of protests against police killings of numerous Black individuals in the first half of 2020, elected officials have begun to embrace the idea of cutting police budgets and reinvesting in community-based programs.<sup>53</sup> Some have supported the dismantling of their city's police department in exchange for investments in community-led public safety initiatives.<sup>54</sup> As the movement to reduce police budgets continues to grow, stakeholders should look to the kinds of programs described here as targets for investment.

### **Stakeholder Approaches to Reduce Gun Violence through Policy Support**

To ensure the viability of these strategies, all levels of government as well as philanthropic institutions must contribute.

#### *Federal Agencies and Institutions*

Federal agencies should use their power to allocate adequate funding for public health focused community interventions on gun violence. Agencies should support federal allocation of funding for local strategies such as Advance Peace,<sup>55</sup> Hospital Based Violence Intervention,<sup>56</sup> and Cure Violence.<sup>57</sup> These programs have demonstrated their success and, consequently, receive some resources from local or state agencies. Yet, additional funding is necessary to expand and sustain their progress.

For fiscal year 2020, Congress allocated funds for gun violence research and other appropriations in the Commerce, Justice, Science appropriations bill. The allocation includes: \$25 million for gun violence research at the Centers of Disease Control (“CDC”), the National Institutes of Health (“NIH”), and Community Investments, \$8 million for community-based violence prevention grants, \$17 million for place-based, data-driven, community-oriented, and cost-effective solutions to violent gun crime, and \$8 million for the Children Exposed to Violence program, early

intervention strategies that address and treat children's exposure to trauma and violence.<sup>58</sup> This allocation of funds is a first step in providing research and agency level support to evidence-based solutions in communities of color. But it is not enough to sustain the success of these programs.

In addition to supporting evidence-based solutions to reduce gun violence, Congress should also set forth a comprehensive agenda that provides consistent funding for research, data, and innovation addressing other forms of violence that impact communities of color. Annual CDC data also shows the rise of suicides by firearms,<sup>59</sup> but there is a dearth of research about suicide rates in communities of color. The same can be said for research regarding rates of interpersonal gun violence against people of color with intersecting<sup>60</sup> marginalized identities.<sup>61</sup> In Congress, the focus of funding opportunities for domestic violence and guns rely on punitive interventions.<sup>62</sup> These carceral measures do not take into account the needs of evidence based prevention strategies that can help empower communities to prevent violence before it starts.

Additionally, there should be greater coordination among administrative offices, Congress, and heads of agencies should work together to pool resources from diversified pools of long-term funding. While traditional gun reform measures have been on legislative agendas for decades, the voices of communities of color have failed to be included.<sup>63</sup>

#### *State and Local Government Institutions*

In states across the country, lawmakers are providing blueprints for change through legislation. For many of these states, their programs have not been defined as criminal justice reform yet are traditionally intertwined with legislative efforts to reduce crime, prison reform, and mass incarceration. It is important to note that while these issues intersect, having stand-alone legislation to address gun violence intervention and prevention — ensuring that resources and attention are directed to these programs specifically — is critical.

California Governor Gavin Newsom signed into law the California Violence Intervention and Prevention (CalVIP) grant program, which provides competitive matching grants for cities and community-based organizations to implement effective programs designed to interrupt entrenched cycles of shootings and retaliation.<sup>64</sup> The legislature is also supporting AB 1603, which authorizes the CalVIP grant program by statute and strengthens the program by removing low caps on grant awards, requiring prioritization of grants from communities with the highest rate and number of

shootings and homicides, and requiring prioritization of programs targeted at individuals at highest risk of being victims or perpetrators of violence.<sup>65</sup> Sustained funding, however, would allow CalVIP to improve its current operations and expand to other areas in the state.

In 2019, the New Jersey legislature passed the Create and Fund the New Jersey Violence Intervention Program (NJVIP). This legislation addresses homicide reduction and interpersonal violence and is modeled after effective state grant programs in Massachusetts and New York. Through this program, the state will provide competitive multi-year grants to cities and non-profit organizations implementing effective, evidence-based violence intervention initiatives. In addition, the legislature created the Hospital-Based Violence Intervention Program Initiative to interrupt these cycles of violence by working with gunshot patients in and after their admission to the hospital. The program also requires the state's victim counseling service centers to create new partnerships with hospital trauma centers to connect gunshot patients with violence prevention programs.<sup>66</sup> Programs like these should be replicated in states throughout the country, and led by the organizations and organizers from the communities that are directly impacted.

In 2018, the Maryland legislature established the Maryland Violence Intervention and Prevention Program Fund (MDVIP) to invest and fund evidence-based public health approaches to gun violence prevention. MDVIP provides financial support to local governments and community-based organizations that use public health principles and demonstrate positive outcomes in preventing gun violence. It also established a council, anchored by the Director of the Governor's Office of Crime Control and Protection, to oversee the distribution of the funding and to review the efficacy of gun violence prevention programs.<sup>67</sup> Funding for MDVIP supported organizations that rely on the expertise of Black leaders on the frontlines of preventing gun violence utilizing HVIP and Cure Violence programs like ROCA and Safe Streets Baltimore. Again, these programs have been impactful, but are simply the first step towards meaningfully addressing gun violence in communities of color. Without funds from the state, these local organizations struggle to meet metrics and evaluations needed to help save lives.<sup>68</sup>

State, county, and local governments should work with health departments, hospitals, schools, universities, and non-profits to (1) share data on all forms of violence, (2) identify protocols for screenings and referrals, (3) develop and enhance programs and poli-

cies to prevent and reduce violence in communities of color, and (4) use data to continuously increase the efficiency and effectiveness of these efforts. In cities like Louisville, where Breonna Taylor was shot and killed by law enforcement, Anthony Smith from Cities United is one of the voices calling for consistent funding into preventing violence versus policing: “We value and lean so much on law enforcement and, as a city, that hurt us,” Smith said. “We’ve not been as imaginative and understanding of what it really takes to keep a community safe.”<sup>69</sup>

In June, New York City started to move in the direction with a \$10 million additional allocation of city funds for place-based public health approaches, including support for evidence-based programs like Life Camp led by Erica Ford, that has consistently shown dramatic reductions in violence.<sup>70</sup>

### *Philanthropic Institutions*

While philanthropic partners have helped create support systems for advocates working on the issue of gun violence, they alone cannot stop the bleeding. Funders can take a multi-year approach to not only help support the leadership of people of color, but also help to fill gaps that direct government services cannot reach. While funding direct services is critical, helping to support other forms of civic engagement can help grow the field of advocates of color who are in positions of leadership working to reduce gun violence. Unfortunately, few organizations led by Black or Latinx organizational leaders are fully funded on the local level.<sup>71</sup>

Refugio “Cuco” Rodriguez, Program Officer for the Hope and Heal Fund<sup>72</sup> spoke about the necessity of funding gun violence prevention work through philanthropy.

Race equity expertise is imperative due to the complexity of the issue. When gun violence reduction efforts and policies lack an in-depth race equity lens, they run the risk of perpetuating inequity and or prescribing solutions to an issue with a very limited depth of understanding. The absence of this critical perspective and expertise leads to unintended consequences that too often result in the criminalization of people of color.<sup>73</sup>

However, in contrast to many philanthropic organizations focused on gun violence prevention, some foundations and companies are beginning to invest directly into Black and Latinx groups doing this work. In June, Google.org gave a \$500,000 donation to the Marsha P. Johnson Institute, an organization focused

on the exclusion of Black transgender women in social justice issues, including gun violence. Elle Hearn, head of the organization, noted how important contributions like these are. “The donation will strengthen our direct cash assistance program, which is empowering individuals to secure housing, healthcare, and other essential supports during this time. Black Trans women are too often forgotten by our society, and with Google.org’s help we’re giving them the support they need.”<sup>74</sup> The Langeloth Foundation provides yet another example. According to Scott Moyer, President of the foundation, their recent \$10 million donation to people of color led organizations is a direct result of the need for policy change in communities of color.<sup>75</sup> Until more organizations follow similar approaches, the resources available to gun violence prevention programs led by communities of color will remain unstable.

### **Conclusion**

The decades long persistence of gun violence in communities of color shows that our current approach is not working. If we value the lives of marginalized communities, we need a new approach to gun violence in communities of color. Rather than of waiting for to gun violence to happen and deploying the police, we can send in teams of culturally competent community workers<sup>76</sup> to intervene and prevent the violence from occurring. They simply are not getting the resources, attention, and compassion they deserve. National, state, and local policy makers must give people of color addressing gun violence the funds to take on this issue and rely on their expertise and experiences when deciding how to address gun violence in communities of color; and Philanthropic stakeholders and partners should center the voices of leaders of color who work to prevent gun violence and invest in their leadership. Until then, it is all too likely that these communities will continue to endure the physical, economic, and social consequences of this issue.

### Note

The authors do not have any conflicts of interest to disclose.

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